

Identifying research directions
for the Longitudinal Surveys of
Australian Youth (LSAY)
2011–13
Discussion paper

November 2010

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Summary

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is embarking on stakeholder consultations to identify topics for research relating to the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). Stakeholder consultations will help to ensure that the next program of research continues to inform youth transition policy, while producing fresh approaches to the analysis of the rich data provided by the surveys.

In November 2008, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) endorsed three research priorities for the LSAY research program:

- ✧ *Improve the education outcomes of young people:* by understanding the factors that impact on participation and completion in education and training, especially for those who are disadvantaged
- ✧ *Provide young people with the skills, qualifications and capabilities needed for the contemporary labour market:* by investigating whether the skills from, and pathways through, education and training are well matched with labour market demands
- ✧ *Ensure that young people lead full and meaningful lives:* by gaining a better insight into the wellbeing and social activities of young people.

These research priorities remain relevant in the current youth policy climate and will continue to guide the research areas for the LSAY research program to 2013. However, the consultation process will also provide an opportunity to comment on these priorities and refine the direction of the analytical program NCVER conducts on behalf of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

In determining the direction of the LSAY research program over the next three years, it is important to build upon the existing body of LSAY research. To begin discussions about those areas of youth transitions which might most productively be explored through LSAY, this paper summarises recent research undertaken through the current priorities, drawing out key messages as well as further questions arising from this suite of work. An identification of the salient themes and issues may also prompt consideration of future research against each priority, particularly in light of current policy directions and trends in youth transitions. In addition, it is important to reflect on how the surveys can be used most effectively and the extent of the effort required to ensure best use of the data.

Research messages

Improving educational outcomes

Recent LSAY research builds on what we know about the individual, institutional, and environmental factors influencing young people's retention in school and their decision to participate in further education and training. In particular, the research has focused on the relationship between poor educational outcomes and key factors such as academic achievement, aspirations, Indigenous status and the school environment. The influence of socioeconomic background on educational success is a central policy concern for both the schools and post-compulsory education sectors. LSAY's contribution in this area could be

through the development of a measure of socioeconomic status (SES) relevant to education policy.

Successful pathways to the labour market

The likely effects on young people of a changing economy and the success of different pathways are two key areas of recent LSAY research. The 2009 data offer an opportunity to examine how the young people currently in the surveys have fared in an economic downturn at varying stages of their youth transitions. LSAY research is also helping us to separate those who are at risk of prolonged exclusion from employment, education or training from those who are taking time out from work or study to travel, start a family, care for others, or take part in other meaningful activities. Future research could consider examining the factors associated with long-term unemployment, as young people who are disengaged for extended periods are more likely to require targeted interventions than those having shorter spells of unemployment.

Wellbeing and support during the transition period

Some researchers have taken advantage of the measures of life satisfaction contained in LSAY survey responses to explore the relationship between wellbeing and educational attainment. A related concern is financial stress and the impact of income support on students' decisions to participate in and complete education and training. LSAY respondents are asked a range of questions about their financial situation, which can then be used to examine these issues. LSAY may also be able to provide information on related areas such as social capital and its influence on youth transitions.

Making the best use of LSAY

Any proposed research should make effective use of the LSAY data, in particular to take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the data and the richness of information collected. Researchers do, however, need to understand the survey instruments to know what questions can be answered. In this regard NCVER is devoting considerable effort to improving the technical documentation accompanying the data. We also encourage input on how best to continue the effort to provide researchers with the technical documentation that will assist in ensuring the best possible analysis of the dataset. Furthermore, NCVER has identified data which have not been thoroughly explored, which we hope will inform the consultations.

The consultation process

The consultation process runs until 3 December 2010 and we invite written submissions until that date. Responses to this discussion paper should be in the form of project ideas and questions for new research, including ways to assist in broadening the LSAY user community of researchers and analysts.

Responses can be sent by 3 December 2010:

- ✧ via email to nhi.nguyen@ncver.edu.au
- ✧ in writing to Nhi Nguyen, Consultancy and International Research Branch, NCVER
PO Box 8288, Station Arcade, SA, 5000.

Introduction

NCVER is undertaking consultations to identify the research directions for the LSAY Analytical Program from 2011 to 2013. This discussion paper, whose aim is to generate ideas and commentary to assist in the identification of research topics, is divided into three key sections:

- ✧ The first section provides background on LSAY and context for the research process using the LSAY data.
- ✧ The second section draws together the key messages and themes emerging from the LSAY research undertaken in the last three years as part of the Analytical Program and Analysis Grants Program.¹
- ✧ The third section looks at how to make good use of the LSAY data.

