



Pathways, Engagement and Transitions:

How young people experiencing
disadvantage navigate the first
three years after leaving school



Executive summary

The post-school transition is a critical time for establishing future pathways

The transition from school to work or further study is critical to young people's long-term career trajectories and economic security.

Economic conditions, shifting labour market demands and evolving education and training systems influence young people's post-school transitions. They are also shaped by **personal, social and institutional influences**, including access to quality education and training, support from family and extended adult networks, and young people's sense of agency, identity and career direction.

Young people experiencing disadvantage are more likely to experience **disrupted** post-school transitions, including periods of unemployment or insecure, low-paid work. This can significantly constrain their capacity to participate fully in work or further study, with **long-term consequences** for themselves and Australia.

Effective evidence-informed policies and programs are critical for supporting young people to build successful post-school pathways into education and employment. This will enable them to make personally meaningful contributions throughout adulthood, strengthen their long-term outcomes and reduce the significant **social and economic costs of disengagement**.

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions study

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study aims to understand the **post-school pathways** of young people experiencing disadvantage. It examines:

- Their level of **engagement in work** and/or **further study**
- The **factors** influencing their pathways
- Ways of **strengthening** young people's post-school outcomes.

This publication, the fifth in the PET series, draws on three longitudinal surveys and interviews conducted annually across 2021 to 2023, with **financially disadvantaged young people** who were in **Year 12 in late 2020** and on The Smith Family's long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*.

It addresses three questions:

- What are the **experiences** and **destinations** of young people in the **first three years** after leaving **Year 12**?
- How do their experiences and destinations **change** during this transition period?
- What **factors helped** or **hindered** young people's successful navigation of work and study post-school?

Data from nearly **800** young people are reported. These young people come from all states and territories, 53 percent are female and 47 percent are male and 16 percent identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Twenty four percent live in non-metropolitan areas and 46 percent have a health or mental health condition.

Young people's participation in work and study post-school

In their third year after finishing school **87 percent** of young people were engaged in work and/or study (up from 77 percent in the first year, and 85 percent in the second year). A further 11 percent were looking for work or engaged in volunteering or unpaid training. **Only three percent** were not participating in any of these activities.

Young people had actively pursued **further study**, with **60 percent** completing or on track to complete at least one post-school qualification. Around **three quarters** of young people (72 percent) were engaged in **employment** in the third year after leaving school.

While the vast majority of young people were engaged, many were still facing a range of **challenges**. Three in five young people (57 percent) were *fully engaged*, that is, working and/or studying full-time, and 30 percent were *partially engaged*.

Two-thirds of young people who were only working were employed **part-time**, and nearly half wanted to **work more hours**. Almost half (47 percent) of those who were only working were employed in retail, sales or hospitality. These data suggest that in the third-year post Year 12, many young people are finding it challenging to secure full-time employment and establish a **longer-term career path**.

Many post-school pathways are dynamic and non-linear

Overall, young people's pathways were highly **dynamic**, with 56 percent of young people having a **different level of engagement** at least once across the three surveys. The **type of activity** (work and/or study) young people were engaged in also varied over time. Of those who were *fully engaged* in each of the three years post Year 12, 43 percent changed their work and study arrangements over time.

Early post-school engagement was a strong **predictor** of later engagement. Three-quarters (73 percent) of those who were *fully engaged* in their first-year post-school remained so in the third year. Conversely, only a quarter (28 percent) of those *not engaged* in the first year were *fully engaged* by the third year.

Factors influencing young people's engagement

The survey data shows that earlier school experiences, such as school attendance or English and maths grades, as well

as some demographic characteristics, such as Indigeneity and language background, were associated with young people's continued engagement in work and/or study over time. For example, 56 percent of young people with a non-English speaking background parent or carer were *fully engaged* in both their first and third year post Year 12, compared to 35 percent of those with an English-speaking background parent or carer.

The interview data also shows how **multiple** external and individual **factors interact** to influence young people's experiences and engagement in work and study over the three years since leaving Year 12. **External factors** included the availability, quality, stability and affordability of supports and opportunities related to housing, health care, transport, study and employment. They also included the **social capital** acquired through strong and diverse adult support networks, particularly those built via employment and study.

Individual factors supporting strong engagement in work and study included cognitive capacity, good health, personal attributes and career management skills. Career management skills comprise three learning areas:

- **Personal management** – a positive self-concept that identifies defined education and career pathways, strong interpersonal skills that facilitate personal growth, and an ability to adapt to life/work challenges
- **Learning and work exploration** – capacity to collate and critically analyse career related information and make informed choices relating to career options
- **Career building** – capacity to create conditions that secure and maintain a career pathway.

The PET study shows that external and individual **factors combined in varied ways** for young people and contributed to their **diverse** pathways and transitions:

- **Highly engaged** young people had clear goals, strong support networks and well-developed career management skills. They successfully navigated alternative pathways, overcame setbacks and adjusted plans while staying on track.
- **Moderately engaged** young people had aspirations but lacked structured plans or supportive networks to help them implement them. They moved between casual work and study, often reacting to circumstances rather than shaping them.
- **Young people with limited/mixed engagement experiences** faced serious barriers, including housing instability, poor mental health, and limited adult support networks, that contributed to prolonged disengagement from work and study. Despite their aspirations, their immediate circumstances overwhelmed their ability to plan or act towards long-term goals.

In summary

In summary the longitudinal data collected from young people experiencing disadvantage shows:

- **Post-school pathways are highly variable**, even among young people with similar backgrounds.
- **Early engagement matters** – being fully engaged in the first-year post-school predicts ongoing engagement.
- **Career management skills are critical** to navigating complex transitions and adapting to challenges when they arise.
- **Strong support networks**, including adults outside the family and school, enhance opportunities, motivation, and direction.

Strengthening young people's post-school pathways

Data collected through the PET study across 2021 to 2023 has consistently shown that strengthening the post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage requires:

- Greater **individualised support** while at school, including **early intervention** for those struggling with the academic and social demands of school and support for those with personal concerns which affect their engagement with school.
- A focus on **intentional career development learning** for young people both at school and post-school. This should include **personalised** career advice and support, which helps them articulate their post school plans and the steps required to achieve this plan. This support should enable young people to access available resources and explore a **range of post-school pathways**.
- Supporting **family members'** access to up-to-date labour market, education and training information, and how they can help young people to develop and achieve post-school goals.
- Providing opportunities to formally increase the **social capital** and career-related adult networks of young people experiencing disadvantage, including through contact with **employers**.
- Identifying young people as a **priority group** in national and state/territory employment policies and programs including a focus on helping those experiencing disadvantage to build meaningful career pathways.
- **System investment** to provide young people experiencing disadvantage with timely and affordable access to social services, such as health, mental health and housing.

The Smith Family gratefully acknowledges the generous contributions and insights provided by young people contributing to the PET study. The quotes and case studies throughout this report have been compiled from interview transcripts, however, the names and photographs used do not represent the individuals involved. Some minor details have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Introduction

The **initial post-school transition** to work, further education and training is a pivotal period that shapes young people's **long-term career trajectories** and economic security (Dietrich et al, 2021). Young people experiencing disadvantage are more likely to experience disrupted post-school transitions, including periods of unemployment or engagement in insecure, low-paid work (Lamb & Huo, 2017). This can influence their confidence and skill development, and in turn, further work and study opportunities throughout adulthood.

