

Executive summary

Despite strong evidence linking young people's goals and ambitions to their longer-term education and work outcomes, the specific factors most strongly influencing aspirations are not well understood. Although prior research has identified a number of general factors that drive young people's educational and occupational aspirations, the important question from a policy perspective is which of these factors matter most and whether they can be influenced by policy.

This study uses data from the 2009 cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) to examine the ways by which relevant background characteristics influence young people's:

- aspirations to complete Year 12
- aspirations to commence university study in the first year after leaving school
- occupational aspirations at age 15 years vis-à-vis the kind of job they expect to have at age 30 years.

A variety of predictor variables are considered, including demographic background characteristics, parental and peer influences, individual academic performance and young people's overall perceptions of school.

An initial analysis of the factors that impact on aspirations confirms the importance of what might be referred to as the 'list of usual suspects' in youth transitions research. These factors include gender, English-speaking background, socioeconomic status (SES) and academic achievement at age 25 years, as well as parental and peer influences. In terms of importance, the results show that academic achievement at age 15 years is the most important predictor of Year 12 completion, followed by parental influence. For intentions to go to university immediately upon leaving school, the most important influencers are the perceived expectations of parents and peers. For expected occupational status at age 30 years, the most important factor again is the influence of parents, along with academic achievement at age 15 years.

This study also explored the extent to which the initial occupational aspirations of 15-year-olds aligned with their actual occupational outcomes about a decade later. The results are not surprising, in that young people's aspirations are somewhat unrealistic, with the distribution of aspirations being quite skewed towards high-status jobs. By age 25 years, the age until which data are available for analysis, a significant portion of young people fall short of what they set out to achieve in terms of occupation. However, this does not mean that they cannot achieve their desired occupations at a later stage in life.

A key insight from this study is just how critical parental influences are in driving young people's educational and occupational aspirations. From a policy perspective, the results from this study reinforce the importance of parent-focused interventions. One example of a successful intervention is the Parents as Career Transition Supports (PACTS) program. This program provides parents and caregivers with free advice on educational pathways and on how to communicate with young people about their careers. An evaluation of the program showed that the proportion of parents who discussed post-school options with their children increased significantly after their participation in it. Expanding the provision of programs that actively engage parents in the career decision-making process may be an effective means for raising the educational and occupational aspirations of Australian youth.