The review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training

A submission to the:
Education Council

Prepared by:
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Authorised by:
Tracy Adams, CEO, **yourtown**

About yourtown

yourtown is a national organisation and registered charity that aims to tackle the issues affecting the lives of children and young people. Established in 1961, **yourtown's** mission is to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised and without voice, to improve their quality of life.

We are one of the largest providers of charitable youth services in Australia, employing over 700 staff across four states. We currently have 50 service centres in 36 locations across Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania. Our service locations are focused in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage and our services include:

- Education re-engagement programs for students, including specific programs for young offenders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific services
- Employment and social enterprises, which support young people to find sustainable employment
- Kids Helpline, a national 24/7 telephone and on-line counselling and support service for 5 to 25 year olds with special capacity for young people with mental health issues
- Mental health service/s for children aged 0-11 years old, and their families, with moderate mental health needs
- Accommodation responses to young parents with infants and children who are identified as being at risk, and to women and children seeking refuge from domestic and family violence
- Young Parent Programs offering case work, individual and group work support and child development programs for young parents and their children
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers'
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse or been exposed to violence.

yourtown's work with unemployed young people

We have over 15 years of experience helping young people who face significant barriers to finding and keeping a job. We currently deliver youth specialist jobactive services under subcontract to MAX Employment in 26 locations, Transition to Work (TtW) in 12 locations across four states, and ParentsNext in Port Pirie and adjacent communities in South Australia. As a result of our experience, we are currently piloting an innovative approach to addressing long-term youth unemployment in Elizabeth, South Australia, Caboolture in Queensland and Burnie-Devonport, Tasmania called **your job your way.**

We also operate **social enterprises** that aim to tackle long-term youth unemployment and disadvantage by providing young people with paid work experience and training as a 'stepping stone' to open employment. Our social enterprises employ young people aged 15-25 years, who are not yet work-ready, and transitions them to sustainable employment through a combination of paid work, on the job training, and support to overcome personal barriers.

In addition, we are the largest provider of **labour market programs** within Queensland through the Government's Skilling Queenslanders for Work (SQW) initiative. Since 2012, we have provided a range of SQW programs that assist young people experiencing unemployment and disadvantage to gain the confidence, skills and experience they need to successfully participate in the workforce. Our SQW model involves a dual support team of a youth worker and employment mentor, who are pro-social role models, building trust and rapport with participants as the basis for program engagement and positive outcomes. This includes post-placement support to help clients maintain employment.

Most of our face-to-face services specialise in working with young jobseekers who are at the highest risk of long term unemployment, including: early school leavers; young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; young offenders/ex-prisoners; those from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, and single parents from jobless families.

Introduction

yourtown welcomes this Review of 'Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training', which as recognised in the Discussion Paper, focuses on a policy issue that has been the centre of many other recent inquiries, research and policy developments, and that is multi-faceted and has a wide range of stakeholders. In our submission, we explore what can be done to address the issues that affect students so that they may be better equipped when leaving school to follow a suitable option. Our recommendations are in part based on the insight that we gain in delivering services to these young people – such as education engagement and employment support services – and in part based on the direct views of our clients that we surveyed for this submission (for more details about this survey see section '**yourtown** post-school pathways survey').

Few would disagree that a person's life opportunities and outcomes are significantly affected by their education and the school they attend, and preparation for and success in post-school pathways – of lack thereof – are key opportunities and outcomes that schools and the wider schooling system can considerably influence. While many young people leave school equipped with the skills, knowledge and capabilities to succeed in their chosen pathway, future career and their life more generally, we know that for too many students, this is not the case. Some students feel pressured into following certain pathways that may be ill-suited to their skills or interests, equip them with the wrong skills to meet their aspirations or that ultimately will lead nowhere, whilst others may lack the skills they require to pursue their preferred option or indeed any option at all.

