



LONGITUDINAL SURVEYS
OF AUSTRALIAN YOUTH

OCCASIONAL PAPER

Assessing the impact of research: a case study of the LSAY Research Innovation and Expansion Fund

JO HARGREAVES
NATIONAL CENTRE FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH



NCVER



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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
or state and territory governments.

Publisher's note

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About the research

Assessing the impact of research: a case study of the LSAY Research Innovation and Expansion Fund

Jo Hargreaves, National Centre for Vocational Education Research

The purpose of this project is to apply the framework developed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) for measuring research impact to assess the outcomes of the research and activities funded under the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) Research Innovation and Expansion Fund (RIEF). LSAY provides a rich source of information about young people and their transitions from school to post-school destinations. The purpose of the Research Innovation and Expansion Fund was to facilitate an increase in the quantity, quality, distribution and accessibility of youth transitions research and analysis using LSAY data in the academic and public policy communities. The RIEF involved a variety of activities, including a competitive research grants program and a fellowship, and has led to the publication of six research reports, a national youth policy forum and data workshops.

Key messages

- The purpose of the fund – to expand the use of LSAY data – was achieved through:
 - providing a number of researchers with the opportunity to undertake projects using LSAY data, many for the first time, and developing their skills to subsequently engage in other projects using LSAY data
 - extending the awareness of LSAY data to national and international research communities
 - imparting end-users with the knowledge and awareness of how LSAY data can be used
 - disseminating research to a wide range of policy and practitioner networks.
- The results of the fund have proved useful to key stakeholders. In terms of direct evidence of the impact on policy, one of the research reports was cited in a parliamentary legislation amendment bill. Research was also used to validate initiatives already underway or to inform the establishment of new programs.

This study reinforces the point that the interplay between research and policy is complex. Nevertheless, in this case, connections between policy, practice and research have been strengthened as a result of the Research Innovation and Expansion Fund. This study also confirms the effectiveness of NCVER processes for the dissemination of research. We note the importance of a media release for immediate impact. Policy forums and engaging directly with policy-makers and other stakeholders can also play a very positive part.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

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Introduction

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is committed to ensuring that its research informs policy and practice in the tertiary education sector. In 2008 the organisation undertook a study on the impact of its research (Stanwick, Hargreaves & Beddie 2009), which demonstrated that, with effort and some cost, it was possible to establish the extent to which NCVER research had been used.¹ A framework was developed for measuring impact against four domains:

- producing knowledge: using citations in other works and also media releases, web downloads and citations in parliament
- building capacity: assessing the extent to which the research has improved the abilities of researchers and stakeholders to engage with the research
- informing policy: judging if and how research has been useful in informing or guiding policy, primarily through interviews with end-users
- informing practice: establishing how the research has informed or guided practice, again through interviews with end-users.

There has been an increased focus on research impact since our original study. The Group of Eight and Australian Technology Network universities, for example, have been exploring how to measure the impact of research, with a large trial involving 12 participating universities (as at 2012) underway. Understanding the different ways research can be used is fundamental to impact studies. Impact can be positive or negative, may or may not be recognised, can occur over short or long periods of time, and is highly dependent on context. In government it is shaped by the political considerations of the time and also public acceptability of new ideas (Levin 2003). Assessing research impact is good practice, however, particularly as it helps to demonstrate that government investment in research is providing value for money.

The purpose of this project is to apply NCVER's framework to a case study, whereby the impact of research and activities funded under the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) Research Innovation and Expansion Fund (RIEF) is assessed.

¹ For the purposes of this project, research is defined as work undertaken that increases knowledge or applies existing knowledge in new ways. Research impact is defined as the application, use and influence of research across various categories.

About LSAY and the Research Innovation and Expansion Fund

The key purpose of LSAY² is to increase understandings of the pathways in the lives of young people, particularly their transitions from compulsory schooling to further education and training and the labour market. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) manages LSAY on behalf of the Australian Government and states and the territories.

LSAY is comprised of a series of surveys focusing on the progress of young Australians as they move from their mid-teens to their mid-twenties. The current surveys involve large nationally representative samples of young people, from whom data about education and training, work, financial matters, health, social activities and attitudes to these and related issues are collected each year. The LSAY program consists of both the data collection and analysis.

The Research Innovation and Expansion Fund (RIEF) was an initiative of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations intended to complement the LSAY program. NCVER was contracted by the department to manage and implement the LSAY analysis program. The overall purpose of the Research Innovation and Expansion Fund was to increase the quantity, quality, distribution and accessibility of independent research and analysis using LSAY data in the academic and public policy communities. Fund initiatives could reasonably be expected to:

- increase the number of researchers using LSAY data for youth transition research
- support the completion of high-quality and independent policy-relevant research projects using LSAY data, including combining LSAY with other relevant sources
- assist researchers to develop the capabilities needed to make full use of the longitudinal nature of the data and to undertake more complex or innovative forms of analysis
- enable low-cost access to LSAY data by researchers (especially early career researchers) and not-for-profit organisations
- strengthen connections between policy development and research – or otherwise complement the LSAY Analytical Program objectives.

