

This summary outlines the findings of the report of Stage 9 of the Life Chances Study:

## ***Turning 18: pathways and plans***

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The Australian Government is promoting the 'Education Revolution' as a key part of its social inclusion agenda. Data from the Brotherhood of St Laurence's longitudinal Life Chances Study (stage 9) illustrate the education experience of 18 year olds from different income groups. The study complements the large scale surveys of young people leaving school, such as the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth and the annual Victorian 'On Track' surveys, by providing both qualitative data and longitudinal family data.

The study is concerned with the experiences of young people from diverse backgrounds and with the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on their life chances, and presents their insights and reflections on their situations. Their experiences are related to some of the current policy issues of social inclusion in education.

### **School completion and academic achievement**

The research is based on contact with the 138 young people who have been in the study throughout their lives. All were born in inner Melbourne, and at 18 the majority (87%) lived in Melbourne, with some in regional Victoria or interstate. At the end of the year they turned 18, 77 per cent had completed Year 12 VCE; 7 per cent had completed other Year 12 (VCAL, special school); 6 per cent were still at school and were planning to complete Year 12; and 10 per cent had left school without completing Year 12.

Their pathways differed according to family income (33% were from low-income families, 26% from medium and 41% from high-income backgrounds). While 98 per cent in high-income families had completed VCE, and 86 per cent in medium-income families, the figure was only 44 per cent in low-income families. However 15 per cent from low-income families had completed other Year 12 qualifications, and 15 per cent were still at school planning to complete Year 12. A quarter from low-income families (26%) had left school early, but none from high-income families.

Social inclusion in education relates not only to completing Year 12, but also to academic achievement, as this influences tertiary education options. The academic achievement of those who completed VCE is indicated by their tertiary entrance (ENTER) scores, on a scale from 0 to a high of 99.95. The young people from high-income families had higher average ENTER scores (81.2) than those from medium and low-income families (69.6 and 68.8). Higher scores at age 18 were positively associated with the following factors at age 16: family factors (high family income, parents with tertiary qualifications, positive family relationships), and school factors (self-rated academic achievement, getting on well with teachers, school engagement) and wellbeing.

For those who completed VCE, there was a clear relationship between their scores and their proposed future activities. The average ENTER scores were: 85.2 for those going to university (60 young people); 82.1 for those taking a gap year (12); 50.8 for those going to TAFE (14); 48.7 for those planning an apprenticeship (2); and 40.4 for those working or looking for work (7).

The activities of those who left school before completing Year 12 included studying at TAFE, undertaking apprenticeships and/or working part or full-time. Some were settled, but others had tried various courses and jobs unsuccessfully and had had long periods of unemployment.

## The 18 year olds' experiences

Additional interviews with 33 of the 138 young people explored their perspectives on finishing school and on further training and employment. They provided insightful reflections on their experiences.

Finishing Year 12 was important for those who did so, because they saw it as the path to university and to job opportunities and because their parents valued it. Year 12 was generally not seen as important by the early school leavers who wanted an immediate job or an apprenticeship. The young people explained that what helped them complete Year 12 were supportive parents and friends, their own motivation and, for some, their teachers. Conversely, what hindered others were problems with family and friends, the stress of study and keeping motivated, and for one, lack of support from school. One young woman explained how the experience had weighed on her:

There was a lot of stress during that year, like at home, at school, it gets to you after a while. That was probably the hardest thing going through the year. At school just the pressure of it, the whole choosing what you do want to do for the future and being forced into that decision.

The 33 young people outlined their post-school experiences. Some were flourishing, others struggling:

- The university students (from both high and low-income families) who had already started their courses were generally enjoying the experience, including having greater freedom than at school, although some found this a challenge as was the need for different study skills. They found their friends helped them study, but sometimes their part-time jobs created difficulties. The high cost of textbooks was often mentioned.
- The TAFE students felt their motivation and their interest in their subjects helped them study while difficulties included travel and finding part-time work.

- The apprentices mostly enjoyed their work and liked the hands-on learning in contrast to school, as well as getting paid. They appreciated the government financial assistance. Problems however included work injuries, fatigue and, for some, fitting in study time.
- The young people who had spent most of the year working or looking for work, as opposed to studying, were either having a 'gap year' of work and travel before starting university or were early school leavers. The gap year students were generally enjoying their time. However, the early school leavers' situations were less satisfactory, as they faced long periods of unemployment and limited full-time job opportunities because of issues such as learning difficulties, mental health problems, lack of work experience and regional location. Some had already unsuccessfully attempted TAFE courses and apprenticeships. One unemployed young man commented:

It's hard. I'm not working, I can't get the dole, I can't get Youth Allowance, so it's very hard you know. Just life in general.

