

LIFE, DISRUPTED:
YOUNG PEOPLE, EDUCATION AND
EMPLOYMENT BEFORE AND AFTER
COVID-19

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ABOUT US

The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) is a multi-disciplinary research centre based in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. We undertake research into the social, political and economic factors, forces and trends that affect young people's lives. By focusing on issues that affect young people, and on developing policy and educational interventions to address youth disadvantage, CYPEP aims to identify the challenges to, and opportunities for, improved life outcomes for young people today and throughout their lives.

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PREFACE

The past eighteen months have revealed long-term labour market trends and highlighted the impact they have on young people. What appeared to be new economic challenges were, in fact, pre-existing social issues magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of these challenges can be traced back to the reassembly and sometimes eradication of conventional occupational structures around the world on the back of post-Cold War globalisation. Automation and digitalisation of industrial production have accelerated this reformation. Job precarity, erosion of working rights, emerging permaflexi arrangements and major shifts in career identity are the consequences. The disruptions caused by the pandemic have highlighted the prolonged disruptions to the daily lives of many young people throughout the world.


This paper explores fault lines that run through the relationship between education and work, such as the contested impact of digital disruption on young people, the rhetoric of soft skills and challenges to the notion of careers, which can no longer be coupled with the idea of a linear pathway to a traditional occupation. Lifelong learning is no longer a desirable activity but a necessity.

In focusing on young people's employment and careers, this paper describes one aspect of a bigger picture. Young people encounter multiple and intersecting challenges involving multiple areas of disruption, shaping futures that are largely constructed for them by wider forces beyond their control, rather than by young people. The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice is exploring the question of whether being young is a disadvantage. We are bringing together existing indicators of how young people are faring in the form of a Youth Barometer that will examine the pressures felt by Australian youth across social, political, economic and wellbeing indicators. The Centre will explore these trends in relation to education policy and practice. It is our contention that the job of educators is not just about developing in individuals the skills to navigate uncertainty, but to work with our students to imagine and create the conditions for a better, more secure life. Moreover, it is to start a conversation about young people based on a language of possibility and to provide resources to inform and shape their futures. Life need not be one of perpetual disruption.

Lucas Walsh

Director, Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice

A DISRUPTED LIFE

A young woman with long, wavy red hair and dark sunglasses is sitting on a weathered wooden bench. She is wearing a light-colored jacket over a dark patterned top. She is positioned in front of a green door with a small window and two brass doorknobs. The door is flanked by walls made of glass blocks. The ground is painted green. The overall scene is outdoors, possibly on a porch or walkway.

It's pretty distressing – you're told in school to follow what you want to do. This is what I want to do. I don't want to be a nurse. I don't want to be an engineer. I [knew] going into my [media] degree, what career outcomes look[ed] like. But this pandemic has completely flipped that. You see, there's obviously always going to be [a] need for healthcare workers, for all these emergency services people. But that doesn't change the fact that I've just spent three years at university trying my best to do something that I want to do for the rest of my life. Like, that doesn't change, so I don't feel like I should be told to do a different degree because of that, because now this has happened there's no job opportunities for me. That's not fair.

Natasha

University student, *Q+A* audience member, 19:48

Introduction

In May 2020, as the effects of COVID-19 started to be realised by many Australians, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) broadcast an episode of the current affairs discussion show, Q+A, entitled ‘Young and Free?’.¹ The panel included Youth Commissioner, Sophie Johnston; CEO of the Australian Industry Group, Innes Willox; actor, Yael Stone; economist and CEO of the Grattan Institute, Danielle Wood; and CEO of online marketplace Airtasker, Tim Fung.

The show’s host, Hamish Macdonald, opened with this overview:

Young Australians are paying a heavy price for this shutdown. They’re losing their jobs, sacrificing their freedoms, and staring at decades of debt . . . and young people are tonight making their voices heard.

Natasha’s was one such voice. Her heartfelt observation towards the end of the episode suggests she feels trapped, as if living a ‘disrupted life’, one that seems suspended somewhere between a career ideal forged and reinforced through her upbringing and education, and a future career reality that she does not want, nor wants to accept. Natasha’s comment is revealing as it peels back the covers on what appears, on the surface, to be a deeply concerning situation during the pandemic, but which highlights a complex mass of conditions that pre-date it. These involve interrelations between students, employers, educational institutions and policy-makers, and shape young people’s career aspirations and actualisations.

Using excerpts from the Q+A episode as touchstones, this paper explores the contextual factors that shape the education and work of young people in Australia. We will first outline young people’s current employment and employability realities. Secure, long-term employment prospects for Australians aged from 15 to 24 years are far worse than some sectors of society are aware of or acknowledge. During the period that the featured Q+A episode was broadcast, the International Labour Organization commented on global youth labour prospects:

The pandemic is inflicting a triple shock on young people. Not only is it destroying their employment, but it is also disrupting education and training, and placing major obstacles in the way of those seeking to enter the labour market or to move between jobs.²

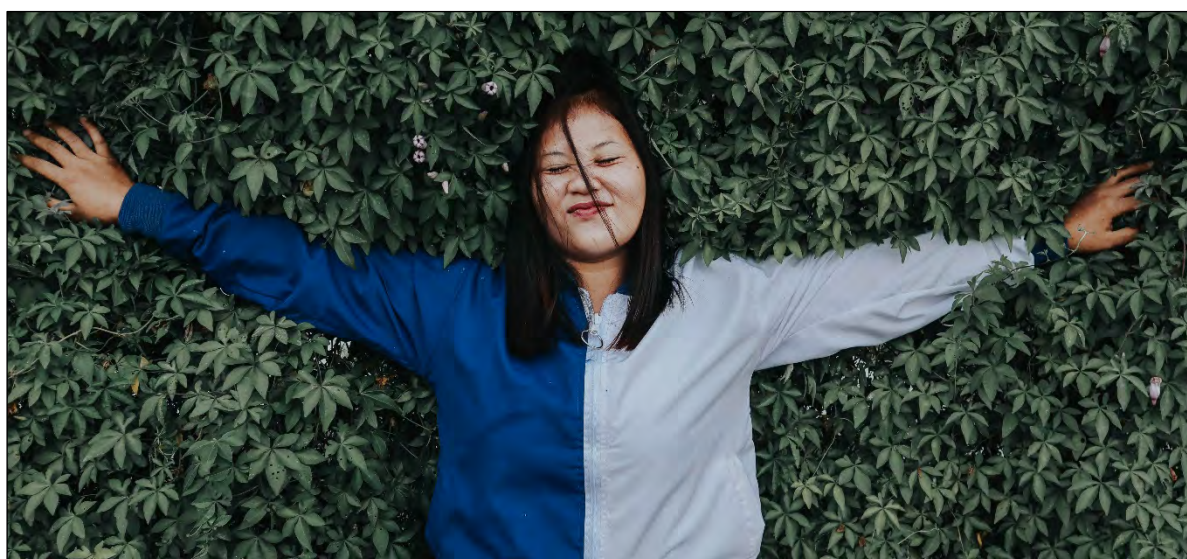
Against this backdrop, we then explore how young people like Natasha experience precarious employment. We examine how young people’s career imaginaries seem at odds with current fluid and unstable career and work profiles, and the roles played by education, employers, and young people themselves in this disconnect. We aim to move debates beyond how work or careers should be imagined post-COVID-19, and to question the ways in which young people like Natasha are forming their career identities within these interrelated contexts.

The Q+A episode took place at the beginning of the pandemic, but COVID-19 cannot be assumed to be the sole cause of Natasha’s and other young people’s ‘career shock’.³ It may be tempting to imagine that young people’s employment opportunities would improve as the public health impacts of the pandemic recede and economic conditions improve. At the time of writing, overall economic conditions were better than expected, although difficult to fully ascertain given the historically significant economic intervention of governments throughout Australia.

