# Successful youth transitions

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Longitudinal
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## OVERVIEW

The transition from school to work and adulthood is getting longer as post-Year 12 education becomes the norm. While the transition process may have become more complex, the traditional markers of a successful transition – adult worker, citizen and community participant, spouse or partner, parent (at least for some) and household manager – remain the same.

We know that there is a range of underlying issues associated with the wellbeing of young people that may affect a successful path to adulthood. These include disability and health problems, alcohol and substance abuse, accidents and crime. Young people confronting problems such as these, or who are disadvantaged by other factors, may face more difficult transitions. External factors such as the state of the economy also influence the outcomes of the education and employment of young people.

Helping young people to avoid poor school and negative early labour market experiences can eliminate the adverse long-term consequences of unemployment and assist them to make the transition to adulthood. A rich and varied school education is probably the best intervention that society can offer.

## INTRODUCTION

Youth transitions refer to young people's journeys from school to post-school study and on to employment. This is a time when young people experience rapid biological, psychological and physical changes, as well as changing social and economic situations, as they begin to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. Cynthia Lloyd (2005) notes that in today's world young people are:

- entering adolescence earlier and are healthier
- more likely to spend their adolescence in school
- more likely to postpone entry into the labour force
- more likely to delay marriage and childbearing.

Similar observations are made by Shaienks and Gluszynski (2009),

who identify that the changing labour market has also resulted in higher rates of participation in post-secondary education and extended periods of living with parents. The traditional markers of adulthood such as full-time employment, a stable relationship, owning a home and having a family have been delayed, or not reached at all (Hillman & Marks 2002). The transition from childhood

to adulthood has lengthened and it is now no longer a straightforward and linear process (Smyth, Zappala & Considine 2002). And, while for most it is a journey navigated successfully, for those who suffer setbacks in terms of their physical and mental health, the transition can be difficult and have long-term ramifications.

Today society expects – as expressed in the Australian Government's Social Inclusion Agenda – that all young people will have an opportunity to succeed in life, regardless of their family backgrounds, economic circumstances or educational level. In reality, young people are more likely to be disadvantaged or at risk of experiencing difficulties in the transition process because of poor socioeconomic backgrounds or lower levels of education (Shaienks & Gluszynski 2009).

In this paper, we first define a 'successful youth transition'. We then consider a range of factors that affect transitions. Following this, we discuss a number of interventions which can help young people to make the transition successfully.

## THE DEFINITION OF A SUCCESSFUL YOUTH TRANSITION

Having the capacity to secure full-time employment or continuing with further education or training is the traditional indicator of a young person's[1] successful transition to adulthood (Smyth, Zappala & Considine 2002). In this context therefore, achieving the milestones proposed in the discussion paper, *Stronger future for all young Victorians* (Victorian Government 2010) would appear to offer young people their best chance of success:

- *At the age of 15*: just before entering the senior secondary years young people need to be engaged in education and have the literacy and numeracy skills to successfully complete senior secondary or initial vocational qualifications; they need to have sound knowledge of the career options and education and training pathways open to them.

- *At the age of 19*: young people should have attained (or be in the process of attaining) an initial qualification that enables them to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

- *By the age of 24*: young people should be establishing strong career paths and have attained higher-level vocational education and training (VET) or higher education qualifications; those who did not complete an initial qualification at the age of 19 should have re-engaged with education and training.

It follows that young people with repeated spells and longer durations of unemployment might be regarded as having been less successful in achieving the roles normally associated with participation in adult life. But we also need to recognise that new entrants to the labour market may experience higher levels of unemployment compared with their counterparts because, by virtue of their age, they have less labour market experience (Nguyen et al. 2009).

In defining success, we should also consider the quality of a young person's employment. This might cover earnings, job status and security, the nature of employment (permanent or casual), flexibility, training and promotional opportunities, and job satisfaction (Karmel & Liu 2011; Curtis 2008; Ryan forthcoming). Again, we need to keep in mind that being employed is not the only measure of success in youth transitions – nor should it be. Social outcomes and personal attributes are also considered to be important, for example, getting married or being in a stable partnership and having a family (although young people today are putting off marriage and having children), good mental and physical health, and the capacity for lifelong learning (Dwyer, Harwood & Tyler 1998; Nguyen et al. 2009; Wyn 2009).

