

'Please sir, I want some more'

Securing better pay and conditions for youth workers in Australia

Recent youth sector workforce audits have revealed high staff turnover, critical skill shortages, service gaps and an increasing demand for youth services. Michael Emslie argues for better pay and conditions for youth workers as a way to address these concerns. Youth workers' pay is compared with general wage growth and the wages of those undertaking similar work, and a case is made for pay parity to attract and keep competent workers in the youth sector. It is also argued that such changes would help achieve various government policies designed to avert and respond to the impacts of the current global financial crisis, and create a more socially inclusive society and sustainable youth sector.

by Michael Emslie

Recent workforce audits have revealed significant skill shortages and increasing demand in the human services sector (Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) 2008; Australian Services Union (ASU) 2007). Simultaneously there has been a renewed interest in the professionalisation of youth work in various Australian states and territories.¹ These developments have also occurred on the tail of a major global financial crisis, the likes of which we have not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s. With a new Labor government in office, we have heard much talk about the value of young people, and the Rudd administration's commitment to building a strong youth sector. This context provides a timely opportunity to place the question of youth workers' wages and conditions on the agenda. In this paper I argue for improving the pay and conditions of youth workers, and suggest why now is a good time to do so.

This question is important for a number of reasons. Clearly if we are serious about the professionalisation of a largely uncredentialed sector, decent wages and condition are critical (Perkin 1989). Likewise, if we are serious about addressing the gender pay gap in Australia then attention needs to be given to reasonable salaries and conditions for youth workers, most of whom are women. Moreover, such a project complements recent government initiatives designed to modernise the industrial relations system, stimulate the economy, and create a more socially inclusive society and sustainable community sector.

This paper begins by drawing on recent reports that argue for further investment in youth services. While I rely mainly on material from the state of Victoria, the similarities across the various jurisdictions are such that the arguments and findings are also applicable to youth sectors in other Australian states and territories that are encountering funding pressures and struggling to recruit and retain staff.

Critical skill shortages in the youth sector are examined. The practical value of improving youth workers' wages and conditions as a way of attracting and keeping competent workers is observed. This is a topic that covers a broad area; given the constraints of the paper, I will cover the issues in non-government organisations (NGOs). This is not to suggest that similar issues don't exist in the government and private sectors.

Youth workers' pay is compared with that of other human service workers, and the need for pay parity to address workforce attrition is raised. Consideration is then given to how various government policies designed to encourage social inclusion, strengthen community organisations and respond to vulnerable young people connect to arguments about the need to improve the pay and conditions of youth workers in NGOs. The paper then examines the value of investing in the youth sector in response to the current economic downturn. Finally, observations are made as to how youth workers' pay and conditions can be improved.

Improving wages and conditions to address critical skill shortages

Research reports critical skill shortages in the Australian youth sector. This includes gaps in generalist youth services and youth workers in interface or urban fringe, regional and rural communities (Rose 2008a; Rose & Atkins 2006; Access Economics 2008a).² There are also documented needs for more resources to be directed towards child protection as well as initiatives for young people in out-of-home care, leaving care and activities aimed at preventing young people offending (Clare 2009; Raman, Inder & Forbes 2005; Rose 2008b).³ Homelessness, alcohol and other drugs, disability and mental health services, all of which employ youth workers, are seeking improvements to wages

and conditions to strengthen their ability to meet growing demand (Wright-Howie 2008; Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) 2008; Department of Human Services (DHS) 2008b; The Boston Consulting Group 2006). There are also calls for further investment in student support services and youth workers in Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) 2009; Ferrari 2009).

The research just mentioned details critical vulnerabilities for the youth work sector. Services are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain qualified, skilled and experienced staff. Problems with recruitment and attrition contribute to extensive youth service gaps, escalating waiting lists and high levels of unmet need identified in the reports. At the same time, workers are encountering greater than ever demands for services, increasing complexity of service user needs and mounting workloads, and, because of this pressure and lack of remuneration, worker turnover is high.

Pressures on funding and inadequate resourcing are hampering services' ability to continue to provide adequate levels of service, not to mention quality services, and job security. The Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS), for example, released a report arguing that Victorian NGOs, "are already working as efficiently as they can and further productivity improvements are not possible without additional funding" (VCOSS 2009, p.1). In other words, youth service providers are operating at maximum capacity and further investment, including better pay and conditions, is needed to address these workforce limitations.