Nevertheless, optimism would be misplaced. Young people's education-to-employment transition has been increasingly challenging over the last two decades.⁴

Like many young people, Natasha appears to be facing precarious economic and employment conditions—a situation not likely to be temporary or short-lived. Nor are young people like Natasha suffering a shock to their careers or life because of the pandemic, which would suggest that this disruption could be managed or overcome. Rather, many young people are confronting a life permanently disrupted—a 'continuous present' where their futures seem to be not only deferred, but out of control.⁵ We propose that, in 2021, young people are inhabiting inherently insecure lives that are being constructed *for* them, rather than *by* them, and are suffering prolonged disadvantage. While this discussion focuses on young people's employment and careers, we would like to emphasise from the outset that education serves a wider set of purposes than just the economy.

So, who do we mean by young people? For the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations defined young people as between 15 and 24 years of age.⁶ This definition is also widely used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), but even within major Australian data sources discrepancies emerge. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, for example, has previously adopted a definition which includes those aged 12 to 24.⁷ Other differences emerge depending on the perspective taken. For instance, psychological and biological lenses that focus on young people's development⁸ may differ from sociological views that consider the influence of culture, society, or socio-economic status.⁹ 'Youth' as a category does not emerge separately from its political context, cultural and social values, or economic approaches. Rather, it is produced and shaped by these processes in a continuous and intricate manner.¹⁰ Sociologists have long viewed distinctions between youth and adulthood as problematic and changing.¹¹ Demographic changes and the standardisation of the young lifestyle have reshaped what constitutes being young.¹² Often, experiences and phenomena associated with being an adult, such as starting a family and securing a home, are stretched out later in life. While definitions of young people are contextually bound, fluid and elastic, in this paper we define young people as between the ages of 15 and 30 years of age.

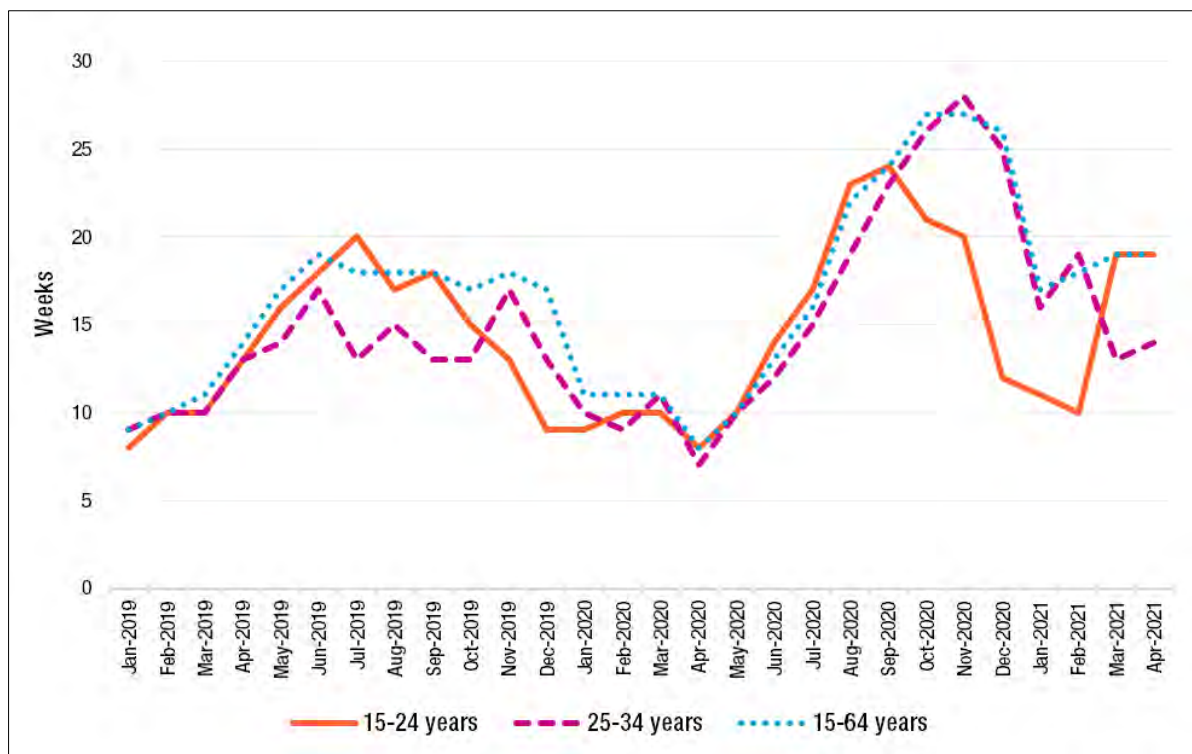


Present reality

The past year was not a turning point in the global economy—it was an escalation of longer-term labour market trends that have profound significance for young people. The emergence of COVID-19 has served to accentuate existing fault lines in current employment markets and in the expected relationships and linear progressions between education and work. The economic impact of the pandemic has been swift and pronounced. S&P Global issued an early warning that the world would suffer a global economic recession due to the coronavirus pandemic, with unemployment in Australia likely to go to the highest level since 1998.¹³ Although older people are more at risk in terms of health, the number of reported cases remains the highest in the 20–29 years age category,¹⁴ and so the virus remains a health issue for young people. Arguably, young people have been most affected by the economic impacts.

Like many young people, Natasha appears to be facing precarious economic and employment conditions and, although this situation can appear temporary from a macroeconomic standpoint, it can, nevertheless, cause significant stress for individuals. Young people face multiple complex challenges associated with labour market entry. In particular, looking for a job can be stressful for young people with little to no previous work experience, especially so if the search continues for an extended period of time. For example, in 2019, Australians aged between 15 and 24 years spent between 8 and 20 weeks searching for a job; this increased to between 8 and 24 weeks in 2020, with the longest period registered in September (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Median duration of job search in weeks



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021, cat. no. 6291.0.55.001

This figure also reveals that in the next statistical age cohort (25 to 34), the period of job search was even longer, peaking at 28 weeks in November 2020. As lockdown restrictions began to ease later in 2020, it appeared that young people could find work relatively easily once again and, by October, the median time taken searching for a job decreased (21 weeks), with a further decrease by December (12 weeks). While some commentators have suggested this is a sign of economic recovery,^{15,16,17} this trend needs to be interpreted with caution. Young people may have taken less time to find a job, but types of jobs available tended to be seasonal, part-time, casual, low-wage, and insecure, and were mostly concentrated in just a few industries such as accommodation and food services (45 per cent), retail trade (31 per cent), and arts and recreation (23 per cent).¹⁸

The fact that those in the 25 to 34 age group continue to take longer to find work may be because they are not willing to take on this type of unreliable, insecure, part-time and low-wage employment at their stage of life.

During the first six months of the pandemic, over 30 per cent of workers lost employment across the accommodation and food services sectors, which are major employers of young people. Those aged 20 to 29 were among the worst affected. Economy wide, 18.5 per cent of jobs for people under the age of 20 disappeared.¹⁹ From March to May 2020, underutilisation (the combination of underemployment and unemployment expressed as a percentage of the labour force) skyrocketed. The rate among young people, especially young women, was particularly severe. By July 2020, 13 per cent of women under 25 had left the labour force in Australia and 157,000 teenagers had lost work. Many gave up looking.²⁰

History repeating

I think undoubtedly young people have been hit very hard by this, and that's the nature of how this has hit us . . . every piece of data will tell you that this has been the swiftest, deepest economic decline probably in history. The Bank of England says this is the deepest recession in 300 years, so that gives you the context. And the Great Depression lasted from 1929 to 1940 before the war kicked in and unemployment was at its deepest in 1937. So, it was a long, slow burn with that one. This has been swift and brutal. And young people have been at the brunt of it because of the way that it's impacted and the way that it's unfolded with those public-facing jobs, unfortunately, going first. That's where a lot of young people work, it's where they get their start in their careers.

Innes Willox

Australia Industry Group, Q+A panel member, 05:28

Past experience leads us to expect that the unfolding economic downturn would have a disproportionately negative impact on young people seeking work and those in work. The global financial crisis (GFC) of 2007–8 had immediate and long-term effects on young people throughout the world.²¹

While Australia fared relatively well during the GFC, young Australians felt its impact quickly and disproportionately compared to the working population as a whole. Of the net 30,600 jobs lost between January and July 2009, all but 400 were held by teenagers. While most jobs lost by adults were replaced with new jobs offered to adults, teenage unemployment climbed.²² Prior to COVID-19, youth unemployment in Australia was approximately double that of the overall working population,²³ despite nearly three decades of unbroken economic growth. Arguably, the generation affected by the GFC had yet to fully recover prior to the downturn amplified by COVID-19. As one journalist noted, ‘while the percentage of prime-age workers has increased since the GFC . . . the level of youth in employment has fallen off a cliff’.²⁴ Flowing beneath recent economic downturns has been the rise of insecure work.

