

Career advice and career plans: Sources, satisfaction and realisation

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The literature on career decision-making suggests that students make their decisions based on the degree of match between their own attributes and certain perceived characteristics of occupations and that these perceptions are generally accurate (Gottfredson, 2002). However, in Australia, there is also evidence that students have misunderstandings about the status of some occupations, including trades (Alloway, Dalley, Patterson, Walker, & Lenoy, 2004). The sources of career advice available to middle-secondary students and their satisfaction with that advice was found through a survey of a representative sample of Australian 15-year-old students. Nearly all Year 10 students reported that they had received career advice at school and they stated that they were satisfied with that advice. It was found, however, that students' career aspirations do not match well with the opportunities in the Australian labour market and that some students (a minority) are embarking on educational pathways that will not lead to the careers to which they aspire. Thus, there are several areas of mismatch in the career advice available to students, their satisfaction with it, their career aspirations and their educational plans. These discrepancies may contribute to an explanation of labour and skills shortages and suggest that there is some scope for remediation to the benefit of students and the labour market.

Background

With the levelling-off of participation rates in study past the compulsory years of school, questions have arisen about the benefits of more years of education. One issue is the relationship between extra years of schooling beyond the compulsory age and a young person's ability to make a smooth transition into the labour market. Another is the rate of attrition in post-school study. These issues have been investigated in recent research reports in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) series (Ainley & Corrigan, 2005; Dockery, 2005; Marks, 2006; McMillan, 2005; McMillan, Rothman & Wernert, 2005). They have raised concerns that young people may be choosing to remain at school and pursue further study—rather than undertaking training in the post-compulsory years through vocational education providers—on the basis of poor advice. One proposal to assuage these concerns is the improvement of career advice provided to young people while they are still at school.

Career advice in Australian schools

Previous research into students' perceptions of school-based career advice and education have suggested that the variations in services provided could be conceptualised as two opposing ends of a continuum, ranging from student-centred approaches to information-centred approaches (Walker et al., 2006). Student-centred approaches tend to be highly proactive and individualised, comprising one-to-one counselling sessions and a high level of responsiveness to the individual needs of students. Information-centred approaches, on the other hand, tend to be passive, relying on students to initiate contact and are more general in the information provided, with a focus on satisfying systems administrative requirements, such as paperwork for work experience and subject selection.

Alloway et al. (2004) and Walker et al. (2006) reported that general levels of awareness of the types of services available through career advisors were considered satisfactory overall, although students'

confidence in accessing and satisfaction with these services varied across school and students. Students in schools identified as having a student-centred approach to career advice expressed more confidence in accessing this advice than did students in schools identified as having a more information-centred approach. Younger students—those in Year 10—felt they were less well-informed about the range of services available than did older students (those in Year 12), and were less confident about accessing information (Alloway et al., 2004). Similarly, Lokan, Fleming and Tuck (1993) found that students' perceptions about the usefulness of different sources of career information differed by year level in their study of 5000 Year 9 to Year 11 students. There were also differences in usefulness according to student socioeconomic status (SES), language background and intentions to complete Year 12, although there was no difference between leavers and completers in the perceived usefulness of the information received from school career advisors.

A number of studies have concentrated on specific groups of young people and their post-school plans. Using data on young people in Years 11 and 12 who are part of The Smith Family's Learning for Life program, Beavis (2006) reported that there was some confusion among these disadvantaged students about the educational requirements of expected occupations. Nearly one-quarter of those surveyed were planning to achieve levels of education too low for their preferred jobs. There was some evidence that family expectations influenced these plans; unfortunately, the influence of school career advisors was not included in that study.

This paper examines the provision of career advice in secondary schools and its use by a cohort of Australian students who were 15 years old in 2003. The majority of these young people were enrolled in Year 10 in Australian schools at the time. This cohort, the LSAY Y03 cohort, has been followed through to 2005, and in each year young people were asked about any career advice they may have received at school during the year and how useful they perceived that advice to be. They were also asked about their plans for post-school study and their expected occupation at age 30. The paper then examines how well their educational plans match their occupational plans.

