Young people negotiating risk and opportunity: post-school transitions 2005-2009

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This phase of the Life-Patterns program has continued the tradition of a strong participatory approach to research, through regular written and verbal feedback by participants, which shaped the progress and outcomes of the research program. We appreciate the generosity, willing engagement and honesty of our participants.
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Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of the findings of the Life-Patterns research program over the five-year period 2005-2009. This completes phase two of the research program, funded by a grant from the Australian Research Council, titled Pathways then and now: new student transitions to adulthood in a comparative context. During phase two we added a new age cohort (Cohort 2) into the research program as well as continuing with the first age cohort (Cohort 1). Taking into account prevailing social conditions and policy frameworks, we are able to examine the extent to which the changes in education, employment, wellbeing and social relationships that were instigated during the decade of the 1990s are relevant for this younger generation of Australians and how.

The report provides an analysis of the social conditions that have impacted on the lives of participants in both cohorts of the Life-Patterns program. Although the two cohorts are separated by 16 years, they face some similar conditions. For example, participating in post-secondary education is now a normative expectation. Cohort 1 were in the vanguard of the expansion of post-secondary education; Cohort 2 participants have benefited from what has been learned about the need for better information about post-school pathways and the implementation of more flexible education pathways. By their second post-school year, the overwhelming majority of Cohort 2 participants (92%) are involved in some form of further and higher education.

Previous analysis of Cohort 1 revealed the need for a more sophisticated understanding of young people’s post-school trajectories. Our analysis leads us to conclude that the metaphor of pathways, although ubiquitous, has the limitation of suggesting a linear progression from set points on a compass. Cohort 1 participants’ trajectories are not most usefully described as linear. Their trajectories involve complex mixes of study and work and are affected by family life and relationships as well as health and well-being. Their trajectories reveal mixtures of leaving and returning to the parental home, part-time work and part-time study, full-time study and part-time work, and full-time work and full-time study. Hence we approach the analysis of Cohort 2’s trajectories with an open mind about the nature of their transitions and about which points of transition are significant.

As a result of our analysis of Cohort 1, we came to understand that young people were entering a ‘new adulthood’ early, rather than languishing in a prolonged period of ‘youth’. This finding goes against the grain of much youth research of the 1990s and 2000s. However, our evidence for the new adulthood is compelling, and has raised our awareness of the extent to which this generation has changed many of the expectations of adult life. They established the normative pattern, followed by Cohort 2, of combining study and work while still at secondary school, and of continuing to combine study and work during their post-school years. The lives of Cohort 1 were characterised by flexibility, precariousness and mobility in work and the struggle to maintain a work-life balance. Our analysis of the first post-school years of Cohort 2 reveals that they also struggle with these elements.
Health and wellbeing emerged as significant concerns for Cohort 1. We note that the dominance of the theme of transition from school to work within youth studies and in education policy has obscured the significance of other areas of policy such as health and has masked the importance of wider life priorities of young people, including wellbeing and social relationships. We also note that Cohort 1 participants placed a very strong priority on family relationships and relied heavily on family support. The nature of family support for young people has also tended to be overlooked within the literature. Although family is often acknowledged as ‘important’, relatively little is known about what this means and how family support is provided across different groups of young people. Our analysis of Cohort 2 is informed by the need to explore these dimensions in more detail.

The approach to our research builds on the tradition within Life-Patterns program to use a mixed-method approach. We have employed both surveys (including open-ended sections) and interviews to research Cohort 2. This report describes the demographic characteristics of Cohort 2, revealing the sample size, patterns of attrition and patterns of migration from rural to urban areas. The data presented in the report derive from surveys and interviews conducted in 2007 and 2008.

A comparison of the education and employment patterns of transition for both cohorts reveals similarities and differences. There was a clear trend for the majority of participants in both cohorts who had not entered post-secondary education in their first post-school year to do so in the following year. Young people in rural and regional areas were more likely to defer post-secondary study, and the reasons were mainly related to the costs of moving to a new area and education fees. In Victoria, young people in rural and regional areas were more than two and a half likely than their metropolitan peers to defer post-school study. Cohort 2 participants experienced more stable pathways within post-secondary education, possibly reflecting better access to information than their counterparts in Cohort 1, and a more responsive post-secondary education system. Like the first cohort, the participants in Cohort 2 place a high priority on gaining educational credentials.

Cohort 2 participants appear to have a better understanding of the realities of engaging in part-time, contract and precarious work, involving non-standard hours, than the previous cohort did. Eighty seven per cent of Cohort 2 participants had a job during their first post-school year. For one in five, full time work was their main priority at this stage, with study fitting around their work. By 2008, eight out of ten participants were combining study and work – a pattern established by Cohort 1. Young women were most likely to mix study and work. Young men from high socio-economic backgrounds and young people from rural backgrounds were the most likely to say that full-time study was their main priority. Despite the high levels of employment, 66% of participants said that it was difficult to get work, and a quarter said that the work they were doing was not ‘suitable’. Those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were the least likely to find ‘suitable’ work, and the most likely to be engaged in irregular work and evening shifts.

The report describes the ways in which participants in Cohort 2 negotiate, manage and balance the conflicting demands on their time and resources. Like Cohort 1, maintaining the right balance between time and energy spent on work and study as well as maintaining personal relationships and being well is a significant preoccupation. This is reflected in a significant gap between their preference for spending time with friends and family and the reality. Family and friends are the most significant source of support to participants. Families provide social, cultural and material resources according to their means. The data shows that young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds receive the most material support. While most of the participants state that they are very healthy, a sizeable minority reveal concern about their physical and mental health.

In conclusion, our analysis of the lives of young Australians in their first two years out of secondary school identifies four areas for further consideration: study and work; family; inequalities; and wellbeing and health.
Chapter 1: Introduction

This report provides an overview of the lives of a group of young Australians over the five-year period 2005-2009. In 2005 they were in Year 11 at secondary schools in Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. Their trajectories were mapped and their attitudes and perspectives documented as part of the Life-Patterns longitudinal research program. This report provides an insight into how they manage their engagement in multiple life spheres over time: education, employment, relationships and wellbeing. In focussing on their experiences of further and higher education, we acknowledge that this dimension has become increasingly important in young people’s lives. These young people are also negotiating predominantly mobile and precarious youth labour markets, a scenario that was established in the early 1990s and continues to impact on young people. The findings reported here reveal the importance to young people of managing a balance between the spheres of education and employment, wellbeing, personal and social relationships and leisure and the challenges they face in establishing this balance. Finally, the research provides insights into the nature of intergenerational relationships and the significance of the social and material resources that families provide for some young people to support their management of education, employment, wellbeing and balance in life. This overview reveals how these elements interact and provides insights into the production of inequality. Not all young people are able to access the resources needed to manage this complex set of commitments. Those who are least well-resourced, financially and in terms of cultural capital, are often those who find it the most difficult to juggle the conflicting demands in their lives.

We have two cohorts in our research program: Cohort 1 who left secondary school in the early 1990s and Cohort 2 who left it in the mid-2000s. Both cohorts are introduced in depth in the following pages.

This chapter provides the background to the Life-Patterns research program, describing the development of the project to date and the nature of the two cohorts. Chapter two provides a discussion of the social and economic context of the lives of both cohorts. It presents an argument for the use of a generational framework for understanding young people’s lives. This chapter discusses some of the features that impacted on the lives of Cohort 1 and that continue to have an impact on Cohort 2. For example, the concept of the ‘new adulthood’ continues to have relevance for Cohort 2. This cohort is also engaged in the struggle to find a balance in life across multiple and often conflicting life spheres. Health and wellbeing are emerging as a concern for a significant minority, and we note the significance of family as a source of support. The chapter also highlights differences in the social and economic context of the lives of these two cohorts, including a better articulation between secondary school and
post-secondary educational pathways; a more stable economic environment for young people in the mid 2000s than there was for young people in the early 1990s. Chapter three is the first of a series of chapters that provides an analysis of the experiences of Cohort 2. Chapter three analyses their study and work experiences. It shows that despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of young people in this cohort are engaged in study by their second year out of secondary school, there is considerable diversity within this trend. In particular, young people draw on a range of resources to support themselves financially. Some are able to draw on family resources to a greater degree than others. A majority are employed in part-time work. We show how managing study and work is something that almost all have to consciously manage, and some groups have real difficulty in managing this task. Chapter four explores the ways in which this cohort negotiates and manages the complexities of their lives. It shows how they draw on available resources, including family support to manage the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities presented to them. This chapter highlights the links between study, work and well-being. It reveals that a proportion of the cohort is concerned about their physical and mental health. Social divisions, including gender, geographic location and socio-economic status are reflected in the constraints within which they operate and in the opportunities available to them. Already, two years out of secondary school, inequalities are apparent in their life patterns.

The Life-Patterns longitudinal research program

The Life-Patterns research program is a longitudinal panel cohort study involving two different age cohorts that correspond to generations X and Y. Phase one of the project (1991 – 2004) established Cohort 1. This cohort consists of young Victorians who left secondary school in 1991 and were born in the early 1970s. They were surveyed in 1991 to obtain basic information about their first steps after leaving school. Between 1991 and 1996 the sample was reduced from the original (the total population of school leavers of just over 29,000) to a representative sample of 2000. In 1996, when they were aged 23, they were surveyed in detail about their lives and have been surveyed (and a sub-set interviewed) at regular intervals since then (generally every two years). This phase was funded initially by the Australian National Training Authority and then continuously by the Australian Research Council (ARC).

Phase two of the Life-Patterns program was conducted from 2005-2009 with the support of a grant from the ARC. This phase saw the introduction of a new age cohort of young people who were born in 1988/1989. The decision was taken to broaden the geographic location of this cohort beyond Victoria, in order to expand its relevance within Australia. The lives of Cohort 1 were also tracked through to 2009. Phase three of Life-Patterns, also supported by the ARC, is being conducted from 2010 to 2014, documenting the opportunities, challenges and life experiences of Cohort 1 through to their early forties and Cohort 2 to the age of 26. In 2010 Cohort 1 participants were aged in their mid-thirties and participants in Cohort 2 were aged 22.

Concluding phase two

This report provides an analysis of the experiences of Cohort 2 from late secondary school years to their early post-school years, concluding the research undertaken in phase two. We argue that the social changes over the last 15 years from the late 1980s through the 1990s, that have impacted on Cohort 1, continue to influence subsequent generations, including the young people in Cohort 2. Previous Life-Patterns research reports (see Dwyer et al. 2003, 2005; Wyn et al. 2008) describe how participants in Cohort 1 constructed their choices in response to this transformative period. The impact of social and economic change and government policies on this generation is analysed in greater detail in a book by Lesley Andres and Johanna Wyn that compares the Life-Patterns Cohort 1 with a longitudinal cohort of Canadians from Andres’ Paths on Life’s Way study based in British Columbia (Andres & Wyn 2010). Taking into account prevailing social conditions and policy frameworks, we are able to examine the extent to which the changes in education, employment, wellbeing and social relationships that were instigated during the decade of the 1990s, are relevant for this younger generation of Australians and how.
Cohort 2 in 2007 and 2008

This report draws on surveys and in-depth interviews conducted with participants in Cohort 2 in 2007 and 2008. Continuing with the tradition established through the analysis of data from the first cohort, we draw on evidence that combines quantitative and qualitative data. Rather than simply using the qualitative data as anecdotal evidence or as a source of confirmation of statistical patterns through quotes, we find that both interviews and surveys provide the sufficient depth of analysis to analyse the complex and uncertain pathways taken and decisions made by young people in their early post-school years. This enables us to refrain from the over-simplification that can result from relying on either quantitative or qualitative research alone. The longitudinal character of our project allows us to map the progress of participants from their late secondary school years, well into their late twenties and early thirties (as we did with Cohort 1) rather than taking a snapshot of a group of young people at a single time and place.

As we have emphasised in our analyses of the first cohort, we overcome the limitation of focusing solely on single outcomes (such as career outcomes or patterns of residence), by exploring the interconnections between different aspects of life and the relevance of the process that shape those patterns over time. This mixed-method approach and the longitudinal character of our data enable us to understand the impact and nature of social change rather than apply a static conceptualisation of young people’s experiences which does not take account of wider social and economic conditions.

