EDUCATION AND YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

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EDUCATION AND YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

My task today is to introduce key issues for discussion. The meeting is fortunate in having before it not only the series of papers which set out the problems of youth unemployment in the particular countries of the Commonwealth and the manner in which educational and other programs have been used to address them, but also Dr. Kenneth King's illuminating working paper together with the Secretariat's summary of issues for discussion. Given this background material, I propose to concentrate on youth employment (as distinct from youth unemployment) and to consider the contribution that education and training arrangements can make to the adult world. I shall attempt this in a manner relevant to the countries we represent, whether industrialised or developing, although this will require a rather high degree of generality.

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Reading the country papers and Dr. King's working paper I was struck by the paradox of two apparently conflicting impressions. On the one hand, virtually all the countries of the Commonwealth appear to have youth unemployment or underemployment problems of signficant magnitude, whether they are industrialised countries or developing ones. Moreover, virtually all countries have reacted to this by seeking to increase

participation in formal educational institutions, by developing various training schemes and by emphasising vocational as against general education. On the other hand, Dr. King argues convincingly in support of the first proposition of his paper that "there is no common youth unemployment crisis across the Commonwealth". How can we reconcile such different impressions?

The paradox arises largely from the plurality of causes of youth unemployment. Clearly the level of youth unemployment is related to the general level of economic activity. Changes in that level, or in the rate of economic growth, impact immediately on those entering the workforce. If business conditions slacken, new recruits to the workforce will find it difficult to obtain jobs. Unemployment among the young will therefore be especially sensitive to cyclical fluctuations in the economy. What may be even more important for the developing countries is the long-term rate of growth of their formal economies; without high levels of capital formation and associated high growth rates, the rate of job creation will be insufficient to absorb the increasing cohorts of young people leaving the school system.

In the industrialised countries there has been a tendency to attribute youth unemployment to lower levels of economic activity and slower rates of economic

growth in the period since the early 1970s. However, a number of long-term changes has been taking place, as a result of which young people are being locked out of the primary labour market. These structural factors may be present in differing forms and to differing degrees in all countries whether industrialised or developing.

In many countries real wages for junior employees have been rising relative to those for adults. This, combined with the costs of training new recruits, the regulation of the employment of young people and the rates of labour turnover among them, has rendered the employment of the young unattractive: the costs of employing them are simply too high in relation to their productivity. Increasing participation of women in the workforce in the industrialised countries and the possibility of mobility between the informal and the formal economies in the developing countries must also affect the competitive position of the young.

In the industrialised countries long-term changes in the industrial and occupational distribution of employment - in particular the shifts from primary production and manufacturing to service industries, from blue collar to white collar jobs, from tradesmen to technicians - have reduced the number of low-paid jobs available for young unskilled workers: young men

and women can no longer readily obtain full-time paid employment as farm labourers, factory workers or domestic servants. These changes are also likely to affect the developing countries which cannot be insulated from the consequences of technological change on production methods.

There will always be some unemployment among young people as they explore the job market by experimenting with one or another kind of occupation. However long-term unemployment among the young appears to have been increasing in most countries in recent years. Those who suffer such unemployment tend to come from disadvantaged groups, in particular those who have left school early with low educational attainments.

Of all the possible factors responsible for youth unemployment, education can be involved only in respect of the balance between labour costs and productivity. If education is to contribute in any general way to the alleviation of youth unemployment, it can do so only by raising the productivity of the young and thus making them more employable. It cannot in itself remove cyclical fluctuations or cure long-term stagnation. It cannot directly create jobs. Blaming the schools for youth unemployment is a rhetorical scapegoat favoured by some politicians.

Just as education cannot be blamed for youth

unemployment neither can reform of the education system be expected to eliminate unemployment among the young. Nor, indeed, can manpower training schemes which, while they may improve the probability of employment for individual participants, do little more than reshuffle the pack. Job creation depends on economic growth.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

For the young, the problem is not so much that of becoming unemployed as that of entering employment - getting on to a track that will lead to some kind of career. This is true both for industrialised and developing countries. I therefore propose to concentrate on employment rather than unemployment. But first a comment on the concept of employment itself.

Those of us in the industrialised countries who have spent much of our working lives in the three decades of full employment following World War II tend to divide the population between those who are gainfully employed and those who are not in the workforce (young dependants, old dependants, and housewives). To us 'employment' has been a term synonmous with 'useful activity'. Clearly this is not a universal proposition. It was not the case two hundred years ago in the Western world; and it is not the case in the developing countries today where the distinction between the formal and

informal economies is an important one. Moreover, in the industrialised countries the so-called 'underground' economy has become of increasing significance; the acceptance of alternative lifestyles itself implies that employment and useful activity are no long synonymous.

