

The Year 12 advantage revisited:

How post-school outcomes vary by Year 12 completion pathway

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FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

Year 12 completion matters, but completion alone does not capture the different pathways young people take or the outcomes that follow.

*This study of **2,070** young people experiencing disadvantage identifies four different Year 12 pathways:*



Year 12 completion with ATAR

26%



Year 12 completion with a certificate

32%



Completing Year 12 without a certificate

10%



Leaving school before the end of Year 12

32%

What the study found

ATAR pathway

Young people had consistently higher engagement in work and study across the first four years after school.

Certificate pathway

Outcomes were initially closer to those of early school leavers, but improved by the fourth year after Year 12.

No certificate pathway

Engagement was often very similar to early school leavers, but they were more likely to be engaged in post-school study.

Early school leavers

Engagement also improved over time, although substantial gaps remained four years after Year 12.

Why it matters

A binary measure of Year 12 completion masks important differences in attainment and post-school outcomes. The findings reinforce the need to:

- Support school engagement and achievement earlier
- Provide tailored career support across university and non-university pathways
- Strengthen transitions into further qualifications and employment, particularly for non-ATAR students

Executive summary

The transition from school to further education, training and employment is a critical period in young people's lives. Educational pathways are built over many years through the interaction of family resources, educational opportunities, aspirations, support systems and broader policy settings. Yet discussions about educational success often reduce these pathways to a simple distinction between completing Year 12 and leaving school early. This report shows that Year 12 completion is not a single outcome. Rather, young people experiencing disadvantage followed four distinct pathways through senior secondary school, each associated with different patterns of engagement in education, training and employment after school.

This report draws on six years of longitudinal data from The Smith Family's Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study to examine the experiences of 2,070 young people experiencing disadvantage who were in Year 10 in 2020. It combines survey, interview, attendance and achievement data to explore the pathways young people took through senior secondary school, the factors associated with these pathways, and how their experiences unfolded over the four years after leaving school.

What pathways did young people take to the end of Year 12?

By 2023, 68 percent of young people had completed Year 12. However, completion outcomes varied considerably:

- **26 percent** completed Year 12 and received an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).
- **32 percent** completed Year 12 with a Senior Secondary Certificate of Education (SSCE) but no ATAR.
- **10 percent** completed Year 12 without receiving an SSCE.
- **32 percent** left school before the end of Year 12.

These four distinct pathways were associated with markedly different post-school experiences. Reporting Year 12 completion as a simple binary measure may obscure important differences in educational attainment, transitions, and opportunities.

What shapes senior secondary pathways?

A variety of individual, family, educational, and system factors were associated with pathways. Differences were evident well before students entered senior secondary school.

Young people with higher Year 9 attendance and stronger academic achievement were substantially more likely to complete Year 12 with an ATAR, while those with lower attendance and achievement were more likely to leave school early. More than seven-in-ten young people with low Year 9 attendance did not complete Year 12 with either an ATAR or an SSCE.

Pathways also varied across demographic groups. ATAR attainment was more common among females, non-Indigenous students, young people whose parent/carer had completed higher levels of education, and those from non-English speaking backgrounds. These findings suggest that educational pathways are influenced not only by students' abilities and choices, but also by the resources, opportunities, and educational experiences available to them.

More detailed interviews with over 50 young people reinforced this picture. Young people's decisions reflected a combination of aspirations, interests, experiences of school, health and wellbeing, financial circumstances, access to opportunities, and perceptions of which pathways represented the best fit for their goals and circumstances.

State differences suggest system settings matter

The study identified substantial differences in pathways across states and territories. ATAR attainment ranged from around 10 percent in Western Australia to 40 percent in Victoria, while the proportion of young people completing Year 12 without an SSCE ranged from 4 percent in Victoria to 15 percent in Western Australia.

These differences suggest that outcomes are shaped not only by young people's characteristics and aspirations, but also by how education systems organise senior secondary qualifications and pathway options. Qualification structures, assessment arrangements, vocational pathways, and progression opportunities may contribute to the pathways young people pursue and the outcomes they achieve.

Young people who complete Year 12 without a certificate warrant greater attention

Ten percent of young people remained at school until the end of Year 12, but did not receive an SSCE. Despite reaching the end of secondary school, this group's post-school outcomes were often closer to those of early school leavers than those of students who attained a certificate or ATAR.

This group also had broadly similar demographic and earlier educational characteristics to young people who attained an SSCE (but not an ATAR). The factors contributing to non-certification are therefore not readily explained by measures available in the PET study.

The findings raise important questions for future research and policy. An improved understanding of why some students remain engaged through to the end of Year 12 but leave school without a recognised qualification may identify opportunities for relatively targeted supports that improve certification and subsequent engagement in education, training and employment.

How were pathways associated with post-school outcomes?

Young people who achieved an ATAR consistently experienced the strongest post-school outcomes. They had the highest rates of engagement in work and study throughout the four years after school, were substantially more likely to participate in tertiary education, and were more likely to combine work and study.

However, the study also shows that pathways continue to evolve after school. Young people who completed Year 12 with an SSCE but no ATAR initially had outcomes closer to those of early school leavers than ATAR recipients, but their engagement improved over time. Many completed vocational qualifications, while some subsequently entered university through alternative pathways.

The interviews highlighted that pathways were often non-linear. Young people moved between work and study, entered higher education through vocational routes, and adapted their plans as circumstances changed. At the same time, barriers such as poor mental health, financial constraints, transport difficulties, caring responsibilities and low apprenticeship wages sometimes delayed or interrupted intended pathways.

Careers guidance can help young people navigate pathways

Most young people reported receiving careers advice, but access and perceived usefulness differed across pathways. Young people who left school early were less likely to receive careers advice and less likely to find it useful.

Young people described careers advice as most valuable when it started early enough to inform subject choices, considered multiple pathway options rather than focusing narrowly on university entry, and provided practical support to help translate aspirations into achievable plans.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings point to actions for schools, education systems, and governments, and organisations that support young people experiencing disadvantage. Improving outcomes requires attention not only to whether young people remain at school until Year 12, but also to the qualifications they attain, the pathways available to them, and the support they receive to make successful transitions beyond school.

Schools can:

- **Identify and respond to emerging difficulties** early by monitoring attendance, achievement and engagement, and providing additional support before students select their senior secondary pathways.
- **Strengthen pathway planning and careers guidance** so that students and families understand subject and certification requirements and the range of academic, vocational, and alternative pathways available.
- **Monitor progress towards certification** to identify and support students at risk of completing Year 12 without attaining an SSCE.

Governments and education authorities can:

- **Look beyond headline Year 12 completion rates** by examining different completion pathways and whether young people leave school with a recognised qualification.
- **Examine differences between jurisdictions** to identify how senior secondary structures, certification requirements and available pathways contribute to patterns of attainment.
- **Better understand and address non-attainment of an SSCE**, including why some young people remain at school until the end of Year 12 but do not attain the qualification.

Community organisations and other services can:

- **Help young people navigate education, training and employment pathways**, particularly at key transition points or when their circumstances or plans change.
- **Address practical barriers to participation** that can disrupt participation in education, training or employment, including financial pressures, transport and other circumstances.
- **Provide continued support beyond school**, including helping young people re-engage with education or training if their initial pathway is disrupted or discontinued.

As Australia increasingly relies on a workforce with post-school qualifications, it is important to understand which pathways support qualification attainment and successful transitions. This report shows that improving outcomes for young people experiencing disadvantage requires attention not only to Year 12 retention, but also to the qualifications they attain, the opportunities available to them, and the support they receive as they navigate education and employment pathways.



Introduction

The transition from secondary school to further education, training, and employment is a critical period in young people's lives. A substantial body of Australian and international research has demonstrated that completing secondary school is associated with better educational, employment and social outcomes, while early school leaving is associated with increased risks of unemployment and, lower earnings, as well as reduced participation in further education and training (Lamb et al., 2015; OECD, 2023). As a result, improving school completion has been a long-standing focus of education policy and practice.