The rise of precarious work

What [the economic fallout from the pandemic] has highlighted is the failure of casualisation across the workforce, particularly for young people. We have one of the highest rates of casualisation in the developed world. For young people, that’s been particularly difficult. We’re predominantly employed in industries like retail, like cafes and bars and restaurants—all those industries that have been really, really difficultly hit for young people. And this is the outcome of that. [. . .] We need to learn from the mistakes of the past. And we need to forge a future where young people do have opportunities, [so] this doesn’t happen again.

Sophie Johnston

Youth Commissioner, Q+A panel member, 04:17

During recent decades, throughout the world there has been a steady rise of non-standard forms of employment, such as temporary and part-time employment, on-call and short-term agency jobs, spurred by labour market regulations as well as macroeconomic and technological and demographic change.²⁵ According to one estimation, 36 per cent of Australian jobs face ‘a significant or high risk of automation’.²⁶ One North American study suggested that as much as 47 per cent of occupations may be at risk of some degree of automation in the coming decades.²⁷ Further, demographic change has seen the labour force participation rate of Australians over the age of 65 years grow,²⁸ intensifying labour market competition for work.

According to the OECD, ‘Australia has one of the highest shares (13 per cent) of employees working in short part-time jobs (defined as working 1–19 hours per week) among OECD countries’.^{26 p.1} Young people are also more likely to be in part-time jobs.²⁹

Casual work was pervasive prior to the pandemic, with one in four Australian workers employed in a casual position. More than half of these had no guaranteed hours.²⁶ This trend can be traced back to the end of the 1990s.³⁰ Many of these casual employees have been with their employer for reasonably long periods—over half of the 2.6 million casual workers in Australia had been with their current employer for at least twelve months; approximately 192,000

had been with their employer for over a decade.³¹ Casual work has thus become a fixture in the lives of many Australians, as with other people around the world.

Young people in casual work are typically the first to lose their jobs or experience precarious living during an economic downturn. Employees in part-time and casual work in general are particularly vulnerable to downturns. They either cannot find any work, or not enough work.

Underemployment, defined by the ABS as part-time workers who are available to work more hours, rose significantly during the recession of the 1990s and following the GFC, and it continues to rise. Since 2007, the rate of underemployment has been high in Australia compared to other OECD countries.²⁶ By 2017, underemployment had reached the highest level in the four decades since the measure officially began, with almost one in three young people unemployed or underemployed.³² Citing ABS data, the Reserve Bank of Australia³³ highlighted this upward trend (Figure 2). Notable spikes in underemployment appear at times of recession, such as during the GFC and in the early 1990s.

Figure 2: Youth underemployment trend (15–24 years)



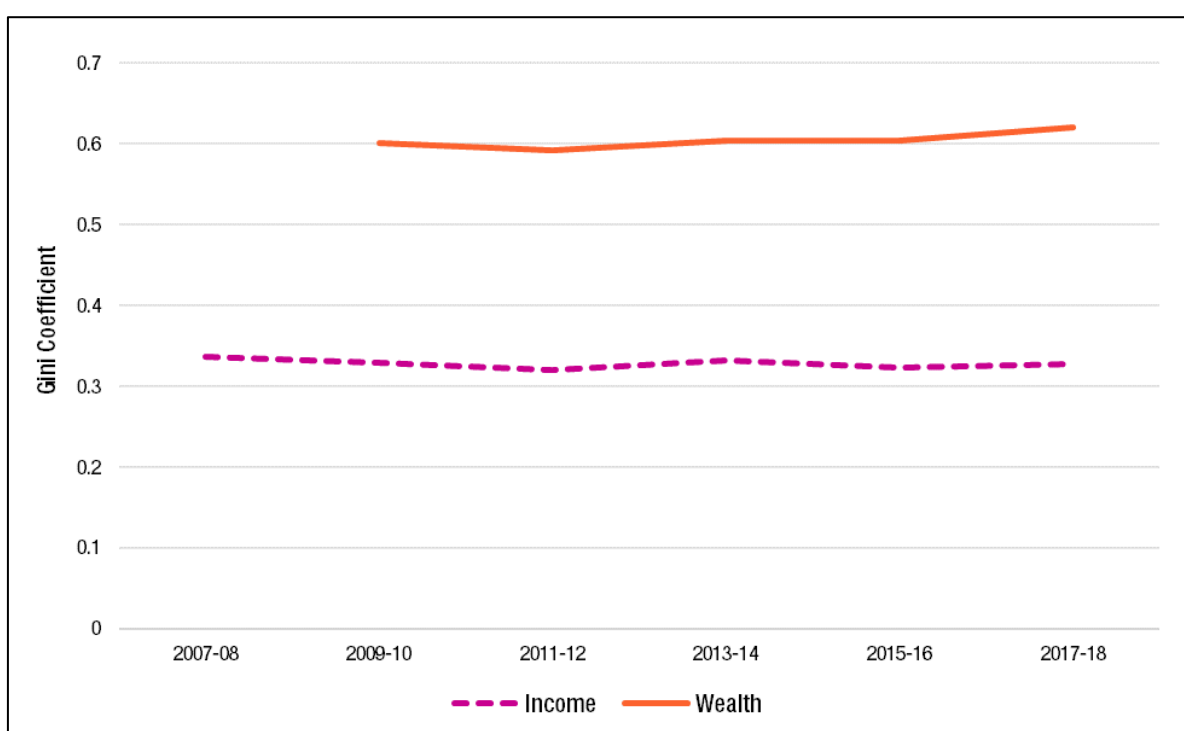
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021, cat. no. 6202.0

Although gender inequality has been steadily reducing in terms of youth unemployment, new inequalities appear in underemployment, with higher underemployment rates being observed for males than for females.³⁴ Rates of underutilisation (both unemployment and underemployment) in Australia are striking because, unlike comparable economies such as the UK, in Australia they increased during decades of economic growth.²¹

Rising wealth inequality

These trends in the labour market occur in a context of inequality that has been persistent at best, if not increasing.^{35,36} The Gini coefficient is an indicator of income or wealth concentration commonly used to measure inequality. A coefficient of zero indicates complete equality and a coefficient of one indicates that only one person owns all the income or wealth (complete inequality). When used as an indicator of income inequality, the Gini coefficient in Australia has remained relatively unchanged at around 0.33.³⁷ When used as an indicator of wealth inequality, this coefficient increased 3.2 per cent, from 0.6 in 2009–10 to 0.621 in 2017–18.³⁸ Overall, these numbers indicate that inequality in Australia has stubbornly remained at similar levels for ten years (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Australia's income and wealth inequality



