

# **Australian Young People, their families and post-school plans: a research review**

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April 2007



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**FAMILY EXPECTATIONS AND POST-SCHOOL PLANS: A  
LITERATURE REVIEW**

## Introduction

### Objectives of the review

This literature review is part of a project commissioned by The Smith Family that is investigating the effects and influences of family expectations on the cost benefit analyses undertaken by students when they are considering their post-school plans.

The 2006 report for The Smith Family, *On track? Students choosing a career*, pointed to the possibility of a strong effect of family expectations on young people's post-school plans (Beavis, 2006). Post-school plans often include decisions about further education, so a family's influence or involvement in assessing the costs and benefits associated with this decision is not surprising (Usher, 2005). *On track?* identified uncertainties about how and to what extent family expectations shape young people's educational plans. It concluded that the extent to which this influence is shaped by the gender, interests and ability of the young people remains unknown

The present project is intended to help better understand the inter-relationships between family expectations and young people's plans. It comprises this literature review which informs the development and analysis of some intensive case studies of a small number of young people and their families. The report includes a consideration of the key issues resulting from the research as well as suggestions for policy and further practice.

### The Australian context

The choices and pathways available to young people today as they make their way from school to work or further education are many and varied. What was once seen to be a linear pathway is now often described as a mosaic, or 'crazy paving and stepping stones', where students move in and out of education and different areas or types of employment (sometimes combining the two) and are more likely than previous generations to experience periods of part-time employment, casual work, unemployment and, for some young people, time outside the labour force and education altogether (Dwyer et al. 2003; Harris, Rainey & Sumner, 2006).

Both in Australia and overseas, governments, education departments and universities are keen to identify pathways and evaluate policies and programs designed to facilitate the transition process. Consequently there are a number of large-scale surveys which collect information about young people's post-school pathways. Because much of this is cross-sectional data, it is limited in describing influences across time or outcomes in the long-term. Where demographic data are included, there is some indication of the influences on post-school planning; however, the complexity of individual choices and associated pathways emerges more fully in the context of qualitative research where individual stories are documented and analysed (Harris, Rainey & Sumner, 2006)

Equity issues are a key theme in data analysis; not all young people are equally represented in higher education or in high status jobs. Against the ongoing impact of social and economic change, research needs to consider young people in the context of their lives. It is important that the data relating to post-school pathways, and associated policies and programs, are not interpreted from a viewpoint of ideas and conditions that are now outmoded. Research which includes young people's own viewpoints and interpretations of the significant influences on them, and the complexities of their individual stories, provides useful insights into many contemporary issues (Eckersley, Wierenga, & Wyn, 2006).

The lives of young people are highly fluid and their education and labour market activities and status can change rapidly from one period to the next. Indeed, education and training policy in Australia, by increasing the range of options and encouraging flexibility, has made pathways in

Australia more individualised and complex (Rothman & McKenzie, 2006). This has raised concerns about whether all young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds -- have the capacity, skills, knowledge and support to navigate their way through the increased number of options and multiple pathways available in Australia.

A significant proportion of disadvantaged young people fail to make a successful transition to work or further study (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2006). This has an adverse effect on individual lives, as well as on wider social and economic development. For example, research shows that:

*... young people not in full-time learning or work, experience more financial and personal stress and lower levels of participation and integration with civil society. They are less satisfied with their lives. (Long, 2006, p.1)*

Supporting young people to make a successful school to work transition is important not just in economic terms but also for the human consequences associated with unsuccessful transitions.

Included in the Australian research are surveys conducted with students participating in The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* strategy and suite of programs. In the 2005 report *What Do Students Know about Work?*, students' post-school plans were surveyed. Most of the students had developed plans which reflected a combination of their interests, abilities and the influence of their families. There was still some fluidity in their plans which in some cases changed over the course of 12 months, and some confusion regarding the matching of educational requirements with career paths. The incompatibility of some students' educational and career intentions was flagged as an area for concern (Beavis, Curtis & Curtis, 2005).

A subsequent survey conducted in 2006, *On Track? Students choosing a career*, provided an opportunity to examine how students' plans had evolved over a year (Beavis, 2006). The study also analysed the perceived costs and benefits of a university education on the young people's projected careers. The plans of most of the students had continued to evolve and many planned on further education at university or TAFE. The survey revealed that, in general, anticipated income was not a significant factor in students' plans to attend university. Instead, the type of role that a particular career involved, and how it aligned with the students' interests and abilities, emerged as important in their planning process. Relationships between family expectations and student plans for further study also emerged as an important influence on decisions to attend TAFE or university.

*Typically, these young people – all of whom are from low socioeconomic families – were planning a future shaped by their interests, perceived ability and, it seems, their families. The picture to emerge of these families, from these data, was one of supportiveness. The interests of young people were being encouraged and their plans set at a level to accord with their ability. (Beavis, 2006, p vi)*

The following overview of research provides an insight into the decision-making processes undertaken by the young people as they make the transition from school to work or further education.

### **Structure of the review**

The research reviewed in this paper attempts to identify the factors which influence post-school planning, as well as the underlying processes which explain how these factors operate. A particular focus is research which investigates the nature and extent of the influence that families have on students as they make plans for life beyond secondary school. While the term 'family' is used throughout the review, this may encompass other significant people in young people's lives including guardians, carers and blended families in their many forms.

The previous reports written for The Smith Family, which include data collected from the *Learning for Life* students, raise a number of questions, suggesting that further exploration of the influences on post-school planning at an individual micro level, particularly the role that families play, is an important next step towards understanding the influences on young people's post-school planning.

There is a broad base of literature on which to draw, including theories and research undertaken in the areas of career development, post-school pathways, and the factors which influence the decision-making processes of young people. This research comes from a range of fields that include sociological and psychological approaches, government reports, books and journals dedicated to career development and vocational guidance. Some of the research is quantitative and involves large-scale surveys; other research is qualitative and, while less generalisable, gives some insight into individual processes of decision making.

The review has been structured to survey the following areas of research:

- *The influence of family, friend and networks* – which explores the way in which family processes and relationships impact on young people as they make the transition from school to work
- *Family contexts* – research which links family structural factors and characteristics such as socioeconomic status with post-school planning
- *Adolescent decision making* – the influences identified in the previous sections are considered in the broader context of theoretical and empirical research describing the underlying processes of career development

Wherever possible, the review emphasises Australian research studies, although this is relatively limited in some of the above fields. The nature of the relationship between family background, the characteristics of school systems and occupational outcomes varies widely among countries (Shavit & Müller, 1998). Findings from international research are included where these can usefully be applied to the Australian context.

## **The influence of family, friends and networks**

The research literature confirms what one would intuitively expect to be the case: the influence of families on the educational and career choices of young people as they move through their individual life journeys is immense (Hodkinson, 2004). Indeed, many career counselling services for adults who need support with aspects of career development later in life have them focus on family influences in their formative years, as these are viewed to have a key and long-lasting effect over an individual's life span (Chope, 2005).

Foskett and Helmsely-Brown (2001) describe how the 'huge unconscious persistence' of a family's attitudes and values affects the decision making of 14–18 year-olds. They claim that young people are never completely free of the influence of their family and they see the choices made by 14–18 year-olds as being a synthesis of inherited values and emerging individual values.

The ways in which families influence young people varies according to the broader context the family operates in (social, economic and ethnic), the structural features of the family and the family processes. In turn, these are influenced by the personal characteristics of the young person (e.g. gender, birth order) (Whiston & Keller, 2004).

