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Gary Marks

ACER, g.marks@unimelb.edu.au

Julie McMillan

ACER

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### **Recommended Citation**

Marks, Gary and McMillan, Julie, "Early School Leavers: Who Are They, Why Do They Leave, and What Are the Consequences?" (2001).

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# Early school leavers: who are they, why do they leave, and what are the consequences?

Gary Marks and Julie McMillan

*Australian Council for Educational Research*

10 September, 2001

Dr Gary Marks is a Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Council for Educational Research. He has been project manager of the LSAY project since 1996.

His LSAY publications include reports on Early School Leaving, Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy, Well-being, Youth Employment and Earnings, Participation in Year 12 and Higher Education, and Tertiary Entrance performance. He has worked on projects commissioned by the National Education Performance Monitoring Taskforce and is involved in the analysis of the PISA data.

Dr Julie McMillan is a Research Fellow at the Australian Council for Educational Research, where she works on the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth project. Her current research focuses on influences on the educational attainment and early labour market outcomes of young people. Dr McMillan previously worked at the Australian National University, where she developed a range of new measures of socioeconomic status and social class for use in Australian research. She has co-authored reports on the measurement of socioeconomic disadvantage among school and higher education students for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs and the National Education Performance Monitoring Taskforce.

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## Introduction

Three decades ago, the majority of teenagers in Australia left school before the completion of Year 12, and most moved relatively quickly into stable full time employment. Since the 1980s, however, a substantial increase in school retention rates has increased the age at which many young people enter the labour market. Furthermore, changes in the youth labour market mean that the pathway from school to work was not so clearly defined by the late 1990s. There are concerns that a proportion of young people, especially those who do not complete secondary school, are now at risk of experiencing a transition characterised by long periods of unemployment, interspersed with short periods of employment in low skilled, part time or casual jobs. Such experiences are likely to continue to have negative repercussions for the future labour market activities of this group of young people.

This paper addresses three broad issues:

- In the late 1990s, who left school before the completion of Year 12? Are the sociodemographic factors which exerted an influence in the past still influencing the educational pathways of young people?
- What are the reasons given by young people for leaving school early?
- What are the consequences of school non-completion in the immediate post-school years?

## Data

Our analysis is based upon data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) project, which follows the experiences of young people as they move from school into post secondary education, training and work. A number of cohorts of young people have

been surveyed as part of the LSAY program. In order to examine the influences on, and consequences of, leaving school in the late 1990s, data for this paper focuses on the cohort of young people who were in Year 9 in 1995, and examines their experiences up to 2000. The initial sample included 13 613 students from all states and school sectors, with approximately equal numbers of males and females. The students were surveyed in their school in 1995, where they completed a questionnaire about themselves and their families, and undertook reading comprehension and numeracy tests. Further data have been collected from this cohort on an annual basis. By 2000, 7889 persons remained in the sample. All results have been weighted to correct for both the original sample design and the effects of attrition (Marks and Long, 2000). These data from the 1995 Year 9 cohort provide the most up-to-date and detailed information on recent school leavers in Australia. The results of an analysis of three older cohorts of Australian youth (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn, 2000) are also used for comparative purposes in order to assess whether the profile of school non-completers has changed in recent decades.

## Who are the 'early school leavers'?

Approximately 9 per cent of the 1995 Year 9 cohort left school by the end of Year 10, and a further 13 per cent left before August of Year 12. Seventy-nine per cent of the cohort remained in secondary school until at least August of Year 12. For the purposes of this paper, we classify this latter group as 'completers'.

Past research suggests that factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, region, school sector and achievement in middle schooling are related to the non-completion of school. A profile of young people who did not complete school in the 1980s and 1990s is presented in Table 1 and described below.

Table 1: School non-completion by sociodemographic and academic characteristics, early 1980s to late 1990s (per cent).