However, much of this research treats school completion as a binary outcome, distinguishing between those who complete Year 12 and those who leave school early. This approach provides limited insight into the diversity of pathways that young people follow through senior secondary school. Australia's senior secondary system offers multiple routes to the end of schooling, including pathways leading to an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), completion of a Year 12 certificate without an ATAR, and other forms of senior secondary participation. Educational and career pathways have also become more diverse over time, with students increasingly combining academic, vocational, and employment-focussed options as they prepare for life beyond school (Pilcher et al., 2025).

Research suggests that multiple factors influence which students pursue different options. Academic achievement, educational aspirations, family resources, and broader socioeconomic circumstances all influence the pathways young people pursue (Fullarton & Ainley, 2000; Austin et al., 2022; Bennett et al., 2022). Effective career education and guidance play a critical role in supporting informed pathway decision-making (Austin et al., 2022; Tomaszewski et al., 2017). Students who have access to high-quality career guidance are generally better equipped to understand available opportunities and align their educational choices with future goals. However, recent research highlights that students pursuing VET pathways report receiving less career support at school than those intending to go to university (CESE, 2026). Consequently, students following differing pathways often enter adulthood with different levels of preparation, opportunities, and access to further education, training, and employment.

Despite this, relatively little research has examined how different pathways through senior secondary school are associated with longer-term post-school outcomes, or how those outcomes unfold over time. Existing studies have tended to focus on university participation, VET participation, or school completion separately, rather than considering how different routes through secondary school shape broader engagement in work and study over time. This is particularly important for young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, who may face additional or compounding barriers when navigating educational and career decisions, and whose pathways are more often complex and less linear than those assumed in traditional models of school-to-work transition (Tomaszewski et al., 2017; Bennett et al., 2022).

This report addresses this evidence gap using data from The Smith Family's longitudinal Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study. It examines how four distinct pathways to the end of secondary schooling are associated with post-school engagement over the four years following school. Drawing on both quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews, the report explores who follows these different pathways, the factors shaping pathway decisions, and how post-school outcomes vary across groups. In doing so, it provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between senior secondary pathways, young people's transitions to adulthood, and the education and training gaps that affect transitions among young people experiencing disadvantage.

The findings demonstrate that post-school trajectories differ substantially across pathways and suggest that treating school completion as a simple binary measure may mask important inequalities in young people's transitions beyond school.



The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) Study

The PET study is a longitudinal research project that aims to understand the senior secondary and post-school experiences of young people experiencing disadvantage, the factors that shape these experiences, and how school completion and post-school engagement can be strengthened.

The study follows three cohorts of young people who participated in The Smith Family's long-term educational scholarship, *Learning for Life*[1] (Table 1). Together, these cohorts provide insights into young people's pathways through senior secondary education and their transitions beyond school.

Table 1: PET study cohorts

Cohort	School year in baseline year	Study period	Focus
Cohort 1	Year 12 in 2020	2021-2023	Transition from school into post-school pathways
Cohort 2	Year 10 in 2020	2021-2026	Pathways through senior secondary and into post-school destinations
Cohort 3	Year 10 in 2023	2024-2026	Recent pathways through senior secondary and transitions beyond school

By following these cohorts over time, the PET study seeks to:

- Understand educational and post-school pathways taken by young people experiencing disadvantage.
- Explore the factors that are associated with these pathways.
- Identify ways to strengthen post-school outcomes for young people experiencing disadvantage.

The project draws on multiple sources of data, including:

- Annual surveys conducted between March and May
- Annual interviews conducted in August with 60 survey participants
- Demographic, school attendance and achievement data collected by The Smith Family since participants first joined *Learning for Life.*

By surveying and interviewing the same group of young people over several years, PET provides a unique opportunity to understand how their pathways unfold, what changes over time, what remains consistent, and the factors that influence their experiences. Combined with historical *Learning for Life* data, PET provides a rich picture of educational and post-school pathways among young people experiencing disadvantage.

This report draws on six years of longitudinal data collected between 2021 and 2026 to examine how the pathways of young people who were in **Year 10 in 2020** unfolded through secondary school and to four years after leaving school. It examines:

- The different pathways students take to the end of Year 12.
- The characteristics of students taking each pathway.
- Whether young people taking different pathways through Year 12 experience different patterns of post-school engagement over the four years following school.

Defining Year 12 completion outcomes

PET survey data was used to define four distinct Year 12 completion outcomes. These outcomes were determined using survey data collected between 2021 and 2023, covering the period when participants moved from Year 10 through to the completion of secondary school. Participants were classified into one of four groups based on whether they remained in school to the end of Year 12, and the qualifications they obtained.

- **Year 12 – ATAR:** Completed Year 12 and received an ATAR.
- **Year 12 – SSCE:** Completed Year 12 and received a Senior Secondary Certificate of Education (SSCE) but did not receive an ATAR.
- **Year 12 – No SSCE:** Remained in school until the end of Year 12, but did not receive an SSCE.
- **Left school early:** Left school before reaching the end of Year 12.

Some young people may subsequently complete an SSCE or obtain an ATAR through alternative pathways. These later completions are not captured in this analysis.

1 All young people on *Learning for Life* live 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.

Characteristics of the Year 10 2020 cohort

A total of 2,070 young people who were in Year 10 in 2020[2] and are included in the analyses presented in this report.

Key demographic characteristics of the sample are shown below.

- **Gender:** 54 percent identified as female and 45 percent as male.
- **Indigeneity:** 16 percent identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
- **Language background:** 30 percent had a parent or carer from a non-English speaking background.
- **State or territory of residence:** Participants were drawn from all states and territories, with the largest proportions residing in New South Wales (28 percent), Victoria (24 percent), and Queensland (22 percent). A further 12 percent lived in South Australia and 8 percent in Western Australia, while Tasmania and the territories together accounted for approximately 6 percent of participants.
- **Location:** 69 percent lived in a metropolitan area, and 31 percent in a regional or remote area.
- **Health and disability:** 43 percent reported a health condition, disability, developmental condition, behavioural disorder, or mental health condition.

The young people who completed the survey were broadly representative of the cohort of Year 10 students participating in *Learning for Life* in 2020.[3]

Longitudinal interviews

In addition to the quantitative surveys, young people who completed the annual survey were invited to participate in in-depth interviews about their experiences of school, work, study, and other activities.

The first interview cohort comprised 20 young people interviewed annually between 2021 and 2023. Twelve participants completed interviews in all three years, allowing their experiences to be tracked as they moved through senior secondary and into post-school life.

A second interview cohort was established in 2024 and 2025. Thirty young people were interviewed each year, including 25 participants who completed interviews in both years. No participants in the 2021–2023 interview cohort were included in the refreshed sample.

These interviews explored young people's experiences of work, study, and other activities after leaving school, as well as the factors influencing their pathways. This report draws on insights from these longitudinal interviews to complement the survey findings with qualitative perspectives.

The Microsoft Copilot Researcher application was used to assist with the identification and summarisation of relevant interview content. All outputs were subsequently reviewed and verified by a member of The Smith Family research team.



2 The analysis excludes 101 young people who were still completing Year 11/12/13 in 2023 (5.3% of cohort), and 141 cases excluded for other reasons, including a) the survey was completed by a carer or proxy; and b) the young person was receiving a carer/parenting payment or disability payment.

3 The survey data are weighted to ensure the characteristics of young people who completed PET surveys are representative of all young people invited to PET. This report assesses outcomes in different years with cross-sectional analyses. Analyses were conducted using the weights that corresponded to the year of each outcome.

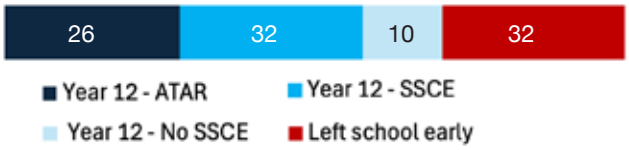
Results

Pathways through Year 12

By March 2023, 68 percent of young people who were in Year 10 in 2020 had completed Year 12 (Figure 1). Of the total cohort, 26 percent received an ATAR, 32 percent achieved a Senior Secondary Certificate of Education (SSCE) without an ATAR, and 10 percent completed Year 12 without obtaining an SSCE. The remaining 32 percent left school before the end of Year 12.

Among young people who commenced Year 12 in 2023 – excluding those who had already left school - 35 percent received an ATAR. This estimate is considerably lower than those provided by Pilcher and colleagues (2025), who reported 64% of Year 12 students in 2024 received an ATAR.

