

participants

1992–2000 VET participants

longer-term career

vocational education

Successful training

career outcomes

1992–2000 Successful

VET participants

Successful longer-term

career outcomes

for **VET participants:**

1992–2000

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Executive summary

A major policy setting for VET in Australia is formulated in terms of *the transition from study to work*. During the 1990s, considerable restructuring and deregulation of the labour market has taken place. This project provides first-hand evidence of the impact of this on graduates from within the VET sector.

The Youth Research Centre has at its disposal a database as part of a longitudinal study. This database includes 400–500 VET graduates who have established themselves in what they consider to be career jobs. A target group which has been chosen from the database for an intensive feedback program provides a unique means of documenting career transition during the 1990s in general, and the transitions of VET graduates in particular. The specific focus of the project was concerned with the question: How do the participants themselves explain their successful career outcomes?

Participants were selected on the basis of the following four criteria:

- ❖ their expressed satisfaction or sense of fulfillment regarding career progress
- ❖ a job position that is ongoing—permanent or at least a ‘renewable contract’
- ❖ a position viewed as a career—or at least one with ‘genuine career prospects’
- ❖ as far as possible, a position related to the field of study

A sample of 303 successful graduates was selected in terms of the four criteria. Those selected were particularly positive about VET studies, with at least three-quarters rating them highly on a range of factors and 95% seeing them as job-related. The main study areas in the sample were business/economics, trades, arts/social sciences/education, and the computing/technology areas. Males were more likely to have achieved highly on all criteria, and particularly in terms of permanency (86% males, and 75% females).

While specific courses and personal networks were rated highly among the major reasons offered for success, the most important factors were particular personal attributes (planning, persistence and flexibility).

This helps to explain the fact that varying combinations of two different modes of career choice were evident from the interview transcripts. One (the career advancement mode) revealed a definite focus on traditional occupational goals, while the other (the life-context mode) assessed career outcomes alongside a set of other personal priorities. These modes were not mutually exclusive. Some respondents were more likely to emphasise one or the other, but most seemed to incorporate both modes in their approach to their careers.

Our respondents were very positive about the contribution their education and training had made to their career outcomes. Of the 238 in the second stage of the project, 213 had indicated that their studies had contributed significantly to their success, with only 23 of them calling into doubt the link between study and career. The issue at stake, therefore, is not their qualifications as such, but how these can then be translated into effective personal outcomes. They argued that the balance between objective factors (about job outcomes and status) and subjective assessments (of career aspirations and attainment) has become much more important in the measure of success.

Factors such as ‘permanency’, ‘ongoing commitment’ and ‘study-related positions’ are still important elements in the makeup of career profiles, and these depend on the qualifications

and skills each individual has to offer. However, there was a clear consensus that we now need to pay much closer attention to the subjective weightings given to these factors. Four dominant themes emerged: self-assessment, personal goals, suitable qualifications, and flexibility. The emphasis placed on these suggestions that the shift towards a more flexible workforce is not simply a factor affecting the objective conditions of work, but, that it has also led to a more flexible attitude on the part of employees towards their own definitions of success and career.

Introduction

This is the final report of a year 2000 research study undertaken by the Youth Research Centre (YRC) with funding from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. The project was centred on a sample of VET graduates who had embarked upon successful careers. It sought information from them about how they defined and explained their 'success' and 'career', with the expectation that this would provide a better understanding of career outcomes for VET students within the restructured labour market.

The report makes use of existing YRC file details about the 1992–99 pathways of the proposed target group: their courses of study, their assessments of those courses, their employment record during and immediately after their studies, their assessment of their career prospects each year from 1996 onwards, and their current career status.

The centrepiece of the study was an intensive feedback program concentrating specifically on participants with successful career outcomes. The aim of the project was to document their actual process of career transition, what they see as the most important factors (contributing to effective career transition) and the main barriers (to be overcome or to be avoided).

The question

The overall aim of this project was to investigate and document successful longer-term career outcomes of a selected sample of VET graduates.

The specific focus of the project was concerned with the following question:

How do the participants themselves explain their successful career outcomes?

There were four reasons for choosing this particular focus.

An identifiable sample

The Youth Research Centre has at its disposal a database of 29 000 Victorians who had completed their schooling in 1991 (Dwyer et al. 1998). The database is part of an ongoing longitudinal study of participants in post-compulsory education (The Life-Patterns Project). We have already identified within that study, those participants with VET experience and have data on file concerning their experience of VET study and their eventual career outcomes.

In 1996, the Youth Research Centre had used this database for an ANTA-funded study entitled *Participant pathways and outcomes in VET, 1992–95*. The overall objective of that study was to examine student aspirations, experience and outcomes in order to identify barriers to participation in, and effective delivery of VET programs. Particular emphasis was placed on their assessment of their experiences within the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

Thus, we already have on file details about the 1992–99 pathways of the proposed target-group:

- ❖ their courses of study, their assessments of those courses
- ❖ their employment record during and immediately after their studies
- ❖ their assessment of their career prospects each year from 1996 onwards
- ❖ their current career status

The advantage of these records is that they not only contain time-specific information that can provide a reliability check to the interview program which is the centrepiece of the study, but they also provide data specific to VET participants, including their reasons for and sources of information about undertaking VET, their assessments of its career relevance, and the relationship between their fields of study and their subsequent employment.

More specifically, we are able, from the 1998 files, to identify 400–500 VET participants in our longitudinal study who indicated that they have established themselves in full-time ongoing employment or jobs that they consider to be career jobs. Choosing a target-group from them for an intensive feedback program provides a unique means of documenting ‘career success’ or vocational integration in a way that will extend our knowledge significantly about career transition during the 1990s in general, and the transitions of VET graduates in particular.

An appropriate timeframe

One of the limitations of our earlier 1996 ANTA study (as with many of the graduate destination surveys conducted in Australia) was that insufficient time had elapsed since the completion of studies to form an accurate assessment of comparative outcomes. There is a serious need for a study of VET outcomes which adopts a longer timeframe than usual, particularly because of the changes which have taken place throughout the 1990s within the restructured labour-market. As Marginson has pointed out in commenting on the nature of the usual graduate destination surveys, the data are 'collected too soon after graduation to constitute a useful measure of graduate outcomes' and should rather be gathered:

as late as practicable in the year after graduation, and be supplemented by annual later year census studies of the graduate population, perhaps at five and/or ten years after graduation.

(Marginson 1999, p.185)

Canadian scholars would argue that two or even three years is too short a time span to allow for the process of fulfillment of career aspirations to take full effect, even though, for example, some graduates initially experience periods of unemployment, 'care should be taken in drawing conclusions' about possible mismatches between qualifications and employment 'a short time after graduation' (Anisef & Axelrod 1993, p.107). In a review of European studies, Teichler (1989, p.235) similarly cautions about the need to pay attention to 'the diversity of the links between higher education and work'. This is particularly true for the current generation of VET graduates because they are entering a radically restructured labour market in which greater flexibility and contingency are at play and for whom a dilemma arises because the meaning of career has changed.

A major advantage of our longitudinal data set is that it enables us to extend our analysis beyond the initial year or two of graduation. At least three-quarters of the students in our ongoing longitudinal sample had graduated by the end of 1996. Thus many of them have had over three years in which to seek out career positions for themselves somewhat related to their areas of specialisation. This not only means that we can document their actual career outcomes at an objective level, but that they can provide us with valuable subjective assessments of the process of career attainment and the actual meaning of 'career success' in the new labour market.

Relevance to new labour market conditions

Another limitation to the available data on graduate career outcomes is that the statistical categories provide little information of a detailed qualitative kind that would enable us to draw any useful conclusions about the ways in which the *process* of career transition has changed in the new labour market. Thus, while we have data, for example, on employment outcomes in terms of occupational categories and industry sectors (for example, Ball 1999), more detailed information is lacking about whether employment outcomes are genuine *career* outcomes, and whether the notion of career has changed. 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 the graduate's actual field of study? Also, the broad statistics do not enable us to identify the distinguishing characteristics of the particular graduates who have been successful. What differentiates them from their fellow graduates who have not been, and whether there are key factors of an objective kind that may operate as threshold variables vis-a-vis successful career outcomes?

Traditionally, notions of career have 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 flexibility and contingency as a result of new employment practices calls these elements into question. Thus, even in the buoyant

American economy in 1998, there has been a distinct shift towards a 'contingent' (those *without* regular full-time jobs) workforce which now includes at least 30% of all workers (Mishel et al. 1999). For those graduates who have found career positions, there is clear evidence of a mismatch between qualifications and actual job outcomes (Bureau of Labour Statistics 1999). In Australia, which currently has higher levels of unemployment, the situation is similar but worse, with indications that the expansion of the contingent labour sector is a major contributor to much of the job growth being achieved. An increasing number of graduates with full-time positions is not working in their preferred areas (Marginson 1999). While among their peers who claim to have 'career jobs' there is a considerable number who are only employed in those jobs on a part-time basis (Dwyer et al. 1998). It is significant that 'contingency' is now a feature of the Australian economy with the inevitable result that casual employment has accounted for 62% of the job growth in Australia since 1985 (Henderson 1999).

The economic trends suggest that, across the Western world, 'employment is becoming increasingly fluid, occupational boundaries are changing or dissolving, and more jobs are temporary' (Stern, Bailey & Merritt 1997). Research evidence from both the US and the UK has indicated that training programs do not by themselves, create jobs (Freeman & Katz 1994; Nickell & Bell 1995). Canadian studies of graduate career outcomes indicate that many face 'job instability, underemployment, "inappropriateness" of their training in relation to the job, disparity of integration conditions according to the field of studies' (Trottier, Cloutier & LaForce 1996, p.92).

Gregory's detailed study of higher education expansion and economic change has demonstrated that, in Australia, the coming generation has certainly not been insulated from these global economic forces. There is a growing mismatch between educational levels and job market realities which may be a consequence of the narrowing of opportunities within the middle range of occupations. Gregory concluded that 'the increased education levels of the young have not protected them from bearing the major adjustment from the lack of job growth' (Gregory 1995, p.321). His analysis is confirmed by other studies of labour market outcomes for Australian 20 to 24-year-olds which show that:

Perhaps surprisingly and certainly of concern, given the emphasis placed on educational attainment and qualifications, data on changes in the occupational distribution between 1993 and 1998 suggest a general trend toward lower-skilled jobs for both young men and young women ... among young women there has been a clear shift away from advanced skill jobs ... towards jobs which require only intermediate or elementary skills ... young male workers were more likely to work in Elementary clerical, sales and service occupations, as Labourers, and as intermediate production and transport workers.
(Wooden & VandenHeuvel 1999, p.47)

Given this type of evidence on the changing nature of labour market conditions within the global economy, it is important to obtain some first-hand evidence of the impact of this on new entrants to the labour market. Particularly within the VET sector, there is a need to ensure that prospective students are properly informed about the relationship between their course of study and its likely career outcomes as well as the kinds of ongoing career decisions they will need to make within a more flexible workforce. What would our advice be, for example, if we accepted the relevance of Sennett's comments about American college graduates?

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.
(Sennett 1998, p.22)

Importance of subjective assessments

Because of the growing uncertainty about 'career' outcomes in the restructured labour market, in our tender regarding this project we highlighted the need to link objective and subjective findings about transitions. Combining objective data (about job outcomes and status) with subjective assessments (of career aspirations and attainment) is particularly

important if we are to move beyond an analysis of career transitions that perpetuates a false and out-moded assumption of a one-to-one relationship between post-school qualifications and actual employment outcomes. Because of the changing nature of career paths in the twenty-first century it is important to document how graduates themselves are redefining the notion of career and what they see as the relationship between educational attainment and occupational outcomes.

This type of approach is in line with much of the recent European and British literature in the field of youth studies (Furlong & Cartmel 1997; Wyn & Dwyer 1999), which has been strongly influenced by Beck's conceptualisation of the 'risk society' (Beck 1992). Particular interest has been shown in his discussion of the shift from predictable normal or 'standard' biographies of the industrial era to more individualised risk-filled 'choice' biographies of late modernity. The 'normal' biographies were developed within a social context, shaped by the predictability of the established institutional structures of the family, education, industry and the labour market, and so the 'markers' of transition (the age of consent, voting age, adult wage and career path, marriage and parenthood, home ownership, and at the end of the term, the age of retirement and pension entitlements) reflected this assumption about linear and predictable norms.

