

# **Making choices: Exploring influences on post-school career pathways**

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## **Abstract**

*Research into school students and their experiences of the world of work, both during their school years and the first few years post school, has offered some insights into some of the factors influencing the decisions young people make about their career options and pathways. This paper will explore some of the data from a research project which in itself was a follow-up study to two previous projects, one with a range of school students and one with school-based new apprentices. While the study was designed to find out the effect of workplace experiences while at school on post-school pathways, qualitative findings suggest that each individual has a unique context, story and blend of circumstances which produce the individual's pathway. This is the focus of this paper. The research also offers some valuable insights into the types of experiences, guidance and support that young people could find more useful in terms of finding out more about work and study options and possibilities.*

## **Introduction**

One of the aspects of research that lures us on to further research is the unexpected findings that extend beyond the original research questions. In this case, qualitative comments included in surveys and telephone interviews offered important insights into the approaches to employment and training of a diverse group of school leavers in the crucial decision making years immediately post school. The comments and interviews demonstrated the young capacity of the young respondents to draw upon numerous influences, experiences, capacities and predilections to plan their lives, in a way that the quantitative data alone were not able to do. The paper examines some of the findings arising from a series of three Australian research projects (Smith & Green, 2001, Smith & Wilson 2002, Smith & Green, 2005). All three projects were funded by the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation Committee, administered by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

The third project (Smith & Green, 2005), undertaken in 2004, on whose findings this paper is based, described and analysed how school students' engagement with workplaces while they are at school influenced their post-school pathways and their choices in both work and study. The participants in this final study were volunteers from the two earlier projects, so we had a deep understanding of their schoolday experiences and attitudes to assist with analysis of the data. For this paper we have utilised the data from a restricted range of questions in a mailed survey and telephone interviews. The paper does not present general findings from the project, which can be found in the full report (Smith & Green, 2005).

## **Background and literature review**

The initial study (Smith & Green, 2001), through a survey and case studies, examined both the extent and nature of Australian school students' contact with workplaces and the type of learning such contact provided. This research found that typically most

students have an opportunity to complete work experience, and that over two-thirds of students in Years 10 to 12 now have formal part-time jobs, typically working around 10 hours a week but in some cases much more. The second project (Smith & Wilson, 2002) looked specifically at school-based new apprenticeships (SBNAs) using an adapted version of the questionnaire from the first project. As the first major academic study of SBNAs, the project uncovered some interesting findings about students' views of their learning from their workplace and training-provider experiences. It also helped to map the common industry areas of SBNAs and differences among them in terms of students' experiences.

Throughout the three projects, workplace engagements were categorised under three groupings; work experience, which refers to the one- or two-week engagement in a workplace selected by the student and sponsored by the school; part time paid work, and structured work placement, such as in that normally incorporated in VET in Schools programs. Work experience is not well represented in the literature compared with VET in schools (Green & Smith, 2003), despite the near universality of work experience among Australian school students. The enthusiasm for VET in Schools has put this under-funded and at time poorly supported program under pressure with some research questioning its importance (Billett 1998) but our research suggested work experience should be retained and improved (Green & Smith, 2003). VET in Schools (VETiS), as a more recent phenomenon, has been investigated more widely. Its inception and growth have been well documented (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2004) so that the most recently available figures show that 202,935 students were enrolled in VETiS programs in 2003. This represented approximately 47 per cent of all senior secondary students (MCEETYA, 2003). VETiS has been shown to have a variety of positive results for students, including increased self-confidence and is particularly beneficial for those students who are not academically strong (Teese et al, 2004). There had been few recent studies of part-time work before the Smith & Green (2001) study. Findings from some earlier studies in Australia and the United States focused primarily on effects of school work on grades (eg Greenberger 1988) but also showed that working experience may influence employability and future earnings potential. School-based new apprentices (SBNA) are a distinctive type of part-time work, involving commencement of a contract of training (apprenticeship or traineeship) attached to a part-time job. They commenced in 1997; by 2003 there were 12,290 across Australia (NCVER, 2004). The program is a priority of the current federal government.

