

# Life-Patterns, Career Outcomes and Adult Choices

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For this report, the research team consisted of:

- Professor Johanna Wyn, Chief Investigator and Writer
- Debra Tyler, Researcher and Writer
- Associate Professor Peter Dwyer, Senior Fellow and Writer
- Dr Graeme Smith, Analyst

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# Preface

## Background

Our research commitment to issues of youth transitions began in the mid-1970s (Dwyer, Wilson and Woock, 1984; Wilson and Wyn, 1987). At that time the Commonwealth and State Ministers for Education had agreed on the need to examine changes affecting the school-to-work transition. A combined working party recommended a change of focus to deal with what was termed the 'discouraged school leaver effect' (Working Party, 1976).

Throughout the 1980s this focus was greatly influenced by policy programmes and goals formulated by the OECD (OECD/CERI, 1983; OECD, 1984; Henry, 1996). This led to the adoption of a metaphor of 'pathways' in national planning strategies concerned with the relation between educational attainment and employment outcomes: for example, in Norway (Heggen and Dwyer, 1998: 270); in the United States (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990); in Great Britain (Department of Employment/Department of Education and Science, 1991); in Canada (Canadian Labour Force Development Board, 1994); and in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994).

The traditional school-to-work transition was no longer seen as a predictable option, and so the policy documents began to confer on youth a kind of permanent 'student' status:

Ideally, the teenage years should be a period in which to invest in education and training. This will not only help young people to enter the workforce but will also pay off later in life by providing a solid basis for more secure employment and further training. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994: 90)

In effect, the two-step 'school-to-work' transition had now been redefined into a three-step sequence, which included the intervening stage of 'post-compulsory education', in the hope that by the year 2001 this would include as much as 95% of 19-year-old Australians (AEC, 1991). The official report not only claimed that this was 'a realistic and measurable policy objective' but even boldly asserted that the picture presented was 'related closely to the reality of involvement by young people' (AEC, 1991: 48).

The 'reality' was not quite so straightforward. Not only had the achievement of a post-school qualification become a pre-condition for effective

participation in adult life, but in addition the process of achieving some kind of adult 'career-path' had become much more challenging. Traditionally, notions of career usually carried with them the expectation of finding a job that was permanent, full-time, and somewhat related to the person's field of expertise or study. Unfortunately, the increasing emphasis on labour market flexibility and contingency as a result of new employment practices promoted during the 1990s made it harder even for highly-qualified graduates to combine these elements successfully. For the post-1970 generation of young adults a series of questions emerged about the very meaning of 'career': what is the relationship, for example, between having a 'full-time' job and having a 'permanent' job, or between one with career 'prospects' and one that has become a career, or between a career job and a graduate's actual field of study? These questions placed more of the onus on individuals to 'negotiate' their own outcomes - to weigh up for themselves whether they should give priority to job 'stabilisation' rather than pursuing further educational specialisation; whether they should delay their entry into the labour market by being more selective about their career paths; or whether they should change their study or career orientations to fit the emerging realities of the labour market.

The economic trends suggest that across all the Western world 'employment is becoming increasingly fluid, occupational boundaries are changing or dissolving and more jobs are temporary' (Stern, Bailey and Merritt, 1997). Young people have had to come to terms with these changes in the labour-market in order to match their career aspirations with new conditions in the workforce. Thus the *balance* between objective factors (about job outcomes and status) and subjective assessments (of career aspirations and attainment) became much more important in their measures of success. This had long-term implications for their understanding of what 'career' was likely to mean in the future. Given the evidence on the changing nature of labour market conditions within the global economy, they needed to take into account the decline in predictability of career outcomes within the Australian labour market as well. The Australian situation was not likely to be very different from that in America where today, as Sennett (1998: 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.

## The Sample

Our data file is based on a survey of 29,000 Victorians leaving school in 1991, and who completed a 1992 follow-up survey on what they had done since. In preparation for a more detailed analysis of student outcomes in 1996, this prior evidence was reviewed and a consistent file for the 1992 data was established for 11,000 of the original 1991 participants. The comparative data for the 1991 and 1992 sets are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: The 1991 data-set and its 1992 follow-up

	1991 % (n= 29, 115)	1992 % (n= 10, 985)
from Year 10	12	12
from Year 11	13	12
from Year 12	76	77
intended post-school study/studied	73	75
<i>study for apprenticeship</i>	14	14
<i>study as traineeship</i>	7	7
intended working/worked	26	25
female	52	56
male	47	44

Right from the beginning of their 'pathway' into adult life, it was evident that the individual journeys were already beginning to display considerable diversity. Although 90% of our sample, for example, have undertaken some form of study in their post-school years, for many there have been delays, stop-overs and changes of plan. Even in their first post-school year of 1992, there was a variety of study and work outcomes. About 19% had gone directly into the workforce without doing any further study, 23% were working but were combining that with further study, 44% were fully involved with study and were not currently employed, and 13% were unemployed and looking for work.

In 1996, the 1992 data-set was narrowed down to concentrate mainly on those who had undertaken further study on leaving school. It included students from both urban and rural areas, covering a representative range of school (60 per cent from Government schools) and ethnic (with one third of parents born outside Australia) backgrounds, and a variety of parental educational attainment (close to half not having completed high school). The sample was drawn from two separate 1992 groupings: a 'Studying' sub-set of those who went on to further

study at the end of school; and a 'Non-Study' sub-set of those who initially chose some other alternative. However, it is significant that of these 'Non-Study' respondents in our 1996 sample as many as 80% had returned to study in the intervening years.

Of the final set of respondents who made up the refined 1996 sample, 90% had undertaken courses of study since 1992, with two-thirds spending at least three years. Nearly 80% had made the university their first preference, but initially only 64% had gained entry. Although only 11% had sought entry into vocational education and training (VET) colleges, 24% actually enrolled directly on leaving school.

A further note on the composition of the 1996 sample is needed. Apart from the concentration on continuing students, another significant variation from the original 1991 data-set (as is often the case in longitudinal studies of this kind) was an increase in the relative proportion of female respondents. Throughout the subsequent studies, in the analysis of data, care has been taken to allow for this shift.

In general, one major advantage of the longitudinal data set in our Life-Patterns Project is that it enables us to map the progress of the participants from their final year at school through to their late twenties. This extends our analysis well beyond the initial year or two after graduation. For example, at least three-quarters of our sample had graduated by 1996, and thus many of them have had about six years since in which to seek out career positions somewhat related to their areas of specialisation. Not only can we now document their actual career outcomes, but we can identify valuable subjective assessments of the process of career attainment and the actual meaning of 'career success' in the new labour market.

A major limitation to much of the data on graduate career outcomes is that the statistical categories lack information of a qualitative kind that would enable us to draw any useful conclusions about the ways in which this *process* of career transition has changed. Thus, while statistical studies provide data on career outcomes in terms of occupational categories and industry sectors (Ball, 1999), more detailed information is lacking about whether the outcomes are genuine career outcomes and whether the notion of *career* has changed. Broad statistics do not enable us to identify the distinguishing characteristics of the graduates who have been successful, what differentiates them from those who have not been, and whether there are key factors that may be operative as threshold variables vis-a-vis successful outcomes. Our Life-Patterns sample enables us to examine issues such as these in detail.

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## This Report

This year marks the beginning of Phase Two of the Project. Phase One was completed in the year 2000, and its findings featured in our recent book *Youth, Education and Risk* (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). This report acts as a link between the two phases of the Project.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of the concluding stages of Phase One and identifies the key issues that led us to reshape the Life-Patterns Project in preparation for Phase Two.

Chapter 2 provides a summary of the 2002 survey and some of the written comments provided by the continuing participants.

Chapter 3, titled **The Careers Paradox**, looks at the ways in which the members of the study have been approaching their careers, with particular emphasis on the 'rethinking of careers' that had become a key emerging issue towards the end of Phase One.

Chapter 4, titled **Adult Choices**, begins with a discussion of the main theories about youth transitions and then examines the theme of 'adult choices' to extend that discussion and explain some of the unresolved questions resulting from the established transition frameworks.

Chapter 5, titled **Identity Formation**, concentrates on the material provided to us in 2002 during the interview process and illustrates how the Life-Patterns participants are assessing their own progress now that they have reached their late twenties.

We have also added a number of appendices to provide some specific detail on some of the background characteristics of our Phase Two sample.

# Chapter 1: Concluding Phase One

The year 2000 marked the end of Phase One of the Project. We had originally set out to establish a ten-year record of youth transitions or pathways into adult life, and in our regular YRC reports we have documented those transitions as thoroughly as possible. However, as the years went on we became increasingly aware that many of our assumptions (derived from standard policy and research frameworks) were being challenged by the evidence. So, in the year 2000 we decided to refocus the Project in preparation for a Phase Two beginning in 2002. The purpose of this chapter is to draw to a close the data from Phase One, and to identify the emerging issues that would provide the terms of reference for our Phase Two.

## Year 2000 Outcomes

By the year 2000 the participants in our study were about 27 years-of-age and had come to the end of ten years of post-school transition. Overall, those years had seen a continuing pattern of individual progress. The proportion finding 'real fulfilment' had increased from 28% to 34% over the previous 3 years. Table 2 shows that there were, however, 16% finding progress hard to make, with 7% still facing difficulties and 9% who felt a lack of achievement.

Table 2: 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	9	11
I expect things to improve in the near future	13	14	18

There had been further improvement in job outcomes. Table 3 shows that while 7% were still having difficulty finding an on-going job, those with permanency had grown from 59% in 1998 to 68% in the year 2000. Three-quarters had a number of jobs over the previous five years, but had now found full-time jobs. For over 60%, these jobs were related to their field of study and were viewed as an on-going commitment.

Table 3: 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

These variations in outcomes, described in Table 3, reflect the increasing diversity of young people's transitions in the contemporary world. Thus, when we look back over the ten year period since their final year at school in 1991, we find that the journeys different young people have undertaken indicate that linear routes have not been as common as is sometimes assumed. In our research samples there are five separate groups who had followed distinctly different routes between the years 1991 and 1996:

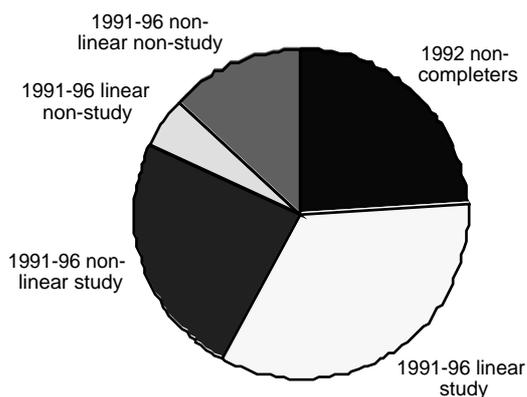
- *the 1991-96 linear study group* - a group (34%) made up of those who went straight from school into further study and completed their initial course without change or interruption;
- *the 1991-96 non-linear study group* - made up of those who began further studies but then interrupted them or changed courses or institutions (24%);
- *the 1991-96 linear non-study group* - made up of those who followed a linear path directly into the workforce after school and did not return to further study before 1996 (5%);
- *the 1991-96 non-linear non-study group* - those who went straight into the workforce after school but then returned to further study prior to 1996 (13%); and
- *the 1992 non-completers* - those (24%) from our original 1991 sample who left school without even completing Year 12.

The Chart (next page) shows the distribution.

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

Report 19 (Dwyer, Tyler and Wyn, 2001, ch. 2), but we can repeat here some of the evidence provided in that previous Report.

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. Thus, offspring of fathers with a professional or managerial occupation were most likely to enter university (64%) and least 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).



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 *after* the 1991-96 period, 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 4: Class of 91 outcomes – 1992-99 (%)

	1992 non-completers	1991-96 linear study	1991-96 non-linear study	1991-96 linear non-study	1991-96 non-linear non-study
career job	26	48	39	38	39
"prospects" job	47	33	36	35	24
other work	21	12	19	21	24
other	6	7	6	6	13

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.

The data show that the one-third who followed a linear study path from 1992 onwards without interruption proved most successful by 1999 in finding permanent full-time career jobs, although even for them that had been the outcome for less than half of the whole sample (48%). If we combine this category with those who 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.

Areas of study chosen also manifested differences related to gender. 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%).

## Background Factors

Despite the variations in routes undertaken or chosen by the participants, a variety of background factors appear to have influenced the choices made. In particular, there is still evidence of structural influences such as class and gender affecting our participants. We reported in detail on this in Research

In general, therefore, young people from more advantaged family backgrounds were 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. In contrast, those from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to be over-represented both among those who fail to gain post-

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school qualifications and among those who fail to establish careers for themselves.

## Emerging Issues

By the year 2000 it was becoming increasingly clear to us that we needed to rethink the 'pathways' theme that had originally provided the framework for the Project. There were two emerging issues in particular - the rethinking of careers, and the adoption of 'mixed patterns' of life priorities - that made the original theme less helpful for providing a proper understanding of the adult choices our participants were making about the future shape of their lives. The emergence of these issues also foreshadowed the need to move on to a second phase of the Project.

### *Rethinking Careers*

There is evidence in the survey data that the participants had initially accepted the policy assumption that post-compulsory programs open up pathways into future careers. In the 1996 responses, 81% believed that there was a strong link between further study and better jobs, and 72% thought that this would be true in their own case. Most also accepted the assumption that their qualifications would ensure highly-skilled or professional careers as a result. The participants were asked what type of employment they would like in the future, but also what they would 'realistically expect' to do. Not only did the majority (66%) indicate an ambition for professional or managerial careers, but almost all of these asserted that they 'realistically expect' to achieve this (61%). For those who had graduated by 1998, at one level this had proved to be the case - except that having a 'professional' job did not mean that it was full-time, or permanent, or that it promised a 'career'. As a result many of them were revising their previous expectations. They were beginning to discover that, given the move to more flexible and deregulated labour markets, outcomes from post-compulsory education were now less straightforward and took longer to achieve with less guarantee of a 'movement through a coherent set of educational and employment experiences leading to some identified destination' (AEC, 1991: 94).

