



LONGITUDINAL SURVEYS OF AUSTRALIAN YOUTH

Outcomes of stakeholder consultations to identify the LSAY analytical program for 2011–13

NATIONAL CENTRE FOR
VOCATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH



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NCVER

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or NCVER.

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About the research



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In November and early December 2010, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) conducted consultations to identify research topics using the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). LSAY tracks young people from the age of 15 to 25 as they move from school into further study, work and other destinations. It uses large, nationally representative samples of young people to collect information about education and training, work, and social outcomes.

From the consultations emerged a consensus that the three research priorities which have shaped the research effort in the last couple of years have retained their currency. Those with an interest in youth transitions remain primarily concerned with:

- ✧ better understanding the factors influencing education outcomes
- ✧ how to facilitate good transitions into the labour market
- ✧ how the role of wellbeing affects young people's transitions.

Those consulted also expressed a clear view on the importance of ensuring that this rich dataset is well used by researchers, policy-makers and others involved in youth transitions. They were also interested in seeing how the LSAY data can help inform broader attempts to devise measures of complex phenomena such as social capital and wellbeing.

The results of the consultations are presented in this paper and will help to determine the research topics best suited to the LSAY data. These will be used to shape the 2011–13 LSAY analytical program of research that NCVER conducts on behalf of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

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Introduction

This report summarises the outcomes of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research's (NCVER) 2010 consultations to identify research topics using the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). These will help determine the LSAY analytical program of research from 2011 to 2013.

To help generate ideas, a discussion paper was released in early November 2010, with written responses invited up until 3 December 2010. Face-to-face meetings were held during November in Perth and Canberra. NCVER also conducted a webinar to enable people from across the country to contribute their ideas. Over 50 stakeholders participated in the face-to-face meetings and the webinar; written submissions were received from eight organisations and individuals. Stakeholders included representatives from state training authorities, not-for-profit organisations, technical and further education (TAFE) institutes, universities, school peak bodies, academics, unions, and government agencies, including the Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations (DEEWR).

On the whole, suggested research ideas align strongly with the existing LSAY research priorities:

- ✧ *Improve the education outcomes of young people:* by understanding the factors that impact on participation and completion in education and training, especially for those who are disadvantaged.
- ✧ *Provide young people with the skills, qualifications and capabilities for the contemporary labour market:* by investigating whether the skills from, and pathways through, education and training are well matched with labour market demands.
- ✧ *Ensure that young people lead full and meaningful lives:* by gaining a better insight into the wellbeing and social activities of young people.

In addition, those consulted showed considerable interest in more technical issues that would serve to improve the measurement of outcomes from youth transitions policy and programs.

This paper summarises the consultation findings into four key sections:

- ✧ factors influencing education outcomes
- ✧ transitions into the labour market
- ✧ the role of wellbeing and social outcomes on transitions
- ✧ technical reports and documentation.

Factors influencing education outcomes

Understanding the factors that affect participation and completion in education and training has been a core focus of previous and current LSAY research and continues to be a major concern, particularly in light of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) targets for Year 12 completion and university participation.

With the recent changes to the school sector, there is significant interest in using LSAY data to explore how jurisdictional differences in policy and programs and different aspects of the school environment impact on young people's education outcomes. In particular, research that might throw light on how to assist disadvantaged youth and early school leavers with their transitions was strongly supported. This included exploring the influence of aspirations formed in the school-age years.

Research topics that fall under this heading align strongly with the first LSAY research priority:

- ✧ *Improve the education outcomes of young people:* by understanding the factors that impact on participation and completion in education and training, especially for those who are disadvantaged.

Institutional structures and the school environment

There was much interest in exploring the potential to use LSAY data for examining the effects of institutional structures and different aspects of the school environment on young people's behaviours and their educational participation and attainment. It was also noted that there had been a great deal of research into participation, and more is needed on completion and post-school educational attainment.

Because of the different ways jurisdictions structure their Senior Secondary Certificate of Education (SSCE), comparative research by jurisdiction would help to analyse the effects of these differences on student outcomes. This sort of analysis would also be useful for evaluating the effects of a national school curriculum on student outcomes. State-by-state comparisons can also shed more light on the impact of VET in Schools programs. This continues to be an area of interest because of the increasing development and uptake of these programs in senior secondary schooling.

