From retention to participation: Reconceptualising student involvement in education, training and employment

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Abstract
The implementation of the first phase of legislation to raise the school leaving age in Western Australia from January 2006 has brought numerous challenges and opportunities to key stakeholders. Students, parents/caregivers, employers, teachers/lecturers and educational managers have each been compelled to reappraise the manner of their interactions with systems designed to facilitate appropriate transitions for young people. Written from a systemic perspective, this paper argues that current measures for evaluating student retention (i.e. the apparent retention rate and return to school rate) have become anachronistic with the new legislation. A more fruitful – although hitherto recondite and in particular, difficult to measure concept – is the level of student participation in one or more of the options of education, training and employment now available to them. The paper proposes a range of criteria by which this may be identified and accomplished, leading to more accurate evaluations of student choices, destinations and outcomes.
Introduction

The home page on the Western Australian Department of Education (DET) website relating to Raising the School Leaving Age (RSLA) commences with an introduction from the current Minister for Education and Training, the Honourable Liljianna Ravlich MLC. In part, this states (www.det.wa.edu.au/schoolleavingage/):

“In the most important change to education in 40 years, the WA Parliament passed legislation on Tuesday, 15 November 2005 to raise the school leaving age to 16 in 2006 and 17 in 2008. It does not mean that all young people have to stay at school. But it does mean that doing nothing is no longer an option. Young people must be in school, training, an apprenticeship or a traineeship, or approved full-time employment - or combinations of part-time education/training and employment. For those young people at risk of not participating in education, employment or training, special support is provided through Participation Coordinators across the State. The Participation Coordinators will work with these young people to develop personalised education and training plans to suit their needs. The Government believes that no young person should be left behind - they are all important.”

The main aim of this paper is to explore the nature of the initial assertion made by the Minister in relation to the chief ways educators are currently able to measure the success or failure of efforts to engage students in education, training, employment or combinations of these activities. In particular, the following seeks to interrogate the utility of three main concepts employed for these purposes in the post-RSLA legislation environment in WA. These are: The Apparent Retention Rate; the Return to School or Grade Progression Rate; and the Participation Rate. As a key performance indicator for the DET in reporting to State and Commonwealth authorities on educational matters, the last measure – the Participation Rate – receives the bulk of critical attention in this paper.

A conclusion is drawn from the following that the Minister is correct in her premonitory appraisal of the impact of the RSLA legislation. Indeed, in certain ways, it may be stated that this confident assurance underplays significantly the far-reaching effect that passage which the Acts Amendment (Higher School Leaving Age and Related Provisions) Bill 2005 is having on the provision and delivery of education and training, as well as on the outcomes anticipated and experienced by young people. The argument is put that, in a range of positive ways, the RSLA initiative in Western Australia presages momentous, ongoing cultural change for students, parents/caregivers, educationalists and employers for the foreseeable future. It is predicted that during the forthcoming five year period, this will be recognised not merely in terms of an alteration in relationships between stakeholders and the system per se, but in particular, to the ways in which strategic assessments as to the performance and measurement of outcomes are conceptualised and conducted. The notion of ‘participation’ is viewed as central to these changes.
Background: Legislative, policy and program context

The genesis of the RSLA legislation in Western Australia lies in benchmark Commonwealth, State and Business funded reports delivered during the 1990’s and early C.21st (MCEETYA, 2000; DEST, 2001; Dusseldorp, 2002; MCEETYA, 2002; and Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004) where it was estimated that the economic cost to Australia from students failing to complete 12 years of education was approximately $2.6 billion (estimated $2.9 billion 2006). The Adelaide Convention in 1999 committed all Australian Ministers of Education to ensure that “…all students have access to the high quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education or its vocational equivalent and that provides clear and recognized pathways to employment and further education and training” (MCEETYA, 1999, 3.6). Subsequently, all States and Territories have initiated plans to raise the school leaving age from 15 to 17 years of age. Whilst planning work towards this aim is ongoing throughout the country, an acute skills shortage in Western Australia in particular led the State Government to fast track relevant legislation. Promoted during a brief public consultation period via the appealing, underpinning principle “15 is too young to stop learning” (Carpenter, cited in DET, 2004), the Acts Amendment (Higher School Leaving Age and Related Provisions) Act 2005 was passed in November 2005 with bipartisan parliamentary and community support, amending the School Education Act 1999 and extending the compulsory period of education and broadening the range of educational, training and employment activities available to students. The legislation took effect in WA in January 2006 with the school leaving age being raised from 15 to 16 years of age. The leaving age will be raised again from 16 to 17 years in January 2008.

