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Early school leaving and 'non-completion' in Australia

Introduction

LSAY Briefing is a series produced by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The aim is to bring summaries of findings from ACER research to a wide audience – in an accessible format and language, and identifying some of the implications for policy and further research.

In particular, *LSAY Briefings* draws on data from ACER's *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY)* project, which studies the experiences of young people as they move from school into post-secondary education, training and work. Key LSAY reports published by ACER on which this paper are based, are listed at the end of the paper.

Definitions

There is a lot of research about 'early school leaving', but there is no universally accepted definition for an 'early school leaver'.

Marks & Fleming (1999) defined **early school leavers** as *those students who left school by the beginning of Year 11 and did not return to school*.

Lamb's team (2000) adopted the term **non-completers** in their

study of an earlier sample to represent *all those students who do not finish Year 12* – which includes the 'early school leavers' as well as those who may have continued beyond Year 10 but who left before the end of Year 12.

Non-completion of school affected close to 30 per cent of the sample in the Lamb et al study.

Compared with Year 12 graduates, non-completers are more likely to experience extended periods of unemployment; and those who succeed in finding work are more likely to obtain jobs in a narrow field of occupations. Non-completers are also more likely to be reliant on government assistance. We need to identify who doesn't complete schooling to Year 12, and why.

Who leaves early?

Marks and Fleming focused on a representative national sample of students who had been in Year 9 in 1995. By 1997 around 9 per cent of these students had left school – that is, before Year 11.

A dominant factor in early school leaving is the effect of achievement in literacy and numeracy. In simple terms, students who perform well at school are far less likely to leave



Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth BRIEFING

HIGHLIGHTS

- Students performing well at school are less likely to leave school early
- There is a tendency for boys, as compared to girls, to leave school early
- Students whose parents are less educated than average are more likely to leave school early
- Over 20% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students left school by the beginning of Year 11
- Only a small number of schools have an impact on the school leaving rate after allowance is made for the characteristics of the student population
- A high proportion of early leavers in recent years have gained employment

school early than those with low levels of achievement.

In addition, students in a number of groups are more likely to leave school early (see Table 1). These include:

- Boys, compared with girls (and the difference is increasing with time). When school achievement, individual schools and other factors are taken into account, the odds of boys leaving school early are about 1.9 times more likely than for girls.
- Those whose parents work in manual occupations. Students

from trade, skilled, semiskilled and unskilled occupational backgrounds have higher rates of early school leaving – particularly for boys.

- Being an Aboriginal/ Torres Strait Islander. About 20 per cent of these students in the sample left school by the beginning of Year 11 – over twice the rate for other students.
- Students from regional and rural areas, and from some states and territories.

- Students from government schools, as compared with non-government schools.

In addition there are substantial differences between states and territories in the extent of early school leaving.

School factors

There is a common view that in some schools, students are far more likely to leave early than is the norm. While it is true that schools vary markedly in their rate of early school leaving, it cannot be concluded that those differences are due solely to the schools themselves. The research by Marks and Fleming indicated that in only a fairly small proportion of schools (about 5 per cent) was the rate of school leaving higher than expected given the schools' location, sector and the academic mix (achievement levels) of their students.

Table 1: Early school leavers by background and other characteristics, (per cent of Year 9 class of 1995 who left before Year 11)

	All	Male	Female
Achievement in literacy and numeracy – high	2	3	1
Achievement in literacy and numeracy – above average	5	6	5
Achievement in literacy and numeracy – below average	10	12	8
Achievement in literacy and numeracy – low	20	21	17
Parents' Occupational Group – Professional/Managerial	6	7	5
Parents' Occupational Group – Clerical/Personal service	6	7	5
Parents' Occupational Group – Trade/Skilled manual	11	13	9
Parents' Occupational Group – Unskilled manual	12	13	9
Non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background	8	10	7
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background	21	22	20
Metropolitan location – population over 100,000	6	7	6
Regional location – population 1000 – 99,000	10	12	8
Rural location – population under 1,000	14	17	10
Australian Capital Territory	5	6	3
New South Wales	12	14	10
Victoria	6	8	5
Queensland	10	11	7
South Australia	5	5	4
Western Australia	9	9	8
Tasmania	18	15	21
Northern Territory	10	13	7
Independent school	4	5	4
Catholic school	7	8	5
Government school	11	12	9