The idea of a successful youth transition needs to be expanded and moved beyond the traditional domains of study and work to capture the complexity and multidimensional nature of young people's lives (Smyth, Zappala & Considine 2002). Lloyd (2005) argues that, for successful transitions, young people need to be adequately prepared for the five key adult roles of: adult worker, citizen and community participant, spouse, parent, and household manager. Although not all of these roles will be relevant to all young people (for example, the transition pathway for one young person may

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1   In this paper, unless otherwise specified, our discussion of youth transitions will focus on young people aged between 15 and 24 years.

be to work but not parenthood, while for another the converse will apply), the important issue is that young people have the capacity to achieve a successful youth transition into these adult roles. Lloyd (2005) proposes that for this they need to possess the following attributes:

- good mental and physical health, including reproductive health, and the knowledge and means to sustain health during adulthood
- an appropriate stock of human and social capital to be a productive adult member of society
- the necessary social values and the ability to contribute to the collective wellbeing as a citizen and community participant
- adequate preparation for the assumption of adult social roles and obligations, including the roles of spouse or partner, parent, and household and family manager

- the capability to make choices through the acquisition of a sense of self and a sense of personal competence
- a sense of wellbeing.

Based on panel findings of a study investigating youth in developing countries, these attributes identified by Lloyd (2005) are useful in examining the criteria for successful transitions for young people in general, but they should also be viewed in conjunction with personal attributes and capabilities. Lloyd (2005) makes the point that we need to take into account the range of individual and external factors that influence youth transitions, including family circumstances, institutional structures, income support, ancillary support (such as career advice) and wellbeing, as well as labour market settings. These considerations are imperative, especially for some groups of young people who face disadvantage.

## FACTORS AFFECTING SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS

Research using data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) shows that young people who are not engaged full-time in either education or employment (or a combination of both) may face higher rates of unemployment, cycles of low pay and employment insecurity in the longer-term, even when economic times are good (see, for example, Marks & Fleming 1998). Again, we need to emphasise that activities other than full-time engagement in either education or employment are nevertheless worthwhile. Of those not fully engaged in education or employment, the most common activity for men is travel, and for women it is caring

for children or others (Pech, McNevin & Nelms 2009; Hillman 2005).

Specific groups of young people are less likely to be fully engaged in education or employment and these are of particular concern and considered to be 'at risk'. These include Indigenous people, young people living in areas of the lowest 20% of relative socioeconomic disadvantage, and those who did not complete Year 12 (ABS 2010). According to Anlezark (2011a), young people who are more likely to be identified as being 'at risk' of making a poor transition display the following characteristics:

**Table 1    Characteristics of young people 'at risk' of poor outcomes**

| Exogenous factors[a] | Mediating factors[a] |
|---|---|
| • Indigenous | • Poor attitudes to school |
| • Born in Australia | • Attend government school* |
| • Live outside metropolitan areas | • Poor student–teacher relationship |
| • Low academic achievers | • Dislike of school |
| • Low levels of literacy and numeracy | • Intention in Year 9 to leave school early |
| • Low socioeconomic status | • Poor student behaviour |
| • Parents with blue-collar occupations | • Lack of engagement with school extracurricular activities |
| • Parents without university education | |
| • Non-nuclear family | |

Notes:   * May also be an exogenous factor if limited school choices are available.
a  Exogenous factors refer to factors over which the individual has little or no control. Mediating factors themselves are outcomes of choices, but also contribute to being 'at risk'. Some of these factors have different levels of influence, and multiple factors can lead to greater disadvantage.

Source:   Anlezark (2011a).