There is a voluminous literature on post-school pathways that often attempts to attribute pathways to experiences at school. Some studies have examined post-school pathways of school students that have had involvement in VETiS programs, such as Polesol *et al* (2004), Fullarton (2001), Porter (2006) and those undertaken by Polesol and Teese, for example, (2002). Polesol *et al* (2004) noted in a study of over 2200 school leavers in 2003 that 63% said that part-time work had been important in shaping their career decisions, although this study did not include detailed data. Other literature argues for the predominance of socio-economic status as a predictor of post-school activity (Duncan *et al*, 2005) and this is clearly supported by statistical evidence (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994 and subsequent years). The nature of the family of origin is also important (Way, 1996) in a manner beyond simple socio-economic status. In a recent study by Sue Thomson, found that subject choice was the major influence on the educational and career options open to Year 12 students after

finishing school. She also emphasised the importance of access to quality career guidance before leaving school (Thomson, 2005).

### **Research method**

The main research method was a comprehensive survey sent in late 2004 to respondents from two previous projects (Smith & Green, 2001 and Smith & Wilson, 2002) who had indicated their willingness to undertake follow-up research. The first project, which had sought information about all types of workplace engagement, yielded a database of 424 potential respondents to a follow-up survey. The respondents to the first project were drawn from 13 schools in two States and the survey was administered in schools. The second project, which was about school-based new apprentices (SBNAs), involved a mailed survey of a large sample of all SBNAs in three States, using State Training Authority databases. It yielded a database of 375 potential follow-up respondents in those three States. 70 from the first database (non-SBNAs) responded to the current survey and 56 of the latter (SBNAs) (16% response rate overall). The SBNAs were shown through a variety of statistical techniques to be a representative sample of SBNAs in those States, while the 70 respondents arising from the first survey were less representative as the original survey had attracted much higher returns from private schools than government schools.

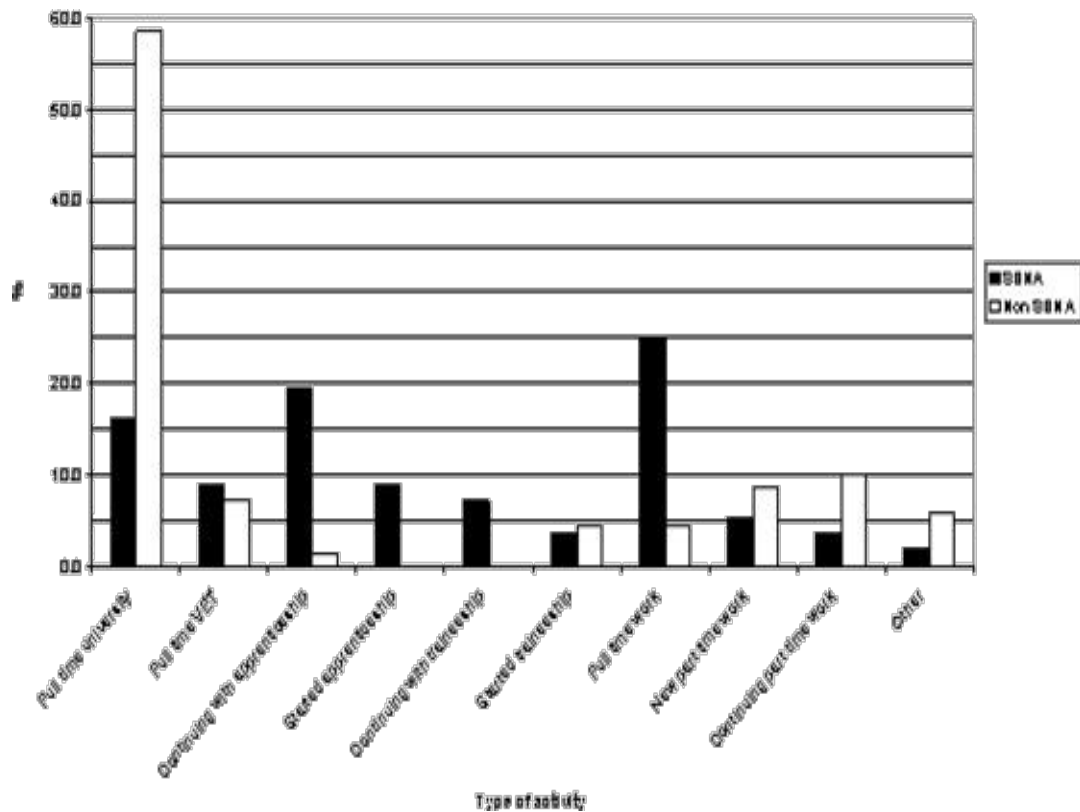
The survey data were supplemented with telephone interviews with 18 respondents who indicated their willingness to be interviewed in more depth. Of the 18 interviewed, eight were SBNAs and ten were not. The interviews were designed to follow up on some interesting emerging issues from the survey and to provide further detail about aspects of the research questions that could not be examined in great detail through the survey. Data from telephone interviews were consistent with the findings from the survey and added descriptive richness to the findings.