Post-school transitions are shaped by broader **economic conditions**, shifting labour market demands and evolving education and training systems. As businesses and industries adapt to global technological, economic and social shifts, young people must navigate an increasingly **complex landscape** of work and study choices.

A range of **personal, social and institutional influences** can also shape young people's post-school transitions. These include access to quality education and training, support from family and extended adult networks, and young people's own sense of agency, identity and career direction.

For **young people experiencing disadvantage**, navigating these factors can be particularly challenging. Limited access to high quality tailored guidance, along with fragmented support systems and fewer opportunities to build social capital can significantly constrain their capacity to participate fully in work or further study.

Ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on post-school transitions

The 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic recession is a recent example of significant social and economic change that disrupted young people's transitions into the labour market and tertiary education (e61 Institute, 2022; Deng et al, 2024). While Australia has moved to

economic recovery (Productivity Commission, 2023a), young people continue to face significant challenges (e61 Institute, 2024; Lamb & Huo, 2024), with **youth unemployment** increasing from 8.0 percent to 9.2 percent between 2022 and 2024 (ACOSS, 2024). Long-term unemployment has also increased, particularly among young people experiencing disadvantage (e61 Institute, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the experience of tertiary education for most students, including the rapid shift to online and mixed-mode course delivery. Young people indicated these changes affected their education and learning experiences. In 2023, 76 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds believed their education or learning experiences were still being impacted by the pandemic and over one-third (37 percent) felt they did not belong at their institution (Deng et al, 2024).

Young people who are struggling to transition into full-time employment and/or post-school study are at **risk** of becoming **permanently disengaged** from economic participation. The fiscal cost of a lifetime of disengagement is conservatively estimated to be equivalent to \$473,400 per young person or \$20.7 billion per cohort, with the social cost an additional \$1,353,400 per young person or \$59.3 billion per cohort (Lamb & Huo, 2024).

Understanding how **multiple influences** interact to effect post-school transitions is critical to designing more evidence-informed policies and programs that support young people experiencing disadvantage. Supporting young people to build successful transition pathways into education and employment enables them to make personally meaningful contributions throughout adulthood, strengthens their long-term outcomes and reduces the significant social and **economic costs of disengagement**.



The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions study

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) project is a longitudinal study exploring the pathways and factors affecting 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*.¹ 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, the PET study aims to:

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

Hearing directly from young people is a particular strength of the PET study. The project has collected a range of data through:

- Annual surveys in March-May
- Annual interviews in August with a sub-group of 60 young people who completed the surveys
- Combining these data with information collected by The Smith Family since these young people began on *Learning for Life*, such as demographic, school attendance and achievement data.

By surveying and interviewing the same group of young people over time, the PET study provides a unique opportunity to better understand the **dynamics** of young people's pathways over time, what changes, what stays the same, and what influences these pathways.

This publication focuses on young people who were in **Year 12 at the end of 2020** and explores their transitions and pathways in the first **three years** after leaving Year 12. It uses information from the three PET surveys and interviews conducted across 2021 to 2023, to address three questions:

- What are the **experiences** and **destinations** of young people in the first three years after leaving Year 12?
- How do their experiences and destinations **change** during this transition period?
- What **factors** have **helped** or **hindered** young people's successful navigation of work and study post-school?

Characteristics of the Year 12 young people

A total of 997 young people in Year 12 in 2020 completed all three PET surveys, representing 46 percent of those initially invited to participate in 2021. Of these, the responses of 790 young people are reported in this publication.²

In 2023, key characteristics of these young people include:

- **Gender:** Over half (53 percent)³ are female and 47 percent are male
- **Indigeneity:** Sixteen percent are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people
- **Location:** Just over three-quarters (76 percent) live in metropolitan areas and 24 percent live in regional areas
- **States and Territories:** All were represented, with around a quarter living in each of New South Wales and Victoria, approximately one-fifth in Queensland, and around one in 10 in each of South Australia and Western Australia. Tasmania and the two territories together comprised about six percent of respondents
- **Health and disability:** Nearly half (46 percent) of respondents indicated that they had a health or mental health condition
- **Year 12 Completion:** One in ten participants had not completed Year 12.

The young people who completed the surveys were broadly representative of the cohort of Year 12 students who were on the *Learning for Life* program in 2020.⁴

In addition, 27 young people who were in Year 12 in 2020 and completed the annual surveys took part in one-hour interviews conducted in 2021, 2022, and 2023. These interviews explored their experiences of work, study, and other activities since leaving school, along with the factors shaping these experiences. This report draws on longitudinal interviews with seven of these young people to present detailed case studies illustrating a range of post-school pathways and circumstances.

1 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>

2 Overall, 207 young people were excluded from the analysis for a range of reasons. Responses were excluded if at any wave: 1) a proxy or carer completed the survey on behalf of the young person, 2) the young person was still at school or had returned to school to complete Year 12, or 3) the young person was receiving a carer/parenting payment or a disability payment. These exclusion criteria were applied in recognition that these young people often could not be in engaged in full-time work or study.

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

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

Young people’s participation in work and study post school

The PET survey asks young people about their engagement in work and study after leaving school. Young people are defined as **fully engaged** if they are working 35 hours a week or more, studying full-time, or combining both part-time work and study. Those working or studying part-time (fewer than 35 hours) are defined as **partially engaged**. Young people who are not participating in work or study are defined as **not engaged**, though they may be looking for work, in unpaid work or volunteering.

Over time, the proportion of young people experiencing disadvantage who were either *fully* or *partially engaged* increased from 77 percent in the first year after Year 12, to 85 percent in the second year and 87 percent in the third year (see Figure 1). In both the second and third year after

Year 12, a further 11 percent of young people were looking for work, volunteering, or engaged in unpaid training.⁵ Only three percent of young people were *not engaged* and not participating in job-seeking, volunteering, or unpaid training.

The activities that young people participated in also changed over time (see Figure 2). In each year, similar proportions (29 to 34 percent) of young people were combining work and study. Between the first and third year after Year 12, the proportion of young people only engaged in study decreased from 23 percent to 14 percent, while the proportion only working increased from 25 to 40 percent. By the third year after leaving school, the majority (64 percent) of those combining work and study were studying a bachelor’s degree, in addition to working.

Figure 1: Engagement in work and/or study in the first, second and third year after leaving Year 12