The key target audience for LSAY research are government ministers and senior government officers with responsibility for policy development and implementation in education, employment, social affairs, youth and disadvantaged groups. Others with a strong interest in LSAY include providers of services to young people (especially in the areas of career advice and transition support), social policy research centres, community organisations and industry.

A particular target group of the Research Innovation and Expansion Fund was the academic research community, with the aim of increasing their capabilities for, and interest in, using the LSAY data for research.

The Research Innovation and Expansion Fund comprised five distinct research projects, which were funded through a competitive grants program, and a research fellowship, as well as other activities such as data workshops.

² <<http://www.lsay.edu.au>>.

Competitive research analysis grants program

The aim of this program was to increase the pool of researchers using LSAY data as well as to produce independent policy-relevant research. Research proposals were elicited by NCVER in 2008 through a public invitation for proposals, in a similar manner to the process undertaken for the Open Category of the National Vocational Education and Training Research Evaluation Program (NVETRE). The projects funded were chosen on the advice of a selection panel comprising representatives of the LSAY Strategic Advisory Committee, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and NCVER. NCVER adopted specific quality assurance procedures for the management of the research projects, including peer review. The dissemination treatment for research commissioned through the RIEF program was restricted by contractual arrangements to final reports, published by NCVER and appearing on the LSAY website, with stakeholder notifications and media releases subject to the approval of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Five projects were funded:

- *Education and happiness in the school-to-work transition*, Mike Dockery, Curtin University of Technology
- *Post-school education and labour force participation in Canada and Australia*, Siobhan Austen and Fiona MacPhail, Curtin University
- *Lost talent? The occupational ambitions and attainments of young Australians*, Joanna Sikora and Lawrence J. Saha, Australian National University
- *Against the odds: influences on the post-school success of 'low performers'*, Sue Thomson and Kylie Hillman, Australian Council for Educational Research
- *From education to employment: how long does it take?*, Darcy Fitzpatrick, Laurence Lester, Kostas Mavromaras, Sue Richardson and Lulu Sun, National Institute of Labour Studies.

Fellowship for a new career researcher

The primary purpose of the fellowship was to offer an early career researcher an opportunity to work with the LSAY data. One fellowship was funded:

- *Returns from education: an occupational status approach*, Jung-Sook Lee, University of New South Wales.

Youth policy forum

The policy forum, *Young people: finding their way in a new era*, was held in Melbourne on 10 November 2009. The forum was designed to showcase how the LSAY survey data could be used in multiple ways to improve young people's transitions into life after schooling.

As an excellent platform to showcase three of the five commissioned projects from the RIEF, the forum sought to inform policy-makers about the education outcomes for young people, the skills required by young people for the contemporary labour market, as well as ways to ensure that young people lead full and meaningful lives.³

Highlighting the appetite for information on youth transitions, the event attracted 289 delegates. Approximately 70% of those who submitted an evaluation rated their satisfaction with the event as

³ Unfortunately a member of the National Institute of Labour Studies team was not able to attend due to ill health, while Siobhan Austen was not able to attend due to work commitments.

seven or more out of ten. The format of the event was rated by 80% of attendees as seven or more out of ten, and a similar proportion indicated they would attend another policy forum. Some of the criticisms of the event related to the lack of discussion of research results and the implications for policy and practice. The majority of people interviewed for this project, however, suggested that the research is continuing to make an impact and that the findings will be of enduring relevance: 'when the forum was held some of the work presented was in developmental stages and since they have all been published it is just now coming to fruition'.

The forum was an important event in terms of bringing together the researchers working on LSAY data and providing an opportunity for a wide range of stakeholders to become aware of and familiar with both the LSAY dataset and the research program. For many this was their first time engaging with the material and it appeared to lead to ongoing use of the research.

Longitudinal data workshops

The data workshops were developed and conducted by NCVER. The primary aim was to explain to researchers and interested policy-makers how to work with the LSAY data. Two workshops were held, one in Melbourne on 1 September 2009, and one in Brisbane on 2 July 2010. Further information on the workshops can be found in appendix A.

LSAY data access

To assist researchers to access LSAY data, the Research Innovation and Expansion Fund made funds available to cover the costs associated with accessing the data through the Australian Data Archive. These funds were for researchers who were not already members of the Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research Incorporated (ACSPRI). The initiative was advertised on both the Australian Data Archive and LSAY websites.

During the period over which the RIEF ran there were only a few enquiries about data access and all were from researchers outside Australia. One application for funding was processed. This was for a researcher with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Public Governance and Territorial Development Directorate, who requested access to the Y98 LSAY data. The Australian Data Archive Manager indicated that the other enquiries were eligible to access the LSAY data free of charge since they were from staff of universities that are members of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

NCVER also maintains records of requests for access to the LSAY unit record data. Since NCVER commenced providing the analytical and reporting services for the LSAY program, the numbers of requests have steadily increased, from about 20 in 2008 up to about 40 in 2011. And while there were a significant number of requests following the data workshops (conducted in late 2009 and mid-2010) we cannot be sure if these were directly linked.