In 2005 the first survey (Wave 2:1) of Cohort 2 collected data from 1,954 young people who were in Year 11 of secondary school. These participants were in New South Wales and Victoria. In order to ensure a broader geographic representation, a second survey was conducted in 2005 (Wave 2:1A) consisting of 2,023 young people from the ACT and Tasmania. Both groups were surveyed in 2007 (Wave 2:2) and 2008 (Wave 2:3). The 2007 survey involved 1,321 participants and the 2008 survey 946 participants. We conducted in-depth interviews with 30 and 50 participants in 2007 and 2008 respectively.

The following tables show the general characteristics of our Cohort 2 sample from information gathered in the 2007 and 2008 surveys: Table 1 shows the proportions of male and female participants over the two years, revealing the process of attrition, and showing the trend for young women to respond more favourably to the invitation to participate in a longitudinal study than young men.

### Table 1: Cohort 2 sample by gender in years 2007 and 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th></th>
<th>2008</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1321</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between 2005 and 2006 the female proportion of the sample increased from 55% to 67% as a result of attrition in the male sample.

Table 2 reveals the extent of the migration of rural youth to metropolitan centres in their search for educational and employment opportunities.

### Table 2: Location of Cohort 2 sample in years 2005, 2007 and 2008 (n=942), (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2007*</th>
<th>2008*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional city</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country town/rural area</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note: In 2007 and 2008 some students did not answer this question in the survey, mostly because they were overseas taking a ‘gap year’.

In their first two years post secondary school, there was an increased migration to metropolitan areas as young people took up educational and employment options that were not available in country towns, rural areas or regional centres. Our interview data also shows that for some young people moving away from rural or regional areas was an active choice they made, in search of new opportunities.

Table 3 describes the socio-economic background of our participants. We have constructed a measure of socio-economic status (SES) based on parental employment and educational background. In this we treated: a) the completion, or not, of tertiary education of either parent; and b) employment, or not, in a professional or managerial capacity as contributing markers of SES, and thus ranked a par-
participant according to how many of these markers their parents displayed (see Appendix A: A Note on Methodology).

**Table 3: Cohort 2 sample by socio-economic status of parents in 2007 and 2008, (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-economic group</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium SES</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High SES</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our analysis of the finer grain of data about SES and location shows that lower SES participants were more likely to come from rural areas than metropolitan or regional areas. Only 29.3% of the lowest SES group are males, compared with 39.5% of the highest group. This reflects the specific difficulty of both recruiting and maintaining the participation of this segment of the population.

The majority of our participants were born in Australia (94%). The remaining six percent came from 33 countries, mainly China, India, Sri Lanka and New Zealand. Approximately 75% of our participants’ parents were born in Australia. Our figures for country of birth do not reflect the national figures for young people. For instance, national figures for 15 to 19 year olds born overseas is 12%, while for 20 to 24 year olds is 18% (ABS 2009). However, the national figures match the figures for our participants’ parents, where 25% of those aged 40 to 59 years old where born overseas (ABS 2009).
Chapter 2: Social & economic context

This chapter sets social and economic backdrop of our participants’ lives. The last three decades have seen a decline in the stability of social structures such as family and employment, a reduction in the support provided by the welfare state and a loosening of the relationship between education and employment. For our participants, relative to their parent’s generation, some markers of adulthood are now achieved relatively early while other markers are incrementally achieved over a more extended period of time. Young people engage in traditionally adult practices at a younger age (including employment, taking responsibility for the care of family members, managing complex information on the internet and becoming sexually active), yet are thwarted by housing markets that exclude them and by the long process of gaining the benefits of their educational investments in employment outcomes. As we have argued elsewhere, rather than following the popular view that youth has become ‘extended’ in time we find that some elements of adulthood are achieved earlier, and that the nature of adulthood in late modernity has changed (Wyn et al. 2008; Wyn & Woodman 2006). Young people have had to construct new narratives of life that enable them to make sense of this changing world. A key element of this is the negotiation of the balance between their life priorities: studying, working and engaging in social relationships and the management of time.

This has been especially so for Cohort 1, born in the early 1970s. In their early post-school years in the 1990s they were confronted with an economic recession and changing labour market expectations which pressured them to gain skills and further education qualifications to navigate a tight labour market with high levels of youth unemployment. They were the first generation of Australians for whom studying well into their twenties became a common experience. This cohort represented a vanguard in the way they understood and used education and work (Andres & Wyn 2010), thus setting the tone for the next generation.

Cohort 2, separated by 16 years from Cohort 1 faces very similar conditions. They have the benefit however of the pioneering experience of the previous generation. Based on the experiences of the generation of which Cohort 1 is a part, educational institutions have responded by developing more effective career education programs and government programs aimed at supporting young people’s post-secondary school pathways have proliferated.

When our Cohort 2 participants entered the labour market in the mid 2000s, they entered a labour market that reflected 17 years of continued and unprecedented economic growth (OECD 2009), followed by the economic downturn of 2009 as Australia experienced the impact of a global financial crisis. In the following sections of this chapter we provide a summary of recent thinking about the social and economic context of young people’s lives and the impact this has on their opportunities and attitudes. We draw on both cohorts in this section in order to illustrate the ways in which they are responding to their circumstances. When quoting participants, we identify their gender, age and where relevant, their geographic location. Cohort 1 participants are identified as C1 and Cohort 2 as C2.
Metaphors of youth trajectories

One of the most significant impacts in the changes in the relationship between education and employment has been that traditional ‘normative’ and linear youth transitions have been replaced with a much more complex picture than many of the established educational and labour policy and research frameworks assume (Dwyer et al. 2003). Our previous reports have argued that conventional research and policy assumptions about young people’s transitions to adulthood have tended to be out of touch with the realities of young people’s experiences and the choices they are making as they shape a new adulthood (Dwyer et al. 2001, 2003). Policies have tended to lag behind the changing realities of young people’s lives. As we noted in our 2001 report:

The findings from our research therefore caution against the acceptance of a ‘normative’ experience of youth, and suggest that the linear model of transition implied in the pathways image fails to do justice to the actual experience of young Australians... Their lives do not fit the predetermined agenda of the linear model which assumes that young people progress through a pre-set series of ‘stages’, leading at the proper time to a movement from dependence to independence, from school to work, from young people’s status as adolescents to their eventual achievement of a stable and secure adulthood. For example, the pathways metaphor displays a pre-occupation with career paths based on a definition of labour market participation as a consequence of participation in various post-compulsory education pathways. Unfortunately, this masks a significant overlap between study and work that for many young people is in the forefront of their experience. Images about ‘pathways’ or linear transitions from school via further study and then into the world of work and an independent adult way of life do not reflect their actual experience. They are establishing different patterns of response which involve complicated mixes of study, work and family life as part of the youth agenda: mixtures of leaving and returning to the parental home, of part-time work and part-time study, of full-time study and part-time work, and even of full-time work and full-time study (Dwyer et al. 2001: 24-25).

The Life-Patterns research has consistently demonstrated that ‘normative’ and linear transitions from school to work have become an outmoded framework to understand young people’s lives. Analyses of Cohort 1 show that many young people are likely to be in both work and study, rather than transitioning from one to the other, and it is often difficult to tell whether the trajectory is from education to employment, the other way around or both simultaneously. The longitudinal character of our project has made it possible to identify the different and changing trajectories that our participants pursued in their post-school years, revealing the fragmented, multifaceted and non-linear nature of their trajectories through education, work and relationships (Dwyer et al. 2003, 2005).

For example, by 1996, 80% of the Cohort 1 participants who had entered a ‘non-studying’ pathway on leaving secondary school had returned to study. Of the 90% of Cohort 1 participants who undertook some form of study immediately after leaving secondary school, only one-third followed a direct linear pathway through post-compulsory study (Dwyer et al. 2005). Our research reveals the variety of routes taken by young people to reach their goals, including discontinuing studies, changing courses or institutions, or entering the workforce after school and returning to study after some years.

Our second cohort provides increasing evidence that a non-linearity in young people’s transitions is becoming the norm. This is supported by other research that identifies a trend away from standard trajectories in the sequencing of study, family formation, work and accommodation amongst Australians (Martin 2009). In their early post-school years, Cohort 2 participants show a trend towards a more linear trajectory than the previous cohort. By the second year out of secondary school as many as 92% of the participants are engaged in further education. With 80% of those who are participating in post-secondary education combining study and work, the notion of a linear pathway may be based on an overly-simplistic perspective of young people’s activities. It remains to be seen as the study unfolds, whether the
acceptance of further education as normative by this generation translates into a ‘smooth’ or seamless transition process into work. Statistical studies that show outcomes across broad populations often only measure one dimension (i.e. young people’s ‘primary’ status as student or worker) rather than recording the full extent of their life responsibilities and engagements. The representation of clear lines that is drawn from these simplified, numerical representations of young people’s lives feeds metaphors (for example ‘smooth’ transitions) that do not do justice to young people’s experiences at this time of their lives and may even give a misleading impression. Our analysis of Cohort 1 suggests that even for those who were able to make a relatively direct transition from study into the workforce (a linear transition) the experience was not ‘smooth’. Many of these subsequently changed direction, and for a majority, the mix of part-time work and study, plus the challenge of keeping a balance in life meant that this was a time of stress, pressure and anxiety (Andres & Wyn 2010; Wyn & Woodman 2006). In Cohort 2, the rejection of the so-called normative pattern of moving in a linear progression from school to further study to employment is especially evident amongst young people from low socio-economic background and non-metropolitan areas. In the following chapters, we look more closely at these trends.

Despite the tendency for policies to lag behind experience, increasing the notion that complex patterns of life are having an impact on the way post-school transition is understood by policy-makers and influencing educational policies. This shift is reflected in the recognition of the need to foster diverse pathways from education to employment; to create better articulation between different education sectors; and to recognise of the relevance of life-long learning (DET 2003; DSF 2006; Watson 2003). Yet, more work is needed to give greater recognition of the learning that occurs in workplaces while young people are still in secondary school (Stokes & Wyn 2007; Wyn 2009a).

Both cohorts have invested in further education, continuing to study after leaving secondary school. Participants in Cohort 1 reveal that they saw learning as an on-going process, both in formal and informal settings. As we have previously argued:

...formal learning is seen as a mechanism ‘through which young people can gain some control over their (future) lives and education is valued pragmatically because of the necessity for educational credentials. Yet, learning in formal settings is often poorly related to settings outside educational institutions (Stokes & Wyn 2007). Learning in non-formal settings (for example, paid work in workplaces, in leisure pursuits, engaging in cultural activities and in voluntary work) is valued by young people because it equips them to engage with immediate issues and rehearses the exercise of choice and decision-making (Wyn 2007: 40).

Our research provides an evidence base that challenges many of the policy assumptions that have driven education and youth policies over the last two decades. It suggests that educational policies need to acknowledge a greater diversity of trajectories, both within and across chronological time. In the following chapters, we see the extent to which, in the first years of their post-school careers, the young participants in our research take up and own these prevailing ideas about life-long learning. We also see the ways in which their trajectories represent complex and multi-faceted patterns.

The labour market: changing the rules of the game

Far-reaching changes to the economy and the labour market through the 1990s have had profound implications in the lives of our participants in Cohort 1. These changes have affected their social relationships, their expectations about family life and home ownership (Wyn & Woodman 2006). They have influenced the nature of employment and the ways in which work is seen by young people. Even for the vanguard group of middle class metropolitan youth that were the most likely to follow a linear pathway through post-compulsory education, once graduated, they had to confront a precarious labour market and short-term contracts, only finding more secure positions in their late twenties (Andres & Wyn 2010). Faced with this reality, they talked about employment as a journey with multiple possible ways forward, rather than as a point of destination.
The following comments by young people in Cohort 1 in 2005 illustrate the complexities and uncertainties and varieties of youth pathways in times where the links between education and employment are tenuous; where there is a need to be flexible, mobile and adaptable to manage change; and where establishing a balance between work and other social activities is becoming paramount (Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Dwyer et al. 2005).

Often it takes people longer to discover what you really want to do. You do this by changing education streams and job opportunities and then finally find something you like doing. It took me a long time, many courses and different experiences, but I finally got what I enjoy (30 year old male, metropolitan area: C1).

I never knew what I wanted to be in high school and still don’t. Most of my friends are the same. Even ones who did know are now looking into other areas of employment. The days of staying in one job forever are gone. I can’t see myself in this job (nurse) much longer. So underpaid compared to people in business areas (31 year old female, regional area: C1).