It is informative, for example, that as many as 15 per cent of those who saw their 1998 job as one with genuine career prospects were in fact only working part-time. Amongst them there was a group of people making up 8% of the 1998 sample who at that stage had more than one job - one of which was in their area of specialisation with a renewable contract. There were for example graduate nurses who had regular but part-time work in child-care or as nannies and who supplemented their income doing restaurant or bar work in another part-time job in the evenings. Or there were a few accountancy graduates who kept the books on a part-time basis for small business firms and worked as croupiers at night in the local casino. Others were relief teachers,

part-time research workers in an 'out-sourced' consultancy, or an apprentice jockey who only got an occasional ride at large meets.

Other evidence that some rethinking of careers was taking place arose from the fact that many also displayed a strong tendency to move beyond a narrow focus on the workplace. They insisted on the need to pay equal attention to other aspects of life: lifestyle choices; personal growth and satisfaction; relationships with others; leisure and travel. At this stage in their lives, having just completed their studies and entered their mid-twenties, for the majority of our respondents 'having a steady job' was certainly the number one priority, but it is important to note that this does not necessarily equate with pursuing a career. For most, the financial security that employment provides was obviously important. Some were much more ambitious and determined 'to rise to the top', but others when given the chance to comment about their ambitions indicated that wider priorities counted just as much.

In 1998, we provided a list of 15 priority items to be rated in terms of their level of importance in the respondents' personal lives. The two top priorities indicated by the participants were 'having a steady job' and 'family relationships' - while both 'career involvement' (ranked 7) and 'earning a lot of money' (ranked 10) received lower priority than either 'involvement in leisure time activities' (ranked 4) or 'travelling to different places' (ranked 6). Again, in our year 2000 survey the distinguishing features of a 'career' job for over 90% of the sample was that the job 'is a secure one' but also one that 'makes me think a lot'. Features such as 'responsibility over others' (42% males, 36% females) or 'high status' (39% males, 32% females) were the least favoured items of all. In reflecting on the overall evidence from the year 2000 survey and interviews it became 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' (Dwyer, Tyler and Wyn, 2001: 13).

### *Mixed patterns*

This balance - and possible conflict - between 'career' and other dimensions of 'personal fulfilment' is evident in a growing trend during the course of Phase One towards what we have called 'multi-dimensional lives' (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001: 199-201). This may be partly the result of the fact that the relationship between career and those other dimensions is a more

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complex one now than it was for the parents of our participants. For the post-World War 2 generation of their parents, growing into adulthood in the industrial era, by the age of 25 most were already established in the predictable life-patterns of traditional 'adulthood' : marriage and career, their own homes, children, and expectations about a secure and settled life into the future. At the same age, our participants on the whole are less secure and settled, are still in the process of establishing on-going relationships and careers, and are very much aware that the predictability of life-paths that their parents had believed in has been replaced by the need for flexibility and pragmatic choices as the only reliable basis for future security. Their ambitions or goals for the future are in many ways the same as those of previous generations: the establishment of a family, attaining a degree of economic security, maintaining good personal relationships and being happy are recurring themes. But it is important to note that these goals give very high priority to the themes of personal 'well-being' and relationships. These elements need to be added to the two dimensions of 'education and work' which in the past were used as the dominant themes for analysing young people's transitions. Where the difference between the generations lies is in the 'mix' or balance between different aspects of life and the need to be 'proactive' and pragmatic about likely future outcomes.

Our research data from Phase One suggested that this was a widely-shared outlook, but as with the issue of 'rethinking careers' we were still uncertain about its likely implications for the future. What this shift of perspective signified for the long term, or whether some respondents were just biding their time or reluctantly 'settling for less' was not entirely clear and called for further investigation in a second phase of the Life-Patterns Project. The increasing emphasis our participants were placing on mixed life-patterns and flexibility makes it difficult for us to guess at what kind of picture will emerge over the next few years, but there is little doubt that new perspectives on life will be central to it. The extent to which mixed life-patterns is a constrained or only a short-term manifestation of youth, or is instead a shaping of life-long identities and possibilities, is as yet an unresolved question, but it is obviously now a major issue for research inquiry during Phase Two.

## Chapter 2: Survey 2002

In response to the emerging issues identified at the end of Phase One, we undertook to initiate a second phase beginning in 2002. The purpose of Phase Two was to concentrate specifically on the two emerging issues of *rethinking careers* and *mixed patterns* of life priorities. In setting up the sample, we decided to confine ourselves to the list of participants who had responded in detail to our final survey of Phase One. We were conscious that this might modify the nature of the sample, but because our focus had shifted beyond the original theme of 'pathways' to issues that had emerged towards the end of Phase One, we were more concerned to maintain continuity with the data we had on file from the year 2000. Nevertheless, it is worth making some introductory comments about overall compatibility between the Phase One data-set and that we had decided on for Phase Two.

### Sample Compatibility

We have already drawn attention to two differences between our 1996 selected sample of about 2000 participants and the initial 1991 data-set of about 29,000. First, by 1996 the gender balance had changed with the female proportion rising from 52% in 1991 to 65% in 1996. For our refined sample in the year 2002 the proportion was slightly higher at 67%. As we have indicated, throughout the course of Phase One, in the analysis of data, care was taken to allow for this shift.

Secondly, in establishing the 1996 sample, the 1991 data-set was narrowed down to concentrate mainly on those who had undertaken further study on leaving school. Thus, although about 27% of the 1996 sample came from a 'Non-Study' sub-set, it is significant that of these 'Non-Study' respondents in our 1996 sample as many as 80% had returned to study in the intervening years. As a result, whereas only 66% of the initial 1991 data-set had undertaken further study by 1992, the proportion with further studies in the 1996 selected sample was as high as 90%.

On other key indicators such as parental background (class and level of education), ethnicity, locality, and type of schooling there were no major shifts in the overall representation in our chosen sample of 1996. What has happened since then? The following Table gives comparative percentages for the period 1996-2002.

Table 5: Sample consistency 1996 – 2002 (%)

Indicator	1996 <i>n</i> =1926	1998 <i>n</i> = 1430	2000 <i>n</i> =1121	2002 <i>n</i> =752
Government school	60	56	58	56
Australian born mother	65	65	67	68
Father: Professional/ Managerial	33	34	34	35
Mother: university qualified	13	14	15	15.5
Rural	33	31	34	34
Female	65	66	67	67

### Survey 2002 - A Success File

By 2002, most had completed their studies. Only 3% listed studying as their main occupation and 91% had gained some qualification. Many have been qualified for a number of years: 55% qualified before 1996 and a further 18.4% qualified in 1996. Of first qualification gained, a majority, (74%) were from a university and 19.5% were from a TAFE. In this sense, Phase Two is dealing with a 'success sample' - their tertiary education participation and outcome rates are much closer to the goal that the Government set in the early 1990s than is true of the generation as a whole. They are undoubtedly the most educationally qualified of their generation, with a majority also having completed a second qualification (57%).

The data on employment may also characterise our participants as a 'success sample'. Only 1.3% reported that they were unemployed and looking for work, while 75% were in full-time jobs and only working the one job. A further 12% were in several jobs or in part-time employment. However, it is difficult to get accurate figures for comparison. The Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that labour force participation for 20-24 year old males in 2001 - 2002 was 86.1% and 77.4% for females. The labour force participation for 25-34 year old males was 95.5% and 70.6% for females. The unemployment rate for people aged 25-34 in 2001-2002 was 5.9% (ABS, 2002).

Of the participants in our study, 7.5% reported that their main occupation was home or family commitments, and there was a variety of relationship commitments across the sample: a majority (62%) were in on going relationships (36% married and 29%

in defacto relationships), 13% were parents, and 36% described themselves as 'single and unattached'.

Further data concerning employment shows that reaching this point has involved most of the participants in a fair amount of shifting jobs and options. Only 18% have held only one job since 1996. A majority (61%) have held between two and four jobs and a very mobile 20% have held five or more jobs since 1996. In all 82% have changed jobs in this time, and 55% of this group say that they changed jobs because of better opportunities.

Responses to our survey suggest that this mobility will continue. While 55% say that they now hope to stay in their present job as long as they can, 28% expect to move in the next two years and 16% hope to move in the next year.

We asked several questions about the nature of jobs, career status, permanence and the relationship between qualifications and work. The responses show that 48% got their job as a result of qualifications and area of study, while work experience was the key factor for 26.5% (Table 6).

Table 6: How I got my job

	%
qualifications	31.4
my specific area of study	16.9
work experience	26.5
luck mainly	3.1
personal qualities	9.2
connections	10.8
other	2.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

While only 16.9% were prepared to say that they got their present job as a direct consequence of their specific area of study, a much higher proportion (82%) were prepared to say that they were in a job that was directly or indirectly related to their field of study (Table 7). 76.4% are in 'permanent' jobs and 73% have 'career' jobs. In the follow up interviews and subsequent survey we will be exploring what participants understand this to mean.

Table 7: Link between main source of income and main field of study

	%
directly related	66.3
indirectly related	15.8
not related	14.0
none of the above	3.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

The link between main source of income and field of study matches participants' work/career

expectations. For 66.8%, their current job is their preferred career and for a further 15.8% the current job is seen as a stepping stone to a career. For 17% the current job is either not at all related to career expectations or is seen as just a job – not a career. Table 8 shows that there were two main time periods when participants got into jobs that they regard as career jobs: one in 1996 and one in 1999 or later. This may reflect a pattern for some to get into a career job fairly directly after graduating, and for others to get their career job after a further qualification or more work experience.

Table 8: When did you get your career job?

	%
before 1996	33.4
in 1997	13.0
in 1998	13.5
in 1999 or later	40.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### Flexible careers

In previous surveys, participants reported that the relationships between area of study and employment were more complex than they had expected. Participant responses appeared to show that they were developing a flexible notion of career, in which the traditional emphasis on full-time, permanent employment was being challenged. In this survey, we sought to explore these issues more fully. Table 9 describes how participants think about the very idea of a 'career'. Participants were asked to rank each statement.

Table 9: Which of these statements come close to your ideas about careers?

	<i>very much or greatly agree</i>
A career job offers scope for advancement	91.5%
To be a career your job must involve commitment	88.1%
A career is any ongoing role that offers personal fulfilment	81.6%
Having a single career for life is a thing of the past	66.6%
A career job is one directly related to your area of expertise	58.6%
A career is a permanent, full time job	48.3%
My job one thing, career is something else	40.0%
You don't have to have a job to have a career	32.7%
Your ongoing source of income – that's your career	29.8%
I wonder whether career jobs really exist these days	24.6%

These responses reveal that participants do not disagree with the idea of a career job. However, there is certainly evidence that the concept of career is changing. Less than half of the respondents connect a career to a full-time, permanent job and less than half of the participants stated that a career was related to permanent, full-time work.

Instead, career is clearly seen as a job that has scope for advancement, that involves commitment and that offers personal fulfilment. Just over a third of respondents thought that you don't actually have to have a job to have a career and a quarter wondered if career jobs really exist these days. Two thirds of participants also agree that having a single career is a thing of the past.

### **Influences on life and life situation**

Family and friends continue to be the most significant positive influences on the lives of participants. Personal development is also a significant element and travel featured as a stronger influence on participants' lives than work. The details are presented in Table 10.

*Table 10: Most positive influences on life since school*

	<b>Most positive</b>
family support	49.5%
self discovery	38.7%
travel	25.0%
friends' support	23.6%
studies	16.0%
work situation	12.0%
sport/leisure	11.3%
work associates	10.2%
social life	10.5%

Most participants are fairly satisfied with life overall, and especially with their personal development and family life. An overwhelming 91% of the participants are satisfied or very satisfied with their level of personal development, and 89% are satisfied or very satisfied with their current family life. However, social life, personal relationships and health and fitness are areas of less satisfaction. Health and fitness and personal relationships, work and career have been singled out as areas where participants are less satisfied with their life progress and that they wish was better. This is described in Table 11. In response to questions about physical and mental health, only 56% of respondents were prepared to claim that they were 'healthy' or 'very healthy' physically, and a similar percent (58%) said they were mentally 'healthy' or 'very healthy'.

*Table 11: Areas you wish were better*

	<b>%</b>
health and fitness	26.3
personal relationships	21.5
work / career	19.2
educational attainments	11.6
personal development	7.3
social life	7.1
family life	7.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### **Keeping the balance**

We found in our earlier surveys that one of the areas of concern to participants was managing to balance different life commitments. This continues to be an area of concern. We asked how much time they estimated was spent on the main areas of life and then to say how they would prefer to divide their time. The disparities were striking. Time spent on work is the main area where people would prefer to spend less time. Almost 30% of participants estimated that work was the area of their life where they spent most of their time. But only 12.9% said that this is where they would prefer to spend more time. In other areas of life (family and home life, personal relationships, leisure and recreation, and health and fitness), participants expressed a preference to spend approximately 20% more time than they currently do. Interestingly, the estimate of time spent and the preference for time spent on study was approximately the same (see Table 19). The reasons that participants gave for the differences between time spent on activities and preferences were mixed, but the main reason was the difficulty that participants have in balancing different commitments in life, followed by the pressures of work (Table 12).

