

Life Patterns Project

Pathways in Adult Life:

Summary Report on the 2014 Survey of
participants in cohort 2

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PATHWAYS IN ADULT LIFE:

SUMMARY REPORT ON THE 2014 SURVEY

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Photo: Jessica Crofts

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of the survey you completed earlier this year. The survey is part of an ongoing research project by the Youth Research Centre at The University of Melbourne. It explores the pathways through different areas of life taken by Australian young people, including their experiences in education, the workplace, their family and personal relationships, attitudes to life, and health and wellbeing. With your contribution we are able to provide valuable insights that can inform governments, social institutions, and your generation.

This report takes a longitudinal view to provide a perspective on how you have fared over the last year at work, studying, in your social relationships and your wellbeing and living arrangements, and how this compares with previous years. This enables us to understand what has changed for your generation and what has not, and how the different elements of your lives are related.



SAMPLE AND LIVING SITUATION

This report is based on the responses of 616 participants from Victoria, Tasmania, the ACT and New South Wales. Participants were aged 25-26 years in 2014. In the last two surveys, we have noted an increase in the proportion of participants who complete the survey online compared to those who complete the printed survey. Like last year, 40% of surveys were completed online. Consistent with previous years, there were more women respondents than men (68% to 32%), and 63% of participants lived in a metropolitan area, with the rest distributed mostly in regional centres and country towns. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants involved in this wave of the survey.

Table 1. Composition of the group in 2014, aged 25-26(%)

Female	68
Male	32
Metropolitan centre	63
Regional centre	22
Country town	11
Rural, not in a town	4

Over the last six years the proportion of you who have moved into independent living arrangements has increased. In 2014, fewer participants live at home with their parents and rely on direct support from their family as a main source of financial support than in the previous five years. Full-time work continues to increase as the main source of financial support, and more people are in a relationship (either married, in an on-going or in a de facto relationship) than in the previous years – although this has remained stable since last year (with the difference that there has been a slight shift towards more people getting married). Table 2 shows the trend towards more independent living over the last six years.

Table 2. Living arrangements, relationships and financial status, 2009-2014, aged 20-26 (%)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Living arrangements						
Living at home with parents	63	58	50	45	38	31
Living in a share house	20	25	30	27	24	22
Living on your own	4	4	4	6	9	11
Living with your partner	9	13	17	22	29	37
Civil status						
Single, unattached	60	56	44	48	43	42
Married	1	1	3	4	7	11
In an on-going relationship	33	38	37	40	40	37
In a de-facto relationship	4	6	8	10	13	12
Sources of financial support						
Full-time work	20	27	40	55	64	70
Part-time work	62	58	47	34	25	23
Direct family support	34	29	21	12	9	9

In addition to the data presented in Table 2, analysis of your responses shows that several trends remain stable from last year survey. For instance, males (37%) are currently more likely to be living at home with their parents than females (29%), while females are more likely to be living with their partner (41% vs. 29%). Those that are currently studying are slightly more likely to be living with their parents than those that are not (35% vs. 30%). Finally, in terms of 'civil status', women are more likely to be married (12% vs. 7%) and in a de-facto relationship (14% vs. 8%) than men.



EDUCATION

The analysis of this survey reaffirms the high rate of participation in post-secondary school studies for this cohort. In 2014 a majority of participants (77%) have completed a post-secondary school qualification (compared with 23% of all Australians aged 20 - 24 in 2011) with 54% of the total sample already holding a bachelor degree from a university (compared with 14% of Australians aged 20 – 24 in 2011) and approximately a quarter holding a TAFE degree (Foundation for Young Australians, 2013: 13). Also, 12% of the total sample has completed a bachelor and a postgraduate degree, while another 13% that are currently studying are on track to achieve it too. An important minority of participants have not continued or gained a post-school qualification (17% of total sample). Table 3 shows these education patterns:

Table 3. Level of education achieved by 2014, aged 25-26 (%)

Level of education achieved by 2014	% of total sample
No post-school study	17
Bachelor degree only	28
TAFE degree only	14
TAFE & Bachelor degree	1
Bachelor degree & postgraduate degree	12
Still studying, no degree yet	3
Still studying, towards a 2nd degree (a TAFE degree)	4
Still studying, towards a 2nd degree (a Bachelor degree)	8