Most young people who experience difficulties in their transition to adulthood have low academic achievement and, as a consequence, leave school early (Lamb & McKenzie 2001). We know that early school leavers may face difficulties if they attempt to return to school, including, very often, no alternative to the secondary school system. When they do attempt to seek assistance to get their lives on track, they find a lack of suitable information on the national, regional and local labour markets and, similarly, little information on health, welfare and recreational services. Where there are services, many in these groups are unaware that they exist. Early school leavers face other disadvantages, both in their personal lives – increased drug and alcohol abuse – and in the labour market, with poor working conditions and irregular incomes (Dwyer 1995, cited in Smyth, Zappala & Considine 2002).

The *state of the economy* also impacts on the outcomes of young people's education and employment, with the effects varying by gender and education level (Herault et al. 2010; McMillan & Marks 2003; Anlezark 2011a; Pech, McNevin & Nelms 2009; Scarpetta, Sonnet & Manfredi 2010). For example, labour force data at the time of the 2008 economic downturn demonstrated that more young people faced unemployment and for longer durations (Anlezark 2011b), while those with the lowest education levels were less likely to be studying and most likely to experience unemployment (Herault et al. 2010). Furthermore, during difficult economic circumstances the proportion of young people combining work and study is lower as a result of the increased competition in the part-time youth labour market (Anlezark & Lim 2011).

The Australian Government report, *The state of Australia's young people*, gives us a snapshot of some of the *health and lifestyle issues* faced by young people today that impinge upon the transition process (Muir et al. 2009). As table 1 demonstrates, young people with these characteristics are more likely to be at risk of making a poor transition to adulthood (at least in terms of engagement in education or employment).

## DISABILITY AND HEALTH PROBLEMS

- Slightly more than one-tenth of all young people aged 15–24 years have long-term physical health conditions, with 13% reporting some form of learning difficulty.
- Approximately one in ten has a disability.
- One in four has a mental health disorder, with one in three living in moderate-to-high psychological distress.

- Suicide accounted for 20% of all young male (15–24 years) deaths and 15% of all young female (15–24 years) deaths in 2007. Among young people, suicide is the leading cause of death.
- Young people with high levels of psychological distress are much less likely to be in paid work or education than those with no, low or medium levels of distress.

## ALCOHOL USE

- Among all age groups young people aged 15–19 years have the highest rates of hospitalisation for acute intoxication.

- Approximately 22% of males and 16% of females aged 18–24 years have an alcohol abuse disorder.

## CAR ACCIDENTS

- Car accidents are the second highest cause of death for young people.

- Young men aged 20–24 years are seven times more likely to be involved in dangerous driving than women in the same age group.

## ILLICIT DRUG USE

- Approximately 20% of 16-year-olds and 40% of 18 to 24-year-olds use illicit drugs.
- Around 5% of young people aged 18–24 years are considered to have a cannabis abuse disorder, and 4% are considered to have a stimulant abuse disorder.

- In 2007 slightly less than 3% of young people aged 14 years or older reported driving a motor vehicle while under the influence of illicit drugs.

## CRIME

- In 2007 approximately 12 000 young people were placed under juvenile justice supervision orders. Of those, roughly 650 were placed in detention centres, with a larger representation from Indigenous groups.

- From the age group 17–24 years, 5282 were placed in adult prisons in 2007; of those, females only accounted for 6.6 % and Indigenous young people were over-represented.

A poor or negative early start on the path to adulthood can have lasting detrimental effects on young people's lives and, although it is not possible to change many of their background characteristics such as low socioeconomic background and country of birth, early interventions can help young people overcome these disadvantages – and the earlier, the better (Lamb & McKenzie 2001).

## EFFECTS OF SCHOOLS, TEACHERS AND STUDENT NETWORKS ON OUTCOMES

Positive school factors can assist a smoother youth transition by improving the experience that young people have at school and their engagement with the school. Having a good student–teacher relationship is also important.

