



Senior Secondary Transitions in a Changing Context:

Insights from the Pathways,
Engagement and Transitions Study

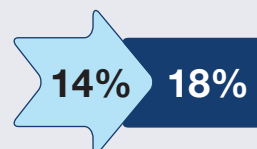
Executive summary

Senior secondary transitions are worsening for young people experiencing disadvantage

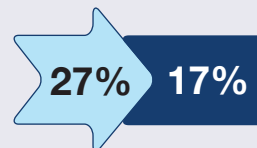
Comparing students who were in Year 10 in 2020 and 2023, with outcomes measured ~18 months after Year 10, three years apart:

What has changed?

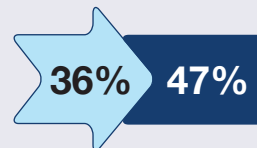
More young people left school before commencing Year 12:



Fewer early school leavers are employed full-time:



More early school leavers are not engaged in work or study:



What has remained stable?

97-99% of students still at school intend to complete Year 12

Post-school plans for university, VET, and work were similar across both groups

Why this matters now

This study shows that while post-secondary aspirations remain consistently high, differences in earlier schooling experiences and labour market conditions have affected the senior secondary and post-school transition pathways for young people experiencing disadvantage. Early school leavers are particularly vulnerable to worsening labour market conditions and require targeted, coordinated support to secure stable, meaningful pathways as they move into early adulthood.

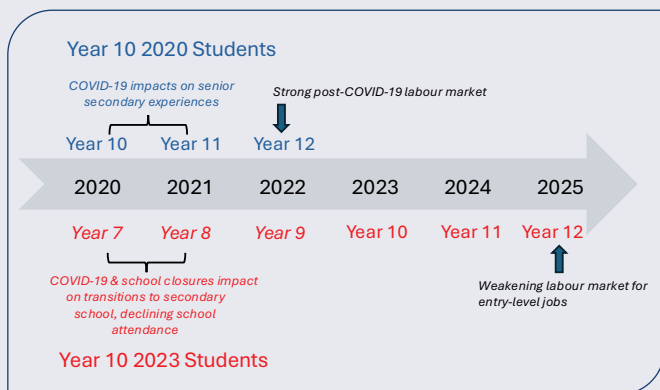
Changing experiences and contexts for secondary students

The transition through senior secondary school and into work or further study is a critical period that shapes young people's longer-term education and employment outcomes. These transitions are influenced not only by individual circumstances, but also by the broader social and economic contexts young people encounter at key transition points. For young people experiencing disadvantage, disruptions during their secondary schooling can have lasting consequences, increasing the risk of early school leaving, unemployment, and disengagement from work or study.

Young people who were in Year 10 in 2020 and 2023 progressed through their senior secondary years under markedly different schooling and economic conditions. The 2020 students experienced the most intense period of COVID-19 lockdowns and remote learning during Years 10 and 11, while the 2023 students experienced their deepest disruptions much earlier, in Years 7 and 8 when study habits, peer relationships, and school routines typically develop.

These differing phases of disruption shaped the trajectories of these two student groups in distinct ways, with the 2023 students entering senior secondary school from a lower base of regular school attendance.

At the same time, the economic conditions shaping post-school pathways changed substantially over a short period. The 2020 students transitioned out of school during a period of post-pandemic labour market recovery, when youth employment was increasing and entry-level jobs relatively abundant. In contrast, when the 2023 students reached the same transition point, the youth labour market had weakened, with declining youth employment, fewer advertised entry-level roles, and heightened competition—particularly in industries that typically employ young people. As this report shows, these combined schooling and labour market shifts have already translated into poorer early outcomes for early school leavers.



The 2023 students were leaving school early at higher rates than the 2020 students

The proportion of young people leaving school before Year 12 was higher among the 2023 students (18 percent) than the 2020 students (14 percent). The increase was particularly evident for students leaving at the end of Year 10 or during Year 11, while the proportion leaving after completing Year 11 was similar across both groups. Understanding whether the proportion of young people completing Year 12 has changed between the groups will only be possible when 2026 survey data is available (i.e. the first year post-Year 12 for the 2023 students). It is possible that similar proportions of young people in each student group left school before the end of Year 12, but that the 2023 students made the decision to leave earlier in their school progression.

For those continuing at school, post-school intentions were the same for each group

When young people were in Year 11, similarly high proportions in each group *intended* to complete Year 12 (97 percent for the 2020 students, and 99 percent for the 2023 students). Among those who continued to Year 12, plans for university, TAFE, and work were also unchanged.

Early school leavers in the 2023 student group had worse employment outcomes

The most substantial differences emerged in early post-school outcomes for early school leavers. The 2023 students had significantly worse employment outcomes than the 2020 students. The 2023 students were less likely to be employed full-time (2020: 27 percent; 2023: 17 percent), more likely to be unemployed (2020: 41 percent; 2023: 53 percent), and the 2023 students who were employed worked fewer hours on average. The share of early school leavers not engaged in either work or study increased markedly—from 36 percent to 47 percent in just three years—with the sharpest rises among young males.

These changing employment outcomes reflect broader structural trends affecting youth employment, including declining availability of and heightened competition for lower-skilled, entry-level jobs, and rising precarity in youth-dominated industries.

Experiences with finding and maintaining work

Interviews with 30 young people from the 2023 group highlight the personal and structural barriers shaping these outcomes. Young people described challenges related to disability, mental health, caring responsibilities, chronic illness, job availability, transport barriers, financial strain, and limited workplace support. Many expressed strong motivation to work but lacked guidance navigating job applications, interviews, or workplace expectations. Negative workplace experiences, including discrimination, exploitation, or toxic environments, further affected their ability to enter or maintain employment.