Data and measures

Data for this paper were provided by the LSAY Y03 cohort, an initial sample of 10 370 students from across Australia who were aged 15 years in 2003. LSAY is a series of surveys that focus on the progress of young Australians as they move from their mid-teens to their mid-twenties, from their initial education to independent working life. These surveys involve large nationally representative samples of young people from whom data are collected each year about education and training, work and social development. The LSAY Y03 cohort is based on the Australian sample for the 2003 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an initiative of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Participating students undertook tests in mathematical literacy, reading literacy, scientific literacy and problem-solving skills, and completed a brief questionnaire, which included scales to measure their attitudes as well as questions to collect information on their backgrounds. Further information on the Australian PISA sample can be found in Thomson, Cresswell and De Bortoli (2004).

Toward the end of 2003, members of the LSAY Y03 cohort answered a brief telephone interview, which collected additional information about school and employment. Further data on education, training and labour market activities and aspirations have been collected from cohort members in 2004 and 2005 using telephone interviews. At the time of the 2005 data collection, cohort members were 17 years old, and the majority were in Year 12. There were 8691 respondents remaining in the active sample in 2005, although not all were attending secondary school that year. A further description of the sample is available in Rothman (2007).

For reporting on types of career advice activity accessed in schools, information on Year 10 career advice was based on data from cohort members who had been in Year 10 in 2003, 2004 or 2005.

Information on Year 11 career advice activity was based on those who had been in Year 11 in any of the three years, and information on Year 12 career advice activity was based on those who had been in Year 12 in any year.

For reporting on relationships with perceptions of career advice, a smaller sample was used. This smaller sample comprised cohort members who were in Year 10 in 2003 only, and would have been in Year 11 in 2004 and Year 12 in 2005, including those who may have left school after Year 10 or after Year 11. This smaller sample eliminates issues of differences that might be attributed to changes in career advising practice between year levels over time and permits the examination of changes across time of students' perceptions. Data on career aspirations and educational plans were collected from all cohort members (10 370) in 2003 and those still in the survey in 2004 and 2005.

Measures

Data on the types of career advice students have accessed and their impressions of how useful each was is available for three years (2003, 2004 and 2005). In each of those years, cohort members who were in school during the year were asked about the type of career advice they had received, and their perceptions of that advice. Students were asked about their participation throughout the years in seven different career advice activities at school. An example of these items, from the 2005 interview, is presented in Appendix 1.

Items regarding students' perceptions of the usefulness of career advice were assigned scores from 1 to 4, with the response 'not at all useful' assigned 1 and 'very useful' assigned 4. Rasch analyses of these items showed that the logit scores of the responses were clearly separated, indicating that recoding scores onto a logit scale was not necessary. A principal components analysis then showed there was no single factor that underlay these items, indicating that each item should be reported separately and that it would be possible to create an overall score by finding the mean of the usefulness scores based on the number of activities accessed and rated.

As part of the PISA student questionnaire, cohort members were asked, 'What kind of job do you expect to have when you are about 30 years old?' They were also asked about their expected level of post-school education and training. Responses about occupations were coded to ISCO-88 then reduced to eight major occupational groups.

Participation in career advice activities

All students in the LSAY Y03 cohort participated in at least one type of career advice activity across Years 10, 11 and 12. Most activity occurred in Year 10, when 99 per cent of students accessed at least one activity. On average, Year 10 and Year 12 students reported accessing five different types of activity, and Year 11 students reported four out of seven selected activities.

The most common type of career advice activity across Years 10, 11 and 12 was the distribution of written material and handouts. In Year 10, 95 per cent of students received such material. This was followed by a talk from the school's career advisor, with 87 per cent of students reporting this activity.

More than one-half of Year 10 students (54%) reported having a talk from a representative of a TAFE institution or a university. By contrast, 76 per cent of Year 12 students reported this activity. During that same period, employer representatives spoke to 54 per cent of Year 10 students and 50 per cent of students in Year 12.

