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## VET programs boost employment prospects

Participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs improves the employment prospects and earning power of recent school leavers, a report into VET pathways by school leavers concluded.

The report, released on 18 September, found there are benefits to young men and women in undertaking a VET program rather than entering the workforce without any form of post-school education and training, with completion of a program providing even greater benefits.

The VET pathways from school to work taken by more than 6000 young Australians were examined. Data were collected annually from 1995 when the study's participants were in Year 9, until 2004 when most were aged 23 and had entered the workforce. By that age, approximately 20 per cent of school leavers had done no post-school study or training, 40 per cent had commenced a university course and 40 per cent had undertaken a VET qualification.

All three VET pathways analysed – apprenticeships, traineeships and non-apprenticeship VET programs (mainly TAFE courses) – provide greater access to full-time employment. Of the young people who were employed, many more of those who had completed a VET qualification said their job was part of their intended career path.

The findings suggest that young women who complete a traineeship are more likely to find full-time employment than those who do no post-school study. Young men who complete apprenticeships experience very high levels of full-time employment and earn substantially higher wages than those who do no post-school study.

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Traineeships are particularly important post-school pathways for Indigenous Australians and for those living in rural and remote areas.

Students who do not complete secondary schooling and who do no post-school training experience relatively poor labour market outcomes.

The study's authors concluded that it underlines the importance of career advice in the early years of secondary schooling, when students form intentions about their future study and work as a lack of clear information about potential VET qualifications and careers is likely to lead to individuals having poorer labour force outcomes than they might otherwise achieve.

Further information and additional findings are available in the report, *VET Pathways Taken by School Leavers* by David D. Curtis. The study is research report number 52 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), a program funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) with support from state and territory governments.

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## Are middle school programs effective?

While there is a lot of information available about middle schooling, a critical review of the research found very little hard evidence for its effectiveness – case study and qualitative research tended to predominate.

ACER Research Director for Teaching, Learning and Leadership Professor Stephen Dinham along with Dr Ken Rowe, presented a review of middle school research at the British Educational Research Association conference in Edinburgh this month.

There has been growth in the introduction of various forms of middle schooling since the 1980s. In Australia, the USA and UK middle schooling usually involves students in Years 5 to 9, while in New Zealand it relates to Years 7 to 10 students. In some instances it may involve a separate school, while in others a middle school program is provided within the primary/secondary school structure.

The rationale for *middle schooling* arose in response to concerns about less than optimal learning progress among emerging adolescents, and more particularly, their attitudes, behaviours and engagement in schooling.

Despite the literature claiming positive effects of approaches to middle schooling that focus on the cognitive, developmental, social and emotional needs of adolescents, evidence to substantiate the claims remain elusive.

So what matters most? Certainly not student compositional characteristics such as student socio-economic background, nor school *structural* arrangements of interest to advocates of *middle schooling*, but the imperative of *quality teaching* and *learning* provision, supported by *teaching standards* and ongoing teacher professional development focused on evidence-based practices that are demonstrably effective in maximising students' learning outcomes and achievement progress.

While it is not feasible to legislate such *quality teaching* into existence, the fact that teachers and teaching make a difference should provide impetus and encouragement to those concerned with the crucial issues of *educational effectiveness*, *quality teaching* and *teaching standards*, to at least invest in quality teacher recruitment, pre-service education and on-going professional learning.

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The reviewers argue that a key reason for the small effects of 'structural' interventions is that they are based on the assumption that schools and their administrative arrangements for teaching and learning are advantageous for the stakeholders they serve (i.e., teachers, students and parents). The fact that this is mostly not the case requires emphasis – reflecting a failure to understand operationally the fundamental distinction between structure (e.g., middle and single-sex schooling; class size, etc.) and *function* (i.e., quality teaching and learning provision). Schools and their 'structural' arrangements are only as effective as those responsible for making them work (school leaders and teachers) – in cooperation with those for whom they provide a professional service (students and parents) – regardless of students' ages and stages of schooling, and their socio-cultural and socio-economic background characteristics.

With alternative approaches to middle years' education being introduced in a variety of nations in attempts to improve educational outcomes for students, it is essential that these decisions are informed by the best evidence about effective organisational, curriculum, assessment and pedagogical approaches. This is particularly important because while *middle schooling* arrangements are expanding in Australia and New Zealand, they are being significantly wound back in the United Kingdom and under pressure in the USA – the two 'heart lands' of *middle schooling*.

Conference paper:

[Fantasy, Fashion and Fact: Middle Schools, Middle Schooling and Student Achievement](#) (PDF: 1:02 MB)

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## X, Y and Z: Research charts education across three generations

Three decades of research into young people's education and post-school transitions reveals trends for future generations.

ACER has conducted extensive research into young people's education and post-school transitions over the last 30 years, through the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) and earlier studies.

ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Sheldon Rothman and Research Fellow Kylie Hillman presented their findings at the annual ACER conference in Brisbane in August.

Longitudinal studies such as LSAY give a clear picture of what young people are up to at any point in time and the pathways they took to get there. The capacity to follow the same young people over time means that the factors influencing their pathways and outcomes can be identified and the employment experiences of successive generations can be tracked.

Rothman and Hillman's analysis of the trends in young people's participation in education from the 1970s until this year reveals several important patterns.

The research shows that young people's literacy or numeracy levels have remained constant since 1975, showing no decline overall. There have, however, been changes to the patterns of literacy and numeracy over time: the average literacy scores for males have declined, while the average literacy scores have improved for females and for students with language backgrounds other than English.

Year 12 completion rates have increased dramatically, from 35 per cent in 1975 to 79 per cent in recent years, mostly for students from lower-socioeconomic-status families, in non-metropolitan areas and in government schools.

For school non-completers, the proportion undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships increased from 24 to 40 per cent over the last 30 years.

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Participation in higher education has doubled over the period, from 20 to 40 per cent.

Students' subject choices in secondary school have been found to relate to the patterns of their education and workforce participation in later life.

Students who study advanced maths and physical sciences, or humanities and social sciences in secondary school tend to enter university. Those who study business, other sciences and technical-vocational courses tend to commence a mix of further study and workforce participation immediately after secondary school, such as undertaking part-time work and part-time study, or apprenticeships or traineeships.

Students who choose service-vocational subjects or who study a range of eclectic subjects without a clear post-school pathway are least likely to enter further study. Students who choose these subjects are the most likely to have unfavourable post-school outcomes such as being un- or under-employed, or to be employed in work that is unsatisfying.

Consistently over the last 30 years, young people's overall feelings of satisfaction with their lives has been found to relate to their education and training activities and their participation in the labour force. Secondary school students working in part-time or casual jobs report higher levels of happiness than other students, particularly with regard to their social lives, their independence and the money they have each week. Young adults who are fully occupied in study or work or some combination of the two activities report higher levels of satisfaction with their lives than those who were not.

In their home lives, young people who are married are consistently more satisfied than those who are in de facto relationships and those who are single, despite marriage among young adults (ages 20–25) declining significantly and more people entering de facto relationships. In particular, young women are less likely to get married if they are studying. Having children had no impact on wellbeing.

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Being married and employed contribute to the likelihood of young people owning their own homes, but home ownership is being delayed with successive generations. The percentage of Australians purchasing homes in their 20s has decreased steadily since the 1960s; in the 1990s less than one-third of 26-year-olds surveyed had managed to buy a home, and less than two-thirds had done so by age 30.

Correspondingly, young people today are not making a move from the parental home directly into a home of their own, but are spending increasing numbers of years in rental accommodation.

Young people are also increasingly living in their parents' homes for longer, although those from non-metropolitan areas were more likely to leave home earlier. Interestingly, people's attitudes to living with their parents changed over time. For young people in the 1980s, living with their parents at age 20 was associated with lower levels of satisfaction, while for those in the 1990s there was no relationship, and among young people this decade, living with their parents is associated with higher levels of satisfaction.

This research into the changing nature of young people's education and post-school transitions will inform planning and policy to prepare future generations of young people as they embark on their own post-school journeys.

A copy of the conference presentation *X, Y and Z: Three decades of education, employment and social outcomes of Australian youth*, delivered by Sheldon Rothman and Kylie Hillman at ACER's Research Conference 2008, 'Touching the future: Building skills for life and work' can be downloaded from the [conference website](#).

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## ACER UPDATE

### Principal for a Day 2008

The Principal for a Day event was held in Victoria on 2 September. The program, which is delivered by the ACER Leadership Centre in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, provides an opportunity to showcase the successes of state education, and opens doors for principals into business and community networks. For business and community leaders, the program provides insight into and better understanding of the young people who represent the future of Victoria. This year's program involved more than 100 "Principals for a Day" matched with school leaders in primary, secondary and special schools in metropolitan and regional Victoria. The Principal for a Day key was followed by a Forum, on 16 September, in which guest panelists discussed the issues arising from the Principal for a Day program, around the theme "Leadership: Finding the common ground". Further information on the Principal for a Day program is available from the [PFAD website](#).

### ACER International Institute hosts Indian educators

A group of four Indian educators will visit the ACER International Institute in September and October under the Australian Endeavour Scholarship program. The scholarships, funded by the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, were awarded through the Australian High Commission in Delhi.

The Indian educators will work with ACER International Institute staff to study school-based and system-wide student assessment practices in Australia. The group will be in Australia for six weeks. Four weeks will be based at the ACER offices in Melbourne, and two weeks will be spent in Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane. The educators will visit schools and talk with leaders and teachers about the administration and use of student assessment.

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