The legislation states that students affected will have access to a range of options on a full-time basis. These include: School; undertaking a course of study at a university; higher education course registered under the Higher Education Act 2004; training under the VET Act 1996; an apprenticeship or traineeship; employment (where the Minister may ‘make an approval under any condition’); a prescribed course (e.g. community based course) approved by the Minister; and/or a combination of the above. School students already had access to similar provisions prior to promulgation of the Act. Previously, this had occurred at the discretion of the principal (through S.24 School Education Act 1999). Under these arrangements, school studies plus VET in Schools (ViS) plus Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) had become a common learning combination for students with almost one third of Year 11 enrollees accessing such options at the beginning of 2006. Thus, whilst the principle of combinations had already become well established it can be stated that a key purpose of the Acts Amendment Act 2005 was to extend this to a broader range of possible combinations and place greater decision making in the hands of students and parents/caregivers rather than principals.

The Acts Amendment Act 2005 consequently introduced a minimum of administrative mechanisms to assure compliance, the primary one being ‘Notices of Arrangements’. These comprise Forms A, B and C, whereby:
• Form A is intended for completion by students who engage in previously approved, accredited programs;

• Form B is for those who wish to engage in a Combination of Options (i.e. school, TAFE, employment)

• Form C is to be completed by students who wish to undertake employment

Importantly, a young person at school is not obliged to inform the Minister.

To deal with the strategic, tactical and operational exigencies and opportunities created by the Acts Amendment Act 2005 the Retention and Transition Program Implementation (RATPI) Directorate was established and housed within DET. The three key roles and responsibilities of the Directorate are:

• Firstly, to facilitate the implementation of the of the RSLA legislation in a manner that effectively engages all 15-17 year olds, with a focus on students who traditionally have not completed year 11 and 12 (or equivalent)

• Then, to support the Department (e.g. TAFE colleges and schools) in the development of improved or new programs (i.e. learning programs, learning environments, career development and support services) for students most at risk of disengaging

• Finally, to build collaborative links between the DET, other government departments, industry and community organisations and groups to develop programs to improve the life outcomes for young people at risk of disengagement in particular.

Staff involved in this enterprise comprises a small Central Office team and 14 Managers of Participation (MPs) and 30 Participation Coordinators (PCs) located in the 14 Education Districts of WA. The number of PCs in Districts will be increased gradually to approximately 100 by 2008 when stage two of the legislation is implemented. It is significant to note that, on one hand, whilst attached to DET, the Directorate is actually an agency of the Minister and not simply another branch of DET; and on the other, that the activities of the Directorate are destined to become mainstreamed within DET (provisionally) within a five year timeframe when the central office team will be disbanded and the activities of the Directorate continued at the district level.

**Immediate effects of the legislation**

The overt, early (May, 2006) indication, is that the legislation has been effective in terms of general compliance with the legislative provisions. At the February 2006 census conducted by DET of all schools (government and non-government) approximately 98% of the (estimated) 29,200 strong cohort of 15 year olds was identified as returning from Year 10 to Year 11 to engage in education, training, employment or combinations of these options. Between February and May, MPs and PCs in districts have identified approximately 1800 students at risk of disengagement and have been or are currently engaged in formulating Individual Pathway Plans (IPPs) to assist these
young people with identifying appropriate programs for engagement with education, training and/or employment options. Toward this end, over 800 Notices of Arrangements have been issued at 10 May 2006. Notwithstanding several pressure points that have been identified in the system (these are evident particularly in terms of: Firstly, the number and variety of programs available to students; secondly, the availability and suitability of staff to teach students in these programs; and thirdly, concerns from teachers in schools as to increased levels of disruption from small groups of students for whom mainstream classes are clearly unsuitable) generally speaking, it can be stated that the first stage of implementation has operated successfully.