The most common grouping of activities included a talk from the school's career advisor, written materials, an individual session with the career advisor and—in Year 10—group discussion.

Table 1 Participation in career advice activities: Proportion of students receiving types of career advice in Year levels 10, 11 and 12, 2003–2005

Type of career advice received	Year 10		Year 11		Year 12	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Talk from school career advisor	6965	87	5838	69	5628	81
Written material/handouts	7657	95	7032	84	6442	92
Group discussion	6227	78	4327	51	4057	58
Individual talk with school career advisor	5076	63	4418	53	4514	65
On-line search for materials	4050	50	3978	47	4219	60
Talk from employer representative	4323	54	3791	45	3472	50
Talk by TAFE or university representative	4374	54	4613	56	5281	76

Note: Denominator is number of students in that year level (2003–2005) who received some career advice. Results are unweighted for attrition.

Perceptions of the usefulness of career advice

Students in the LSAY Y03 sample were asked to comment on the usefulness of each of the career advice activities they had accessed while at school, rating each activity as ‘very useful’, ‘somewhat useful’, ‘not very useful’ and ‘not at all useful’.

Table 2 Students who found career advice very useful, by year level

Type of career advice received	Year 10		Year 11		Year 12	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Talk from school career advisor	3010	43	1873	32	2209	39
Written material/handouts	3063	40	1996	28	2448	38
Group discussion	2000	32	1096	25	1058	26
Individual talk with school career advisor	3042	60	2457	56	2661	59
On-line search	1407	35	1300	33	1479	35
Talk from employer representative	1796	42	1442	38	1304	38
Talk by TAFE or university representative	2006	46	2009	44	2651	50

Note: Denominator is number of students in that year level (2003–2005) who received some career advice. Results are unweighted for attrition.

Members of the LSAY Y03 cohort were generally positive about the value of the career advice they received at school, although some types of advice were seen as more useful than others. In Years 10, 11 and 12, an individual conversation with the career advisor was perceived as the most useful. For example, in Year 10, 60 per cent of students stated the conversation was ‘very useful’. Group discussion was seen as the least useful at all three year levels.

Relationships between perceptions of usefulness and student background and school-based factors

The relationship between how useful cohort members perceived career advice at school and a number of background factors highlighted some significant differences, but the overall influence of these factors is extremely small. Gender and socioeconomic status had small, significant influences on perceptions of usefulness, but explained less than 1 per cent of the variation in usefulness scores.

Some school-based factors also had an influence on how useful students found career advice, particularly those related to school climate. In addition, cohort members who found career advice useful also reported that they were influenced by their teachers and career advisors when considering the type of work they would like to do after school.

Academic achievement—as measured by students’ performance on PISA tests in mathematical literacy, reading literacy, scientific literacy and problem-solving skills—was statistically significant,

with lower-achieving students reporting that career advice was more useful, although the contribution of this factor was very small.

One of the strongest associations was between perceptions of the usefulness of career advice and the number of career advice activities accessed during the year. As young people participated in more activities, they found career advice overall to be more useful.

There was very little difference between schools in students' perception of the usefulness of career advice. Nearly all of the variation—and only a small proportion of that variation could be accounted for—is because of differences between students.

Career aspirations and educational plans

The first part of this paper has been concerned with students' participation in and perception of career advice at school. In this section, students' career aspirations and their educational plans are compared. In addition, for those who had left school without completing Year 12, their main activity (whether study, employment, unemployment or non-engagement) was compared with their aspirations to assess whether they are on track to realise their aspirations.

School non-completion and post-school plans

Young people were asked, at age 15, to indicate what type of job they expected to have at age 30 and what level of education and learning and work activities they planned upon leaving school. It is to be hoped that young people make career choices that are consistent with opportunities in the labour market, and that they know what post-school study may be required to meet their goals.