LSAY research reference guide

In 2004 a reference guide to the LSAY research reports, *What do we know about the experiences of Australian youth? An easy reference guide to Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth research reports, 1996–2003* was published by the Australian Council for Educational Research. An additional component of the REIF was an update of this guide, such that a single, updated and current compendium and reference guide for LSAY research reports now exists.

Methodology

This study uses the model for assessing the impact of research, developed by NCVER in 2008,⁴ whereby impact is evaluated across the four domains of: producing knowledge, building capacity, informing policy and informing practice. Combinations of qualitative and quantitative impact indicators are used. The approach is pragmatic: using experts to provide informed opinion, and a broad range of citation indicators, the latter acting as proxy measures of impact.

The model also acknowledges a number of key elements on which NCVER places high importance and which have been successfully implemented over many years. All of these approaches are aimed at maximising the impact of research. These include:

- establishing the priorities and purpose of the research with some involvement from end-users, where appropriate
- adopting multiple dissemination strategies, acknowledging the diverse needs of the sector
- engaging with stakeholders throughout the research cycle
- managing independent commissioned research through a competitive funding round process, ongoing quality assurance and advice on methodological and dissemination treatments, peer review, data checking and editing.

The primary sources of information for this case study included:

- analysis of project information and intended impacts
- a bibliometric analysis, undertaken by specialist information services staff using Google, Google Scholar, Publish or Perish, Scopus, VOCEDplus full text and parliamentary databases. These have been supplemented by records of media citations held by NCVER and Google Analytics data
- interviews with six researchers and eight end-users (see table 1). End-users were identified either as a contact suggested by the researcher or by random sampling from attendees at the youth policy forum or data workshops. A semi-structured interview approach, designed to capture the various categories of impact according to NCVER's model, was used. In addition, interviews were undertaken with two NCVER staff members responsible for management of the LSAY program and the LSAY RIEF research program.

The detailed findings from the bibliometric analysis of each research report and the interviews are contained in the support document to this report available at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2513.html>>.

⁴ *Assessing the impact of NCVER's research* <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2152.html>>.

Table 1 Researchers and end-users interviewed

Researcher or organisation	Link to LSAY RIEF program
Mike Dockery, Siobhan Austen, Joanna Sikora, Kylie Hillman, Darcy Fitzpatrick, Jung-Sook Lee	Researchers
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations	Suggested by researcher (Fitzpatrick)
Social Policy Evaluation, Analysis and Research Centre, ANU (contact now at University of Victoria, Canada)	Attended the youth policy forum
Trade Training Centre Project Manager, Polytechnic Tasmania	Attended the youth policy forum
Outcomes and Evaluation Division, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria	Attended the Melbourne data workshop and youth policy forum
Polytechnic West	Attended the youth policy forum.
CareerLink; VETNetwork	Suggested by researcher (Dockery) ; contact from VETnetwork and Career Development Association, who invited Dockery to speak
Highlands Local Learning and Employment Network (Vic.)	Attended the youth policy forum
North Central Local Learning and Employment Network (Vic.)	Attended the youth policy forum

Caveats

The interviews with the end-users did not involve discussion about the individual research reports but about interviewees' engagement overall with the LSAY research or the forum or data workshops, depending on their links to the program. This is because the end-users interviewed varied in their knowledge and involvement with LSAY and their use of and engagement with the research projects: they were either more familiar with one or two specific reports or had a general awareness of all the research reports. Consequently, the outcomes from the end-user interviews are not reported against individual research reports.

NCVER acknowledges that the sources of information and the ways of capturing them in the bibliometric analysis are proxies for impact; they are not 'measures of impact'. NCVER also applies fairly broad definitions across the categories of impact, indicators and sources of information. Our bibliometric analysis involving citation indexes and web searching does not apply a strict metrics or ranking criterion, which is more suited to the hard sciences. Rather, for our purposes, citations involve references across a range of mediums, including parliamentary databases.

Given the reference period for this case study is only one to two years from the publication date, it is too early for the full effects of citation to be realised. It takes time for a research report to collect citations, and, as our previous study revealed, the ideal reference period for a citation analysis is three to five years following publication. In the longer term, citations in other research documents will be an important source of knowledge production.

Findings

Table 2 summarises the main impacts arising from the six primary LSAY RIEF reports across the four categories of producing knowledge, building capacity, informing policy and informing practice.

The results in this table are then discussed under each of the four main category headings, with supporting data and details in the support document available at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2513.html>.