Today the elements of predictability and permanence can no longer be taken for granted. Increasingly adults of all ages now find themselves negotiating changes that have affected established institutions and expectations—marriage break-ups, retrenchment, new workplace agreements, single parenthood, retraining, flexi-time, outsourcing, or intermittent unemployment. There is much more pressure on individuals to make 'choices' for themselves and to be ready to revise those choices as their life and work situations change. This introduces a strong 'subjective' element into the meaning of career, which challenges the assumption that subjective evidence is essentially subordinate or unreliable by comparison with findings of a less personal or statistical nature. As we have noted in a recent study on transitions for UNESCO:

The large-scale statistical data are clearly important for documenting outcomes from the generation as a whole, but this evidence about them needs to be balanced by evidence from them ... precisely because the old-style linear model of transition has lost much of the predictability which gave it legitimacy, it is now more important than ever to devise ways of uncovering the complexity and ambiguity of transition in post-industrial society. Many of the uncertainties, shifts, tensions and overlapping of interests that young people are experiencing in their daily lives can only be revealed and understood by letting them identify for the researcher what is really important for them, and what sense they are making for themselves of the risks and dilemmas in their lives.

(Wyn & Dwyer 2000, p.155)

To achieve this, it is important to broaden our understanding of 'significance' beyond the purely *statistical* and impersonal, and to allow for the wide variations in meaning and importance due to subjective definitions of what 'success' and 'career' mean to the different participants. A further advantage of this project, therefore, is that it gives us direct access to the subjective variations in the responses of our interviewees, and what these tell us about how they are assessing their employment conditions and career outcomes within the new labour market.

These four concerns provide the background to this project.

The sample

The overall aim of the current project was to investigate and document *successful* longer-term career outcomes in a selected sample of VET participants. We are able from our most recent files to select a target group to document 'career success'. We can utilise this sample in three ways:

- ❖ by undertaking a re-analysis of the existing data on file for participants in our 1996 ANTA study to identify particular sub-groups demonstrating successful career outcomes
- ❖ by re-examining the annual survey and interview data for 1997, 1998 and 1999 in our longitudinal study to identify differences in career outcomes amongst the participants and to relate these to background variables and course specialisations with a view to determining those factors contributing to successful career outcomes for VET graduates
- ❖ by establishing an intensive feedback program, concentrating specifically on participants with successful career outcomes to document their actual process of career transition—*how do the participants themselves explain their successful career outcomes*, and what do they see as the most important factors (contributing to effective career transition), and the main barriers (to be overcome or to be avoided)?

Source data: 1991–96

Our data file is based on a survey of 29 000 Victorians leaving school in 1991 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
Study for apprenticeship	14	14
Study as traineeship	7	7
Intended working/worked	26	25
Female	52	56
Male	47	44

In 1996, the 1992 data-set of 11 000 was re-surveyed and this has been followed, on a yearly basis, by a subsequent interview sample of 100 and a questionnaire sample of about 2000. The sample was narrowed to concentrate on those who had undertaken further study subsequent to leaving school. It included students from both urban and rural areas covering a representative range of schools (60% 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).

Apart from the concentration on continuing students, the only other significant variation from the original sample (as is often the case in longitudinal studies of this kind) was an increase in the relative proportion of female respondents. In the analysis of data throughout the subsequent studies care has been taken to allow for this shift. The overall consistency in the yearly samples is illustrated in table 2.

Table 2: Sample compatibility, 1996–2000 (%)

Indicator	1996 n= 1926	1998 n= 1430	2000 n= 1121
Government school	60	56	58
Aust.-born mother	65	65	67
Professional/managerial father	33	34	34
Uni. educated mother	13	14	15
Rural	33	31	34
Interrupted studies	15	12	12

Project sample

To establish an appropriate sample for use in this current project a series of indicators of ‘success’ were established. The survey returns for both 1998 and 1999 were analysed to select participants whose details fulfilled the required criteria. The indicators were:

- ❖ expressed *satisfaction* or sense of fulfillment regarding career progress
- ❖ job is *ongoing*—permanent or at least a ‘renewable contract’
- ❖ job is viewed as a *career* position—or at least one with ‘genuine career prospects’
- ❖ as far as possible, in a job *related to the field* of study

An initial sample of 525 ‘successful’ participants with some form of vocational education and training was established, and after a more stringent application of the criteria, we settled on a project sample of 303.

The indicators for these 303 were as follows:

❖ happy with where I’ve reached	169	
❖ real fulfillment in what I’m doing	134	Total: 303
❖ permanent job	240	
❖ renewable contract	40	Total: 280
❖ in a career job	192	
❖ genuine career prospects	67	
❖ likely career prospects	26	Total: 285
❖ related to my field of study	193	
❖ indirectly related	45	Total: 238

Obviously not all of the members of the sample had been completely successful on all four of the indicators, but lower success on any one indicator was counterbalanced, by considerable success on others.

In addition to these career-related factors, we also have available on file, some more general background details regarding members of the sample, including demographic data and assessments of VET programs of study. In general, there is some indication that

socioeconomic factors have influenced entrance into VET pathways. Thus, the VET proportion from government schools is higher than for the 1996 total survey group. In our current project sample, the proportion from metropolitan Melbourne or with Australian-born or university-educated mothers is lower, and fewer have fathers in professional or managerial occupations. These background details are shown in table 3.

Table 3: Comparison background details, 1996–2000 (%)

	1996 total (n = 1926)	1996 VET (n = 742)	2000 sample (n = 303)
Female	65	63	61
Government school	60	67	68
Aust.-born mother	65	67	58
Professional/managerial father	33	27	26
Uni. educated mother	13	9	7
From metropolitan area	63	57	59

In addition to demographic details, we also have the 1991–92 study and work intentions and outcomes for our project sample on file, which can again be compared with data for the total group (table 4).

Table 4: Intentions and outcomes, 1991–92 (%)

	1991 intention	1992 outcome	
	2000 sample	Total group	2000 sample
Work	21	42	49
Study	67	66	70
Apprentice/trainee	20	21	11

Overall, more of our current project sample achieved study outcomes in 1992 than was true for the total group in our 1992 file. The totals in all columns exceed 100% because the apprentices and trainees are also included in the study group, and there is an overlap between work and study in 1992.

It is also worth adding that as many as 10% of our year 2000 ‘successful’ project sample reported that they were unemployed for six months or more in 1992.

Summary

- ❖ A sample of 303 successful graduates was selected in terms of four criteria.
- ❖ 68% were from state schools, and 70% had gone directly into post-school studies.
- ❖ Persons with university-educated and professional parents were under-represented.
- ❖ 10% had been unemployed for at least 6 months in 1992 after leaving school.

Role of education

In our major survey of 1996 we asked all participants a number of detailed questions about how they assessed the quality and usefulness of their post-school studies. We can therefore provide some comparative details in this area. While the overall assessment of VET is comparatively high, for our ‘successful’ sample the responses are even more positive. Thus 84% of them were satisfied with their courses in 1996, and three-quarters not only thought that VET courses were more practical but they also thought that the staff had shown real interest in the students. Not surprisingly, over 90% judged VET courses as useful for future jobs and therefore worth recommending to others.

Some relevant judgements are shown in table 5.

Table 5: Assessments of VET, 1996 (%)

	All 1996	VET 1996	Sample 2000
Good for future jobs	91	91	95
Worth recommending	69	86	92
Satisfied with VET	n/a	81	84
VET more practical	66	68	75
Staff interested	n/a	59	74
Teaching good	n/a	55	52
Administration good	n/a	39	36
Course advice good	n/a	38	41
VET low quality	10	12	11
As good as university	28	44	55
Better than I expected	n/a	54	65

In our survey of 1998, we provided participants with the opportunity to make a further assessment of vocational education and training. We sought their reasons for undertaking VET studies and what they saw as the usefulness or otherwise of such study. From our current project sample we have detailed comments on these issues from 88% (or 266 participants). Their responses relating to when they first decided to undertake VET studies are given in table 6.

Table 6: Undertaking VET—sample, 2000 (n= 266)

	Per cent
In my last year at school	24
On missing my other preferences after Yr 12	23
After a period of time in the workforce	27
After completing another course elsewhere	6
During another course elsewhere	11

The reasons for choosing VET varied across the sample. The main factors considered are shown in table 7.

Table 7: Reasons for VET—sample, 2000 (n= 266)

	Highly ranked (%)
To gain an initial qualification	72
To help me get a job	67
As a step towards university	19
To retrain for a different career	26
To increase chances of promotion	34
As required by my employer	28

While between a quarter and a third of them gave career-related reasons (such as retraining, promotion or job-skilling) for undertaking VET, over two-thirds had done so either to gain an initial qualification or as a step towards obtaining employment.

Summary

- ❖ The sample was particularly positive about VET studies, with at least three-quarters rating them highly on a range of factors and 95% seeing them as job-related.
- ❖ VET appears to have been a ‘second-string’ option, with only 24% choosing it while at school, 23% on missing their other preferences, and 27% after being employed.
- ❖ Over two-thirds had chosen VET to gain an initial qualification with a job in mind.

Further characteristics of sample

The project is concerned with VET participants with successful outcomes. What do we know about their study and career characteristics? Our 1998 survey provided details on 266 of our project sample. They represented a range of different study backgrounds, with the largest groupings being those who have done business or economics courses (59). The remainder were: trade qualifications (38); arts, social science or education qualifications (32); computing or technology areas (24). As might be expected, there is not necessarily a one-to-one relationship between area of study and actual job, even though 238 (or 79%) of the 303 have indicated that their job is either directly or indirectly related to their field. The types of jobs held by those from the main fields are shown in table 8.

Table 8: Job positions

Trades	Business	Arts etc.	Computers
auto mechanic (3)	accounts (15)	accounts clerk	admin. (6)
builder	admin. (9)	admin. (3)	computer tech. (2)
carpenter (5)	banking analyst	child care (8)	freight clerk
chef (2)	car sales exec.	corrections counsel	furniture tech.
driver	credit analyst	editor	import manager
electric mechanic	drinks waiter	kindergarten	IT officer
electronics tech.	electricity service	legal service	law clerk
farmer	finance manager	library officer	quality inspector
fitter & turner (2)	hospitality trainee	musician	receptionist (2)
garden manager	insurance consult	personal assistant	records officer
landscape gardener	law consultant	police force	retail manager
machinist	marketing (3)	postal service	retail sales
mechanic	receptionist		technical manager
mill hand	payments officer		traffic co-ordinator
painter	payroll officer		welfare officer
plane engineer	personnel manager		
plumber (2)	police force		
product assembler	real estate		
river worker	retail manager		
road labourer	retail owner		
sales rep.	retail sales (3)		
telecomm tech.	service inventory		
tyre fitter	shearer		
	transport co-ord.		

The main areas with multiple representation in our sample are shown in table 9.

Table 9: Main areas of study

	No.
Business, economics	59
Trade qualification	38
Arts, social sciences, education	32
Technology, computing	24
Maths, sciences	14
Creative, performing arts	8
Hospitality	8
Nursing, health	7
Engineering, surveying	7

Close to two-thirds have had more than one job since 1996, and two-thirds have been employed in the private sector. The respondents are generally positive about their current job and, although only about two-thirds have jobs directly related to their field of study, as many as 88% believe it enables them to use their skills and abilities (table 10).

Table 10: Job characteristics, 1998

	Per cent
Same job since 1996	33
2 to 5 jobs since 1996	67
Public sector	22
Private sector	64
The pay is good	60
I have the freedom to decide what I do	62
It lets me use my skills and abilities	88
Chances for promotion are good	53
Job security is good	69
It is directly related to my qualifications	68

Summary

- ❖ A wide diversity in job descriptions exists for each of the main study areas.
- ❖ The main study areas in the sample were business/economics, trades, arts/social sciences/education, and the computing/technology areas.
- ❖ Two-thirds have changed jobs since 1996, and 88% say their current job lets them use their skills, although only 68% are in jobs directly related to their qualifications.

Problems of definition

We have already drawn attention to the fact that a rethinking of the meaning of careers is currently in train because of new labour market conditions. Again, this is not a problem unique to Australia but one associated with changes taking place within the global economy. In examining career outcomes in the twenty-first century there are problems of definition that need to be faced.

Vocational integration

One major Canadian research study of graduate outcomes (Trottier, Cloutier & LaForce 1996, p.94) has observed that for those who have found stable jobs:

This stable job may not correspond to the one that the graduate hoped to hold based on his or her initial plans for the future and on the training that he or she acquired because he or she had to reassess his or her situation and plans according to aspirations and competitive position in the job market.

