



# Pathways, Engagement and Transitions:

Dynamic post-school  
pathways of young  
people experiencing  
disadvantage



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# Executive summary

## The post-school transition is a critical time and COVID-19 has made it more complex

The post-school transition into work and further study has always been a critical time for young people and the decisions they make during this period can have long-lasting impacts across multiple life outcomes. It can be particularly challenging for young people experiencing disadvantage.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic and social upheaval has further complicated the transition of young people finishing school. It displaced them from employment, altered their experience of school and tertiary education and impacted the mental health of many.

Young people tend to have higher rates of unemployment, be more negatively affected by a recession and take longer to recover from it, than older people. For young people experiencing disadvantage, COVID-19 has exacerbated existing educational and employment vulnerabilities.

## The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions study

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study aims to understand the post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage. It examines:

- Their level of **engagement in work and/or further study**
- The **factors** influencing their pathways
- What more could be done to **strengthen** young people's **post-school outcomes**.

Over three years, 2021 to 2023, it is hearing directly from two cohorts of financially disadvantaged young people on these matters. These young people were in **Year 10** or **Year 12** in late **2020** and on The Smith Family's long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*. The PET study also provides an important opportunity to understand the immediate and longer-term impact of COVID-19 on these young people.

The study is collecting data through:

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

This is the second PET publication and focuses on what has **changed and remained constant** over the first **two years since leaving school**, for the young people who were in Year 12 in 2020. It draws on survey responses from over 1,000 young people and interviews with 33 of them. Young people from all states and territories participated in the survey, 55

percent are female and 45 percent are male, and 15 percent are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Just under 30 percent live in non-metropolitan areas and over a third have a health or mental health condition.

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

Young people's engagement in work and/or study increased to **85 percent in 2022**, the second year after leaving Year 12, up from 77 percent in 2021.

In 2022, **57 percent** of young people were **fully engaged** (working and/or studying 35 hours a week or more) and **28 percent** were **partially engaged** (working or studying less than 35 hours a week). This compares with 54 percent and 23 percent of young people respectively in 2021. The extent to which young people were *not engaged* in work or study decreased from 23 percent in 2021 to 14 percent in 2022, with the vast majority of this group looking for work, volunteering or in unpaid work. **Only three percent of young people were not participating** in any of these activities in the second year after leaving Year 12.

Young people were **more likely to be working** and **less likely to be studying** in the second year compared with the first year after Year 12. In 2022, 70 percent of young people were working, compared with 55 percent in 2021. In 2022, 48 percent of young people were studying, compared with 52 percent in 2021.

While 70 percent of young people were engaged in work in the second year after Year 12, their participation in the labour force was somewhat **unstable**. Of those in work, 14 percent were working **two or more jobs**, over one-third (37 percent) wanted to **work more hours**, and 34 percent had **looked for a new job** in the past four weeks. The most common occupations were in retail and sales, labouring and other construction, transport, distribution and warehouse roles, and hospitality. In combination this data suggests that many young people are in **precarious, low-wage roles** with unclear **career progression opportunities**.

As in the first post-school year, levels of engagement varied between different groups of young people in the second year after Year 12. However, the **gaps in engagement** that were apparent in 2021 had closed or **were closing by 2022**. In the first year after Year 12, males had lower levels of engagement



relative to females (75 percent and 79 percent respectively). By the second post-school year, the levels of engagement of males and females were similar (86 percent and 84 percent, respectively). In the first year after Year 12, 66 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were engaged, compared with 79 percent of non-Indigenous young people. By the second year, the gap in engagement had reduced from 13 percentage points to nine percentage points. In 2022, 78 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were engaged compared with 87 percent of non-Indigenous young people.

### Engagement stability and dynamics

By surveying the same young people over two years, the PET study explores the extent to which individual young people **maintained** or **changed** their level of engagement across these years. The PET data highlights the **dynamic nature** of post-school pathways for young people experiencing disadvantage.

Three in five young people (61 percent) had the same level of engagement in 2022 as they had in 2021. When surveyed in 2021 and 2022, 40 percent of young people were fully engaged, 11 percent were partially engaged, and 10 percent were not engaged in work or study at both points in time.

**Two in five** young people (40 percent<sup>1</sup>) had **different levels of engagement** in the second year, compared with the first year after Year 12. Almost a quarter of all young people (24 percent) were working and/or studying *more* hours, and 16 percent were working and/or studying *fewer* hours in 2022, compared with 2021.

The interviews with young people reinforced the dynamic nature of post-school transitions, suggesting that point-in-time surveys may **under-estimate** the **extent of change** in young people's engagement. All but one interviewee experienced some change in work or study circumstances during the second post-school year.

Young people experienced **varied** and **often multiple changes** in their work or study circumstances between the first and second year post-Year 12. They commenced work, changed jobs or stopped working, and/or commenced, completed, withdrew from, or changed courses. Several young people who were engaged for the majority of the second year post-Year 12, also experienced periods of not being engaged in work or study across that year. Further, all

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this publication all figures are rounded to the nearest whole number, therefore percentages in some cases may not add up to 100.

the interviewees who were not engaged in work or study at the time of both surveys, had been engaged at some point during the year. The interviews highlight that the level of change in young people's engagement in work or study is even higher than the surveys identified.

## Factors supporting post-school engagement and successful transitions

The PET study highlights that a number of factors interact to influence the post-school transitions and improve the engagement of young people experiencing disadvantage.

- Young people's **career management skills** are essential to making strong and informed transitions into post-school work or study. This includes their **personal management skills, learning and work exploration skills and career building skills**.
- **Strong supportive adult social networks** created, initiated or highlighted various career development opportunities for some young people experiencing disadvantage. These networks included family and extended family members, friends, co-workers and managers, and educational staff and placement supervisors.
- **Career related part-time employment, course placements, paid cadetships or internships** provided many young people with opportunities to explore their chosen pathways and further investigate the extent to which these pathways matched their interests, skills, and abilities. Paid cadetships or internships were key to enabling some young people to participate in further education and were seen as key opportunities to acquire skills and provide exposure to potential employers.

- **Academic support systems and programs** provided some young people with the means of engaging and succeeding in their studies.
- **Post-school opportunities** to explore **apprenticeships and higher education** opportunities supported some young people to increase their engagement in work or study.

## Barriers to successful transitions

Not all young people in the PET study were on strong career pathways and young people identified a range of barriers to their engagement in work or study.

- The significant disruptions caused by the **COVID-19 pandemic** were still impacting young people in 2022. The shift to online learning during the pandemic had discouraged some from further study, job losses or reduced hours continued to disrupt employment experiences, and some young people had been unable to complete Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications.
- **Precarious and limited employment opportunities** remained a feature of many youth labour markets.
- **Financial constraints** associated with costs of living forced some young people to choose employment over study opportunities, particularly when study options required significant hours of unpaid work placements.
- **Poor health and mental health** and inadequate, ineffective and/or expensive health care excluded some young people from the care they needed to be able to fully engage in work or study.
- Some young people have significant **informal caring responsibilities** that affected the extent to which they could fully engage in work or study.



## What more can be done to strengthen the post-school transitions of young people experiencing disadvantage?

The PET study identified a number of opportunities to strengthen the post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage including:

- Greater **individualised support** while at school to help more young people to **complete Year 12**. This includes **early intervention** for those struggling with the academic and social demands of school and support for those with personal concerns which affect their engagement with school.
- Ensure a focus on **intentional career development learning** for young people of all ages and stages, including continuing efforts to:
  - Help young people to **articulate** their career development skills and use a common language to describe those skills
  - Develop consistency in the **quality** and availability of career and transition services.
- Provide young people with accessible **information on diverse career pathways** and enhance efforts, both while they are at school and post-school, to encourage their increased participation in **Vocational Education and Training** and **apprenticeships**.
- Fund an expansion of high-quality **career-related, remunerated work placements, cadetships and internship programs**, which target young people experiencing disadvantage.
- Support **family members'** access to up-to-date labour market, education and training information, and with how they can help young people to develop and achieve post-school goals.
- Investigate ways to formally **increase the social capital** and **career-related adult networks** of young people experiencing disadvantage, including through employers.
- Identify young people as a **priority group** in national and state/territory **employment** policies and programs including a focus on helping those experiencing disadvantage to build **meaningful career pathways**.
- Strengthen young people's access to timely and affordable **health** and **mental health** services.