The process

Consultations will be held in late 2010, with face-to-face consultations conducted in three states: one in Perth to be held in conjunction with a data workshop and another in Canberra, with invitations to participants in the eastern states. The remaining consultation will be held in Adelaide in conjunction with a webinar.² This will cater for individuals across the country who are unable to attend face-to-face consultations.

Written submissions will also be solicited during the consultation period (5 November to 3 December 2010). NCVER will analyse the submissions and suggest research projects to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for consideration in late 2010. A suite of projects focusing on the key questions and themes as articulated by DEEWR will be undertaken; the outcomes of these projects will subsequently be disseminated through research reports and briefing papers, other synthesis publications, and at conferences and forums.

¹ The Analysis Grants Program is a commissioned research program funded through the LSAY Research Innovation and Expansion Fund (RIEF). The funds were provided by the federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to complement the broader 2008–10 LSAY analytical program conducted by NCVER on behalf of the Department. In 2009, five projects were commissioned and are due for completion 2010.

² Short for web-based seminar, a webinar is a very specific web conference transmitted over the web. It's hosted entirely online using two common communication technologies—web (internet browser) and audio (telephone). Key feature of webinars are their interactive elements—the ability to give, receive and discuss information.

About the LSAY program

The purpose of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) is to increase understanding of the key transitions and pathways in the lives of young people, particularly the transitions from compulsory schooling to further education and training and the labour market. The program tracks young people from around 15 to 25 years, collecting information on how they move from school to post-school destinations. LSAY uses large, nationally representative samples of young people and covers a wide range of education, employment and social aspects of the school-to-work transition.

LSAY is managed and primarily funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations on behalf of the Australian Government and the state and territory governments. The field work is undertaken by Wallis Consulting Group and NCVET manages the analytical and reporting services of the program.

LSAY target audience

Key members of the LSAY target audience include Australian Government and state and territory ministers and officials with responsibility for policy development and implementation in the areas of education, employment, social affairs, youth and disadvantaged groups. Others with a strong interest in LSAY include providers of services to young people (especially in the areas of career advice and transition support), social policy research centres, academic institutions and community organisations.

About the LSAY survey

LSAY comprises a series of surveys that focus on the progress of young Australians as they move from their mid-teens to their mid-20s. It includes surveys conducted from the mid-1970s through to the mid-1990s (Youth in Transitions Survey – YIT, the Australian Longitudinal Survey – ALS and the Australian Youth Survey – AYS) and the current LSAY collections, which began in 1995.

Survey participants (collectively known as a ‘cohort’) enter the study at age 15 or, as was the case in earlier studies, when they were in Year 9. Individuals are contacted once a year up to the age of 25 years through computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). Studies began in 1995 (Y95 cohort), 1998 (Y98 cohort), 2003 (Y03 cohort), 2006 (Y06 cohort) and more recently in 2009 (Y09 cohort). Since 2003, the initial survey collection year (referred to as a ‘wave’) has been integrated with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA). Table 1 summarises the LSAY cohorts and their survey cycles.

Table 1 Summary of LSAY cohorts

Cohort	Commencement Sample Size	Sampling unit	Survey period	Average age when first surveyed	No. waves
Y95	13,613	Year 9	1995-2006	14.7 years	12
Y98	14,117	Year 9	1998-2009	14.7 years	12
Y03	10,370	Age 15	2003-2013	15 years	11
Y06	14,710	Age 15	2006-2017	15 years	11
Y09	TBA	Age 15	2009-2020	15 years	11

Note: The Y95 and Y98 surveys were extended to 12 waves to ensure that all respondents reached 25 years of age.

Each year around 10 per cent of the remaining sample is lost. Unfortunately, this attrition can lead to biased population estimates when members of the various groups of people (for example, Indigenous youth) drop out at uneven rates. Survey attrition in LSAY is addressed by trying to maximise the year-on-year response rate and through the application of attrition weights.