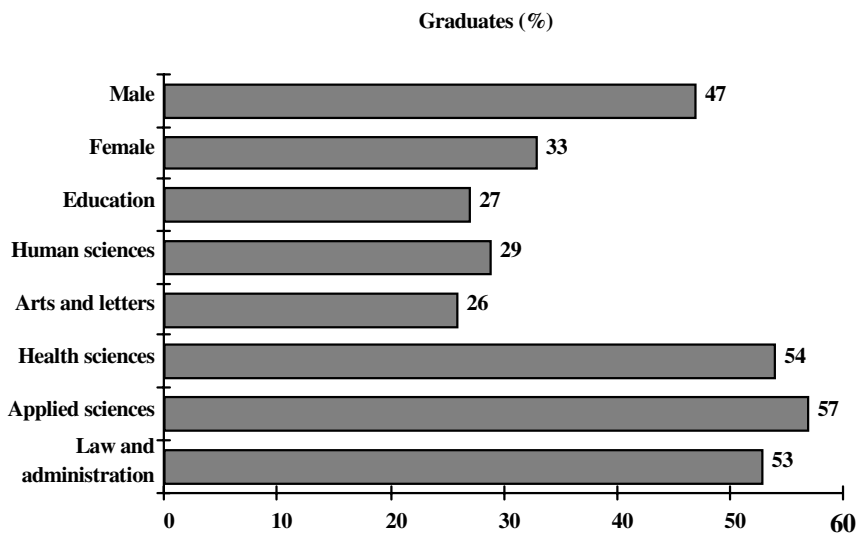
The authors of that study addressed the problems of definition and developed a three-fold typology of career success or 'vocational integration' which allowed for some loosening of the link between integration and actual field of study. They defined career attainment in terms of the integrated, those in the process of integration, and the inactive.

- ❖ The 'integrated' were those who within three years of graduating had achieved a permanent full-time job envisaged as a career choice—'even if the job is not the one he or she initially hoped for' (p.94).
- ❖ Those 'in the process of integration' were either not working full-time, or were in a temporary position, or else had a full-time job which was not envisaged as their career job.
- ❖ The final group were said to be 'inactive' because of their non-involvement in the labour market (often because they were continuing with post-graduate studies).

The Canadian data for vocational integration are shown in figure 1.

Of particular interest, for the present discussion is that there was considerable variation across different fields of study with regard to vocational integration. This is not necessarily a new phenomenon (in reality there have always been variations in the predictability of outcomes in different career areas), but the fact that those variations are still noticeable even three years after graduation suggests that new factors are at work. In this context it is also worth commenting that the Canadian study pointed to some loosening of the assumed links between structural factors such as class and family background and career attainment. Thus, while social background factors still influence young people's choices of courses of study, and while gender continues to influence career outcomes, the influence of socioeconomic status (SES) on career attainment was becoming much less certain. The authors noted that their hypothesis concerning the advantaged position of those from higher SES backgrounds 'was not verified', and that this was probably because the determining factor governing outcomes was not status, but 'that the positions to which they aspire require a specific level of training and special skills' (Trottier, Cloutier & Laforce 1996, p.104).

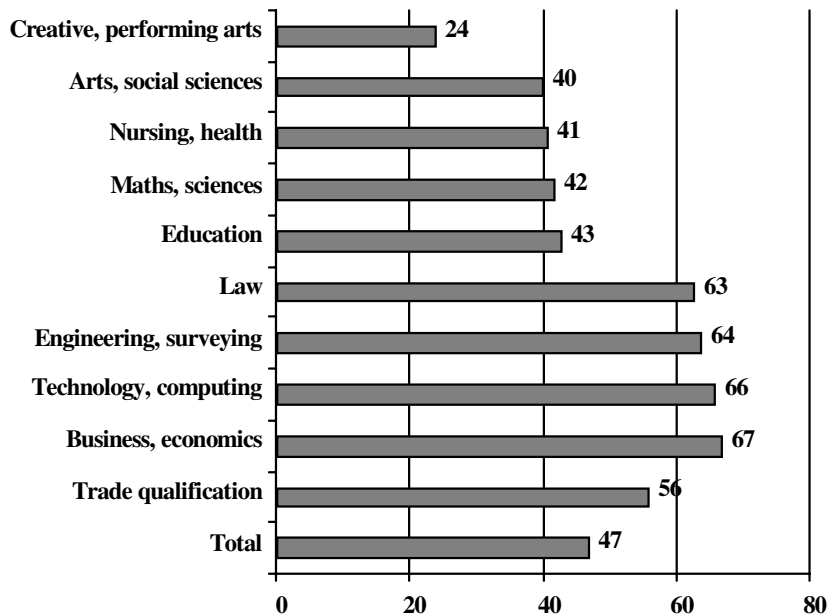
Figure 1: Vocational integration of 3-year Canadian graduates



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

The growing complexity and uncertainty affecting successful career outcomes is evident in our own longitudinal study. Who are the ones with permanent full-time career jobs by 1999? The following figure presents the relevant data.

Figure 2: Field of study outcomes, 1999 (%)

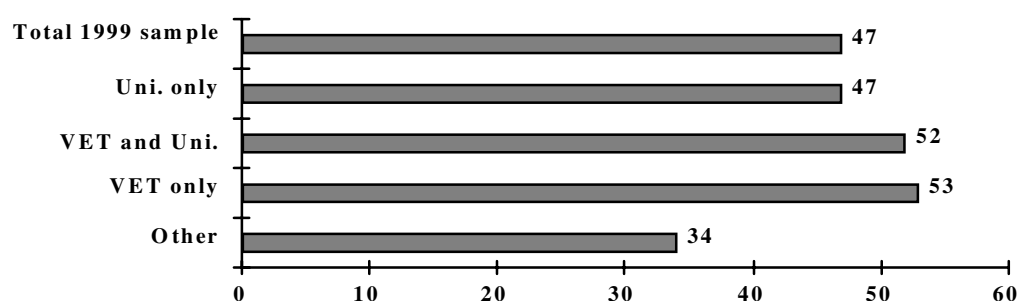


Given that our sample has had more than three years to become established after completing their first post-school qualification, it is not surprising that the percentages are higher than those for the Canadian graduates. Nevertheless, the figures across the various fields of study are relatively similar to those from Canada. This is also confirmed for data on socioeconomic

status and gender. Thus, while males (51%) surpassed females (46%), school background did not make any noticeable difference in terms of career outcomes, and there was an under-representation of those whose female parent had a university qualification, while there is a slightly higher representation by those from metropolitan and professional/managerial family backgrounds. Those participants who had completed their studies at a university did not appear to have been as successful in gaining vocational integration as those with a VET qualification (47% as compared with 53%).

We can provide further detail on this last point. In our 1999 sample, 55% had undertaken university studies exclusively, with the remaining 45% split between those with both university and VET course backgrounds (14%), those with only VET type qualifications (20%), and others with undefined or discontinued study histories (11%). If anything, the graduates from non-university settings have fared better in terms of eventual outcomes. Figure 3 gives the percentage breakdown for the 1999 respondents.

Figure 3: Study institutions and integration



Sample variations

A further problem of definition arises when we compare objective and subjective assessments of 'career success'. We have done this regularly in our annual surveys. The 1999 responses are given in table 11. As can be seen, there is little variation between the males and the females in terms of subjective assessments.

Table 11: Subjective assessment of career outcomes, 1999 (%)

	Male	Female	Total
I would consider it as an ongoing career	65	63	64
Not currently a career position but has genuine 'prospects'	11	12	11
It doesn't yet offer 'career prospects' but may in the future	8	8	8
It is unlikely to develop career prospects	7	7	7
None of the above	8	10	10

If we compare these figures with figure 2 there is in fact a 17% divergence between the overall objective assessment (47%) and the subjective classification (64%). This obvious discrepancy suggests that restricting the definition of careers to jobs that must be both permanent, and full-time may not allow sufficiently for the flexibility in job outcomes within the new labour market. It also highlights the need to inquire more closely into the reasons particular participants have for assessing a job as an 'ongoing' career.

This can be seen from the ways in which variations in career factors affect the members of our sample. The project sample of 303 VET graduates was identified on the basis of four criteria:

- ❖ career satisfaction
- ❖ an ongoing position

- ❖ genuine career prospects
- ❖ a field-related job

As we have indicated, the extent to which each participant scored highly on the particular indicators varied. There was a range of outcomes in our sample, and also a range of assessments about those outcomes. For example:

- ❖ While 240 had found *permanent* positions, at most, 138 of these positions were directly or indirectly related to their field of study.
- ❖ While 285 had found either a *career* job or one with ‘genuine career prospects’, at least 53 of these jobs were not permanent or field-related.

Thus, the relationship between permanency and career is not a straightforward one—and this is particularly the case for females in our sample as can be seen in greater detail in table 12.

Table 12: Gender contrasts

	Males (%) n = 118	Females (%) n = 185
Permanent jobs	86	75
2–5 jobs since 1996	70	65
In career jobs	64	63
Directly study-related	64	63
With field-related permanency	51	42

There is also some variation in the relationship between fields of study and job outcomes. Table 13 provides the evidence. People from the trades, business and maths/sciences appear to have been the most successful in finding permanent jobs, although those from trades are less likely to regard these as career jobs. Field-related jobs are more common for those from arts/social science/education or from maths/sciences.

Table 13: Outcomes by field of study (%)

	Permanent	Career job	Field-related
Business, economics	83	64	61
Trade qualification	84	53	61
Arts, social science, education	72	66	69
Technology, computing	75	67	54
Maths, sciences	86	64	71

These variations in outcomes across the different fields of study provide some justification for our earlier comments about the impact of recent economic trends on traditional understandings of career. In the past, notions of career usually carried with them the expectation of finding a job that was permanent, full-time, and at least somewhat related to the person’s field of expertise or study. Our evidence suggests that the relationship between these various factors is now a much more complex one. It is important therefore to examine the extent to which current graduates are aware of this and are taking it into account in their subjective assessments of their career outcomes.

Summary

- ❖ Of the 303 in the sample, 138 had career jobs that were both permanent and field-related, with the remainder displaying complex combinations of the three factors of permanency, career prospects and field-related positions.
- ❖ Males were more likely to have achieved highly on all three factors, and particularly in terms of permanency (86% males, and 75% females).

- ❖ Permanency is higher for the fields of business/economics (83%), trades (84%) and maths/sciences (85%), but the arts/social sciences/education fields were more likely to result in field-related (69%) career (66%) positions.

Satisfaction and success

Another factor which adds to our problems of definition is that the participants themselves use personal satisfaction as a definite indicator of career success. Because of the variety of combinations of permanency, career positions, and field-related jobs, striking a balance between ‘satisfaction’ and ‘objective success’ becomes extremely complicated. What kind of relationship pertains between the objective outcomes and their subjective assessments?

Within our project sample, 56% have stated that they are happy with their progress, while the other 44% express a real sense of fulfillment. Are these different assessments based on or reflected in the objective data? It is certainly true that the levels of real fulfillment are higher in our ‘successful’ sample (both males and females) than for the survey groups from which it is drawn. This is evident from table 14.

Table 14: Levels of satisfaction (%)

	Total sample			Project sample		
	All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female
Happy	40	38	41	56	53	58
Fulfilled	28	25	29	44	47	42

What is this ‘sense of fulfillment’ due to—the fact that they have found permanent positions, or that these are career positions, or that the positions are directly related to their field of study? It would appear that those with *career jobs* and those with jobs that are *field-related* are more likely than those with permanent jobs to express a sense of fulfillment.

Table 15: Levels of satisfaction by outcome (%)

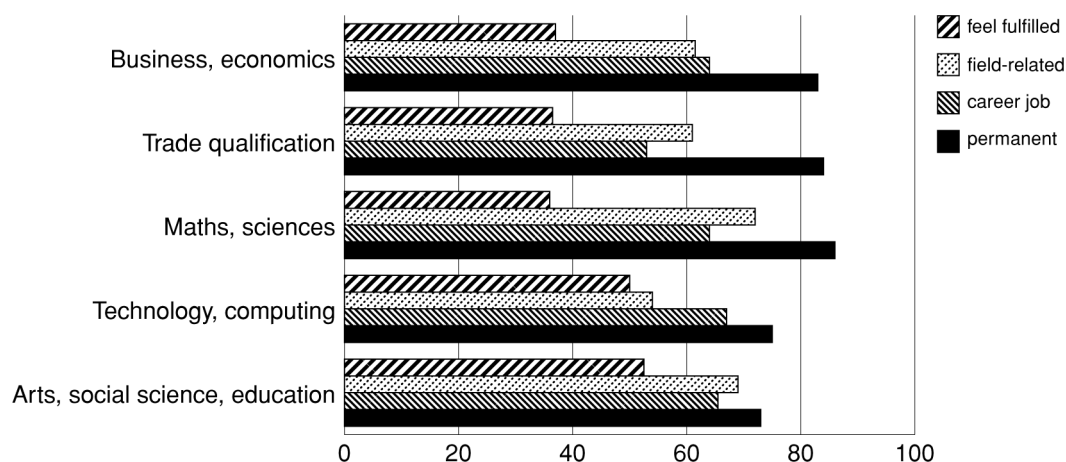
	Permanent n = 240	Career job n = 192	Field-related n = 193
Happy	58	53	52
Fulfilled	42	47	48

The relative weighting given to the various factors at a subjective level also leads to some divergence between subjective assessments and objective outcomes with regard to actual fields of study. For example, those from the fields of arts/social science/education, and those from technology/computing have a lower percentage in permanent jobs than those from the other fields. Yet, despite this, they include more who feel real fulfillment in what they are doing (figure 4).

