# Australian young people:

## their stories, their families and post-school plans

**Jennifer Bryce, Michelle Anderson,
Tracey Frigo, and Phillip McKenzie**

May 2007

Australian Council for Educational Research

ACER

THE SMITH FAMILY

*everyone's family*

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A report prepared for The Smith Family

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# Preface

Australia cannot afford for any of our young people not to make successful post-school transitions. We need to ensure that all of our young people have supports and systems to ensure that opportunities are available to develop the skills and capabilities that will be required of them throughout their working lives. Importantly, the pivotal role played by education in supporting economic prosperity and social cohesion has been recognised in the Human Capital stream of the COAG National Reform Agenda in a recent report of the COAG National Reform Initiative Working Group.[1]

In 2002, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released a discussion document on a framework for measuring a knowledge based economy and society.[2] Human capital development was among the core dimensions for building such an economy and society. In 2006, an OECD report noted that while Australia is among the top countries in the OECD we have one of the highest gaps between high and low performing students, with the low performing students coming largely from low SES backgrounds.[3]

During the previous four years, in conjunction with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), The Smith Family has been researching the challenges faced by our *Learning for Life* (*Learning for Life*) students, all from low SES backgrounds, in making successful post-school transitions. The findings from that research have been published in four reports that can be accessed on The Smith Family website www.thesmithfamily.com.au.[4]

Last year's report flagged how important it would be to tap into the family context more deeply to assess the degree and type of influence that families were having on the decision making processes of *Learning for Life* students. The Smith Family's fifth major research report on the school to work transition, *Australian young people: their stories, their families and post-school plans,* written by Jennifer Bryce and her colleagues from ACER makes a distinctive contribution to our understanding of the different ways that families support post-school transitions. It is the first time that we have had the benefit of collecting data from in-depth interviews with *Learning for Life* students and members of their families.

The stories derived from the interview process provide insights into the worlds and family contexts of our students and also about the types of support they need to build on their strengths in achieving the post-school goals that they are setting for themselves. While our previous research has clearly shown that *Learning for Life* students plan for their futures in ways that are very similar to their more advantaged peers, we also know that they and their families often require additional forms of assistance to enable them to implement their plans effectively.

The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* suite of programs has been developed with a dual generational focus that facilitates the participation of children and young people in educational and learning opportunities in the context of their families. In addition to adding to the evidence which guides the development of *Learning for Life*, this year's report also draws out a number of key policy implications that, if implemented, could particularly enhance the opportunities of Australia's financially disadvantaged young people to make a contribution to Australia's present and future workforce. In contributing to an understanding of the research and practice that could influence policy this report illustrates The Smith Family's commitment to iterations of research-policy-practice. This is consistent with our strategic directions in actively seeking to enhance our human capital which other research shows leads to an increase in productivity levels needed to rise to the challenges and benefits of a 21st Century knowledge economy and society.

**Dr Rob Simons**
Head of Research and Evaluation
The Smith Family

1   COAG (2006) *Human Capital Reform: Report by the COAG National Reform Initiative Working Group* 10 February 2006.

2   ABS (2002) *Measuring a Knowledge-based Economy and Society: An Australian Framework.* Australian Bureau of Statistics Discussion Paper, Cat. 1375.0, August 2002.

3   McGaw, B. (2006) 'Achieving Quality and Equity in Education', Lecture, The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre, University of South Australia, viewed 14 March 2007.

4   The Smith Family (2004) *Post-School Plans: aspirations, expectations and implementation;*  Beavis et al (2005) *What do students think of work? Are they on the right page?: junior secondary school students' perceptions of the world of work;* Beavis et al (2005) *What do students know about work?: senior secondary school students' perceptions of the world of work;* and Beavis (2006) *On track? Students choosing a career.*

# Acknowledgements

# Executive summary

*Australian Young People: their stories, their families and post-school plans* was undertaken by ACER for The Smith Family to extend the findings of its report released in 2006 entitled *On track? Students choosing a career,* which identified uncertainties about how and to what extent family expectations shape young people's educational plans, in particular their plans for transition from school to tertiary education, training or work. Narrative oriented interviews aimed to enhance the survey findings of *On track?* by exploring young people's stories in depth. On advice from The Smith Family, ten 'achievers' from the *Learning for Life* program were interviewed and also nine of their family members (seven mothers, one father and one older sibling). An 'achiever' was defined as a young person who had made a positive start towards achieving post-school goals. This might be a pathway from Year 12 to university, or from Year 10 to an apprenticeship or on-going employment.

The challenges facing young people are enormous. No one institution or approach can be sufficient, on its own, as a means to helping young people make a successful transition from school to study, work and adult life.

A review of the research literature was conducted. It focused on the effects and influences of family expectations on the cost-benefit analyses undertaken by students when they are considering their post-school plans. The main areas considered were:

- the influence of family, friends and networks (parental support, aspirations, family relationships);

- family contexts (issues such as the influence of socioeconomic status and parental education); and

- adolescent decision-making (issues such as the importance of personal agency, that is, self-efficacy and certain personal attributes such as persistence and self-confidence[5], dispositions and consideration of post-school options at an early stage of schooling).

The review of research literature concludes that the influence of families is significant and reinforces the need for policy and programs to consider young people within the context of their families in order to improve their post-school options.

Data from interviews with young people and their family members supported the main findings of the research literature. The data were considered in relation to three broad areas:

- the role of families in the formation of post-school plans;

- transition from school to post-school options: realities of young people; and

- transition from school to post-school options: young people's hopes for themselves and for others.

The combined impression from the research literature and the stories of the young people interviewed for this study is that families are closely involved in their children's decision-making about post-school options. It is acknowledged that families in this study had taken the initiative to seek support from The Smith Family. In this they may therefore be more 'proactive' than other families that have financial difficulties.

The key issues that have arisen from this study are expressed in terms of factors that appear to help young people and their families from low socioeconomic backgrounds to make successful transitions from school to post-school options, and the main barriers encountered by young people and their families when making decisions and undertaking transition from school to post-school options.

Five main factors helped young people and their families:

1. Families provided young people with a 'safe and secure' net while they were free to make choices about their post-school options. This was summed up by the comment: *"Let them choose, but be there for them"*.

2. Although young people's career choices were sometimes constrained by financial and locational considerations, they were not, on the whole, constrained by the family's expectations.

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5    The term 'personal agency' is used by Candy et al. (1994) in a discussion of attributes of lifelong learners. It is defined as a positive concept of oneself as capable and autonomous. This is coupled with self-organisation skills such as goal setting.

**3.** Young people in this study tended to show high achievement from the early years of secondary school. They also showed an early predisposition to tertiary study.

**4.** Young people in this study manifested characteristics of lifelong learning such as a love of learning, initiative, persistence and determination. These characteristics appeared to contribute to their self-efficacy and independence and a remarkable sense of future, which helped them to strive towards bettering their life prospects.

**5.** There was much mention of the assistance of financial support – such as scholarships from The Smith Family. But financial support alone was not sufficient to help these young people to achieve their goals. Mentoring, such as that provided by The Smith Family, was very important, along with the support of significant teachers and friends, who complemented the support provided by families. In some cases such mentors could provide practical support that families were unable to access, this included current and accurate information on career pathways and the types of education and preparation needed to pursue them.

The following barriers were encountered by young people and their families and are acknowledged by the broader research literature:

**1.** There is little evidence of families in this study being able to work closely with schools to provide guidance for their children.

**2.** Many young people in this study had no familiarity with university environments. Their backgrounds, social environments, and networks would not have contributed to their understanding of tertiary institutions. The array of tertiary courses was confusing (and sometimes lacked meaning) and most of these young people had non-linear pathways – a kind of trial and error process – before discovering the courses they were pursuing at the time of interview for this study.

**3.** Young people sometimes suffered from what seemed to be a self-imposed pressure when they were in Year 12. Most families did not overtly pressure children to do well, but several young people interviewed had achieved well at secondary school, then buckled under pressure when faced with Year 12 exams.

The fieldwork and relevant literature review conducted for this study have contributed to a deeper understanding of the intentions of students, and the ways in which families influence the choices that young people make in their lives. The challenges facing young people are enormous. No one institution or approach can be sufficient, on its own, as a means to helping young people make a successful transition from school to study, work and adult life. Young people need an 'opportunity rich' environment and one in which they are equipped and supported for meaningful decision making.

# *Chapter one*: Introduction

## Purpose of the study

In 2006 The Smith Family commissioned ACER to conduct a study that would shed further light on the inter-relationships between family expectations and the post-school plans of financially disadvantaged young people. The study was intended to extend the findings of *On track? Students choosing a career* (Beavis, 2006) which identified uncertainties about how and to what extent family expectations shape young people's educational plans.

There are complex choices and pathways potentially open to young people as they make their way from school to work or further education. In contemporary Australia the transition from school to post-school activities is not a simple, linear, 'one-off' process. This raises concerns about whether all young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – have the capacity, skills, knowledge and support to successfully navigate their way, and to avoid being in 'at risk' circumstances.

This study combines a major literature review with in-depth interviews of ten young people and nine family members. An outline of the methodology is given in the Appendix. The study aims to enhance the findings of previous studies undertaken by ACER for The Smith Family (*What do students think of work? Are they on the right page? Junior secondary school students' perceptions of the world of work (*Beavis, 2006) and *What do students know about work? Senior secondary school students perceptions of the world of work* (Beavis et al., 2005)) by probing and examining the stories of a group of young people who have participated in The Smith Family *Learning for Life* program and who are considered to have made a positive start towards achieving their post-school goals. By asking these young people questions such as: "How did you do it? What were the main barriers? How did you overcome them?", the study suggests ways that young people in similar situations may be helped in making a successful transition from school.

This study has a particular focus on the role that families play in young people's schooling and choice of post-school pathways, and the ways that families can be better supported in these regards. 'Family' has been interpreted broadly to include siblings and other significant individuals.

## Organisation of the report

This report consists of an Executive Summary, Introduction (Section 1), a review of the literature (Section 2), stories of the young people (Section 3), discussion of review of the fieldwork findings in light of the broader research (Section 4), and concluding comments and identification of key issues (Section 5). The research methodology is outlined in an appendix.

The young people's stories are included in the body of the report (Section 3) because they are powerful, and the use of the young people's words in the stories encapsulates vividly the various experiences of their transitions from school to tertiary education or work and contextualises the findings for readers.

> There are complex choices and pathways potentially open to young people as they make their way from school to work or further education. In contemporary Australia the transition from school to post-school activities is not a simple, linear, 'one-off' process.

This section summarises research that relates to the effects and influences of family expectations on the cost-benefit analyses undertaken by students when they are considering their post-school plans.[6]

The 2006 report for The Smith Family, *On track? Students choosing a career*, pointed to the possibility of a strong effect of family expectations on young people's post-school plans. Post-school plans often include decisions about further education, so a family's influence or involvement in assessing the costs and benefits associated with this decision is not surprising (Usher, 2005). *On track?* identified uncertainties about how and to what extent family expectations shape young people's educational plans. It concluded that the extent to which this influence is shaped by the gender, interests and ability of the young people remains largely unknown.

This report is intended to help better understand the inter-relationships between family expectations and young people's plans. This review of the literature informs the development and analysis of some intensive case studies of a small number of young people and their families, as well as suggestions for policy and further practice.

## The Australian context

The choices and pathways available to young people today as they make their way from school to work or further education are many and varied. What was once seen to be a linear pathway is now often described as a mosaic, or 'crazy paving and stepping stones', where students move in and out of education and different areas or types of employment (sometimes combining the two) and are more likely than previous generations to experience periods of part-time employment, casual work, unemployment and, for some young people, time outside the labour force and education altogether (Dwyer et al., 2003; Harris, Rainey & Sumner, 2006).

Both in Australia and overseas, governments, education departments and universities are keen to identify pathways and evaluate policies and programs designed to facilitate the transition process. Consequently there are a number of large-scale surveys which collect information about young people's post-school pathways. Because much of this is cross-sectional data, it is limited in describing influences across time or outcomes in the long-term. Where demographic data are included, there is some indication of the influences on post-school planning; however, the complexity of individual choices and associated pathways emerges more fully through longitudinal research studies where young people are followed over time (e.g. Fullarton et al. 2003), and in qualitative research where individual stories are documented and analysed (Harris, Rainey & Sumner, 2006).

Equity issues are a key theme in data analysis; not all young people are equally represented in higher education or in high status jobs. Against the ongoing impact of social and economic change, research needs to consider young people in the context of their lives. It is important that the data relating to post-school pathways, and associated policies and programs are not interpreted from a viewpoint of ideas and conditions that are now outmoded. Research which includes young people's own viewpoints and interpretations of the significant influences on them, and the complexities of their individual stories, provides useful insight into many contemporary issues (Eckersley, Wierenga & Wyn, 2006).

The lives of young people are highly fluid and their education and labour market activities and status can change rapidly from one period to the next. Indeed, education and training policy in Australia, by increasing the range of options and encouraging flexibility, has made pathways in Australia more individualised and complex (Rothman & McKenzie, 2006). This has raised concerns about whether all young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – have the capacity, skills, knowledge and support to navigate their way through the increased number of options and multiple pathways available in Australia.

A significant proportion of disadvantaged young people fail to make a successful transition to work or further study (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2006). This has an adverse effect on individual lives, as well as on wider social and economic development. For example, research shows that:

*… young people not in full-time learning or work, experience more financial and personal stress and lower levels of participation and integration with civil society. They are less satisfied with their lives.*

*(Long, 2006, p.1)*

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6    The full research review is available separately on The Smith Family website: Frigo, T., Bryce, J., Anderson, M. & McKenzie, P. (2007), *Australian Young People, their families and post-school plans: a research review* available www.thesmithfamily.com.au/index.cfm?pageid=2598&pid=2535

Supporting young people to make successful school to work transitions is important not just in economic terms but also for the human consequences associated with unsuccessful transitions.

Included in the Australian research are surveys conducted with students participating in The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* suite of programs. In the 2005 report *What Do Students Know about Work?*, students' post-school plans were surveyed. Most of the students had developed plans which reflected a combination of their interests, abilities and the influence of their families. There was still some fluidity in their plans which in some cases changed over the course of 12 months, and some confusion regarding the matching of educational requirements with career paths. The incompatibility of some students' educational and career intentions was flagged as an area for concern (Beavis, Curtis & Curtis, 2005).

Against the ongoing impact of social and economic change, research needs to consider young people in the context of their families and broader lives.

A subsequent survey conducted in 2006, *On Track? Students choosing a career,* provided an opportunity to examine how students' plans had evolved over a year (Beavis, 2006). The study also analysed the perceived costs and benefits of a university education on the young people's projected careers. The plans of most of the students had continued to evolve and many planned on further education at university or TAFE. The survey revealed that, in general, anticipated income was not a significant factor in students' plans to attend university. Instead, the type of role that a particular career involved, and how it aligned with the students' interests and abilities, emerged as important in their planning process. Relationships between family expectations and student plans for further study also emerged as an important influence on decisions to attend TAFE or university.