Policy implications

The findings of this study reinforce a consistent message: earlier, sustained support is increasingly critical as young people experiencing disadvantage navigate more challenging school-to-work transitions. While aspirations remain high, weaker labour market conditions and lingering impacts of earlier disruption mean that delays in identifying and addressing disengagement now carry greater consequences. In this context, shifting support earlier in secondary school, before senior secondary and labour market entry, is increasingly important.

These findings sharpen the urgency of long-standing priorities:

- **Schools** have a role in identifying and responding to disengagement earlier, strengthening career education, and guide young people to develop the skills and experience they need to navigate a range of post-school pathways.
- **Government and education systems** have a key role in enabling earlier, coordinated intervention to support young people, sustaining targeted supports for students at risk, and responding to structural changes in the youth labour market.
- **Business and employers** can support stronger transitions by helping to better align young people's skills with employer needs, through expanding accessible entry-level opportunities, partnering with schools, and providing inclusive, supportive workplaces.

Conclusion

Overall, this study shows that while senior secondary aspirations remain consistently high, differences in earlier schooling experiences and labour market conditions have affected the senior secondary and post-school transition pathways for young people experiencing disadvantage. Early school leavers are particularly vulnerable to worsening labour market conditions and require targeted, coordinated support to secure stable, meaningful pathways as they move into early adulthood.

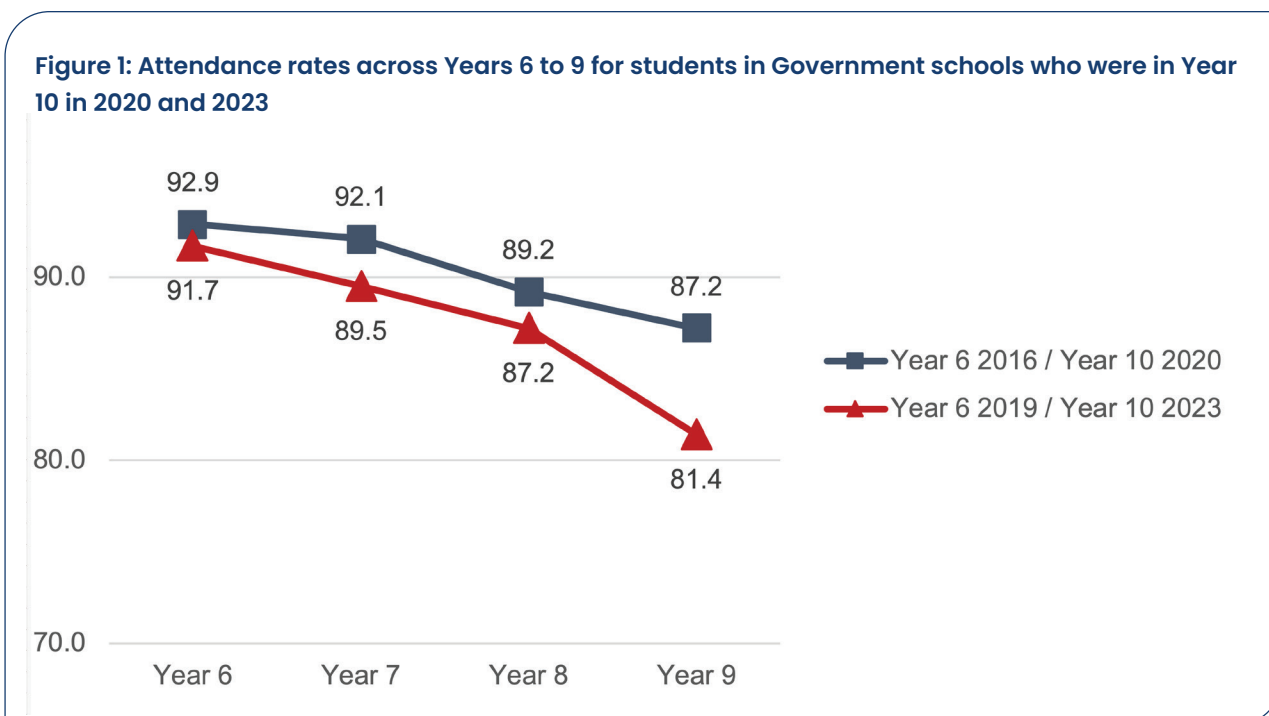
Changing school and labour market contexts

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schooling for young people across Australia. Lockdowns and the rapid shift to remote learning disrupted daily routines, reduced opportunities for connection, and heightened challenges related to technology access, family stress, and the availability of learning support (Gannon et al., 2024; Giallo et al., 2024). Many secondary students found it harder to develop a sense of belonging after school closures, reporting disrupted social connections and a greater need for emotional support from teachers (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). These challenges were even greater for students experiencing disadvantage, who were more likely to experience technology barriers, family stress, and reduced support during remote learning (Giallo et al., 2024; The Smith Family, 2024). For all students, but particularly those experiencing disadvantage, these early disruptions may have had lasting implications for engagement and later transitions into work or study.

The extent of these impacts likely varied depending on *when* students encountered the most significant disruptions. Young people who were in Year 10 in 2020 (the ‘2020 students’) experienced their senior secondary years, Years 10 and 11, during the most intense period of lockdowns and remote

learning in 2020 and 2021. In contrast, those who were in Year 10 in 2023 (the ‘2023 students’) faced the greatest instability much earlier, during Years 7 and 8, when school routines, peer connections, and study habits typically become established and embedded (Orben et al., 2020). As a result, each student group entered their senior secondary years from a different starting point in terms of attendance, engagement, and overall preparedness.

School attendance patterns also differed between the two groups, with the 2023 students experiencing lower average attendance across Years 6 to 9 (see Figure 1). While both groups experienced the typical gradual decline in attendance across these years, the Year 10 2023 students started from a lower base and saw a steeper decline by Year 9. These early attendance gaps suggest that the 2023 students may have faced more persistent or compounding challenges during the early secondary years of schooling. Given that lower attendance in earlier years is associated with a higher likelihood of early school leaving (The Smith Family, 2023), it is possible that these attendance differences between the groups will contribute to longer-term differences in their senior secondary pathways.



