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Are we there yet?   
Overview of the Longitudinal Surveys   
of Australian Youth

Tom Karmel

*Presented at the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth research forum: Are We There Yet? Youth Transitions in Australia*

*11 April 2013, Sydney*

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### NATIONAL CENTRE FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH

### **CONFERENCE PAPER**

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# About the research

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Level 11, 33 King William Street, Adelaide, SA 5000  
PO Box 8288 Station Arcade, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia

**P** +61 8 8230 8400 **F** +61 8 8212 3436  **E** [ncver@ncver.edu.au](mailto:ncver@ncver.edu.au) **W** <www.ncver.edu.au>

## Are we there yet? Overview of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

### Tom Karmel

This presentation opened the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth research forum entitled Are We There Yet? Youth Transitions in Australia held at the Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney, on 11 April 2013. It begins with the observation that youth longitudinal surveys have a long history in Australia, dating back to the Youth in Transition study which commenced with a cohort of young people born in 1961. The latest incarnation is the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) which has tracked cohorts of Year 9 students selected in 1995, 1998, 2003, 2006 and 2009. These young people are interviewed over a period of ten years, between the ages of 15 and 25 years.

I argue that the interest in youth transitions dates back to the 1970s when the oil price shocks increased the unemployment rate significantly. Young people leaving education are new entrants to the labour market and therefore inevitably were hit hard by the downturn in the labour market. While the overall unemployment rate has fluctuated, it has never returned to the levels of the 1960s and youth unemployment remains an issue. Hence the interest in youth transitions.

One would have thought that, with over 35 years of research, we would know everything there is to know about youth transitions. But over the past 35 years the labour market has changed fundamentally, with educational participation increasing dramatically and a paucity of ‘good’ jobs for those without Year 12 and, increasingly, post-school qualifications. The world facing 20-year-olds today is not the same as the world of the 1970s. Thus, understanding youth transitions is an ongoing issue and will continue to be so unless the world we live in stagnates. Researchers will not run out of topics.

In the presentation I also make an attempt to map the breadth of topics being researched and how they have changed over the past 25 years. A bonus is a long list of research papers that look at the longitudinal youth data.

Tom Karmel  
Managing Director, NCVER

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# Are we there yet? Overview of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) follows young people from Year 9 through school and into work and life up to the age of 25 years. The program is funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and is jointly managed by the Department and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

The surveys provide a very rich set of data on background characteristics of the young person and his or her parents, school characteristics, educational participation and attainment and labour market activity, as well as topics such as aspirations and wellbeing. One element that makes it particularly valuable is the incorporation of reading and mathematics achievement tests at around the age of 15 years. (Since 2003 the test has been part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] at the age of around 15 years.) The richness of the data allows the identification of the importance of various ‘treatment variables’ on various outcomes; the panel nature of the data provides an additional bonus by allowing unobserved time-invariant variables also to be taken into account. The richness of the data, its panel nature and the time element inherent in a longitudinal survey mean that analysis based on the data gives the best chance of establishing causal relationships. This is not to say that the dataset does not have its challenges. First, it is very complicated. Second, the survey suffers from substantial attrition over the various waves. The latter means that the dataset is more suited to establishing relationships than it is in providing precise point estimates of the proportion of the population with certain characteristics.

The surveys have a long heritage and can be traced back to the Youth in Transition studies beginning with a cohort of young people born in 1961. The surveys are a public treasure and are available to all researchers through the Australian Data Archive. Table 1 sets out the various cohorts. The various organisations who have played an important role should also be acknowledged, notably the Australian Council for Educational Research and the Bureau of Labour Market Research, as well as the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and its predecessors, and NCVER.

