

Summary: Senior secondary transitions in a changing context



Key findings from the PET 6 report – July 2026

Purpose

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study follows young people experiencing disadvantage as they move through secondary school and into work, training, and further study. This report compares two *Learning for Life* cohorts: young people who were in Year 10 in 2020 and those who were in Year 10 in 2023. It explores how aspirations, pathways, and early post-school outcomes have changed over three years. Over 5,000 young people participated in the survey, and the report also draws on interviews with 30 young people.

Key findings

Young people continue to have high aspirations. Almost all students in Year 11 intended to complete Year 12, and post-school plans remained largely unchanged across both cohorts. The majority aspired to further study, employment, or a combination of both.

More young people left school before Year 12. The proportion of young people leaving school before Year 12 increased from 14% in the 2020 cohort to 18% in the 2023 cohort. This suggests that young people who leave school are doing so earlier than previous student cohorts.

Employment outcomes are worsening. The biggest differences between the cohorts emerged for young people who left school before Year 12. Compared with the 2020 cohort, early school leavers in the 2023 cohort experienced lower rates of full-time employment, higher unemployment, and higher levels of disengagement from both work and study. Young men were particularly affected.

Young people face multiple barriers. Interviews highlighted a range of challenges affecting employment and study pathways, including physical and mental health concerns, disability and caring responsibilities, transport and licencing barriers, the financial cost of further education and training, limited access to technology, difficulty gaining work experience, and negative workplace experiences. Despite these challenges, most unemployed young people were actively seeking work and remained motivated to build a stable future.

Why it matters

The transition from school to employment, training or further study is a critical period that can shape future opportunities. The two cohorts experienced very different circumstances: the 2020 cohort completed school during the COVID-19 pandemic but entered a recovering labour market, while the 2023 cohort experienced earlier educational disruption and finished school as labour market conditions weakened.

The findings suggest that while aspirations remain strong, achieving those aspirations is becoming more difficult for young people experiencing disadvantage. Earlier intervention, stronger career education, targeted support for young people at risk of disengagement, and stronger connections between schools, employers, and community organisations will be increasingly important.

The overall message: **young people experiencing disadvantage continue to be ambitious and future-focussed. However, changing educational and labour market conditions are making successful transitions more challenging. Coordinated support throughout secondary school and into post-school pathways is critical to helping young people achieve their goals.**