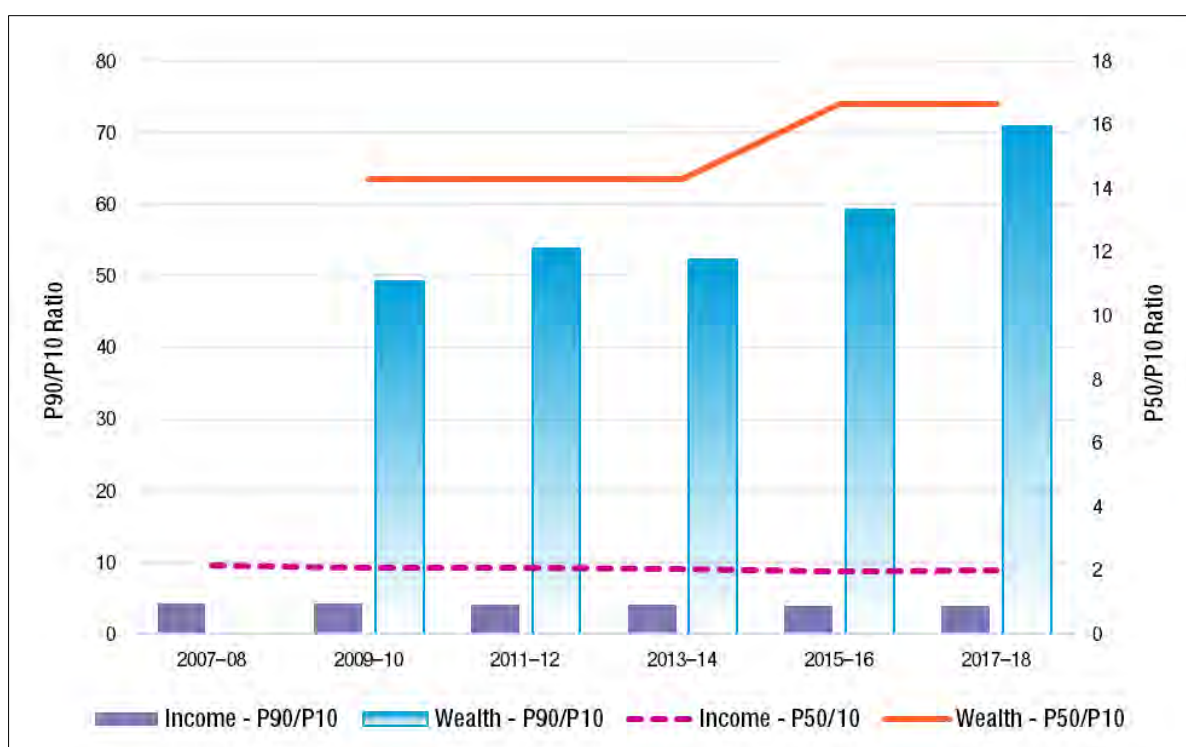
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019, cat. nos 6202.0 & 6302.0

When taking a closer look at the income and wealth distribution, it becomes clear that inequality is more complex than suggested by the Gini coefficient. An alternative way of measuring inequality is using ratios to compare those at the top (P90), middle (P50) and bottom (P10) of the income and wealth distributions (Figure 4). Income inequality decreased between those in the middle and those at the bottom (P50/P10) by 8 per cent from around 2.2 in 2007–08 to 2.0 in 2017–18, and by 8.5 per cent from around 4.4 to 4.0 between those at the top and at the bottom (P90/P10) of the distribution.³⁷ In other words, taking the income of those at the bottom of the distribution as a reference, the income of those in the middle was twice that size and the income for those at the top was four times that size in 2017–18, after decreasing since 2007–08. However, wealth inequality has increased.

In 2017–18, the wealthiest 10 per cent of households (P90) amassed around 71 times the wealth of the 10 per cent least wealthy (P10), an increase of 44 per cent since 2009–10. A more modest increase of 16.7 per cent has also occurred between the middle (P50) and bottom (P10) households in the wealth distribution, with those in the middle accumulating around 17 times the wealth of those at the bottom in 2017–18.³⁸

Hence, despite improvements in inequality in the labour market, such as the 13.4 per cent narrowing in the gender pay gap between May 2012 and November 2020,³⁹ a reduction of 7.2 per cent in the income gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous households,⁴⁰ and the decrease in income inequality discussed above, young Australians face a society with entrenched wealth inequality.

Figure 4: Australia's income and wealth distribution

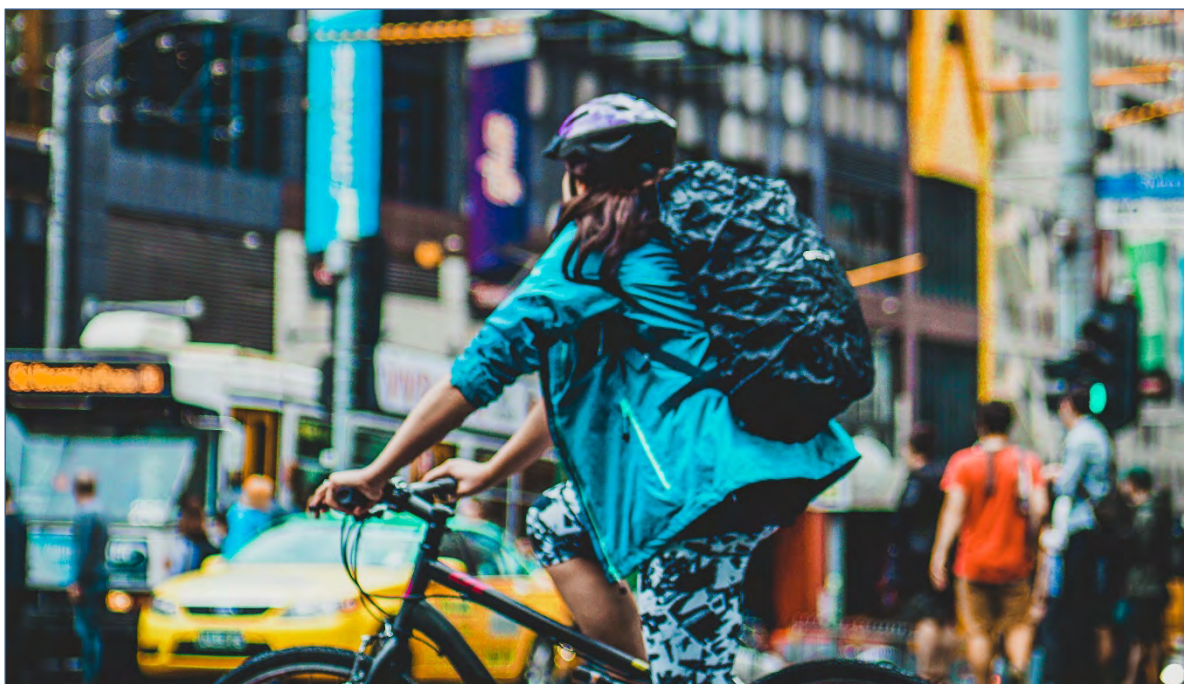


Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019, cat. nos 6202.0 & 6302.0

Credential inflation and the ever-changing occupational structure

Another significant concern for young people is the breakdown of a long-held assumption that higher education qualifications will lead to desirable and secure work.^{4,41} Higher education participation rates are at record highs,⁴² with enrolments up 41 per cent in the last decade.⁴³ In 2018, nearly 1.5 million students (71 per cent of whom were domestic students) were studying at Australian universities, largely in the areas of business, arts, health and education (66 per cent of enrolled students). Of the domestic students enrolled, 73 per cent were undertaking bachelor qualifications. Just over three-quarters (77 per cent) of these undergraduate students were aged between 18 and 24 years and in the first year of their degree.⁴³

Recent data has indicated that even well-educated young people are increasingly likely to enter low-paid employment in Australia.²⁶ Not only are there fewer full-time permanent jobs available for the increasing numbers of highly qualified job seekers,⁴ but graduates have reported experiencing labour market mismatches despite their qualifications, including skill underutilisation, poor job quality and limited choices.⁴⁴ Recent studies of both international and Australian graduates have identified characterisations of young people as overeducated and over-skilled as significant issues for policy-makers and employers.^{45,46} But these characterisations assume that, as well as a minimum standard of educational attainment, there is an upper limit to the level of education and skills required for a particular job. Does learning have a ceiling?