Table 1 Cohorts of the longitudinal surveys of Australian youth

| Survey | Cohort(s) | Survey period | Age when first surveyed | Age range during survey period | Sample size |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) | Born in 1961\* | 1978 to 1994 | 17 years | 17 to 33 years | 6 246 |
| Born in 1965\* | 1981 to 1995 | 16 years | 16 to 30 years | 6 628 |
| Born in 1970\* | 1985 to 1994 | 15 years | 15 to 24 years | 5 472 |
| Born in 1975 | 1989 to 1996 | 14 years | 14 to 20 years | 5 653 |
| Australian Longitudinal Survey (ALS) | Long-term unemployed youth aged 15 to 24 years | 1984 to 1987 | 15 to 24 years | 15 to 24 years | ≈3 000 |
| Young people aged 16 to 25 years | 1985 to 1991 | 16 to 25 years | 16 to 25 years | ≈9 000 |
| Australian Youth Survey (AYS) | Young people aged 16 to 19 years | 1989 to 1996 | 16 to 19 years | 16 to 26 years | 5 350 |
| Young people aged 16^ | 1990 | 16 years |  | 1 501 |
|  | 1991 | 16 years |  | 1 146 |
|  | 1992 | 16 years |  | 1 198 |
|  | 1993 | 16 years |  | 1 088 |
|  | 1994 | 16 years |  | 1 116 |
| Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) | Year 9 in 1995 | 1995 to 2006 | 14.5 years | 14.5 to 25.5 years (average) | 13 613 |
| Year 9 in 1998 | 1998 to 2009 | 14.5 years | 14.5 to 25.5 years (average) | 14 117 |
| Aged 15 and participated in PISA# | 2003 to 2014 | 15 years | 15 to 25 years | 10 370 |
| Aged 15 and participated in PISA | 2006 to 2017 | 15 years | 15 to 25 years | 14 710 |
| Aged 15 and participated in PISA | 2009 to 2020 | 15 years | 15 to 25 years | 14 251 |

Notes: \*Follow-up survey of Australian Studies in School Performance samples.

^Added to original sample.

#Only includes those who were successfully contacted using follow-up telephone interviews at wave 1.

Sources: Australian Council for Educational Research (1997, 1996); Bureau of Labour Market Research (2005a, b); Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2013, 2012a, b, c, 2011); Nguyen et al. (2010); Thorn (2000).

The title of this forum is: Are We There Yet? Youth Transitions in Australia. Implicit in the title is a suggestion that after 35 years of research surely we understand everything there is to know about youth transitions. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I would first like to go back to the motivation behind the creation of this collection of surveys. If we go back to the 1960s the post-war experience in Australia is one of very low unemployment. The majority of young people did not complete Year 12 and jobs for school leavers were easy to obtain. Indeed, a young person could leave school before Year 12, enter a bank or the public service and begin a long and rewarding career. This all changed in the 1970s with two oil price shocks. As can be seen from figure 1, the first oil price shock caused the unemployment rate to jump from around 2% to 5%, with the rate increasing to over 6% in the second oil price shock. The point about this is that young people bear the immediate brunt of a downturn in the labour market because they are, virtually by definition, entrants into the labour market. Thus the first cohort of the Youth in Transition study were aged 15 in 1976 and the transitions of this group of young people were far more difficult than would have been the case ten years earlier.

Figure 1 Unemployment rate, Australia

Note: Quarterly data are seasonally adjusted.

Source: OECD.StatExtract.

The recession in the early 1980s and the resulting sharp increase of the unemployment rate to over 10% in 1983 was the major driver behind the creation of the Bureau of Labour Market Research in the mid-1980s and the beginning of the Australian Youth Survey. Figure 1 also shows the impact of the recession in the early 1990s. Even a period of sustained economic growth did not reduce the unemployment rate to its levels of the 1960s. The point is that youth transitions have been occurring in unfriendly labour markets for 35 years. Hence government policy continues to struggle to address the challenges that young people have in making the transition from education to work.

Figures 2 and 3 show that the youth unemployment rate has remained relatively high over the whole period, although there has been considerable cyclical variation. The figures also show that the peaks are amplified for young people, with the unemployment rate peaking for 15 to 19-year-olds at 25% (16% for 20 to 24-year-olds) in the early 1990s.

Figure 2 Unemployment rate by year (August figure) 15 to 19-year-olds

Figure 3 Unemployment rate by year (August figure) 20 to 24-year-olds

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013a).

Figure 3 Unemployment rate by year (August figure) 20 to 24-year-olds

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013a).

The second reason why the issue of youth transition remains current and cannot be ‘researched out’ is that the world has changed significantly over this period. For young people, major changes include a dramatic increase in educational participation, not just to Year 12 but in post-school education, and a collapse of young people’s jobs (perhaps with the exception of jobs in the trades for young men). Figures 4—7 plot full-time educational participation rates and full-time employment to population ratios of young people.

Figures 4–7 Full-time education to population and full-time employment to population percentages, 15 to 19-year-olds and 20 to 24-year-olds by gender, 1986–2012

Full-time education/population

Full-time employment/population

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013b)

Since the mid-1980s there has been a steady increase in educational participation, even though it is less marked for those aged 15—19 years. Most likely the level is getting close to saturation. Accompanying this increase is a decrease in full-time employment. We have seen that in 2012 the proportion of women aged 20—24 years in full-time education was almost at the level as the proportion in full-time work.

