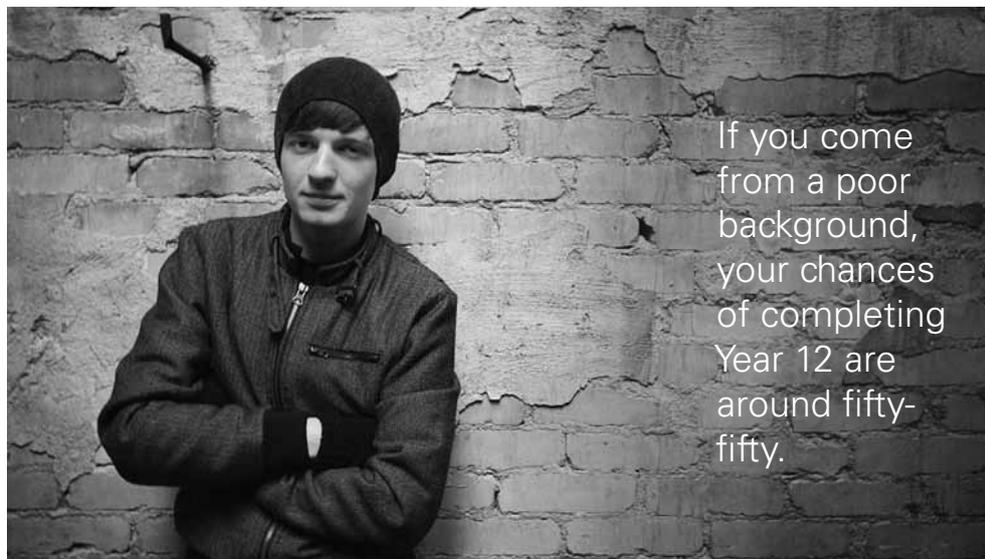


# Special feature / Beyond Earn or Learn

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Twenty-year-old Gary<sup>1</sup> has lived with paranoid schizophrenia for most of his young life. At school, losses of temper saw him land in detention at his school, which was unaware of his serious mental condition. Perceiving a lack of sympathy and support from teachers, who lacked the time and training to help him, Gary soon grew hostile towards school and lost interest in learning. Gary was finally expelled and, after a series of cash-in-hand jobs, he had strong doubts about his ability to ever enter the paid workforce.

For most young people who drop out, this is where their education ends, leaving them moving from one dead-end job to another, at risk of homelessness and addictions, wholly dependent on welfare payments for survival. And Gary's story is all too common. One-quarter of all young

Australians aged 18 to 25 are neither learning nor earning.<sup>2</sup>

Keeping young people in school has been a high priority of 30 years of federal and state governments. For several reasons, the economic and social costs of early school leavers are significant. Young people who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed, to live in poverty, to be sick or suffer mental health issues, to have dysfunctional relationships, to abuse drugs and alcohol and find themselves on the wrong side of the criminal justice system.

Today we have a large gap in educational achievement between students from poor backgrounds and those from rich ones. If you come from a poor background, your chances of completing Year 12 are around fifty-fifty.<sup>3</sup> Worryingly, Australia's education system is failing a large and

growing number of young people, especially those from a background of disadvantage who are now wholly disengaged from learning and unlikely to find stable and meaningful work.

## Learn or Earn

To address poor school completion rates, the Rudd government introduced its Learn or Earn program, a 'carrot and stick' model designed to encourage disengaged young people to re-engage with training or paid work. Under Learn or Earn, young people who have dropped out of high school must be either studying or working to qualify for income support payments. If they do not comply, their payments are cut.

Too often when designing policy that relates to young people, governments consult with those they consider 'key

stakeholders' – experts and service providers – but rarely with young people themselves. As the national voice for young people and the youth affairs sector, the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) asked young people like Gary who have dropped out of the education system about their experiences of the Learn or Earn program. These findings have been released in AYAC's recent report, *Beyond learn or earn: Young people tell how policy can better support those who need it most*.

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## Better solutions for disengaged young people

AYAC's research found that keeping young people on fixed and linear pathways to finish Year 12, regardless of their complex personal circumstances, does not work for these disenfranchised young

people. While it is true that young people need to be held accountable to study or work goals, the most disengaged – the focus of Learn or Earn – need highly targeted support, not coercion, to enable them to finish school or find work. AYAC's research found that young people do not want to travel along the one rigid path to school completion that Learn or Earn currently mandates. As one young person told us: 'School is not for everybody and making people stay when they're not going to like it is just ridiculous.'

individual barriers.

For Gary, this was the case. Now in his third year of study at a local flexible learning centre<sup>4</sup>, Gary is expecting to graduate with his Year 12 qualification half way through 2013. He credits the centre, which offers strong personal support and counselling services, for turning his life around.

*'I was going downhill for a while with a lot of outside problems. If it wasn't for this school and its services I'd probably be in gaol or dead,' he said.*

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What does help these young people is offering them multiple 'detours' or pathways where they are given the support and space to work on the issues that hold them back. Many struggle with poverty, unstable home lives, homelessness, anger problems and ill health. Before many young people can even think about finishing school, they need to spend time gaining self-esteem and social skills, and have access to whatever intensive and tailored support they need to help them address their

AYAC recently took Kris,<sup>1</sup> another young person we interviewed, to meet with Schools Minister Peter Garrett at the November launch of the *Beyond learn or earn* report. She shared her moving story of being raised by a mother who struggled with drug addiction, of attending school with dirty clothes and untreated head lice, and of how her school failed to recognise and help her through this vulnerable period. Coercion or one-size-fits all programs did not help Kris. Rather, what made the

difference was the caring and intensive personal and educational support provided through a local flexible learning program that is now helping her get her high school qualification.

### Conclusion

The Gonski reforms will create a significant shift in the way governments provide funding to address educational disadvantage. This is to be applauded. The attention and funding that will be directed to the most disadvantaged students, if Gonski is implemented, is a good start. But the help that the most disengaged young people really need is the kind of help that is built around their individual needs. Programs that place young people's needs at the centre, rather than targets or quotas.

While Learn or Earn is a dedicated attempt at improving the productive participation of Australia's young people, the policy has some way still to go before it can genuinely assist the most vulnerable students who lag far behind not only in educational attainment, but also in the most basic life skills. For many young people like Gary and Kris, no stick will keep them in a schooling system that they do not fit in and which does not fit them. What they need are more effective solutions that deal with the complex personal and systemic causes of early school leaving and that help young people right where they are.

### Notes

1. Real names not used.
2. 'Disengagement' means 12 months or more of disengagement from employment, education or training, which may include some short stints of engagement, such as in casual work or training courses.
3. Only 56% of students from poorer backgrounds complete Year 12 compared to 75% of students generally. Source: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011, *Review of funding for schooling – final report*, p.114, retrieved from, <<http://foi.deewr.gov.au/documents/review-funding-schooling-final-report-december-2011>>. Poorer young people in Australia have lower levels of academic performance than in other OECD countries, such as Finland and Canada. Source: NOUS Group 2011, *Schooling challenges & opportunities: A report for the Review of Funding for Schooling Panel*, August, p.5.
4. Flexible and innovative learning programs – also known as 'second-chance education', 're-engagement programs' or 'flexi schools' – offer a high ratio of staff to young people, holistic one-on-one support and small group work from a multidisciplinary team of educators, social workers and counsellors.

**More information:** You can find out more about what young people have to say about education and employment policies and what should be done to better support them into training and career pathways by reading the *Beyond learn or earn* report: [www.ayac.org.au/learnorearn](http://www.ayac.org.au/learnorearn)