Figure 1: Year 12 pathways of the Year 10 2020 cohort (%)



Demographic differences in Year 12 completion outcomes

Consistent with previous research (Semo *et al*., 2024), ATAR attainment varied substantially across demographic groups (Figure 2). ATAR pathways were more common among females (30 percent) than males (21 percent), among non-Indigenous students (29 percent) than Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students (9 percent), and for students in major cities (30 percent) than in regional and remote areas (17 percent). Parental education was also associated with ATAR attainment. Thirty-five percent of students whose parent or carer held a degree or diploma achieved an ATAR, compared with 26 percent whose highest parental qualification was below Year 12.

Language background was another notable factor, with 49 percent of students from non-English speaking backgrounds achieving an ATAR, compared with 17 percent of students from English-speaking backgrounds.[4] These patterns highlight persistent differences in educational attainment across demographic groups and are consistent with broader research on educational inequality.

Earlier educational indicators were also strongly associated with Year 12 completion outcomes among the Year 10 2020 cohort (Figure 3). Among young people with high attendance in Year 9, 31 percent completed Year 12 with an ATAR, and a further 38 percent completed Year 12 with a SSCE but no ATAR. In contrast, only 8 percent of those with low attendance received an ATAR and 21 percent completed Year 12 with a SSCE. Overall, 71 percent of young people with low Year 9 attendance did not complete Year 12 with either a certificate or an ATAR.

A similar pattern was evident for academic achievement. Nearly half of students with A or B grades in English (48 percent) or Maths (52 percent) received an ATAR, compared with around one-quarter of students with C grades (26 and 27 percent respectively) and fewer than 15 percent of students D or E grades (7 and 13 percent respectively).



4 Young people within this cohort who have a parent/carer from a non-English speaking background (NESB) have different characteristics than their peers. They are more likely to be living in a two-parent family, be living in a metropolitan than regional area, and are less likely to report living with a health condition. They are also more likely to have higher attendance than their peers and receive higher grades in Year 9. Once demographic and earlier educational indicators are taken into account, students with a NESB parent/carer remain more likely to be on an ATAR pathway than their peers.

Figure 2: Year 12 outcomes by demographic characteristics (%)

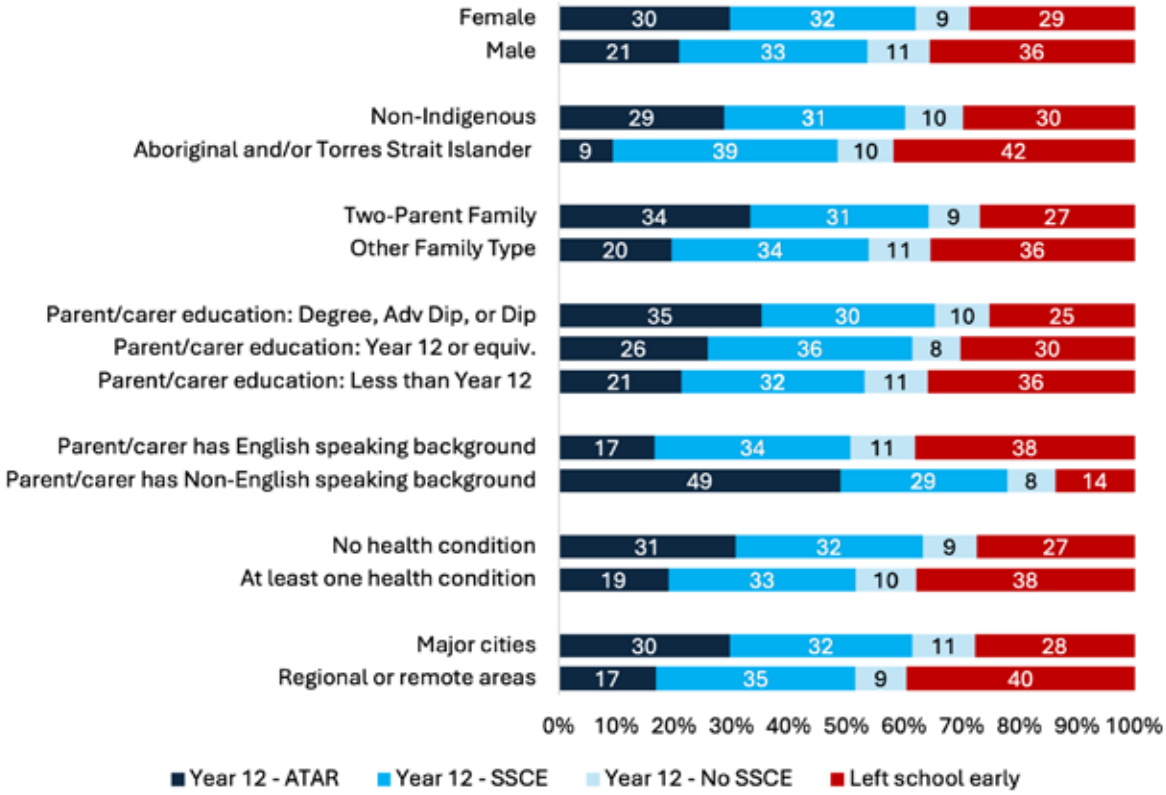


Figure 3: Year 12 completion outcomes by Year 9 attendance and achievement (%)

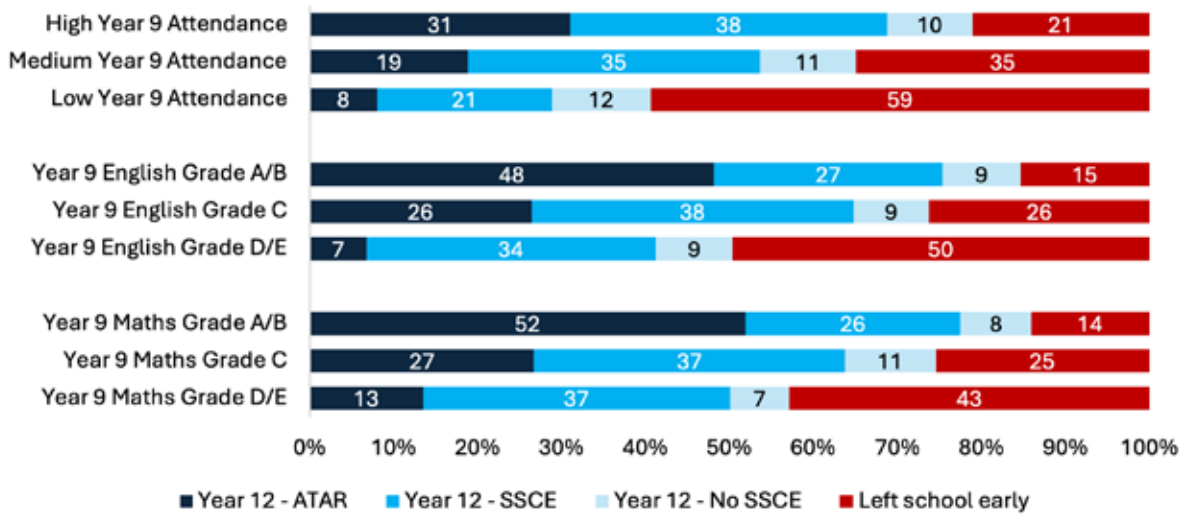


Figure note: High attendance is defined as 90% and above, medium attendance as 70%-89.9%, and low attendance as less than 70%.

These findings are consistent with findings from the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth* (LSAY), where Year 9 literacy and numeracy achievement strongly predicts later ATAR attainment (Semo et al., 2024). Together, these findings suggest differences in Year 12 completion outcomes are often evident several years before students enter senior secondary school, highlighting the importance of supporting attendance, engagement, and academic achievement during the middle years of schooling. They also highlight the value of ensuring young people receive timely careers guidance and understand the full range of senior secondary, vocational, training, and post-school options available to them when making pathway decisions.

