EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines patterns of course enrolments in Year 12 and the consequences of students' course enrolments on their education, training and work experiences to age 19. In particular, it looks at what happens to young people enrolled in different senior school subjects as they move from school to post-school education and training and to work. The analysis is based on data collected between 1990 and 1997 as part of the Australian Youth Survey (AYS), a national longitudinal survey of young people.

Course enrolments were derived from information on the subjects students studied in Year 12. Course enrolments comprised the combinations or clusters of subjects students studied. The combinations were identified using statistical clustering techniques with 70 subjects identified from information provided by respondents. Twenty different groupings of subjects, defined for the purposes of this report as courses of study, were identified.

Course-taking patterns in Year 12 vary substantially according to gender, early school achievement, socioeconomic status, type of school attended and ethnicity. Students from different backgrounds tend to enrol in different groups of subjects and as a result are located in different parts of the curriculum. For example:

- About one in five boys enrol in maths and the physical sciences compared to one in 12 girls;
- Girls more often take the biological sciences or chemistry with maths and humanities. Over 25 per cent of females enrolled in a combination of maths, science and humanities subjects. The rate for males was 15 per cent;
- Over 15 per cent of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds enrol in courses combining vocational education and technology subjects compared to about 8 per cent of high SES students;
- Nearly 25 per cent of students from high SES backgrounds enrol in maths and science courses. The corresponding rate for low SES students is 15 per cent;
- Over 14 per cent of government school students enrol in courses combining vocational education and technology subjects, compared to 8 per cent of Catholic school students and 4 per cent of students in non-Catholic private schools.

The importance of the differences in the patterns of course-taking is related to the different educational and occupational opportunities that the various courses lead to. Young people from higher SES backgrounds, those from private schools, those who are high achievers earlier in school, and students from non-English-speaking backgrounds tend more often to study the courses that are avenues to higher education and the professions. Disadvantaged students tend to participate in courses that lead to vocational education and training or more often to entry to the labour market without any further formal education or training. Their experiences in the labour market vary, although frequent spells of unemployment were a common experience up to age 19 for young people who took courses that predominantly did not lead on to any further education or training.

The findings suggest that while the senior school curriculum operates to transmit the influences of student background and early school achievement on post-school education and career trajectories, it also has an independent influence. After controlling for background, achievement and school differences, there remain
large variations in the likelihood of participating in further education and training based on subject choice in Year 12. These findings show that student course-taking is a strong predictor of post-school outcomes.