

Executive Summary

Young futures: Education, training and employment decision-making in non-metropolitan areas



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With acknowledgements to Tim Harrison and Helen Weadon for work undertaken early in the project

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Research project funded by the Department of Education and Training (DET) Victoria, Strategic Research Seed Funding Pilot program 2018-19

September 2019

Project web site can be accessed via <https://federation.edu.au/schools/school-of-education/research/research-groups/rave-researching-adult-and-vocational-education>

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Introduction

This is the final report of the project 'Young futures: Education, training and employment decision-making in non-metropolitan areas'. The project was funded by the Department of Education and Training (DET) Victoria as a Strategic Research Seed Funding Pilot 2018-19.

The study examined the processes that young people in rural, regional and peri-urban areas go through as they make choices about their post-school trajectories, and set out to develop good practice models for communities, employers and education providers to support them.

The project set out to answer the following questions:

1. How do young people navigate decisions related to post-school education, training and work and what decisions do they make?
2. Who and what are the influencers and how do they affect the decisions?
3. What could change to provide better post-school outcomes for a larger proportion of young people?

Rationale

Young people in regional, rural and peri-urban communities face particular challenges in imagining and navigating their post-school futures. In particular geographical areas, choices may be constrained by economic dislocation, distance, and community or cultural issues. These locational factors may be compounded by individual disadvantage. Regional/rural communities also suffer if they are not fully utilising the considerable resource available in their young people. While there has been other research into young people's transition from school in rural and regional areas, both in Australia and overseas, the project is believed to be the first to specifically examine peri-urban areas. As the population of Victoria continues to grow, these areas will continue to be of vital importance.

Methodology summary

The research was carried out in six communities across the State of Victoria, during the third quarter of 2018 and the first half of 2019. The locations were determined in conjunction with the Victorian Department of Education and Training. Three were rural/regional towns, each being two to three hours' drive from Melbourne; three were peri-urban areas on the outskirts of Melbourne, two with rapidly growing populations with high migrant diversity, and one a rural town with an industrial history just outside the city boundaries.

- Rural/regional towns: Horsham, Sale, Shepparton.
- Peri-urban sites: Berwick, Hastings, Werribee.

Only one location had higher than the Victorian average household income; and four were below the State average for progression of school-leavers to further or higher education.

In total, 212 people participated in the research, including 112 young people. The contribution of all participants is deeply appreciated. This is a significant number of participants, but represents a small number compared with relevant populations in Victoria. However, trustworthiness of the findings is increased by the multi-site nature of the research, multiple triangulations among different participant groups and triangulation against On Track reports.

At each site, three phases of qualitative research were undertaken; and a fourth phase of the project was a desk analysis of publicly-available 'On Track' statistical reports. The four phases were:

1. 58 interviews with community stakeholders who worked with young people aged 15-24, an average of 9.5 per site. Significant stakeholders were selected according to a defined protocol. These included organisations working with young people, including intermediary apprenticeship providers, local and nearby higher and further education providers, employers of young people, and Aboriginal and/or migrant organisations.
2. Interviews and focus groups at two schools at each site. At all schools, the Principal or delegate and at least one careers staff member were interviewed, a total of 32 interviews. At the government schools, separate focus groups of Year 11 and Year 12 were held, a total of 90 students. Each student also completed a pre-focus group 'snapshot survey' of demographic and other details, and intended post-school destinations.
3. Interviews with 32 young people, who had left school in 2017, in their home town location, at university or Technical and Further Education (TAFE), or by phone; in small groups or individually. These young people were accessed with the help of local stakeholders and, in some cases, education providers at the education institutions which the young people were attending. As with Phase 2, each young person also completed pre-focus group/interview 'snapshot survey', this time also including intended and actual post-school destinations.
4. Analysis of the relevant Victorian Government 'On Track' survey reports for 2018, to garner further information and also to triangulate the qualitative findings. The publicly available reports for the relevant local government areas were analysed for key variables, including destinations and views about career advice received at school.