These complex relationships between the constituent elements and the variations for the different fields of study are reflected in the individual characteristics of the members of our project sample. The extent to which each participant scored highly on each of the four different criteria we used to select our sample varied considerably, but on analysis, the participants could be divided into four different groups:

- those with permanent career jobs directly or indirectly related to their field of study (138)
- those with permanent career jobs or at least ones with career prospects, even if not related to their field of study (68)
- those who have career or ‘career prospect’ jobs even though at present these may not be permanent or field-related (53)
- those whose jobs are either permanent or viewed as providing a ‘stepping stone’ to a chosen career (44)

Figure 4: Field outcomes (%)



Variations across these four groups are shown in table 16.

Table 16: Variations in career outcomes groups (%)

	Gp A	Gp B	Gp C	Gp D
Permanent jobs	100	100	0	77
In career jobs	100	24	70	0
Genuine career prospects	0	76	30	0
Directly study-related	86	38	68	27
Possible career	0	0	0	59

For Group A (138 members) all have permanent employment, all are in career jobs and the vast majority (86%) have positions that are directly study-related.

For Group B (68), there is also 100% record of permanency, but here three-quarters of the jobs are not yet careers but ones with 'genuine career prospects'. In their case 'permanency' does not necessarily equate with 'career'.

Group C members (53) do not have permanent jobs. At first sight this may not appear a 'successful' outcome, but 100% of the group report that they either have attained career jobs (70%) or at least ones with genuine prospects (30%).

Group D (44) is an extreme illustration of the difference between 'permanency' and 'career'. By contrast with group C which registers zero on the permanency criterion, as many as 77% in group D had permanency. However, also by contrast with group C, with its 100% 'career-job' profile, members of group D can only make a claim to 'possible careers' and that is only true for 59% of them.

When we look at the variations in the ways the main fields of study are represented in our sample, we find that there is an under-representation of arts/social science/education graduates in group A (table 17). This helps explain the lower proportion of females in the group, but also is perhaps related to the way in which notions of permanency are understood in different employment settings. Changes in employment conditions for women in health and education areas in the public sector for example are likely to be reflected in our data which show higher levels of study-related outcomes for them but lower levels of permanency.

Table 17: Group A—main fields of study

	Total sample	Group A	Group A (%)
Business, economics	59	30	51
Trade qualification	38	18	47
Arts, social science, education	32	13	41
Technology, computing	24	14	58
Maths, sciences	14	9	64

Even allowing for the gender and field differences that are accentuated within group A, in general terms it is now much more important for graduates to examine a range of factors or a blending of job criteria in making up their minds about possible career paths. No one field of study in our sample, either at the group A or the total sample level, can guarantee that all of the objective criteria of ‘success’ will be met for its graduates, or will be met to the same extent for each individual concerned. Being qualified in a particular field of study is obviously important for setting out on a career path but, depending on where particular individuals place the emphasis regarding the different career criteria, their field of study in itself is not likely to be the deciding factor regarding eventual career success.

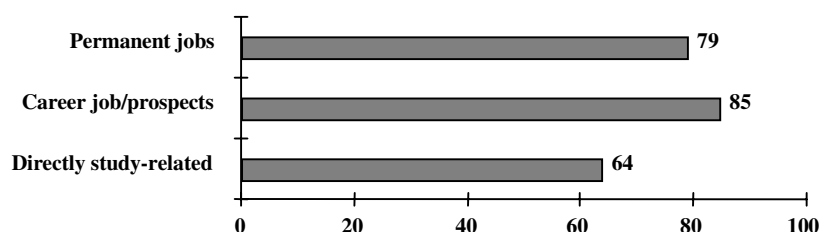
This complexity in the ways in which the objective ‘success’ criteria are reflected in the different fields of study raises a further issue with regard to the sub-groups in our project sample. This can be seen by looking more closely at the composition of the final three (B, C, D) in table 16. The contrasts between the three groups are sharp, but if we ask the question ‘who succeeds?’, the answer clearly depends on the weighting given by group members to the different criteria.

For example, those in group B might well take pleasure in the fact that they all have permanency and genuine career prospects, but it is also likely that those in group C might trade their total lack of permanency for the advantage they have in being not only much more successful in finding career jobs but also in finding ones that are directly study-related (68%).

Similarly, those in group D might be disappointed to have missed out on study-related career jobs by comparison with their counterparts in group C, but might on the other hand draw satisfaction from the fact that they have much more in common with groups A and B as far as permanency is concerned (77%).

While these variations across the different criteria regarding a ‘sense of fulfillment’ are important, it is worth remembering that all of the sample are at least ‘satisfied’ with where they have reached. For the sample as a whole, we know that levels of permanency are high and that, while only about two-thirds have found positions that are directly study-related, if we add in those with genuine career prospects, as many as 85% could be said to have career positions. The overall characteristics of the sample are shown in figure 5.

Figure 5: Sample characteristics (%)



Summary

- ❖ Those with *career jobs* and those with jobs that are *field-related* are slightly more likely than those with permanent jobs to express a sense of fulfillment.
- ❖ Related to this is the finding that the fields of arts/social science/education and technology/computing which have lower levels of permanency nevertheless include more who feel a real sense of fulfillment.
- ❖ There is a balance in the sample between the three factors of permanency (79%), career prospects (85%) and field-related positions (64%).
- ❖ The complexity in the objective combinations of these three factors is matched by further complexity in the sample's subjective assessments of successful outcomes.

Comment

A simple solution to these problems of definition would be to put to one side subjective assessments of career attainment and fulfillment and then to limit successful outcomes to those with permanent full-time career jobs in line with the Canadian definition of vocational integration. We would simply accept the fact that, of those in our total longitudinal sample who completed their schooling in 1991 and subsequently gained VET qualifications, there are at most 53% who by now have proved to be successful (figure 3).

The problem with this solution is that it fails to take into account evidence that the levels of success are much greater. As many as 79% of our sample have, in fact, found permanent jobs. Eighty-five per cent see their jobs either as ongoing careers or ones with genuine career prospects, and 64% derive a real sense of satisfaction or fulfillment from the fact that the jobs they have are clearly study-related (figure 5).

It may be true that a rigorous analysis would insist that their studies have provided them with little better than a 50/50 chance of success, but they read the outcomes of their studies more positively than that. For this reason, we have used a *combination* of four different criteria to derive our project sample. This establishes a reasonable balance on the one hand, between subjective definitions of success, and on the other, the fluid nature of the objective conditions which prevail in the current economic context. The problems of definition, however, do at least demonstrate the importance of seeking to document how VET graduates are themselves already in the process of exploring the new labour market and making sense of it for themselves. The final sections of this report will place a heavy emphasis on their assessments of what 'success' and 'career' now mean.

Overview of initial findings

We have settled on a project sample of 303 participants who finished their schooling in 1991 and who at various stages since then, have undertaken vocational education and training. All of them are satisfied with their progress towards future careers, and have achieved either permanent, career, or field-related positions for themselves. In terms of family and school backgrounds, the majority came from government schools and from non-professional families, while only 7% of them had female parents with university qualifications. On completion of their schooling, 70% had gone on immediately to further study, although only 24% of them had viewed VET as their first choice. A further 23% had decided on VET after missing out on their other preferences. In their first year out from school as many as 10% had been unemployed for at least six months.

The vast majority in the sample have expressed high levels of approval for their VET course, with over 90% advocating its job value and their own readiness to recommend such courses to others. This is not surprising given that over two-thirds had enrolled in VET either to gain an initial qualification or for the purpose of gaining employment of their choice, and that up to

this point in time, VET graduates appear to be having more success in the labour market than their university counterparts (see figure 3).

With regard to their experience of the job market, since 1996 two-thirds have had two or more jobs but have reached the stage where they have jobs directly related to their qualifications. As many as 88% of them consider that their jobs enable them to use their skills and abilities.

Although our project sample includes more females (61%) than males, the males in the sample have had more success in finding permanent jobs for themselves (86% of them versus 75% of the young women). Over 80% of those with trade qualifications, with business studies, or with maths/sciences have found permanent jobs. At least two-thirds from other main fields of study have career jobs and 70% of those from arts/social science/education or from maths/sciences have jobs that are directly related to their field of study.

By comparison with the total longitudinal study participants, levels of personal satisfaction are understandably high, with 56% happy with their progress and 44% expressing a sense of fulfillment. Given that the males in the sample have been particularly successful in gaining permanent career positions (even if outside their field of study), it is not surprising that as many as 47% of them express 'fulfillment' by comparison with the total longitudinal group's 28%.

The relationship between objective outcomes and subjective assessments of progress requires further analysis. At the objective level, the interplay between permanency, career positions and field-related employment is a complex one and no doubt, at the subjective level, this leads to varying degrees of satisfaction about career outcomes. The next section of this report looks more closely at this evidence.

Subjective assessments

This project was given a specific focus on the question: how do the participants *themselves* explain their successful career outcomes? As we indicated in our tender for the project, this makes subjective assessment of VET careers the centrepiece of the study. The second stage of the project was devoted to this issue.

A feedback program was designed in a way that ensured that the participants were given sufficient scope for personal input. This part of our report is concerned therefore with the personal responses we have received as a result. We provided participants with a choice between personal interviews and written responses, and as a result we were able to maintain a second stage sample size of 238 (98 males and 140 females), using an interview sub-sample of 109 to provide a more intensive follow-up investigation on issues of major importance. For the purposes of this report we have drawn specifically on 80 interview transcripts each of which provided a comprehensive coverage of all the issues canvassed. The main issues included:

- ❖ their own assessment of their career progress
- ❖ their assessment of their progress in the past year
- ❖ how secure they felt about their current career position
- ❖ the extent to which prior studies had contributed to their success
- ❖ what they saw as the major factors contributing to their success
- ❖ what they saw as the major obstacles or difficulties faced

Meanings of success and career

My mother thinks success is about having my car paid off; she thought leaving to go to a job with less pay was madness.

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

She had completed a field placement at Centrelink during her course and thought they would be good for immediate employment prospects and in general paid well. She was right; she worked for them for 2 years but what she did not take into account was how awful the jobs would be. She was on contract work the entire time (in one instance sacking her the day before they were obliged to give her ongoing work), but more importantly she said the work was so demoralising, refusing needy people payments, never having a regular client base, moving from one office to another every few months ... she quit. Even though she did not

have a job lined up, she was prepared to risk it. She knew if she were desperate she could get residential work—she was right and began that kind of work. It was difficult work, where the organisation provided little support, low pay and gave the worker no authority to make any kinds of decisions about the clients. Dana applied for another position at a different residential support unit for young intellectually disabled people. She has been in this position for just over a year. She is thoroughly enjoying her work. She looks after 10 clients, and has done so for the past year; she says she knows them inside out; she describes this as a cosy family with a great team of people to offer support. She was surprised to find that the ‘religious’ nature of the organisation made a difference by creating a homely, cosy and supportive atmosphere.

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

The ways in which young people today define success are not necessarily the same as those adopted by previous generations. While many still display traditional attitudes towards career attainment, there is also an awareness of an increasing demand for flexibility on their part. The respondents report that to be successful they often feel the need to be pro-active 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.

This is evident in many comments that a career for them is not something that is established ‘once and for all’—it is subject to revision, and has to be reshaped or altered in relation to rapidly changing circumstances. So, when we look at how the interviewees have responded to the question, ‘would you describe yourself as successful?’, we find a strong emphasis on their self-image. If a young person has shaped their self-identity in such a way, if they are pleased with what they see (and how effective they have been in changing their circumstances to make a ‘success’ of their working life), then often their response is ‘yes, I am successful’.

Only a third of them have continued in the same job since reaching their mid-twenties in 1996. It is not surprising that for many of them, transitions which they had thought would be predictable, are now deemed much more uncertain with no apparent guidelines or rules to assist. Interestingly, interviewees talk more about the journey they are on rather than where they expect to go.

You start off learning, develop a competence, legitimise your skills and then move on. I don’t know where I am headed with it.

Skills such as flexibility and adaptability take on new measure in this climate and are referred to often. Additionally and importantly, the capacity to see change as a fundamental element on this journey is seen by a number of the interviewees to be key in determining their success.

I am stepping outside my comfort zone which does make me nervous, but I need to be stimulated and challenged, to then enjoy the rewards.