Stakeholders were also keen to have identified the factors that assist young people during their formative years in high school. In particular, there was an interest in understanding whether differences at the school level influence student outcomes. This would involve examining institutional arrangements and identifying the key characteristics of successful schools.

In addition, the link between teacher characteristics and student outcomes was a suggested area of research, particularly how the impact of teacher knowledge and an understanding of career development can influence student transitions. Research in this area could examine the school/principal questionnaire undertaken as part of PISA (Programme for International

Student Assessment) tests and analyse data on teacher qualifications. The subject choices of students and the decision to repeat Year 12 (or Year 13) are further avenues of investigation.

Early school leavers

With the current emphasis on increasing the proportion of young people completing Year 12, there was interest in using LSAY data to analyse the impact of the different strategies (such as increasing the school leaving age and introducing the Youth Compact) used to encourage young people to complete Year 12. Research could again involve state comparative analysis because different states have different legislation. However, there is limited information about specific programs in the LSAY surveys.

Stakeholders were also interested in exploring the factors associated with keeping students engaged with learning and connected with school, including whether engagement varies by student characteristics such as gender. Equally important to stakeholders is exploring the reasons why young people leave school early, as this may not necessarily be a poor outcome if they are leaving to take up other meaningful activities. Nevertheless, one of these reasons could be related to poor achievement at school, which may discourage young people to continue their education. Therefore it would be important to consider analyses that explore the barriers related to completing Year 12.

Aspirations

Current LSAY research has found that a positive attitude towards education and having ambitious occupational plans can help young people achieve successful school-to-work transitions. Stakeholders were interested in how we can further develop this research to better understand how aspirations are formed and how they are influenced (for example, homework, teacher focus, parental engagement etc.), and whether they develop differently for different groups of young people, such as males and females, or those from low socioeconomic backgrounds or underachievers. There was some interest in examining whether these aspirations change over time, and whether this has an effect on young people's decision-making about participation in further education and training. However, the LSAY data are limited in how far we can measure aspirations; we could not, therefore, determine whether aspirations from early childhood are maintained into adolescence.

Other suggestions for research in this area include examining the contribution of aspirations to young people's transitions into further education and training, particularly for disadvantaged youth, and the effect that formal pathway planning, such as that required as part of some senior secondary certificates, has on their decision-making (for example, the registration of career goals and the further education and training needed to reach these goals for the Tasmanian Certificate of Education).

Disadvantaged groups of young people

Improving the education outcomes of young people from rural and remote regions and Indigenous and low socioeconomic backgrounds remains high on the agenda for many stakeholders. In particular, there was interest in research examining how these circumstances affect schooling and subsequent work and post-school study decisions, especially in light of the Bradley targets for university participation.

For those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, analysis exploring the family environment, for example, the presence of intergenerational unemployment or parents' educational achievement, could give some indication of how these circumstances have affected schooling and subsequent work decisions. Examining whether parental qualifications influence student outcomes in tests such as NAPLAN¹ is not possible using the LSAY data. However, the information collected from students about their parents' qualification levels and occupations could be used to develop a better measure of socioeconomic status for subsequent LSAY research. Suggested research topics for young people from rural and remote regions include exploring their subject choices and study outcomes, and the extent of relocation to participate in further study.

While there was a demand among stakeholders for better information about young people with a disability, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including refugees, and the real impact of poverty, the sample sizes in the LSAY dataset constrain the extent of analysis possible. Currently, the LSAY data oversample students from smaller states and those from an Indigenous background. There were suggestions offered to broaden the scope of the cohort to better sample disadvantaged groups of young people, but these lie outside the parameters of this consultation.

Supporting school-to-work transitions

Stakeholders wanted to see research that takes advantage of the longitudinal nature of the LSAY instruments, for example, to explore how young people negotiate their pathways from school, and from this, to identify the most effective approach to support, such as the role of career advice, community centres, and the influence of mentoring and other pathway programs, particularly for disadvantaged students who require the most support. Since LSAY is not a tool that enables the evaluation of specific jurisdictional programs, there is limited scope to explore some of these approaches in depth.