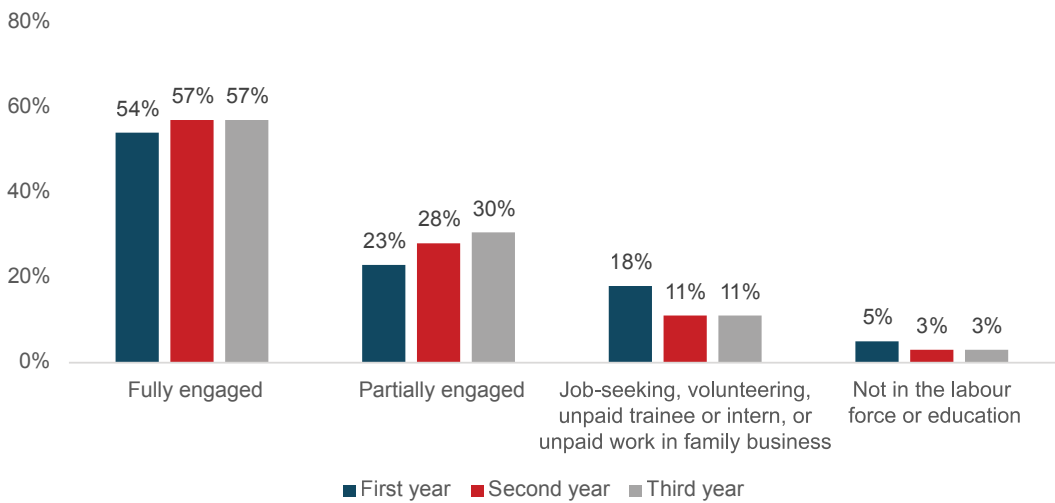
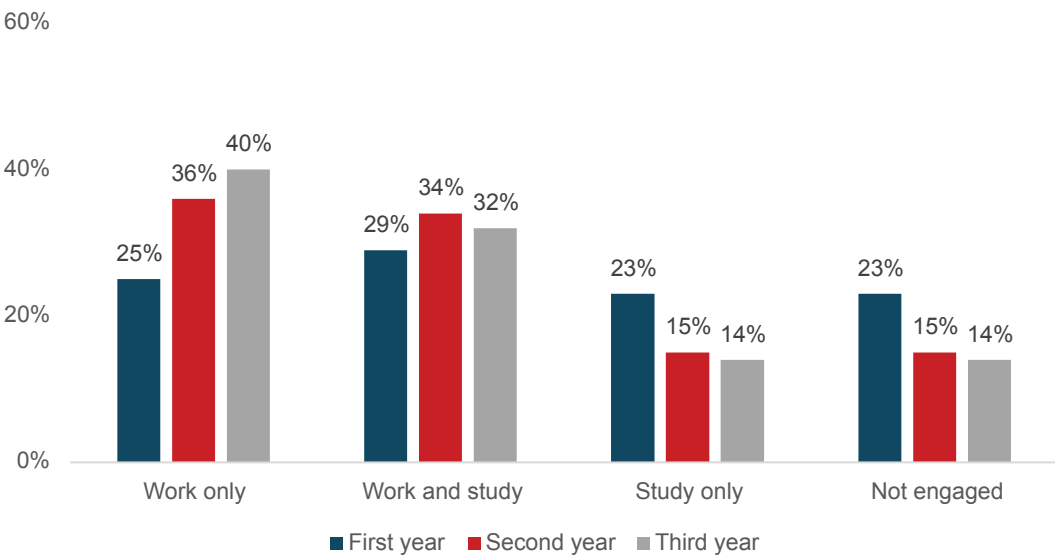


Figure 2: Participation in work and study in the first, second and third year after leaving Year 12



⁵ In 2023, the majority (99 percent) of these young people were looking for work. A small proportion were also volunteering (10 percent), engaged as an unpaid trainee or intern (5 percent), or engaged in unpaid work in their family business (8 percent).

Participation in study

By the third year after leaving Year 12, the majority (**80 percent**) of young people experiencing disadvantage had completed, or were on track to complete, a qualification. One-in-five (20 percent) had completed a VET qualification while at school, and were not actively pursuing a post-school qualification. Three-in-five young people (60 percent) had either completed, or were on track to complete, a **post-school qualification**. This group included 24 percent pursuing a bachelor's degree, 12 percent a Certificate IV, 18 percent a Certificate III, and five percent up to and including a Certificate II. More than half of young people pursued **multiple** qualifications over time, with 57 percent of those studying in the third year after Year 12 having already completed another qualification.

Working only

Of the 40 percent of young people who were *only* engaged in work in their third year after leaving Year 12, one-third (36 percent) were working full-time, and two-thirds (64 percent) were working part-time. Nearly half (46 percent) of young people engaged only in work were **underemployed**, that is they wanted to work more hours (see Figure 3).⁶ The desire for more hours was particularly evident for young people working up to 10 hours a week (64 percent), between 11 and 20 hours a week (75 percent), or 21 to 30 hours a week (56 percent).

As shown in Figure 4, almost half of young people (47 percent) engaged only in work were employed in retail, sales or hospitality work. One in six (16 percent) were employed as labourers, factory process workers or cleaners and approximately one in five (18 percent) were employed as childcare, community or health care work (10 percent) or in administration or customer support roles (8 percent).

Figure 3: Preferred hours of work, by hours worked, for young people who were working only in the third year after leaving Year 12

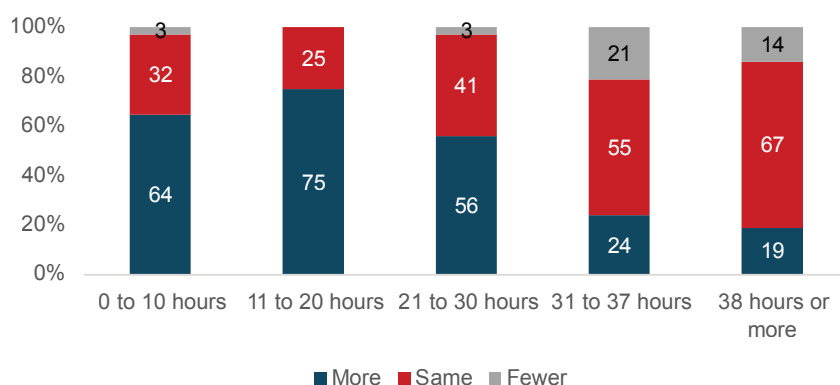
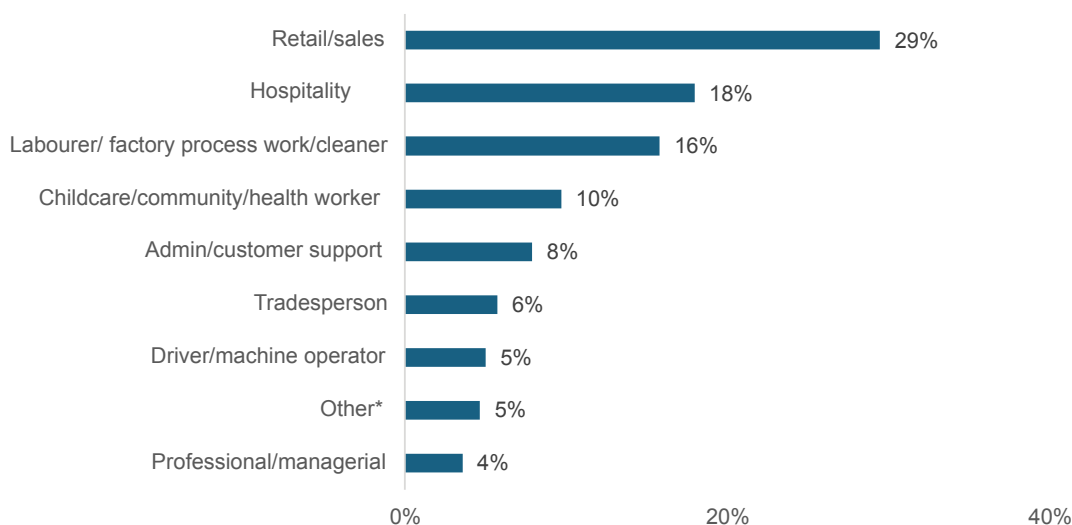


Figure 4: Occupation of young people who were working only in the third year after leaving Year 12



*Other includes occupations in the arts, entertainment, tourism or sports industries.

