

REPORT

Getting to work?

Insights about the transition from education to employment from the Life Chances Study, Stage 11

Dina Bowman | Malita Allan | Iris Levin

Life Chances is a unique longitudinal study that examines how family income, social class, ethnicity and gender affect the lives of individuals. The study began in inner Melbourne in 1990 with 167 babies and their parents. The families were from a range of ethnic backgrounds and had high and low incomes.

Since 1990, each stage of the study has focused on different issues. This report from Stage 11 considers the impacts of advantage and disadvantage on young people's transitions from education to regular or satisfactory employment. We explore how 37 young people, interviewed in their mid-twenties, made sense of their experiences of education and work, and the extent to which their opportunities shaped their perspectives.

Key points

Social, economic and technological change have changed the world of work

The world of work that the young people in the Life Chances Study encounter is quite different from that which their parents experienced. The labour market has changed over the past 50 years, with the shift to a service economy and the growth in part-time rather than full-time jobs.

Underemployment has overtaken unemployment and twenty-somethings are hit hard.

There is also an increased expectation by employers that young jobseekers will have post-secondary credentials. Yet the policy emphasis on skills has been accompanied by the marketisation of post-secondary education and concern about the quality of some of the courses offered. Several of the young people we interviewed indicated that the advice they received from parents did not take labour market changes into account.

The impacts of these changes on young adults are uneven

While almost all the young people we interviewed understood post-secondary education as a prerequisite for getting a 'good' job, their experiences and expectations were shaped by their socioeconomic circumstances. Those who were less well-off, especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, tended to view education as a means to gain economic security. Nevertheless, only a few had managed to secure satisfactory employment in their fields directly after their studies. These young people had studied courses linked to a profession, such as teaching, but even they struggled to find permanent work in that profession.

In contrast, those from better-off families tended to view university as a strategy to enhance their cultural and social capital, and their knowledge of the 'rules of the game'. They took a longer view, recognising that a bachelor's degree might not be sufficient to lead to what they saw as a 'proper job', from which they could build a career. Further study was required to develop skills and to build networks. Some were happy to take their time, studying and travelling as they gained experience—indeed, some understood university mainly as an experience to be savoured and a means of acquiring useful networks.

How the young people we interviewed responded to the competitive labour market reflected their differing levels of social knowledge, networks, economic resources and opportunities. Some expressed confusion, disenchantment and disappointment because they could not understand why it was so hard to get the jobs they desired. But others—especially those from better-off families—took personal credit for their good position, ascribing it to careful planning. Most hedged their bets, investing in higher education but uncertain whether it would pay off and help them to get a 'proper' job.

Evening up the odds

Young people have been hit hard by the structural changes impacting Australia's labour market. Our interviewees' experiences suggest that young people from low-income backgrounds in particular need access to up-to-date information and guidance about education, training and work, so they can make informed decisions about their futures. This would help to even up the odds for those young people who cannot rely on their parents for contemporary career advice.

Broader policy development is also needed that responds to current and future challenges in a coherent and integrated way. As the Brotherhood of St Laurence (2018) has argued elsewhere, Australia needs a national employment strategy that encompasses career information and guidance, as well as workforce planning, skills building, economic development, social procurement, inclusive employment and support services.

Labour market and education sector changes

Labour market changes

The labour market in Australia has undergone profound changes since the postwar decades of growth. Globalisation, together with rapid technological change, demographic change and political change, is reshaping the world of work.

Wage growth has stagnated. Unemployment has declined to around 5% overall, but remains high for young people (at 11.4% in January 2019) (ABS 2018b; 2019). Underemployment is increasing, with a growing number of part-time rather than full-time jobs (ABS 2018b; Reserve Bank of Australia 2017). These changes reflect a shift to service industries (Bowman 2015) and the erosion of the standard employment relationship (Whiteford & Heron 2018).

Skills and prolonged transitions to regular or satisfactory work

Despite their high levels of participation in the labour market, young people are finding it increasingly difficult to get a 'proper job'—and there is a risk that some will never gain secure employment. While part-time or casual jobs can provide a stepping stone to more secure employment, prolonged casual work and underemployment can have scarring effects, with long-term impacts on earnings (Mooi-Reci & Wooden 2017).

In the 1990s, when the young people in the Life Chances Study were born, rising youth unemployment in Australia

and elsewhere led to increased emphasis on education and skills, which was strengthened by the OECD consensus about the importance of higher education and skills. Policy makers became enthusiastic about human capital, a term coined by the American Nobel Prize laureate economist Gary Becker. The term generally refers to education, training and health and how investment in these can deliver dividends for both the individual and the economy (Bowman, Borlagdan & Bond 2015). For Becker, human capital comprises 'the knowledge, information, ideas, skills and health of individuals ... [and is] by far the most important form of capital in modern societies'. He argues that the economic success of individuals and nations depends 'on how extensively and effectively people invest in themselves' (Becker 2002, p. 3).

