

9. Looking ahead — the transition from school

By the age of 16, students are nearing the end of their secondary schooling. Of the 447 participants in the age-16 study, 27 had already left school. Most of the others planned to stay at school until the end of Year 13.

Life beyond school offers many possibilities, and we were interested in finding out how our participants saw their lives unfolding in their first year of leaving school. We were particularly interested in three aspects of their post-school life:

- their plans for tertiary study
- their career aspirations
- the support and information they get to help them plan for the future.

These three issues are important in the current youth transition landscape, which emphasises individual choice at a time when the pathways and possibilities are constantly expanding. However, students may not necessarily have been taught the skills or have the capacity to successfully navigate the options and make the required decisions.

FEELINGS ABOUT LEAVING SCHOOL

We found that in general our participants had a positive and open outlook towards leaving school. In particular, they were looking forward to:

- earning money
- having more freedom
- being able to study what they want
- making their own decisions
- meeting new and different people
- establishing a career.

However, they also saw leaving school as a challenge. In fact, many of the things students thought would be best about leaving school were also the things they thought would be hardest about leaving school.

They include:

- establishing a career
- working out what they want to do
- learning how to manage their time and money.

Female students were more anxious than male students about what life would be like once they left school. Females were concerned about things such as maintaining old friendships and starting new ones, and about practical matters such as managing their money and developing tertiary study skills.

INTENDED ACTIVITIES AFTER LEAVING SCHOOL

Students identified a range of activities they would be likely to undertake in the year after they left school.

The four most common were:

- further study
- travelling
- earning-while learning
- working fulltime

Half the students planned to undertake only one of these four options, and half said they would combine two or more of them. This suggests they were looking at different ways of following their interests, and were factoring in possible changes of direction, such as finding a new interest or failing to get into the course of their choice.

Further study

The majority of our participants — 72 percent — were planning to undertake further study

once they left school. Of those, more than two thirds (69 percent) expected to go to university, and another 19 percent expected to study at a polytechnic. Most expected to study fulltime.

Pakeha and Asian students were more likely to be planning fulltime study than Māori or Pacific students. Girls were slightly more likely than boys to be planning fulltime study.

Students from high decile schools, and those whose mothers had high educational qualifications, were much more likely to say they planned to go to university rather than another kind of tertiary institution. Students from low income families and whose mothers had low educational qualifications were less likely to aspire to any kind of tertiary study.

More than half the students expected to study more than once in their lifetime, usually to deepen their expertise in a particular area.

Travelling

About half of the students thought they would travel during their first year after school. Two quite separate groups of students were most likely to travel:

- those who were most engaged in risky behaviour
- those with university-qualified mothers.

More females (58 percent) than males (44 percent) expected to travel during their first year after school.

Earning-while learning

Relatively few students (23 percent) expected to undertake a 'learn-as-you-earn' option, such as an apprenticeship or an industry cadetship. Twice as many males than females were considering this option. This probably reflects the male domination of most apprenticeships, which tend to be in the trades area.

Working fulltime

Just over a fifth (22 percent) of students expected to work fulltime in the first year after leaving school. More males (29 percent) than females (16 percent) expected to do so, and more Māori and Pacific students (30 percent) than Pakeha and Asian students (13 percent).

FAVOURED OCCUPATIONS

Students' most-favoured occupations fell into two broad areas:

- technical and associated professional
- professional.

Students were more likely to be interested in a professional occupation if they had high cognitive and attitudinal competencies, a high number of NCEA credits, and their mothers had high educational qualifications.

Far more males than females were considering a trade occupation — 24 percent of males compared with just 3 percent of females.

Almost two thirds of students said their future career choice was 'strongly connected' or 'quite connected' to the subjects they had taken at school. About half said they thought their career choice was a job that would pay well, though relatively few said that this was the reason they were interested in it. Instead, they were more interested in a job that was personally rewarding and enjoyable.

CAREER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

We wanted to find what activities and sources of information students found most useful when they were thinking about careers and pathways from school. We asked them about a wide range of career-related activities, including things such as talking with a school careers advisor, as well as non-school-based activities such as media advertising.

They identified many of these career-related activities as useful, but not necessarily as very useful. In addition, many of the students had not taken part in most of the common school-based careers activities we listed. This is disturbing given that schools are mandated through National Administration Guideline 1.6 to provide appropriate career education and guidance for all students in year 7 and above.

For most students, families were their single most useful source of career information. More than 80 percent said that talking with their family about their future options was either 'very useful' or 'useful'.

Talking with their friends was their next most useful source of career information.

Just half of the students said that talking to teachers or a careers advisor was useful or very useful. Rather worryingly, 41 percent of students said they had never talked to a teacher or career advisor about their future options, and 45 percent had not taken part in related activities such as visiting a tertiary institution or attending a career expo.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONCEPT OF 'CAREER'

Young people are faced with many more career possibilities than their parents. They have more subjects to choose from at school, and many more tertiary institutions at which they can study. There are also many more types of career available to them, making career decisions a fundamentally more difficult proposition.

Ideas about what a career is have also started to change. More people now expect their working life to offer fulfilment and satisfaction, rather than simply being a way of earning money. People change jobs and careers more often during their lifetime, and they develop and specialise their skills. There is also much

more interest in issues such as work-life balance, flexible working conditions, and the use of fixed-term contracts rather than having a fulltime position.

We wanted to find out whether these emergent trends were reflected in the way students thought about the concept of 'career'.

We found that they did tend to see a 'job' as being different from a 'career', and that they recognised that simply having a job was not a sufficient condition for having a career.

But they were more likely to agree with traditional rather than emergent ideas about what a career is. Thus they were more likely to see a career as a job you can do well, and where you get promoted to higher positions in the same workplace, rather than as a something that allows you to travel and get work somewhere else, or to use the same skills to get different kinds of jobs in different workplaces.

The students did show a high level of agreement with two emergent career ideas. These were that a career means:

- having a qualification you can keep building on with more qualifications and experience in the same area
- being in paid work and having enough time for family friends and leisure activities.

However, we believe that the careers education currently being offered in schools means that students will struggle to get to grips with the shifts between traditional and emergent ideas about career. The new New Zealand Curriculum may help address this problem by shifting the way we think about knowledge, teaching and learning. For example, there may be potential for career decision-making skills to be taught through the key competencies.