# Introduction



The post-school transition into work and study has always been a critical time for young people. The decisions young people make during the initial post-school period may have long-lasting impacts across multiple life outcomes (Dietrich et al, 2021). Historically, unemployment and underemployment<sup>2</sup> rates for young Australians have been twice that of the rest of the labour market (Dhillon & Cassidy, 2018), and these rates are higher still among young people experiencing disadvantage (OECD, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated recession have added further challenges to young people's post-school transitions. In the first year of the pandemic, young people were twice as likely as those over the age of 25 to lose their jobs and nearly one in eight young people were not in employment, education or training (Littleton & Campbell, 2022). During the pandemic, 45 percent of young Australians experienced unemployment and 61 percent were underemployed (Walsh et al, 2022).

The pandemic also negatively impacted young people by:

- Delaying their entry into or displacing them from employment
- Altering their experience of school and tertiary education
- Reducing the extent to which young people were willing and able to meet post-school education costs (e61 Institute, 2022a; e61 Institute, 2022b).

For young Australians experiencing disadvantage, COVID-19 disproportionately exacerbated existing vulnerabilities associated with poorer educational and employment outcomes. In 2020, young people experiencing disadvantage were almost twice as likely as their more advantaged peers to withdraw from study, and more than 40 percent of young people experiencing disadvantage were not working,<sup>3</sup> compared with approximately 30 percent of young people not experiencing disadvantage (e61 Institute, 2022a).

As the economic shocks brought about by the pandemic dissipate and labour markets recover, early indications suggest young people are taking advantage of the strengthening labour market and choosing work over further study. Among 20 to 24 year-olds, the unemployment rate declined from 13.8 percent in mid-2020 to below seven percent by early 2022 – the lowest rate since 2009 (ABS,

<sup>2</sup> Underemployment refers to someone who is currently employed, but is not working full-time and would like to and is available to work additional hours (ABS, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Defined as unemployed or not looking for work.

2023a). In 2022, young Australians were more likely than in 2021 to be fully engaged in work (26 percent and 24 percent respectively) and less likely to be fully engaged in education (50 percent and 53 percent respectively) (ABS, 2022).

Despite this recovery, the COVID-19 recession is still expected to have scarring effects of up to 10 years for young Australians (Andrews et al, 2020). Of particular concern are its effects on delayed entry into the labour market, inferior job pathways and job quality, reduced willingness of people to pay for formal education, and general pessimism associated with recessions (e61 Institute, 2022b).

## Skill sets to navigate post-school pathways

More than ever, young people, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, require a comprehensive skill set and effective support networks to overcome barriers and successfully navigate increasingly complex post-school pathways (Education Council, 2020). The knowledge and skills required to gather, analyse and interpret relevant information for effective career decision-making include three broad skill sets (National Careers Institute, 2022; Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework, 2021):

- **Personal management skills** – that foster self-reflection, self-development and relationship management
- **Learning and work exploration skills** – that promote effective information seeking and continuous learning
- **Career building skills** – that facilitate the investigation of career options, management of learning and work roles and active implementation of career transitions.

These career management competencies are one of the key factors influencing young people's post-school pathways. Understanding how young people experiencing disadvantage develop and use these skill sets in dynamic environments and complex circumstances, can help inform improvements in policies and programs designed to better support their post-school transitions and outcomes.

## The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions study

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study is exploring the pathways and factors affecting post-school transitions of young people experiencing disadvantage across three years, 2021 to 2023. The young people participating in this study are those who were in Years 10 or 12 in 2020 and on The Smith Family's long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*.<sup>4</sup>

The PET study aims to:

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

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

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

By surveying and interviewing the same group of young people over three years,<sup>5</sup> the PET study provides a unique opportunity to better understand the dynamics of young people's pathways over time, what changes, what stays the same, and what influences these pathways.

## This publication

This publication focuses on the young people who were in Year 12 at the end of 2020 and explores their transitions and pathways in the first two years after leaving Year 12. It includes information they provided in the 2021 and 2022 PET surveys and interviews.

This publication examines three key questions:

1. What are the **experiences** and **destinations** of young people in the first two years after leaving Year 12?
2. How have their experiences and destinations **changed** during this transition period?
3. What **factors** have helped or hindered young people's successful navigation of work and study transition pathways?

## Characteristics of the Year 12 young people

A total of 1,286 young people in Year 12 in 2020 completed the 2021 and 2022 PET surveys, or 59 percent of all those invited to participate in the study in 2021. This publication reports on responses from 1,042 of these young people.<sup>6</sup>

4 All young people on *Learning for Life* are living in a low-income family and most are recruited to the program when they are in primary school. More information on the program is available at <https://www.thsmithfamily.com.au/programs/learning-for-life>

5 That is, taking an approach that is longitudinal (tracking the same people over time) rather than cross-sectional (examining a relevant group of people at any single point in time).

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



Key characteristics of these young people include:

- **Gender:** Over half (55 percent) are female and 45 percent are male
- **Indigeneity:** Fifteen percent are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- **Location:** Just under three-quarters (72 percent) live in metropolitan areas and 28 percent live in regional areas.
- **States and territories:** All were represented, with around a quarter living in each of New South Wales and Victoria, one-fifth in Queensland, and around one in 10 in each of South Australia and Western Australia. Tasmania and the two territories together comprised six percent
- **Health and disability:** Over a third (37 percent) indicated they had a health or mental health condition
- **Year 12 completion:** One in 10 had not completed Year 12 at the time of the 2022 survey.

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

Thirty-three young people who were in Year 12 in 2020 and completed both PET surveys also participated in a one-hour interview in mid-2021 and mid-2022.<sup>8</sup> The interviews explored details of the young people's experiences of work, study, and other activities since leaving school and the factors influencing these experiences. Nineteen of these young people are female and 14 are male. Six are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people.

<sup>7</sup> The survey data are weighted to ensure the characteristics of young people who completed both PET surveys are representative of the characteristics of all the young people invited to participate.

<sup>8</sup> Two young men who were interviewed in 2021 were not able to be contacted for the 2022 interview. Three young people who were interviewed are excluded from this publication as they were receiving either a Disability or Carer payment.



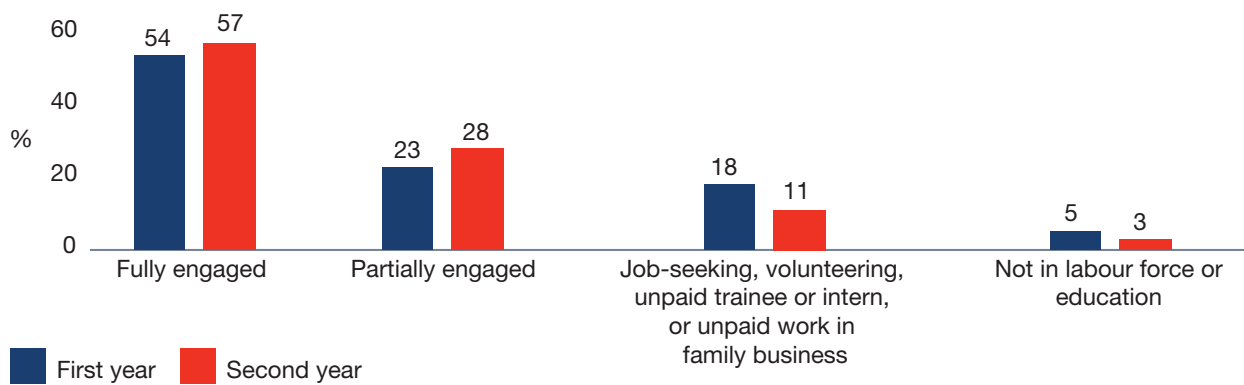
# Young people's participation in work and study post-school

The PET survey assesses young people's engagement in work and study after leaving school. Young people are defined as *fully engaged* if they are working and/or studying for 35 hours a week or more. Those working or studying for fewer than 35 hours are defined as *partially engaged*. Young people who are not participating in any paid work or study are defined as *not engaged*, though they may be looking for work, in unpaid work or volunteering.

In the second year after leaving Year 12, young people had increased engagement in work and study, compared with the

first year after leaving Year 12 (see Figure 1). In their second post-school year, 85 percent of all young people were engaged in work and/or study, compared with 77 percent in the first post-school year.<sup>9</sup> Full engagement increased from 54 to 57 percent and partial engagement increased from 23 to 28 percent. The proportion of young people who were not engaged, decreased from 23 to 14 percent, with most of this group looking for work, volunteering or in unpaid work.<sup>10</sup> In the second year after Year 12, only three percent of young people were not participating in any of these activities.

