Young adults’ confidence in Australian institutions

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This Life-Patterns program has maintained a 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 deeply appreciate the generosity, willing engagement and honesty of our participants.
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The Life Patterns research program is designed to follow patterns in people’s lives over time in order to gain a longitudinal and holistic understanding of the ways in which two generations of Australians are responding to our rapidly changing world. The program is based at the Youth Research Centre, in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne.

The generosity and ongoing support of the Life Patterns participants has meant that this study has built up a unique picture of the reality of the lives of two generations.

THE LIFE PATTERNS PROGRAM:

- follows two generations of Australians - one that left secondary school in 1991 (corresponding to the popular notion of ‘Gen X’) and another that left secondary school in 2006 (corresponding to the popular notion of ‘Gen Y’ or the ‘Millennials’). Multiple comparisons can be made between the two cohorts across different points in their lives.
- explores the pathways through different areas of life taken by Australian young people including their experiences in education, the labour market, their family and personal relationships, attitudes to life, concerns, and health and wellbeing.
- provides a unique picture, very different from the stereotypes of smooth transitions from education to work, or of the narcissistic or complacent generation often described in public discourse. We have argued for the importance of paying attention to the diversity of experiences that characterise young people’s lives.
- allows for insights to be drawn that feed into policy advice and also into public debate. Our work is often in the media disputing the simplistic claims about young people.
- was designed to follow patterns in young people’s lives over time in order to gain more than a static glimpse. We are interested in developing a more dynamic picture of young people’s lives rather than a single snapshot in time.

The Life Patterns project is ongoing, thanks to the continued engagement of the participants, and the support of the University of Melbourne and the Australian Research Council.
1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from survey data collected in the first half of 2019 from participants of cohort 2 in the Life Patterns longitudinal research program when they were aged 30-31 years. It focuses on their responses to a question asking them about their levels of confidence in Australian institutions including banks and financial institutions, the Federal Government, the media, trade unions and the legal system. The survey was administered against a backdrop of significant failures of institutional responsibilities impacting on the environment and the economic wellbeing of Australians that were widely publicised. For example, in January 2019, mass fish deaths in the Murray-Darling River system occurred, with graphic images presented in the media. In February, the findings of the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry were released. The defamation case against *The Daily Telegraph* by Geoffrey Rush was won in April 2019.

The findings of a report released in February 2019 by the Australian Academy of Science indicated that the mass fish kills, of up to 1 million fish, which occurred between December 2018 and January 2019 in the Murray-Darling River system were caused by the drought and exacerbated by the over-extraction of water from the rivers (Australian Academy of Science 2019).

The report’s findings were widely reported in the media as were the fish kills. Australians were confronted by the deaths of rarely seen large Murray cod fish and thousands of smaller species of fish. Although confidence in the management of the Murray-Darling Basin by the Federal Government and state governments in Queensland, NSW, Victoria and South Australia diminished, both the NSW state government and the Federal Government were re-elected in 2019.

The final report of the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry (Hayne 2019) was tabled in the Federal Parliament in February 2019. The Royal Commission received over 10,000 submissions. The final report was the result of seven rounds of hearings conducted in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Darwin examining financial products and the conduct of financial institutions. The Commission made 76 recommendations after uncovering a variety of questionable practices including: fees for no service, inappropriate financial advice and improper conduct by financial advisors. The Commission’s hearings and reports were widely covered in the media. These events would have been freshly in the minds of the Life Patterns research participants when they responded to our survey in April and May 2019.
The timely and accurate reporting of events in the media is regarded as fundamental, yet this report shows that less than 1% of participants had a great deal of confidence in the media and more than a quarter had no confidence at all. In 2019, our participants’ levels of confidence in the Federal Government’s capacity to act in their interests and those of the country was very low, with 80% of participants saying that they had little, or no confidence in the government, nearly a quarter expressing little confidence in Australia’s financial institutions and one in four saying they had no confidence in the Australian political system. Yet other institutions continue to have the confidence of Life Patterns participants. The police force and the armed forces, in which 21% participants reported that they had ‘a great deal of confidence’ were the only institutions about which participants expressed strong confidence, with universities a distant second with 9% expressing ‘a great deal of confidence’.