Responses from four questions in the 44-question survey and three questions from the 18-question telephone interview were analysed for this paper. Most of the data were analysed by whether the respondent was an ex-school-based new apprentice (SBNA) or not. Some of the analysis is undertaken according to other criteria.

### **Findings & discussion**

The vast majority of the respondents to the follow-up survey had left school in 2001 or 2002, and almost all had completed their schooling to the end of year 12 (and in a few cases Year 13). The major activity of respondents six months after leaving school is shown in Figure 1. The researchers were aware of young people's multiple work, learning and life roles and ensured that questions reflected this complexity, eschewing simplistic categories such as 'working' or 'studying'. The questions about jobs were clearly separated into jobs associated with new apprenticeships and other jobs. Figure 1 shows that the main difference in the major activity between the ex-SBNAs and the other students was that more SBNAs were in full-time jobs and far fewer were at university. It can be seen that nearly all respondents had what some researchers call a 'decent job' – few had part-time work as their major activity - or were involved with 'decent study'. (It should be noted however that the sample of non-SBNAs, due to the research method in the original project, was biased because

that private school students were over-represented. There was no such bias in the SBNA sample.)



**Figure 1: Major activity six months after leaving school**

Having given this overview we can now move onto the individual differences that characterised these young people, and can be reasonably safely assumed to characterise most young people. The respondents were asked if what they ended up doing was what they had planned. Table 1 shows the responses for the 126 young people in the survey (56 ex-SBNAs and 70 non-SBNAs). 22 altogether (17.5%) said that the activity was not what they had planned. Table 2 shows reasons given for change in plan, for these 22 young people.

**Table 1: Was the major activity what the respondent had planned?**

	SBNA		Non SBNA		Combined	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Didn't have a plan	6	10.7	7	10.0	13	10.3
Yes, it was what I had planned	37	66.1	54	77.1	91	72.2
No, it wasn't what I had planned	13	23.2	9	12.9	22	17.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 2: Reasons (from provided choices) given for change in plan**

	SBNA		Non SBNA		Combined	
	<i>No</i>	%	<i>No</i>	%	<i>No</i>	%
My results were better than I expected	2	15.4	1	11.1	3	13.6
My results were worse than I expected	1	7.7	2	22.2	3	13.6
Couldn't find employment	3	23.1	1	11.1	4	18.2
Family or personal reasons	3	23.1	1	11.1	4	18.2
Other	4	30.8	4	44.4	8	36.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100.0</b>

'Other' reasons for change in plan were as follows:

SBNA	Non SBNA
I was offered an apprenticeship - but also did work experience while at school	I thought I knew what I wanted. Listened to others' opinions too much, decided against them at last minute.
My scores weren't high enough & I decided to go to TAFE and learn about horses which is my passion	Found a good job and stuck with it
I was offered @ my job so I did it to gain qualifications	Decided to take break from study
I wanted to experience what it was like in the workforce	Started uni, didn't enjoy the course so I quit

Table 2 shows that reasons for changes in plan were both positive – such as being offered a job at a current workplace - and 'negative' – such as not enjoying a university course. But most young people (Table 1) had stuck to their plan, with slightly more SBNAs (70%) doing so than non-SBNAs (66%).

While the main focus of the project was about the effects of workplace experiences while at school, and many of the findings (Smith & Green, 2005) supported quite a strong influence, it became clear that many other factors were involved in respondents' decisions about post-school pathways. Table 3 shows the respondents' answers to provided choices about factors influencing the major activity six months after leaving school.