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



Note: Participants looking for work and volunteering, unpaid trainees and interns, those in unpaid work in a family business and those not in the labour force or education, together make up the 14 percent of young people who were not engaged in the second year after leaving Year 12.



<sup>9</sup> There are no national data directly comparable with the PET data. The closest comparable data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics reports engagement for a broader age range (15-24 years), includes all levels of socioeconomic status, and information is gathered at the household level and responses may be provided by someone other than the young person (i.e., a parent or carer).

<sup>10</sup> The engagement outcomes in this report relate to the young people who participated in both the 2021 and 2022 PET surveys. As such, engagement levels vary slightly from those reported in *Pathways, Engagement and Transitions Report 1 (2022)* as not all young people who responded to the 2021 survey, responded to the 2022 survey.

## Engagement in work or study over time by different groups of young people

Engagement outcomes among all groups of young people improved between the first and second year after leaving Year 12 (see Figure 2), with some groups substantially increasing their levels of engagement. In the first year after Year 12, 75 percent of **young males** were engaged in work and/or study and this increased to 86 percent in the second year – a similar level of engagement as **young females** (84 percent).

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander** young people’s engagement increased from 66 percent in the first year to 78 percent in the second year after Year 12. While their level of engagement was still lower than non-Indigenous young people (87 percent), the gap in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people closed from 13 percentage points in 2021 to nine percentage points in 2022.

Young people who had **not completed Year 12** had improved their engagement from 61 percent in 2021 to 71 percent in 2022. Overall however, in 2022 the level of engagement among young people who did not complete Year 12 was still significantly lower than the young people

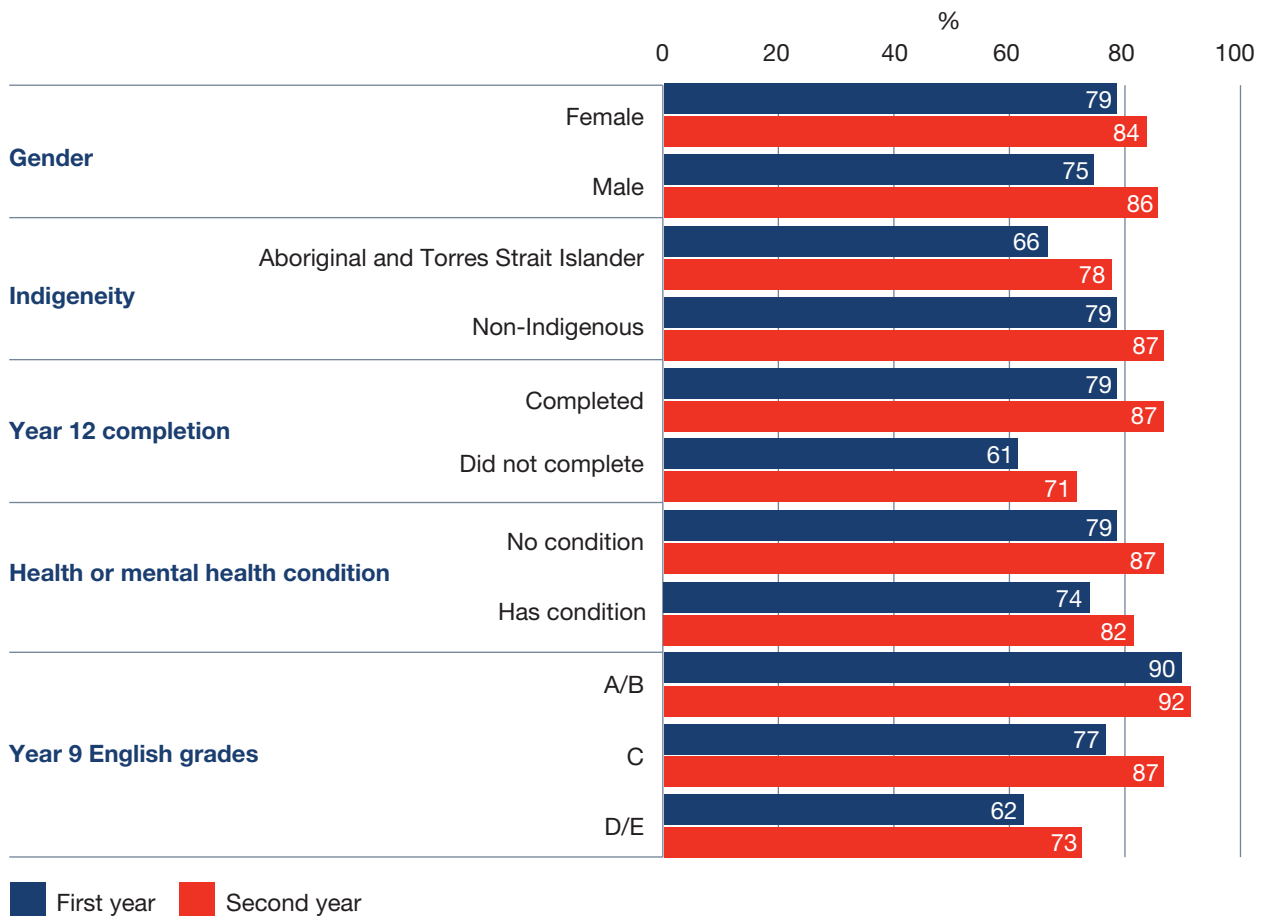
who did complete Year 12 (71 percent compared with 87 percent).

Young people with **health or mental health conditions**, increased their engagement from 74 percent to 82 percent in the second year after Year 12, slightly lower than that of young people with no health conditions (87 percent).

Young people who received a **D or E grade in Year 9 English** had increased their engagement from 62 percent to 73 percent in the second year after Year 12. However, young people with these grades were still less likely to be engaged than those who received higher Year 9 English grades. Ninety-two percent of young people who received an A or B grade in Year 9 English and 87 percent of those who received a C grade were engaged in the second year after leaving school, compared with 73 percent of those who received a D or E grade.

Together, these data reinforce the relationships between early achievement patterns, Year 12 completion and post-school engagement in work and further study.

**Figure 2: Proportion of young people engaged in work and/or study, in the first and second year after leaving Year 12**

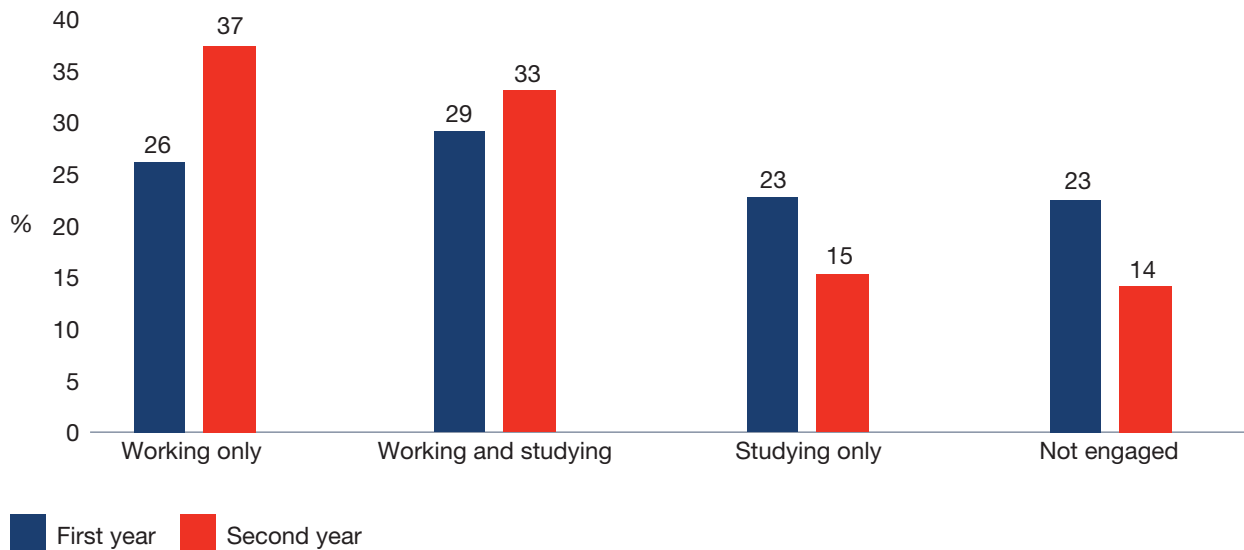


## Engagement patterns

The overall increase in engagement was due to a higher proportion of young people working in the second year compared to the first year after leaving Year 12 (70 percent and 55 percent respectively), with a particular increase in the proportion engaged in work only (see Figure 3). In the second year after Year 12, 37 percent of all young people were working only, compared with 26 percent in the first

year. There was also a slight increase in the proportion of young people working and studying, from 29 percent in the first year to 33 percent in the second year after Year 12. In comparison, only 15 percent of young people were studying only in the second year, compared with 23 percent in the first year after Year 12.

