Strategic engagement: including youth in the development of the *Youth Work Health and Safety Strategy for South Australia*

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Abstract. Young workers represent 40% of Australia's casual workforce and 92% of young workers are also students. Work and study, combined with multiple other time pressures, contributes to negative health and safety outcomes for young workers. Young workers are more likely to be precariously employed, less likely to report incidents, accidents and injuries and may have poorly developed self-advocacy skills. These features make youth a vulnerable part of the workforce. We describe research that framed an overarching *Strategy for Youth Work Health and Safety for South Australia* designed to lead to healthy, safe, fair and productive working lives for young workers.

Keywords. young workers; work health and safety (WHS); participation; organisational design and management

1. Introduction

Young workers (aged 12-25 years) are known to be vulnerable to work-related injury and illness as well as to breaches of their rights at work (Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work in Australia, 2012; Laberge et al., 2011; Martin, Hébert, Ledoux, Gaudreault, & Laberge, 2012). Young workers typically work in precarious jobs, so their vulnerability and sense of insecurity is increased (Furlong & Kelly, 2005). In Australia, 40% of all casual workers are youth and 92% of those are also students (Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work in Australia, 2012). Balancing commitments to work, study, sport, family and other social activities is a challenge for many young workers. When this is coupled with long working days with irregular hours and night work there are likely to be negative outcomes for young workers' health and safety (Laberge & Ledoux, 2011; Martin et al., 2012). The picture is made more complex when overlaid with other findings about young workers; recent research suggests that there is a higher risk of sexual harassment, discrimination and being underpaid for young workers (Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work in Australia, 2012). Finally, young workers have a high risk of injury in the work place (Chin et al., 2010) and tend to be poorly trained in work health and safety (WHS) principles, processes and issues.

Young workers are an 'at risk' group within the working population. There are multiple reasons for this. Workers in precarious employment, such as many Australian young workers, are known to be less likely to report workplace incidents and injuries (Quinlan, Mayhew, & Bohle, 2001). Evidence suggests that young workers who come from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds receive less WHS training than either young workers generally, or other immigrant workers for whom English is their first language (O'Connor, Loomis, Runyan, dal Santo, & Schulman, 2005). The

experience of risk may be gendered; girls who work and attend secondary school were found to experience a high incidence of sexual harassment in the workplace (Fineran & Gruber, 2009), and young women employed as casual workers in small business settings were also exposed to sexual harassment (Levy & Purdy, 2010). These issues may be exacerbated when young workers do not have well-developed self-advocacy skills.

Some research has focused on the need to empower young workers and encourage self-advocacy (Chin et al., 2010). Others have examined the role that advocates might play to help young workers. For example, Castillo (2011) suggests that involving parents in safety information may improve the safety of young workers. Gender may play a role; Tucker and Turner (2014) found that young women were more willing to report WHS concerns than young men.

In response to these facts and research findings, in 2013 we were commissioned by the South Australian WHS regulator (SafeWork SA) to research and develop a *Strategy for Youth Work Health and Safety for South Australia* (the Strategy). The purpose of the Strategy is to guide future action by the regulator and other stakeholders. This paper describes the method, findings and the Strategy.

2. Methods

This research was inclusive in nature; we strove to include the voices of a wide variety of stakeholders including young workers, their advocates (unions and parents), employers and their representatives, educators, and community groups with interest or action in the area of youth. Given the goal of this research we did not conduct a systematic literature review, instead we examined the existing knowledge about programs conducted by government agencies, educational organisations, and community groups in Australia and internationally (not reported here). A Project Steering Committee, consisting of representatives from the main stakeholder groups, assisted us in framing and conducting the research. We also formed a Young Worker Reference Group, comprised of young workers from varied backgrounds, to advise us, user-test research methods and help us to make contact with young workers.

Given we were seeking to interview and interact with minors, we faced considerable ethical considerations. The Central Queensland University Human Research Ethics Committee approved each step in the research. Police clearances were obtained for each of the researchers and additional ethics clearance was obtained from the SA Department of Education, the Association of Independent Schools and Catholic Education to enable us to talk to young people in their schools.

Our research commenced with two anonymous, online surveys (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009) targeting 12-25 year olds. The first asked young people to tell us their WHS stories (n = 72). The second asked young people about their perceptions of WHS (n = 212). An innovation in the research was our use of social media (a Facebook page mirrored on Twitter, and a web page) to access young people in the community, to provide information as well as for recruitment purposes (Minchington, 2010). We found paid advertising on Facebook to be an effective way to increase the number of survey participants. We also used snowballing of contacts through our Project Steering Committee and Young Worker Reference Group to give us the widest possible access to young people and other stakeholders.

We conducted focus groups and small group interviews (n=115) with young people in secondary schools and post-secondary institutions, and with representatives of key stakeholders. Finally, we used a highly participative Future Inquiry Workshop (n = 29) (Blewett & Shaw, 2013) with representatives of the key stakeholders to determine where

the common ground exists and where there is commitment to work for change.