Table 2 Overall summary of impacts across the six research reports

	<i>Education and happiness in the school-to-work transition</i>	<i>Post-school education and labour force participation in Canada and Australia</i>	<i>Lost talent? The occupational ambitions and attainments of young Australians</i>	<i>Against the odds: influences on the post-school success of 'low performers'</i>	<i>From education to employment: how long does it take?</i>	<i>Returns from education: an occupational status approach (fellowship)</i>
Knowledge production						
Outputs	One formal report, 2010 Media release (x 2 NCVER and Curtin Univ.) Podcast Insight article	One formal report, 2010	One formal report, 2011 Joint media release with <i>Against the odds</i>	One formal report, 2010 Joint media release with <i>Lost talent</i>	One formal report, 2011 Media release	One formal report, 2010
Citations	45	9	35	20	19	11
Capacity building						
Researcher perspective	Another team of researchers from NATSEM built on this research; researcher gained further funding; researcher had discussion about doing future papers on this work with visiting researchers from overseas	Led to a successful International Research Linkage Grant through the Canadian Government, extending the work to consider how post-school education choices translate into labour market participation	Led to subsequent work and proposed future work by the research team, both in terms of research grant applications and collaborations; the OECD applied for access to the LSAY data following a presentation by the researcher on the value of using the data	The research team has extended the work by running the same models on high performers (PISA forthcoming); had the opportunity to talk to other countries interested in the benefits of building on longitudinal surveys	Opportunity for the research team to engage with the LSAY dataset for the first time, and is now one of the datasets they will consider using to answer research questions in the future	Having worked on predominantly qualitative research the fellowship gave the researcher the opportunity to engage with the LSAY data and gain knowledge about quantitative research from NCVER researchers, which has led to subsequent involvement in quantitative research projects
End-user perspective	Greater awareness of LSAY data and research and how it could be applied in their own organisations. Supported professional development activities. Developed confidence in their knowledge about LSAY research more broadly, and capacity to share this information amongst networks.					

Table 2 Overall summary of impacts across the six research reports (continued)⁵

	<i>Education and happiness in the school-to-work transition</i>	<i>Post-school education and labour force participation in Canada and Australia</i>	<i>Lost talent? The occupational ambitions and attainments of young Australians</i>	<i>Against the odds: influences on the post-school success of 'low performers'</i>	<i>From education to employment: how long does it take?</i>	<i>Returns from education: an occupational status approach (fellowship)</i>
Contribution to policy						
Researcher perspective/citation analysis	Not aware of direct impacts, but believes it has been used in forums within the VET and career development fields, and in DEEWR and Productivity Commission reports	Not aware/none cited	Not aware/none cited	Not aware/none cited	Cited in the Social Security Legislation Amendment Bill and media release (Senator Chris Evans 2011 'Research confirms a good education is the key to getting a job')	Not aware/none cited
End-user perspective	The research has informed policies on rural and remote education and the governance of the Trade Training Centres in Tasmania (Polytechnic Tasmania) and in a policy framework around youth transitions (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development). DEEWR used the research in a paper for APEC and in a cabinet document looking at disadvantaged youth; in both cases the findings from the research were used to set the scene about youth transitions.					
Contribution to practice						
Researcher perspective	While the researchers were unable to cite specific examples, they have all presented at conferences or practitioner networks, sometimes at the request of those networks.					
End-user perspective	Informed the way the Trade Training Centres at Polytechnic Tasmania established partnerships between training providers and regional schools. The research also had practical implications for supporting students and for how they set up vocational education in schools. Informed the Youth Partnerships Initiative, of which the North Central Local Learning and Employment Network is one of eight trial sites.					

Knowledge production

The most common forms of output from the research were formal reports and presentations (table 2), consistent with the outputs proposed as part of the dissemination strategies. Table 3 gives more detailed results of the bibliometric analysis. *Education and happiness in the school-to-work transition* had the most varied outputs from the research and also had the greatest number of citations.

Captured in the 'Other' citations data (table 3) are a number of presentations the researchers gave. Some of these presentations occurred as a direct result of requests from organisations working in the field of youth transitions, such as the Career Development Association of Australia. There has also been extremely strong international interest in all of the research, with presentations in Canada, Ireland, Sweden, France, Portugal, Germany and Hong Kong.

It is particularly interesting to note that *From education to employment: how long does it take?* was cited in the Social Security Legislation Amendment Bill in November 2011 and by Senator Chris Evans, the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace in a parliamentary media release.

⁵ Note that details are expanded further in the sections below and also in the support document.

Table 3 Summary of citations across the RIEF research reports⁶

Publication date	<i>Education and happiness in the school-to-work transition</i> 19 April 2010	<i>Post-school education and labour force participation in Canada and Australia</i> 21 September 2010	<i>Lost talent? The occupational ambitions and attainments of young Australians</i> 12 January 2011	<i>Against the odds: influences on the post-school success of 'low performers'</i> 21 September 2010	<i>From education to employment: how long does it take?</i> 29 June 2011	<i>Returns from education: an occupational status approach (fellowship)</i> 16 December 2010
Where cited (as at 31 March 2012)						
Journal article	-	1	1	1	-	-
Research reports ¹	4	3	4	4	3	2
Book chapters	-	-	-	1	-	-
Conference papers	3	-	1	1	-	-
Parliamentary databases	-	-	-	-	2	-
Other ²	6	3	7	4	-	3
Media	32	2	19	9	14	6
Total	45	9	32	20	19	11
Google Analytics website data (from report publication date to 31 March 2012)						
Total unique page views ³	2202	1138	2619	2727	2189	781
Media release	386	-	752	752	361	-
Google Analytics VOCEDplus data (from report publication date to 31 March 2012)						
Full record display unique page views	10	12	10	7	8	9

Notes: (1) Research reports include citations in NCVER publications.