**Table 3: Greatest influence on the major activity being undertaken six months after leaving school**

Influence	SBNA		Non SBNA		Combined	
	<i>No</i>	%	<i>No</i>	%	<i>No</i>	%
Example of family/friend	7	12.7	10	14.3	17	13.6
A person gave advice	8	14.5	9	12.9	17	13.6
A subject at school	5	9.1	10	14.3	15	12.0
Another experience	8	14.5	6	8.6	14	11.2
Other	27	49.1	35	50.0	62	49.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Responses were fairly similar between the two groups, with the SBNAs, however, less likely to be affected by school subjects. Additional comments were possible in each of the categories. With relation to ‘example of family and friends’, the non-SBNA group mentioned the influence of parents and family in choosing a university course or in finding employment:

*‘Father completed degree’; ‘Mum went to Uni to become a teacher’.*

*Family and friends helped me get a job where they all worked.*

The SBNA group comments included ‘*major influence from parents*’ and ‘*pressure from family*’ as well as one comment demonstrating the influence of family precedent: ‘*it seemed like the natural progression*’.

Family members were cited again in qualitative comments about ‘a person that gave advice: for example, comments included ‘*parents suggested travel*’ (non-SBNA) and ‘*parents showed me a course list*’ (SBNA).

Respondents who cited a subject they studied at school as the most influential factor gave responses such as:

*I was good at art so I decided to try visual arts at uni* (non-SBNA)

*I liked the Humanities subjects so I decided to do a BA* (non-SBNA)

Some of the SBNA group had already started on work-related pathways while at school in some instances, as these comments reveal:

*I did hospitality and tourism* (SBNA)

*...metal working at my school.* (SBNA)

Most of the comments attached to ‘another experience’ related to work experience with one related to a vocational placement. The SBNA group included two who were offered permanent jobs related to their school-based new apprenticeship.

The final category, ‘Other’, brought forth a very wide range of qualitative comments including

personal preferences: *I have always loved horses and the TAFE course would allow me to get into the industry*

pragmatism: *Had finished traineeship in this field. Money was a huge factor! and No influence – just what was available for juniors at the time.*

ambition: *To get a good job you need a good education and Goal since I was young – a career path I’d always dreamed of*

expectations: *Expectations of everybody because I have always done well at school and Personal expectations*

There were many other diverse comments about the influences, opportunities and pathways once again demonstrating the multiplicity of pathways, reasons for further study and choices and potential selections. The respondents wrote more qualitative comments in this section than in any other.

The survey went on to ask a number of questions about what the young people had been doing in the two or three years since they left school. These often showed quite a

lot of movement since the original activity. Some typical responses to a question asking them to summarise what they had been doing (with five lines provided on which they could write) are reported below.

**Briefly, summarise what you have done since you left school**

SBNA	Non SBNA
<p>Worked fulltime as a scaffolder. Studied at University for one year and didn't enjoy it.</p> <p>I have trained as a professional Body Piercer. I've trained as the best in the state and now I train others</p> <p>I have done Cert III Tourism and doing a Diploma in Hospitality Management.</p> <p>Got a plumbing apprenticeship; now a 2nd year.</p> <p>Full time work (clerk); certificate trainee; temping (admin); contract (project support officer) 6 months; full time work (admin officer).</p> <p>I have finished my apprenticeship and now have a full time job as a qualified butcher. I am now training other workers.</p> <p>Travelled to Germany, worked at same job for two years after coming back to Australia, position made redundant, started temp work, asked back to old job - resigned after five months because of too much work, spent about 680 hours each year teaching people about the bible.</p> <p>Gone to TAFE 2004. Will be going to uni 2005.</p> <p>Continued my apprenticeship on boat building.</p>	<p>Travelled within Australia over a few months before starting work at a supermarket for the remainder of the year. Enrolled fulltime at university in a Bachelor of Business ... Currently in 2nd year at uni still doing business (property) course and recently employed as a property research analyst part time.</p> <p>Started a medical degree @ University of Adelaide (2nd year now), began part time job at local ice-cream store, bought second hand car...uhh...got rid of an old boyfriend and got a new one !!! ☺</p> <p>I worked for 18 months until I fell pregnant a year ago, in that 18 months I worked I got engaged and married. At the moment I have a 7 month old son and a baby due at the beginning of 2005.</p> <p>Looked for work for over a year &amp; didn't find any. So went to uni for 2 years now.</p> <p>Had a gap year, started a traineeship for certificate III in hospitality, after the year finished ended my traineeship and went to uni, am now studying civil engineering at Wollongong Uni.</p> <p>Attended Adelaide Uni - B.Environmental Science. Have had 3 casual jobs in holidays - cherry picking, pizza delivery, chicken farmhand. All terminated when work ran out. Spent lots of spare time volunteering for Scouts SA Branch activities. Also been on several expeditions around Australia - mostly bushwalking and 4WDing.</p> <p>Worked part time on checkout while studying bachelor of media at Adelaide University full time. Finishing my degree (3rd year) at end of October and just recently changed jobs into hospitality industry due to hours.</p> <p>Full time university, moved towns co-habitation with partner, some temporary casual work.</p> <p>Went to uni, dropped out; worked full time; went to an independent college and worked part time; now have a full time job.</p>