That teachers have a significant influence on student achievement is well recognised (Marks, McMillan & Ainley 2004; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 1999), while other research has emphasised that good teaching is particularly important for students who have little motivation to undertake education or have little support at home, such as those from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, migrants with limited formal education or low proficiency in English, and Indigenous children (Banks 2010). Teachers have an impact on students' post-school study choices, with teachers shown to influence students to study mathematics and science subjects after leaving school – their impact on subject choice is greater than students' actual science experiences at school (Anlezark et al. 2008).

The Productivity Commission has identified a number of areas of concern relating to the quality, availability and training of Australian teachers. These include a significant decline in the literacy and numeracy skills of new teachers, major shortages of teachers in maths and science subjects, a lack of formal training for teachers, and a shortage of teachers in rural and remote areas. Furthermore, Banks (2010) has identified a lack of male teachers as role models to assist young boys to be motivated and engaged at school.

In addition to good student–teacher relationships, the networks young people form with their peers and with their community – in other words, their social capital – can be important in achieving wellbeing and educational outcomes (Edwards 2004). LSAY research shows that some elements of social capital are found to increase the educational engagement, achievement and participation of young people above and beyond the influences of family background, school type and geographical location, indicating that social capital has the potential to offset the effects of disadvantage (Semo 2011).

## INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

Many students leave school without completing a qualification because of limited subject choices (Victorian Government 2010). The 2008 Victorian On Track survey revealed that more than 60% of early school leavers would have remained in school had there been a wider choice of subjects, and more than 50% would have stayed at school had more vocational programs been offered (Victorian Department of Early Education and Child Development 2009).

In this context the results from research on VET in Schools is mixed: participation in school vocational programs can influence students' post-school plans, although VET in Schools has not necessarily led to higher Year 12 retention. Nguyen (2010) found that students who had intended to get a job straight after leaving school changed their post-school plans to include further VET studies or an apprenticeship or traineeship after participating in school VET programs.

Schools offering VET subjects can provide students with a wider choice of subjects, but there are also implications for the school curriculum, with some studies indicating mixed results in the effects of VET in Schools programs on school retention. In summary:

- Students who chose VET in the senior secondary years of schooling were more likely to have changed their intention (made in Year 9) about completing school by Year 11, although this may be due to the availability of vocational subjects in schools.

- Students who chose to study VET may be advantaged by completing Year 12 where VET studies can be counted towards a Year 12 certificate in schools.

- For students who did not go to university, the initial post-school outcomes were more promising as a result of participation in school vocational programs. This is because they had higher chances of getting an apprenticeship, studying at a technical and further education (TAFE) college or obtaining full-time employment (Lamb & Vickers 2006).

In general, schools that offer VET alternatives as part of the school curriculum (the school model) had higher retention rates for VET participants, whereas schools providing stand-alone VET programs (the TAFE model) had better initial post-school outcomes, in terms of students avoiding unemployment and being more successful in accessing tertiary study, apprenticeships and full-time work (Lamb & Vickers 2006).

## INCOME SUPPORT

Poverty is a barrier to a successful transition for young people (Lloyd 2005). Young people living in poverty and experiencing financial hardship may be restricted in their capacity to fully participate in education, training and the labour market. For example, McMillan (2005) in her examination of the LSAY Year 95 cohort reported that 10% of students claimed financial difficulties as their main reason for leaving university without completing a course.

Receiving Youth Allowance appears to be positively associated with completion of both university and full-time VET courses (Ryan forthcoming), although some students receiving Youth Allowance but little other income support still experience financial problems. Those relying on Youth Allowance are more likely to experience more instances of financial stress compared with other young Australians. In addition, eligibility[2] for AUSTUDY and Youth Allowance can affect participation patterns in higher education. James et al. (2007) found that young people relied more on paid work than on Commonwealth income assistance because of their ineligibility for AUSTUDY and Youth Allowance or insufficient income support from the government. This reliance on paid work may have restricted young people's ability to fully participate in tertiary studies.