Half the students who finished Year 12 also had part-time jobs while they studied. These jobs tended to provide pocket money for those from more affluent families, but contributed to the household expenses or the costs of education for those in less affluent families. For some, work interfered significantly with study commitments. One student with a night job noted:

Like at the very start of this year I didn't have the job and I could be more attentive and concentrating on the studies. Once I got it, after that you get really tired after work and it becomes harder to study after work ... and like the next day I would sleep in and end up missing classes.

Costs of education presented an important barrier for those on low incomes. School costs that caused problems included books and other materials, uniforms, and additional tutoring. University students emphasised the high cost of textbooks, while fees were a problem for those wanting to attend TAFE, especially if not eligible for concessions. One early school leaver commented:

I'd love to go to do a TAFE course to do my diploma in fitness but that's very expensive and you have to work at the same time, so you can't really do it. It's like a few thousand dollars for fitness. It's very expensive so it's hard.

### **Policy implications and challenges**

Australian Government policies to increase inclusion and equity in education have included setting targets to increase Year 12 completion (with a target of 90 per cent of young people completing Year 12 or equivalent by 2015) and the proportion of university students from low socioeconomic groups, and increasing access to vocational training. This is accompanied by raising the school leaving age, guaranteeing training places and withdrawing income support for unemployed early school leavers who are not in training.

Promoting social inclusion in education has many aspects, but it must include providing education which is affordable for all. This study finds that school retention and academic achievement are associated with both family resources and school resources. Where families lack the necessary resources, appropriate supports for young people need to be provided by schools, universities and other training organisations.

Messages from the study include:

#### *To promote Year 12 retention*

- Actively engage the less academic students in appropriate courses, for example by providing positive support for non-academic courses such as VCAL

- Support those on low incomes, by addressing school costs such as textbooks and subject fees, and also with adequate family income support
- Promote a healthy balance between students' paid work and study.

#### *To promote further education and training*

- Acknowledge that for some disadvantaged young people, fees for TAFE courses are already a barrier which a loan scheme is unlikely to overcome
- Monitor the impact of the proposed TAFE fee increases
- Ensure support services and career counselling for TAFE students are well resourced to promote course completion and appropriate pathways.

#### *To promote university enrolment of low SES students*

- Review criteria for selection to offset disadvantage
- Promote flexible pathways, for example for TAFE students
- Ensure university is affordable.

In conclusion, the findings highlight the challenges for policy makers and educators wanting to increase Year 12 completion and social inclusion in education. These include the need to 'invest' in education and training resources to:

- Ensure affordable schooling and further training that does not exclude those on low incomes
- Provide appropriate learning opportunities for young people with low academic achievement and learning difficulties
- Provide adequate income support for young people from low-income families to allow full participation in education and training.

## The Life Chances Study

The study commenced with 167 children born in inner Melbourne in 1990 and has followed their lives since. It has aimed to explore over time their life opportunities and outcomes, to compare the lives of those in families on low incomes with those in more affluent circumstances and to inform government and community interventions to improve the lives of Australian children and young people, especially those in disadvantaged circumstances.

The families and young people have now been interviewed over 9 stages of the study and reports written for each stage.

### Access to Life Chances Study reports

The full version of the new report

- *Turning 18: pathways and plans*  
Life Chances Study stage 9  
(Taylor & Gee 2010)

is available on the Brotherhood of St Laurence website [www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au).

Earlier reports also available on the website include

- *School engagement and life chances: 15 year olds in transition*  
(Taylor & Nelms 2006)
- *Life chances at 16: Life Chances Study stage 8* (Taylor & Nelms 2008)
- *Stories of early school leaving: pointers for policy and practice*  
(Taylor 2009)

The report *Eleven plus: life chances and family income* (Taylor & Fraser 2003) (250 pages) can be purchased by contacting [publications@bsl.org.au](mailto:publications@bsl.org.au)

### The Life Chances DVD

Information about the new *Life Chances* DVD will be available on the website [www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au).

The DVD *Turning 18* (30 minutes) presents seven of the young people from diverse backgrounds from the Life Chances Study talking about their experiences as 18 year olds of finishing school, work, money, friends and their future plans.

The DVD also includes *Turning 13* which presents the same young people when they were aged 4 and aged 13.

The DVD will be of interest to tertiary teachers and students in areas such as youth studies and education and to others with an interest in the young people's accounts of their lives, including policy makers, educators and service providers.

### Acknowledgements

The current stage of the Life Chances Study has received generous support from the Bokhara Foundation, the Myer Foundation, the Hector Waldron Pride Charitable Trust managed by ANZ Trustees, and the JM Harrison Charitable Trust and the Edith Kemp Memorial Trust Fund administered by Equity Trustees Limited.

### Contact

Website [www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au)

Earlier reports of the Life Chances Study can be purchased from the Brotherhood of St Laurence, 67 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy 3065 (phone 03 9483 1386).

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February 2010