(2) 'Other' includes citations in a variety of outlets such as At a glance, research degree theses, edited volumes, resource materials and other presentations.

(3) Unique page view: when a visitor to the website views the same page more than once during the time they spend on the website, Google Analytics aggregates this number so that it is recorded as the one unique view of that page by that single user.

Media

While media coverage is not a precise indicator of impact, it does provide a general indication of a topic resonating across a broader audience. We need to be mindful that there are a number of contributing factors that determine what may or may not 'grab' attention at any particular time, and which can also be affected by other events. Nevertheless, a media release does generate substantial additional immediate interest in a report, as the Google Analytics data below demonstrate (table 4).

NCVER maintains its own records of media coverage. This primarily relates to articles in national and state/territory newspapers, radio and articles in national training or industry-related magazines or newsletters. Most coverage tends to occur on publication release. *Education and happiness in the school-to-work transition* generated the most media coverage, followed by *Lost talent? The occupational ambitions and attainments of young Australians*.

The last impact study was undertaken by NCVER in 2008 and it is interesting to note that since that time the level of citations across all media outlets has substantially increased. This may suggest that

⁶ The detailed citations for each of the LSAY RIEF research reports are provided in the accompanying support document.

general media interest in NCVER research is rising. However, the other contributing factor in this study is that the media routinely seizes information on youth issues as a matter of course because this area generates a great deal of interest with the general public.

Google Analytics

Since NCVER's last impact study the organisation has made improvements to the collection of website data using Google Analytics. Google Analytics is a free web analytics tool that NCVER has used to collect and analyse usage statistics on the NCVER and LSAY websites. It tracks how visitors interact with the websites, including where they come from, how many visit the websites, who they are (user groups), how long they spend on the website, what pages they visit and what publications they view or download. Users are able to access LSAY reports via the LSAY and NCVER websites; and data are provided for both websites. The date of the reporting period of this study extends from publication of the research report to 31 March 2012. The detailed data appear in the support document to this report.

Of the groups we can identify, government users, research organisations and 'other' are the most frequent visitors⁷ to the LSAY RIEF research reports on the websites – in varying order across each of the reports. The terms most used to clarify the 'other' category are:

- Most used, in order:
 - student (+ teacher, TAFE, university)
 - university (+ student)
 - NGO
 - consultant (+ VET consultant)
 - community (+ sector, organisation)
 - organisation (+ community, international, non-government organisation).
- Next most used, in no order:
 - apprenticeship centre
 - group training
 - not for profit
 - personal
 - private
 - professional (association, organisation, services)
 - RTO (registered training organisation)
 - software developer
 - private (company, research, study).

The Google Analytics data reveal that over half of those looking at the publication summary page go on to view the full report.

Most of the users accessing the publications have come from Australia, but the data show users from a wide range of countries, with *From education to employment: how long does it take?* generating

⁷ Apart from the category 'guest', which can be defined as a user who has come to the website for the very first time, or whose previous visit(s) have not been remembered by the website, or they are yet to log in.

interest across 31 countries. Not surprisingly, 7% of users accessing *Post-school education and labour force participation in Canada and Australia* were from Canada.

Most user activity occurs within the first one to two weeks of a report being published, but analysis of Google Analytics data over time can reveal:

- spikes or renewed interest in a report, perhaps as a result of their relevance to specific external events or due to information about them being posted on other websites such as Australian Policy Online or in *NCVER News*. This was the case with *Post-school education and labour force participation in Canada and Australia* and *Lost talent? The occupational ambitions and attainments of young Australians*
- whether a report receives regular and relatively consistent viewing, as has been the case with *Education and happiness in the school-to-work transition* during the reporting period.

The data confirm the importance of media releases and email alerts to generate interest, bringing the research to the attention of policy-makers and practitioners. Based on total number of page views, the top four most popular RIEF reports (table 4) all had an associated media release when published, whereas the other reports did not (as agreed between the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and NCVER, based on dissemination plans and contractual requirements).

Table 4 Google Analytics top four RIEF publications

RIEF publications	Release date	Total # of page views	Media release
<i>Against the odds: influences on the post-school success of 'low performers'</i>	21 September 2010	2727	Referenced in <i>Lost talent?</i> media release
<i>Lost talent? The occupational ambitions and attainments of young Australians</i>	12 January 2011	2619	Yes
<i>Education and happiness in the school-to-work-transition</i>	19 April 2010	2202	Yes
<i>From education to employment: how long does it take?</i>	29 June 2011	2189	Yes

General observations about dissemination

A wide range of dissemination strategies, both print and other, are an important component of the applied research process adopted at NCVER. As part of the interviews, respondents were asked to rate how important particular forms of dissemination were to facilitating impact, on a five-point scale ranging from one (of no importance) to five (of great importance).

