

## **On Track to What? A Foucauldian analysis of a recent Victorian post-compulsory education policy initiative**

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## ***On Track to What? A Foucauldian<sup>i</sup> Analysis of a Recent Victorian Post-compulsory Education Policy Initiative***

### **Abstract**

*Drawing on research findings, this article attempts an ‘eventalization’ (Foucault 1991a) of the implementation of On Track, a recent initiative in Victorian post-compulsory education policy. I argue that On Track can be understood as an act of surveillance that not only manages but also produces a risk that is deemed manageable by government. Those aspects of the risk that are unmanageable are rendered invisible. Hence the inherent tension for LLLEN in implementing On Track Connect: while there is a growing recognition of the need to understand youth transition in late modern times as being a ‘recursive state’ (Lesko 2001) the governance framework persists in constructing youth transition as partaking of panoptical time that compels us to attend to progress, precocity, arrest, or decline through initiatives such as On Track.*

### **Introduction**

Current ideas of youth development portray a slow steady movement toward adulthood. These ideas partake of panoptical time; a time framework that compels us – scholars, educators, parents, and teenagers – to attend to progress, precocity, arrest, or decline’ (Lesko 2001, p.41). Foucault had introduced the notion of the panopticon to explore a mode of surveillance in prisons that was total and affected the subjectivities of both the prisoner and the guard. Panoptical time can be used to explore how ideas of what is ‘normal’ development are used to privilege certain ways of being, to monitor who is deemed to be ‘at risk’ of not conforming to these notions and to govern their behaviour. Such at-risk discourses construct youth as making decisions, adopting behaviours and dispositions that jeopardize certain preferred, ‘fundamentally normative’ futures (Kelly 2000 p.468). In the process of seeking to manage risk, new aspects of risk are created thereby constituting further areas for intervention. This paper draws on this perspective to consider the implementation of *On Track* within Victorian post-compulsory education policy as an instance of panoptical time and explores the consequences of that policy for one Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN).

### **Panoptical Time**

... not all times are the same ... There remain public and private times, slower and faster times, and more and less rationalized times. (Lesko 2001 p.35)

Lesko (2001) argues that the modern age is defined by time. She adopts the suggestion that it is the clock, not the steam engine, that is the premier machine of the industrial age. Drawing on Landes (1983), Lesko notes the invention of the clock brought the ability to attend to the passage of time and thereby to make judgments of productivity and performance; productive use of time became one measure of valuable individuals in Western contexts. The sciences were also active in the imposition of panoptical time; for Foucault (1973) this occurred in the development of natural history and the shift from a concern with the laws and regularities of the cosmos to the description of change and growth in nature over time. Disciplines such as anthropology located 'primitive' others in 'another time and place' while the 'developed' were granted the 'here and now' (Fabian 1991 cited Lesko 2001 p.37). In narratives of cultural evolution and youth development it is the ending that is important, such narratives allow today's events to be read as omens of tomorrow. Foucault suggested such 'mutations of history' involve an attempt to preserve sovereignty of the subject as if 'we were afraid to conceive of the *Other* in the time of our own thought' (1972 p.12, original emphasis). Otherness is 'ominous': the future may be diminished by the actions of those who cannot or will not act in conformity with our construction of responsible or civilized ways (Lesko 2001 p.37).

Narratives of youth development evolved alongside social practices in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: longer stays in school, organised leisure activities for youth, juvenile justice policies and protection from child labour (Lesko 2001 p.38). Consequently youth were understood as 'becoming', 'a situation that provoked endless watching, monitoring, and evaluation' (Lesko 2001 p.38). The development of physical and psychological stages of 'normal' development such as those of Piaget and Erikson are both, for Lesko, examples of panoptical time. The implementation of age-graded schools is a further example that is particularly pertinent to this discussion. Chudacoff (1989 cited Lesko 2001 p.49) argues that the concentration of youth of the same age together in 'stage-based' schools resulted in decreased tolerance of variation from the standards of 'normal' development. Progressing through the levels of the school has become normative, a plethora of statistical age-based norms have become the basis of not only governance but also of the way that youth think of themselves and their future opportunities (Hacking 1991 cited Lesko 2001 p.50). I will now consider how such use of panoptical time has resulted in notions of youth at risk.