> *Typically, these young people – all of whom are from low socioeconomic families – were planning a future shaped by their interests, perceived ability and, it seems, their families. The picture to emerge of these families, from these data, was one of supportiveness. The interests of young people were being encouraged and their plans set at a level to accord with their ability.*
>
> *(Beavis, 2006, p. vi)*

The following overview of research provides an insight into the decision-making processes undertaken by young people as they make the transition from school to work or further education.

### Structure of the literature review
The literature summarised in this section attempts to identify the factors which influence post-school planning, as well as the underlying processes which explain how

these factors operate. A particular focus is research which investigates the nature and extent of the influence that families have on students as they make plans for life beyond secondary school. While the term 'family' is used throughout the review, this may encompass other significant people in young people's lives including guardians, carers and blended families in their many forms.

The previous reports conducted for The Smith Family, which include data collected from the *Learning for Life* students, raise a number of questions, suggesting that further exploration of the influences on post-school planning at an individual micro-level, particularly the role that families play, is an important next step towards understanding the influences on young people's post-school planning.

There is a broad base of research literature on which to draw, including theories and research undertaken in the areas of career development, post-school pathways, and the factors which influence the decision-making processes of young people. This research comes from a range of fields that include sociological and psychological approaches, government reports, books and journals dedicated to career development and vocational guidance. Some of the research is quantitative and involves large-scale surveys; other research is qualitative and, while less generalisable, gives some insight into individual processes of decision-making.

The review has been structured to survey the following:

- **The influence of family, friends and networks** – which explores the way in which family processes and relationships influence young people as they make the transition from school to work.

- **Family contexts** – research which links family structural factors and characteristics such as socioeconomic status with post-school planning.

- **Adolescent decision-making** – the influences identified in the previous sections are considered in the broader context of theoretical and empirical research describing the underlying processes of career development.

Wherever possible, the review emphasises Australian research studies, although this is relatively limited in some of the above fields. The nature of the relationship between family background, the characteristics of school systems and occupational outcomes varies widely among countries (Shavit & Müller, 1998). Findings from international research are included where these can usefully be applied to the Australian context.

## The influence of family, friends and networks

The research literature confirms what one would intuitively expect to be the case: the influence of families on the educational and career choices of young people as they move through their individual life journeys is immense (Hodkinson, 2004). Indeed, many career counselling services for adults who need support with aspects of career development later in life have them focus on family influences in their formative years, as these are viewed to have a key and long-lasting effect over an individual's life span (Chope, 2005).

An overview of research which investigates the influence that family, friends and networks have on young people as they formulate ideas and plans for life beyond school leads to the following conclusions.

Parental support plays a significant role in adolescents' career development. Families have a strong influence on post-school planning (Foskett & Helmsley-Brown, 2001; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1998). Families and friends are a key source of information and support for young people as they establish values, aspirations and make decisions about life beyond school (Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi & Glasscock, 2001).

While formal support networks such as schools and career guidance programs provide information to young people in their senior years at school, the informal support network that families provide is equally, if not more important. This influence is apparent from the early years of secondary school (Semple, Howieson & Paris, 2002).

Although parents are often motivated and well-intentioned, they are not always able to provide useful information and direction to their children. Some parents report that they lack the tools and resources necessary to help students through the post-school planning process (Wimberly & Noeth, 2004).

A safe and secure set of relationships is an important enabling factor for young people to freely explore post-school options. There is some suggestion that enmeshment and conflict in families may have a detrimental role in terms of support available and consequently the support to young people in planning their post-school options (Penick & Jepsen, 1992).

## Family contexts

The research on the importance of family processes and relationships highlights the importance of placing children and young people within the context of their families. Equally important is situating families and young people within the context of their communities.

While family processes and relationships have an important influence on young people, it is important to recognise that the ways in which families influence young people are a product of both the way in which the family interacts *and* the location of the family in the broader social context. Both play an important role in shaping the resources available to young people as they make their post-school plans (Whiston & Keller, 2005).

Equity issues are a key theme in data analysis; not all young people are equally represented in higher education or in high status jobs. Research identifies a need to continue to develop strategies to improve opportunities for traditionally disadvantaged groups of students, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, rural and remote areas, and Indigenous students.

Socioeconomic background plays a critical role in career development but remains largely unexplained in theories and models of vocational behaviour. Further investigation of the experiences of young people from different backgrounds which takes into account their worldviews and perceptions of career options from a young age is needed in order to understand the interaction between social class and post-school planning (Heppner & Scott, 2004).

Much of the research considers significant influences on young people's post-school planning, particularly when they weigh up the costs and benefits of pursuing university careers. Important influences include the young people's own perceptions of their abilities and interests. Family expectations are significant and often young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds give little consideration to further education because it is not a part of their family's experience. But when such young people do pursue further education, assistance from a mentor is invaluable – for both motivational influence and practical needs.

Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to have a more instrumental view of education and may be more likely than their more comfortably-off peers to have shorter-term goals in relation to pursuing further education (James, 2000). Financial assistance may play a less significant role than might be expected, and geographical distance and isolation appear to discourage university enrolment (Wright, 2005).

Hence, the Australian research is in broad agreement with American research that financial support for young people at the time of university entrance is not sufficient to produce equitable participation in tertiary education across social groups. Inequalities lead to differential outcomes and come into play at a much earlier stage of a young person's education.

## Adolescent decision-making

Adolescence is a time of physical, social, cognitive and emotional growth and a key period during which young people establish their sense of identity, including their vocational identity. The establishment of a vocational identity is associated with a number of important decisions that are made during this period, including decisions relating to further education.

The decision-making processes associated with post-school planning begin from an early age (Alloway et al., 2004). Most young people have started to make plans about life beyond school in the early secondary years.

It is evident that families have a significant influence on young people from the earliest times up to and including the post-compulsory school years. The decisions that parents make about their children's education, and the attitudes and aspirations that parents convey, help to shape the options available to their children and influence young people's own values and aspirations towards further education (Whiston & Keller, 2005).

While social contexts have an influence on the decision-making process, young people also have a sense of taking responsibility for their lives (personal agency) with respect to their futures and see themselves as self-determining (Hodkinson, 2004). Their predispositions and preconceptions about the futures available to them are a significant influence on their decision-making (Foskett & Helmsley-Brown, 2001).

A young person's pathway beyond school is influenced by a vast array of contexts, some outside the individual's control. Far from being linear, post-school pathways have the nature of a complex web.

## Key findings from the research literature

The role that families play in this process is significant and is influential on many levels, both explicitly and implicitly. As young people imagine and explore their future lives, parents play a key role in their children's socialisation and identity formation. In order to work effectively with young people in the area of post-school planning, it is important to understand the nature and extent of family influence, and to work with families so that they are able to provide the support and information that will empower their children to maximise their educational and career opportunities.

Although there is quite an array of statistical data on student pathways, the body of research that explores the processes by which students make their decisions, and follows the students as they move through school and

beyond, is relatively small. The key themes identified in this review confirm the complexity of the individual processes of young people's decision making when it comes to making the transition from school to work and/or further education. The main findings include the following:

- Parents and families are a significant influence on students' decision making and this influence is profound from a very early stage.

- Young people need support with post-school planning from the *early* years of secondary schooling, if not before.

- Family processes and relationships provide an important positive base for enabling young people to develop their vocational identity and engage in the tasks associated with career development.

- Parents and families have an influence on young people's developing attitudes, aspirations and predispositions which inform their thinking about their lives beyond school.

- The ways in which families influence young people are a product of both the way in which the family interacts *and* the location of the family in the broader social context which influences their attitudes and access to cultural capital (these contexts include socioeconomic status and Indigenous background).

- Parental education levels are significantly linked to young people's educational attainment and aspirations for further education.

- While many parents are motivated and well-intentioned, not all parents and families feel that they are adequately informed or equipped to assist in post-school planning.

- The majority of formal career guidance programs appear to focus on the provision of information to senior secondary students in isolation from their families and home experiences.

- There is clearly a need for further qualitative and longitudinal research to enable a better understanding of the micro-processes involved in post-school planning and the influence of families.

A key finding arising from this literature review is that there is much to learn regarding the processes and the extent to which families influence the post-school decision making of their children. The social, cultural, political and economic contexts are dynamic; continual change affects family structures and relationships and potentially introduces other influences on young people as they plan for life beyond school.

However, the influence of families reinforces the need for policy and programs to consider children and youth within the context of their families in order to improve their post-school options. There is much research about the pathways that young people take but less understanding surrounds the processes by which they make these choices. Yet understanding these processes is fundamental to program and policy development that will enable all young people to make informed decisions about their futures.

Adolescence is a time of physical, social, cognitive and emotional growth and a key period during which young people establish their sense of identity, including their vocational identity.

# *Chapter three*: The young people's stories

Early in the project it was agreed, in consultation with The Smith Family that the fieldwork would focus on 'achievers'. Within this project, an achiever was defined as a young person whose present post-school pathway involves education, training and/or employment. This might be a pathway from Year 12 to university, or a pathway from Year 10 to an apprenticeship or on-going employment.

The researchers used in-depth interviewing with young people and a family member as the key research approach. Use of this approach allowed for deeper exploration of decision-making processes and the influence of such factors as family expectations on young people's ideas about and experiences of post-school options. Liamputtong and Ezzy's (2005) review of numerous qualitative studies highlights the value of in-depth interviews. The authors note that in-depth interviews are an excellent means of gathering detail about an individual's understandings and experiences.

The stories that follow illuminate and contextualise the findings from the fieldwork in the next section. Researchers, with the consent of the young people who have taken part in *Learning for Life*, constructed their stories from the interviews conducted beforehand (see the Appendix). The young people were then contacted to be sure that the stories were factually correct and that no features were included that might lead to them being identified. Sometimes the young people themselves chose a pseudonym and they thought of suitable titles for their stories.

## *It's been a roller coaster*
### Leisel's story

Leisel's story has many ups and downs, sparked by her mother passing away while she was still at school. Leisel went to live with a friend, but in her own words "that did not turn out" and nor did a stint with an older couple. It was tough being split up from her siblings, especially her sister with whom Leisel was, and is, still very close. "All through that time I was going through school and yep, it was major". Her sister had by this stage moved interstate because her placement had not worked out either. Leisel would talk all the time on the telephone to her sister, but would see her only about once a year. Her boyfriend's family was kind and would say "you can stay here and they buy me stuff and I don't even ask – it's nice", says Leisel.

Separation from her family and moving around a lot has fed Leisel's fierce independence. Leisel adds "I've had to fend for myself since I was 13, so I'm kinda used to it". Whether one was used to it or not, juggling work and study while still at school was tricky, especially at exam time. But Leisel was pretty organised to fit all of it into her life. She worked out that she had to do her work whenever she got it. She highlighted to the researchers, "it doesn't always happen but hopefully I get into a pattern". Sometimes the nature of the part-time work would present obstacles to her goals of bringing in some pocket money and studying, and she had to make other arrangements. Sometimes it was her own choice to make a change, for example, her decision to stop milking cows at 5 am because it got in the way of her exams and other major assessments. However, in another instance her decision to stop working at a fast food outlet was not her preferred choice. The reason for stopping, Leisel recalls, was that "the shop wouldn't give me the time off that I needed, so I stopped". Year 12 was more important.

Learning at school felt "rushed" and "crammed in". "Six classes a day and exams were always two a day. You didn't get the exam preparation, you didn't get to research". Friends would help alleviate these feelings to a certain extent through "study groups and things like that to help before exams". Leisel recalls how she and her friends would go through questions and then relax afterwards by watching a bit of football on the television. At weekends she would spend time at her boyfriend's relaxing. People from the chaplaincy service at school were also a support, always making a point of keeping in contact with Leisel.

One aspect of school Leisel did not mind was the expectation from the school for students to be more independent in the later years. Leisel especially enjoyed Business. It was her best class and "the teacher was really helpful". She had a flare for it, maybe because she has had to manage in life.

Preparation for university was not something Leisel had really considered, "I didn't even think I was going to get into uni because of my University Entrance Score".

Leisel could not take up her first offer from a university because of the cost. She knew she just wanted to get into a university. "I wanted some sort of education, yeah." She had "always had high hopes" that she wanted "to achieve", but she was going to have to wait until the next round of offers. Leisel recalls how she "was pretty upset". Unsure as to whether she would get another offer, Leisel set about looking at different options, such as TAFE.

Preparation for university was not something Leisel had really considered, "I didn't even think I was going to get into uni because of my university entrance score". She felt an added pressure from her extended family. Leisel would not be the first from her family to go onto university. The weight of her brother's earlier success was a heavy burden because of the expectations it set up for her from the rest of the family. As Leisel recalls "yeah, well when my brother got into uni, I thought yeah, wow he's so good he got into uni. The first one in the family to get in, the first one in the family to pass high school.

"Then it was coming to the end of my Year 12 and my extended family were like, 'You'd better get into uni, your brother did, you're just as smart as him' and when I got my [university entrance score] I was crushed [because it was so much lower than she had hoped for]. I thought there was no way I was going to get into uni, they expected me to do well even though I didn't do quite as well". Leisel kept the news from her family at first, only her boyfriend and the school knew her actual score. Yet, getting her university entrance score was a significant event in Leisel's journey so far. On the one hand, the score was lower than expected, on the other hand, she was excited to think that she had achieved the goal of Year 12 and that she was going to go to university after all.

Leisel liked teaching so started off doing a teaching course at a different university from the first round offer she had previously had to reject. However, she found the university lecturers "not very helpful or supportive" and the students "were like little cocoons and they wouldn't share". Leisel was not in a good space and she left that course and did a foundation studies course in Education instead. This foundation course became a pathway to her preferred course, a Bachelor of Business and Commerce. A pathway she needed to take because of her lower than hoped for university entrance score.

The compulsory nature of lots of subjects was a turn-off for Leisel. However, within this constraint Leisel enjoyed, what she calls, "the practical subjects, like accounting" because she could apply "the maths and stuff". But university was a very different space than school and her observation of her brother's free time did not match her own experience of university life. Laughing, Leisel recalls, "I thought because he gets heaps of time off, that I'd get heaps of time off, but you don't. I had to go five days a week last year, for just a couple of hours, so that was awful". Leisel also found the way she was expected to write and speak at university compared to school was also very unfamiliar. It took some getting used to, as did her time management and unwelcome distractions from what Leisel called "the social aspect at uni".

Of support at university, however, are Leisel's strong network of older friends, many of whom she had previously been with at school. Car pooling to and from university with her boyfriend is a practical help to Leisel and having one of her mum's friends as a lecturer is also considered a bonus, a familiar face in an otherwise unfamiliar setting; as too is having her older brother there who is doing similar subjects at the same university. Leisel does not take such supports for granted and notes "there is a lot of outside support if you're willing to seek it, so that's good".