Figure 4: Year 12 completion outcomes by state (%)

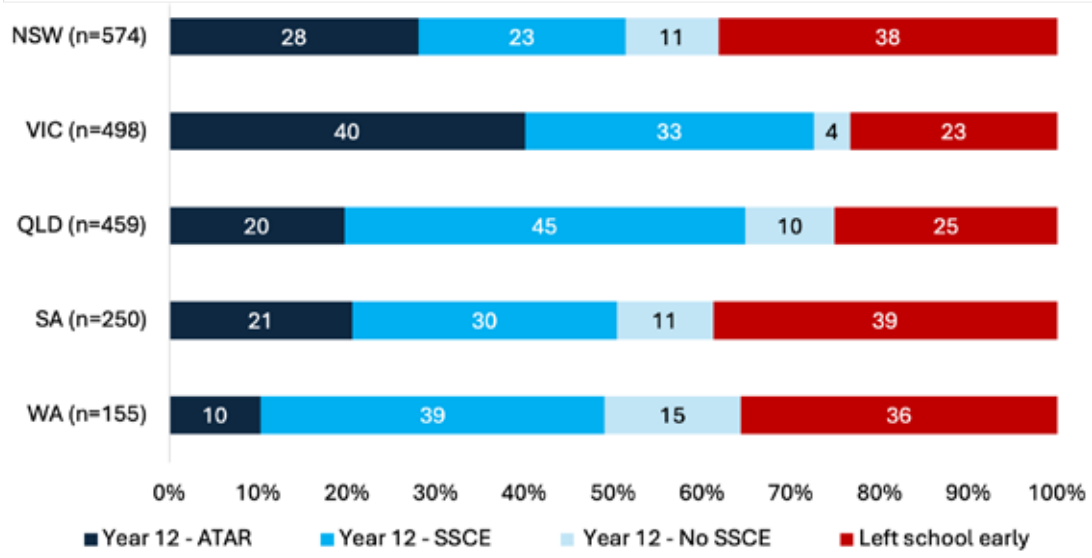


Figure 4 highlights differences in Year 12 completion outcomes across states.[5] ATAR attainment ranged from around 10 percent in Western Australia to 40 percent in Victoria.

National estimates provide useful context, although they are not directly comparable to the PET results. Pilcher et al. (2025) reported that 64 percent of Year 12 students received an ATAR, with proportions ranging from 38 percent in Western Australia to 79 percent in New South Wales. In contrast, the present study examines ATAR attainment across the entire cohort of young people who were in Year 10 in 2020, including those who left school before Year 12, rather than only those enrolled in Year 12.

Differences between states were also evident across the non-ATAR pathways. Queensland had the highest proportion of students completing Year 12 with a certificate but no ATAR (45 percent), while New South Wales had the lowest proportion (23 percent). Victoria had the smallest proportion of students remaining in school until the end of Year 12 without achieving a certificate (4 percent), compared with 15 percent in Western Australia.

These differences are likely to reflect, at least in part, variation in senior secondary qualifications and pathways across jurisdictions. For example, students in Victoria could complete the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), which provided a more applied learning pathway than the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) while still enabling students to graduate with an SSCE.[6] Because Victoria's senior secondary qualifications have subsequently changed, the distribution of students across completion pathways may differ for more recent cohorts.



5 Estimates are not presented for ACT, NT, and TAS due to the sample sizes for each state being less than n=100

6 Within the 33% of Victorian students in the Year 12 – SSCE pathway, 39% percent completed with a VCE, 58% completed with a VCAL, and 3% completed both.

Who are the young people who complete Year 12 without an SSCE?

Young people who remain in school until the end of Year 12 but do not receive an SSCE represent a relatively small group. However, they may also represent an important opportunity to increase recognised qualification attainment, given that they have already persisted through almost the entirety of their secondary schooling. Understanding the factors that prevent these students from obtaining an SSCE could help inform targeted intervention and support.

Compared with students who were awarded an SSCE, those who completed Year 12 without receiving a certificate had broadly similar demographic and educational characteristics, including gender, Indigeneity, parent characteristics, attendance, and academic achievement in earlier years of school (as listed in Figures 2 and 3). This suggests the factors contributing to non-award of an SSCE may not be readily explained by the demographic and educational measures available in PET. Further research is needed to explore other influences, such as subject selection, course completion requirements, school engagement during the senior years, wellbeing, personal circumstances, or administrative barriers that may distinguish these students from those who successfully obtain an SSCE.

Insights into pathways selection from qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews provide additional insights into the factors that shaped young people's senior secondary pathways. Decisions about remaining in school to the end of Year 12 are influenced by both **pull factors**, such as wanting to pursue a particular career path, and **push factors**, such as bullying and a lack of support at school. A previous report from the PET series, based on the same cohort of students, explored these reasons in more detail (The Smith Family, 2024). Here, we explore some more examples, also addressing some of the other identified pathways to the end of Year 12, for example, decisions related to pursuing an ATAR.

Broadly, pathway decisions reflected a combination of goals, perceived fit, and opportunity, rather than academic ability alone. Some young people chose to complete Year 12 and pursue an ATAR because they had identified a university course or occupation that required it. Others were less certain about their future plans, but viewed Year 12 as a way of keeping future options open.

> *"It was really just trying to get into uni. Try to get a good score and into a course that I would like to get into."* (Mandy, female, ATAR student)

> *" yeah, I'm going through school, and obviously, like, the things that I'm learning are gonna help me in the long run, so it's better that I continue studying and then complete Year 12…"* (Ru, male, ATAR student)

For others, non-ATAR pathways, vocational education, or early school leaving were seen as a better fit for their interests, preferred learning style, or career aspirations. In some cases, a concrete opportunity such as employment or an apprenticeship reduced the perceived value of Year 12.

> *"At the time, I wasn't really sure if I'd do Year 12… if I don't have a job before I finished Year 11, I was going to do Year 12, but I found the job so I didn't feel the need to do Year 12…*
> *I wasn't the type of kid that liked school. I liked it more hands-on kind of stuff, so what I'm doing now is much better for me and more enjoyable"* (Iqbal, male, early school leaver)

Among those who left school early, two broad patterns emerged highlighting push and pull factors for leaving school. For some, leaving school formed part of a planned transition into employment or an apprenticeship (pull factors), such as Iqbal's experience above. For others, leaving school followed a period of disengagement associated with challenges such as bullying, poor mental health, or difficult relationships within the school environment (push factors).

> *"I left high school because of bullying… they [the school] didn't do anything… I'd get in trouble for retaliating to the bullying and nothing would happen to them… and I left"* (Ava, female, early school leaver)

> *"I was having a lot of mental health problems which is why I just did not want to go to school… we tried telling them and stuff but there wasn't much understanding from any of them really"* (Holly, female, early school leaver)

These interviews suggest that while attendance and achievement are strongly associated with pathway outcomes, individual decisions were also shaped by young people's aspirations, opportunities, and experiences both within and outside school.

Careers advice and Year 12 completion outcome

Most young people (79 percent) reported receiving some form of careers advice at school. However, experiences differed across Year 12 pathways in both access to careers advice and perceptions of its usefulness.Young people who left school before completing Year 12 were more likely to report not receiving any careers advice (35 percent) than those who completed Year 12 (10–18 percent). They were also less likely to report that the advice they received was useful (26 percent), compared with 42–45 percent of young people who completed Year 12.

Despite these differences, many young people across all pathways reported mixed views about careers advice. Around three-in-ten participants described careers advice as neutral, while between 8 and 12 percent of Year 12 completers and 10 percent of early school leavers reported receiving advice that they did not find useful.

These findings suggest that careers advice is not reaching all young people equally, and may be least effective for those who are most at risk of leaving school before completing Year 12.

Qualitative interviews provide some insight into why young people's perceptions of careers advice differed. Experiences varied considerably in terms of timing, breadth, and practical support. While some young people described receiving guidance that helped them explore options aligned with their interests and goals, others reported that careers advice focused primarily on university pathways and provided little information about alternatives.