### Youth-at-Risk

Increasingly alienated, in the classical sense, young people are also increasingly *alien*, alienated others, differently motivated, designed, constructed. And the awful possibility presents itself, insistently: they

aren't simply visiting us, after which they'll simply go away; rather, they are here to stay, and they're taking over  
 (Green & Bigum 1993 cited Kelly 2003, p.166; original emphasis)

Discourses of youth at risk often derive from concerns about globalisation. Globalisation is a term that conveys a number of intertwined phenomena (see Giddens 1999a; Hutton & Giddens 2001; Strain 2000, van der Veen, 2000). The uncertainty of youth transitions in the globalised context has created a context where various experts are called on to assist in calculating and measuring risk thereby attempting to better understand, intervene in and control youth transitions (Kelly 1999). The process of watching and monitoring youth in and of itself results in their transitions being understood in increasingly complex and uncertain ways (Kelly 1999) and constitutes a range of anxieties about the dangers posed by, and to, some youth (Kelly 2003). In part this reflects the historically novel character of at-risk discourses (Kelly 2000) in that all youth are potentially at risk of 'something' (Tait 1995 cited Kelly 2000 p.466)<sup>11</sup>. While discourses of risk build on a historical process of constructing certain populations as deviant, delinquent and deficit (Swadener 1995 cited Kelly 1999, p.204) when applied to youth such narratives provide almost unlimited opportunity to regulate behaviour and disposition (Kelly 1999).

Kelly draws on Beck (1992, p.130) to explore the conditions whereby individuals have '*become the reproduction unit for the social in the life world*' (original emphasis). Beck argues that processes of individualisation both carry and are carried by processes of standardisation: they deliver individuals 'over to an *external order and standardization*' that was unknown in earlier eras (Beck 1992, p.132; original emphasis). At the same time, individuals are responsible for managing risk notwithstanding that the risks have been produced by institutions and society: risks are positioned as '*consequences of the decisions [individuals] themselves have made*' (Beck 1992, p.136; original emphasis). Such decisions include the decision to leave school at a point beyond the duration legislated as compulsory but now identified as 'early'. The youth-at-risk discourse establishes specific ideas about 'certain preferred or ideal adult futures and the present behaviours and dispositions of youth' (Kelly 1999, p.204; original emphasis). In other words, it is based in panoptical time which mobilizes particular uses of expertise to watch, monitor and evaluate the progress youth make toward adulthood (Lesko 2001) and the labour market, the 'motor' of individualised risk (Beck 1992). While the category 'youth-at-risk' has come to function as a generalised deficit category (Bessant 2002) it can, however, be used to explore how 'knowledge' about youth is transferred into "obvious" post-compulsory education policy and the implementation of responses that do not necessarily align with the lived experience of the young unemployed (Bessant 2002, p.38).

My interest in this paper is to consider a recent initiative in post-compulsory education policy in Victoria from this perspective. It is to an brief overview of that policy that I now turn.

### **LLEN and *On Track*: post-compulsory education initiatives in Victoria**

In Victoria policy responses to concerns around globalization and risk have focused on references to 'community building' and 'lifelong learning'. Since 2001, 31 Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN) have been established across Victoria, Australia following the Ministerial Review into Post-Compulsory Education and Training Pathways (the Kirby Review). LLEN fit within broader Victorian policies on community building and joined-up government. These policies are "based on the premise that a community that takes ownership of and responsibility for local problems is likely to be effective in resolving these problems" (VLESC 2003, p.1). The perceived success of organic networks to collaboratively engage with youth training, education and employment issues has led to the adoption of networks in a number of policy strategies by the Victorian Labour government since 2000, including school networks and LLEN.

While school networks would operate across established institutions, LLEN involved the formation of new entities: incorporated associations with an elected and Chaired Committee of Management. Committee of Management composition of LLEN is rule-governed to ensure its composition reflects a range of community sectors. The work of the LLEN is undertaken by a small staff often comprising only an Executive Officer and an Administrative Officer thereby ensuring that LLEN "not become an additional layer of bureaucracy" (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000, p5).