While some respondents qualified their answers, the average scores are fairly evenly distributed across the various avenues of dissemination (table 5). In the previous impact study, media coverage and academic publications stood out for not being rated as highly.

Table 5 Importance to impact of various types of dissemination

Type of dissemination	Score
Research reports	3.94
Seminars and conferences	3.88
Briefing papers	3.91
Media coverage	3.44
Academic publications	3.56
Discussions with policy-makers	3.69

In a comparison of ratings with the end-users, most researchers in this study not surprisingly tended to give a higher value to the impact of academic publications. A few respondents concurred that media coverage is good for prompting people to take notice but that it doesn't actually mean they use the findings.

When asked what dissemination strategies end-users find particularly useful in raising awareness and leading to use of the research findings – or data sources such as LSAY – the following were the most commonly suggested:

- presentations and events
- short (two-page) summaries, or briefing papers
- email alerts, preferably with a brief summary about the research and which link directly to the publication.

The overall consensus from the interviews was that dissemination strategies that make the research easily accessible, in plain English and focusing on practical outcomes were the most favoured. A key challenge is ensuring that briefing papers are pitched to the right audience. Another critical element is whether the research answers the question that policy people are trying to answer at that time – regardless of good dissemination the topic needs to be relevant and timely.

Capacity building

In all cases the researchers were able to cite specific examples of capacity building, in terms of extending their research through further research grants and/or collaborations, as well as engaging with the LSAY dataset.

Three of the five research projects involved researchers who were new to working with LSAY data. In addition, the fellowship specifically targeted a researcher new to LSAY. This researcher experienced a significant amount of capacity building, since he had moved from a purely qualitative research background to engagement in quantitative methodologies. Some of these researchers commented that they found using the dataset challenging because of its complexity, but overall a worthwhile exercise.

One of the projects led to a successful application for an International Research Linkage Grant through the Canadian Government. The grant was awarded to enable them to extend their work on the post-school education choices of young women in Canada and Australia and to consider how those choices translated into the labour market. Another principal researcher used their research project to demonstrate the value of using LSAY data to the Directorate for Education at the OECD, and as a consequence the OECD applied for access to the data. An unexpected impact for one research team was that they were given the opportunity to begin discussions with other countries that want to explore research questions that can be addressed by using a longitudinal dataset such as LSAY.

An accumulated body of work may generate greater impact, but, as one researcher noted, the capacity building aspects of single projects can be significant. They generate 'further opportunities for the researchers' and directly assist in building a body of work around specific topics. Moreover, some of the researchers were involved in the consultations to establish a new set of research priorities for the LSAY program, which will lead to more targeted research in the future and build on the work already done.

There was also clear evidence of capacity building amongst the end-users as a direct result of initiatives within the RIEF, particularly through access to the research reports, having the opportunity

to explore the data in a workshop, or attending the youth policy forum. Many became much more aware of LSAY data and associated research after the forum. Their attendance at the forum supported their professional development activities, while encouraging them to increase and share their knowledge about LSAY research more broadly. Although some were already using the research before attending the youth policy forum, the forum made them more aware of the relevance of the research and increased their confidence in using it. Many end-users play a key role in increasing research impact, by filtering and helping to tailor findings to increase their relevance and accessibility to a particular audience. One end-user commented:

The forum gave us exposure to a range of approaches to conceptualising research into youth transitions, and some interdisciplinary perspectives. The forum also led to forming a range of connections with people who work with the LSAY data. (University of Victoria, Canada, end-user)

Following the forum another end-user offered support to an early career researcher in her organisation in applying for an NCVER Community of Practice research scholarship to conduct specific research on youth transitions for their region.⁸ This project conferred ongoing development benefits in terms of the acquisition of research skills in their organisation.

Contributing to policy

Many of the researchers were unable to confirm whether the research had informed policy. One of the challenges this raises is how to encourage and equip researchers to become more engaged in tracking the influence of their work beyond academia and to report on the outcomes and ongoing influence of their research in policy and practice.

As noted in the section relating to citations, this case study did find evidence of impact on policy. *From education to employment: how long does it take?* was cited in *Social Security Legislation Amendment Bill* (Second Reading of House of Representatives, Hansard, 23 November 2011) and in the associated media release: 'Research confirms a good education is the key to getting a job' (2011). Citations in journals are often used in academia as an easy and popular measure of impact, but when looking for research's influence on policy we find that citations in parliamentary legislation such as Hansard have significance.

Several of the end-users were able to provide examples of where the research has been used in policy. It has informed policies on rural and remote education and on the governance of the Trade Training Centres in Tasmania (Polytechnic Tasmania) and in a policy framework relating to youth transitions (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development).