Questionnaire scope

For all LSAY cohorts, a measure of academic proficiency³ and information on core demographics, study and vocational plans and attitudes to school are collected in the initial written test.⁴ This data collection was undertaken at Year 9 for the Y95 and Y98 cohorts and at age 15 for the subsequent cohorts, which were derived from the PISA samples. At this time a school questionnaire filled in by school principals collects more detailed information on the level of resources in the school, the school environment and the qualifications of staff and teacher morale. In subsequent telephone interviews with LSAY participants, the focus is on the individual and their transition, with information collected on education and employment experiences and outcomes, student aspirations, as well as the institutional factors which help explain the outcomes of various youth transition pathways.

The LSAY questionnaire is structured across nine key sections, with a school and study focus when respondents are younger, but with more of an employment and income focus in later years. The key sections of the LSAY questionnaire are:

- A. School (experience)
- B. Transition from school
- C. Post school study
- D. Work (employment)
- E. Job history
- F. Job search activity
- G. Not in the labour force
- H. Living arrangements, Finance and Health

³ PISA assesses young people's ability to apply their knowledge and skills to real-life problems and situations rather than how well they have learnt a specific curriculum. In this way PISA is able to assess students' capabilities in scientific, reading and mathematical literacy

⁴ For the Y03 cohort, some additional information was also obtained post PISA via a short telephone interview.

J. General attitudes.

All LSAY questionnaires are available from the LSAY website at:
<<http://www.lsay.edu.au>>, classified under the Technical papers section.

About LSAY products

The key products associated with the Analytical Program are research reports, briefing papers, cohort reports and technical reports and associated documentation to support users of the LSAY data. The research reports are comprehensive pieces of original research based on analysis of the LSAY data. A total of 59 research reports, dating back to 1996, are currently available. Briefing papers are summaries on specific topics, usually based on previous LSAY research, with some primary analysis of LSAY and other data where appropriate. The cohort reports are produced annually for each cohort and provide a picture of a group of young people at a particular point in time, and over the period since commencement. All LSAY publications are available without cost via the dedicated LSAY website.

To guide the research, in 2008 NCVER instigated a consultation process, which resulted in three priorities:

- ✧ *Improve the education outcomes of young people:* by understanding the factors that impact on participation and completion in education and training, especially for those who are disadvantaged
- ✧ *Provide young people with the skills, qualifications and capabilities needed for the contemporary labour market:* by investigating whether the skills from, and pathways through, education and training are well matched with labour market demands
- ✧ *Ensure that young people lead full and meaningful lives:* by gaining a better insight into the wellbeing and social activities of young people.

These priorities have guided the research undertaken in the last three years of the research program, which is summarised in the next section.

Research themes emerging from LSAY research 2008–10

Improving educational outcomes

Recent LSAY research builds on what we know about the individual, institutional, and environmental factors influencing young people's retention in school and their decision to participate in further education and training.

A key focus of recent research has been an examination of the relationship between poor educational outcomes and key factors such as academic achievement, aspirations, Indigenous status and the school environment.

Academic achievement—literacy and numeracy

One of the key strengths of LSAY is its integration with PISA tests, which facilitates the collection of the individual background characteristics of respondents, particularly information relating to literacy and numeracy proficiency. Literacy and numeracy levels are important determinants of Year 12 completion and are strongly linked with participation in further post-school study.

Due to their consistently lower scores in reading and maths assessments, improving the performance of Indigenous youth in literacy and numeracy is one of the key target areas on the national agenda, the aim being to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. However, recent analysis shows that raising the literacy and numeracy levels of Indigenous youth only explains half the gap (Nguyen, forthcoming). This is because Indigenous youth face a combination of disadvantages such as poor access to post-school education, in addition to low literacy and numeracy levels, all of which subsequently affect their educational outcomes.

Another question explored by the research was whether low achievement in literacy or numeracy tests necessarily compromises later success. Thomson and Hillman (2010) found that academic underachievement is not the end of the road for most students. Almost three-quarters of those who were 'low achievers' at age 15 years made a successful transition into full-time employment or study, or a combination of these. Motivation, positive school experiences, and aspirations to participate in further education and training were found to be key determinants of a student's later success.

The school environment

LSAY allows us to explore how different aspects of the school environment may make an impact on school outcomes. Previous LSAY research has shown that positive school experiences have a positive influence on school retention, with the most recent suite of LSAY work confirming the value of a good school environment on student outcomes.