Other changes to occur include the increasing popularity of part-time work among full-time students and the phenomenon of gap years for those completing Year 12, not to mention the creation of traineeships in a wide range of occupations. As an aside, some of these changes have created an issue for the longitudinal youth surveys: age 25 now is really too young to consider that the transition phase in a young person’s life is over. Ideally, we should now survey the cohorts until age 30 (although attrition as well as the expense is an issue).

In any case, the changing nature of education and the labour market means that many of the old issues require a fresh look, in addition to new issues that arise. Researchers do not need to fear that they will exhaust the lode.

To complete these opening remarks, and as a transition to the remainder of the forum, I thought it would be useful to examine some of the work done over the past 15 to 25 years. With assistance from the NCVER library I have obtained a list of all research papers making use of Australian longitudinal data. For the period from 1995 we extracted from NCVER’s research database, VOCEDplus, all relevant papers. For the earlier period, 1985 to 1995, a Google Scholar search was undertaken to capture a sample of papers from this period. The resulting papers are listed in the appendix. While I make no claim for the list to be exhaustive, it is a pretty good sample.

From the list, I have extracted the topics of each paper and created three ‘word maps’ corresponding to 1985 to 1995, 1996 to 2005, and 2006 onwards. The word maps are shown in figures 8—10.

Figure 8 1985–1995 ‘word map’



Figure 9 1996–2005 ‘word map’

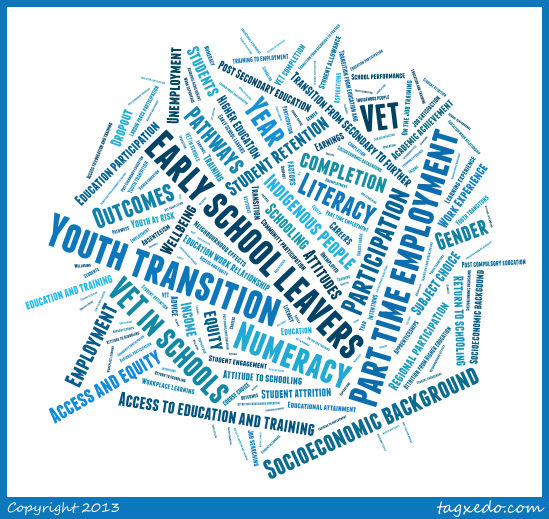
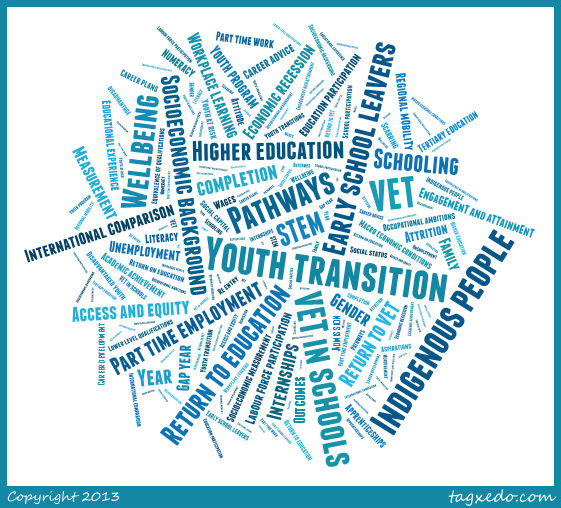


Figure 10 2006 onwards ‘word map’



In the first period, unemployment and its various dimensions were particularly important. Participation in higher education was also a focus. In the second period we have a number of papers on early school leavers, youth transitions and part-time employment (generally associated with full-time education). Youth transitions remained a priority for the last period (with considerable work on pathways which has certain similarities) but there are some new focal points such as VET in schools and papers on Indigenous people. STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) also featured in a number of papers. Of course, the key topics only form a small part of the overall work, and the breadth of topics is a feature in all periods. Indeed, an important creative aspect of research is looking at the obscure as well as the obvious.

This is all background to the forum, and I look forward to a spirited discussion on the rest of the program, as set out in table 2.