The aforementioned research recommend an investment in services for young Victorians, including increasing workers' pay and conditions, as a way of addressing current service and skill shortages, strengthening job security and improving the youth sector's capacity to meet growing demand. Decent wages and conditions are a way to attract competent people to the youth sector and plug the loss of experienced workers. Reasonable pay and conditions attract people to youth work and encourage them to stay working with young people. Indeed such investment accrues cost savings in the long run, which includes reduced

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spending on recruitment (Access Economics 2008a; Raman, Inder & Forbes 2005; The Allen Consulting Group 2008a; The Boston Consulting Group 2006). All this is not however to argue that youth worker wages should be increased at the expense of establishing new services, given the projected growth in the industry (ASU 2007; Bessant 2007). Rather, both areas require urgent attention, including an injection of funds, given the existing service gaps and needs of the sector.

Wage parity and reasonable working conditions

To attract quality staff, retain experienced workers and develop career paths, youth workers' pay in NGOs needs to keep pace with general wage growth. A high proportion of youth workers in Victoria are employed by the not-for-profit sector, compared to the public or government sector and private sector, and most workers in the Victorian community sector, including the youth sector, are paid according to the Social and Community Services (SACS) (Victoria) Award 2000. Entry level wages for full-time (38 hours per week) youth workers paid in accordance with the Award currently trail behind adult average ordinary time earnings by \$603 per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2009; Australian Government Workplace Authority (AGWA) 2007). The highest rate of pay available to youth workers in the Award is \$247 less per week than average weekly earnings. Raising youth worker rates of pay in the SACS (Victoria) Award 2000 to levels comparable with average weekly earnings would make youth work a more attractive field to enter and stay in, and would improve the supply of workers to meet current and projected demands.

Youth worker wages in NGOs generally trail behind the pay of other human service workers. In April 2008, for example, entry-level wages for youth workers paid in accordance with the SACS (Victoria) Award 2000 were approximately \$494, \$281 and \$320 less per week than beginning pay rates for teachers, nurses and child protection workers respectively (ASU 2008). The gap widens when comparing top-level wage rates. Senior level teachers, nurses and child protection workers in Victoria can

earn up to \$595, \$586 and a staggering \$1,345 respectively more per week than the highest rate of pay available to qualified and experienced youth workers paid under the Award (ASU 2008). Due to lower wages, youth workers leave NGOs for better pay in other sectors and industries, including the public sector where wages have considerably outgrown those in NGOs (The Allen Consulting Group 2008a, p.6; 2008b; Precision Consulting 2007). Increasing the pay of youth workers to levels comparable to other human service workers would improve youth work's status as a preferred career choice, and assist in addressing current workforce issues.

There is also practical value in improving employment conditions in the youth sector to attract and keep competent workers. The Victorian Government is on track to introduce a portable long-service scheme in the not-for-profit sector, and the Australian Government's scheduled paid parental leave is another step in the right direction (ASU 2009). Stress, bullying, harassment and occupational violence contribute to youth workers leaving the sector, and improvements to occupational health and safety such as safer workplaces, adequate staffing levels and reasonable workloads would help in retaining skilled workers (ASU 2008).

I now turn to the issue of federal and Victorian government policy initiatives to demonstrate how raising youth worker wages and conditions complements recent government measures designed to create a more socially inclusive society and sustainable community sector.

Alignment with the Australian Government's policy agenda

If the Rudd Labor Government is serious about achieving its social inclusion agenda then there is value in investing in the youth sector, including in the improvement of youth workers' wages and conditions. According to the Australian Government itself, social inclusion entails ensuring children at greatest risk of long-term disadvantage have access to the services they need (Australian Government 2009). NGOs, including youth services, provide an invaluable means for promoting social inclusion, and better wages and conditions are critical for attracting

workers to the youth sector and retaining them. Well trained, committed staff with a sense of future in the industry are critical if we are serious about addressing the needs of young people who are socially excluded. Youth workers make a significant contribution to civil society and encourage democratic engagement of young people, which is consistent with the objectives of the government's social inclusion agenda (Staples 2007).

Further, a key objective of the Australian Government's social inclusion agenda is to invest in "human capital" (Smyth 2008). This is the idea that a vibrant Australian economy requires healthy and flourishing people able to participate in the workforce. Youth workers play a key role in supporting and preparing young people for work, and providing decent wages and conditions is a way of securing good quality youth work professionals in such roles (Gillard 2007).

One of the first actions of the new national Office for Youth (OfY) is to carry out a stocktake of the resources being directed to youth affairs across the Australian Government and to identify potential gaps and areas for future attention (OfY 2008). Such an audit should capture the workforce concerns of the sector discussed herein.

The government has also reinstated funding to a national youth affairs peak body, the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC 2009). If AYAC is to play a lead role in working with state-based youth sector peaks then it needs to recognise the need for improved wages and conditions and to lobby for these (Youth Coalition of the ACT (YCACT) 2009; Youth Affairs Council of South Australia (YACSA) 2009). The Victorian Government is also in the process of developing new initiatives for the community sector and young people, which provide further opportunity to address youth sector workforce concerns.

