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## Pathways from school to work.

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# Pathways from school to work

## Introduction

*LSAY Briefings* 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, identifying some implications for policy and further research.

In particular, *LSAY Briefings* draws on data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) program, which studies the experiences of young people as they move from school into post-secondary education, training and work.

This issue examines the main pathways by which young Australians move from school to work. The concept of 'pathways' has been a powerful organising idea in Australian education and training over the past 10 years. Policy makers have used the concept to pursue two major objectives:

- (1) to broaden the range of school-to-work pathways so that there are realistic choices available for all young people, not just those oriented to university study or an apprenticeship; and
- (2) to help young people and their families navigate their way through the increasingly complex array of education and training options that are becoming available.

## What are pathways?

The term "pathways" first started to be used widely in Australia with the publication in 1991 of *Young People's Participation in Education and Training* (the Finn Review, Australian Education Council). The imagery of the pathway had five main elements as used by Finn:

- a set of *interrelated* experiences providing for *progression*;
- education and training should have a *sense of continuity* even when individuals cross institutional and sectoral boundaries;
- young people should have access to a *range of different pathways* and should be able to move from one to another *without losing ground*;
- there is a need for effective credit transfer and articulation arrangements to provide *smooth bridges* between pathways; and
- *signposts* (information and career advice) are needed at the start of each pathway and at each junction between pathways.

In 2001, these elements of pathways were used as a basis for the report of the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce *Footprints to the Future* (Eldridge, 2001).



## Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth BRIEFING

### HIGHLIGHTS

- School-to-work pathways in Australia are highly diverse and individualised.
- Forty-three per cent of Year 10 students from the late 1980s had obtained a university degree or a TAFE diploma, or were studying for one of these qualifications, by the mid-1990s.
- Tertiary qualifications aid considerably in maintaining full-time employment.
- The majority of school leavers without tertiary qualifications spend most of their first seven post-school years in full-time work.
- However, around 16 per cent of male Year 10 students and 20 per cent of female students were involved in problematic transitions after leaving school.
- A good early start is vital: young people whose principal activity in the first year after leaving school was either an apprenticeship, full-time employment or full-time study were much more likely to experience a successful pathway.

It proposed a comprehensive approach to improving young people's prospects of successful transitions through school and into further education, work, and adult life. In part, the Taskforce was intended to reduce the risk of significant numbers of young people experiencing the sorts of difficulties documented in this paper.

## Which young people take which pathways?

Two LSAY Research Reports provide a detailed analysis of which types of young people follow which types of pathways, and with what effects (Lamb & McKenzie, 2001; Lamb, 2001). In order to ascertain the nature and impact of different pathways, it is necessary to have information on young people covering a number of years after they leave school. The most up-to-date information covering a reasonable span relates to a national sample of 2200 Year 10 students from the late 1980s, who were surveyed for seven years until the mid-1990s. By that time sample members were aged from 23 to 25 years. It should be noted that most of these young people entered the job market at a time of recession, which probably increased the difficulty of making the transition from education to work.

One of the key features that distinguishes post-school pathways in Australia is whether they involve tertiary study or not. In broad terms, 43 per cent of the sample had obtained a university degree or at least Associate Diploma qualifications from the Technical and Further Education sector, or were studying for such qualifications in the seventh year

**Table 1 Percentage distribution of Year 10 students in the late 1980s by whether they obtained tertiary qualifications over the seven post-school years to the mid-1990s**

Characteristic	No tertiary qualification or current study %	Tertiary qualified or still in study %
<b>Gender</b>		
Males	62	38
Females	52	48
<b>Socio-economic status</b>		
Lowest	70	30
Lower middle	60	40
Upper middle	47	53
Highest	39	61
<b>Parents' education</b>		
Secondary school or less	67	33
Some postsecondary	53	47
University	33	67
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Australian-born	58	42
Other-English	61	40
Non-English-speaking	48	52
<b>Residence</b>		
Urban	52	48
Rural	67	34
<b>School type</b>		
Government	65	35
Catholic	40	60
Independent	35	65
<b>School attainment</b>		
Early school leaver	92	8
Year 12	44	56
<b>Total number</b>	<b>1229</b>	<b>939</b>

after leaving school. The majority (57 per cent) of school leavers did not obtain such relatively high-level tertiary qualifications in the seven years after leaving school and were not working towards them. Of this group 13 per cent (and around 7 per cent of the cohort overall) obtained an apprenticeship-type qualification.