Compared to the people I went to school with I have followed a very different path, they generally married and stayed in Geelong, I feel they haven’t lived up to their potential; I gave everything up when I moved from Geelong to Melbourne; I threw everything at it.

Success is also often gauged according to the respondent's capacity to negotiate a position and work conditions which provide them with a sense of personal fulfillment.

I love working in this area, I enjoy the patients and the others I work with; I'm the happiest person I know—I get energy from this place everyday.

It is difficult to separate personal fulfillment from professional fulfillment; they appear to be inextricably linked. This is demonstrated in the degree to which young people are making significant choices in relation to work according to lifestyle choices.

Success is not so much about earning as it is to be personally happy, to be stimulated and challenged, to be enjoying the rewards, to have the respect of your peers ... then I am on the way.

'How I want to live' or 'who do I want to be' (Giddens 1991) is not left to chance, it is actively engaged with, and the interviewees demonstrated strongly that they have the capacity to change or influence situations for themselves.

I look at my peers who have more reliable work and I wish I had that but I don't want to be like the ones who are really bored and hate their work.

I left the bank, I was so frustrated, there was no room for spontaneity, I feel greater fulfillment now as I am determining a lot and responsible for a lot.

I am looking for a new job; even though the money is good, the hours are too long; but now I am a father, my family is my first priority and I want to spend more time with them.

There is a strong sense of individualism in much of the evidence which results in individuals having a heightened sense of their role in the transition process. Yet this can also mean that barriers are read by some as individual shortcomings rather than the outcome of processes which are often largely outside an individual's control (for example the changes in the youth labour market).

... it gets like you're out there working your butt off most days and you're worried about if you're ever going to be able to afford your own house ... it gets like you can't see the forest from the trees, you know, the big picture.

In many of the interview responses, there is little or no acknowledgement of social forces at work. For them, personal choices and initiative have been the primary determinants in their 'career' and 'success' outcomes:

It is up to me to make things happen, a lot of people make their own luck.

I made a go of it, they sat back and waited for jobs to come to them, I knew the only jobs around were in Melbourne so I left, I stood up and came to Melbourne.

I know I am successful, it is about keeping your word, honouring your commitment and putting your entire whole effort into it.

There are structural factors involved as well. A respondent feels that there weren't enough opportunities for her in the country, so she moved into the city. A seasonal farm worker is worried about the decline and eventual death of the agricultural industry in its traditional 'farm' structure. The woman who feels intense pressure from her family to have children of her own, and the other woman who argues that young mothers can't really enter into career paths because pregnancy and career are mutually exclusive life paths. For the interviewee who had more of a struggle navigating complex employment situations, the potential to feel good about himself and his 'success' was somewhat reduced.

Success is a difficult concept to gauge; you do your best when you have no idea what will happen next. I suppose I feel reasonably well placed (in terms of being successful) ... part of my success has been pure luck, being in the right place at the right time, but when you are looking for work you try to not be too hard on yourself, emotionally. I found it a very up and down period, it became really hard to not believe it was a personal thing ... for whatever reason you didn't get the job, it hurt.

Success is one thing—career is another. When we asked about the meanings of career the tone of response changed. The term 'passion' was frequently introduced in connection with a

successful career, because 'in any industry these days you need to be prepared to develop new strategies for any change, keep developing interests, but if it isn't a passion then there isn't much hope'. Commitments have to be made to put everything into determining success, and an essential ingredient for this is passion.

If you are serious you need to set yourself up, you do the work, you do the study. You have to have a passion, you have to be prepared to move on, take on initiatives, take on more; if you are half-hearted it won't work.

There are several dimensions to the 'passion' respondents might feel for their particular occupations/careers. There may be an inherent desire or personal goal the individual has which is embodied in their particular vocational calling, and the success they feel might not be linked so much with their actual job, but with the career path they are taking.

There is no way I will get out of bed at 5 am for my 'accounts payable' job, but I will do it every weekend for my makeup work. I know it is risky putting so much energy into a field which is still so competitive and more often than not it's who you know not what you know but ... you take a chance crossing a road, so I am going for it.

'Passion' might be placed within a work context, in that the attachment a respondent might have for their career may be directly linked to how they place themselves within their particular work environment. The need to make a difference, and the potential to achieve set goals were strongly represented by them as means of determining success.

I have been able to change how the centre operates, it is so much better, more organised, more caring, more learning opportunities than before.

If I wasn't there the lives of these young people would fall apart; I know I make a difference; this is what counts.

This same passion may be placed within a social context. Acknowledgment by family, peers, by employers, or by clients is also a strong factor in determining degrees of 'commitment' for these young people. In many instances respondents refer to how they are perceived by their friends and family and how important it is to them that they receive positive feedback from them. Darren draws attention to this as he takes up a new position.

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

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

As luck would have it when Darren began looking around for a new position he ran into a friend who worked at the ANZ bank; his friend told him of a new position coming up—financial planner. Darren contacted this friend's boss and was told to get his CV in by 5.00pm that day. He was interviewed the next day and offered the job that evening. Darren managed to negotiate a two-month break before starting this new job as he was determined to get in an overseas holiday before he knuckled down for the next five years. His girlfriend was also putting pressure on him to take some time off so they could go overseas together. The bank agreed to his conditions.

He starts the new job this week (after a wonderful trip overseas) and is quite anxious about it. It will involve much more work on his own, rather than the team approach which was how he operated at ESANDA. However, he is delighted to be making the move as he was always convinced he didn't want to be a straight accountant; he wanted to be more around the business side of accountancy. In terms of seeing himself as a success, he says he isn't yet, but he is on the way and gaining more satisfaction with every step. It is not about the money he says:

For me it is more about being challenged and stimulated; yes, financial rewards help, but for me it is about gaining the respect of my peers; if I have achieved this I have gained some form of success.

Promotion and advancement within work, financial success, and appreciation are also aspects of this affirmation of commitment.

I feel trusted to do the job; the management committee (the parents) agreed I could take on the coordinator's position; this acknowledgment was really important to me.

You have to feel something of value in what you have contributed, but it is also about being appreciated.

Career modes

I am slowly heading up that path, a path which is full of learning, growing, developing and dynamic with a hint of stability and no repetition whatsoever.

As we reflect on the substantial interview data, not only do we notice that the subjective definitions are quite diverse but we also see a wide array of career trajectories. This is shown in the *lifestories* of many of the respondents—the occupations many have taken on, the number of hours they may work in a week, the decision to travel, the personal choices in relation to homes, families and relationships. In addition, however, there is just as wide a spectrum of *attitudes* towards careers—the goals many respondents have set, what is important to them and what is not, and the varied ways many of them regard the concept of a 'career'. We hear from the business consultant: he doesn't want children so that he can make selfish choices in regards to his own career advancement. By comparison there is the farm worker who works seasonally and doesn't want to be tied down to the one job for too long; or the social worker who wouldn't give up her job because she sees her work as socially valuable, even though she knows she can get better pay elsewhere. In turn, while one young adult may say 'a career counts for approximately 80% of [my] happiness', another who has now returned to study argues that the very idea of a career in today's working world is no longer relevant.

In our earlier surveys with this longitudinal sample (see Dwyer et al. 1998), there was a strong focus on vocational and occupational goals by the respondents, but now that they have been involved with the workforce for a protracted period, other priorities are being emphasised as well. As we see this same group of respondents branch out into new and differing occupational and life choices, lifestyle choices are becoming increasingly linked to career patterns for many of them. As they form relationships, travel, or buy homes, there is increasing complexity and variation amongst the group.

Despite the complexity conveyed by the transcript material, for the purpose of trying to recognise some useful patterns in the careers of these young adults, it is possible to identify two modes of career attitudes which the respondents have tended to encompass within their lives. This is *not* a neat two-fold typology which, so to speak, divides the respondents into two artificially separate analytic categories. There are definite overlaps between the two modes in the responses. However, for purposes of analysis we have found it useful to choose two basic but contrasting reference points in relation to career attitudes, and to examine the ways in which different respondents could be said to have particular characteristics of one or both of these modes.

We called the first of these modes the *career advancement mode*. It was put succinctly by one respondent, who simply said:

Career is all about advancement.

Despite their insistence on the need for greater flexibility in their approach, in many ways the traditional linear progression of young people—from school to post-compulsory education, and then into work and careers—persists in their attitudes towards careers. There is the overwhelming practical assumption by many of them that financial security is of primary concern. As one respondent says ‘I’ve always been after financial security, not enjoyment’. To have a job is the first part of building a career and a life. To move on to a career is of obvious importance, but this can’t be done without first starting off in a job. Several respondents have stated that they will take whatever job they can get, and from there build their way up to a better job and then maybe a career. Practically, a job provides the money for the necessities of a lifestyle, as well as potential experience for further jobs.

In addition to having a job that provides financial security, some interviewees regard the greater financial rewards of career advancement as important to them. One engineer who works in a mining town hates his particular lifestyle—no culture, nothing to do, no women—but he is extremely happy with his pay, and the fact that his company covers living expenses means he is willing to stay on for a few more years. The fact that his company will also place him in overseas employment in the years to come means he is willing to stay on at his job. Several respondents have always seen their success in terms of their careers as related to their income. A marketing consultant who does not particularly enjoy her job says that the financial rewards more than make up for it—‘if you work hard you expect rewards’. In looking at the transcripts, it must be said that the perceived need for financial security influences many of the career attitudes of these young adults.

In several cases, respondents have made the point of comparing themselves to friends and/or family in terms of the particular position that they occupy. The social status associated with an individual’s career status—the particular position held within an organisation or the role of the person within a community—is seen as holding particular importance—‘I can say I feel good about what I am up to; I feel I have stature within the community; when I tell people what I do it sounds impressive’. As one respondent argues, a career needs to involve ‘a capacity to improve and step up the ladder’, otherwise a job is nothing more than a means of payment.

Involved in many of the attitudes towards the idea of career is the belief that it must be an occupation or a job in which a person continues for many years to come. An implicit part of that long-term dedication to a job is the fact that there must be job satisfaction in one’s work. Put simply, one respondent suggests, ‘A career is when you really like it’ and as another puts it, ‘It is about having a job you care about’. Many respondents suggest that this is the important part of their career. The fact that, as one young health worker puts it, if you are willing to dedicate yourself to your particular occupation or profession, you have to enjoy what you are doing. If job satisfaction is lacking, respondents have talked of their decision to change jobs or go back to study to change career paths altogether. In the context of career advancement, the acknowledgment that job satisfaction is important to one’s career suggests that the concept of career contains the idea of a long-term future. An example of someone who has had a clearly focussed career outlook since their school days would be a cabinet-maker who runs a joinery business which employs eight staff.

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

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

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

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

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

The second mode or approach to career development was more complex. We termed it the *life context mode*. It was summed up by one respondent in the following way:

Studying Early Childhood, working part-time, full-time foster care of five young people, Latin dancing (going for my medals), relationship and family. Needless to say, I am also stressed because I take on too much, but I am getting better at it.

Observing the complex career choices of the individual respondents has shown that a linear progression career model fails to do justice to the ways in which they are making their choices. Other factors are also very much part of their decision frameworks as they learn to cope with the ambiguity of outcomes. In addition to career decisions and attitudes formed along the lines of a linear advancement, there are as many that are based on the personal circumstances of the respondents' lives. As it is with any lifestyle, there are many dimensions/aspects of this 'life context mode'.

An inherent part of the context mode would be lifestyle choices of these young adults and the impact these would have on a career. At one level it could involve the 'type' of life a respondent has chosen to lead. One young man likes to remain mobile, moving from job to job and maintaining a certain sense of flexibility and diversity, but 'wanting to shift around all the time makes it difficult to build on what you have established'. For another respondent, the decision to travel overseas has meant he doesn't really want to dedicate himself to long-term jobs or a career for the meantime. For a young father 'having a family has introduced a new sense of responsibility and I realise that I can't spend as much time at work as I used to'. In many of these cases the defining characteristic of the context mode is the fact that lifestyle is the primary determinant in career choices and attitudes. As one respondent shows, even though she had a very good salary package in her job, she was frustrated with the work and very unhappy because she couldn't dedicate enough time to her husband or her family—so she made a change in her occupation and career. At the same time, there are changes going on in the world which have an effect on both career and personal dimensions of respondents' lives. The very nature of work in post-industrial Australia has forced many to change their career aspirations. While one respondent has embraced this new type of work, becoming a consultant himself and charging highly for his services, another was angry at the lack of opportunities in the bank she worked in and quit.