⁶ Underemployment refers to someone who is currently employed, but is not working full-time and would like to, and is available to work additional hours (ABS, 2021).

Pathways after leaving Year 12

Surveying the same young people over time enables a closer examination of how *individual* young people transition between work and/or study, and the complex and dynamic nature of these transitions.

Overall, while 44 percent of young people had the same level of engagement in each of the three years, **56 percent changed** their level of **engagement at least once**. The most common pathway – 33 percent of young people – were *fully engaged* each year, though the type of activity they were engaged in typically changed. Only three percent of this group were working full-time each year, 15 percent were studying full-time each year, and 39 percent had combined a full-time work and study load. The remaining 43 percent variously changed their work and study arrangements over time.

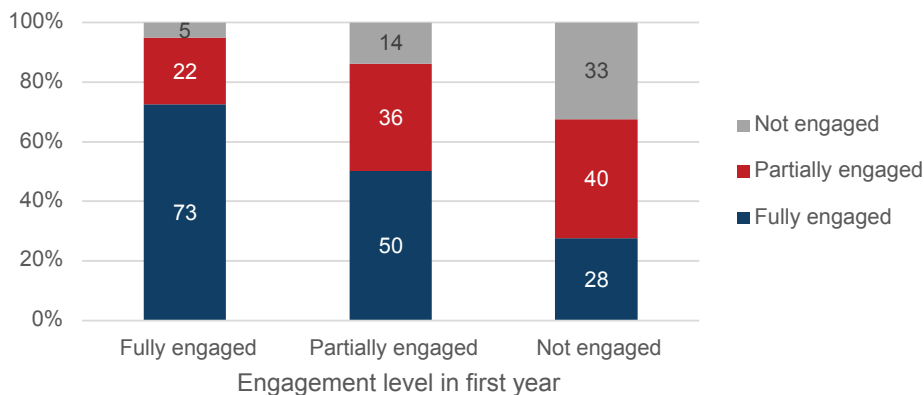
While the proportions of young people who were *not engaged* decreased from 23 percent in the first year to 14 percent in the third year post-Year 12 (see Figure 1), these were not the same young people each time. This further reflects the highly **dynamic nature** of young people’s pathways in the three years post-school. One-in-three (33 percent) young people were *not engaged* in work or study at least once, but only six percent were *not engaged* across all three surveys.

Initial transitions and later experiences

Figure 5 shows young people’s **initial transition** experience in the first year post-school was particularly important for engagement in subsequent years. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of young people who were *fully engaged* in the first year after Year 12 were still *fully engaged* in the third year, with 22 percent moving to *partial engagement* and five percent moving to *not engaged* in the third year. In contrast, half (50 percent) of those who were *partially engaged* in the first year increased to *fully engaged* in their third year after Year 12, and only 28 percent of those who were *not engaged* in the first year after Year 12 were *fully engaged* in the third year.



Figure 5: Engagement in the third year after Year 12, by level of engagement in the first year after Year 12



Young people's engagement over time

Figures 6 and 7 contrast the factors related to consistent full engagement or non-engagement in the first and third years after Year 12. While some **demographic characteristics** were associated with the likelihood of young people remaining *fully engaged* in their third year (see Figure 6), **earlier school experiences** (see Figure 7) also had strong links with different engagement outcomes.

The proportions of young people who were *fully engaged* in both the first and third year were higher among non-Indigenous than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (42 percent and 22 percent respectively). They were also higher among those with a non-English speaking

background parent or carer compared to those with an English-speaking background parent or carer (56 percent and 35 percent respectively). There were no differences by gender or where young people lived, in the proportions who were *not engaged* in both the first and third year after Year 12 (around eight percent).

Large differences were evident when considering **earlier indicators** of school engagement or achievement, both in terms of young people's initial transition in the first year and changes through to their third year. For example, young people achieving a C in Year 9 maths were more likely to be *fully engaged* in the first year after Year 12 than those who achieved a D or E grade (57 percent compared to 35 percent). Of those *fully engaged* in the first year, those who achieved a C grade were **also more likely to remain fully**

Figure 6: Change in engagement between the first and third year after leaving Year 12, by demographic factors

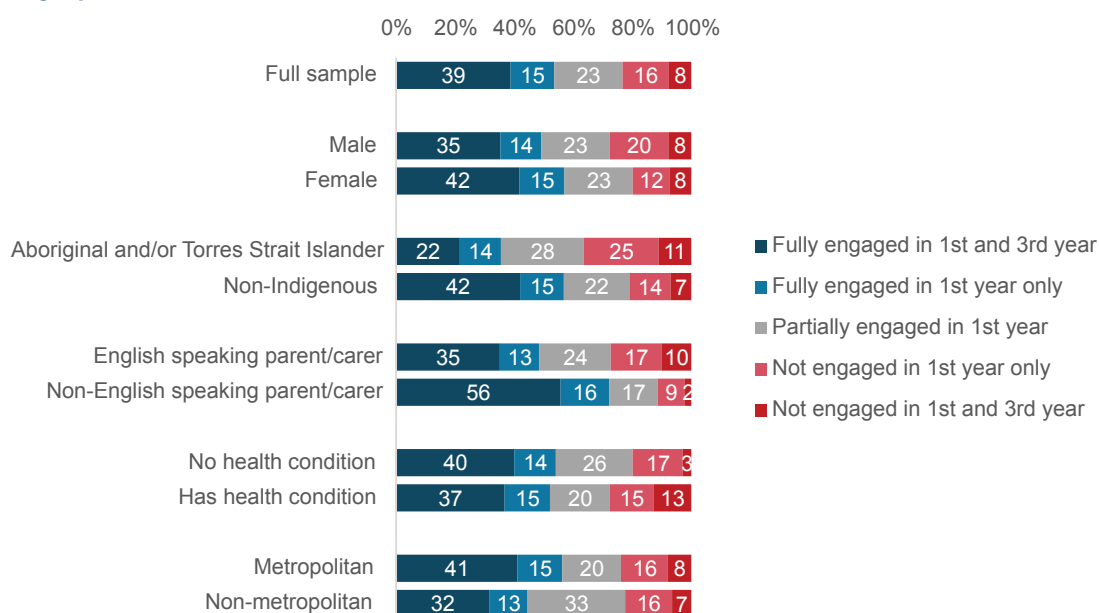
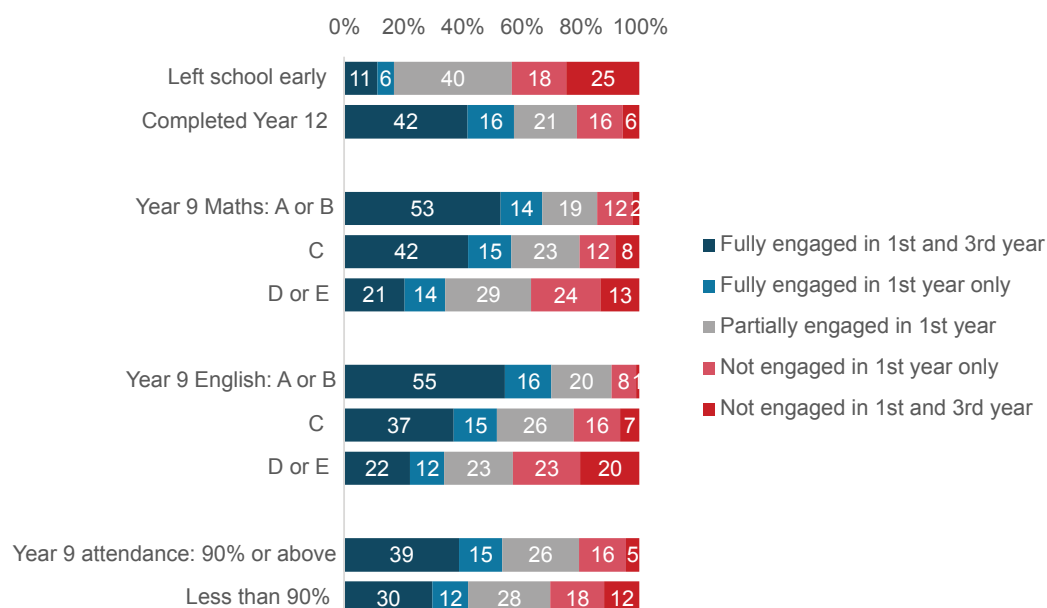