Although overeducation and over-skilling are contentious terms, more university graduates are entering the labour market in areas where credential inflation might occur.⁴⁷ This process is largely driven by broader macroeconomic and microeconomic trends. Because the economy is always in a state of dynamic flux, the occupational structure constantly changes as new jobs emerge. Newly needed, newly valued skills gradually grow out of existing

occupations and new in-demand jobs emerge which, initially, command high salaries.⁴⁸ This process takes a number of years to fully materialise. Over time, these successful, in-demand occupations, largely generated in the economy with relatively little innovative inputs from the education system, are deconstructed by the mass tertiary education system. Universities and higher educational institutions then begin to roll out programmes around credentials designed to signal elements of employability regarding these new jobs. However, as more graduates with similar credentials enter the job market, earnings in the corresponding occupations tend to decrease. All in all, this may drive an overall drop in the earning premium associated with any tertiary degree. For example, holding a Bachelor degree was associated with a roughly 39 per cent earning premium in 2005 in Australia while the OECD average was 62 per cent.⁴⁹ In contrast, the earning premium fell to about 27 per cent by 2018, while the corresponding OECD average was 43 per cent in the same year.⁵⁰

In Australia, the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment has been administering the Graduate Outcomes Survey since 2016, although statistics on graduate outcomes have been available since 1996.⁵¹ These show that work participation rates changed between 2019 and 2020. The demonstrated downturn in graduate employment outcomes ‘is likely the result of both the pandemic and general labour market conditions’,⁵² but this downturn did not automatically result in more graduates re-entering higher education (Table 1). This appears contrary to the notion that, in economically challenging times, ‘more seats in institutions of higher education are sold’.⁵³ For example, the proportion of people who completed undergraduate degrees returning to full-time study did not change significantly from 2019 (18.9 per cent) to 2020 (18.5 per cent). There is, however, a noticeable increase in graduates from research-based degrees returning to further full-time study (from 5.8 per cent in 2019 to 7.1 per cent in 2020). One explanation for this is that some form of sheltering is taking place for this cohort, with some people continuing to study to avoid changing labour market conditions, such as higher rates of unemployment.^{54,55}

The proportion of those with undergraduate qualifications working full-time after graduating fell from 72.2 per cent (2019) to 68.7 per cent (2020) which illustrates that full participation in the labour market is challenging for new graduates in the latest economic downturn triggered by the pandemic.

Table 1: Graduate employment and study outcomes 2019–2020

	UGRAD 2019	UGRAD 2020	PGRAD C/W 2019	PGRAD C/W 2020	PGRAD RES 2019	PGRAD RES 2020
In full-time study (%)	18.9	18.5	6.0	6.7	5.8	7.1
In full-time work (as a proportion of those available) (%)	72.2	68.7	86.8	85.6	81.1	80.1
Overall employed (as a proportion of those available for any work) (%)	86.8	85.1	92.7	91.6	90.7	90.0
Median salary (employed full-time) (\$)	62 600	64 700	85 300	87 400	90 000	93 000

Source: Social Research Centre, Graduate Outcomes Survey 2020, National Report

Generally, increased participation in higher education changes the nature of educational credentials, and they become relative, positional goods rather than absolute markers of distinction or excellence that would ensure desired labour market outcomes.⁵⁶ This phenomenon has been referred to as an ‘educational arms race’.⁵⁷ Hirsch⁵⁸ described the relative nature of educational credentials using a metaphor of queuing. When we line up for jobs, the value of our credentials largely depends on the qualifications of those lined up with us. While we can find pleasure in educating ourselves throughout the life course, we cannot expect that securing more and more advanced credentials will automatically lead to better jobs. In Hirsch’s words, ‘education enjoyed in its own right is capable of indefinite extension; as an instrument for entrée into top jobs, it is not’.⁵⁸ Yet, striving for more education becomes a collective response by job seekers hoping to secure desired employment. Pursuing educational credentials becomes a form of defensive consumption and a regrettable necessity through which we might get ahead of others in the job queue. It is important to remember that the incredibly rich set of social outcomes of education cannot be reduced only to measures of earning capacity. The social outcomes of education are broad in range and refer to better health and wellbeing, higher social trust,⁵⁹ increased civic participation,⁶⁰ and a range of skills and competencies generated in various contexts of learning.^{61,62}



PRESENT LIFE, DISRUPTED



Right now, like, all my friends, all my uni mates, all we think about is there used to be this very stepping-stone way of getting to things. You build experience, you do internships, it builds networks and opportunities. But that seems to be very paused or, like, it's almost obsolete now. So, I feel like government answers are always great but, right now, all we can think about is: What are we going to do next? What's literally next?

Natasha

University student, *Q+A* audience member, 14:16

Natasha seems to speak with some anxiety of an unknown and insecure future. This anxiety may stem not just from the reality of the contemporary employment market and employability challenges, but from the perception that control of her planned, linear progression towards desired career outcomes has been taken away from her. Job security continues to be important, but where employers were once seen to provide security, the onus has shifted to young people to gain the skills and capabilities to pave their own stepping stones, which are made slippery by a changing workforce. With no alternative, the impetus is placed upon young individuals to work within a game of endless self-curation.

Current challenges can and are having deleterious impacts on young people. Feelings of ‘being stuck’ and of ‘putting personal lives on hold’ arise because there are real and perceived employment and career blocks.^{63,64}

Insecurity not only curtails the ability of young people to make future milestone decisions and plans about, for example, family and career, it also influences the ways in which their confidence and identities are developed.^{65,66} What is most concerning is that the impacts of economic and employment precarity appear to be persistent and enduring features of young people’s lives and incite pervasive and prolonged feelings of uncertainty. These then force young people to inhabit a continuous present,⁵ and they lose their sense of control—that their future is theirs to craft.



Past career paradigms

What role do different actors play in creating careers for young people?

Over several years, people like Natasha have likely made career decisions through interactions with ‘familiaris’ such as family, friends, teachers at school, coaches, employers and mentors.⁶⁷ In similar ways to young people featured in recent Australian and international studies,^{68,69,70,71} career aspirations have likely been formed in young people’s

early years, and been limited and narrowed over time by their social context, as well as what they see and hear from the people around them on social media and in popular news.⁷² Natasha might define a career as an occupation or job that appeals to her, being ‘hugely influenced . . . by the depth and breadth of [her] knowledge about the world of work’⁷⁰ and bring her ‘own assumptions and prejudices into [this] career thinking’.⁷³



From Natasha’s comments during the *Q+A* episode, her career imaginary appears to be a traditional one. She is not unique in this regard. A recent major international study by the OECD, based on the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey of over 600,000 15-year-olds from 79 countries and economic areas, found that a vast majority articulated traditional conceptualisations of careers as ‘20th century, and even 19th century, occupations’⁷⁰ and aspired to career trajectories that were both professional in nature (requiring tertiary qualifications) and status-oriented. In Australia, 52 per cent of girls and 42 per cent of boys expected to work in one of the ten most commonly cited jobs by age 30, including being a doctor, business manager, engineer, lawyer, veterinarian, architect or psychologist.⁷⁰

This imagination of a career as an occupation stems, in part, from early twentieth century vocational psychology.⁷⁴ This theorised that a person’s career as a particular occupation would be held for their life-time because it matched that person’s skills, interests, goals and personality and allowed them to practice and master what they did best. This occupational-matching model of careers has a rich history in vocational psychological research and practice, and influences strongly to this day how different people think about themselves relative to certain occupations.⁷⁵

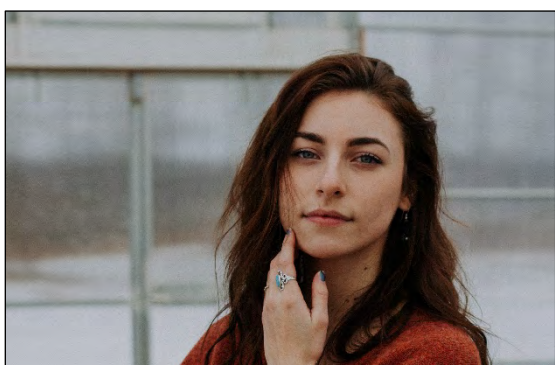
Natasha also implies that a career is a linear progression. This view is described in the sociological works of academics in the 1970s,^{76,77} who observed the interrelationship between a person’s career and organisational dynamics during a period marked by globally stable employment markets. To ensure productivity, efficiency and continuity, organisations secured long-term commitments from employees through the creation of career structures

and systems that were imbued with a ‘logic of advancement’.⁷⁸ These strategies saw employees move up organisational hierarchies through well-defined positions and be rewarded with increasingly higher levels of pay and status.

