

**JOURNEYING THROUGH  
THE NINETIES:  
The Life-Patterns Project 1991-2000**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1: The Life-Patterns Project: Survey 2000</b>	<b>7</b>
The Survey Sample	7
Individual Progress	7
Broader Issues	9
On Balance	11
<b>Chapter 2: Destiny: The Influence Of Gender And Family Background</b>	<b>14</b>
Study Choices	15
Career Outcomes	17
Implications	19
Summary	23
<b>Chapter 3: Destinations: Looking Back Over The Decade</b>	<b>24</b>
Retracing the Journeys	26
Career Details	28
<b>Chapter 4: Questioning Youth</b>	<b>35</b>
Continuities	35
Discontinuities	37
Research Preserves	38
A Question of Balance	41
<b>References</b>	<b>46</b>

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# INTRODUCTION

**A**t the beginning of the 1990s the transitions of young Australians into adult life were a major focus of national education policy. Their transitions were represented through the imagery of 'pathways'. There appeared to be three different 'routes': there was the old main road directly into the workforce and other adult pursuits - one less used now but still taken by early school leavers; there was the vocational education and training route towards the establishment of working careers and an adult way of life; and there was the super-highway through the university giving direct access to 'the knowledge society' of the 21st century.

During this period, the Youth Research Centre has been directly involved in a process of documenting these various transitions with a view to assessing the suitability of the pathways image accepted at a policy level. Our major research projects have placed particular emphasis on the sense young people themselves make of the pathways they take, whether the stated goals of policy square with their aspirations and outcomes, and whether the delivery of programs allows sufficiently for changes of interest and vocational focus on the part of particular individuals. By the year 2000 the young people who have participated in those projects are well into their late twenties, and this is therefore an appropriate time to draw together the different strands of evidence to form what is in effect a ten-year overview of their post-school journeys and outcomes.

That is the purpose of this Report. It begins with the latest findings from our Year 2000 survey of the participants in the Life-Patterns Project and thus provides an up-to-date picture of what life is like for those who finished their schooling in 1991 and are now in their late-twenties and establishing themselves in adult life. The next two chapters tease out some of the implications of these findings and the life-patterns that have emerged as we have come to the close of a ten-year record from 1991 to 2000. The final chapter broadens the perspective and looks at some of the comparative evidence from other nations which suggests that many of the conventional research and policy assumptions about young people's transitions to adulthood are increasingly out of touch with the realities of their experience and the choices they are making as they shape a new adulthood for themselves.

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## Chapter 1

# THE LIFE-PATTERNS PROJECT: Survey 2000

The annual survey for the year 2000 brings to an end our ten-year profile of a representative sample of young Victorians who completed high school at the end of 1991. This chapter gives details on this year 2000 survey for the Life-Patterns Project, and identifies some key factors in the survey findings.

### The Survey Sample

The consistency of our sample is evident from the rate of returns into the late 1990s, with 1334 respondents in 1997, 1430 in 1998, 1296 in 1999 and 1126 in 2000. Although the returns over this period have been lower than for 1996, the basic features of the sample have largely remained intact as can be seen below.

**Table 1. Sample Compatibility: 1996-2000 (%)**

Indicator	1996 n= 1926	1998 n= 1430	2000 n= 1126
Government school	60	56	58
Female	65	66	67
Australian-born Mother	65	65	67
Father: Professional/Managerial	33	34	34
Mother: University Qualified	13	14	15
Rural	33	31	34
Interrupted studies	15	12	12

### Individual Progress

By this year, the participants in our study are about 27 years-of-age and have now come to the end of ten years of post-school transition. The responses have continued the pattern of individual progress displayed in previous years. By now 40% of our sample have formed an on-going relationship (18% married) and 8% have had children. Over the years, 48% have spent at least a month overseas, 28% had moved out of the family home and later returned, while a third have obtained a housing loan.

**Table 2. Events since leaving school**

	%
spent a month or more overseas	48
moved out of the family's home	76
returned to live at the family's home	28
done post-school study or training	83
obtained a housing loan	33
married	18
formed an on-going de facto relationship	22
had a child	8
separated or divorced	2

The proportion finding 'real fulfilment' has steadily increased from 28% to 34% over the past 3 years. There are, however, 16% who are finding progress hard to make, with 7% still facing difficulties and 9% who feel a lack of achievement.

**Table 3. Responses to Progress**

	2000	1999	1998
I'm happy enough with where I've reached	38	40	34
I feel real fulfilment in what I'm doing	34	28	28
It's proving difficult to feel fulfilment	7	6	6
I don't feel I'm achieving what I want	9	19	11
I expect things to improve in the near future	13	14	18

There has been further improvement in job outcomes. While 7% are still having difficulty finding an on-going job, those with permanency have grown from 59% in 1998 to 68% in the year 2000. Three-quarters had a number of jobs over the past five years, but have now found full-time jobs. For over 60%, these jobs are related to their field of study and are viewed as an on-going commitment.

**Table 4. Job Outcome (%)**

	2000
permanent	68
full-time	76
more than one job in past 5 years	76
job directly related to field of study	61
job an on-going commitment	67

Usually in discussions about 'career paths', a career job is defined as: permanent, and full-time, and an on-going commitment. Putting these three elements together, we find that 50% fulfil these criteria, with males (56%) doing noticeably better than females (48%).

**Table 5. Full-time Permanent Career Jobs**

	%
males	56
females	48
<b>total</b>	<b>50</b>

It is interesting to contrast this established definition of 'career' with what the participants themselves consider important in deciding on a career job.

**Table 6. Favoured Aspects of a Career Job - 2000**

<i>n = 1109</i>	high support
the job is a secure one	1025
it makes me think a lot	1001
it pays well	989
is full-time	861
requires organisational skills	836
is busy and demanding	664
lets me work on my own	646
has flexible hours	636
involves responsibility over others	422
it is a 'high status' job	385



The responses indicate that what matters the most to over 90% of the sample is that the job 'is a secure one' and that features such as 'responsibility over others' (42% males, 36% females) or 'high status' (39% males, 32% females) are the least favoured items of all. It is also interesting to note the contrast between the 90% support for a job that 'makes me think a lot' as against the 60% options for one that 'has flexible hours' on the one hand or one that is 'busy and demanding' on the other.

## Broader Issues

In the most recent survey we also sought responses on a number of broader issues which might reflect the life priorities and commitments of the participants. The responses reveal a degree of consensus on major items. For example, when asked to rate from low to high how much practical importance in their lives they placed on selected items, both males (75%) and females (87%) placed a high priority on 'developing personal relationships'. Males (80%) were more likely than females (76%) to emphasise career, while females stressed family/home life (93%) more than males (67%). Two-thirds of the males placed great importance on 'leisure/recreational activities' and three-quarters of both males and females emphasised 'health and fitness' issues. Their goals in life reflected similar trends.

**Table 7. Goals in Adult Life**

<i>n = 1113</i>	males (%)	females (%)
financial security	93	96
special relationship with someone	90	94
care and provide for a family	75	82
working for a better society	60	68
pursue a life of pleasure	62	65
make a lot of money	57	48
help people who are in need	42	56
enjoy an affluent lifestyle	49	46
religious ideals	23	29

Another question asked what had been the major factors shaping their lives over the past 10 years. Almost all (97%) saw their own decisions as being the most important, following by their studies, and relationships. Parental influence (80%) was rated more highly than the influence of their peers (47%).

**Table 8. Influences Shaping Life**

<i>n = 1113</i>		%
your own independent choices	1078	97
the studies or training you have done	955	86
personal relationships	905	81
the job(s) you have had	905	81
the influence of your parent(s)	886	80
your lifestyle	882	79
your health	712	64
being financially well-off	684	61
your hobbies/sporting interests	604	54
the influence of your friend(s)	526	47

A number of questions asked about leisure and other activities and interests. TV, reading and outdoor leisure activities were the main leisure pursuits. Males (36%) were twice as

likely as females (18%) to play organised sport, while females (42%) were more likely than males (13%) to regard shopping as a leisure pursuit.

**Table 9. Leisure Activities**

<i>n=1109</i>	<b>Total</b>
reading	422
watching TV	570
going to cafes	258
going to films	186
cultural activities (theatre, galleries etc)	56
shopping	356
outdoor leisure (walking, cycling etc)	502
playing organised sport	266
resting	365

Meeting friends and visiting family were weekly events in their lives, with 'partying' and going to films gaining majority support at least on a monthly basis. While 45% frequently surfed the web, as many as 66% rarely or never indulged in computer/video games. Involvement in clubs, associations or hobby groups proved to be minority interests.

A final question was in fact a repeat of one we asked back in 1996 - what they saw as likely for themselves in five years time. It is interesting to compare the two sets of responses. Not surprisingly, given that a further four years have passed, a higher proportion expect to be married and parents and owning their own home five years from now. On the remaining factors there is a really remarkable consistency in their expectations in the year 2000 and those they held four years earlier.

**Table 10. Likely five years from now (%)**

	<b>very likely</b>		<b>likely</b>	
	<b>2000</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>1996</b>
A. I'll be married	40	26	17	22
B. I'll be a parent	28	10	16	13
C. a secure, well-paid job	44	39	38	42
D. in a position of authority	17	13	32	31
E. unemployed	-	-	1	1
F. dependent on welfare	-	-	0	1
G. self-employed	5	4	7	8
H. returned to study	5	3	18	18
I. own my own home	26	12	26	18
J. above average wealth	13	7	29	24
K. in casual or irregular work	1	1	7	7
L. no work outside home duties	1	0	2	2
M. living in another country	3	2	7	8

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## On Balance

It must be noted that even after ten years of post-school education and experience many of the participants are still uncertain about what they have achieved. It is however true that 62% are satisfied with where they have reached, 67% regard their current job as an on-going commitment, and 76% have full-time jobs. Two features stand out in this year's responses: the complexity of the participants' journeys from school towards their late twenties; and yet at the same time evidence of some widely shared priorities across the sample as a whole.

The complexities can be illustrated by looking at some particular examples.

*Darren planned on being accepted into uni after finishing his VCE. He was sorely disappointed when he missed out on everything he had put down. He reluctantly began an accounting course at TAFE but transferred to University to complete a Bachelor of Commerce (majoring in accounting) when he was able to. He was pleased to be given credits from his TAFE work towards his degree.*

*During his study period Darren had been regularly working at Safeway to provide him with some finances but in the last year of his degree he managed to get employment with the Commonwealth Bank four days per week and finish off the remaining 3 subjects of an evening and weekend. He wasn't happy at the Commonwealth so began looking around for Graduate Programs, he settled on one which wasn't exactly what he wanted but thought he would give it a try. He loved it, but after two and a half years decided he needed to branch out, to step outside of his comfort zone as at the back of his mind was the goal to go out into business on his own one day and he needed to learn how to do this. In terms of a career Darren believes having knowledge and experience within an industry is what it is all about; not necessarily security and stability - that would be a bonus.*

*As luck would have it when Darren began looking around for a new position he ran into a friend who worked at the ANZ bank; his friend told him of a new position coming up, financial planner. Darren contacted this friend's boss and was told to get his CV in by 5 o'clock that day. He was interviewed the next day and offered the job that evening. Darren managed to negotiate a two month break before starting this new job as he was determined to get in an overseas holiday before he knuckled down for the next 5 years. His girlfriend was also putting pressure on him to take some time off so they could go overseas together. The bank agreed to his conditions.*

*When we interviewed him in mid-2000 he was due to start the new job that week (after a wonderful trip overseas) and was quite anxious about it. It will involve much more work on his own, rather than the team approach which was the deal at his previous workplace. He is delighted though to be making the move as he was always convinced he didn't want to be a straight accountant, he wanted to be more around the business side of accountancy. In terms of seeing himself as a success, he says he isn't yet, but he is on the way and gaining more satisfaction with every step. It is not about the money he says, "for me it is more about being challenged and stimulated; yes financial rewards help, but for me it is about gaining the respect of my peers; if I have achieved this I have gained some form of success".*

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*Dana* applied to get into psychology after finishing her VCE. In her words she failed miserably, she didn't get into anything she wanted. Again in her words she sat on her butt for 6 months trying to decide what to do. She enrolled in a course at TAFE titled Certificate of Occupational Studies in Social and Community Services. It was not psychology but it did have a welfare component, a very loose component as she was about to find out. However she completed the course then enrolled in Childcare studies but gave it up as quickly as she began. She then applied for the Associate Diploma in Welfare Studies, completed this and then applied for Bachelor of Social Work and again psychology. She again missed out on psychology but was accepted into Social Work. She was given credits for previous study so the course only took 2 years to complete.