Increasing or further developing social capital is one way to assist students to gain positive school experiences, which Semo (in progress) shows can lead to increase in educational attainment. LSAY research shows that school networks are important in facilitating positive outcomes for young people, since student levels of engagement are strongly influenced by

their connectedness with their school, their relationships with their teachers, and the opportunities the school provides (such as extracurricular activities). This translates into elevated aspirations, better academic performance, and increased school retention, along with an increase in the likelihood of future participation in education and training. However, there is currently no consistent measure of social capital available for researchers (Semo, in progress).

Aspirations

Other factors with the potential to assist students to overcome disadvantage include a positive attitude towards education and developing ambitious occupational plans during school-aged years (Sikora & Saha, forthcoming; Nguyen, in progress). Having clear plans also assists young people to achieve positive employment outcomes by age 25, even if these do not match original intentions (Sikora & Saha, forthcoming). Improving the aspirations of disadvantaged youth is therefore a potential strategy for increasing their participation in education and training, a strategy highlighted in the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al. 2008) in relation to disadvantaged students, currently under-represented in higher education. However, the precise role that aspirations play in influencing students' decision-making needs further investigation, since a strong correlation with cultural factors such as socioeconomic background has also been identified.

Other factors to consider

Young people are more likely to be 'at risk' of making an unsuccessful transition because of poor socioeconomic backgrounds or lower levels of education (Liu, in progress). As with social capital, socioeconomic status does not have a consistent measure. The LSAY data provide scope to explore an appropriate measure for SES, as well as looking at how this factor contributes to students' educational outcomes. Based on the recommendations from the Bradley Review (2008), the target by 2020 is to achieve 20 per cent of undergraduate enrolments in higher education from students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Successful pathways to the labour market

Recent LSAY research has explored the likely effects of a changing economy for young people and examined the success of different pathways to the workforce.

Choosing the 'right' pathway

Youth transition pathways are examined in a number of reports (Karmel & Liu, forthcoming; Ryan, in progress; Austen & MacPhail, 2010; Dockery, 2010). Karmel and Liu (forthcoming) examine pathways from the point of view of a variety of outcomes. Their interest is in whether some pathways work for some groups, but not others. For young women one pathway dominates—Year 12 and then university. For young men, no single pathway dominates, and taking a trade apprenticeship or going to university both lead to particularly good outcomes. Only in relation to one outcome variable—earnings—is there a relationship between academic orientation and the pathway, with 'academic' boys doing quite badly if they leave school early and 'non-academic' boys not doing well if they choose the university route. Austen and MacPhail (2010) find that high educational attainment helps to protect young women against withdrawal from the labour market once they become parents.

Completion of Year 12 or a vocational equivalent is still regarded as a 'success' indicator, and is considered as the minimum requirement, particularly for young people who do not continue onto full-time tertiary study. However, the notion of a vocational equivalent is questioned by Lim (forthcoming), who argues that the notion of vocational education and training (VET) equivalent pathways is not helpful from the point of view of outcomes.

Identifying ‘at risk’ behaviour

Young people’s transitions are no longer straightforward, with increasing proportions of Australian students either choosing to take a gap year before commencing university, or combining part-time work and study (Anlezark & Lumsden, in progress). At the same time, young people who experience periods of disengagement from the labour market may be considered ‘at risk’ of making an unsuccessful school-to-work transition.

LSAY research is helping us to separate those who are at risk of prolonged exclusion from employment, education or training from those who are taking time out from work or study to travel, start a family, care for others, or undertake other meaningful activities. As many as a third of young people are not in full-time employment or study for periods between the ages of 15 and 25 years. However, most of these young people do not view this as a permanent state and a majority go on to achieve satisfactory education and labour market outcomes by their mid-20s. A much smaller proportion, certainly less than 10 per cent, are genuinely ‘at risk’ for significant periods of time between the ages of 15 and 25 years (Anlezark, in progress). Labelling young people unnecessarily as being ‘at risk’ is not helpful if it results in these young people becoming stigmatised. Instead, focusing on young people who are unemployed for extended periods may be more useful than trying to predict who may be most ‘at risk’ in a more general sense.

Wellbeing and support during the transition period

In addition to their educational and employment outcomes, young people’s health and wellbeing requires attention. While young people are among the happiest and healthiest in the population (Nguyen, in progress), there are some concerning trends in their wellbeing over time. One in four young people aged 15–24 suffers from a mental health disorder and over 30 per cent are overweight or obese (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007).

Using the LSAY data, we can see that the period between their late teens and early 20s is a particularly happy time for young people. But by age 25, young people are less happy with their social and home lives (Nguyen, in progress).