In particular, Leisel highlights the support of The Smith Family from when she was young through to her present time at university. "The Smith family have always offered me tickets to sporting events and stuff like that and Christmas presents and that makes me feel better. Also, organising sponsors and mentors I think basically, if I didn't have The Smith Family helping me with school I wouldn't be at uni because I couldn't afford it. It helps me pay for books and those sorts of things. Yep, they always help".

Leisel is more settled now compared to when she was at school. Her immediate family has reunited and share a house together and during what spare time she has from uni, Leisel runs a regular youth group. On the university front, Leisel is looking forward to having more choice in her following years of study. In particular, she is motivated at the thought of majoring in HR and management. She knows she will have to work her way up and does not expect to be in a high paying position straight away after graduating, but she does like the thought of training others. "I used to be a trainer at the fast food restaurant. That's probably where I got the idea from".

Leisel's advice to other young people? "Stick to it, even if things are not turning out. It takes time, it won't work out straight away, but it does". ■

# Rainbow's story

Rainbow was always smart. Around about Year 3 she started to read her grandmother's Mills and Boone and somewhere around that time she even read Jane Austen. One day in Year 6 she got only 60 per cent for a test and another smart girl, whom she didn't get along with, beat her. Rainbow felt really disappointed in herself and decided to start studying. She got 95 per cent for the next test and beat the other girl. This was the beginning of her competitive spirit. Even now, doing fourth year Arts/Law, she likes to compete with someone and she mentions that she is getting straight Distinctions.

Rainbow's journey has been "very hilly", but she has always wanted to learn and she seems to have always learned from her experiences. In high school she says she was a "nerd" and was bullied a lot to the extent that she had to change schools to a less academic high school, which she regrets, but she believes that at the other school she would have been bullied right through to Year 12.

So what have been the 'hills' that Rainbow has had to cross? Lack of money has permeated Rainbow's journey so far. Whenever asked about how she helped Rainbow, her mother always mentions money – "I could sometimes give her $20", she says. Rainbow describes winning a Smith Family scholarship (at university) as "a miracle". But even with that money, and for some of the time a government scholarship, there were a lot of obstacles. "People don't realise all the additional expenses not covered by a scholarship when you don't have money. The scholarship pays for your books, your accommodation and your food, but often there isn't enough left over for transport – particularly when you live in the country and there is a costly train fare home". In the early days, when she was home-sick, Rainbow used to hitch-hike home from university to see her family. Her mother didn't like it, but there was no alternative. And what if, like Rainbow, you are doing a 'middle class' kind of course like Law? How do you get to the Law students' ball? Why should a student without money miss out on this? Rainbow had to. She couldn't afford a dress. Some of her middle class colleagues from the city were buying Gucci. She couldn't even afford a $30 outfit from the local shop.

When you live in a single-parent family with a sick mother and no money, it is not only the *lack* of money that provides an obstacle, it is the difficulty of climbing out of that situation in a social sense. When she was in Year 8, Rainbow found herself living in what her mother described as "the worst neighbourhood" in a regional town. Through all this Rainbow knew that she had to keep learning to be sure that she wouldn't end up in a dependent situation like her mother. She made friends outside of school, with people who many would label 'drop-outs', but she found that "they're actually really very different inside from what you'd think", so, although they didn't aspire to professional careers themselves, they encouraged Rainbow to keep studying.

A middle class kind of course like Law poses particular obstacles for a student from Rainbow's background. As well as the demands of study, Rainbow had to try to teach herself to mix with 'professional people'. While she was growing up she had no opportunity to talk with such people – so when she met them through her Law course, she didn't know *how* to talk to them. She was the first in the family to go to university, so no one could tell her what it would be like. As she said, "I didn't even know what 'Arts' was!" But she figured it out by net-working and seeking help and she sees herself as still learning how to cope with 'professional' social gatherings.

How has Rainbow managed the huge transformation from 'nerdy' introspective Year 8 student to where she is now? Rainbow seems to be a model of a 'lifelong learner'.

Rainbow had realised back in Year 8 that she had what she described as "really poor social skills". At this young age she didn't know that she would follow a career such as Law, but she realised that she was introverted and 'nerdy'. Good marks would not be enough. She forced herself to do public speaking, undergoing some painful experiences. Then later on when she was trying to build up contacts in the world of Law, she realised that she didn't know how to talk in a middle class way, how to cope with a large sandwich at lunch, or not to turn up to lunch with a solicitor wearing her 'raggy' top. She now has a suit, and next time someone mentions that they know the prime minister, she'll make sure that her jaw doesn't drop.

Another 'hill' was learning to cope with pressure. Rainbow was used to getting straight A's at school, but all of a sudden when faced with Year 12 exams she 'ran amok'. She was out socialising even though her 'drop-out' friends were telling her she should be home studying. The pressure was coming from teachers, from family (proud of their first potential university student) and also from herself, as Rainbow acknowledged: "I really stuffed up my [Year 12]. It was because I was so worried and so anxious and so stressed that I wouldn't be able to get those high marks I

set for myself. So in the end I went – nup, I don't even want to try!" Rainbow ended up getting her place at university on her principal's recommendation, because of the high marks she had obtained at school.

Once Rainbow got to university, there were still 'hills' to be coped with, particularly the huge difference of living in a university residential college compared to her home in a rural town. She felt very home-sick. But Rainbow soon came to realise that "when you're in a college, you're looked after" and in her usual resourceful way she made use of the advice of tutors and established support networks of friends, although her mother's view is that it "wasn't good" for Rainbow to mix with people "from a different situation"; maybe her mother felt that Rainbow's aspiration to have a professional career would be too much of a struggle for her. When your family has had no experience of university life or professional work it is probably impossible for them to understand your aspirations or what you believe you need to do.

Rainbow's family give invaluable support in terms of love and care, but Rainbow also needed people who could take an interest in what she was going through and understand the significance of what she was achieving. She found this support from The Smith Family *Learning for Life* Workers.

Many 'hills' have been crossed, and Rainbow is now well established in her Arts/Law degree, getting very good grades. She says she loves her course and she seems to be well on the way to her goal of being "a really successful person". Although she does spend a lot of time 'holed up' in her room studying, she gives the impression of being very sociable and outgoing, involved in a lot of activities at university. She says, "I rarely have time for myself".

How has Rainbow managed the huge transformation from 'nerdy' introspective Year 8 student to where she is now? Rainbow seems to be a model of a 'lifelong learner'. She says she has always wanted to learn, and this desire seems to have driven her through the huge obstacles she has confronted. Her mother comments on her considerable determination and describes her as "strong willed". It is clear from talking with Rainbow that she has an extraordinarily analytical mind.

Accompanying Rainbow's analytical mind is an ability to learn from experiences – and she has also done this from an early age. When she "stuffed up" her Year 12 exams, she realised that it was mainly due to stress and she emerged from the experience determined to make the most of her opportunities at university. It seems that Rainbow doesn't leave anything to chance. She says there have been no surprises in her life path so far – she takes everything, both the 'hills' and the accolades, in her stride. And she has learned to accept who she is and to like who she is. She said: "I think when I was younger, I felt really sorry for myself that I was poor and couldn't have these things that rich kids could have. I would have loved it if my Dad were a solicitor and I could have picked up all these amazing ideas and concepts … But I don't feel sorry for myself now, because I've realised … I think it's actually been a gift, because I'm the person I am today because of these experiences and – I like who I am today. Especially, I think that's why I've got such an inner determination".

Rainbow's dream is to reach the "pot of gold". Maybe – well into the future – when she's about 40, she might go into politics. But when she reaches the "pot of gold" she wants to share it. "Once I've got a job", she says, "I want to be able to help someone". ◼

# *It is what it is* Aidan's story

Aidan's story starts in Year 7 – his first year in Junior High School. He is in an accelerated program – probably quiet and obedient at first, but after a while these accelerated program kids realise they are missing out on some fun and, as Aidan said, he didn't really take Junior High School seriously. All except for English. According to Aidan, the Year 7 English teacher took a genuine interest in those students who wanted to learn. And the teacher had a genuine love of English, which he conveyed to students like Aidan. "It wasn't just teach by the book", Aidan said. That teacher got Aidan writing, and gave him direction. Aidan realised he could write and the English teacher helped him to realise that he could write well.

Aidan had grown up in a house of books, with a Mum who read to her children. Her advice to other parents is that the three most important things are to read to your kids, to be there for them – "make a fuss of whatever work they bring home from school", and be positive about school.

By the end of Junior High, Aidan was doing some Year 10 units although Year 10 doesn't really start until Senior High. In Year 10 work became a bit more serious for Aidan and he was doing some Year 11 units.

Maybe there was a point in Senior High when that seriousness relaxed a bit – Aidan's Mum says that he "dropped his

bundle" in Year 12 and socialising became important. No matter, he still got his Year 12 certificate, although his university entrance score wasn't as good as he'd hoped. It was at this time that his English teacher (the one from Year 7) was able to give some useful advice and direction. Aidan said he was really unprepared for thinking about what to do at university. The English teacher helped to steer him through the course admissions guide, although Aidan said he applied for university "just to make the deadline", implying that he didn't give a lot of consideration to his choices at that point. As he said, it wasn't until he got his university entrance score that he could start to do some serious thinking about his options: "then you really know what you can do". That was when he put the Communication course as his first preference. The English teacher helped him to select the course, although there were really only two possible courses at rural universities – and Aidan only considered a rural university because he wanted to live with or close to family members. He saw his limited choice of courses as a bit of a challenge.

So Aidan was accepted for the Communication course, even though, as he put it, "I got into a course that I probably shouldn't have". This was because his university entrance score was low. But he enrolled in a Foundation Studies course and had an interview with people there, who must have been impressed, because, he said, "that pretty much got me into the [Communication] course". This is an important turning-point in Aidan's story.

Aidan's mother was delighted when he was accepted into a university course. Worried about Aidan being unemployed, she said "all I asked was that they got their [Year 12 certificate]". So Aidan had more than fulfilled this wish. Aidan's mother had come to love learning and had been a role model as a mature age student. She said that she went back to school "to be a good influence". Having come from a large family and left school at fifteen, after 'battling' on a pension, she returned to study for an arts degree at thirty and loved it, because "everyone supported everyone". She didn't pressure Aidan to go to university, Aidan said that his Mum "always encouraged me to go to uni, but … she always gave me the freedom to choose whatever I liked".

For some young people university is a great unknown. Aidan said that he had "a little bit of an idea" of what it would be like. His mother said that she "dragged" the children along to university activities she was involved in during her course. Aidan also saw her as "very, very dedicated". This led to him expecting university to be more difficult than it

turned out to be, he said, "I thought it would be harder than it is, like, it's not five hours every night".

There were some things about university that took a bit of adjustment, for example living in a residence with others where you had responsibility for cooking and cleaning. Aidan said: "More than being driven, you have to drive yourselves". Aidan knows that he does best at the subjects he enjoys – that's a main reason for choosing Communication. He tried a Journalism major but found that he didn't like interviewing people – he likes writing. Nevertheless, chatting with a 'mentor' from a Melbourne newspaper provided by The Smith Family was helpful.

The process of transition from school to university could have been a difficult time for Aidan – with an entrance score perhaps not as high as he knew he could achieve, and constrained by a small selection of suitable courses at rural universities. But he now seems settled in his chosen course and it is not as high-pressured as he'd expected from observing his mother at university. "I'm a bit surprised at how relaxed you can be", he says, "I thought that you had to sort of freak out continuously or stress continuously … if you put the effort in, you're capable".

Aidan's mother is amazed at how much he seems to have grown up in the relatively short time since leaving school. A part of this is the fact that he can look after himself in the community of a university residence. But also, this young person who has never been on a plane and has always lived in a rural environment, is keen to study overseas – in fact he is applying for an exchange to a South East Asian campus. He wants to study languages, in particular Malay-Chinese and Japanese. He sees this as "a good kick start to learning to live in a different country" and overall this experience should boost his potential in the job-market.

Aidan is aware that all of his university experience is underpinned by the assistance he has received from The Smith Family: "There's a lot of things you cannot do if you don't have that scholarship there to help you out". Although there have been turning-points in Aidan's story, such as deciding to take school seriously when he entered Senior High School and getting into Communication at university when his university entrance score was low, he seems to be learning that life is what you make of it. He says, "If you do your work, if you put the effort in, you get your results – like it's you are in the position you put yourself into"; hence the title of his story, "It is what it is". ■

Aidan had grown up in a house of books, with a Mum who read to her children.

# It's not the beginning of the end Violet's story

Home Economics classes at school were where Violet thought, "Wow I can do this – I can go to university". But Violet, the youngest of four children, did not always think university was an option for her. No one else in the family had gone to university. In fact, Violet did not think she was smart enough to go to uni at all even though she "never failed anything or struggled".

In Year 10, Violet would hang out with her 'brainy' friends by the library. They were known, collectively, as the 'libraries'. According to Violet, her friends were "A++ students", while she "was just sort of average". Her friends were quite competitive. Violet says one friend in particular felt her "'A' was always more hard earned than if I got an 'A' in class – because my teacher marked a lot easier than her teacher!" Violet found confidence from talking to the "lady in the library", who always had words of encouragement for her.

Violet saw the library lady as someone she could turn to for "a little bit of support", as she was so kind to everyone. She could talk to her "like a friend". This seemed to boost Violet's confidence and along with her mum's ever present support of "just try your hardest" and "no pressure", Violet continued with her studies at school. Not only did she continue, but she excelled in Home Economics and she loved it.

Violet's Home Economics teacher was a "really good role model". She would help Violet with her writing, especially strengthening her referencing and paragraph structuring skills. Violet felt that time spent on those key factors "strengthened her writing" and helped her prepare for university. The fact that Violet was excelling in Home Economics and loved it, was a real confidence boost. She was so inspired by her teacher that she decided to pursue a uni-pathway to become a Home Economics teacher.

The transition from school to uni was a challenge. A friend helped her to enrol, but as Violet says herself, it was a "big decision when I was only 16". Suddenly, Violet found herself travelling for at least one and a half hours to uni and juggling part-time work commitments with study. "Students need to feel there is more than one option available, if they

feel it is not for them" she says, and "not to make yourself sick over it because it is just not worth it". The pressure began to mount up and within six weeks of starting uni Violet became run down. "I just got so stressed out and in the process made myself sick because of it – I just couldn't handle it", Violet recalls.

Life post-school had an "overwhelming feeling", which she had heard was normal, "but it still felt strange". "I don't belong, I shouldn't be here" were saddlebags Violet carried. Beliefs reinforced because it was difficult to meet new people at a large university and as Violet says, "it's hard when you are so young". After all, Violet was only 17 years old. While Home Economics was a subject she enjoyed, only Science, Maths or Business were available as her second specialisation, which she found a real turn-off. Violet chose Business, but "didn't feel confident about later teaching a subject she did not feel she was coping in".