She had done a field placement at Centrelink during her course and thought that would be good for immediate employment prospects and in general paid well. She was right: she worked for them for 2 years but what she didn't take into account was how awful the jobs would be. She was on contract work the entire time (in one instance being sacked the day before they were obliged to give her ongoing work), but more importantly she said the work was so demoralising - refusing needy people payments, never having a regular client base, moving from one office to another every few months. She quit. Even though she did not have a job lined up she was prepared to risk it. She knew if she was desperate she could get residential work, and began working at a residential support unit. It was difficult work, where the organisation provided little support, low pay and gave the worker no authority to make any kinds of decisions about the clients. Dana applied for another position at a different residential support unit for young intellectually disabled people. She has been in this position for just over a year. She is thoroughly enjoying her work. She looks after 10 clients, and has done so for the past year. She says she knows them inside out, and describes this as "a cosy family with a great team of people to offer support". She was surprised to find that the "religious" nature of the organisation made a difference to the homely, cosy and supportive atmosphere created.

She says she isn't earning as much as many of her peers but says what is important is having a job you care about, and a job which makes a difference - this is what career means to her. She says what she does matters, and if she doesn't turn up for work the lives of 10 people will be affected, because they depend on her. Dana says it is important for her to be involved in a job that helps the world in some way, and this is successful to her. Her mother feels differently. She has been telling her daughter to return to Centrelink, that she would have her car paid off and be ready for a home loan by now if she had stayed. Apparently what her mother didn't realise was how demoralising the situation became for Dana who said she was taking more sickies than anything else and hence not even pretending to look after her clients properly. That was not a job that mattered!

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*Gabrielle* always wanted to be a makeup artist. She knew at the end of year 12 that this wasn't going to be easy, to support herself while studying as well as not just doing the course but excelling in it. "You have to stand out in this industry; it is so competitive you have to have something different to offer".

Gabrielle developed a five year plan, and completed an Advanced Certificate in Administration to enable her to work in this area for the next few years while saving up to begin her Certificate in Makeup Artistry on a part time basis. She has worked in 3 different firms over the past 5 years, as an administrator, an assistant to the accountant and now in the accounts section of a car rental agency. In the meantime she has begun her make up course on a part time basis. She has completed 6 units out of the required 9 and averaged 98 out of 100 for all of them. On the weekends she works for an agency doing Bridal and special event makeup and hair; anything to get more experience in the industry.

She says she is determined and knows that she has the drive to succeed. She doesn't have time for relationships and will only consider going overseas if it in some way can contribute to her goal of "having my name up in lights, as the person behind the scenes who made it happen, who did all the hair, the makeup, the special effects". As soon as her Certificate is completed, Gabrielle wants to continue with further study into wig making and more elaborate special effects, ("you know like when someone's leg gets blown off..."). She recognises the advantages of being multiskilled in this industry. The difficulty is that fees, make up and other materials are all quite expensive, but this will not deter her, she is determined to chase her dream, determined to give it her best.

Gabrielle describes herself as passionate about her course and ambition, she realises she is aiming high in such a competitive arena and acknowledges the risks, "in the industry it is generally who you know rather than what you know which makes a difference, but you take a chance crossing the road, and I've decided to go for it".

The obvious differences in choices and outcomes in these three examples are reflected in the experiences of the other participants in our annual interview sub-sample of one hundred. Despite these differences and also some marked variations of emphasis and outcomes between males and females, it is clear that a balance between gaining financial security and maintaining relationships with family and friends dominate the responses of the sample. For many, personal fulfilment is not being defined solely in 'career' terms. In the past 'who people are' has been defined by what they do (or don't do) in jobs whereas, on balance, the majority of our participants would seem to imply that occupational destiny is not all there is to life. They define themselves in terms of a blending of 'being' and 'doing'. As two of the sample wrote:

*you need a clear focus on personal goals, together with continuing with your own personal development. It is important though to keep a balance of life aspects so that you don't lose things which are of high value in your life ie. relationships, personal well-being.*

*My values are gradually changing. I enjoy working but now try to live a more balanced life and to separate work from home/social life. I think that I will be less likely to 'burn-out' at work if I do this - I like the notion that we are continually learning and no longer have one job for life.*

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## Chapter 2

# DESTINY:

## The Influence of Gender and Family Background

The British authors Furlong and Cartmel (1997) suggest that there is an ‘epistemological fallacy’ amongst the younger generation, which has served to ‘obscure’ the continuing influence of structural determinants of educational and employment outcomes. They have examined evidence from the UK which indicates that young people’s experiences are still ‘strongly affected by gender divisions’, and that ‘there is little evidence to suggest that the effect of social class on life chances is diminishing’ (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p. 112). While they concede that the influence of structural constraints has become more obscure, and that a shift has taken place ‘promoting individual responsibilities and weakening collectivist traditions’, they nevertheless contend that life chances remain highly structured. We ask in this chapter in what ways does destiny still prevail.

The shift to an attitude among young people which is ‘promoting individual responsibilities’ has become a major focus of recent European and British literature in the field of youth studies and has been strongly influenced by Beck’s conceptualisation of the ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992). We have discussed his ideas in previous YRC publications on the Life-Patterns Project. In the international literature, particular interest has been shown in his discussion of the shift from predictable normal or ‘standard’ biographies of the industrial era to more individualised risk-filled ‘choice’ biographies of late modernity. Increasingly adults of all ages now find themselves negotiating changes that have affected established institutions and expectations - marriage breakups, retrenchment, new workplace agreements, single parenthood, retraining, flexitime, outsourcing, or intermittent unemployment. This has led to greater uncertainty in their lives and the need to adjust to that uncertainty through individual choice. This means that personal ‘flexibility’ has been heightened at a time when impersonal ‘predictability’ has become much more confused.

This shift in life experience has obvious implications for the established approaches to adolescent development. Underlying the traditional model of ‘growing up’ there has been a combination of structural prerequisites concerning the organisation of society and adult roles that are now much less reliable. The model was a useful one during the industrial era and could be applied with a reasonable degree of accuracy and predictability to determine who was likely to succeed and how, and who might prove to be at risk. The model assumed, for example, that the permanence and stability of the major institutions and functions of society (the family, schools, government services, the industrial base, the labour market and career structures) could be relied on throughout the life-course of any one individual. It also assumed that there were predictable social class influences on people’s lives, and male and female roles for different members of society, which the young could be prepared for and grow into. It was also assumed that there were standard, accepted and recognisable ‘role models’ that were an important part of the socialisation process, uninfluenced by media and pop culture images and portrayals.

Many of those predictable aspects of life have become obscured in contemporary society, and there are now significant overlaps in the lives of both young and old between

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characteristics of life that were in former times separated out from each other and assigned to different stages of the life-course. At a social level, changes to the significance of studenthood and parenthood, leaving home, and career pose problems for structural analysis - new forms of family, delayed entry into and interruptions to career-paths, students as members of the adult labour force, and adults in their late-twenties remaining in or returning to the parental home. Members of the post-1970 generation have grown up in this social environment and it has increased the importance for them of making the right choices for themselves.

It is important to note however that this emphasis on 'choice' does not deny the continuing influence of structural determinants but that the balance between 'structure' and personal 'agency' has become less predictable. Proponents of choice biographies recognise the inherent inequalities associated with concepts of 'risk'. Beck, for example, draws attention to individuals who lack real alternatives in their lives, but who nevertheless will have to 'pay for' the consequences of decisions not taken (Beck, 1992, p. 135). Structural constraints continue to affect the range of choices available to young people from different social backgrounds, even if they appear to subscribe to prevailing notions of choice and personal autonomy (Rudd and Evans, 1998, p. 60). Because of this Furlong and Cartmel argue that there is a deceptive element or 'epistemological fallacy' in the recent emphasis on 'choice biographies' which leads young people to discount the influence of the structural factors which still determine many of their choices.

## **Study Choices**

One way of examining this issue is to determine the extent to which factors such as gender and socioeconomic status continue to influence employment and career outcomes. Here we can make use of a Canadian typology of 'vocational integration' (Trottier, Cloutier and Laforce 1996). The Canadians examined the career outcomes of Bachelor students three years after they graduated. The increasing uncertainty of outcomes revealed by the data led the authors to develop a three-fold typology of career attainment: the integrated; those in the process of integration; and the inactive.

The 'integrated' were those who within three years of graduating had achieved a permanent full-time job envisaged as a career choice - 'even if the job is not the one he or she initially hoped for' (p. 94);

those 'in the process of integration' were either not working full-time, or were in a temporary position, or else had a full-time job which was not envisaged as their career job; and

the final group is 'inactive' because of non-involvement in the labour market (often because they were continuing with post-graduate studies).

Of particular interest for the present discussion is the fact that while gender continued to influence career outcomes in this study of Canadian graduates, the influence of socioeconomic status (SES) was much less certain - probably because the determining factor governing outcomes was not status but 'that the positions to which they aspire require a specific level of training and special skills' (Trottier et al, 1996, p. 104).

When we apply the Canadian typology to our own survey sample we find that even though there is clear evidence in our survey and interview records that the participants are making decisions for themselves, background influences are still important in the kinds of choices they make. For example, their actual choice of institutions was clearly influenced by their parental background. This is evident from Table 11.

**Table 11. Study Paths (%)**

<b>1999 Sample</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Prof/Manager Father</b>	<b>University Mother</b>
	n=1296	n=381	n=168
Uni and Voc. College	14	14	16
Uni Only	55	<b>64</b>	<b>69</b>
Voc. College only	19	14	7
none of these	12	8	8

Thus, offspring of fathers with a professional or managerial occupation were more likely to enter university (64%) and less likely to take up college courses (14%). Those whose mother had a university qualification also tended to focus on university study, 69% of their number doing so. On a somewhat different issue, it is worth reporting that metropolitan-based respondents were more likely to enter university (56%) than the rural respondents, of whom less than one third (32%) had gone on to a tertiary institution. In terms of secondary schooling, almost three quarters of those who came from independent schools went into university courses, whereas at most 41% of government school students enrolled in a university course. In contrast, government school students were more likely to try both university and college courses (29% of all government school students) than their private school counterparts (7% of all independent school students).

Social background was also a factor in the types of course or areas of study chosen. The offspring of professional fathers and university-educated mothers were over-represented in the prestigious fields of medicine, dentistry and law and under-represented in trade and non-degree courses (Table 12).