The influence of families can be defined as both relating to the actual vocational and associated educational outcomes of the young person or the ability of the young person to engage in the tasks associated with career development and establishing a vocational identity. These tasks include the process of self-discovery, investigating options, making decisions and implementing plans. Career development research focuses on the confidence, maturity and ability of individuals to engage in these tasks. Family factors influence both the way in which young people approach career development tasks, and their actual educational and vocational outcomes or destinations.

The research which documents young people's post-school planning decisions consistently identifies parents as a key source of information and influence. The research which looks at how families influence young people's post-school planning generally focuses on either:

- family processes or relationships – including parenting style, parental support, or
- family background characteristics – such as socioeconomic status, parental education and occupation

The following section discusses some of the research findings relating to family processes and relationships.

### **Parental support**

The research literature confirms that parents, regardless of socioeconomic background, want their children to do well in life. The level of parental involvement in career development does not vary with socioeconomic status (Trusty, Watts & Erdman (1997). Families play a key supportive function in terms of social support, emotional support, social integration or network support, esteem support, information support and tangible assistance (Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi & Glasscock, 2001). Supportive relationships prepare individuals to deal more effectively with stressful situations, such as those encountered in the course of post-school planning, by promoting self-esteem, self-efficacy and minimizing anxiety.

A longitudinal study in Scotland of young people preparing to leave school identified a number of levels of influence which were categorised as part of either the formal network (formal career guidance) and the informal network (family and friends) of career support. The study found that

the informal support networks had more influence on young people's career development, decision making and transitions than the formal networks (Semple, Howieson & Paris, 2002).

The informal network (family and friends) influences young people's thinking in three main ways:

- *Planned, explicit interventions* – situations where parents had an explicit intention to provide help or advice, including encouragement and motivation, raising aspirations, practical assistance and contacts, and involvement in the careers guidance process
- *Implicit assumptions* – where values, expectations and assumptions were shared without being clearly articulated. This was often demonstrated in interviews when parents and children would practically use the same words to describe work or education values
- *Unplanned influence* – where young people absorbed impressions and developed ideas from their parents' and families' experiences.

The influence of the 'informal network' may in part be attributed to the fact that families and friends are generally ready to state their views and give advice to young people, and young people seek this out. This can be a positive or a negative influence depending on the appropriateness of the advice (for example, whether it is based on realistic expectations, whether it is well-informed advice) and whether it presents a complete picture of post-school options. The nature of this advice may be quite directive when compared to formal careers counselling at school which encourages young people to explore their interests and make their own decisions.

The idea that families generally are and want to be supportive of young people is not surprising. Young (2005) describes the 'co-construction of career' by parents and their children as a 'family project', the underlying goal of parents being to maintain a good relationship with their children as they assist the transition to adulthood and social inclusion. A primary aim of parents is to develop positive relationships with their children and to prepare them to be independent. However, while parents want to be supportive, there are questions as to whether this support is always well-informed.

Semple, Howieson and Paris (2002) found that some young people tended to have informal networks of support were that better equipped to support them than others. The ability of families and friends to understand education, training and opportunities varied, as did levels of confidence in being able to intervene. Where the informal network was weak, this had negative consequences on young people's transitions (although a strong informal network was no guarantee of a smooth transition).

A study by Wimberly and Noeth (2004) points out that while their research with young people confirmed the strong influence parents had on young people's future planning, focus group discussions with parents indicated that parents often felt that they lacked the tools and resources necessary to help students through the post-secondary planning process. The primary contributions of parents were their motivation, good intentions, and encouragement. Thus, although they were generally motivated and well-intentioned, parents were not always able to provide useful information and direction to their children.

### **Families and aspirations**

Research has shown that there is a strong relationship between educational aspirations and educational achievement which is, in turn, an influence on post-school planning. Explanations as to the nature of the relationship between aspirations and achievement vary - whether it is aspirations that influence achievement, or whether achievement influences aspirations.

According to Hossler, Schmit & Vesper (1998), parental expectations and encouragement have the greatest impact on students developing aspirations, particularly with respect to planning for further education. Hossler et al. assert that parents can have a more influential role on students' educational aspirations than student achievement. Parents' education level, peer influence and involvement in school activities are also associated with a positive disposition towards post-secondary education.

Similarly, research by Khoo and Ainley (2005) has found that aspirations for education are a very powerful influence on actual participation in Year 12 and further education. These intentions, formed relatively early in secondary school were powerful predictors of subsequent participation in education. The students' attitudes to school, combined with and a sense of proficiency in foundation literacy and numeracy skills, were more strongly related to their educational intentions than any other aspects of student background, including socioeconomic background. The authors contend that many social background influences (including socioeconomic status) may influence educational outcomes through their affect on aspirations or achievement.

The aspirations of most young people with regard to further education, especially compared with previous generations, are high. Research conducted by Alloway et al. (2004) identifies that many young people have a strong preference for university. While parents surveyed by Alloway et al. viewed their influence as minimal, students and their career advisers claimed that parents were a key influence the students' attitudes and aspirations towards further education.

The percentage of young people who subsequently go on to further education has increased across time. While the number of young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds has increased, their participation in higher education continues to be at a lower level than young people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The expansion of university education has most often benefited young people with better educated parents. Machin (2006) argues that while education can be an escalator out of social disadvantage - leading to better job prospects for youths facing greater risks of poverty and reducing the prevalence of income poverty in adult age - educational failure can reinforce it.

Research conducted with cohorts from the *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth* has shown that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to attend university. They have lower scores on tests of school achievement, they are less likely to remain at school until Year 12 (and they are more likely to leave school early-before Year 11), they are more likely to undertake vocational education and training subjects while at school, they are less likely to study science and mathematics subjects in Year 12, which influences subsequent course and institution selection. A lower socioeconomic family background is associated with lower participation in higher education, even after these other factors are considered (Fullarton, Walker, Ainley & Hillman, 2003; Rothman, 2003).

It is interesting to note here that although families appear to play a central role in young people's post-school choices, the bulk of programs and initiatives which are designed to support young people do not actively and explicitly target or work with families. Consequently, there is much that remains unknown about the ways in which families influence young people's post-school planning.

While aspirations are important, the way in which of parental aspirations influence young people need to be considered in the context of family relationships. Way and Rossman (1996) found that although an authoritarian parenting style was associated with young people being able to articulate post-school plans, these young people did not necessarily possess the skills and maturity to make meaningful independent career decisions.

### **Family relationships**

Research that examines the influence of relationships and parenting style on educational and career decision making is often based on psychological theories that describe the processes that adolescents undertake to separate from their families as they become individual, autonomous young adults. It is generally believed that the ideal family situation to support young people as they explore possible careers is a cohesive one, where young people have a healthy level of attachment to their families but have been supported to go through a process of 'individuation' where they develop their own identities, ideas and values. Close relationships and experiences of security promote exploration and risk taking (Ketterson & Blustein, 1997).

Hughes and Thomas (2003) reviewed a number of studies which investigated family interactions and career development and suggest that much of the research is problematic in terms of the small sample sizes and their composition. The studies are fairly diverse in their foci and highlight the complexity of family interactions; however, there is a convergence of the literature supporting the notion that family processes do have an influence on the career development of young people, reinforcing the notion that the support of families is important.

A number of researchers investigating career self-efficacy have suggested that a safe and secure set of relationships is an important enabling factor for young people to freely explore post-school options. Parental support increases career self-efficacy and thus boosts students' confidence to explore options, including options that they may previously have thought to be inaccessible, and to engage in career planning (Turner & Lapan, 2002).