*Table 12: How much do each of the following explain the difference between your responses to the previous two questions?*

	<b>mostly</b>	<b>greatly</b>	<b>less</b>	<b>not at all</b>
lack of certainty	10.2%	19.1%	36.2%	34.5%
lack of opportunities	7.8%	18.7%	44.7%	28.8%
difficulties in balancing commitments	25.0%	38.5%	27.1%	9.4%
work pressures	24.8%	33.2%	28.0%	14.1%
domestic responsibilities	11.5%	23.9%	44.5%	20.1%
family pressures	6.1%	16.5%	39.1%	38.2%
these days hard to fulfil hopes	6.2%	17.6%	40.2%	35.8%
addictive behaviours	0.8%	2.3%	7.9%	89.0%
health factors	3.3%	12.0%	31.2%	53.5%

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Some light is shed on these responses by the participants who provided written responses to questions about the reasons for differences in their hopes and aims for life and the reality at this stage. The examples that are included here reveal the complexities with which participants are contending as they continue to make difficult decisions about work, study and life.

*“I sometimes wonder what I am doing and where I am going with my life. I started with such high aspirations and good intentions. I went to university and studied for four years only to be in a job that does not even require you to finish high school. Despite this, I really enjoy my job and find that I am quite suited to it. I have decided that since it does not look like I can establish a career for the time being I will concentrate on owning my own home.”*

*“It’s taken me eight years (since I finished uni) to get where I am now. I feel like I have finally reached the place in my “career” that I always wanted to be... and now that I’m here I feel it’s time for a new challenge – looks like it’s back to uni for me!”*

*“Thank you for your survey. Question 33 made me realise that what I am spending most of my time and energy doing is giving me the least satisfaction.”*

*“I can’t seem to figure out how to get what I want: i.e. a committed relationship, a job/career that I enjoy. The world seems to be passing me by and leaving me behind.”*

*“My health has taken a back seat to my career and now my health is suffering.”*

*“I made work my priority and now I have regrets about my social and personal life.”*

*“I have noticed a definite divide in my friends and acquaintances into two basic groups – those who have chosen to marry and follow a relatively ‘traditional’ path through life... and the other group who are steadfastly clutching to their independence and resisting the pressure from family / friends to marry and ‘settle down’.”*

These comments show that achieving a balance in life continues to be a focus, as the participants juggle their needs to have employment, their hopes for a meaningful job and their goals of personal development and relationships. Despite being a ‘success cohort’, in their own estimations life is still a struggle with uncertainty. The next chapter explores in more detail how these complexities affect their views and experiences of careers.

## Chapter 3: The Careers Paradox

At the very least, the contrasting strands of evidence in our Life-Patterns Project suggest that young people's transitions between study and work are now much more complex than many of the established research and policy frameworks assume. To make sense of this complexity we need therefore to re-examine some of our research assumptions and practices (Gudmundsson, 2000; Looker and Dwyer, 1998) so that we can uncover the ways in which the institutional and personal points of reference for young people's transitions have been affected by the introduction of new elements of uncertainty (Dwyer, Tyler and Wyn, 2001: ch. 4). For this generation it is not a simple either/or between the past and the present but very much a both/and as they try 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: 11).

### Promise and Uncertainty

The proof of the promise lies in what they have been able to achieve so far. By comparison with other developed countries Australia has overall a lower proportion (63%) of its 25-64 year-old labour force with post-compulsory education qualifications. This shortfall is beginning to be bridged and our sample reflects this with 91% having some kind of post-compulsory qualification. As a result, 75% now have full-time jobs and 66.8% have achieved their preferred career positions. Contributing to this is the degree of family 'investment' in their education and personal development. For example, when asked in the year 2000 about the most positive influences on their life since leaving school as many as 80% clearly identify 'parental influence' as a dominant factor, with peer-group influence receiving only 47% support. This acknowledgment of the influence of their families is a theme that has been repeated regularly over the course of the Life-Patterns Project in both the annual surveys and the interview responses. In effect, a large part of the 'promise' influencing their current choices derives from the fact that their families have provided them 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. As a result, they have been given the advantage of time to sort out and balance for themselves their own priorities for the future.

One way of examining the element of promise in the lives of the participants is to identify the extent to which their personal backgrounds and qualifications have influenced their levels of success. Fortunately, our Phase 1 and Phase 2 samples are still reasonably compatible with regard to background factors. While there has been some increase (from 25% to 31%) in the proportion whose mothers had a tertiary qualification, the proportions for example with fathers not in professional or managerial jobs are reasonably similar. The comparative details are displayed in the following tables.

Table 13: *Mother's level of education (%)*

	Phase 1 Sample	Phase 2 Sample
University degree	13	16
Other tertiary	12	15
Year 12	12	11
Less than Year 12	54	50
Other	6	8

Table 14: *Non-professional/managerial backgrounds (%)*

Father's Occupation	Phase 1 Sample	Phase 2 Sample
Farmer	8	6
Tradesman	14	11
Factory worker/labourer	11	12
Clerical/office worker	4	5
Salesman	2	2

For the purposes of analysis, we can select out from our current sample two contrasting groups. Group A would consist of those whose father had a professional or managerial occupation and whose mother had a tertiary qualification. They total 150 or 20% of our Phase 2 Sample. Group B would consist of those with the paternal occupations shown in Table 14 and whose mothers were not tertiary graduates. They total 232 or 30% of the sample.

How have the members of these contrasting groups fared on the job front? Table 15 suggests that

at first sight the work situations for members of the two groups are largely comparable.

Table 15: 2002 main work situation (%)

	Total Sample	Group A	Group B
family commitments	7	5	6
casual work	4	6	4
looking for work	1	2	1
full-time job	76	79	74
regular part-time	7	3	8
study	3	3	4
a number of jobs	2	1	3

However, when we look more closely at their work situations specifically in terms of careers, the evidence for the two groups diverges markedly. This is shown in Table 16.

Table 16: 2002 Jobs and careers (%)

	Total Sample	Group A	Group B
in preferred career	62	71	57
job is a 'stepping stone' towards career	6	14	13
job not directly related to career	15	7	7
'just a job'	10	4	16
none of the above	7	4	6

What makes the difference? Why is it that both groups are generally on a par with regard to their work situations but that Group A emerges with better career outcomes? While it is true that the two groups represent two ends of the spectrum of parental 'advantage', it is also true that at least the majority

(57%) of Group B have still managed to compete successfully on the careers front. Is there something that those 57% have in common with the 71% of Group A who also have careers, or is parental background the only sustainable explanation? The most likely alternative explanation derives from the post-school qualification profiles of the two groups, particularly given the increased importance being placed on this factor within the labour market.

Table 17 presents data on qualification profiles of our Phase 2 sample as a whole, of those in the total sample who have attained career positions, of all the Group A and Group B members, and also on those in the two groups who are in career positions. What are their initial post-school qualifications, and what importance can we place on any further qualifications they have gained since?

This Table shows that having a university degree as a first qualification is a deciding factor in explaining the diversity of career outcomes across the various participants. It also appears that this initial factor is more decisive than the gaining of a further qualification although this does seem to have some bearing on career outcomes for successful Group B members with a further qualification.

It is informative to examine the explanations offered by the participants for their own success. The main reasons offered by all participants are related to their qualifications, their specific area of study and their previous work experience. In particular, the majority of those in Groups A and B who have achieved career positions are in perfect agreement with each other on the importance of the educational factors as reasons for their success. Table 18 provides the evidence.

Table 17: Qualifications and careers (%)

Ist Qualification	Phase 2 n=763	With Careers n= 557	Group A n= 150	A careers n= 106	Group B n= 232	B careers n= 132
university	66	<b>71</b>	80	<b>85</b>	60	<b>72</b>
TAFE	18	17	15	12	19	12
apprentice	4	4	0	0	7	8
other	3	3	3	2	2	-
none	8	5	2	1	12	7
<b>2nd Qualification</b>						
university	36	36	42	39	28	30
TAFE	9	9	6	8	9	10
apprentice	1	1	-	-	-	2
other	12	15	16	17	12	16
none	42	38	35	36	50	42

Table 18: Participant reasons for career outcomes (%)

Ist Qualification	Phase 2 n=763	With Careers n= 557	Group A n= 150	A careers n= 106	Group B n= 232	B careers n= 132
qualifications	30	35	31	<b>37</b>	28	<b>37</b>
specific area of study	16	18	15	<b>20</b>	16	<b>20</b>
previous work	25	26	33	28	22	23
mainly luck	3	2	0	0	5	5
personal qualities	9	9	7	6	11	9
connections	10	6	7	8	9	3
other	7	3	5	0	8	2

There is a convergence between the objective data on career outcomes and the subjective assessments of the reasons for success. In general, access to a tertiary qualification (in particular a university degree) has made a considerable difference with respect to career outcomes. This is so even for those whose parents had themselves enjoyed educational advantages. It is certainly true for those who lacked a similar kind of parental background, and it has been instrumental in enabling the majority of them to compete successfully with those from the more advantaged families. Thus, for at least two-thirds of our sample, the promise of gaining advantage through post-school study has been fulfilled.

Nevertheless, even for those who have now attained careers, uncertainty has also been part of the picture. This has definitely been true of the choices they have been faced with as they have sought to act upon the promises held out to them. Even those who have adopted more traditional attitudes towards career attainment show an awareness of an increasing need for flexibility in how they define their careers. To be successful they expect to be proactive in ways their parents did not seem to contemplate in the 60s and 70s. It is no longer mainly a matter of following some predetermined path but also one of making the 'right choices' for yourself. Rightly or wrongly, what they feel is that many of the old certainties about careers are gone. They are learning for themselves to live with ambiguity. Even after they had gained their tertiary qualifications, they have had periods of unemployment or have only been able to gain part-time positions. Since 1996 as many as 82% of our sample have changed jobs and a fifth of them have done this at least five times. Currently, 28% do not expect to be in their present job in two years time and a further 16% hope to move in the next year. Not surprisingly, when we asked them in the year 2002 survey how they envisaged their careers, they overwhelmingly identified with definitions in terms of personal development rather than expertise (58.6%) or permanent full-time jobs (48.3%). Coming to terms with uncertainty is already affecting how they are beginning to define 'careers' for themselves, as the following comments illustrate.

*I am in a job that I enjoy at the moment, it is only a job and not something I can make a career of. I just feel that I have had all this build up with my tertiary education and initially finding work in a related field only to end up doing a job that is not related and that really wouldn't require the amount of study I have completed.*

*I feel that I studied hard to receive a degree in my chosen field, however I feel that there was no guarantee of job security. I worked in the field for 7 years, and changed jobs several times. In my last position I was retrenched from my job and have since changed career paths.*

*My career has not been as I 'dreamed' it would be. My work is a day to day existence that doesn't contribute to society as I had hoped for.*

## Finding the Balance

The interplay between promise and uncertainty confronts the participants with questions about how to achieve a balance between the two. Finding the balance between study, work and other life priorities continues to be a theme in the written responses of many of our participants.

*Would like to lead a more balanced life – work 50 hours per week plus, not much time to spend with friends and family. Would like to 'meet someone' but difficult to do so when spend so much time at work!*

*I sacrificed relationships etc to study and get a career established – which I have not achieved and what I really desire more than a successful career is a happy family life etc: marriage, children. Most of my friends are married so there is no one to go out socially to meet new people with and I am often excluded from social events as I don't have a partner.*

*After 10 years of University education and nearing completion of a veterinary medicine residency to sit for specialist exams in 3 months I am exhausted. I watch no TV, have minimal social life, no family life. I work at the hospital >100 hours a week and all other time is spent studying. I have achieved great things academically, but have studied continuously to the detriment of my life, family, health, fitness and pleasure for the last 14 years. I am tired!*

*My concentration on work, partner and family/friends has left my fitness level and personal wellbeing less than where I would have hoped it would be. However I'm currently changing this and allowing myself to be no. 1 priority so that my fitness improves.*

*I am currently completing my doctoral degree (a few months away from completion). I find it difficult to decide on career paths - trying to find the right balance between financial security and career fulfilment.*

Finding the right balance forces each individual to reflect on the choices available to them and to decide what are their real priorities in life. Giddens (1990) sees this as an important ingredient of what he terms 'reflexive modernity'. Conscious attention needs to be given to how decisions in one dimension of life (eg career) may affect choices they want (or need) to make in other dimensions as well (eg relationships, lifestyle, locality). Thus, while it is true that many of this post-1970 generation have not 'finalised' some of these other choices, it would be misleading to read this as evidence that they have not yet taken them seriously into account in the decisions they have so far made. It is interesting to note, for example, that while 36% (44% of males and 33% of females) in 2002 describe themselves as 'single and unattached', as many as 85% of these (equally for males and females) at the same time report that they are very satisfied or satisfied with the 'way things have turned out with regard to their own personal development'!

This is even more revealing when we recall the continual questioning about their own personal development or 'identity formation' that is so much part of their search for 'balance' in their lives. Both in the generalised survey results and also in the individual responses there are contradictory strains in their assessments of what they are making of their lives. It underlies much of the rethinking they are doing with regard to careers, evidenced by the extent to which an emphasis on personal development comes through also in their definitions of careers - the favoured options being 'scope for advancement' (91.5%), 'commitment' (88.1%) and 'personal fulfilment' (81.6%). Thus, while it might appear that their sense of identity may be grounded in what is happening to them in terms of careers, how this impacts on other dimensions of their lives drives the paradox home for them, and they must take this into

account. It is worth repeating here a previous Table (Table 19, below) which displayed the contrasts between 'reality' and 'preferences' for how they currently spend their time and energies.