**Table 12. Areas of Study (%)**

	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Prof/Manager Father</b>	<b>University Mother</b>
		n=381	n=168
trade apprenticeship	6	4	3
arts, social sciences	8	9	<b>15</b>
business, economics	16	18	15
engineering, surveying	5	7	7
medicine, dentistry	4	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>
technology, computing	6	7	6
law	3	5	<b>6</b>
nursing, health	10	10	10
education	5	6	4
creative, performing arts	2	3	4
maths, sciences	11	<b>15</b>	12

Areas of study chosen also manifested differences related to gender (Table 13). Of the 1334 members of the 1997 survey, males were more likely than females to take up: apprenticeships (14% of males and 1% of females); engineering and surveying (14% of males and 2% of females); and information technology courses (12% compared to 4%). Females were more likely than males to enrol in: nursing or health (13% of females compared to 2% of males); arts and social sciences (14% compared to 5%); and education (9% compared to 2%).



**Table 13. Gender Enrolment Patterns and Fields of Study**

<i>n</i> = 1334	Female %	Male %
trade apprenticeship	1	14
arts/social sciences	14	5
business/economics	17	20
engineering/surveying	2	14
medicine, dentistry	4	4
technology, computing	4	12
law	3	4
nursing,health	13	2
education	9	2
maths, science	13	12
other	20	11
<b>1997 TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

### Career Outcomes

Social background still has an impact regarding 'career access'. If, for example, we look at the *unsuccessful* outcomes in our sample we find that those with *non*-professional fathers, or mothers *without* university qualifications, are over-represented (Table 14).

**Table 14. Background of Non-Career Unqualified (%)**

	Sample <i>n</i> =1296	Unqualified <i>n</i> =102	Non-career Unqualified <i>n</i> =55
father professional	35	22	14
non-professional	65	<b>78</b>	<b>86</b>
mother uni-grad	15	5	6
non-uni-grad	85	<b>95</b>	<b>94</b>

Furthermore, regarding those with full-time jobs, and those with careers, we find that a higher percentage with full-time jobs have professional/managerial fathers, and those without qualifications are scoring badly on the career front (Table 15).

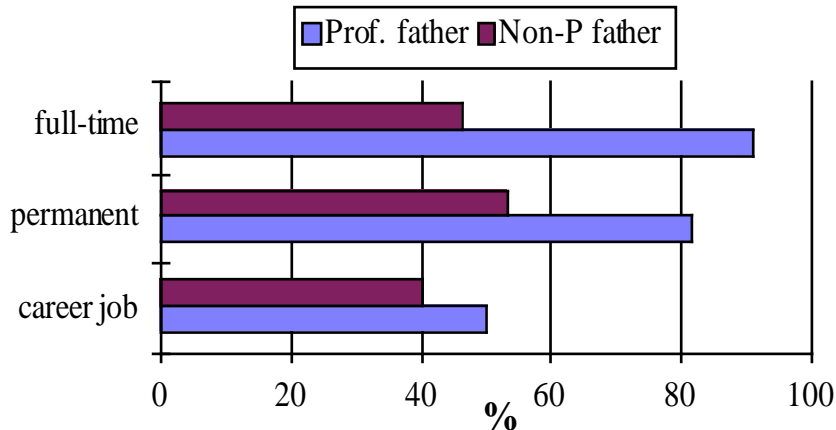
**Table 15. Job Outcomes (%)**

	Sample <i>n</i> =1296	Prof/Manag. Father <i>n</i> =381	University Mother <i>n</i> =168	Unqualified <i>n</i> =102
full-time	65	<b>69</b>	61	64
permanent	64	61	55	65
career	64	64	61	<b>47</b>

Table 15 would appear to offer some contradictory evidence. It suggests for example that the unqualified have been more successful in gaining permanent full-time jobs than those with university-educated mothers, and that they have also been more successful than those with professional/managerial fathers in gaining permanency. However, the backgrounds of the 102 unqualified members of our sample reveal that those with professional/managerial fathers (22) are more successful than those without (80) in terms of full-time jobs (91% versus 46%), permanency (82% versus 54%) and career employment

(50% versus 40%). Thus, for the unqualified, family background factors continue to make a significant difference.

**Chart 1. Unqualified Outcomes (n=102)**



At a sample-wide level, however, it remains true that our 1999 data tended to confirm the findings of the Canadian study. Table 16 provides the data for Canadian graduates on all three categories of their typology.

**Table 16. Per Cent Vocational Outcomes (Canada)**

	high SES	mid SES	low SES	female	male	Total
Integrated	39	39	42	33	47	39
Integrating	41	50	50	55	41	48
Inactive	20	11	8	12	12	12

Source: Trottier, Cloutier and Laforce, 1996, p. 98.

A somewhat similar picture emerged in our own sample. The relevant data for males, females, and the offspring of professional or managerial fathers and university-educated mothers are given in Table 17.

**Table 17. Per Cent Vocational Integration (1999)**

<i>n=1296</i>	Males	Females	Prof/Man. Father	Univ. Mother	Total
Vocationally Integrated	51	46	49	42	47
Vocationally Integrating	39	45	39	44	44
Inactive	10	9	12	14	9

When we look more closely at the composition of the 'vocationally integrated' we find further evidence that actual courses of study no longer carry with them the career certainties that might once have been expected. As we can see in Table 18, there are some unexpected outcomes among the 'integrated' which call into question some of the status assumptions of structural analysis. Thus, with regard to school background, it appears that those from government schools have been as successful as their counterparts from the more prestigious private schools (47 per cent for each) and, despite the over-representation within the university sector of people from more privileged family backgrounds, university graduates are not yet proving as successful as their vocational college counterparts (47% as compared with 53%).

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**Table 18. Vocational Integration: 1999 Sample**

<i>n=603</i>	Per Cent of Each Sub-Set
males	51
females	46
government schools	47
catholic schools	48
private schools	47
non-English-speaking parents	43
from metropolitan city	50
professional/managerial father	49
university-educated mother	42
university qualified	47
college qualification	53
Total Sample	47

## Implications

The specific data regarding background influences cannot be understood in isolation from the other evidence in our study which illustrates the considerable complexity and diversity that characterise the experience of the post-1970 generation. Given this, it is important to ask whether the 'epistemological fallacy' that Furlong and Cartmel refer to has its own research implications. Does it so to speak have a mirror image in the inability of a structural analysis derived from the industrial era to account for the more diffuse post-industrial experience of an emerging generation that has grown up in a very different kind of world from that of its predecessors. If the relationship between structural constraints and individual perceptions of choice has become 'obscure', we must not only seek to clarify the continuing importance of structural factors, but also allow that some of the obscurity might well derive from *blindspots* in the established assumptions of structural analysis itself.

A good illustration of this can be seen in a recent article on the persistence of social structure in the lives of Canadian youth. The article compared data from five longitudinal surveys covering the years from 1973 to 1996. The authors found that, except for a discernible rise in the aspirations of young females, 'structural factors continue to influence the nature and level of career ambitions of Canadian youth' (Andres et al, 1999, p. 277). Thus, 'regardless of the economic climate encountered by a given cohort, the higher the status of the father's occupation and the higher the parents' education, the higher the occupational aspirations and expectations of youth' (p. 271). But those aspirations need to be tested against actual *outcomes* resulting from changes in the post-industrial labour market. Instead, the authors seem to assume that the questions asked back in 1973 about specific occupations or careers meant the same to each subsequent cohort over a 23 year period - even though far-reaching changes were taking place in the definition and organisation of occupational categories and in young people's own levels of participation both in education and in the labour market. They do establish the internal consistency of the consolidated longitudinal data about *aspirations*, but are short on specific reference to the obvious changes in educational participation and career outcomes that have occurred during the period they have covered. Thus, while they state that 'successive cohorts of Canadian youth have acquired higher levels of education' and that in response to the demands for higher skill

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levels 'educational institutions have expanded to fill the need' (p. 265), those changes do not appear to be reflected either in their data or in their findings.

The authors indicate that they are aware of current discussions about choice biographies concerned with 'individual behaviour and lifestyles' and 'increased exposure to risks and uncertainties' and 'multiple experiences' (p. 263), and so it seems strange that they then base the article exclusively on a linear analysis of aspirations restricted to the two dimensions of education and occupation derived from the prescriptive categories of the industrial era. Given the clear-cut categories and the heavy reliance on statistical measurement it is not surprising that they found (as we have with regard to our own participants) that 'parental socioeconomic status influences youths' aspirations and expectations' (p. 271). But the analysis stops there and so conveys an impression of 'destiny' at work: the acceptance of a youthful aspirational 'starting point' as if it is some kind of preordained fate or self-fulfilling prophecy. What young people make of their *subsequent* journeys as they revise their choices or change their initial routes is ignored. The authors are perhaps aware of the limitations of their statistical categories and impersonal data when they acknowledge the need to examine 'how these dispositions change over time and how they relate to occupational outcomes' - particularly by means of 'qualitative responses to open-ended questions, or in-depth interview data that will permit an examination of why and how these changes took place' (p. 279). It is a pity then that they did not make greater use of the qualitative material that they had available to them, or that they did not take into account - or even refer to - the other Canadian study of 'vocational integration' which also examined socio-economic factors but came to a very different conclusion - that their hypothesis concerning the advantaged position of those from higher SES backgrounds 'was not verified' (Trottier et al, 1996, p. 104).

Our experience in the Life-Patterns Project has convinced us of the importance of combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to avoid over-simplifications and a tendency to bracket out anomalies or excessive 'variance' in the statistical findings. Because we have continually checked our survey data against the individual responses in our interview sample, we have been made very aware of the elements of complexity - and ambiguity - that now affect young people's lives. From early in the study it became apparent that the participants were re-adjusting their expectations and plans about future careers and, as we have spelt out in earlier reports, they were beginning to take into account the social and economic changes that had affected their transitions into adulthood.

In line with the policy assumptions there is certainly evidence of a *vocational focus* on the part of some respondents (they display a focus on gaining qualifications to enable a career choice to be made). There are other respondents who still give priority to finding a job even independently of completing post-school studies and manifest an *occupational focus* (they give priority to work, with other life-choices subordinate to that). Some of the respondents have revealed a concern with what is best described as a *contextual focus* (in their responses they emphasise the 'life' context chosen, such as family, community, religious or political involvement, lifestyle, or 'field' of work). Allowance also needs to be made for those who have made definite changes in their study, career or life options by adopting *altered patterns* (they reconsider their original route and change to another destination). Finally, the evidence suggests that many of the respondents actually have a preference for maintaining a balance of commitments in their lives. Their options reveal *mixed patterns* (they place equal value or emphasis on a range of activities or goals) (Dwyer and Wyn, 1998, p. 295).

We have tested this VOCAM typology in our annual surveys and the balance has shifted away from the more traditional 'vocational' and 'occupational' linear patterns towards the more 'flexible' patterns. Table 19 displays the changes.

**Table 19. Typology of Youth Life-patterns (VOCAM)**

		<b>1999</b> n=1296	<b>1997</b> n=1334	<b>1996</b> n=1908
<b>Vocational Focus</b>	focus on gaining qualifications to enable a career choice to be made	19	15	27
<b>Occupational Focus</b>	give priority to work, with other life-choices subordinate to that	10	27	13
<b>Contextual Focus</b>	choose a 'life' context (family, community, lifestyle, 'field' of work)	24	13	10
<b>Altered Patterns</b>	reconsider their original route and change to another destination	9	1	6
<b>Mixed Patterns</b>	place equal value or emphasis on a <i>range</i> of activities or goals	37	44	43

It seems likely that the increased emphasis in 1997 on the occupational focus of 'holding a job' was related to the fact that this was a period of job-hunting after completion of post-school studies. It is also probable that the decline in the emphasis on 'pursuing a career' is related to experience of the new realities of the labour market. What is most significant is that a majority of both males and females now include themselves in the final three categories, even though more males (37%) than females (25%) still favour the first two priorities.