	Males				Females			
	1980/1 Yr 10 cohort	1988/9 Yr 10 cohort	1992/3 Yr 10 cohort	1995 Yr 9 cohort	1980/1 Yr 10 cohort	1988/9 Yr 10 cohort	1992/3 Yr 10 cohort	1995 Yr 9 cohort
<b>Total cohort</b>	62	46	30	26	51	37	18	16
<b>Parental occupation</b>								
Prof/managerial	33	27	16	17	23	19	7	11
Clerical/sales	43	29	22	23	35	25	14	14
Skilled manual	68	48	30	34	51	38	17	21
Unskilled manual	71	60	38	40	68	45	21	22
<b>Parents country of birth</b>								
Australia	65	49	33	29	51	40	19	19
Other Eng. speaking country	66	50	27	28	67	41	13	19
Non Eng. speaking country	47	31	19	13	43	24	9	9
<b>Region</b>								
Metropolitan	60	43	28	21	49	32	14	12
Non-metropolitan	69	54	43	34	58	48	25	21
<b>School sector</b>								
Government	67	52	35	32	58	43	21	21
Catholic	53	30	18	14	37	22	10	10
Independent	21	17	11	13	18	13	5	10
<b>Literacy and numeracy</b>								
Very high				10				6
High				18				12
Low				34				20
Very low				46				34

Source: 1980/1, 1988/9 and 1992/3 Year 10 cohorts (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn, 2000:18); 1995 Year 9 cohort (McMillan and Marks, forthcoming)

*Gender:* Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, boys were more likely than girls to leave before the completion of secondary school. Among the students who commenced Year 9 in 1995, 26 per cent of males compared with 16 per cent of females did not go on to complete secondary school, a gap of 10 percentage points. This gender gap has been relatively constant throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Multivariate analysis suggests that gender differences in school non-completion cannot be explained by gender differences in literacy and numeracy, or by other sociodemographic factors.

*Socioeconomic background:* Numerous studies have concluded that young people from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds are less likely to complete school, and in the late 1990s this continued to be the case. For example, in the 1995 Year 9 cohort, 26 per cent of young people whose parents were unskilled manual workers left school before the completion of Year 12, compared with only 15 percent of those whose parents were professionals or managers. However, there are indications that the influence of socioeconomic background on school non-completion is declining. For example, the gap between girls from professional and unskilled manual families fell from 45 percentage points in the early 1980s to 11 percentage points in the late 1990s. A similar pattern is evident if SES is measured by parental educational level.

*Ethnicity:* As a group, students from language backgrounds other than English are less likely to leave school early than students from English-speaking backgrounds. Of those who were in Year 9 in 1995, 12 per cent of students whose parents were born in non-

English speaking countries, compared with 24 percent of those whose parents were born in English speaking countries, did not complete secondary school. While participation rates differ among various ethnic groups, most groups display higher, and in some cases substantially higher, participation rates than the offspring of Australian-born fathers (Marks *et al.*, 2000). The influence of language background remains significant after controlling for other factors such as socioeconomic background, and literacy and numeracy.

*Urban-rural differences:* Rural students continue to be overrepresented amongst early school leavers, and the gap between rural and urban students in school non-completion did not decline between the early 1980s and the late 1990s. Of the students who attended Year 9 in rural and remote areas in 1995, 29 per cent left school before completing Year 12, compared with 26 per cent of students from regional areas, and 17 per cent of students from metropolitan areas. Furthermore, regional differences remain significant after controlling for a range of socioeconomic background and schooling factors.

*School sector:* School non-completion is substantially more common among students who attend government schools, than among those who attend Catholic or other independent schools. Of the Year 9 students who attended government schools in 1995, 26 per cent left school before the completion of Year 12, compared with 12 per cent of Catholic school students, and 11 per cent of independent school students. However, school sector differences have declined since the early 1980s. For example, the gap in non-completion between male

students attending government and independent schools declined from 46 percentage points in the early 1980s, to 19 percentage points in the late 1990s. Similarly for girls the gap has declined from 40 percentage points to 11 percentage points. While these school sector differences can be partially explained by differences in the socioeconomic and academic mix of students attending different school types<sup>1</sup>, school sector nevertheless continued to exert a significant independent effect on school non-completion in the late 1990s.