Since that time, other significant events that have tested the strength of Australia’s governance and the quality of Australia’s institutions include the bushfires in December 2019 and January and February 2020 that devastated an unprecedented 12.6 million hectares of land, killed 33 people and one billion animals. Furthermore, 11.3 million people were affected by the smoke as it spread inland (Werner & Lyons 2020). Images of people stranded on beaches on the south coast of NSW waiting to be evacuated did little to inspire confidence in the ability of institutions to cope with crises. Then in March, a cruise ship, the Ruby Princess, with ill passengers arrived in Sydney during the COVID-19 pandemic. Around 2600 passengers were allowed to disembark without any health checks. By May 2020, 22 deaths and almost 700 COVID-19 cases had been linked to the Ruby Princess (McKinnell 2020; Noyes & Ward 2020). Against this backdrop, the level of public confidence in Australia’s institutions remains a significant issue. The findings presented here provide a troubling snapshot in time of young adults’ levels of confidence in the institutions that govern their lives.
In 2019, the annual survey was completed by 494 cohort 2 participants aged 30-31 years. In 2019, 154 (31%) participants were men and 340 (69%) were women. The majority of participants were living in metropolitan centres (57%), 24.5% were living in regional cities, 16% were living in rural areas and 2% were living overseas. Over three-quarters had at least one university qualification and 63.4% were employed on a full-time basis – see Appendix.

Female participants were more likely than their male peers to live in regional cities and less likely than their male peers to live in rural areas – see Figure 1.

With regards to highest level of education, female participants were more likely than their male peers to have at least one university qualification – see Figure 2.
Despite being more likely than their male peers to have university level qualifications, female participants were less likely to be employed on a full-time basis: 80% of male participants compared to 55% of female participants were employed full-time - see Figure 3.

**FIGURE 2. HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION BY GENDER**

**FIGURE 3. EMPLOYMENT STATUS BY GENDER**
When participants were asked about their levels of confidence in various Australian institutions, they were provided with four answer options ranging from ‘a great deal of confidence’ to ‘no confidence at all’. The responses varied considerably according to the institution in question. For example, 21% had a great deal of confidence in the armed forces and the police whereas less than 1% [0.2%] had a great deal of confidence in the media; the Federal Government [0.6%] or the Australian political system [0.6%].

Around one in four participants indicated that they had no confidence at all in the media, the Australian political system or the Federal Government. Less than 5% reported having no confidence in universities, the police or the public service.

### TABLE 1. LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE IN EACH INSTITUTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>A great deal of confidence</th>
<th>Quite a lot of confidence</th>
<th>Not very much confidence</th>
<th>None at all</th>
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<tr>
<td>Armed forces</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Legal system</td>
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<td>47.1</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
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<td>Media</td>
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<td>14.1</td>
<td>60.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trade unions</td>
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<td>35.0</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>11.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
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<td>Federal government</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>25.1</td>
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<td>Public service</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
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<td>41.7</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banks and financial institutions</td>
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<td>26.5</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian political system</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### WHAT YOUNG ADULTS SAY

Participants were asked to provide comments and many took the opportunity to explain why they had so little confidence in some Australian institutions. After conducting a content analysis of these comments, we found that two institutions topped the list of concerns: the Federal Government and the media. Given the percentages who expressed having no confidence in these two institutions, this is not surprising.

Many participants were disillusioned with the media finding them unreliable, motivated by financial gain and generally not serving the public interest. For example:

*Media is very biased, and journalists don’t deserve their title, as they don’t do investigative work. Media is misleading* [female participant with a university degree living with her partner in a capital city].

*Traditional media and social media are not reliable organisations and fail to take responsibility for their social impact* [female participant with a university degree living in a capital city].

*Media is now only motivated by money. Genuine journalists are few & far between. It’s hard to know who to trust anymore* [female participant with a university degree living with her partner in a capital city].

*Media: I am utterly disillusioned with the right of Australian politics and the Murdoch newspapers’ erosion of our democracy, and it is shaping my future life goals. I now want to detach from active involvement in community and urban life because I feel like the cards are stacked against a fair, progressive and reasonable society* [male participant with a post-graduate degree living with his partner in a capital city].
On the other hand, a few participants indicated that their distrust of the media did not apply to all media outlets. For example:

I trust some media outlets (like the ABC) but don’t have much trust in others [female with a university degree living with her partner in a capital city].

Some participants commented on how the media amplifies the lack of confidence in politics. For example:

Our politics at the moment is a complete shambles bent on corporate greed and division... media isn’t helping as it sensationalises unimportant issues and buries that which really matter [female with a university degree living with her partner in a regional city].

The big issues of nationalism & climate change, further pushed aside by the media, a largely Rupert Murdoch owned media, which it seems like he controls what happens across the world [female with a post-graduate degree living with her partner in a capital city].

The lack of confidence in the Federal Government was summed up in comments such as:

The government, in particular, is failing us when it comes to the issues that are important to us - affordability (housing, life needs, etc), social justice (asylum seekers, homelessness) and the environment [female participant with a university degree living with her partner in a capital city].

Australian political system needs changing, we are not achieving or heading to the correct direction as a country [male participant with a VET certificate living with his partner in a country town].