It is also interesting to note with regard to vocational integration outcomes that the final 'mixed pattern' is proving to be the most successful of all. The degrees of success for each of the patterns is shown in Table 20.

**Table 20. Typology Outcomes - 1999**

<b>Pattern or Focus</b>	<b>% Successful</b>
Total Sample	47
pursuing a career in area of interest (V)	49
holding a job with economic security (O)	48
the broad context (eg family, lifestyle, 'field' of work)(C)	40
to rethink priorities and make new choices (A)	33
a balance of commitments rather than just one aspect (M)	55

This growing significance of 'mixed patterns' raises an interesting question concerning the established categories of structural analysis. In the past, the theories of social stratification and class analysis that have been used to explain predetermined structural influences on people's life chances have made use of the concept of 'social mobility' to allow for variations and unexpected outcomes which suggest that life is not as predetermined as the structural categories seem to imply. Particularly in studies of intergenerational change, the concept has been used to explain how people from working class or underprivileged backgrounds have succeeded in escaping their destiny by moving

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'upward' on the social scale, or for those from more privileged backgrounds there has been some recognition of a failure to fulfil their destiny as a result of 'downward' mobility from their superior class position. At times in locality studies reference might also be made to 'lateral' moves of people from one region to another, but usually within structural analysis social mobility is essentially a *uni-dimensional* concept and the possibility of *horizontal mobility* is not part of the equation. If, however, mixed patterns involving a range of educational, occupational, lifestyle, personal relationship and locality choices are now assuming greater significance in the lives of young people, the concept of social mobility needs to be broadened to allow for these other kinds of priorities which in effect *cut across* the pre-set and hierarchical categories on which structural analysis relies. If the assumption is made that high educational and occupational aspirations are the only relevant determinants, it is not surprising that other elements are excluded from both the data-gathering and the analysis, and that self-fulfilling prophecies about inevitable destiny result.

Thus, while it is important to reaffirm the importance of structures and the effects of social stratification despite this increased complexity in young people's lives, it is equally important to examine whether established research practices may be contributing to a misreading of how young people are responding to the new social and economic conditions affecting their lives. In commenting on a similar longitudinal study in the Netherlands, Du Bois-Reymond notes that one of the 'most disturbing' findings was that these 'young people do not like adulthood'. What was being referred to here was their preference for blending different aspects of their lives - study, work, personal relationships and leisure interests, by contrast to their parents whose lives were dominated by time-consuming or debt-ridden responsibilities.

If there is one thing (post)-adolescents do not want, it is the idea of 'nothing but work' until they are 65 by which time they will be 'old and knackered'. Now already, before they have started their professional life properly, they are thinking about *mixed models* where work and leisure time complement each other profitably - and leisure time is certainly not the part they want to lose out on (du Bois-Reymond, 1998, p. 74, italics in original).

There is similar evidence in our own longitudinal study. The patterns are definitely there and seem to reflect the structural shifts that have taken place in many of the basic institutions of society (the family, education, industry and government) which are also having to come to terms with issues of flexibility, pragmatic choice, uncertainty and lack of permanence. Given the increasing emphasis on 'choice' and 'flexibility' in the new labour market, it is hardly surprising that those who are beginning their careers under these new conditions are measuring outcomes with reference to *their own* choice and flexibility in life-patterns.

In addition to employment and education, other priorities regarding locality, living arrangements, lifestyle, experimentation, leisure and multiple personal commitments are also seen by them as part of *their* 'human capital' and are already being taken into account (Wyn & Dwyer, 1999, p. 19).

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## Summary

What then are the main conclusions that we can draw from this brief overview of young people's destinies in the 1990s? Regarding the 'epistemological fallacy' and the continuing influence of gender and social background there are four things we can say.

1. Socioeconomic status and gender continue to act as 'threshold' determinants of student choices. Young people from more advantaged SES family backgrounds are more likely to gain access to university pathways and the more prestigious courses within them. Clear gender differences prevail regarding individual choices of particular fields of study.
2. On the down side, those from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to be over-represented both among those who fail to gain post-school qualifications and among those who fail to establish careers for themselves.
3. Once particular individuals have crossed the 'threshold' of post-school study, and regardless of whether their enrolment has been in universities or vocational colleges, at an objective level males are more likely than females to achieve 'vocational integration', but SES background becomes a less likely indicator of successful career outcomes.
4. There is an apparent disjuncture between subjective and objective assessments of 'career', partly related to changes to professional classifications and increasing casualisation within the labour market, and partly related to re-assessments of the 'work ethic' within the post-1970 generation. Whether the established categories of research on social stratification take these changes sufficiently into account remains a question, particularly with regard to patterns of horizontal mobility and the blending of diverse priorities in life.

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## Chapter 3

# DESTINATIONS: Looking Back over the Decade

If the expected links between ‘destiny’ and outcomes are being called into question by the upheavals affecting young people’s experience, what can they themselves tell us about the journeys they must now make into adult life? One of the most pleasing aspects of the *Life-Patterns Project* for us has been the readiness of the participants to provide feedback on an annual basis about their progress, their choices and their changing priorities in life. As we saw at the beginning of chapter 1, the consistency of our sample is evident from the high rate of returns and the basic characteristics of the sample. There has in fact been an on-going ‘core’ of about 970 participants who have responded regularly and promptly as each annual survey has gone out.

When we began our series of studies of young people’s transitions into adult life it seemed logical to focus particularly on the pathways image that was influencing youth policy at the time. Now as we look back some ten years later, we can see from the accumulated evidence that the image was in fact a misleading one. It was a projection into the future of past assumptions about predictability of outcomes and linear trajectories more suited to the industrial era than to the world of the 21st century.

The evidence since the early nineties raises complex issues about the relationship between the process of policy formation and the impact of research. For example, it is obvious from the accumulated evidence of the set questions in our annual surveys, and from the more ‘personal’ responses given in the course of individual interviews, that most of the participants are not simply passive recipients or ‘objects’ of national education and youth policy regarding their pathways into adult life. They are instead interpreting and responding to the policy settings in ways which suggest that neither the settings nor the assumptions underlying them adequately reflect the complexity of young people’s own experiences, choices and outcomes. In effect, through the medium of their own ‘practice’ they are challenging predicted policy outcomes.

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 of the post-1970 generation. 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



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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.

A further difficulty with the linear model is that it does not make sufficient allowance for the changes that have occurred within the labour market during the nineties. The national and international data suggest a considerable degree of mismatch between educational levels and employment outcomes instanced by 'under-employment' of certificated workers who are in effect 'over-qualified' for their jobs. An increasing number of graduates with full-time positions are not working in their preferred areas (Marginson, 1999), while among their peers who claim to have 'career jobs' there is a considerable number who are only employed in those jobs on a part-time basis. It is significant that 'contingency' is now a feature of the Australian economy with the inevitable result that casual employment has accounted for 62 per cent of the job growth in Australia since 1985. As one study shows (Wooden and VandenHeuvel, 1999, p. 47),

surprisingly and certainly of concern, given the emphasis placed on educational attainment and qualifications, data on changes in the occupational distribution between 1993 and 1998 suggest a general trend toward lower-skilled jobs for both young men and young women.... among young women there has been a clear shift away from advanced skill jobs.... towards jobs which require only intermediate or elementary skills.... young male workers were more likely to work in Elementary clerical, sales and service occupations, as Labourers, and as intermediate production and transport workers.

This uncertainty about 'career' outcomes raises questions about the relationship between having a 'full-time' job, having a 'permanent' job, and deciding when a job moves beyond being one with career 'prospects' to one that has become a career. As a result one of the findings of our projects is that we need to take into account the decline in predictability of career outcomes in the new labour market. The Australian situation is not likely to be very different from that in America where today, as Sennett (1998, p.22) has noted,

a young American with at least two years of college can expect to change jobs at least eleven times in the course of working, and change his or her skill base at least three times during those forty years of labor.

Certainly in the Life-Patterns Project the assumed one-to-one relationship between notions of 'career' and 'permanent full-time' employment is proving difficult to sustain as we approach the end of the study. It is providing a different image of the journeys that young people are working out for themselves as they move through their twenties.

Another aspect of linear projections is that even when they are aimed at bringing about change, they almost inevitably take the past as the guide to the future. They look at a forward journey from the point of departure. Even if they take the desired *destination* as the point of reference they still plot a route rather than plan a journey. - and thereby neglect some of the possible connections and alternative routes more directly associated with the destination or eventual arrival point. For example, what would our educational and labour market planning for young people look like if it was based on the kinds of outcomes referred to in the Sennett quote above? Even if we continued to use the imagery of

'pathways' we would begin to think of it in terms of 'starting-points' and 'journeys' rather than predetermined and fixed routes - there would be 'stop-overs' for some and 'side trips' for others and a variety of 'connecting flights' in between. Our understanding of future transitions would encourage young people to consider 'flexible career options' and thus visualise their initial choice mainly as a 'realistic starting-point' to help them establish some specific skills or credentials which they could then build on in a variety of ways. Rather than projecting the experience of the past and assuming a predetermined move forward, we would be re-examining past patterns in the light of subsequent experience.

Given this type of perspective, in this chapter we want to take the recent experience of our participants as our reference point and then trace back their journey to see what it tells us about 'post-compulsory pathways'.

## Retracing the Journeys

Looking back from the present at the various types of transition journeys that different young people have undertaken, linear routes have not been as common as policy assumes. In our research samples there is a sizeable group made up of those who have followed a linear pathway through post-compulsory study (34%), but there are also other types of journey undertaken: by those who begin further study but change courses or institutions (24%); by those who follow a linear path directly into the workforce after school (5%); by those who begin to do this but then change their plans and enrol in study (13%); and finally by those who leave school without completing (24%). The following Chart shows the distribution.

Chart 2. 1992-98 Transition Types (n=2548)

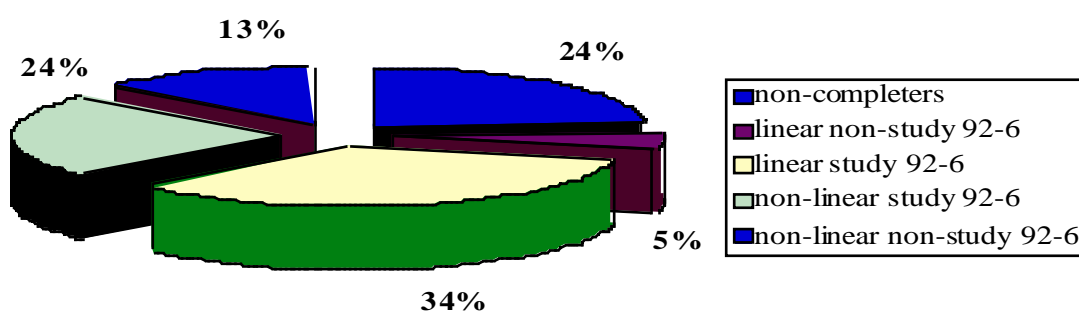


Table 21 illustrates some of the variations for the different groups during the first five years of their post-school journeys. There are some interesting variations in the evidence. Thus the percentages for work outcomes in column one remind us that jobs for 17 to 19 year olds were relatively scarce in the recession years of the early nineties, so that even for those who went directly from school completion into the workforce high rates of unemployment were a feature and *only about two-thirds* found jobs (columns 2 and 5). Even so it is interesting to note that over a third of those who went into full-time study on leaving school (columns 3 and 4) were also part of the labour-force and, while the Table does not show it, by 1996 this proportion had doubled. Of the non-completers (column 6), 15% took up some form of training (mainly males in apprenticeships) and within three years of leaving a further 8% returned to study (mainly in vocational education short-courses).