Figure 7: Change in engagement between the first and third year after leaving Year 12, by earlier school factors



engaged in their third year after Year 12 (74 percent remained *fully engaged*, compared to 60 percent for those who achieved a D or E grade).

Factors influencing young people's engagement

The three years of qualitative interviews reinforce the extent of **change** that young people experienced over time, and how multiple external and individual factors interact to influence their experiences and engagement in work and study in the time since leaving Year 12.

External factors included the **availability, quality, stability** and **affordability** of supports and opportunities related to housing, health care, transport, study and employment. They also included the **social capital** acquired through strong and diverse adult support networks, particularly networks built via employment and study.

Individual factors supporting strong engagement in work and study included cognitive capacity, **good health**, personal attributes and **career management skills**. Career management skills comprise three learning areas (National Careers Institute, 2022):

- **Personal management** – a positive self-concept that identifies defined education and career pathways, strong interpersonal skills that facilitate personal growth, and an ability to adapt to life/work challenges

- **Learning and work exploration** – capacity to collate and critically analyse career related information and make informed choices relating to career options
- **Career building** – capacity to create conditions that secure and maintain a career pathway.

The **combination** of external and individual factors affecting young people **varied** and influenced their pathways and transitions in diverse ways. Examining these factors by young people's overall engagement in work and study over the three years after Year 12, offers insights into what **helps** or **hinders** the post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage.

The following case studies detail the pathways of seven young people with varying post-school experiences. They highlight how the combinations of external and individual factors have shaped these young people's decisions and opportunities. These pathways are broadly described as **highly engaged, moderately engaged** and **limited engagement**. Highly engaged young people include Babak, Byron and Evanna, who have been fully engaged across the three years of interviews. Alice and Braden have experienced moderate engagement, with inconsistent or intermittent engagement in part-time work or short-term study. The young people with limited engagement in work or study, Dilek and Toby, have endeavoured to pursue opportunities but have experienced prolonged periods of time not engaged in either work or study.



Highly engaged young people

Young people who were highly engaged across the three years after leaving Year 12:

- Had relatively favourable **external factors**, strong support networks, personal strengths and career management skills.
- Effectively accessed **support** and used **social capital** to overcome challenges. These young people had well developed skills across the three **career management learning** areas when they left school, and further strengthened them during their transitions.
- Were able to use their skills and networks successfully to **identify** clear occupational pathways and **pursue** career goals with well-defined study and/or work **plans**.

Babak

Background and schooling

Babak and his family moved to Australia as refugees and he joined the education system in Year 8, attending extra classes to catch up academically. From a young age, he was proactive in building adult support networks through community volunteering, gaining new experiences and connections.

In high school, Babak consistently achieved the curriculum standards in English and maths while working part-time. He was passionate about history, politics and humanities, so he studied history in senior secondary school. Since completing Year 12 in 2020, Babak has lived at home with his parents, who continue to support him and encourage his academic and career ambitions.

Transition experiences and factors

In the three years after Year 12, Babak successfully navigated his career development through full-time university studies and part-time work. He had aspired to become a teacher since school and made steady progress towards that goal. Before finishing Year 12, he received early university offers due to his leadership in community volunteering. Babak started his Bachelor of Arts (Teaching) degree the following year.

Though he initially found university *a bit hard*⁷ because his parents had limited experience with tertiary education, Babak had developed strong **career management skills** and personal skills by the end of Year 12. His chosen career path aligned with his interests and abilities, and he created a clear learning plan to achieve it. Babak also used his **help-seeking skills** to access academic support both at school and university.

At university, Babak's **learning and work exploration skills** grew. Early in his degree, he explored various study options and gained more insights into potential teaching careers. He developed a deeper understanding of how his knowledge and skills would align with labour market opportunities, which led him to adjust his learning plan.

By the second year of his degree, Babak used his enhanced skills to change his course, streamlining his path into teaching.

At the start of the year, I changed to a Master of Teaching...With this course pathway...there's four units you do. You're already doing the master's degree in the last semester, making it shorter if you...have a certain grade level.

In the first two years of his degree, Babak worked part-time in retail and fast food, gaining valuable skills and experience. However, as his studies became more demanding in the third year, he adjusted his work hours to focus on his study and maintain his grades.

Midway through his final year, Babak planned to explore other career options by completing an internship in a different industry during the summer holidays. He saw this as an opportunity to gain experiences beyond teaching and understand what it is like to work in a different field.

An optimistic individual, Babak believes that positivity, self-confidence, and seizing every opportunity to learn and explore are key to his success, including participating in mentoring and internship programs.

People finishing high school should always talk to their career advisor from school, and talk to people from different industries about what their jobs look like, and their experience. And always ask questions... the more you ask, the more you gain.

⁷ All text in italics in the case studies are direct quotes from interviews with young people.

Byron

Background and schooling

Byron grew up in an Australian capital city, and *really enjoyed being at school*. He enjoyed the social aspect of school, participated in sports, and enjoyed the hands-on experience of the Certificate II in Hospitality and Certificate II in Construction he completed while at school. Byron was a strong maths student but had some learning difficulties that meant he struggled more in English.

While at school, Byron worked two part-time jobs in retail and hospitality. He had been *on and off with different career ideas*, but halfway through Year 11 he decided he could fulfil his interest and passion for *helping people* by becoming a paramedic. He had been a volunteer lifesaver since he was a young teenager and enjoyed both the rescue and medical aspects of the role. One of Byron's *careers teachers* was instrumental in helping him get a deeper understanding of his career goal and in beginning to extend his adult support network.

She helped me get information for how I could achieve that goal...She knew...a paramedic...and got her to come in and do an interview of what it's like and what kind of things you have to do...where to go to uni and stuff...it definitely helped a lot...to figure out how I could get there.

After completing Year 12, Byron moved in with his partner and her family who, along with his family and friends, were a consistent source of practical and emotional support.

Transition experiences and factors

In the three years after completing Year 12, Byron maintained a strong and positive self-concept about becoming a paramedic. Although he initially planned to enter university, he did not achieve the required Australian Tertiary Education Rank (ATAR). Instead, he used his **career management** and **problem-solving skills** to find an alternative pathway.