Thus, although 9 out of 10 of the sample (in response to an earlier question) were content with their personal development and family life, in this later question there was a definite gap between 'actual' and the 'desired' regarding these items. In fact, 73.3% would wish it otherwise, and it is clear that the demands of work have much to do with this. While 220 of them admitted that work occupied most of their time and energy, only 96 saw this as desirable. By contrast, 225 would prefer to devote most of their effort to personal relationships even though only 74 have found this possible. This is evident too in the gaps between actual and desired priorities regarding family/home life (186 versus 321), leisure/recreation (28 versus 132) and health and fitness (37 versus 160). When asked how they explained these gaps, 63.5% identified 'difficulties in balancing commitments' and 58% pointed to 'work pressures'.

Somewhat related to this divergence of evidence, their responses about personal relationships and levels of health and fitness display a similar gap. Thus, while in one question only a small minority were at all dissatisfied with their current physical (12.6%) or mental (16%) health, at least one quarter (26.3%) nevertheless in another question had definite doubts about their own health and fitness and at least one fifth (21.5%) expressed concern about their personal relationships. The extent to which these more individual or personal issues are in the forefront of their minds perhaps throws light on their low levels of concern about political action and community involvement.

The questions raised about their own personal development or 'identity formation' take us back to an issue we have discussed in our recent book *Youth, Education and Risk* (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). We drew attention to the fact that both the males and females in our sample were moving beyond some of the traditional gender stereotypes and were placing considerable emphasis on developing 'multi-dimensional lives'. We even suggested that there was an element of irony in this to the extent that it was at least partly due to the uncertainties they were experiencing in the labour market (p. 192). This is reflected in how they are now beginning to define careers, and the outcome of their post-compulsory education, in personal development terms.

Our research does indicate that those alternative avenues of personal interest are of increasing importance to our participants. There is a

Table 19: Time commitments

	Estimate of areas where most time is spent		Preference for time spent	
	No	%	No	%
work	220	29.5	96	12.9
family/home life	186	25.0	321	43.1
personal relationships	74	9.9	225	30.2
leisure/recreation	28	3.7	132	17.7
health and fitness	37	5.0	160	21.4
study	44	5.9	42	5.6
concern for the environment	9	1.2	32	4.3
community involvement	7	0.9	10	1.3
political action	2	0.3	7	0.9

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definite shift toward more complex life-patterns and multi-dimensional lives, which suggests that they are beginning to rethink the priorities and expectations their parents had encouraged in them. The message we derive from the responses in our Life-Patterns Project to both the large surveys and the interviews is that, whether by choice or constraint, they are already moving beyond the narrow career investments to which they had been led to aspire while still at school.

The changed experience of young women is an important ingredient in this shift of perspective. As we saw in Chapter 6, they are the ones for whom increasing participation in post-compulsory education and also in the labour market has been the most dramatic. Despite these added dimensions to the lives of young women of this post-1970 generation, they continue to insist on the importance of what might be considered as either 'traditional' roles - their personal relationships, the prospect of family life, the opportunities for 'private' time with family and friends, notions of 'care' for those who are close to them - or a sense of a balance of personal commitments which blend together the 'private' and 'public' dimensions that were so separated along gender lines in the industrial era. The males in our Life-Patterns Project are also aware of these new dimensions, but for them foreclosed options within the labour market propose a greater threat to what many of them still see as their traditional roles. It is interesting to note, however, that despite this in our sample only about one third of them are narrowly focused on the model of industrial manhood (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001: 199).

In our book we puzzled over the question of whether this shift towards multi-dimensional lives was a matter of choice or mainly the result of the constraints associated with career uncertainties. The 2002 survey responses of those who are now definitely established in their careers indicate that for them the balance of a range of personal life commitments is a matter of conscious choice. Although they now have the advantage of pursuing their career goals in life, their responses indicate that for them career needs to be kept in perspective. Given that they have finally been able to establish themselves in their chosen career, we might expect that they would be more likely than most to regard it as their primary focus. Also, in terms of traditional criteria, we might also expect the males in particular to have such a career focus. The evidence does not support these expectations.

In our sample there are 557 members who now claim careers for themselves. In fact the proportion of males to females in this group reflects the make-up of the total sample - 33% male and 67% female. Also their definitions of career appear to be no different from those of the sample as a whole - for example, defining career in terms of 'personal fulfilment' merits an 81% response in line with that of the total sample. The proportion who devote most of their time and energy to their work (34%) is slightly

higher than for the sample as a whole (29.5%), but out of the 557 with careers only 14% or 75 (29 males and 46 females) are in favour of this. They would prefer to be giving more time and energy to other commitments in their lives - again in line with the response profile of the total sample. It is clear therefore that even for the 'successful' their careers are viewed as one part of their lives (albeit important), but in fact too demanding of their time and energy by comparison with the other commitments they have in their lives. This is equally true of both the males and females who have so far succeeded on the career front.

It is important at this point of our analysis to insist that there is a paradox at work here. The evidence does not point to a sharp break from the past but an attempt on the part of the participants to blend or establish a balance between traditional expectations and new life circumstances within which elements of personal choice become decisive (Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler, 2001). Their post-school 'pathways' may have taken them on a more prolonged journey than was the case for previous generations but, as we noted in our 2001 report,

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: 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 (Dwyer, Tyler and Wyn, 2001: 41).

Now the majority of our sample have achieved that - at least in the sense that they have successfully resolved the paradox for themselves through the choices that they have made. Already these initial findings from Phase Two of the Life-Patterns Project have carried us beyond the tentative analysis presented in previous reports on Phase One. The majority of our sample are no longer in some kind of 'transitional phase' but have now established themselves in their own adult way of life, characterised by

- flexibility/reflexivity;
- a readiness to make on-going career choices for the future;
- personal autonomy/responsiveness to change; and
- a balance of life commitments.

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## Chapter 4:

# Adult Choices

Most of the academic literature on the upheavals and disjunctures that have affected the post-1970 generation measures their experiences against an established model of transition to adult status. In the UK there has been an on-going structure/agency debate about the ways in which well-established structural factors of class, ethnicity and gender place definite constraints on evidence of agency and choice emerging from a range of recent research studies (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Rudd and Evans, 1998). In the European literature attempts are made to resolve the problems of upheaval by inventing new stages of transition to reflect the apparent prolongation of the time-span between adolescence and adulthood due to the economic and social transformations of the late 20th century (Evans and Heinz, 1994; Chisholm, 1997; du Bois-Reymond, 1998). In Northern America those upheavals are often read as disruptions or breaking-points that raise serious doubts about any effective transition to adulthood (Lerner, 1995; Côté, 2000). Our extended involvement in the Life-Patterns Project leads us to doubt all of these approaches.

First, the structure/agency debate has certainly proved helpful in highlighting the way the influence of structural factors (eg class, gender and ethnicity) has become 'obscured' as a result of young people's need to make their own choices in life. At the same time, given the academic nature of the debate, the interplay between these competing influences on young people's lives has in fact been 'under-played'. Evidence for or against each of the factors tends to be used selectively and not enough attention is paid to what the conflicting evidence tells us about the increased complexity of young people's transitions since the 1990s. At times, the debate proceeds on the assumption that this complexity has not been 'fully tested empirically' or that the available research evidence is either 'weak and often speculative', or else lacking in 'any systematic analysis'. This does little justice to a wide range of studies which present convincing evidence on the subject, from the UK (Ball *et al*, 2000), Europe (Heggen and Dwyer, 1998; Heinz, 2000), the US (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999), Canada (Anisef and Axelrod, 1993) or our own work in Australia. What the accumulated evidence on the increased complexity of youth transitions demonstrates is that 'we need to sharpen our awareness of the interplay of structural forces and individual's attempts to control their lives' (Evans, 2002, p. 265). To achieve

this we need to move beyond the niceties of academic debate about competing definitions of youth transitions and concentrate much more on what this interplay can tell us about the heightened importance of *adult choices* in assessing the outcomes of those transitions.

Secondly, if we take this increased complexity as a valid starting point for understanding youth transitions in contemporary society, we need to investigate how it has affected those transitions. The European literature has been particularly helpful in this regard. A range of studies has drawn attention to ways in which customary transitions into adulthood have been 'prolonged'. The contrasts between the lives of the post-1970 generation and those of their parents at a similar age offer clear evidence of this. By comparison with their parents, many young people today in their mid to late twenties were still studying, were not yet married or with children, had not yet established their own households and were not fully established in careers. This served to suggest that they are therefore in some kind of intermediate stage between adolescence and adulthood - post-adolescence is the term frequently used or even 'over-aged young adults' referring to those already close to their thirties but not yet leading 'fully adult' lives. The problem with this type of analysis is that, while it demonstrates that the traditional time-sequence of transition has been disrupted, it tends to ignore significant upheavals of a different kind affecting the early stages of the sequence.

In other words, if we are to give a thorough account of disrupted youth transitions, it is important to recognise that the 'time-slippage' that has occurred cuts both ways. For example, across the whole of the Western world there has been a definite shift in the age at which people get married which adds weight to assumptions about 'deferred' adulthood. Less attention is paid to the fact that puberty is now a pre-teen event in young people's lives. Yet this downward age-shift clearly has important implications for our understanding of adolescence, as well as for the decisions now faced about sexuality and personal relationships because of the widening of the gap between puberty and marriage across the whole time-sequence. In other words, while there is little doubt that the transition of youth to fully-fledged 'traditional' adult status has been prolonged over the last quarter-century, at the same time there

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has also been a downward trend in the exposure of youth to what were traditionally seen as adult choices in life. This earlier exposure to traditional adult choices applies in many aspects of life - lifestyle and leisure activities, access to communications technology, involvement in the workforce, independent sources of income, sexual experience and personal relationships, and self-reliance within fragmented family structures. There are now overlaps between roles that were once viewed as separate or sequential, 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. The consequence of these disruptions across the whole of the time-sequence of transition is that adolescents today are inevitably making adult choices within their day-to-day lives.

Thirdly, if we concede that this intrusion of adult choices into the lives of 'pre-adults' disrupts their expected transitions, this means that those transitions are neither as predictable nor as well understood as past youth transitions may have seemed. Some of the North American literature has focused directly on this issue, particularly because 'individualised' choice was a longer-established feature of youth transition there than in other regions of the world. Research on youth transitions in North America has relied heavily on the study of 'adolescence' - identifying the 'stages' that young people must pass through and how they conform to or deviate from established norms of maturity and 'adult' identity formation. The disruptions affecting youth transitions today tend therefore to be read as a disruption of that identity formation. Our own research experience (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001: chs. 2 and 7) certainly confirms findings from the North American literature about the problems confronting young people today in their transitions. But for us, notions of 'arrested adulthood' (Côté, 2000) or 'youth in crisis' (Lerner, 1995) tend to present a one-dimensional perspective of young people as mere 'adolescents' who lack the cultural, personal and material capital to respond to the changes affecting them.

It is important to recognise that, if today's adolescents are being expected to make adult choices earlier in their lives, this means that an age-old element of human formation, pre-dating the invention of 'adolescence', has been re-introduced into the life-process of Western youth. This suggests that we cannot simply assume that, with all the resources available to them, they are unable to blend youth experience and adult choices in ways that were once common in Western societies and are customary in many non-Western societies even today. If it is true that adolescence is no longer the insulated age-

bound experience it was throughout the twentieth century, we cannot simply detach it from this limited historical context and assume that other versions of adolescence are essentially dysfunctional.

Different research traditions have made helpful contributions to our understanding of how much has changed in the transition from youth to adulthood. Nevertheless, after reviewing the range of competing theories about the disruptions of youth transitions, we are convinced that it is time to move on from preoccupations with 'faulty' transitions to an investigation of what young people are able to tell us about their own informed *adult choices*. We need to concentrate much more on what can we learn from our respondents about:

- the choices they have made for themselves in coming to terms with the adult world; and
- what shape they envisage their adult lives are likely to take in the future.

## Making Choices

At around age 27-28 years, the participants are feeling the effects of the decisions they have made earlier. Many feel that they were not adequately equipped to make well-informed choices and yet both educational and career choices were 'foisted' upon them.

*I feel I chose the wrong university course for me. Didn't/ never had correct or useful information which has been a massive job/career/life setback.*

*Poor career guidance at school and post-graduate uni cost me a couple of years that could have been better spent.*

*Not knowing what you want to be at Years 11 and 12 meant I'm not in the job I'd like to be in. And still don't know what. No one I know is satisfied with what they do. There needs to be more education/information in high school about what's out there to do and the realities of it - ie nursing is taught idealistically at uni. In the real world it is crap, high pressured and disillusioning.*

*I am now studying pharmacy at (regional university) because I have a better chance of having a good job. Whereas a science degree did not provide that job security. Although I wish I could still stay in Melbourne to study so that I could be close to my family and friends.*

*I would have furthered my education after school, in a different way, still in the same field, however in a better, more professional area or job. The qualifications I had, I really didn't use them to my interests or potential.*

*I didn't complete my BSc. degree while I was enrolled in the uni and I deeply regret it. I wish to resume my studies so I can achieve the qualifications in the near future.*

*I now wish that I had done a double degree instead of a single one, because that would improve my chances of establishing a career that I'm content with. I also wish that I did deeper research into the work prospects of getting an Arts degree and maybe then I would have been more motivated to study harder and obtain higher grades.*

*Although I have been working in a job directly related to my university education I wish to move into another area of specialisation related to the post graduate education I am currently studying.*

When we look back over the transitions of our participants since their final year at school in 1991, definite and considered choices are evident in the pathways they have undertaken. As we indicated earlier in this Report, those pathways have not conformed to the single linear transition advocated in post-compulsory education policy. They have instead displayed considerable diversity. Given the increased pressure on their age-group (from policy guidelines, community attitudes and parental expectations) to continue on a clearly-defined education path after completing their schooling, their deviation from the standard model cannot simply be characterised as the action of 'drifting dreamers' (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999: 4). The evidence from detailed questions in a series of annual surveys and from our interview samples indicates that they certainly have taken into account both the pressures to conform and the consequences of their choices at a personal level.