Source data: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority National Student Attendance Data Collection.

Labour market changes

In addition to these schooling differences, major changes in the economic environment mean that these student groups have transitioned into very different labour markets. The 2020 students entered the workforce during a period of strong post-pandemic recovery, when youth employment was rebounding. For example, the proportion of 15–24 year-olds who were unemployed decreased from 15.9 percent in July 2020 to 6.8 percent in July 2022 through the recovery period. However, the 2023 students experienced a tougher labour market in July 2025, when the age 15–24 unemployment rate increased to 9.5 percent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025a, see Figure 2), potentially signalling deteriorating job prospects for young people. Figure 2 also shows variance in unemployment rates by gender, with young male workers particularly affected from 2022 onwards. Notably, the overall unemployment rates for 15–64 year-olds during this three-year period remained relatively stable, increasing from 3.5 to 4.3 percent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025), highlighting that the headline unemployment rates often mask larger movements in youth unemployment (e61, 2023).

Similarly, the Jobs and Skills Australia's Internet Vacancy Index also shows that the number of internet-advertised vacancies for Skill Level 5¹ jobs (those that require limited skill or qualifications) decreased by 43 percent between July 2022 and July 2025 (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2026),

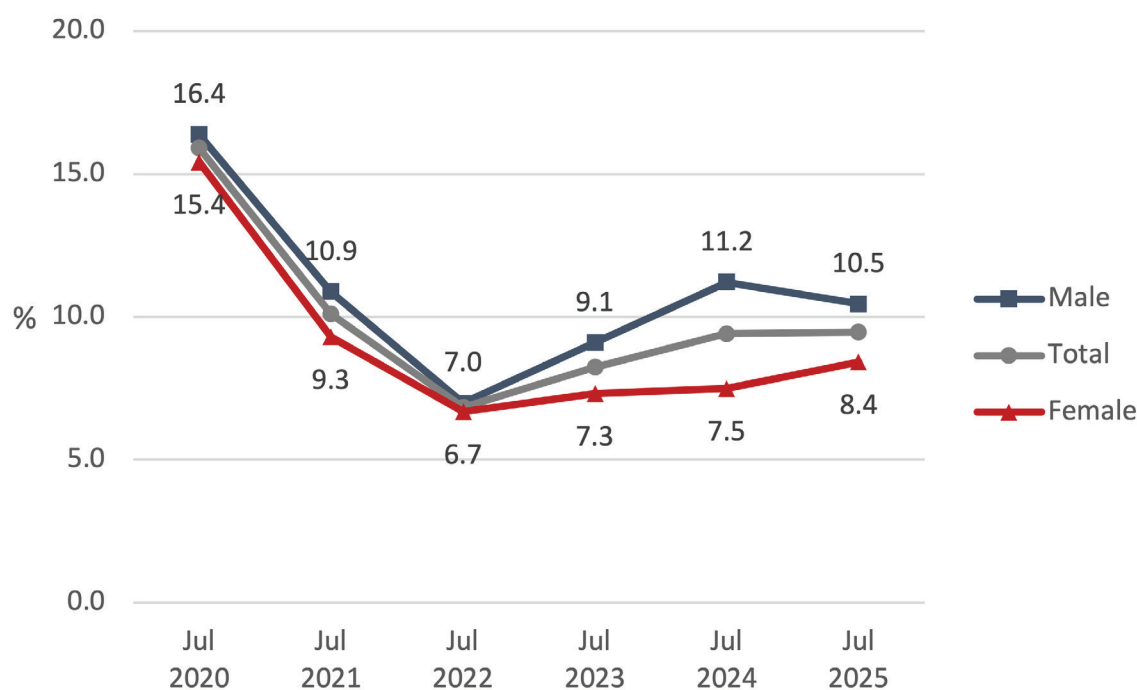
highlighting reduced vacancies in the occupations that school-leavers typically pursue. Early school leavers in the 2023 group are likely to have been particularly affected by these changing labour conditions, given they were entering this market in 2024 and 2025.

Taken together, these schooling and economic differences mean that the two student groups—those who were in Year 10 in 2020 and those who were in Year 10 in 2023—have faced very different pathways through senior secondary school and into employment. The 2020 students experienced major schooling disruption but entered a stronger labour market, while the 2023 students had lingering schooling impacts and are facing a far tougher economic environment. For early school leavers, especially, these differences are likely to shape their early post-school outcomes in distinct ways. This study helps us understand how these combined factors influence the first two years after Year 10 and where targeted support may be most needed.

The report addresses the following questions:

- How have senior secondary pathways and students' intentions to complete school changed between the two groups, measured three years apart?
- To what extent do post-school intentions and engagement in work differ across the two groups, and what factors may be driving these changes?

Figure 2: July unemployment rates for 15–24 year-olds, by sex, 2020 to 2025



Source data: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Survey 2025

¹ In Australia, Occupation Skill Level 5 refers to jobs that require a level of skill commensurate with a compulsory secondary education. This level includes occupations that may require a short period of on-the-job training, and in some cases, no formal education or on-the-job training may be necessary. Examples include factory worker, kitchenhand, or sales assistant.

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions Study

The PET study is a longitudinal study exploring pathways and factors affecting the senior secondary and post-school transitions of young people experiencing disadvantage. The project has followed three groups of young people who were on The Smith Family's long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*.² These groups included young people who were in Year 10 or Year 12 in 2020, or in Year 10 in 2023. By following the pathways of these different groups over time, PET aims to hear directly from young people to:

- Understand the **pathways** young people experiencing disadvantage take as they move through and beyond school
- Explore the **factors** that influence these pathways, and how they change over time
- Identify **what more can be done** to strengthen the post-school outcomes of young people experiencing disadvantage.