**Table 21. Class of 91 Transitions – 1992-96 (%)**

	<b>linear non-study 92</b>	<b>linear study 92</b>	<b>non-linear study 92</b>	<b>non- linear non-study 92</b>	<b>non- completers</b>
92 work	67	33	37	61	34
92 study	0	100	100	0	15
study change	0	0	100	100	8

These groupings are derived from the data built up from the 1992 file on 11,000 young Victorians who had left school at the end of 1991. That file included students who had left in Years 10 or 11 without completing their schooling, others from Year 12 who completed but did not go on immediately to further study, and the remainder who chose a variety of study or training options such as an apprenticeship, a vocational college course or a university degree. The data on those from Years 10 and 11 – the non-completers – have been supplemented from another study of ours (Lamb, Dwyer & Wyn, 2000) and so these are composite estimates rather than direct file-data.

It is important to note that, even though we can identify five comparatively different post-school routes, there are crossovers between them. We cannot assume for example that all non-completers have turned their back on further study, or that full-time students have not also been part of the workforce. Nor can we assume that the eventual outcomes for the groups from 1996 onwards are predetermined by the different routes that were followed during the first five years after school.

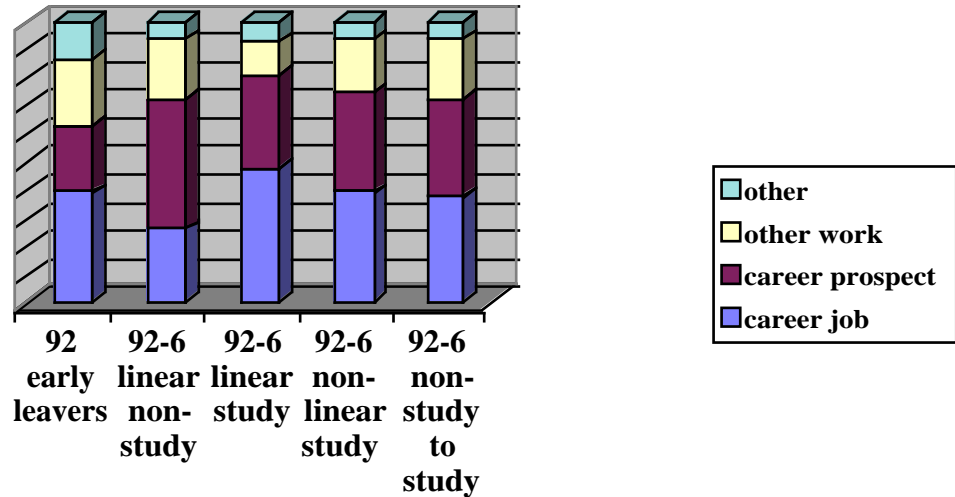
Thus, if we examine the career outcomes for each of these groups we find that by 1999 less than half had gained permanent full-time career jobs, a third had at least found jobs with genuine career prospects, while the remainder were either in contingent work or not part of the labour force. The following Table gives the breakdown.

**Table 22. Class of 91 Outcomes – 1992-99 (%)**

	<b>linear non- study 92</b>	<b>linear study 92</b>	<b>non- linear study 92</b>	<b>non- linear non-study 92</b>	<b>non- com- pleters</b>	<b>total</b>
career job	26	48	39	38	39	38
“prospects” job	47	33	36	35	24	32
other work	21	12	19	21	24	21
other	6	7	6	6	13	9

What the data show is that for the generation as a whole, even after close to ten years of post-school experience, by 1999 only about 38% had found a career job defined as permanent and full-time. On this definition those who followed a linear study path from 1992 onwards without interruption proved most successful, although even for them that has been the outcome for less than half (48%). If we combine this category with those who have found jobs with ‘genuine career prospects’, we find that as many as 7 out of 10 across the whole sample were well-positioned, although our estimate for the non-completers would indicate that they have been the least successful and are twice as likely as the rest not to have paid jobs. The 1999 breakdown for each of the groups is displayed in Chart 2.

Chart 3. 1999 Outcomes for Class of '91



If we exclude the supplementary data on non-completers and revert to the year 2000 findings from our survey sample, we find further improvement with 56% of males and 48% of females in full-time permanent career jobs.

### Career Details

One aspect of our Life-Patterns Project has been concerned with a detailed examination of what career means at an individual level for the participants. Our findings are beginning to show that now, in the participants' minds, career does not necessarily equate with permanency and neither bear a one-to-one relationship with the field of study. The outcomes for different fields of study are inconsistent and lead to different subjective assessments. For example, in 1997, 75% of those with a business qualification described their jobs as 'permanent' but only 51% saw these as jobs in their 'preferred career area', whereas for health professionals 70% were working in their preferred area but only 54% had permanency. We have detailed evidence about this kind of material for 984 of our 1997 participants (Table 23).

Table 23. 1997 Qualifications, Job Status and Careers (%)

Field	permanent	related to study	not related
Trades	86	60	11
Computing	78	59	9
Services	79	40	15
Business	75	51	15
Arts	58	46	19
Engineering	66	51	15
Health	54	70	6
Education	50	72	6
Maths/Science	59	44	17
<b>Total (n=984)</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>14</b>

What this evidence suggests is that the relationship between ‘permanency’, ‘field of study’ and ‘career positions’ is a complex one and varies depending on the particular type of qualification held by different people. We can show this by means of the data from our 1998 survey, which confirms the findings from the 1997 sample and indicates that areas such as trades or business/economics with the highest ‘permanency’ outcomes had the lowest ‘field-related’ and ‘career position’ outcomes, while the reverse was true of those qualified in the fields of education or nursing. Table 24 provides the contrasts between the top six of the areas of training in our 1998 sample which accounted for 698 of the 1296 respondents.

**Table 24. 1998 Qualifications and Job Outcomes (%)**

	<i>frequency</i>	permanent	field-related	career job
maths/science	139	53	60	55
education	75	45	<b>80</b>	<b>79</b>
nursing etc	129	57	<b>85</b>	<b>75</b>
computing etc	74	77	70	70
business	209	<b>78</b>	61	68
trades	61	<b>85</b>	61	67

This loosening of the links between permanency, full-time positions and field-related career jobs is not unique to Australia. Thus, even in the buoyant American economy in 1998 there has been a distinct shift towards a ‘contingent’ (those *without* regular full-time jobs) workforce which now includes at least 30% of all workers (Mishel et al, 1999), and for those graduates who have found career positions there is clear evidence of a mismatch between qualifications and actual job outcomes. Official figures from the United States show that since 1986 ‘2 of every 3 jobs created over this period were in occupations that do not require a degree’ and that ‘over the 1996-2006 period, the majority of occupations with the largest expected job growth will require less than an associate degree’ (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999, pp. 55, 61). Gregory’s detailed study of higher education expansion and economic change has demonstrated that in Australia the coming generation has certainly not been insulated from these global economic trends. There is a growing mismatch between educational levels and job market realities which may be a consequence of the narrowing of opportunities within the middle range of occupations. Gregory concluded that ‘the increased education levels of the young have not protected them from bearing the major adjustment from the lack of job growth’ (Gregory, 1995, p. 321). This also has implications for the linear assumptions written into longitudinal studies (e.g. Andres et al, 1999) which perpetuate the predictive categories of the industrial era as if nothing has really changed.

One way of illustrating this issue is to look beyond the ‘objective’ job situation of the respondents and examine their ‘subjective’ assessments of their ‘careers’. We have done this on a regular basis in our annual surveys and the 1999 responses are given in Table 25. As can be seen, there is little variation between the males and the females and the overall figure (64%) is considerably higher than that for the ‘vocationally integrated’ on objective criteria (47%) given earlier in Table 17 of the previous chapter.

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**Table 25. Subjective Assessment of Career Outcomes (1999)**

	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
I would consider it as an on-going career	65	63	<b>64</b>
not currently a career position but has genuine 'prospects'	11	12	11
it doesn't yet offer 'career prospects' but may in the future	8	8	8
it is unlikely to develop career prospects	7	7	7
none of the above	8	10	10

How do we explain this 17% divergence between the Table 17 objective assessments (47%) and the Table 25 subjective classification (64%)? It is at least partly related to the job situations of the young women, due to the fact that in our sample there is a higher representation of women (22%) than men (4%) in the combined fields of health and education, which suffer from a lack of permanency. Although these graduates are likely to be employed in their respective industries, the lower permanency levels reflect the changes that have taken place in those sectors. The shift towards short-term contracts for both nurses in the health system and teachers in the education system is thus shown in the fact that, while many of them are professionals, fewer of them have permanency in their long-term future. Nevertheless, it is important to note that even for the males in the total sample there remains a 14% discrepancy between their subjective and objective assessments.

In other words, this shift to short-term contracts in particular professional fields is not sufficient to explain the full extent of the divergence between the subjective and objective findings. Our interview material suggests a further explanation. It reveals that the shift towards a more contingent and flexible workforce is not simply a factor affecting the *objective* conditions under which people are now expected to work, but that it has also led to a more contingent or flexible attitude on the part of employees towards *their own definitions* of work and career. If the meaning of career has changed, then a different understanding of the 'work ethic' is also at stake. Because there is now a less predictable relationship between the objective elements of permanency, field-related jobs and careers, this complexity is being taken into account at a subjective level as well.

It is informative for instance that as many as 15 per cent of those who claimed that they already had career positions were in fact only working in them part-time (Table 26). Strictly speaking, if we were to insist on the exact definitions of the Canadian typology, on *objective* grounds we would be required to exclude the part-timers from the category of 'vocational integration'.

**Table 26. 'Career' Work**

<b>job-type</b>	<b>Per Cent</b>
full-time	79
part-time	15
other	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

There are other anomalies. As we have seen in the previous chapter, despite the expectations held regarding the higher status private schools, school background does not appear to make any noticeable difference in terms of *career* outcomes, and while there is a slightly higher representation by those from a metropolitan and professional/managerial family background there is an under-representation of those whose female parent had a university qualification. Similarly, those participants who completed their studies at a university do not yet appear to have been as successful in gaining vocational integration as those with a College qualification.

There were also obvious variations across fields of study. In terms of the objective definition of 'vocational integration', the most successful fields were business or economics, technology and computing, engineering and surveying, and law. The least successful (partly related to the strict application of the criterion of 'permanency') were creative and performing arts, maths and sciences, education, and nursing. Table 27 provides the various proportions.

**Table 27. Vocational Integration and Field of Study**

	%
trade qualification	56
business, economics	67
technology, computing	66
engineering, surveying	64
law	63
education	43
maths, sciences	42
nursing, health	41
arts, social sciences	40
creative, performing arts	24

A final factor that needs to be taken into account in any analysis of current career is the increasing incidence of job-changing in the deregulated labour market. If Sennett (1998, p. 22) is correct in suggesting that today young Americans face the prospect of about eleven job-changes in the course of their careers, a re-examination of the relationship between 'permanency' and 'career' is required. As other American authors point out, 'employment is becoming increasingly fluid, occupational boundaries are changing or dissolving, and more jobs are temporary' (Stern, Bailey & Merritt, 1997), so it is worth asking to what extent this is likely to be an issue for young Australians as well.

Our study indicates that its impact is already being felt. For example, our year 2000 annual survey asked the respondents about their employment experience over recent years. By that stage they had passed their mid-twenties and nine years had passed since they left school. Most of our sample had already gained a post-school qualification and had reached the stage where, in traditional terms, they would be settling into an on-going career-job. In fact, most had already discovered that finding the job of their choice was not as straightforward as the linear model assumed. Table 28 displays the range of jobs undertaken by the year 2000 workforce participants, with as many as 77% indicating that they had not stayed in the same job from 1996 onwards.