**Figure 3: Participation in work and study in the first and second year after leaving Year 12**



While the proportions of young people engaged in work increased between the first and second year after Year 12, the nature of work was somewhat unstable. Of those employed, 14 percent were working two or more jobs<sup>11</sup>, over one-third (37 percent) wanted to work more hours, and 34 percent had looked for a new job in the past four weeks.

The type of work that young people were engaged in varied according to their engagement patterns. Of those working full-time and not studying (12 percent of young people), the most common occupations were in retail and sales (21 percent), labouring and other construction (20 percent) and transport, distribution and warehouse roles (16 percent). For those working part-time and not studying (25 percent of young people), the most common occupations were retail and sales (28 percent) and hospitality roles (24 percent).

The type of jobs that young people were entering, along with the high proportions working multiple jobs, wanting more hours, or looking for new work, suggest that many are in precarious, low-wage occupations with unclear progression opportunities.

### From not engaged to working and studying

Among the young people who were not engaged in work or study in the first year, almost three in five (58 percent) were engaged in the second year after leaving Year 12. Of these, 53 percent were working only, 25 percent were combining work and study and 22 percent were studying only.

<sup>11</sup> The rate of multiple jobs is higher than broader population estimates, where 7.9 per cent of people aged 15 to 19 and 8.9 per cent of 20 to 24 year-olds are holding multiple jobs (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

# Engagement stability and dynamics after leaving Year 12

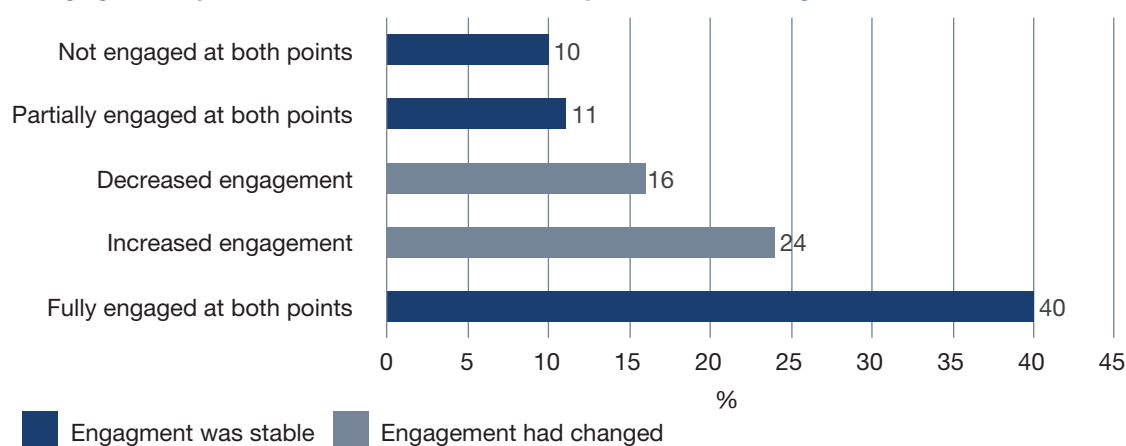
## Levels of engagement

By surveying the same young people over two years, the PET study highlights the dynamic nature of post-school pathways and the extent to which each young person's engagement remained the same or changed in the years since leaving Year 12. Three in five young people experiencing disadvantage (61 percent) had the same level of engagement in work and/or study in the second year after Year 12 as they had in the first year. Forty percent were fully engaged,

11 percent were partially engaged, and 10 percent were not engaged at both points in time (see Figure 4).

Two in five young people (40 percent) had a different level of engagement in the second year compared with the first year after leaving Year 12. Almost a quarter of young people (24 percent) were working and/or studying *more* hours, and 16 percent were working and/or studying *fewer* hours in the second year compared with the first year.

**Figure 4: Engagement patterns in the first and second years after leaving Year 12**



## How engagement varies over time among different groups of young people<sup>12</sup>

The patterns of engagement over the first two years after leaving Year 12 were stronger for some groups of young people than others (see Figure 5). The proportions of young people who had consistent or increasing engagement in the first two years after leaving school were higher among non-Indigenous than Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander young people (75 percent compared with 68 percent), and for those who completed Year 12 compared to those who had not (76 percent compared with 65 percent).

Young people without a health or mental health condition were more likely than those with a condition to have consistent or increasing engagement in the second year after Year 12 (77 percent compared with 70 percent).

Similarly, a higher proportion of young people who had received an A or B, or a C grade in Year 9 English had consistent or increasing engagement in the second post-school year compared to young people who received a D or E grade in Year 9 English (79 percent and 76 percent respectively, compared with 64 percent).

### Full and increasing engagement

Gaps in engagement levels among some groups of young people that were apparent in the first year after leaving Year 12, were beginning to close by the second year.

Young females were more likely than young males to be fully engaged in both the first and second year after Year 12 (41 percent compared with 38 percent, respectively). However, with males' level of engagement reaching that of females in 2022 (as shown in Figure 2), young males were more likely than young females to have increased their level of engagement in the second year after Year 12 (27 percent compared with 21 percent respectively, see Figure 5).

Non-Indigenous young people were more likely than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to be fully engaged in both years after Year 12 (42 percent compared with 25 percent, respectively). However, reflecting the decreasing gap between engagement levels for these two groups of young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were more likely than non-Indigenous young

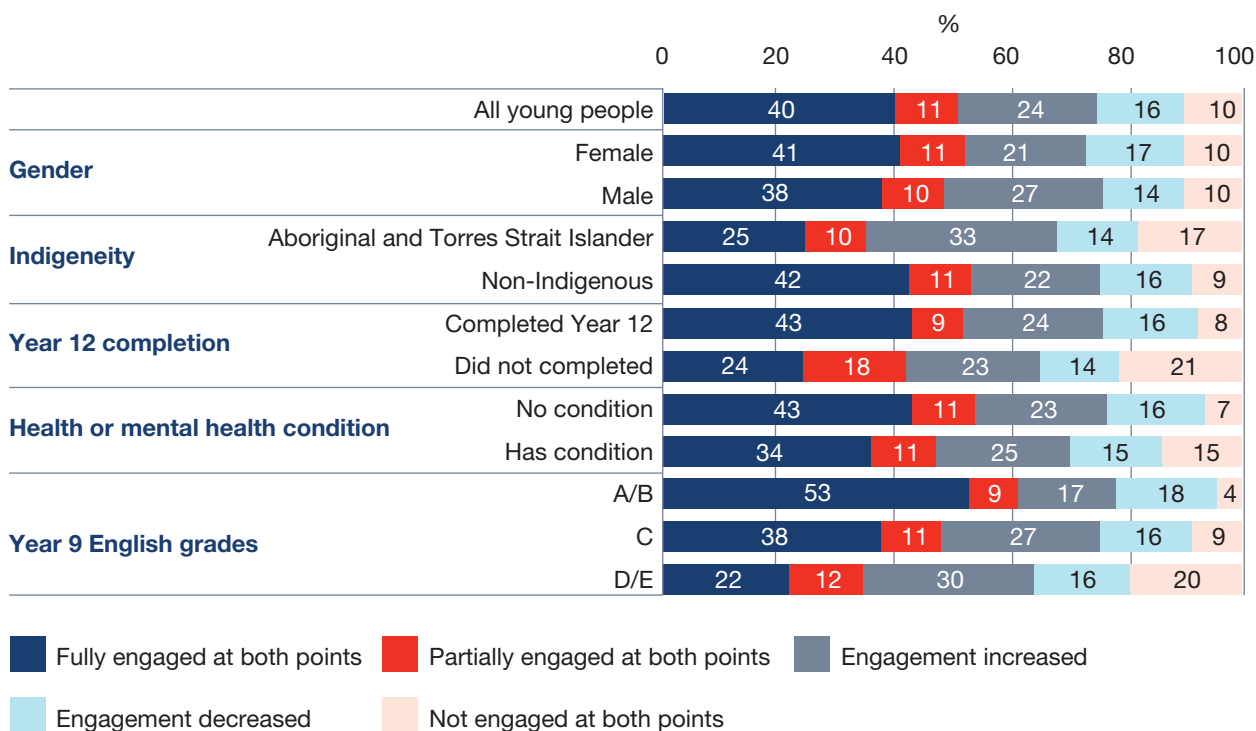
<sup>12</sup> All the outcomes discussed are statistically significant.

people to have increased their engagement by the second year after leaving Year 12 (33 percent compared with 22 percent, respectively).

