

# Giving our youth the promise of a job and a future

## OPINION

It's time for the State to step in and give jobs or training to the growing ranks of unemployed youth, or risk losing much of a generation to welfare dependence and its significant economic and social costs, argues Helen Connolly.



Photo: InDaily

SA needs a 'Jobs Promise' for young unemployed – a guaranteed offer of either a subsidised job, apprenticeship, or training in a government department or agency, for all 15-25 year olds out of work for more than six months.

The jobs promise would provide young unemployed with a public-sector job at a good wage on projects that could include infrastructure upgrades to public and private buildings, environmental and community-development projects, provision of teacher support, community services, and other activities to support the public good.

Without a bold and ambitious plan our economic recovery will not address the issue of youth unemployment, and another generation of young people will face a future of entrenched unemployment-underemployment levels that have sadly and reprehensibly become 'the norm'.

Despite decades' long employment growth and stability, Australia has staggering youth unemployment rates. They sit alongside increasing homelessness and poverty. Initiatives designed to address job shortages through subsidised programs and work for the dole schemes have failed to provide pathways to meaningful employment.

As the impact of COVID-19 starts to sink in, it's time to reflect that there are more than 659,000 un/underemployed young Australians – that's 31.5% of the country's entire youth population.

It's the highest level of youth unemployment I've seen in my working life. It follows a trend that started in the '80s, gained momentum after the GFC, and which has now seen the number of full-time jobs for young Australians halved.

In SA, youth unemployment hotspots include Barossa/Yorke, Mid North, and Port Pirie where rates are more than 15.3%. With the ABS now reporting that one quarter of those directly impacted by COVID-19 are young workers, young people are again bearing the brunt.

As they face a drastically changed job market with jobs traditionally undertaken by young people further eroded by COVID-19, competition for fewer entry-level jobs will be fierce. It's likely we'll also see a widening gap between those with qualifications and experience, and those without.

Young people will be left to suffer the long tail of the post-pandemic recession too, and impacts won't be felt equally across all young people either. Those from low-income households, living in regional areas, from refugee and migrant backgrounds, early school leavers, young parents, young people from jobless families, those living with a disability, and young people who have mental health issues, chronic illness, caring responsibilities, and who are homeless, will be impacted most. These are young people already in need, for whom targeted assistance is already falling short.

We know this well-worn path too well. After two decades of the same/same response we're going to end up with a generation of displaced and (rightfully so) disaffected young people.

If we continue to allow this to be 'the norm' we will create several more generations of young people with little or no work experience, little or no continuous income, and little or no hope for the kind of future they, or their parents and grandparents imagined for them.

The economic, social and community impact of youth unemployment is far reaching. There's not just the lost productivity factor, but also the mental health costs as intergenerational transfer of joblessness continues to impact the most vulnerable across the community.

When unemployed teens become long-term unemployed adults, and they themselves have children who are then living in jobless households, the associated health and social costs are enormous.

The time for change is well overdue, and the data is clear. With youth unemployment rates reaching levels three times higher than those experienced by older Australians – despite young people being more educated than past generations – we must do something different.

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If we are to “build back better” in SA, everyone needs to contribute to finding solutions. We need a rise in productivity that will see no one left behind. We need a plan where everyone, particularly young people, can get a foot in the door. We need to embrace a model of economic and jobs growth that ensures young people are prioritised, and we need to act quickly.

South Australia needs to harness the resources within State control and set targets for youth employment across metro and country regions. This means instructing all government departments to leverage public expenditure to meet these agreed youth employment targets with a promise to our young people that guarantees they receive an offer of a job, apprenticeship, or training in a government department or agency, if they have been out of work for more than six months.

For all the challenges targets and a jobs promise would pose, the benefits could be profound.

The technical problems are not impossible to solve, and more importantly it will be something we haven't tried before.

*Helen Connolly is SA Commissioner for Children and Young People*

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