Forging a link between education and work has been an enduring theme of this study. We found this to be a defining issue for participants in cohort 1, the cohort that we have been following since 1991. For many of them, finding a job in their field of study became an elusive quest, despite having achieved a tertiary education qualification. For your cohort, at least 66% have stated that you are working in your field of study (an increase from 2012, where it was at 57%), while 64% said that their educational qualification has helped them to find a job (up from 54% in 2012). While these are positive trends, there is still a significant group that are finding it hard to find a job in their field of study, and we have read many examples of the struggle to get the right job in the comments on your surveys. Thirty-five percent of participants with a tertiary education qualification affirmed that there are very few jobs in their area of study. Further, 15% have stated that they have not been able to find jobs in their area of study and that they are already looking outside their area of expertise due to lack of jobs in it.

Finally, our analysis shows that those living in urban places, and those studying or working part-time were less likely to find a job in their field of study than their counterparts who were in rural areas or were studying or working full time. Thus, while studying might pay off in terms of employment opportunities for some participants, the route is far from smooth. The following quotes illustrate the experiences shared by many participants.

Currently, I have settled for work outside of my field of study though occasionally pick up once off jobs that relate to my studied field. The importance of regular guaranteed work and income has forced me to settle in a job outside of my area of study.

(Urban, male, TAFE degree)

I studied Engineering at Uni and was looking for work in Engineering for 12 months before ending the job I am still in now (engineering). For many of my fellow students from uni they are either in jobs unrelated to engineering or looking to complete further study in a different field for lack of available work in engineering.

(Rural, male, bachelor degree)

I am no longer looking for work in the area that I studied. I looked for work in the first 6 months after completing my studies but was unable to get a job in my field. I therefore settled in the job that I was doing during my studies (admin). I am comfortable in this job now and focusing on other things for the future, for example family.

(Urban, female, bachelor and postgraduate degree)

We turn now our attention to the sphere of work to continue highlighting the interrelationship between the different spheres of life.



EMPLOYMENT

This year's survey has not presented any surprises in relation to the persistent flow from part-time to full-time work. More of you are working full-time than three years ago (from 39% in 2011 to 68% in 2014) and part-time employment has halved from 33% in 2011 to 17% in 2014. In terms of status of employment, the trend is from non-permanent to permanent work for most of the participants. Table 4 illustrates this trend.

Table 4. Employment status 2009 – 2014, (%)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Permanent	34	40	46	52	60	63
Renewable contract position	3	5	8	9	9	11
Limited term contract	3	4	6	6	5	7
Sessional or casual	47	37	29	21	16	12
Not applicable	13	13	10	9	8	7
Other	1	1	1	2	2	1

Comments by some participants illustrate the trend towards more secure employment in their mid-twenties. While some participants enjoy the stability and standard hours that are associated with some full-time work, others value flexibility at work, which for some enables a better distribution of their time. Nonetheless, some participants commented on job insecurity or the long hours they feel they are expected to work as a trade-off for a good job.

Positively, I am financially secure. I feel as if my job is secure. The only negative is I've discovered it's a job not a career.

(Urban, female, full-time work, civil drafter)

At this time, the flexibility in my work conditions is great because it enables me to focus on my studies. Going forward, I would like greater certainty, that is, ongoing work.

(Urban, female, part-time work, administration)

I work the usual 9-5 full time hours. I feel very lucky that my boss is flexible and understanding and it is not expected that I stay back late like many graduates often find themselves in. My boss encourages work/life balance. This is my dream job, so I hope I can continue to develop this into an ongoing long lasting career. I would hope not to have to revert to ever working unpaid internships now that I have a salary income as I feel after doing so many unpaid internships, I have earned my stripes.

(Urban, female, full-time work, music supervisor)

Self-employed is good as work is as flexible as you want it to be. However the nature of farming is very busy and often long hours, continuous days without breaks. This can lead to added stress.

(Rural, male, full-time work, farming)

Table 4 shows the progression towards more stable employment for a majority, but many participants still have not achieved security in their work. At least a third of participants do not have a permanent job. Issues of work instability and insecurity are not just related to patterns of type of employment (permanent vs. non-permanent) but they are also reflected in the proportion of participants working irregular hours and shifts works. This continues to be a major concern for participants across the board. For example, like last year, at least seven out of ten participants who are employed are working some form of irregular hours. Table 5 reveals the working conditions for those participants that have been employed from 2009-2014.

