



# PATHWAYS, ENGAGEMENT AND TRANSITIONS:

Initial post-school transitions  
among young people  
experiencing disadvantage

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### BACKGROUND AND THE PATHWAYS, ENGAGEMENT AND TRANSITIONS STUDY

COVID-19 has particularly impacted young Australians' educational and employment experiences since early 2020. In July 2022, youth unemployment and underemployment remained high at 7.0 percent and 15.0 percent respectively. These rates, however, are not merely a feature of COVID-19 and have existed for over a decade. Young people are also highly vulnerable to long-term scarring effects from entering the labour market at times when it is more difficult to get into work, such as during COVID.

Young Australians experiencing disadvantage are particularly at risk of poorer educational and employment outcomes, and this is exacerbated by economic uncertainty. This has long-term impacts on many aspects of their lives, including income, housing, health and wellbeing, family formation and community connectedness.

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study focuses on the experiences of young people experiencing disadvantage. It aims to understand their pathways through work and study over time, the factors that influence these pathways, and what more could be done to strengthen young people's post-school outcomes. A particular strength of the PET study is that it is hearing directly from young people on these matters. Over three years (2021–2023), PET is following two cohorts of young people experiencing disadvantage. These young people were in Year 10 or Year 12 in late 2020 and on The Smith Family's long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*.

The study is collecting a range of data through:

- Three surveys in 2021, 2022 and 2023 respectively.
- Three interviews with a sub-group of 60 young people who completed the survey, in 2021, 2022 and 2023.
- Combining this new data with information collected since these young people began on *Learning for Life*.

This is the first PET publication and focuses on the young people who were in Year 12 in 2020. It draws on survey responses from over 1,500 young people and 38 interviews. Young people

from all states and territories participated in the survey, with 15 percent being from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Just under 30 percent lived in non-metropolitan areas and over a third had a health or mental health condition.

#### Young people's participation in work and study post-school

The majority (75 percent) of young people surveyed were engaged in work and/or study in the year after leaving Year 12. Around half (52 percent) were fully engaged (35 hours a week), and 23 percent were partially engaged (less than 35 hours a week). A further 18 percent were looking for work, volunteering or working in an unpaid internship or their family's business. Only seven percent were not participating in any of these activities.

Young people's pattern of engagement varied across characteristics such as Indigeneity, whether they had a health or mental health condition and their Year 9 English grades. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were much more likely than non-Indigenous young people to be participating in work only, and to not be studying.

Over half (53 percent) of all young people in the survey were working and a substantial proportion, including half of those working part-time, would prefer to work more hours. Among those in a job, 39 percent had looked for a new job in the four weeks prior to the survey. These patterns suggest that the jobs that many of these young people are in soon after leaving school are likely to be temporary roles, that ideally serve as stepping stones to others more aligned to their career aspirations.

Of the small group of young people who were not engaged and not looking work, the reasons influencing this include a health or disability issue, they were planning to study, or they lacked the resources to look for work.

The survey highlights a diversity of work and study patterns for young people experiencing disadvantage and these may lead to different longer-term employment and life outcomes. The data highlight that early academic indicators such as Year 9 grades are strongly linked to post-school study pathways, but these links are not absolute. There is a substantial minority of students who were struggling academically in Year 9, who are pursuing study post-school.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were much more likely than non-Indigenous young people to be participating in work only, and to not be studying.

## Enablers to completing Year 12 and transitioning to work and study

Young people identified several factors that helped them decide on, and work towards, their post-school pathway including:

- Support from a range of sources, particularly family and friends, as well as non-government organisations
- Work exposure, VET study and being able to try different career options while at school
- Careers support while at school.

Most young people surveyed (86 percent) recalled receiving careers support while at school and just over half of this group (55 percent) found this support helpful.

## Barriers to successful transitions

Young people identified several barriers to them successfully transitioning post-school including:

- The COVID-19 pandemic
- Limited study and work options in regional areas or for some occupations
- Difficulties in applying for post-school study and being first in their family to undertake such study
- Mental health issues.

## Satisfaction with life

Sixty two percent of females surveyed and 68 percent of males, rated their life satisfaction as six out of 10 or higher, with 30 percent and 40 percent respectively rating it at eight out of 10 or higher. Most attributed their optimism to a combination of factors, including attainment of study goals, such as completing Year 12, greater freedom and independence, their social support networks, and embarking on a pathway linked to their 'passion'. A number described how they enjoyed being treated as adults.

For the most part, those studying had positive experiences and a number were enjoying working and the financial independence that came with it. For those who had a less optimistic outlook, some were trying to work out their goals and purpose in life and some were dealing with setbacks, such as not being able to study in a field that would lead to their preferred career.

## Strengthening post-school transitions

Young people participating in the first year of the PET study made a number of recommendations on how to strengthen the post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage including:

- More access to **comprehensive careers advice at school**, including in the middle years of school and outside of critical periods (for example subject selection, applying for post-school study), and **transition support** in the period after leaving school.





- More **personalised, one-to-one advice from careers staff**, with a focus on exploring what a young person wants to do in life and options for them to achieve their goals, including more frequent support for those who do not have specific goals.
- A **broader approach to careers advice**, including information about labour markets, employment pathways, skills that will be in demand in the future, alternative pathways and support to develop a range of options in case they face difficulties getting into their first choice.

Young people wanted more opportunities to study VET subjects at school and post-school, engage in work experience placements and be exposed to the world of work while at school.

- **Connecting young people to mentors**, internships and older students to help inform their career planning.
- Greater **individualised support**, including early intervention, for **students who are struggling** with academic and/or personal issues.
- Support to develop **self-confidence** and other **life skills**, including how to seek help, seize opportunities and learn from their mistakes.

Other recommendations which emerge from the data are:

- Increased opportunities for young people to study **VET subjects** at school and post-school, engage in **work experience** placements and be exposed to the **world of work**, while at school.
- Greater exposure to **apprenticeships** and **traineeships** and what to expect when a young person is the **first in their family** to participate in post-school study.
- Strategies that support **family members'** access to up-to-date labour market, education and training information, and how they can support young people to develop their goals and plans to achieve them.
- More focused support, including with careers, for young people experiencing **mental health issues**.



## INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has particularly impacted young Australians' educational and employment experiences since early 2020 (Kabatek, 2020). Schools and higher education institutions moved to online and hybrid forms of learning, with disruptions persisting through 2021 and 2022. Youth unemployment and underemployment<sup>1</sup> reached 16 percent and 20 percent respectively in 2020 and in July 2022, they remained at 7.0 percent and 15.0 percent respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

However, high rates of youth unemployment and under-employment are not merely a feature of COVID-19. Youth unemployment has persistently been around double that of the overall working population for more than a decade. In 2019, in advance of COVID, the youth underemployment rate was 18 percent (Walsh et al, 2021). Australian research highlights that young people are highly vulnerable to long-term scarring effects from entering the labour market at times when it is more difficult to get into work (such as after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and during COVID), with negative longer-term effects on their future labour market participation and income (Borland, 2020; e61 Institute, 2022).

Young Australians experiencing disadvantage are particularly vulnerable to poorer educational and employment outcomes, and this is exacerbated in times of economic uncertainty. The 2016 Census found that at age 24, only half (51 percent) of this group were engaged full-time in work, education and training, compared to 82 percent of their peers from advantaged backgrounds (Lamb et al, 2020). The gap remains as large at age 29, highlighting the persistence of this challenge. At age 24, young Australians experiencing disadvantage are also much more likely to be not engaged in any work, education or training (32 percent), compared to seven percent of their advantaged peers (Lamb et al, 2020). This has flow on effects to many aspects of young peoples' lives, including income, housing, health and wellbeing, family formation, as well as societal-wide dimensions such as community connectedness (Education Council, 2020).

Youth unemployment has persistently been around double that of the overall working population for more than a decade.

## THE PATHWAYS, ENGAGEMENT AND TRANSITIONS STUDY

A better understanding of what happens to young people in the initial transition period after they leave school and how their earlier experiences at school influence this, can help shape policies and programs that better support young people's post-school outcomes, particularly for those experiencing disadvantage.

Few Australian studies focus on the post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage, how these pathways unfold over time, or the factors that influence decisions around further study, work and training. The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study sets out to address this gap by following, over three years (2021–2023), two cohorts of young people experiencing disadvantage. It includes young people who were in Year 10 or Year 12 in late 2020 and were on The Smith Family's long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*.<sup>2</sup>

The PET study aims to:

- Understand the pathways young people experiencing disadvantage take as they move through and beyond the latter years of school
- Explore the factors that influence these pathways
- Identify what more can be done to strengthen the post-school outcomes of young people experiencing disadvantage.