Social and health balance has become increasingly important to my lifestyle. I have learned to enjoy the journey rather than focus on the destination (31 year old male, metropolitan area: C1).

These comments reveal the diverse and complex patterns of transition through education and employment that Cohort 1 participants have navigated. They have changed the meaning of employment, from their parents’ notion of full-time employment and upward mobility in one occupation to viewing it as a ‘state of mind’ or a journey (Dwyer et al. 2005). That is, rather than searching for a destination, these young people instead focused on managing and enjoying the journey; including giving an important place to social relationships and being healthy.

The analysis of surveys and interviews with Cohort 1 also show the extent to which they became aware of the need for flexibility in defining career. They understood that in order to be successful they needed to be proactive in ways their parents did not seem to contemplate in the 1960s and 1970s (Dwyer et al. 2003). The promise and hope of building up a career through further studies with parental support would not necessarily be rewarded by their career of choice in an uncertain labour market. In other words, while obtaining further education credentials became a critical prerequisite to secure employment, it did not guarantee certainty of achieving the desired occupation (Ball 2003; Wyn et al. 2008).

To this point our research has revealed significant shifts in understanding employment and education in a changing environment. It has also highlighted other dimensions of change in young people’s lives, including the shaping of their identities. In other words, not only has there been an erosion of traditional social structures (Wyn 2007) and the predictability enjoyed by previous generations lost (Leccardi & Ruspini 2006), there has also been a discernible shift from a collective identity towards a greater sense of personal autonomy. This includes an increasing pressure on young people to construct their ‘own portfolios for living’ and draw upon their individual resources (Dwyer et al. 2005: 36). It has also involved developing new priorities that entail flexibility and the capacity to be reflexive; valuing ongoing career choice; keeping options open; and a balance between life commitments (Wyn et al. 2008).

A new adulthood

The priorities, goals and actions of both cohorts indicate that they understand the need to keep their study and career options open in order to manage uncertainty. This tendency has sometimes been understood at a superficial level and appeared as if their lives have no direction or clear objective; the kind of unpredictability usually associated with adolescence. The failure to follow linear trajectories has often been interpreted as a faulty transition because young people’s trajectories did not reflect timelines that were normative for the previous generation. Our research findings challenge these ideas, and suggest instead that young people are entering a ‘new’ adulthood early.

Young people’s lives are not just a response to uncertainty and unpredictability – they are also...
engaging with opportunities. This relatively complex life, that combines work and study, is valued by young people as an opportunity to learn to manage conflicting responsibilities by being involved in school and non-school settings. Our research findings from Cohort 1 reveal that flexibility is valued over predictability as the basis for security in a changing labour market (Wyn 2004). Their parental expectations of employment security and traditional ambitions of ‘upward mobility’ have been replaced by ‘horizontal mobility’; thus rejecting previous generations conceptualisations ‘that career equates with full-time employment in one occupation’ (Wyn 2004: 10-11). Together with a need for more personal autonomy and flexibility in their career choices, young people place a high priority on balancing life commitments, such as family and social relationships, displaying a considerable diversity in their life goals (Dwyer et al. 2005).

Nonetheless, what becomes clear from our research on Cohort 1 is that it is normative to enter the workforce while completing the secondary schooling years. In May 2007, 77% of Australian youth aged 15 to 19 years were enrolled in education and 52% were employed in a job (ABS 2007). Of these two activities the most common combination was young people studying full-time and employed part-time (almost 30%) (ABS 2007). Focusing on non-metropolitan Australia, Alloway and colleagues (2004) report that an increasing number of secondary school students are mixing study and part-time employment. This has led to growing concern by teachers’ over the stress these dual activities may produce in young people. Our research also shows that young people are employed as early as 13 years in metropolitan areas and six years in rural areas (see Stokes & Cuervo 2009). This early employment confronts young people with many of the experiences that are supposedly solely the province of adults, from legal and monetary issues to occupational health and safety issues.

Wyn (2004: 11) suggests that young people’s engagement with adult practices should be more recognised. She argues:

… the evidence is that young people are engaging with adult responsibilities and experiences incrementally, early in their lives. Instead of having “extended transition” into an adulthood such as that experienced by their parents, this generation are more likely to be entering a “new adulthood” earlier in their lives.

In sum, the use of terms such as ‘generation on hold’ and ‘post-adolescence’ to describe an extended transition from youth to adulthood is a misleading representation of young people’s lives and transitions (Wyn 2004, 2007). It is tempting to use these terms as concepts that describe the widening gap between young people’s aspirations (as well-credentialled young adults) and harsher economic realities (Dwyer et al. 1998). However, young people’s transition processes into adulthood should be characterised by ‘early’ engagement with adult practices, in a scenario of transitions that are ‘incremental, uneven and unpredictable’ that shape this ‘new adulthood’; and as a result, we must view adolescence and adulthood as overlapping stages (Wyn 2004: 12).

**Health and wellbeing**

Australian research identifies a plethora of health issues that are increasingly relevant for the life of young people. Some of these issues are mental health problems, especially clinical depression and anxiety disorders; body image; being overweight; substance abuse and sexually transmissible diseases (AIHW 2007; Mission Australia 2007; Wyn 2009b). Our participants have touched upon many of these concerns in surveys and in interviews (Wyn et al. 2008). Both cohorts have highlighted the importance of managing a balance between educational and employment commitments and their personal health and wellbeing.

Despite the importance of health and wellbeing to young people, it tends to be marginalised in policy and conceptual frameworks that inform youth transitions. Existing evidence of the interrelationships between health and learning, including the evidence that young people who leave school early and who are unemployed are more likely to have a mental health problem (AIHW 2007) tends to be overlooked. Given the interrelated nature of transition processes with health and wellbeing, we have argued in the past for less-fragmented youth policies and a bridge to the current gap between the dimensions of education, employment and health through the development of a multi-dimensional approach (Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Wyn 2007). The dominance
of the theme of transition from school to work within youth studies and in education policy has obscured the significance of other areas of policy such as health and has masked the importance of wider life priorities of young people, including wellbeing and social relationships (Wyn & Woodward 2006; Wyn 2007).

A significant proportion of participants in Cohort 1 during their twenties stated the importance of health issues and expressed the view that their wellbeing was at risk. In 2002, when they were aged 27-28, almost half of our participants stated that they were physically healthy or very healthy and approximately 40% stated that they were mentally healthy or very healthy, and at least a quarter were concerned about their health and fitness (Dwyer et al. 2005: 26). Moreover, asked in their early thirties to reflect on hopes they had at school and how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with the way things have turned out, the most dissatisfying aspect was their health and fitness (with approximately 30%) – even beyond work and career issues (with 15% of people dissatisfied). Health and fitness was ranked as most dissatisfying by at least a quarter of the men and a third of the women from Cohort 1.

Many of the participants found balancing their professional commitment and their social life and health a central challenge during their twenties. The following comments reflect the concern with wellbeing expressed by Cohort 1:

My health has taken a back seat to my career and now my health is suffering. (29 year old female, regional area: C1)

My career isn’t going anywhere but I have made a choice not to worry about that for a while. The pay is good, the people are good. The job market is bad and I have a large mortgage but my personal development and mental health are my priorities. (30 year old male, metropolitan area: C1)

My concentration on work, partner and family/friends has left my fitness level and personal well-being less than where I would have hoped it would be. However, I’m currently changing this and allowing myself to be no. 1 priority so that my fitness improves. (30 year old female, metropolitan area: C1)

Thus in this post-industrial society health has become one of the key issues of personal life that has to be managed by the individual (White & Wyn 2008). As White and Wyn (2008: 207) argue, a process of individualisation, as a result of the decline of traditional social structures, places individuals in the centre of the stage:

From the standpoint of the rational and responsible individual in today’s society, the body itself is an outcome of choices and actions. This means that responsibility for good health is seen not only as a good thing, but a necessary thing and a moral obligation. Failure to reach the standards of health, fitness, well-being, and optimisation that are individual’s responsibility is accompanied by guilt.

In their late teens, our second cohort has also given high priority to being well and healthy. This reveals a continuation rather than a contrast between generations X and Y. As we will show later in the report, members of this cohort also value the capacity to manage their multiple responsibilities: studying, working (even sometimes two jobs), social relationships and staying health and fit. The following comments illustrate this point:

It’s just about stress management and that you need to balance your life out and make sure you are doing other things. (19 year old male, metropolitan area: C2)

I stressed so I got sick a lot and every time I had an assessment, I’d miraculously get sick; I don’t know why, but yeah I always got sick before assessments and that always stressed me out and I didn’t sleep properly... (19 year old female, metropolitan area: C2)

The above comments by young people in both cohorts illustrate the relevance of health and wellbeing for their lives.
The relevance of family and social relationships in young people’s lives

We have argued that our second cohort has replicated some of the educational, employment and well-being priorities and patterns developed by the first cohort. Nonetheless, the second cohort has also developed distinctive approaches that reflect their social conditions, including a different inter-generational resource base, more flexible education options (Wyn et al. 2008) at a time of economic prosperity during their late teens and early twenties (OECD 2009). In this section we want to touch upon the increasing relevance that family support is having in young people’s transitions, including the unequal resources that different social groups are able to draw upon.

The last two decades have seen an increasing interest in sociological studies on the ability of young people to draw resources from their families (e.g. Jones 1995, 2005; Heath & Cleaver 2003; McLeod & Yates 2006; Pusey 2007; Wierenga 2009). There is increasing interest in understanding the capacity of families to be mediators of ‘external structural factors’ and transmitters of social and economic advantage and disadvantage from one generation to the next (Jones 2005: 5). Our analysis of data from Cohort 2 reveals that the availability of non-material resources is also of significant relevance for these young people.

Our analysis of Cohort 1 drew attention to the importance of family relationships and support in youth transitions. Rather than looking into popular conceptualisations of inter-generational conflict or solidarity, the longitudinal nature of our research allowed us to examine over time how different social groups of young people were able to draw upon resources; including the evident and subtle inequality of resources that advantage some social groups over others.

Cohort 1 participants stated that family (including parents and siblings) was the most important source of support and advice to them during their early adulthood and throughout their twenties (Dwyer et al. 2003). These two participants’ comments from our first cohort exemplify the importance of family:

I enjoy my job but I am finding challenging to balance work and family life. For me, family and friends continue to be the most important thing in my life. (27 year old male, metropolitan area: C1)

My parents, siblings and nieces all play an important role when I make choices to do with my career and broader life. (26 year old female, metropolitan area: C1)

We found a similar family pattern in our second cohort, with family identified as the most significant source of support during their final years of school (Wyn et al. 2008). Most of the participants clearly stated the importance of family, and friends and extended networks, and the material and non-material resources provided by them. For instance, the importance of family support meant that many of the participants who did not need to move for further study planned to spend 2007 living in the family home. For those participants that had to move out of home to continue further studies, family support became a major issue. This young woman, who had to move from a rural area, illustrates this point:

I really miss not having the support network that you’re used to, like friends at school, family people who are just always there (19 year old female, metropolitan area: C2).

Inter-generational support emerges as being of special relevance during periods of uncertainty and vulnerability, and provides an important buffer against the risks associated with unemployment or making the transition from the family home to independent living. The subsequent surveys and interviews with the second cohort will provide an opportunity to further examine inter-generational relationships at a time uncertainty about the impact of the global financial crisis on Australians. We will be exploring the extent to which we see an entrenchment of inequalities.

These considerations have provided a backdrop for understanding the context for our analysis of young people’s lives during their transitions from secondary school. The following chapters draw in detail on the surveys and interviews conducted with Cohort 2 participants during 2007 and 2008.
Conclusion

This chapter frames our report with the changing social context in which young people’s transitions beyond secondary school are played out. We are conscious that research on ‘youth transitions’ can assume universal, almost timeless trajectories by young people, across the binaries of school-work, youth-adult, and single-partnered. However, our analysis of the previous generational cohort (Cohort 1), and the comparison of this data with Andres’ Paths on Life’s Way longitudinal research on young people in Canada shows that local conditions and national policies make a significant difference. For this reason, we are reluctant to use metaphors that imply universal states of transition or linear pathways. Instead, our research aims to highlight the particular experiences of young people, within their social, economic and political context.