This is the case for university graduates, where for many it would appear that their time at university was relatively happy, but with their high levels of happiness declining upon completion of their qualifications. This compares with those undertaking vocational qualifications, such as an apprenticeship or traineeship, who experience happiness during the training period, which continues after completion (Dockery, 2010). However, LSAY finishes at age 25, which means we have no opportunity to see whether satisfaction levels fluctuate beyond this age.

Financial stress and income support are related areas of concern for young people because both of these can impact on the decision to participate in education and training. Student income support, such as Youth Allowance, has been shown to improve completion rates and assist in successful youth transitions (Ryan, in progress). This may be because those in receipt of income support are less likely to work while studying, although this is dependent on whether the student is still living at home (Polidano & Rezida, forthcoming).

Summary of 2008–10 research program and areas identified for future research

Table 2 summarises the suite of research activity undertaken over the last three years of the LSAY Analytical Program and the Analysis Grants Program. It also identifies questions and areas for future research emerging from the findings.

Table 2 Summary of 2008/10 research

Author	Summary	Possible future research
Sikora, J & Saha, LJ forthcoming, Lost talent? The occupational ambitions and attainments of young Australians	This research looked at the characteristics of high-achieving young people who failed to achieve their education or occupation plans (~15%). The research finds that high achievers who fail to realise their goals tend to be those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, males and those with a low personal assessment of academic ability and low satisfaction with school. Ambitious careers plans can help achieve success at 25 years.	Why do some high achievers have low self-perception of their academic ability?
Austen, S & MacPhail, F 2010, Post-school education and labour force participation in Canada and Australia	This research uses comparative datasets to investigate why the proportion of young people aged 20–24 with post-school qualifications is much higher in Canada (50%) than in Australia (38%). The research finds that differences between the two educational systems may impact on the post-school choices young people make.	What can be learnt from the Canadian colleges to raise the education attainment of young people aged 20–24 years in Australia?
Thomson, S & Hillman, K 2010, Against the odds: 'low achievers' success after school	This research investigated whether low achievement in a test at age 15 compromises later success (defined as satisfaction with life, together with the extent to which young people are fully occupied with education, employment or a combination of these). The research finds that academic under-achievement is not the end of the road for most students, with almost three-quarters of those who were 'low achievers' at age 15 years going on to successfully make the transition into full-time work or study (or a combination of these).	Why does socioeconomic status affect young people's chances of post-school success? Is it related to parental income, networks, aspiration, or other factors? What factors influence a student's motivation (career advisors, parents, teachers etc.)?
Dockery, M 2010, Education and happiness in the school to work transition	This research confirmed previous research that attaining higher levels of education is linked to lower levels of happiness or satisfaction with life. The research found that undertaking vocational qualifications, such as an apprenticeship or traineeship, has a positive impact on happiness during the training period, with happiness continuing after completion. However, for university graduates, it would appear that their university days were relatively happy, with high levels of happiness declining upon completion of their qualifications.	Do these findings hold true for older people? Are older people with more education attainment less happy than those of lower education attainment? What role do other factors not currently captured in LSAY such as work–life balance play in the relationship between education and happiness?
Ryan, C (forthcoming), Year 12 completion and youth transitions	This research compares the outcomes of young people who complete Year 12 with those who undertake alternative pathways, focusing on those who do not go on to full-time tertiary study in VET or at university. The research finds that, among this group of young people, Year 12 completion achieves the best employment outcomes with the exception of apprenticeships for males and to a lesser extent traineeships for girls. Vocational alternatives without Year 12 produce poorer outcomes.	What models of schooling encourage young people to complete Year 12, especially those more attuned to applied rather than academic learning? What effect does the motivation of the learners or the nature of the course content or currency of qualifications in the labour market have?
Ryan, C (in progress), Income support and youth transitions	This research examines the role and impact of Youth Allowance on participation in post-school education and training, course completion, 'gap' taking and the financial position of young Australians. Changes to the eligibility rules of Youth Allowance since this analysis was undertaken should be considered when interpreting the findings. The research indicates that Youth Allowance does not appear to increase the proportion of the eligible population going on to full-time tertiary study after school. However, it does appear to substantially improve course completion rates and assist in successful youth transitions.	How have changes to Youth Allowance eligibility over time affected participation in post-school education and training, course completion and 'gap' taking?