Furthermore, when we have asked them about their priorities in life they have displayed a complex understanding of the demands that are part of adult life. In making their career choices the majority take a range of non-career factors into account or emphasise a balance of commitments. This is evident from the responses of the Phase Two sample as a whole and the two-thirds who have now attained career positions.

Table 20: Post-1996 priorities (%)

Priority	Phase 1 1999 Sample	Phase 2 Sample	Now In Careers		
			F	M	T
the important thing is to pursue a career in my area of interest or expertise	19	18	18	25	20
holding an on-going job that provides economic security is the big thing	10	12	11	11	11
the broad context (eg family, lifestyle, 'field' of work) is the deciding factor	24	25	27	20	24
the important thing is to rethink priorities and make new choices	9	8	5	7	5
the important thing is to keep a balance of commitments rather than just concentrate on one aspect of life	37	38	39	37	39

As might be expected, we find a higher proportion of males who are more single-minded about their career paths (25%) by comparison with their female counterparts. Still, overall even the males with careers are more likely to agree with the others in the total sample, with the large majority

(including 57% of males with careers) favouring the 'broad context' and 'balance of commitments' options instead. The general tendency to measure their outlook on their jobs and careers against other commitments in their lives indicates a definite seriousness of intent - they make genuine adult choices for themselves based on a diverse and complex understanding of what adulthood entails.

There is a strange irony here that is related to the disruptions that have affected the established time-sequence of transition from youth to adulthood. Instead of prolonging the experience of adolescence or postponing the realities of adulthood, those disruptions have caused an *overlap* in their lives between the two. When they make choices about study, work, relationships, family, or lifestyle, the disruptions to the established time-sequence make them feel that they are continually 'working against time'. The time-line is there, but in terms both of their own parents' experience and of parental expectations for their sons and daughters, there is a constant mismatch between the time-line and life realities.

For example, even in their parents' generation and before, there were other *adults* who pursued academic studies well into their late twenties and beyond, who 'chose' to remain single or not have children, who changed or disrupted their careers, or who did not have households of their own. They were not denied adult status because of those choices. In fact, while some of those who deviated from the norm may have done so lightly or 'immaturely', the

decisions of most were accepted as genuine adult choices about personal priorities, despite strong social pressure to the contrary. Because they were assumed to have reached the age of decision and responsibility, they were seen as making the right choices for themselves. In other words, in the past even for those making non-mainstream choices the established time-line led to an assumption of adulthood. For present-day young adults in their twenties, the same assumption is not readily made - in fact the mismatch between the out-moded time-line and expected 'normal' outcomes calls their adult choices into

question. There is an obvious reluctance to let go of established assumptions about what 'ought to be', and a failure to give due credit to a generation that knows it has grown up in a new kind of social environment and is making the necessary choices of coming to terms with it.

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Terms like 'generation on hold', 'post-adolescence' and 'over-aged young adults,' that have been used in the international literature to explain the delaying of traditional outcomes, tend (perhaps unintentionally) to perpetuate the assumption of the linear two-dimensional sequence - by conveying an impression that these groups of young people will somehow or other eventually arrive at 'normal' adulthood defined in terms of the industrial era and their parents' expectations of them (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001: 188-9).

## Shaping a Life

The disruptions to the time-sequence of transition have affected the predictability of outcomes for the post-1970 generation. As we have seen earlier in this Report this presents them with a careers paradox evident in the interplay of 'promise' and 'uncertainty'. It has also affected their sense of 'identity formation' - how they measure their personal development as they come to terms with the upheavals affecting their transition into adult life. They are faced with a series of choices in their lives on a variety of fronts which pose real problems about how to achieve a balance between what they had been led to expect of adulthood and what it actually holds in store for them.

At one level, their experience of transition may appear little different from that endured by those of the generations that had preceded them - in their youth they too had to adjust to new circumstances that were often largely unforeseen by their own parents. At another level, however, it was very different because the upheavals were so far-reaching - affecting gender roles, family formations and lifestyles, educational priorities, economic volatility and the redefinition of career paths within deregulated and flexible labour markets. While it is true that their parents' generation was also being affected by those upheavals in the present and had even faced some of them in their own adolescent years, there were some clear contrasts between what adulthood meant 'then and now'. To understand the contrasts - while resisting the tendency to view generational change in simplistic 'either/or' terms - it is helpful to examine the generally accepted expectations of adulthood each generation has faced.

For example, while their parents' formative years coincided with the sexual revolution and women's lib, there were still dominant expectations about *traditional family roles* based on an accepted separation of the 'public' and the 'private' along gender lines. There may have been generalised notions of emerging equality, but the expectation was still predominantly one of motherhood and fatherhood along traditional lines. Similarly, while there were emerging signs of increasing flexibility in personal job prospects as the economy expanded and diversified, there was still a generally accepted expectation of *predictable career-paths* (particularly for

males) that would guarantee a family's financial security through to the age of retirement. Sennett (1998) has covered this well in his recent book **The Corrosion of Character**. Again, while the cult of individualism was increasingly becoming part of adolescent lifestyle and leisure, expectations of *collective identity* and personal fulfilment in social, workforce, class, political and local group membership were still influential in establishing a sense of belonging for them and in shaping the adult choices they would eventually make.

It could be argued that the changes affecting the parent generation in fact were seen as largely positive. This was reflected in an expectation or ambition about *upward social mobility*. New opportunities for both males and females from different classes and regions seemed to be opening up as world economies entered their 'golden years'. The added prospect of increased access to double incomes and greater material prosperity for a growing number of families accentuated for the generation (and their hopes for their offspring) the expectations of 'promise' and the passing of 'uncertainty'. For their offspring the re-emergence of uncertainty has in many ways 'turned the clock back' in terms of generational change, evoking memories of 'hard times' shared more readily by their parents' parents. Still, the contrasts with their grandparents' youthful experience are clearly very much greater.

Thus, the dominance of pre-set traditional roles has been weakened by the far-reaching social changes that have taken place. There is now more of an onus on individuals to shape their own identities and learn how to cope for themselves. For both males and females *personal flexibility* has become much more crucial for a successful transition to adult life. This is clear from the responses of our participants.

In our 1996 survey of the participants in our Project, we asked them how they would define the characteristics of 'adult life'. Items related to personal autonomy - financial independence, making your own choices/decisions, and your emotional maturity - were given greatest weight. In our 2000 survey we returned to this issue and 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. Interestingly, parental influence (80%) was rated more highly than the influence of their peers (47%).

Along with the onus placed on individuals to make choices for themselves, there is an increasing need for a *readiness to make on-going career choices for the future*. We have seen that already job-transitions are the majority experience for our participants, that at least one fifth of them have changed jobs at least five times in the past five years, and that 44% of them do not expect to be in their current 'career' position

in two years time. 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 it has also led to a more contingent or flexible attitude on their part towards their own definitions of success and career.

Allied with the need to consider career choices, there is an increased emphasis on developing *personal autonomy*. Participants need strong personal resources to make difficult individual choices and to survive the disruptions and uncertainty that result. Clearly, the major personal resource which marks out the post-1970 generation from its predecessors is found in the attainment of post-school educational qualifications. It is no surprise therefore that of the 27% of our original sample who had not continued on a study path on finishing school as many as 80% returned to study within the next five years. Also, within our 2002 sample, there are now 57% who have gained more than one post-school qualification since leaving school. They are resourcing themselves for the future, which probably explains why they define their careers in terms of personal 'advancement', 'commitment' and 'fulfilment', and profess high levels of satisfaction about their progress in life.

In an appendix to this Report we have provided a statistical analysis that explores the relationship between this element of autonomy and the job choices different participants make. In general, that analysis suggests that those with high indices of personal autonomy show a greater readiness to make on-going job choices. For example, those with permanent positions who nevertheless are contemplating a change of jobs within the next two years are more likely to be those with university degrees who come from more advantaged family backgrounds. This is particularly the case for the young women in the sample. Table 21 provides a summary of the data.

Table 21: *Permanency, job choice and personal resources* (%)

	Intend to Change Jobs in 2 yrs	Intend to Stay
non-university educated	22	78
university educated	43	57
from advantaged family background	46	54
advantaged family background females	49	51
uni-ed from advantaged background	53	47
<b>Total sample</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>58</b>

This emphasis on personal autonomy and a capacity to draw upon individual resources is also partly related to changes that have affected social support networks. Many of the formal support structures of a social, local or workplace kind that

existed for previous generations have been weakened or lost over the past quarter-century, and so there is more pressure on today's young adults to create their own portfolios for living. As we have shown earlier in this Report, allied with the increased emphasis on autonomy there is an often-repeated insistence on the need for a *balance of life commitments*. It seems likely that the changes that have taken place in gender roles have greatly contributed to this, making both males and females aware that life can no longer be compartmentalised along gender lines. Each individual is faced with a broader range of adult responsibilities and can no longer assume that they can be left for someone else to fulfil. As we pointed out in our recent book (Dwyer and Wyn, 2000:192)

there are implications in the truth that throughout the life of this post-1970 generation developments in the global economy have had far-reaching cross-national effects on the lifestyles and consumer interests of all generations - but particularly on the young. They have been cultivated - and in this sense enculturated into an individualised sense of 'choice'. They were not only candidates for the labour-market but were a market in their own right; and so their tastes, their interests, their leisure pursuits and their assumed 'drives' were courted and pursued. They had identities that were to be shaped, labelled and expressed, even though as students they were told to 'keep their eye on the main chance'.

In other words, even in terms of the linear model of 'transition', outcomes for the post-1970 generation depend therefore *not* on their educational achievements alone, however admirable or desirable they might appear, but how these balance and blend with other aspects of their personal lives. Alongside what has been an unprecedented and significant inter-generational investment in education as a public good and a means of career fulfilment, there has been a shaping of other dimensions of their lives that were marketed as intrinsic to their identity formation.

We are not arguing here that the expectations their parents have had about adulthood no longer exist or no longer influence the lives and choices of their offspring. Nor are we arguing that the issues now being faced and the attitudes that are being shaped are totally new and did not influence the lives and choices of their parents when they were young. Nevertheless, there has been a definite *shift in the weighting* to be given to old and new priorities. So, even if we allow for the continuing influence of structural factors associated with class, ethnicity and gender, young people framing their transitions to adulthood around the old priorities are likely to face less foreseeable outcomes than their parents would have at the same age. Similarly, those who accept the importance of following the new priorities in shaping their future are more likely to be able to find and take advantage of whatever opportunities are on offer. There are however problems for them as well - particularly with regard to issues of 'collective identity' and 'upward social mobility'.

A negative interpretation can be placed on the high priority given by our participants to notions of personal autonomy and flexibility. While their insistence on maintaining a balance of commitments in their lives might seem admirable, the heavy emphasis on their own personal development can be criticised for excluding concerns related to collective identity that were taken for granted by previous generations. Repeatedly in our surveys the overall responses have displayed low levels of support for items related to political action and local community involvement. Even a concern for the environment which has often been portrayed in the media as a young people's issue only gains mild support. Whether this is due to disillusionment with the ways in which political parties or trade unions operate, or to their exclusion from the forums of the influential, or to a preoccupation with uncertainty about their careers is not clear from the data to hand. What is clear is that, even in terms of what they see as 'desirable', not many would devote any considerable amount of time to priorities of collective identity - community involvement (12%), political action (7%) and even the environment (24%).

There are conundrums too with regard to the priority their parents have placed on 'upward social mobility'. The overall high level of recognition of the help and support given by their families indicates an appreciation of the benefits they have derived from that parental priority. At the same time, their insistence on balancing a range of commitments in their lives points to a tendency towards *horizontal* mobility (Dwyer and Wyn, 2000: 188-9) which at times their parents (and other researchers) find difficult to accept. Particularly in the interviews with various participants this is a recurrent theme - that they have made personal career choices for example that in their parents' eyes have not been to their best material advantage (Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler, 2001: 27-37). In our 2000 survey many of them make a clear distinction between having a secure job (92%) and one of 'high status' (34%). Whether this is something unique to our sample - although there is some support in other research in America (Willis, 1998) and Europe (du Bois-Reymond, 1998), or a temporary outcome of career uncertainties at present, is difficult to say. They are obviously serious about finding on-going careers for themselves, so if they are in fact reassessing for themselves the balance between personal fulfilment and material reward this might at first sight appear to represent a dramatic break with the past.

The paradox of 'promise' and 'uncertainty' however cautions us against making any such assumption about 'dramatic breaks'. It is instead a matter of blending and selecting from the old and the new. The responses of our participants indicate that they do not all approach this in the same way. In fact there is a diversity in the ways different

individuals shape life for themselves, which is evident from the five-fold typology of life-patterns (see Table A2 - Appendix A) which we have used to analyse their assessments of life priorities (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001: 175-9). In making the necessary choices to resolve the paradox for themselves, they are weighing up the main priorities of a 'new adulthood' alongside the established characteristics of adulthood represented in the lives of their parents. For purposes of analysis, the priorities are displayed here in the form of a contrast, but this is not meant to point to a 'make or break' experience. What is clear is that a definite shifting of priorities has taken place.