Young people who had received an A or B Grade in Year 9 English were more likely to be fully engaged in both the first and second year after Year 12 (53 percent) compared with

those who received a C Grade (38 percent) or those who received a D or E Grade (22 percent). However, young people who had received a D or E grade in Year 9 English were more likely than those who had received an A or B grade to increase their engagement in the second year after leaving Year 12 (30 percent compared with 17 percent, respectively).

**Figure 5: Engagement patterns in the first and second year after leaving Year 12 by characteristics of young people**



## Engagement dynamics

The point-in-time levels of engagement captured through the two surveys emphasise the dynamic nature of post-school transitions of young people experiencing disadvantage, with two in five young people changing their level of engagement between the first and second surveys. The 33 young people who were interviewed for the PET study further illustrate how young people's work and study lives changed during the first two years after Year 12, including among young people whose engagement seemed to have remained stable between the two surveys.

Only one of the 33 interviewees had the same level of engagement at both surveys and a year of stability between the surveys – studying the same course and working at the same two part-time jobs throughout their first and second year after leaving Year 12. The remaining 32 interviewees, including those who were not engaged at both surveys, had experienced some change in their circumstances during the year – having started new jobs and/or left jobs, or having completed, changed, commenced, or withdrawn from courses of study. Many young people experienced multiple changes. The dynamic nature of young people's post-school transitions is illustrated by the experiences of Evanna<sup>13</sup>, Rosa and Dilek.

Evanna was working full-time at the same company when each of the PET surveys were conducted. However, she left that job just after the first survey, and started and withdrew from a Vocational, Educational and Training (VET) course. She spent time not engaged in work or study, before completing a short course. Evanna worked full-time in a job using that short-course qualification for eight months, before returning to the original full-time job she had left just after the 2021 survey.

*In 2021 I was working full-time for about two months... I hated it...so I quit, and then I was doing a Certificate... but I couldn't be bothered doing that...so I was just relaxing. Then I did a short course...my friend did it and getting to work with my friend was cool. They put us on shifts together...I did that for eight months, but the money was bad...so I reapplied for the 2021 job and got that. Evanna*

Rosa was working part-time when both surveys were conducted. In the first year after Year 12, she was working 12 hours a week at a community centre. In the second year post-school, she was still working part-time but 30 hours a week across two roles. Between surveys, her hours and pattern of work changed substantially. COVID-19 restrictions closed the community centre, and foreseeing this Rosa secured casual work in a supermarket, where she worked 48 to 54 hours a week for most of the year. In January 2022, the community centre re-opened and Rosa recommenced

her part-time job there, which increased her total hours to between 60 and 70 a week. Not long after, the supermarket cut back on casual staff and reduced Rosa's hours to 18 per week. In mid-2022, Rosa was getting only two short shifts a week at the supermarket, and so was applying elsewhere, looking for a more stable and secure position.

*The community centre...offered me a job so I was doing that...But because of lockdown...I had to find another job...I got the supermarket job...I was casual but doing full-time hours...but now they're trying to utilise as many part-time and full-timers as they can, so this week...and next, I only have two shifts. Rosa*

Dilek was not engaged in work or study when either of the surveys were conducted. During the year however, he had commenced and withdrawn from a pre-apprenticeship course, held two different part-time jobs, and after the second survey, had started working full-time.

*I had been doing a course...but...most of the lessons were in class and...I was getting basic prep work in class...but I needed actual...hands-on...experience to get work so...I dropped out...Since then, I have been just looking for work most of the time...and changing jobs. Most of the work that I've done, they haven't been the job that I want. Dilek*



<sup>13</sup> All names of young people have been changed.

# Factors affecting post-school engagement and transitions

The experiences of the young people interviewed for the PET study highlight the interactions between key factors which influence successful transitions from school into work and further study. Many young people who were successfully transitioning in their second year after Year 12, had identified their chosen career path during school. For others, career pathways emerged during the second year post-school, through the influence of previous experiences and with the help of adult social networks. Some young people were supported on their pathways by university support services and programs. Others were flourishing despite adverse circumstances and significant gaps in support services. For a few, their pathways had not yet become clear because of difficult circumstances and a paucity of support.

## Career management skills

Young people who were making successful transitions in the second year after Year 12 demonstrate the importance of strong career management skill sets. With these skills, young people were able to successfully identify and navigate available work and/or study opportunities and the many related systems designed to support post-school transitions.

A range of strong **personal management** skills were essential to young people's successful transitions. Young people on well-defined pathways have clear ideas about their

strengths, interests and motivations and a strong positive academic self-concept. In the two years since leaving school, they had engaged in behaviours and demonstrated attitudes reflective of personal growth. They understand the value of strong interpersonal skills and since leaving school have been working on strengthening their social and relational skills.

Young people who were pursuing work or study pathways of their choice, demonstrated **learning and work exploration** skills. They were honing their knowledge of career opportunities and relating those opportunities to their academic self-concepts, personal interests, and skills. Most had considered the advantages and disadvantages of alternative pathways and investigated options before deciding on a particular pathway. They had accessed information and were strengthening their knowledge and understanding of the relationships between career aspirations and potential occupations, and had compared the requirements of those careers with their actual or potential education and skill levels.

Young people who were successfully transitioning through work and study pathways also had strong **career building** skills which they were using to facilitate their decision-making about appropriate work and/or study opportunities. Many young people who were making significant progress



on their chosen pathway had identified potential hurdles in their pathways and developed and implemented plans and strategies to manage and navigate these challenges. They are building or strengthening career identities and developing and implementing goals that are guiding and motivating them to achieve their desired longer-term outcomes. Most interviewees are proactively strengthening their career-related social networks, and several had or were engaging in help-seeking behaviours by accessing support services to help them achieve their goals.

The experiences of Evan and Kari, who had strengthened their engagement between the first and second year after Year 12, illustrate how these career management skill sets support transitions and are being consolidated through experience. They also highlight how young people have used these skills to identify and take advantage of available opportunities, facilitating their post school transitions to this point. While Evan and Kari's circumstances and experiences are unique, their career management skill sets are common to all the interviewees who have successfully transitioned into work or study.

## Opportunities through an apprenticeship pathway

Like many of the interviewees who commenced VET pathways after leaving Year 12, Evan was unsure what he wanted to do when he finished school. At the end of Year 12, he was lacking direction and 'felt lost'. He had not been particularly academic but had liked many aspects of school. He had many supportive teachers and his parents encouraged and supported him to complete Year 12.

Evan understood the value of post-school education and considered enrolling in university 'because he didn't know what...to do.' He had the self-awareness to recognise that he 'didn't want to try and study for something' he was unsure he would finish, so he decided to find employment and took a part-time job in hospitality 'until he could find something that he wanted to pursue as a career'.

Evan had not been specifically looking for an apprenticeship but heard about an Indigenous apprenticeship program from a friend's father working in the building industry. The program required Evan to complete an introductory VET course. The pre-program training provided him with initial exposure to the practical skills the apprenticeship would teach him and gave him an opportunity to assess if the realities and requirements of the training and work environment aligned with his interests and abilities.

When Evan completed the pre-program training and formally started the apprenticeship, he initially 'wasn't keen about waking up early' but quickly came to appreciate the 'discipline' that working full-time gives him. He enjoys that work provides learning opportunities, feels a great deal of satisfaction in the work processes, and is proud of the tangible outcomes his work achieves.

*I like learning about how it works...I didn't give it too much thought before, but now I get to see the process and...that more goes into it than I thought...Starting off with nothing and you end up seeing what you've built... it's a satisfying feeling...and I can show my parents or my girlfriend...'I built that'. Evan*





Evan appreciates the lifestyle benefits of the work, including the financial security of full-time employment. He also values that the daily physicality of the work has helped him to pursue a personal goal of increasing his fitness.

*When I first started out...I'd be tired and sore...sluggish at the end of the day...now I can do it each day...Before I couldn't do both the gym and going to work...now I've built up enough muscle and endurance to be able to do both...I've been getting a lot fitter, which has been a goal of mine for quite some time. Evan*

Since senior secondary school, Evan had known of the importance of having goals, however he had always found it difficult to identify 'any clear goals that he wanted to accomplish'. In the second year after Year 12, Evan had formed a career identity and was on a pathway he finds meaningful and satisfying. He has clear career goals and is motivated to pursue them. Importantly for his ongoing career management, his long-term professional goals incorporate lifelong learning and a strong desire for continuous skill development. Evan's goals also demonstrate his understanding that in the distant future, his capacity for such physically strenuous work will decline and he is already considering alternative pathways to manage that prospect.