These traditional career conceptualisations dominated business-school thinking and academic literature until the 1980s, when non-standard forms of employment, such as short-term contracts and part-time work, became more prevalent as global economic conditions changed.^{79,80} By the 1990s, mass organisational restructures, workforce downsizing and the flattening of traditional organisational practices and hierarchies had been triggered globally. Several contemporary studies at the time reported that, as a result, career profiles for many employees changed from stable, secure and hierarchical to uncertain and insecure.^{81,82} This has led international and Australian researchers to question whether a single, linear, long-term, upwardly-trajectorial career has ceased to exist.^{83,84,41}

Even before COVID-19, other disruptions, including rapid technological advancement, climate change and, in some countries, ageing workforces, destabilised global employment markets and reshaped work profiles. These changes have seen increasing numbers of people engaged in transient, insecure, under-employed and short-term work.²⁵ Contemporary career imaginaries have also been forced to shift from ideas of occupations or a sequence of organisational roles and statuses to notions of inter-organisational mobility, flexibility, capacity for temporary and multiple employer relationships, and individual accountability for adaptable career management and ambition.^{79,85} Terms such as ‘boundaryless’, ‘protean’, ‘portfolio’, and ‘kaleidoscope’ have entered the vocabulary to capture what a person’s career can look like in the current employment landscapes.⁸⁶

Despite the changes that have occurred over several decades, occupational status, longevity, advancement and reward have endured as career ideals in young people’s minds.^{70,80} Young Australians accept the probability of precarious employment during their secondary, vocational or higher education, but they also expect to secure full-time, permanent employment post-education⁸⁷ and that such employment will be related to their chosen career.⁸⁸ Although young workers in Australia and in other countries may be anxious about their long-range career prospects, they still aspire to stable, long-term careers that are fashioned along traditional lines.^{89,90,91} Further, they may acknowledge that unpredictable and fluid work environments put more onus on them to be skilled, flexible and mobile, but their call to employers is for a genuine career, not a ‘career portfolio’.⁹² Young people want rapid career progression and increasing pay rates aligned with promotions, and are frustrated with the lack of available vertical career options relative to their parents’ generation.^{92,93,94}



What is the new ‘career normal’?

Out of this [COVID-19 pandemic] will come different jobs, a different sort of economy, a new normal.

Innes Willox

Australia Industry Group, *Q+A* panel member, 14.57

There have been lively debates on the main characteristics of jobs and careers in an advanced, increasingly digital economy, sometimes referred to as Industry 4.0.⁹⁵ Increasing numbers of freelance or portfolio work reflect the rise of the gig economy.⁹⁶ Digital platform-mediated work emerged around 2008, with Uber and Airbnb among the early innovating pioneers.⁹⁷ Described in early discussions as the ‘shared economy’, platform-mediated work progressively came to be known as gig work – temporary contract work that connects self-employed workers directly with clients via digital platforms.⁹⁸ All technological innovations carry with them the possibility of associated disasters⁹⁹ and, alongside early adopters who emphasise the benefits, digital platform-mediated works, have their sceptics who caution against putting too much faith in them.

In the *Q+A* episode, Tim Fung, CEO of Airtasker presented the gig economy as an enabling job-mediator in the contemporary labour landscape. According to this view, the availability of gig work is a progressive step forward as it allows jobseekers to find flexible jobs, however temporary and insecure they may be, when conventional, full-time and secure employment is not an option. Opposing this enthusiastic presentation of the gig economy by one of its financial beneficiaries, Youth Commissioner Sophie Johnston points to the darker sides of platform-mediated work. Gig work offers little to no work protection, does not allow workers to organise themselves against employer misconduct or unfair treatment as unions do, and provides insecure, casual jobs built around disconnected mundane tasks that offer minimal job satisfaction.

The exchange between Tim Fung and Sophie Johnston reflects emerging debates between advocates and critics of the gig economy about the acceptable and probable nature of future work and careers. For gig economy advocates, such work provides flexible, boundaryless career opportunities for individuals, allows for greater work autonomy, and offers the ability to integrate work–life balance and tailored career development and experiences.¹⁰⁰ In contrast, labour activists point out that gig work is largely unregulated and is associated with increased risks for workers, such as including low or sporadic pay, lack of welfare coverage, social isolation, overwork, fewer developmental opportunities and lack of union protection.^{101,97,102} One side espouses that individualised, whole-of-life careers are the result of such work, the other argues that ‘real’ jobs rarely exist in the gig economy, let alone careers.

Do these new working conditions represent an advantage or a disadvantage for young people? The COVID-19 pandemic may well be the push needed for key actors, such as school-based leaders and careers practitioners, to question, reconsider and reform what contemporary careers and associated attitudes, competencies and

development mean, and should mean, for young Australians. Tim Fung's assertion that traditional views regarding job and career security are rather outdated and unhelpful deserves serious consideration.

One recently proposed conceptualisation of a career is that of a sustainable career, which consists of work experiences across an individual's lifespan that intersect with multiple life domains, particularly work, social life and family.^{103,104} The idea of a sustainable career came from a consideration of contemporary economic and social factors, such as the ways in which increasingly complex global employment markets impact employee-employer relationships, as well as different work profiles. It is differentiated from other career conceptualisations by its 'explicit and strong focus on both individual and contextual elements related to career management'.¹⁰⁵

Thinking about a career in this way is not new—it is neither related to COVID-19 nor is it a typology that fits the gig economy or this generation of young people.¹⁰⁶ Life-span, contextual and process-oriented notions of careers have been theorised for decades¹⁰⁷ and have been relevant for decades, given the ever-changing shapes of global economies, political landscapes, education systems and employment.

So why do traditional career images, aspirations and notions of success prevail?

Careers education during secondary schooling

A key site where young people's career aspirations are shaped is the school.

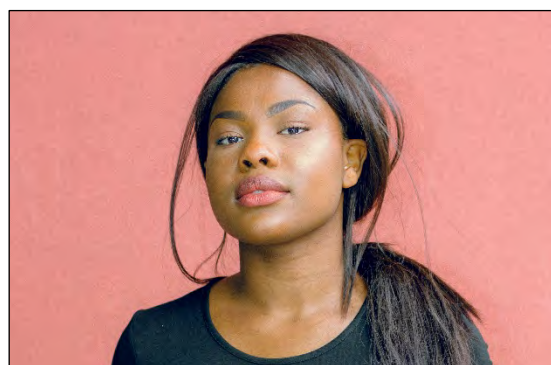
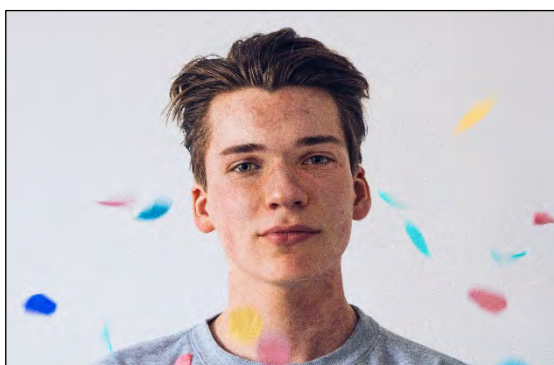
*For governments and schools, it is the role of career guidance to ensure that young people go through education and training and into the labour market with understanding and confidence.*¹⁰⁸



Career advisors within the school system play an essential role in helping students navigate the transition between education and employment. The entire, multifaceted burden of labour market entry should not be placed solely on one particular occupational group, but it is reasonable to ask if careers education, particularly in Australian secondary schools, is helping students to move into different jobs or education pathways.