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations used the research in *From education to employment: how long does it take?* in a paper for APEC and in a Cabinet document addressing disadvantaged youth. In both cases the findings from the research were used to set the scene on youth transitions. They noted that this kind of research has an educational function, with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations commenting about the Fitzpatrick et al. report that it 'help[ed] to keep people who make policy decisions better informed, but given the type of research question it may be unlikely to lead directly to policy change'.

⁸ Hegol, L 2012, *Transition to post-Year 10 education in regional Tasmania*, NCVER, Adelaide.

All people interviewed for this project recognised the difficulties inherent in tracking the ways by which research directly or specifically influences policy. One of the NCVER staff members with oversight of the LSAY program noted that the primary stakeholder groups responsible for youth affairs are not a cohesive group. This presents additional challenges in terms of reaching the various target audiences. On the other hand, research findings relating to youth issues resonate well with the media, which gave good coverage to some of the research reports.

This study was undertaken only 12 months after the final research report from the LSAY RIEF suite was published. It is possible its impact on policy is yet to eventuate.

Regardless, several end-users commented on the key findings from the research as being useful – in either providing new information and concepts or strengthening and validating the case for existing policies. They also noted that the forum was accessible to people from a policy background. One end-user stated:

The more informed you are about the issues then the better you can influence policy, so rather than being able to provide specific examples it is more about the underpinning knowledge gained from the research that you take to the policy debate.

(Highlands Local Learning and Employment Network)

Contributing to practice

A couple of the end-users were able to cite examples of where the research has influenced or informed practice.

In one case it informed the way the Trade Training Centres at Polytechnic Tasmania established partnerships between training providers and regional schools. The research also had practical implications for supporting students and for how vocational education in schools could be set up.

In another case, an end-user believed that the research has informed the Youth Partnerships Initiative, of which the North Central Local Learning and Employment Network is one of eight trial sites. The Youth Partnerships Initiative is a Victorian Government program aimed at designing and testing new ways for the education, youth and family support, justice, homelessness and mental health sectors to work more collaboratively to support individual young people experiencing problems. In particular the LSAY research was used to refine the definition of vulnerability and to inform specific project development. This end-user also advised they are aware generally of the LSAY research being referenced in numerous publications, for example, those emerging from the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

Following his presentation at the youth policy forum, Mike Dockery was asked to present at several practitioner networks, including VETnetwork and the Career Development Association of Australia. The VETnetwork professional development event, ‘School to work transitions’ held in Perth in August 2011, attracted 40 participants from TAFE institutes, government schools, education departments and group training organisations across metropolitan and regional areas. It is an example of the ‘spin-offs’ generated from a presentation at one event and how research findings can be extended to people ‘on the ground’.

Some of the end-users commented that, rather than directly influencing a change in practice, the research may be used primarily for information. In part, this is a reflection on the timeliness of the research, with one end-user commenting that, ‘while the research is interesting we are already aware of the issues and taking measures to address it’.

Many continue to engage with the research and share that knowledge by drawing other people's attention to the research findings, either via informal processes or specific references in papers and policy-related documents. Several were able to cite specific examples of how they have subsequently used the knowledge gained from the youth policy forum and the research, for example, to promote the research findings to the principals and deputy principals of the schools they work with.

Conclusion

The overall purpose of the program of activities associated with the Research Innovation and Expansion Fund was to increase the quantity, quality, distribution and accessibility of independent research and analysis using the LSAY data, particularly in the academic and public policy communities.

This study has shown that the RIEF has provided the opportunity to create a more self-sustaining critical mass of researchers with a relationship to LSAY, with the majority of researchers funded in the analysis grants program being new to research making use of LSAY data. Six high-quality independent research reports that made use of LSAY data were published as a direct result.

The published reports subsequently led to researchers from other organisations, nationally and internationally, exploring the ways by which LSAY data could be used. The citation analysis and interviews with researchers revealed several examples of other research teams or the researchers themselves continuing their work on LSAY data. Some of these research projects combine LSAY with other relevant sources such as the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey and NCVER data.

The youth policy forum and data workshops reached a wide range of academic, public policy and practitioner communities. The end-users interviewed for this project varied in their knowledge about LSAY and the research reports. One had been involved with LSAY for over ten years, while others were exposed to LSAY and the research for the first time through their attendance at the forum. All commented that the forum was a great opportunity to engage directly with the researchers, explore additional questions and other work, as well as establish networks and collaborations.

The end-users of the research in this study identified examples of how the research findings have been promoted to broader networks and how the LSAY data have been used for youth transition research in their own practice.

The Research Innovation and Expansion Fund deliberately adopted a research model similar to that of the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation Program; that is, the external commissioning of research.⁹ This was seen as a positive model, with one person from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations expressing the view that, given that the RIEF resulted in a broader range of academic researchers engaging with LSAY, this model could be replicated. Independent evaluations of the LSAY program conducted for the department also highlighted the success of the RIEF in enabling a wider range of researchers to access and use the LSAY data.