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**Table 28. Paid jobs since the beginning of 1996**

	No	%
none	5	1
only 1	246	22
2 to 5	721	65
over 5	129	12

It is not surprising therefore that even some of those with jobs in their preferred career area were still unsure when they would be able to call it a 'career' job. In fact, over half of the 1998 respondents had reservations on this issue. Their responses reveal that 21% were unsure when they were likely to gain career status, 22% expected it to happen within a year, and a further 9% expected it after that (Table 29).

**Table 29. When do you expect to get a 'career' job?**

expectations in 1998	%
expect to get career job this year	11
next year	11
after next year	9
unsure	21

What this evidence demonstrates is that the uncertainties of the deregulated labour market are already being experienced by the graduates of the nineties. Yet there is still an implicit assumption in much of the public discussion of the 'knowledge society' of the new millennium that the formation of a highly-qualified younger generation guarantees for them an adult life built on highly-skilled and rewarding career-paths. When viewed from their point of arrival a decade later, the post-school experience of the 'class of 1991' challenges that assumption. For many of them a secure career-path is at best a prospect for the future rather than an achieved goal. The relationship between career, field of study and permanency has become much more complex than the pathways metaphor had led them to believe, and they are beginning to redefine for themselves what career means. By the year 2000 exactly half of them - in *objective* terms - had gained career positions, and the proportion was even higher (67%) if we take their subjective assessments into account. The point of arrival therefore for many in our sample offers a sense of achievement, but even for them the journey has not been as straightforward or predictable as they may initially have hoped.

To conclude this chapter, we can offer some further case studies to illustrate the different journeys and outcomes of some more of our participants.



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*Robert* always had clear goals, he wanted to get an apprenticeship in cabinet making as soon as he had completed his Year 12. He achieved this in three years. This is despite the fact that he was told by a teacher at his school that he wouldn't amount to much. Robert's response was immediate, "I set out to prove better, never say never, I will always find a way!" As soon as his forms were signed on his apprenticeship he quit the company he had been with for 3 years and started up his own business. One of his goals was to have his own business by the time he was 21.

He initially set up a joinery business with a business partner, also a qualified cabinet maker. As part of the sharing of responsibilities Robert said he would take on the book keeping side of things. He returned to TAFE and began an Associate Diploma in Accounting.

Four years later the business has grown, and it now employs 8 staff. In the last few years Robert has set out to "get a bigger slice of the market, to be the Grollos of the furniture making industry". He has deferred his accounting course as now the company is expanding he says he physically can't make the 6pm classes. He is disappointed that this has happened but says what he learnt in the first year has already helped him immensely.

Robert still lives at home and says that without his family none of the "success" was possible. He says it was his family's values which most influenced him, "do the best you can, but only if you do it well, no half heartedness will be accepted".

Robert and his partner continue to "complement" each other and share a vision of where the company will go. He likes the fact that his partner is also "honest, straight forward, self disciplined and careful", as he describes himself. Robert says he is also a good learner and that he likes and is good at listening, particularly when talking to older people. He feels that sometimes he is held back from the bigger contracts because they don't think he is old enough or experienced enough to take on such responsibility but in general he feels he is respected within the industry. This is extremely important to him.

When talking with Robert he says he has achieved everything he set out to do: "I have put everything in place that I wanted to". However, in the last few months Robert has had to review his further plans for expanding the business - he has had to take 3 months off work with glandular fever. As a result his emphasis has changed, "I need to concentrate on improving the productivity level of the factory and the effectiveness of the way it all comes together so I can reduce my hours". He admits he likes to be in control, but also acknowledges that his 3 month absence from the business doesn't seem to have altered much on the factory floor. He wants to remain "less hands on" and realises it is possibly "more of an attitudinal thing than anything else", whatever happens, he says he will make changes rather than risk his health.

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*Andrina* began an Arts degree at University, and while studying took on a part time job working in the area of market research. She began to wish she had concentrated on marketing in her degree. While still finishing her degree she enrolled at RMIT TAFE in a Marketing course. She felt this is what she should have done in the first place. After completing both her degree and Advanced Certificate she enrolled in a Degree in Business and Marketing much to the “confusion” of her family who hoped she would now be earning and able to get her own place!

She worked hard in her course, determined to do well, and was aiming for a graduate position in one of the larger banks where she wanted to make the most of the opportunities offered by the larger organisations. Upon finishing her degree she was successful in gaining a recruitment position at a large bank. She was rapt, “I feel very satisfied I am here after such a long wait, I wish I had known marketing was where I wanted to be.” *Andrina* attributed her success to a number of factors, certainly her results at uni, but also the support from her parents (even if they were keen to move her on!) , her skills in interview situations and her age, “I am older than the other candidates, I certainly have more to offer”. She immediately moved into a one bedroom flat closer to the city.

The work wasn't that stimulating from the beginning, “they weren't doing what they said they would”; the hours were long (60 per week) and the pay was good, but this didn't make up for the fact that the culture of the workplace was extremely hierarchical and rigid. “Coming from a marketing background, I couldn't believe no one was really interested in the product, this was a real warning bell for me - I thought I might look around for somewhere smaller.”

After 8 months *Andrina* quit - “ my parents were a bit shocked as I asked to move back home to save a few dollars, but they also knew I wasn't happy at the bank”. She said she just couldn't put in that much effort to get so little back - “there was no spontaneity; I was crushed when I tried to demonstrate any kind of initiative and yet this is what I wanted, this is what I thought I was going to get, there was no training...”. *Andrina* decided “I didn't want to look back years later and say, ‘well I never did get to do what I wanted; I wanted to be able to do my own thing’, so I left”.

She has joined up with a business partner and they have started a fresh juice franchise, the first one opened in April 2000, with at least 2 more planned. “It has been extraordinarily difficult as I have no experience at all in the retail trade, but I am so determined; we have done our homework, our research and we are ready to go”. *Andrina* puts in at least 60 hours per week and expects to do so for the next 5 or 6 years, but says, “I don't mind at all; I don't mind being flat out - I have the opportunity to do so much more and I enjoy it so much more!”

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## **Chapter 4**

# **QUESTIONING YOUTH**

In some of our previous publications, in particular *Rethinking Youth* (Wyn and White, 1997), we have discussed in considerable detail the theoretical issues raised by the findings from contemporary research into the lives of young people in Western societies. Our most recent book (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001) has paid attention to some of these issues, but it has concentrated much more on the actual research findings. By way of completion, some further comments are added in this chapter concerning the research and theoretical perspectives which affect and shape our understandings of young people's lives and their transitions into adulthood.

In most of our work we have made use of both quantitative and qualitative studies, and have also incorporated an interactive element of participant research. This provides the young people in question with the opportunity to shape the questions being asked and to identify of their own accord the issues, concerns and interests that they consider to be paramount in their lives.

This combination of approaches to research poses a dilemma for the researcher. Where does the weight of evidence lie - in the standardised results, the statistical correlations and factor analysis, or in the more subjective and individualised interview transcripts, or in the overlap of evidence and patterns of variance that point to inconsistencies between the quantitative and qualitative findings? How do we avoid excluding or denying the validity of one form of evidence in favour of another? How do we give due weight to the different sources of information in order to build up a composite image of what young people's lives entail? Above all, how do we respect the established understandings developed over many years of youth research and educational practice and yet at the same time acknowledge the changes that have taken place in young people's lives which point to the need to broaden our understanding and take new factors, attitudes, expectations and uncertainties into account? Both continuities and discontinuities with the past are present in the experience of the generation we are writing about, and each of these elements must be given their due.

### **Continuities**

Youth is a social process whereby new generations are prepared for and explore their own individual transitions into effective participation in the adult life of their own societies and communities. The context for this process and their transitions is a 'given' in their lives and their effective participation depends largely on their own ability to 'make sense' of established institutional settings and practices while they learn to negotiate a complicated set of personal norms, customs and lifestyles that enable them to fulfil the demands and enjoy the rewards that are part of adulthood. There are two basic points of reference which serve to chart this journey into adult life: the institutions they belong to, and the personal sense of identity they are shaping for themselves.

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These points of reference provide continuity with the past. In general terms, young people still grow up in family settings, still go to school, are still subject to specific laws which mark them off from adults in various ways, live in a consumer society which shapes their tastes and caters directly to their individual interests, and as they grow older they find that their lives are inevitably affected by the labour market both in terms of what is happening to their parents and what their own future prospects are likely to be. These established institutional points of reference have continued into the present, despite the new forms of family units that exist now, the changing demands affecting schooling and post-school qualifications, a tightening of legal procedures and application of 'adult' prescriptions within 'juvenile' jurisdictions, the more intensive treatment of 'youth' as a consumer market in its own right, and the considerable restructuring of the labour market which has altered the future conditions of working life both for their parents and themselves.

In terms of their own personal sense of identity there are also continuities with the past. They need to learn about and develop their relationships with family, friends and peers, explore lifestyle choices which display or fulfil their personal inclinations and abilities, and they will choose between a range of membership groups (sporting, cultural, religious and political) that will form part of their own personal understanding and expression of 'citizenship' as active members of adult society. Again, these personal points of reference continue today, even though the current range and style of these expressions of personal identity in the present generation may reflect the considerable changes that have occurred since their early childhood.

One element that highlights how deeply established these institutional and personal points of reference remain, despite the changes, is the persistence of elements of social division and inequality in the affluent societies of the West. A variety of reports from the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999; Mishel et al, 1999) document a widening of extremes of wealth and poverty during the remarkable period of American economic recovery throughout the 1990s. Various studies have provided substantial evidence from Australia (Lamb et al, 2000; Teese, 2000; Dusseldorf Skills Forum, 1999), Canada (Côté, 2000; Côté and Allehar, 1994) and Britain (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) that demonstrates that factors such as social class and gender still have a predetermining effect on both the range of choices available to particular groups of young people and the outcomes they are likely to be able to achieve for themselves. Similarly, even though the majority of school dropouts in the US may come from white middle income families, those of African American or Hispanic backgrounds are likely to be much less successful in terms of the outcomes of their decisions to leave (Ianni and Orr, 1996). In Australia, even allowing for the significant increase in school participation rates among the post-1970 generation, the data indicate that successful outcomes from schooling are still predominantly related to social class background (Lamb et al, 2000).

Even the data on gender point in the same direction. Females may now have higher educational participation rates than males, but the outcomes in terms of courses undertaken, types of occupation and levels of income still perpetuate the established gender disparities which pre-dated increased female educational participation levels (Marginson, 1999; Yates and Leder, 1996).

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## Discontinuities

It is important to insist, however, that there are also significant discontinuities with the past which must also be acknowledged if we are to derive an accurate assessment of what young people's lives are like today (Ball et al, 2000). Even the factor of 'age' as a defining constituent of adolescence (Lesko, 1996; Holmes, 1995) has undergone a number of transformations in recent times which raise questions about some of the normative modelling commonly used in theories of adolescent development. Puberty in some Western societies has undergone a downward shift of about five years throughout the 1900s, so if we assume that puberty and adolescence are interrelated, what does the shift in puberty age do to our established assumptions about 'stages' of development associated with age-sequences?

