Jobless young need opportunities not punishment
Judith Bessant
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The Rudd Government's "earn-or-learn" policies will not achieve their aims.

THE Federal Government plans to make it tougher for young people and their families to receive income support unless they return to school or engage in some form of officially sanctioned training. It is also apparently thinking about introducing "military-style boot camps" for unemployed teenagers.

Many Australians will no doubt applaud this as "doing something positive". But if we think about it, the Government's "earn-or-learn" policies in reaction to the global fiscal crisis do not deserve applause.

These Federal Government proposals are compounded by the state Labor Government's alarming decision to make TAFE students pay tuition fees using a HECS-style compulsory loan such as university students incur. This is extraordinary, as is the absence of public debate about this. Many TAFE or Vocational Education and Training students come from lower-income families. If analysis of residential post codes is reliable, Victorian TAFEs enrol a considerable proportion of the poorest people in our state. And a high proportion of unemployed people enrol in TAFE. We are talking about some of the more disadvantaged groups in our community.

Enrolling every young person into TAFE or university — and making them pay for this — will not boost the economy or fix the unemployment problem. If every 25-year-old in Australia had a PhD, this would still not eradicate joblessness or restore the economy.

Forcing jobless young people back to school or into training is designed to cut down the official unemployment statistics while giving up on fixing the unemployment problem. These policy initiatives pander to public anxiety about "unemployed youth".

There is a popular prejudice that young people are both troubled and troublesome, and therefore need to be under the watchful eye of responsible adults. Yet keeping young people in education for extended periods of time is not in their best interests, nor in the long-term interest of the community.

As has happened too many times in the past three decades, governments are treating the unemployed, in this case young people, as the problem — rather than addressing the real need, which is for more jobs.

If the Government is serious about "skilling up" Australia and giving young people real opportunities to participate in their community, why not invest in new capital infrastructure such as social housing and expand the apprenticeship model to both TAFE and universities?

Why, for example, wait until 2020, as the Federal Government suggests, to tackle the serious problem of youth homelessness given that an estimated 4663 young people aged 12-18 are homeless on any given night in our state?

Why not use such projects as opportunities to create real jobs and new, more attractive education opportunities while solving social problems that see thousands of teenagers without secure and stable accommodation? It's a situation that calls into question our capacity to call ourselves a civilised society.
It would also mean that young people get paid while educating themselves. It means they get an education while earning a wage as they become plumbers, builders, child-care workers, teachers, lawyers or vets.

It means they can start to practise independent living without facing a decade of paying off their HECS debts.

There are also benefits in seeing education as a social good as well as a means for securing participation in the labour market. This requires serious investment.

In several European countries such as Ireland, Denmark, and Finland, education and indeed tertiary education is recognised as a basic right or social good worthy of proper funding and students there do not pay fees.

While many people like to believe Australia is a modern society characterised by a commitment to social equity and the value of public education, policy and practice demonstrates we are a long way from that.

Compared with other OECD countries, we are close to the bottom in terms of our total expenditure on tertiary education as a portion of our GDP.

The proportion of private funding is also high with the average annual fee being the third highest after the US and Japan.

We consider it prudent policy to double government funding to the car industry to the tune of $6 billion, to guarantee all bank deposits, to implement a Nation Building Plan, to provide stimulus and other infrastructure packages and to introduce new legislation to establish the Australian Business Investment Partnership designed to support commercial property assets in Australia. Why are we not investing in young Australians by funding a decent education and training system and by investing in real jobs for the future?

It is time for the Rudd Government to demonstrate its ostensible commitment to "social inclusion" and social democracy and rethink this punitive, prejudicial and ineffectual approach to some of our most vulnerable citizens.

_Judith Bessant is a professor at the school of social science and planning at RMIT University._