Author	Summary	Possible future research
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Karmel, T & Liu, J (forthcoming), Which pathways work for which groups of young people	This research looks at how VET or university pathways contribute to successful youth transitions, and whether the effects are the same for different groups of young people. Outcomes at age 25 years are examined. The research finds that, overall, completion of Year 12 followed by university study is the best pathway (even if an individual has poor academic orientation). But there are strong gender differences.	Year 12 is becoming the foundation qualification for further study, whether it is VET or higher education. It may be useful to explore why this is so. Is it the skills acquired through the completion of senior high school or is it the currency of a Year 12 certificate in the labour market?
Lim, P (forthcoming), The vocational equivalent to Year 12	This research investigates what might be the vocational equivalent to Year 12 by considering three dimensions of equivalence: volume of learning, attributes of a qualification (complexity and learning outcomes), and labour market and further study outcomes. The research indicates that measuring equivalence to Year 12 is difficult because certificate-level courses vary substantially in their volume of learning and complexity, even within individual certificate levels.	As above
Nguyen, N (in progress), The role of aspirations on the education choices of young people	This briefing paper looks at the role of aspirations in the education choices of young people, specifically those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The research suggests that young people's educational intentions are related to their subsequent participation in education and training. However, the role of aspirations is complicated by the interaction of other factors such as socioeconomic background.	How do key factors such as socioeconomic background, aspirations, educational attainment and regionality interact with each other?
Nguyen, N 2010, The impact of VET in Schools on the intentions and achievements of young people	This briefing paper uses previous research on the impact of VET in Schools and some primary analysis of LSAY data to assess the effect of these programs on school retention, post-school VET and employment and on young people's school and post-school aspirations. The research finds that, while participation in VET in Schools programs has positive effects on, attitudes to, and satisfaction with, school, it does not necessarily lead to increased Year 12 retention. However, it does assist in post-school employment choices and smooths the school-to-work transition by providing a greater exposure to the world of work.	What do the various school VET programs offer different groups of students?
Nguyen, N (forthcoming), Early post-school outcomes of Indigenous youth: the role of literacy and numeracy	This briefing paper explores the impact of literacy and numeracy levels on the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. The research finds that improved literacy and numeracy levels contribute significantly to improving Indigenous outcomes, particularly in increasing Year 12 completion rates, but these improvements alone are not enough to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth outcomes.	What factors might improve Indigenous youth educational outcomes?
Anlezark, A (in progress), At risk youth: a transitory state?	This research draws on existing 'at risk' youth research, as well as some primary data analysis to consider whether 'at risk' is a permanent or transitory state. Young people generally view their circumstances favourably and, despite around a third experiencing unemployment between 18 and 19 years, most go on to be gainfully employed by their mid-20s. It is the small proportion of young people who are unemployed for extended periods we should give our attention to, rather than the larger group of 'disengaged youth' who may be combining part-time work and part-time study or other activities.	How do young people fall into long-term unemployment, and how can it be avoided? What approaches reduce unemployment duration for young people?
Semo, R (in progress), Social capital and young people	This briefing paper examines social capital and young people, exploring social capital frameworks and concepts, and demonstrates how LSAY data can be used to understand the complexities of social capital and youth transitions. The work indicates that good school and community networks can improve education outcomes. In this way, social capital can increase educational engagement, achievement and participation over and above the influences of family background, school type and geographical location, with the potential to mediate the effects of disadvantage.	This is an area of limited previous research and warrants further investigation, particularly how social capital is acquired by young people, and how it influences youth transitions and later labour market outcomes.
Author	Summary	Possible future research
Liu, J (in progress), Successful youth transitions	This briefing paper explores what is meant by a 'successful' youth transition and considers a range of contributing factors. The work indicates that a successful transition requires	How do intrinsic and extrinsic factors interact to achieve a successful youth transition? Can