#### Adult Priorities in Life

<i>Post-WW2 Generation</i>	<i>Post-1970 Generation</i>
traditional family roles	flexibility/reflexivity
predictable career paths	on-going career choice
collective identity	personal autonomy
upward mobility	balancing commitments

Our sample's continuing acknowledgment of the importance that their families have in their lives suggests that they are taking both the old and new priorities into account, and that, as we have noted in our recent book (Dwyer and Wyn, 2000:199), it is important:

not to exaggerate the significance of this shift or to set up new stereotypes - male and/or female - to replace the old. One of our main reasons for developing a diverse five-fold typology of life-patterns, in attempting to make sense of what the participants in our study were telling us, was that they had displayed a broad range of responses about individual priorities in life. Some were more focused on career or on work than others, and some were in the process of changing their priorities for the future, even though it was evident from our findings that the largest grouping - for both males and females - was made up of those adopting 'mixed patterns'.

In conclusion, it is informative that, whatever the balance of priorities chosen by different members of our Project, by now as many as 91% express real satisfaction with their own personal development. By and large, they feel that they have made the appropriate choices. They are learning how to shape life for themselves, even though many of them also admit that maintaining the right balance remains a real challenge for them.

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## Chapter 5: Identity Formation

In 2002 a sample of 24 participants were interviewed about their lives since 2000, and were asked to reflect on their experiences of work, study and life since they left secondary school in 1991. Their narratives reveal how individuals draw on the experiences they have had to construct biographies that enable them to find meaning in their past and present and also to imagine their futures. Their stories reveal a capacity for social 'reflexion' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 26). The processes that these authors describe fits closely with the experiences of our participants.

It becomes normal to test out a number of different mixes; several overlapping identities are discovered and a life is constructed out of their combination (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 27).

The narratives of our participants reveal how they are pulling threads together, to create the shape of life they want, with the balance they want (with varying amounts of success). In three short case studies, Nat, Carmel and Frank give a first hand account of the way they have dealt with uncertainty and the ongoing journey of determining meaningful pathways for themselves. This journey involves at its very core the need for the participants to make 'adult choices' about every aspect of their lives; adult choices that appear to have little in common with Cote's (2000) description of this generation as experiencing an 'arrested' adulthood.

### Nat

Nat is twenty-nine years old and is employed by a large advertising company as the Manager of Trade and Marketing for Australia and New Zealand. This is not where she expected to be at 29; in fact, sales and marketing were perhaps the areas she thought herself to be least interested in. The journey for Nat began at the end of Year 12 when she missed out on her first preference for university - medicine. With her score she would have been successful the year before, but things had changed, the Tertiary Entrance Result (TER) scores had increased across the board for university entrance and she did not qualify for entrance to her chosen course. She had to quickly rethink her plan.

Nat's next plan was to get into a science course at university and then to transfer over to medicine at the end of her first year. However she describes herself as 'losing focus' at university and did not get the results to transfer. She admitted she wasn't too devastated as she was still unsure if it was medicine she really wanted to do. In her third year

she did a triple major: cell biology, botany and anatomy. She particularly chose anatomy to help her work out if this was the 'right' way for her. She concluded that anatomy was really about having a good memory and not about learning good people skills. This disjunction between her goals and her present course was a warning sign for her. She decided to take on extra subjects to help her work out what direction to take, including accounting and philosophy of science. On completing these subjects, however, she still did not feel she could make a decision.

What made the difference was her vacation work over the summer breaks from university. Over the years, while she was a student, she worked as an occupational health officer for a petrol company in a regional city in Victoria and for a petrochemical company in Tasmania. She also had a spell working as an accounts file clerk and in customer service with a bank. It was this last job that revealed to Nat that she enjoyed working with people, not science!

She then starting looking for work in the 'people' arena and took a job with a large advertising company that offered her the kind of scope she wanted. She said that the company appeared 'broad-minded' and that they regarded her science background as an asset. She started in the sales area, on the understanding that the company 'would teach her the rest'. Over the next five years, she has moved up the ranks in the company and, in 2002, was in charge of 60 million dollars worth of business export interests. She says: "I like it; you get to influence things; you work out how things come together and you can influence the direction of the company."

Today Nat defines her career as not a job but "a *mindset* of what I do everyday; it's about what I learn, the journey I am on, the big chunks of learning and the relationships I develop." She does not describe her job as permanent because she realises that the company could be the subject of a take-over bid 'tomorrow.' Although she has worked there for the last five years, she was only planning to stay for two years in the first instance, because "any less wouldn't look good on the resume", but the company has kept her interested. She feels she has *chosen* to stay where she is.

Nat fiercely defends her life beyond work and has consciously decided to pursue her own interests and goals as an individual. She has put a lot of effort into designing and supervising the building of her own home. While she feels there is pressure on her to find a partner and marry, she believes that her own personal development has been more important than waiting for someone to shape her

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life for her. "I'm going to be in life - not wait for it to happen! In my 20s I was searching, but now I know myself much better. I am much more confident."

## **Carmel**

Carmel's father died when she was 14. She said "I was forced to grow up. Overnight I became responsible for the store: the running of it, all the ordering. Mum didn't speak English very well, so I even had to go to parent-teacher interviews and interpret for my younger brother. He's five years younger than me. I felt like I had been thrown in at the deep end." Carmel admits that she struggled to come to terms with the level of responsibility she had to take on. "Most people, these days, start at 22 taking on these adult responsibilities. I was 14. It feels like I've been doing it for a really long time." Carmel still lives at home with her mother and younger brother. She has recently bought a flat but as an investment only. She feels she has responsibilities to the family so is not ready to move from the family home yet. Carmel has also had to make major changes and adjustments in her life to cater to her changing work environment. When Carmel finished Year 12, she was not successful at her first attempt of university entry. She went to TAFE to complete a Diploma. She was disappointed she had to go 'sideways' but was "so relieved to get in somewhere and I didn't want to be on the dole" so she became accustomed to it. In fact she really enjoyed the practical nature of the TAFE course. When she completed the course and did then transfer to University to complete a degree in Business, she was disappointed at the 'theory based' nature of the approach. Today she feels it would have been better for her to take a break between the two courses, possibly a year off, as she still wasn't sure if it was what she wanted. "Now I have been on the same track (ie marketing) for so long, I begin to wonder if it is what I want. My parents always encouraged me to get the education first and then think later, but I'm not sure this is the way to go". Carmel could not get direct employment in a marketing job, as she had had no practical experience. She took a job in administration hoping that it would broaden her options. However the company who employed her had to tender to the Federal Government for their continuing program. Carmel felt confident that the team would be successful in their tender application but this was not the case. She decided she would not work in the public sector again, especially if it meant tendering for your position every year. "I would prefer to work for a private company where there would be more stability; I do not like waiting for decisions to be made - it is too unpredictable." Being unemployed for Carmel caused her to question every decision she had made; she blamed herself to begin with. But then: "I now know how it all works; the others were sacked too and they were older and more experienced than I was. I saw how hard it was for them to get work as well. I realise now it's not just me; it's the system. I try to not get depressed; I try to make the best of it and go for it." Today Carmel works as an administrative officer managing associate memberships connected to her employer. She has enjoyed the work and the

stability it has offered, but has just begun to think about leaving as she feels she has outlived her learning curve: "unfortunately there is nowhere to move here; I may return to study, whatever - there is no pressure; I can be choosy as I am still employed".

## **Frank**

Frank has never seen further education as a priority. "I enjoy writing reports but I have never been much of an academic. I don't seem to retain things very well." As such he has pursued work rather than study. At first he began working at Pizza Hut as a driver doing deliveries, but "the cost of the fuel meant it just wasn't worth it", so he quit. From here he helped out a friend of a friend who was building a factory. He stayed in this job for 11 months, mainly employed as a light factory hand with a bit of engineering thrown in. He enjoyed the work but was frustrated by what he saw as poor management and a lack of clear roles of responsibility. However he did not have to put up with this situation for long: "for a time there was not much work coming in and we were told we could be laid off; when they ran out of money, it was a big relief as it was freezing in winter and sweltering in summer; in other words, not a comfortable place to work". It was after a period of unemployment that Frank came across the bus driving job.

Frank thinks it is harder today to work out what it is to be an adult than it was in his parents' day. Both of his parents were 21 when they married, and they worked on a farm. "Life wasn't so much of a rush then; admittedly you would have your busy times when the crops came in, but then there would be a lull and there was real time to spend with your family and friends." He believes it is 'harder now' as there aren't the opportunities there were back then. "I feel I am always on the run - 2 or 3 different jobs a day; I don't like it - it takes away from your life and the time you have to think about what you want to do." Frank describes himself as "a follower, grabbing the tail rather than the horns" which means that he is "not as forceful or as ambitious as I'd like to be." Frank loves his bus-driving job; he says he loves "the practical jobs which benefit people." He wants to direct more of his energies into truck driving, but admits he only wants to do it for a few more years. There is some impetus he says for him to earn a better income, as he has been living with his brother and the brother's girlfriend has just moved in and "you know the story, three's a crowd, so I need to get out and find my own home."

He would like to have more time to spend with his family although he admits that he does enjoy learning from his numerous work places. "Each job offers something different, and I like becoming more versatile; it helps to also stretch you so you can find your own limits. It's just difficult getting the balance right!"

Nat, Carmel and Frank have very different biographical trajectories. What they have in common is a conscious, reflexive approach to their own life pattern. Each of these young people reveals an awareness that their life trajectory has not followed

a 'usual' or 'normal' pattern. They are aware of the constraints within which they are working. Nat was forced to make a choice about her study plans when her TER score did not allow her to take up the area of study she had initially expected to enter. From there, her career as a student was marked by change and exploration of her skills and capacities. In the end, it was her holiday jobs that assisted her to make a 'career' decision. Carmel, like many young people, was forced to take on adult responsibilities at a young age, and feels she has been living like an adult since she was 14, yet at the age of 28 is still living with her mother and younger brother. Frank feels that it is difficult to find the opportunities that enabled people in his parents' generation to establish settled life and work patterns. He is doing his best in the circumstances, and is also living with family members. These three, brief stories illustrate the significance of making individual choices and at the same time of having an awareness of the wider context in which they are living, including the constraints. In each of these cases, personal autonomy and achieving a balance in life are central themes. In the following discussion, we discuss how the themes of choice in work and career, and adult life, personal autonomy and achieving a balance in life are viewed and managed by other participants in our study.

## Choice biographies and choice careers

Participants emphasised that the meaning of career has shifted. For them, career encompasses a holistic understanding for their orientation in life. For over 80% of the participants, the meanings they attribute to career give highest priority to activities that offer scope for their own *advancement*, an opportunity to show *commitment* and scope for *fulfilment* (see Table 9). What is striking about their perspectives on career is that they assess career in terms of the potential offered for their own personal experience. The main definitions of career do not relate to the objective characteristics of an occupation.

Beck has used the term 'zombie categories' to describe a number of concepts used in social analysis today. A 'zombie category' is an empty category, also described as the 'living dead', a 'husk' of its former self that has no real relevance to the new realities that these concepts are being applied to (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 203). It is possible that the traditional concept of career has become a concept whose meaning requires further investigation.

Many of the participants in our study agreed with Nat:

*A career is a mindset of what I do everyday, not the job I am doing. It's about what I have learned, not what I am being paid for.*

*A career is about changing and developing, always extending my skills.*

Young people frequently use the word 'journey' to depict career as an ongoing process rather than as a destination or outcome. For them the notion of career has become synonymous with the idea of a journey that enables them to develop themselves and to keep learning, as Frank explains:

*I still think of it (a career) as a full time job, which in reality is rare. It's not for me anyway I get itchy feet and like learning from one job to another. I just wish I could earn more. Truck driving is still very much part of the journey.*

Other participants said:

*A career is like a journey, it's the chance to sort out what it is which makes me happy. In general the \$'s are not the driving force.*

*I hated being unemployed but I wanted more than a job, I wanted to do something that added value to the community. I wanted to do something meaningful and important. A career is who you are and what you make of life- who I am personally and professionally and ongoing.*

## Personal development, choice and career

The participants' perspectives challenge us to re-think the relationships between personal development, choice and career. In response to the survey sent to participants, 'personal development' was placed second to 'family support' as the most positive influence on them since leaving school. In the interviews it became clear that 'personal development' and 'self-discovery' meant the same thing and for them it was integrally related to their idea of career.

Their reflections show that establishing and maintaining a career was a vital and relatively conscious part of their own personal development and self-discovery process. In this sense, careers have an holistic emphasis, because they are closely related to individual identity and the development of the self. The participants saw their work as intrinsically linked to their personal relationships, their capacity for self-discovery and the assistance this provided in working out if this is what they wanted. This was understood to be a kind of journey, often a prolonged journey, not always a simple or straightforward process. They said:

*It's not about flicking a switch, it happens over a period of time, you need to stand back and reflect on what's happened- the big picture I mean.*

*It's about discovering who you are and developing some confidence along the way to work out what you want and how you are going to get there.*

## Career and permanence

It was difficult to establish the difference between a permanent job and a career job, because none of the interviewees were prepared to say their present job was permanent. The idea of permanence is one of

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the characteristics of career that is no longer relevant. While some of the participants said they thought their job would be permanent (all being well), they were fully aware of the impossibility of knowing this for certain. For example one interviewee commented:

*Permanent? Well, anything can happen really.*

In general there was an awareness that departments get restructured, people are made redundant, companies are bought out and circumstances can change overnight (both locally and globally). One young man had witnessed his team being made redundant when they arrived for work on the Monday morning and his response was to hope he would also be given a redundancy as he had lost faith in the institution and wanted to go elsewhere. He felt let down by this situation, saying 'You sacrifice, but what do you get back?' When he did not receive a redundancy package, he resigned (after getting another job first). In his new job he is keeping a look out with the idea that 'I will jump if there is a better opportunity'. His plan is to then set up his own business. He hopes this will protect him from experiencing what he describes as the 'total destruction of his work environment in one second' and give him back some sense of having control.