*Once I got my apprenticeship...I had a clear goal. I decided I wanted to finish the apprenticeship...After I've been in the trade for a bit longer...I will see what I could do next...I wouldn't mind becoming a builder who... controls everything on the site...or...being a supervisor later down the line...just so that I wouldn't have to tax my body too much when I get older. Evan*

Evan's transition from partial engagement in the first year after Year 12 to full engagement in the second, illustrates the wide range of career management competencies young people require to effectively shape and influence their post-school transitions.

## Opportunities through a higher education pathway

In the first year after Year 12, Kari was not working or studying. She has had a very traumatic life and consequently has significant ongoing mental health issues. Kari grew up in foster care but living in the same rural town as her biological parents had its challenges.

Kari is very intelligent and has maintained a strong positive academic self-concept. As a young child she was 'in all the gifted and talented' classes. However, as she got older and her history of trauma increasingly manifested in behavioural issues, Kari experienced multiple moves between numerous 'alternative' schools.

Throughout her schooling, there were numerous times when Kari contemplated leaving school before completing Year 12. However, she decided to complete Year 12 because she identifies as a significant positive role model for her younger siblings. She is, however, very disappointed with the extent to which the education system let her down.

*It's really upsetting, looking back at who I used to be and how smart I used to be and how it all got thrown away because schools just didn't have the patience for kids... with trauma. I feel like so much of my education could have been salvaged and I could have graduated with an ATAR instead of an asterisk... Kari*

From her early teenage years, Kari had to 'take her mental health into her own hands', ensuring she got 'to the doctors or...the hospital' as she needed. She recognises this as a failing of the foster care and health systems, but also feels that these experiences taught her to be 'really self-aware' and to 'know what she needed before anyone else did'.

During the first year after Year 12, Kari increasingly spent time living in the city with her boyfriend and his family. The extent to which her boyfriend's family welcomed her into their home improved her mental health and made it feasible for Kari to start considering and planning for her future.

*...moving two-and-a-half hours away and still having contact with my foster mum and siblings...that made my life really good and positive...It has definitely increased my mental health. Kari*

Kari has very strong self-management, planning, organisational and problem-solving skills. She feels she developed these skills in part, through having to navigate the health, foster care and education systems and manage complex aspects of her personal life from an early age. These skills have been instrumental to Kari being able to improve her living situation, strengthen her mental health, start on a career path she is passionate about, and increase her level of post-school engagement in the second year after Year 12.

Like many young people, the career paths that interest Kari are related to her personal experience, driven by a desire to give back to the community, and a hope these potential paths would provide her with insights into her own situation. However, unlike most of the interviewees on university pathways, Kari had not aspired to university when she was at school. Kari could only contemplate university studies once she had moved to the city, stabilised her housing and mental health, and strengthened the positive relationships she was forming with her boyfriend and his family. Her self-reflection and personal insights have facilitated these positive changes but also keep Kari realistic about the ongoing nature of recovering from extensive and persistent trauma.

*For a lot of my life...I was in survival mode...I didn't learn what healthy friendships and relationships were... Getting into a healthy relationship and getting into a family that actually loves each other and communicates effectively...It's definitely been a really good and exciting growth experience that's made a big difference...I still have struggles, but I can be patient. Kari*

With improved living arrangements and mental health in the second year after Year 12, Kari explored pathways that would help her pursue her long-term interests in 'forensic work...behavioural analysis...and understanding the way that people function.' Through her explorations and with encouragement from the one member of her extended family who attended university and from her boyfriend and his family, Kari identified a university pathway that interested her.

While Kari says she applied to university somewhat 'impulsively', her success in the application process is testament to her intelligence and perseverance. Having not attained an ATAR at school, Kari had to sit alternative university entrance exams and research and submit an essay, the timing of which coincided with her and many other household members contracting COVID-19. Kari's exam and essay results gained her entry into an Indigenous Pathways Program which she commenced on a full-time basis at the beginning of 2022.

Kari recognised the study load at university was going to exceed anything she had experienced, so before commencing the course, she applied her problem-solving skills and 'did a lot of research into...the best way to learn'. Her research gave her strategies that she is implementing to effectively plan, organise and complete her course work and assessments. Kari also knows she is likely to need extra support with her studies so has considered accessing university services in addition to the mental health and therapeutic support services she already uses.

Kari 'really enjoys' her course and appreciates the learning environment in which 'they treat you like you're a person and like you're an adult'. She sees a very clear career path for herself and has goals to progress from this course into a degree and then onto a pathway that may subsequently lead to different careers in the future.

*I'm doing...an extended entrance course...I'll get all my credits and...transfer them...to a degree...When I finish that I either want to be working with criminals... in the court system...or the law enforcement system... after criminals have been dealt with...I'd love to...help people who were in my position and my mum's position... kind of break that cycle...help people before they get to that point...to figure out why...the things that happened happen...I think that would be really positive...I can help kids...like me. Kari*

## External factors influencing successful transitions

While personal skill sets are pivotal to successful post-school transitions, the PET study shows the effective acquisition of and opportunity to use these skills are heavily influenced by supportive adult networks and support programs and services.

### Supportive adult social networks

Most young people in the PET study sought advice and information about work or study options from their adult social networks. Among those who completed both surveys, in the second year after leaving school, 72 percent sought advice and information from relatives, half (49 percent) talked to friends about work or study options, two in five (39 percent) sought guidance from educators and/or career advisors, and a quarter (26 percent) discussed work and study options with their managers and/or other work colleagues.

All the interviewees spoke of adults and adult support networks who had significantly supported their post-school transition. In the first year after leaving Year 12, almost all interviewees mentioned the significant emotional and practical support they received from immediate family members and friends. Similarly, many young people talked of the instrumental role supportive high school teachers had played in encouraging and guiding their pathway choices as they transitioned out of Year 12.

In the second year after leaving Year 12, family members and friends remained important emotional and practical support for young people experiencing disadvantage. For most young people, family members had supported, encouraged and, at times 'pushed' them during the processes of finding and applying for work and/or enrolling in study.

### Extended adult networks

Some young people had challenging circumstances with their immediate family, or their families lacked the networks and capacity to provide the support young people need to successfully transition into work or further study. For these and many other young people, extended social networks provided practical assistance but also helped them to strengthen their personal management skills. Extended adult networks have been pivotal in creating or introducing young people to opportunities that build confidence and positive self-concepts. These networks have also fostered further career exploration by offering additional information that supported some young people to progress their skill development through further study and others to consider different occupational pathways. For a number of young people, their extended adult networks created or introduced them to opportunities they would not otherwise have had access to.

*It was pretty hard for me...finding a job...I had been searching for six months...I got my first actual proper interview, and I was panicking...didn't know how... to answer anything and I didn't get the job...So after that I started volunteering...The owner is the mother of my brother's partner...and through that role I realised I wasn't as bad at talking to people as I thought...so when I...reapplied for a paid job and...had another interview... I got it...my first job. Peter*

*One of my dad's friends was in the business...and...I met people through him...and they gave me the idea... So I got myself enrolled...and joined the course with them...I met a lot of other people...who were in the same situation as me...Through the course I got a job, and got my communication skills...I managed to talk and lose some of that shyness...that...helped in subsequent interviews...and for the job I have now. Sahil*

*My partner's mum was the one to push me...She's been majorly supportive...She makes sure I take my medication...She drops me at the station every time I've got uni...I was in foster care my whole life...so having someone that didn't know me at all just come in and instantly accept me and who loves me...she's definitely my biggest support. Kari*

For many young people who were working, supportive co-workers and managers had become increasingly important in their second post-school year. These colleagues were helping them to settle into working environments and understand the relationship between learning, education and work options. Co-workers and managers were also actively progressing the learning experiences of these young people. For those who were studying, career-related work experiences created the nexus between classroom theory and practical application. A number of young people had employers who were financing or offering to finance additional study and training. For others, their managers had become a new source of advice and support with making career decisions.