The occupations nominated by young people were coded using the ISCO-88 standard. For the analyses presented in this section, eight major occupational groups were recognised.¹ They are shown in Table 3, along with the percentages of the current labour force (all ages) employed in each group (column 2) and the percentages of young people nominating careers in each group (column 3). Also shown in the table are the percentages of young people who expected to have a job in each of the occupational categories and who did not complete Year 12 at school (column 4) and who neither completed school nor embarked upon an alternative vocational program (column 5).

Table 3 Young people's choices of ISCO major occupational types by non-completion status

Major occupational group ^a (ISCO-88)	Percentage of current workforce in category	Percentage of young people choosing the group	School non-completion rate as a percentage of occupational category	Alternative non-completion rate as a percentage of occupational category
Manager, senior administrator	8	6	15	7
Professional	20	46	8	4
Associate professional, technician	13	20	12	6
Advanced clerical	4	1	28 ^b	12
Service, sales	16	10	32	13
Trades and related occupations	13	9	46	15
Plant/machine operators	9	<1	50	20
Labourers and elementary occupations	18	7	21	11
Total (as % of all young people)	100	100	16	7

Notes: a. ISCO categories mapped onto major ASCO groups. Low frequency groups merged.

b. Figures shown in grey are based on low (<30) cell frequencies.

¹ In Australia, the tenth major group of ISCO-88, jobs in the armed forces, are located within other major groups according to the level of each particular military role.

A notable feature of Table 3 is a mismatch between students' career aspirations and current labour market opportunities. In an evolving labour market in which some categories of work are declining — such as manufacturing — a degree of mismatch can be expected. However, the extent of the mismatch is quite large. For example, 46 per cent of young people surveyed indicated they expected to be in a professional occupation by age 30. However, ABS (2007, p. 48) data show that approximately 20 per cent of the current labour force is employed in these occupations. There are similar mismatches in associate professional occupations. Conversely, 18 per cent of these young people expect to have clerical, sales or elementary occupations, whereas these categories make up double that proportion of the current labour force.

Clearly, young people's occupational aspirations are ambitious. The direction of these mismatches is consistent with status seeking, one of the factors identified in Gottfredson's (2002) theory of career selection. Based on the current distribution of occupations, many young people will not realise their career aspirations. This suggests that career education needs to focus more explicitly on the emerging labour market structure and its likely opportunities. These are specific career competencies identified in the Australian Blueprint for Career Development (Haines, Scott, & Lincoln, 2006). It also suggests that educational provision needs to be broad enough to accommodate young people's career aspirations, while recognising that young people will adjust their goals as they gain further information about labour market requirements and their fit to it.

Are young people on track to realise their occupational goals?

The final two columns in Table 3 provide indications of the extent to which young people are on a trajectory that will lead towards the achievement of their occupational goals. For the professionally-oriented group, since they will require a university degree, school completion is the relevant indicator. Eight per cent of this group have left school without completing Year 12 and have deviated from their goal. For the associate professional or technician group, completion of school or a vocational equivalent is the relevant indicator. For this group, six per cent appear to have deviated from an educational path that would lead to their desired occupation. Among those whose employment goals include clerical, sales and service occupations, 13 per cent have ceased involvement in education and training. Among skilled crafts and trades aspirants, 14 per cent have ceased to be involved in education or training that will enable them to achieve their goals. Of the final two occupational groups, 12 per cent have ceased involvement in education or training and seven per cent (not shown in the table) are not fully engaged in a combination of education, training or work.

The data in Table 3 are based on activities at age 17. It is likely that some of the young people who have left education and training will return to it. Nonetheless, some tentative conclusions are warranted. Most young people are on initial trajectories that are consistent with their desired occupations at age 30. Between 6 and 14 per cent of the cohort, however, have deviated from a path that will enable them to realise their occupational goals.

