A research centre in the UK recently found that lavishing praise on students, particularly low-attaining students, may be counter-productive. By providing a no-fail, no-consequences environment in which the top priority is to make everybody feel good about themselves, we are doing little more than setting young people up to fail.

It would appear our modern education systems have delivered us not only a backslide of Australian student rankings, but also our highest youth unemployment rate in decades. Research suggests that basic employability skills, where worker can arrive on time, take instruction and get on with others, are wanting in this generation of young people.

An ad for an apprentice recently posted on a job site perfectly summarised the difficulty faced by employers trying to give a young person a go. It listed only two selection criteria:

1) Not afraid to work

2) Can turn up Monday to Friday.

Following an article I recently wrote on this topic, I was contacted by an extraordinary range
of people sharing their frustration in finding themselves saddled with the kind of employee I described as having “the correct bit of paper, but a total inability to effectively apply it”.

The stories that came my way shared a common history. Early on in the training path of some young people, there can be a total disconnect between the individual’s assessment of their strengths and weaknesses compared to everyone else’s.

This is nothing new. Typically coined “poor insight”, there’s a raft of research including the aptly named Why the Unskilled are Unaware that demonstrates the cognitive mechanisms at fault here – or, more simply put, why stupid people don’t know they’re stupid.

But what happens when this person hits your training environment? What is the education system’s role, responsibility and duty of care (and to whom) in this situation?

Can education fix this?

Sadly, our modern education system has become complicit in the business of manufacturing aspirations, no matter how delusional. This is facilitated by the ever-present fear of litigation if little Johnny/Sally becomes in any way upset by honest feedback about their performance.

Should students be taught about work ethic and interpersonal skills to make sure they’re ready for to enter the workforce, or is that someone else’s responsibility? Shutterstock

This has left teaching staff too terrified to have conversations with students as to whether they are suited to their chosen career path, or at genuine risk of being found guilty of discrimination if they apply consequences for poor progress or dysfunctional behaviours that wouldn’t be tolerated in a workplace.

Here are some examples that were sent my way:

TAFE trainee X was capable of doing the tasks required of him. However, he had a habit of proffering potentially dangerous advice to clients outside his training – despite being been told not to do this. His placement took to hiding the phone from him. He also overshared gruesome details of his chaotic personal life to stunned clients. Trainee X was convinced he would be offered employment at the end of his stint, although his placement told him not to expect this, privately labelling him “a disaster” and “unemployable”.

University student Y committed a serious, immoral (un)professional foul during a work placement that raised serious concerns regarding her character and fitness to practice. Against her supervisors’ recommendation, her university rewarded her behaviour with a second chance to complete her placement, inflicting her upon another (unwitting) workplace. 
Consider also the impact of the various get-out-of-jail-free cards (exam re-sits, extensions, appeals, supplementary assessments) available to students in the case of poor performance, shambolic time-management or concerning interpersonal behaviours such as poor team skills, lack of initiative, unadaptable to change and poorly developed ethics. Would these be available in the work place?

While there is an interesting and nuanced debate to be had about if and how educators could teach personal attributes and employability skills, the most basic understanding of how consequences shape human behaviour would suggest that rewarding such conduct by making excuses and allowing endless chances will only groom future unemployables.

**It's for their own good**

Has it occurred to anyone else that providing a fantasy training environment, that in no way reflects the expectations of a real workplace, actually isn’t fair to students?

When educators are prevented from providing genuine feedback and applying realistic consequences, we deny students the opportunity to recognise and play to their strengths while reflecting upon their weaknesses, to change any counter-productive attitudes/behaviours, or redirect their efforts into a more suitable career course.

The solution requires a shift in attitude from educational organisations, students – and their parents – with clear legal protections in place for educators who, rather than setting students up to fail, actually want them to learn how to succeed.