During 2003 the Victorian government introduced a further policy initiative focused on issues of youth transition from education to employment. *On Track*:

... an important Victorian Government initiative designed to ensure that Year 10 to 12 government and non-government school students are on a pathway to further education, training or employment after leaving school  
(VLESC 2004 p.2)

*On Track* involves contacting all students in Years 10, 11 and 12 who left school the preceding year. The *On Track* policy is a State initiative that converges with the monitoring and tracking element of the Career and Transition Services Framework (Department of Education, Science and Training 2003) launched by the Federal government in 2003. The intent is to identify those youth not involved in education, training or full-time employment: any young person not 'appropriately' involved is referred to

LLEN for additional support. This component of *On Track* is called *On Track Connect* and involves LLEN drawing on their knowledge of local agencies, networks and support systems to broker and negotiate ‘appropriate referral arrangements’ and to provide advice to adolescents about options for ‘reengagement’ thereby connecting them with an ‘appropriate pathway’ (VLESC 2004, p.2).

The information gathered through *On Track* is to be used to provide a ‘better understanding of outcomes of education as well as assisting Government to improve pathways planning both centrally and at the local level’ (VLESC 2004 p.2). The data collected is provided to schools and aggregate data is provided to LLEN. For Kelly (1999, p.207) such efforts involve a constant attempt to

know better the truths of youth at risk and the way to produce these truths, as youthful bodies, motivations, behaviours and dispositions... *elude and escape* the frames and categories which attempt to order them.

### ***On Track to What?***

A Foucauldian perspective enables us to shift from big questions concerning the nature of power and its source to small questions concerning ‘what happens’ thereby allowing us to gain a ‘complex configuration of realities’ (Foucault 1983 p. 217). Disciplinary power involves the production of relationships of regulation that foster subjected, practised and docile individuals and populations (Foucault 1977). The appropriate end of governance is the ‘correct disposition of things – even when these things have to be invented so as to be well governed (Rabinow 1984 p.51). Castel (1991, p.295) argues that we are witnessing a move beyond discipline to an obsession with efficiency; at the centre of this shift is ‘the administrator who plans out trajectories and see to it that human profiles match up to them’. It is the use of expertise that enables adolescents to be rendered thinkable and government operable (Kelly 1999); expertise enables the development of discourses that promise risks, uncertainties and the messiness of the lives of youth can be

objectively, scientifically or critically identified. Once identified, various programs and interventions can then be mobilized to regulate the dangers, the uncertainties and the contingencies of an age of ‘manufactured uncertainty’.  
(Kelly 2000, p.464)

The confidence *On Track* activity is intended to foster hides the superficiality of the quest for certainty and the desire and willingness of youth to avoid such governance. For example, in a cursory review of the 2002 data

(received by LLEN in 2004), a given LLEN has an estimated number of early leavers of 457. However, those adolescents who consented to be contacted for *On Track* total only 248 (54% of the *estimated* total). The same LLEN has 2578 youth who completed Y12; of these 1779 consented to be contacted for *On Track* (69%). The pathways of the significant proportion of youth who are positioned as both 'at-risk' through their early school leaving behaviour and 'elusive' through declining involvement remain invisible. At the same time, those who are visible, that is, who have consented to being tracked are analysed in detail for their destinations and their reasons for taking the decisions they have made. This in turn is used to 'assist Government' (VLESC 2004 p.2) in understanding the 'unthinkable' and 'ungovernable' (Kelly 1999). For example, from 2004 *On Track* data will inform a five-year longitudinal study ostensibly 'to provide a comprehensive picture' on the movement of 2003 Y12 school leavers (Department of Education & Training 2004).

Furthermore, the complexity of adolescent lives belies such linear portrayal. Considering the data from the same LLEN of Y9/10 Early Leavers *that have been tracked* 70.1% are in vocational education and training, an apprenticeship, a traineeship or full-time work. Of the Y11 Early Leavers 67.5% are thus occupied. What is to be made of the fact that a higher percentage of those who left in Y9/10 are 'appropriately involved' than those who stayed a year longer in school and completed Y11? Research such as that by McMillan and Marks (2003) illustrates the complexity of outcomes for early school leavers: in their research early leavers had more favourable outcomes than school completers who didn't progress to university. Similarly, what is to be made of the survey data that indicates School Completers are more likely than Early Leavers to not study because they 'don't feel ready for more study at the moment' (57.1% against 34.6%). Where is the category 'at risk' in this scenario? In the invitation to attending the briefing on this data a number of questions were introduced to frame discussion including

whether young people working part time are also studying full or part time and to what extent should we consider young people working part time as being at risk either because employment is likely to be unsustainable /insecure / unskilled and poorly paid<sup>iii</sup>