Table 5. Working conditions 2009 – 2014, Aged 20-26 (%)

Does your work ever involve...	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Working night or evening shifts	54	51	51	47	44	44
Weekend work	72	67	67	59	59	57
Working public holidays	58	51	50	46	43	40
Variability in when you work	N/A	N/A	27	33	42	42
Not applicable	22	24	5	30	27	24
Other non standard shifts	5	4	5	4	4	6

Table 5 shows that over the last six years a significant proportion of participants have worked irregular hours. Similarly to last year survey, working irregular hours was most common among those in part-time work, in jobs not related to their field of study, in non-permanent employment positions and those still studying (particularly those doing it full-time). The conditions of irregular work have an impact in other spheres of participants' lives, including wellbeing and the capacity to sustain relationships that matter to them, as the following quotes illustrate.

My working conditions cause me a fair amount of stress and anxiety. My irregular hours (as a casual) means that I am always worried about whether I will have enough hours in the next fortnight to pay my bills and for food. Certain times of the year are quieter than others, which is always stressful. I feel like I need to always be as available as possible - not taking sick days or leave, working the weekend and late shifts, often at short notice, to maintain a sense of job security and try and improve my chances of getting work in the future.

(Urban, female, part-time work, librarian)

My working conditions dictate my other life commitments – for example study, social life, exercise. They can be very exhausting and stressful but I cannot do my job and training without accepting these conditions.

(Urban, female, full-time work, medical practitioner)

Working conditions are demanding and additional hours (worked for free) are not often acknowledged and never rewarded. For the last year and a half, I have worked roughly 360 hours in unpaid overtime and for the last 9 months have been paid below the minimum award rate (this has very recently been addressed and my employer has agreed to back pay me to the minimum, but overtime hours are unpaid). To be working so hard for so little makes me feel miserable about my self-worth.

(Urban, female, full-time work, architect)

Sometimes I find it annoying that my schedule is always changing and that I don't have set shifts. My boyfriend doesn't like that I work weekends and at times I feel guilty about that as that is the time that he has off and we could spend time together.

(Urban, female, casual work, retail)

While working irregular hours and in non-secure jobs is a source of stress for some participants, others have progressed in their working career and feel a sense of accomplishment or that they are in the right track. This means that the labour market is more complex than ever and those traditional securities provided by class position or educational achievement might not be guarantee of stable work in the present. Table 6 shows some interesting patterns related to how participants are experiencing work.

Table 6. To what extent do you agree with the following statement about your current work, by "strongly agree" and "agree" only, Aged 25-26 (%)

	In 2014
The pay is good	67
Chance for promotion are good	42
Job security is good	68
The work is interesting	77
It gives me a feeling of accomplishment	76
My work is psychologically stressful	51
It is what I expected to have at this stage	53
My work is physically stressful	29

While two thirds of participants are satisfied with their current pay and job security, and three quarters feel a sense of accomplishment and that work in an interesting position, half of participants find work psychologically stressful. This is a concerning sign that relates to poorer mental health trends over the year that we address next. We now turn our attention to issues related to wellbeing and broader goals in life.

WELLBEING AND GOALS IN LIFE

In terms of looking from the past to the present, we asked participants how they felt about their progress in life. We found that 39% were happy enough with what they have achieved and 23% felt real fulfilment in what they were doing. Interestingly, of those who said they were happy with their achievements, those in full-time work (47%) were more likely to reflect this happiness than those in part-time work (25%). Participants were also asked about their priorities in life since leaving school. Table 7 reflects these patterns.

Table 7. Your priorities since leaving school (mark only one option), Aged 25-26 (%)

	In 2014
To pursue a career	24
To hold an ongoing job	14
The broader context of life	24
To rethink my priorities	6
To keep a balance of commitments	31

While pursuing a career is important, like the previous cohort, keeping a balance in life is paramount for your generation. As the quotes above show, this has been an elusive quest for many participants – an issue that is reflected below in the health trends. Tables 8 and 9 illustrate how participants rate their physical and mental health. In general, while some of you report being healthy, there is a significant minority (of between 13% and 18%) who say they do not feel they are physically or mentally healthy.

Table 8. Physical health 2012-2014, (%)

	2012	2013	2014
Very unhealthy	3	2	3
Unhealthy	11	15	16
Neutral	18	21	15
Healthy	50	49	51
Very healthy	18	13	15

Table 9. Mental health 2012-2014, (%)

	2012	2013	2014
Very unhealthy	3	4	4
Unhealthy	11	13	19
Neutral	26	24	20
Healthy	46	45	44
Very healthy	14	13	13



In general terms, there has been a decrease in participants' mental and physical health over the last three years. It is concerning that the proportion of participants indicating they have poor mental health has increased from 14% in 2012 to 23% in 2014. If we add the category of neutral, we would find that at least 43% of participants are unable to state that they feel mentally healthy or very healthy.

