

Career Advice in Australian Secondary Schools: Use and Usefulness

LSAY Research Report 53

Sheldon Rothman and Kylie Hillman

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines young people's participation in career advice activities while at school and their perceptions of the usefulness of the advice they receive. The data are from the 2003 15 year-old cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). Most members of this LSAY Y03 cohort were in Year 10 in 2003. The present report examines how much career advice students accessed in Years 10, 11 and 12 across three years of data collection (2003–2005). A smaller group of the cohort is followed each year; this group was in Year 10 in 2003, Year 11 in 2004, and Year 12 in 2005. For this group of more than 5000 young people, analyses were conducted to determine what influences their perceptions of the usefulness of career advice while at school.

Four major questions guide this report:

1. How widespread is the provision of career advice in Australian schools?
2. How useful do students in Australian schools find this advice, and what types of advice appear to be most useful?
3. Are there some types of student who find career advice more useful?
4. Is there a relationship between perceptions of career advice and school-based measures?

Main findings

Participation in career advice activities

All students in the LSAY Y03 cohort participated in at least one type of career advice activity across Years 10, 11 and 12. Most activity occurred in Year 10, when 99 per cent of students accessed at least one activity. On average, Year 10 and Year 12 students reported accessing five different types of activity, and Year 11 students reported four out of seven selected activities.

There were small differences across States and Territories, with 97 per cent of students in the Australian Capital Territory reporting some type of career advice activity in Year 10 and nearly all students in New South Wales and Victoria reporting activity. By Year 12, participation ranged from 97 to 99 per cent of students. There were no differences in participation between school sectors in Year 10 or in Year 12; in Year 11, however, the proportion of government school students accessing at least one career advice activity (94%) was lower than in other sectors.

Types of career advice activity

The most common type of career advice activity across Years 10, 11 and 12 was the distribution of written material and handouts. In Year 10, 95 per cent of students received such material. This was followed by a talk from the school's career advisor, with 87 per cent of students reporting this activity.

More than one-half of Year 10 students (54%) reported having a talk from a representative of a TAFE institution or a university. By contrast, 76 per cent of Year 12 students reported this activity. During that same period, employer representatives spoke to 54 per cent of Year 10 students and 50 per cent of students in Year 12.

The most common grouping of activities included a talk from the school's career advisor, written materials, an individual session with the career advisor and—in Year 10—group discussion.

Perceptions of the usefulness of career advice

Members of the LSAY Y03 cohort were generally positive about the value of the career advice they received at school, although some types of advice were seen as more useful than others. In Years 10, 11 and 12, an individual conversation with the career advisor was perceived as the most useful. For example, in Year 10, 60 per cent of students stated the conversation was ‘very useful’. Group discussion was seen as the least useful at all three year levels.

Relationships between perceptions of usefulness and student background and school-based factors

The relationship between how useful cohort members perceived career advice at school and a number of background factors highlighted some significant differences, but the overall influence of these factors was extremely small. Gender and socioeconomic status had small, significant influences on perceptions of usefulness, but explained less than 1 per cent of the variation in usefulness scores.

Some school-based factors also had an influence on how useful students found career advice, particularly those related to school climate. In addition, cohort members who found career advice useful also reported that they were influenced by their teachers and career advisors when considering the type of work they would like to do after school.

Academic achievement—as measured by students’ performance on PISA tests in mathematical literacy, reading literacy, scientific literacy and problem-solving skills—was statistically significant, with lower-achieving students reporting that career advice was more useful, although the contribution of this factor was very small.

One of the strongest associations was between perceptions of the usefulness of career advice and the number of career advice activities accessed during the year. As young people participated in more activities, they found career advice overall to be more useful.

There was very little difference between schools in students’ perception of the usefulness of career advice. Nearly all of the variation—and only a small proportion of that variation could be accounted for—was because of differences between students.

Implications

The general lack of differences in students’ perceptions of the usefulness of career advice suggests that career advice is delivered to students equitably across schools and within schools. In other words, students believe that the career advice they receive at school meets their particular needs. Regardless of background, students see career advice as useful. This is particularly important for young people in communities that may be disadvantaged by location, social standing or economic situation.

Two important groups of students perceived career advice more favourably than did other students. There was a small but statistically significant relationship between lower achievement scores and more positive comments about the usefulness of career advice. Young people who were unsure about whether they would complete Year 12 also had more positive comments about career advice. This indicates that career advice programs are valued by young people who are more vulnerable when making the transition from school, and that career advisors should continue to provide support to these young people.

A positive school climate is related to positive perceptions of the usefulness of career advice. It was not possible, however, to determine if positive comments about career advice are additional to school climate, or if the positive school climate is because the career advice program is integral to the general climate of the school.

A school’s career advice program, as part of its larger career education program, needs to encompass as many career advice activities as possible. Young people appear to appreciate a wider variety of activities in their career advice program, as it may provide them with more opportunities to find a career they wish to pursue.