Not only are ever more categories of risk constructed for youth to occupy (Kelly 1999) it is also risky for the agencies involved in the working with adolescents. Despite the partiality of the data the LLEN has been flooded with requests from education providers for further breakdown of the data on which, presumably, they will plan their own responses. Whilst it is positive to see education providers seeking to base practise on research, the limitations of the data and the 'silences' within it must be articulated. At the same time, Government is conscious of managing its own risk. In the *On Track Connect 2004 Guidelines for LLEN*<sup>iv</sup> a whole section is dedicated to Risk Management

and the legal and privacy implications of such surveillance. Furthermore, while the lives of youth are ‘messy and sexualised’ (Lesko 2001) the protocols, agreements, templates and scripts appended to the Guidelines are silent on these realities.

Not any less was said about it; on the contrary. But things were said in a different way; it was different people who said them from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results. Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name ... is less the absolute limit of discourse ... than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies.

(Foucault 1977 p.27)

A few examples will illustrate such ‘silence’. For the 2004 process, the LLEN had recommended that school leavers giving consent to be contacted be asked for a mobile phone contact rather than a street address and landline. This request rested in an appreciation that some youth, particularly those identified as being at-risk, often are not ‘attached’ to a permanent residence. This request was not adopted by the Department. When commented on, the response from a departmental staff member was ‘if we can’t contact them, we can’t contact them’. The process of contact even of those youth who did consent to be supported was an ‘arduous task’ that had taken an ‘inordinate amount of time’. While most of the 238 young people exiting Y12 in 2003 and referred were able to be contacted the effort involved some 703 phone calls over 38 days<sup>v</sup>. While most youth were contacted within the first three calls, some were only contacted after nine calls, three have had a message left and 13 were never able to be reached. Unsurprisingly to the LLEN, the most effective mechanism for contacting youth involved bulk SMS messaging to mobile phone numbers.

A further example that provoked discussion within the LLEN was the detailed script that is to be used when contacting the young person by telephone. The script does not provide opportunity for discussion of personal, health, familial or social aspects of life that for many youth will be a major factor in decisions to disengage from education. When a youth worker commented to a staff member of the Department ‘I’d ask about health ... if you only look at education and training it will fail’ the response was ‘No, can’t do that’. The further advice was that ‘It’s broad enough to do some of that’ however the matter would be referred back to see if ‘it was an issue for the Department’. Kelly (2003, p.173) suggests

... the reflexive constitution of knowledges by ... expertise increasingly intersects with management, service delivery and budget knowledges to produce hybridized knowledges about ‘appropriate’ and ‘economic’ forms of guidance and government of youth at risk and their families. These processes of hybridization are often contested, mediated,

messy and contradictory ... mobilize rationalities that exist in tension with the knowledges and purposes implied and professed by intellectual expertise in the domain of Youth Studies.

Within panoptical time otherness is 'ominous' (Lesko 2001 p.37); it concerns a risk that government is unable to manage, therefore government adopts technologies that do not produce the risk:

[Experts] do not simply process risks that appear 'externally' over the horizon ... The apparatuses of surveillance and discipline ... routinely produce the risks they assess and manage. The important corollary of this point is that only those risks are produced which are in principle 'manageable'.

(Crook 1999 cited Kelly 2003, p.170)

It might be suggested that, having identified a manageable risk there is a need to have youth to whom the produced risk can be attached. The LLEN found that many youth whom were contacted 'just don't seem to want to know about it'. It was suggested that some youth didn't understand the *On Track* survey they completed at exit from school: of the 218 youth that the project worker successfully questioned 86 (39%) refused any further referral. More significantly a number of youth stated that they had declined the opportunity to be involved in *On Track* as they exited school but nonetheless had been included and referred to the LLEN for *On Track Connect*. The project worker noted that often she 'talked them into [the questioning]' advising them to 'just answer the questions and I'll stop ringing you'. This is in contrast with the assertion by government that 'what they are telling us very clearly is that they appreciate this support' (Department of Education & Training 2004). Presumably the referral of reluctant participants indicate a policy decision that certain groups of youth, such as those working part-time, are at-risk and should be assisted in connecting with an appropriate pathway regardless of their expressed desire to receive such assistance. If so, this makes a significant difference to the scale of the project: only four of the youth finally questioned by the LLEN were working full time while the great majority, 155, were working part-time or casually. As such, the number of referrals to *On Track Connect* cannot be used as an indicator of the extent to which youth desire to be assisted to pathways other than those they are constructing for themselves.