Data analysis was a mix of standard statistical tests and thematic qualitative data analysis that enabled us to dissect our data and the materials available to us and group them in meaningful ways (Strauss, 1987). The outcome of the Future Inquiry Workshop enabled us to be confident that our recommendations would be achievable and would attract collaborative effort.

3.   Results

3.1 Survey of WHS Stories

The first online, anonymous survey attracted 72 WHS stories, both positive and negative, from young workers. Some of the survey responses were very short while others contained considerable detail. We summarised some of these stories during the progress of the research and published them on Facebook to encourage young people to participate. We presented these posts as points for discussion. Our Young Worker Reference Group told us not to expect young people to comment on our Facebook page, and true to form they did not. However, according to Facebook's 'insights' our page had a maximum reach in excess of 15,000 people. Limited paid advertising was responsible for the majority of Facebook 'likes' and we noticed a surge in survey completions following paid advertising.

The WHS stories survey allowed us to develop five composite case stories that were used to illustrate positive and negative WHS matters in our report (Blewett, Rainbird, Clarkson, Etherton & Paterson, 2013). These case studies, drawn from the real experiences of real young workers, are authentic and provide a compelling sense of 'me-too' for young people. For example, *Tamsin's Story* describes a young worker in a retail job who was exposed to physical risks as well as harassment and pressure to work long hours. She felt isolated and abnormal because she was not coping with her work, and as a result ended up resigning from her job. Her next job 'shocked' her because it was 'poles apart'. Here there was a collaborative approach to WHS and she felt valued because her 'contributions were recognised'. Collectively the case studies can be used to demonstrate what it's like to be a young worker, what it feels like to self-advocate or to be disempowered, and what to look for in a healthy and safe workplace.

3.2 Survey of WHS Perceptions

The survey of WHS perceptions attracted 212 valid responses, 37% were aged 12-17 years and 63% aged 18-25. Overall 59% female and 41% were male. Most respondents lived in metropolitan Adelaide (77%) and 62% said they were working as well as studying. Only 16% of respondents were permanent employees, 12% of respondents were full-time workers while 46% were casual workers. Most respondents worked either in retail (46%) or hospitality (30%).

The findings of the second survey indicated that young workers have clear WHS priorities and concerns. Young workers identified that the most important issues were: not being trained to do the job, stress at work, lifting heavy things at work, fatigue from work and bullying at work. Participants were significantly more likely to report an injury at work than they were to report something unsafe or something that might make them sick. Data revealed that young workers may not report because they do not want to cause a problem (64%) and because they don't feel confident (61%). Further, those 17 and under were also likely to not report because they felt too scared to report. However, there were no differences on the basis of gender or industry.

Most young workers (60%) reported that they received information about WHS in the form of work-based training, from their employer (58%), supervisor (49%) or HSR (29%),

while 38% said they received information as part of their studies outside work. Unions were the source of information for 44% of young workers, while 8% sought information from business associations. Participants in the older age group (18-25y) were more likely to identify the internet and social media as additional sources of information about WHS than the younger group.

When WHS issues were discussed or reported, most participants told us that they would be most likely to talk to their workmates and supervisor. Other popular choices were friends their own age, parents, the HSR, and the union. We asked respondents if they had or had not reported and, depending on their answer, they were presented with a series of questions asked about their experience of reporting a WHS issue, or the reasons for not reporting. Of those who had reported, most (79%) went to their workmate, their parent (66%), supervisor (65%), or friend their own age (64%). A small percentage (typically 3%) reported that the response was to be yelled at or ignored, most reported that they were listened to (typically 70%), but only about 20% reported that the problem was fixed. Interestingly, 35% reported to their HSR and of these, 63% reported that the problem was fixed.

The main reason for not reporting a WHS issue to anyone was "I haven't needed to report anything". Fewer than 10% told us they did not report because they expected to be fired, abused, yelled at, ignored or not taken seriously. About 15% reported that they doubted that reporting to given categories of people would make a difference.

3.3 Focus Groups, Interviews and Future Inquiry Workshop

Our focus groups and interviews gave us rich information about the concerns of young workers that were supported by the survey data. The dominant, underlying theme that was that of respect. Young workers want respect for themselves, for the work they do, and for the unique set of priorities and circumstances they bring with them to the workplace. This was often raised specifically in our discussions with young workers and was also implicit in the issues identified by the research. The Future Inquiry Workshop gave us the opportunity to tell stakeholders about our preliminary findings, to hear how stakeholders might work collaboratively in the future, and to find out from them where their priorities for action lay. In summary, we identified 8 key areas for action: the psychosocial working environment; the physical working environment; precarious work and work/life balance; fatigue; training and education of young workers; training and education of employers; the need to hear the voice of young workers; and the obstacles faced by employers. These were incorporated into the Strategy as outlined below.