The project has gathered data through annual surveys conducted between March and May, 2021 to 2026; annual interviews in August with a sub-group of 60 survey participants, and by combining survey responses with administrative data collected by The Smith Family since participants began on the *Learning for Life* scholarship, including demographic information, school attendance, and achievement data.

By surveying and interviewing multiple groups of young people over several years, the study can identify which aspects of post-school pathways change over time, which remain stable, and whether these time differences are due to age, timing, or broader shifts in social and economic conditions.

This report compares the senior secondary pathways of **two groups** of young people – those who were in Year 10 in 2020 and 2023, in the **first two years after completing Year 10**. For most of the young people involved, the first two years are Year 11 and Year 12.

Characteristics and pathways of young people in each group

A total of 2,422 young people in Year 10 2020 completed surveys in both 2021 and 2022, and 3,061 of those in Year 10 in 2023 completed surveys in 2024 and 2025.³ Of these, the responses of 2,307 and 2,800 young people respectively are reported in this publication.

The demographic and educational characteristics of each student group are provided in Table 1.^{4,5} Survey participants are broadly representative of the *Learning for Life* student populations in each state and territory.

Some small demographic and schooling differences were clear between the groups. A higher proportion of the 2023 students were male (49 percent compared to 46 percent), Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people (21 percent compared to 16 percent), living in regional areas (34 percent compared to 31 percent), but fewer had reported a health or other condition (43 compared to 47 percent) or had a parent who speaks a language other than English (33 percent compared to 39 percent). As would be expected from the broader attendance patterns for these groups in Figure 1, Year 9 attendance rates were lower among the 2023 students, with 34 percent recording high attendance (an attendance rate of 90 percent or higher) compared to 49 percent for the 2020 students. Similarly, a higher proportion were achieving D or E grades in English and maths.

All analyses presented in this report consider and account for the demographic differences between the student groups.

2 All young people on *Learning for Life* are living in a low-income family. Most young people are recruited to the program when they are in primary school. More information on the program is available at <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/programs/learning-for-life>

3 For the Year 10 2020 students, 97 young people (4.0%) were excluded from analysis if (1) either of the surveys were completed by a parent or proxy, or (2) the young person was receiving a carer/parenting payment or disability payment. A further 18 (0.7%) were excluded as insufficient information was completed to clearly identify their senior secondary status. For the Year 10 2023 students, 198 (6.5%) and 40 (1.3%) young people were excluded from analysis for the same respective reasons.

4 Throughout this publication all figures are rounded to the nearest whole number, therefore in some cases may not add to 100%.

5 The survey data are weighted to ensure the characteristics of young people who completed two waves of the PET surveys are representative of the characteristics of all young people invited to participate.

Table 1. Demographics and earlier school outcomes for the Year 10 2020 and 2023 students

	Year 10 2020 %	Year 10 2023 %
<i>n</i>	2,307	2,800
Young person:		
Male	46	49*
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young person	16	21*
Lives in major city	69	66*
Has at least one health, mental health, developmental or behavioural condition	47	43*
Young person's family:		
Two-parent family	46	44
Parent/carer completed Year 12 qualification or equivalent	38	36
Parent/carer speaks language other than English	39	33*
Year 9 attendance rate		
Low – less than 70%	13	25*
Moderate – 70 to less than 90%	37	41
High – 90% or higher	49	34*
Year 9 English grade		
A/B	27	24*
C	47	44
D/E	26	32*
Year 9 Maths grade		
A/B	24	20*
C	38	40
D/E	38	41*

*Represents a statistically significant difference between the 2020 and 2023 groups at $p < .05$.

Pathways in the two years after Year 10

Table 2 provides the pathways through Year 11 and 12 for each of the student groups. The proportion of young people leaving school before Year 12 increased from 14 percent for the 2020 group to 18 percent for the 2023 group, a difference that was statistically significant after adjusting for differences in demographic characteristics and Year 9 attendance and achievement. This increase occurred predominantly for those leaving after Year 10, which increased from 10 percent (2020 students) to 14 percent (2023 students), while the proportion leaving after completing Year 11 remained the same. The increase in early school leavers for the 2023 group was the result of even decreases in those completing Year 12 and those still at school or TAFE and studying a different year level (mainly Year 11), with both decreasing by two percent.

These patterns likely indicate a higher rate of early school leaving for the 2023 students. However, because the survey does not capture Year 12 completion until the third year after Year 10 (i.e. 2026 for the 2023 students), the overall rate of early school leaving is not yet known. It may be that young people who were likely to leave school early simply made that decision earlier in their schooling. At the system level, the Year 10–12 full-time apparent retention rate in Government schools increased from 73.5 percent in 2022 to 76.4 percent in 2025 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025b), suggesting an overall improvement in Year 12 completions over this period.

Table 2. Pathway status ~18 months after Year 10, by student group

	Year 10 2020 %	Year 10 2023 %
<i>n</i>	2,307	2,800
Currently in Year 12 or completed Year 12 at school or TAFE	80.0	77.5
Currently completing another year level (10,11,13) ⁶ at school or TAFE	6.4	4.4
Not at school / left school - Completed Year 11	3.9	4.1
Not at school / left school - Completed Year 10 or below	9.7	14.0*

Plans for school completion and post-school destinations for those still at school

For those who were still completing school, the two student groups had very similar plans concerning Year 12 completion and their post-school pathways, despite the different experiences of COVID-19 disruptions and attendance patterns (see Table 3). For example, in both groups a little over one-in-three intended to study at university after leaving school. Around one-quarter intended to pursue work only, and two-in-five intended to combine work and post-school study.