*I look at what my colleagues are doing, getting an idea of how things work. That's really increasing my knowledge... Seeing what you're going to be doing for the rest of your life changes your perspective...For me, it's making me appreciate the work more. It's backed up my interest in my degree. I really appreciate the learning opportunity because if I hadn't had this experience and got into the workforce, after graduating I wouldn't have been exposed to that...Our managers and in-store trainers are very understanding, I do appreciate them...My plan is to hold this job until I graduate. Rabia*

*My bosses are really good...they want me to...get qualified...and they said...they would adjust the hours for me, so I can do courses...I would definitely like to go to TAFE or uni...so I can become...qualified. Jarrod*

*My job is what I'm also studying...and it really does help me with my studies...I knew it would be...smarter to work in the field that I'm studying, so I can have a full understanding of how work would be...My co-workers are wonderful...they're very supportive. They're always helping me...If it's something that feels...overwhelming... something I haven't been used to or done before, they help me...My manager...she's a new source of support – the person I could go to for advice and help aside from my family or friends. Farah*



A few young people are developing career-related networks and exploring career related opportunities beyond their current pathway and into the future. These young people are purposefully cultivating relationships with adults outside their immediate workplaces who they feel have reliable career information and with whom they can discuss career experiences and development opportunities.

*In thinking about my future, I talk to other people at work in different occupations...There are different... supervisors...I talk to them...A few of them are like quite older and they're from other occupations...I'm just always trying to see where you can go...what I could do next. Evan*

*I just want to get into flight school immediately. I was able to talk with an ex-air force pilot...And he told me that all you need is money, and you can pay for your flight lessons. Daniel*

For a few students, tertiary educators, including placement supervisors, are providing significant career development support, and reinforcing the value of practical experience during study. In the second year after Year 12, these educators provided young people with informed insights into their chosen careers but also into future careers opportunities the young people had not considered. For some, tertiary educators helped to translate classroom theory into meaningful practice and offered young people the opportunity to discuss the nuances of different work environments. Through these relationships, some interviewees have strengthened their career identities, which is further motivating them to complete their studies. These young people also illustrate the importance of ongoing exploration and decision-making for effective career development.

*When we go on placements, we're obviously assigned a teacher who will mentor us...We spend time together and talk about...stuff that helps me in thinking about the future...also...I got a lot of mentoring from the placement supervisor...She taught me the way that you set up the day is very different depending on the clients...that was a really big eye-opener for me. Hazel*

*I'm really drawn to the research side of my possible career. There's a lot of experiments happening...I'd like to be part of that...One of the lecturers...said that research is the pathway he did, and he seemed to really enjoy it. He inspired me to take on that approach as well, mixing research and clinical practitioner work. Rabia*

*The lecturers want us to get a job in our own fields, so we know what it's like, and not just rely on the theory...They expect you to get...used to developing a skill set that you'll need in your career...so they've started getting us to focus more on applying skills in the workplace. Sahil*

## Programs and services

Help-seeking and work exploration behaviours were common among young people who were engaged in work and/or study and making strong post-school transitions. A number of interviewees were receiving or had received significant support from a variety of support services and programs.

## Cadetship and internship programs

While a few young people were approached to apply for cadetship or internship programs, other young people specifically sought out these opportunities in the second year after Year 12. These young people were purposefully progressing their career development and expediting their career goals by augmenting their studies with practical experience.

As with the young people who were developing extended career related adult networks, the young cadets and interns demonstrated a clear understanding of the relationship between continuous learning and career progression. They had also developed or were strengthening attitudes and skills that were helping them to identify and implement career goals. Work-related opportunities are also teaching the realities and requirements of work, which has helped interviewees to assess the extent to which their chosen pathway is a good fit for their skills, interests and abilities. One young person not only saw the value of workplace experience for his own career development, but also for the competitive edge it gave him with peers who may not have gained work experience by the time they graduate.

*The best thing this year was definitely the internship... It was one of The Smith Family programs...Seeing what goes on in a major company...has given me a lot of insight into the industry and I met other interns who are completing or have already finished their degrees... There were like 35 other interns...It's really interesting to hear their perspectives...We're all put in different areas, so I can hear what they're doing and compare it to what I'm doing...and see what I want to do....There was also the other Smith Family interns who were working in different companies...who I could chat to about their experiences...I definitely have a strong focus on my studies after my internship. Eliza*

*It's a six-month contract...I'll just learn everything that they have. There's really a lot to learn...At uni...they just go on teaching and teaching and teaching. Some of it's related but some of it isn't...I'm so happy...that I'm not just doing uni full-time...I feel everything you learn on the job...is priceless...I was at a performance meeting recently and they're pretty happy...I saw the graph literally go up with my productivity...in the last two and a half months...so I'm happy with that...I'll definitely stay here...It's really important to have real world experience in my field. Any employer in my field...that's what they want over someone who's just done a degree and doesn't know anything that's happening outside of that degree. Sahil*

## University services and programs

Some young people who were studying had or were seeking support from a range of university services<sup>14</sup>. All these young people recognised the extent to which these help-seeking behaviours were essential to them being able to successfully engage in and complete their studies. A few young people sought additional academic support through a range of different avenues to help them with difficult content. These young people were mindful of the imperative to pass core subjects essential to course completion.

*The drop-in sessions were pretty helpful. The university would dedicate some time, it'd be a live class where the lecturer is there for us and we can ask questions, get the help we need. It does help. Rabia*

*You submit your draft assignments...and if say it's a report or essay or whatever format the assessment task is, then they give you feedback...And you can work on it then, to improve before final submission. I found it's actually really useful. Babak*

*I went to these help sessions after-hours at uni with the teachers...that was...for one subject...which I hated...so I needed that help to pass the unit, which I did. Sahil*

A few students were accessing more general and practical support programs aimed at further exploring career options. For example, two young people had joined student-led networks that offered regular, ongoing opportunities to learn from and be mentored by peers who were further ahead in their studies.

## Barriers to engagement and successful transitions

While the presence of effective extended adult networks and support programs significantly influenced successful transitions, the absence of these created barriers to successful transitions. A number of interviewees who had withdrawn from courses during the second year after Year 12 attributed their struggles with remaining in study to insufficient academic support.

For the young people who completed both surveys and were not engaged in work or study at either point, their limited engagement also narrowed the scope of their social and support networks. For example, only seven percent of young people who were not engaged in each year had sought work or study advice from managers or colleagues, and 20 percent sought advice from educators or careers advisors. In contrast, these figures were 28 percent and 41 percent for young people who had been engaged for at least one point in time. Those struggling to engage in work or study in the first two years after leaving school are likely to find themselves at a further disadvantage in terms of the adult support networks they can draw on.

There were also a range of other factors that hampered young people's efforts to find work or a suitable course of study after leaving school. These included COVID-19, precarious and limited employment opportunities, financial constraints, poor health and/or mental health, and informal caring responsibilities.

## COVID-19

In the second year after leaving Year 12, many young people felt their lives had been disrupted by COVID-19. Among all young people surveyed, two in five (39 percent) had their work disrupted, the same proportion said their mental health was affected and a third (32 percent) felt their future plans had been disrupted. Among those studying in the second post-school year, half (50 percent) said their studies had been 'very' or 'extremely' disrupted.

In 2022, many interviewees were still feeling impacted by COVID-19. A number of students had found the shift to online learning very challenging and still felt the effects of this. Most of those impacted by lockdowns, lamented the impact COVID-19 restrictions had on their motivation to study. For some young people who were studying in the second year after Year 12, online lessons continued to be the typical mode of delivery, and they felt this was significantly impacting the quality of their education and impinging on their progress and motivation.

*...the unit I really struggled with and dropped out of, that was online...I definitely know online is not for me... because I had no opportunity to see a single member of the teaching staff on campus...I still have to do the units I dropped – one of them is online. Eliza*

*Last semester three of my classes were online and the other two were face-to-face...It was really confusing... Online is like being in class, except it's a zoom call...We just fill in our online workbook...So, it's kind of like doing it in class. It's just you're not in class...My issue is mostly about the online atmosphere. I'm not able to get myself fully immersed in it. It's a bit difficult. Kari*

Some young people had lost their jobs, had hours significantly reduced or had churned through different positions during the pandemic. Others had not been able to complete practical components of VET qualifications or had not taken up further study because of negative remote learning experiences during Year 12. One young person's preferred career path was disrupted, in part due to her challenges with the COVID-19 vaccine. Young people whose post-school work and/or study had been interrupted were facing significant delays in entering their chosen career paths.

<sup>14</sup> The interviewees who were studying VET courses did not mention institutional services.