Hearing directly from young people is a particular strength of the PET study. It is collecting a range of data including through:

- Three surveys, in the first half of 2021, 2022 and 2023 respectively.
- Three interviews with a sub-group of 60 young people who completed the survey, conducted mid-year in 2021, 2022 and 2023.
- Combining this new data with information collected by The Smith Family since these young people began participating on *Learning for Life*, such as demographic, school attendance and achievement data.

By surveying and interviewing the same group of young people over three years<sup>3</sup> the PET study provides a unique opportunity to better understand the dynamics of young people's pathways over time, what changes and what stays the same, and what influences these pathways.

This publication focuses on the young people who were in Year 12 in 2020 and examines how they moved through the latter years of school and navigated pathways in their first year post-school.<sup>4</sup> It uses information from the 2021 survey and interviews to address three key questions:

1 Youth underemployment is where young people (aged 15-24 years) want and are available for more hours of work than they currently have.

2 All young people on *Learning for Life* are living in a low income family. More information on the program is available at <https://www.thsmithfamily.com.au/programs/learning-for-life>

3 That is, taking a longitudinal (over time) rather than a cross-sectional (point in time) approach.

4 This report is the first of several publications from the PET study. Subsequent publications will examine the longer-term experiences of both the Year 10 and Year 12 student cohorts.

1. What are the initial experiences and destinations of young people in their first year after leaving school?
2. What factors influence young people's experiences and destinations in this initial transition period?
3. What helps or hinders young people successfully navigating their transition into work and study pathways?

The timing of the 2021 survey and interviews means that many participating young people – but not all – were experiencing COVID lockdowns that affected their work and study activities during 2021.

### Characteristics of the Year 12 young people

A total of 2,177 young people who were in Year 12 and on the *Learning for Life* program in late 2020, were invited to complete the first PET survey. The survey included questions about school experiences, careers support at school, post-school study and work experiences, caring responsibilities, life satisfaction, and health and wellbeing.

Overall, 1,693 young people completed the survey, giving a strong response rate of 78 percent. This publication reports on responses from 1,503 of these young people.<sup>5</sup>

Key characteristics of these young people include:

- Over half (55 percent<sup>6</sup>) are female and 45 percent male
- Fifteen percent are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- Just under three-quarters (71 percent) lived in metropolitan areas, and 29 percent in non-metropolitan areas

Three-in-four of the young people surveyed were either fully or partially engaged in work and/or study in the initial period after leaving Year 12.

- All states and territories were represented with around one-quarter living in each of New South Wales and Victoria, one-fifth in Queensland, and around one-in-ten in each of South Australia and Western Australia. Tasmania and the two territories comprised six percent
- Over one-third (38 percent) indicated they had a health or mental health condition
- 12 percent had not completed Year 12 at the time of the survey.

The young people who completed the survey were broadly representative of the cohort of Year 12 students who were part of the *Learning for Life* program in 2020.<sup>7</sup>

Thirty eight of the Year 12 young people who completed a survey also participated in an hour long interview which explored their experiences of school, post-school activities (work, study, or other activities), sources of support, advice and information, living arrangements, and health and wellbeing. Twenty one of these young people are female and 17 are male. Seven of these young people are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people.

### YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN WORK AND STUDY POST-SCHOOL

The PET survey assesses young people's engagement in work and study post-school. Young people who are engaged for 35 hours or more per week are defined as *Fully Engaged* and those working or studying for fewer than 35 hours a week, as *Partially Engaged*. Young people who are not participating in any paid work or study are defined as *Not Engaged*, though they may be looking for work or volunteering.

The majority (75 percent) of young people surveyed were either fully or partially engaged in work and/or study in the initial period after leaving Year 12 (see Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> Around half (52 percent) were fully engaged, while a further 23 percent were partially engaged. One in four (25 percent) were not engaged, however most of this group were looking for work or volunteering. Only seven percent of young people were not participating in any of these activities.

5 Responses from young people who were still completing Years 12 or 13, or who were receiving a Carer or Disability payment and could not be engaged full-time in work or study, are not included in the analysis for this publication. The latter group will be a focus of subsequent analysis. Responses from a proxy who completed the survey on behalf of the young person are also excluded.

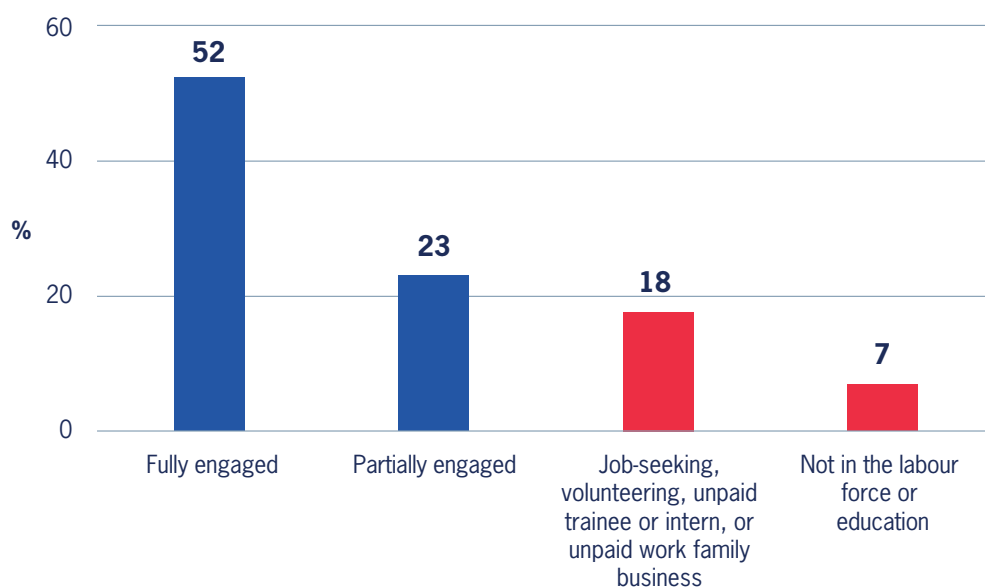
6 Throughout this publication all figures are rounded to the nearest whole number, therefore percentages in some cases may not add to 100.

7 The survey data are weighted to ensure the characteristics of young people who completed the survey are representative of the characteristics of the cohort invited to participate.

8 There are no directly comparable national data with PET data. The closest Australian Bureau of Statistics data reports engagement for a broader age range (15–24 years), includes all levels of socioeconomic status, and reports are provided at the household level (possibly by a parent or carer).



**Figure 1: Engagement in work or study in the first year after leaving Year 12**



Note: Participants looking for work, volunteering, unpaid trainee or intern, unpaid work in family business and those not in the labour force or education, together make up the 25 percent of young people who were not engaged.