Young people described careers advice as being more useful when:

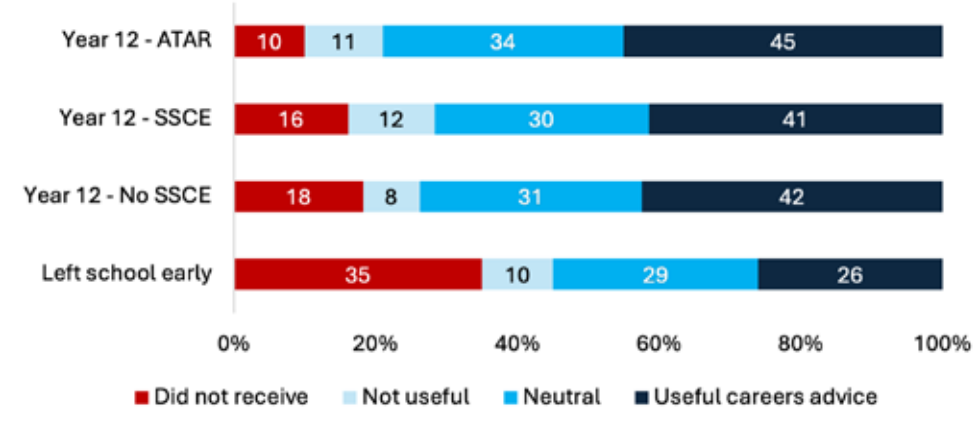
- it began early enough to influence subject choices and prerequisite requirements;
- it included personalised conversations linking career goals to multiple realistic pathways
- it provided practical support with applications, enrolment processes, work experience opportunities, licences, or referrals.

> *"The school—the school did a few info sessions for universities; stuff like that. But they didn't do much for TAFE or alternate learning paths; so, I'm currently going through the PCYC 'get set for work,' and they've helped"* (Heath, male, Year 12 SSCE)

> *"With my school, they didn't really tell us that in order to do an extra subject in year 12 you have to get good grades in year 10 or in year 9, so if we knew that I really think that we would have pushed ourselves to work hard towards that goal instead of leaving it to the last minute and saying, you can't do that subject just because you didn't get the good grades for it, so I feel like having everything planned a lot earlier on would have helped a lot."* (Mandy, female, ATAR)

> *"For them to actually try and help kids get into the pathway they want to do instead of just leaving it to the last minute."* (Sienna, female, early school leaver)

Figure 5: Access to and perceived usefulness of careers advice by Year 12 pathway



Engagement outcomes in the years after school

Previous PET research reported that young people who completed Year 12 were more likely than early school leavers to be engaged in education, training or employment in their first year after leaving school (The Smith Family, 2024; The Smith Family, 2025). **Figure 6 shows that engagement outcomes vary substantially across Year 12 completion pathways, with the strongest outcomes observed among young people who achieved an ATAR.**

In the first year after school, 87 percent of ATAR recipients were fully or partially engaged in work or study, compared with 72 percent of young people who completed Year 12 with a certificate but no ATAR, 65 percent of those who completed Year 12 without a certificate, and 68 percent of those who left school early. Young people who achieved an ATAR remained the most engaged group throughout the following three years, with engagement rates consistently above 90 percent.

These findings suggest that the higher engagement levels previously reported among Year 12 completers largely reflect the outcomes of young people who achieved an ATAR, rather than Year 12 completion alone. Young people who completed Year 12 without a certificate had engagement outcomes that were closer to those of early school leavers across the four years observed.

While engagement changed over time, the differences evident in the first year after school largely persisted. Engagement increased among young people who completed Year 12 with an SSCE but no ATAR, rising from 72 percent in 2023 to 80 percent in 2026. However, this improvement was not sufficient to close the gap with ATAR recipients. Similarly, engagement levels among young people who completed Year 12 without an SSCE and those who left school early remained comparatively low throughout the period. Overall, the findings suggest that Year 12 pathways are associated with both young people's initial post-school engagement and their longer-term trajectories, with early differences in engagement remaining evident four years after leaving school.

Figure 6: Post-school engagement outcomes by Year 12 pathway, 2023–2026 (%)

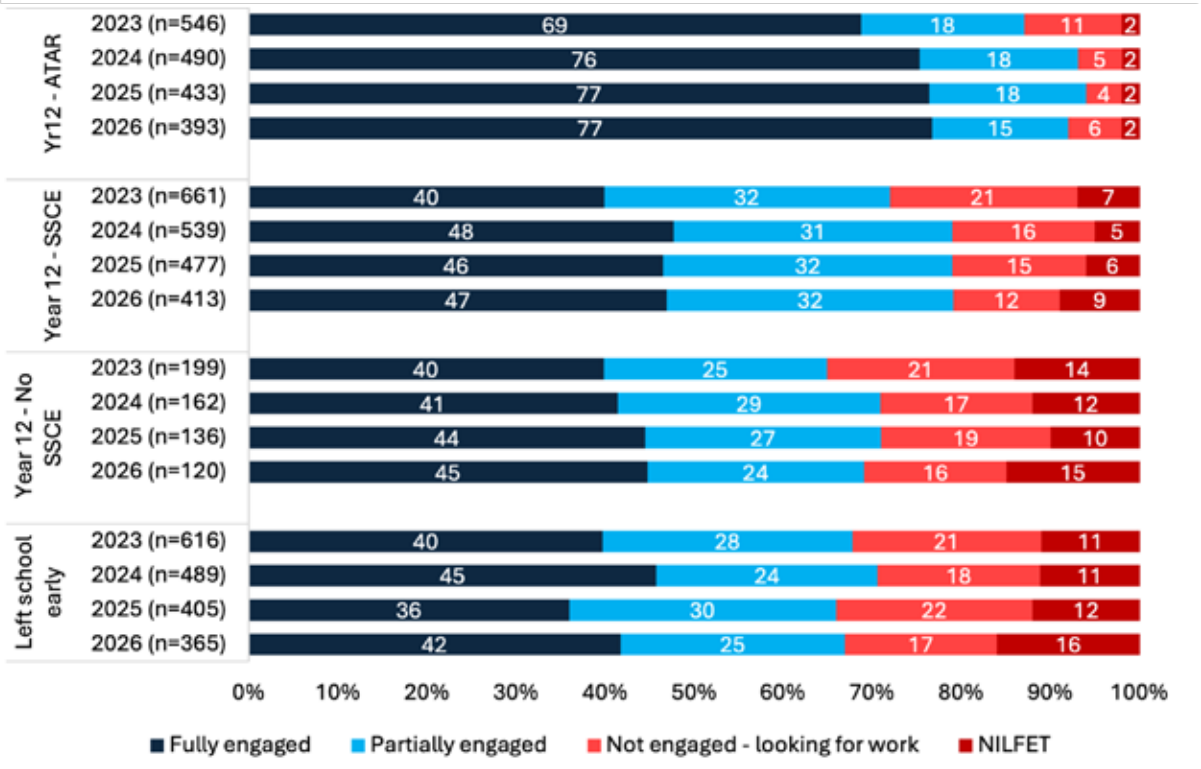


Figure note: NILFET – Not in Labour Force, Education or Training.

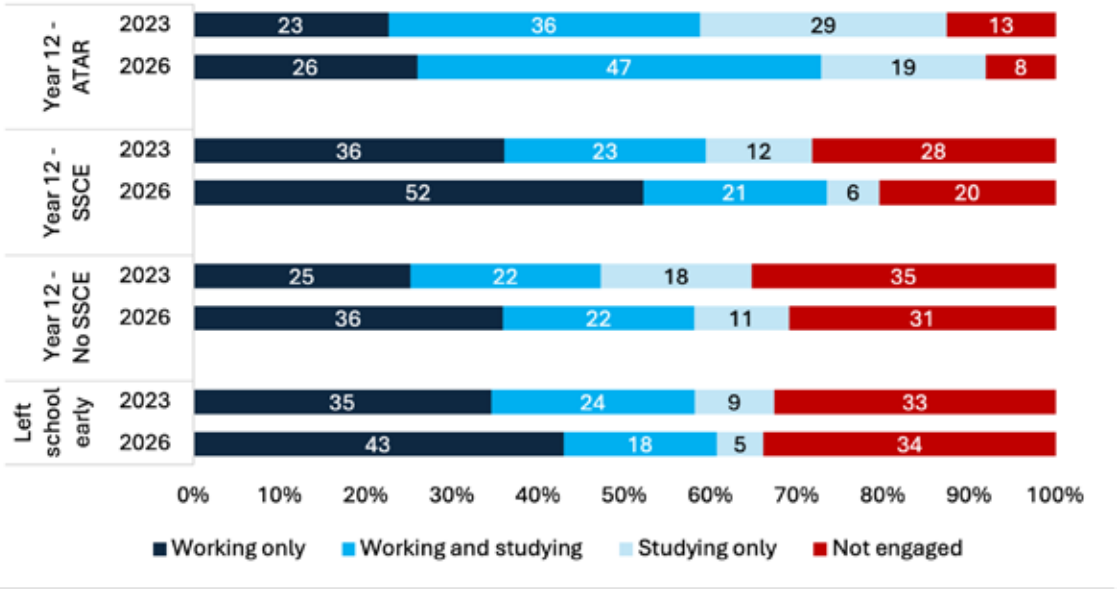
Engagement activities in the years after school

Figure 7 shows the types of activities young people were engaged in in the first and fourth years after leaving school. Young people who received an ATAR were the most likely to combine work and study in the first year after school (36 percent). By the fourth year after school, this had increased to 47 percent.