This idea has been extremely influential. The 1994 Working Nation white paper stated:

The youth labour market has changed. We are not going to return to a world where large numbers of full-time jobs are available for unskilled young workers. For all young Australians education and training are the keys to employment. Every young Australian should be in education, training or employment.' (Keating 1994, p.13)

Since then, youth policy has become 'synonymous with education and training policy, with an emphasis on the promotion of the nation's human capital, with the creation of higher skills from its workers' (Cuervo & Wyn 2011, p. 18).

This shift is reflected in increases to the compulsory school age and in policies that require young people to be either learning or earning (COAG 2009). Year 12 retention rates rose from 45% in 1984 to 78% in 2010 (ABS 2011). Policy changes in the higher education and vocational education and training (VET) sectors were intended to increase quality and access through competition. According to the ABS (2018a) 45.7% of persons aged 20 to 24 years were engaged in study in May 2018.

The marketisation of post-compulsory education

There is no doubt that education has value and can be transformative, but policies that encouraged demand-driven and marketised post-compulsory education had profoundly negative impacts.

Key changes in educational policy have boosted the number of young people undertaking university or vocational education, without necessarily improving employment outcomes.

Universities

Increasingly, universities have emphasised the link between education and employment and the notion of employability. Students also appear to value this link. According to the Grattan Institute:

for most students, employment is a factor in their decision to enrol in a higher education course. For bachelor-degree students, about 85 per cent give a job-related consideration as their main reason for study (Norton & Cakitaki 2016, p. 78).

The Bradley review (Review of Higher Education 2008), influenced by fierce global competition and a desire to see Australia perform at the top of the OECD table, recommended opening up higher education and putting in place a demand-driven system. The review suggested that students could choose where to study, that universities could enrol as many students as they wished, but that all higher education institutions would have to be accredited, and that criteria for the title of university and for the right to offer research degrees would be tightened (Review of Higher Education 2008, p. xiii). In 2009 these reforms were implemented, but there has been concern that the policies have affected the quality of Australia's educational institutions, which has decreased in the past decade (Pitman 2014).

This process, which is not unique to Australia, has been described as the 'McDonaldization' of higher education (Hayes & Wynyard 2006). McDonaldization is a term coined by sociologist George Ritzer for processes that are routinised and modularised to maximise efficiency. He points out that 'rational systems are unreasonable systems' because 'they deny the basic humanity, the human reason, of the people who work within or are served by them' (Ritzer 1994, p. 154).

Indeed, the demand-driven policy has been critiqued by the Group of Eight major universities in Australia (Go8). According to this group, allowing universities to enrol as many students as they want has diminished the value of higher education, and created the false view that anyone without a degree is a 'failure' (Knott 2016).

The Group of Eight universities have argued that the surge of enrolments over recent years has left too many graduates with 'broken dreams and a large student debt', and that employers have been demanding university qualifications for jobs that in the past did not need a degree. Furthermore, some universities have enrolled students whose ATAR scores have been much lower than the advertised cut-off scores. Although this was not the intention of the demand-driven system policy, this trend has been evident, according to the Go8 universities. They have suggested students should be encouraged to study at TAFE, rather than university, if that is best for them; as the Go8 CEO put it, 'universities have a far

broader role in society, and for our students, than being a degree factory for jobs' (quoted in Knott 2016).

Vocational education and training

At the same time as the marketisation of universities, the VET system has changed too. In 2012, the Commonwealth, state and territory governments agreed on a new market-driven funding model for vocational education, intended to promote opportunities for for-profit registered training organisations (RTOs) alongside public TAFE institutes. This demand-driven funding has been the primary means of forcing TAFEs to compete in an open market.

Some commentators have argued that these reforms have led to a sharp reduction in government spending per hour of VET delivery as well as a massive transfer of wealth from taxpayers to the owners of for-profit training providers (Bachelard 2015; Yu & Oliver 2015). Furthermore, the questionable behaviour of some for-profit providers has served to undermine confidence in vocational qualifications and taken advantage of students unable to make informed decisions (CEDA 2016; Myconos, Clarke & te Riele 2016). Disadvantaged students are underrepresented at for-profit colleges, and TAFE and other public providers continue to enrol most of the early school leavers, regional students and students with a disability. Severe funding cuts to TAFEs have eroded capacity to assist disadvantaged students (Myconos, Dommers & Clarke 2018). Moreover, for-profit providers are also avoiding offering courses in skill shortage areas like the trades (which are often more expensive to run) and instead focusing on high-volume, high-profit areas like business studies (Yu & Oliver 2015).

There have been calls to reform the VET sector with TAFE as a centrepiece, strong industry engagement and a focus on training suited to emerging industry needs (CEDA 2016). Nevertheless, as Shreeve (2018) points out, achieving change 'will not be easy as it involves resetting federal-state relationships and balancing the sometimes competing priorities of students and industry groups'.