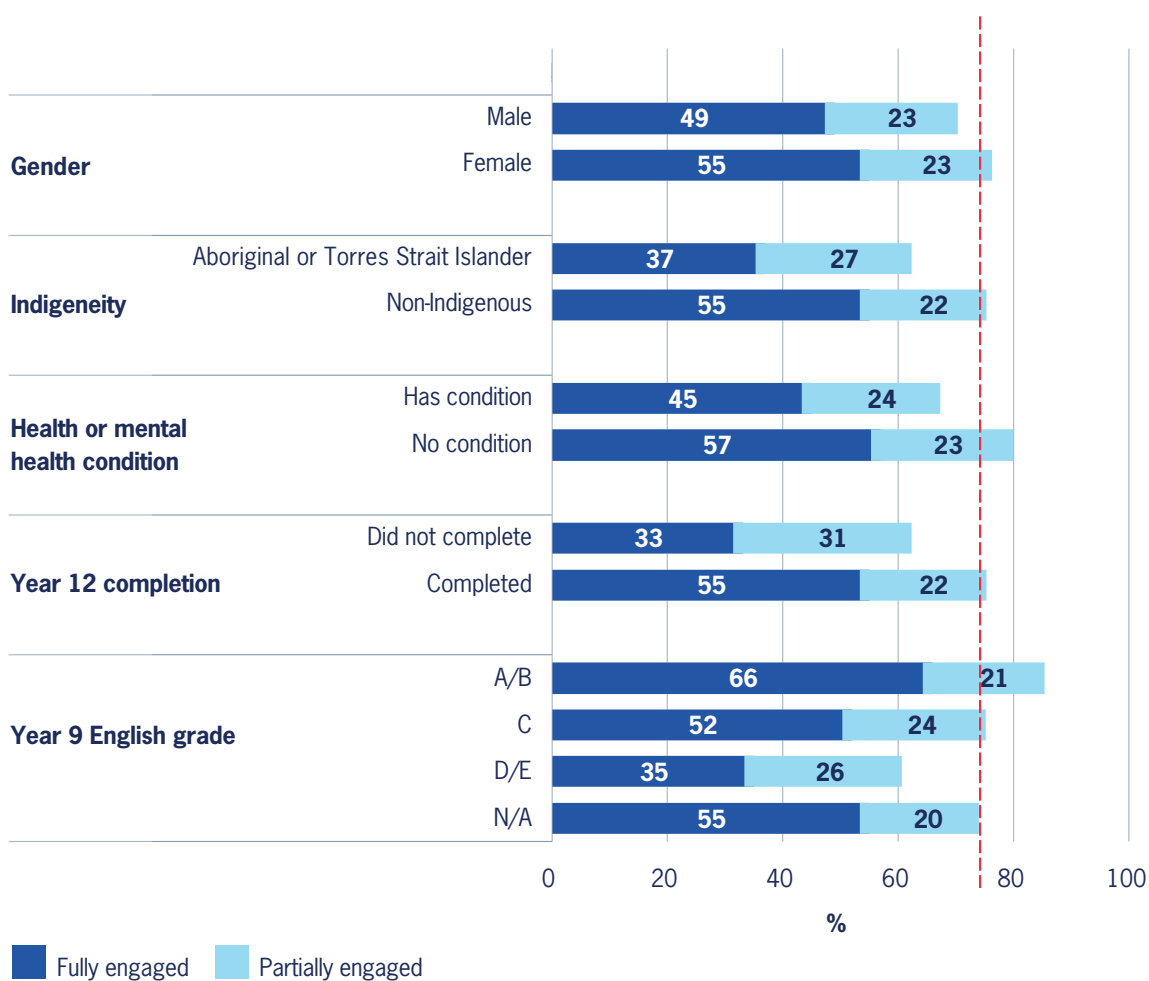


## Which groups of young people have higher rates of engagement?

Engagement outcomes were high overall, but some groups of young people had higher rates than others (see Figure 2). A slightly higher proportion of young females than males were engaged (78 percent compared to 72 percent), as were non-Indigenous young people compared to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people (77 percent compared to 64 percent). Young people without a health or mental health condition were more likely to be engaged than their peers with these conditions (80 percent compared to 69 percent). Young people without a health or mental health condition were more likely to be engaged than their peers with these conditions (80 percent compared to 69 percent).

Engagement outcomes were substantially higher among young people who received an A or B grade in Year 9 English, compared to those with a D or E grade (87 percent compared to 61 percent). Engagement was also higher for young people who had completed Year 12 (77 percent) compared to those who had not (64 percent). These post-school patterns of engagement reflect previous research showing that some young people who struggle as they move through school may need additional support to complete Year 12 and identify suitable post-school pathways (The Smith Family, 2018).

**Figure 2: Engagement outcomes by characteristics of young people**



Note: The red line represents the proportion engaged among all young people who completed the survey. N/A means data is not available.



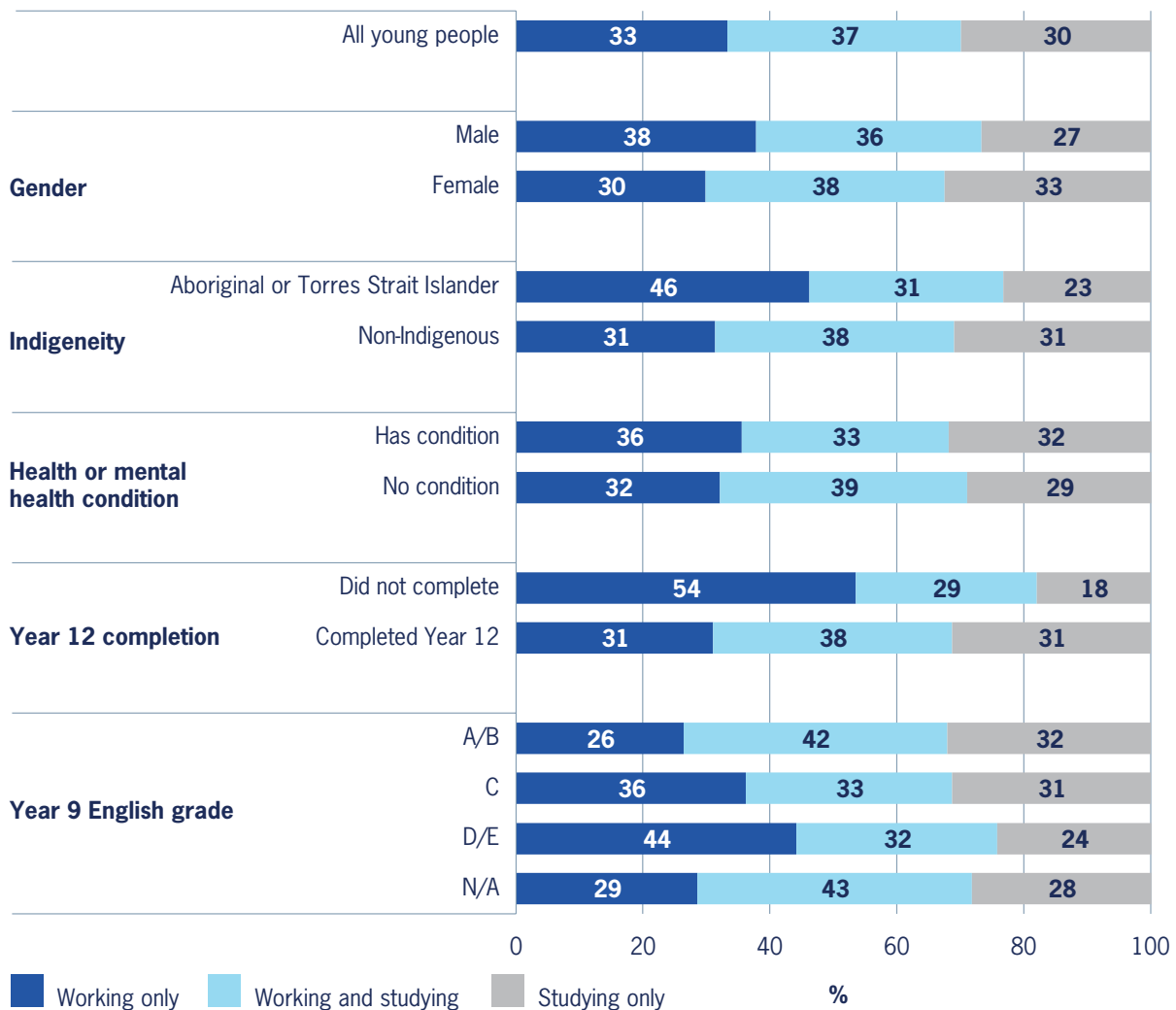
## Work and study patterns

The pathways of young people who were fully or partially engaged in the first year after Year 12 varied considerably across characteristics (see Figure 3). For example, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people were much more likely than non-Indigenous young people to be working only (46 percent compared to 31 percent), whereas non-Indigenous young people were more likely than their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers to be engaged in some form of study, including in combination with work (69 percent compared to 54 percent).

Similarly, 54 percent of young people who had not completed Year 12 were engaged in work only, compared to 31 percent who had completed Year 12. Young people who achieved A or B grades in Year 9, had the highest rates of undertaking study in the year after leaving school (74 percent).

Different initial patterns of work and study in the period immediately post-school may lead to different longer-term employment and life outcomes. This will be explored in subsequent PET publications.

**Figure 3: Work and study participation among young people who are engaged**



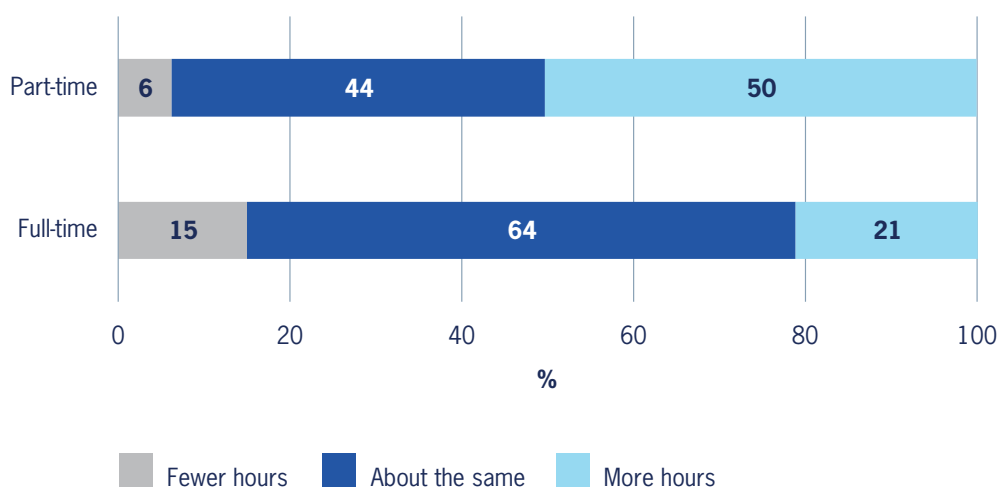
Note: N/A means data is not available.