Wages and conditions and Victorian Government initiatives

If the Victorian Government really wants to strengthen youth sector organisations it needs to increase youth workers' wages and conditions. The Victorian Government is currently interested in building stronger community organisations, and a key strategy to achieve this ought to be increasing the pay and conditions of

youth workers (Victorian Government 2008). The government can use the Office for the Community Sector (OCS) and the Community Service Workforce Capability Framework as opportune platforms to announce increases to the NGO price index and salary levels (OCS 2009).

The Vulnerable Youth Framework is one of the Victorian Government's latest attempts to improve the wellbeing of disadvantaged young people. Improving the pay and conditions of youth workers should be part of any such plan. While the policy framework is still being finalised, the discussion paper provides a good indication of what to expect (Department of Human Services (DHS), Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) & DEECD 2008). There is no mention of wages and conditions in the paper. If the Victorian Government is serious about improving the wellbeing of young people, particularly those who are vulnerable, then attention needs to be given to reasonable salaries and conditions for workers who are tasked with supporting them. Improving youth worker wages is also consistent with recent measures to stimulate the Australian economy in the wake of the global financial crisis.

Responding to the global financial crisis

The years of economic prosperity in Australia leading up to the current global financial crisis have not translated into better pay and working conditions for youth practitioners. Indeed the wages of those employed to work with young people have gone backwards over recent years relative to general wage growth and rises in inflation. Now that Australia is experiencing an economic downturn, will this continue to be the case? It is reasonable to expect that prevailing economic conditions in Australia could put downward pressure on wages to reduce the risks of rising unemployment (Access Economics 2008b). As Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2009) claims, "Neo-liberals ... argue that the cost of the recession should be borne by employees, through wage cuts and retrenchment" (p. 26).

Can youth workers expect to be remunerated at more equitable and adequate rates? The reality is that the youth sector has been experiencing a "financial crisis" for some time and

not increasing wages now would only further exacerbate the workforce problems plaguing the youth sector, which are described in this paper. While governments in Australia could use the global financial crisis to not move on youth worker wages, the crisis actually provides an opportune time for increasing public spending, including investing in NGOs. Moreover, increasing youth workers' pay is consistent with prevailing economic management in Australia.

There is value in investing in the youth sector in response to the current economic downturn. Such spending complements recent government initiatives designed to stimulate the economy and protect Australia from the impacts of the economic recession (Access Economics 2008b). The Rudd Labor Government has delivered two economic stimulus packages to date totalling over \$52 billion to support jobs, growth and "nation building" (Swan & Tanner 2009). Raising wages for youth workers and investing in the youth sector to secure its current and future viability are consistent with these measures and recognise that the role of government is fundamental. According to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2009), this role includes, "as a funder and provider of public goods" (p.25). PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), the Fundraising Institute of Australia (FIA) and the Centre for Social Impact (CSI) (2009) report that many Australian not-for-profit organisations are experiencing a decline in fundraising and investment incomes as a result of the economic downturn, and are shedding staff and reducing services to cut costs at a time when expenditure is also rising (Tippet 2009). However, PwC, FIA and CSI overlook the opportunity of a community sector economic stimulus package to meet the budget shortfalls and maintain strong NGOs. Flourishing youth services are critical for young people in the current economic environment.

Investing in youth workers and services is worthwhile at this point in time given predictions that the global financial crisis will lead to increased demand on youth service providers (Access Economics 2008b). Financial stress is a key factor leading people to seek the services of NGOs and Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard (2009) argues young people are particularly "at risk in a downturn". There are already reports that the number of young

Australians in full-time jobs is falling faster than the overall population, and youth unemployment is rising disproportionately higher than the adult rate of unemployment (ABC News 2009; OECD 2009). Furthermore, as employers reduce outlays to remain profitable, young people, who are predominantly represented in part-time and casual employment, could experience reductions in hours and pay. A reduction in the availability of paid work makes it more difficult for young people to secure an adequate income from employment (McDonald, Backstrom & Allegretto 2007). This puts young people "at risk" of poverty, disadvantage, deprivation and social exclusion. If this is the case, youth service providers who are already operating at capacity can expect more young people affected by the recession to seek their support. Access Economics (2008b) argues that NGOs can expect increasing and changing demands for their services as the economy continues to slow. This situation will only intensify and exacerbate the range of workforce concerns described in this paper, such as those relating to mounting workloads, escalating waiting lists, high levels of unmet need, having to turn away young people needing help, and difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified, skilled and experienced staff. I have already made the case for providing youth workers with better pay and conditions to help address these issues, and the value of such investment is accentuated, given the likely impacts of the global financial crisis on young people and the youth sector.