Increased competition

As a consequence of the multiple changes, there is increased competition for the available jobs. A recent Anglicare study (2018) found that 'across Australia, there are at least four jobseekers competing for each low-skilled, entry-level job' (p. 14). And although there is a long-term trend towards more highly skilled jobs (Australian Jobs 2018), competition for graduate jobs remains fierce. In this context, university graduates and VET students are competing with other jobseekers for entry-level vacancies (Neville 2014).

Getting to work?

For many young people, the effect of these changes— increase in part-time work, increased expectation of formal post-secondary qualifications, and the marketisation of post-secondary education and training—has been to prolong the transition from school to regular or satisfactory work. Young people now have quite different experiences of post-secondary education and work from those of their parents, and yet increasingly young women and men rely on their parents for advice and support.

This study examined how the young people we interviewed made sense of their post-school education and employment and what helped or hindered them as they embarked on their lives as adults.

Research method

The purpose of Stage 11 of the longitudinal Life Chances Study was to better understand the experiences of the young adults, in their mid-twenties by 2014, in post-compulsory education and training and the labour market, and examine their pathways from school to satisfactory employment. Stage 11 had 2 parts:

- a survey sent to 135 young people (reported in Allan & Bowman 2018)
- in-depth interviews with 37 of these participants, on which this report is based.

Phase 1: Analysis of the initial survey data

In 2014, when the young people were aged 24, a survey was sent to 135 of the original 167 participants in the Life Chances Study. Of these, 98 young people responded, a 73 per cent response rate.

Following initial analysis, we adopted a framework to help classify these young people's employment trajectories. We drew on the ILO (2009) Transitions to Work framework which distinguishes between those who are in satisfactory or regular work ('transited'); and those who do not have a satisfactory or regular job ('in transition'). The ILO framework excludes students, but we included them as in Australia many young people combine work and study. Through longitudinal analysis of the case histories of these 98 survey respondents, we also developed an assessment of the quality of their transitions from education to employment, distinguishing between direct and indirect paths, and further categorising these paths as smooth or rocky.

Phase 2: Interviews

In 2015, we selected a subsample of 37 survey respondents to interview about their experience of education and employment. The semi-structured interviews drew on a narrative biographical approach (Riessman 2006; Wengraf 2001), using key questions only as a guide and allowing the young people to tell their own stories, and reflect on the factors that have shaped their current situation and life chances.

The interviews explored the young people's education and employment pathways; their current circumstances and life chances; the role that work and education played in their lives at age 25; and their aspirations and plans.

A team of five interviewers conducted the interviews in late 2015. Some were face to face, but most were by phone. Most took an hour although a few were much longer. With consent, they were audio recorded, transcribed and de-identified before analysis. Interviewees received a \$50 voucher to thank them for their participation. Interviewers were asked to note their reflections as field notes, which assisted the reflexive analysis of the interviews.

De-identified transcripts of the interviews were read closely by the research team members. A workshop was held to discuss identified themes and develop an initial coding framework which was used to code the transcripts. The coded data was then examined to investigate identified themes in more detail. Using longitudinal data, we mapped the education and employment trajectories of the interviewees to identify patterns and provide context for their accounts.

In particular, we were interested in understanding what shaped these young people's different experiences of and views about education and employment.

Interview sample

The sampling framework aimed to select interviewees representing the spread of gender, family income (low, medium, high), ILO transition from education to work status (transited, in transition and students) and type of pathway (smooth, rocky). Because participation was voluntary it was not possible to recruit participants exactly to match the framework. While the sample was small and not representative, the interviews provide detailed personal insights. The characteristics of the 37 young people who agreed to be interviewed are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Interviewee characteristics – by income, gender, employment and education status

	Transited		In transition			Students	Total
	Regular work	Satisfactory work	Unsatisfactory work	Unemployed	Not in labour force	Student/apprentice (work and study)	
Women	5	5	1	0	1	6	18
Low-income	2	1	0	0	0	3	6
Medium-income	1	2	0	0	1	2	6
High-income	2	2	1	0	0	1	6
Men	8	1	2	3	0	5	19
Low-income	3	0	1	2	0	0	6
Medium-income	3	0	0	1	0	2	6
High-income	2	1	1	0	0	3	7
TOTAL	13	6	3	3	1	11	37

Note: In this table, **regular work** is full-time permanent or self-employed; **satisfactory work** is in an intended field, but part-time or on a casual or fixed-term basis; **students** are those whose main activity is study.

All the interviewees had been born in inner-city Melbourne, but most had moved since. At the time of the interview most lived in Melbourne, but several lived in regional Victoria or interstate. The interviewees were evenly spread by family income and gender. Eight interviewees (3 young women, 5 young men) were from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB). While the 98 survey respondents were evenly spread by employment status, a year later when the interviews were conducted there were more people in regular or satisfactory work, which is reflected in the interviewee demographics. Five of the 6 who were unemployed or unsatisfied were young men, 3 of them from low-income families. There was a slightly smaller proportion of students among the interviewees than among the survey respondents, but interestingly over a third of those who had been studying when surveyed had then struggled to find regular or satisfactory work and had returned to study by the time of the interview. Eight people were studying full time, two were studying part-time and there was one apprentice. One young woman, the mother of two young children, was not in the labour force.