*Achievement in literacy and numeracy:* Of the factors considered in this paper, achievement in literacy and numeracy has the strongest influence on school non-completion. Just under 40 per cent of students who were in Year 9 in 1995 and whose literacy/numeracy performance was very low (more than one standard deviation below the mean) did not complete school. In contrast, only 8 per cent of students whose performance was very high (more than one standard deviation above the mean) left school early. Multivariate analysis indicates that the effects of achievement on school non-completion cannot be explained by background factors such as gender, SES, ethnicity, region, or school sector. Multivariate analysis also demonstrates that the effect of literacy and numeracy achievement is much stronger for leaving by the end of Year 10, than for leaving after the commencement of Year 11 but before the completion of Year 12.

*Summary:* During the last two decades, there has been a marked decrease in the proportion of young people in Australia who leave school before the completion of Year 12. Apparent retention rates rose dramatically during the 1980s and early 1990s, from 35 per cent in 1980 to 77 per cent in 1992. Since 1992 the holding power of schools has slightly declined, so that by 2000 the apparent retention rate was 72 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1984–2001). Throughout this period, low literacy and numeracy achievement in middle schooling has remained a strong influence on subsequent school non-completion. On a positive note, the influence of socioeconomic background and school sector on school non-completion declined. But despite these improvements, by the late 1990s, coming from a low SES family, attending a government school, being male, having Australian-born parents, and growing up in a non-metropolitan area still remained significant predictors of school non-completion.

## Reasons for school non-completion: the views of young people

Another way of identifying factors that influence school non-completion is to ask young people

themselves. These subjective explanations have the potential to provide a fuller understanding of the process of school leaving. Lamb, Wyn and Dwyer's (2000) study of school non-completions from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s found that work-related factors such as "to do an apprenticeship" or 'to get a job' were the most common reasons given by non-completers (see also Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001:100).

Similar results are evident in the late 1990s (see Table 2). For nearly 80 per cent of the non-completers from the 1995 Year 9 cohort, wanting to get a job or apprenticeship was an important consideration in their decision to leave school. Furthermore, nearly half of the non-completers said that this was the main reason why they left school. The next most important reason was also work-related. About 76 per cent indicated that "to earn my own money" was an important consideration, although only 5 per cent indicated that this was their main reason for leaving school.

School-related factors were less prominent among the reasons given for non-completion. Less than a third of non-completers indicated that not liking school, not doing well at school, or the subject/course choice offered by the school was their main reason for leaving school. Very few students left school because of advice from teachers. Similarly, very few said they left school for financial reasons.

Table 2: Reasons for leaving school given by non-completers in the late 1990s (per cent)

	Important reason	Main reason
<b>Work-related reasons</b>		
I wanted to get a job/ apprenticeship	79	48
To earn my own money	76	5
I wanted to do job training that wasn't available at school	45	5
<b>School-related reasons</b>		
I didn't like school	50	13
I was not doing very well at school	42	9
The school didn't offer the subjects/courses I wanted to do	38	6
Teachers thought I should	16	2
<b>Other reasons</b>		
Financially, it was hard to stay at school	19	1
Other reasons	–	11
<b>Total</b>	–	100

Sample: LSAY 1995 Year 9 cohort (n=1390)

<sup>1</sup> For example, in a bivariate analysis of the Y95 data, the odds of leaving by the end of Year 10 for government school students were 2.7 times those for independent school students. After controlling for literacy and numeracy, socioeconomic background, and a range of other demographic factors, this odds ratio declined to 1.6. Similarly, the unadjusted odds ratio for later school leaving was 2.9, but this declined to 1.5 after controlling for other factors (McMillan and Marks, forthcoming).

## Consequences of school non-completion

The results presented in Table 2 suggest that the majority of non-completers leave school in order to find employment. In the second half of this paper, we ask whether non-completers are disadvantaged in the labour market, by comparing the activities of those who left school before completing Year 12, with the activities of those who completed Year 12. Our analysis is restricted to the cohort of young people who were in Year 9 in 1995. By 2000, the modal age of the study participants was 19 years. Those who did not complete Year 12 had been out of school for up to five years, and the majority of the completers had been out of school for two years. Thus, these data represent the most up-to-date information on the early post school destinations of school leavers.