## Transitions into work

Over half (53 percent) of all young people in the survey were working (13 percent full-time and 40 percent part-time). Seven percent of all young people were engaged in an apprenticeship and a further five percent in a traineeship. The vast majority of those in an apprenticeship or traineeship were doing so full-time, and combining work and study.

Among those who were working, 89 percent worked one job, and 11 percent were working two or more jobs. As shown in Figure 4, a substantial proportion (50 percent) of those working part-time indicated they would prefer to work more hours. These young people could be described as underemployed. Twenty-one percent of young people who were already working full-time also indicated they would like more hours.

**Figure 4: Proportion of young people in work who would like to work fewer, the same or more hours**



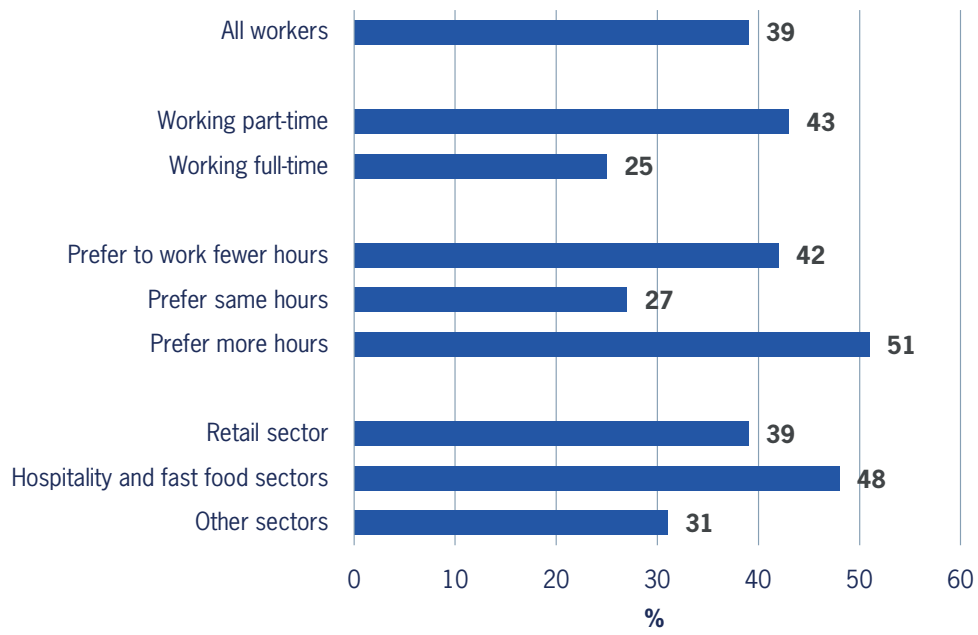
Among those who already had a job, a sizeable proportion (39 percent) said they had looked for a new job in the four weeks prior to responding to the survey (see Figure 5), though this figure varied across different work characteristics. One-in-four (25 percent) young people who were working full-time and 43 percent of those working part-time indicated they were looking for a new job. The proportions of young people looking for a new job were higher for those wanting to work more hours (51 percent) or fewer hours (42 percent). One-in-four (27 percent) of those wanting the same hours as they currently work had also looked for a new job.

Young people who were working in the hospitality and fast food and retail sectors were particularly likely to be looking for a new job (48 percent and 39 percent respectively).

Together, these patterns indicate that while a substantial proportion of young people experiencing disadvantage engage in work in the initial post-school transition period, the jobs they move into are likely to be temporary roles that ideally serve as stepping stones to roles that are more aligned to their career aspirations.

One-in-four young people who were working full-time and 43 percent of those working part-time indicated they were looking for a new job.

**Figure 5: Proportion of young people currently in work who looked for a new job in the last four weeks**





### Transitions into further study

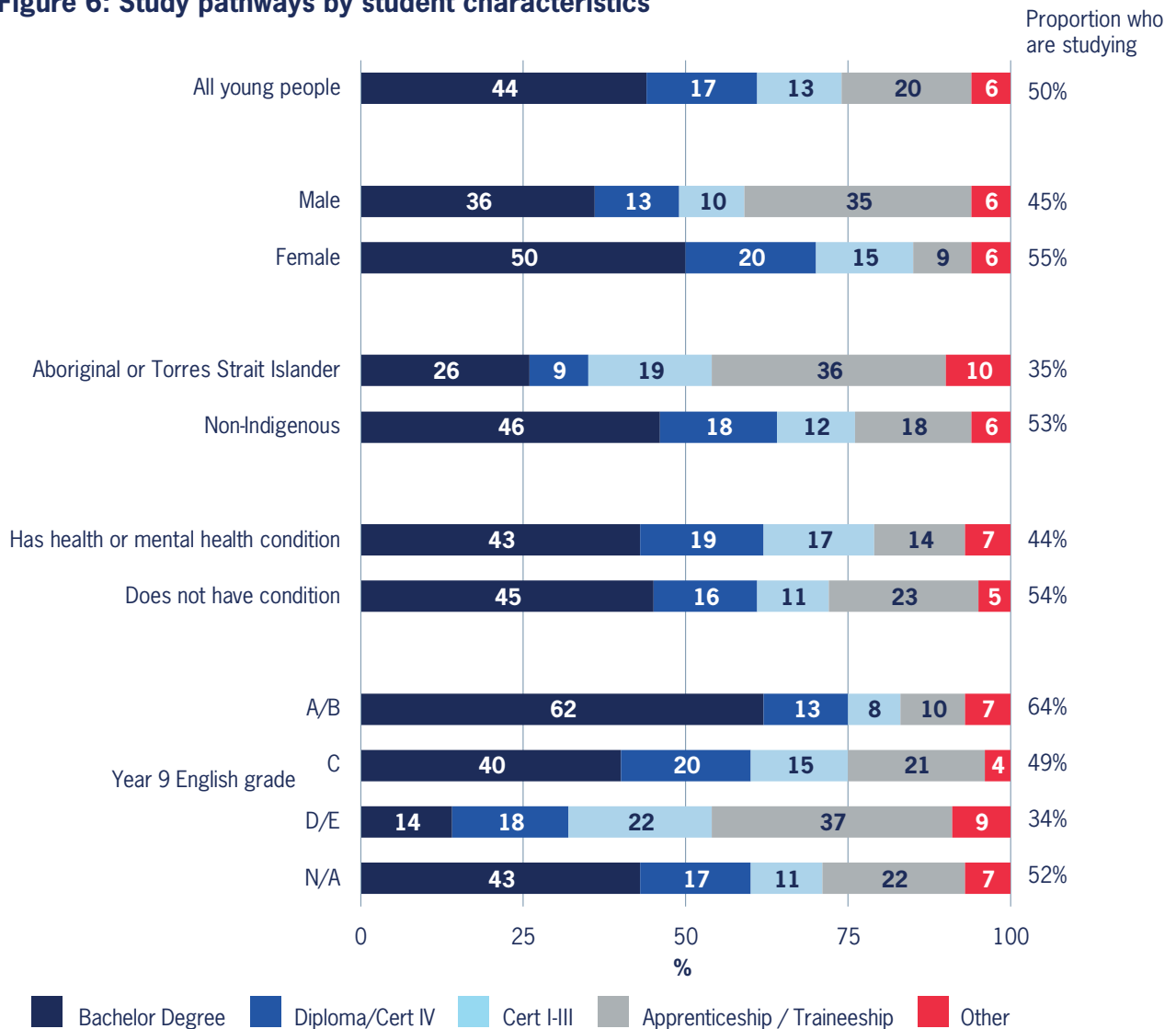
Half (50 percent) of all young people who completed the survey were studying at least part-time in the initial period after leaving school. A further ten percent had enrolled in study but had not yet started or had deferred study.

Of those who were studying, 44 percent were enrolled in a Bachelor degree, with 17 percent studying a diploma, advanced diploma or Certificate IV, 13 percent a Certificate I to III, 20 percent an apprenticeship or traineeship and six percent doing other study activities (e.g. university bridging courses, see Figure 6). More young females were enrolled in study than young males (55 percent and 45 percent respectively), with more young females than males enrolling in a Bachelor's degree (50 percent and 36 percent respectively). More young males than females commenced an apprenticeship or traineeship (35 percent and nine percent respectively).

Study pathways also varied considerably across other characteristics. For example, students who received A or B grades in Year 9 English were around twice as likely to be enrolled in further study compared to those who received D or E grades (64 percent and 34 percent respectively). Around two thirds (62 percent) of young people who received an A or B grade in Year 9 English and who were engaged in post-secondary study had enrolled in a Bachelor's degree, compared to 14 percent of those who received a D or E grade. Of those with a D or E grade in Year 9 English and who engaged in study, 37 percent were doing an apprenticeship or traineeship.