¹ National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy

Transitions into the labour market

One of the key strengths of the LSAY survey instruments is their ability to explore the various pathways and transitions that different groups of young people make into the workforce, whether these pathways are successful, and the factors assisting a smoother transition from school into work. Much of the interest in this topic raised during the consultations focused on potential LSAY research to explore the outcomes of young people without formal qualifications, including early school leavers, and those who have been in long-term unemployment or disengaged from study. Identifying the factors that affect the attainment of skills and qualifications is a related area of concern.

These research ideas align with the second LSAY research priority:

- ✧ *Provide young people with the skills, qualifications and capabilities for the contemporary labour market:* by investigating whether the skills from, and pathways through, education and training are well matched to labour market demands.

Pathways of early school leavers and those with no formal qualifications

The prospects of early school leavers in the labour market emerged as a particular concern, especially if these young people do not pursue alternative further education and training. These groups of young people are arguably the least competitive in the labour market. LSAY data could help explore how well they fare in the workforce, and whether they continue on to further education and training.

More specifically, there was support for research looking at those early school leavers who re-engage in education through a vocational education and training (VET) pathway. Research can explore their education outcomes and whether completion of lower-level VET qualifications assists transitions into further education and training.

For many of these young people, the quality of employment may be an issue, pointing to another potential research area, namely, an examination of youth in low-skilled jobs and the likely effects of such job experience on their subsequent employability, as well as their social outcomes. Research could explore how young people take up these types of occupations, whether they remain in them long-term, and how they move out of them. The LSAY data can be used to separate those who combine these low-skilled jobs with study before transitioning into better skilled occupations after completion of post-school qualifications from those working without any formal qualifications.

Long-term unemployment and disengagement from study

There was support for research that expands on recent LSAY work distinguishing those who are suffering periods of prolonged exclusion from employment, education or training from those who are taking time out from work or study to undertake other meaningful activities, such as travel, starting a family or caring for others.

Here, the longitudinal nature of LSAY would make it possible to investigate the extent, nature and reasons for experiencing periods of disengagement, and to explore whether there are scarring effects or whether the duration of disengagement has an impact on the longer-term outcomes of young people. Such research would shed light on the question of whether a direct school-to-work transition provides better longer-term outcomes by age 25, compared with indirect pathways or ‘interrupted’ transitions. These studies may also shed light on the factors with the potential to help young people avoid long-term unemployment and disengagement, and could explore LSAY data on the job-searching activities of young people. However, this group of young people are more likely to drop out of the survey, and hence the sample size would limit the extent of the analysis.

Attainment of skills and qualifications

Providing young people with the skills, qualifications and capabilities for the contemporary labour market remains a core issue. There was support for LSAY research that helps our understanding of the factors that improve educational attainment, particularly for disadvantaged youth who have lower educational attainment levels. Furthermore, LSAY data can explore the barriers preventing learners from pursuing certain career pathways or progressing from lower-level qualifications to higher VET or university study. This research could usefully explore particular sub-groups, for example, young people from rural and regional communities, and investigate the differences between males and females.

Another suggested area for investigation was determining whether the qualifications young people obtain match their subsequent occupations. Again, the issue could be explored for those in rural communities, where the labour market demands vary and are quite specific.

Recent LSAY research has shown that part-time work exceeding ten hours per week while studying at school can have a negative impact on student outcomes. There is more work to do in this area of looking at the links between work and study. For example, it would be of interest to know more about the effectiveness of work experience programs. There was also some interest in looking at young entrepreneurs and the characteristics they possess.

The role of wellbeing and social outcomes on transitions

The consultations elicited significant interest in topics that fall under the third LSAY research priority:

- ✧ *Ensure that young people lead full and meaningful lives:* by gaining a better insight into their wellbeing and social activities.

It was considered useful to gain a better understanding of how wellbeing affects education and employment outcomes. In particular, stakeholders were interested in young people's relationships with others, the role of social activities outside the school environment and the contribution of social capital to education and employment outcomes.

The wellbeing of young people

Investigating the relationship between young people's wellbeing and their education and employment outcomes requires a broad measure of wellbeing that includes physical health, emotional and psychological health, and mortality rates. Because of the focus of the LSAY program on youth transitions, there is limited scope to explore research questions in this area. Satisfaction ratings with individual aspects of life are the only consistent measure of wellbeing that can be analysed from LSAY. This posed the possibility of developing a better measure of wellbeing in LSAY, which is discussed in the next section.