Table 2 Program of Are We There Yet? Youth Transitions in Australia

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Session | Presenter | Discussant |
| Welcome and opening | Ms Nhi Nguyen, NCVER |  |
| Are we there yet? Overview of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth | Dr Tom Karmel, NCVER |  |
| School matters: understanding their impact | Mr Patrick Lim and Dr Sinan Gemici, NCVER | [Mr Bill Scales AO](http://www.lsay.edu.au/newsevents/events/speakers.html#Bill_Scales), Chancellor of Swinburne University of Technology |
| What drives young people? Influencing student aspirations and engagement in education | [Associate Professor Kristy Muir](http://www.lsay.edu.au/newsevents/events/speakers.html#Kristy_Muir), Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales  Dr Sinan Gemici, NCVER |  |
| Who takes a gap year and why? | Associate Professor David Curtis, Flinders University | Mr John Ross, *The Australian*  Ms Talia Smith  Mr Joshua McLarty |
| All about the money: young people and their financial position | Associate Professor Chris Ryan, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, The University of Melbourne  Ms Nhi Nguyen, NCVER | Professor Kwong Lee Dow AO, Honorary Fellow, The University of Melbourne |
| **Panel discussion**  Mapping the journey to adulthood: heading in the right direction? | Facilitated by Mr Paul Barclay, ABC Radio National  (session will be recorded for the ABC radio program *Big Ideas)* | [Mr Bill Scales AO](http://www.lsay.edu.au/newsevents/events/speakers.html#Bill_Scales), Chancellor of Swinburne University of Technology  [Associate Professor Kristy Muir](http://www.lsay.edu.au/newsevents/events/speakers.html#Kristy_Muir), Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales  Dr Tom Karmel, NCVER  Professor John Buchanan, Workplace Research Centre, University of Sydney Business School |
| Closing remarks | Ms Nhi Nguyen, NCVER |  |

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Thorn, W 2000, ‘Transition Surveys in Australia’, paper prepared for International Workshop on Comparative Data on Education to Work Transitions, June, Paris.