Ways forward

One way forward is for the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC), which is to be replaced by Fair Work Australia (FWA) on 1 January 2010, to require the Victorian Government to increase youth workers' wages so they are in line with rates of pay for youth workers in Queensland. In May 2009 the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission (QIRC) ruled on wage increases for social and community service workers of between 18% and 37%, phased in over a three-year period and commencing in July 2009 (QIRC 2009). Queensland youth workers paid in accordance with the Queensland

Community Services and Crisis Assistance Award (State) 2008 could now earn up to 50% more than Victorian youth workers doing comparable work who are paid in accordance with the SACS (Victoria) Award 2000 (ASU 2009). The ASU (2009) argues similar increases to wages can be obtained for youth workers in Victoria by means of enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) that oblige the Victorian Government to adequately fund NGOs so they are in a position to deliver improved pay. This would require the AIRC or FWA to rule in favour of increases to wages in EBAs. The ASU (2009) reports the Queensland Government agreed to fund the wage outcomes and similarly the Victorian Government could adopt a supportive position.

As well as the aforementioned “community sector economic stimulus package”, the Australian Government’s “Award modernisation” process offers another opportunity for improving youth workers’ pay and conditions. The process includes creating a national social and community services industry Award, due to come into effect on 1 January 2010, to supersede numerous federal and state social and community service industry Awards, including the SACS (Victoria) Award 2000 (Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) 2008). The wage adjustments to the Queensland Community Services and Crisis Assistance Award (State) 2008 set a benchmark for rates of pay and working conditions to be included in the new federal Award.

The Victorian Government can also assist with improving youth worker wages and conditions by raising the NGO price index. The Allen Consulting Group (2008a) reports the Victorian Government’s NGO price index, the annual adjustment to the payments made by the government to NGOs to cover “normal” annual cost increases, has been 2.9% since 2003. At the same time the Melbourne consumer price index, or inflation, increased by 3.1% on average, and average weekly earnings by 4.7% every year since 2003. On each of these measures the NGO price index has fallen behind. As a result of this, indexation of youth workers’ pay in NGOs has not kept pace with the cost of living or

average wage growth. VCOSS alerted the Victorian Government to the effects of the inadequate funding indexation, including high turnover of staff, difficulties recruiting workers, and a hampered capacity to deliver required services, in 2005 and again in 2009 however requests to adjust the calculation have so far been declined (VCOSS 2008; Wilson 2005).

Conclusion

This article argues that the time is right to improve youth workers’ wages and conditions. A decision to do so would fit in with a range of recent government policy directions including those related to “Award modernisation”, supporting vulnerable young people, building a sustainable youth sector and achieving social inclusion. Raising youth worker wages could also ameliorate the impacts of the global financial crisis.

The supply of youth practitioners is not meeting demand, which results in service gaps, waiting lists, unmet demand and a high turnover of staff. I argued that paying youth workers more and providing better working conditions improves the attractiveness of youth work as a career and is a practical way of addressing these workforce concerns.

This paper suggests that the Victorian Government pay youth workers wages that match improvements recently announced in Queensland, and raise the NGO price index to levels comparable with inflation and general wage growth. It is also suggested that the Australian Government could deliver an NGO economic stimulus package. The value in increasing rates of pay and working conditions for youth workers in the SACS Award to levels where there is parity with others doing similar work has been highlighted.

This paper does not specifically address the question of how improving youth workers’ pay would actually improve the wellbeing of young people, and this relationship is worthy of further investigation. There is also a need for further research on the value of youth work, including what

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youth work is worth and just how much youth workers should actually be paid. Such calculations should be driven by the needs of the sector and what is involved in delivering professional youth work. Following Offe (1977), such an investigation could also explore whether youth workers' remuneration reflects their achievement and productive organisation, as one would expect if wage structures reflect market logic. Further to this are questions concerning how youth services should be funded, in particular what conditions and strings should be attached to increased wages. Such research, however, does not precede giving youth workers a fair go and improving their wages and conditions. There is already ample evidence that pay and conditions are insufficient, which, among other critical workforce issues, makes it difficult to attract and retain quality workers.

Notes

1. There is not complete consensus about the need for professionalisation and some players still have reservations about such a 'way forward'.
2. The Victorian Government has not yet publicly released the final report from the KPMG investigation *Improving youth service responses in Victoria* more than a year after its completion (Ferrari & Smith 2008).
3. The skill shortage is so critical in Victoria's child protection services that the Department of Human Services (DHS) is actively recruiting staff from overseas (DHS 2008a).

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