Her mum's observation was about the amount of assignments. At first there is a perception of "plenty of time, then the panic starts … You feel for them, it creeps up on them".

Violet felt more pressure at uni than school. She worried about the possibility of failing subjects, a foreign idea from her experiences of learning at school. Such experiences, together with the lengthy travel, work commitments and not knowing anyone at uni, led to Violet's decision to leave. It was a very difficult decision at the time. Indeed, her mum says "she was heartbroken. I think she felt she was letting us down". And Violet did feel she was letting others down. A feeling heightened in Violet's mind because she had to tell her family of her decision. Not that this decision to leave university was a concern shared by her mum. As her mum said, "she did not have to achieve for everyone else".

Violet's mum felt for her daughter. She would offer encouragement through praise and being there for her daughter, but suggested it was important not to "push kids too far". Her mum would try and help Violet if she could, but found that "a lot of times you can't help them anymore – things have changed. I mean, I can't turn on a computer".

> The transition from school to uni was a challenge. A friend helped her to enrol, but as Violet says herself, it was a "big decision when I was only 16. Suddenly, Violet found herself travelling for at least one and a half hours to uni and juggling part-time work commitments with study.

Violet felt a little bit of pressure, especially after receiving the scholarship from The Smith Family, to stick with her post-school choice. "There was a bit of extra pressure because in my interview I told them I looked forward to becoming a Home Economics teacher. I felt they wouldn't have offered me the scholarship otherwise".

Violet's foray into university might have ended with her decision to leave, but she had other ideas. Violet knew she wanted to keep studying, "I didn't want to be just another person who gets a job. I really did want to keep learning through study. So I had to wait for the mid-year intake". But this time she prepared differently.

Violet found support from her Home Economics teacher at school. Violet's teacher suggested that she might like to consider enrolling for a Bachelor of Arts. This teacher's argument was "then you have the freedom of changing and you'll have a foot in the door". Armed with this suggestion, Violet worked part-time and made sure she checked all the uni enrolment details, as she was "going to go for it". Her prior experience of uni life was a big help with knowing how to enrol and how to get organised.

This time her choice of course allowed Violet to choose a smaller university much closer to home. While exploring all the subjects a Bachelor of Arts offered, Violet found she "really, really loved" Public Relations. Gradually, Violet has become more focused in her studies and is now doing two majors – PR and Marketing. Unlike her other uni experience, Violet has a solid network of support. A friend from school is doing some of the same classes, and Violet finds it "really good to chat to her to see how she is going". Her boyfriend too attends the same university, "so he knows what it's like, he's in the same boat, he understands".

For Violet, the smallness of the university, its classes and the opportunity for group project work suits the way she prefers to learn. "It's small", she says, "you know everyone. You don't feel funny asking questions".

Life has changed a lot for Violet since that first six weeks attending another university. She studies part-time, works part-time and has moved out of home to live with her boyfriend. They share the costs of living and studying together. Violet, for example, "saved up for a year and a half to buy a computer". This year, her goal is to buy a computer chair to go with it.

What work options are ahead for Violet? As it has been until now, Violet is just taking it as it comes. "Day by day, I suppose" she reflects. Her friend has suggested they should one day open their own PR Company. The idea of being self-employed holds some appeal, however, not right away. "I'd need to go and work for someone else first and get some experience because then you can get some credibility behind your name".

Not lost on her mum are the changes in Violet and her life. "[Violet] has grown up a lot, matured since she left home. It is a big achievement". Her mum is very proud of Violet and says that "Violet even surprised herself!" And as for Violet, what has she learnt from going from school to university? Two key messages stand out in our interview. Firstly, Violet suggests, a young person "should always have the option to talk with someone in their chosen field – real life advice from the real world". Secondly, and perhaps more reflective of Violet's choice of title, "it's not the beginning of the end", is her concluding advice.

"I don't think you should do something because somebody else thinks you can or can't do it. I don't think you should be discouraged. If you think you can, then you should do it. But you have to be realistic about it. You have to be prepared to work for it and work hard for it. That's what I think". ■

"I don't think you should do something because somebody else thinks you can or can't do it. I don't think you should be discouraged. If you think you can, then you should do it".

# Family matters Nathan's story

Family matters to Nathan. "Everything I do, mum knows about. We are close to each other". His mum says he is "like the man of the family". The support and care for each other and the other family members is palpable.

Nathan "derailed" during primary school. His marks were bad, he "hated" school, but he does not really remember why. "I was just really depressed and really hated myself and that's not me, I am a happy person. I did not know what was happening". But whatever 'it' was that was happening to Nathan, he knew it had to change.

For Nathan, a change of school helped turn the situation around. Even at his young age, still at primary school, Nathan played a key part in the move. He talked with a friend about his decision. "I wanted to do it and of course mum supported me". Nathan's choice of school was a private school and as he says, "of course I could not afford it". Instead, he was able to get in under a bursary. Central to making the change happen was Nathan's mum. She organised the bursary and other processes to ensure the transition went smoothly.

Life at this new school was a whole new ball game for Nathan. At school Nathan honed his networking and leadership skills. He got involved in public speech competitions, productions and even organised a charity event in his latter years of schooling. He says all his teachers were supportive, but particularly his Drama teacher. Nathan's mum credits some of his success to his ability to "talk to anybody. He is just not shy. He loves public speaking and hosting programs". "He is involved in everything", his mum says, "he was even Vice-Captain of the school!"

Nathan's ability to network and the ease with which he can talk to anyone creates opportunities. He started working part-time at 13, something his mum says he wanted to do. He worked really hard and ended up in a Deputy Junior Manager role at a business. He even received a trip to Melbourne to accept an award – recognition for his quality work at the business. Working and studying at school went hand-in-hand for Nathan. Would he go on to university or could he see himself staying on at his place of part-time work?

Nathan liked his place of work, but when he imagined himself in 20 years time he saw the same environment and himself doing the same type of work. This sameness was not for him. University was going to be the choice of direction for him. But what course?

University life began with Nathan doing a Business course. His mum was thrilled he was at university. But university was a lot different to school. The onus was on the individual to find out things and get work completed, but in Nathan's view with very little support. That's where his network of friends was important. One in particular, has been friends with Nathan for about 12 years. "We're like brothers. If I need anything, we help each other". But sometimes things come along in life that you are not really prepared for, and that's what happened in Nathan's family.

Trouble for one family member, hits all family members. Being a close family, the ill-health of a grandparent was a difficult time for Nathan. Reflecting on this experience, he says, "you can't account for things like that to happen … it has been like a huge hump in the year". A hard situation to deal with when, as his mum had remarked, "he likes to be busy, he is full-on". It made his study and work and family and social life all go out of kilter. Added to this destabilising effect of his grandparent's ill-health, Nathan was not that passionate about the subjects he was doing. Still in his own words he was "going very well, passing [his] subjects". He was expecting quite good grades, but then his grandparent got ill.

Strength in good times and in troubled times comes from his family. "Just be there for them", his mother says, reflected in such actions as not hiding anything from him, talking with him and waiting up until he comes home from being out. Nathan could have let the ill-health of his grandparent swamp him, and perhaps for a time it did, but it did seem to re-kindle his desire to work in the medical field. His mum says, "he always wanted to be a doctor. He has a passion for helping people". He was encouraged to work hard at uni to move into Paramedics. The hands-on nature and diversity of Paramedics holds appeal for Nathan. He worked hard at his studies, but still kept up with all the other activities in his life that seem to make him who he is – a friendly, outgoing and genuinely kind person.

Nathan knows that without his family, friends and the financial and mentor support offered through The Smith Family, going to university would not ever have been possible. Money, in particular, was a big obstacle. Some days he would not have enough petrol money to get him to work. But Nathan is resourceful and his advice to other young people is to talk with people and weigh up your options. What does the future hold for Nathan? He hopes to move from Business Management to Paramedics, a goal perhaps spurred on by the ill-health of his grandparent and his passion for helping other people. ■

# An open book Helen's story

Helen sees her life as an open book because anything could happen – especially now that she has passed Year 12. She likes the thrill of not knowing what is around the corner. Helen's mother finds it "marvellous" that Helen has a traineeship in childcare, which enables her to be independent and sees her as having "grown up a lot in a short time". One senses that her mother sees this as the beginning of a solid career for Helen, who lives at home with her mother and older brothers. Helen is the first member of the family to complete Year 12 and this was a cause for much celebration – her grandmother took her on holiday to Fiji as a reward. In a family with a history of low school achievement, Helen's mother was surprised that she did so well at school and "got a career". She said, "anyone can work at a check-out" and seems relieved that Helen won't have to do that.

Helen is aware of how proud her mother feels: "that's all she wanted to see – that one of us get through high school and have a good job". Helen realised that, as the youngest, she had to be "the one". And indeed, getting Year 12 was a huge achievement for Helen: "I was jumping for joy, I was so happy! I was telling everybody I'd got it, and I phoned my Dad and he was over the moon – the first one in the family!"

Helen had good reason to jump for joy. It had been a tough road. She changed schools a lot and that was very unsettling, especially the transition from primary to secondary school – different students, different teachers, different subjects "and just being able to get to the classes". Fortunately through all of this, Helen could turn to her family – particularly to the brother closest to her in age (2 years older) – they had a special bond and he was always there for her. In the early days of high school there was a lot of peer pressure to get involved in drugs and alcohol. One time the pressure was so great that Helen stayed away from school, so the school provided some counselling. But she gradually established a very supportive circle of friends. Helen said, "we never went anywhere without each other … they'd tell me things that happened to them … we'd share experiences, like, how did you cope with that?"

Maths was another hurdle. Helen just didn't seem to be able to grasp it. The Smith Family provided tutoring. It just "didn't click". She was in a top Maths class, which made it especially challenging, and she always got upset if she couldn't do something – in the background was the idea that her mother would be disappointed. She plodded away at it telling herself, "I've got to do it for Mum". And she passed Year 10 Maths. Helen is quite surprised that she stuck at school through to Years 11 and 12. She used to hate school and she used to feel that there was no point in staying on. She described Years 7, 8 and 9 as a struggle mainly because of the peer pressure and she couldn't do some of the work; that really got her down, "I just didn't want to be there. It gave me a negative attitude towards everything". But she did stay on. It was partly the

# A 'Jackson Pollock' kind of journey Marcia's story

Marcia obviously works long hours. She talks about finishing at 8.00 pm and then deciding to do some more. She loves it. She is apprenticed to her sister as a jeweller. She loves the idea of having "a lump of nothing and turning it into something beautiful". Marcia's 'dream job' would be to run her own jewellery-making business and to be able to have a day off now and then. Six months into her apprenticeship, she is well on the way to her dream. How did this come about?

It is the happy confluence of two pathways: a discovery that she loves making jewellery and a torrid time during the last few years of school. Around Year 9 Marcia says "I got sick of being treated like a little kid. I thought, hello, I have my own personality and I can think for myself. You don't have to tell me exactly what to do." While she craved more adult approaches, the work was getting harder; it seemed a big leap into Year 11, where "it was really hard yakka

trying to do assignments that I couldn't really understand". Sometimes it all got too much. She felt that most of the teachers were "not really paying attention to you except when you did a bad thing, because you weren't an A+ student". And this helped to cement a feeling that there was not much point in staying on at school.

Fortunately a very understanding teacher taught Marcia in Years 9, 10 and 11. She could tell that Marcia was not enjoying being at school. She encouraged her to try to stay on and complete Year 12 and offered to help her with assignments, but, in Marcia's words, "a month into Year 11 she said, this isn't working out. Find out what you want to do and I'll help you get to where you want to go". No pressure – an acceptance and an understanding. It turned out that this teacher had preferred adult learning styles and had entered university via a TAFE pathway.

need to please her mother and also, compared to what she expected, Year 10 was "a fly through". There wasn't nearly as much pressure from teachers as she expected. The teachers said it was just a practice for the Year 12 certificate: "the teachers weren't at you all the time to study hard and be always listening in class, and you just relaxed a lot, so everything was easier". Once Helen had passed through Year 10, she thought she might as well go on to Years 11 and 12.

Year 12 was another matter, however. There was a lot of pressure; pressure from teachers and, of course, that pressure to not disappoint her mother. Helen felt as though the teachers were "constantly at" her. There were two main ways that she coped. One was working with friends. Helen had study groups with her closest friends. They could be completely open with each other: "they weren't going to put you down and say, you don't get it – Oh my God! … They'd say, well, this is how I do it, maybe you could find a way to do it like this too, and then you'll understand it". The other way that Helen got through was by finding ways to relieve stress.

Helen had to relax when she got home. She couldn't follow the study plans set by the teachers, "I'll do it my way", she said. When she got home she would sit in her room and listen to Heavy Metal music or go for a walk. She also did yoga and meditation. In earlier years she did karate. When she had relaxed she was ready to do homework, "My mind would be clear. I could think about [the work] and I could do it about an hour before I went to bed – because then it goes through your mind and it sinks in". So Helen learned

the best ways for her to study: she had to be relaxed and discussion with friends was very helpful.

Overall high school was a struggle. Helen's mother was ill and had no involvement with the school. No one at home could help her with her homework – her older brothers had not enjoyed school and her mother would sit there with her, but didn't really understand the problems. And through it all, Helen knew that she must be the one to go through to Year 12.

Now she has her childcare traineeship. It suits her because she always liked the idea of working with people and she learns in a practical way – she wouldn't want a job that involved sitting at a desk, and this is partly why she never considered going to university – the other reason was she didn't think she was smart enough. She wasn't sure what childcare would be like – half way through Year 12, "something clicked" and she thought she would like to do it. Nevertheless, it has its challenging moments, particularly when children are first left by their mothers and they cry incessantly or when she is expected to do three things at once. But one day, when she set up games that the children loved, and they told their mothers about it and their faces "lit up" – that was really rewarding.

Helen expects that in five years' time she will still be in childcare but in a more responsible position. On the other hand – she has certificates in Marine Studies and Hospitality, and her life is an open book, she'll just keep turning the pages – who knows where she'll be? ■

Coupled with the help of an understanding teacher was a loving and supportive family. The closeness of the family is palpable as Marcia and her sister speak of family relationships. When asked whether her parents were concerned about education, Marcia answered: "They are more concerned about us than they are about education". Like the supportive teacher, Marcia's mother at first tried to encourage her to stay at school, but when it was clear that Marcia couldn't "hack it", she also said, "go and find something you want to do". Both teacher and mother emphasised that Marcia must find something that she really wanted.

Some of Marcia's friends left school around the same time as she did, but they are just hanging around at home on the dole whereas Marcia is a happy apprentice, largely due to her

"Find out what you want to do and I'll help you get to where you want to go".

family's support. Although she describes her Dad as "more a closed book and a little hard to read", like her Mum he is caring but firm. Both parents seem happy for their daughter to explore and find what she really wants to do – but having found it, she must stick at it. Not that there's any thought, at present, that Marcia doesn't want to "stick" at jewellery. But she saw her father's reaction when her brother suggested giving up his apprenticeship after completing a year of it, and their Dad said, "No – this is what you chose".