Table 3. Students at school: Intentions for school completion and post-school plans, for each student group

	Year 10 2020 %	Year 10 2023 %
Student intends to complete Year 12 ^a	97	99
Main plan after leaving school^{b,c}		
Work in a paid job (casual, part-time or full-time)	58	57
Study at university	37	36
Vocational Education Training (VET) study	22	21
Do an apprenticeship or traineeship	19	21
Take time off or gap year	16	13
Other	2	2
Summary of intentions after leaving school		
Does not intend to work or study	11	10
Intends to work only	24	23
Intends to study only	25	24
Intends to combine work & study	41	43

- a. Asked of young people who had not yet left school in the first-year survey after Year 10 (predominantly Year 11).
 b. Asked of young people who had not yet left school in the second-year survey after Year 10 (predominantly Year 12).
 c. Young people could select multiple options for their plans after leaving school, so percentages will add to more than 100 percent. The summary of intentions adds to 100 percent.

⁶ Most of the young people completing a different year level were in Year 11. Year 13 is an optional educational year offered in some states, allowing students to complete their Year 12 qualifications over an extended period, or to retake subjects they did not pass. Availability can vary by state and school.

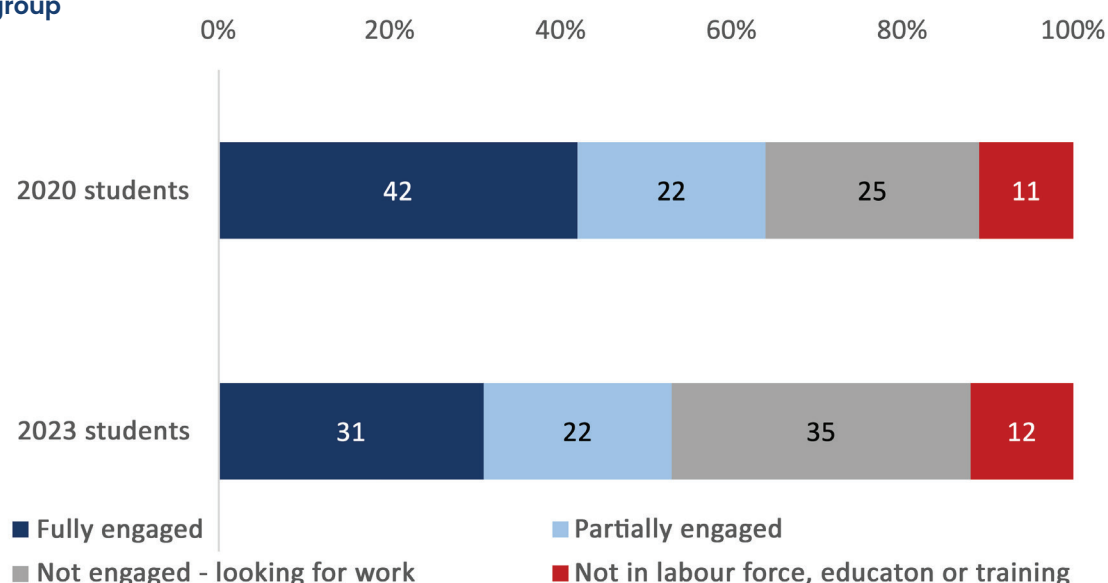
Table 4. Employment and post-school study status, number of jobs and average working hours per school-term for each group of students, in the second year after Year 10 (2022 and 2025)

	2020 students		2023 students	
	Still at School %	Left School %	Still at School %	Left School %
Employed full-time	1	27	0	17
Employed part-time	42	32	38	30
Not Employed	57	41	62	53
<i>n</i>	2,002	298	2,307	482
Of those who are employed:				
Working more than one job	10	7	10	8
Average hours worked per week	12	30	10	26
<i>n</i>	866	177	865	149
Studying full-time		4		7
Studying part-time		31		21
Not in further study		65		72
<i>n</i>		302		490

Table 4 and Figure 3 show that the decline in employment among early school leavers was not offset by greater participation in study or training for the 2023 students. The share of early school leavers engaged in full-time or part-time study fell from 35 percent for the 2020 group, to 28 percent for the 2023 group. Over the same period, the proportion not engaged in either work or study increased from 36 percent to 47 percent. This rise in non-engagement was especially

marked among young males, increasing from 33 percent to 50 percent, compared with a smaller increase from 39 percent to 43 percent among young females. Taken together, these patterns indicate that the 2023 students, and potentially further student groups in subsequent years, are experiencing greater challenges in securing employment and sustaining meaningful post-school engagement, with young males experiencing disadvantage particularly affected.

Figure 3: Engagement outcomes of early school leavers in the second year after Year 10, by year group



Note: The proportion of early school leavers who were not engaged, or not in labour force, education or training (NILFET) increased from 36 (2020 students) to 47 percent (2023 students) overall. For males this proportion increased from 33 percent to 50 percent, and for females from 39 percent to 43 percent.

Improvements in mental wellbeing

In addition to the school and labour market contexts, self-reported mental health and wellbeing also shifted over the three-year period. In the second year after Year 10 (predominantly Year 12), a higher proportion of the 2023 students rated their mental health as 'excellent' or 'very good' compared with the 2020 students. The proportions increased:

- From 39 to 41 percent among males
- From 17 to 25 percent among females
- From 27 to 33 percent overall

The increases in mental health, however, were smaller among early school leavers increasing from 26 percent (2020 students) to 28 percent (2023 students).

Declines in young Australian's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic are well documented, with psychological distress increasing sharply in 2020 and remaining elevated through 2021 and 2022. Longitudinal evidence indicates that mental health began to improve into 2022, although levels remained above pre-pandemic baselines, pointing to a gradual and incomplete recovery (Biddle, Edwards, Gray, & Rehill, 2022; Laß et al., 2025). The more positive mental health reported by the 2023 students relative to the 2020 students is consistent with these broader trends, and likely reflects differences in the timing of their senior secondary schooling relative to the peak and recovery phases of the pandemic.