The main feature of these responses is their diversity. An interesting feature of most of the responses is the equal weighting that many respondents seemed to give to their work and their study (and in some cases, their voluntary or domestic activities). These responses gave a much more nuanced feel for the young people's lives than the simple questions about their major activity. There is some indication here that old-style descriptions of people as 'student' or 'worker' may no longer fit the way in which young people think about themselves. It is interesting, and perhaps significant, that the three apprentices in the first column are those who are among the least forthcoming about the other parts of their lives. This may reflect the easy self-

labelling that ‘being an apprentice’ allows, with all the associated weight of centuries of apprenticeship history (Lane, 1996).

Respondents were then asked to reflect on what had affected events in the two or three years since leaving school, as well as factors that influence their first post-school choices, which are reported in Table 3 above. Half of the responses to this question are presented below; the first 50% of qualitative responses in each category (SBNA and non-SBNA) received are given:

**If none of your workplace experiences that you had while at school have affected your career path and plans, then say what has most affected your career path and plans?**

SBNA	Non SBNA
<p>The influence of my school teachers &amp; their constant support throughout the years have most affected my career path &amp; plans.</p> <p>Pragmatism - I chose what I chose in order to have more options in later life and to give myself time to consider further study.</p> <p>Job availability.</p> <p>income and working conditions.</p> <p>I realised I can't work in an office. I need challenges and excitement in my work.</p> <p>Getting a job/apprenticeship after school.</p> <p>Government &amp; environmental factors affecting the viability of commercial fishing industry.</p> <p>Life plan - marriage, buying a house, planning for children.</p> <p>I am confused about my career path. I am unsure of the course I am doing now but will hopefully stay in that position for a few years. I realise that it is part of my personality to want to try a variety of things.</p> <p>Growth &amp; development; new experiences; new career path.</p> <p>Nothing.</p> <p>Going to Sydney for work.</p> <p>Family environment, high personal value and love of learning.</p>	<p>My year 12 subjects &amp; results, my general interests.</p> <p>TAFE course.</p> <p>Other than work experience my hobbies, skills &amp; talents have shaped my career path choice.</p> <p>No workplace experiences made me decide to study music! I love working with people = I thought I wanted to work in hospitality, I was wrong. Music is working closely with people also thought I love singing.</p> <p>My own intentions, experiences of family + friends.</p> <p>Personal attitudes, own choice.</p> <p>Parental guidance; my choice to attend university.</p> <p>I did not choose the job I am currently in, I was offered it &amp; stuck with it as I was offered a managerial position. But next year I plan to start studying again.</p> <p>Not finishing my HSC has made me want to go back to TAFE and redo year 11 and 12 as soon as my children are old enough.</p> <p>Desire to improve self and be successful. Ambition. NOT wanting to be like my parents.</p> <p>My love of food and cooking.</p> <p>Family members; interest in the health industry from subjects @ school; need to deal with people.</p> <p>What affected my career paths &amp; plans most was the chance of doing graphic design in yr 12 which made me realise that I wanted to do something beyond this that did not involve computers. My part time job has allowed me to realise I like dealing with people so now I am doing primary teaching at uni instead of visual arts that I did for at uni at uni the year before.</p> <p>Did sciences &amp; arts in yr 12. Sciences were too challenging so I opted to do an arts degree.</p>

Again the influences show a great deal of diversity. Responses include those related to:

- Being offered a job;
- Enjoying or not enjoying a school or university course;
- Personal interests and talents; and



- Personal and relationship issues

In addition, some respondents mentioned other people's advice. The telephone interviews gave the opportunity to probe further in this area. We were interested in family role models and the role of families in opening doors for young people. Responses to a question on these issues are as follows. (It should be noted, in relation to this table and the next, that interviews were carried out by three researchers and one of the researchers reported responses in the third person. Names are pseudonyms.)