Marcia's mother lets her discover things, but insists she must face the consequences of her actions. Marcia says, "usually she's right!" When she was in Year 8, Marcia didn't want to do an English assignment. Her Mum said, "That's OK, you chose not to do it. But I'm not going to write a note to say

there's a reason you couldn't do it. You have to go and say, I couldn't be bothered doing it". So Marcia ended up "staying in every lunch time for, like, a month, until I finished the assignment … And I thought, I won't do that again!"

It seems that Marcia's older sister (ten years older) had a similar approach when Marcia first visited her jewellery business at the age of 13. Marcia said, "she'd have me up to the workshop and she'd let me do what I wanted, pretty much". And that is how Marcia's interest in jewellery started. She loved to visit her sister – located a few hours' drive away – and it became "something I'd really like to do". Her sister was a little worried at first that Marcia was closing her options too soon. But her attitude is similar to that of her parents, her advice is: "Give young people support. They will choose. Let them choose what they want to do, but be there for them if they make a mistake. Let them make their own decisions, but be there for them".

Marcia explains how her Dad also helped her to realise that she has artistic flair: "I used to sit around at home with canvasses and stuff and paint a little … One day my dad picked up one of my works and said, 'I'm keeping this to go on the wall'. And I went, wow! Maybe I have an arty flair? And kind of from then on I felt maybe I could do something with it".

Marcia has made a ring for her friend, and he loves it. She relishes the idea of making "something that's totally different – that no one else has made". She had expected it to be more difficult to get to where she is now, but, she says, "if you put your mind to it enough, I think it kind of flows". Yet, without her family and that understanding teacher, or if she had done it "half-arsed", she might have been a high school drop-out like some of her friends. Her advice to other young people is: "Find what you want and what you love and pursue something in that line. Don't get on the dole, because you get lazy. And you kind of get used to sitting around and not doing anything. Then it'll be harder in the long run to get off your arse … And [don't] stick out at something that you're not going to be happy with, because it'll just slow you down and make you not want to do anything".

The painter Jackson Pollock started off with nothing and built his art works and reputation all on his own – he had one serious downfall, but rose up again. Maybe Marcia's downfall was her battle with school and a feeling that only one teacher could see her potential. Maybe Jackson Pollock lacked the support of a family like Marcia's and a mentor like her sister. It is early days, but we look forward to seeing what Marcia does with "that lump of nothing". ∎

# *Once upon a time* Josie's story

Josie's story begins in Year 10. It was where she started to seriously consider what she wanted to do. It was the time in her school life that Josie says, "you were supposed to know which subjects to choose and which subjects would get you to where you wanted to go". Not that there was really any doubt for Josie. Her choice would have something to do with drawing. She had always loved to draw and she was very good at it. Even today, Josie says "I always take my sketch pad in my bag". She got her talent for drawing from her mum, who was "the arty one".

Josie's mum is a significant figure in her life. She supports Josie and steps in when she thinks it is needed. It is a fine balance. On one hand, alerting Josie and the other children in the family to the fast approaching assignment deadlines and on the other hand, not wanting to "treat them like eight year olds". Ultimately, Josie's mum wants Josie "to do what she enjoys" and she is glad Josie "is getting to do what she wants to do". Sometimes, though Josie's mum wonders "how to motivate her to broaden her interests". But in the end, her mum believes it is more important to "let them choose

Most of her scholarship fund has to go on travel.

what they are interested in, otherwise kids won't succeed". Being happy and interested in what you are doing for a job; important criteria also for Josie.

Josie could have sought help in her choice of university course from the Guidance Counsellor and teachers at school. There were plenty of people to talk to, she recalls. But Josie did not do this, preferring instead she says to "get the bits and pieces myself, I like my independence".

Developing networks was tricky at school. No car and no access to relevant work experience while still at school, and no access to public transport made it difficult for Josie to travel to and from friends homes and get a part-time job. Not having a part-time job, while it gave Josie more time to study it was also a loss of an income of her own. It is because employers "want the kids to be at their beck and call", is the reason her mum gives for Josie not being able to get a part-time job. Josie's reflection is that it is a *Catch-22* situation, with employers wanting someone with experience, but until she can get a job she cannot develop the experience.

# The endless journey to success Elise's story

Elise was always expected to go to university. Her parents wanted her to be happy and use her potential. A university degree, her dad said, gives you freedom and wider opportunities – a sentiment shared by Elise. But actually meeting expectations does not just happen. Elise has always worked hard.

Getting her Year 12 results was a big event. Elise felt equally relieved and excited as the news sunk in that she had got into her second preferred university course. "I was at home on the internet pressing that button. Your heart goes so fast. Just when it's loading; you're going should I look or not look". Elise's parents were really happy for her, especially at the sight of a higher than expected university entrance score. Their happiness made Elise happy too, "it was really good" she recalls. It was a great day getting her results. A day made even better because her latter years of school life had been a bit bumpy.

Family life imploded for a couple of years, "pretty much Grade 11 and through the whole of Year 12", Elise reflects; a critical time in Elise's schooling and it was distressing for her and her family. Elise moved out of the family home. Elise remains positive about the couple of years away from home. "It was a time in my life where I became really independent. It was a good change, but it was also a hard change". Elise found she liked doing things for herself because it made her "feel worthy".

At the start of Year 12 Elise became interested in Applied Science Medical Imaging. She recalls, "it was weird how I came upon it. I was in a waiting room one time and I was reading a national geographic and I saw all the pictures of cat scans and X-rays and I thought: 'well this really interests me'". Additional benefits in Elise's eyes were the changing nature of the work and the "good money in it". She decided to find out more about her new found interest. She sought the help of her school to organise work experience at the local hospital. One day a week for a total of five weeks, instead of doing sport, Elise would observe Radiologists in action. It helped her realise she *was* interested in this field.

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Year 12 was a challenge, largely because of the stress of exams. "You need to focus on all your subjects to get the best marks". But getting the results to go to university was just the tip of the iceberg of obstacles to be overcome. As Josie's mum recalls, Josie got into her first university choice "but couldn't do it because there was no fee assistance and it was too late to get into the next animation course".

Even now at university, Josie finds it a challenge to do some of the projects because they require her to go to different places and use specialist equipment. Most of her scholarship fund has to go on travel. Josie comes back onto the university campus to use the equipment, which other students may have access to in their homes. Despite these challenges, Josie loves university compared to school. But understanding uni life takes time.

Enrolment processes the first time round are tricky, she recalls. Josie believes that having experienced enrolment once helps, as does talking with friends. Knowing, for example, how to cluster your subjects together really helps make the week more manageable. The structured orientation week and opportunities to meet others in a relaxed way really helped Josie develop good networks.

Josie relishes in having more choice at university and learning together with other people who are also interested in the same things. She says it makes life feel easier. It is not just one person she can talk with but as Josie says, "there are a whole lot of people around you who are interested in the same thing". This includes her study group, whom she says "all help each other to get through the bits and pieces because it is not always as easy as you might think".

Josie is still trying to figure out what she will do in the future. She would really like "to do character design … like in the Japanese animation style". Regardless of what specific job lies ahead for Josie, she believes strongly in the importance of doing something with her life. Otherwise, she says, "you get nowhere". Her advice to others is to try and work out what you want to do early: in year 10 she thinks. Be resourceful, "Find out what grades you need to do certain subjects (at university) at an early age". Josie says to take one step at a time and "if you don't know something, find someone and ask because if you don't ask you don't get". ■

Elise says the university course she got accepted for is a "basic course towards every medical course, which is not that basic!" It was her alternative route to Applied Science Medical Imaging, her preferred university course. Her parents wanted her to become a doctor or a psychiatrist, but Elise chose not to go down that path. "I chose not to because a lot of psychiatrists get depressed and end up committing suicide". Elise has a laugh. "I wanted to do something that would make me happier. There was no pressure from anyone. My parents were like, you can do what you want". At the start of university, Elise moved back in with her parents.

Life at university was different to life at school. The structure of school life was gone and the volume of work had increased at university. By the second semester, Elise realised that time between classes had to be spent studying. In first semester she spent a lot of her time just walking around the university, talking with people and getting used to her new surroundings.

The amount of university work was a bit of a surprise for Elise. "I mean you know it's going to be big but you don't realise how big it is going to be". It was "A LOT more", Elise says. Subjects in high school, which were spread over two years, were suddenly being crammed into one semester – 13 weeks! "Even though you are going through it again, going through it at high speed really stresses you". To get into Bio-Medical Imaging, Elise knew she had to get good marks. Juggling work and study and this added pressure to do well in her subjects could become overwhelming. "Just the stress and fear of failure", Elise recalls, "they are big things that can stop you".

In retrospect, Elise thinks the school counsellors could have prepared her more for university life. The information they could provide to Elise was limited. Of support to Elise were her friends, family and The Smith Family. Teachers help, but for Elise their support is to get her to her chosen path. Family and friends are more significant supports. "They are with you a longer time. Even though we had that two year break, my family have always been there for me".

Five of Elise's friends from school also go to the same university. Elise believes that having friends around when the going gets tough is important. It helps having friends who are going through the same things and as Elise says, "we can keep pushing each other on". However, she also recognises that not all her friends want to study like she does. "I still see them because I love them but I can't be around them when I need to study and they say 'let's go out' and I say 'no, go

away'. They are a temptation". Elise's brother is doing a very different university course, but she still finds it a support to have someone familiar around at the university. However, it is Elise's parents that are a real help.

When Elise got too stressed at university, thoughts of "I can't do this, I can't do this" started playing in her head. It was her parents who were there to directly counterbalance such negative thoughts with "you CAN do this and this is what you need to do". "Encourage but never force them", her dad says, otherwise "it could be detrimental and they suffer for that". For Elise, this direct approach from her parents worked. It "just cleared my mind". It helped Elise put things into perspective and boost her confidence that she could get good marks, which she did.

Thanks to a great deal of support and her own skills and attributes, Elise did well at university. Of significance was the emotional support and understanding from family and friends. Such support was complemented with practical support from The Smith Family. She approached someone from The Smith Family to send her a guide on time management – an area she wanted to address because of her study and work commitments. Applying the guidance from the time management sheet, Elise could see in black and white how much time she needed to devote to study and how much time she had free to do other things. Of greater impact was the financial support provided to Elise from The Smith Family scholarship. Combined with Elise's own part-time work income, the scholarship really relieved "the stress of having to pay $100 per book". This financial support is not lost on Elise who realises that without it, she might be quite disadvantaged in her study pursuits. It was an impact she had observed in some of the choices her friends had to make. "If some of my friends didn't have their parents to help, some of them were stressing and just didn't buy the books and that made it really hard for them towards the end".

Elise's hope is to eventually become a Radiologist and reap the rewards for all her hard work. Over the last few years, Elise says she has really grown up. High school was more social and in Elise's view, "those who like high school more than uni are the people who don't really want to grow up". Overall, university life suits Elise better. However, Elise is only too aware, "there are always going to be stressful times and you'll want to give up, but you just keep going". "Just don't give up" is Elise's motto. "There's going to be lots of things that will try and stop you, but if you want it that bad, you'll get it done. Even if you do need a break to defer you can still go back and get it done". ■

> Life at university was different to life at school. The structure of school life was gone and the volume of work had increased at university.

# *The hard road* Evangeline's story

Evangeline is a generous young person. The interviewer's plane was considerably delayed because of an electrical storm, so the meeting arranged to take place after Evangeline's work had to be abandoned. Evangeline was prepared to make another time, at short notice, very early the next morning. The interview had to be slightly shortened so that Evangeline could get to work, but at least we didn't lose the opportunity to hear her story.

Evangeline was always bright, and she always wanted to learn. Her brothers are bright in their different ways – one is a gifted guitarist, and one can "play soccer like no one you've ever seen". But, unlike Evangeline, they're not keen to learn academically. She thinks it's "a boy thing". Evangeline's dad has always "doted" on her. Since she was little he always said he thought she would be Australia's first female prime minister. Comments like that and her love of learning got her interested in Law from an early age. At school Evangeline participated in mock trials and debating and "every possible academic thing".

It has been a hard road, and Evangeline is still travelling down that road. She would have liked to get into Law at university – she has been interested in Law since Year 6 – but her university entrance score was too low. So – since leaving school, Evangeline has completed a Certificate III in Business Administration and obtained a job in a Law firm where she answers phones, does the mail run, types legal letters from a Dictaphone and gets to deliver documents to courts. But she says, "I never, ever saw myself as just being a secretary. It's just not what I ever see myself as being".

Evangeline has been driven by her love of learning: "I always *wanted* to learn. That was just one thing I loved … I loved school". There have been two particularly tough patches on her road so far. The first was when she had to move schools. She didn't have a lot of friends at school and describes herself as "not a very social person" but she had found a friend, "the best friend I ever had", and at the end of Year 10 she had to move. Evangeline said: "that killed me". The friend was smart, like Evangeline. They had talked about going through to Year 12 together and what subjects they would do. The thought of going through a further two years of school without a friend led Evangeline to question whether to go on – even though she had loved school so much. But at the end of Year 10, Evangeline got an

award for every subject except Maths and a special award for excellence in citizenship, and she thought: "I'm not throwing all this away. I have to go to Year 12". So – it was a close shave – she might have left school after Year 10, but she stayed on.

Another very tough patch in her journey was when Evangeline got her university entrance score at the end of Year 12. Based on her good school results, she had been expecting to get a score in the 90s, but it was only in the 60s. This is still clearly a successful Year 12 result, but not good enough to get into Law. She says she was "very, very disappointed … I couldn't see how I got such a low score". It seems that Evangeline's expectations were reasonable. She had been a keen learner throughout high school, so her final result was a shock.

Who have been the significant people as Evangeline has travelled down this hard road? Certainly her dad, with his confidence and pride in her academic ability, also her boyfriend of 5 years who has given her essential emotional support, and also "the best Drama teacher there ever was" in Years 8, 9 and 10. She was a young teacher and "sort of in with us" and "as cool as us". This teacher was an excellent mentor for Evangeline, "she always tried to push you in the right direction but she never tried to interfere". She would tell Evangeline, "you're smart, you can do anything you want, just keep on the rails".

And, although the going has sometimes been hard, Evangeline has certainly kept on the rails – even now when she sees herself as "settling for less" she probably won't stay in this state for too long. She has come to realise that a good Year 12 result is "not the be-all and end-all" and that there are many contented people in the community who have not been to university. Nevertheless, she says "I feel I can do better" and she admits that she still needs to get over her disappointment. But Evangeline has started to consider other directions, maybe somewhere along her road she will take up Nursing because she would like to do something that is fulfilling – that helps other people. The main thing is, she says, that although you must listen to the advice of others, you do need to be happy with what you are doing, you can't let other people control that. In the end, she says, "just do it your way". ■

> She has come to realise that a good Year 12 result is "not the be-all and end-all" and that there are many contented people in the community who have not been to university.