Planned post-school pathways to work

Because of the small proportions of young people nominating occupations in some groups, notably clerical, agriculture and fisheries, and plant or machine operators, some of these groups were combined for subsequent analyses. For each combined ISCO group, the proportions of young people nominating particular post-school activities are shown in Table 4. The match between ISCO major groups and post-school education and training activities is expected to be approximate because some major groups are quite diverse. The focus of this section is on the occupational category to which

young people aspire, so both school completers and non-completers have been included in the analysis.²

Table 4 Planned post-school education and training activity by ISCO major occupational group of desired job at age 30 (row percentages)

ISCO group	Higher education	Apprenticeship	Traineeship	Other VET	Look for work	Defence forces	Travel	Don't know/ Other
Manager, senior administrator (6%)	55	7	1	18	8	1	2	7
Professional (46%)	79	3	0	7	4	0	2	5
Associate professional, Technician (20%)	56	6	2	17	8	2	2	8
Clerical, Service, Sales (11%)	21	18	5	30	13	5	1	7
Skilled craft, trade (9%)	11	52	4	12	13	1	1	5
Plant operator, elementary (8%)	48	10	1	10	12	0	2	17
Total	57	11	2	13	8	1	2	7

Notes: Row percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Figures shown in grey are based on low (<30) cell frequencies.

The ISCO standard recognises four broad levels of training, but these levels do not correspond closely to the structure of post-school training in Australia. For this reason, planned post-school activities — attending university, getting an apprenticeship or traineeship, doing a TAFE or other training course, and seeking work (without further education or training) — have been used.

Joining the defence forces, travelling and other activities account for only three per cent of planned activities, but seven percent of young people do not know what they will do in order to realise their vocational goals. The proportion of those young people intending to seek plant or machine operator or unskilled work who do not know what further learning they will do is rather high at 17 per cent. That almost half of this vocational group plan to undertake a higher education course is surprising as this appears to represent an over-investment in human capital formation.³ This major group in the classification includes those people who expect to be engaged in home duties at age 30, and many of these may plan to gain advanced educational qualifications, work for a period and, by age 30, have begun to form their own families.

The overall educational plans reflect some deviations from the pattern that can be expected for the cohort. It is likely, based on the post-school activities of recent cohorts, that fewer than half the cohort will enter higher education. The proportion planning an apprenticeship corresponds closely with expectations, but it is likely that many more than the proportions shown will do traineeships and other VET programs. About one in ten cohort members will likely do a traineeship and about one in five will likely undertake a non-apprenticeship VET course.

Four out of five young people who hope to have professional jobs by age 30 plan to do a university course. Since a university course is a minimum requirement for most professional occupations, it appears that 20 per cent of the cohort either do not know what the educational requirements are for their desired occupations or are embarking on trajectories that are unlikely to lead to the work they want.

² The ISCO standard does not recognise any particular level of training associated with the legislator, senior official or manager major occupational group, so no comment is offered about the appropriateness of the post-school activities planned by this group.

³ The issue of over investment in education receives more attention in European literature – where it is called over-education – than it does in Australia (e.g. Schatteman & Verhaest, 2007).

Of the young people who plan to have technical or associate professional occupations, a rather high proportion (56%) are planning a university education, and perhaps too few are planning forms of apprenticeship or non-apprenticeship vocational education and training. Approximately 20 per cent of this group of young people either do not know what education and training path to follow or have plans that are unlikely to lead them to their occupational goals.

Young people who plan to work in the clerical, sales, services and skilled trade areas almost certainly need at least an AQF certificate level 3 qualification. Although just over half of those who plan to pursue a trade career intend to undertake an apprenticeship, this figure should be substantially higher than the 56 per cent shown for apprenticeships and traineeships. As seen for the professional and associate professional groups, approximately 20 per cent of the group appears to be planning a post-school education and training program that is unlikely to enable them to realise their vocational goals.

The situation for plant and machine operators is less clear. Almost half of this group are planning a university education. While this may be applauded as a commitment to a liberal education, it does not represent efficient allocation of resources for the individual or the community.

Two types of mismatch can be identified. Many young people are planning a university education, and for many this represents an over-investment in education. However, it does appear that approximately 20 per cent of cohort members are either unsure about what is required to realise their goals (7%) or plan to undertake post-school activities that are not consistent with their occupational intentions (13%).