Most of the interviewees (22) had attended government secondary schools. Seven (5 young women, 2 young men) had left school before finishing Year 12. Nevertheless, all but one had commenced some post-compulsory education or training: 18 (49%) participants studied only at university (one course or more), 11 (30%) studied both VET and university courses, 7 (19%) studied only VET courses.

Drawing on longitudinal insights about life events such as disrupted schooling, moving house, illness and

bereavement, we classified people's trajectories as smooth or rocky. Those with direct and smooth pathways to regular or satisfactory work were more likely to come from medium and high-income backgrounds, while those who had had rocky pathways and were unemployed or not in regular or satisfactory employment were more likely to come from low-income backgrounds.

Ethics

Ethics approval was granted in November 2015 by the Brotherhood of St Laurence's NHMRC-accredited research ethics committee.

Limitations

The study is small and not representative. Nevertheless, the survey data about the young people's trajectories enabled the development of a structured sample for the interviews. The interviews allowed the young people to share their explanations of what helped or hindered them in the years since they had left school. Importantly, they also had the opportunity to make suggestions about policies that might make a difference. The value of the study lies in its detailed insights into the factors that shape young people's life chances.

Experiences of getting to work

Influence of parental expectations

Parental expectations played an important role in nearly all young people's decisions about post-secondary education. For those whose parents were tertiary-educated, the expectation was that the children would follow in their parents' footsteps, gain skills and qualifications and enjoy the experience of university. Of course, universities and the labour market have changed since their parents were young, so the university experience that was fondly remembered is quite different from contemporary reality.

Some of those from less well-off families were also encouraged to complete post-compulsory education, primarily to get good jobs and to take advantage of the opportunities that were not available to their parents. But it was evident that by itself a qualification was not necessarily enough to secure desired employment.

Nevertheless, most of the people in this study spoke about post-compulsory education as a means to gain employment—in the short or longer term. For some this worked out well; others felt disillusioned and confused. Some of the better-off young people understood university as an experience, while a few interviewees saw further education as irrelevant to their lives. We consider these perspectives below.

Higher education as a path to desirable employment in the short or longer term

Good degree to good job

Those young people from low-income families who now had regular or satisfactory work saw education as transformative, enabling them to establish a good career and gain economic security. For example, Karen, a teacher, explained:

I think Mum really valued education ... she didn't really push university on us but she really wanted us to go to university because if you've got a good degree then you get a good job, and then you don't have to work as hard in Just not have to struggle in life, I suppose, if you've got a permanent job. (Karen, low-income, NESB)

Karen's parents, migrants from Asia, divorced when she was young. Her mother took an active role in Karen's education, changing her state school when her grades fell, despite difficulties affording school books. She wanted her children to study at university so they would find permanent jobs and secure their future.

Having worked in a fast food restaurant, Karen placed high value on having a profession or, as she put it, 'a career

rather than a job'. When she graduated with a teaching degree, she worked on fixed-term contracts for three years. But it was not easy: towards the end of her contract, she applied for thirty jobs before finally securing a permanent position. While teaching remains a respected profession, as Jenkins and co-authors (2017) observe, new graduates often experience an uncertain and unsupported transition into the profession.

Karen was helped by supportive colleagues and mentors. She recognised that as a child of migrants she lacked the contacts and feel for the 'rules of the game' that enable successful navigation of social fields. She volunteered and when asked why, she responded: 'To get a job, unfortunately'. She knew she needed to actively build networks and develop the social capital she lacked. She also sought out a mentor to help her prepare for job interviews:

I was pretty lucky at my old school. I had a really good mentor and she prepped me really well in the interview stage. I mean, it's hard to show your personality in a 60-minute interview when you're all nervous and jittery in front of a panel of people asking you questions. But yeah, because my mentor had been teaching for God knows how long, must be 20 years or something, she knew what types of questions would've been asked and so she helped me a lot. Maybe I was just lucky.

Karen contrasted her life to her mother's: 'She struggled a lot and she moved for a better opportunity, whereas I'm pretty lucky growing up in Australia, lots of opportunities education-wise.'

First degree as a first step

While many took a relatively direct path from school and university to work, some young people took their time. For most of those from better-off backgrounds, a first degree was considered as a first step on a ladder. Abigail, from a high-income, English-speaking family, explained that education provides 'qualifications that will help you kind of get a foot in the door for the industry that you're interested in'. Like Karen, she had found getting a permanent job was not easy. Following completion of a master's degree, she worked in an unrelated role before eventually getting a job in her field. Abigail was hopeful that her investment in post-compulsory education would open up opportunities in the future. Similarly, Hugo, from a middle-income family, observed: 'Tertiary education, I guess, is a little bit of a leg-up into the world sometimes, depending on what you do'.