Thus the link between education and employment should be conceived of sufficiently broadly to embrace activities which extend beyond wage earning and employment. This means that in the industrialised countries education has relevance for alternative lifestyles, communal living and leisure activities; and in the developing countries for the informal market.

In discussing education and employment, it is necessary to include within the general rubric of education the training of people in the acquisition of specific skills, even though 'training' in a narrow sense is often not the responsibility of the educational authorities. Many programs for young people, which aim at combating unemployment through training them in particular skills, have a clearly educational role; the distinction between education and training is a hazy one.

The contribution that education and training can make in assisting young people to gain employment

or to undertake useful activities must be by raising their capabilities. For this purpose an increase in formal education is generally desirable; this is the responsibility of the educational authorities. On the other hand, training in the acquisition of specific skills may be best undertaken by on-the-job training together with some classroom instruction, making use wherever possible of assistance from employers and from non-formal agencies; this should be the joint responsibility of the education and employment authorities and of employers and non-formal agencies.

SCHOOL EDUCATION

There are three main arguments for raising the participation of the young in primary and secondary education. The first relates to the view that more education raises productivity in employment and enhances the individual's contribution to society. Over two hundred years ago, Adam Smith advocated the establishment of elementary schools so that all people might be instructed in 'the most essential parts of education ... to read, write and account'. He went on to argue that children should also be instructed in the elementary parts of geometry and mechanics: 'There is scarce a common trade which does not afford some opportunities of applying to it the principles of geometry and mechanics ... '. In spite of those who in Adam Smith's

day feared the effect of education on the willingness of the labouring classes to work, the benefits of universal primary and mass secondary education are widely held to be incontestable.

In the industrial countries trends in workforce participation, the industrial-occupation structure and technological change are good reasons for promoting an expansion of educational activity. The evidence is clear that unemployment is concentrated among early school leavers and the less well qualified. To compete in the labour market young people require an effective education. They also require a broad education for those areas of employment that are likely to expand in the decades ahead - in particular the service industries; and they need a better scientific education to operate in a world of high technology. For the new generations of workers education is also important if they are to enjoy to the full the leisure opportunities that technological progress is likely to bring.

School develops general reasoning skills and and a capacity for learning; these provide the foundation for further vocational education. This is clearly of importance in all countries. However, in the developing countries the affective or non-cognitive results of schooling may be even more important. In the words of a World Bank report: 'Many of the non-cognitive effects

of schooling - receptivity to new ideas, competitiveness, and willingness to accept discipline - are directly related to productive economic activity. Others - tolerance, self-confidence, social and civic responsibility - are more personal or political in nature, but may also affect economic performance.'

The second argument for raising participation in school education relates to equity. In virtually all societies disadvantaged groups participate less in education; this locks them into a cycle of disadvantage. The children of the disadvantaged enjoy fewer years of schooling and achieve lower levels of attainment; thus, disadvantage passes from generation to generation. Increased educational opportunities for the disadvantaged are a step in the direction of a fairer society. As long as there are restrictions on the availability of education the disadvantaged are likely to be grossly under-represented in educational institutions - equality of educational opportunity requires more opportunities.

Thirdly, education is a worthwhile activity in itself. If jobs are not available for young people, alternative activities must be sought; participation in education is obviously preferable to idleness.

VOCATIONAL VERSUS GENERAL EDUCATION

In recent years there has been an increasing

emphasis on vocational education in most countries. This is evident from the country papers. The emphasis on vocational education has been associated with the view that the employment difficulties of the young have in some way been the result of inappropriate curricula and that the curricula of secondary schools, in particular, are too 'academic'.

This tendency to promote a rather narrow vocational education and to argue for specific skills training seems to me to be ill based for a number of reasons. In the first place, a broad general education is needed to provide a firm foundation on which vocational specialisms can be built. In particular, the basic communication skills are a sine qua non for further education.

Secondly, although technical education needs to be promoted, we cannot afford to neglect an understanding of society and human relations: human problems are much less amenable to solution than technical ones. As an increasing proportion of our population becomes engaged in offering services rather than in producing goods, high priority must be accorded to communication skills and an understanding of the human condition.

Thirdly, in a rapidly changing world people are likely to occupy several different jobs during their

working lives. Their capacity for retraining will depend on their having a broad based general education. In the same vein, those whose occupations remain more or less the same over their lifetimes need to be receptive to the up-dating of their skills.

Fourthly, training involving specific skills is generally better undertaken on the job than in formal education institutions. This is as true for doctors and engineers as it is for tradesmen and farm workers.

Fifthly, there is the question of manpower planning. It is hardly necessary to emphasise the difficulty of projecting manpower requirements in any detail. Most exercises in such projections go badly wrong. This suggests the need for educational qualifications which provide an entrée to a range of alternative occupations; and this requires broad based education with the postponement of narrow specialisations for as long as possible.