These mismatches assume that the desired occupational category is realistic. It is argued above that this is not so for a substantial proportion of the cohort and that more young people are hoping to enter high status occupations than there are positions available. Conversely, fewer young people plan on entering lower status jobs than are required. Even with the aspirational bias towards high status jobs, educational aspirations are high. It is very likely that the process of compromise and adjustment will continue as these young people continue their education and labour market explorations. For example, we know that of the 40 per cent of young people who enter higher education, about 14 per cent will withdraw and that another 13 per cent will change their courses (McMillan, 2005). Similarly, we know that between one-third and two-thirds of apprenticeship commencers (depending upon occupation) will cancel their programs (Ball & John, 2005), but that some of these will transfer to other programs, including other apprenticeships (Curtis, 2006).

Two expressions of status bias are apparent, first in career aspirations and then in educational plans. A likely lack of job satisfaction is one of the difficulties that may arise from this status bias. However, a more serious problem confronts those young people who do not know what the requirements of their desired occupation are. They may embark on an educational pathway that will not enable them to realise their goals, or leave a pathway that could have led to their desired occupation. For both groups, but particularly for the latter, interventions aimed at providing better career information, including the availability of various occupations and the educational pathways that lead to them, are required.

Advice, Aspirations and Plans: A Paradox

The data presented in this paper reveal that most students have participated in a range of career advice activities at school. Over 80 per cent of young people have listened to a presentation by a school-based career adviser or have received written career information. Students are most satisfied with career advice in the form of individual consultation with a school-based career advisor. Two-thirds of students reported experiencing this form of advice and two thirds of them were very satisfied with it. Talks by career advisers were the most common form of career advice, but fewer than 40 per cent of students rated this as very satisfactory. The results reveal a generally favourable view of the quality of the career advice that young people receive at school.

If the career advice was effective, independently of it being received favourably by students, closer matches between career opportunities and students' occupational goals might be expected. Further, a closer match could be expected between students' occupational aspirations and educational plans so that there is a better prospect that students' career goals would be achieved. We find, however, that students' career aspirations are ambitious. 'Aiming high' is laudable, and students' career choices are certainly not set in concrete at ages 15 to 17. Moreover, as Gottfredson (2002) indicates, career choices are the result of a continuing process of circumscription, selection and compromise. The process of compromise will continue for these students as they complete school, move into post-school education and training programs and make an initial transition into the labour market. It seems, however, that the process could be assisted by career advice that focuses on existing labour market opportunities and on the changes that can be expected in the structure of the labour market. Further, specific attention to the educational requirements of occupations may improve the match between career aspirations and educational plans.

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Appendix 1: Career advice questions used in LSAY

Box 1 LSAY questionnaire items regarding career advice, used from 2003 to 2005

A23	Now some questions about careers advice at school. During 2005, have you done any of the following at your school?		
	a Listened to a talk from the school's career advisor?	Yes	No
	b Received hand outs or written material about careers?	Yes	No
	c Taken part in a group discussion about careers?	Yes	No
	d Spoken individually to the school's career advisor?	Yes	No
	e Looked on-line for career guidance or advice?	Yes	No
	f Listened to a talk by an employer representative?	Yes	No
	g Listened to a talk by someone from a TAFE or University?	Yes	No
A24	FOR EACH 'YES' ASCERTAIN AS BELOW		
	a How helpful was the talk from the school's career advisor? Was it ...(READ OUT)		
	b How useful were the hand outs or written material? Were they ...(READ OUT)		
	c How useful was the group discussion? Was it ...(READ OUT)		
	d How useful was your conversation with the career advisor? Was it ...(READ OUT)		
	e How useful was the on-line career guidance or advice? Was it ...(READ OUT)		
	f How useful was the talk by the employer representative? Was it ...(READ OUT)		
	g How useful was the talk by the TAFE or University representative? Was it ...(READ OUT)		
	1. Very useful		
	2. Somewhat useful		
	3. Not very useful		
	4. Not at all useful		