Andrina began an Arts degree at university and while studying she took on a part-time job working in the area of market research. She began to wish she had concentrated on marketing in her degree. While still finishing her degree, she enrolled at RMIT TAFE in a marketing course. She felt this is what she should have done in the first place. After completing both her degree and advanced certificate she enrolled in a Degree in Business and Marketing much to

the 'confusion' of her family who hoped she would now be earning and able to get her own place!

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

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

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

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

Another dimension would involve the personal 'dreams' or 'aspirations' of respondents. At times these personal goals may include career aspirations which respondents are working towards. A security guard had originally wanted to be a chef and apprenticed a number of years as one in the city but, on finding the working reality different to his career dream, he now works in security while working towards a qualification with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. Personal aspirations could also include goals that occur outside the sphere of careers and work. A health worker has always dreamt of having children and is happily planning to make a family. Another respondent wants to 'develop a real creative aspect of my life' rather than being restricted by their current occupation. There are several respondents who want to travel and see the rest of the world, even though they can't see how they can combine this with their current occupations or careers.

There are other personal circumstances which invariably have had their effect on the respondents' careers. Personal illness can have a huge effect on people, and it is often recognised as a large factor in the lives of those affected by it. Sometimes it can even be related to career and lifestyle and respondents have had to make decisions based on that: 'Stress-related illness reminds me I can't go as fast I would like'. Family or relationship problems have also had their effect on people; one respondent had a change in career focus after she grappled with her own career desires and her family's very strong expectations of her. Another returned student has had many personal conflicts with the management styles of those businesses he has worked for and thus is aligning his study choices with these conflicts.

Complexity of career transitions

It would be tempting for the sake of logical neatness to divide the responses in terms of a binary 'either/or' division between the two career modes we have identified. We believe that would be both artificial and misleading, if only because there are obvious overlaps between the two in many of the transcripts. It is important therefore, to acknowledge that they are not mutually exclusive. There is a complexity in these young people's lives so that, while they are not rejecting traditional approaches to career, they are also fitting their understandings of career into a broader personal context.

At one level, it is possible to identify a search for 'balance' in terms of the present situations of the respondents. For example, some responses have closely linked the idea of needing to feel a close tie between personal aspirations (a need for personal satisfaction and happiness in what they are doing) and one's career/occupational outcomes. As one respondent says about their current job, they will 'move on to a new job if it has no substance'. Here we have an attempt by individuals to consolidate the idea of advancing in an occupation to make a career, but within the context of personal and emotional investment, which may even involve balancing a number of different alternatives as part of their career planning.

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

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

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

As has been noted, there are those who try to place the context of individual lives—family, husbands, wives, a mortgage, travel, personal preference—within a career mode, trying to negotiate both to maintain both. This complexity is reinforced by the fact that these young adults have multi-faceted lives: the pilot who tries to combine travelling and personal life with his own career advancement, and the successful businesswoman who worries about her peers' perceptions while suffering from work-related stress.

There are nevertheless, some responses which reflect an archetypal vocational focus in terms of career advancement. One married respondent was glad that they could not have children as it meant greater freedom in work and career. There are others who could be said to reflect a purely contextual focus, such as the respondent who was more interested in his mobility and freedom than any idea of career advancement, which meant he was willing to move around from job to job. In between there fall the large number of those who try to incorporate *both* aspects of personal lives and of career.

Personal changes are occurring all the time, new understandings help me reflect and change.

In one sense, of course, this is what might be expected given their stage in life. As young adults, they are going through personal changes, while the world is also changing around them.

The careers info I got was shit ... the question should be directed more to what do you want to do with your life ... rather than which job do you want.

In another sense, there are new experiences which are to some extent unique to their generation. Some of these are due to their prolonged participation in post-school study during their early adult years, and some are due to new lifestyle and relationship patterns that have emerged. An interviewee talks of her long years of study in a vocational course, only to find that she didn't even like her vocation—so she returned to study another course. Another talks of his own career advancements but, in finding a partner who likes to travel, has decided to throw it all in to try and find work in London and travel through Europe.

The issue at stake for many is how to decide what kind of balance is best for them. For some, making the right choices has been relatively straightforward, and for them there is a direct relationship between what they have studied and the type of job they have received. From what respondents have learned, to the hands-on experience provided as part of a course, to the potential contacts that are provided through the course of study, many of these young adults see their education as a primary factor in their career paths. One respondent argues that they decided to pursue their particular course of study based on the job opportunities that awaited them upon graduation. The fact that they attained full-time, permanent employment in the area of their study satisfied the respondent. In many ways then, this traditional view of education as a straight line into a job and career is satisfied for interviewees, even if it may at times involve a return to further study. There are developments in technology which have had an effect on some respondents; some have embraced new technologies to find new career paths, while others see the need to update their work knowledge in the face of new information technologies through returning to education.

There are other interviewees, however, whose experiences have been less straightforward. Some consider that other factors besides their education are vital to their own particular career opportunities.

I would go to uni. and get a degree if it was going to make a difference.

Not having my VCE was a barrier, it would have helped, perhaps made me more informed around English and maths, but I feel I learnt more about the world out of school.

Tied to this particular viewpoint is the idea that there are particular personal circumstances and preferences which may not be tailored to a particular course offered. The respondent who is not interested in a particular career path may not find that education offers the key to a 'successful career'. Some respondents are also angry about having done a particular qualification in which they invested time and money, and then not finding the occupational or career opportunities they expected. One respondent hated the administration job she ended up in, quit her job and found her own way into a career that she enjoyed. A social worker ended up in a government job which, although it had good prospects in terms of salary and advancement, she quit and found her own way into an alternative job. Inherent within this perspective is the fact that education can only offer so much. A significant amount of what these respondents see as career decisions and advancement are made on personal initiative, individual agency. 'College can only provide a small amount of education, the rest is up to you.' As a result of this, as one respondent sees it, perhaps education didn't satisfy his requirements in that 'It makes me furious ... I needed more life skill stuff, how to communicate, how to finance, how to have sex and look after yourself'.

Personal goals and aspirations come into play as people realise their own particular needs in career satisfaction—a psychologist is interested in financial investments and has taken up a part-time course at the Stock Exchange with the view of investing so she can retire at the age of 35; a returned student hated the truck-driving industry he was in and is now studying in a

private detective course; an established manager is doing a hospitality course with the goal of being able to pick up work while travelling overseas.

To be able to advance in careers, some people are required to return for further study to update their skills. The increasing temporary nature of 'work knowledge' has many respondents trying to keep up to date with information technologies and processes. Others are ready to develop new skills or, like Steve, to build up a personal portfolio that has many features to it. *Steve* puts it this way:

I'm an automotive engineer, working on the designs of the interior trims in cars, boats and trains. I did Year 12 and went to Latrobe University where I studied full time for one-and-a-half years. After the one-and-a-half years I decided to also start working in the textile industry ... did it for about 12 months. Started in the crappiest of the crap jobs and just worked my way up. It was hard to do both work and study; for example, my employer was happy for me to take time off from work so I could study, but I always had to make up for it.

Once I finished study I got work in maintenance in a textiles plant; it was good in that I managed to use some of the design work I did in university. I started doing more textile courses as well as a business course by correspondence—this was hard too, you have gotta be really motivated to do it.

After four years I left that work; I got a better paid job as a shift supervisor but the work was crappier—I guess I took it because I just wanted to get out of what I was doing. I lasted in that for nine months. Right now I'm working in development, which is good because it uses all of my previous studies and experience; you need to have a design background, and a production background. On top of that, though, I've started up a small business with some mates where we make products out of stuff—you know, like company logos and toys and board games. We make a good profit out of it. Oh yeah, and I'm also an officer in the army reserve which keeps me occupied on the weekends.

You have to have diversity these days if you want to build a successful career. Going back, looking at the changes in the last 20 to 30 years you can't just focus on the one career anymore, you really have to be able to do a million and one things these days.

Detailed responses

Our main concern in this stage of the project was getting some indication of the overall progress being made by members of the sample—the extent, to which they thought their studies had contributed to their success, and what they saw as the most important factors, both positive and negative, affecting their outcomes. Despite the diversity evident from the transcript material presented in the previous section, we also have responses from the participants which reveal some common issues and dominant themes.

Background details

The feedback stage of the project involved 238 members of our sample. Their study backgrounds were as follows.

Table 18: Study backgrounds

Courses of study	No.	Per cent
Uni. and VET	78	33
VET only	136	57
Apprenticeship	24	10
Total	238	100

To what extent do factors such as gender, locality, or study background lead to different outcomes for the 238 who contributed to the feedback stage of the project? By linking the participant responses to the background data on file about them we can examine some of these factors in greater detail.

Gender

There are parallels in the attitudes of male and female respondents towards their careers.

Table 19: Gender and career prospects

	Male (%) n=98	Female (%) n=140
In an ongoing career	53	52
Has genuine prospects	27	25
Neither of these	14	19

Similarly, in relation to how secure the respondents felt about the long-term future of their current work, there was little difference between male and female responses.

Table 20: Gender and financial security

	Male (%)	Female (%)
Definitely feel secure	29	30
To a large extent	36	35
To some extent	27	27
Not sure yet	7	8

In looking at the work situation of respondents in their previous year (1999), however, we find that there was a higher proportion of males in permanent work.

Table 21: Gender and job situation, 1999

	Male (%)	Female (%)
Permanent	80	68
Renewable/sessional/other	16	28

While the males have had greater success in finding permanent jobs, the females are much more likely to emphasise the importance of their studies in their search for jobs.

Table 22: Gender and post-school study attitudes

Usefulness for jobs	Male (%)	Female (%)
Very great	21	30
Great	38	53
A bit	21	3
Not at all	16	12

While 83% of females saw their post-school study as very great or great in its use for finding career work, only 59% of males felt the same way. At the other end of the scale, while 37% of males saw study as only slightly helpful, or no help at all, only 15% of females felt the same way.

Locality

In terms of where the respondents had completed their secondary schooling in 1991—metropolitan Melbourne or regional Victoria (regional centres, smaller country towns, or outlying homes)—there were also varying attitudes and experiences.

In looking at their situation in the past year, we find that a majority of respondents of both regional and metropolitan origins have perceived an improvement or some progress in their careers.

Table 23: Home location and career change

	Melbourne metro (%) n=117	Regional Victoria (%) n=78
Much improved	28	25
Some progress	43	47
Much the same	25	26
Some decline	4	1

If anything, those respondents in our project sample who came from regional Victoria have been somewhat more successful than their metropolitan counterparts in finding an ongoing career.

Table 24: Home location and career prospects

	Melbourne metro (%)	Regional Victoria (%)
An ongoing career	51	60
Has career prospects	26	24
Neither of these	17	15

While approximately half of metropolitan respondents see themselves in an ongoing career, there is a slightly higher rate (60%) of regional respondents who see themselves in the same situation.

Differences in attitude and experiences in terms of respondents' origins are also evident in their post-school study pathways. In identifying their most useful study experiences, vocational and tertiary sector pathways are rated differently according to the rural or metropolitan origins of the graduates.

Table 25: Home location and most useful post-school study

	Metropolitan (%)	Regional Victoria (%)
University	31	14
TAFE	47	53
Apprenticeship	6	18
Other	14	13

Although TAFE is regarded as the most useful form of study for 47% of the metropolitan respondents, nearly a third of them also describe university study in this way. By contrast, 84% of regional respondents regard some form of vocational study—TAFE, apprenticeships or other—as the most useful to their own career/employment directions, with only 14% putting the emphasis on university studies.

This attitude towards university education, is also shown in the responses to the importance of gaining a university qualification in getting a job.

Table 26: Home location and university qualification as factor

	Metropolitan (%)	Regional Victoria (%)
High	48	32
Medium	26	40
Low	19	17
Don't know	6	11

While nearly half of metropolitan respondents saw a university qualification as important in getting a job, less than a third of regional respondents felt the same way.

Study background

These different attitudes towards post-school study are reflected in the career outcomes of the participants. Of the 238 respondents, 160 have done a TAFE or vocational course, and 78 have completed both TAFE/vocational education and university courses. By contrasting the educational and career pathways of VET graduates with those who have done both university and VET, it is possible to identify some issues regarding post-compulsory education and training.

Comparing the two groups and their attitude to post-school training in relation to subsequent careers, some differences emerge.

Table 27: Usefulness of study for career outcomes

	Uni. and VET (%) n=78	VET (%) n=160
Very great	58	11
Great	23	59
A bit	4	14
Not at all	13	14

Over half of uni./VET graduates believed that their study was of ‘very great’ use. Only 11% of VET respondents felt this way, although 59% of them still considered that their study had been of ‘great’ use. It is possible that this difference is attributable to the fact that, for the VET graduates, prior or concurrent work experience was also a major contributing factor to success. Thus, they were less likely to cite a lack of work experience as a barrier to their career outcomes.