**Reporting on the Retention and Transition Program Implementation**

Indeed, it appears that one of the singular dilemmas facing program managers at this time is determining precisely how to report on the progress – success or otherwise – on the implementation from strategic and systemic perspectives. Three measures are currently being employed. These are: The Apparent Retention Rate; the Return to School or Grade Progression Rate; and what may be called the Participation Rate. Before examining these in turn however, a few points need to be made regarding the size and nature of the cohort of students under review, the data produced when counting these, the methods of collection employed and the manner in which data is analysed and reported.

**The cohort** involved here concerns the numbers of Western Australian students counted who, under the terms of the legislation, are or should be, currently engaged in education, training, employment or combinations of these activities as Year 11’s in 2006. These are the students with a 1990 birth date who will turn 16 years of age this year. This group can be said to have started high school in 2003 and will finish Year 12 or its equivalent in 2007. The group includes all students at government and non-government schools in Western Australia. The group also encompasses students engaged in courses at TAFE Colleges, Private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), in gazetted community based courses and those involved in traineeships and apprenticeships. The cohort additionally refers to those in part and full time employment from this age/year group who are currently residents in Western Australia. Calculations involving the group are intended to exclude mature age students studying at a Year 11 level and full fee paying international students engaged in these education, training, employment and/or combination options.

Whilst it may seem irregular to the layperson, those working in educational management or those with a bare minimum of statistical knowledge of the field will acknowledge that there are likely to be significant difficulties involved when attempting to calculate exactly how many young people are associated with the group as defined. The problems are exacerbated by the timing, purposes and types of data collection systems used for calculations.
One would assume that a reasonable starting point for establishing a base-line would be figures produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). This organisation has statutory authority for the production of population figures, a well resourced network for the painstaking and precise tasks of data collection and compilation, as well as some of the finest statisticians and analysts in their fields. However there are two main issues to take into account when using ABS data as a starting point to calculate the exact size of the current Year 11 cohort in WA. Firstly, there is the timing of and intervals between census dates. The last census was taken in 2001; and in 2006, at the end of the five year interval, the closest estimate of the size of the cohort must be a projection – which the ABS obligingly represents in comprehensive sets of tables (ABS, 2006). Although, even this is problematic, given that the projections provided by ABS specify exact ages (i.e. 15 years of age, 16 years of age etc.) and not a school age group (i.e. 15 years, turning 16 years of age in 2006). Nevertheless, as a base line, this is arguably the most credible – and certainly, from a viewpoint of national comparison, highly respectable – starting point. Consequently, taking the ABS projection (which accounts for overseas and interstate migrations) and calculating a mid point between years of the tables provided (ABS, 2006) one may say that there should be approximately 29,067 students comprising the cohort. Notwithstanding, this must come with the rider that, given the (projected and estimated) nature of the calculation, as well as the fact that WA is in the midst of a resources ‘boom’ which can be expected to have engendered heightened levels of migration to the State to those calculated by the ABS (i.e. housing industry sources estimate several hundred interstate and international families per week more are taking up residence in the State prior to the onset of the ‘boom’) one may conservatively estimate a one percent (i.e. +/- 297 students) variance, with the likelihood that the final total would be on the higher rather than lower side of such an adjustment. Thus, a best guess from the ABS data would be, probably, around 29,200 students in the 2006 Year 11 cohort.