Byron used his **learning and work exploration skills** to research study options and enrolled in a part-time Diploma of Paramedical Science through the Australian Paramedical College. He also joined labour hire companies to support himself financially and save for a future with his partner. Over three years, he progressed steadily in his diploma while working two part-time casual jobs—up to 50 hours a week—using his construction and hospitality qualifications. These roles gave him the flexibility to balance work and study as he worked towards his career goal.

Byron felt *more excited* about the alternative pathway he had taken, believing it gave him more practical knowledge than going straight to university. Through the College, volunteer lifesaving, and family connections, he built a strong **adult support network** that included paramedics and nurses. This network provided study support, helped him build his clinical skills, and gave him valuable insights into the realities of a paramedic career.



Evanna

Background and schooling

Evanna is a young Aboriginal woman with strong family connections to her culture. Throughout high school, she was supported by an Aboriginal girl's academy program and does not *think she would have graduated school* without the program coordinator's support.

Evanna *loved school* and found *all the teachers...friendly and...really supportive*. However, she struggled academically and consistently achieved below the national curriculum standards in English and maths. At school, Evanna *just wanted to do sport* and in senior secondary school, she completed a Certificate II in Sport and Recreation.

While at school, Evanna decided she wanted *to become a police officer*. When she was in Year 12, her Aboriginal Coordinator organised a *tour of the police academy* and provided Evanna with significant help with her police application *paperwork*.

Since completing Year 12, Evanna has lived at home with her mother and three younger siblings. Although Evanna aimed to gain greater independence, she relied on her mother for practical and emotional support, acknowledging the significant financial savings of living at home.

Transition experiences and factors

Towards the end of Year 12 Evanna reached the *panel interview* stage of her police application but was unsuccessful. She was advised she could reapply in *12 months* but at the end of 2021 was again unsuccessful and advised to reapply in four years. Despite these setbacks, Evanna's strong **personal management skills** have given her a positive self-concept and commitment to becoming a police officer.

Her strategy has been to maintain full-time employment while awaiting her next opportunity to apply to the academy. In the first two years after school, she changed job three times. These positions strengthened her general employability knowledge and skills, increased her understanding of employee rights and responsibilities and significantly improved her financial position. However, they were not directly related to her goal of becoming a police officer.

The experience Evanna gained in these roles significantly strengthened her **learning and work exploration skills** and **career building skills**, particularly her understanding of how different knowledge and skills can contribute to achieving personal goals. By the third year after Year 12, Evanna recognised that a different *job opportunity* would provide her with skills and experience more closely aligned with those she needed in the police force. She sought and secured a full-time position *that would possibly lead her to getting into the police academy*. With her **help-seeking behaviours**, Evanna used her new adult support network and discussed her police ambitions with her *general manager*. Evanna was subsequently moved to an investigation unit *cos they knew that...this role was better* for Evanna's police career

prospects and they *could see more potential*. In this new role, Evanna felt she was *doing more* than she had in any previous role to improve her police related skills and experience.

I'm learning stuff every day that'll eventually help me out with the police when I reapply...We take matters to court, so you have arbitration, conciliation.

As part of this role, Evanna commenced a Certificate III in Government. She found the study *challenging* but sought help from colleagues and valued that it was teaching her about *legislation and compliance*. Evanna was considering enrolling in a Diploma in Investigation when she completed the Certificate III, as she recognised that this would also strengthen the skills required for police work.

Over the three years since leaving Year 12, Evanna has built and expanded her adult support network, ensuring she has *people around...who help her out* with progressing her goal of becoming a police officer. She seeks help and support from her work colleagues and manager and has maintained contact with her Aboriginal Coordinator from school who *still checks up on her*. Evanna has joined the Police Academy Facebook page of *people trying to apply or have made it through and are helping other people*. She is aware that the police service is *trying to get more police officers because a lot of them quit during COVID*. She remains optimistic about her police goal.

I'm not going to give up. I don't give up. If I want something, I'm going to keep trying for it.



Moderately engaged young people

Young people who were moderately engaged in the three years after Year 12 tended to have more **complex circumstances** and **challenging experiences** than their highly engaged peers. For these young people:

- Adverse **external factors** affected their ability to effectively use or strengthen their individual skills, or manage or improve their circumstances.
- **Career goals** were often more loosely defined than those who were highly engaged.
- They had **clear aspirations** about which field they were interested in pursuing, but were **uncertain** about where to start.
- Their **social capital** was more limited, and they often lacked adult support networks who could help them effectively navigate any career uncertainties or challenging circumstances.

Braden

Background and schooling

Braden attended two high schools in a metropolitan suburb and experienced mixed academic and social outcomes. In Year 10, he met the national curriculum standard in English and exceeded the standard in maths, though he had previously had years when he had not achieved the minimum standards in both. Braden struggled socially at his first high school where he *didn't really feel like he belonged*. This changed when he moved schools, and found a greater sense of belonging and received support from teachers and friends.

In senior secondary school, Braden completed a Certificate I in Construction because he thought it *would be something fun to do*. He also completed a Certificate III in Business Administration, a decision influenced by his interest in business studies during Years 9 and 10, which he felt he understood better than most of his other subjects.

By Year 12, Braden was focussed on achieving his *main goal* of graduating, motivated by a combination of factors:

Mum and dad both dropped out during school, so they wanted me to finish and get a full education. There were a lot of teachers who were very supportive and really wanted to see me make it through. So, I didn't want to let them down...But a couple of teachers...didn't think I'd make it to the end...and I wanted to...prove them wrong...A few...friends...did end up dropping out. I decided I didn't want to be like that.

Since leaving school, Braden has lived at home with his parents, three siblings, a sibling's partner and two nephews. At the end of his second year after finishing school, Braden and his partner welcomed a son into the family home. The household, living in a private rental, faced significant overcrowding, which breached the terms of their tenancy agreement. As a result, the family became increasingly concerned about the risk of eviction.

Transition experiences and factors

At the end of Year 12, Braden expressed ambitions to *get his diploma and master's in business and eventually...start a business*. However, he had limited **career management**

skills, no clearly formed career-related self-concept and identified that he *was a little confused on what I wanted to do*. Braden was unsure about where to access accurate information and guidance to help him explore or define occupational pathways aligned with his skills and abilities. With few trusted mentors to discuss or help develop his employability and career management skills, Braden was unsure about his next steps.

Although he consistently maintained a general interest in business, Braden's limited **learning and work exploration** and **career building skills**, alongside a limited adult support network, meant he struggled to understand the link between learning, work experience, and skill development. This left him unable to identify or pursue specific educational or career goals. He tended to underestimate the personal attributes and technical skills required for success in business and was largely unaware of the practical support and real-world experience needed to turn his aspirations into reality.

I really liked the way business things work...It's really interesting...I've seen how big companies have started off and how they've made it now. I've just thought 'maybe I could be like that,' start off small and make it big later on...I could potentially make it really successful.

Braden did not identify any specific area of business or career path that genuinely interested him, and he consistently struggled with time management and prioritisation. Although he initially planned to enrol in TAFE in the first year after Year 12, he missed the enrolment deadlines and instead decided to take a *gap year...to mostly work and save money*.

In the following years, Braden moved between multiple part-time, casual roles in retail, fast food and hospitality, but these roles did not establish a pathway towards a sustainable or meaningful career. He maintained his retail job from school into the first year after Year 12, but eventually grew bored and left in search of something new. With limited career-building and work exploration skills, he struggled to identify a specific direction.