Also, there are some sharp contrasts between the age-norms of the 1970s and those of the 1990s. In the 1970s a third of Australian women for example were already married by the time they were 20 and as many as two-thirds were mothers by the age of 25. The proportions by the 1990s had fallen to 6% and 25% respectively. Similarly half of 15-19 year-old males were in full-time jobs back in the seventies and this was also true for 46% of 15-19 year-old females. By the 1990s the figure for males was only 22% and for females even lower at 13%. These data are Australian but similar findings are true of other nations as well (Anisef et al, 2000, pp. 14-15). Given the importance of institutional points of reference for the construction of an adult identity, this upheaval in age experience between the generations with regard to marriage, parenthood and employment raised serious discontinuities with the past.

It could be argued that some of this upheaval has been counterbalanced by the increase of de facto arrangements, single motherhood, and the increase in the number of teenagers combining study and work. However, these trends also cast doubt on the assumption about a linear sequence from one stage of life to another - there are now overlaps between roles that were once viewed separately, so that for example the belief that education is a prior or preparatory setting which *precedes* workforce participation can only be supported by ignoring the fact that for a growing number of young people study and work are seen as concurrent and complementary. Schneider and Stevenson report (1999, p. 170) that in their United States study as many as 80 per cent of the students in the sample had jobs. In our Canadian and Australian study (Looker and Dwyer 1998b, pp. 11-12), at least half in both countries 'report a mix of school and work', while only 20% in the Australian sample had 'rarely' or 'never' combined the two. Comparatively similar evidence is available for other countries. Chisholm (1997, p. 14) reports that the study/work combination is 'a significant activity pattern' in a number of European countries, and Rudd and Evans indicated in their British study that 'over 60 per cent of the sample had a part-time job... at the time of the survey, though this figure masks local labour market differences' (Rudd & Evans, 1998, p. 54). Another study from The Netherlands noted that the blending of areas of life has become increasingly common. 'What used to be arranged in series - learning, and then work - is currently becoming a *double field* and a *double life* for adolescents and young adults: learning and work, work and learning, alternately' (du Bois-Reymond, 1998, p. 67, italics in original). There is a sense in which the trends mentioned here indicate that many in their late teens are already at least 'part-time' adults. As far as the study-work combination goes, this is now a majority experience in many countries and at the very

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least it introduces a shift in the relative importance of different institutional points of reference for the shaping of personal identities that cannot be ignored.

The discontinuities not only raise questions of the age at which particular events occur in adolescence, but also questions of when youth 'ends'. If we look beyond the teenage years and examine the data on those in their mid-twenties and beyond a different form of discontinuity has taken hold. In Australia the proportion of women over the age of 25 who are in full-time work has increased from 27% in the 1970s to over 40% in the 1990s. This change in the role of women has come about at the same time that there has been a prolongation of the periods of time for which young people are now expected to 'remain' students, combined with the disappearance of readily-available full-time jobs for younger adults, and the postponement of the age at which most people now in Western societies marry and have their first child. Some researchers even make use of a new category of 'over-aged young adults' to account for this shift. These are people in their late twenties or early thirties whose lives do not yet 'fit' the traditional picture of adulthood based on the achievement of careers, marriage, parenthood and living away from their parents (Côté, 2000; Jones, 2000; du Bois-Reymond, 1998).

A much more problematic element of discontinuity has been introduced by the process of globalisation that has affected the education, employment prospects and lifestyle choices of the post-1970 generation (Côté, 2000; Chaney, 1996; Beck, 1992). At times it is difficult to sort fact from fiction on this issue and many nations are clearly suspicious of what is sometimes seen as an attempted imposition of an American-based monoculture which runs counter to other national traditions and socio-economic priorities. Even attempts such as ours to identify elements of convergence in the life-experience of this generation have at times been accused of exaggerating the impact of globalisation or even worse of relying too heavily on the experience of young people in a small and 'peripheral' nation that is over-influenced by a range of imported social and economic developments that are not as widespread as the dogmas of globalisation profess.

While it is problematic, in working through the evidence we are convinced that it is an element that has to be taken into account. Our comparative work on youth transitions in nations as different as Canada (Looker and Dwyer, 1998b) and Norway (Heggen and Dwyer, 1998) has made us aware of the need to pay serious attention to local traditions and circumstances, and certainly discredits many of the simplistic claims made about the process of globalisation. At the same time, at both a national policy level and within consumer culture there are commonalities of an international and cross-cultural kind that cannot simply be dismissed as irrelevant.

## **Research Preserves**

These elements of discontinuity often meet with a sharp reaction within research and educational preserves. To draw attention to them is at times read as a denial of - or even an attack on - the elements of continuity that still prevail (Andres et al, 1999). Instead of incorporating this new evidence into a broader understanding of what 'growing up' means in the contemporary world, a false opposition is set up between the two, and considerable effort is devoted to preserving the established models and theoretical frameworks in the face of conflicting evidence. It is almost as if conceptual rigour and logical consistency demand that the researcher or the educator must take a stand on one side or the other of a

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set of mutually exclusive binary divides: structure or agency, quantitative or qualitative methods, the normal or the deviant, mainstream or at-risk, career-paths or occupational flexibility. Clean data and clear-cut categories are paramount, even if that means putting in brackets, or relegating to issues of 'variance' or individual difference, well-grounded evidence that for this generation it is not a simple either/or between the past and the present but very much a both/and as they endeavour to balance traditional expectations and new life circumstances. As the authors of *The Ambitious Generation* expressed it, it is a paradoxical awareness of a future consisting of 'promise and uncertainty' (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999, p. 11).

For example, many of the large-scale statistical data-bases make use of pre-set structural categories such as class, gender, ethnicity and race, and are preoccupied with linear transitions related to the two basic reference points of educational attainment and occupational outcomes. Within this framework, it becomes evident that many of the experiences and adult achievements of young people are largely shaped and even predetermined by the structural factors that are part of their individual backgrounds. On the other hand, many of the qualitative small-scale interview and observational studies give us an insight into young people's own subjective outlooks and actions, and as a result tend to provide evidence of the ways in which they see themselves as shaping their own lives. However, particularly within the UK, these different methodological approaches and their different strands of evidence have led to a structure versus agency debate which has an either/or cast to it. Instead of being integrated as two equally important aspects of young people's experience, they are at times opposed to each other and become part of a wider debate (not confined to the UK) about the relative merits of different research procedures. Thus, as Gudmundsson has noted, within Nordic research preserves a misleading argument takes place about 'hard' and 'soft' research 'which among other things means ignoring the extensive research crossing this border'.

Although interdisciplinarity and the combination of various methods have characterised the youth research field, there is a recurrent tendency to reproduce the iron curtain of habitual science between 'soft humanistic' approaches and 'hard sociological' approaches. The latter consist of quantitative research based on large surveys.... often using advanced statistical analysis....By this distinction, the bulk of Nordic youth research is labelled as 'soft' approaches, anything from ethnographic research to interpretation of rock texts, from studies of life stories to analyses of media genres.... the focus has been on a crude distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' approaches, which among other things means ignoring the extensive research crossing this border (Gudmundsson, 2000, p. 137).

Gudmundsson also draws attention to the ways in which research preserves operate at a national level. His comments confirm the difficulties we have experienced in attempting to cross national boundaries to explore the degree to which globalisation is affecting the life experience of young people in Western societies. He is particularly conscious of the central role that British research has played from the time when the Birmingham Centre had a major impact on youth research, and even suggests that our own work has been limited by this influence. It is difficult to break open these strong national traditions but one of the cautions we are conscious of is that the growing importance of globalisation needs to be counterbalanced by a respect for locality and tradition. As Elder has pointed out, 'young people do not live in the total society; they spend their lives in specific contexts,

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in neighbourhoods, schools, communities' (Elder, 1975, p. 14). Today however they also are exposed to TV shows and musical genres from other cultures, spend their time in shopping malls, at pop concerts, on backpacker trips, the internet and mobile phones. How these new influences interact with their local culture and the way they are shaping their personal sense of identity merits consideration even if it challenges some of the preconceptions about the exclusiveness of national identity and tradition. There are exaggerations on both sides.

Another example of the way in which false dichotomies between contrasting strands of evidence are set up can be seen in reactions to data that suggest that young people's transitions between study and work are no longer as predictable and straightforward as many of the established research and policy frameworks assume. Claims that since the early 1970s young people have been confronted with more complex choices about their life-paths, and that the influence of class and gender has become more obscure, are read as a denial that traditional paths continue to be available to them and as an assertion of a complete break with the past. Yet, if we refer back to the evidence about changes in the labour market and the shifts that have taken place in the meaning of careers, we cannot continue to assume a simple linear relationship between qualifications and careers (Dusseldorf Skills Forum, 1999; Schneider and Stevenson, 1999; Gregory, 1995). That relationship is not as accurate a predictor of outcomes as before, and it does not reflect accurately the reality of young people's transitions in the current labour market context. As we have seen in our Life-Patterns Project, it is much more a question of a change in the *balance* between traditional patterns and elements of self-reliance and choice in response to new educational and economic circumstances affecting this generation.

To make sense of the balance that must be struck between continuity and discontinuity with the past we need therefore to break open the boundaries between competing research preserves. If complexity and uncertainty are now much more part of the reality we are investigating, that shift should also be reflected in how we design our research and also the ways in which we do it. The macro-level statistical data continue to be important as they provide insights into the 'big picture' - an essential overview of historical trends and comparative evidence on different categories of youth and the on-going influence of structural factors such as class and gender on their life chances. This is an important source of knowledge about the transitions that young people make, particularly when other independent large-scale longitudinal studies are undertaken which enable comparisons over time to be made and likely trends and correlations to be identified. There are nevertheless other approaches that are equally important.

Questions and analyses that focus on multiple activities recognize the fact that youths do not make educational decisions in isolation from other decisions relating to work, marriage and parenting and geographical mobility. They balance what they perceive to be costs and benefits. They recognize supports and barriers. If we, as researchers, fail to ask about these supports, costs, barriers and benefits we will fail to understand why many young people make the educational decisions they do.

Many of our analysis tools emphasise consistencies and linear relationships. We are less well equipped to measure and describe multiple activities and complex relationships, unless they fit a particular mathematical form (curvilinear relationships, linear interaction effects). A major contribution of more qualitative analyses is that they are able to describe and document some of these complexities....



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Many of the shifts, ambiguities and tensions facing youth come through in these more qualitative responses. These focused, qualitative data can often provide an important counterbalance to large-scale quantitative analyses that can identify, but not necessarily interpret, trends (Looker and Dwyer, 1998b, p. 18).

## **A Question of Balance**

One of the factors that our research has convinced us about is that, by some strange irony, researchers, educators, policy-makers and even parents from a previous generation tend to underestimate all that they have passed on to the current generation. If they are sometimes referred to as 'the choice generation', and if their entry into fully-fledged adult life has been prolonged, it is because they have been provided with a range of educational resources and achievements, alongside an emphasis on personal development and lifestyle experience, that were much more restricted and exceptional prior to the last quarter of the past century. They have lived through a period of considerable upheaval in Western society but they have also been provided with new resources of knowledge and choice that are now perhaps much more crucial at a personal level than they might once have been.

One of the constant themes that has emerged in a number of our research projects has been the high value the participants have placed on their families and their ready acknowledgment of the support they have received from them. They are conscious of the fact that they have been a generation of 'promise' but they also know that they face a degree of 'uncertainty' regarding the future which they feel they have been given the resources to face. Why not build on that? For example, what shape would our school curricula take and what would our careers advice be like if we took this balance between promise and uncertainty seriously? Particularly given the likelihood that they can 'expect to change jobs at least eleven times', and change their skill base 'at least three times', in the course of working (Sennett, 1998, p, 22) what kinds of institutional and personal identity points of reference would we see as imperative for the shaping of these new futures?

