


# It's time to end the apprentice hunger games

NICK KLOMP

---

By **NICK KLOMP**

12:00AM JULY 10, 2019 •  5 COMMENTS

A wall of inequality was built into our post-schooling system decades ago, and today its legacy has left us with an educational caste system of haves and have-nots.

Despite countless reviews and attempts to break it down, this wall is still dividing ambitious school-leavers into two distinct camps.

The system blesses those who choose university with the full support and protection of an advanced, benevolent economy.

For those who choose an apprenticeship, however, the system retreats to a safe distance to watch the sink-or-swim spectacle of the vocational hunger games.

Never mind the fact our sovereign prosperity demands that both our white-collar and blue-collar workforces perform at their optimum; ours is a system engineered to shelter the journey of a university student while leaving our emerging vocational workforces exposed to jungle law,

The weirdest part of all this is there seems to be a compliant, peaceful acceptance of this inequality, which you simply couldn't imagine were it any other form of social injustice.

I'll be honest; the only reason I happened across the historical disparity built into our system is because I've recently become the vice-chancellor of one of Australia's few dual-sector universities (a university that delivers TAFE courses alongside degrees).

I'm one of a handful of educational leaders who sees first-hand how our educational inequality manifests on both sides of the wall.

Let me demonstrate how the system discriminates by following the journey of two of our students from enrolment to employment, in a region with duelling characteristics of high unemployment and critical skills shortages.

Pete and Rebecca both graduate from North Rockhampton High School with good grades. Pete chooses university, Rebecca prefers an apprenticeship.

Pete enrolls in a bachelor of engineering degree, is accepted, and can start studying in a guaranteed spot within weeks. Should Pete need it, fully funded programs exist to give him confidence and academic prepared-ness from even before his first class, right through to graduation.

As an Australian citizen, Pete is entitled to what is known as “the best loan you’ll ever receive” — a low interest HELP loan with generous income-threshold repayments.

This loan covers 100 per cent of the student contribution component of the tuition fees for his four years of study (expected to be about \$37,000), with the commonwealth government funding 100 per cent of the remainder of his tuition fees (which equates to about \$69,000).

This arrangement is guaranteed for the duration of Pete’s studies, regardless of whether the government changes, or the price of coal collapses, or even if he fails a subject or two.

In total my university receives about \$106,000 of taxpayer subsidies to give Pete a world-class education, so that Australia can benefit from Pete competing at a global level over a lifetime as a professional engineer.

And Pete’s first employer — a local civil engineering firm — gets a fully qualified, job-ready, mature graduate delivered on a silver platter courtesy of the system. Pete’s employer bore no direct expense, and wore none of the risk, in the administration of Pete’s education.

What about Rebecca, the aspiring apprentice?

The system expects Rebecca, as a 17-year-old, to scour her chosen industry for a potential employer, then negotiate the terms of her employment and training package with senior management. She has zero room for error here; if Rebecca doesn’t nail this step, someone else will get her spot.

If Rebecca isn’t quite prepared for the transition from school to apprenticeship, then there aren’t the funded support mechanisms in place — at least not anything like that available to Pete.

There is no student loan available to Rebecca unless her apprenticeship is geared at the diploma level or higher; and even if she is eligible Rebecca faces an upfront loan administrative fee (that is, tax), from which Pete is exempt.

Let’s assume Rebecca begins her apprenticeship, which will take 3½ years to complete. There is zero guarantee that she will be allowed to complete her training, even if she performs at the highest level.

This is because she trains at the discretion of her employer, who hires at the discretion of the economy. Should the Australian dollar rise, or the price of coal drop, Rebecca may lose her apprenticeship part-way through her studies, and is effectively cast out on the street to start over. (This happens regularly, by the way.)

Because of training lag times, this cyclical churn of apprentices plays havoc on workforce dynamics. When the market booms, the pipeline of skilled graduates doesn’t flow because of the crimping that occurs during market downturns. This causes wages to skyrocket, hurting industry even more.

Should Rebecca’s employer manage to keep her on during volatile periods, they have to endure at least two costly years of “high-supervision, low-skill” output from Rebecca while her skills develop.

Meanwhile, the government contribution received by my university to manage the vital classroom aspects of Rebecca’s training is, on average, less than one-third of the funding received for an equivalent higher education qualification.

This is despite the provision of qualified educators, practical workshops, learning materials, facilities and consumables being comparable to that of students such as Pete.

Luck is arguably the major factor in determining whether Rebecca's journey through the system is successful, whereas Pete has to worry only about his own merit. Does this reflect on how differently Australia respects the career choices made by Rebecca and Pete?

Our apprenticeship training system may have served our economy well for a time. But the world has moved on, whereas the way we train our apprentices remains stuck in a bygone era.

Change is needed, and it begins by giving Rebecca's career choice the same respect we pay to Pete.

*Nick Klomp is vice-chancellor of CQUniversity.*