Understanding the impact of conditions on young people’s lives generates important policy insights, enabling us to see the ways in which education and labour market policies in particular generate both intended and unintended consequences that are far-reaching but not often understood.

This chapter highlights four areas that reveal the impact of social change on Cohort 1: the labour market and labour market policies; a new adulthood; health and wellbeing and the role of family. Each of these elements has had significant implications for young people’s opportunities and for their outcomes over time. We are interested to see whether these elements also impact on Cohort 2 and how.

For example, Cohort 1 experienced a precarious labour market with few clear pathways leading from study to work. They took a relatively long time after completing their studies to find the jobs they wanted. Along the way, they developed new capacities: they learned that being flexible was an asset, enabling one to maximise opportunities by moving jobs or by moving from work to study in a new area. They also experienced considerable difficulty in managing the balance between work and life. These realities created new ways of approaching life and career, leading to a ‘new adulthood’ in which uncertainty and individual responsibility for managing complexity are taken for granted. Cohort 1 also revealed the impact that these circumstances had on health and wellbeing. This generation has developed new sensibilities about individual wellbeing, and there is a discernible focus on managing to be well, mentally and physically. However, our research with Cohort 1 also shows that there were relatively high levels of concern amongst them about their mental and physical health. Cohort 1 has also reinforced the importance of family to the nature and quality of the trajectories that young people make. Although it is traditional to view youth as becoming independent of family, our data shows that family connections and relationships become strengthened in new ways during the post-school years. Families provide important social and material support to young people, which is often overlooked. Our research shows how family support is in fact necessary to the success of educational policies that aim to have universal post-secondary educational participation. Those who have little or no support from families are the most likely to struggle at all levels.

These considerations provide the backdrop for analysing the initial post-school experiences of Cohort 2. Do the generational changes and directions that we have identified in Cohort 1 also characterise Cohort 2? How do they manage the reality of ongoing labour market unpredictability? How important is family in their management of the first post-school years? How do they assess their health and wellbeing and what strategies are they developing to manage these complex lives?

In the following chapters we explore the answers to these questions.
Chapter 3: Education & Work

In this chapter we draw from surveys and in-depths interviews conducted in 2007 and 2008 to examine relevant patterns in education and employment for Cohort 2. In the first half of the chapter, we analyse educational experiences of this cohort and compare these patterns with the first cohort. In the second half of the chapter we turn to a comparison of employment patterns.

Like their predecessors, Cohort 2 reflects the increasing levels of educational participation by young Australians. Both cohorts are the first generations where education is a continuous process, a lifelong experience, and where post-education employment is not taken for granted. This is reflected, for example, in the increasing importance given to gaining compulsory and post-compulsory educational credentials by government policies, the labour market and individuals (e.g. DET 2003, 2006; MCEETYA 1999). Analysts of youth transition patterns argue that the Government’s target of achieving a 90% secondary school completion rate by 2010, as indicated in the Education Revolution 2008-09 Budget Statement (Commonwealth of Australia 2008) will be difficult to achieve (Lamb & Mason 2008).

In the uncertain and complex labour market scenario of the post-industrial economy, education plays a significant role, where young people increasingly view ‘learning’ as a mechanism through which they can gain some control over their (future) lives (Wyn 2007). Thus, education is valued pragmatically because of the importance of educational credentials; learning (even in non-formal settings) is valued because it equips them to make difficult choices (Dwyer et al. 2003).

Study patterns

Analysis of participants’ study patterns during 2007 and 2008 reveals some important trends. More than two thirds of the participants are engaged in further and higher education. In 2007, 28% of the participants were not undertaking further study. This group had a higher representation of young people from low socio-economic backgrounds and non-metropolitan areas than the group undertaking further study. The following year, the overwhelming majority of non-studiers (83%) took up study. Thus, by 2008 almost all our participants were involved in some further or higher education with the non-participation rate at an extremely low 8%. Figure 1 illustrates the ‘study’ pattern of Cohort 2 in their first two post-school years.
Amongst those who went straight into further study in 2007 there was no significant difference in terms of gender and only a slight difference in terms of socio-economic background with those from higher socio-economic backgrounds more likely to continue studying, especially full-time. As Table 4 shows below, by 2008 80% of those who were studying were attending a university and only 13% were attending a TAFE. In the next phase of the study we have taken active steps to broaden the sample by recruiting participants for Cohort 1 from TAFEs in New South Wales, Victoria, the ACT and Tasmania.1 We will report on the outcomes of this strategy in subsequent reports. However, it is important to note at this stage that this approach has enabled us to include more participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds and more who are recent migrants to Australia. Location was also crucially linked with the likelihood of our participants continuing with further and higher education. Those from metropolitan areas were more likely to continue with their education directly after leaving secondary school than those from regional areas and, especially, those from country towns.

Despite the high level of participation in post-compulsory education by our participants, we are aware of continuing inequalities within our cohort and the generation as whole that affects the education and employment outcomes of young people, or their difficulties in their post-school trajectories. For example, this report documents how young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more able than their peers from lower socio-economic backgrounds to be shielded from the risks of precarious employment through family support and resources. Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely than any other group to be working non-standard hours. Within the high proportion of young people now undertaking post-secondary education there are significant differences in the quality and quantity of resources that they can access to support their study.

### Continuities and interruptions in the educational trajectories

Like Cohort 1, the majority of our Cohort 2 participants who were not studying in their first post-school year began a further or higher education course the year after. This highlights the trend towards non-linearity of youth post-school trajectories and the increase in non-standard trajectories (Martin 2009). As we have previously stated (e.g. Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Dwyer et al. 2005; Wyn 2007) rigid policy frameworks in the transition to adulthood tend to place as a normative precondition the continuation and attainment of a specific post-school education/training qualification. According to those normative standards, in their first post-school year, almost a third of our cohort would have been regarded as failing to achieve a smooth transition to adulthood.

The trend towards non-linear, de-standardised and flexible trajectories is reflected in the proportion of young people deferring their further and higher education places. For example, 21% of our cohort deferred from study in their first post-school year. However, more than two thirds of these deferrers stated that they were planning to begin full-time study in the following year. In accord with recent studies, regional and rural young people were more likely to defer their studies than their metropolitan counterparts. In Victoria, for instance, regional students are two and a half times more likely to defer a place at university

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1 We have recruited 348 new participants currently studying in TAFE institutions to our research program to correct for previous bias towards young people attending university. Of these 348 people, 57% are male. Participants come mostly from metropolitan (48%) and regional centres (40%) and a few from rural areas (12%). Interestingly, 13% percent of the participants were born overseas, while at least a third has parents that were born abroad (38% male parent, 33% female parent).
than metropolitan students (Polesel 2009). The most important reasons for deferring are cost-related factors, such as relocating to a new area, and financial barriers (Polesel 2009). Similarly to this Victorian trend, in the following year, our study shows that seven out of ten of those who deferred had taken up a place at university and one in ten had started some other form of formal further education one year after leaving secondary school.

Other patterns of educational engagement are also of interest. Compared with the previous cohort, in their first two years of post-secondary school study Cohort 2 participants were remarkably stable. Less than 10% changed courses or discontinued their studies. The ongoing analysis will reveal whether this pattern changes in subsequent years. Most importantly however, our data reveals important differences in the experience of continuing with further study based on background and suggest that this experience is much more difficult for some social groups than others. For instance, those participants who began a course but discontinued study were four times more likely to be from a lower than a higher socio-economic background and two times more likely to be from a regional than other areas.

The analysis reveals the emergence of inequalities within the cohort, reflected in patterns of complexity in their trajectories. Socio-economic and location background played an important role. Some social groups are able to navigate more smoothly their first year without having to interrupt or change their plans. Resonating with numerous research studies portraying the inequalities between different social groups (e.g. Alston & Kent 2006; Australian Government 2008; Godden 2007; James et al. 2007; Polesel 2009), location and socio-economic background continued to have an impact on the participants’ experience of education throughout their second post-school year; even though, in real numbers fewer people were discontinuing their studies. This data accords with the findings from our first cohort, where linear pathways in further studies within prescribed policy timelines were most achievable for young people from metropolitan areas that were characterised by high and mid socio-economic status rather than for young people from non-metropolitan areas and low socio-economic status.

### Type of study undertaken

University was the preferred option for these secondary school graduates of 2005. More than three quarters of those who took the direct route into further study chose university as their preferred option. By 2008, as participants took up their deferred places, finished their gap year or were otherwise now able begin study, almost three quarters of the entire cohort were enrolled at university. Table 4 shows the percentage for preferred type of institution in terms of the total cohort and in terms of those continuing study in 2007 and 2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of study undertaken</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total cohort</td>
<td>Studiers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These numbers reveal that our study presents a bias towards those enrolled in a university course. For instance, national figures for young people aged 19 years of age in 2007 and 2008 were approximately 30% (ABS 2008; DEEWR 2008), while our second cohort had a participation rate of 55% and 74% in 2007 and 2008 respectively. On the other hand, approximately 11% of our participants attended TAFE while nationally the figure was around 27% in 2007 (ABS 2008; NCVER 2007).

Those who are attending universities are more likely than those who do not choose a university pathway to be from high socio-economic backgrounds and to be from metropolitan areas. There was no significant differences between males and females. Taking into account the total sample population in 2007 and 2008, young people from rural areas and low socio-economic backgrounds were the most likely to undertake TAFE courses. There was also no gender difference in this pattern. Table 5 depicts the preferred institution of those that continued studying in 2007 and 2008 in relation to the variables gender, socio-economic status and location.
The table shows an increase in the percentage of young people attending university institutions across the board and a slight decrease in the percentage attending TAFE institutions between the first and second post-school year. This increase appears attributable to the significant number of young people who deferred study in their first year not to participants discontinuing TAFE courses. Of those who deferred in their first year, 74% enrolled in a university institution and 12% in a TAFE.

As commented above, Polesel (2009) affirms that financial barriers remain a significant factor for non-metropolitan young people to defer their studies; thus, the sharp rise in university attendance by this group in 2008. The increasing financial costs of higher and further study are heavily implicated in the pattern for young people from non-metropolitan areas and from low socio-economic backgrounds to have a lower participation in education. Godden (2007) calculates that for young people in non-metropolitan areas the annual living costs (including relocation and start up costs) to attend a metropolitan higher education institution ranges from $18,000 to $26,000. In addition to these financial costs, many young rural people are unable to benefit from Dependent Youth Allowance because of means-testing on parental assets, where parents are asset rich but their income is poor (Godden 2007). In order to receive the Independent Youth Allowance, young people have to be ‘out of school at least 18 months and earned 75% of the maximum rate of pay under ‘Wage Level A of the Australian Pay and Classification Scale’ in an 18 month period’ (Godden 2007: 11). This implies that to meet the Independent Youth Allowance criteria, rural young people have to defer their post-school studies to work (Godden 2007, Polesel 2009). To correct this disadvantage, the federal government has reviewed the youth allowance criteria – for example by increasing the parental income threshold and establishing a AUS4,000 relocation scholarship, among other measures.2

These financial and social limitations on pursuing post-school studies are also present for those non-metropolitan young people wishing to study in TAFE institutions but remain in their communities. Barriers faced by rural young people include the cost of petrol and a lack of public transport (Alston & Kent 2006). The following participant highlights this issue.

Thomas lives in a country town in Tasmania. In 2008 he was completing his Certificate Four in Technology and IT in a TAFE. While his school actively encouraged all students to go to University, a couple of his teachers suggested that TAFE would be a good option for Thomas, and he decided to take their advice. Thomas lives with his parents and commutes every day to attend the TAFE. He would like to move out of his parents’ home but he says he cannot afford to. Thomas says that the financial support from his parents and commutes every day to attend the TAFE. He would like to move out of his parents’ home but he says he cannot afford to. Thomas says that the financial support from his parents has been critical. He has found the extra study really difficult and although he would ideally like to finish his course, he is thinking about dropping out. However, he is not very optimistic about finding a good job in his home town: ‘I think it’s going to be very difficult because I live in the country and the jobs are very limited out here’. He would like to get ‘any job really just to get on my feet and

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Table 5: Preferred institution for those continuing study in 2007 and 2008 according to gender, SES and location (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007 University</th>
<th>2007 TAFE</th>
<th>2008 University</th>
<th>2008 TAFE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>SES</td>
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<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-metropolitan</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2 These measures were recently established; thus, future research will be needed to identify their success.
move out and all that’. His goal is to move to a city and work in the retail sector.