Most of the young people we interviewed felt that having a degree was simply not enough to guarantee a good job.

Some of the interviewees from better-off backgrounds expressed the view that the value of higher education had fallen, just as it had become more accessible. Mary, who completed a bachelor's degree and then honours, explained: 'I think because there's a bit of education inflation at the moment, every single person has a degree and it doesn't mean much anymore'. ABS figures (2017) show that only 24.3% of Australians hold a bachelor's degree, but Mary had chosen a very competitive course and wanted to gain professional accreditation, so perhaps it felt to her as if 'everyone' did have a degree. During and after her studies she had worked in two casual jobs and at first had shared a house with her partner and friends, but then had moved back home. She could take her time, because she knew she could live with her parents without paying board and be supported by them.

Therese, who was also from a high-income family, had completed a bachelor's degree and then worked at her parents' business. When interviewed she had started her own business, having struggled to find a job elsewhere. She questioned the value of higher education and its link to employment:

Now that I'm at the point where I have to actually find a job, the lack of jobs has made a lot of that meaningless—not meaningless, but kind of what's the point of it all.

Nevertheless, Therese could work for her parents and get their support in opening her own business as a solution to the lack of suitable jobs. This help was something young people from poorer families did not have.

The university experience and accumulating social and cultural capital

For many young people from better-off families, going to university was 'normal', expected, and made sense in their social environment. As Eddie, from a medium-income, English-speaking family, explained: 'So it was just normal. And retrospectively it was completely logical. Like because you're academically strong, why go into a trade?'

Moreover, these young people from better-off families could choose to simply 'experience' higher education (particularly university) and this desire was often based on familiarity. For example, Tracy, who was from a high-income family, chose to study at a specific university that she already knew: 'I guess I was kind of influenced by where family members had gone because I was familiar with it. I have older sisters and my mum used to do a bit of teaching there so I was used to going as a kid and stuff.'

Rosemary, from a middle-income family, also observed that her parents had influenced her decision to attend university: 'I think they definitely wanted me to go to

university, I think that was an experience they wanted me to have'. The better-off young people emphasised the social connections made at university. They used phrases like 'who you meet while you're at university' and 'it's all about connections'. Romy, who was from a high-income family, had completed a double degree and had a permanent job, reflected on the need for connections:

It is pretty bleak for those who aren't employed. There are many jobs ads online – but few respond when you are applying. Unfortunately it is who you know (in my industry at least), and most good jobs are got through personal connections.

Eddie, from a middle-income family, made a distinction between a career and a job, which is only one component of a career. He viewed university as a filter (although not a very cost-effective one) to get the best people in the job when there are too many people competing. Here again university is seen as a means to accumulate cultural and social capital, which can then be transformed into economic capital. Furthermore, which university matters, as those who do not go to 'good' (prestigious) universities that provide both 'good' qualifications and 'good' social connections are filtered out in the competition for good jobs. Therese, who was from a high-income family, explained the link between her prior privilege and the opportunity to attend a good university: 'So the fact that I went to a private school meant that I got into a good university course, so that kind of all worked in my favour'. Eddie also understood his privilege:

And you know, [university access is] not an accident. So you know, going to primary school in [inner Melbourne] was one [advantage] and then going to [a selective high school]. So that would have been largely due to the fact that I went to a high-achieving primary school and then my own academic capabilities were quite strong.

Eddie took some credit for his opportunities, but both he and Therese recognised the cultural, economic and social capital that paved their way to study at a 'good' university.

But even with this leg-up, some young people needed to use their families' support (economic or social) to find their pathway to employment. For example, Rosemary had graduated with honours and at the time of the interview was working at her parents' business, while she considered further study. She had previously worked in 'dodgy' jobs, but her dad offered her work in his firm 'when they need me or when I need work'. She recognised her privilege and was somewhat surprised at the unfairness of 'the system' (the way things were organised):

I was working 11-hour shifts with a half-hour, unpaid lunchbreak and they would tell me to eat at my desk

for the lunchbreak, so that was pretty bad. It's pretty shocking to realise how dodgy the system can be sometimes and how much it can fail people. So I left that job and I was unemployed and then I found the job at the pizzeria—so it was kind of a spate of two really bad jobs and then I was lucky because my dad said, 'Just come do a bit of work for us for a while'.

Rosemary had time to 'figure out' things without the pressure of looking for a job, unlike other interviewees with fewer resources to fall back on.

Romy, who was from a high-income background, also found it hard to find a satisfactory job and for a time was caught in the catch 22 of needing both a qualification and experience. When she did find a job, she didn't like it but she could fall back on her parents. She lived with them rent-free, as well as receiving financial assistance from them:

I'm very fortunate that I do have my parents, so I wasn't stuck working there and I had the ability to quit when I knew it wasn't right for me. So yeah, I guess, I was very, very grateful for that and it meant that I was able to then apply for jobs that were better for me, that I ended up really enjoying.