*Post secondary education and training:* Leaving school does not necessarily signify the end of formal education and training for non-completers. While very few returned to school or enrolled in university courses, 12 per cent had completed an apprenticeship or traineeship, and 31 per cent had completed other study by the end of 2000.

Nevertheless, in any given year, non-completers were much less likely than completers to engage in post secondary education and training. For example, in 2000, two-thirds of school completers, compared with only 35 percent of non-completers, were engaged in some form of post-secondary education and training (Table 3). Furthermore, the type of education and training undertaken by completers and non-completers differs. Non-completers were most commonly found in apprenticeships, followed by traineeships and other TAFE/non-degree study. Only 1 per cent were studying towards a bachelors or higher degree in 2001. In contrast, completers were concentrated in courses leading to bachelors and

higher degrees (41 per cent in 2000).

The differential amount and type of education and training undertaken by completers and non-completers are likely to influence how the two groups fare in the labour market. In the remainder of the paper, we compare the early labour market experiences of non-completers with the experiences of young people who completed Year 12 but did not subsequently enter higher education in the immediate post-school years. Given the age of the study cohort, it is too early to examine the labour market outcomes of those who entered higher education, most of whom were still studying in late 2000<sup>2</sup>.

*Snapshot of activities:* A snapshot of the education, training and labour market activities in 2000 of non-completers, and completers who did not enter higher education in the immediate post-school years, is presented in Table 4. There are five main points to note from this table:

- The majority (67 per cent) of non-completers were in full-time work. However, there were marked gender differences in the extent of full-time employment among this group. Just over three-quarters of male non-completers were working full-time, compared with only 55 per cent of female non-completers.
- Of the non-completers in full-time employment, just under half of the males were combining work with education and training in late 2000, either through new apprenticeships or other study. However, less than one third of female non-completers in full time work were combining work and study. Similar patterns are evident among the completers who did not enter higher education. This is somewhat concerning, as combining full-time work with study provides a means of increasing the skills base of young people who enter full-time work immediately or soon after leaving school.

Table 3: Participation in education and training in late 2000 (column per cent)

	Persons		Males		Females	
	Non-completers	Completers	Non-completers	Completers	Non-completers	Completers
<b>Not in education or training</b>	65	33	59	32	74	34
<b>In education or training</b>						
Rtn to school/sch. subj. at TAFE	1	0	0	0	2	0
Apprenticeship	22	6	32	12	7	1
Traineeship	5	4	4	4	6	4
Other TAFE/non-degree study	6	15	5	14	8	16
Bachelors or higher degree	1	41	1	37	2	44
<b>(Total N)</b>	<b>(1675)</b>	<b>(6176)</b>	<b>(1000)</b>	<b>(2836)</b>	<b>(675)</b>	<b>(3341)</b>

Sample: LSAY 1995 Year 9 cohort

<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that both the non-completers and completers who do not gain a tertiary qualification are unlikely to enjoy the same labour market advantages as young people who undertake higher education (Lamb 2001:28-33).

- Non-completers were less likely than completers to be engaged in full-time study in late 2000, even after excluding completers in higher education from the analysis.
- Male non-completers were more likely than completers to report that they were not working but looking for work. About 12 per cent of male non-completers, compared with 6 per cent of male completers without higher education and 6–8 per cent of females, were unemployed in late 2000.
- Female non-completers were more likely than completers to be outside the labour force (and not studying). About 15 per cent of female non-completers who had been in Year 9 in 1995, compared with 4 per cent of female completers and 2–3 per cent of males, were not in the labour force in late 2000.