Among the non-ATAR pathways, work-only engagement was the most common outcome. In the first year after school, young people who completed Year 12 with an SSCE but no ATAR (36 percent) and those who left school early (35 percent) were more likely to be engaged in work only than those who completed Year 12 without an SSCE (25 percent). In contrast, young people who completed Year 12 without an SSCE were more likely than other non-ATAR groups to be engaged in study.

Overall, the findings suggest a clear distinction between ATAR and non-ATAR pathways. Young people who achieved an ATAR were substantially more likely to combine work and study, while non-ATAR pathways were more commonly associated with either work-only forms of engagement.

Figure 7: Post-school engagement activities by Year 12 pathway, 2023 and 2026 (%)





Participation in post-school study by Year 12 pathway

Participation in post-school study differed substantially across Year 12 pathways. In the first year after school, around two-thirds of young people who received an ATAR (65 percent) were engaged in study, compared to 35–39 percent of those who completed Year 12 without an ATAR, and 33 percent of those who left school before completing Year 12. These differences persisted over time. By the fourth year after school, 66 percent of ATAR recipients remained engaged in study, while participation rates among the other pathways ranged from 23 percent among early school leavers to 33 percent among young people who completed Year 12 without a certificate.

Among young people who received an ATAR, university study was the dominant post-school pathway. In the first year after school, 45 percent were enrolled in a bachelor's degree, rising to 49 percent by the fourth year after school. This represented around three-quarters of all ATAR recipients who were engaged in study (71 percent and 74 percent in 2023 and 2026 respectively).

Alternative pathways into university were less common among young people who did not receive an ATAR. In the first year after school, five percent of students who completed Year 12 with an SSCE were enrolled in a bachelor's degree, as were 10 percent of those who completed Year 12 without an SSCE. These rates were similar (6 and 11 percent respectively) by the fourth year post-school.

Among young people who completed Year 12 without an ATAR, Certificate IV and Diploma qualifications were common study destinations. In contrast, many early school leavers who continued to study remained enrolled in Certificate III-level qualifications or below. It should also be noted that the qualification level could not be determined for more than 40 percent of early school leavers who were studying in 2023, limiting the conclusions that can be drawn about this group's study pathways.

Overall, these findings suggest that while some young people access university education through alternative pathways after leaving school, participation in post-school study remains substantially higher among those who received an ATAR. These differences are noteworthy given the well-established association between post-school educational participation and later labour market and wellbeing outcomes (Li *et al.*, 2022).

Participation in post-school study remains substantially higher among those who received an ATAR.

Figure 8: Post-school study participation by Year 12 pathway in 2023 and 2026 (%)

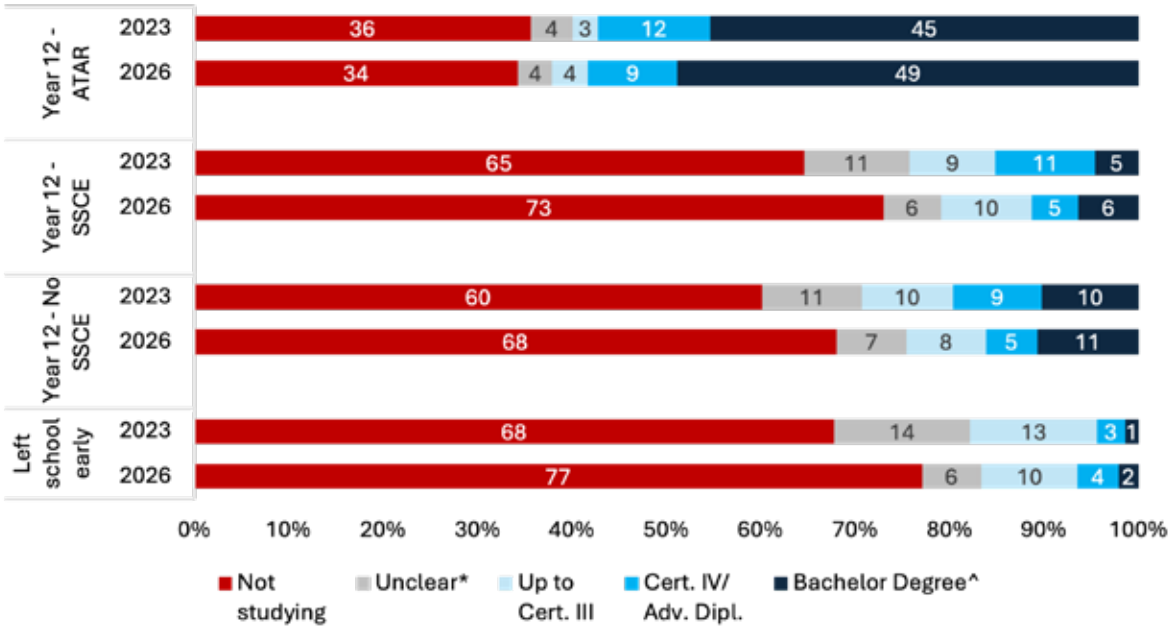


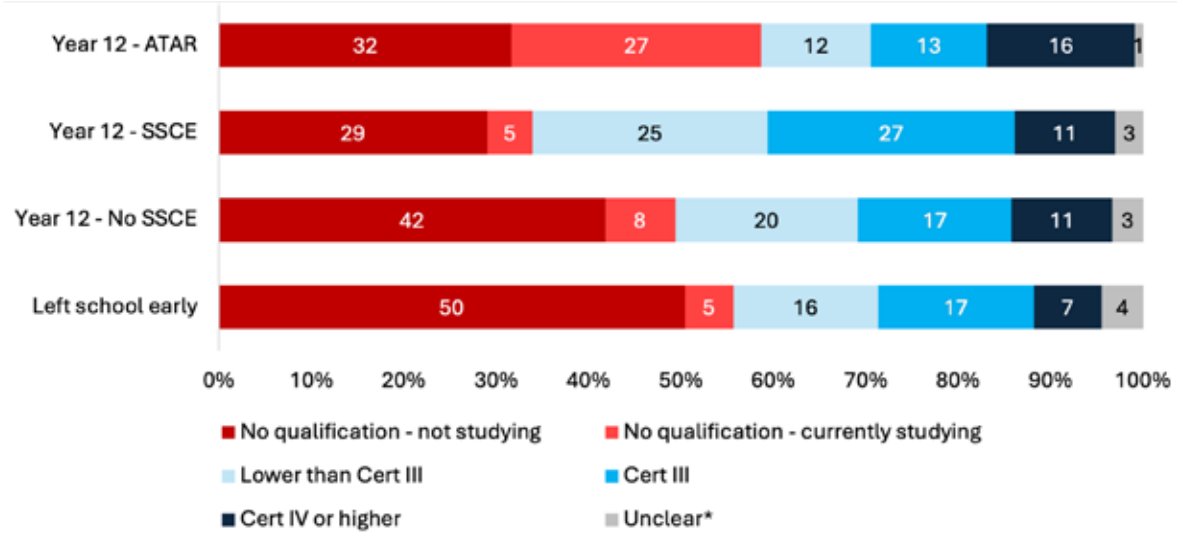
Figure note: *Young people indicated they were studying but did not provide a qualification or the stated qualification was unclear.
^Includes a small number of young people in 2026 studying at a master's level

By the fourth year after school, around half (51 percent) of the young people reported having completed a qualification, including VET qualifications that may have been completed while still at school. Young people who completed Year 12 with an SSCE but no ATAR were the most likely to have completed a qualification (66 percent), with most having completed a Certificate III qualification or below.