In addition to attending prestigious schools and universities, some of these affluent young people had other opportunities to accrue social and cultural capital. They had been involved in sporting competitions and music lessons, had travelled overseas, had volunteered; and many had extra qualifications such as certificates, diplomas or postgraduate degrees. For example, Jacob's mother was a medical specialist and his father a business owner. He attended several primary schools including one in Europe, where his family moved temporarily. He then studied at a private secondary school and went back to Europe on student exchange. As a child he had karate and piano lessons and went on family holidays overseas. He and his sibling were very close to their grandparents who looked after them when their parents went overseas for work. He completed Year 12 with a very high score, took time to travel and then went to university. While studying he lived with his parents and had several casual part-time jobs, including one with his father. He gained a double degree with honours, as well as a certificate IV.

At the time of the interview Jacob was studying full time for a PhD, on a government scholarship. He also had relevant part-time work on a fixed-term contract, as well as a casual job. He complained about being time-poor and 'quite exhausted' but said, 'It's all worth it in the end, I think'.

Jacob's social and economic capital had enabled him to understand the rules of the game and pursue further study, in the hope that this would pay off in the future.

If these more affluent young people were not in permanent jobs at the time of the interview, they were satisfied in their fixed-term contracts and progressing in their 'career' or were satisfied in their casual contracts while studying. They had the resources, including time, to develop and implement strategies to increase their chances of getting a good job. They were accumulating social and cultural capital that could be effectively used in building economic capital.

Roadblocks and detours

While the better-off could afford to take their time making education or employment decisions, those from poorer families often encountered roadblocks. For some of these, taking their time to work out what to do came at a cost. For example, Adele (low-income, English-speaking background) had completed a fine arts degree, following her mother's advice to 'do what you love', but later realised she wanted to study nursing. She reflected that 'in hindsight I would have probably like to have started nursing earlier'. Adele felt she would have benefited from career guidance.

In the case of Duc, rather than him relying on his family, his family relied on Duc. This responsibility shaped his opportunities. Duc is from a low-income, migrant background with divorced parents. His secondary education was disrupted when he left school in Year 10 due to family problems. A year later Duc returned to school and went on to complete Year 12. He then completed VET studies in IT. He wanted to get ahead and enrolled for a law degree at an interstate university. However, since he had to support his family he found he could not afford to continue studying, so he deferred and found full-time work in another city. He struggled to maintain his independence while supporting his family. He explained:

The things that are important, my family, I always make sure that everything's going well. If not, I try to support them as much as I can, whether that be sending them money to my mother. I try to keep in contact.

The opportunity to 'have a university experience' was not available to Duc.

When the people from low-income backgrounds whom we interviewed could not get suitable employment, some responded with confusion, disenchantment or a sense of being tricked. For example, Kong, who was also from a low-income, migrant family, had been unemployed for six months when we interviewed him at age 25. As a teenager

he had helped his family with farm work, and since then had been employed for just six months in a part-time casual job. He lacked the work experience that prospective employers expected at his age. Unlike Karen, he did not understand the value of volunteering to develop networks, explaining: 'It feels like employers don't care if you do volunteer work'.

Kong had understood university as a ticket to economic security. His parents had encouraged him to study, but they could not give him the advice he needed. His family had moved interstate when he was a teenager, disrupting his schooling. And even though he had not done well in Year 12, he attempted further studies. At the time of the interview, he had completed a Certificate III in IT, and then started but did not complete a business studies degree. Without the advice and support he needed to succeed at university, he dropped out. On reflection, he thought it would have been better to study a vocational course that would lead to employment. He explained:

I think that if you're going to study a uni course, study one that has jobs ... like jobs that are in high demand ... [If] when you finish your course it's quite hard to get into a job and if you fail getting into a job a couple of times you lose motivation and you don't want to do it anymore.

Kong was frustrated and was uncertain about what to do and whether further investment in education would pay off:

You're just unsure of what you're doing and you don't know if you complete it, will it make a difference? Because you've been through so much education and training already and you're not sure if it's a waste of time or not ...

Even though his university experience had been unsuccessful, Kong had not entirely lost faith in the importance of acquiring skills and qualifications. Instead, he blamed himself for not choosing the 'right' field. Like Adele, Kong felt he would have benefited from career information and guidance.

Vocational training and employment

Vocational courses did not necessarily provide a straightforward path to employment either. Jaden, who had a disability and was from a low-income family, had studied several TAFE courses, but had been unsuccessful in finding work. He explained: '[I've] never had a paid job. I've studied and then you go looking for work and then study again when I can't find a job after'. He could not understand why, and felt he had been misled by the promise that education automatically leads to employment. He felt that his

qualifications were almost useless because he did not have work experience: 'And you can have so much qualifications but still [employers] go for more experienced people.'