Engagement in work

The employment outcomes for each group are presented in Table 4. These data are provided separately for those still completing senior secondary year levels in the second year after Year 10, and for early school leavers.

Among those who remained at school in the second-year survey, the 2023 students were less likely to combine their school studies with work (38 percent) than the 2020 students (42 percent).

The employment differences for early school leavers are particularly stark. The proportion employed full-time decreased from 27 percent for the 2020 students to 17 percent for the 2023 students, while the share not employed increased from 41 percent to 53 percent. Among those employed, average weekly hours also declined, from 30 to 26.

The increase in unemployment between the 2020 and 2023 students was more pronounced among young males, with the proportion not working rising from 36 to 52 percent, a 16 percentage-point increase. For young females, the proportion not working increased from 47 percent to 54 percent, a smaller rise of seven percentage-points, albeit from a higher starting point in the 2020 group.

These employment trends are even more pronounced than the national patterns shown in Figure 2, where the increases in youth unemployment were much smaller. The patterns suggest that early school leavers, particularly young men experiencing disadvantage, are contributing disproportionately to the broader shift in youth unemployment.

⁷ Pseudonyms have been adopted throughout this section.

Key factors related to employment and job-seeking

The interview transcripts of 30 young people from the 2023 Year 10 group were reviewed to identify common themes related to finding employment, as well as the key facilitators and barriers they encountered. Interviews were conducted in mid-2025, when participants were aged 17–18, and explored their experiences with school, work, and further study. Half of the participants were completing Year 12. Of these five were combining their Year 12 studies with part-time or casual work, while most were focussed on finishing school and planned to look for work afterwards. A small number were actively seeking jobs during the school year.

Among the 15 young people who had left school before Year 12, four were employed at the time of the interview. Most had either worked or actively looked for work in the past year. Three were of the 15 were studying a Certificate or Diploma at TAFE, while others had recently completed post-school qualifications and were transitioning into job-seeking.

Most school leavers who were not employed were motivated and actively looking for work. They described wanting greater structure in their lives, a sense of independence, the ability to support their families financially, and opportunities to progress toward personal and career goals. As Xavier⁷ explained:

I'd be happy to get back into the routine of doing something... always having something to do and knowing that I'm achieving something for myself.
Xavier, early school leaver.

Several also noted that they needed income to afford further study.

I want to save up... If I wanted to do a TAFE course, it's going to cost money. Ian, early school leaver.

Health, disability, and caring responsibilities

Some young people faced significant barriers to finding or sustaining work due to health conditions, disabilities, or caring responsibilities. Sophia, for example, had sustained a head injury that influenced both her decision to leave school and her ability to seek employment, despite wanting to work.

Lucas was a full-time carer for his partner. While he took on short-term roles or study when possible, his caring responsibilities left limited time or flexibility to pursue longer-term employment plans. Others described health issues or injuries that restricted the kinds of jobs they could do. Marlo, who experienced chronic pain, felt his condition reduced his opportunities:

My disability comes into play so even if I physically would be able to do something, they don't want to hire me, just in case. Marlo, early school leaver.

Marlo also suspected he had ADHD and autism, but had been unable to obtain a formal diagnosis due to the cost of professional assessments. He felt this limited his access to supports that might have helped him understand and manage his symptoms more effectively.

Accessibility, transport, and availability

The availability of accessible jobs and transport was a key barrier for most young people looking for work. As 17-18 year olds, many of the young people interviewed were still in the process of getting a driver's licence, and those who did have a licence often had limited access to a car. These transport barriers limited their employment options to those that could be accessed by public transport. However, even where public transport was accessible, some employers were reluctant to hire young people who did not have access to a car. As Marlo explained:

A lot of places have requirements to have a licence, even though you don't need it for the job. Or they won't hire you if you take public transport. If they ask if you have available transport, you just say yes. You don't say you take public transport. Marlo, early school leaver.

Some young people lacked the supports needed to obtain a licence. Lisa described trying to navigate the process largely on her own:

My parents didn't take me for a single drive to get my licence, I had to do it all on my own, and I still don't have a car. Lisa, Year 12 student.

Young people in regional areas faced even greater constraints. Poppy observed that competition for available jobs was high and that lacking a licence or specific qualifications further reduced opportunities.

I am finding at the moment that a lot of people do have multiple jobs and it's not giving the people that don't have a job an opportunity. Because some people are out there working three or four jobs. A lot of places now there's a lot of different barriers, like if you don't have a licence or if you don't have a certain qualification, that's also stopping you from working... Poppy, early school leaver.

Employment barriers were not limited to transport. Some young people struggled to receive responses to job applications, while those studying full-time found it difficult to secure work that fit around their schedules. As Omar shared, despite applying widely he'd had limited success securing a job that fit around his studies:

I've applied everywhere, everywhere I can find. Kitchens, restaurants, cafés, shops, malls. No one's really hiring... I haven't had any luck finding a job just for my days off. Omar, Year 12 student.

Others, like Carla, who had recently completed two beauty qualifications, found that a lack of practical experience prevented her from securing roles in her chosen field, despite actively applying.

I've been using Seek and Indeed and stuff like that, pretty much looking on there every day for jobs that suit what I'm looking for. A lot of the jobs want you to have so-and-so many years of experience within industry. I have to just find that place that is willing to take me on and give me a shot.... Carla, early school leaver.

Financial, digital barriers, and other barriers to study

Many young people recognised that they needed qualifications or experience to access the jobs they were interested in. However, financial constraints, digital access, and other study-related barriers often made it difficult to start or complete these qualifications.