We have identified some definite shifts that have affected the institutional and personal identity points of reference for young people's transitions into the adult world. One of the effects of those shifts has been a postponement or delaying of the traditional 'markers' of adulthood such as marriage, parenthood and careers. By comparison with those before them most of this generation have come to their mid-twenties with those decisions still to be made. There are negative aspects to this (Côté, 2000), but a major positive (if little acknowledged) aspect is that this delay has given them more time to explore and assess the demands of adult life. This casts new light on the assumption made in the established literature that youth is a period of discovery, of achieving a degree of personal autonomy, social competency and 'the mastery of significant life events' (Holmes, 1995, p. 98). If that assumption still has merit, it suggests that the changes to the experience of youth have established a different personal framework for the choices that they will eventually make. It is not simply that another five to ten years have 'slipped by', but that they now come to those events with increased levels of intellectual formation, as well as extended experience in work, relationships and lifestyles. They have been given the advantage of time to sort out and balance for themselves their priorities for the future. The question remains of how we as researchers and educators can support them in making effective choices for themselves.

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First, the transformations that have occurred in the lives of young women during the lifetime of this generation throughout Western societies have far-reaching implications for our own perspectives on the meaning of adulthood. Our programs need to be informed by a better understanding of what the future promises for the adult roles that might be expected of both women *and* men, and how they can be helped to come to terms with the uncertainty that now affects the existing practices and outcomes of schooling and the shaping of personal relationships and lifestyles. Past definitions of youth did rely heavily on assumptions of separate life-paths along lines of gender and those separate definitions inevitably shaped the categories of analysis regarding what adulthood meant for each with reference to marriage, parenthood and career. Those past definitions also conveyed a series of heterosexist stereotypes which are still much more common in the organisation and practices of many schools than might be expected given the changes that have taken place. Those practices are still reflected at a formal curriculum level in terms of subject choice, classroom organisation, careers advice and even in the organisation of extra-curricular activities along gender lines. Preparing young males and females for the blending of gender roles and the new career patterns that are now increasingly common aspects of adulthood poses definite challenges of an organisational and curricular kind within schools for the future.

Secondly, the increasing prevalence of mixed patterns of study/work/leisure in the lives of young adults has accentuated the importance of developing a more holistic understanding of young people's choices and personal development. These mixed patterns introduce a 'third dimension' of personal identity (related to themes of lifestyle, health and well-being) which needs to be added to the two dimensions of 'education and work' which in the past were used as the central themes for analysing young people's transitions. At the very time that the link between these two established dimensions is being emphasised, young people have also been encouraged by media and consumer interests (combined with the delaying of the traditional markers of adulthood) to develop a range of other interests in their lives. School and family are no longer their only institutional points of reference. In fact the prolongation of their years of 'preparation for adulthood' guarantees that other points of reference within this third dimension will be of increasing significance.

Thirdly, we need to pay attention also to the negative consequences that have resulted from the shifts that have taken place in young people's experience. When we look at the indicators that are so common in discussions of young people considered to be 'at risk' they are in effect indicators of the refusal of the carrying society to reflect on the implications of the discontinuities affecting youth transitions (Côté, 2000; Males, 1998; Giroux, 1996). This applies to many of the dominant indicators such as: drug abuse; unsafe sex and teenage parenting; school failure and non-completion; suicide; delinquency and crime. These factors cannot be analysed in isolation from young people's increased exposure to adult lifestyle practices prevalent in their home societies and communities (for example, the issues of drugs and sexuality). Nor can they be properly understood without reference to the continuities in social inequalities (poverty, youth unemployment) which have foreclosed the options of those most likely to be at risk on structural grounds. In fact, the inequalities are exacerbated by the recourse to zero tolerance 'solutions' and the extension into juvenile jurisdictions of punitive measures formerly restricted to adults.

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Schools in particular need to explore more constructive ways of responding to these indicators, both with reference to the link between them and what we have called the 'third dimension' of young people's lives, and also with reference to curricular options and careers advice that pay much more serious attention to the unequal impact of changes in the labour market. Much of current educational policy and practice remains locked into a view of secondary schools as a realm separate from adult 'life', and yet many of their students are already living as part-time adults. This is true of those who are already involved in adult-type jobs and sports, and also of those with adult responsibility for younger siblings or other family members who cannot care for themselves. This is not a new phenomenon, but what is new is that, combined with the shift to balancing school and work, it challenges the childlike status which schools continue to attribute to young people (Lesko, 1996).

The developmental model, which age-based schooling mirrors, appears increasingly out of touch with the reality of young lives in which exploring sexualities, making lifestyle choices, managing multiple responsibilities, maintaining relationships and the complex life patterns that these create, blur the distinction between 'youth' and 'adult'. Educational policy and practice, faced with such an immense challenge, is becoming preoccupied with individual-based, standardised testing as a measure of the worth and success of educational provision. Educational management approaches, such as the 'school effectiveness' movement, retreat into a world of their own and evaluate programs through 'internal' reference points, such as the teacher, the classroom climate or the leadership approach of the school Principal. The provision of 'league tables' (in the UK for example), based on exam results, produces the appearance of highly competitive and 'effective' schooling systems as a means of allaying the fears of parents in a new world of uncertainty affecting the futures of their young.

However, the production of certainty through this mechanism is yet another example of the reluctance of policy-makers to face up to the discontinuities affecting educational practice and outcomes. It seems ironic that in the face of the uncertainty that characterises life today, education is often narrowed down to the artificial construction of highly abstracted measures of individual achievement, and especially of literacy and numeracy. There is a danger here that by marketing the production of false certainty for young people and their parents through these ritualised educational mechanisms schools can appear to students as increasingly out of touch with the ways in which young people are actually 'using' education.

For example, one of the implications of the established pattern for young people to mix school and work is that, rather than school being a preparation for work, the workplace is providing young people with a pragmatic perspective on education. They see that life elsewhere is different. To be successful in employment, people must be flexible and proactive. Notions of career are thus pragmatic and less related to personal identity than for previous generations. From the point of view of these young people, the rigid hierarchies, age-based classifications, and inwardly focused testing procedures only serve to underline the differences between schools and real life for the young adults who are expected to stay within their walls.

If this is so, youth research has some important messages for educational policy. In particular, the ways in which young people themselves are generating understandings of

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the relationships between education, work and life offer policy-makers a glimpse of the future. Flexibility is seen as more important than predictability as a basis for future security in a post-industrial world. In this era, many of the characteristics and markers of adult life which the previous generation took for granted (such as stable, full-time employment) are much more uncertain, so that the transition from secondary school to post-school options increasingly involves a continuation of the effort to balance a broader range of life interests. As institutional arrangements offer less predictability, young people are forced to 'make their own arrangements'.

This returns us to the paradox that, despite the foreclosure of options, young people are giving notice of other priorities that enable them to see out the postponement of their goals. What are their goals? The findings from our Life-Patterns Project suggest that they have remarkably traditional goals for their lives: the establishment of a family, attaining a degree of economic security, maintaining good personal relationships and being happy are recurring themes. At the same time, the response of many of them to their uncertain circumstances means that the 'flexible, responsive and multiskilled' workforce which was foreshadowed in the 1980s has, in one sense, already shaped itself, and now foreshadows the need for 'flexible, responsive and multiskilled' educational programs as well. This new agenda would have as its starting point a focus on the well-being of students, not just as adults of the future, but in the present. This means that the third dimension of 'identity' needs to be made integral to the task of education.

The costs of failing to respond effectively to this need are possibly already being reflected in the increasing concern over young people's mental health. As young people struggle to balance the multiple and often conflicting demands on them, it is time for education to focus more directly on their needs. This means recognising and ameliorating the costs as well as the benefits of the increased responsibility placed on individuals. Mental health, well-being, and identity construction are now part of the core business of schools. Young people need to find that schools are as concerned about their living skills, capacities to understand complexity and manage personal relationships as they are about academic achievement. It also means acknowledging the young adult status of students in the senior years of secondary school.

The element of 'flexibility' not only has powerful implications for school curricula but also for the future organisation of other educational programs. Increasingly young people will not only welcome flexible educational provision at secondary school, but will also seek out opportunities for re-entry. This issue still poses a major problem in our current organisation of schooling, so new initiatives in response need to be facilitated, perhaps blurring the distinction between secondary education and adult education or life-long learning. A more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which young people themselves negotiate their relationship between work, education and other dimensions of life has implications for the on-going negotiations they will make throughout the course of their adult lives. It is time for this understanding to be reflected in educational policy and practice.

Rightly or wrongly, the young people who have participated in our various research projects assess their own experience of youth as a process of learning to come to terms with ambiguity. They look at the transitions they have entered upon and see them not as clearly-

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defined or pre-determined 'pathways' but rather as personal *journeys* that involve delays, stop-overs, side-trips, missed connections and changes of plan. Many of them have eventually reached their original point of destination but even for them it has involved a blending or balancing of promise and uncertainty. Their experience suggests to us that this change of metaphor expresses well a shift of perspective on 'youth' that would give due recognition to the elements of continuity and discontinuity they are struggling to come to terms with as they enter upon their adult lives.

To acknowledge that this generation is learning to live with ambiguity and that they now have more time to balance their priorities for the future does not of itself resolve the contentious issues referred to in the course of this chapter. To resolve these we need to gather much more detailed information about the diverse forms that the mix of continuity and discontinuity takes in specific cultural traditions, localities and social groups. We need to uncover the ways in which the institutional and personal identity-formation points of reference for young people's transitions have been either modified or complicated by the reshaping of adult lives that has introduced new elements of uncertainty into those transitions. Above all, we need to re-examine our own preconceptions in the light of what that reshaping of adult lives means for coming generations.

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# Youth Research Centre

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The Youth Research Centre is located within the Faculty of Education at The University of Melbourne. It was established in 1988 in response to a recognised need by the youth affairs sector for relevant and up to date research on the issues facing young people today.

The aims of the YRC are to:

- identify local, national and international research issues relevant to young people;
- conduct appropriate, relevant, and useful research that addresses these issues;
- promote research agendas and policies which contribute to an understanding of the full range of life patterns of young people, and which support young people's capacity to exercise increased control over their lives;
- promote and encourage awareness of youth issues amongst research students and within departments and research centres of the University;
- facilitate communication between educators, researchers, policy makers and people working in the youth sector;
- facilitate national links and collaborative research on youth issues across different sectors, including education, health, youth work and juvenile justice;
- strengthen international research links and scholarship in the area of youth policy.

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## Youth Research Centre Activities

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The YRC has particular expertise in research on education, transition pathways, social justice, gender equity and employment issues as they affect young people.

The main YRC activities are:

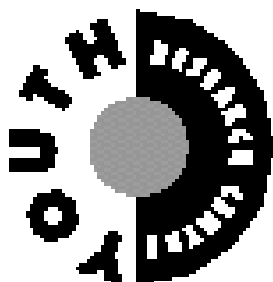
- undertaking research and publishing the outcomes in a manner accessible to policy makers and the youth sector;
- providing information and policy advice to governments and other organisations;
- assisting and encouraging individuals or groups who work with young people.

YRC activities involve:

- undertaking small projects for groups lacking the capacity or opportunity to do so themselves;
- providing a base for post-graduate students wishing to undertake Masters or PhD research on topics related to young people and the youth sector;
- enabling academics to participate in established YRC projects, and/or undertake their own research on youth related issues;
- maintaining a youth sector resource library;
- publishing series of Working Papers and Research Reports;
- conducting public seminars and conferences on a variety of issues relevant to those working in the youth sector.







*Research Report 19*

# **JOURNEYING THROUGH THE NINETIES: The Life-Patterns Project 1991-2000**

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