Table 1 records the distribution of the cohort according to a range of personal and social background factors. Those *without tertiary qualifications* were more likely to:

- be male (62 per cent) than female (52 per cent);
- have parents from the lowest group of socio-economic status (70 per cent) rather than the highest group (39 per cent);
- have parents from the educationally least qualified group (67 per cent) rather than parents with a university degree (33 per cent);
- be from an Australian-born (58 per cent) or other English-speaking background (61 per cent) than from a non-English-speaking background (48 per cent);

- have lived in a rural (67 per cent) than an urban (52 per cent) location;
- have attended a Government secondary school (65 per cent) than a Catholic (40 per cent) or Independent (35 per cent) secondary school; and
- to have left school early (92 per cent) rather than have completed Year 12 (44 per cent).

The other key influence on the likelihood of completing Year 12 and entering tertiary study is achievement in literacy and numeracy. Such data were not available for the cohort analysed in Table 1, but the strong effect of achievement on educational pathways is evident in the other LSAY samples (Marks et al, 2000).

## Mapping pathways to work

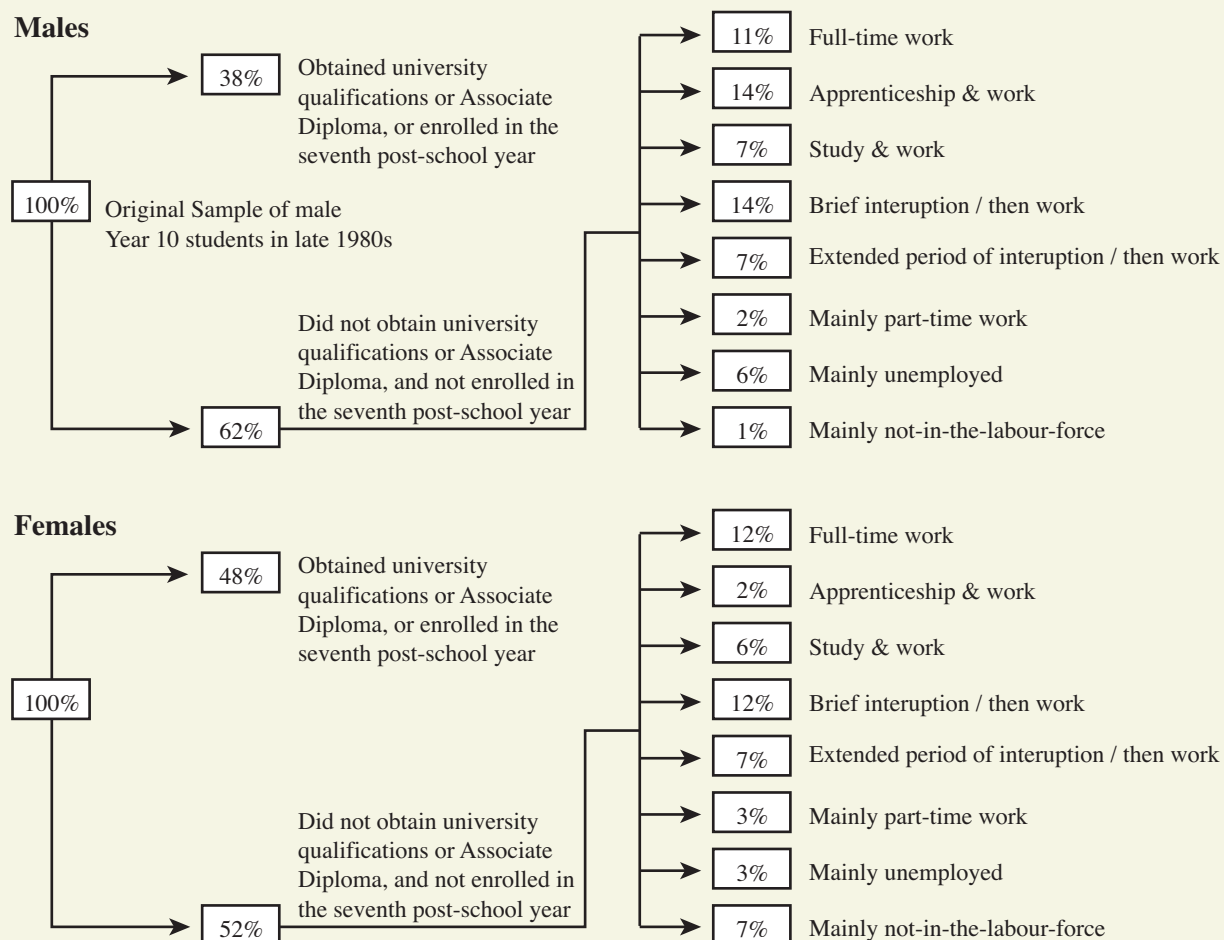
Longitudinal data allow an in-depth mapping of young people's education, training and labour market experiences over time. In this study, the data was collected annually and analysis were based on detailed calendar data. A highly diverse set of activities is evident, which reinforces the point that young people's post-school pathways in Australia are highly individualised (OECD, 2000).