Parental behaviours which have been identified as promoting career self-efficacy include: expressing an interest in issues that were important to adolescents, stating high expectations for the adolescents' careers, encouraging the adolescents to make their own decisions and expressing pride in the adolescents. The degree of agreement between parents and adolescents' perceptions of their relationship was also found to be important to adolescents' career decision-making self-efficacy (Whiston & Keller, 2004).

The day-to-day ways that families relate to each other play a role in what Way and Rossman (1996) describe as 'school-to-work transition readiness'. Families contribute to the development of young peoples' learning processes, such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and critical thinking, which, in turn, are useful in developing 'transition readiness'. The authors found that it was *proactive* family characteristics, such as being cohesive or expressive, having an active recreation orientation, and democratic decision making, that contributed positively to young people's readiness for making the transition from school to study or work.

While general parental support seems to play a positive role, enmeshment and conflict within the family may have a detrimental role with regard to the ability and confidence with which young people are able to establish a vocational identity and approach the tasks associated with career development. Enmeshment refers to a family situation where family members relationships are overly close, which results in difficulties for them. Penick & Jepsen (1992) suggest that:

- adolescents from *enmeshed* families may have difficulty mastering career development tasks because they are unable to distinguish their own *goals* and expectations from those of their parents, while
- adolescents from *disengaged* families may lack familial support and interaction, resulting in limits on self-knowledge and task orientation that interfere with the mastery of career development tasks.

Way and Rossman (1996) describe both of the above family styles as '*inactive*'. Inactive families lack a capacity for action because they either cannot set guidelines for family living ('laissez-faire') or are overly tied to the present family system ('enmeshed') and fail to pursue interests that

involve persons or places outside the family. The disengaged families identified in their research were characterised not only by a lack of organisation, leadership, and rules to live by, but also seemed to have members who were casual to the point of being indifferent to one another with respect to their day-to-day activities.

Enmeshment within a family may or may not be apparent to those involved. For instance Alloway et al. (2004) found in their interviews with some young people regarding their post-school aspirations that it was difficult to distinguish between parental support and views of the young people. That is the young people were of the opinion that their parents were supportive of their decisions; however, there were cases where the young people appeared to have internalised parental views and values as opposed to developing their own.

While it is difficult to identify and separate out the individual family processes that influence career outcomes, there is strong evidence of the importance of family in general, particularly the level of parental support provided to young people as they plan their futures.

### **Summary**

Parental support plays a significant role in adolescents' career development. Families have a strong influence on post-school planning. Families and friends are a key source of information and support for young people as they establish values, aspirations and make decisions about life beyond school.

While formal support networks such as schools and career guidance programs provide information to young people in their senior years at school, the informal support network that families provide is equally, if not more important. This influence is apparent from the early years of secondary school.

Although parents are often motivated and well-intentioned, they are not always able to provide useful information and direction to their children. Some parents report that they lack the tools and resources necessary to help students through the post-school planning process.

A safe and secure set of relationships is an important enabling factor for young people to freely explore post-school options. There is some suggestion that enmeshment and conflict in families may have a detrimental role in terms of support available and consequently the support to young people in planning their post-school options.

Research relating to the influence of the broader contexts in which families operate is considered in the next section.

## Family contexts

The research on the importance of family processes and relationships highlights the importance of placing children and young people within the context of their families. Equally important is situating families and young people within the context of their communities.

While family process and relationships have an important influence on young people, it is important to recognise that the ways in which families influence young people are a product of both the way in which the family interacts *and* the location of the family in the broader social context. Both play an important role in shaping the resources available to young people as they make their post-school plans (Whiston & Keller, 2005).

In Australia, Patton and McMahon have been prominent writers in the field of career development. Their *Systems Theory Framework* (Patton & McMahon, 1999; 2006) reflects that individuals do not live in isolation; the individual system is connected with influences that comprise the individual's social system as well as the broader environmental/societal system. While the model emphasises the role that individual agency plays in developing knowledge, values, ideas the system in which the individual and their families operate contains many complex and interactive influences, including the individual as an active participant in creating their own reality (see Appendix A for a more detailed exposition).

Influences on career development are dynamic, in that they interact with each other, and are located in time where some influences are more salient during different stages of the individual's development or life-journey. Different influences take prominence during different life-stages; for example, at school leaving age, it may be that gender and ability are key individual influences, while socioeconomic status, family and geographical location are key contextual influences. Twenty years after leaving school, an individual's key influences might be values and interest, while their own family and the employment market might be key contextual influences.

There is quite an array of surveys which document the post-school destinations and pathways of young people both in Australia and overseas. Governments, education departments and universities are keen to identify pathways and evaluate policies and programs designed to facilitate the transition process (eg Polesel & Teese 2006; Teese et al., 2006).

These type of surveys are most useful from both a research and policy perspective when they collect the types of demographic data which can be used to help identify the range of influences on students' educational and post-school pathways. Models can then be developed to attempt to explain the extent to which individual variables influence post-school outcomes. An example of this kind that provides a useful delineation of areas is Carpenter & Western (1984, p. 4), who have hypothesised a temporal ordering of the variables influencing student choice and opportunities for access to tertiary education:

- social origins (sex, parental occupation, geographical location, perceived family income, area wealth)
- schooling (type of school, interest in school)
- influence of significant others (perception of parental influence, perception of teacher influence, friends' plans)
- academic self-assessment (opinion of own academic ability, perceived utility of education for later life)
- educational aspirations (plans for education beyond Year 12)
- academic achievement (final school academic results).

Following on from this model, James (2000) developed a conceptual framework to describe factors influencing students' choices about post-school options. Important factors are aspirations, influences (such as family, school, community and information services) and personal context, which includes socioeconomic background. James found that while a large majority of students was keen to succeed at school and finish Year 12, those from isolated or lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more attracted to the immediate returns that work would bring rather than the pursuit of further education. Some of these young people were described by James as 'marking time' at school, until they could leave to find a job. Above all it was parental education and occupation that influenced young people's participation in higher education again suggesting that financial barriers alone are not the most significant influence.

### **Socioeconomic status**

In 1984, Schulenberg, Vondraccek & Crouter observed that 'If one were permitted only a single variable with which to predict an individual's occupational status, it would surely be the socioeconomic status of the individual's family' (p. 130). Young people's occupational choices are often related to their parents' occupations; even the careers that they perceive as options are limited to some extent by their socioeconomic backgrounds (Gottfredson, 1981).

Socioeconomic status is a broad term used to describe factors about a person's circumstances including occupation, income, and education. In research studies the socioeconomic status of young people may be measured by the occupation of their father and or mother, which is coded on the basis of the income and education requirements associated with the occupation. Most government and academic research in Australia uses occupation as a measure of socioeconomic status. In some cases parental education levels are used as an indicator of socioeconomic status; in other studies, depending on data availability and research focus, parents' occupation, education and income are sometimes combined to develop a socioeconomic status measure. However, no matter how the measures of socioeconomic status are constructed, the findings of such studies need to be interpreted carefully. Attributing particular outcomes to the influence of an aggregate measure of socioeconomic status may undermine the ability to differentiate the role of different aspects of socioeconomic status on different outcomes (Marks, 1999). For example, parental education may have a more powerful effect on school achievement and aspirations for further education than parental occupation (Zappalà & Considine, 2001; Watson, & Considine, 2003).

It is worth noting that whereas socioeconomic status is seen, in the literature, as having a significant impact on occupational choice, it is largely overlooked as a factor in the psychological literature which tends to focus on the process of career development and post-school planning (Heppner & Scott 2004). However, Way and Rossman (1996) contend that socioeconomic status may affect family functioning in a variety of ways (eg mediating the family's access to intellectual, cultural and recreational resources; its ability to deal with psychological strains; its social networks) all of which appear to be important in the development of school-to-work transition readiness.