A family connection helped him secure a part-time trial for a potential apprenticeship, which was set up so he could maintain his retail role during the trial period. Braden resigned

from his retail job before his work trial had concluded, and a fortnight later was advised that he would not be offered the apprenticeship.

Braden's sister then helped him find a fast-food job, and he briefly saw potential for a longer-term future with the organisation. However, this role was also short-lived, lasting a few months. In his second year out of school, Braden completed a Certificate II in Hospitality and took on another part-time casual job in the hospitality sector. The late-night hours proved difficult, and although he frequently turned down shifts he was surprised when the employer let him go.

The course eventually got me a position...I believed it was going good but...it was full on nights...to 10 o'clock...so I stopped taking work...They believed that my work ethic wasn't that good...I thought I was doing the best I could, but they didn't see it that way...

Over the next year, Braden moved between three other similar part-time casual positions in the hospitality sector and unemployment. After he became a father, he found it even more challenging to manage the demands of work while raising a baby in an overcrowded house.

There are 11 of us in the house...it's just very hard...just physically draining and mentally tiring because I've had to try and work out ways to make everything fit...It's just a lot more hectic...I've started working graveyard shifts...I'm hoping it all works out.

Overall, Braden's approach to post-school planning was largely **reactive** rather than proactive. He made several decisions, such as leaving jobs prematurely or missing key enrolment dates, the consequences of which often left him without employment or a clear sense of direction. By the middle of his third year after Year 12, Braden still aspired to pursue a career in business and spoke of *definitely ... looking at doing like a bachelor's or a diploma to rocket myself towards a better career*. However, he had yet to form a coherent plan to achieve this goal.

Crucially, Braden lacked an extended **adult support network** beyond his immediate family. Without access to accurate or reliable information about career pathways, or opportunities to develop his **employability** and **career management skills**, he continued to struggle with identifying and taking meaningful next steps.

...down the track, I definitely see myself obviously in business administration, having four years of schooling and experience of it. And just working on a computer. Like, I know my way around them and it'd just be so much easier than standing for most of the day.



Alice

Background and schooling

Alice is a young Aboriginal woman who had little connection to her culture growing up but was eager to learn more about her background and heritage. At school, she tried to engage with programs for Aboriginal students but felt excluded and disconnected from those groups. She also struggled with social anxiety and dyslexia, which impacted her sense of belonging at school and academic achievement.

Despite these challenges, Alice was determined to complete Year 12, encouraged by her mother and motivated by her own goal to complete a Certificate II in Animal Studies, given her passion for working with animals. She lived in a small regional town with her mother and four siblings, supported by her maternal extended family, but had limited contact with her father and his side of the family.

Transition experiences and factors

After completing Year 12, Alice remained committed to her goal of working with animals. While she developed some **career management skills** at school, she struggled to connect how **learning and skill development** linked to her career goals. She was aware of potential employers in her field of interest but could not identify specific roles she wanted to pursue. While Alice understood that further study might improve her prospects, opportunities for further study were limited in her regional town. Alice also felt her dyslexia continued to be a major barrier in her transition to post-school study.

During this time, Alice completed additional qualifications and moved between casual jobs, unpaid work and periods of not being engaged in work or study. Her employment experiences suggest Alice may have struggled to develop **employability skills** and she had a limited extended **adult network** to support her to identify and strengthen these skills. Alice moved on from several jobs after not receiving shifts, not having a contract renewed or not securing a position following paid or unpaid trial periods or traineeships. In several cases, she had limited insights about why those roles ended.

I worked in fast food for three years and then I got terminated for inactive membership because they never gave me shifts. I had a childcare traineeship for one month and then got told I wasn't the right fit for that centre.

I did a five-day trial period in a petting zoo but sadly did not get the traineeship. I'm not too sure why. They said I didn't know enough... That was the only reason I was given.

Alice's social anxiety and dyslexia negatively impacted her capacity to develop and strengthen her **personal management skills** and interpersonal relationships. She felt she was not *the smartest* and she struggled with *meeting new people...and making friends*.

When Alice realised that it was taking *a lot of time and effort* to find a job working with animals, she began strengthening her **learning and work exploration** and **career building skills**. Drawing on support and advice from her family, she was encouraged to *find a second option*. She decided to explore an alternative career path in childcare while continuing to search for any opportunity to work with animals.

My partner's mum...said that having your Cert III... in childcare...you can almost get a job anywhere... They're always looking for workers...Everyone wants to work with animals...So with childcare at least I had something to fall back on.

At the end of the first year after Year 12, Alice enrolled in a Certificate III in childcare as part of a traineeship. However, after completing the certificate and traineeship Alice was not offered ongoing work. Over the next 12 to 15 months, she had short periods of being unemployed as she moved between three different childcare centres trying to secure an ongoing position in this sector. By the end of her second year after Year 12, Alice had begun exploring different employment options and in early 2023 found a casual position in a processing factory.

During this time, Alice had passed her provisional licence test and bought a car, which enabled her to extend her employment and study options. She enrolled, in a part-time Certificate III in Wildlife and Exhibited Animal Care. Alice also secured a volunteer position at a wildlife park and felt she was progressing towards her ambition of working with animals. She hoped to travel around Australia and *to start a family one day* and believed that *in the end, you get to where you want to be if you try hard enough*.

Young people with limited engagement

Young people with limited engagement in the three years after leaving Year 12 often:

- Had **highly complex lives** and faced extremely **challenging circumstances**.
- Found their circumstances **compounded** by **insufficient access** to **support** services and adult support networks.
- Found their circumstances **overwhelmed** their ability to **focus on** anything other than those **immediate circumstances**.
- Experienced **prolonged exposure to stressors** that adversely impacted their social and emotional **wellbeing**. This significantly constrained - or altogether prevented - their ability to plan for or engage in work and study.

Dilek

Background and schooling

Dilek spent his childhood in a refugee camp before moving to Australia as a teenager with his mother and eight siblings. Struggling academically, he achieved below curriculum standards in English and maths. In senior school, he commenced a pre-apprenticeship in automotive mechanics but faced challenges during COVID-19, including having to rely on his phone to complete school work. With financial support, he obtained a laptop which improved his learning. Encouraged by his pre-apprenticeship course and support from family and friends, he completed Year 12, aiming to become a mechanic.

Transition experiences and factors

The first three years after Year 12 were challenging for Dilek. He wanted a job in the automotive industry but struggled to navigate study or employment opportunities. Without connections or **support networks** in the industry, he found it difficult to get guidance or identify opportunities on how to get a start in this area.

I wasn't working on cars in this course. So, I needed to change out oil filters, know about engines...I needed certain things to be done to be an automotive mechanic...They said I needed basically to know everything about cars.

Dilek had some **personal management skills** related to a defined self-concept of becoming a mechanic, but described himself as *shy, quiet and anti-social*. Beyond his mother, brother, and friends, his only adult support was a school counsellor, but Dilek found the advice offered to be general and unrelated to his circumstances. He used the **learning and work exploration skills** he had developed to explore pathways into the industry, but struggled to find useful or accurate information.

The school counsellor...gave me advice to not give up and...gave me some websites that I could go to, to look for other opportunities... Most of them weren't helpful...most of them are a waste of time...basically...I'd call them up and speak to them about really getting experience... everyone was saying that you need more hands-on experience...you need a car...to get parts.