Poppy, for example, had enrolled in a Certificate III to become a nail technician but withdrew due to a combination of cost and digital access barriers. Without a laptop or home Wi-Fi, she found it difficult to complete assignments, and the cost of the required equipment made the qualification unaffordable. As she explained:

I don't have a laptop at home or access to any Wi-Fi... you couldn't do the assessments on your phone. It's just an expensive qualification, it's \$50 for one singular nail brush... You have to buy a nail kit, which is another \$500 for practice at home. It's a pretty pricey qualification. Poppy, early school leaver.

Ian had also attempted a TAFE course but left after a few weeks, finding both the content and associated costs challenging. Financial barriers continued to limit his ability to re-enrol:

I didn't have much money, that was one of the reasons I left. I was looking at doing a computer repair TAFE course but it costs upwards of \$1400 without concession, so I wasn't able to enrol in that one. Ian, early school leaver.

These experiences highlight how financial and digital access barriers can disrupt study pathways and limit access to qualifications young people need to progress toward their employment goals.

Challenging work environments

Some young people had worked in challenging or “toxic” environments that were difficult to manage, especially without prior workplace experience. Jason, who was completing a full-time apprenticeship in the food manufacturing industry, enjoyed the work itself but experienced ongoing hostility from colleagues. After returning from an injury earlier than medically advised, he felt he was treated with less respect and described frequent verbal abuse.

I hated school because I was treated like crap, now I get treated like crap but at least I get paid for it... they just yell at you like they're a drill sergeant. Jason, early school leaver.

Despite this, Jason noted that a supportive manager made a significant difference to his ability to cope. He also reflected that early school leavers might lack the interpersonal and practical skills needed to navigate workplace issues.

The hardest part about leaving school is that I don't have the answers... navigating difficult conversations with my boss is very difficult and I hate asking for things like time off or extra pay, but I have to do it.

Lisa, who was completing Year 12, had also left a difficult job in a large retail chain. After requesting a part-time contract to gain more predictable hours, she felt she was treated differently by her manager, who sometimes rostered her on without telling her and then disciplined her for missing shifts. She ultimately resigned, later regretting leaving before securing another job:

My supervisor would put me on but not tell me, and then I'd get in trouble. She did that to a lot of people. I don't think I should have quit until I had something else... that was a mistake. Lisa, Year 12 student.

What helps young job-seekers

Young people who had experience with work, either during school or after leaving, identified several supports that helped them find jobs or feel more confident about future employment.

Social supports and networks

Informal networks played an important role in helping young people access opportunities. Friends and relatives often alerted them to jobs or made introductions, and some families provided practical or emotional support, sometimes making work a condition of leaving school. Supportive colleagues and managers also helped young people navigate difficult customer interactions or stressful shifts. As Laura noted:

My manager's really nice. If it's stressful and I need a break he'll let me sit down for five minutes, have a drink, calm down. Laura, early school leaver.

Broader networks were also helpful for completing tasks required for employment, such as gaining driving hours. Akam, for example, described how a neighbour helped him reach the 120 hours needed for his licence when his parent was unable to assist.

Targeted school experiences

Several young people reflected positively on school-based supports, such as career information sessions and one-to-one assistance with TAFE applications. Others noted that schools were improving facilities that supported vocational learning, such as specialised rooms for woodwork and hospitality, which helped broaden their understanding of available pathways.

Employment services

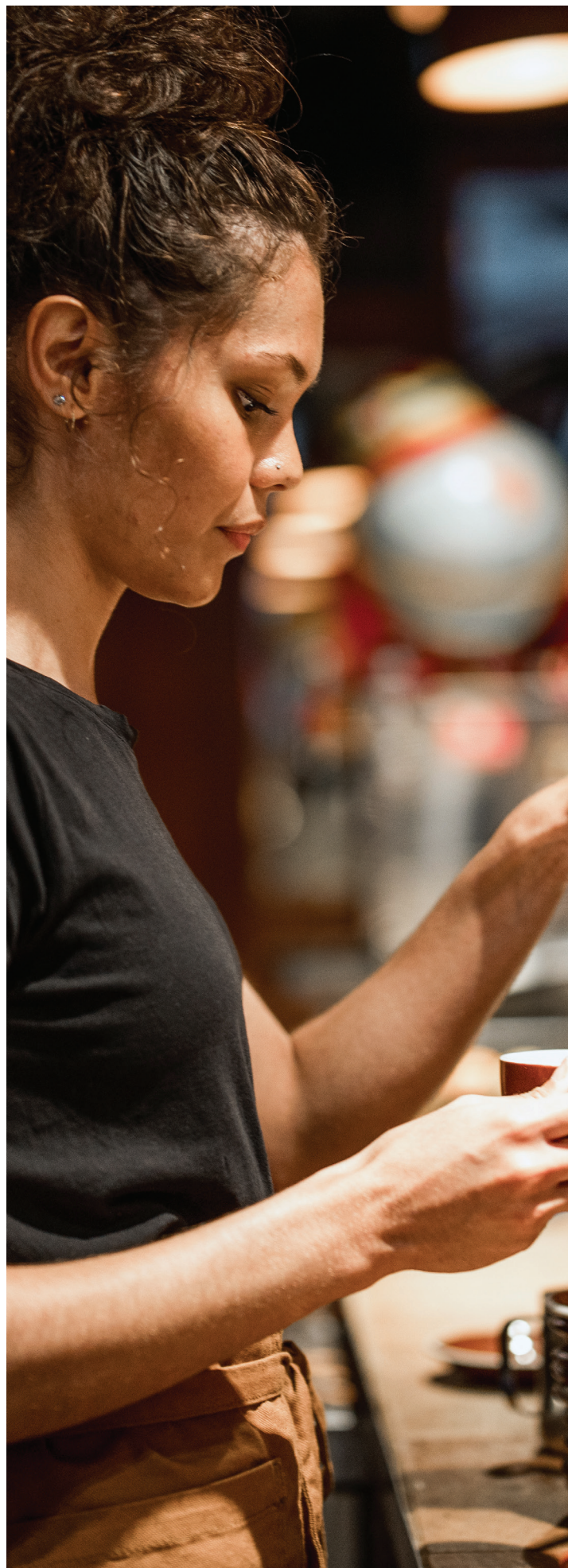
While not the case for all, some young people felt employment providers played a supportive role.