Table 28: Lack of work experience as a barrier

	Uni. and VET (%)	VET (%)
Very much	31	16
Somewhat	14	18
A little	26	23
Not at all	29	42

Nearly a third of uni./VET graduates felt that a lack of work experience was ‘very much’ a barrier to gaining work in career employment—almost double the rate of VET responses (16%).

VET respondents also have a slightly higher rate (55%) of being in an ongoing career, whereas nearly a quarter of uni./VET respondents do not see their current employment as the basis of their career.

Table 29: Study background and career prospects

	Uni. and VET (%)	VET (%)
An ongoing career	47	55
Has genuine prospects	28	25
Neither of these	24	18

Moving beyond the institutional backgrounds of the respondents, we can also identify other differences in career outcomes related to study. These are evident in the link (or lack of it) between career prospects and the extent to which current employment is related to the graduate’s field of study.

Table 30: Field-related employment and career prospects (%)

	Directly related n=155	Indirectly related n=34	Not related n=37
An ongoing career	57	50	42
Has genuine prospects	24	27	27
Neither of these	19	21	31

While 57% of those in field-related employment saw themselves in an ongoing career, less than half (42%) of those in unrelated employment saw their work in that light. Conversely, while nearly a third (31%) of those in unrelated employment did not relate their work to a

career, only 19% of those in field-related work felt the same way. In other words, finding field-related employment is an important element in their definitions of career success.

Similar patterns emerge in attitudes to financial security.

Table 31: Field-related employment and financial security (%)

	Directly related	Indirectly related	Not related
Definitely	34	32	19
To a large extent	39	29	23
To some extent	23	24	42
Not sure	5	15	15

Of those in field-related employment, 73% felt definitely or to a large extent, financially secure. Those not in field-related employment felt less secure, with 57% feeling some uncertainty about their financial security.

Not surprisingly, those in field-related employment were more likely to identify their study as an important factor in relation to finding work.

Table 32: Field-related employment and usefulness of study (%)

	Directly related	Indirectly related	Not related
Very great	31	27	8
Great	45	53	50
A bit	12	6	12
Not at all	10	12	27

While 31% of field-related respondents felt that their study was of very great use—compared with just 8% of non-related respondents—it is interesting to note that 50% of the non-related respondents still saw their study as of ‘great’ use. On the negative side, as many as 27% of those in non-related employment were of the opinion that their study was of no use at all (compared with just 10% of field-related responses).

It is important, nevertheless, to note that at least half of those not in field-related jobs rated their study as an important employment factor. This is confirmed by their assessment that a *lack* of qualifications constitutes a considerable barrier to finding suitable employment.

Table 33: Field-related positions and lack of qualifications as a barrier (%)

	Directly related	Indirectly related	Not related
Very much	10	9	35
Somewhat	16	32	23
A little	23	18	19
Not at all	51	41	23

While 58% of non-related respondents considered that for them a lack of qualifications could be very much/somewhat a barrier to finding work, only 26% of field-related respondents held that opinion.

The other factor identified as a barrier by those in non-related jobs is the lack of work experience.

Over a third (35%) of non-related respondents perceived a lack of work experience as very much a barrier to finding gainful employment, more than double the rate of those in directly related employment (17%).

Table 34: Field-related positions and lack of work experience as a barrier (%)

	Directly related	Indirectly related	Not related
Very much	17	27	35
Somewhat	17	15	15
A little	21	29	31
Not at all	43	29	19

Finally, the positive emphasis placed on the link between 'career' prospects and positions that are 'field-related' raises questions about the link between 'career' and 'permanency'. Many of those who consider that they have achieved an ongoing career for themselves lack permanency but are working in field-related jobs, while others have permanent career positions but are not field-related. Thus, when they were asked in 1999 if they saw their work as career-related, both those in permanent and those in non-permanent work, had career expectations of their respective jobs.

Table 35: Job situation and career attitudes, 1999

	Permanent (%)	Limited contract etc. (%)
In an ongoing career	65	54
Can see career prospects	22	29
Maybe a career	9	12
Unlikely to involve career	2	5

While, those in non-permanent work had a lower rate of belief that their work was an ongoing career, 83% of them could still link their jobs to career work or career prospects—very close to the 87% of those in permanent work.

Nevertheless, like those in field-related positions, those in permanent work felt a lot more secure about their financial futures than their counterparts. Thus 72% of those in permanent work (the field-related figure was 73%) felt definitely or largely secure about their financial future, whereas less than half of those in contract/sessional work felt the same.

Table 36: Job situation and financial security, 1999

	Permanent (%)	Limited contract etc. (%)
Definitely feel secure	33	18
To a large extent	39	30
To some extent	22	39
Not sure yet	6	13

In general, this review of the file data provides further confirmation of the comments made earlier about problems of definition. Clearly, the respondents regard a combination of post-school qualifications and a prior work record as important ingredients in their quest for a career. However, finding a position consistent with that might well mean that personal judgements need to be made about where to place the defining emphasis—on a job that is permanent, one that merits a career 'commitment', one that is field-related, or some combination of these. Thus, males and females are equally satisfied with their career attainment, even though males have proved more successful in terms of permanency and females place more emphasis on the link between qualifications and jobs. What is even more revealing is that, on a variety of measures, for most respondents, levels of approval and satisfaction rise on finding a job that is field-related.

Summary of responses

- ❖ In relation to how secure the respondents felt about the long-term future of their current work, there was little difference between male and female responses. There was however, a higher rate of males in permanent work.
- ❖ Females were much more likely to emphasise the importance of their studies in their search for jobs.
- ❖ If anything, regional respondents have been somewhat more successful than their metropolitan counterparts in finding an ongoing career.
- ❖ Most (83%) of the regional respondents regard some form of vocational study—TAFE, apprenticeships or other—as the most useful to their own career/employment directions.
- ❖ Of the VET-only graduates, 59% considered that their study had been of ‘great’ use and that prior or concurrent work experience was also a major contributing factor to success.
- ❖ Of those without permanency, 83% saw their jobs in terms of careers—very close to the 87% of those in permanent work.
- ❖ On a variety of measures, for most respondents, levels of approval and satisfaction rise on finding a job that is field-related.

Specific issues

In this section, we look more closely at the data gathered from the responses to a number of quite specific issues. The responses enable us to cover those issues in summary form. Thus:

Regarding career progress, for most of our sample there was a high level of satisfaction about what had been achieved so far and most felt that they were now fairly secure in their chosen path. Only 18 of the total 238 (8%) indicated that they were still unsure about their career attainment.

Regarding last-year’s progress, as many as 168 (71%) saw it as a year of improvement with only 9 (4%) reporting that their situation had to some extent declined.

Regarding career security, 190 (80%) claimed to have achieved a career or at least a position with genuine career prospects, although there were 46 (19%) respondents who felt that they could not yet make that kind of claim.

On the issue of personal progress, there was a range of opinions about how successful they had been in establishing a secure future for themselves. Some of the variations were due to the field of study undertaken. Thus, there was Greg, a young draftsman who had experienced some difficulty in finding a position for himself, so ‘to fulfill my career prospects I went to PNG to gain work experience. It is my belief that it is not what study you have done but how much experience you have’. Brenda on the other hand, set out on a quite specific path to help the visually impaired. She ‘did a two-year TAFE course in Australian sign language, followed by one in Disability Studies. A practicum placement led to a job as a special education assistant followed by current enrolment in a BEd at Melbourne Uni’. Sue’s experience was different again, because the only post-school study she had done was in short courses associated with her job as a travel consultant, so for her the pathway was determined by ‘utilising the knowledge of colleagues to learn more yourself, plus dedication to working at “lower” positions and willingness to learn and extend yourself beyond what is expected’.

Regarding the importance of their studies, the overwhelming majority (90%) of the sample drew attention to their studies as a contributing factor in their success. Although the majority of those with a combination of university and VET studies gave priority to their university qualifications, almost all of them (71 out of 78 [or 91%]) acknowledged the importance of their VET studies as well.

Our final sample of 238 participants included 78 respondents who had done both university and VET courses, 24 apprentices and a further 136 who had completed TAFE or other VET courses. Of those with some university experience, 62 (79%) thought that this had given them an edge in gaining a career, although 71 of the 78 affirmed that their other studies had contributed significantly to their success. This view was held by as many as 213 of the graduates, with only 23 questioning the link between study and career. Of the 238, there were 112 who specifically made mention of TAFE as being particularly useful and the 24 apprentices named their apprenticeship program as most helpful. This was even true of a 'self-taught' young musician, Andrew, who claimed that 'in my present career and my "hobby" apart from TAFE I have been virtually self-taught and am planning to be well-established in the next three years and married. I might change my working career then as I feel family comes before work'. A carpenter was much more direct and simply said 'doing an apprenticeship was the key'. Jess, who now has a job as an accountant, thought that her TAFE course and subsequent upgrading of her computer skills had added a further dimension to her past work record and as she put it: 'having a good work record with a previous employer is important, plus a suitable TAFE course. For me being computer literate and up to date with the latest software is important'.

Regarding major success factors, while specific courses and personal networks were rated highly, the most important factors considered ultimately decisive were particular personal attributes (planning, persistence and flexibility).

Some of the participants gave very simple explanations:

- ❖ An important factor is looking for a transfer and promotion between businesses in the same field.
- ❖ The most important factor in my opinion is your character and personal attributes—these can put you ahead of others who may be more qualified.
- ❖ Taking on a wider range of responsibilities in a small business is important, but in small firms there is little or no room to climb the corporate ladder.

Others gave considerable detail, and in fact seemed to have a well-thought-out plan of approach. Arthur, for example, who was working as a consultant in a solicitor's firm drew attention to the fact that:

These days your employer can't promise you a job for life, but through education and training they can give you the skills to get ahead. Spending 2–5 years with the same employer and then moving on is good and brings outside knowledge to your new organisation. Perhaps for the future, with increasing casualisation, young people should be encouraged to open up their own businesses or consultancies rather than join the 'corporates'.

Some who were successful were beginning to think outside the usual career and employment frameworks, and saw this as important for the coming years. Thus, Len who is working in the hospitality industry was adamant that:

My work priorities and career goals are different—my job is only to earn enough money to live.

We kept a check on some of the traditional explanations available from other studies, but found that these tend to be rated as less important than the factors we have already mentioned. If we consider the wide range of factors usually offered as relevant with regard to career prospects, the most frequently mentioned were:

- ❖ VET studies or training explicitly rated by 90% of our sample as having a direct impact on their career outcomes
- ❖ contacts or advice from friends 80% regarded networking and sharing of information with peers as an influential factor
- ❖ family or school connections partly related to the previous factor, and considered important by about two-thirds of the sample
- ❖ going directly to an employer two-thirds also rated this highly and more effective than job ads or employment agencies

Regarding difficulties, the only consistent responses were that, for a small proportion of the sample, the lack of a prior work record had been a factor, while females seemed to have been more affected than males by the lack of permanent positions.

One of the surprising outcomes of this feedback stage of the project was that not many identified major obstacles to progress. This may be partly related to the fact that those in the study had been deliberately chosen because they had been successful, and therefore it is likely that they had experienced less difficulty than others in their age group. It may also be a reflection of a common theme reported in other studies of the post-1970 generation (including those who have been unsuccessful) both in Australia and elsewhere which suggests that:

For young people their own sense of agency carries a degree of personal investment that looks forward to—even insists on—positive outcomes ... they will construct positive links and experiences where, on the face of it, none may be apparent. In other words, where structured pathways do not exist, or are rapidly being eroded, individual agency is increasingly important in establishing patterns for themselves which give positive meaning to their lives.

(Wyn & Dwyer 1999, p.14)

Thus, questions about possible barriers to success were not particularly productive. For 48 (20%) in the total sample, their lack of a prior work record had made entry into a career path difficult, while 84 (35%) admitted to some difficulty in coping with the demands of study. There was some indication of possible conflicts between career demands and other priorities in life but for most, this had not proved to be a major difficulty.

Taking all of these factors into account, the only real difference between males and females related to the lack of available permanent positions, with 38% of females by contrast with 27% of males, experiencing difficulty. In the sample there were 120 (50%) who were particularly definite that they had established themselves in an ongoing career, but their assessment of possible barriers was no different from that of the total group.

Summary of responses

- ❖ Only 18 of the total 238 indicated that they were still unsure about their career attainment, with 90% of the sample highlighting their studies as a contributing factor in their success.
- ❖ 80% regarded peer networking as also important, while two-thirds considered going directly to an employer a more effective strategy than job ads or employment agencies.
- ❖ The factors ultimately considered most important were particular personal attributes (planning, persistence and flexibility).
- ❖ For a small proportion of the sample, the lack of a prior work record had been a factor, while females seemed to have been more affected than males by the lack of permanent positions.