## Common themes from the young people's stories

From among the diverse and rich experiences conveyed in the 10 different stories, there are some common threads. While the sample of young people interviewed was too small to allow for broad generalisation, it was nevertheless apparent that even with financial aid in the form of scholarships, young people from rural backgrounds faced additional challenges in meeting living and transport expenses. It is interesting that these stories do not provide any evidence of the tendency, noted by James (2000), for young people from rural or isolated areas not to seek post-secondary education. This is most likely explained by the fact that the young people selected for interview were 'achievers' (see the Appendix).

The research suggests that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be attracted to the immediate returns work can bring rather than the longer term gains from a tertiary education (James, 2000). This was not evident in the ten young people's stories. Indeed, the interviewers were impressed with the long-term views some of the young people had of their careers – in Nathan's case looking ahead 20 years. Some seemed to have planned, from as early as first year secondary school, a pathway whereby they could 'escape' from the difficult circumstances in which they were growing up.

It was evident that families took a close interest in the young person's plans and wanted to support and guide them – sometimes that support was purely in the form of love and caring because the family member did not have access to resources that could provide further practical assistance.

Family members' lack of access to resources ranged from a lack of understanding, whereby a parent was unable to assist with school work or decipher complex careers materials, to a lack of computer skills. In several cases, families could not assist the young person to establish a 'vocational identity' because the young person was the first in the family to achieve Year 12. This meant that the world of professional work and tertiary level study was a vast unknown. In such cases, it seemed that the young person survived by having strong qualities of personal agency – independence, persistence and determination. The caring family thus provided a 'safe and secure' net, as described in the research by writers such as Turner and Lapan (2002), giving the young people confidence to explore post-school options outside their immediate experience.

Many of the young people interviewed formed a 'predisposition' to post-secondary education at an early stage (Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999). Indeed, this was sometimes from as early as Year 6. In two cases a clear goal was set by the time Year 12 was reached, but for others, tertiary selection seemed to be confusing and choices were made after Year 12 results were received. Thus, young people could see from an early age that staying at school would assist them to lead a better life but they were unclear as to what particular pathway they might follow.

In Section 4 there is a detailed discussion of the fieldwork framed around questions concerning the role of families, the realities of post-school options for young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and the hopes that the young people in this study had for themselves and for others. These findings are discussed in light of the research literature summarised in Chapter 2.

Data from the fieldwork have been classified into three broad areas:

- the role of families in the formation of post-school plans;

- transition from school to post-school options: realities for young people;

- transition from school to post-school options: young people's hopes for themselves and others.

## The role of families in the formation of post-school plans

Two key questions framed the analysis of the role of families in the formation of post-school plans.

**What is the nature of the involvement of family members in the young person's post-school plans?**

The fieldwork indicates that family members are closely involved in young people's post-school planning. Sometimes parents feel that they lack knowledge to provide practical assistance, but there are many examples of ways that support is given. Parents help to instil confidence in young people as they make their plans and sometimes help young people to realise that they have certain skills or attributes that may orient them towards a particular career path. For example, Marcia said:

> "I used to sit around at home with canvasses and stuff and paint a little. Not till one day when my dad picked up one of my works and said, 'I'm keeping this to go on the wall'. And I went, wow! Maybe I have an arty flair? And kind of from then I felt maybe I could do something with it".

Young people valued the fact that advice given by family members was not restrictive. In most cases family members did not impose pressure to follow a particular path, although several parents mentioned the importance of obtaining a Year 12 certificate. Typical of this 'non-restrictive' advice was Josie's mother, who said: "*Let them choose what they are interested in, otherwise kids won't succeed*". Interest and enjoyment in their chosen field of learning are strong messages from both parents and young people. Both factors appear to impact on whether a young person sustains their learning.

In some cases, parents acted as mentors or role models. Aidan's mother 'modelled' being a student. She was a

mature age university student and she used to take Aidan and his younger brother to university activities while they were still at school. So, when speaking of his first weeks at university, Aidan said: "*I had a little bit of an idea through my mum. She was, like, very, very, dedicated – so I thought it would be a lot harder than it is*".

Thus, the families we spoke with were closely involved in their children's post-school plans. They were supportive and caring, but many acknowledged the importance of standing back a bit, letting the young person make a decision, but being there for them when they needed to talk or vent their feelings.

Two parents commented on specific constraints to the level of support they can offer to their child's learning. One parent highlighted ill-health as a factor that impacted on the amount of contact she could have with the school. The other parent cited computer literacy as an issue, exemplified through her comment:

> "Try and help them if you can. A lot of times you can't help them anymore. Things have changed. I mean, I can't turn on a computer" (Violet's mother).

Three of the young people discussed the importance of sibling support. In each case, an older sibling was also doing a university course. The support offered by the older sibling involved such things as advice on content, transport and the security that comes from knowing that someone familiar understands what you are going through.

**How do expectations of family members manifest in a young person's formation of plans and their decision-making about post-school options?**

Sometimes the degree of family support and expectation led to unintended stress for the young person. This was sometimes manifested in a sense of pressure to perform which, for some young people, became unbearable. In three cases, young people did not achieve expected high university entrance scores because they crumbled under the pressure of exams. Two of these young people entered university with forms of special consideration, such as a principal's recommendation. In another case, Evangeline did not achieve a high enough university entrance score for her chosen career of Law and instead she went from school to working in a solicitor's office.

An example of a self-imposed high expectation is evident when Leisel said:

> "When my brother got into uni, I thought yeah, wow he's so good he got into uni. The first one in the family to get in, the first one in the family to pass high school. Then it was coming to the end of my Year 12 and my extended family were like 'you'd better get into uni, your brother did, you're just as smart as him' and when I got my [university entrance score] I was crushed. I thought there was no way I was going to get into uni, they expected me to do well even though I didn't do quite as well".

Whereas family aspirations often appeared to be open, or general, such as a hope that a child would obtain a Year 12 certificate, sometimes, as in the case of Elise, there were clear expectations of a university degree:

> "My parents wanted me to become a doctor or a psychiatrist but I chose not to because a lot of psychiatrists get depressed and end up committing suicide. So I didn't really want to follow along in that path (both laugh). I wanted to do something that would make me happier. There was no pressure from anyone. My parents were like you can do what you want".

Elise said she did not feel pressured by her parents' aspirations; however, there was an expectation that she would undertake a university course. An expectation, which may have been fuelled by both parents working in education. One response from families to a young person's achievements was described by the researchers as "rhetoric becomes reality". This was particularly clear in response to a young person passing Year 12 in a family that had not experienced such academic achievement. There was a sense that there had been much anticipation – sometimes the pressure of expectation described above. But for many years achieving Year 12 and maybe obtaining a place at university had, for the young person, been what Rainbow described as "some far-away thing". It was quite outside the family's experience – and then it suddenly happened and the "far away" world became a reality. Parents celebrated and showed delight when their children did succeed, as was the case with Helen's mother, who was "really pleased that she got her [Year 12]. The only member of the family to get Year 12". Helen's grandmother took her on a holiday as a reward for doing so well. Helen's mother said that Helen's older brothers did not enjoy learning and "weren't good with their homework". It was therefore a tremendous achievement to have a child complete secondary education.

While the expectations of family members did sometimes impose an unintended pressure for the young person, – overt expression of disappointment in relation to children's achievements came from only one parent – the excitement and celebration felt by families when a child obtained a goal, such as university entrance, was palpable.

**Synthesis with the research literature review**

The findings align with evidence from the literature that families play a central role in supporting young people when they plan and undertake post-school pathways. This accords with the findings of Beavis (2006). As noted above, in many cases families were unfamiliar with the world of tertiary education, but their support in terms of providing a 'safe and secure' net was strong (Turner & Lapan, 2002). In particular, there were examples of family members instilling confidence and encouraging qualities of persistence and self-confidence while providing a nurturing refuge. Consistent with Semple et al's (2002) research findings, it seemed that informal networks (family and friends) had a stronger influence on young people's post-school plans than did provision of formal advice.

While families took a close interest in the young person's plans and wanted to support and guide them, they did not have access to resources that could provide practical assistance. This accords with the findings of Wimberley and Noeth (2004) who noted the strong motivation of parents to help their children, but inability to provide useful information and direction.

Consistent with the findings of Whiston and Keller (2004), families provided support that was usually not restrictive in nature. Young people felt free to select a career path that interested them, spurred on by their family's pride in their achievements.

A phenomenon that was not apparent in the research literature and that warrants further exploration included a tendency for some young people to have high levels of stress in Year 12, possibly self-imposed, because they did not want to disappoint their families. It was interesting that in at least three cases there were expectations that the young person would do well and they had high achievement in school-based Year 12 assessments. But when it came to the exams they "ran amok" and seemed unable to cope. This phenomenon does not seem to reflect an incompatibility of career choices (Beavis, Curtis & Curtis, 2005) as the young people involved sometimes did not have a clear career choice, and those who were given special consideration to enter university are now (one or two years later) succeeding with their tertiary level studies.

As suggested in the literature, it seemed that on the whole families were not much involved in career discussions with the schools. This may change with recent developments in Australia (DEST, 2006; Morgan, 2005; OECD, 2002) but it would be worth monitoring the extent to which families are able to participate in post-school planning with their children's schools and the nature of such participation.

## Transition from school to post-school options: realities for young people

This area considers the broad question: Beyond the family, what are key factors for young people that influence their transition from school to post-school options? Six subsidiary questions framed the analysis of the fieldwork in relation to this broad question about the realities of young people's transition from school to post-school options.

### What is understood about young people's school experiences and the ways in which these impact on post-school pathways?

Some 'successful' young people used competition as an important motivator. Winning distinctions and awards at school was a means of obtaining acknowledgment, preparing themselves for a *"better life"* and preparing a bridge whereby they might move from a low and often dependent socioeconomic existence to one of independence. Rainbow spoke at some length about the process of transition from dependency to a 'successful' economically enviable position. The pathway started to be forged in Year 6, when she became competitive:

> *"I was in Year 6, and I didn't get along with this girl in the class. She was really smart. Anyway, I went really badly on a test. I think I got 60 per cent, or something. And I felt so disappointed with myself that I decided to start studying. So I studied, and in the next test I got 95 per cent or something and I beat the [other] student … and I felt happy."*

The young people who thrived on competition spoke of enjoying school where the structures and learning environment seemed to suit them. But some other young people did not enjoy school and their comments reflected those of students who are sometimes labelled 'reluctant learners' or people who feel disillusioned with school. Marcia ended up leaving school in Year 11 because she could not respond to her school's learning environment. From about Year 9 onwards she wanted to be treated as an adult. Helen completed Year 12, but felt restricted by the methods imposed by teachers: *"The teachers at school would give you work and they'd say, you need to go home and study this and you should do it for at least half an hour*

*a night and they would give you a plan. But I just couldn't work like that".*

### At what point do these 'successful' young people start making decisions about their future?

Several young people exemplified trends where young people start to make career decisions at an early age. For example, Rainbow's mother said: *"When she was about 13 or 14,* [Rainbow] *decided that she didn't want to be down and out – she was determined to do better".* At this relatively early age, such students would decide it was important to work hard and try to achieve well at school, however decisions about specific careers or courses tended to be made later. Elise said:

> *"I guess it was at the start of Year 12. It was weird how I came upon it. I was in a waiting room one time and I was reading a National Geographic and I saw all the pictures of cat scans and X-rays and I thought well this really interests me. And I thought, well this is always changing and there's good money in it and it was just generally interesting to me".*

Some young people, like Aidan, were not sure even in Year 12, specifically what they wanted to do. He pointed out that he could not make a firm decision until he knew his university entrance score. Whereas Evangeline had a particular career in mind for most of secondary school, as did Josie. Evangeline was keen to do Law and Josie, Animation. This early decision-making, however, seemed to be exceptional. Most had a general idea of wanting to go to university, but they were unsure about courses or, indeed the reality of what university would be like.

### What do young people see as the cost-benefits of moving from school to a particular post-school option? (e.g. university, work)

There was a variety of ways that young people weighed up the costs and benefits as they made career decisions. A thread running through most of the interviews was a sense of future – that the post-school pathway would lead to improvements in their lives by creating an array of options. Rainbow's determination to move from a dependent to a 'successful' situation has been referred to above. She describes this in terms of a metaphor of moving from a very impoverished situation towards the *"pot of gold"*. Consistent with research findings such as those of Dwyer et al. (2003), the young people realised that their pathways would not be smooth and indeed, some were experiencing difficulties at the time of the interview, but they seemed to accept that various disappointments (such as not getting into Law)

were a regrettable but acceptable part of their way forward. Marcia said: *"I thought it was going to be a lot more difficult to be able to achieve what I want. But – if you put your mind to it enough, I think it kind of flows".* Marcia was hoping that one day she would manage her own jewellery business. At present she is an apprentice. In the interview Nathan was able to look ahead 20 years – he had clearly thought about what he might be doing in 20 years' time and it was very different from his present position.

The ability to weigh-up costs and benefits and to have a strong sense of future was a striking feature of the young people interviewed. When asked about what would be their dream job, all the young people were able to articulate clearly their hopes for the future. For example, Violet said:

> *"My friend said we should open our own PR company. That will be a while away but that would be good".*

"Would that be your dream job?"

> *"I suppose so. I have never worked for myself before but it would be interesting. As long as you've got support of good people that know their stuff around you. I'd need to go and work for someone else first and get the experience. Because then you can get some credibility behind your name."*

This future thinking ability is most likely enhanced by some of the personal attributes described below under the discussion of '*enablers to learning*' – qualities such as persistence and determination.

**How do young people respond to learning experiences after leaving school compared to their learning at school?**

All of the young people interviewed who were university students found that learning at university is very different from learning at school. The main differences revolved around increased autonomy and responsibility as learners. They had a vast array of subject choices and decisions to make – including decisions about attending classes and completing assignments. Many found this overwhelming at first and even the large physical environment was foreign and needed to be negotiated.

Some parents were very aware of the different approaches to study at university compared to school. For example, Violet's mother seems to have been an empathetic but non-interfering observer: *"[There are] a lot of assignments; it creeps up on them – plenty of time, then the panic starts. 'Don't nag me mum', and then we have tears. You feel for them. She has grown up a lot, matured since [she] left home. It's a big achievement".*

By the time of interview all young people who were students had completed at least a year of university study. They had now settled into university life and some found that university work was not as difficult as they had expected. Several mentioned that it was good to be at university with '*focused*' and like-minded people. For example, Elise said of learning at university:

> *"It's good. Growing up more and going towards something you want to do. High school is more a social thing. The people who like high school more than uni are the people who don't really want to grow up, I've realised. Uni is a good atmosphere. People at university want to do pretty much what you want to do."*

Those who were the first in their families to attend university had found university to be a great unknown. They had no way of knowing what it would be like. For example, Rainbow said: *"I didn't really know what it would be like. My mum's never had professional friends who you could ask, what's it like at uni?"*

**What do young people and their families identify as the key barriers and enablers to achieving their desired post-school option?**

## Key barriers:
The main barriers mentioned by young people and their families were:

■ *financial pressures* heightened by the tyranny of distance;

■ *pressures from others* – peers and teachers;

■ the need for *access to relevant work experience*;

■ the *disruption of moving* from one school (or location) to another; and

■ *access to facilities* or information.