In a survey of the attitudes and aspirations of over 7000 secondary students in Years 10 to 12, James (2000) identified a number of factors regarding the students' plans for postsecondary education and work. The students reported a general preference to engage in some form of postsecondary education for both personal and vocational reasons. Post secondary education was seen as less relevant by rural, isolated students, particularly those from medium to lower socioeconomic backgrounds. For these students, the cost of university in particular was a major deterrent, particularly where access was limited. It was also found that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds generally showed less commitment to school, and there was less parental encouragement and discussion about school or school work.

Other research studies indicate that socioeconomic status clearly plays a role in a young person's decision to follow a career that requires further education (Long, Carpenter & Hayden, 1999). Supporting this view, James et al. have shown that for every ten people attending university from medium to high socioeconomic backgrounds, there are only five from low socioeconomic backgrounds (James, Baldwin & McInnes, 1999).

Socioeconomic status can impact on young people on a number of levels, including the broader community level as well as family (Tranter, 2005). Socioeconomic background influences the resources available to young people and their families which include material and financial resources, social capital (social connections and networks) and human capital (eg education). All of these resources have an influence on post-school planning. However, it should also be noted that there is much variability within socioeconomic levels: effects are mediated through individual characteristics (e.g. self-esteem, self-efficacy, coping strategies, optimism, ability and communication skills), family characteristics (cohesion, shared values, conflict, consistency of rules, supportive adults) and the availability of external support systems (Garmezy, 1993).

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to express doubts about the benefits of attending university and to see attendance at university as delaying their entry into the workforce. Thus the barriers to attending university are not only financial but may also reflect a class culture that favours more immediate self-sufficiency & family support through work (Jones, O'Sullivan & Rouse, 2004).

James (2000) found that one-third of the students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds expressed a preference for TAFE courses compared to 14 per cent of students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Those planning to go to TAFE indicated that the course would be more useful to them, affordable and shorter – so they would be earning an income more quickly. This view suggests that it is not only the direct cost of study per se, but potential earnings foregone while studying that act as a deterrent to young people from families with a need to have family members earning money as soon as possible. As James suggests, within middle to low socioeconomic groups there may be more tendency to value the more immediate instrumental rather than the intrinsic benefits of further education.

In earlier work, James found that the lower participation rates of some groups of students also reflect differences in family and community attitudes to the value of education. Indeed these attitudes and values are so entrenched in students, and from such an early age, that many students do not reach a stage where it is meaningful to discuss potential barriers to further education such as financial resources, availability of courses or locality of institutions. In some cases the attitudes, values and behaviours found in senior students who make a successful transition to further education were not present in other young people and had not been present from the early years of secondary school; such students were not in a position, academically or psychologically, for further education to be a meaningful option even if they eventually entered their final years of schooling (James, et al. 1999). It was found that encouragement and discussion of school work increases with socioeconomic status and that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds placed more emphasis on careers advisors. Interestingly, there was also a slight tendency for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to place slightly more importance than students from medium/higher socioeconomic backgrounds on the advice of other family members and other friends. James et al. contend that this is not surprising since students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have parents with lower educational levels and related experience of educational systems.

While the impact of socioeconomic status is apparent, its relationship with educational and labour market outcomes is not straightforward and there are a range of outcomes that people within similar socioeconomic backgrounds may experience (Marks, 1999). Importantly, the longitudinal research indicates that by developing positive attitudes towards education among young people,

encouraging school completion and building strong foundations in literacy and numeracy, the influences of social disadvantage can be substantially reduced.

### **Financial barriers**

Much of the research into the influence of finances and monetary cost/benefit analyses as an influence on post-school planning comes from America. The context for attending and paying an American college (university) education is vastly different from that faced by young people in Australia. While university participation is dependent on the ability to pay, Australia's income contingent loan scheme for higher education tuition fees gives greater access to students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, provided they achieve at a level which gains them a sufficient university entrance score. Even so, Australian research has found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds find it harder to realise their post-school plans to attend university (Beavis, Murphy, Bryce & Corrigan, 2004).

When considering financial costs of participating in further education, there is some evidence that families in general tend to overestimate the costs. In addition, they underestimate the economic benefits that young people gain in the long-term from a university education compared with a high school education. Canadian research has found that these errors in estimating the financial costs and benefits of a university education tended to be greater in families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, suggesting that they may be making what seems to be a reasonable decision about university not being a 'good investment' based on limited or incorrect information (Usher, 2005). Similar research in America suggests that not only do families from lower socioeconomic and minority backgrounds have limited or incorrect information about financial costs and benefits, they also have limited knowledge of financial supports available to students and they do not have financial plans in place that families from medium to higher socioeconomic backgrounds have established when their children are in the early years of secondary schooling (Vargas, 2004; Wimberley & Noeth, 2004; 2005).

Financial considerations do not influence decision-making about further education in a linear or simple way. In the UK, evidence reviewed by Wright (2005) suggests that financial assistance alone is not necessarily beneficial. If students did not enjoy education or were committed to entering employment, financial support was not important – decisions were made on the basis of short-term goals. Middle class students with the same academic achievement as working class students were more likely to stay on at school. Financial inducement was found to be only good for those who are committed to continue. This view is also reflected by Tranter (2005) who interviewed students from socioeconomically disadvantaged South Australian secondary schools and found that for many the pull of the labour market and the short-term goal of a good job were more enticing than three of four years of university study.

Data recently analysed by Cardak & Ryan (2006) supports other research which shows that individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds have lower university participation rates than those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. However, when looking at the role that credit constraints had in explaining the different participation rates, the authors suggest that high-achieving students regardless of socioeconomic background (thus including students from disadvantaged backgrounds) are just as likely to enter university if they achieve a high score, and they are more likely to go on and do well. This suggests that the issue of short term credit constraint has, to some extent, been dealt with by Australia's income contingent loan scheme for higher education tuition fees.

Nevertheless, Cardak and Ryan (2006) argue that there are longer term factors that prevent students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds from gaining the type of entrance scores required for university participation. These factors are tied to socioeconomic background and early learning, manifesting themselves in lower average early school achievement for low

socioeconomic students. They argue that the likelihood of converting earlier school performance into the scores on which university entrance is based is contingent on socioeconomic status. That is, for students of similar ability at an earlier stage of schooling, those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to obtain the high Year 12 results needed for university entrance, especially to the more prestigious courses and institutions.

Although financial support for disadvantaged young people is an important first step in overcoming educational disadvantage, such support does not necessarily mean that those young people from low-income families who aspire to enter university will be academically, sociologically and psychologically prepared for further education. Low-income, minority and first-generation students (that is, the first of their family to attend university) are less likely to be familiar with universities and the requirements of university study. Low-income students who aspire to enrol in universities have been found to lack the information and resources necessary to facilitate this process (Vargas, 2004).

### **Parental education**

Many of the analyses which describe the significance of the relationship between socioeconomic background, and the educational and occupational outcomes of young people use 'parental occupation' as a measure of socioeconomic status. The coding of occupations also provides some indication of parental education. There has also been some research which specifically looks at parental education as a measure on its own. While this is related to socioeconomic status, parental education as a measure may also single out other characteristics and processes related to parents experience and attitudes towards education, which in turn have an influence on young peoples experience of and attitudes towards education and subsequent post-school planning.