These patterns highlight both that early academic indicators such as Year 9 grades are strongly linked with post-school study pathways, and that these pathways are not absolute. There is for example, a substantial minority of students who were struggling academically in Year 9, who are pursuing post-school study.

**Figure 6: Study pathways by student characteristics**



Note: N/A means data is not available.

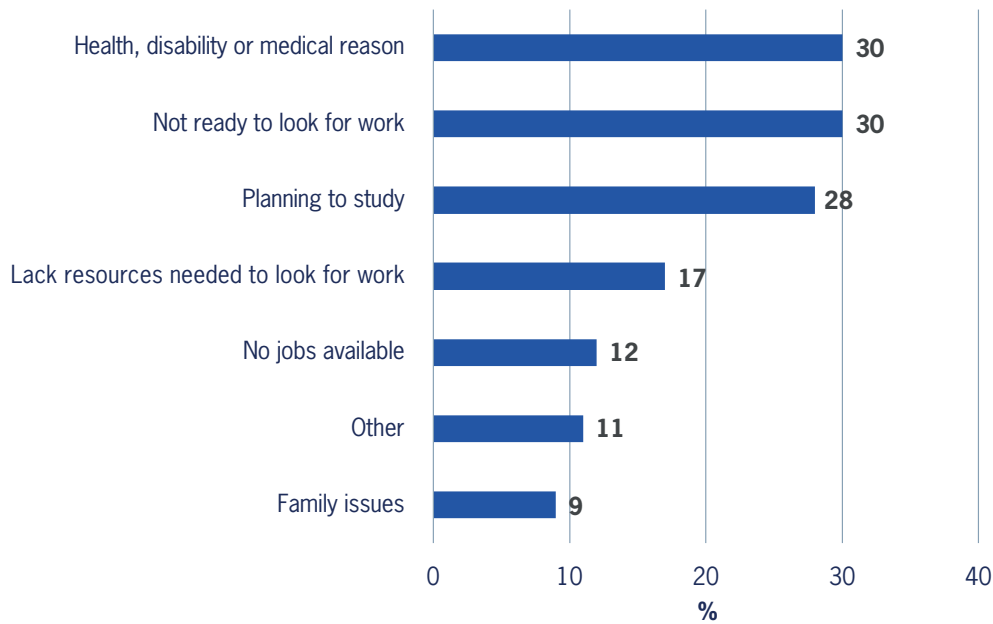
### Young people who were not engaged

Overall, 25 percent of young people were not engaged in work or study in the initial period post Year 12.

Both the survey responses and interviews indicated that many of these young people were in the process of making decisions or enacting plans. For example, the survey data indicates 38 percent of those who were not engaged were looking for work and 17 percent had deferred study.

Of those who were not engaged and not looking for work, the main reasons for not having looked for work were that they had a health, disability or medical reason (30 percent), were not ready to look for work (30 percent), were planning to study (28 percent), or lacked the resources to look for work (17 percent).

**Figure 7: Reasons why young people not engaged in work or study are not looking for work**



Note: Responses do not add to 100 percent as multiple reasons could be provided.



## WHAT HELPS YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING DISADVANTAGE TO COMPLETE YEAR 12 AND TRANSITION TO WORK AND STUDY?

The 38 young people who were interviewed in mid 2021 described several factors that had helped them decide on, and work towards, the pathway they were currently following. These included:

- Support from a range of sources, especially family and friends, as well as non-government organisations
- Work exposure or VET study and being able to try different career options while at school
- Careers support while at school.

### Access to supports

Most of the young people interviewed reported having access to sources of support while moving through senior school and transitioning to post-school life. This took many forms, including emotional support, encouragement to complete their schooling, and careers advice and information. The vast majority of interviewees cited family members as primary sources of support and emphasised the value of discussions with them to gain advice on job and career options.

*My mum. She always wanted us to finish, and she pushed – push, push, push. I talked about in Year 9 “I want to drop out; I want to go to TAFE; I don’t want to go to school no more” but nah, she’s like “No, you’re going to finish”. I guess my mum was the one – she 100% pushed us. If she didn’t, well, then I wouldn’t have finished. Rosa<sup>9</sup>*

Several young people had chosen pathways leading to a particular occupation either because a key family member had suggested the course of study or occupation or had worked in the occupation and provided information on routes into it. Some of these were traditionally female or male-dominated occupations, such as trades apprenticeships for males and community services or health care roles for females. A number of interviewees also accessed jobs or apprenticeships through family or other contacts such as teachers, support workers, or employees of nearby businesses.

Friends and partners were also an important source of support for many young people. For some, their friends were instrumental in helping them decide career paths by brainstorming potential courses, sharing what courses they were going to study, or referring them to job vacancies.

*Honestly just knowing that there are people (friends) there that want to see me achieve something with my life is awesome. Just seeing someone cheering you on to try and get you onto the path where you want to be...it just helps a lot. Michelle*

Non-government organisations were a source of support, with many young people citing The Smith Family as important, both in helping them complete Year 12, and move into post-school study. The former included through the provision of a financial scholarship which helped with the material necessities of school life and eased the financial burden on young people’s families.

*My parents didn’t have a lot of money...so, to me, The Smith Family helped a lot with my education and me being able to go to school. Chloe*

*I received financial support to buy school stuff...it takes a lot of weight off our shoulders, having that money to spend. It’s good. Ethan*

For one interviewee, her Smith Family Tertiary Coordinator<sup>10</sup> assisted her post-school, to transition from one university Bachelor’s degree to another, and facilitated learning support for subjects she was finding difficult. Another described the breadth of support they received from The Smith Family:

*The Smith Family has helped me a lot too. ... Not only financially, but they would email us if we need help. We could contact them whenever we feel like we need to, which was great. Sometimes they check in on us to see where we’re heading. So that was good. ... Just feels like someone cares for me...(The Smith Family) helped me transition through Year 12 to where I am now. Ella*

A small number of young people also gained support from a disability support counsellor or social worker, with this starting while they were at school and sometimes continuing post-school.

### Trying different options while still at school

Almost all of the interviewees had completed one or more VET qualifications while in secondary school or immediately after leaving school. Many took VET subjects out of interest, to try out a field, or as a pathway into jobs or further study. For some, VET courses acted as a career ‘taster’, which helped solidify their choice of career pathway. A number of interviewees were also engaged in voluntary work, or paid or unpaid work trials or placements, to build experience in their chosen career. These experiences either helped young people confirm their chosen pathway or led them to refine their decision and pursue a different study or career pathway.

### Careers support at school

The vast majority (86 percent) of young people who completed the survey recalled receiving careers support while at school (see Figure 8). Of those who recalled receiving support, just over half (55 percent) indicated the support was helpful, 35 percent were unsure if it was, and 11 percent said it was not useful.

Young people who did not complete Year 12 were less likely to recall receiving careers support, than those who completed Year

<sup>9</sup> All names of young people have been changed.

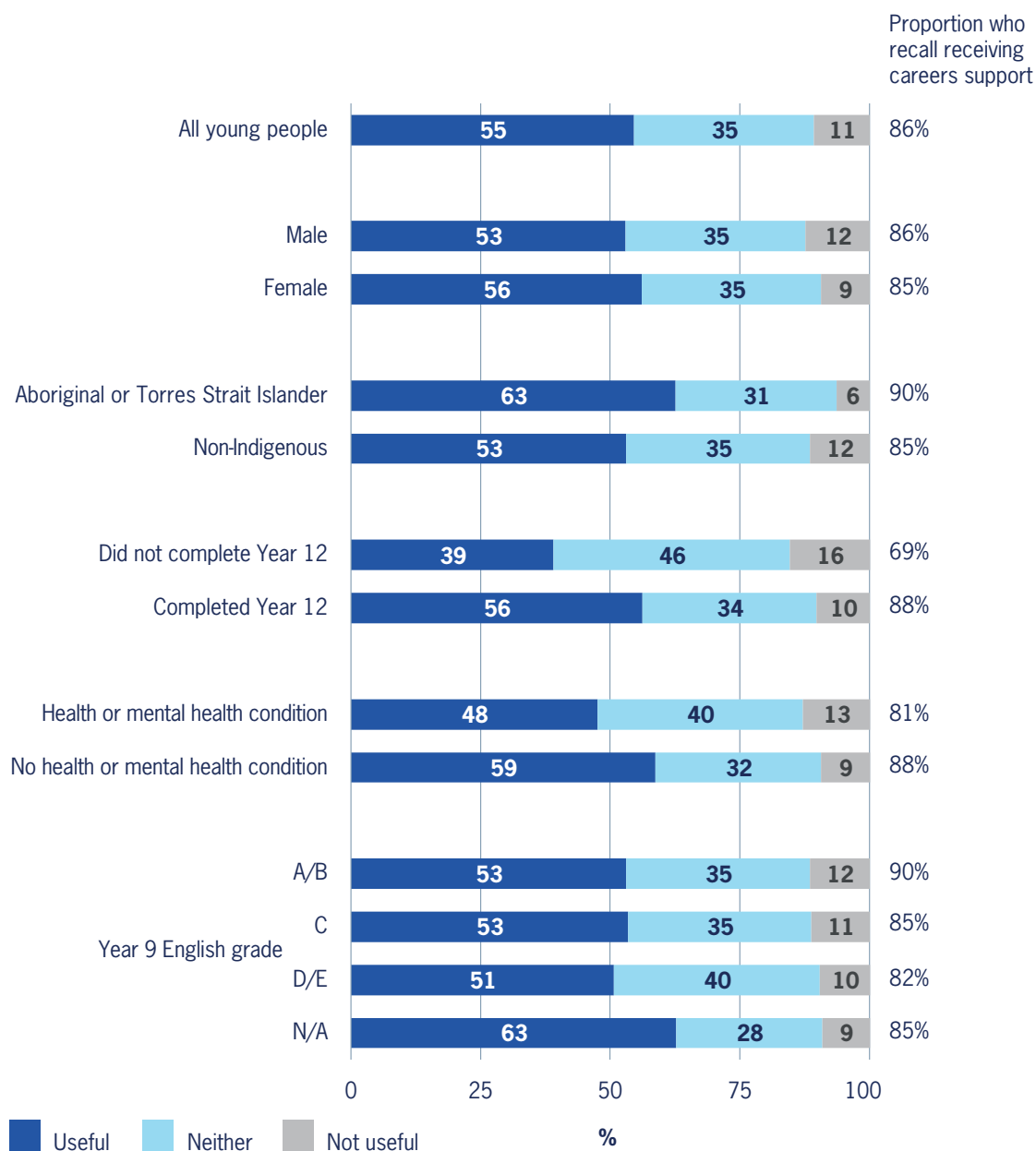
<sup>10</sup> A Smith Family staff member who works with young people on a Tertiary Learning for Life Scholarship to support their participation in tertiary education.