## Financial pressures
A very significant barrier for young people and their families was a lack of money. Funding young people's aspirations was an ongoing challenge. Recalling her time at school, Leisel said:

> *"I got an offer from* [university]*, but I didn't want to do it … after I found out how much they wanted."*

Many young people mentioned the contribution of The Smith Family that enabled them to proceed with their

studies. Elise, for example, recognised the significance of The Smith Family support as she compared her experiences of learning to some of her friends:

> "The Smith family, [is a support] *because of the hours that I do at the* [café] *and even now just having the extra money, relieves the stress of having to pay $100 per book. It was $500 in one go, it's a lot. If some of my friends didn't have their parents to help, some of them were stressing and just didn't buy the books and that made it really hard for them towards the end".*

Young people in rural areas found that distance increased their financial burdens. One young person mentioned that course choices at rural universities were restrictive. Even with scholarships it was difficult to find money for train fares or general living expenses when they had to live away from home. However, these day-to-day financial pressures were not limited to just those young people who lived in rural areas, they were one reason why many of the young people juggled work and study commitments. Such commitments took a toll on young people, with Violet for example getting run down and Nathan noting, *"you do not expect to work and study. Yes it is hard".*

### Pressures from others – peers, teachers

Some found that peer pressure or bullying was a strong deterrent to learning at school. In some cases this was because highly motivated students were seen as *"nerdy"*. Helen said: *"High school was very rough up to about Year 10 because there was peer pressure from different children on the drugs and the alcohol scenarios – just getting through that and not being peer pressured to do all those things was very tough".*

Others found negative views, or lack of interest from teachers was a barrier to their learning at school. One of the factors that encouraged Marcia to leave school before completing Year 11 or 12 was *"teachers not really paying any attention to you except when you did a bad thing, because you weren't an A+ student. That was slowly changing my life and I was going, there's no point. What's the point in sticking it out? There's nothing here that school can offer me. I will make my own life".*

### Access to relevant work experience

Some young people mentioned the difficulty of accessing relevant work experience. For example, Josie said: *"Well, for* [design] *there is not much work experience that you can get. That sort of job is a bit scarce".*

### Disruption of moving

Moving from one school (or location) to another happened frequently for some of the young people interviewed, often because of parents separating. When discussing the difficulties of transferring from primary to secondary school, Helen said:

> "Definitely the changing of the schools, because I've changed a lot. About five different schools from primary to high school. So getting to know different people and playing with them and definitely peer pressure from different people and the classes. The different subjects: every school has different subjects. They don't have the same ones at every school. Picking subjects and actually being able to get into them – getting used to the teachers".

### Accessing facilities and information

Lack of access to facilities or information was an obstacle to learning. Josie, for example, did not have access to the equipment she needed for her specialised course in multi-media. Whereas other young people referred to a need for better access to careers information. Elise's comment was typical of a number of the young people:

> "I think the school should have a bit better counsellors preparing you for uni because when it came to forms, knowing the courses and when you have to apply; well, at my school they were not as organised. They'd tell you they have to get back to you and they didn't or only briefly tell you and then you'd have to do it yourself. The basic knowledge of how to go to uni. They did offer us help, but when it comes to uni they don't know everything about uni".

Similarly, some parents would like more assistance in learning about the various options. Sarah's mother suggested a *"central place"* for parents to look at information. Sometimes the information provided is complex and difficult to read. Violet's mother wanted to help access information, but did not know *"how to turn on a computer".*

### Enablers:

'Enablers' to learning that were apparent from interviews with young people and their families were:

- the development of *personal agency*, the importance of self-efficacy and certain personal attributes such as persistence and self-confidence;

- *determination to learn* and the ability to learn about yourself;

- *like-minded or encouraging friends* and networks of friends were helpful;

- *significant adults* (in addition to family), such as certain teachers and community workers (*Learning for Life* workers and mentors); and

- *a love of reading* and/or encouragement to read.

## Personal agency

The research literature (see Chapter 2) stresses that self-efficacy and development of personal agency is a significant factor in developing habits of learning and ability to learn independently. Rainbow describes her awareness of developing self-efficacy:

> "I can see how I did it now. I was searching for an identity … And I gradually came out of my shell and I've ended up really extroverted. I find it's just people accepting you for who you are".

## Determination to learn

Many of the young people had displayed remarkable persistence in pursuing particular goals when faced with daunting challenges. Evangeline describes her persistence:

> "It was always going to be Law. I did visit other places, but I knew I didn't really want to work there. I wanted to get my foot into the door with Law. So I went and worked at the place I work at now".

## Supportive friends, peers and adults

Many of the young people used friends and peers as 'enablers'. Elise describes how helpful it is to have a friend *"on the same level"* as you:

> "The friends I go to uni with, one in particular is good, to have them and sit down with them to study and it's going to be sad that now I'm going to another uni I won't have her there. Hopefully I will find someone like her there; having your friend who is on the same level as you is a real help".

Significant adults (other than family) who were helpful included teachers and community workers, such as The Smith Family *Learning for Life* Workers who, for example, provided Rainbow with someone who *"really took an interest in me"*. Evangeline describes a teacher who was a mentor:

> "When I was in, I think, Year 8 and 9 I had the best Drama teacher there ever was. She was so cool. She was only very, very young. So she was sort of in with us. When we were in Year 10 she was sort of as cool as us

> … She was great. She was a great mentor. She always tried to push you in the right direction, but she never tried to interfere".

## A love of reading

Many of the 'successful' young people were keen on reading or came from families where reading was considered to be important. Rainbow speaks of the significance of reading for her:

> "I read so much. Like, I couldn't tell you about it now, but when I was in Year 3 or something, I was reading Jane Austen … I couldn't tell you about it now, but I look back and think, wow, that was pretty smart. I was pretty precocious".

"So there must have been a house with books in it?"

> "Yeah – it was more my dad. … . He really encouraged me to read. Then mum had a book case and I started going through her books".

Aidan's mother described how important it is to read to children when they are young. This ties in with much research on successful early learning.

**How do these barriers and enablers impact on young people moving from school to a post-school option?**

The barrier imposed by pressure has been mentioned above. Although for two young people the 'result' of such pressure was overcome (and indeed became a learning experience) where they accessed special pathways into university, for some the pressure had a more lasting impact. It seems that Evangeline crumbled under the pressure and stress of examinations when she set her own expectations high – for a university entrance score in the high 90s – and the teachers at school had high expectations of her as well. She is dissatisfied with her present post-school option of working in a law firm, although she has used her personal attributes of persistence and determination to get there:

> "I wanted to do Law at university, but I didn't get the marks to go and I don't think I wanted to take Early Childhood – I think that's what I was offered. I was a bit devastated because everyone tells you that high school is the be-all and end-all and in Year 12 if you don't get the marks, you don't get anywhere. And then – I think when I got my grades and got my [university entrance score] …"

"Were you disappointed in that?"

> "Yes. Very disappointed".

Rainbow notes the continuing barrier of lack of money now that she is at university, in spite of receiving scholarships including help from The Smith Family. Her financial position makes it very much more difficult to join the middle class environment of law.

Young people seem to address such 'barriers' when weighing up the costs and benefits of their pathways. As mentioned above, while barriers assume considerable importance in young people's stories, they seem to be viewed as something that can be negotiated, as most young people have a view of a future that will be better than their secondary school experiences.

The various personal attributes of the young people described, such as persistence, determination, self-efficacy, are clearly of great benefit as these young people move from school to post-school options. Having the initiative to ask questions, for example, or the confidence to try another opening when a 'door' has been closed, and the ability to set up support networks all suggest that the resilience built up during secondary education is having a continued benefit.

**Synthesis with the literature review**

Many qualities displayed by the young people interviewed suggested that they have characteristics of 'life long learners' such as resilience, persistence, self-reflection and evaluation and a long-term view of their learning (Bryce et al., 2000; Bryce & Withers, 2003). Indeed, the young people interviewed seemed to have a remarkably strong sense of future.

While only two young people had made clear career choices at an early age, it seemed that many had 'predispositions' to tertiary study from early in secondary school (Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999). This seemed to be closely associated with high achievement at school (Marjoribanks, 2003). The young people did not, however, fit Hossler Schmidt and Vespers' model of 'searching' and 'choosing' before leaving school. This may reflect inadequate access to careers advice at school and families' inability to be closely involved in a practical manner, as discussed above.

It was clear that, with one exception, the young people in this study did reflect the findings of Vargas (2004) where students from low income families lacked familiarity with universities and the requirements of university study. The exception was Aidan, who was familiar with a university environment because his mother had returned to university study while he was at school.

The literature review notes that Australian research is in agreement with American research concerning the fact that

financial support alone does not satisfy inequalities that exist across different social groups of young people. From the young people's stories it was clear that mentoring from family members, teachers and significant friends had played a large role in supporting their post-school decision-making. It was also clear that once they reached university, most young people in the study faced obstacles because they had no idea of what a university would be like. This was because their families did not have professional backgrounds or university experience.

## Transition from school to post-school options: young people's hopes for themselves and others

The key question addressed by this theme is, what advice do young people offer to others making decisions about their post-school options?

Resourceful, purposeful and persistent typify the characteristics of the young people interviewed. It is not surprising therefore to see advice that young people would give to others about to embark on the transition from school to post-school options to include:

1. Know there are multiple pathways for learning – *"even if you do need a break to defer, you can still go back and get it done"* (Elise), *"it was a big decision when I was only 16* [to go to university]*, you need to know there are options"*
   *(Violet).*

2. Keep a sense of perspective – *"tackle things head on … don't see them as problems, but as challenges"* (Aidan).

3. Look into the future – *"you would have to think 20 years down the track I think, especially for those who are going to be professionals. And that's what I did"*
   *(Nathan).*

4. Know yourself and what you are capable of – *"I don't think you should do something because somebody else thinks you can or can't do it. But you have to be realistic and you have to work for it. And you have to work for it and work hard for it. That's what I think"*
   *(Violet).*

5. Don't be afraid to ask questions – *"if they don't know something, always ask. Just ask as many questions as you can. You need to find someone and ask, because if you don't ask you don't get"*
   *(Josie).*

6. 'Stick at it' – *"Stick to it, even if things are not turning out. It takes time, it won't work out straight away, but it does"*
   *(Leisel).*

# *Chapter five*: Concluding comments – key issues

An overwhelming impression from the research literature and the stories of the young people interviewed for this study is that families are closely involved in their children's decision-making about post-school options. It must be remembered that the families in this study, while from low socioeconomic backgrounds, had taken initiative to seek support from The Smith Family. They may therefore be more 'proactive' than other families that have financial difficulties.

To sum up the key issues that have arisen from this study it is useful to consider two broad questions:

- What factors appeared to help young people and their families from low socioeconomic backgrounds to make successful transitions from school to post-school options?

- What were the main barriers encountered by young people and their families when making decisions and undertaking transition from school to post-school options?

## Factors that helped young people and their families

Five main factors have been identified:

1. Families provided young people with a 'safe and secure' net while they were free to make choices about their post-school options. This was summed up by the comment: *"Let them choose, but be there for them".*

2. Although young people's career choices were sometimes constrained by financial and locational considerations, they were not, on the whole, constrained by the family's expectations. In many cases families were very proud that their children would be attaining Year 12 and have an opportunity to study at university; their support was usually unconditional.

3. In keeping with the research literature, the young people in this study tended to show high achievement from the early years of secondary school. They also showed an early predisposition to tertiary study, sometimes as early as Year 6. In two cases this was manifested in a clear career goal, in other cases it was a general idea that they would enhance their futures if they continued learning.

4. Young people in this study, who were all identified as 'achievers', manifested characteristics of lifelong learning such as a love of learning, initiative, persistence and determination. Indeed, there were several cases where such determination helped young people to overcome peer pressure and bullying at school. These characteristics appeared to contribute to their self-efficacy and independence and a remarkable sense of future, which helped them to strive towards bettering their life prospects.

5. There was much mention of the assistance of financial support – such as scholarships from The Smith Family. But financial support alone was not sufficient to help these young people to achieve their goals. Mentoring, such as that provided by The Smith Family, was very important, along with the support of significant teachers and friends, who complemented the support provided by families. In some cases such mentors could provide practical support that families were unable to access.

## Barriers encountered by young people and their families

The fieldwork and the broader review of research literature highlighted three main barriers encountered by young people and their families:

1. There is little evidence of families being able to work closely with schools to provide guidance for their children. Some family members expressed frustration at their lack of understanding of systems and processes and their lack of skills to provide practical assistance.

2. Many young people in this study who had the potential to – and indeed in many cases did - achieve Year 12, had no familiarity with university environments. This was because they were often the first member of their family to succeed at secondary school. They had been brought up in social environments that were very different from the rather middle class orientation of many tertiary institutions. The array of tertiary courses was confusing (and sometimes lacked meaning) and most of these young people had non-linear pathways – a kind of trial and error process – before discovering the courses they were pursuing at the time of interview for this study.

3. Another difficulty that arose from being the first in the family to complete secondary school was that these young people sometimes suffered from a self-imposed pressure when they were in Year 12. Most families did not overtly

pressure children to do well, but several young people interviewed had achieved well at secondary school, then *"ran amok"* when faced with Year 12 exams.

## Policy implications

The final years of school are an important marker in a student's transition to further education and training and/or work, and the decisions that they make during these years can have a long-lasting impact on their lives. However, many of the influences on students' post-school plans have been in operation long before the final transition. Decisions made by students and their parents regarding which school they will enrol at, their levels of school attendance and participation, study habits and subject choice, occur well before students reach their final years of schooling. The attitudes, aspirations and values of others are influential from an early age as young people begin to formulate their own ideas about their future careers. To this end there is a clear need for research which includes participants from a very young age, given that structures and components underlying choice seem to be in place by the early years of secondary school.

Families play a significant role in supporting young people as they plan and negotiate their various post-school options. This suggests the need for policy and programs that improve the post-school options of young people and that consider young people within the context of their families. The stories of young people in this study highlight the need to pay attention to:

> Families play a significant role in supporting young people as they plan and negotiate their various post-school options.

**Demystifying the transition from school to post-school options.** In the cases of young people who went from school to university, they and their families found negotiating the new learning and physical environments of higher education a major challenge. This was sometimes detrimental to the amount and nature of participation families could provide to their child.