James (2002) analysed survey data from over 7000 Australian students and found that parental education was the most reliable predictor of the aspirations of young people to attend university. The study examined the relationship between student's attitudes and parental education levels, parents' occupations and home postcode; parental education levels were most closely associated with a desire to attend university. James suggests that educational disadvantage of young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is created by a 'cumulative effect of the relative absence of encouraging factors and the presence of a stronger set of inhibiting factors'. He concluded that the predominant effects were psychological or psycho-social, associated with parents' perceptions of the (lack of) relevance of university education for their children.

Research by Zappalà and Considine (2001) reinforces the significant impact of socioeconomic status on student achievement outcomes. However, among disadvantaged families, students who had a parent(s) with university qualifications achieved higher levels of academic performance than students who did not have a parent(s) with university qualifications. Combining these findings with other research, Watson and Considine (2003) argue that parents who have pursued higher levels of education themselves may be more likely to foster a positive attitude towards school in their children. In contrast, ethnicity, family structure, the main source of family income, and geographical location did not significantly predict variation in school performance once other factors were controlled for.

The influence of parental education is further illuminated by the results of a Commonwealth government social services survey which asked parents to indicate the type of information they required or had required, and the adequacy of information they had received, regarding study, employment and financial support options for their children (aged 16-24). Most of the respondents had needed some information outside their immediate family but this varied with different social groups. More highly educated parents were more likely to express a need for information about further education for their children. In contrast, parents whose highest level of education was

below Year 12 were more likely to state that they did not need information regarding further study for their children (Eldridge, 2001).

### **Family cultural background**

There is not a great deal of Australian research on cultural differences with respect to family influences on students' post-school planning, although it is agreed in the broader literature that cultural background provides an important context in which such planning takes place.

Rothman (2003) found that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to participate in higher education if they were from non-English-speaking backgrounds. If they were born overseas or if their parents were born overseas, they were more likely to attend university than their Australian-born counterparts. Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who spoke only English at home were less likely to attend university than those who spoke an Asian language or a non-European language than those who spoke English or a European language.

Marjoribanks (2003) proposed a model that links aspirations, achievement and family background. Examining data collected from the longitudinal study of Australian youth, Marjoribanks found that the effect of family background, individual characteristics and learning settings on educational aspirations was highly significant; in turn, educational aspirations had a strong relationship with educational attainment. Academic performance at the beginning of high school had an important impact on educational aspirations.

### *Indigenous young people*

There is, however, a small number of research studies which focus on the school to work transition of Indigenous students. Indigenous families are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Historically, barriers to access and success in school education have contributed significantly to the employment disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians. Indigenous young people experience disadvantage at all ages of schooling and this has a significant impact on their school-to-work transition (Rothman, Frigo & Ainley, 2005).

Craven et. al. (2003) found that Indigenous students were more likely to: aspire to leave school early; choose TAFE as a preference for further education; perceive TAFE to be useful for achieving their aspirations; perceive 'contributing to society and community' as important goals; perceive that their teachers were confident that they would get the job they aspired to (although it was also found that teachers held lower aspirations for Indigenous students); and perceive advice from family to be useful. The research also suggested that Indigenous students were less informed about the type of education that they would need for particular careers.

Research with successful Indigenous students has attributed their success to the support and encouragement they received from their families and/or other significant people in their lives. Particularly important is support that enables them to develop a strong identity as students, as Indigenous people, and as future workers and citizens. When significant others held high expectations for these young people, it increased their expectations for themselves and their determination to succeed (Mercurio & Clayton, 2001).

These findings suggest that influences that are important to young people in general are also important to young Indigenous people as they plan their future education and careers - that is, a strong support base in the family and/or community, high expectations of themselves, others having high expectations and confidence that they can succeed, and access to in-depth information on education and career options and how to negotiate their preferred pathways.

## **Programs and initiatives**

A final area of literature, and one which is related to the contexts in which families operate, is that which examines the participation of families in programs that are designed to support them in assisting young people with post-school planning. Typically, these programs are aimed at families from low socioeconomic backgrounds, families from minority backgrounds and families where no-one has previously attended a university.

It should be noted that while the literature commonly cites the influence of family on young people's post-school plans, there has not been a great array of programs that are designed to harness this influence and consequently there is little empirical evidence regarding their effectiveness. In the main, most career guidance programs are based in schools, target students in their senior years, and do not specifically involve parents beyond offering information evenings at key decision-making points, such as subject selection for the following academic year.

There are a number of organizations and funding programs in America which are dedicated towards improving post-school options for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. As mentioned previously, the context and other factors associated with post-school planning for young people in America is somewhat different to that in Australia; however programs that operate in partnership with schools, communities and families are not uncommon.

An evaluation of successful American parent outreach programs confirms that parents can and do play an important role in supporting their children and adds weight to the literature that asserts the influence of families. Perna (2002) identified five critical components for programs targeting low-income students to facilitate educational advancement: (1) identifying the goal of college (university) attendance to raise academic expectations; (2) undertaking college tours, visits, or fairs to help students better plan for college; (3) promoting rigorous course-taking and academic excellence; (4) having parental involvement as a goal; and (5) early outreach, beginning by eighth grade to facilitate curricular planning.

The multi-dimensional nature of programs reflects that parents influence the post-school planning of their children through communicating their expectations, values, aspirations and knowledge, which in turn influences their children's developing values and aspirations. Raising parental knowledge of educational and occupational opportunities when their children are moving into the early years of secondary school is seen to be a key strategy in influencing young people.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have equal access to the same academic, financial and information resources as their peers. However, there are programs which aim to improve post-school outcomes for these students. Jager-Hyman (2004) reviewed a number of these American programs and found that while few had undergone rigorous evaluations, those that demonstrated improved educational opportunities and access to higher education for participants had the following key factors. The programs:

- targetted students early
- co-ordinated with systemic school reform efforts
- offered both financial aid *and* mentoring.

These outcomes reinforce the point that while financial aid is important, it is not always sufficient to improve outcomes for participants. Financial aid combined with support in some form of mentorship are identified as essential components of effective programs (Jager-Hyman 2004).

Torres Marquez (2005) profiles some of the key factors in the operational detail of programs that effectively support parents to engage with their children to improve their educational outcomes

and post-school choices. This study focused on programs that had a specific curriculum aimed at parents. An initial list of outreach programs was narrowed to exclude those that integrated specific activities for parents into a focused curriculum that helped parents to prepare their children for higher education. The final ten programs were located in eight universities and one non-profit organisation. They included both long- and short-term programs and one day events; however, all had a number of common characteristics which contributed to their success

The report highlights 10 outreach programs that have the following five characteristics in common:

- **Committed Program Champions:** high level personnel and knowledgeable leaders with resources extensive networks to secure funding, allowing program staff to focus on program development
- **Cultural Considerations:** parent participation was enhanced where programs were developed in consultation and partnership with the communities that they served. This enable programs to be developed to better meet the needs of parents, for example, hours of operation, transport and language considerations
- **Program Evaluation:** after a year or so of operation, surveys and evaluations led to the programs narrowing their target populations in order to provide quality programming to fewer people rather than low-quality programming for a wider and more diverse group of people
- **Successful Partnerships:** all of the programs had strong relationships with local educational agencies
- **Stable Funding Sources:** including programs federal grants and funding solicited from corporations, foundations and local businesses.

While these programs were viewed as effective, like much of the research in this field, their own evaluation data are based on attitudinal surveys before and after the program rather than long-term outcomes.