This figure however sits uncomfortably with the number of 27,530 Year 10’s recorded in the DET August 2005 census taken of all government and non-government students. Although, for similar reasons that the figure produced by the subsequent February 2006 DET census for Year 11 of the same cohort this figure cannot be taken as a definitive representation of the precise size of the cohort, neither can this. During the February 2006 census of all government and non-government schools only 26,321 students were recorded as enrolled at this time – around 2,900 students or roughly 9% less than the total cohort as calculated from ABS projections (or 96% - or 1,200 students less than the previous [August] DET census count). The 2006 census was taken in mid February, a fortnight after the commencement of the school year and inevitably includes some degree of double counting of students who were listed on school rolls (i.e. as Year 10’s in 2005 who had indicated they would be returning to Year 11 in 2006) although had moved either to other government or non-government schools, or enrolled at TAFE Colleges or Private RTO’s or had gained Apprenticeships or Traineeships or full-time employment. How much double counting – or undercounting – is difficult to gauge, although one could again (i.e. as with the ABS count) factor in a variance of roughly +/- one percent or 290 students. In either case, this could provide an estimated size for the cohort ranging from approximately 27,000 to 26,600.
One may account for some of the ‘missing’ (2,000-2,500) students as attending either TAFE Colleges or Private RTO’s or having secured Apprenticeships or Traineeships or employment – or perhaps, as having just ‘dropped out’ – gone travelling, or occupying a sofa somewhere. Whilst it is inevitable that a small number will have adopted the latter course(s) of (in)action, it is unlikely, given estimations of the numbers of students exercising the former options, that such a number would exceed several hundreds (say, 300 or around 1%). Although accurate counts of the numbers of students attending TAFE Colleges and Private RTO’s are almost impossible to determine (on one hand, because TAFE does not actually count the number of students at sites but the number of course hours consumed by students [AVETMIS, 2006]; and on the other hand, because few Private RTO’s appear to be aware of the reporting requirements regarding student enrolment and attendance under the Acts Amendment Act 2005 [La Cava & O’Neill, Personal Communication, 2006]) estimations from data compiled by the VET Statistics Unit (DET, 2001-2005) put the numbers engaged in training and employment options in the first semesters of these years in the range of 400-500. Consequently, one may estimate the size of the cohort as approximately, somewhere between 29,200 and 27,000 students. Although, obviously, the exact size of the cohort is uncertain.

These kinds of statistical acrobatics may appear unseemly for a government department charged with a duty of care for the young people involved. To be unaware as to the precise number of students may seem a failure to execute this duty. However the reality of the matter is that, on each of the 376 (minimum) sites which this cohort inhabits, counts of students present or absent would be considerably more accurate. This is assured by several (sometimes nine) roll calls per day and significant numbers of student services staff tracking down students who have been absent for extended periods. The issues reviewed above therefore, viewed to emanate primarily from problems of compilation, are consequently, more closely associated with the central systems of data collection and integration involved.

**Systemic data collection and compilation** utilised to arrive at the figures reviewed above are drawn from official census counts conducted by the Evaluation and Accountability Directorate statistics (census) Branch of the DET. To refine the count further, three other sources can be used. These units are the DET/VET Statistics Unit (for TAFE figures), the Apprenticeships and Traineeships Directorate, and the Human Resources Branch. For government schools only, a number of officers argue that this last source is more reliable than the first in terms of the overall count of students in the cohort

* There are actually two further sources of information/systems of collation available – making six in total. The fifth is the ABS data on which population projections are based. This has already been discussed in preceding sections of this paper. The sixth is from the Curriculum Council of Western Australia. This source has the potential to become the most reliable of all the five sources. Under the RSLA legislation, this statutory authority will issue all high school students with a unique identification number that will enable superior monitoring of student whereabouts and activities. Currently however, data sighted which has been produced by this body is at significant variance with that from the other five sources and has been omitted from current calculations.
and additionally, adds depth and complexity to this insofar that it requests categorisation of students by disability level and support requirements. (Indeed, there is an ongoing, gentle rivalry between the two branches over which count is more accurate overall and certainly, in conjunction with ABS data and the official census count, HR figures provide a useful point of triangulation where government school student counts are concerned). This paper however has looked only to official DET census counts, although even this is not so cut and dried as might first appear.

The bulk of the information provided to these units issues from two major student database systems used in government schools (the SIS/STIMS and MAZE systems), from an estimated 14 different student database systems used in non-government schools and from the AVETMIS-oriented systems used in TAFE Colleges. It is anyone’s guess as to the types and numbers of systems used by (a possible 300 plus number of) Private RTOs operating in WA at the current time. Self-evidently, the margin for error – especially given the purposes for which information is requested and the fact that only two of the (approximately) 17 site based systems are accessible centrally – is significant. Indeed, these margins are increased further when examining the methods of measurement for which the collected data is employed.