To abstract from the mass of detailed individualised data, the analysis grouped together similar patterns of activity that can be viewed as pathways. For those

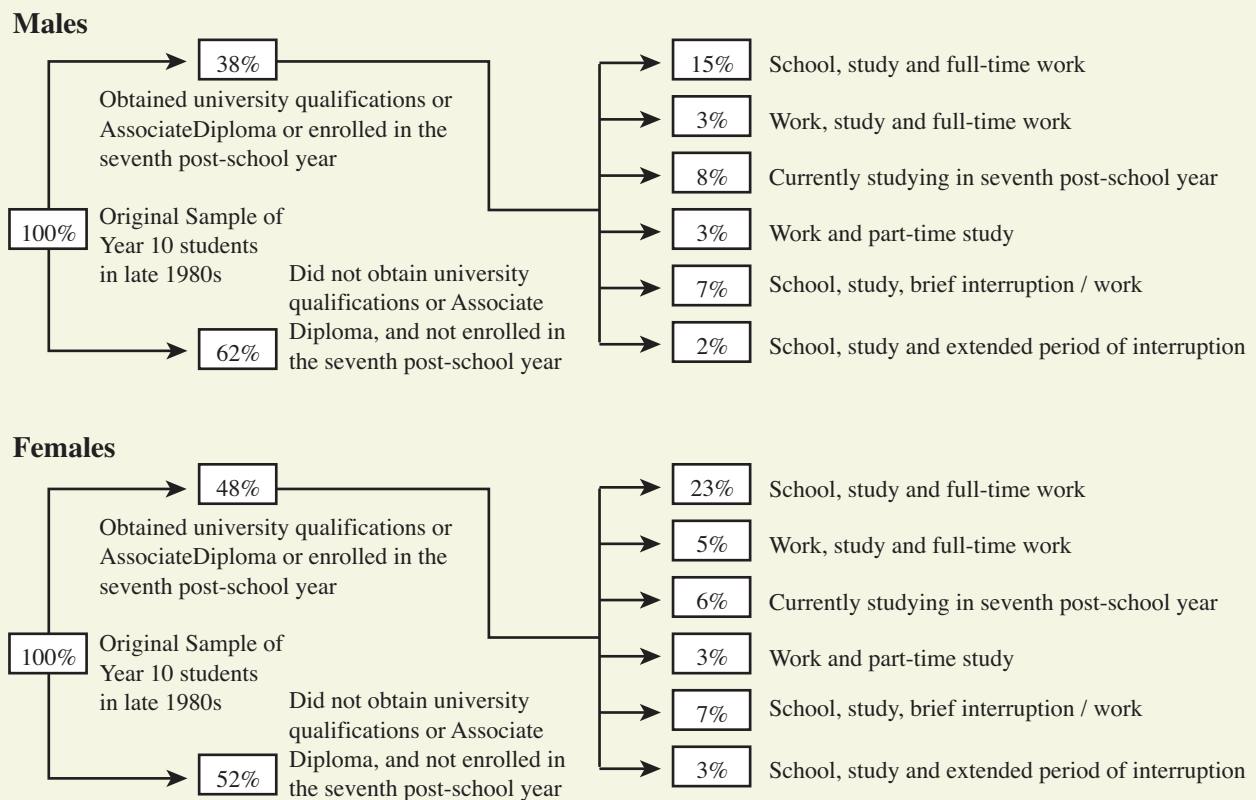
who did not obtain tertiary qualifications after leaving school, the results are shown in Figure 1. Separate charts are provided for males and females because they have quite distinct pathways. Males were more likely to have an apprenticeship, while similar proportions of males and females pursued non-apprenticeship study followed by full time work.