## **Summary**

There is a considerable amount of literature which documents the aspirations and intentions of school leavers, their post-school choices and destinations. Equity issues are a key theme in data analysis; not all young people are equally represented in higher education or in high status jobs. Research identifies a need to continue to develop strategies to improve opportunities for traditionally disadvantaged groups of students, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, rural and remote areas, and Indigenous students.

Socioeconomic background plays a critical role in career development but remains largely unexplained in theories and models of vocational behaviour. Further investigation of the experiences of young people from different backgrounds which takes into account their worldviews and perceptions of career options from a young age is needed in order to understand the interaction between social class and post-school planning (Heppner & Scott, 2004).

Much of the research considers significant influences on young people's post-school planning, particularly when they weigh up the costs and benefits of pursuing university careers. Important influences include the young people's own perceptions of their abilities and interests. Family expectations are significant and often young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds give little consideration to further education because it is not a part of their family's experience. But when such young people do pursue further education, assistance from a mentor is invaluable – for both motivational influence and practical needs.

Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to have a more instrumental view of education and may be more likely than their more comfortably off peers to have shorter-term goals in relation to pursuing further education. Financial assistance may play a less significant role than might be expected, and geographical distance and isolation appear to discourage university enrolment.

Hence, the Australian research is in agreement with American research that financial support for young people at the time of university entrance is not sufficient to produce equitable participation in tertiary education across social groups. Inequalities lead to differential outcomes and come into play at a much earlier stage of a young person's education.

The next section explores research which attempts to identify some of the frameworks and underlying processes that help to explain how these influences operate, particularly within the context of the family influences.

## **Adolescent decision-making**

Adolescence is a time of physical, social, cognitive and emotional growth and a key period during which young people establish their sense of identity, including their vocational identity. The establishment of a vocational identity is associated with a number of important decisions that are made during this period, including decisions relating to further education.

### **The early years**

The final years of school are an important marker in a student's transition to further education and training and/or work, and the decisions that they make during these years can have long-lasting impact on their lives. However, many of the influences on students' post-school plans have been in operation long before the final transition; indeed, many students will have commenced their career planning during the junior grades of secondary school (Alloway et al., 2004). Decisions made by students and their parents regarding which school they will enrol at, their levels of school attendance and participation, study habits and subject choice occur well before students reach their final years of schooling. The attitudes, aspirations and values of others are influential from an early age as young people begin to formulate their own ideas about their future careers.

The influence of parents is particularly salient in the early years during which parents are responsible for choosing their children's schools and when they have a significant impact on their children's developing attitudes, values and motivations. As young people move through adolescence, their families continue to provide emotional, social and financial support and are a primary source of information, supplying much of young people's knowledge of educational pathways and careers (Whiston & Keller, 2005).

Parents play a major role in the socialisation and identity formation of their children. It is not surprising then that parents have a considerable influence on the educational and career decision choices that their children make. The variables which have been found to influence future career plans and where families play a key role include:

- School choice
- Educational achievement
- Attitudes, aspirations and motivation
- Values and priorities about post-school choices (including education, training, work and self-employment)
- Local networks
- Knowledge about educational and occupational opportunities
- Finding jobs and courses
- Providing practical, moral and financial support.

Research has shown that families help shape students' educational aspirations from a young age through their impact on extracurricular reading, attitudes towards school and homework and students' perceptions of their parents' educational aspirations. Parental support is a key predictor of academic self-concept (a young person's concept of themselves as a learner) which in turn is a powerful predictor of achievement and aspirations. The positive effect of parental involvement was found to be the same regardless of whether a family was single or two-parent (Garg et al., 2002).

### **Personal agency**

In general, individual decision-making styles vary – some individuals carefully gather information and weigh up options whereas others are more likely to act on intuition. Individual personality,

values, aspirations and level of maturity influence this process, as do the expectations of others and the quality of the information available.

Theoretical models which describe how young people make decisions about their futures can be seen as:

- Models of *economic/instrumental rationality* – which view decision making as a rational process which *involves* the young person gathering evidence and weighing up costs and benefits of the various courses of action available to them; or
- *Structuralist models* – which view the decisions of a young person as the result of external forces beyond their control (individual's background, influences of other individuals, schools, government policies and economic conditions).

Foskett & Helmsley-Brown (2001) have challenged the economic rational model view that assumes that people's choices about education, training and careers are rational, objective, and based on a 'cost-benefit analysis'. They argue that few students engage in such a systematic approach to post-school planning. More common in current research are '*hybrid*' models which can be described as a *combination* of the two models described above: they acknowledge a degree of individual agency which operates in the context of a range of external factors.

A consideration of contextual influences that acknowledges an individual's personal agency in the decision-making process is a useful model that recognises the complex layers of influences and processes which figure in a young person's life as they plan for life beyond school. Hodkinson (2004) stresses the importance of not over or underemphasising the importance of either personal agency or deep-seated socioeconomic inequalities. He also stresses the importance of recognising that learning and career decision making extend over time and while schooling has a very significant impact, family and community influences are at least as significant.

An Australian study by Alloway et al. (2004) reports that young people planning post-school options see themselves as 'self-determining' and responsible for their own futures, but with considerable parental support. Although some of the students commented that their parents wanted them to follow a particular path, they claimed that they would be supported no matter what they chose to do. The young people held and expressed a strong sense of their own 'agency', 'self-determination', 'independence' and 'free will' irrespective of socioeconomic background and geographical location.

Foskett & Helmsley-Brown's (2001) research examined adolescent decision making regarding post-secondary education. They consider decision making at both a macro scale (looking at a broad range of factors that influence decisions) and a micro-scale (examining the process of choice). The decision-making model they developed, based on survey and interview data, reflects 'choice' as the outcome of interactions between:

- '*context*' (home environment, social environment, institutional environment and lived environment),
- '*choice influencers*' (institutional, social, family and 'lived' (e.g. media)), and
- *the 'chooser'* who acts according to factors specific to the individual including pathway perceptions, lifestyle ambitions, self-image protection.

Thus, student choices depend on a range of factors including their personal experiences, individual and family histories, and their perceptions of education and careers. Although major decisions are made by young people when they reach the post-compulsory stage of schooling, the decision-making process is an incremental one which will be the result of a long sequence of many

decisions made by young people and their families throughout their school years (Foskett & Helmsley-Brown, 2001).

These authors also distinguish between different stages in the decision-making process:

- a *'preliminary search stage'* during which preconceptions of different educational and career options are established (family, peer group approval and self-esteem play an important role during this stage); and
- a *'refined search stage'* characterised by a more rational process of evidence collection and assessment (which not all young people undertake).

The idea of a prolonged preliminary search stage and developing preconceptions about suitable options gives rise to the notion of young peoples' predispositions regarding their futures. This is discussed further in the section below.

### Predispositions

Another model of decision making regarding student choice of college is proposed by Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper (1999), who used surveys and interviews with students as they moved from Year 9 through to university (see Figure 2). There are three phases. The first phase is where students form a 'predisposition' towards postsecondary education. The next phase is the 'search' stage, where further education options are explored, followed by the 'choice' stage.



(Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999)

**Figure 2 Three-phase decision-making model of Hossler, Schmidt and Vesper**

Research in both the US and the UK suggests a tendency for many students to be fairly casual when participating in such decision-making activities. For example, Schneider and Stevenson (1999) found that only a minority of students seriously considered career paths by seeking information or engaging in appropriate activities, although almost all could describe their occupational aspirations and Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997) argued that even when students gave reasons for their choices, creating an impression of rationality, in reality their decisions were more likely to be pragmatic or opportunistic, based on partial information and highly context-related.

