

# **School Non-completers: Profiles and Initial Destinations**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This study examines non-completion of Year 12 at school for a nationally representative sample of young people who were 15 years old and still attending school in 2003. The study explores relationships between non-completion and selected socio-demographic and school-related factors, and changes in rates of school non-completion from the early 1980s to 2005. There is a particular emphasis on how socio-demographic and school-related factors over that period have influenced early school leaving. This study also examines the use of an alternative measure of 'school completion', which incorporates participation in a vocational education and training program after leaving school.

#### **School non-completion in 2005**

The study finds that those most likely to have left school early between 2003 and 2005 are Indigenous young people, young people from non-nuclear families, those whose parents worked in blue-collar occupations or were other than university-educated, those who were from non-metropolitan locations, those born in Australia, those who were low academic achievers and those who were from government schools.

When the unique contributions of the socio-demographic and school-related factors are teased out, not having an intention to complete school, coming from a non-nuclear family, being a below average academic achiever, being male, having an unfavourable attitude towards school and perceiving student–teacher relations as unsympathetic are all associated with a greater likelihood of non-completion.

Common reasons given for having left school without completing Year 12 include having a job or apprenticeship to go to or wanting one, and not liking school. Those who leave for 'positive' reasons — for example to take up an apprenticeship — have more successful transitions, such as being in full-time work or study, than those who leave for 'negative' reasons, such as not liking school.

School climate factors, such as perceived poor student–teacher relationships, poor teacher morale and poor student behaviour, contribute to early leaving. These factors appear to explain some of the early leaving that, in previous research, was attributed to school sector. Positive student–teacher relationships appear to exert an influence beyond school in that early leavers who had experienced favourable relationships appear more likely to pursue a vocational alternative.

#### **The changing profile of school non-completers**

The study examines the socio-demographic and academic profiles of young people who left school without completing Year 12 between the early 1980s and 2005. The following groups consistently displayed low school non-completion rates: females; young people with parents in high-skill white-collar occupations; young people with university-educated parents; those who attended independent schools; those from metropolitan areas; those with parents from non-English-speaking backgrounds; and those with high levels of reading and mathematical literacy.

Throughout the period under consideration, however, the magnitude of differences between some groups changed. In particular:

There was a reduction in absolute differences in the non-completion rates of:

- males and females (occurring between the late 1990s and 2005);
- young people from high-skill white-collar and low-skill blue-collar families;
- young people with university-educated parents and those whose parents had not received post-secondary education (occurring between the early 1980s and the late 1990s); and
- young people who had attended independent and government schools (occurring between the early 1980s and the late 1990s).

The magnitude of differences between the following groups fluctuated over time:

- young people from metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas; and
- young people from different ethnic backgrounds.

By 2005, the divide between the following groups had blurred:

- young people from blue-collar and white-collar families; and
- young people whose parents had not received post-secondary education and those whose parents had received non-university post-secondary education.

### **Post-school plans**

Young people in the 2003 cohort reported quite ambitious career aspirations, with approximately two-thirds expecting to be employed in professional or paraprofessional occupations by age 30. In the current labour market, such jobs account for one-third of employment opportunities. It seems that many young people will need to refine their career goals further. Conversely, relatively few young people expect to have clerical or labouring jobs compared with the employment opportunities available.

Most young people in the cohort described educational plans that are consistent with their career aspirations. Some, however, who expect to gain less than professional or paraprofessional jobs intend to enter university; that is, they are planning more education than is required for the jobs they anticipate. Approximately one-fifth of young people and one-third of intending tradespersons have an education plan that is below the level required for their intended jobs.

### **The initial destinations of school non-completers**

#### *Main activities*

The early post-school education, training and labour market activities of school non-completers were examined at age 17, a time when many of their contemporaries were nearing the completion of senior secondary school. The majority of school non-completers were fully engaged in employment, education or training (80% of male non-completers and 58% of female non-completers). Female non-completers were more likely than male non-completers to be partially engaged in employment, education and training (23% and 8%, respectively), unemployed (12% and 9%, respectively) or not in the labour force (7% and 4%, respectively).

#### *Occupations*

There are marked gender differences in the occupations undertaken by employed non-completers. Employed males are considerably more likely than employed females to be in skilled occupations (such as trades and related work) and are less likely to be in unskilled occupations (such as elementary clerical, sales and service work).

### *Education and training*

Gender differences are also evident in the level and nature of education and training undertaken by non-completers in the early post-school years. Male non-completers are four times as likely as female non-completers to participate in apprenticeships, while females are more likely than males to participate in traineeships and other VET courses. Overall, male non-completers are more likely than females to participate in VET after leaving school (60% and 45%, respectively). Male non-completers are concentrated in engineering and related technologies, and architecture and building, while female non-completers are concentrated in management and commerce, and food, hospitality and personal services.

### **Vocational alternatives to post-compulsory schooling**

In the Adelaide Declaration (MCEETYA, 1999), the education ministers of Australia called for young people to complete 'Year 12 or a vocational equivalent'. This study has provided an examination of the non-completion rate when a vocational alternative is included, although the alternative used in this report is participation in VET after leaving school, as early school leavers in the cohort were still too young to have completed a course of study at Certificate II. Nevertheless, when this vocational alternative to Year 12 is considered, the number of young people who are 'at risk' of making a poor transition from education is reduced. The non-completion rate drops from 16 per cent to 7 per cent.

When a vocational alternative to Year 12 completion is modelled, some of the associations with school non-completion are reduced or removed. Gender is no longer a factor, as both males and females have a non-completion/non-participation rate of 7 per cent. Parent's occupation ceases to have a significant effect, but young people whose parents had not completed secondary school retain a greater risk of non-participation in post-compulsory education and training. Being from an English-speaking background and coming from a non-nuclear family continue to dispose young people to non-participation in senior secondary schooling or a vocational alternative.

The vocational alternative is clearly an important one for some young people, especially males.

### **Achievement domains and school non-completion**

Low achievement in all four academic achievement domains — reading literacy, mathematical literacy, scientific literacy and problem solving — is associated with an increased likelihood of school non-completion. When their influences are modelled jointly, low achievement in reading literacy and mathematical literacy are strongly related to non-completion, but scientific literacy and problem solving do not make substantial independent contributions in explaining early school leaving