Attitudes, aspirations and reasons for leaving

Attitudes and aspirations

The Marks and Fleming report also examined the role of attitudes to school and educational aspirations in early school leaving.

The four measures of attitudes to school life examined were:

- satisfaction with school in general;
- satisfaction with relationships with teachers;
- satisfaction with the relevance of school to future life; and

- students' satisfaction with their achievement at school.

For each measure, students with the most positive attitudes to school were substantially less likely to leave school early than those with less positive attitudes. Attitudes to school have a stronger association with early school leaving among boys than girls.

Student aspirations are strongly associated with early school leaving. Students in Year 9 who thought they would leave school before Year 11 had a strong tendency to do just that. Of early school leavers, 63 per cent had indicated in 1995 that they would not be at school in 1997. This suggests that educational aspirations for upper secondary school formed at an early stage in secondary school tend to be fulfilled.

Reasons for leaving

It tends to be assumed that students leave school for negative reasons. This is not generally the case, as indicated in the Marks and Fleming study (see Table 2).

Over 80 per cent of the early

school leavers who were interviewed saw 'getting a job/apprenticeship' as an 'important' reason for leaving.

The next most popular reason was 'to earn my own money', followed by 'I didn't like school' (around one in seven leavers chose this as the main reason for leaving).

Nearly half said job training not available at school was a significant factor for them.

Very few students said financial considerations were the main reason they left school.

Overall, most leavers were 'very happy' (40%) or 'happy' (48%) to have left school.

What early school leavers do after they leave

Much research shows that early school leavers have poor labour market outcomes. However, the strong economic growth in Australia over the past few years and the fact that there are perhaps fewer early school leavers

competing for jobs have meant that the recent group of early leavers have experienced less joblessness than early groups (see Table 3). Marks and Fleming found that more than 70 per cent of the early school leavers in their sample were working in full-time jobs. A further 11 per cent were looking for work, and only 5 per cent were in part-time study.

About 70 per cent of those in full-time work had found a job within one month of leaving school; 95 per cent within six months. There was a fairly high level of job stability: three quarters of those in full-time work at the time of the 1997 survey were still in the same job they had obtained on leaving school – up to two years earlier.

On the other hand there are some worrying findings. The proportion of female early school leavers in full-time work is considerably lower than for males, while the proportion looking for work is slightly higher.

The occupations of early school leavers are highly clustered in particular groups and there is a large gender difference in the clustering (see Figure 1).

Table 2: Reasons given for leaving school before Year 11 (per cent)

Reasons for leaving school	Important			Main reason		
	All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female
'I wanted to get a job/apprenticeship'	84	88	77	54	64	40
'I was not doing very well at school'	40	41	39	5	4	7
'I wanted to do job training that was not available at school'	48	49	47	5	3	8
'I didn't like school'	51	53	49	13	11	15
'Financially, it was hard to stay at school'	18	16	21	1	0	3
'Teachers thought I should'	19	24	11	2	3	2
'To earn my own money'	80	85	71	6	7	5
'The school didn't offer the subjects/courses I wanted to do'	41	38	46	5	3	8
Other reasons	-	-	-	10	7	14

Table 3: Main activity in 1997 of early leavers from the Year 9 class of 1995 (per cent)

Activity	All	Male	Female
Full-time work	72	80	58
Part-time job	8	7	10
Looking for work	11	10	13
Part-time study	5	3	9
Travel/holiday	0	0	0
Other	4	2	9

NB. columns may not add to 100 due to rounding

Males tend to work in trade and unskilled manual occupations, and females in sales and personal service work.

