

# Post-school plans



# of junior secondary students: Are they realistic?



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*A report that investigated the educational and occupational plans of junior secondary students prepared by ACER for The Smith Family was released in March. The study surveyed more than 3000 financially disadvantaged students in Years 8 and 9 who are part of the Smith Family's Learning for Life Program. One of the study's co-authors, **Adrian Beavis**, reports on its findings and implications.*

The question of how young people from low income families overcome financial disadvantage in making a successful transition from school into the world of work has been the subject of ongoing research by The Smith Family. In 2004 ACER completed a study *Post-School Plans: aspirations, expectations and implementation* for The Smith Family. The researchers found that young Australians have a good understanding of their own interests and abilities and make their post-school plans accordingly.

That study also prompted further research. The result is a new report, *Junior secondary school students' perceptions of the world of work* by Adrian Beavis, David Curtis and Niola Curtis, released by The Smith Family in March 2005.

This recent study involved a survey of 3721 students who are all participants in The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program – a scholarship program for students whose families meet The Smith Family eligibility criteria of low income and commitment to their children's education. It provides financial support and educational support from Smith Family staff.



The study asked two research questions about how young people are preparing for their later years of education and their entry into the world of work, and the factors that shape these plans:

- What are the plans and aspirations of young people and factors associated with these plans?
- How accurate are the understandings about paths from education to work that young people in the early years of secondary school bring to their plans?

The second question was extended to consider the characteristics of those who appear to have a poor understanding of the pathways they need to take into the world of work.

### **Educational plans**

Two thirds of the students surveyed planned to complete Year 12. Around 20 per cent did not yet know if they would complete Year 12. Students with an interest in work and problem solving using their hands were more likely to plan to leave at the end of Year 10 or to not know at what level they would leave school.

Most students planned to continue studying after leaving school. More than half (52.3 per cent) of the students surveyed intend to undertake further study after school with students identifying university, TAFE and apprenticeships or traineeships as likely options.

Students' perceptions of their own school performance weighed heavily on their plans for further study with those who perceived themselves as doing better at school most likely to plan post school education.

Students who perceived themselves as below average in school performance were more likely to plan to leave school at the

end of Year 10, or to not know at what level they would leave school. They were more likely to plan no further study after leaving school, and if they were planning post-school education, were more likely to plan an apprenticeship or traineeship.

There was also a substantial minority who did not know what they want to do. Boys and students who perceived themselves as below average in their school work were more likely to not know what they will do, or if they did know, planned lower levels of education than others.

### **Vocational aspirations**

When asked to nominate an occupation they would like to do at the age of 25 around 70 per cent of students could do so, while around 30 per cent did not know what they would like to do. Of those nominating an occupation, around half indicated they would like a professional level job and a further 25 per cent would like a trade level job.

Gender and perceived ability appeared to influence vocational aspirations. Girls were more interested in the professions and boys in trades. Girls preferred jobs in which more women than men work. Conversely boys preferred jobs where males are predominant. Those with the lowest levels of perceived ability were least likely to prefer a professional level job and most likely to prefer a trade or lower status occupation than other students and were less inclined to expect to get their preferred job.

### **Mismatched plans**

While many students had well-founded plans for their post school future, some appeared to be headed for disappointment in later life. Some were planning a level

of education that will not be sufficient to qualify them for the type of job they want. Others were aiming for employment in areas where there will not be enough jobs available for all who want them.

Almost half (just over 45 per cent) of students planned an education that would provide them with the level required for the job they would like. However, around 35 per cent of students planned education that would be at too low a level for the occupation that they would like at the age of 25. Of most concern, 23 per cent of all students surveyed were planning a level of education that would be too low to attain their employment goal, yet they still expected to get that type of job.

The students who reported this 'mismatch' of educational and vocational plans were more likely to be male; report below average achievement at school; have low levels of vocational engagement; and be unhappy and keen to disengage from school.

From a policy perspective it is these students who are of most interest.

They plan less education than is required to obtain the job they say they would most like to do. These students can be seen to be at risk of making educational plans that will not allow them to achieve their vocational goals. These findings provide a case for improving access to career counselling, mentoring and, perhaps, work experience so that students are able to make a better link between school and what they want to do afterwards.

Another area of concern identified in this study is that, proportionately, many more of the *Learning for Life* students wanted professional and trade level occupations than are available in the Australian labour market. It is likely around 5 per cent of them will be unemployed, at current rates,

but only one per cent expected to be unemployed. This suggests that these young people need to refine their plans to take account of these realities in the world of work and compromise their preferences.

### Conclusions

This study has shown that the Year 8 and 9 students in the *Learning for Life* program have begun to locate parts of the world of work that they like – guided it seems by their gender and constrained by perceptions of their ability. These students were beginning to identify paths that they will need to follow in order to enter the world of work. However, it appears that a sizeable proportion of them did not properly understand these routes – they do not know how to get to where they want to go.

Overall, the Year 8 and 9 students in this study appeared to match their perceived ability to their educational and vocational goals. This is important for, despite the fact that all of these students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those who perceived themselves as above average were seeking jobs which require above average skill levels and ability. They were not limiting their horizons to low level work because of this background. Those students in the *Learning for Life* program who perceived themselves as having high ability, would like to attain, on average, higher levels of education, higher skilled jobs, and jobs with higher levels of socioeconomic status than other students in the program.

Despite this, there appears to be a mismatch between what these students would like to do – especially in terms of skill levels – and the availability of these jobs in the labour market. While these students were not representative of all Australian Year 8 and 9 students, this finding does raise

questions about the extent to which these young people correctly understand the skill levels required for various occupations, and whether they know how and where these skills need to be acquired.

The students whose educational plans did not appear to provide the correct pathway to their planned destination tended to be those who were not happy at school, and who thought they do not do well there. However they should not be seen necessarily as marginalised nor dispirited – most of these students planned an active engagement in the world of work, across a wide range of occupations. The direction they are setting, however, will make it difficult for them to implement these plans. They need to adjust their plans or change their destinations, and to do this, they require pertinent information and guidance. At this point, it is likely that their families, schools, communities and society more generally could be expected to play an important role. Labour and educational 'markets' do not function as well on 'imperfect knowledge'.

Students whose plans appeared on track need encouragement to reflect upon their choices and develop other options because many were seeking employment in areas where there will not be enough jobs for all who want them.

### For further information

The full report *What do students think of work?: Junior secondary school students' perceptions of the world of work* by Adrian Beavis, David Curtis and Niola Curtis and further information on the *Learning for Life* program are available on The Smith Family website at [www.smithfamily.com.au](http://www.smithfamily.com.au)

The Smith Family, with ACER, is currently undertaking further research into the perceptions and post school plans of older *Learning for Life* students in Years 10, 11 and 12, with results due to be released later this year.