At the end of his first-year post-school, Dilek left his pre-apprenticeship course to find work and save for a car. He took jobs in fast food and retail, but COVID restrictions led to reduced hours. By his second year out of school, repeated job rejections left him discouraged. His mother disapproved of his decision to leave his course, and a family breakdown forced him out of home, leaving him homeless.

At this time, Dilek couch-surfed, stayed in emergency accommodation, and was hospitalised for two weeks due to the toll of his situation. Though he received support from housing, youth and food services, gaps in service coordination left him struggling with housing, food insecurity and poor health.

Despite wanting a job, Dilek struggled to develop further **career skills** or engage in study or work plans due to his difficult circumstances. His case worker helped him to maintain Centrelink payments, update his resumé and speak to employers. By his third year after leaving school, he was on the waitlists for multiple services, relying on a youth centre for essentials and temporary accommodation.

Though reluctant to discuss his mental health, Dilek acknowledged the stress of his situation. He spoke with emergency service counsellors and was waiting for long-term support. Despite his situation, he remained hopeful about becoming independent, still aspiring towards an automotive apprenticeship and eventually opening his own shop. In the meantime, his case worker was helping him find retail work to build his skills and earn income.



Toby

Background and schooling

Toby was born in Australia and grew up in a capital city with his mum and sister, with substantial practical, emotional and financial support from his extended family.

Toby performed well in high school, exceeding national standards in English and maths. He completed a Certificate II in Electrotechnology during senior secondary school, drawn to the idea of becoming an electrician, but was generally uncertain about his preferred career path.

While at school, Toby took on occasional jobs but never had consistent part-time work. The unpredictability of COVID-19 left him mentally exhausted and struggling with his mental health. After finishing Year 12, he felt he needed a break before determining his next steps.

...I had no clue...where I wanted to go with my future...and was pretty lost after school...I just wanted to get into the workforce...and then I was thinking I'd soon find out what I wanted to do, but...it didn't happen that way.

Transition experiences and factors

The first three years after Year 12 were challenging for Toby due to poor **mental health**, leading to minimal engagement in work or study. He struggled to develop **career management skills** and had no **adult support networks** beyond his family, though they provided practical, emotional, and financial help. Toby also had limited **personal management** and **learning and work exploration skills**. He relied on opportunities to emerge that might clarify a potential career path, but otherwise he was not proactive about identifying those opportunities.

After school, I was just unsure where I wanted to go in the future...I just waited...to try to figure out my interests...Just build up some sort of skill, I guess, was the main idea.

In the first six months after Year 12, Toby was not engaged in work or further study. Encouraged by his aunt, he enrolled in a full-time Certificate III in Business Studies. Although he wasn't particularly interested in the course, he felt he needed qualifications to move forward. He completed the Certificate at the end of 2021, but Toby had *no sense of achievement* having completed the course as it *wasn't easy but it wasn't hard*. He had hoped the course would help him identify a direction, but it did not offer clarity on his interests or a potential career path.

Toby had limited capacity to implement **learning and work exploration** and **career building skills** because of his poor mental health. In the second year after Year 12, he started a trial position as a labourer. While his boss was a *pretty nice bloke*, Toby was unable to maintain this work because he could not *escape this feeling of anxiety*.

On leaving this job, he did *not want to take a step back and not work*, so he asked for and was given part-time casual work in an extended family member's café because it is *better than doing nothing*. Toby's shifts were irregular and seasonal and often there were weeks when he did not get any shifts. Toby enjoyed the social aspect of this work as he was able to *make good friends* with his colleagues. However, it negatively impacted on his self-concept as he felt he was *cheating* by taking a *job with family*. Over the following two years, Toby was not able to progress beyond this part-time casual work, picking up shifts *here and there*.

Across the three years after Year 12, Toby felt *pretty indecisive...unmotivated*. He wanted to study but found it difficult to identify or develop a **career learning plan** as he had ongoing concerns about making decisions that he felt would waste his time and finances.

I have, like commitment issues...committing to a course, especially a big course. Like being a tradie's a four year course, getting a doctorate can be like anywhere from six to 10 years...That sort of commitment scares me because it's like once you pick it, you've got to do it...The plan is to continue studying what I want to pursue, but it's just that I don't know what I want to pursue yet.

Toby had access to mental health support that might have assisted him strengthen his **personal management skills**. However, his mother struggled financially, so Toby could not justify the cost of accepting support or *make the commitment of...going every week*.

I've been thinking of seeing a...therapist...but yeah, it's expensive and...I don't know...it feels...somewhat selfish of me to waste that money every week on a clinical psychologist. It's \$220 a session...and with subsidies, if you go on a Mental Health Plan, it's \$130 or something.

In the third year after Year 12, Toby was still struggling to strengthen his **learning and work exploration** and **career building skills**. He had limited capacity to make effective career decisions that would help him to identify, change or enhance his transition pathway. He had developed a vague idea of wanting a career in which he would be *helping*

people, but had no **adult support network** that could provide accurate knowledge or information about possible career options or study or work pathways in this broad field.

While Toby felt his **mental health** had improved since school, it remained a significant barrier to making effective decisions about career options.

I'm not in as good a place as what I'd hoped to be and I'm not really taking as big of a step as I want, but I have to allow myself to build up that strength...to actually move forward...to making the decisions that I know I have to make...to go and study something...I don't know what I want to do for work...but I've gotten to the point where I'm just sick of being in this rut, like mentally.



Conclusion

This report sheds light on the **destinations** and **dynamic experiences** of young people experiencing disadvantage in their first three years after leaving Year 12. It also identifies the **factors** that have **helped** or **hindered** young people's successful navigation of work and study post-school.

In summary the longitudinal data collected through the PET study from young people experiencing disadvantage shows:

- **Post-school pathways are highly variable**, even among young people with similar backgrounds.
- **Initial transition experiences matter** – being fully engaged in the first-year post-school predicts ongoing engagement.
- **Career development and management skills are critical** to navigating complex transitions and adapting to challenges when they arise.
- **Strong support networks**, including adults outside the family and school, enhance opportunities, motivation, and direction.

The comprehensive multi-year data summarised in this and earlier reports provides **evidence-informed** insights on the policies and programs that are required to support young people to build **successful post-school pathways** into education and employment:

- Greater **individualised support** while at school, including **early intervention** for those struggling with the academic and social demands of school and support for those with personal concerns which affect their engagement with school.
- A focus on **intentional career development learning** for young people both at school and post-school. This should include **personalised** career advice and support, which helps them articulate their post-school plans and the steps required to achieve this plan. This support should enable young people to access available resources and explore a **range of post-school pathways**.

- Support **family members'** access to up-to-date labour market, education and training information, and how they can help young people to develop and achieve post-school goals.
- Provide opportunities to formally increase the **social capital** and career-related adult networks of young people experiencing disadvantage, including through contact with **employers**.
- Identify young people as a **priority group** in national and state/territory employment policies and programs including a focus on helping those experiencing disadvantage to build meaningful career pathways.
- **System investment** to provide young people experiencing disadvantage with timely and affordable access to social services, such as health, mental health and housing.

Providing more effective support to young people experiencing disadvantage will enable them to make personally meaningful contributions throughout adulthood, strengthen their long-term outcomes and reduce the significant **social and economic costs of disengagement**. The longer-term benefits will accrue both to **young people** themselves and the **nation**.



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