Some interest was expressed in exploring the impact of financial stress and debt on young people's decisions to participate in further education and training. And although the survey collects some information on how young people manage financially, initial analysis on these questions would be needed to see how they can be used as a proxy for financial stress.

Social capital and the impact of relationships

Suggested research topics in the area of social capital focused on the role that significant relationships play in young people's wellbeing, education and employment outcomes. This includes the impact of mentors, role models and other significant adults, as well as their peers and family unit.

Related to this is the role that community involvement plays in young people's outcomes, such as volunteering. The impact of other social activities or 'discretionary time' outside the school environment is another issue that stakeholders were interested in exploring, particularly whether participation in extracurricular activities helps or hinders young people's transitions.

Technical reports and documentation

During the course of the 2008–10 LSAY analytical program NCVER directed some of its effort to broadening the use of the LSAY data in the research community by making those data more accessible. These efforts include providing data workshops, producing detailed technical documentation and user guides, providing interactive data tables (cohort reports) on the website, as well as assisting in questionnaire development.

Continued efforts to improve data quality and accessibility were strongly supported during the consultation period. These include considering the potential to develop exploratory analysis and visualisation tools for LSAY, and using the data to determine better measures of complex areas such as socioeconomic status, social capital and wellbeing. Other areas for development of the survey were also discussed, such as dealing with attrition, extension of the survey to 30 years and improving questionnaire content and scope; however, these are not within the remit of the analytical program.

Measurement and scope

Publishing technical reports as part of the research program can assist researchers to make better use of the LSAY data. For example, explaining issues such as how variables used in the cohort reports are derived and how to deal with missing data and imputations could help to broaden the group of LSAY users.

Investigation into methodological issues such as devising better measures of socioeconomic status, social capital and wellbeing, areas of interest that emerged in the consultations, would also be feasible within the analytical program.

Developing a better measurement for wellbeing would be the most challenging of these. As mentioned earlier, wellbeing includes a broad range of components. Reviewing the life satisfaction questions and the limited health identifiers in LSAY would need to be considered to enable the survey to provide a more comprehensive exploration of young people's health and wellbeing. This would require consideration of privacy issues and the likely impact on response rates from inclusion of such questions.

Other suggestions included broadening the scope of the survey to include questions capturing family formation and attitudes to relationships; asking young people in the last wave to suggest what has been the main influence on them; repeating the PISA tests or measurements of particular questions; and expanding the ability to evaluate specific programs. The addition of items and additional scales adds to the interview length, which may affect attrition, but trade-offs could be considered to increase questioning in a certain subject area at the expense of reduced questioning in others. However, the strength of the survey instruments to track young people's transitions may be lost if there is a significant 'break' in the measurement of items. In addition, we must keep in mind that LSAY is primarily a youth transition survey and as such should not attempt to measure everything. Technical papers investigating the feasibility of additional items and scales, including wellbeing and health measures, would be a useful starting point.

Linking data sets

Exploring the possible linkage between other datasets and LSAY as a means to capture additional information is an alternative strategy to that of adding more questions to the survey instruments. The usefulness of a unique student identifier was raised, which would provide better information about participation in VET in Schools and better documentation on variables such as student's tertiary entrance rank by state. Similarly, technical reports could explore the potential to link with the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Children (LSAC) to capture early childhood information.

Conclusion

The consultation process provided an opportunity to gauge the relevance of the LSAY research priorities and identify the direction of the analytical program to 2013. Stakeholders involved in the process participated actively and reflected a growing awareness of LSAY and an interest in exploring how the data can help inform youth transitions.

There was a consensus that the three research priorities which shaped the research in the last couple of years have retained their currency. And while a range of research topics and ideas were canvassed, the 2011–13 analytical program will not satisfy every suggestion raised. This is because we will need to determine the questions best suited to the LSAY data, taking into account the limitations of the information collected, the approaches suitable to the longitudinal nature of the dataset and the resources available for research.

Nevertheless, this paper sets up a detailed framework for the direction of the LSAY research effort for the next couple of years and ensures that the work produces fresh thinking relevant to current policy directions, as well as broadening the use of LSAY in the wider research community.



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