## PART-TIME WORK

Combining part-time work and study is beneficial to young people in terms of gaining valuable work experience and financial independence from their parents. But, combining part-time work and study can be both positive and negative to youth transitions (Anlezark & Lim 2011). Working longer hours can mean limited time for study, with negative effects on school performance, although early attachment to the labour market can assist young people with post-school full-time employment.

Furthermore, students can become more engaged in education through learning in formal and informal work arrangements, as long as they are able to access the learning opportunities provided by this work. Although part-time or casual jobs often do not reflect their career aspirations, students who work in these jobs acquire useful skills (for example, teamwork and time-management skills) and valuable work experience, both of which are beneficial to their future employment (Marks 2006; Anlezark & Lim 2011). There is also evidence that young people who combine school and work while receiving Youth Allowance or AUSTUDY fare better in the transition to work (Commonwealth of Australia 2009).

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that part-time work can have a detrimental effect on students' academic performance and Year 12 completion, especially if it involves long hours (McMillan, Rothman & Wernert 2005; Anlezark & Lim 2011).

## ANCILLARY SUPPORT

Clear careers advice and guidance are crucial if young people are to make informed decisions about their education, training and employment options before they leave school (Thomson 2005). The 2008 On Track survey report showed that careers advice was one of the factors that motivated possible early school leavers to remain at school. This means that good-quality careers advice helps to increase retention rates, thereby improving school completion.

Rothman and Hillman (2008) found that students view careers advice — specifically well-informed and appropriate advice — as useful, regardless of their background characteristics, and it is particularly helpful for those who have lower academic ability or who are unsure about completing Year 12 (Thomson & Hillman 2011). Poor careers advice on the other hand can have an adverse effect on students' post-school outcomes (McMillan, Rothman & Wernert 2005). For example, research has shown that careers advisors can steer students inappropriately both into and away from mathematics and science careers (Anlezark et al. 2008).

Mentoring programs combining part-time work and study arrangements have also been promoted by some organisations working with young people (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). However,

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2  Subject to meeting prescribed criteria, young people may be eligible for Youth Allowance if they are between 16 and 24 years old and are studying/training or looking for full-time work. Young people who are 15 years old may also be eligible if they pass the independence test. Those who are aged over 25 years and studying full-time may be eligible for AUSTUDY. Source: <http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/payments/ya_eligible.htm>, viewed June 2010.

crucial to the effectiveness of the mentoring program is the provision of counselling services to those who are likely to leave school early or who are at risk (McIntyre et al. 1999).

For young people who face multiple disadvantages, a potentially more effective approach to the provision of such services is a 'wrap-around' model of support. This model works by coordinating the range of services available into an individualised package that addresses the particular needs of a young person. Although more commonly used in state child and family support services (NSW Department of Community Services 2009), authorities dealing with homelessness and state education departments are adopting this holistic approach to the complex needs of some young people (see, for example, McDermott & Bruce 2010; Webb & Peever 2009; NT Department of Education and Training 2011).

## CONCLUSION

A successful transition requires young people to be adequately prepared for five key adult roles: adult worker, citizen and community participant, spouse or partner, parent, and household manager. Despite this relatively modest definition, achieving a successful transition is not always straightforward for young people because many factors affect their progress to adulthood. As we have seen, this transition has become more drawn out and more complex in recent times, with the issues confronting young people likewise becoming more complicated and less easy to predict. Early interventions that support young people through these complex times are critical.

Some of the factors affecting successful youth transitions are of an extrinsic nature, for example, family background, health, disability and the state of the economy. Others are intrinsic, for example, education and risk-taking behaviour. It is the intrinsic factors that offer the best prospects for intervention to assist young people along their transition pathways.

Arguably, most crucial of all is ensuring that young people's educational experiences are conducive to their making successful transitions. Factors promoting positive educational experiences include ensuring that students engage meaningfully with school and the school environment, have good relationships with their teachers, and maintain the networks they form with their peers and their community. Access to well-informed and appropriate careers advice also appears to encourage rewarding educational experiences. Finally, income support may be of some benefit in assisting successful youth transitions for young people experiencing financial hardship.

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