This higher cost associated with further and higher education for young people of lower socio-economic status and non-metropolitan areas represents restricted opportunities rather than the relatively elective opportunities encountered by their metropolitan and high socio-economic status counterparts. In other words, the latter are presented with a wider variety of opportunities for educational provision and living arrangements. They are in a vanguard social position from where they enjoy the gains of participating in higher education.

It is also important to remember that young people’s life spheres are not restricted to study. They also encompass employment and social and personal relations, leisure and wellbeing. In addition, the initial years of post-school life, particularly in terms of their decisions about further study, are shaped by their socio-economic and geographical background. In this way, chronic patterns of inequality in education and labour market outcomes for young Australians are perpetuated.

In sum, while these initial post-school routes do not determine the eventual life outcomes for this cohort, they display persistent patterns of inequality in terms of socio-economic status and location. The high rate of further and higher education participation demonstrates the importance all of our participants give to gaining more education qualifications after finishing school. Several studies stress this importance by suggesting that those participating in formal post-school education, especially higher education, are more likely than those who do not participate in higher education to benefit from their investment in education through financial gain over a working life-time. They are also likely to be enriched intellectually through engagement with local, national and global (Australian Government 2008; NATSEM 2008; Watson 2003).

We now turn our attention to the employment patterns of the second cohort with the awareness that these two dimensions – education and employment – are not separated spheres of young people’s lives but deeply intertwined, shaping their experiences.

**Employment**

Andres and Wyn’s (2010) analysis of Cohort 1 reveal that their generation experienced radical policy changes that substantially shaped their post-school experiences – such as the dismantling of collective bargaining, the casualisation and precariousness of employment and a severe financial recession in their early post-school years. Cohort 1 faced a change in the ‘rules of the game’ that accentuated the uncertainty in the labour market creating a precarious and volatile environment, where flexibility, mobility and adaptability became the tools of survival.

While the rules of the game of work dramatically changed for the previous generation, Cohort 2 seems to have entered the labour market having a better understanding of these rules. Moreover, contrary to their predecessors they grew up in a period of a national economic boom of 17 years of consistent growth, until the economic downturn in 2009 (OECD 2009). Participants in the first cohort of our study experienced the effects of the economic recession in the early 1990s in the form of a reduction in the proportion of jobs in the youth labour market. By contrast, in terms of employment availability participants in Cohort 2 have enjoyed buoyant times. Youth participation in the labour force (those aged 15 to 19 years old) increased in the last two decades reaching almost 60% by 2006 (ABS 2007). Thus, the second cohort grew up in a more stable economic and employment scenario than the first cohort, albeit one dominated by flexibility, casual employment, and the shift to a service economy.

**The pervasive relevance of work in young people’s lives**

Our data shows that young people are actively participating in the labour market, with an overwhelming majority having had a job during their first post-school year (87%). More than half of our participants have already had a job during secondary school. For this cohort of young people, employment has a significant role in their daily lives. Almost half of our participants responded that work was a priority in their lives, including one in five who asserted that ‘full-time work’ was their main current commitment. In addition, almost two thirds of our participants stated that their full-time or part-time job is one of their main sources of financial support.
By their second post-school year eight out of ten participants were combining study and work. Figure 2 shows the percentage of our participants that combined study and work in 2007 and 2008.

Their lives have a multi-dimensional nature shaped by study and work, among other activities.

**The stratification of employment**

Similar to the study patterns, commitment to employment was highly stratified in terms of location and socio-economic background. However, with employment patterns, gender also emerges as a significant factor. On the one hand, males from rural and low socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to engage in full-time work and view this as their main priority in life than their counterparts. This resembles traditional conceptualisations of rural communities symbolised as ‘male spaces’; where young males are more likely to find a job in the community and stay, while more young females will leave their communities, looking to continue with tertiary studies (Alloway et al. 2004: 248). Alloway and colleagues argue that limited structural opportunities and endogenous influences (i.e. family and community influences, youth subjectivity) play a significant role in defining career pathways in the early years of post-school study.

On the other hand, young women were more likely to ‘mixing work and study’ than males and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds and metropolitan areas were more likely to state that studying full-time was their main commitment than their counterparts. That is, metropolitan young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds placed a greater investment in further and higher education. Like their ‘choices’ of further study, the first steps of their post-school employment life are strongly connected to their social position.

**Employment is more available for some social groups**

As mentioned above, the availability of employment opportunities reflected the buoyant economic period of the first decade of the 2000s. This was sustained by the fact that at least 66% of our participants have not found it hard to find work, even if the employment was often only temporary and/or precarious. However, again the scenario is not clear cut. Amongst those who did find employment, a quarter of our participants reported that this was not ‘suitable employment’; that is, it was a job that did not fit in with their studies and/or family and home commitments. This pattern reveals a hidden dimension of inequality within the conventional description of this generation as having had it ‘easy’ and that for some, keeping up with their many obligations has a significant impact in their wellbeing. Employment patterns reinforce the finding that some social groups fare better than others. Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to find it hard to gain access to a suitable work than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds and females were two times more likely to find it hard than males. Interestingly, young people in metropolitan and regional areas find it more difficult than rural youth.

The qualitative component of our research project reveals the complexity of participants’ experiences in the labour market. The following case study of one participant provides a good example of the complexity faced by some young people in their post-school experiences. Tamara shares a house in regional Victoria. She describes herself as ‘a happy person’, who generally does not ‘get stressed a lot’. However, her experience illustrates the hardship of not being able to find employment. Together with the difficulties of being unemployed, Tamara also found it hard to keep up with the workload at university, noting that ‘it was hard towards the end of university year,
we had a lot of assignments to do. It was really
difficult having to juggle them all’. She spent 10
months looking for a job through different ave-
nues; such as job agencies, internet sites and hand-
ing out resumes. Tamara believes that, ‘there are
not jobs in regional towns’.

It was very stressful not having a job, that
was probably the hardest thing from last
year and the fact that I didn’t have one for
so long meant that my parents were on my
back to get a job. I wasn’t paying rent so they
sort of expected me to be earning money. I
felt like I was letting them down because I
hadn’t found a job.

Most of our young people are participating in em-
ployment as well as education. However, this high
level of involvement in the labour market can lead
to superficial conclusions that mask the diversity
of young people’s lives, overlooking the structural
and subjective difficulties faced by some groups
of young people. The high level of participation
in the labour market should not obscure the differ-
ent meanings and roles that employment has for
young people and the interaction of gender, loca-
tion and socio-economic status in their position,
and experience, within the labour market. Broad
patterns mask the different trajectories undertak-
en by young people. In addition, there is a need
to understand the status and type of employment
undertaken by young people; that is, its precari-
ousness – such as the limited social benefits, low
wages or irregular shifts; its temporal nature – that
is, the length of job tenure; or and whether these
jobs represent a ‘stepping stone’ to a job in their
preferred career or an entrapment in insecure and
temporary employment (MacDonald 2009).

The nature of youth employment

In the last decade the growth of on-going, full-
time jobs has been outpaced by the growth of
casual employment (Pocock et al. 2004). This
trend has been especially strong within the youth
sector, with an increase from 54% to 66% of 15-
19 years old in casual employment from 1992 to
2005 (AIHW 2007). Our data reveals the extent
of precariousness and uncertainty in the work-
place for our participants with a majority involved
in casual work and less than a third having had a
permanent job during 2007. Furthermore, in terms
of their rights at work, at least a third are unsure of
how wages and conditions are determined in their
main jobs. Finally, like our first cohort, these young
people are prepared to change jobs and seek bet-
ter employment opportunities; with more than 60%
expecting to stay less than two years in their current
employment and more than a third already looking
for another job. Table 6 depicts these employment
patterns.

Table 6: Employment patterns in 2007, (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Currently hold a permanent job</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently hold a casual/sessional job</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently unsure how wages and conditions are determined in their jobs</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staying less than two years in their current job</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently looking for another job</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These responses by our participants depicted a
widespread scenario of labour mobility, flexibility
and precariousness. Their responses also reveal im-
portant social differences within our cohort. For ex-
ample, rural young people, especially males, were
more likely to be involved in permanent jobs and
working longer hours per week (eight hours more
per week) than participants in metropolitan and re-
gional areas. Metropolitan participants, especially
for those from a higher socio-economic back-
ground, were the most likely to see their job as only
for the short term. Eight out of ten young people
in metropolitan areas from high socio-economic
backgrounds expected to remain less than two years
in their job. In contrast, the participants from non-
metropolitan areas were more likely to believe that
there was a strong link between their current job
and their longer term career expectation. This was
specially for those living in ‘rural, not in town’,
where more than a third (35%) viewed their job as
in their preferred career area or as a ‘stepping
stone’ towards that career (19% metro – 24% re-
gional – 26% country town). This strong link was
also suggested by those that came from a low socio-
economic backgrounds, who were three times more
likely than their high socio-economic background
counterparts to have a job that they saw as a step-
There were also gender differences. Males expected to stay longer in their jobs than females and were two times more likely than female participants to relate their current job with their preferred career area. Thus, young rural males from a low socio-economic background were most likely to feel that they are already working in their expected career field. This group, when looking for another job, were also the most likely to seeking a career pathway rather than simply looking for more hours of work. By contrast, their metropolitan counterparts were mostly searching for higher remuneration but not necessarily a 'career job'. This reflects the different meaning of work to these groups at this stage of their lives. Employment for young people in metropolitan areas, and for those from higher socio-economic backgrounds, was at this stage being undertaken in order to support their studies. Those who were not studying (overwhelmingly males, especially those in rural areas from lower socio-economic backgrounds) were making a direct entry into the labour market with the aim of entering their preferred career or occupation.

The vast majority of our cohort is employed but the meaning of their work is different. Different social groups have embarked on different trajectories, with different capacities and opportunities to be flexible and to redirect their route. Ryan comes from a high socio-economic background and lives with his parents in Melbourne. He describes how 2007 went for him:

I feel my last year went really well. Basically I got my results over in Vietnam because I was on a family holiday over there. For the first months up until June I was working in retail... mum has got her own business, [but] we decided I should get a job where she is not my boss, you know. It was a complete learning curve, I learnt a lot from that, like just personality-wise... In June I left the job and was a week in London with my godfather and then we’d also arranged [with his parents] to do a Contiki Tour so did that which went for thirty days. I want more travel in my life. I want the flexibility to travel... I chose environmental engineering because I knew you could travel a lot doing that job and I like the travel side of things. I got into my [university degree] first preference... environmental engineering and I’m enjoying it a lot so far...

Like many in his social group, attending university was a natural step after leaving secondary school. He was able to find employment in his mothers’ business. Although he does not see this as his ‘career’, he has identified some aspects of this work experience as ‘personal development’, and spells out what he has learned personally from working part-time as a sales person in his mother’s business. His transition from secondary school was well-supported through the family-based resources on which he was able to draw.

For many other participants in Cohort 2, the transition was not as smooth as Ryan’s and they did not enjoy the same level of personal and structural support. Trevor comes from a middle class family in metropolitan Tasmania. He wanted to attend university but was unable to due his citizenship status. He is a permanent resident, and as such is ineligible for HECS support. His parents were unable to pay for his university fees outright. Trevor was very disheartened and disappointed when he learned that he would be unable to attend university for another two years, when he would gain full Australian citizenship. Instead he moved away from his father’s home and started working as a kitchen hand, some weeks working up to 70 hours. He worked this many hours to be promoted and given better roles in the kitchen, and because he was unable to rely on his parents for any financial support. However, Trevor ‘found [that] my social life took a big hit’ and he struggled to maintain current friendships or build a new friendship network.

The hours started to kill me. The irregular hours started to kill me you know. Some mornings you’d start work at 10 o’clock and some mornings you’d start work at 2 o’clock in the afternoon. You know, some I remember once I started work at 4 in the afternoon, I was meant to knock off at 10 and I ended up working till 2 o’clock in the

3 Within the group of young people employed, three quarters answered that their current job did not have a direct relationship with their preferred career area and/or that it was just a job.
morning.