The Apparent Retention Rate ARR is possibly the most utilised measure in reporting the number of students ‘staying on at school’, although probably the most unsatisfactory to employ at the early stage of RSLA program implementation. This is for several reasons. Foremost, by virtue of definition, the ARR refers to the number of students who are retained in school over a five year period. As Lamb, Walstab, Teese Vickers & Rumberger (2004, p.102) succinctly put the case, an ARR “…is expressed as the percentage of Year 7/8 students who progress to Year 12”. For the cohort of 1990 birthdates starting Year 8 in 2003 therefore, this puts the group in the fourth year of a five year cycle which, obviously, runs counter to the parameters of the definition. A second – equally cogent – argument that can be mounted against employing the ARR as a predominant measure of success or failure at this early stage is that the ARR is a somewhat blunt statistical measurement in any case. (Indeed, the term ‘apparent’ in the nomenclature is intended to reflect this). There are a number of studies (Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Lamb et al., 2004; Campbell, 2003; MCEETYA, 2002; Marks & Fleming, 1999; Teachman, Paasch & Carver, 1996) detailing the problems and issues associated with the extent to which the ARR can be viewed as an accurate reflection of numbers of students completing Year 12. Perhaps the most significant of these is the fact that a final ARR involves significant statistical modelling (see, Lamb et al., 2004, especially Ch’s 7-8) in order to compensate for increases and decreases in the size of the cohort over the five year cycle. One may observe that to do otherwise, simple acceptance of the ARR for the cohort currently in question would provide an inflated impression that there is a 99% ARR. This ‘inflation’ occurs owing to the size of the cohort actually increasing by 1.6% in earlier stages of the cycle – and is therefore unrepresentative of what is more likely an ARR of about 97.6% (n.b. adjusted slightly to compensate for the problem of double counting which, on extant evidence, probably occurred during relevant census counts).
And this figure, self-evidently, stands at considerable variance to the figure attached to ABS projections (i.e. as discussed above).

Nonetheless, it is evident that despite such problems, ultimately, the ARR will provide a key measure as to the success or failure of the RSLA legislation in general and the implementation program in particular. Certainly, this is a favoured method of reporting progress used by the ABS and other monitoring agencies such as the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth or LSAY. Consequently, whilst not entirely apposite for use until the end of the cycle, the ARR can be utilised as an instrument to provide an indication to assist ongoing evaluations by comparing and benchmarking current against preceding progress during cycles.

The Return to School Rate (RSR) is possibly a more fruitful way to present a measure of the progress for the RSLA initiative during the early stages. Referred to in various documents as a ‘Grade Progression Rate’ (Rousel & Murphy, 2000), this refers to the number of Year 10 students recorded as enrolled in schools at the August census date who return to schools to resume studies in Year 11 and are recorded as enrolled at schools during the February census. The relevant figures are presented in Table 2. This measure provides a more specific snapshot of student numbers at a given point in time; although, its veracity and usages may by no means be considered unproblematic. Foremost, several of the issues highlighted above with respect to the ARR resurface. These involve double counting, undercounting and the time lag involved between data collection points. Whilst the two former issues are self explanatory, the latter presents several interesting points of speculation. The time lapse between August and February provides data that appears in official publications as data for ‘Semester One’ and ‘Semester Two’. Whilst this may be viewed as a slight misnomer in that the first is collected at the beginning of the year/term one period, and the second, mid-way through term three, the problem thereby highlighted is not insignificant. When one examines relevant SIS/STIMS data for the beginning of December, a discrepancy of around 1% or 250 (less) students exists between this and the official (August) census count (i.e. in those schools which actually employ SIS/STIMS). The question arises therefore, ‘Why is there a decline in recorded student enrolments during the final 12-14 weeks of the Year 10 school year?’ In the absence of a full range of quantitative data and similarly, a lack of qualitative input, this must remain an open question – although underscores an issue associated with the veracity of official DET census data. It could be that part of the answer may lie with data not readily obtainable from TAFE and the Apprenticeships and Traineeships branches (i.e. owing to the different data collection and compilation methods and times in these branches). A proportion of the students concerned (and by extension, perhaps numbers of students at MAZE schools and non-government schools as well) may be heading off to TAFE and/or laying the groundwork for joining employment as apprentices and trainees, although the data available may be considered somewhat too speculative to support this assumption at this stage.
And this, ostensibly, is the key point to be made here. The RSR – as with the ARR – provides a somewhat incomplete picture as to influences affecting the size of the cohort. As with the ARR, the RSR is not a particularly reliable way to gauge the success or otherwise of the RSLA legislation and the operations currently underway to support this. At any one time, the figures produced may be considered ‘reliable’ with a one to three percent (1 – 3 %) margin for error; which, in a cohort of approximately 29,200 means that almost 2,000-2,500 students may be unaccounted for at any time. Clearly, another system of measurement is required.