12 (69 percent and 88 percent respectively) and less likely to find the careers support useful if they did recall it (39 percent compared to 56 percent). Young people with a health or mental health condition were slightly less likely to recall receiving any careers support at school compared to those without a condition (81 percent and 88 percent respectively). They were also less likely to say the support they received was useful (48 percent compared to 59 percent).

These data suggest that while most young people recall receiving careers support at school, their experiences of how useful this support was varied. Student groups with lower rates of attendance (for example because of health conditions) may miss out on careers support opportunities and have limited opportunities to make these up at other times. Similarly, a wider array of careers support and more targeted support for some groups may be necessary, to account for the varied interests and capabilities of different students.

**Figure 8: Perceptions of careers support received at school**



Note: N/A means data is not available.

In close alignment with the survey data, all but two of the young people interviewed had received information, advice and support from school careers staff. Where they had received it, it was varied in nature, including assistance in choosing Years 11 and 12 subjects, choosing and applying for VET courses, writing résumés, applying for jobs, and finding alternative entry pathways where the student's ATAR did not meet course entry requirements. An example of the last came from a participant who had varying experiences with careers advisers at school:

*One of the careers advisers that I went to, she was really helpful, the other one wasn't at all. ... The course that I wanted to do, I had to get a 70 ATAR and she was pretty much just saying that I wouldn't get it ... and that I needed to look at other options. ... I wasn't too happy with that, so I went to a different careers adviser. She let me keep my first option as the 70 ATAR one, but she helped me find other ways into that actual course. Hazel*

For young people who engaged in careers counselling, many found the one-to-one career conversations helpful in thinking about careers that interested them and choosing relevant subjects. A young person noted she benefited from her careers team because they could provide impartial advice when her family and friends were too subjective.

*My careers team at high school were lovely and they helped me a lot. ... I think the fact the careers advisor wasn't a family member and therefore didn't have any bias. ... They talked to me about what I wanted to talk about and what I wanted to do without implementing their own ideas was possibly the best aspect of having a careers advisor. Chelsey*

Some young people who accessed school careers counsellors felt somewhat let down by the experience, with some saying they still felt 'lost' after finishing school. One participant pointed out that despite his adviser's best efforts, putting the careers advice into practice was difficult, as his mental health prevented him from asserting himself in the workforce and contributed to his lack of self-confidence.

*They helped me with my résumé and feeling comfortable, as comfortable as I could be when talking to new people. They really have helped me a lot when it comes to looking for a job, but that doesn't really help me find a job. Peter*

For young people who engaged in careers counselling, many found the one-to-one career conversations helpful in thinking about careers that interested them and choosing relevant subjects.

How young people accessed a school's careers counsellor varied. Some interactions were up to individual students' volition, while in other schools, counsellors played a more present role in day-to-day school activities. Some young people who could access a careers counsellor chose not to during their time at school. Some did not see a need as they had already decided what they wanted to do career-wise; others felt uncomfortable speaking to them due to shyness.

A few young people reported an absence of careers staff and activities in their school and noted the impact of this.

*I think that was a thing that my school lacked. They really lacked helping us to choose a decision...And I think because our school never really provided career counselling, right now a lot of my friends from school, they're currently dropping out of their degree or changing...a lot of them are just not happy with what they chose. Rabia*

In addition to careers staff, teachers played a role for some young people in helping them think about future careers, including providing advice tailored to students' individual interests and strengths. They suggested career options and helped students to clarify or refine their area of interest, gain traineeships and apply for courses. Some young people described ways in which teachers went 'above and beyond' to help them decide on a future direction and in some cases, teachers remained in touch with their former students after leaving school, informing them of courses or jobs they might consider.

Where school careers support was available but seen to be lacking, this was often because little information or exposure to the wide range of careers and pathways outside of university or popular trades was provided. Young people expressed the view that some careers counsellors were pushing limited options that were not of interest to them. Some found teachers' and career counsellors' conceptions of success could be rigid and unhelpful if students' career goals diverged from their ideals.

*My school...cared a lot about education more than anything else, that's why they neglected all the career paths. They were very focused on getting students a really good ATAR. Rabia*

### **Careers and work exposure**

Many schools offered university, careers and trades expos, which many young people found moderately helpful. One participant appreciated that these expos showed her there are several pathways into a chosen career.

*There were some people that didn't go straight to uni. And they did TAFE courses or got their certificate before going to uni. So I guess I learnt [from these expo days] that you don't have to go to uni straight away. There are other pathways. Ella*

The value of work experience in helping young people understand career opportunities was also highlighted.

...That was for one week. That was really enjoyable. ... it really opened my eyes to how IT would be in actually work settings. Which solidified my decision, (of) doing software engineering. That was what shaped up my thinking. Sahil

### **Autonomy and flexibility in post-school study options**

Most interviewees who were studying were doing a university Bachelor degree or bridging or foundation course, and a small number were enrolled in VET courses at TAFE. These young people mostly reported positive experiences. Many enjoyed the subject material that their courses offered, and for some, this confirmed that they were 'on the right track' regarding their future careers. Some enjoyed the teaching style and relished the autonomy they were afforded at these institutions compared to their school years. Most found their courses just challenging enough to keep them engaged. Many who were undertaking Certificates or Diplomas at TAFE enjoyed their courses' practical and hands-on elements.

Some young people valued the flexibility of their courses and that they could tailor their degree or certificate to their specifications, goals, and interests. A university student enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts explained:

*I really do enjoy the idea that I can structure it myself, I can choose which precise subjects I'm more interested in and get more niche understandings of things that I'm interested about in my degree. Chelsey*

For another young person, the customisable nature of her VET study came in the number and variety of courses she undertook. While studying to become an enrolled nurse, she also studied a beauty course online and planned to study a business course to open a beauty business when she wasn't nursing. Another participant liked that she could work at her own pace, and

maintained that while her course in disability services was meant to last for a year and a half, she planned to have it completed within a year.

