



Nicholas Wyman, Contributor

I blog about job skills and training in the 21st-century workplace

Check out how US\$100M is helping disadvantaged youth worldwide find their future

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CITI NEW RECRUIT DARREN WHO HAS FOUND HIS DREAM CAREER IN HOSPITALITY.

You'd think with his HSC in hand, Australian student Darren from NSW would be able to find a job. No. He applied for several jobs but didn't hear back from many of those employers. It didn't help that he had no work experience so couldn't find a way into entry-level jobs.

"My brother was an apprentice carpenter and I saw him learning and getting mentored in his apprenticeship. I thought apprenticeship would be a pathway to the future," says Darren.

It took the Citi New Recruits Program to help him find a pathway to work. Having completed that four-week program in 2015, he started an apprenticeship at the Stitch Bar on York St, Sydney, while studying a Certificate III in Commercial Cookery.

A career in cookery is a great fit for Darren, who loves working evening hours and staying up late. Actually, he often helped his mum in the kitchen with baking when he couldn't sleep at night.

On a typical day in the Stitch Bar kitchen, Darren works through various tasks on the prep list helping get ready for a fast-paced dinner service.

"I really enjoy learning new skills," he says. From crafting cheese balls for tapas to filleting fish, this job gives him a smorgasbord of kitchen skills to pick up and refine. Once he's qualified, Darren plans to track down work overseas, firstly in the US.

Since 2013, the Citi New Recruits Program has also offered a solid bridge to young people in NSW and Victoria needing job-ready skills to link them to training and employment. Often that's vocational training such as apprenticeships and traineeships that build their skills that can be recognised worldwide.

Skilling Australia Foundation runs that program for Citi and consistently nine out of 10 participants find work or go onto further training. It's one of six programs that Citi Foundation is funding under its global Pathways to Progress initiative. The foundation today [1 Sept 2017] announced it's pumping another \$1.5 million in grants to help 1800 young disadvantaged people find employment. They are among half a million young people across the world, aged 16 to 24, who Citi Foundation will guide into training and jobs over the next three years. That's possible through Citi Foundation's global expansion of Pathways to Progress, announced in February this year. The investment of US\$100 million is the largest philanthropic commitment in Citi Foundation's history.

Becoming a chef is a great move for Darren – it's one of 10 occupations the Commonwealth Department of Employment says will experience the biggest jobs growth over the next five years. Others include general sales assistants, nurses, carers for aged people and those with disabilities, child carers, accountants, electricians, general clerks, contract/program/project administrators and waiters. Nine out of those 10 occupations involve vocational education and training (VET).

A key part of vocational training and education (VET) is the apprenticeship. It helps bridge the gap between the school education system and young people finding meaningful and quite possibly future-proofed careers. The number of Australians starting apprenticeships and traineeships is in decline. Between 2014 and 2015 alone, their numbers dropped by nearly 200,000. However, for VET overall, there's been a 2.4% increase in the number of government-funded students in January to March this year compared with the same time last year, figures from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research show.

VET is the key to Australia filling the 150,000 vacancies across many occupations that are crying for qualified candidates. As well, the rates of university graduates finding jobs continue to shrink. Does it make sense that Australia has so many skilled jobs unfilled yet swathes of young people without work?

Automotive mechanics is another area with significant vacancies and an area that appealed to a young Melbourne woman, Sarah. Having obtained her HSC, she was ready to pursue that passion and checked out many options. Citi's school-to-work program, aka Citi New Recruits, fitted well and helped her eventually secure an automotive apprenticeship at Lance Dixon Motors in Melbourne.

Sarah says: "At the start, family and friends were unsure that I would like to work on cars or even that I would be able to do so. It wasn't until I started to apply for jobs that people took me seriously. I had a hard time in high school and was determined to prove everyone wrong.

"On finishing school and with the soft skills I learnt through the New Recruits Program, I found it very easy to find an apprenticeship thanks to the Skilling Australia Foundation."

Sarah says she gains new experience and knowledge of her field every day.

"If you're not determined in your job, you won't succeed in troubleshooting the error of the car. If you're not concentrating you could potentially add to the original problem."

There's a lesson in that, too, about the problem of youth unemployment. As a nation we need to concentrate our efforts to deal with it today and for the future. Initiatives such as Pathways to Progress tackle the issue of persistent high youth unemployment in particular communities. It's not just about helping make these young people job ready and finding them a path to employment, but also driving an entrepreneurial spirit, providing access to local jobs and boosting capacity for those young people and community organisations.

Skilling Australia was one of six organisations to benefit from the latest round of Citi Foundation grants. Others are the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Foundation for Young Australians, Global Sisters, Social Ventures Australia and The Smith Family. All programs focus on low socio-economic communities in Australia.

Sydneysider Darren will soon have a portal through which he can work across the globe – that portal is a qualification. He's found his path. As such he's joining a global workforce of peers who are striving to make a name for themselves through meaningful training and work thanks to the Citi Foundation. That's US\$100M in action possibly in your neighbourhood.