Finally, many vocational education programs, while aimed at preparing people for the labour market, are in fact training them for non-existent jobs. Given the unpredictability of the level and distribution of employment, it is rational to equip people for a wide range of activities (I say 'activities' rather than 'employment' advisedly) rather than for particular jobs.

The purpose of education is the development in the individual of the capacity to communicate, to make critical judgments, and to understand the society and culture in which he or she lives. In the more colourful words of a recent Australian report on education, education is about 'liberation from the tyranny of irrationality, prejudice and ignorance'. In operational terms the emphasis, at least in the compulsory years, should be on achieving minimum competence in cognitive skills - reading, writing, speaking, calculating and computing - and on understanding one's society and one's place in it. Without such achievements, the individual will not be able fully to contribute to economic growth or fully to participate in the wider activities of society.

My advocacy for general education does not mean that I am necessarily advocating traditional or 'academic' curricula. The curriculum should be seen as the vehicle for the acquisition of basic communication skills and a basic understanding of the societies in which we live. The curriculum can have a variety of emphases and perspectives; indeed, for some students, a broad based vocational curriculum may be appropriate. It is the skills that are important; the tasks through which they are acquired are secondary.

TRAINING

When young people leave school, most wish to enter full-time employment or undertake tertiary education. Full-time employment is not, however, available for anything like the numbers seeking it. In the case of the industrialised countries, full-time employment opportunities for the young have been declining for twenty years or more; in the developing countries, the formal sector is often a relatively small part of the total economy. In both situations the development of training schemes that lie outside both full-time employment and full-time tertiary education is desirable. What is needed is a tripartite partnership between the education authorities, the employment authorities and employers.

In many Commonwealth countries, forms of apprenticeship, derived from the traditional British pattern, are to be found. This pattern has many shortcomings. In the first place it usually covers only the traditional trades in such industries as metal working and building. There is no coverage for the wide range of occupations in commerce, finance, and community service which is becoming of increasing importance in all countries. Secondly, the apprenticeship system usually exhibits an extreme gender bias; this is one reason why, especially in the industrialised countries, young women are particularly disadvantaged in obtaining

jobs. Thirdly, the quality of the training experience is variable and often the supervision of the training arrangements is inadequate. Fourthly the system is expensive for employers since apprentices have to be paid wages: subsidisation of apprenticeships by governments is becoming common. Finally, the availability of apprenticeships depends on the state of business. Businesses take on apprentices when times are good but tradesmen may emerge from them when business is bad and job opportunities are few. Thus, apprenticeship may operate in a perverse fashion in relation to the supply and demand for skilled tradesmen.

Training schemes, as alternatives or supplements to apprenticeship, are to be found in many countries including industrialised and developing Commonwealth ones. These may be directed towards improving employability or merely creating jobs. Most of these schemes have developed piece-meal, as band-aids to patch up particular problems. What are needed are training schemes which integrate in a systematic fashion the responsibility of the education and employment authorities and the employers. The British Youth Training Scheme is an example of one that is developing in this direction.

An integrated training scheme would rest on two foundations. First, the young people concerned would

be trainees and not employees. As trainees, they would be paid training allowances not wages; the allowances would usually be significantly less than wages. Secondly, employers would be expected to provide places within their workforce for a proportion of young people, e.g. 10 per cent of their employees might be trainees. They would thus be required to have a workforce with a reasonably balanced age distribution. This requirement might be achieved by agreement on an industry basis or made enforceable by law.

Trainees might be expected to spend about half their time obtaining on-the-job practical experience (and in doing so contributing to the work of their employer) and about half in more formal education and training. This could be given in educational institutions, in schools run by employers or through non-formal agencies. These arrangements would recognise that, for many young people leaving school, full-time employment opportunities are not available. Many school leavers either do not wish to proceed to further formal education or are not qualified to do so. For these, there would be offered training which would build on the general education offered by the schools and through which young people could ultimately obtain entrée to paid employment in the formal economy or to useful activity of some other kind.

SUMMARY

To sum up. I suggest that the emphasis should be on the role of education and training in preparing young people for the activities in which they will take part in adult life. Greater participation in primary and secondary schooling should be encouraged. At least during the years of compulsory education, school should offer a broad general education, not necessarily of a traditional academic kind, directed towards the acquisition of a minimum competence in communication skills and of an understanding of society and the individual's place in it. Beyond compulsory education, and in addition to the offerings of formal tertiary institutions, there should be training arrangements based on a tripartite partnership of education authorities, employment authorities and employers; in such a partnership non-formal agencies would play an important part.

Above all, attention should be directed towards the activities of the young, whether they are at school or work, in the formal or informal economy, gainfully employed or unemployed, or are involved in some combination of these. There is no simple path from education to employment, but rather a web that entangles educational institutions and authorities, government economic policy, employers, the wider society and the young people themselves.