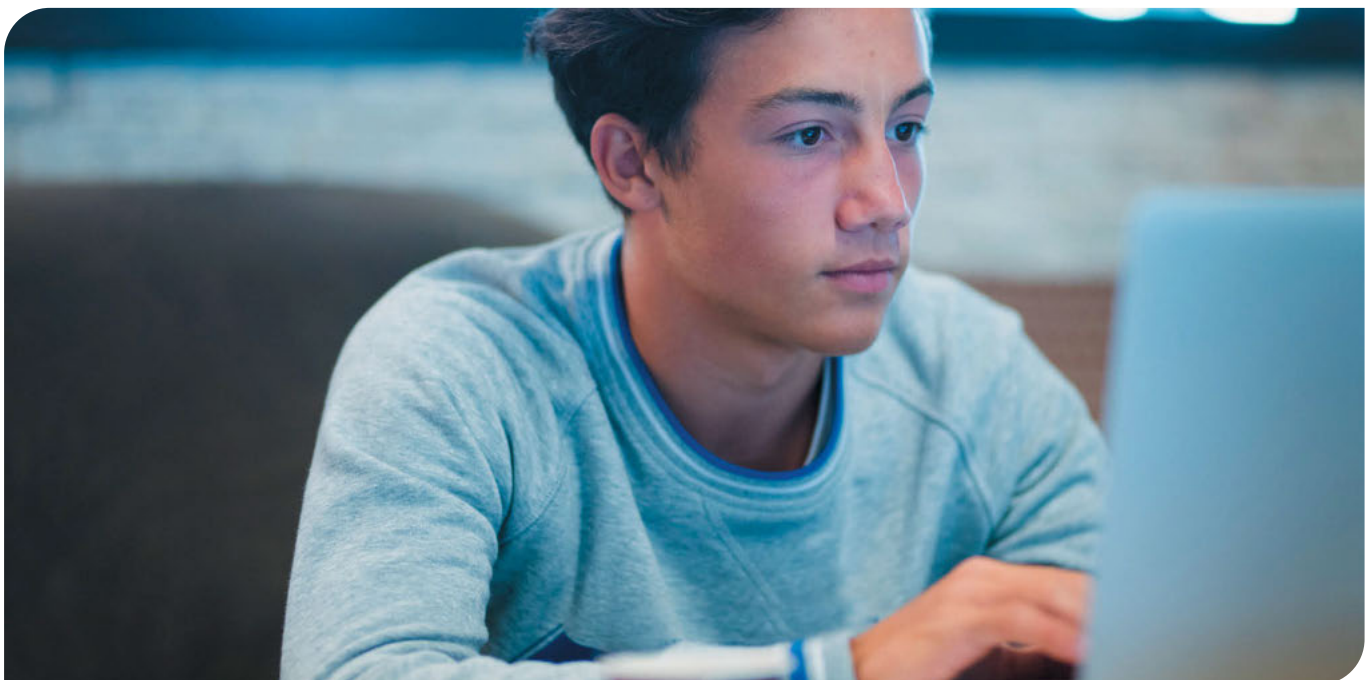
## **BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS**

Several factors acted as barriers to successful transitions for interviewees, including:

- The COVID-19 pandemic
- Limited study and work options in regional areas or for particular occupations
- Difficulties in applying for university and TAFE courses
- Mental health issues.

### **COVID-19**

Given the timing of the PET study, the most prominent barrier faced by young people was the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of which were felt during 2020 and 2021.<sup>11</sup> Young people who were in Year 12 in 2020, were severely affected by the pandemic and its associated restrictions, as it arrived at a particularly crucial time in their schooling and continued just as they were ready to move into post-school life, especially for those living in Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. Due to COVID restrictions, Year 12 coursework and many university and TAFE courses shifted to online learning. This led to many young people struggling to maintain motivation and interest, which for some had a deleterious effect on their attendance and achievement. Those enrolled at university in 2021 lamented the inability to be on campus and make friends.



11 The ongoing impact of COVID in 2022 and beyond will be explored in subsequent publications.



*I think the whole lockdown and whole COVID situation really changed the world. It just made everything different. All my expectation has changed, even for university, I was expecting every day, I'd have to go to university, and we'd all be seated in theatre lecture rooms, and we would just be really social. When I got to uni it was just not like that at all. Rabia*

For others, the pandemic instilled a sense of uncertainty as they were making the transition from school to their career pathway. When asked if she had always known what she wanted to do when she left high school, one participant responded:

*Yes, I feel like I've always known, but I feel like last year – how uncertain it was during the COVID times, I felt like towards the end of the year I was kind of like, I don't really know how or what I should do. Mercedes*

COVID restrictions also prevented young people from completing VET Certificate courses or from taking up paid work trials, internships, or work experience that had been arranged before the pandemic, all of which had the potential to help participants explore their choice of pathway. For others, COVID lockdowns led to reduced work hours or loss of jobs, and difficulties finding paid employment, which is so critical for most young people experiencing disadvantage.

*If I had become good at hospitality, they would have taken me...I would have stayed there forever, but lockdown came, so they cancelled my work experience. Abraham*

### **Availability and opportunity**

Several other factors prevented young people from pursuing their desired pathway. One participant hoping to study ICT at TAFE lived in a small town in regional Victoria. He had been unable to find a suitable course in his chosen field within travelling distance. He was looking for work but had few opportunities to gain employment, let alone in his desired (computer-related) field. Another, studying a Foundation Nursing course, said it was difficult to find work in her desired field (aged care) as most employers sought workers with experience.

### **Difficult application processes and asking for help**

A barrier experienced by some young people was difficulty applying for university and post-school VET courses. Two found the university process difficult. In one case, this was because she was the first in her family to apply and had no sources of support to help navigate the application process. For another, difficulties navigating the university enrolment process led to her enrolling in fewer classes than she should have.

A third participant, also the first in their family to study after leaving school, found the online application process for a TAFE certificate course overwhelming, so had abandoned the process. This interviewee's reluctance to seek help was echoed by several young people who described how they lacked the confidence to ask for help, or did not want to seem reliant on others for advice or assistance. The idea of self-reliance and independence when

it came to planning for their future was a recurring theme among some young people, to the point where, in some cases, asking for help was perceived to be a sign of weakness or ineptitude.

*(Staff at the community centre) have offered, but I don't want to count on them to help. ... I don't want to have to always ask them for help. Rosa*

### **Mental health issues**

The survey found that 30 percent of the cohort reported a mental health condition, and of those, 44 percent said it often or always impacted their ability to do things. Similarly, a sizeable proportion of the young people interviewed reported experiencing mental health issues – commonly anxiety and depression – in the past and currently. While many said their mental health had improved since leaving school, in some cases, poor mental health impeded their efforts to strive towards goals. This was particularly the case for a small number of young people who, when interviewed, were neither working nor studying, because they were focusing on recovering from mental health issues. One such participant spoke of an abject fear when thinking about her future and noted that her poor mental health contributed to her inability to plan.

*Honestly, thinking about my future is really scary. I never really did it 'cos when you're really mentally ill at a really young age, you just don't really think about your future 'cos you don't think you're going to be there ... And so you don't really make plans for it. And so I'm just waiting for whatever rocks up to me. Like when I'm older, I kind of have plans. Tarni*

### **Uncertainty about most suitable pathways**

Some young people expressed uncertainty about their planned pathways or frustration that they could not decide on a career path or were not moving along their intended pathway faster. Others wondered whether they had jumped into a pathway too quickly after leaving school, sometimes based on limited career information, and questioned whether they had made the right choice.

One young person had not met the course requirements for her bridging course, so was trying to decide on a VET course of study. She described her most significant challenge in leaving school as 'trying to find a purpose'. Others spoke of how they felt 'lost' because they had not decided on a pathway immediately after school. Two interviewees, who were working in fast food and retail jobs when interviewed, described themselves as being on a gap year before applying for TAFE courses. Both expressed frustration at their indecisiveness in choosing a course of study and at having spent most of the year 'procrastinating'. Both wished they had gone straight from school to TAFE. They disliked their current jobs, and one said he felt like a burden on his parents.

Some young people were moving along a pathway but were unsure whether they would continue in the same direction or

eventually work in the career their pathway was leading to. One interviewee had graduated Year 12 with a high Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) score and was enrolled in a Bachelor degree with a high ATAR requirement. However, she was unsure whether she wanted to continue in the course and was contemplating changing to another university degree course.

*My ATAR was 94 ... people said you want to make the most of your ATAR, so if you get in the 90's you don't want to be a teacher ... so it was like, if I get a high ATAR I had to get into a high degree, and I wish I didn't think that way, because ... I would've done something else, like a lower ATAR, but maybe I would've found it more suitable. ... why choose based on your ATAR, why not choose based on what you're passionate about? Rabia*

### Being first in family at university

Several interviewees who were the first in their family to attend university had struggled with the transition from school to university and found it difficult to access help to ease the transition.

*When I first started uni it was a bit hard because of a lack of pre-experience being at university, a lot was different and it's kind of hard because none of my parents were educated [and so] they can't assist me with my education. Babak*

*I felt really scared and a bit shy ... I was just too scared to ask for that help ... so it's basically me starting school all over again and having no friends, not knowing the teachers and then just trying to build the confidence to be able to talk to the teachers, but I just didn't have that confidence. ... I felt very dumb in the classroom; everyone seems to understand what was happening, but I just kind of struggled understanding what was happening. Summer*

## HOW ARE YOUNG PEOPLE FEELING ABOUT THEIR LIVES AND FUTURE?

Many of the young people interviewed for the PET study faced ongoing financial challenges that their peers do not typically face. Many were also dealing with mental health struggles and some had difficult family situations. Despite this and the added uncertainty caused by COVID, most young people expressed optimism about their lives and future. Completing Year 12 had given many a significant mental “boost” and sense of accomplishment, with many reporting they were enjoying the transition into adulthood.