Substantial proportions of both sexes are in occupational groups that traditionally have provided few opportunities for on-the-job training and career advancement. In general, however, work satisfaction was high among these early school leavers – for the kind of work, their relationships with supervisors, and their chances for promotion.

What about ‘non-completers’?

Let’s focus now on ‘non-completers’ – all those students who leave before the end of Year 12, even if they have continued beyond Year 10.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, rates of apparent Year 12 retention, as low as 36 per cent only ten years earlier, reached a peak of 78 per cent in 1992. During the 1990s, however, retention fell and by 1997 non-completion of school to Year 12 affected close to 30 per cent of all students (ABS, 1999).

Lamb et al showed that the population of non-completers is over-represented by boys, particularly from lower socio-economic backgrounds; students from rural areas; and students from backgrounds where parents have low levels of education. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds have a relatively high rate of completion. Again, low levels of school achievement is a strong correlate of early school leaving.

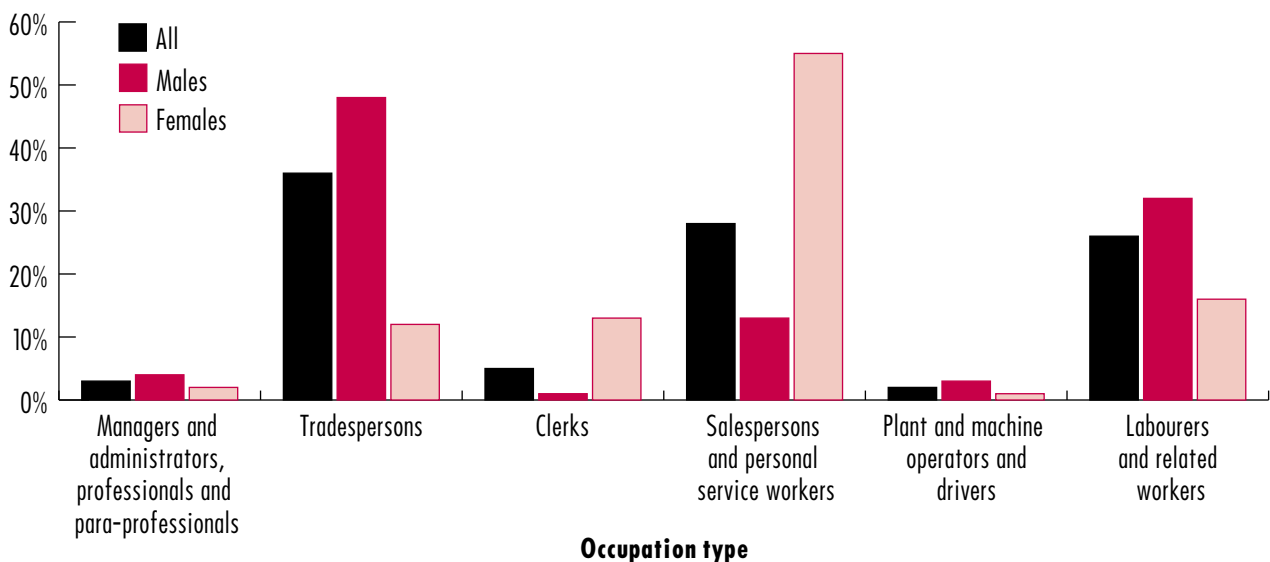
The non-completers group is becoming increasingly composed of boys. In the early 1980s, males made up 56 per cent of non-completers. By the mid 1990s they accounted for 64 per cent.

Compared with Year 12 graduates, non-completers are more likely to experience extended periods of unemployment. They can also experience difficulty making the transition from school to post-school education and training. As with early school leavers, non-completers are more likely to obtain jobs in a narrow field of occupations.