**Is there any job a family member holds that has influenced you to do something similar, or influenced you away from what they did?**

Influenced to do similar	Influenced to do different
<p>My cousin is a chef, but actually tried to discourage me before I started it. He's happy that I'm doing it now.</p> <p>There hasn't been a big influence, but my dad is a mechanic and so I knew that I wanted to do something with my hands.</p> <p>Yes to both. I'm studying law and my father was a barrister and is a judge, and my mum is a member of the migration review tribunal. You have to practice law first to get a job like that and I think my mum's job is exceptionally stimulating. But I wouldn't consider practising law because of the hours and stress. I would prefer to have mum's job another way. I've had to live with Dad so I know I wouldn't practice as a lawyer. I started the law course because I didn't know what else to do and just because I thought it would be interesting.</p> <p>His father was a big influence as he has his own business, and Daniel described him as a business manager and owner. He 'wants to go there'.</p> <p>Mother worked with horse transport company – increased interest in horses.</p>	<p>My parents never went to uni and had average jobs. I wanted more, so in that way they did influence my desire to go to uni.</p> <p>I was interested in nursing but my mum wouldn't let me. She was a nurse. She said that physically it wasn't worth it. If I had really wanted to she wouldn't have stopped me but it put me off.</p> <p>The respondent's father was a pharmacist but he did not push her in any particular direction. Other family members had little impact re nursing choice. .</p> <p>Not really. My Dad was an electrician, and I knew that I didn't want to become a tradesman. I'm the first in my family to go to uni, so that has pushed me more. .</p> <p>My father's a fisherman. In some ways it influenced me towards fishing because I like it. But in other ways it's put me off it. The increasing regulation from the government. The lifestyle has positives and negatives. The quotas that restrict where you can fish.</p> <p>No influence at all.</p>

The young people were also asked who they talked to for advice and ideas, and what extra advice they would have liked. These responses are placed together in the following table (individuals' responses are not necessarily side by side). They are not analysed by whether the respondent was a SBNA or not. It seems from these responses that where the young people had very clear vocations they were quite happy with the advice they received. But those that were more uncertain really appreciated those who helped them, were critical of those that did not seem to have the requisite knowledge, and would have liked to be able to access more information. There were several responses that criticised the lack of advice about 'non-traditional' pathways into occupations or university courses. Family, family friends and their own friends were important both as role models and as direct sources of information. Socio-economic status is clearly indicated in some responses and affected respondents' ability to consider study or travel in a different place, or the nature of careers that were available as role models.