In contrast to the above example others saw the uncertainty as just part of the picture. They do not see change and uncertainty as personal, but rather 'the way it is'. They see change as inevitable and work on skilling themselves both mentally and physically to prepare for the challenges that are inevitably ahead for them.

Some young people manage this better than others. It appears from the interviews that it is these participants, the ones who approach life strategically, who in general fare better. As one participant expresses it – 'I am strategic, I keep up the contacts, build networks, I need to make sure I am not vulnerable.' This young woman has accepted that 'living your own life therefore entails taking responsibility for personal misfortunes and unanticipated events' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 24). She has internalised the need to have the capacity to constantly reflect, to reinvent one's self, to be flexible and to remain on alert one hundred per cent of the time. It is important to acknowledge that this requires a lot of effort. As this young woman comments – 'It's made me tougher, I have had to become harder.'

Far from living through a prolonged adolescence, the evidence from our study suggests that they have learned the lessons early of making very adult choices.

## Adult Choices

There is no doubt in the minds of the interviewees that they have been making adult choices and decisions for a number of years, not simply since

leaving school. The death of a parent, a serious illness, an understanding that it is up to them and no one else to get good results in years 11 and 12 are all examples which demonstrate the young people have felt adult responsibilities for a significant period of time. Many different life experiences are interpreted by these young people as 'adult':

*Starting off at TAFE at age 24 when all the other students were 17 felt like a pretty adult thing to be doing!*

Similarly there are examples of young people engaging positively and confidently with an adult world even when traditionally they are not meant to have arrived there yet.

*I feel I have had a very different life to dad already, he stayed in the one job till he retired, I have started my own business at 22. I am now responsible for 8 men and the quality of what we produce. When I first started out it was difficult to convince clients to take me seriously, they thought I was too young to know what I was doing.*

There are also many examples of young people engaging strategically with the world of work in a very 'adult way'.

*I left the cosmetic industry because it could never provide what I wanted. Starting off as a flight attendant now is definitely a stepping-stone to bigger and better. I have done my homework: I need to do more flying, I need to do a number of short courses, I need to be noticed and I need to keep my eyes open. The goal is to be Qantas' customer service manager in 3 years.*

*I felt frustrated by the team approach, the process took too long and I wanted to work on my own. So with the help of technology I can successfully work from home and everyone is happy.*

One of the key elements of making 'adult' choices involves balancing commitments in different life spheres and it is clear that for them, managing this complex set of life factors is a key element in their own identity formation. One of the themes that recur in their narratives about adult choices is the ways in which they shape the sphere of personal autonomy.

## Personal Autonomy

When interviewing these young people it became clear that the interview alone was not the prompt for their thinking on the question of career, and on maintaining a balance in their lives. The interview process provided them with an opportunity to express thoughts and concerns that were at the forefront of their thinking. Their reflections and the depth of their narratives reveal that these issues were regularly discussed with partners, family, friends and work associates.

We were impressed with their capacity to constantly reflect on their situation. These young people are very actively engaged in ensuring they get what they want in all areas of their lives. They believe that it is up to them individually to achieve this, and hence there is a sense of dynamism about

the process of reflection. This capacity to reflect and the tendency to take personal responsibility for their lives fits closely with the concept of individualization.

In order to survive the rat race one has to become active, inventive and resourceful, to develop ideas of one's own, to be faster, nimbler and more creative- constantly, day after day. Individuals become stage managers of their own biographies" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

However, as Bauman in the preface to the same text says, 'let there be no mistake: now as before individualization is a fate, not a choice; in the land of the individual freedom of choice, the option to escape individualization and refuse participation in the individualizing game is emphatically **not** on the agenda' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: xvi).

The interviewees clearly understand that they have to be active players in planning their own journey, and that this is not a choice. They know if they do not take on this attitude they will be left out and left behind.

*It's up to you to organise your life to work out what you want- no one else.*

*I feel I have had good luck and opportunities have come my way, but in the end I have had to make it work.*

*I am spending less time at my fitness level than I like, but I can't blame work, for me it's about prioritising.*

One of the effects of individualisation is the weakening of links with collective causes, including an identification with class-based groupings, union movements or formal politics. In the next section, we discuss how our participants express this.

### **Political action, community involvement and work associated with the environment**

In the survey participants were asked how they would rate their interest in a number of activities. Spending time with family and friends rated very highly but to the researchers surprise political action, community involvement and working for the environment rated very low. What does this mean for our next generation of politicians, for the environment and for the support of capacity building in our local communities? The results, presented in Table 19 above, show that concern for the environment, community involvement and political action are scarcely relevant to them. The interview questions that probed these areas revealed a group of young people who are incredibly disillusioned with the formal political process:

*How can you have faith in people like that, just listen to the way they shout and argue?*

*They drive me nuts the way they carry on and we're meant to trust them. To believe in their promises?*

In general there is strong sense that these young people feel they are powerless to make a difference anyway through formal political processes.

*It's difficult to see you have an influence. I know it's a bit of a cop out 'this not in my backyard' approach, but you can't change anything.*

*It's difficult to see you have any influence at all, particularly on individual issues.*

It may be tempting to typecast this generation as apolitical or even as self-obsessed, but further enquiries reveal a rich array of contributions to the community through informal processes. Once again, however, there is a need to understand how terms that the older generation take for granted are defined by this generation. In this instance, what has become clear is that the term community was not being used to refer to their 'local' community but to their 'personal community' (Gilding, 1997).

*Where we live doesn't feel like our community- more our friends and work become our 'local' community.*

While there is an evident desire to do more for their 'personal' community however there is not enough time.

*I would like to do something later.*

*I work nights and sleep days so it is difficult.*

*The weekends are precious I choose to spend this time with family and friends.*

Interestingly there are those who do make time, who strongly act upon a social consciousness even if they don't describe it as such and manage to prioritise and serve their 'personal' community. For example:

*I am personally responsible about the way I act, I ride a bike, I do not own a car.*

*I have done volunteer work for animal aid for 4 years now.*

*I have always done work for the community radio station, it helps out those who are housebound, sort of like a friend they never met.*

*When I am qualified I will return to the country, I want to work in a public hospital, not private, they need me more and I definitely want to stay in the country, I saw how they struggled to provide services to their community.*

*I run the mentoring program for the church every Thursday night.*

## **Balancing Commitments**

The challenge of balancing commitments runs through each of the different themes to emerge from the interviews. This takes the form of daily decisions about their work lives, their personal lives and the question of their contribution to community and global issues. The result of this is a sense of constant movement, almost like treading water. This momentum involves constantly reviewing where they are at and then determining how satisfied they are with the results of their own personal/professional audit. Inevitably they are faced with planning and implementing forms of change to bring their lives into alignment with their goals. The case studies of Nat and Frank demonstrate this process. The following extracts from the interviews show how

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this constant process of assessment and reassessment operates in their lives:

*If I continued with the bank it would have meant flying to Sydney three times a week, leaving at 6 am and returning at midnight, this meant I missed out on seeing my nephew and I missed my footy team play. So I worked out my priorities and work didn't come first.*

*I have a two year old, even though I loved working in the city, at head office, I wanted to be closer to home and part time. I wanted more time with my family so I'm back in the branches.*

*I was taking on every shift and my relationship was suffering, so I cut back, I reduced the number of overnights.*

Clearly, some young people were more able and effective at this shaping and balancing than others and, as one participant stated 'If you have self-doubt in this environment it is very difficult to achieve.' Others agree:

*The juggling is exhausting at times. I have health issues, I am involved in setting up a new business, my wife has just started a new job and we haven't even had a honeymoon yet.*

*I often feel really alone; it is difficult to adjust to so many changes, if you drop off the radar screen it is often difficult to get back on.*

Overall there appeared an acute awareness of the role of the individual in sorting this messy process into some sort of order. In some scenarios there was an understanding that the industry they were entering needed to be treated carefully as there was the potential for burnout. Teaching and one to one counselling were two identified areas. With the counselling example the institution supported the students and encouraged them to introduce a 'balanced' approach to their work life.

*The industry encourages you to think balance, you know all the health promotion material, prevention is better, so most of us will only do this kind of work part time.*

Some young people had to experience a negative experience at their work place before they 'shaped and balanced' and would now unfortunately describe themselves as disillusioned.

*It sounds awful, that is not committing to the future at my current work but I need to look out for myself - it sounds cut-throat but look at the way the company treated my fellow workers.*

*I missed out on a promotion I thought I deserved. It was a political decision, not based on professional competency. I have had to reassess my commitment; I don't think loyalty pays off anymore. If I am this expendable I need to find other things I am interested in.*

Others have reached a personal hiatus that has moved them in new directions:

*I spent 4 years unemployed, the group of friends I had were headed towards drug and alcohol. I felt I could spiral the same way. It frightened me. It made me realise you can't sit back and wait- you need to go out and find something for yourself, I knew then I wanted more.*

*After being diagnosed bipolar I shifted priorities. Instead of trying to crack an industry that has so far proved*

*impenetrable (after six years) I would do something different, perhaps be kinder to myself in the process. I have returned to study and I am enjoying it.*

## Concluding comments

With the benefit of ten years' hindsight after leaving school, the stories of our post-1970 cohort of young people reveal a generation who have made a rapid transition. This transition is not the conventional one, from youth to adulthood, although this has been achieved. More importantly, they have, of necessity, managed the transition from a school system and social policy framework based firmly on an industrial era to living, working and studying in a post-industrial era.

The bias towards a 'success cohort' has advantages. It means that the participants' responses and reflections can be viewed as an indicator of the directions in which changes to social orientations and dispositions is occurring. One of the effects of this 'success cohort' may be that their understandings and views have a close fit with the concept of 'individualisation' proposed by Beck (1992).

In their own words, society and its institutions are seen as relatively fragmented and unreliable. They believe that they have no other option than to rely on themselves to make their lives worthwhile. While relationships with family and friends with others are very important to them (see Table 19), their statements reveal a strong sense of personal responsibility for their own outcomes. Rather than focusing on external goals (such as the achievement of a particular status level in an occupation or the success of a political grouping) they focus on very personal goals, such as being healthy, continuing to learn, personal fulfilment. In one sense, in the course of one generation, they have succeeded in changing the meanings of many of the core elements of life.

Career, for example, is now seen as a personal journey. Young people reflexively construct career narratives that meaningfully link their past, present and future lives. The term career, to the post-1970 generation is an almost wholly internally referenced concept. This means that it is possible to consider a fragmented, stop-start work life on short-term contracts a career. The idea of permanent work is regarded with suspicion. Instead, a mix of formal and informal learning and mobility across different work settings and experiences are woven together to construct individual 'careers' that are far-removed from the upwardly mobile, occupation-based careers of the previous generation.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching for the development of education and youth policy. They foreshadow new approaches to learning and earning that equip young people to establish a meaningful and balanced life.

# Appendix A:

## Pathways, Priorities and Careers

**F**or the purposes of analysis, in Chapter 3 we selected from our current sample two contrasting groups. Group A consisted of those whose father had a professional or managerial occupation and whose mother had a tertiary qualification. They total 150 or 20% of our Phase 2 sample. Group B consisted of those with non-professional/managerial paternal occupations and whose mothers were not tertiary graduates. They total 232 or 30% of the sample.

The assumption can be made that these two groups represent two ends of a spectrum of parental 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979). As we saw in Chapter 3, the gaining of a post-school qualification has enabled members from the less advantaged end of the spectrum (Group B) to achieve similar career outcomes to those of their initially more advantaged counterparts (Group A). This appendix extends our analysis of outcomes to examine a range of other factors that may also have affected the transitions of participants from these two contrasting groups.

### Pathways and Careers

The members of the Life-Patterns Project were completing their high-school years in a period of heightened expectations about the need for tertiary study. It seems reasonable to expect therefore that the members of Group A would have been the most likely to respond to these expectations. The evidence from our data confirms this.

In particular, if we refer back to the information we have on the various pathways that have been followed by the participants of our study, we find that not only does Group A have higher initial participation rates in post-school study (92%), but almost two-thirds of them (61%) completed their studies without interruption or change of any kind. The percentages for the Group A sample with 'linear' study pathways is higher than for those in Group B or for Phase 2 participants as a whole (Table A1). The increased emphasis on the need for a post-school qualification gave added importance to what was the likely pathway for many of them anyway. Given their parental background it was likely that there was already a well-established expectation for them to go on to tertiary (preferably university) studies on the completion of their high school certificate - in many cases with a particular professional career in mind. For the large majority of Group A that expectation has been fulfilled.

*Table A1: Pathways and Career Outcomes (%)*

1991-1996 Pathways	Phase 2 Sample n= 763	Group A in careers n=106	Group B in careers n= 132
linear non-study	3	0	1
linear study	50	<b>61</b>	50
non-linear study	32	31	35
non-linear non-study	12	8	12
early leavers	3	-	2

### Life Priorities and Careers

At various stages during the Life-Patterns Project we have made use of a five-fold typology (VOCAM) of life-priorities (see Table A2; also Dwyer and Wyn, 2001: 176-8) to analyse participants' attitudes towards their careers. The purpose of the typology was to extend traditional approaches to careers by adding some alternative approaches that were emerging from our data. Traditionally, it had seemed reasonable to assume that young people entering the labour-market would either have a particular 'vocational' focus (eg a trade or profession) or else an 'occupational' focus (such as a means of living, job security, permanency). To these two we have added a further three to allow for a range of other factors that our participants have been taking into account. Thus, there were those who had adopted a 'contextual' focus (locality, 'field' of work, lifestyle), or an 'altered' focus (changing their careers or job preferences), or a 'mixed' focus (insisting on a balance between career and other personal priorities).