To some extent governments' emphasis on higher education has overshadowed the importance of vocational education and training. VET offers an alternative pathway to university and sometimes a second chance, especially for early school leavers.

In this study, two women had enrolled in VET as a 'second chance' strategy and had then gone on to university. Three other young women studied VET courses and found work shortly afterwards; these women did not believe that higher education was essential, especially as they appeared to have greater economic security than friends who had gone to university. For example, Shona, who was from a middle-income family and had left school before completing Year 12, had completed a VET course and then found a job where she had progressed to manage several staff:

I've got a lot of people say, you didn't go to uni or anything, and I haven't really needed to. I work with these girls who are a bit younger than me that have gone to uni, and they're doing just exactly the same as what I'm doing ... I'm not getting paid any less or anything like that. So I really haven't had a disadvantage of not doing any study. I've never needed to.

Shona felt she was in a much better position, having gained experience on the job, than her friends who could not find work. She did not feel she was at any disadvantage, financially or socially, because of not studying at university. Barbara, also from a middle-income family, felt that young people were at a disadvantage if they studied rather than worked. Like Shona, Barbara valued on-the-job experience, pointing out that 'You couldn't really learn how to groom a dog from reading a book'.

Evening up the odds

The increasing importance of post-school qualifications extends the transition from school to work for many young people. Students juggle work, study and other obligations and incur debt to gain qualifications, without any guarantee of future employment.

Unequal opportunities

Increased competition means that the nature and quality of qualifications matter, and where someone studies matters. In this way unequal access to education can entrench inequality, especially at a time when universities have

become increasingly focused on market share rather than quality education. Without the relevant social networks, know-how and advice, some young people pursue education or training that is not suited to their circumstances or aspirations. They do what they think is best but without fully understanding the consequences of their decisions.

The young people we interviewed tended to understand their own opportunities as being the result of either luck or careful planning. Neither perception recognises the systemic and structural factors that shape their opportunities. And this meant that interviewees tended to focus on individual explanations and strategies. However, their stories should be seen as reflecting the interplay of their social and economic circumstances with wider trends in the labour market.

Accumulating advantage and disadvantage

For those who complete qualifications there is no guarantee of stable employment—even for those with the ‘right’ networks. But those who have had the benefits of attending a ‘good’ school are more likely to attend a ‘good’ university, and accrue the associated social capital that will lead to future employment and economic security. The odds are stacked against those who already have experienced disadvantage. They are less likely to understand what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as the ‘rules of the game’—the unspoken conventions that govern particular social contexts. Without formal guidance and mentorship to gain relevant know-how and networks, they can flounder despite their best efforts.

Even the most advantaged young people in this study understood that being qualified for a job was not enough. Relevant work experience is vital and those lacking the ‘right’ social connections or the means to gain unpaid experience can effectively be excluded from opportunities. The better-off young people could also fall back on family when times were tough—working for their parents, living at home and being supported emotionally and financially. In sharp contrast, some of the young people we interviewed faced the competitive labour market with little family support. And this was not because their families didn’t care, but rather because they lacked the necessary social, cultural and economic resources.

The role of social policy in evening up the odds

A focus solely on human capital (the skills or qualifications people have) can obscure the relevance of other forms of capital (such as access to social and occupational networks) and paradoxically can reinforce inequality. Our research shows the importance of examining the impacts of post-compulsory education and training policy reform on different groups of young people. It points to the role that career guidance and supported work experience can play in improving access to education and employment networks and know-how.

Our research also highlights the importance of second chances. The path from education to employment is often not straightforward. There are many roadblocks, delays, detours, U-turns; and sometimes things come to a halt. For young people from well-off families, the impacts of a stretched or windy path tend to be cushioned. For those with fewer resources, the impacts hit hard. Social policy plays a vital role in supporting all young people so that they can find their way to sustainable employment and build their lives on sound foundations. It is for this reason that the Brotherhood has argued elsewhere that we need a national employment strategy that encompasses career information and guidance, as well as workforce planning, skills building, economic development, social procurement, and inclusive employment and support services.