	<p>young people to be adequately prepared for five key adult roles: adult worker, citizen and community participant, spouse, parent, and household manager. It suggests that the most important intervention of all for a successful transition is to ensure that young people have a good education at early stages in their lives, but notes that income support and careers advice are also useful.</p>	<p>this shed light on how multiple disadvantage may be overcome?</p>
<p>Nguyen, N (in progress), The wellbeing of young people</p>	<p>This briefing paper looks at the link between wellbeing (using satisfaction as a proxy for wellbeing) at key transition stages, such as finishing school or moving out of the family home. Recent trends in physical, emotional, and psychological health using external data sources provide context.</p> <p>The analysis indicates that the period between their late teens and early 20s is a particularly happy time for young people. But by age 25, young people are less happy with their social and home lives. Young people are generally disability free, although the picture on mental health is not so good, with one in four people aged 15–25 suffering from mental illness. Road accidents and suicide remain the major causes of death for young people.</p>	<p>What are key indicators of health and wellbeing that could be explored in LSAY?</p> <p>Is there a relationship between health and wellbeing and education outcomes?</p>
<p>Anlezark, A (in progress), Young people in an economic downturn</p>	<p>This briefing paper considers how young people have fared in the recent economic downturn, focusing on the impact on education and employment participation over the first 12 months. It discusses how structural labour market changes over the past 20 years may have changed the likely impact of the downturn on the three million young Australians aged between 15 and 24. These structural labour market changes include a change in the types of jobs available to young people and the increasing trend to combine work and study.</p>	<p>Do we see the same groups of young people in unemployment in the 2009 downturn as those experiencing unemployment in the downturn in the 1980s and 1990s?</p> <p>What are the characteristics of young people continuing in full-time education? Has this mix changed (particularly for the 20 to 24-year-old group)?</p> <p>What is the impact of the downturn on the availability of part-time work for students?</p> <p>Does part-time work for those who are not students provide protection against scarring from youth unemployment?</p>
<p>Anlezark, A (in progress), Who takes a gap year and why?</p>	<p>This briefing paper quantifies the extent of gap-taking, describes who takes a gap year, and compares their employment outcomes with 'non-gappers'. Definitional issues associated with 'gappers' are noted. The research indicates that a quarter of Australian high school students take a gap of one to two years before commencing university. Most work, study or travel during this time. 'Gappers' tend to be weaker academically than 'non-gappers', come from English-speaking backgrounds, have part-time employment when at school in Year 12, and generally do not receive Youth Allowance when at school. Much of the gap-taking is incidental, often related to missing out on a chosen course.</p>	<p>Is there a relationship between changes in eligibility for Youth Allowance and gap-taking?</p>

Making good use of LSAY data

Any proposed research ideas and projects should make effective use of the LSAY data, in particular to take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the data and the richness of information collected. Researchers do, however, need to understand the survey instrument to know what questions the data are capable of answering. NCVER is presently devoting considerable effort to improving the technical documentation that accompanies the data.

Making good use of the survey instruments

Recent reviews of LSAY have concluded that the surveys are an informative source on the determinants of successful youth transitions in Australia (Nguyen et al. 2010). This is largely because of the scope and depth of the information collected on school and post-school study and work, attitudinal and demographic characteristics. Ideas for future research topics should consider the wide range of information available, some of which has not been explored in previous LSAY research.

Exploring underused questions in LSAY

The LSAY datasets have a large number of variables. For example, the Y95 cohort has over 5000 variables. However, many of these variables have been underused, which may be because some questions are limited, such as the information on whether respondents have a disability, a question only asked in relation to trouble experienced looking for work. Others are not used because they have only been asked once for only a specific cohort. For example, Body Mass Index (BMI) was only asked of those first interviewed in 2003 (Y03 cohort) and on only one occasion, in 2007, when the majority of the cohort were, on average, aged 17 years. Therefore we can only explore the relationship between physical health, education and employment in a limited way. In such instances there may be scope to combine analysis of LSAY with other datasets such as the Australian Youth or Youth in Focus surveys.

Information collected through the PISA school questionnaire, which collates the information provided by school principals, is another underused source. Questions are asked about the qualifications of teachers and numbers of staff, teacher morale, school and teacher autonomy, school resources, and school policies and practices, such as the use of student assessments. All this information can be useful for examining the influences of different school environments on student outcomes.

Table 3 summarises suggested ideas for future research topics and gives some examples of underused questions in LSAY research.

Table 3 Underused questions in LSAY research and areas of interest for future research

