Executive summary

This paper set out to study how disadvantage affects education outcomes, in this instance, Year 12 completion, a familiar yet important gauge of adolescent academic success in Australia. Using a number of indicators of the social and family circumstances of young people that reflect differing dimensions of disadvantage, the study undertakes a comparative analysis of two datasets with alternative measures of disadvantage — the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) and the Youth in Focus (YIF) survey. The latter, which has rarely been employed to examine this issue, provides an additional set of disadvantage measures that may be relevant to school completion, including family income and welfare receipt history. This study therefore has the potential to provide a better understanding of the role of this extended set of disadvantage measures as they relate to school completion.

An important feature of this research is that the two datasets cover the same birth cohort of young people. Both the LSAY 2003 (Y03) cohort and the YIF survey include young people who were born between October 1987 and March 1988, and in both datasets subjects' completion of Year 12 was measured late in the 2006 calendar year. Both sets of data contain overlapping information on their respondents' background and experiences of schooling. However, each of the surveys also possesses strengths that the other lacks. In particular, LSAY Y03 contains measures of student achievement from the PISA survey that the YIF data do not, while the YIF data have more information on family background factors (current family income, welfare receipt history, family structure history) and aspects of the young people's earlier experiences of schooling and their engagement in risky or anti-social behaviour that LSAY Y03 does not.

The fact that both the LSAY Y03 and the YIF data include information on young people born at a common time makes a comparison possible; however, other aspects of the sampling design of the two surveys may potentially limit the nature of this comparison task. To ensure that our comparison yielded valid outcomes, we drew on an analysis of school completion among the same birth cohort from the Australian 2006 Census of Population and Housing (hereafter called 'the Census'. Encouragingly, the distributions of young people across labour market and education activities in the two datasets appear broadly representative of young people in general from the Census, once weights that accounted for their differing design features were added to the analysis. One marked exception to this statement is that Year 12 completion in LSAY is overestimated. In particular, Year 12 completion among Indigenous students in LSAY was much higher than that found in the broader population, while the YIF rates matched what is known about this area from other data.

The factors influencing school completion have been widely studied in previous research in different contexts, with the measures of disadvantage considered in Australian studies limited to the standard measures available in the relevant data. Since many studies have relied on LSAY or its predecessors, the measures used have typically involved parental education and occupation-based socioeconomic status.

Earlier Australian research has identified a strong link between measures of parental education or occupational status and Year 12 completion. This study has been able to include a broader set of measures to capture the multidimensional nature of disadvantage — its cultural and material aspects — and its influence on students' performance. Poor school experiences, participation in risky activities and aspirations were revealed as the main predictors of Year 12 completion, while, significantly in contrast to earlier research, the size and importance of the commonly used indicators

of disadvantage associated with school completion, notably, parental education and occupational status, were lower. Although family income had a positive impact on Year 12 completion, by comparison with these cultural factors, its effect was found to be quite small.

In general, in the LSAY data, disadvantage seems to be played out through its impact on school performance and on the educational aspirations of young people. These are likely to be different sides to the same coin of the main results found in the YIF data, where disadvantage partially exerted its influence through the poor experiences of early schooling among respondents, which lowered their Year 12 completion levels.

The exercise of considering alternative measures of disadvantage, drawing on both the LSAY and YIF data, has been informative in identifying a few core factors — poor school experiences, risky activities and aspirations — that matter for school completion and, importantly, for indicating the direction of further study into the complex linkages between disadvantage and school completion.