It was common for participants to view employment as a means of financial support, as a good way to develop an individual responsibility or become independent, to pay debts or as a way of building a social network. Interestingly, those from low socio-economic background viewed their work as a more positive and significant aspect than their counterparts from higher socio-economic backgrounds. For example, Miranda felt finding a job was the most positive aspect of her year; for Nancy it was changing job and entering ‘the corporate world’ that ‘went particularly well’; while Henry, living in regional New South Wales, felt work was more enjoyable due to friendlier people. Finally, even though, doing well in their studies after leaving secondary school was a positive aspect for all our participants who took the ‘studying pathway’, the experience of studying tended to be reported more positively by those from high socio-economic status backgrounds. Most importantly, what the above quotes reflect is the different opportunities available to different social groups, illustrating the promise and uncertainties faced by young people.

Conclusion

The broad patterns show that this cohort of young people who left secondary school in 2006 has embraced further education. An overwhelming majority have taken up a place in university or TAFE by the second year out of secondary school. There was a strong preference for university over TAFE. We note that our sample at this stage has an over-representation of young people taking up a study pathway after leaving secondary school, compared with the wider population. Our participants are more likely to have had educational ‘success’ than their age cohort of young people in Australia as a whole. However, analysis of the finer grained detail reveals a more complex picture.

While a majority followed the pathway of combining work and study (by 2007 81% of the cohort are combining study and work), the meaning of these are different for the different social groups. Socio-economic background and geographic location in particular are associated with distinctive pathways. Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those in rural settings are more likely than their counterparts to go directly into the labour market without further study. For them, their jobs represent the first step in gaining their preferred job or occupation. Their peers from higher socio-economic backgrounds and in metropolitan areas are more likely to take up post-secondary education (for a significant minority after taking a gap year). However, the participants in further study are overwhelmingly employed in precarious, part-time work and expect to stay in these jobs for a limited time.

For those who have taken up further study, the first years reveal relatively little change of direction. This is in contrast with Cohort 1, who experienced significant changes of direction during their first years of study (see Dwyer et al. 1998; Dwyer & Wyn 2001). This may reflect the provision of better careers advice in secondary schools, enabling this cohort of young people to make more informed decisions about their study pathways than their predecessors. Analysis of their next steps will confirm this possibility.

Finally, gender patterns, although evident, are not strong at this stage. Young women and men are embracing post-secondary education. The similarities in choices and trajectories for young men and women in metropolitan areas are especially clear. The main differences in gendered patterns appear in rural areas, with young men being more likely to stay in their rural area and seek direct entry to the labour market.
Chapter 4: Negotiating, balancing & managing

In previous research reports we have framed young people’s post-school lives as characterised by promise and uncertainty (Dwyer et al. 2003, 2005; Wyn et al. 2008). In these reports we have argued that this was associated with an increasing awareness of young people’s individual responsibility for negotiating their pathways and the existence of relatively weak institutional pathways. Individual responsibility heightens young people’s sense of opportunity, because they are placed in the position of having to make choices. The weakening of traditional institutional pathways through work and study create uncertainty. In this context, parental resources are an especially significant buffer. Those who can draw on material resources (e.g. living in the parental home while studying) and social support (e.g. gaining advice from parents and wider networks) are more able to access the ‘promise’ of a longer and deeper educational experience. It is also important to note the relevance of new technologies in the lives of this cohort. They are ‘digital natives’ who take for granted the use of digital technologies to connect with others and to gain information. These technologies are also resources that enhance opportunities and provide support.

Cohort 2 participants are in the age group that is often referred to as ‘generation Y’ in the media. Although we do not tend to characterise our cohorts using these particular generational terms, we have previously argued that a social generational approach provides a useful framework for understanding the distinctive nature of social transitions and approaches to life. In terms of employment, for instance, this generation became acutely aware of the need for ‘flexibility in how they define their careers’ and that to be successful they must be ‘proactive in ways their parents did not seem to contemplate in the 1960s and 1970s’ (Dwyer et al. 2003: 18). Cohort 2 did not really witness the erosion of the previous generations’ certainties about careers and the pressure to obtain post-compulsory educational credential to access a good job in a precarious labour market as directly as their predecessors (Cohort 1) who are also known as generation X. As we note elsewhere, the dramatic increase in post-secondary education uptake in the early 1990s, coupled with significant changes in education and labour market policies have impacted very directly on Cohort 1 (Andres & Wyn 2010).

However, our data suggest that Cohort 2 has taken on board – and possibly improved on - many of the approaches and priorities of generation X (Cohort 1). Like them, they are overwhelmingly optimistic about their futures (Wyn et al. 2008). They also face the same challenge of striking a balance between some dimensions of their life...
(education and employment choices) and other dimensions (relationships, lifestyle) which add another degree of complexity to their lives.

**The stress of mixing work and study**

One of the most important concerns of our participants was the difficulty of balancing work and study with personal and social relationships. This was related to the overload factor of combining work and study, often exacerbated by the need to work irregular shifts (at nights and on weekends). More than 80% of those continuing with further and higher studies were combining study with work. Almost three quarters of the total cohort of workers in Cohort 2 were employed during weekends and more than half during night or evening shifts and on public holidays. Table 7 shows these patterns according their different type of institution of study and for non-studiers.

The work profile of those enrolled in post-secondary education institutions is worth exploring in more detail. A national study into the cost of living for university students revealed that there is a 27% deficit in the mean income and expenditure for a full-time undergraduate student, with student debt more than doubling between 2000 to 2006 (from 10.7% to 24.4%) (James et al. 2007). The situation is far worse for many students from non-metropolitan areas. As Godden (2007) explains, this 27% mean deficit in cost of living is greater for non-metropolitan students that have to live away from home to continue with further studies.

In general, for those attending university, socio-economic background was a strong indicator of the amount and type of employment undertaken by our participants. Across the entire cohort, those from the lowest socio-economic group were two times more likely to work on night and evening shifts, and during weekends and three times more likely to work during public holidays than those from the highest socio-economic group. This may be an indicator of the buffer that parental resources provide for young people at this stage of their lives. Having greater control over the conditions of their work meant that they also had more choice about the structuring of their non-work time (Woodman, 2010). If they are not working at irregular or non-standard hours, young people can socialise with friends (and family) more easily and they can fit in with university and TAFE timetables more effectively.

The following experiences by these young people paint a picture of the difficulties of balancing their different commitments in life.

Lana lives at home with her parents in Canberra. She found it very difficult to achieve a balance between work and study. She worked approximately thirty-five hours a week and attended full-time university. As a result of working and studying full-time she felt stressed and failed one university class. Lana felt angry and disappointed as she has always been a ‘straight A student’ at school. Furthermore, work and study has taken its toll on her social relationships and even though she lives at home, she claims that she does not see her family as much as she would like to, ‘because I’m working all the time’.

Lachlan, attends university in Launceston where he lives in the college residence. He chose his university degree based on the high possibilities of getting a job after graduating. He often commutes to Hobart to see his family. Lachlan found it very hard to juggle work and study mainly because his part-time job required working until very late. ‘I was working at a local bar and nightclub which was bad because that was like working till about four thirty in the morning’. This work shift was very bad because ‘I had classes at 9 am in the morning’. Lachlan thought that he had to prioritised and decided to work less hours because his university work began going ‘downhill’ and was ‘dying’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>University students</th>
<th>TAFE students</th>
<th>Non-studiers</th>
<th>Total sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Night or evening shifts</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend work</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working public holidays</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gender and location were also related to significant employment differences. Young women and metropolitan participants were more likely to be working irregular shifts than their counterparts and young people in rural areas tended to work an extra day (five hours more) per week than their metropolitan peers. Amongst young people enrolled in TAFE, there were strong differences in working patterns by gender. Females enrolled in TAFE courses were three times more likely to work night and evening shifts and public holidays, and two times more likely to work during weekends than males.

Finally, metropolitan young people were three times more likely to work night and evening shifts and public holidays, and two times more likely to work during weekends than rural young people. In other words, many young people are enduring long days and weeks with little time for rest or leisure. This is especially so for females, those from a low socio-economic background and for metropolitan residents.

The patterns for irregular and non-standard working hours are similar for those young people that were not studying. The major difference was in terms of location. Regional young people who were not studying were slightly more likely to be working irregular shifts. Employment patterns for young people in country towns were more like those of their peers in metropolitan areas. It is the rural participants, not from towns, that are the least likely to be working irregular shifts, reflecting both their likelihood of being in a job in their preferred career as well as fewer work opportunities.

What this data on irregular shifts in employment reveals is the difficulties many of our young people face while juggling their commitments (work and study) and their personal and social relationships. This is of particular significance to their search for balance in life.

In addition, there is a tension for young people between their priorities in employment, study and relationships. As with our previous cohort, the contrasts between ‘reality’ and ‘preference’ for how they spent their time showed that personal and social relationships were very important for young people (Dwyer et al. 2003). The significance of relationships in their lives is corroborated by national youth surveys identifying very similar responses to ‘what young people valued’, regardless of their geographical location: ‘family relationships’, ‘friendships’, and ‘being independent’ (Mission Australia 2006), highlighting the importance young people attribute to social and personal relationships and to their personal autonomy. As Wyn (2007) explains, the de-traditionalisation of social structures combined with an uncertain and precarious labour market reinforces the significance of meaningful long-term personal and social relationships for individuals.

These participants’ experiences illustrate the significance of social and personal relationships. For instance, despite stating that she did not see her family as much as she wanted to (see above), Lana claims that her ‘family is really good, like my mum she’s always going to be my mum but she’s one of my closest friends as well and I can talk to her and stuff. So our relationship got a lot better especially at the beginning of last year when I didn’t know that many people but yeah socially it was really great’. Lana is also ‘a very social person’ and needs ‘to have a good circle of friends like in order to function’. For Tony, his family is his most important coping strategy when he is finding things tough. He was able to talk to and rely on his parents and brother in a way that he is not able to talk to his peers, and found that they help him to gain perspective on his life.

Mila lives at home with her parents in Sydney. She struggled with the transition from school to university and found it hard to juggle university and part-time work. However, living at home gave her the ability to not worry so much about money as she does not have to ‘pay rent or bills’. Mila did find that university was ‘a lot of hard work’ due to the heavy workload and long hours. ‘I was [at university] five days and starting pretty early and finishing late as well so I wouldn’t get home till about eight o’clock a couple of days a week’. Depending on her university timetable she found it difficult to find time to work her administration job. Nonetheless, Mila claimed she also benefited from a flexible boss and workplace. Most importantly, she highlights the need for the support of family and friends: ‘just the idea that they’re supporting me and they believe that I can do it that sort of makes me think well, I can do it’.
Drawing resources – coping strategies

In past research studies we have focused on the parental influence in young people’s choices in their post-school lives (Dwyer et al. 2003). In our previous cohort (currently in their thirties) we found a strong inter-generational influence, mostly represented in the degree of family ‘investment’ on young people’s education and personal development. For example, at least 80% identified ‘parental influence’ as the dominant sphere of support in comparison to peer support that was at 47% (Dwyer et al. 2003: 16).

In one sense, our research resembles Pusey’s (2007) argument: rather than finding evidence of inter-generational conflict (where parents feel a burden by having to continually support their children in their post-school lives) what we have is a new inter-generational mode of relating, that involves crucial support for young people from their families, as well as support by young people for their parents. Young people can be significantly advantaged by high levels of parental support at this stage of their lives. We suggest that more needs to be known about the dynamics of cross-generational relationships and transfers of material and social resources during the early post-secondary stages of people’s lives. The transfers of these resources have critical significance for the reproduction of social inequalities between different social groups. In other words, inter-generational transfers can entrenched both benefits and disadvantages.

Interdependence and family resources

Evidence of inter-generational relationships and support appears across a range of different areas of our study. One of these areas is the affordability of accommodation, which has become an important issue for young people. This is one of the key areas where young people have stated they need the support of their parents, relatives, and friends. Data from our previous cohort and evidence from international research studies (e.g. Furlong & Cartmel 2007; Leccardi & Ruspini 2006) indicates that there is a pattern for young people to remain in the parental home for a longer period than previous generations (e.g. baby boomers). This is also the case with our current cohort. The majority are living at home with their parents (as Table 9 indicates). However, by their second year of post-school life some participants are establishing residential independence from their parents. Table 8 shows the living arrangements patterns for our participants in 2007 and 2008.