The Participation Rate (PR) may well provide this. Whilst there are several educational and academic definitions specifying what constitutes a Participation Rate (some of these are discussed below), the primary one for the purposes of evaluating the success of the RSLA initiative and the accompanying implementation program must operate within the context – or more precisely, parameters – established by the State and Commonwealth Governments. In this respect, these bodies employ the term in specific ways to determine the extent to which Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s) are met for purposes of intergovernmental agreements and reporting on educational matters.

Thus calculation of a Participation Rate is associated closely with the effectiveness indicators ‘Outcome One: Quality education for Western Australians who choose government schooling’ and to a lesser extent, ‘Outcome Two: A responsive vocational education and training sector which meets the needs of Western Australian students and employers’. The former refers specifically to the proportion of young people (defined here as 15-19 year olds) who are engaged at school (government and non-government) universities or Vocational Education and Training (VET). The latter, more generally to the proportion of the WA population aged from 15-64 years of age enrolled in publicly-funded VET through the WA DET. Whilst both measures have a degree of utility however, neither can be viewed as very precise instruments for purposes of measuring the success or otherwise of the RSLA initiative. This is because, in both cases, the parameters explaining participation do not take into account what can be said to constitute participation under provisions of the RSLA legislation.

Under the Acts Amendment (Higher School Leaving Age and Related Provisions) Act 2005, participation may be taken as that proportion of the total number of young people in an age group who are in full-time education (school, further or higher education); in training (TAFE or Private RTO’s involved in (pre)Apprenticeships or Traineeships), in full-time employment, or in part-time education or training combined with part-time work. Current definitions for the calculation of a rate of participation by young people however (whether in relation to the specific cohort under review in this paper, or more widely, the 15-19 year old age group) do not take into account the involvement of Private RTO’s or employment (part or full-time) which may be accessed.
Interrogating Participation

Thus, responding on the assumption that there will usually be exceptions to hard and fast pronouncements intending to direct the activities of human beings, three questions follow in quick succession:

- Why participation?
- What can be said to constitute participation in the reality of affected stakeholders?
- How may one measure a participation rate?

Why Participation?’ is a deceptively simple question which, in the first instance, can be answered in very simple terms: Because there is little other choice. The RSLA initiative provides for four options to facilitate student engagement: Full-time schooling; full-time training at TAFE; full-time employment; and/or part-time combinations of the three. Clearly, measuring retention or grade progression will cover only some of these kinds of engagement. Formulation and calculation of a participation rate involving all of the different options available to students for engagement will provide a necessary corrective and additionally, has the potential to provide more fulsome responses to questions regarding the actual size and nature of the cohort under consideration.

In the second instance, there are compelling – if somewhat more esoteric – reasons issuing from recent work emerging in Nordic countries in educational philosophy and theory as to why formulation and calculation of a participation rate would be a more apposite measure of student engagement than the ARR and/or RSR. An article entitled The punctual fallacy of participation (von Wright, 2006) for example, traverses the difficult although relevant and insightful notions of punctual and relational perspectives of communicative action in learning and teaching environments. In the current context the import of this article (and those used by von Wright to construct her case), is that an intellectual argument can be mounted to suggest that education (and by extension, training and workplace learning) is not something which occurs at a given place and time; but rather, occurs primarily by virtue of the communicative relationships constructed through actions adopted by students to make meaning regarding their personal situations. Whilst this idea could use considerably more investigation than can be dedicated in the current paper, the point is clear: Participation, rather than retention or progression is likely to be a more useful concept for looking at what students are actually doing from personal as well as systemic perspectives.