Separate case studies were written for each site, synthesising the data from each of phases 1 and 2 and 3, to aid analysis. These were then combined into 'compound' case studies for each site.

For the final analysis, syntheses of each of the three fieldwork phases and the On Track data were combined in a short overview, and implications for each of the following stakeholder groups were drawn out: Policy-makers, schools, community organisations, tertiary providers, and young people and their families. The findings are drawn from the views of all participants, not just young people's.

Key findings of the project, derived from all phases of the research (See main report for details)

1. Most young people experience considerable stress when deciding what to do after school, generally at the same time as studying hard for good Year 12 results. Decisions made under stress may be sub-optimal, and hence more reassurance about fallback choices and alternative outcomes needs to be provided.
2. A proportion of young people are clear from a young age what they want to do, those plans generally being associated with an occupation, or more broadly an industry; and sometimes with going to university or entering 'a trade' as non-specific destinations. These decisions are quite often gendered.
3. Parents are the most common influences on young people's decisions, often with contributions from other family members. These may involve high or low aspirations, gendered expectations, or may result more generally from family backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic status, or employment and/or educational histories.
4. Options are narrower for young people in rural/regional locations, because of the financial implications of moving away, and those in peri-urban areas may also experience transport disadvantage. Where the desired destination is not easily accessible, extra effort and expense is incurred by the young people and/or their families. Young people and those who work with them may feel aggrieved about this.

5. Young people, especially males, displaying an interest in a career in trades are steered into VCAL and sometimes to early school-leaving, sometimes in apprenticeships; they may experience regret not to have completed school.
6. Gap years are a common response to financial issues and for a decision-making 'buffer'. Gap years may be intended, a back-up plan, or unintended. Considerable change may occur between the first year out and second-year out.
7. The most useful careers advice to young people is personal time with a trusted adviser at school. They wish to retain this source of advice after leaving school, particularly at the time at which the ATAR results are issued, and during the first-year out when changes in circumstances often occur.
8. Part-time jobs while studying are fundamental parts of young people's lives, and often their school-days jobs continue well into their post-school careers. Little value is ascribed to these jobs by key players.
9. While a great deal of information is available to young people, in-school or from external sources, they do not find the way in which it is presented particularly useful. External services are piecemeal, not always trusted, and not 'joined up.' First-hand information about study and jobs may be limited by distance or by lack of work experience opportunities.
10. Young people display considerable resourcefulness, resilience and responsibility in their planning and in their activities after leaving school.

What could change to provide better post-school outcomes for more young people?

Suggestions derived from the interviews may be summarised as:

- Better and more 'joined-up' careers advice; better and more 'joined-up' support services;
- More resourcing of careers advice in schools, particularly access to individualised advice;
- More liaison between schools and employers, including but not confined to, more work experience opportunities;
- Specifically, more appreciation of the role of the employers who give jobs to young people while studying, and validation of the work that young people do in these jobs;
- More focus on locational disadvantage, with practical measures to overcome it, rather than having young people put all the work in to combat the associated challenges;
- Harness local individuals and institutions who are able to assist in overcoming challenges in particular locations;
- Educate and support parents and grandparents from a wide range of backgrounds to assist young people;
- Take the stress out of Year 12; young people need a Plan B and even C;
- Provide careers advice after school-leaving, preferably from school careers staff;
- Avoid channeling young people into options that close off future pathways;
- Recognise and normalise all of the post-school pathways that occur;
- Exercise caution in out-sourcing employment services and apprenticeship intermediary services to for-profit companies, or at least institute additional monitoring activities.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations, derived from the key findings and the participant suggestions, for the following stakeholder groups: schools, community organisations including employers, tertiary education providers, young people and their families, and governments. It should be noted that much of the research took place before the new approach to careers education in Victorian schools began to be implemented, which is addressing some of the issues that the project found.