How does a LLEN respond in such a situation? Foucault's (1980) notions of resistance and capillary power are evident. The LLEN employed a youth worker to complete the *On Track Connect* project. As such, the question of 'silence' within the Guidelines was the focus of persuasive arguments from the youth worker. The LLEN was intent on gaining 'really important data at the end of this process' that would enable an understanding of why adolescents did not pursue the opportunities for assistance made available to them. Having been declined the opportunity to do this 'formally' because of

Departmental concerns about risk management the LLEN had acted in its capacity as an incorporated society independent of government and had 'quietly' extended the required script. The Department staff member involved in the Committee of Management was excluded from the process to remove any conflict of role. As a result of this 'responsive approach' the LLEN was in a position to gain 'rich data' on the recursive nature of youth transitions in the region and appropriate responses if a meaningful, strategic and sustainable intervention were to be implemented. For this LLEN the important questions reside in a different modality of 'becoming' that is not 'stuck in the present', one that recognises youth find their own path to their own future in their own time. Such a perspective accords closely with recent life-patterns research that suggests the need for a post-industrial approach to educational policy that focus on the relationship between education and broader identity formation thereby equipping adolescents to 'thrive in a precarious employment environment' (Wyn 2003 n.p.).

## **Conclusion**

Government is

Intrinsically linked to the activities of expertise, whose role is not one of weaving an all-pervasive web of 'social control', but of enacting assorted attempts at the calculated administration of diverse aspects of conduct through countless, often competing, local tactics of education, persuasion, inducement, management, incitement, motivation and encouragement

(Rose & Miller 1992 cited Kelly 2000, p.466)

Foucault reminds us that within the ascendancy of governmentality all forms of power ultimately refer back to and are regulated, deregulated and re-regulated by the state. *On Track* involves an attempt to minimise the risk of youth transition to adulthood in a globalised context. Within it *On Track Connect* acts as an intervention intended to connect youth to pathways that will lead them to futures deemed appropriate by others, in some instances irrespective of whether youth agree to such an intervention. *On Track* can be understood as an act of surveillance that not only manages but also produces a risk that is deemed manageable by government. Those aspects of the risk that are unmanageable – including those youth whom refuse consent to be 'governed' – are rendered invisible. Hence the inherent tension that LLEN are charged with resolving: while there is a growing recognition of the need to understand youth transition in late modern times as being a 'recursive state, rather than a life state left behind once and for all' (Lesko 2001, p.63) the governance framework persists in constructing youth transition as involving development-in-time, partaking of panoptical time that compels us to attend to progress, precocity, arrest, or decline through initiatives such as *On Track*. Lesko (2001 p.62) suggests that the 'slow development in time of the modern panoptical [youth] is under pressure' by

globalisation. However 'despite changes associated with virtual time, flexible bodies, and lifelong learning, the episteme of development-in-time appears likely to prevail' (Lesko 2001 p.63).

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<sup>i</sup> This paper is epistemologically diverse; it does not adopt an opposition between humanist and post-structuralist approaches. Rather, I adopt Noel Gough's (2002) suggestion that blind spots, those areas that remain unilluminated by any given theory, method or perception, are created by our positioning and are best illuminated by shifting position.

<sup>ii</sup> See Kelly (1999) for an overview of the literature concerning youth "at-risk".

<sup>iii</sup> All subsequent unattributed quotes are drawn from data produced during 2004 participant observation in various LLEN meetings.

<sup>iv</sup> Both the guidelines and the data provided to LLEN by the Department have been provided to LLEN after the LLEN had already taken action given the need to meet the Department's own, very tight, timelines to complete the project. As Lesko (2001 p.35) notes 'not all times are the same ... There remain public and private times, slower and faster times, and more and less rationalized times.'

<sup>v</sup> The Guidelines require at least three attempts at contact.