Young people who received an ATAR had the lowest rate of qualification completion. However, this group was also substantially more likely than other pathways to still be engaged in study, suggesting that many were continuing towards longer higher education qualifications rather than having already completed them.

In contrast, young people who left school before completing Year 12 were both less likely to have completed a qualification (44 percent) and less likely to be currently studying (23 percent). This suggests that by the fourth year after school, this group had accumulated fewer educational qualifications and were less likely to be progressing towards additional qualifications than their peers.

Figure 9: Qualification completion by fourth year post-school by Year 12 pathway





Post-school employment by Year 12 pathway

Employment outcomes differed less than study outcomes in the first year after school. Across most pathways, around three-in-five young people (approximately 59 percent) were employed. However, young people who did not receive an ATAR were more likely to be engaged in work only, while ATAR recipients were more likely to combine work with study.

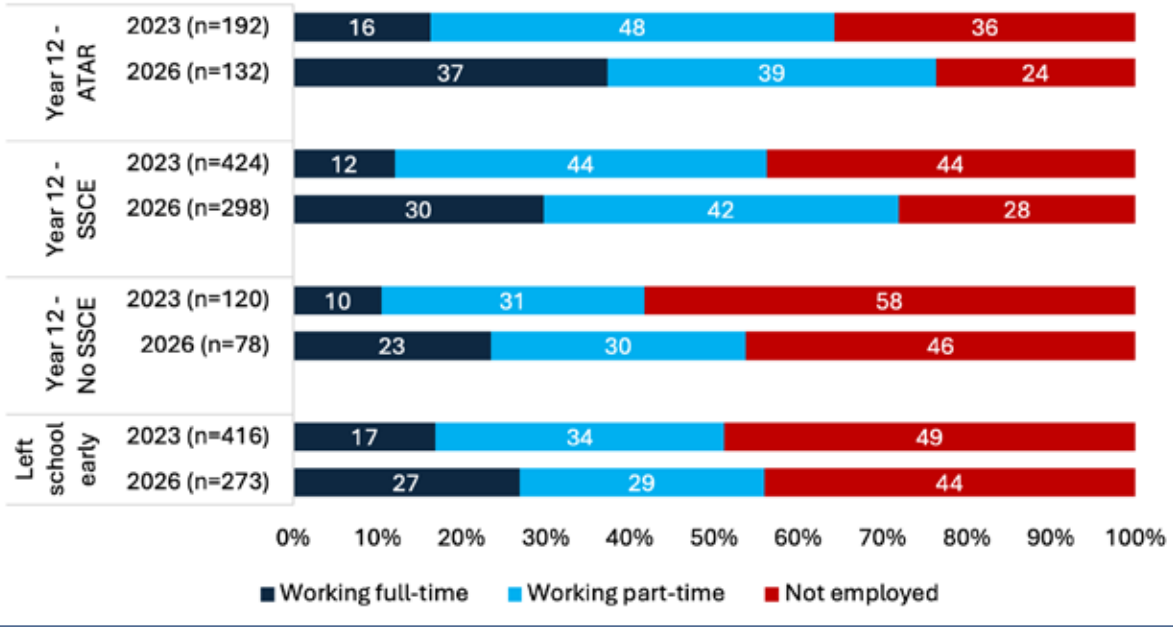
Across all pathways and survey waves, part-time (including casual) employment was more common than full-time employment (Figure 10). Among young people who were not studying in the first year after school, those who received an ATAR and those who left school early were the most likely to be employed full-time (16–17 percent) compared with 10–12 percent among the other pathways. Young people who completed Year 12 without an SSCE had the lowest employment rates, with 58 percent not employed, while ATAR recipients had the highest employment rates, with 36 percent not employed.

By the fourth year after school, employment rates had increased across all pathways and a clearer pattern had emerged. Young people who completed Year 12 with an ATAR (76 percent) or an SSCE (72 percent) were substantially more likely to be employed than those who completed Year 12 without an SSCE (54 percent) or left school early (56 percent). In addition, the proportion employed full-time increased across all pathways as young people transitioned further into the labour market.

These findings suggest that differences in employment outcomes become more pronounced over time. While employment levels were relatively similar in the years immediately after school, young people who achieved an ATAR or an SSCE were more likely to be employed by the fourth year after school than those who did not complete these qualifications. These findings are noteworthy given that young people experience substantially higher rates of unemployment than the broader population (ABS, 2026), highlighting the importance of understanding which educational pathways are associated with stronger transitions into employment.



Figure 10: Employment status of young people not engaged in study, by Year 12 pathway, in the first and fourth year after school



Perceptions of employment and study pathways

In 2026, young people who were working were asked how they viewed their current job. Among those who were employed but not studying, more than half reported that their current job was "just a job for now", while only 20 percent said they wanted to make a career in that field. Young people who left school early were the most likely to report wanting to make a career in their current field (25 percent) and the least likely to describe their job as "just a job for now". One possible explanation is that young people who left school early entered the labour market sooner than their peers and therefore had more time to establish themselves in employment and identify career pathways that suited them.

Among those who were studying in 2026, students were broadly positive about their study experiences, irrespective of their Year 12 pathway (see Table 2). Around 80 to 90 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that their course was preparing them for future jobs, that they would complete the qualification, that they knew what they wanted to do when they finished, and that they were happy with the choices they had made. One exception was knowing what they wanted to do after completing their current course. Around 74 percent of Year 12 – ATAR students agreed with this statement, compared with 84 to 90 percent of students from the other Year 12 groups. This may partly reflect the greater proportion of Year 12 – ATAR students studying bachelor's degrees, where the pathway from study to a specific occupation may be less clearly defined.

Figure 11: Perceptions of current job among employed young people, by Year 12 pathway, 2026

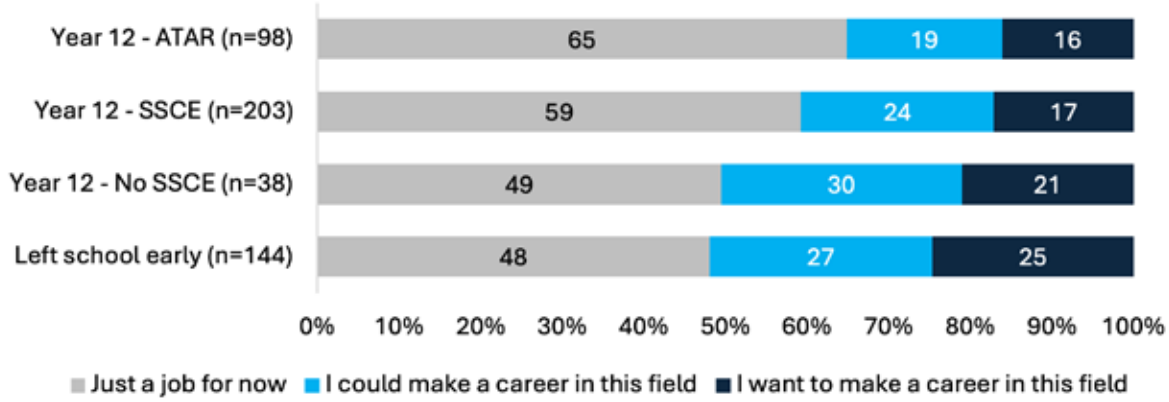


Table 2: Perceptions of study choices, for those studying in 2026. Proportion who agree or strongly agree with each statement

	My current course is preparing me for the job I want to do in future %	I'll complete the course I'm doing %	I know what I want to do when I finish the course %	I am happy with the study choices I have made so far %
Year 12 – ATAR (n=251)	89	95	74	80
Year 12 – SSCE (n=93)	91	93	88	83
Year 12 – No SSCE (n=35)	89	94	85	90
Left school early (n=63)	86	93	84	77

Qualitative interviews provide additional insight into young people's experiences of work and study after school and highlight the dynamic nature of post-school pathways. They shed light on the decisions young people make, as well as the barriers and supports that shape their career goals and opportunities.