Australia needs a new political system. It’s become about politicians keeping themselves employed rather than doing things to help the country long term. The latter should determine the former. [female participant with a VET certificate living with her partner in a capital city].

The Australian Government situation is a joke... The inconsistency within the leadership party has probably held up our progress as a country over the last 10 years or so [female participant with a university degree living with her partner in a capital city].

Politics in this country appears to be based on short term gains. I believe politicians know what they need to do but lack the political will to do it for fear of being voted out.... particularly in the example of the environment [male participant with a university degree living with his partner in a regional city].

On the other hand, some regarded the current state of politics as an outcome of general apathy towards public institutions. For example:

I believe the current apathy around politics and public institutions is in part to be blamed on the electorate not seeking to influence their elected officials effectively but rather seeking attention for their complaints in public arenas like social media [male with a post-graduate degree living in a capital city].

However, there was a general view that the Federal Government was not tackling the big challenges that require immediate attention. As a female with a post-graduate degree living with her partner in a capital city noted:

Our government is avoiding the hard issues, especially relating to the environment. I don’t want to know what the effects will be if we do nothing, however, we are currently seeing more natural disasters such as increased bushfires, flooding, storm events, heatwaves and our health care system struggling with influenza (let alone pandemics).
The graph in Figure 4 shows the percentage of male and female participants who had no confidence at all in each of the selected institutions. Overall, male participants were more likely than their female peers to report having no confidence in these Australian institutions.

In particular, men were more likely to report having no confidence in the media: 33.8% compared to 22%; the Federal Government: 30% compared to 22.9%; and trade unions: 16.7% compared to 9%.

**FIGURE 4 PERCENTAGE WITH NO CONFIDENCE IN EACH INSTITUTION BY GENDER**

![Graph showing percentage with no confidence by gender for different institutions](image)
In recognition of the strong representation of university-educated participants in our study, we looked more closely into the responses by educational level. We divided educational levels into three groups: Post-graduate degree; Bachelor degree; Other education (school and Vocational Education and Training [VET]).

The graph in Figure 5 shows the level of confidence in the selected institutions according to highest level of education. Almost 40% of participants who did not have a university level qualification reported having no confidence at all in the Australian political system.

This group of participants were also more likely than their university-educated peers to report having no confidence in the media, the Federal Government or the legal system. However, university-educated participants were more likely than those with other levels of education to indicate that they had no confidence at all in banks and financial institutions and in trade unions.
5. LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE ACCORDING TO EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The graph in Figure 6 shows the level of confidence in the selected institutions according to employment status. Participants who were employed on a full-time basis were more likely to report having no confidence at all in the media than their peers who were not employed or who were employed on a part-time basis.

Employed participants were more likely than participants who were not employed to report having no confidence in the Federal Government, the Australian political system, banks and financial institutions or trade unions. Participants who were not employed were more likely than their employed peers to indicate that they had no confidence at all in major Australian companies. Of the participants who were not employed, no-one reported having no confidence at all in universities or the police.

FIGURE 6 PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WITH NO CONFIDENCE IN EACH OF THE INSTITUTIONS ACCORDING TO EMPLOYMENT STATUS
6. DISCUSSION

To make sense of these findings, we firstly provide a brief summary of the key points, and then draw on a series of previously published reports to discuss the findings. We draw on three publications that enable us to point to some of the reasons for the lack of confidence that cohort 2 Life Patterns participants have expressed in many of Australia’s key institutions. These publications are: *Youth and the New Adulthood: Generations of Change* (Wyn, J., Cahill, H., Woodman, D., Cuervo, H., Leccardi, C., and Chesters, J. 2020); *Examining the most important issues in Australia: similarities and differences across generations* (Chesters, J., Cook, J., Cuervo, H., and Wyn, J. 2018); and *Gen Y on Gen Y* (Wyn, J., Cahill, H., Woodman, D., Cuervo, H., Chesters, J., Cook, J., and Reade, J. 2017).

More than one quarter of participants stated that they had no confidence in the Federal Government and the media. On the positive side, universities and the police force enjoyed high levels of confidence with less than 4% of participants stating that they had no confidence in these two institutions. Both the police and the armed forces were seen as deserving a ‘great deal of confidence’ by 21% of respondents. Life Patterns participants are equivocal about the legal system, the public service and trade unions. For example, 35% expressed ‘quite a lot of confidence’, but nearly 60% expressed ‘not very much confidence’/‘no confidence’ in trade unions.