4.   Discussion and Conclusion

4.1 The Strategy

The key areas for action that emerged from our data framed the *Strategy for Youth Work Health and Safety for South Australia*. Four key strategic action areas were outlined in the Strategy, each with categories for improvement that we identified from our data as illustrated in Figure 1.
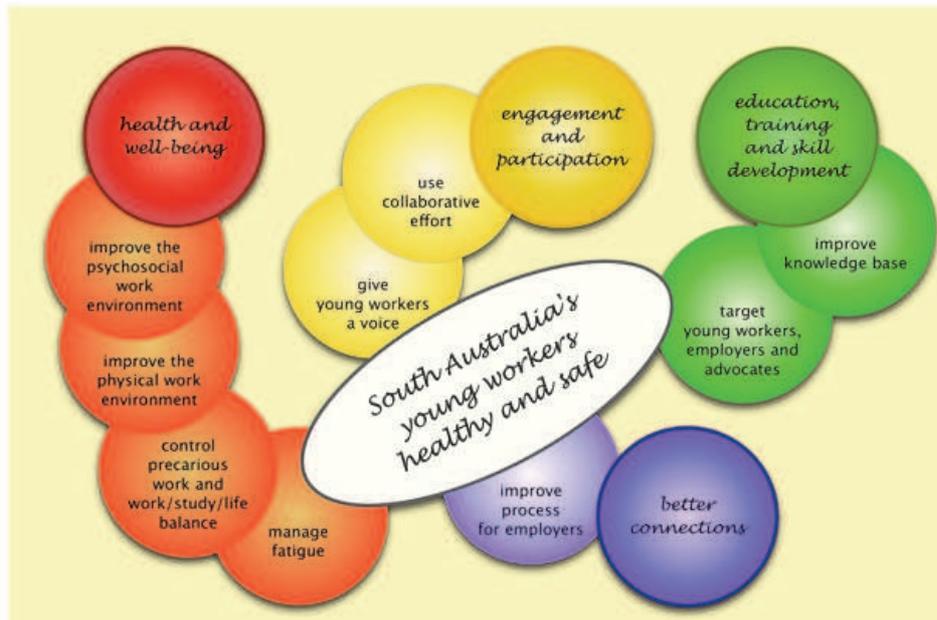
Figure 1: Diagram of the Strategy for Youth Work Health and Safety for South Australia

The first key strategic action area, *Health and Well-Being*, picks up the primary concerns that young workers expressed about the lack of respect that they encounter at work. They considered that lack of respect is evident in the psychosocial and physical working environments, and the precarious nature of young people's work. It is coupled with difficulties in managing fatigue and the many competing demands in their lives.

The strategy of *Education, Training and Skill Development* is key in and of itself, but it is also a means of addressing other strategies. From our data it was clear that training, education and skill development need to be directed to different stakeholder groups and in different ways; that is to young workers, their advocates, and employers. We identified gaps in the knowledge about young workers and work health and safety that can help guide future research. These include: the exploitation of young workers from CALD and refugee backgrounds (including those on student visas); the differences between 'young' and 'new' workers (is it age or experience that counts?); and the management of fatigue when jobs are casual and there is a need to balance work, study and life.

The Future Inquiry Workshop identified that there is considerable energy amongst stakeholders for *Engagement and Participation*; thus a key strategic action was to establish collaborative arrangements to advance knowledge about young workers and to provide a forum for stakeholders to work together. A primary goal for such arrangements is that they give young workers a voice, and that they simplify and encourage reporting of incidents by young workers.

The final key strategic action area, *Better Connections*, acknowledges the experience of small and medium employers who are the predominant employers of young workers. Large employers tend to have specialist resources to manage WHS. Small and medium employers told us they are faced with complex regulation, making compliance difficult. On the one hand, employers acknowledged that they have obligations and responsibilities, both moral and legal, and that they are, in general, keen to comply. On the other hand, young workers (and other stakeholders) asked how employers can register a business without understanding their WHS obligations and responsibilities. Simplifying processes and accessibility for reporting by young workers, and making WHS knowledge a pre-requisite for starting a business are two items that fall under this heading.

4.2 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to frame an overarching *Strategy for Youth Work Health and Safety for South Australia*, taking into account the existing knowledge about what works, and the voices of various stakeholders in South Australia. Our research method was inclusive of stakeholders' voices, and in particular, the voices of young workers. The *Strategy for Youth Work Health and Safety for South Australia* was adopted by the regulator and State government and launched in November 2013. Action plans that will make the Strategy manifest are being developed collaboratively by the stakeholders.

Young workers are well aware of their capacity to do a good job, to learn, to think and they want to be respected for what they are capable of in the workplace. The Strategy provides a road map for change in South Australia that will potentially lead to significant improvements in youth WHS and will help achieve the goal of healthy, safe, fair and productive lives for young workers in South Australia.

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