Table 4: Education, training and labour market activities in late 2000, by school completion status and gender (column per cent)

	Persons		Males		Females	
	Non-completers	Completers not in higher ed.	Non-completers	Completers not in higher ed.	Non-completers	Completers not in higher ed.
<b>Studying full-time</b>	5	18	4	16	7	19
<b>Working full-time</b>						
Enrolled in ed. and training <sup>a</sup>	27	22	36	30	15	15
Not studying	40	39	40	36	40	42
<b>Working part-time</b>						
Part-time education and training	1	2	<1	1	2	2
Not studying	7	10	4	8	12	11
<b>Not working</b>						
Part-time education and training	1	1	1	1	1	1
Looking for work	11	6	12	6	8	6
Not in the labour force	8	3	3	2	14	4
<b>(Total N)</b>	(1675)	(3222)	(1000)	(1595)	(675)	(1627)

<sup>a</sup> Includes apprenticeships, traineeships and part-time study  
Sample: LSAY 1995 Year 9 cohort

*Types of jobs obtained:* The types of jobs first obtained after entering the labour market can influence earnings and later labour market outcomes. Marks and Fleming (1999:24) argued that the clustering of early school leavers in jobs that typically have limited opportunities for advancement (males in unskilled manual work, and females in sales and personal service work) is potentially problematic. This is especially the case for those in part time or casual work that is not coupled with study, as this type of work is highly concentrated in relatively low skill occupations in relatively low paying industries where there is limited access to training and promotion opportunities (Wooden, 1998).

The types of jobs held in late 2000 by non-completers and completers not in higher education are presented in Table 5. Focusing first on persons in full-time work, non-completers were less likely than completers to obtain white collar jobs (37 per cent of non-completers,

compared with 62 percent of completers not in higher education, were employed full-time in managerial, professional, clerical, sales or personal service work). In contrast, non-completers were more likely than completers to obtain trades and semi/unskilled manual work.

The occupational profile of those in part-time work in 2000 differs from that of full-time workers. The majority of both school non-completers and school completers in part-time work held clerical/sales/personal service jobs. Relatively few were found in the highest occupational category or in skilled trades positions, supporting the concern that part-time work is concentrated in relatively low-skill occupations that provide limited access to training and promotion opportunities. Non-completers in part-time work do not appear to be more or less disadvantaged in this regard than completers in part-time work.

Table 5: Occupation in late 2000, by gender and school completion status (column per cent).

	Persons		Males		Females	
	Non-completers	Completers not in higher ed.	Non-completers	Completers not in higher ed.	Non-completers	Completers not in higher ed.
<b>Panel 1: Full-time jobs</b>						
Managerial/prof/para-prof	11	14	9	13	15	15
Clerical/sales/personal serv.	26	48	11	25	58	74
Trades	38	22	50	39	12	4
Semi/unskilled manual	25	16	30	23	14	8
<b>(Total N)</b>	<b>(1104)</b>	<b>(1904)</b>	<b>(751)</b>	<b>(1012)</b>	<b>(353)</b>	<b>(892)</b>
<b>Panel 2: Part-time jobs</b>						
Managerial/prof/para-prof	7	9	#	11	6	8
Clerical/sales/personal serv.	64	65	#	49	77	77
Trades	10	6	#	10	3	3
Semi/unskilled manual	19	20	#	31	14	12
<b>(Total N)</b>	<b>(197)</b>	<b>(784)</b>	<b>(61)</b>	<b>(339)</b>	<b>(135)</b>	<b>(444)</b>

# Cell sizes too small to provide reliable estimates  
 Sample: LSAY 1995 Year 9 cohort

*Job mobility:* A recurrent concern in the literature relating to early school leavers, is that they are at greater risk of moving in and out of jobs; that is, they have difficulty obtaining relatively stable jobs. In the study cohort, there is evidence of a high degree of job mobility (or instability) among non-completers (see Table 6). However, the amount of job mobility decreased/stabilised the longer these young people were in the labour market. For example, among the non-completers who left after the commencement of Year 11, about half experienced a job change between 1997 and 1998, but by the 1999 to 2000 period, this had fallen to 37 per cent.

