

About the research



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Education and happiness in the school-to-work transition

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Very few would argue that education does not enhance people's lives, with higher educational attainment being linked to better career paths and health. It is curious then that previous research has found that attaining higher levels of education is linked to lower levels of happiness or satisfaction with life. This would appear to be at odds with current policy promoting the value of further education. Could it be that attaining higher education sets people up to fail by encouraging expectations that can never be met?

Using data from the 1995 Year 9 cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), Mike Dockery examined the relationship between individuals' highest level of education and their self-rated happiness. He also looked at the impact of factors such as family circumstances while at school and personality traits on this relationship.

Key messages

- Undertaking vocational qualifications, such as an apprenticeship or traineeship, has a positive impact on happiness during the training period, with happiness continuing after completion.
- For university graduates, it would appear that their university days were their glory days, with the graduates' high levels of happiness declining upon completion of their qualification. Unfortunately, as the cohort is only tracked until their mid-20s, it is not possible to determine whether this is a temporary dip upon entering the labour force or a more permanent state.
- Early school leavers and youth at risk (sole parents or low-income family) experience persistent adverse impacts on their career outcomes and wellbeing.

The young people who make up the 1995 and 1998 cohorts of LSAY have all been interviewed in relatively prosperous economic times. It will be interesting to see if, and to what degree, happiness varies for later cohorts, following the adverse global economic events of late 2008. It would also be interesting to track happiness past the mid-20s to see whether the differences between apprenticeships and university graduates, for example, persist.

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