What can be said to constitute participation in the reality of affected stakeholders therefore may be brought more sharply into focus. From a systemic perspective, a definition is required that is more encompassing than that which is currently applied. At present, participation is measured by counting students engaged in full-time schooling, VET courses and higher education. A more rigorous definition in light of newly created contextual and educational factors brought about by the RSLA legislation would be: That proportion of the cohort actively engaged in education, training, employment and/or combinations of these options. Although, this said, several points require clarification regarding how one may measure participation in these terms.
How one may measure participation as defined in such a way requires reference, firstly, to defining the total numbers of students involved. The definition as stated refers only to ‘the cohort’. This is in recognition of the problems and issues outlined in preceding sections of this paper dealing with actual numbers of students involved. Whilst, obviously, it is a priority to determine as closely as possible the number of students involved in this or any other exercise, it seems unproductive – ideological rather than intellectual – to create a baseline from a single data source when there are others with equivalent credibility (and problems) at variance. For the purposes of determining the size of the cohort therefore, an argument can be mounted that, for the current cohort of Year 11’s, a figure be derived via triangulation involving the three most credible sources: That is to say, the DET census calculation of Year 10’s from the August count (27,500); an adjusted ABS Population Projection (29,200); and when available, the Curriculum Council figure involving the total number of unique student identification numbers for current Year 11 students. Of course in the absence of the third source indicated here, a simple mean of the former two will needs suffice (28,350) for the 2006 cohort. Should further adjustments, verification (and negotiation) for a different number be required, this can be obtained from contributing and related data sources (see above, ‘Systemic data collection and collation’).

A second point to be made regarding the favoured definition for a Participation Rate is that it contains the specification ‘actively’. The issues involved here are primarily pedagogical, but they are also contextual and, in a sense, philosophical. The term is included in the definition primarily in acknowledgement that, just because a student is counted as enrolled in (say) full-time schooling, does not necessarily mean that s/he is actually engaged in any purposeful activity other than mere attendance. And of course, the same can be said for those ‘students’ nominally undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships or those who are employed. In one way, this may be viewed as a flaw in the RSLA legislation in Western Australia. Under the Queensland RSLA legislation for example (Youth Participation in Education and Training Act 2003), as well as attendance, certain benchmarks for attainment are established (i.e. gaining a senior certificate or a Certificate III etc.). This is not entirely explicit in the Acts Amendment Act 2005 however. Consequently, it would seem reasonable that, when calculating the eventual participation rate for a cohort, suitable gauges of active participation are factored into determinations. Whilst these are open to further consideration and negotiation at this stage, one would envisage measures such as school and TAFE graduation rates and completion rates for apprenticeships and traineeships.

Conclusion

Thus, in the current timeframe, formulation and calculation of a participation rate to measure the success or otherwise of the RSLA initiative in Western Australia would appear as a moving feast. Clearly, traditional measures applied to gauge measures of effectiveness such as the ARR and RSR are inadequate to deal with the legislative changes. Although similarly, one may say that the same applies to what currently passes as a participation rate. This is evident in the way the participation rate is currently
(officially) determined and even in the way suggested in this paper that a more rigorous and encompassing definition may be applied.

Consequently, at this early stage in implementation processes designed to embed the RSLA legislation in WA and prior to more detailed consideration as to how to deal with the issues at hand, a proposal is put, to meld the old with the new. Currently, the simplest and perhaps most effective way to measure a participation rate for year 11’s in 2006 is to take the number of Year 11 students counted at the August 2006 school census, add to these the number of students registered as having submitted Notices of Arrangements by that same date, and calculate the total as a proportion of the number who commenced Year 11 in February 2006. Similar calculations can be made in August 2007 when the ASR and the ARR can be used in calculations. Although, hopefully by this time, more consideration will have been given to what promises to become the thorniest issue regarding participation in Western Australia, that of active participation in education, training employment and/or combinations of these.

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