The interviews showed that **vocational and alternative-entry routes** often enabled later participation in higher education and the completion of additional qualifications. Consistent with the survey findings, an ATAR remained the most direct route into university study. However, some young people also described reaching higher education through alternative pathways, including completing certificates or diplomas before entering university, or undertaking lower-level qualifications to access apprenticeships or their preferred occupation.

Zoe, for example, decided to study nursing at TAFE after having a baby. Having nearly completed this qualification, which would enable her to work as an Enrolled Nurse, she subsequently decided to continue on to university and pursue a Bachelor of Nursing.

Ryan provides another example of later entry to university. After spending several years working two jobs and exploring a career in the defence force, he ultimately decided to enrol in a mechanical engineering degree.

After becoming dissatisfied with her employment and financial situation, Charlotte enrolled in a beauty services course at TAFE and later secured a traineeship with a beauty salon, where she now undertakes both on-the-job and off-the-job training.

Barriers and facilitators

Interviews also highlighted that intended pathways could be sustained, delayed, or interrupted depending on whether personal and practical circumstances remained manageable. Young people described a range of factors that shaped their ability to pursue study and work, including:

- Mental health concerns that affect attendance, concentration, course participation and job continuity.
- Course costs and the need to save sometimes delayed enrolment even when their interest was clear.
- Low apprentice wages, travel and very long days made some otherwise attractive trade routes unsustainable.
- Caregiving responsibilities altered the time and flexibility available for work or study.
- The delivery mode mattered: some participants benefited from online flexibility, while others found video-based group learning or large classes unmanageable.
- Transport, licensing, and equipment costs could be barriers for young people with limited financial resources, but community organisations sometimes facilitated access to opportunities by covering these costs.

Aria, for example, talked about the need to save before commencing study, while Savannah discussed her mental health as a likely barrier to continuing a course she had commenced.

"So obviously she's [mum] struggling financially as well so she wouldn't be able to help too much for the course itself, financially. So, I just want to build up my savings and then look into studying" (Aria, female, Year 12 – No SSCE)

(after ceasing a university degree) "I did a TPP [Tertiary Preparation Pathways] there previously and I enjoyed that but not really the Bachelor of Creative Industries… I just found it very hard to want to do it at the time. I don't think my mental health was the best." (Savannah, female, early school leaver)

Similarly, non-engagement often reflected a blocked transition rather than an absence of aspiration. Young people who were not engaged in work or study at the time of interview frequently described ambitions to work, gain qualifications, become financially independent, or undertake further study. However, many were uncertain about the next practical step, whether because they were unclear about their interests and goals or because they faced barriers such as transport difficulties, financial constraints, caring responsibilities, or health concerns.

Key findings and implications for policy and practice

Drawing on six years of national longitudinal data, this report identifies four distinct pathways through senior secondary school and shows they are associated with markedly different experiences after school. Year 12 completion remains important, but it is not a single outcome. Reporting completion as a binary measure can obscure substantial differences in the qualifications young people attain, their participation in further education and training, and their subsequent engagement in employment.

Young people who attained an ATAR had the highest and most sustained levels of engagement in work and study. Outcomes among those who followed other pathways were more varied. In particular, young people who remained at school until the end of Year 12 but did not receive an SSCE frequently had outcomes similar to those who left school early.

Pathways develop over time and are associated with multiple factors

Senior secondary pathways do not begin in Years 11 and 12. Differences accumulate across childhood and adolescence and are evident well before students select their senior secondary subjects. Year 9 attendance and achievement were strongly associated with later completion outcomes, while pathways also varied by parental education, language background, Indigeneity, gender, and location. Interviews showed that young people's decisions were further shaped by their aspirations, interests, experiences of school, health and wellbeing, financial circumstances, and access to suitable education, training, and employment opportunities.

These findings suggest that pathways are built through the interaction of individual aspirations, family resources and educational background, school experiences, available opportunities and system settings. Support should therefore begin early and extend beyond academic assistance alone.

Recommendations for **schools and education systems** include:

- Using attendance, achievement, and other engagement indicators throughout schooling to identify students who may benefit from additional support.
- Acting before senior secondary subjects and pathways are selected, while recognising that lower attendance and achievement may have emerged much earlier.
- Addressing the underlying reasons for disengagement, including health and wellbeing concerns, bullying, difficult relationships at school, and a lack of suitable learning options.
- Working with young people and their families to build understanding of senior secondary requirements and the full range of academic, vocational, and alternative pathways.

System settings contribute to the pathways available to young people

The substantial differences observed between states suggest that pathways may be affected not only by students' characteristics and choices, but also by how education systems structure senior secondary qualifications and options. ATAR attainment and the proportions completing with and without an SSCE varied considerably across jurisdictions. These differences are likely to reflect, at least in part, variations in qualification structures, applied and vocational options, and the routes available through and beyond senior secondary school.

The national perspective provided by PET is therefore important. It makes it possible to examine young people's pathways using a common framework across jurisdictions, rather than viewing each state or territory in isolation.

Recommendations for **governments and education authorities** include:

- Reporting Year 12 outcomes in greater detail, distinguishing between ATAR, non-ATAR certificate and non-certificate pathways.
- Improving consistency in pathway reporting across states and territories.
- Evaluating senior secondary pathways according to where they lead, including qualification attainment, further education, sustained employment, and continued engagement.
- Reviewing whether academic, vocational, and applied pathways provide clear routes to recognised qualifications and viable post-school options.

Completing Year 12 without a certificate requires greater attention

Young people who remained at school through to the end of Year 12 but did not receive an SSCE represented 10 percent of the cohort. They had broadly similar demographic and earlier educational characteristics to young people who attained an SSCE, suggesting that non-certification is not readily explained by the measures available in the PET survey.

This group warrants particular attention. They persisted through almost all of secondary school but left without the recognised credential generally associated with Year 12 completion. Further research is needed to determine whether this reflects unmet course requirements, subject or pathway choices, disruptions during the senior years, health or personal circumstances, administrative issues, or other barriers not captured in the study.

Recommendations include:

- Monitoring whether students who remain enrolled are on track to meet certification requirements.
- Identifying students at risk of reaching the end of Year 12 without an SSCE and providing timely, targeted support.
- Investigating the reasons for non-certification and whether some students are narrowly missing the requirements.
- Providing transition support to students who leave without an SSCE, including assistance to complete a recognised qualification through an alternative route.

Young people need informed pathway planning and practical support

Most young people received careers advice, but early school leavers were less likely to receive it and less likely to find it useful. Young people described guidance as most valuable when it began before subject selection, covered university and non-university options, connected their goals with several realistic routes, and included practical assistance.

Schools should provide timely and personalised pathway guidance, particularly for students showing signs of disengagement or uncertainty. This should include clear information about subject prerequisites, SSCE requirements, VET, apprenticeships, traineeships, higher education, and alternative-entry options. Families should also have access to clear information so they can support young people's decisions.

Pathways remain flexible, but continued support matters

Young people's pathways continued to develop after school. Some entered higher education through certificates or diplomas, used vocational qualifications to enter apprenticeships or preferred occupations, or moved between work and study as their goals changed. However, progress was sometimes delayed or interrupted by mental ill health, costs, transport, low apprentice wages, caring responsibilities, unsuitable delivery arrangements, and limited access to licences or equipment. Young people who were not engaged in work or study often retained clear aspirations but lacked a viable or manageable next step.

Recommendations for governments, education providers, and community organisations include:

- Maintaining accessible routes back into education and training after the initial school-to-work transition.
- Strengthening connections between schools, VET providers, universities, employers, and community services.
- Combining education and employment programs with practical support for transport, licences, equipment, course costs, health and caring responsibilities.
- Provide active navigation and transition support for young people who leave school early, complete Year 12 without an SSCE, or experience a disrupted post-school pathway.

Overall implications

These findings reinforce the value of having diverse senior secondary pathways available to young people. However, they also highlight the importance of ensuring young people leave school with a recognised qualification and a viable pathway into further education, training, or employment. As Australia increasingly relies on a workforce with post-school qualifications, the challenge is to ensure that diverse pathways provide young people with genuine opportunities to gain qualifications and make successful post-school transitions.



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