In the first four boxes shown in Figure 1, the young people concerned – who did not obtain tertiary qualifications – spent the majority of the first seven years after leaving school in full-time work. In all, 46 per cent of males who were Year 10 students during the late 1980s, and 32 per cent of female students, were

**Figure 1 Pathways of Year 10 students from the late 1980s who did not obtain tertiary qualifications over the first seven years after leaving school, by gender**



**Figure 2 Pathways of Year 10 students from the late 1980s who obtained tertiary qualifications over the first seven years after leaving school, by gender**



categorised in these four types of pathways. For these young people, full-time employment was achieved mostly without lengthy periods of unemployment, or periods not in the labour force.

The last four boxes for males and females in Figure 1 (page 3) represent less successful transitions. While one of these involves a considerable period of full-time employment (the fifth pattern), it is achieved only after an extended period of time spent unemployed, in part-time work or not in the labour force. Full-time employment for those who experience this pathway is preceded by an extended settling-in period. The final three pathways involve even less time in full-time employment after leaving school. Overall, 16 per cent of male Year 10 students and 20 per cent of female students

were involved in one of these more problematic transitions after leaving school. Extended periods of unemployment were more common among males.

There are two important gender differences amongst young people without tertiary qualifications. First, a much higher proportion of young men than young women obtain an apprenticeship after leaving school, and apprenticeship qualifications are strongly linked to employment. Second, a much higher proportion of young women than young men spend most of the seven year period after leaving school not being in the labour force, possibly for child-rearing purposes.

Figure 2 records the percentages of male and female school leavers *with tertiary qualifications* who followed various pathways. In mapping the

post-school activities of this group, a slightly different classification system was used because few among this group experienced extended periods of unemployment or time outside the labour force over the first seven post-school years.

Overall, a higher proportion of females (48 per cent) than males (38 per cent) obtained a tertiary qualification in the seven post-school years or were studying for such a qualification in the seventh post-school year. A higher proportion of females than males also took the "classical" transition path of moving straight from school to tertiary study and then to full-time work (23 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively). However, fewer than one half of both males and females with tertiary qualifications could be classified as being on this particular

## The importance of a good start

The first year's experience after leaving school plays a key role in the likelihood of making a successful transition to employment. Young people whose principal activity in the first year after leaving school was either an apprenticeship, full-time employment or full-time study were much more likely to experience a successful pathway over the first seven post-school years. Those at most risk of problematic transitions were young people whose principal activity in the first post-school year was either part-time work (without study), being unemployed, or outside the labour force.

pathway. These proportions reinforce the point that even for those with tertiary qualifications the pathways connecting school, work and tertiary study are becoming more differentiated.

Among the group who had obtained tertiary qualifications, it is really only those classified into the sixth main pathway in Figure 2 ("School, study and extended period of interruption") who stand out as having difficulty obtaining full-time work. Only some 2 per cent of males and 3 per cent of females experienced a post-school pathway that involved tertiary qualifications and an extended period of interruption before taking up work after their studies.

This is not to say that the other pathways have necessarily led to the types of jobs that these young people have wanted, but at least they are in full-time employment or studying and therefore fall outside conventional notions of young people at risk. Tertiary qualifications strongly facilitate young people maintaining full-time employment and, despite a very rapid growth in the number of tertiary graduates over the past 15 years, it is likely that demand for graduates will continue to grow.

## Policy challenges

Over the last decade, Australia has taken many significant steps in order to improve the school to-work transition process. However, as the analyses in this briefing paper have shown, those without tertiary qualifications continue to find it harder to overcome a poor start in the labour market. LSAY and other research have shown that an initial poor start in the labour force is likely to have a 'scarring' effect which is difficult to overcome.

As argued in *Footprints to the Future*, the challenge to improve the transition from school to work cannot be tackled successfully by the education sector alone. It requires a co-ordinated and sustained approach across all of the agencies responsible for working with young people and their families.

From an educational policy perspective, the strongest thrust needs to be preventative - improving skill acquisition. Skills can be acquired through tertiary study, apprenticeships, other vocational study, and full-time work. Other LSAY work has shown the importance of skills in literacy and numeracy acquired through schools, which are associated with more

favourable labour market outcomes. It is young people without marketable skills that have the most difficulty in the transition from school-to-work.

In addition, it is important that policies promote full-time employment among young people who do not pursue tertiary study, such as expanding the range of industries that take on apprenticeships, and encouraging employers to employ school leavers.

Furthermore, intensive and broad-ranging assistance should be maintained for young people who actually experience difficulty in their transitions from school to full-time work.

## 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, Science and Training (DEST).

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 DEST, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, the Australian Education Systems

Officials Committee (AESOC), 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](http://www.acer.edu.au)

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