*The last twelve months, I've been in and out of jobs, mainly 'cos of COVID...I worked in one place which was super good. I loved to do that job, but unfortunately, because so many people from COVID were cancelling... they could only really afford to give me one shift a week and it was two hours away from...home...so I ended up leaving...I have been studying a Cert III...I'm hoping to get into that really soon...but there's some aspect that would stand in my way – the COVID vaccine, because I've only had two and a lot of places you need to have three, and I'm unable to have the third because I was sick from my first two. Mercedes*

*I tried to enrol in TAFE...but online isn't something for me, because it takes a lot of motivation to actually do it. If you go to the campuses, you get more help... If I want to be in this industry, I definitely have to get a qualification...but because of lockdown...certain stuff I had planned to do...it's just harder to now reach. Rosa*

*If it wasn't for COVID, I would've had my Cert II... because I needed a specific amount of placement to be able to get my Cert II. And, you know with COVID, we weren't allowed to go out...so I couldn't actually get my hours...And I moved on...it's not really a goal anymore. Peter*

## **Precarious and limited employment opportunities**

In the first two years after Year 12 it was very common for young people in the PET study to have casual and precarious employment, with uncertain and inconsistent hours and low job security. Some interviewees viewed these experiences as learning opportunities while others were negatively impacted – losing confidence, and subsequently churning between casual part-time roles, unemployment, and non-engagement in the labour market.

*The apprenticeship was promised to start...and then the day I've quit my casual job in a supermarket, the apprenticeship workplace said 'we no longer need you'...I got that over email, not even a call, not even told in person...I did email them back and they just never gave me an answer. So I was jobless for a month. Braden*

*I wasn't getting paid properly. I was chasing my pay all the time and everybody who's worked there had that problem. Mercedes*

For some young people, particularly those living in non-metropolitan areas, their post-school transitions were significantly impacted by a lack of entry-level positions and a paucity of adult support networks. A number of interviewees had been engaged with an Employment Service Provider for substantial periods of time in an effort to find and then retain an entry-level position. However, for many, their early post-school labour market experiences were marred by negative events.

*There was a fraction of the time during study that I was working casual at a supermarket, but for a couple of months now they've just completely ignored me, so I don't think I work there anymore...I live in a small country town...It is hard to search for work...The only thing I'd ever be experienced or qualified to do...everyone else was going for it and I'd miss out. Matthew*

*I got a job last year...and I didn't really get along with everyone there and I was getting \$60 a week...so I quit that job...I started applying for other places...I had a few interviews...but didn't hear back...now I'm on... Centrelink...and this job program...They help young people who are struggling to find work...I started working at a supermarket...towards the end of January 2022. Samantha*

*I was putting in resumes I need for Centrelink...the JobSeeker thing. And I was putting like 20 resumes in a month. No one answered me...I guess I just wasn't the person they wanted. They found someone better or something...I've learned to just let things happen...I know it's not the best way to think. Peter*

## **Financial constraints**

Some interviewees discontinued their studies before completing their course due to financial constraints. For these young people, there were two key issues – needing to be completely financially independent and able to support themselves and/or the hidden financial costs associated with unpaid tertiary placement requirements.

*You pretty much have assignments back-to-back, and you've got placement as well that you're not allowed to work during, which is two weeks, then four weeks, then six weeks. So, you've got to think, "Can I go that...long without working for an income?". Kim*

*The reason I left the course it was more money-wise...I wasn't living at home. I was living with my partner... having to pay rent and bills...on top of buying food and all that stuff. Summer*

Many of the interviewees were making significant financial contributions to their family's household budget, including for rent, food and utilities. Some young people were using buy-now-pay-later lending services to cover unexpected expenses. A number of young people with significant financial concerns were so consumed by having to find work, they could not effectively identify their skills and interests or investigate the suitability of different work or study options.

*What's difficult? Money. That's about it. Well, money is difficult for everyone, but if I didn't live with my brother, I probably would not be making enough to live by myself. Peter*

*I do have Afterpay and Zip Pay...With my Zip, I had to use it on gift cards at Woolworths, 'cos we had to get food. Afterpay, I had to get clothes for my sister's wedding. So, I paid for mum's and dad's clothes. Braden*

## Poor health and mental health

Among the survey respondents, 30 percent had poor mental health, and of those, 46 percent said it 'often' or 'always' impacted their ability to do things other young people do. Many of the interviewees had struggled with poor health and mental health over the two years since leaving Year 12. Some were managing poor mental health with medication and therapy and had had periods when they felt they were doing well. Other young people could not afford the ongoing costs of psychologists or were on waiting lists to see specialists. For young people who did not have adequate support, their poor health had continued to impinge on their ability to work or study. Four of the interviewees were not in work or study at the time of the 2021 or 2022 interviews and all of them experienced ongoing challenges with their health.

*I've had a tough few months...because my depression, just went really bad. I wasn't on any medication or anything...just felt quite alone or that no one cared. Finally got on some medication so, that helped a lot...I am seeing a psychologist...I stopped studying...I was failing and really behind. Hayley*

*I used to have a therapist...but when I hit 18, I lost them...I don't have enough money to pay for one. Peter*

*So I have a condition which causes periodic paralysis... At the moment it causes me not to be able to see out of my right eye. Hence why I've been off work...the last time I had it, it went away within two months...but now...I'm pretty sure it's been six months. Chloe*

## Informal caring responsibilities

Several interviewees have significant caring responsibilities for family members with illnesses and/or disabilities. In the second year after Year 12, some managed these responsibilities while maintaining full-time work or study, but for others their engagement was significantly curtailed by the demands of providing care.

*My brother has a condition...that requires everyone to sort of stay home and look after him...I look after him a lot of the time...when the rest of the family are out...His condition is very unstable...We have to...check up on him every half hour. Matthew*

*At the moment, it's making it a bit harder for me wanting to go to work or trying to be at work. Mum has a palliative care team...but no one's really home with her, and it's hard...We don't really have 'family family'...here, so of course I'm going to cut my day out...to be with my mum...At the moment everything that I do is based around my mum. Summer*

*My parents have a lot of health conditions...I interpret for them...I do regular housework...I cook...This is going to be just how it is, and in the future...I'm just going to be helping them more...as they will just get worse. Farah*



## What more can be done to strengthen the post-school transitions of young people experiencing disadvantage?

Young people participating in the PET study identified a number of opportunities to strengthen the post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage including:

- Greater **individualised support** while at school to help more young people to **complete Year 12**. This includes **early intervention** for those struggling with the academic and social demands of school and support for those with personal concerns which affect their engagement with school.
- Ensure a focus on **intentional career development learning** for young people of all ages and stages, including continuing efforts to:
  - Help young people to articulate their career development skills and use a common language to describe those skills
  - Develop consistency in the quality and availability of career and transition services.
- Provide young people with accessible **information on diverse career pathways** and enhance efforts, both while they are at school and post-school, to encourage their increased participation in **Vocational Education and Training** and **apprenticeships**.
- Fund an expansion of high-quality **career-related, remunerated work placements, cadetships and internship programs**, which target young people experiencing disadvantage.
- Support **family members'** access to up-to-date labour market, education and training information, and how they can help young people to develop and achieve post-school goals.
- Investigate ways to formally **increase the social capital** and **career-related adult networks** of young people experiencing disadvantage, including through employers.
- Identify young people as a **priority group** in national and state/territory **employment** policies and programs including a focus on helping those experiencing disadvantage to build **meaningful career pathways**.
- Strengthen young people's access to timely and affordable **health** and **mental health** services.





# Conclusion



The PET study provides important insights into the post-school transition pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It shows that young people's post-school engagement increased from the first to the second year after leaving Year 12, with most young people involved in work or study for some or all of this two year period.

The post-school transition period was dynamic for a large proportion of young people, and for some, it has been, and remains, challenging.

Young people making successful transitions through work and/or study typically had strong career management skills, access to extended adult networks to inform their decision-making, and demonstrated active help-seeking behaviours to address academic and personal challenges.

Other young people had more challenging experiences, characterised by precarious and limited employment opportunities, financial challenges, and limited access to necessary networks and services, including to support mental health. While the COVID-19 pandemic brought about or exacerbated these challenges, they have also been long-standing concerns for young people experiencing disadvantage.

Improving young people's longer-term engagement in work and study throughout adulthood will require significant improvement to the range of supports currently available to young people experiencing disadvantage, both in school and post-secondary settings.

The final year of the PET study will provide further insights into the post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage. It will continue to explore the extent to which COVID-19 impacts them and any longer-term consequences of the decline in the proportion who were studying in the second year post-school.

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GPO Box 10500  
Sydney NSW 2001

T Freecall: 1800 024 069  
E [research@thesmithfamily.com.au](mailto:research@thesmithfamily.com.au)

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[thesmithfamily.com.au](https://thesmithfamily.com.au)