Poppy, for example, was supported to complete her Responsible Service of Alcohol certificate and a career pathway course, which she felt improved her job prospects.

I would recommend the course to people. It's what you want to do in life, or why aren't you working right now, what are your barriers. Poppy, 17, early school leaver.

Nathan, who had progressed into a managerial role in the marine industry, noted that young people often had limited awareness of available jobs and felt that employment services could do more to match young people with suitable opportunities.

Overall, although young people were eager to work, a range of structural or financial barriers often made this difficult, and the support they received from the networks around them was critical in helping them navigate early study and employment pathways.



Summary of findings

Across the two groups of young people experiencing disadvantage examined in this report – those in Year 10 in 2020 and 2023 – this study highlights both continuity and significant change in the factors shaping young people's senior secondary and early post-school pathways. The study highlighted:

- **A higher proportion of the 2023 group left school before Year 12.** The increase coincided with smaller decreases in the proportion of students who were attending school in Year 12, and those enrolled in a different year level in their second year after Year 10 (mostly Year 11). This pattern suggests that the increase in early school leavers includes a combination of those who would likely have left but chose to do so earlier, and those who may otherwise have stayed through to Year 12. The 2026 survey will provide further insights on those pathways.
- **Among those still completing school, the plans for post-school pathways were consistent across the groups.** Both the 2020 and 2023 Year 10 students showed similar reflections on their Year 12 completion intentions, and post-school plans.
- **The differences in early secondary attendance may have affected the timing of early school leaving, however it is not yet clear that overall rates of early school leaving were impacted.** The 2023 students entered senior secondary school with lower Year 6-9 attendance (on average) and showed steeper declines into Year 9, potentially affecting patterns of early school leaving.
- **Economic conditions differentiated the cohorts' employment opportunities.** The 2023 students faced a weaker and more competitive youth labour market, with fewer entry-level roles and declining youth employment compared to the strong post-COVID-19 recovery experienced by the 2020 students.
- **Early school leavers were disproportionately affected by shifting labour market conditions.** Compared to the 2020 group, early leavers in the 2023 group were less likely to be employed full time, and more likely to be unemployed.
- **Young people described a range of factors affecting their ability to find and maintain employment.** These included the availability and accessibility of jobs, the costs of enrolling in further study, health and disability concerns, and limited experience with navigating stressful workplace environments.

Recommendations

The findings of this study reinforce policy messages that are consistent with previous reports: **earlier, sustained support matters** for improving senior secondary and post-school outcomes of young people experiencing disadvantage. While young people's aspirations for completing school and engaging in work or further study remain strong and largely unchanged, the contexts shaping these transitions have become more challenging. Weaker labour market conditions, lingering impacts of earlier schooling disruption and the emerging influence of generative AI and automation on entry-emerging work mean that delays in identifying and addressing disengagement now carry greater consequences. In this environment, shifting support earlier in secondary school, before the senior secondary years and transition to the labour market, is increasingly critical for reducing the risks of early school leaving, unemployment, and disengagement.

These findings sharpen the case for acting on long-standing priorities. In a more challenging schooling and labour market context, the following policy directions are now more urgent:

For schools:

- **Strengthen early identification and support.** Use available data resources (e.g. attendance, engagement, and achievement data) to identify students at risk of disengagement in the early secondary years, and provide sustained, personalised supports before students disengage more deeply.
- **Enhance career education and post-school planning.** Deliver earlier, higher quality career guidance that exposes students to diverse pathways, including vocational options and emerging industries, alongside one-to-one support for navigating decisions and applications.
- **Embed work-relevant skills and experiences.** Provide structured opportunities for students to build foundational, digital, and employability skills, including real-world learning and exposure to workplaces.

For government:

- **Enable earlier, coordinated intervention.** Strengthen system-level approaches to early identification by improving data sharing, and access to integrated supports spanning education, health, and social services.
- **Invest in sustained and targeted supports.** Fund programs that provide intensive, personalised support through the early secondary years and into transitions, recognising the cumulative impacts of disadvantage and disruption.

- **Respond to structural labour market change.** Expand pathways aligned to emerging industries, address declining entry-level opportunities, and ensure policy settings support secure, accessible roles for young people with limited experience or qualifications.
- **Support inclusive and supportive workplaces.** Adopt employment practices that recognise the needs of young workers, including flexibility, supervision, and development opportunities that enable them to enter and remain in the workforce.

For business and employers

- **Create accessible entry-level opportunities.** Increase the availability of secure, supported entry-level roles for young people, particularly those with limited experience.
- **Strengthen partnerships with schools and communities.** Collaborate with schools and community organisations to provide work exposure, mentoring, and pathways into employment, particularly for young people experiencing disadvantage.

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Acknowledgments

The Smith Family acknowledges Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Custodians of the lands on which we live, work, and learn. We recognise and respect their enduring connection to land, waters, skies, culture, and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and we extend that respect to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples we work alongside in communities across Australia.

We acknowledge and thank the many young people who are sharing their insights and experiences through participating in the Pathways, Engagement and Transitions study.

We also thank the many individuals who supported their participation, including parents, carers and The Smith Family team members and the Social Research Centre who have supported data collection.

We are grateful to the Paul Ramsay Foundation (PRF), the Australian Government through the Department of Education, and “Allan and Gill Gray Philanthropies” for their support of the PET study. PRF works for a future where people and places have what they need to thrive. With organisations and communities, it invests in, builds, and influences the conditions needed to stop disadvantage in Australia.

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© The Smith Family 2026
ISBN: 978-1-876833-25-1

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