Even allowing for this variation in priorities regarding careers, it might still seem reasonable to assume that the members of our two contrasting groups would approach those priorities in different ways. For example, while we might expect the family background of members of both groups to lead to an emphasis on a vocational focus with either a profession (Group A) or a particular trade (Group B) in mind, we would also expect that those with a basically occupational focus would be more likely to belong to Group B. The following Table seems to confirm this, with a higher proportion (16%) from Group B favouring an occupational focus.

Table A2: Life Priorities (VOCAM) and Career Outcomes (%)

	Phase 2 Sample n= 763	Group A in careers n=106	Group B in careers n= 132
(V)ocational Focus	18	22	21
(O)ccupational Focus	12	11	<b>16</b>
<i>Sub-total</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>37</i>
<hr/>			
(C)ontextual Focus	25	24	21
(A)ltered Focus	7	6	3
(M)ixed Patterns	38	37	39
<i>Sub-total</i>	<b><i>70</i></b>	<b><i>67</i></b>	<b><i>63</i></b>

Overall, two-thirds of our participants adopt the three more complex or flexible approaches to careers. Although Table A2 does not show it, the adoption of these alternative approaches is true of as many as 71% who are 'very satisfied' with their personal development, and it is even true of 71% of those with careers who had followed a 'linear study' pathway from 1991 to 1996. This overall trend confirms findings from previous years which indicate that the more traditional approaches are not as common as once might have been the case, and that the 'mixed patterns' alternative is the one most favoured by more than one-third throughout the sample (especially by 40% of those in career positions that are permanent). The overall trend

adds further weight to the need to examine a diversity of patterns in the choices that young people are currently making in their transitions into adulthood. While this does not imply the rejection of the customary 'vocational' and 'occupational' trajectories associated with the established model, it calls for an acknowledgment that in both our policy and practice we need to *add to* those trajectories in ways which allow increasingly for *other* life-patterns which reflect more truly the experience and choices of the young generation of today (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001: 83).

## *Appendix B:*

# Autonomy and Job Choices

As we pointed out earlier in this Report, in considering their career choices our participants have placed increased emphasis on personal autonomy – the development of strong personal resources to make difficult individual choices and to survive the disruptions and uncertainty that result. We have identified the attainment of post-school educational qualifications as the major personal resource which marks out the post-1970 generation from its predecessors. In this appendix we examine our most recent data to explore the link between this sense of autonomy and the job choices being made by our participants.

One expression of this sense of personal autonomy is reflected in attitudes to job permanency, and is reflected in the survey in the responses to the questions 16 “If you currently have a paid job, for how much longer do you think that you will continue with this job?” (under a year, up to two years, as long as I can), and question 17 “What is the status of this job?” (permanent, renewable contract position, limited term or casual, other).

The answers which individual participants gave to these questions emerge from complex mixes of motivations and situations. Those who say they anticipate continuing for ‘under a year’ would include those who reconciled to dire fate (who know they’ll be sacked when their contract finishes) as well as the most autonomous individuals.

The raw frequencies for the responses to question 16 “how long do you intend to stay in your present job?” are shown in Table B1:

*Table B1: Expected stay in present job: response frequencies*

	Frequency		%
Valid	< 1 year	118	16.5
	up to 2 years	202	28.3
	as long as I can	393	55.1
	Total	713	100.0
Not relevant	64		
Total	777		

The relatively high proportions of participants who anticipate job changes in the near future (16% in <1 year, 28% in < = 2 years) have been noted in the report above. However this raw data does not reveal whether these answers refer to the expectation of an involuntary termination, such as the end of a work contract, or to the contemplation of a voluntary move. Neither will the data tell us whether such a move may be linked to career advancement or to driven by personal priorities not directly linked to career progress.

However, cross-tabulation of the responses to q16 (how long do you anticipate staying in your present job) with those to q17 (What is the status of your job: permanent, contract, casual etc) reveals that most of the anticipated moves are not associated with short term employment contracts. We find that many permanent job holders, in fact 42% of these,

*Table B2: Expected stay in job cross-tabulated with permanence status*

### *job status \* expected stay in present job cross-tabulation*

		expected stay in present job			Total	
		<1 year	up to 2 years	as long as I can		
job status	Permanent	Count	65	162	314	541
		%	12.0%	29.9%	58.0%	100.0%
	renewable contract	Count	12	18	32	62
		%	19.4%	29.0%	51.6%	100.0%
	limited term or casual	Count	38	17	29	84
		%	45.2%	20.2%	34.5%	100.0%
	Other	Count	3	5	17	25
		%	12.0%	20.0%	68.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	118	202	392	712
		%	16.6%	28.4%	55.1%	100.0%

anticipate changing jobs in less than 2 years (see Table B2). This proportion is not greatly different from the 48% of fixed term contract holders who similarly anticipate moving. We may conclude that holding a permanent job does not greatly increase their expectation of continuing in this job. The relatively small differences between the expectations of these participants from contrasting job permanence categories suggest that job-changing attitudes do not merely reflect coercion.

As would be expected, those in limited term and casual jobs would have different expectations, and this is demonstrated by the fact that 45% of them expect to anticipate moving in less than a year, compared with 12% of permanent employees. However, even in this group, the proportions of casual employees who expect to move in 1-2 years (20.2%) is not so different from the corresponding proportion amongst the permanent or contract employees (29%).

It is reasonable, then to interpret the anticipation of job changing as a reflection of autonomous, perhaps horizontal mobility, or at least a positive attitude towards this, particularly if we limit this interpretation to those with permanent jobs. For these participants it is reasonable to assume that the answer to q16 does indicate personal choice. Thus we can define the variable 'autonomy' for permanent job holders only, to indicate those who anticipate job changing in 'under a year', or 'up to two years'.

From the 777 respondents, this gives us 227 'autonomous participants' and 315 'non autonomous participants', with 235 undefined with respect to this variable. The following section will investigate who these 'autonomous participants' might tend to be.

## Explorations of Autonomy: qualification, socio-economic background and gender

### *Type of Qualification*

Between those whose first qualification was university, TAFE or apprenticeship, rates of autonomy differ significantly. We find that autonomy increases consistently with the status of the initial qualification, from 19% for apprenticeship trainees, 28% for TAFE qualified and 49% for University qualified (see Table B3). This level of association is highly statistically significant. In this context, statistical significance means that such levels of association could not plausibly have occurred by random variations between individuals – the probability of this occurring being estimated as less than 0.00005, employing the widely used Mann-Whitney U test.

Supporting the strong and significant association between training institution and autonomy, we also find associations of autonomy with particular jobs or economy sectors.

In an earlier survey (wave 5, 1997), we collected data on participants' jobs from which status categories can be constructed: professional, para professional, administrative, sales and service, skilled manual, unskilled. Note that these refer to the jobs which they held in 1997, and thus may be only a weak indication of current employment. However, in general, it is clear that autonomy is generally associated with higher status jobs, and that, consonant with the associations with training sectors, skilled trade participants are least likely to show this autonomy, as is shown in Table B4.

Table B3: *Autonomy vs kind of qualification*

		kind of qualification (first) vs AUTONOMOUS			
		AUTONOMOUS		Total	
		NO	YES		
kind of qualification (first)	University	Count	181	177	358
		%	50.6%	49.4%	100.0%
	TAFE	Count	74	29	103
		%	71.8%	28.2%	100.0%
	Apprenticeship	Count	21	5	26
		%	80.8%	19.2%	100.0%
	Other	Count	13	3	16
		%	81.3%	18.8%	100.0%
Total		Count	289	214	503
		%	57.5%	42.5%	100.0%

**Table B4: Autonomy vs job status group**

			job group ordered vs AUTONOMOUS		
			AUTONOMOUS		Total
			NO	YES	
job group ordered	professional/managerial	Count	64	58	122
		%	52.5%	47.5%	100.0%
	para professional	Count	51	37	88
		%	58.0%	42.0%	100.0%
	Administrative	Count	38	31	69
		%	55.1%	44.9%	100.0%
	Sales and retail	Count	29	18	47
		%	61.7%	38.3%	100.0%
	skilled trade	Count	15	4	19
		%	78.9%	21.1%	100.0%
	Unskilled	Count	14	4	18
		%	77.8%	22.2%	100.0%
Total		Count	211	152	363
		%	58.1%	41.9%	100.0%

## Socio-economic background and autonomy

A variable 'SES' was constructed to reflect the socio-economic background of the participants. This variable combines the attributes 'father professional/managerial' (that is employed as professional, self employed professional, or employed managerial) with 'mother tertiary educated', (at university or other institution). Members of the '2' group in the tables have both of these attributes, the '1' group have one only, the '0' group have none.

**Table B5: Socio-economic background vs autonomy**

			SES vs AUTONOMOUS		
			AUTONOMOUS		Total
			NO	YES	
SES	.00	Count	167	87	254
		%	65.7%	34.3%	100.0%
	1.00	Count	98	82	180
		%	54.4%	45.6%	100.0%
	2.00	Count	46	56	102
		%	45.1%	54.9%	100.0%
Total		Count	311	225	536
		%	58.0%	42.0%	100.0%

Table B5 shows a clear correlation between socio-economic class background and autonomy – 55% of the high socio-economic group are autonomous, in comparison with 34% of the low socio-economic group. This association, as with that of first qualification, is strongly statistically significant ( $p < .0005$ ).

Does this correlation reflect internalised dispositions of the participants, or merely training history, employment sector etc? That is, does the increased tendency to autonomy amongst the high

socio-economic participants merely reflect their higher levels of participation in higher status education, or would they show an increased tendency to autonomy regardless of their educational background? Conversely, do the university educated from low socio-economic status backgrounds have as great a propensity towards autonomy as that of their better heeled peers? Here, we are interested in the possibility of multiple effects and interactions, which can be identified by comparing the correlations for various subgroups. In this way, we can identify some important interactions.

We saw above that the university educated were likely to be more autonomous. Table B6 below shows that parallel to this effect, it is the university educated from high socio-economic backgrounds who are most autonomous.

Investigating the university educated only, we are controlling for educational sector. The university educated from medium and low socio-economic backgrounds do not exhibit the same levels of autonomy as those from high socio-economic backgrounds. Amongst the participants from high socio-economic backgrounds, 62% of those who went to university are autonomous, whereas only 40% of the university students from low socio-economic background are similarly autonomous. Table B6 below shows the rates of autonomy of university trained participants by socio-economic background.

**Table B6: Autonomy of university graduates vs socio-economic background**

SES	% Autonomous	% Not Autonomous
0	40	60
1	53	47
2	62	38

## Gender and Autonomy

Gender also has a marked effect, which interacts with socio-economic and educational effects. Overall, females tend to be more autonomous. 45% are autonomous, compared with only 34% of males, as shown in Table B7 below.

Table B7: Autonomy rates of males and females compared

		gender		Total
		F	M	
Non autonomous	Count	193	122	315
	%	54.1%	65.9%	58.1%
autonomous	Count	164	63	227
	%	45.9%	34.1%	41.9%
Total	Count	357	185	542
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

It is females from high socio-economic backgrounds who display the highest levels of autonomy.

Splitting the file by gender reveals some interesting patterns, shown in Table B8. We find that females from high socio-economic backgrounds tend

to be the most autonomous group of all. In fact they tend to drive the association of socio-economic background with autonomy, and there is not a significant association of socio-economic background with autonomy amongst males.

We can revisit the association of autonomy with socio-economic background for university graduates, this time controlling for gender. The proportions are shown in Table B9, and they show that this association of autonomy with socio-economic background is in fact driven by the females. Amongst university qualified females, those from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to be autonomous (66.7% autonomous amongst the high group, compared with 38.2% autonomous amongst the low group). Again, this difference is highly statistically significant – the probability (p) that such a distribution of autonomy would arise in the group by chance alone is minuscule ( $p < .0005$ ). By contrast, the male university qualified participants as a group show only average rates of autonomy (43.5% autonomous), and there is no systematic difference between those from higher or lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Table B8: Associations of autonomy with socio-economic background: Genders compared

		AUTONOMOUS VS SES				
gender		SES			Total	
		.00	1.00	2.00		
F	autonomous NO	Count	104	57	30	191
		% within SES	65.4%	48.3%	40.0%	54.3%
	YES	Count	55	61	45	161
		% within SES	<b>34.6%</b>	<b>51.7%</b>	<b>60.0%</b>	45.7%
	Total	Count	159	118	75	352
		% within SES	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
M	autonomous NO	Count	63	41	16	120
		% within SES	67.0%	66.1%	59.3%	65.6%
	YES	Count	31	21	11	63
		% within SES	<b>33.0%</b>	<b>33.9%</b>	<b>40.7%</b>	34.4%
	Total	Count	94	62	27	183
		% within SES	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table B9: Association of autonomy with socio-economic background and gender amongst university (first) qualified

		AUTONOMOUS VS SES (UNI QUALIFIED)				
Gender		SES			Total	
		.00	1.00	2.00		
Female	autonomous	Count	39	50	40	129
		%	38.2%	59.5%	66.7%	52.4%
	Total	Count	102	84	60	246
Male	autonomous	Count	22	14	11	47
		%	44.0%	38.9%	50.0%	43.5%
	Total	Count	50	36	22	108

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