Schools have long been criticised as demoting careers education, of viewing it as ‘extra-curricular activities taking time away from the curriculum that really matters and is assessable’.¹⁰⁹ This criticism goes hand-in-hand with a perceived emphasis on academic outcomes and tertiary destinations post-school as measures of students’ success.^{110,111,112} In a recent large-scale study of Australian school students, 55 per cent felt that their schools cared more about their Year 12 ATAR results than they did about what happened to students as people. A similar proportion stated that they faced either ‘too much’ or an ‘incredible amount’ of pressure from their school to enter university after leaving school.¹¹³

These practices are concerning, and the Australian government has recently refocused on the value of careers education.¹¹⁴ Other studies show that many Australian students enrol at university without knowing why they are doing so, what courses would be best for them, or what employment could result from their qualifications.^{115,116} In many cases, students enrol with no intentions of completing, drop out and, in hindsight, believe they should not have started in the first place.¹¹⁷ Once at university, things do not seem to improve. One recent Australian study found that a majority of participating students had a limited understanding of the careers to which their courses might lead, and of the relevance of postgraduate study to their chosen career goals.¹¹⁸



Information and advice provided to school students can depend on teachers' and advisors' preconceptions of which students are better suited to tertiary education pathways.^{119,120} Advice provided to students regarding alternative post-school pathways has been found to be at times untrustworthy, uneven or based on inadequate knowledge.^{113,121}

Even if tertiary study is the right pathway for an individual, the careers advice is likely to be caught in old paradigms of occupations and work that help fuel expectations of a long-term, single professional career.¹²² Studies have shown that many young people are influenced by cultural messages, particularly from their families, that encourage them to aspire to perceived prestigious or professional occupations.^{68,123,124,125} These messages are then reinforced in school environments, where careers practitioners not only favour occupational-matching approaches when offering advice to students,⁷⁵ but do so in ways that imply that going to university post-school will result in a 'good' career, whilst not going to university will result in a 'bad' one.^{67,112,122,126}



What about providing better, and publicly available, graduate employability information so that young people could make optimal educational and career decisions? The argument here is that providing comprehensive statistical information on graduate employability outcomes (earning premium included) of educational qualifications in the present job climate could be a natural deterrent against making 'suboptimal' individual educational and, consequently, career choices. Current employment statistics could then be deployed to steer people into in-demand educational and occupational fields.

There is nothing inherently wrong with providing comprehensive labour statistics on occupational outcomes of educational fields and students and their parents and carers would no doubt find them informative. But the value of using such incomplete data to help students plan their near-future education to match with jobs that may be available only in the distant future is questionable. The time between the first inception of a particular career idea, choosing a corresponding educational pathway, then taking up a matching occupation can easily stretch to ten years. Due to the unpredictable influence of geopolitics and international trade relationships on the future employment climate in the globalised and increasingly digital economy, the occupational structure may go through drastic changes during

this time. Labour market volatility and periods of economic booms and busts are inherent components of capitalism and they make even the most thoughtful planning of any particular career trajectory challenging.

How do we connect the need for careers education to inform students about the current labour market conditions to notions around the fairness of those conditions? A current problem with careers education is that it seems to take the labour market as given, as though little can be done to change the conditions. In addition, careers education continues to be relegated to the periphery of crowded school curricula. Careers education could refocus on the necessary skills to navigate contemporary work. The Foundation for Young Australians¹²⁷ suggests that jobs can be grouped into clusters that require similar skill sets. But this skills-focused approach is also problematic.

Perpetual portability and the ‘permaflexi’ employee

Employers have been telling us now for a very long time that there is that disconnect between what they need and want, and [what] they will need in the future, and what the education system provides. And that’s why employers, more and more, are looking at experiences in a much broader sense than just simply the piece of paper.

Innes Willox

Australia Industry Group, Q+A panel member, 18:32

The call for young Australians to develop ‘employability’ or ‘transferable’ or ‘soft skills’ is not new—businesses have been leading the demand for more ‘work ready’ young people for several years.^{128,129} One of the most persistent criticisms of contemporary education is that it allegedly does not teach or create a range of employability skills in students at either secondary or tertiary levels. In the views of some business advocates, education needs to change so that it is more responsive to labour market demands.

There are several issues regarding the development of employability skills that are important to understand. Young people may develop such skills during their secondary schooling, but may not be able to evidence these when applying for jobs. Working out how to teach and reliably assess a broad range of employability skills is a challenging task for education systems. Progress has been slow, and while assessment efforts are currently underway, they are far from complete. For example, the OECD has published its draft analytical frameworks on creative thinking, information and communication technology (ICT), and financial literacy, which are due to be implemented in the next round of PISA in 2022.¹³⁰

Policy researchers and curriculum authorities have tried to expand conventional learning assessment to include critical thinking. Critical and creative thinking has been measured in the Victorian curriculum since 2016.¹³¹ The Australian Council for Educational Research (the National Project Manager for PISA 2022) recently set up the Centre

for Assessment Reform and Innovation to develop comprehensive analytical and methodological frameworks to assess some of the commonly described soft skills,¹³² or 21st century skills. Ten of these have been identified:¹³³

1. Creativity and innovation
2. Critical thinking and problem solving
3. Learning to learn, or metacognition
4. Communication
5. Collaboration or teamwork
6. Information literacy
7. Information and communication technology (ICT) literacy
8. Citizenship (local and global)
9. Life and career
10. Personal and social responsibility, including cultural awareness and competence.

Assessing these soft skills is difficult.¹³⁴ These and similar projects tend to undergo extensive pilots and field trials before implementation and, despite commendable aims and efforts, it will take a long time until any assessment tools can be verified and accepted by various stakeholders.

Even if a young person has been assessed as possessing some of these employability skills during their education, they might not be able to apply them in different work settings. Nor may they intend to continue to develop or demonstrate them.¹³⁵ This does not mean that a young person is unemployable or that education has failed to develop their employability. It does highlight the complexity of point-in-time understandings and demonstrations of work readiness.



We will emerge from it, and the economy will change shape, and opportunities will emerge, and it's about having skills that are transferable and portable.

Innes Willox

Australia Industry Group, *Q+A* panel member, 15:07

Not all of these skills are necessary in all work settings for all young people, and different employers will prefer different sets of skills.^{136,137} Context is important when discussing skills attainment and assessment in education settings. Generic models of assessment that presuppose equality and objectivity in education, and assume students can overcome systemic barriers to attain all skills, are not sustainable. In such models, if a student cannot attain a skill, or does not want to, or only does so poorly, they risk being judged and stratified accordingly. In Australia and internationally, educators should be challenged to think and teach beyond such assessment approaches and help students to connect individual skill development with future career self-images.²⁰

The idea that school and tertiary education systems can target qualifications and skills to the needs of business and the future of work is a fallacy: 'the gig economy has eclipsed the idea that there is a linear relationship between education and work'.⁴ This does not mean that young people will not need to constantly upgrade their educational qualifications to secure or maintain employment in any form—they will. Nor will their qualifications guarantee satisfactory, let alone desired, career outcomes—they will not. It also does not mean that qualifications alone will be enough to gain employment. Well before the advent of COVID-19, international academic literature documented employers' preferences for role-compatible work experience and skills when making hiring decisions.¹³⁸ The importance of personal skills and experience, alongside higher education credentials, for employability and employment leverage has continued as a strong youth research theme.^{139,140,141} In 2021, 'you need to have skills' is still a persistent youth mantra.

I think young people just really need to invest into this number one asset that they have, which is their skills.

Tim Fung

Airtasker, *Q+A* panel member, 14:01

Australian students like Natasha are concerned that they do not possess the relevant experience and skills to gain the careers that they want in the current competitive employment environment.¹⁴² In response to this constant push to upskill, young people are compelled to be more adaptive and seek experiences to improve their employability.^{89,143,144} They are bolstering their skills and knowledge by participating in extracurricular activities, work experience and volunteering.¹⁴⁵ Yet, this is creating concern for them,⁴¹ which will only be exacerbated in post-

pandemic times. They not only feel pressured to seek credentials and experiences to improve their employability in competitive employment markets,^{89,144} but feel disillusioned and betrayed by the trap in which they find themselves.⁴ Listening to Natasha, she seems fearful of this trap and that her efforts will be for naught. Danielle Wood sympathises:

I would say it's incredibly tough, Natasha. You know, even before the COVID crisis hit. What we know is that it was taking university graduates longer to find that first permanent role. Often, they were cobbling together casual work or part-time work to get some experience before they landed a role in their particular sector. So, there is no easy answer.

Danielle Wood

Grattan Institute, *Q+A* panel member, 11:57

Current employment market realities necessitate students' employability narratives to be ones of 'self-enterprise', where they consciously and constantly better themselves and relate 'to others as competitors and [their] own being as a form of human capital'.¹⁴⁶

It is unclear how far a positive attitude and the constant building of skills and social capital will take young people beyond enabling them to tread water in the sea of global uncertainty. While current experiences of uncertainty are indeed very real, from a labour market perspective, uncertainty is itself wreaking havoc globally and further entrenching social inequality. But there are other deeper changes taking place here.