Table 8: Living arrangements for total sample population in 2007 and 2008, (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At home with parents</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a shared house</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On your own</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With your partner</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In college</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, not all young people are able to have the benefit of remaining in the family home while they juggle study and work. Young people living in metropolitan areas were more likely to stay with their parents (86%) than those from rural towns (61%). Young people in rural areas often need to migrate to obtain employment and to undertake further education. Interestingly, however, there was no significant difference in socio-economic status when it comes to living at home with parents, which highlights the extent to which living with parents in the first years following secondary school has become normative for this generation.

The transfer of inter-generational resources becomes clearer when we focus on the type of accommodation young people enjoy. Those in the highest socio-economic status group were more likely to afford to live in a residential college than those in the lowest socio-economic group. These residential patterns are important at the time of life when young people are expanding their social networks and their bases from where they draw resources and support. This was of critical significance for those non-metropolitan students that had to relocate to urban areas and reconstruct their social network.

The transition from school to university was an important part of their first years of post-school life. Being able to afford to live in a college at university helps young people to more rapidly create social networks that provide support. The following examples are from young women from high socio-economic backgrounds who were able to live in residential university colleges while they got...
Young people negotiating risk and opportunity themselves established at university. Olivia, who comes from a country town said that ‘it was hard to move from country to city but living in college was good to meet people’ and, thus, build a social network of support. She found it ‘hard to balance study, work and leisure’ and relied on her ‘university friends and work-mates’, as well as ‘on talking to her mother’.

Grace comes from a regional town. She felt that ‘university went very well; academically I did much better than I thought’. It took her the ‘whole year to get sort things out’, especially since she had ‘to work hard because it was a new place’. Living in college provided support but nevertheless Grace felt ‘very stressed, falling apart from not being at home’ but also feeling she was living ‘a big adventure’. She resorted to ‘working out, meditation and going to the beach’ to cope, as well as seeking professional help and did ‘counselling at the university’.

The in-depth interviews enabled us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the current pressures experienced by young people. These pressures were mainly due to a lack of time for social relationships, the long days of study and work and for some, the financial stress of making a living. The difficulty of achieving a balance was already evident during their last year of school and in the early of post-school years. In Year 11, 56% of our participants had a paid job outside school hours. In the next years they reported it was hard for many to spend the time they desired on family and friends. Figure 3 shows that in 2008 52% wanted to spend most of their time on family and home life, only 29% were able to do so. Similarly 59% wanted to spend most of their time on personal relationships, whereas only 31% could do so.

The challenge of achieving a balance in life across the dimensions of study, work, relationships and wellbeing was a major source of stress, particularly for those that were lacking the support of their family because they moved out of home to attend further or higher education.

Finally, it is important to state that while remaining in their parents’ house might reduce the cost of living for some young people and living in a college contributed to creating new social relationships, other residential arrangements were also critical to building networks and support in their first years out of school. Although marriage or having a partner was not a high priority for most of our participants (only 20% stated it had a very high importance in their lives at present), for a minority of our cohort having a partner constituted an important resource. This minority is mainly composed of those originally from outside major cities, low socio-economic background and females than their counterparts. In terms of enjoying an experience travelling or working abroad, this possibility was more likely opened to those from high socio-economic status.

**Sources of support**

It is important to look at how inter-generational relationships shape the routes undertaken by young people. In a sense, what we argue is that conceptualisations of inter-generational relationships that focus solely on young people’s achievement of financial, residential and emotional independence from their parents overlooks the significance of inter-generational transfers (Pusey 2007). Understanding patterns of inter-generational relationships is important to understanding the ways in which patterns of social inequality are perpetu-
ated. We agree with Ball (2006) that conceptualisations of class dynamics in terms of family tend to be crude and ineffective. Although family is widely recognised as being of significance (often through a token reference to Bourdieu’s work), it is relatively seldom that the actually dynamics are investigated. There are exceptions, and we include Gillies (2000); Leccardi and Ruspini (2007) and Pusey (2007) in this list. Our data suggest that we need to look at family relationships beyond the ‘problematisation’ of family relationships as a constraint for youth in their developmental ‘task’ of becoming ‘adults’ and independent, and as a stage of youth through which they transition. It is important to understand the nature of the resources that are available for each social group and how they interplay in the creation and re-creation of social inequalities.

In general terms, as figure 4 shows, (full and part-time) employment and direct support from family have been the two most important sources of financial support for our cohort. Personal savings also were important. A significant minority were also relying on exogenous sources of support, such as youth allowance or scholarship/bursary.

Our data shows that financial support from family was more readily available to those from high socio-economic backgrounds than their peers. Young people from high socio-economic background were two times more likely than those from a low socio-economic background to receive direct support from the family, rely on a repayable loan from family and make a greater use of personal savings. This financial support facilitates greater flexibility in post-school pathway options.

In contrast, those participants from the lowest socio-economic status are five times more likely to receive welfare assistance (youth allowance) than the participants in the highest grouping, with females more likely than males to rely on these payments. Females are also more likely than men to rely on part-time work and personal savings as main source of support, while there is no gender difference in family support.

Part-time work is the most mentioned source of financial support for people of any location. However, metropolitan youth are more likely to draw their financial support from part-time work and from personal savings than people from rural areas – that is, from country towns and outside towns (69% vs. 46% and 38% vs. 18% respectively). Young people from low socio-economic status background were more likely to have stated that full-time work was their main source of support than those from high socio-economic backgrounds than their peers. Young people from high socio-economic background were two times more likely than those from a low socio-economic background to receive direct support from the family, rely on a repayable loan from family and make a greater use of personal savings. This financial support facilitates greater flexibility in post-school pathway options.

Figure 4: Sources of financial support for total sample in 2007 and 2008, (%)  
Note: The categories ‘private loan’ and ‘university loan’ were not present in the 2007 survey.
socio-economic status. Full-time work had also a greater significance of males from rural areas rather than for their counterparts. The trend to go directly into full-time work is strong amongst low socio-economic status young people. Non metropolitan participants (in regional and country towns & outside of towns) are more likely than metropolitan participants to draw on financial resources from their full-time employment, and are twice as likely as metropolitan young people to receive youth allowance and scholarships or bursary.

Opportunities and challenges

In our in-depth interviews, some young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds mentioned moving out of their parents’ home as an important achievement. Cameron lived with his parents in Canberra and was pleased to be able to move out of home into a shared house: “I didn’t know I could do that on low wages”. Fred was pleased to move from a rural area to a major city. He said “it is a good feeling to be able to manage”, where he felt that “money is a big issue”. These young people showed another side of the coin: their achievements were more related to ‘getting by’ with limited resources.

Employment was also a source of satisfaction for some. Henry spent “three months unemployed, eating my savings” and was relieved to find work in a setting that he found to be friendly and enjoyable. Like other young people, he felt he had become more responsible as a result of being employed. Employment helped Henry to achieve higher self-esteem, even though he had to work 60 hours a week to pay off contracted debts. Not all our participants from low socio-economic status backgrounds found it hard to find a job. For example, Nancy felt that changing jobs was an achievement. She moved into “the corporate world”. She left her previous job because she wasn’t being paid: ‘The boss wasn’t paying me so I just left. He never had the money to pay me, he used to always say to me, ‘I’m broke, I’m broke’ and he never used to pay me; for like two months where I wasn’t getting paid’. Nancy is enjoying her new job and the social networks it enabled her to build. Even though she knew that “resources are out there and you can get them from media and school” to search for new employment, and she only spent a week being jobless, she found it stressful facing the uncertainty of leaving one job to find another with better working and salary conditions.

A strong theme in the in-depth interviews was that for those studying it was especially important to get “good marks”. Nevertheless, acquiring greater individual “responsibility”, mostly through employment, was also integral to their assessment of their success. Building social networks was also a source of satisfaction. Those from high socio-economic status were the most likely to mention “travelling overseas” as a particular source of satisfaction.

This chapter has highlighted the way in which young people have to continually negotiate study, work, and personal and social relationships during their initial post-school pathways. Looking at our total cohort, our participants described their experiences of 2007 as challenging (84%), unpredictable (53%), somehow disappointing (59%) and stressful (66%) but also exciting (73%) and fulfilling (67%). This picture reveals a life of challenges but also of opportunities, which is intersected by gender, socio-economic background and geographic-locational influences.

In terms of gender, the employment patterns during 2007 reflect the precariousness, mobility and uncertainty experienced by the young women participants. The major difference when compared with their male peers was that young women more likely to strongly agree that their experiences were “challenging”, “confusing” and “stressful” than males. However, they were also more likely than their male counterparts to say that their experiences were “exciting”. Men were more likely to find experiences “predictable” but they were also less likely to report “disappointing” experiences than women participants.

In terms of location, metropolitan young people found life more exciting than their non-metropolitan counterparts.

Socio-economic background also correlated with how young people felt they had fared during 2007. Those whose parents were in the highest socio-economic group were more likely to describe their experiences as “exciting” than those in the lowest group. The latter found their experiences more disappointing and slightly more stressful and confusing. Through our in-depth interviews, the former were more likely to com-
ment that experiences were exciting, interesting, and overall fulfilling; even despite the hard work that combining employment and further study (especially university study) represented.

In terms of type of activity, those involved in university studies were more likely to choose multiple and often contrasting descriptors for their experiences in 2007 than their TAFE and working counterparts. They felt more challenged, confused and stressed but also more excited.

Managing and wellbeing

While it is true that overall our participants appeared to be healthy, it is important to state that a significant minority reported that they felt physically unhealthy (12%) and mentally unhealthy (12%). Table 9 shows a greater concern about their health by young women than young men.

Most importantly, our in-depth interviews allow us to look at the nuanced of the relationship between the different spheres of young people's lives and their wellbeing. Finance emerged as a common source of stress in the interviews with participants. Financial difficulties were more prevalent amongst those from low socio-economic status backgrounds and those from non-metropolitan areas. As stated above, Henry was one of some young people that 'struggled to find full-time work'. He was concerned about being overweight and felt that he experienced discrimination because of this. He found that working was a help, and in particular, alleviated some of the stress he was experiencing about managing financially, even though it created its own pressures, because he had to work 60 hours a week to pay a debt. His friends and his mother were the most important sources of support.

As we mentioned above, young people resorted to different mechanisms and strategies to cope with the challenges and pressures of work, study and personal and social relationships. Some of them looked for leisure activities, such as art work, working out, fishing, boxing, or listening to music and playing video games, and even drinking. A few looked to spirituality, like Hanna. She felt that something that was hard during the year was 'adjusting to university culture', 'getting good marks'. Hanna relied on friends from university, and her Christian support group, and in being involved ‘in the student arts/culture body’ at university.

In sum, parents were their main source of emotional support, but also siblings and friends. Interestingly, females were more likely than males to discuss their problems with parents, siblings, work-mates and partners. Seeking support from friends showed no gender differences.

Table 9: Health status by gender in 2007, (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical health</td>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>Physical health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very unhealthy or unhealthy</td>
<td>8 9</td>
<td>14 13</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>15 18</td>
<td>21 25</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very healthy or healthy</td>
<td>77 73</td>
<td>65 62</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

This chapter highlights two significant features of the first two years out of secondary school. Firstly, it reveals the interrelatedness of multiple dimensions of ‘transition’. We have previously taken issue with the tendency for youth studies literature to focus exclusively on ‘the’ transition from school to work (via further education) (see Wyn & Woodman 2006). This chapter illustrates why it is important to recognize the significance of wellbeing in their lives. As we have argued elsewhere (Wyn 2009b), wellbeing is both an individual characteristic and a social process. The evidence presented in this report shows the extent to which these young people strive to maintain their wellbeing. Managing to keep a balance across life creates a sense of stress for many of our participants, particularly for those who have little actual control over their working hours. This can create clashes with university and TAFE timetables and can also mean that they find it difficult to meet with their friends (see Woodman, 2010 for an extended analysis of this dimension of young people’s lives). Although personal relationships, recreation and leisure are important to them, study and work routines can make it difficult to manage everything. This chapter has identified how different groups fare across the complex dimensions of their lives.

Secondly, this chapter has illustrated the powerful impact of structural factors (geographic location, socio-economic status of parents and gender) on their lives. Young people who are able to live with their parents are relieved of the harsh realities of an over-heated housing market. Many are also subsidized in a variety of other ways including the costs of living (food and transport). Young people living at home can also access social support from their parents. This is an important form of assistance because in the period immediately after leaving school young people are making many decisions (e.g. study, employment, relationships, leisure). Yet not all young people are able to benefit from the ‘buffer’ that living in their parents’ home brings. For some, having a close ongoing relationship with parents is not feasible or possible for a range of reasons. Others have to move out of the family home in order to attend university or TAFE. This is particularly the case for young people whose families are in rural or regional areas.