## Sources of advice, and extra advice that would have been useful

Who did you talk to for advice and ideas?	What (advice) would have been helpful that was not available, or that you chose not to access at the time?
<p>My school was supportive with ideas.</p> <p>I talked mostly to my mum and to friends. Our school didn't have a good careers adviser.</p> <p>The career adviser-I didn't have a whole lot of time for her. She actively encouraged VET programs and didn't spend a lot of time with the rest of us.</p> <p>I undertook testing-my mum sent me for it. It wasn't a lot of use. It told me not to be a secretary or a mechanic and I could have told myself that. It's more interesting now looking back on it.</p> <p>I went to the Adelaide uni open day. It was good but they are obviously trying to sell a product.</p> <p>I talked to family, friends, and friends that were already at uni.</p> <p>As an adviser (rather than giving information) my godmother. She's my aunt but she's a lot younger than my mum. So she's more in touch and had known me for my entire life so she knew what I'd be good at.</p> <p>A thing I have to criticise is that at XX school they didn't talk about any other options apart from uni.</p> <p>Now I know I can get into any uni course with my Diploma except those that have prerequisites. I was never told this.</p> <p>Close friends and family offered support but were not strong in providing advice. Positive feedback from work experience persons eg you seem suited to this work was probably the main factor that affected her career decision.</p> <p>No one.</p> <p>Nobody really, just friends. I found out what they were planning, then made up my own mind.</p> <p>Guidance officer was pretty incompetent. Mum has done a science degree and a Dip Ed. The course I applied for was a last minute decision. I applied late through QTAC (Queensland university admission process). It was either that or fishing or perhaps a trade. I was only 16 when I finished school.</p> <p>The same teacher who influenced and assisted me with SBNA.</p> <p>I was doing the traineeship at school, and the traineeship people just asked me if I wanted to do an apprenticeship and transferred me to the apprenticeship board and organised it all for me.</p> <p>I already had the SBNA, so went straight on to the apprenticeship without thinking about anything else.</p>	<p>It would have been good to have a good careers adviser to give us ideas about more options. It was a small school, so it should have been possible for him to get to know what we were all interested in and help us more.</p> <p>None - the apprenticeship people were pretty good about telling us everything we needed to know.</p> <p>I would have liked more info about other universities and how the courses would be taught. We weren't encouraged to think about interstate or overseas. You have to chase that up yourself.</p> <p>The respondent wanted to have more opportunities to do work experience. She and her peers learnt a lot about the workplace (both positive and negative) from work experience..</p> <p>Needed more information, eg. a list of categories, options and qualifications required in various industries.</p> <p>Probably – there's a lot of uni stuff that you don't know about back then. Information about courses doesn't give enough information on majors and subjects offered within a course. I would have picked a B.Sc instead of B. Environmental Science if I'd known more about the actual subjects. You don't really even get told until after first year at uni.</p> <p>Careers guidance officer didn't explain the OP (university admissions index) properly. Didn't tell us that you can go to TAFE and then get in, and didn't explain alternative pathways. I don't think they know. They need to be more up to date.</p> <p>They should have people from different industries to come to school to give a talk School's a bit sheltered so you don't know what's out there-although a school based traineeship is a bit of an eye opener</p> <p>More experience in the workplace – for example, through one of the SBNA placements, he met a builder buying materials and went, at his own arrangement, and did some work experience in carpentry and plans, when he has completed his current apprenticeship (motor trimming) to consider doing a mature (over 21) apprenticeship in carpentry / construction.</p> <p>A careers adviser who could tell me about options available to me (not Centrelink, as they do not really help.</p>

## Conclusion

The findings from this study provide support for existing literature about the influences on post-school activity of part-time work (Smith & Green, 2001), VET in schools (Polesol *et al*, 2004), socio-economic status (Duncan *et al*, 2005), family of origin (Way, 1996) and subject choice (Thomson, 2005). In this respect the paper does not extend knowledge significantly. Where we feel that the findings do extend knowledge is in the presentation of the qualitative comments that illuminate the complexity of the lives of young people. This is the reason why large numbers of comments have been presented in their raw form. The diversity of the young people's pathways and the complexity of each young person's individual situation, as revealed in these raw data, do not readily lend themselves to quick and easy analysis. In analysing young people's pathways one might as well analyse adults' pathways, as young people's lives are no less complex and no less subject to a range of environmental and intrinsic influences. The most that policy makers can do with such information is to attempt to provide young people with a range of services and experiences that allow maximum opportunity. Matters such as socio-economic status and relationship issues cannot always be substantially affected by provision of services, either at school or elsewhere. However there are other factors that can be affected by interventions. These include the availability of information about jobs, about university courses, about VET courses and particularly about pathways that VET courses may make available. Such information could be written or verbal or could be gained by direct contact with the workplace or educational institutions. The factors also include the availability of well-informed careers advisers at school and also outside school. Informal careers advice outside school, and direct access to workplaces and occupations, is particularly valuable in encouraging a *critical* approach to the literature or other marketing that may be available. The potential for exploring the workplace experiences of school students may provide another avenue for broadening understanding about the workforce. The lack of availability of family and family-friendly advisers to some young people could be addressed by interventions at school or by other agencies, and could help to address the obvious inequality of opportunity arising from young people's family circumstances. Finally, making the young people's comments available to careers advisers will assist in educating such professionals about the realities of post-school life for young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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