**The identification and removal of financial barriers to learning.** Financial pressures were a recurring theme in all the stories. While the young people displayed, for example, strong prioritising skills, their continuity of learning was sometimes under threat because of financial pressures. These included hidden or perhaps unanticipated costs of travel, books, computers and so on.

**Strategies for alleviating stress from young people's experiences of learning at school.** Common to all the young people's stories was their access and use of networks of support. Such networks included mentor relationships, support from significant adults and study groups of peers. The 'achievers' in this study were resourceful, yet for some the pressure of Year 12 exams was a significant barrier.

**Young people as potentially powerful resources for other young people.** There is much research about the pathways that young people take but less understanding surrounds the processes by which they make these choices. The stories that emerged from this study suggest that young people themselves become powerful and accessible resources as they question, negotiate and network. The ability to ask questions of others featured in many of the young people's and their families' stories, and many of the young people coped with the transition experience by strategic networking with their peers.

This study is small and limited to young people of similar social, cultural and economic backgrounds. It is important to find out the extent to which the implications outlined above hold for young people from a variety of backgrounds. It is clear, however that a key policy priority is to build stronger partnerships between families, schools and their communities. Research and evaluation studies (Perna, 2002; DEST, 2004) indicate that successful partnership programs have five characteristics in common:

- *Committed program champions*: high level personnel and knowledgeable leaders with resource extensive networks to secure funding, allowing program staff to focus on program development.

- *Cultural considerations*: parent participation was enhanced where programs were developed in consultation and partnership with the communities that they served. This enabled programs to be developed to better meet the needs of parents, for example, hours of operation, transport and language considerations.

- *In-built program evaluation*: after a year or so of operation, surveys and evaluations may lead to the programs narrowing their target populations in order to

provide quality programming to fewer people rather than low-quality programming for a wider and more diverse group of people.

- *Successful partnerships*: all of the programs had strong relationships with local educational agencies.

- *Stable funding sources*: including government grants and funding solicited from corporations, foundations and local businesses.

The fieldwork and literature review conducted for this study have helped to deepen knowledge and understanding of the ways in which families influence – both positively and negatively – the choices that young people make in their lives. The detailed exploration of young people's 'achieving' experiences through a narrative approach has provided further insight into the barriers and enabling factors such young people encounter when planning and undertaking transition from school to post-school options.

The findings of this study also reinforce the importance of schools and other social institutions, and non-government agencies working closely with families throughout schooling and beyond, and also the importance of the different forms of support provided by *Learning for Life*. The challenges facing young people are enormous. No one institution or approach can be sufficient, on its own, as a means to helping young people make a successful transition from school to study, work and adult life. Young people need an 'opportunity rich' environment and one in which they are equipped and supported for meaningful decision-making.

The stories of the young people, who have participated in *Learning for Life,* suggest that the different forms of support that it provides have, in fact, assisted them. It has helped them to bolster their personal strengths and to build on those of their families in forming their post-school plans and meeting the challenges of taking on more adult responsibilities.

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# *Appendix*: fieldwork methodology

Clear boundaries were set to guide the focus and development of the project. The research literature concerning young people, their decision-making processes about post-school pathways, and the role of families is potentially vast and raises a variety of issues. The review concentrates on research concerning the effects and influences of family expectations on the cost-benefit analyses undertaken by students when they are considering their post-school plans. Wherever possible, the review draws on the findings of Australian research studies. The literature review is structured around three main areas:

■ The influence of family, friends and networks;

■ Family contexts; and

■ Adolescent decision-making.

## Preparation for the fieldwork

The Smith Family's data base of *Learning for Life* families was used to identify potential families for interview.[7] Following consultation with families and young people about whether they would be interested in participating in this research project, and their agreement *Learning for Life* Workers from The Smith Family provided contact details for 13 young people (two were siblings) who appeared to meet the above definition of 'achiever'. The families are located in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria.

A project flyer was developed by the research team in collaboration with The Smith Family. A copy of the flyer is at the end of this Appendix. Each family was telephoned by a member of the research team to invite them to participate in the project. A flyer was sent to the young people and their families, which provided background information about the study, the purpose, process and intended use of the interview data. Confidentiality and other such ethical issues were addressed in the flyer.

Due to time and cost factors it was decided that whereas all young people would be interviewed face-to-face, interviews with family members would be by telephone. A pilot interview with a young person who fitted the definition of an achiever was conducted prior to commencing the fieldwork for the project. The pilot allowed the researchers to check such issues as the overall coherence of the interview

schedule, timing and language, as well as establish a common approach to the interviews.

## The interviews

From the original possible sample of 13 families, the researchers interviewed 11 young people. One young person (one of the siblings) then chose not to participate. Another young person withdrew when they could not make the mutually agreed time, despite offers from the researcher to reschedule. Along with the interviews with young people, nine family member interviews were conducted (i.e. seven mothers, one father and one older sibling). One parent proved difficult to contact, despite repeated scheduling of an interview time and therefore was not included, while one young person requested that family members not be contacted.

Interviews were conducted in November and December 2006. All the young people agreed to the interview being recorded. Interviews took place at The Smith Family offices or community facilities, such as municipal libraries or neighbourhood centres. Most interviews went for about one hour. If young people had to travel some distance to attend the interview they were offered cab vouchers. All relevant issues to the project's focus were covered, but the openness of the interview format allowed researchers to pursue new lines of information as they arose and were relevant to the project. All young people were 18 years of age or older, so it was not necessary for an adult or *Learning for Life* Worker to be present during the interviews. The telephone interviews with family members were shorter and were not tape recorded. They were a little more structured and the interviewer took detailed notes. Because of the emphasis on 'story telling', the interview schedule with the young people was more open. Interview schedules are at the end of this Appendix.

It was discovered at the point of interview that one young person's story did not fall within the specific criteria set for this research project. For that reason, The Smith Family, decided to omit that case from this particular project. Thus 11 interviews were undertaken, but only 10 were used for this report.

Details of the young people and their families have been kept strictly confidential. The data from interviews and the arrangements are kept in secure storage. In the report, fictitious names and other means to de-identify participants have been used.

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7    These families had previously agreed to be contacted for research purposes.

## Narrative orientated interviews – the development of stories

A key theme in the interviews was to explore young people's experiences of making the transition from school to some form of post-school option: education, training and/or work. This theme acted as an organiser for the development of narratives from the interview. The value and use of narratives or stories is well documented (e.g. Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The researchers used narratives to refer to both the interview process and the result of the process – the written stories (Polkinghorne, 1988).

A key purpose for the use of narrative orientated interviews was to evaluate events within the context of a young person's experience of the events. Such perspectives, Eckersley et al (2006) argue, are critical to the development of strategies designed to address challenges facing young people today.

Commenting on the methodological advantages of narrative orientated interviews, Chase (1995) notes that such a process *"invites others to tell their stories, to encourage them to take responsibility for the meaning of their talk"* (p. 3). The researchers encouraged this process in two ways. Firstly, the interviews addressed a coherent set of themes from the young person's current activity, previous school experiences, obstacles/challenges and enablers, to exploration of his/her hopes for the future. Secondly, at the conclusion of the interview the researchers asked participants to take some responsibility for the construction of his/her story. The researchers asked the young person to suggest, for example, where his/her story might begin, who were the key people and events in his/her story to-date and what might his/her story be called. Not only did this approach facilitate greater 'ownership' of the story, but it provided another means of identifying what was of importance to the young person.

> A key purpose for the use of narrative orientated interviews was to evaluate events within the context of a young person's experience of the events.

Our research approach aimed to develop and maintain dignified and respectful relationships with participants. While the researchers constructed the stories, each story was posted back to the young person for his/her signed consent. This allowed the young person to check the story for accuracy and ensure that the content and details were sufficiently de-identified.

## Fieldwork data analysis

The researchers engaged in an interactive and rigorous process of identifying and refining the main categories for discussion of the findings. Data from the fieldwork have been classified into three broad areas, with key questions for each area identified. These are outlined below:

1.  The role of families in the formation of post-school plans:

■ What is the nature of the involvement of family members in the young person's post-school plans?

■ How do expectations of family members manifest in a young person's formation of plans and their decision-making about post-school options?

2.  Transition from school to post-school options ('realities of young people'):

■ What is understood about young peoples' school experiences and the ways in which these impact on post-school pathways?

■ At what point do these 'successful' young people start making decisions about their future?

■ What do young people see as the cost-benefits of moving from school to particular post-school options? (e.g. university, work)

■ How do young people respond to learning experiences after leaving school compared to their learning at school?

■ What do young people and their families identify as the key barriers and enablers to achieving their desired post-school options?

■ How do these barriers and enablers impact on young people moving from school to a post-school option?

3.  Transition from school to post-school options ('young people's hopes for themselves and for others'):

■ What advice do young people offer to others making decisions about their post-school options?

In the discussion these questions have been integrated with the frameworks and issues identified through the literature review.

## Limitations

The researchers sought to gather multiple perspectives on young people's experiences moving from school to post-school

options, with a particular emphasis on the voice of the young person in each case. We acknowledge that other perspectives from such people as school teachers, employers and university lecturers would provide further sets of information. Such information may have drawn attention to areas not canvassed in the current report and/or provided further weight to particular issues highlighted by the young people and their families. This study is seen as one further contribution to the area of young people and their post-school plans.

**The following flyer was used to inform families about the study:**

# The family expectations and post—school plans project

### What is the *Family Expectations and Post School Plans* project?
This project seeks to better understand how young people achieve their post school goals.

### Who commenced the project?
The Smith Family has asked the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to do the study. ACER is Australia's leading independent educational research and development organisation.

### How are young people selected for interview?
You were selected as a person who has been part of *Learning for Life* and who has had a successful post school pathway. We are interviewing a number of young people from around Australia as part of this project.

We understand that you have agreed to take part in this research, but please realise that it is OK for you to withdraw at any time.

### How will the interviews be conducted?
We hope that the interviews will seem more like conversations with people telling their stories. We would like to know what young people think is important about the choices they make after leaving school. Each interview will go as long as the person needs to cover all the points they wish to make. To help the project team recall what was discussed, we would prefer to audio-tape each interview.

### Is the information confidential?
Yes. All information provided by individuals is **strictly confidential**; it will not be released to any other organisation. Individuals may withdraw from the interviews at any time, without any adverse consequences. No one will be identified in any data or reporting.

### How will the information from interviews be used?
ACER will analyse the information from the interviews and prepare a report for The Smith Family. It is anticipated that the report will be published as a major Research Report in the first half of 2007 and the findings made widely available.

### Will participants receive feedback?
Participants will have the option of reviewing a summary of their interview, to make further comments or changes. A copy of the final project report will be available from The Smith Family website, www.thesmithfamily.com.au.

### Where can I obtain further information about the project?
For further information about the project please contact your *Learning for Life* Worker at the local Smith Family Office or Jennifer Bryce (ACER) on (03) 9277 5564, email bryce@acer.edu.au or contact Community Programs at The Smith Family on 02 9085 7191.

## Below are the interveiw schedules used:

**Interview Guide – Young person**

| Broad theme | Main questions |
| --- | --- |
| **Current activity** | Tell me about what X involves. <br> Doing X takes up X amount of your time. What sorts of things do you do during the rest of the week? (during holidays?) |
| **Challenges, Obstacles/ Barriers Enablers** | Preparedness: <br> ■ What did you feel MOST prepared for when starting X? <br> ■ What did you feel LEAST prepared for when starting X? <br><br> **Decisions and Support:** <br> ■ When did you decide to ….? How did you make that decision? <br> ■ Did you have to give-up anything in order to do X? How did you feel about that at the time? <br> ■ Who or what did you turn to for assistance when…? (What about when you were at school?) <br> ■ Did you feel other people had particular expectations of you? **OR** Did you feel any pressure from anyone else about what you should be doing? <br><br> **Summary:** <br> ■ Overall, how do your experiences of school compare to your experiences of doing X? [What's changed for you?] <br> ■ From being at school to now doing X, what are the three biggest challenges you faced? How did you deal with these? What advice would you have for other young people…..? |
| **Future** | ■ Imagine we were catching up again in a couple of years, what might I find you doing then? <br> ■ Where do you see yourself at present on that road? <br> ■ What would be your dream job? What needs to happen for this goal to be realised? |
| **Overall reflections** | In your journey so far, what's surprised you the most? <br><br> If I were trying to tell your story about post-school experiences: <br> ■ Where would I begin your story? (e.g. at school) <br> ■ Who would be the important characters in your story? <br> ■ Is there an important moment in your story? (you know, like a cliff hanger, crisis, major event or experience) <br> ■ Are there any unexpected twists or turns in your story? <br> ■ What's the headline for the next installment? <br><br> Is there anything else that you think is important to understanding your experience of going from school to (insert current activity) that we have not discussed? |

## Interview prompts:

- ■ elaboration – "can you tell me a little bit more about that? How did you deal with ….?"
- ■ continuation – "go on", "what happened then?"
- ■ clarification – "do you mean…?", "if I'm understanding you correctly, you're saying…"
- ■ attention – "I see"
- ■ completion – "are you suggesting there was some reason for that?"
- ■ evidence – "how certain are you that things happened like that?"

*(Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005)*

# Interview Guide – Family member

DATE: _____     TIME: _____

INTERVIEWEE: _____     INTERVIEWER: _____

| Broad theme | Main questions |
|---|---|
| **(A)**<br>**Current activity & family context** | **1.** X is now doing Y. What's it like for you having X doing X?<br>**2.** [Does it mean you have to do something different that you didn't do before? e.g. meals, transport, finances]<br>**3.** Does X have any older or younger brothers and/or sisters? [follow-up questions about what they do compared to X / similarities and differences] |
| **(B)**<br>**School & transition to current activity** | **1.** When X was at school, was he/she interested in {insert activity}? How did you know?<br>**2.** Were you aware of X's main likes and dislikes about school? What were these?<br>**3.** Were you aware of any key people or events/activities that meant a lot or helped X?<br>**4.** Tell me, in what ways were X helpful, while {name of young person} was at school?<br>**5.** Did you have time to do much with X's school? What sorts of things did you do? OR/ What stopped you from being able to do much?<br>**6.** When did you first become aware that X wanted to do Y? How was that decision made?<br>**7.** What was your reaction to this decision? OR How did you feel about that at the time?<br>**8.** What did you do to show your support? OR What made you react in that way? (if not keen on the idea) |
| **(C)**<br>**Challenges, Obstacles/ Barriers Enablers** | **1.** X is doing Y now, but did you have to deal with any key challenges or barriers/obstacles to make this happen for X?<br>**2.** Who or what did you turn to for assistance when …? Did you have to give-up anything in order to for X to do Y?<br>**3.** What advice would you have for other families who want to help their children go from school to doing something else after finishing their schooling? |
| **(D)**<br>**Overall reflections** | **1.** In your journey so far, what's surprised you the most?<br>**2.** Is there anything else that you think is important to understanding your experience of X going from school to Y that we have not discussed? |

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