Topic areas	Areas of interest & underused questions	Comment
School principal questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School-level information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Available through the Australian Council of Education Research (ACER)
Student characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Socioeconomic status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The development of a good measure of SES requires further exploration
School experiences and transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Change in primary/secondary schools and reasons why ▪ Repeated or missed schooling including primary/secondary school, and Year 11/12 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interest in whether changes to schools affect student outcomes ▪ Consider using missed or repeated schooling as an indicator of low self-esteem and low retention
Use of computers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Availability ▪ Frequency ▪ Proficiency and experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explore in terms of social capital, educational resources, IT literacy
Satisfaction with post-school study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Juggling work and study ▪ Financial stress ▪ Balancing family commitments and personal relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explore what factors may act as barriers to participation in post-school study
Job training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Type of training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explore different types of training undertaken by respondents
Job search activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Duration of time looking for work ▪ Different job-searching activities, including registering with Centrelink 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explore outcomes from different types of job-searching activity
Problems looking for work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reasons for not working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide a different measure of barriers to participation in the workforce
Living arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Type of accommodation ▪ Family structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explore the effects of living arrangements on school and post-school outcomes
Disability and health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ BMI 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provides limited information but may be an area where more than one dataset is used
Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Financial stress and shortage of money 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explore financial stress and whether this is a barrier to participation in post-school study
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Importance placed on family, friends and relatives ▪ Friends in the workplace and place of study ▪ Frequency of contact with these relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Devise a measure of social capital

Challenges

The challenges presented by LSAY as a research tool include attrition, the end point of the survey program (age 25), and the limited scope for measuring specific youth transition programs.

Attrition

Attrition bias is a common problem with longitudinal surveys and leads to two specific problems. First, it is not even: typically poor achievers drop out of the survey more often than more successful young people. This can largely be overcome through the use of weights and multivariate analysis. A second problem is that investigation of sub-populations is not possible because there are insufficient respondents from some sub-populations, such as those from a non-English speaking background.

Extended youth transitions

As discussed earlier, the increasing trend for young people to take longer to complete their school-to-work transition means that the LSAY cohorts are terminated before some young people are firmly established in the labour market. Many young people at age 25 have only recently left or may still be enrolled full-time in higher education, which is a limitation on the overall ability of the LSAY program to examine longer-term outcomes. Wage rates at age 25, for example, are a poor measure of the return from education, and happiness at age of 25 years may not be a good measure of happiness over the lifecycle.

Evaluation of programs

The main purpose of the surveys is to track youth transitions, but LSAY is not a tool for evaluating specific government or jurisdictional programs. This is because it may not be able to identify participation in such programs and it cannot capture the changes in programs that occur between cohorts. Participation in VET in Schools is an example of the difficulties faced in trying to measure specific programs. In trying to assess the long-term effects of these programs on post-school and employment outcomes, NCVER examined VET in Schools activity between 1997 and 2000, but could not capture the significant structural changes in arrangements in VET in Schools that have occurred in the last decade (Nguyen, 2010).

Related to this is the limitation of the dataset in some areas, such as in health and wellbeing. LSAY is primarily concerned with measuring the transitions of young people from school into work and, as such, the focus is on education and employment outcomes. Satisfaction ratings with individual aspects of life are the only consistent measure of wellbeing that can be analysed from LSAY.

Broadening the use of LSAY

During the course of the 2008–10 research program NCVER has focused on broadening the use of LSAY in the research community by making the data more accessible. These efforts include providing data workshops, producing detailed technical documentation and user guides, providing interactive data tables (cohort reports) on the website, as well as assisting in questionnaire development. Some further improvements to the questionnaires are currently underway, including a K-6 scale to enable the collection of a better measure of the mental health of young people. However, addressing all the limitations of the data requires extensive resources, which will also take time to translate into readily available data for research.

Publishing technical reports as part of the research program can assist researchers make better use of the LSAY data; technical reports can be a vehicle for examining better measures of complex areas such as social capital and socioeconomic background. New research ideas could therefore include technical topic areas.

Conclusion

The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth are the longest continuously operating longitudinal study in Australia and provide a strong evidence base for youth transitions policy. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion about how to continue to make the best use of LSAY by encouraging researchers to provide insights into the education, employment and wellbeing of Australia's young people. More specifically, the consultations will inform the 2010–13 Analytical Program of work to be carried out by NCVER on behalf of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

NCVER encourages those with an interest in youth transitions to participate in the 2010 consultations and thereby assist in devising a research program that produces fresh thinking relevant to current policy directions.

We invite written submissions during the consultation period to 3 December 2010. Responses to this discussion paper should be in the form of questions for new research and project ideas, including ways to assist in broadening the LSAY user community of researchers and analysts.

Responses can be sent by 3 December 2010:

- ✧ via email to nhi.nguyen@ncver.edu.au
- ✧ in writing to Nhi Nguyen, Consultancy and International Research Branch, NCVER
PO Box 8288, Station Arcade, SA, 5000.

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