This has been absolutely devastating, this crisis. What I would say to those young people is: We do know from past economic downturns that things do get better. I understand it's hard now. It looks like a pretty devastating outlook. But things will improve. So, hang in there, use the time to build capital. Go out. Get a new skill.

Danielle Wood

Grattan Institute, Q+A panel member, 55:58

The new normal

In a speech to the National Press Club on 29 July 2020, Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, Kate Carnell, proposed a new award with a 'permaflexi' classification for casual staff, a mode of employment between permanent and casual work. The permaflexi classification was previously mooted in 2019 by the NSW Business Chamber. Under this classification, workers would be entitled to a 10 per cent loading on base pay rates, plus rights normally only available to permanent employees, such as access to holiday pay and sick leave. The proposal also suggested additional flexibilities for employers, for example, making it easier to change employees' hours.

The notion of a permaflexi employee has deeper relevance to the issues raised in this paper. It is not hard to imagine a future in which young people become permaflexi employees, where constantly upgrading skills and living in permanent flux becomes the 'new normal'.

Whether it be climate change, political instability or economic upheaval, we frequently see in mass media references to a new normal. Recounting an article in 1995 by fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly, a reflective blog by David Roberts questions what the new normal might mean in relation to COVID-19 and global warming by evoking the following analogy:

Consider a species of fish that is fished to extinction in a region over, say, 100 years. A given generation of fishers becomes conscious of the fish at a particular level of abundance. When those fishers retire, the level is lower. To the generation that enters after them, that diminished level is the new normal, the new baseline. They rarely know the baseline used by the previous generation; it holds little emotional salience relative to their personal experience. And so it goes, each new generation shifting the baseline downward. By the end, the fishers are operating in a radically degraded ecosystem, but it does not seem that way to them, because their baselines were set at an already low level. Over time, the fish goes extinct—an enormous, tragic loss—but no fisher experiences the full transition from abundance to desolation.¹⁴⁷

There are signs already that young people today are expecting and accepting persistently precarious employment conditions as their 'unremarkable norm'.^{148,149} This is concerning, and in the context of this discussion paper, there is a real risk that future generations will regard such conditions as normal without even questioning if they are disadvantageous. As Roberts suggests:

*Maybe climate chaos, a rising chorus of alarm signals from around the world, will simply become our new normal. Hell, maybe income inequality, political dysfunction, and successive waves of a deadly virus will become our new normal. Maybe we'll just get used to [waves hands] all this. Humans often don't remember what we've lost or demand that it be restored. Rather, we adjust to what we've got.*¹⁴⁷

Natasha's predicament would be familiar to many young Australians (and Australians in general). Hers is a disrupted life. Suspended in time, unable to plan, young people often find themselves struggling to find a track with no map and constantly changing terrain. Precarious living becomes the norm and young people are increasingly expected to learn to live within that new normal. With prolonged uncertainty comes a lack of control, or at the very least a limited range of choices in a life lived in the short term and an expectation that it will be characterised by disruption. Maybe a life of perpetual uncertainty is the new normal. And perhaps, as Beck has observed, some types of uncertainty are 'dependent on human decisions, created by society itself'¹⁵⁰ and *manufactured*. Natasha's story could be the fruition of such manufactured uncertainty.

YOUTH AS DISADVANTAGE



Given the confluence of challenges faced by young people across multiple domains, such as secure employment, home ownership, deterioration of the natural world, prolonged uncertainty and an absence of security, it is possible that the very experience of *being young* is a disadvantage.

Disadvantage is a term with multiple meanings, measurement strategies and policy implications. It can mean that someone does not have access to opportunities, goods or services considered necessary or ideal (disadvantage as deprivation). It can also mean that one group has access to more or better opportunities, goods and services than another (disadvantage as inequality, inequity or injustice).

If being young is a disadvantage because young people cannot access necessary or ideal opportunities, goods or services, who decides what is necessary or ideal? When people aged between 11 and 17 were asked what goods and activities they considered essential to live a normal life, the result was a list of eighteen elements ranging from a computer or other mobile device, a local park or green space, to holidays and extra-curricular activities. By these measures, 49.7 per cent of 11- to 17-year-old Australians are deprived in at least one way.¹⁵¹



For those participating or seeking to participate in the labour market, a job is seen as a means to gain autonomy and flexibility when it comes to spending decisions.¹⁵¹ Leveraging on this sentiment, characteristics such as enhanced work-life balance and autonomy are often highlighted as features of the gig economy by its advocates (such as Airtasker's Tim Fung). If these features are considered necessary or ideal for employment, and they are actually delivered by the gig economy, it could be argued that young people have an advantage over previous generations. However, Youth Commissioner Sophie Johnston's reference to working conditions in the gig economy suggests that necessary, or at least desirable, working conditions include being covered by an enterprise agreement, being paid at least minimum wage, and injury compensation. In contrast to emergent portable and permaflexi

employment conditions, a linear career progression also seems to be an aspiration for young people like Natasha. Young people may be at a disadvantage if they are increasingly deprived of working conditions that some consider essential, and other entitlements such as superannuation, annual leave, penalty rates or workplace accident insurance. Likewise, if young people are less likely to work under these essential conditions than any other group, are they disadvantaged because their conditions are unequal to those of other age groups?

Issues around inequity and injustice also come into question. Why is it that young people are more likely to be deprived of desirable employment opportunities and security? Can it be argued that it is through their own decisions or are there structural forces outside their control that are shaping their choices? The same questions could be asked about home ownership, the natural world, certainty and security in general. Could young people be deprived of some of these and yet not be disadvantaged or does disadvantage involve multiple areas of deprivation?

Is being young a disadvantage? This is a deliberately provocative question, but one worth exploring. It is contentious because the conditions of employment that we describe in this paper are not exclusively confined to young people. Furthermore, many young people will go on to have relatively safe and secure lives. What makes young people distinctive is that they are just starting out in life. They can lack experience and crucial opportunities to develop skills and experiences for life. They can also lack assets on which to fall back and face a confluence of challenges that place them at serious risk of disadvantage.

Conclusion

The past eighteen months have revealed long-term labour market trends and highlighted the impact they have on young people. What appeared to be new economic challenges were, in fact, pre-existing social issues magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these challenges can be traced back to the reassembly and sometimes eradication of conventional occupational structures around the world on the back of post-Cold War globalisation. Automation and digitalisation of industrial production has accelerated this reformation. Job precarity, erosion of working rights, emerging permaflexi arrangements and major shifts in career identity are the consequences. The disruptions caused by the pandemic have highlighted the prolonged disruptions to the daily lives of many young people throughout the world.

The *Q+A* discussion highlighted the fault lines that run through the relationship between education and work, as well as the contested impact of digital disruption on young people. One element that has persisted is the rhetoric of soft skills. Teaching soft skills is challenging but not insurmountable as education systems have been teaching these skills since the beginning of modern public education,^{152,153} often through cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Schools need to recognise that careers can no longer be coupled with the idea of a linear pathway to a traditional occupation. Careers are better thought of as an assemblage of roles, perceptions and attitudes towards work and life across time—a process, not a destination. Lifelong learning is no longer a desirable activity but a necessity, with learning how to learn at its foundation. Opportunities for work-based learning, social interaction and communication are vital to the development of a sustainable career identity.

In focusing on young people's employment and careers, this paper describes one aspect of a bigger picture. While important, education should not exist only to serve the economy. It has always served a wider set of purposes across personal, political and social domains of life.

Young people encounter multiple and intersecting challenges involving multiple areas of disruption that are largely constructed *for* them, rather than *by* them. The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice will start by exploring the question of whether to be young is a disadvantage by bringing together existing indicators of how young people are faring in the form of a Youth Barometer that will examine the pressures felt by Australian youth across social, political, economic and wellbeing indicators. The Centre will explore these trends in relation to education policy and practice. It is our contention that the job of educators is not just about developing in individuals the skills to navigate uncertainty, but to work with our students to imagine and create the conditions for a better, more secure life. Moreover, it is to start a conversation about young people based on a language of possibility and to provide resources to inform and shape their futures. Life need not be one of perpetual disruption.



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