Dominant themes

In the second stage of our project, we asked all participants what, in their experience, were the main factors which had contributed to their successful career outcomes. As we have mentioned above, we found that the traditional explanations available from other studies tended to be rated as less important than a range of personal qualities identified by the participants themselves. We followed up this issue in greater detail and four dominant themes emerged. They were:

- ❖ self-assessment
- ❖ personal goals
- ❖ suitable qualifications
- ❖ flexibility

On the theme of *self-assessment*, a number of respondents had quite detailed comments to make. For example, there was Nick, an accountant with a mining firm, who in his own way has summed up many of the attitudes and concerns shared by others in our sample.

Find out what motivates you and what the alternatives are, and seek to match these, and periodically re-evaluate. For example, which are you aiming for—autonomy or direction; career progress; individualism or team atmosphere? Make use of career and life mentors; look for jobs that allow for development, but also develop your own personality and breadth of interests outside work—all this makes you more employable.

Lorna, who is self-employed, pointed to:

Belief in myself and confidence. 1. know yourself—what you are good at and suits your personality; what hours you can commit to work; what wage you are satisfied with; future expectations such as home and travel; what sort of lifestyle makes you comfortable 2. choose a profession to suit these 3. work out what you need to do to achieve this 4. find out how to get into a suitable course and go for it 5. get into a job. Other factors are health or sudden illness or injury, and family expectations and commitments (for example, the cost of raising children).

In looking at personal motivations, it is important to note the support, financial and/or emotional, of family in the number of changes young adults are making in their working and personal lives. A farm manager argues that it is impossible to start a farm these days without the financial investment and working expertise of an older-generation family. A returned student had to move back in with his parents because he couldn't afford the pay his fees upfront as well as cover living expenses. Others value the encouragement parents provide when personal and work changes/decisions are being made—a few respondents for example list their parents as primary motivators in their decision to pursue tertiary education, while others believe that the values and beliefs instilled in them by their parents—the will to succeed, persistence, a hard-work ethic—have had a large bearing on their subsequent careers.

Even given the emotional and practical support of their family, the setting of your own *personal goals* was mentioned as a key ingredient to success. There was an awareness that either being unsure about your own aspirations on the one hand, or expecting results too soon on the other, were obstacles to success. There was also an awareness of a need to balance a range of personal priorities.

Family support and advice are important, but you still have to make up your own mind about where you want to go and what you want to do.

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

Tess, a publishing editor, had found that having a blend of short-term and long-term goals was important:

Although getting the first job takes time, determination will get most people a foot in the door—being unsure about what you want seems to cause most problems. Having realistic long and short-term goals helps with keeping positive—a crappy job may still help you get that dream job.

Many of the respondents made specific reference to the importance of suitable qualifications. Some saw these as a further dimension of their personal goals:

My TAFE diploma certainly helped me out with the whole discipline of working life and gave me a clearer, better understanding of the world. Studying and socialising with people with similar goals, passions etc. is extremely helpful and is such a positive thing.

A number of the participants were insistent that not just any qualification would do—there was a need to match individuals' interests or skills with the realities of the job market.

Combining work and study in an area you really have an interest in or flair for is extremely important—just as important as the right contacts or qualifications and hard work. Finding the right course after three attempts has given satisfaction and commitment to my job.

Andy, who is a lab manager with an engineering qualification, saw this as quite a complex process but he had sorted out the key factors for himself as follows:

Education; good references from previous employers; industry-based learning in my studies; luck, perseverance and an optimistic approach; knowing the job market and where jobs will be available in the future; matching this with your interests gives a good indication of what to study.

As one interviewee argues, a course of study for him would have to specifically involve 'defining skills that you want, without taking up a lot of your time'. Throughout the interviews, there is constant references to a return to study. Many of these respondents look to short courses/further study/qualifications to either: improve/upgrade their current career opportunities; take on new aspects/responsibilities in their current workplace; or develop a complete career change in a new course.

It was not surprising therefore, that the theme of *flexibility* was uppermost in the minds of many participants. They not only needed to balance a number of different considerations but also show a readiness to move on when the time was right.

Spending 2–5 years with the same employer and then moving on is good and brings outside knowledge to your new organisation.

When leaving my job to return to study, it was the hardest decision I have ever had to make and it took me a while to finally decide. To acknowledge to myself I needed to change was the hardest thing.

Steve, the automotive engineer, put it this way:

You have to have diversity these days if you want to build a successful career. Going back, looking at the changes in the last 20 to 30 years, you can't just focus on the one career anymore, you really have to be able to do a million and one things these days.

The emphasis placed on these dominant themes suggests that the shift towards a more contingent and flexible workforce is not simply a factor affecting the objective conditions under which people are now expected to work, but that it has also led to a more contingent or flexible attitude on the part of employees towards *their own definitions* of success and career.

Overview of participant assessments

The ways in which young people today define success are not necessarily the same as those adopted by previous generations. While many still display traditional attitudes towards career attainment, there is also an awareness of an increasing demand for flexibility on their part. The respondents report that to be successful they often feel the need 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 individuals' making the 'right choices'.

In this sense, a career for them is not something that is established, 'once and for all'—it is subject to revision, and has to be reshaped or altered in relation to rapidly changing circumstances. When we asked about the meanings of career, the term 'passion' was frequently introduced. Two key elements in this were: an inherent desire or personal goal which is embodied in their particular vocational calling; and acknowledgment by family, peers, by employers, or by clients that their contribution is valued.

Two different modes of career patterns were evident from the interview transcripts. One (the career advancement mode) revealed a continuing focus on traditional occupational goals, while the other (the life context mode) assessed career outcomes alongside a set of other personal priorities. These modes did not constitute a divided two-fold typology—they were not mutually exclusive. Some respondents were more likely to emphasise one or the other, but most seemed to incorporate both modes in their approach to their careers.

The responses provided detail on a number of quite specific issues:

- ❖ *Regarding career progress*, for most of our sample there was a high level of satisfaction about what had been achieved so far and most felt that they were now fairly secure in their chosen path. Only 8% indicated that they were still unsure about their career attainment.
- ❖ *Regarding career security*, 80% claimed to have achieved a career or at least a position with genuine career prospects, although 19% of respondents felt that they could not yet make that kind of claim.
- ❖ *Regarding the importance of their studies*, the overwhelming majority confirmed this, with 90% of the sample highlighting their studies as a contributing factor in their success. Although the majority of those with a combination of university and VET studies gave priority to their university qualifications, almost all of them (91%) acknowledged the importance of their VET studies as well.
- ❖ *Regarding major success factors*, while specific courses and personal networks were rated highly, the factors ultimately considered most important were particular personal attributes (planning, persistence and flexibility).

We followed up this final issue in greater detail and four dominant themes emerged. They were:

- ❖ self-assessment
- ❖ personal goals
- ❖ suitable qualifications
- ❖ flexibility

The emphasis placed on these dominant themes suggests that the shift towards a more contingent and flexible workforce is not simply a factor affecting the objective conditions under which people are now expected to work, but that it has also led to a more contingent or flexible attitude on their part towards their own definitions of success and career.

Final reflections

The interview transcripts show that the individual contexts of the respondents are very important to our understandings of career and success. The transcripts reveal the diversity and complexity of the individual contexts, but they also enable us to identify some general themes or factors that can contribute to our understanding of career outcomes in the new labour market.

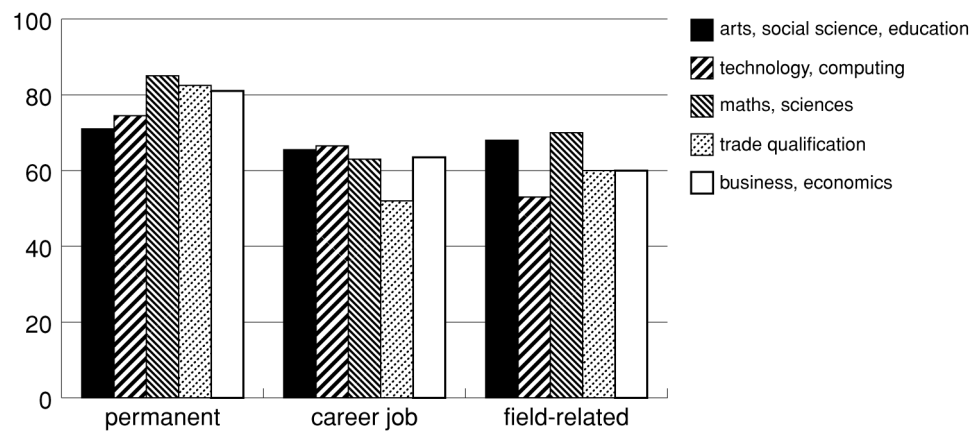
With regard to the VET background of the participants, the evidence was very positive. The vast majority in the sample expressed high levels of approval for their VET course with over 90% advocating its job value. They also expressed a readiness to recommend such courses to others. This is not surprising given that over two-thirds had enrolled in VET either to gain an initial qualification or for the purpose of gaining employment of their choice, and that, up to that point in time, VET graduates appear to have had more success in the labour market than had their university counterparts. Some of the relevant findings can be shown in point form.

- ❖ The sample was particularly positive about VET studies, with at least three-quarters rating them highly on a range of factors and 95% seeing them as job-related.
- ❖ VET appears to have been a 'second-string' option, with only 24% choosing it while at school, 23% on missing their other preferences, and 27% after being employed.
- ❖ Over two-thirds had chosen VET to gain an initial qualification with a job in mind.
- ❖ Permanency is higher for the fields of business/economics (83%), trades (84%) and maths/sciences (85%), but the arts/social sciences/education fields were more likely to result in field-related (69%) career (66%) positions.
- ❖ In relation to how secure the respondents felt about the long-term future of their current work, there was little difference between male and female responses. There was however, a higher rate of males in permanent work.
- ❖ Females were much more likely to emphasise the importance of their studies in their search for jobs.
- ❖ Regional respondents have been somewhat more successful than their metropolitan counterparts in finding an ongoing career.
- ❖ Most (83%) of the regional respondents regard some form of vocational study—TAFE, apprenticeships or other—most useful to their own career/employment directions.
- ❖ The majority of the VET-only and apprentice graduates considered that their study had been of 'great' use, and that prior or concurrent work experience was also a major contributing factor to success.
- ❖ On a variety of measures, for most respondents, levels of approval and satisfaction rise on finding a job that is field-related.

In establishing our project sample of 303 VET graduates, we made use of four criteria: career satisfaction; an ongoing position; genuine career prospects; and a field-related job. Our evidence suggests that the relationship between these various factors is a complex one and that there are variations in outcomes across different fields of study. Thus, both the objective and subjective data demonstrate that, while being qualified in a particular field is important for setting out on a career path, the field of study in itself is not likely to be the deciding factor in relation to eventual career success. The balance of factors varies from field to field, depending on where particular individuals place the emphasis regarding the different career criteria. This element of subjective assessment is reflected in variations between the various

fields in the context of either permanency, or careers or field-related outcomes. Variations for the main fields of study in our sample are shown in figure 6.

Figure 6: Outcomes variations (%)



While the balance of factors produces considerable variation across the different fields of study, it must be remembered that our respondents were nevertheless very positive about the contribution their education and training had made to their career success. Of the 238 participants in the second stage of the project, as many as 213 had indicated that their studies and qualifications had contributed significantly to their success, with only 23 of them questioning the link between study and career. The issue at stake therefore is not their qualifications as such, but *how* the gaining of the necessary or suitable qualification can then be translated into effective personal outcomes. Paradoxically, because of the changes that have taken place in the labour market, a qualification is now a much more important prerequisite, but it is also a less certain guarantee of success. There is much more of an 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.

This increased onus on individuals to determine their own career transitions is reflected in the subjective assessments of the project participants. Two different modes or approaches to career choices were evident: the career advancement mode revealed in a definite focus on occupational goals, and the life context mode which assessed career outcomes alongside a set of other personal priorities. These modes were not mutually exclusive and most seemed to incorporate both modes in sizing up their options. There were in general four dominant themes considered crucial as far as successful career outcomes were concerned:

- ❖ self-assessment
- ❖ personal goals
- ❖ suitable qualifications
- ❖ flexibility

It is clear that for this sample at least the *balance* between objective factors (about job outcomes and status) and subjective assessments (of career aspirations and attainment) has become much more important in the measure of success. Clearly, factors such as 'permanency', 'ongoing commitment' and 'study-related positions' are still important elements in the make-up of career profiles, and each of these increasingly depends on the skills and qualifications each individual has to offer. However, we now need to pay much closer attention to the subjective weightings given to these factors. In determining those weightings, our participants indicate that, in their experience, the four themes they have identified are ultimately the most important.

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