# Appendix

## List of LSAY data-based research[[1]](#footnote-1)

| **Title** | **Authors** | **Publication date** | **Keywords for word cloud** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| The Australian National Longitudinal Survey | McRae, I | 1984 |  |
| [The influence of unemployment duration and heterogeneity on the transition from unemployment for Australian youth](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv28057) | Brooks, C; Volker, P | 1985 | Unemployment duration |
| [An analysis of factors influencing the probability of transition from unemployment to employment for Australian youth](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv20980) | Brooks, C | 1986 | Transition to employment |
| What happens to the young unemployed?: some facts from the Australian longitudinal survey | McRae, I | 1986 | Unemployment |
| Young employed and the search for work | Eyland, A | 1986 | Job searching |
| Long-term unemployed youth: who are they and do they improve their employment status? | McRae, I and Merrilees, W | 1987 | Long term unemployment |
| [Participation in education](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv40259) | Williams, T | 1987 | Participation in education |
| Youth labour market in Australia: a survey of issues and evidence | Miller, P and Volker, P | 1987 | Labour market |
| [1989 Australian Youth Survey: first results](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv34427) | Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training, Economic and Policy Analysis Division (EPAD) | 1991 | Higher education; Employment; Unemployment |
| [Labour market experience, education and training of young immigrants in Australia: an intergenerational study](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv38751) | Flatau, P and Hemmings, P | 1991 | Migration; Labour market; Immigrant; intergenerational mobility |
| An analysis of youth training in Australia 1985—88: technological changes and wages [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Chapman, B and Tan, H | 1992 | Income; Technology; Training; Technological change |
| Career interruptions among young Australian men and women [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Lewis, D and Shorten, B | 1992 | Career development; Career interruptions |
| Health consequences of employment and unemployment [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Graetz, B | 1992 | Wellbeing; Employment; Unemployment; Health |
| Human capital investment and self-selection [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Vella, F and Gregory, RG | 1992 | Workforce development; Career choice |
| Part-time employment and participation and retention in higher education [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Wooden, M, Robertson, F, and  Dawkins, P | 1992 | Part-time employment; Student retention; Participation; Higher education |
| Part-time employment: where does it lead? [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | McRae, I | 1992 | Part-time employment |
| Poverty in Australia: a study of the implications of education, household formation and the labour market experience of the young [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Bell, DNF, Rimmer, R and Rimmer, S | 1992 | Disadvantaged; Outcomes of education and training; Socioeconomic background; Poverty; Household formation |
| Predicting the long-term unemployed: a primer for the Commonwealth Employment Service [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Chapman, B and Smith, P | 1992 | Labour market; Long term unemployment |
| Some recent governmental uses of the National Longitudinal Surveys (NLS) [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Pergamit, MR | 1992 | Governance; Public policy |
| The dynamics of underutilisation of youth labour [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Ross, R | 1992 | Labour market; Youth transition |
| The dynamics of youth unemployment: a preliminary analysis of recurrent unemployment [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Junakar, PN and Wood, M | 1992 | Unemployment |
| The effect of child care costs on women's market work [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Teal, F | 1992 | Family; Employment; Gender; Finance; Child care; Gender |
| The relationship between gender roles and female labour market performance [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Vella, F | 1992 | Gender; Labour market |
| Young entrepreneurs in Australia and the United States [paper in [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117)] | Blanchflower, DG and Mayer, B | 1992 | Self employed |
| [Youth in the eighties: papers from the Australian Longitudinal Survey research project](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv35117) | Gregory, RG and Karmel, T | 1992 | Labour market; Employment |
| Entering higher education in the 1980s | Williams, T, Long, M, Carpenter, P and Hayden, M | 1993 | Higher education |
| Year 12 in the 1980s | Williams, T, Long, M, Carpenter, P and Hayden, M | 1993 | Secondary education; Year 12 completion |
| Graduating from higher education | Long, M, Carpenter, P and Hayden, M | 1995 | Higher education; Destinations |
| [Where do they go?: an evaluation of sources of data used for the monitoring of students’ destinations and other educational outcomes in Australia](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv2530) | Lamb, S , Polesel, J, Teese, R, Davies, M and Charlton, M | 1995 | Outcomes of education and training; Student definitions |
| [Completing school in Australia: trends in the 1990s](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv37583) | Lamb, S | 1996 | Student retention; Student attrition; Year 12 completion |
| [Part-time youth employment and training: evidence from the Australian Youth Survey](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv1233) | Flatau, P and Simpson, M | 1996 | Part-time employment |
| [School students and part-time work](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv32331) | Robinson, L | 1996 | Part-time employment |
| Selected data from the Youth in Transition study [paper appearing in appendix of ‘[Student pathways: a review and overview of national databases on gender equity’](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv20920)] | Long, M and Perry, L | 1996 | Gender; Post secondary education; Articipation; Gender; Equity |
| [Reading comprehension and numeracy among junior secondary school students in Australia](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv11355) | Marks, GN and Ainley, J | 1997 | Literacy, Numeracy |
| [School achievement and initial education and labour market outcomes](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv30338) | Lamb, S | 1997 | Academic achievement; Outcomes; Employment; Socioeconomic background |
| [Access and equity in vocational education and training: results from longitudinal surveys of Australian youth](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv13372) | Lamb, S, Long, M and Malley, J | 1998 | Equity; Access to education and training; Access and equity |
| [Attitudes to school life: their influences and their effects on achievement and leaving school](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv4215) | Marks, GN | 1998 | Students; Attitude; Schooling; Attitude to schooling |
| [Factors influencing youth unemployment in Australia: 1980—1994](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv11148) | Marks, GN and Fleming, N | 1998 | Unemployment |
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| [Well-being among young Australians: effects of work and home life for four youth in transition cohorts](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv22906) | Fleming, N and Marks, GN | 1998 | Wellbeing |
| [Youth earnings in Australia 1980—1994: a comparison of three youth cohorts](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv40953) | Marks, GN and Fleming, N | 1998 | Income; Employment; Earnings |
| [Curriculum and careers: the education and labour market consequences of Year 12 subject choice](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv21917) | Lamb, S and Ball, K | 1999 | Education work relationship; Careers; Subject choice |
| [Early school leaving in Australia: findings from the 1995 Year 9 LSAY cohort](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv32427) | Marks, GN and Fleming, N | 1999 | Socioeconomic background; Early school leavers |
| [Initial work and education experiences of early school leavers: a comparative study of Australia and the United States](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv22438) | Lamb, S and Rumberger, RW | 1999 | Early school leavers; Youth transition |
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| [The effects of part-time work on school students](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv9948) | Robinson, L | 1999 | Part-time employment |
| [The influence of school factors on young adult life](http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv3897) | Ainley, J and McKenzie, P | 1999 | Dropout; Unemployment; Income; Youth at risk; Student retention |
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1. I would like to thank Radhika Naidu for compiling this list. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)