References

- ABS 2011, *Australian social trends, March 2011*, Cat. no. 4102.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- 2017, *Educational qualifications in Australia: 2016 Census data summary*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- 2018a, *Education and work, Australia*, May 2018, Cat. no. 6227.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- 2018b, *Labour force, Australia, September 2018*, Cat. no. 6202.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- 2019, *Labour force, Australia, January 2019*, Cat. no. 6202.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- Allan, M & Bowman, D 2018, *The young adults: life chances at age 24*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.
- Anglicare Australia 2018, *Jobs availability snapshot 2018*, Anglicare Australia, Canberra.
- Bachelard, M 2015, 'Privatisation turned vocational education into a den of shonks and shysters', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December.
- Becker, G 2002, 'The age of human capital', in EP Lazear (ed.), *Education in the twenty-first century*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, California, viewed 13 March 2019, <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/0817928928_3.pdf>.
- Bourdieu, P 1977, *Outline of a theory of practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Bowman, D 2015, 'Caught in transition?', *Insight*, no. 12, pp. 18–21.
- Bowman, D, Borlagdan, J & Bond, S 2015, *Making sense of youth transitions from education to work*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.
- Brotherhood of St Laurence 2018, *Submission to the Senate Inquiry into jobactive*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic, <http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/10892/1/BSL_subm_Senate_Inquiry_into_jobactive_2018.pdf>.
- CEDA 2016, *VET: Securing skills for growth*, Committee for Economic Development of Australia, Melbourne, viewed 13 March 2019, <<https://www.ceda.com.au/Research-and-policy/All-CEDA-research/Research-catalogue/VET-skills-for-growth>>.
- COAG 2009, *Council of Australian Governments meeting communiqué, 30 April*, Council of Australian Governments, Hobart, viewed 27 March 2019, <<https://www.coag.gov.au/meeting-outcomes/coag-meeting-communiqu%C3%A9-30-april-2009>>.
- Cuervo, H & Wyn, J 2011, *Rethinking youth transitions in Australia: a historical and multidimensional approach*, Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne.
- Hayes, D & Wynyard, R (eds), *The McDonaldization of higher education*, IAP, Charlotte, North Carolina.
- ILO 2009, *School to Work Transitions Survey: a methodological guide*, International Labour Organization, Geneva, viewed 13 March 2019, <http://www.ilo.org/employment/areas/youth-employment/work-for-youth/WCMS_191853/lang--en/index.html>.
- Jenkins, KA, Charteris, J, Bannister-Tyrrell, M & Jones, M 2017, 'Emotions and casual teachers: implications of the precariat for initial teacher education', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 42, no. 12, pp. 162–79.
- Keating, PJ 1994, *Working nation: the White Paper on employment and growth*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
- Knott, M 2016, 'Big debts and broken dreams: students without degrees branded as "failures"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 July.
- Mooi-Reci, I & Wooden, M 2017, 'Casual employment and long-term wage outcomes', *Human Relations*, vol. 70, no. 9, pp. 1064–90.
- Myconos, G, Clarke, K & te Riele, K 2016, *Shedding light: private 'for profit' RTOs and young early school leavers*, NCVET, Adelaide.
- Myconos, G, Dommers, E & Clarke, K 2018, *Viewed from the margins: navigating disadvantage and VET*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.
- Neville, I 2014, *Labour market trends*, Department of Employment, Canberra, viewed 10 November 2016, <<http://www.nagcas.org.au/files/Conference%202014%20presentations/Ivan%20Neville%20Labour%20market%20trends.pdf>>.
- Norton, A & Cakitaki, B 2016, *Mapping Australian higher education 2016*, Grattan Institute, Melbourne.
- Pitman, T 2014, 'Reinterpreting higher education quality in response to policies of mass education: the Australian experience', *Quality in Higher Education*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 348–63.
- Reserve Bank of Australia 2017, 'The rising share of part-time employment', *Bulletin*, September quarter.
- Review of Higher Education 2008, *Review of Australian Higher Education: final report*, (D Bradley, chair), Australian Government, Canberra.

Riessman, CK 2006, 'Narrative analysis', in V Jupp (ed.), *The SAGE dictionary of social research methods*, SAGE Publications, London.

Ritzer, G 1994, *The McDonaldization of society*, Pine Forge Press, Los Angeles.

Shreeve, R 2018, 'A new national set of priorities for VET would make great social and economic sense', *The Conversation*, 2 October.

Wengraf, T 2001, *Qualitative research interviewing: biographic narratives and semi-structured methods*, SAGE, London.

Whiteford, P & Heron, A 2018, 'Australia: Providing social protection to non-standard workers with tax financing', in OECD, *The future of social protection: what works for non-standard workers?*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Yu, S & Oliver, D 2015, *The capture of public wealth by the for-profit VET sector*, report prepared for the Australian Education Union, Workplace Research Centre, The University of Sydney.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Deborah Patterson for her meticulous editing.

We deeply appreciate the involvement of the Life Chances Study participants who shared their views on and experiences of getting to work.

We are grateful to Cara Bradley, Joanna Baevski and Janet Taylor for assisting the authors with the Stage 11 interviews.

Funding for the Life Chances Study has been received from diverse government and charitable sources. The recent stages have received generous support from the Prue Myer Fund.

For further information

Read more about the longitudinal Life Chances Study on the Brotherhood of St Laurence website at <www.bsl.org.au/research>.

Contact us

Research & Policy Centre
Brotherhood of St Laurence

67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Australia

T (03) 9483 1183
E research@bsl.org.au

bsl.org.au/research

© Brotherhood of St Laurence 2019

Apart from fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism, or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968* and subsequent amendments, no part of this paper may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the publisher.