The socio-economic status of parents also exerted a powerful influence. Young people whose parents were in the highest socio-economic group were the most protected from the potential challenges of the first post-school years. They were the least likely to be working in jobs that involved non-standard hours. This meant that they had fewer time conflicts with their studies and they found it easier to have time with friends. Those whose parents paid for them to live in university residential colleges were the most protected from the stresses of managing multiple commitments.

These findings set the scene for our follow-up interviews and surveys with our participants in 2010. We look forward to exploring how well they are managing ‘the balance’ in next few years.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This report provides insights into the lives of young Australians during the first two years after leaving secondary school (2007 and 2008). Through the use of survey and interview data, the report traces their experiences, successes and challenges as they navigate these significant post-school years.

By the end of the second year post-secondary school (2008), 91% of our participants were studying in a university or a TAFE. This means that education plays a central role in the lives of the overwhelming majority of our participants. Never before have so many young Australians been engaged in post-secondary education, and this is a trend that is likely to continue, with state and federal education policies aiming to achieve universal school completion and increasing rates of post-secondary education participation. The ‘compact with young Australians’ initiated in 2009 aims to achieve a 90% rate of completion of Year 12 or the equivalent for young Australians by the year 2015 (COAG, 2009).

Because this research is part of a larger longitudinal study that includes a previous generation, we are able to compare the lives of these young people with the generation who left secondary school 14 years earlier. In chapter two we provide a brief overview of the broader policy and economic context of their lives. Against a backdrop of disappearing full-time jobs for the unqualified and increasing expectations for tertiary educational credentials in most workplaces, these young people were the first to embrace the idea that post-secondary education is an essential tool for securing their futures. As they negotiated the new industrial relations realities of the mid 1990s, including the trend to contract and part-time employment and the disappearance of standard working hours, the theme to emerge from our surveys and interviews with them over the 1990s and 2000s was the quest to keep a balance in life.

In this respect, nothing has changed for our second cohort. Most take for granted the need to become well-qualified and earn post-school educational qualifications, embracing further education in even greater numbers than the first cohort. This means that after leaving secondary school the vast majority continue to be students. However, it would be a mistake to let this status as students obscure the reality that they are also workers, friends, and family members, as well as participants in other activities such as sports, the arts and in civic life.

We emphasise this point because it has become a habit, in policy circles, to characterise young people’s trajectories in very simplistic terms. In the main, the focus of policies on Australian young people is on ‘the’ transition from school to work, with post-secondary education being seen as an essential pathway for ensuring that this transition is
“smooth” (Lamb & Mason 2008). This understanding of the post-secondary school lives of young people is at best an artefact of statistical data that has been cleansed of almost all of the messy elements of real life.

We could construct a narrative, drawing on selected elements of our own statistical data, describing a wonderfully unproblematic trajectory for the majority of our participants, from secondary school into universal participation in post-secondary education.

With the benefit of hindsight that the data from our first cohort provides, we have kept an open mind about the nature of their trajectories, and have attempted to capture what matters to them. This has resulted in a more complex picture of their transition processes, one that warrants greater attention from policy makers in the fields of secondary, further and higher education, health, and the youth sector. We find that the strongest theme to emerge from our data is the struggle to balance the sometimes contradictory demands of the multiple spheres of their lives. This is evident in the extent to which young people experience pressure and stress. The struggle to manage is across three dimensions: financial, temporal and mental.

The financial costs of undertaking post-secondary education are significant. This is mainly met by young people earning money through paid employment and by their families, through direct financial support (loans or gifts) or through subsidies for other living costs. Managing to survive financially is a very significant factor in their lives. The need to both study and work in itself creates a second layer of complexity. Work and study timetables need to be reconciled, and this causes significant stress and pressure for young people. Thirdly, young people need to develop strong coping mechanisms to manage the pressures of finding and keeping jobs, juggling timetables across study and work and finding time to be with people who are important to them. This report documents these struggles in detail.

With a policy focus in mind, we believe that, in answer to the question ‘how are young Australians faring?’, the answer is they are struggling. Policy-makers would be remiss to simply ignore the extent to which young people are bearing the risks of education and labour market policies and the implications these have in their social life and wellbeing.

We suggest that the following areas warrant further attention:

1. **Study and work:**

   By 2008, 65% of our participants relied on part-time study to finance their studies and 17% were working full-time. This means that a total of 82% relied on employment to finance their study. This means that work is not an ‘optional extra’ – it is the main way that young people are able to invest in their own education. Even statistically this does not make for a ‘smooth’ transition ‘from school to work’. Instead, the achievement of a 91% rate of participation is achieved through the management of the complex interface between the demands of being a student and being a worker. We are struck by the extent to which their narratives focus on work instead of study. Getting work is a very high priority. Some have had to defer their studies in order to work (34% are living mainly of personal savings) and others have deferred in order to qualify for the Youth Allowance (32%). For the vast majority, being a student is about juggling work and study timetables and demands, and it is a constant struggle. As their stories reveal, workplaces, eager to have the skill and energy of this young part-time workforce, do not choose to acknowledge that a majority of 19-24 year-olds are also students. Workplaces could do more to provide security for these largely part-time workers, stable hours and recognition that some elements of students’ commitments (e.g. exam timetables) are not negotiable. Although educational institutions are aware of the work status of their participants, not enough recognise that more flexible options need to be provided in order to accommodate their employment. New policy approaches, bridging the outdated silos of education and employment, are needed to ensure that workplaces and educational institutions do more to enable young people are able to be both students and workers.

2. **Family:**

   The transformation in post-secondary educational participation rates is largely supported by families. The crucial role that families play in supporting young people through their post-secondary educational years is very evident from our data.
For a majority of young people, families provide a crucial buffer, providing support for accommodation, financial support, advice, networks and social support. Those who are not able to access family support are amongst the most disadvantaged. Yet, there is little recognition of the extent of inter-generational transfers of resources. In this regard too, the costs of educational and labour market policies are being borne by individual families.

3. Inequalities:

The extent to which the costs of universal post-secondary educational participation are being met by young people and their families sets the scene for unequal outcomes. Already it is apparent that young people from rural areas and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds face the greatest struggle in managing the work-study balance. Their responses to almost all questions reveal the divergence in their experiences. Young people from high socio-economic backgrounds are: more likely than all other participants to say that they are physically and mentally healthy; more likely to say that their post-school years were ‘exciting’; less likely to have full-time work while studying and more than twice as likely as young people from low socio-economic backgrounds to be receiving direct financial support from their parents. Young people from low socio-economic backgrounds were twice as likely as their higher socio-economic peers to be working non-standard hours: night and evening shifts, on weekends and public holidays. Young people from rural areas were more likely than their peers in non-rural areas to draw on the Youth Allowance (if studying) and to be working full-time. These patterns of inequality reflect the differential access to resources amongst our participants. It is definitely harder for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to fund their investment in further education, and they tend to lack the shielding effect that parental resources can provide, that protect their higher socio-economic peers from having to work irregular and non-standard hours. This means that the pressures of managing to study and work are the greatest for those who generally have the least resources. Educational policies could do a lot more to recognise the needs of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and from rural areas.

4. Wellbeing:

Already at this point in time many of the participants in Cohort 2 are concerned about their mental and physical health. Our findings identify systematic pressures on our participants. They have a range of coping mechanisms for managing these stresses. Ultimately however, the pressures on them, if they fail to personally manage to get ‘the balance’ right, can contribute to poor health. Given that we have a new scenario, with unprecedented numbers of young Australian now juggling study and work during their late teens and early twenties, it is time to recognise that this brings new issues to the fore. Mental and physical health are now taking centre-stage in their lives – it is time for our policies to meet this challenge. Furthermore, the experience of the previous generation (Cohort 1) provides important lessons for policy-makers and society at-large: they too spent their twenties juggling work, study and social relationships and in their thirties constructing their own families. Our latest data reveals that these challenging times have had a significant impact in their health, with a quarter of our participants in Cohort 1 feeling at least mentally and physically unhealthy.
Appendix A: A note on methodology

A longitudinal approach

The Life Patterns research program is a longitudinal panel study of young Australians. As we stated in chapter 1, the longitudinal character of our program enables us to examine the impact and nature of social change rather than employing static or single snapshot views and conceptualisations of young people’s lives. This longitudinal approach provides strong based-evidence of significant social processes and changes – for instance, migratory patterns of young people in rural areas to metropolitan centres that unmask the structural barriers faced by these young people in their post-school pursuit of tertiary education and employment.

This research report is based on waves 3 and 4 (2007 and 2008 respectively) of Cohort 2. Where our data allowed us to compare over time the choices and changes taken by our participants, we have taken a longitudinal approach that is reflected in tables and figures throughout the report. There are a few tables where this approach was not possible or pertinent. For instance, in table 1 we decided to present the total numbers of our sample populations in 2007 and 2008 (that is, as two snapshots); or where a question was asked in one wave (e.g. in 2007) but not in the other (e.g. in 2008) (e.g. tables 6, 7 and 9).

Establishing the socio-economic status of our participants

A recent discussion paper by the federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations states the complexity of measuring the socio-economic status (SES) of a person or a group (see DEEWR 2009). It establishes this concept as ‘complex and relative’, varying ‘across time and space’ and expecting to ‘mean different things in different contexts’ (see p. ii). In the Life Patterns research program we have used two variables to assess the socio-economic status of our participants; particularly in the years where they are still at school (e.g. Cohort 2 in 2005) or are just starting their post-school journey. The variables we use are the level of educational attainment and the occupation of the parents of our participants.

Firstly, we ask participants in the survey to select among 7 categories of their father and mother’s highest level of educational attainment. These categories are: ‘not applicable’, ‘less than Year 12’, ‘Year 12’, ‘trade certificate’, ‘university degree’, ‘other tertiary qualification’, and ‘other’ (where participants can specify or introduce another category of which is the highest education level of their parent). Secondly, we ask participants to select among 12 categories of the occupation of their father and mother. Categories varied from ‘qualified professional’, ‘managerial position’ to ‘qualified tradesperson’, ‘clerical/office worker’, ‘salesperson’, ‘factory worker’, ‘home duties’ and ‘unemployed’, among others.

Occupational categories, ‘qualified professional’ or ‘managerial position’, and level of educational attainment categories, ‘university degree’ or ‘other tertiary degree’, were taken as markers of SES. The SES(n) scale is simply the total number of such markers a participant’s parents hold, giving a potential range of 0 (no higher education qualifications, or professional or managerial employment) to 4 (both parents with higher education qualifications, or professional or managerial employment). For ease of comparison, in this research report, three similar size categories were constructed: Low SES (SES(n)=0-1); Medium SES (SES(n)=2) ; High SES (SES(n)=3-4).
References


The Youth Research Centre, established in 1988, is located within the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. The Centre is committed to research that benefits young people, where possible involving them in research. It is also committed to improving practice in the education, youth, health and community sectors. This is achieved through its research and development programs, as well as its role in teaching and research training.

The Centre’s research and development is informed by a holistic approach to young people’s lives in a context of social and economic change, including formal and informal learning settings, work, home and leisure. It seeks to understand the interrelationships between these dimensions of life and young people’s learning, participation, health and wellbeing.

Research and development is organised into three programs:

* Youth Transition
* Youth Participation and Citizenship
* Youth Health and Wellbeing

Projects focus on young people in the middle years of schooling through to young adulthood and on the institutions and organisations that serve their needs, spanning a number of educational phases and working across policy areas. These programs are well-connected to international research collaborations and the Centre undertakes research in international as well as local settings.

The conceptual frame for the Centre’s work is in the field of educational sociology. This provides a basis for inter-disciplinary approaches to research, professional development and teaching, including disciplines such as the arts, health sciences, psychology, education and history. This approach is implemented through partnerships within the Melbourne Graduate School of Education as well as with other faculties and schools at The University of Melbourne and with researchers in other universities in Australia and internationally. The Centre uses innovative methodologies and where possible takes a mixed (quantitative and qualitative) methods approach.

For more information, visit our website: www.education.unimelb.edu.au/yrcc