In Australia, a similar 'last minute' style of decision making was observed by Johnson (1994) during interviews with some Year 12 students in their final weeks of schooling:

*They had often only just realised that they had entered into courses of study that did not match their aspirations, had collected superficial information about the options available to them, or had only just realised the effort required to achieve what they wanted...The vast majority of students had only vague notions of university or work as a post-high school option, despite the interviews being conducted eight weeks before the end of the senior secondary education. Few students had actively gathered or were gathering information and those that had some knowledge had used sources of convenience such as peers, parents, and school personnel. (Johnson 1994, p.8)*

The 'predisposition' stage described by Hossler et al (Figure 2 above), is a key stage where students develop core values and make important decisions consciously or subconsciously, about options and opportunities that are appropriate for them. This stage was evident in a research study of young people in Years 9 and 10, but theoretically it occurs at any time leading up to this point. Their analysis of survey data shows that 'parental support and encouragement' are clearly the best predictors of postsecondary educational aspirations. 'Parental encouragement' is defined as the amount of conversation about college that parents and students engage in, while 'parental support' linked to tangible evidence such as financial planning and visits to colleges. It is the 'predisposition' that is a crucial stage and one in which the family plays a significant role

*Clearly parents play an important role. Parents who regularly talk to their children about college [university] provide the encouragement necessary to promote a full exploration of educational options. Despite the stereotypes about the relationships between parents and their teenage children, this study suggests that parents have an important effect on this important decision making process. (Hossler, Schmit & Vepser, 1999, p. 66)*

Closer to the point of decision, other influences begin to operate. Primary decision making takes place prior to Year 10. Hossler et al. note that support and encouragement are not sufficient to ensure that plans will come to fruition; they are an important underlying basis for the next stage which is defined as the 'search' stage. This stage usually takes place in the senior high school years. Here there is a move from sources of information from the young person's immediate family and close friends to external sources of information (eg a careers counsellor), coinciding also with the adolescent's growing independence and the need to get more specific information about courses and institutions. Towards the end of high school, more active information seeking takes place and the student's current and perceived future grades become a more important consideration in their post-school planning.

These studies suggest that the fundamental structures and components underlying choice are often in place by the time a child is in early secondary school. During this period the family plays a key role in influencing the attitudes and ideas that children have about education and the world of work.

*Choice is a dynamic and emergent concept at all times. It originates in the attitudes, values, perceptions, images and beliefs of a young child's family and their circumstances, before evolving in the young person's own emerging values and perceptions. (Foskett & Helmsley-Brown, 2001, p.202)*

Thus the family is a significant context in which a young person makes post-school plans. Initially, the family plays a key role and the choices that young people make take place within the context and the complexity of family relations. Not surprisingly, younger people report a far greater influence of parents than other people in their lives, particularly in the initial stages of their thinking about career development. Parents' primary contributions came in the form of motivation, good intentions, and encouragement (Wimberley & Noeth, 2005).

Studies suggest that young people's vocational decision making is fluid and dynamic as they confront unfulfilled expectations, delays and turning-points (Mortimer et al. 2002). This is difficult to capture through surveys, particularly those that are undertaken at one point in time. Longitudinal surveys are able to provide additional insights into the complexities of post-school pathways and decision-making processes that young people engage in. Such work is usefully complemented by qualitative approaches which focus in depth on the young person and their circumstances, which give voice to young people as they engage in decision-making (Dwyer et al. 2003).

### **Summary**

The decision-making processes associated with post-school planning begin from an early age. Most young people have started to make plans about life beyond school in the early secondary years.

It is evident that families have a significant influence on young people from the earliest times up to and including the post-compulsory school years. The decisions that parents make about their children's education, and the attitudes and aspirations that parents convey, help to shape the options available to their children and influence young people's own values and aspirations towards further education.

While social contexts have an influence on the decision-making process, young people also have a sense of taking responsibility for their lives (personal agency) with respect to their futures and see themselves as self-determining. Their predispositions and preconceptions about the futures available to them are a significant influence on their decision-making.

A young person's pathway beyond school is influenced by a vast array of contexts, some outside the individual's control. Far from being linear, post-school pathways have the nature of a complex web.

## Key findings

The role that families play in this process is significant and is influential on many levels, both explicitly and implicitly. As young people imagine and explore their future lives, parents play a key role in their children's socialisation and identity formation. In order to work effectively with young people in the area of post-school planning, it is important to understand the nature and extent of family influence, and to work with families so that they are able to provide the support and information that will empower their children to maximise their educational and career opportunities.

Although there is quite an array of statistical data on student pathways, the body of research that explores the processes by which students make their decisions, and follows the students as they move through school and beyond, is relatively small. The key themes identified in this review confirm the complexity of the individual processes of young people's decision making when it comes to making the transition from school to work and or further education. The main findings include the following:

- Parents and families are a significant influence on students' decision making and this influence is profound from a very early stage.
- Young people need support with post-school planning from the *early* years of secondary schooling, if not before.
- Family processes and relationships provide an important positive base for enabling young people to develop their vocational identity and engage in the tasks associated with career development.
- Parents and families have an influence on young people's developing attitudes, aspirations and predispositions which inform their thinking about their lives beyond school.
- The ways in which families influence young people are a product of both the way in which the family interacts *and* the location of the family in the broader social context which influences their attitudes and access to cultural capital (these contexts include socioeconomic status and Indigenous background).
- Parental education levels are significantly linked to young people's educational attainment and aspirations for further education.
- While many parents are motivated and well-intentioned, not all parents and families feel that they are adequately informed or equipped to assist in post-school planning.
- The majority of formal career guidance programs appear to focus on the provision of information to senior secondary students in isolation from their families and home experiences.
- There is clearly a need for further qualitative and longitudinal research to enable a better understanding of the micro-processes involved in post-school planning and the influence of families.

A key finding arising from this literature review is that there is much to learn regarding the processes and the extent to which families influence the post-school decision making of their children. This is particularly the case as social, cultural, political and economic contexts are

dynamic; continual change affects family structures and relationships and potentially introduces other influences on young people as they plan for life beyond school.

However, the influence of families reinforces the need for policy and programs to consider children and youth within the context of their families and communities in order to improve their post-school options. There is much research about the pathways that young people take but less understanding surrounds the processes by which they make these choices. And yet understanding this is fundamental to program and policy development that will enable all young people to make informed decisions about their futures.

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## Appendix A

### Career Development Theories

Traditionally, literature regarding career development has been in the area of vocational guidance. Early theories in this field were primarily concerned with identifying clients' skills and characteristics and matching them with particular jobs. Over time, theories have evolved to adopt a developmental approach which acknowledges that 'career' involves life, not just a job, that everyone has a 'career', and that the nature of work is changing constantly so that the idea of one occupation for life is no longer appropriate. This development is closely associated with lifelong learning, where an individual learns throughout life both within and outside institutions and the individual is in control of learning and thus also in control of 'career' management (McMahon and Tatham, 2000). Career development is now seen as a dynamic, interactive process which occurs over time.

Career development theories can inform an understanding of the processes which underlie a successful transition from school to further education and/or work. Key theories reviewed by Rogers and Creed (2000), and found to be useful for informing the school-to-work transition process, include:

- *Social Cognitive Career Theory*: which views work transition as a gradual process beginning in the primary school years, and focuses on the connection of self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals that influence an individual's career choice
- *Person-Environment Fit Theory*: which examines how people seek out environments that are congruent with their personalities
- *Career Development Theory*: which describes the behaviours that individuals need to engage in as they move from career exploration to occupational establishment
- *Learning Theory of Career Counselling*: which proposes that although individuals are active, intelligent problem-solvers, their actions are the result of past and present contexts which need to be understood in order to understand their perceptions of events.