The data workshops and the concomitant ability to work closely with NCVER staff enabled researchers to develop capabilities in terms of both research with longitudinal data and the adoption of more complex or innovative forms of analysis. The fellowship recipient, who moved from a purely qualitative research background to quantitative methodologies, is a case in point.

Several researchers and end-users commented that the LSAY data require a substantial amount of promotional work, as the dataset is not well known. Some were surprised that it is not used more often. Another stated that social science students are not oriented towards the use of survey data as

⁹ <[http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/about.html#National_VET_Research_and_Evaluation_\(NVETRE\)_program](http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/about.html#National_VET_Research_and_Evaluation_(NVETRE)_program)>.

part of their research training, so there is a need to specifically promote the use of LSAY as a good source of information (for example, to researchers beyond the economics or social policy disciplines, such as to the Australian Psychological Society and other professional bodies). One end-user mentioned the Economic and Social Outlook conferences run by the Melbourne Institute, which showcase the HILDA data, suggesting this might be one way to consider bringing the LSAY data to the notice of more people.

Another suggested identifying research institutes in universities and government departments aligned to topics to which LSAY might be relevant and contacting them directly. Another end-user specifically commented that the workshops, which allowed people to work through the data and showed them how it could be used, offered the best solution to its promotion.

One researcher remarked that a great deal of work on education and young people ‘falls between the cracks’. Her suggestion was to promote the messages to teachers in schools rather than to a policy audience: ‘focus on tailoring the outcomes of the research to things teachers can actually do and have control over, which will not be the same thing as policy-makers’.

Another researcher highlighted the importance, to ensure maximum impact from the research, of getting policy people engaged in the research. It is not only NCVER’s role to promote research to the government but also for the researchers themselves to maintain ties with policy circles.

This study reinforces the point that the interplay between research and policy is not straightforward. Nevertheless, connections between policy, practice and research do occur, and in this case have been strengthened as a result of the Research Innovation and Expansion Fund, with researchers being invited to speak at practitioner events, citations in a parliamentary legislation and end-user examples of engagement with and use of the research.

In addition, the research has contributed more broadly to the three higher-level research priorities of the LSAY program. These are aimed at: understanding the factors that impact on participation and completion in education and training; investigating whether the skills from, and pathways through, education and training are well matched with labour market demands; and gaining better insights into the wellbeing and social activities of young people.

The primary purpose of the Research Innovation and Expansion Fund was to increase the capacity of researchers and end-users working with LSAY data, and this study has shown clear examples of where this has occurred. As a model, the RIEF combined a number of initiatives, which collectively had impact in terms of raising the profile of LSAY and increasing the quantity and quality of research.

This study has also confirmed that NCVER is on the right track with its dissemination of research. The capacity of researchers to purposefully engage in the end use of their work was highlighted, and NCVER will continue to promote this objective. NCVER will also continue to periodically select themes of research for impact studies, thereby continuing to build more robust examples of where research is influencing policy and practice.

References

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Appendix A: data workshops

A number of data workshops were held during 2008–10:

- In late February 2009, NCVER staff facilitated a data workshop for members of the National Institute of Labour Studies research team with the aim of helping them interpret the LSAY data for their research project.
- In early September 2009, four NCVER staff, together with Pam Millwood from Wallis Consulting Group, facilitated a workshop for researchers on the LSAY data. The purpose of the workshop was to broaden the use of LSAY data and to increase awareness of the LSAY program more broadly as a source of empirical evidence for informed policy-making. The workshop also provided an opportunity for NCVER to showcase the new LSAY cohort report structure and format, as well as the revised LSAY technical documentation. There was a high level of interest in the workshop, with the maximum number of 30 places filled. Workshop participants were current and potential users of the LSAY data from the academic community, government departments, non-government organisations and other research organisations. The event was very successful, with positive feedback on the day from participants.
- In response to a request from the National Senior Officials Committee (NSOC) representative on the LSAY Strategic Advisory Committee (SAC) and the Executive Director, VET Policy Development, Queensland Department of Education and Training, at the November 2009 SAC meeting, two LSAY data workshops were held in Brisbane on 2 July 2010. The first, 'Getting to know LSAY', was aimed at individuals with an interest in youth transitions who wanted to learn more about what LSAY has to offer. The other workshop, 'The Ins and Outs of LSAY Data', was directed at researchers with a quantitative background who were interested in youth transitions and in using longitudinal data to investigate this subject matter. The responses however were mixed, with some of the attendees attending the wrong workshop, based on their skills and backgrounds.
- In response to another request from a representative on the LSAY Strategic Advisory Committee, in July 2010 NCVER hosted a seminar at the Department of Education and Training, NSW on how to access and use LSAY statistics and resources.

Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Assessing the impact of research: a case study of the LSAY Research Innovation and Expansion Fund – support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2513.html>>. It contains detailed findings from the bibliometric analysis of each research report and the interviews.



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