Taking a closer look at the issues that concern Life Patterns participants and the challenges in their lives. The report, *Examining the most important issues in Australia: similarities and differences across generations* (Chesters et al. 2018), is based on survey data collected in 2017 from cohort 1 participants (aged 43 – 44 years) and cohort 2 (aged 28 – 29 years). Responding to an open text question on the survey, participants nominated the three most important issues facing Australia. One issue, the environment and climate change, overwhelmingly dominated the responses of both cohorts, with nearly 40% nominating this as the most important issue for Australia. Other areas of concern tended to be associated with the life stage of the participants in the two cohorts. For cohort 1, the other most important issues were the cost of living, security and terrorism, education and the economy. For cohort 2, the other most important issues were the lack of jobs/job security, drug abuse, housing affordability and health.
The 2018 report noted the rare intergenerational consensus about the environment as the number one issue for Australia. But perhaps more importantly, the report noted the high level of despair and frustration expressed by both cohorts about the lack of leadership by all levels of government. The following two quotes (Chesters et al. 2018: 6) illustrate this frustration:

“Government inaction on climate change in this country is a crying shame. Look at what they are doing in terms of addressing climate change in California, in Germany, in Scandinavia, even in China! But here it’s all too hard apparently.” [male participant, cohort 1]

“I’m concerned about the environment & the lack of action by government to fix problems.” [female participant, cohort 2]

The sense of frustration and despair about the lack of political leadership to address the existential threat posed by climate change, as well as the weakening nexus between educational qualifications and employment outcomes is echoed in the report Gen Y on Gen Y (Wyn et al. 2017). This report, which focuses specifically on cohort 2, analyses the results of a workshop held in 2016 with participants when they were aged 27-28. Through a series of facilitated discussion groups and activities, the participants identified the challenges their generation faces and the strategies they use to survive. In the report Gen Y on Gen Y, it is clear that these young adults feel that their generation is stereotyped as being lazy and selfish by the media and the lack of employment security, poor housing options and the expectations by employers of long working hours contribute to high levels of stress. They overwhelmingly see the complexity, stress and insecurity that characterise their lives as a personal responsibility, to be managed through strategies of their own making, placing little faith in the institutions that dominate their lives to bring improvements.

Despite this, participants in cohort 2 also confirmed their interest in the ‘bigger picture’, to contribute to a better future, summed up by one participant (Wyn et al. 2017: 11) as:

“One thing that I feel like might be a bit more unique to our generation is that I think we all feel like we can make a difference to the world and that I think is a positive thing. It means that we have our minds placed on something else rather than just our own wealth and security. I know there’s a lot of conversations there about environment and climate change, change in the media, things like that.” [female participant, cohort 2].

As Cahill and Leccardi (2020) argue, the lack of confidence that the young adults in cohort 2 of the Life Patterns research program express is the flip side of new forms of resilience through which young adults manage their lives. Drawing on a workshop with Life Patterns cohort 2 participants in 2018, Cahill and Leccardi (2020: 67) report the overwhelming sense of a ‘mismatch between past expectations, present realities and unpredictable futures’ which foster feelings of anxiety. Cahill and Leccardi argue that to craft an intelligible life, young adults practice a form of resilience that involves making ‘daily and future life meaningful without reliance of traditional discourses and timelines, and the willingness to accept contradictions and ambiguities as opportunities’ (Cahill and Leccardi, 2020: 67). Against this backdrop, the formal institutions of politics and governance have become to be seen as less relevant to their lives. This includes trade unions that have traditionally been an important source of support for working people and a force for the conservation of the environment. Education, however, remains a key strategy for young people, both as an investment in a credential that they hope will have value, and as a space in which to foster the intellectual and practical tools they require to be resilient.
7. CONCLUSION

Drawing on survey data from the first half of 2019, this report raises important questions about the levels of confidence that Australia’s young adults have in Australian institutions. The low levels of confidence in the Federal Government, banks and financial institutions, major Australian companies, the political system and the media signal that there is little trust in Australia’s governance and in many of Australia’s key institutions. Higher levels of confidence are seen in the police force, the legal system, the armed forces and universities.

The snapshot in time captured by this report is troubling because it highlights a widening gap between the collective goals of young Australians (a sustainable environment, income and housing security, good physical and mental health) and confidence in the institutional supports for these goals. Faced with the task of making life meaningful, young Australians may, as Cahill and Leccardi (2020) suggest, be developing a form of ‘resilience on the run’ which draws on the capacity to improvise, in the face of unpredictability and contingency.

By late 2019 and in 2020, the catastrophic bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic will have influenced young people’s attitudes to the Federal Government and the media, banks and financial institutions, trade unions and major Australian companies. This report suggests that these events, like others that occur subsequently, will feed into an existing gulf between the goals of young Australians and the practices of many of Australia’s key institutions, and the sense that Australia’s political and business leaders are not willing to tackle the issues that are most important to young adults.
8. REFERENCES


## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

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