Table 6: Percentage of employed young people who were in a different job to that held 12 months previously

	1997 –1998	1998 –1999	1999 –2000
Non-completers who left school by the end of Year 10	34	33	33
Non-completers who left school during Year 11 or Year 12	51	46	37
Completers who did not enter higher education	–	–	43

<sup>a</sup> Analysis restricted to persons who had been in post-school employment in two consecutive years.  
 Sample: LSAY 1995 Year 9 cohort

Job mobility should not necessarily be viewed as a completely negative experience for the non-completers. For many, the immediate post-school period represents a ‘settling in’ period, where they move between jobs in an attempt to find the types of work or careers they most like. For example, the most common reasons given by non-completers for changing jobs between 1999 and 2000 were either to get a better job (31 per cent) or because they were not satisfied with the job (37 per cent). Considerably smaller proportions of the non-completers who

changed jobs indicated that it was because they had been laid off (8 per cent) or that it was a temporary job (9 per cent).

*Young people’s views about their jobs and careers:* Finally, we look at non-completers views about the type of work they had obtained. By 2000, the vast majority of employed non-completers in the sample were fairly satisfied or very satisfied with various aspects of their jobs, and there were no differences between the work satisfaction levels of non-completers and completers who had not undertaken higher education (see Table 7). However, this should not be used as grounds for complacency, as in each year since leaving school, only about 55–58 per cent of employed non-completers indicated that their job was the type of job they would like as a career.

Table 7: Percentage of employed young persons who were fairly satisfied or very satisfied with various aspects of their work in late 2000.

	Non-completers	Completers not in higher ed
The kind of work you do	94	93
The tasks you are assigned	94	93
Your immediate boss or supervisor	91	92
The people you work with	96	96
The pay you get	84	85
Recognition you get for tasks well done	80	82
Opportunities for training	81	80
Your opportunities for promotion	69	69

Sample: LSAY 1995 Year 9 cohort (n=3886)

*Summary:* The second half of this paper has examined the consequences of school non-completion in the immediate post-school years. The most common reason given by non-completers for leaving school was to gain employment, and the majority (67 per cent)

were indeed in full-time employment in late 2000. Furthermore, the majority of employed non-completers displayed high levels of work satisfaction, and over half were in the type of job they would like as a career. Job mobility, while high, was mostly in order to obtain better jobs.

However, the picture is not completely positive. Even by the age of 19, some differences in the post school activities of non-completers and completers had emerged. Non-completers were less likely to engage in post-secondary education and training, especially in degree-level courses. They were also likely to experience less successful transitions from school to work: male non-completers were more likely to be unemployed, and female non-completers were more likely to be outside the labour force (and not studying), than were completers who had not undertaken higher education. Furthermore, those non-completers experiencing problematic transitions were disproportionately drawn from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and displayed lower literacy and numeracy levels. Of those who entered full-time work, non-completers were clustered in blue collar occupations, while completers were clustered in relatively higher status white collar work. Differences between the labour market activities of completers and non-completers are likely to become even more pronounced once the school completers in the study cohort who were undertaking higher education in the late 1990s/2000 complete their studies and enter the full-time labour market.

## Conclusion

Our findings suggest a number of areas requiring ongoing policy attention. First, as the completion of secondary schooling has implications for subsequent education, training and labour market outcomes, there is an ongoing need to ensure that school non-completion rates are minimised. The second is an equity issue. Despite improvements in the school completion rates for some equity groups, by the late 1990s non-completers were still disproportionately drawn from low socioeconomic backgrounds, government schools, males, the offspring of Australian-born parents, and non-metropolitan areas. Targeted policy initiatives designed to improve the school participation rates of these groups remain necessary. The third issue relates to literacy and numeracy levels. Young people who have attained high literacy and numeracy levels by Year 9 are more likely to complete secondary school, and even if they do not complete school, they are more likely to experience positive labour market outcomes in the early post-school years. Thus, improving the literacy and numeracy skills of young people requires ongoing attention. Finally, while the majority of non-completers obtain full-time employment after leaving school,

some do experience difficulties in making the transition to stable full-time work in the initial post-school years. These initial difficulties may have ongoing implications for future labour market outcomes, and as such, there is a need to identify and provide intensive assistance for the subgroup of non-completers who experience difficulties in making the transition from school to work.

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