Feeling the pressure of study, work, financial hardship, and being away from family, relatives and friends has been an enduring theme over the years, negatively influencing mental health. While some of you exercise regularly to manage stress and keep fit and/or feel on-track with your goals in life; others are finding it hard to balance different spheres of life. Here are some quotes that illustrate these different experiences.

There are very few jobs in the legal industry at the moment. Many graduates are looking for work in other industries out of necessity... I am not employed in 2014. Being unemployed causes me to feel stressed over finances.

(Urban, female, unemployed).

My previous job was taxing on my mental & physical health. It was isolating, and hard to eat properly as I did not get breaks (therefore skipping meals). Since starting my new job in the last 3 months I already feel a big improvement on my health and well-being. I have plenty of supporting co-workers. I get breaks and paid meals.

(Regional, female, full-time work)

Prior to completing my degree I was under a lot of stress & unhealthy both physically & emotionally. On top of studying, I was working 7 part time jobs or internships at one time which didn't leave a lot of room to think about my health. I was in a constant state of stress, not eating as nutritiously as I could and did not have time to exercise. I also didn't have a great deal of time to focus on social & romantic relationships. My life is the complete opposite now. Everything is harmonious and I feel mentally & emotionally happy & stable. I have also begun to focus on my fitness. I feel great.

(Urban, female, full-time work)

The quotes above reaffirm a common pattern in your generation. As more participants leave education behind to enter and pursue the labour market in full-time positions, work continues to have an impact on their wellbeing. We also asked about body image issues for which more than half (52%) expressed it has been or is an issue in your lives. Here are some quotes that reflect how many of you work hard to maintain a healthy life and body:

Self-esteem and body image have been of question and concern in the past 12 months. By improving my general health and wellbeing I believe that self-worth will improve and a greater feeling of happiness with life in general will be achieved.

(Urban, female, full-time work)

Whilst I do not feel body image affects me greatly, I have increased my exercise regime. I now exercise 3-4 times a week. This is partly body image but is mostly due to watching my family develop health issues associated with weight as they age... unhealthy eating and lack of exercise over the years has had a detrimental effect.

(Urban, male, full-time work)

I'm not concerned with how I look, however I'm concerned with my overall health. Since I started studying part time last year while continuing to work full time I have noticed that I am not maintaining healthy eating habits and am not physically active as what I used to be.

(Urban, female, full-time work)



GENERAL LIFE ISSUES

The last question of the survey asked you to reflect and comment on issues that matter to you and that might or might not have been covered in previous questions. In the last two surveys, but particularly in 2013, we have found that costs of living and housing affordability are common concerns for your generation. Some similar patterns can be found in this year survey. These quotes summarise this generational feeling.

Firstly, the stress involved in working full time and the expectations it brings are physically, mentally, and emotionally draining. It makes it difficult to relax on the weekends and the nature of my role leaves little time after work to pursue leisure activities. On a philosophical level, it seems strange that there are expectations to achieve and work extremely hard, and yet, these acts do little to fulfil me in my work or in my life. Perhaps it's an isolated occurrence, but it is draining.

(Urban, male, full-time work)

I literally cannot afford to buy property in Sydney on my current income, which is an average income. If house/unit prices continue to outgrow wage rises, I will never be in a position to buy property. I am sick of renting and as a result moved back into my parent's house.

(Urban, female, full-time work)

When I graduated I thought the whole world was at my feet. It's definitely not. I need to work harder than I thought I would, make tougher decisions than I thought I would, accept worse financial conditions than I thought I would, and work for less-inspirational people than I thought I would. For a long time this frustrated me immensely; I'm now starting to accept, but I also see that this situation shouldn't prevent me from setting out to do something great with my life. It'll likely just take a little longer than expected.

(Regional city, female, full-time work)

While you and your cohort continue to negotiate the opportunities and challenges of these aspects of life, we hope to keep working with you to continue the task of building a well-informed picture of you and your generation.

**We appreciate and thank you for your contribution
and we look forward to seeing how future years
go for you and the group**

**For more information on the Life Patterns Project
visit our website:**

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