Most interviewees attributed their optimism to a combination of factors, including attainment of study goals, greater freedom and independence, their social support networks, and embarking on a pathway linked to their ‘passion’. A number described how they enjoyed being treated as adults. For the most part, those studying had positive experiences and a number were enjoying working and the financial independence that came with it.

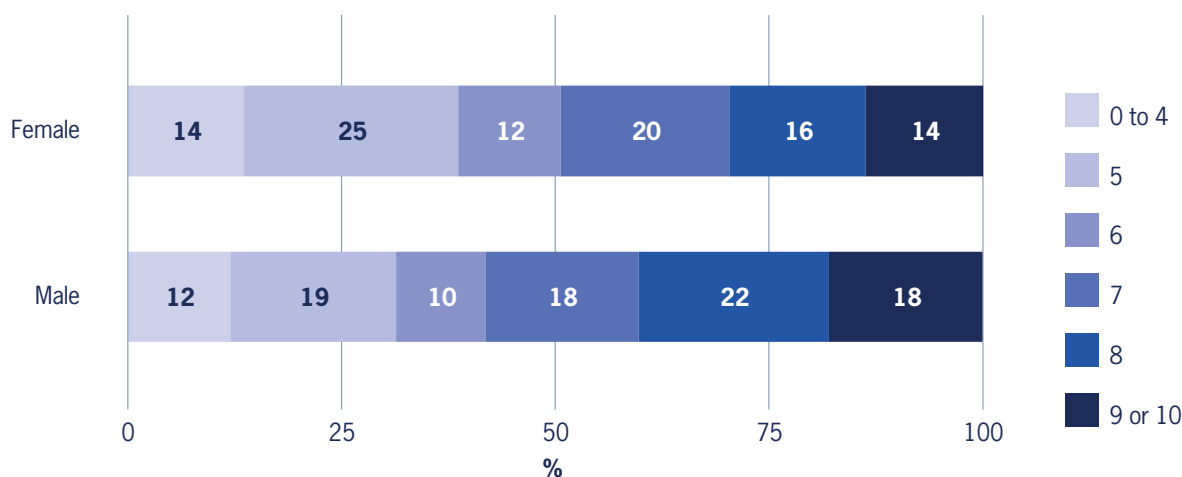
*I was able to graduate, I was able to get into one of the courses that I really wanted, I was able to provide my parents with something that they always wanted to see, and there's of course other doors that I have opened and I'm very happy to have achieved them. Farah*

These experiences were largely reflected in the survey results, with 62 percent of young females and 68 percent of young males rating their life satisfaction as six or higher out of ten (see Figure 9). Thirty percent of females and 40 percent of males rated it at eight out of 10 or higher.

Young people who had found their passion and can readily see themselves as belonging in the world, expressed satisfaction with life.

*I feel like I'm in a pretty good position at the moment where I've pretty much got my life together and just knowing what I want to do now. I remember when I was*

**Figure 9: On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your life?**



*graduating, I was still just really confused on what I wanted to do and everyone was pushing different things and I had to take a step back and really think about myself and realise what I wanted to do. Michelle*

*When I found my place, I succeeded so much, I achieved so much, I learnt so much more, I'm so much happier. Mercedes*

*Now I'm studying what I love which is also teaching, at least I can help students that have been in my position, because it's really hard when you move to places and you don't know English, and very hard for you to learn... hopefully I can somehow help them, especially from kids that have been through something that I've been through. Farah*

For the most part, working was a positive experience for young people. They enjoyed learning new skills and the financial independence that came with working. For some, their positive working experience contrasted with their challenging school years. When asked about why she enjoyed working compared to school, a young person who worked full-time for a government agency noted:

*I feel more of a purpose being [at work] and also especially my job now, it's very set in what I can and can't do and what I am doing. It's like following a schedule and a procedure rather than just doing things yourself type of thing. Brooke*

The survey also showed there were sizeable proportions of both females and males who rated their satisfaction with life at five or less (39 percent and 31 percent respectively). A few interviewees also seemed less sure about this stage of their life and had a slightly less optimistic outlook at this point, as they were still trying to work out their goals and purpose in life. Some were dealing with setbacks, such as the disappointment of not being able to study in a field that would lead to their preferred career.

*Even now, I don't know where I want my life to go down; I know that one day I want to be a mum, but other than that I really do not know what I want to do with my life. Chloe*

## RECOMMENDATIONS ON STRENGTHENING POST-SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

The young people interviewed for the PET study recommended a number of strategies for strengthening school completion and post-school pathways:

- More access to **careers advice at school** – including in the middle years of school and outside of critical periods (subject selection, applying for post-school study), as well as 'transition' support in the period after leaving school.
- More **personalised, one-to-one advice from careers staff**, with a focus on exploring what the young person wants to do in life and options for them to achieve their goals, and more frequent support for those who do not have specific goals.





*I just think more discussions around what's on offer and job pathways would be a great thing...(and) instead of (teachers) saying 'you know you probably can't do that', it's not you can't do it, let's think of some steps in order for you to get there.*  
Mercedes

- **Careers advice** should have a **broader focus** on information about labour markets, employment pathways and the types of skills that will be in demand in the future to support students' decision making.
- **Connecting young people to mentors**, internships and older students to help inform their career planning.

*I think mentoring and internships are really useful because... each are provided to share knowledge and ideas through a person who already has experience and knowledge from the field and can help give information to the person who they're mentoring...they are a significant thing.* Babak

- Greater **individualised support**, including early intervention, for **students who are struggling** with academic and/or personal issues.
- Support to develop **self-confidence** and other **life skills**, including how to seek help when needed, seize opportunities and learn from their mistakes.

*The only time I would have asked for help was when the teacher would personally come over to me and talk to me about my work...I wish I could have asked for help more.*  
Samantha

*So my advice would be always taking every opportunity because every opportunity would give you a new opportunity to learn and explore new things that you might find useful that might change your mind.* Babak

A relatively small number of young people in the PET survey were undertaking apprenticeships or traineeships. Further exposure to such opportunities as well as what to expect when they are the first in their family to participate in post-school study would be helpful.

The PET research also highlights a range of strategies which supported young people to complete Year 12 and make positive post-school pathways. These could be further enhanced so more young people experiencing disadvantage can access them:

- Studying **VET subjects** at school and post-school and engaging in **work experience** placements and **work exposure** while at school.
- Providing **information** on alternative pathways (such as bridging, foundation or VET courses) and supporting young people to develop a range of **options** in case they face difficulties getting into their first choice of pathway.
- More focused support, including with careers, for young people experiencing **mental health issues**.

A relatively small number of young people in the PET survey were undertaking **apprenticeships** or **traineeships**, so further exposure to such opportunities, as well as what to expect when they are the first in their family to participate in post-school study would be helpful.

Given the important role young people identified **family members** have in providing them with careers advice, strategies that strengthen this group's access to up-to-date labour market, education and training information, as well as how to support young people to develop their goals and plan pathways to achieve them, would also be valuable. This is particularly the case for young people living in disadvantage, where family members are less likely to have completed Year 12 or be in the labour market, than those of their more advantaged peers.



## CONCLUSION

The PET study provides important insights about the factors and circumstances affecting work and study pathways for young people experiencing disadvantage. This publication focuses on their initial transition after leaving school, as decisions and experiences during this time can affect opportunities and outcomes in subsequent years.

The study highlights that the majority of young people surveyed are either engaged in work or study, or seeking pathways into their preferred work or study options. Only seven percent are not engaged in these activities or looking for work, and of these, many are impacted by health or mental health conditions.

Many of the young people who are in work would like more hours and many are also looking for a new job, highlighting the dynamic nature of their engagement with work at this stage of their lives.

On the whole, young people experiencing disadvantage are enjoying this initial post-school transition period, are generally optimistic about their futures, and relishing the independence that comes with moving into work and post-school study. Some feel uncertain about where they are heading or what their next steps might be, particularly when they were trying to work out their goals or dealing with setbacks or health or mental health conditions.

The young people in this study identified several factors that helped or hindered their progression through this period, and tangible solutions that could help young people in future. These included more personalised careers support at school to help young people identify a range of options they might be interested in pursuing, assistance with identifying how to plan for those pathways and the potential application processes involved, and structured exposure to the world of work while they are at school.

These young people were emerging from school and entering this important transition phase during the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought unprecedented and ongoing challenges. Despite the resilience of these young people, the challenges of transitioning from school during a pandemic with far-reaching and deep impacts on educational and labour market opportunities necessitate intensive and targeted support for young Australians experiencing disadvantage.

How the pathways of these young people develop over the next couple of years is a key focus of the PET study and will be explored in subsequent publications. This provides a unique opportunity to better understand the dynamics of young people's pathways and how they might be better supported.





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