

Life Satisfaction of Young Australians: Relationships between Further Education, Training and Employment and General and Career Satisfaction

LSAY Research Report 43

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based upon new research that brings together two streams of previous investigation in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) program—that of emotional well-being and that of transitions to further education, training and work. In particular, it explores how young people's self-reported life satisfaction is related to educational activities and various labour market outcomes during the early post-school years. Data for this report were collected from a cohort of students who were in Year 9 in 1995. Most sample members completed Year 12 in 1998 and at the time of data collection in 2002, had been out of school for four years. The average age of the 6095 young people who remained in the active sample in 2002 was 21 years.

The report has three broad aims:

- To describe the relationship between life satisfaction and participation in a range of post-school education, training and labour market activities each year between 1999 and 2002.
- To assess whether the relationship between life satisfaction and post-school activities holds after prior levels of life satisfaction are taken into account.
- To assess whether movement between activities in the post-school years is associated with changes in life satisfaction. In particular, are changes in activities that result in an increase in the amount of time spent in formal activities such as study or employment (such as moving from joblessness into employment, or moving from part-time employment into full-time employment) associated with increases in life satisfaction? Are changes in activities that lead to a decrease in time spent in formal activities (such as moving from study or full-time work into part-time work or joblessness) associated with decreases in life satisfaction?

Two aspects of young people's life satisfaction were examined: satisfaction with their careers and satisfaction with their lives in general. The measure of career satisfaction incorporated cohort members' reported happiness with their career prospects, their future, the money they receive and the work they do. The measure of general satisfaction incorporated cohort members' ratings of their happiness with their lives at home, social lives, spare time activities, standards of living, where they live, how they get along with others, their independence and their lives as a whole.

The activities of young people were divided into four categories:

- *Dual role*: Young people who were enrolled to study full-time and who were also working 20 or more hours per week were labelled dual role. In 1999, this group comprised 9 per cent of the sample.
- *Fully Allocated*: Other full-time students who were working less than 20 hours a week, along with young people working full-time (more than 30 hours a week) and part-time students who were also working for 20 hours or more a week, were labelled fully allocated (in that their time was fully allocated to these activities). More than three-quarters of the sample (77%) were in this category in 1999.
- *Partially allocated*: Part-time students who were working less than 20 hours a week and young people working less than 30 hours a week (part-time workers) who were not studying were labelled partially allocated. In 1999, this group comprised around 8 per cent of the sample.
- *Unallocated*: Young people who were not in education, training or paid employment were labelled *unallocated*. Slightly more than 6 per cent of young people were in this category in 1999.

The major findings of the investigation of the relationship between life satisfaction and post-school activities in the years 1999 to 2002 are:

- Overall, the sample members reported quite high levels of life satisfaction, as measured by the scores on the general and career satisfaction scales, which is consistent with the findings of previous Australian research on young people.
- There were small but significant associations between general and career satisfaction and post-school activities in each of the post-school years between 1999 and 2002.
- In 1999 and 2001, young people in the *dual role* and *fully allocated* groups reported higher levels of general satisfaction than those young people whose time was not totally taken up by these activities. This included those who were in the *partially allocated* group and those in the *unallocated* group. In 2000, young people in the *dual role* group again reported higher general satisfaction than those in *fully allocated* activities. There were no significant differences between the general satisfaction levels of those who were in *fully allocated* and *partially allocated* groups, nor between those in *partially allocated* and *unallocated* groups in this year, however.
- For career satisfaction, young people who were in a *dual role* in 1999 reported higher career satisfaction than those who were in the *fully allocated* group, who in turn reported higher career satisfaction than those who were *partially allocated* and those who were *unallocated* in that year. In 2000 and 2001, the same pattern of significant results was found. In 2002, the difference in career satisfaction between those who were in a *dual role* and those who were in the *fully allocated* group was not significant; these two groups both reported higher career satisfaction than those who were *partially allocated*, who in turn were more satisfied than those who were *unallocated*.
- After adjusting for prior general and career satisfaction as measured in 1999 (at age 19), significant differences between the activity groups on the general and career satisfaction scales for 2002 remained. Those who were in *dual role* or *fully allocated* groups reported higher satisfaction than those who were *partially allocated*, who were in turn more satisfied than those who were in *unallocated* activities in 2002.

The major findings of the investigation of the longitudinal relationship between life satisfaction and post-school activity pathways are:

- The results suggested that decreasing the amount of time allocated to study and/or work led to decreased satisfaction levels. Those who moved from *fully allocated* activities into *partially* or *unallocated* activities reported decreased general and career satisfaction compared to those who remained in fully allocated activities. Similarly, those who moved from *partially allocated* activities into *unallocated* activities reported lower career satisfaction than those who remained in *partially allocated* activities.
- Findings relating to the relationship between increases in the amount of time allocated to study and/or work and increased satisfaction levels were mixed. For example, among those who had been in the *partially allocated* and *unallocated* groups in 1999, pathways that led to an increase in activities did not lead to an increase in general satisfaction. Moving into *fully allocated* activities, however, was associated with increased career satisfaction among young people who had been in *unallocated* activities in 1999.

As reported in other studies, the relationship between post-school activity pathways and the life satisfaction of young people, although significant, was relatively small. Other factors, not examined in this study, may contribute to young people's life satisfaction to a greater degree. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the relationship between post-school pathways and career satisfaction was stronger than that between post-school pathways and general satisfaction. The relationship reported here between general satisfaction and post-school pathways is important though, and warrants attention, as it suggests that involvement in part-time work, unemployment or withdrawal from the labour force may have a negative impact on young people's levels of satisfaction with broader, non-economic aspects of their lives. Rather than simply becoming dissatisfied with their income, future career direction or the work they do (as measured by career satisfaction), young

people who are in these less desirable situations also report decreased satisfaction with their social lives, their use of spare time, their independence and their lives as a whole (general satisfaction).

The results of the analyses reported here have implications for those involved in developing and implementing policies aimed at young people, as well as those who are involved in working directly with young people. Engagement in some form of purposeful activity may have benefits for the healthy functioning of young people that go beyond having sufficient income or a future career, extending to how they see their lives in general. Other research has suggested that young people who are underemployed or unemployed are at greater risk of developing problems with mental health, including depression and anxiety (Argyle, 1999; Diener et al., 1999). It is imperative that future policies and intervention recognise the effects that post-school activities can have on the emotional well-being of young Australians.