However, some groups of non-completers make relatively successful transitions to the workforce, but there are concerns for those groups which do not, especially since they more often take up employment in the least secure sections of the labour market.

The LSAY program is currently undertaking research over a longer timeframe – covering several years beyond the decision to leave – to explore the complex patterns of choice and consequences in non-completion of schooling.

Figure 1: Occupations of early school leavers, 1997 (per cent)



Note: Figures are rounded and this may affect the total.

Some issues and policy implications

Curriculum issues

Large numbers of students are leaving our schools before completing Year 12. In addition, some who remain at school to the post-compulsory years may do so reluctantly, lacking a viable alternative. How can schooling be made more relevant and valuable for these students?

Numbers of vocational, work-based or industry-related programs have already been developed in the senior secondary school. In many cases, these are now being incorporated into Year 11/12 certificate courses.

In addition to their certificate courses, schools and colleges have developed a range of curriculum and organisational alternatives for students who have been identified as at risk of leaving school before Year 12. Some of these programs allow students to combine working and learning, and may be based around effective partnerships with local employers and the community.

However, before expanding vocational programs there is the fundamental question of whether such students are 'better off' in the workforce gaining skills and experience, rather than participating in school-based vocational courses?

Participation and retention

There is a difference between retention/enrolment rates and successful participation and school completion. Some schools are exploring partnerships with industry, TAFE and other

education and training agencies, where students may spend only part of their time in schools (NCVER, 2000), but continue their post-compulsory learning in a blend of educational, training and workplace settings.

'Retention' may no longer adequately describe the schools' role in helping students to complete their schooling. New definitions, understandings and measures of their success are needed.

The challenge of gaining recognised qualifications

A comparison of Australian and US experiences in the early 1990s (Lamb and Rumberger, 1999) shows that rates of school non-completion are similar – 21 per cent in the US and 22 per cent in Australia. However, many of the American early leavers manage to acquire the equivalence of high school graduation by passing the test of General Educational Development (GED). By two years after normal graduation, 44 per cent of the sample's early leavers had completed the equivalent of high school completion in this way. Another 24 per cent were enrolled in school or an alternative program to obtain a diploma or equivalent. By contrast, Lamb and Rumberger found that less than 10 per cent of their Australian sample completed high school after leaving, although much larger numbers than in the US obtained recognised qualifications through tertiary institutions, most notably TAFE.

Policy makers in Australia may want to consider introducing something like the GED as another pathway for those who leave school before finishing Year 12.

Achieving equity

In terms of early school leaving, some groups continue to be disadvantaged – rural students, boys, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Even after taking into account literacy and numeracy achievement, these groups show higher rates of school leaving, which indicates the differences in school leaving cannot be solely attributed to performance at school.

There are indications that female non-completers are disadvantaged in terms of gaining full-time work. This may be partly because fewer females have been employed as apprentices and apprenticeship has provided an effective pathway to employment.

Appropriateness and value

Retention at school is not enough of itself. Education and training aimed at potential non-completers and at returnees must be flexible, relevant and rewarding – ensuring they are engaged in programs and courses which promote the acquisition of skills that will help lead to secure jobs and better futures.

The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

The *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth* (LSAY) is a research program jointly managed by ACER and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA).

The program includes more than 20 years of data on young Australians as they move through school and into tertiary education, the labour market and adult life.

LSAY commenced in its present form in 1995 with a

national sample of 13 000 Year 9 students. Another sample of Year 9 students was drawn in 1998. Data is collected via mail and telephone interviews.

Advice and guidance is provided by a Steering Committee, with representatives from DETYA, Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, the Conference of Education System Chief Executive Officers

(CESCEO), the Conference of ANTA Chief Executive Officers, non-government schools, academics, and ACER.

The data collected through LSAY are deposited with the Social Science Data Archives for access by other analysts.

Further information on the LSAY program is available from ACER's Website: www.acer.edu.au

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