Various constructs in the literature aim to describe the position of a person developmentally in terms of ability to make career decisions. Career maturity, career decision-making self-efficacy, and career indecision all refer to different but overlapping concepts which describe the ability, maturity and self-confidence with which people engage in career planning. The construct of career decision-making self-efficacy is of particular interest when considering family influences on post-school planning.

'Self-efficacy' may be defined as a person's beliefs about their capability to perform to a level which enables them to influence the events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy is related to how people think, feel, behave and motivate themselves; it is developed over the lifespan and, for young people, can be strongly influenced by family, peers, school and the media.

Career decision-making self-efficacy is thought to have important implications for successful transition from school to work or further education and for general well-being. Other personal factors such as self-esteem, cognitive style and individuals' perception of barriers (particularly external) can all contribute to positive career decision-making self-efficacy. Further research is needed to understand how these factors operate at a personal level (Creed et al., 2004).

In Australia, Patton and McMahon have been prominent writers in the field of career development. Their *Systems Theory Framework* (Patton & McMahon, 1999; 2006) reflects a constructivist worldview in describing both the content and the process of career development (see Figure 1).

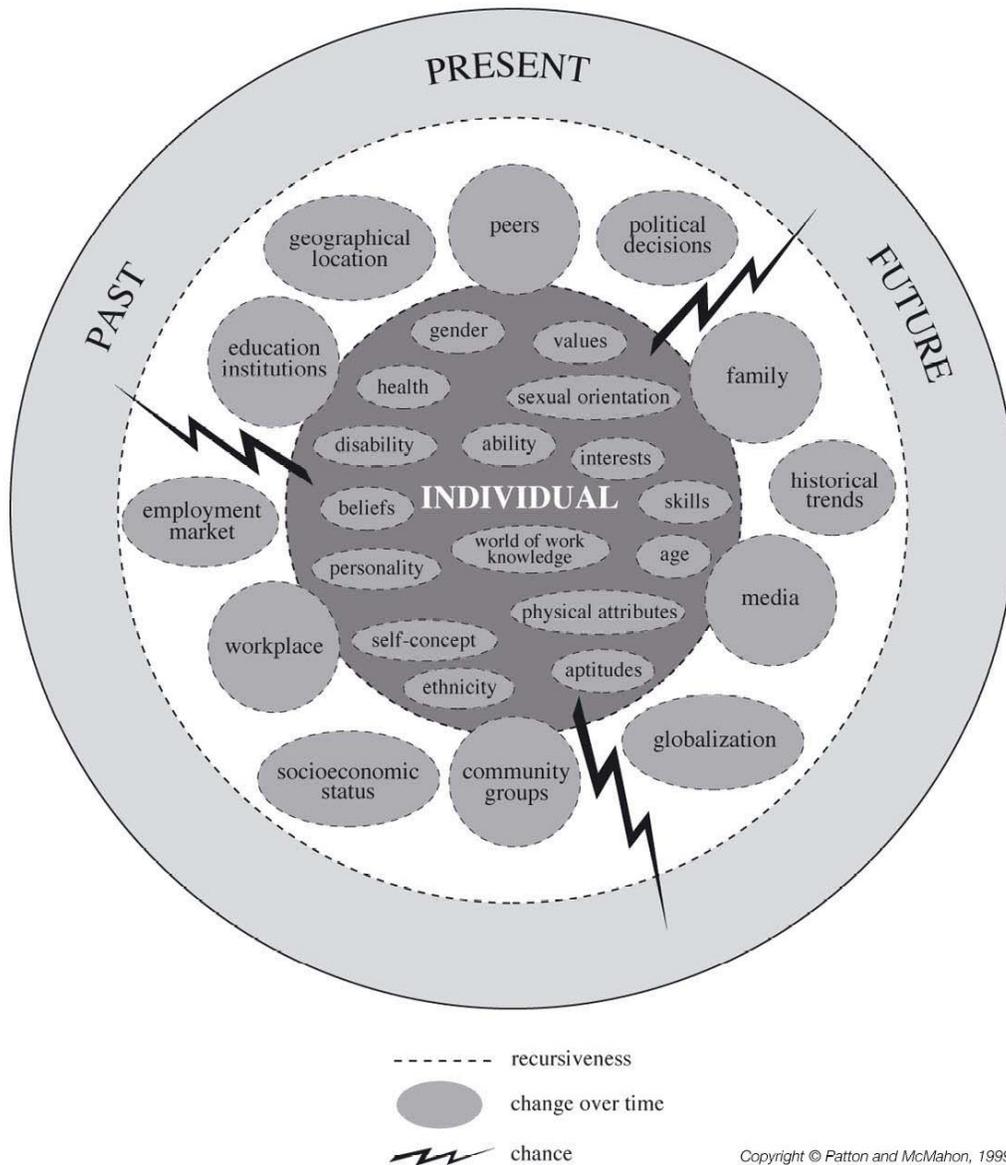
The model recognises that individuals do not live in isolation; the individual system is connected with influences that comprise the individual's social system as well as the broader environmental/societal system. The authors point out that while the influence of many factors, such as geographic location and political decisions, on career development is less well understood within the theoretical literature, their influence on career development may be profound.

Influences on career development are dynamic, in that they interact with each other, and are located in time where some influences are more salient during different stages of the individual's development or life-journey. Such influences can be:

- *intrapersonal* (individual characteristics such as personality, gender, ability) or
- *contextual* (social, cultural, environmental).

The *Systems Theory Framework* (Figure 1) is useful because it illustrates the fluidity and non-linearity of present-day career development, showing it as a dynamic process, depicted through influences, recursiveness, changes over time and chance. The variables in this diagram can operate both as supports and barriers. These variables are also thought to be highly interactive; interventions anywhere in the system will interact with other elements of the system to bring about change.

One strength of this model is that it provides an overarching framework within which concepts of career development described in the range of various career theories can be usefully positioned. The model emphasises the role that individual agency plays in developing knowledge, values, ideas and the role of the individual as an active participant in creating their own reality.



**Figure 1: Systems Theory Framework**

The model above may be used to reflect the changing influences on career decision making over time. Patton and McMahon (1997) have presented the model in successive versions showing different influences that take prominence during different life-stages; for example, at school leaving age, it may be that gender and ability are key individual influences, while socioeconomic status, family and geographical location are key contextual influences. Twenty years after leaving school, an individual's key influences might be values and interest, while their own family and the employment market might be key contextual influences.

As noted by Sweet (2006), research on vocational development and maturity has had a major impact upon the nature of career guidance practice and programs. In particular it has been a major influence in helping to shift practice away from an approach based on trait and factor assessments and interventions at a single point of time (most typically assessments and guidance interviews at

the point of leaving school) to a more strongly developmental approach, embedded in the curriculum through career education programs, and focusing upon helping young people to develop career self-management skills (McMahon and Tatham, 2000).

Formal career guidance that is available to young people today is significantly different in both quality and content from that which was available in the past. In light of changes to the labour market and the need for individuals to have a range of skills to help them negotiate the myriad of opportunities and pathways available to them, career guidance now aims to provide both information and to help young people to develop broader career management skills. This often focuses on developing a young person's career decision-making efficacy, acknowledging the changing environment (as shown in Figure 1) within which a young person operates. Particular initiatives in this area, implemented by the Australian Government, are discussed below in the section: Programs and initiatives.