As the Discussion Paper suggests, this is not a new problem. There have long been disconnects between some students' school education and post-school pathways, with governments seeking to positively support and influence outcomes in relation to opportunities and preferences of students' post-school pathways through policy changes. For example, although funding for subsidised places has now been capped, policy changes over the last decade saw university participation increase by 40% and, between 2012-2017, a number of equity groups have seen high rates of growth in enrolments, including low SES students (30%), students with Disability (54%) and Indigenous students (52%).[1] Conversely, over the same period, participation in vocational education and training (VET) has declined from a peak of 7% in 2012 and, based on current trends, is predicted to fall to 3% by 2031.[2]

Unquestionably, the most significant disconnect exists between the education and schooling system and the cohorts of students who transition from school into unemployment, and notably long-term unemployment. Through our work with young people who are at risk of disengaging or have disengaged from school, or who are unemployed, we know that little policy action has been taken at a system level to ensure that these students instead leave school well-equipped for their transition into a meaningful pathway option. Indeed, as has long been the case, today the youth unemployment rate is higher than the overall unemployment rate, standing at some 11.6%, compared with 5.1% for all persons in Australia; which in our view, brings into sharp focus just how little has been done to reverse this.[3]

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[1] Koshy, P. (2018). *Equity Student Participation in Australian Higher Education: 2012 – 2017*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Perth: Curtin University.
[2] Dawkins, P., Hurley, P., & Noonan, P. (2019). *Rethinking and revitalising tertiary education in Australia*. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.
[3] Australian Bureau of Statistics (October 2019) *Labour Force data*.

Although finding sustainable work can be especially difficult for any young person regardless of the skills with which they leave school (e.g. owing to lack of experience and changes to Australia's labour market such as increasing casualisation of employment, fewer low-skill, entry-level roles and credential inflation are reducing the pool of accessible jobs for young people), the persistent high youth unemployment rate only further emphasises the importance that all young people should leave school with the essential skills, including personal skills, they need.

Indeed, in our experience there are many, primarily disadvantaged, children and young people for whom the education and schooling system is simply not appropriately tailored to meet - and sometimes is at complete odds with - their learning style, learning interests and holistic support needs, to enable their engagement and the fulfilment of their potential at school. Hence, in our submission, we outline a number of ways to better accommodate the needs of students who face these issues. These include a call for a national review to specifically look at this issue as without serious system reform, young people will continue cycles of disadvantage at great cost to them individually and to society.

As the Discussion Paper suggests, this Review provides an opportunity to re-imagine what is possible at school and the role that school plays in adequately preparing young people for their next stage of life. Having acknowledged that engagement at school affects students' post-school pathways options, we hope the Review will be bold and seek to address the needs of disadvantaged students that have long been overlooked.

- **yourtown post-school pathways survey**

To ensure that our submission to this Review is based on the experiences, needs and preferences of the young people with whom we work, we undertook a survey with our service users. The 408 respondents included national service users of Kids Helpline and jobactive as well as a selection of clients in New South Wales and South Australia who access our specialist employment and education engagement services. The survey was published on the Kid Helpline website and social media sites (Facebook and Instagram) from 4 to 14 November 2019. Face-to-face clients were texted a link to the survey during this period.

The majority of respondents were still studying at school (58%), 95% of whom were in Years 10-12. The remaining respondents were unemployed/job-seeking (17%), working (13%), studying at university (8%) and undertaking an apprenticeship/traineeship (4%). It is important to note the differences in size of these groups of respondents when groups are referred to in this submission and that some groups have a small respondent sample size (e.g. undertaking an apprenticeship/traineeship – 4% equates to 18 respondents).

Most respondents (81%) had accessed the survey through Kids Helpline's (KHL) website and social media (Facebook and Instagram), 10% were jobactive clients and the rest (9%) were clients from our education engagement and employment support services.

Nearly half of respondents were 17 years old (48%), 16% were 18 years old and 13% were 16 years old. There were 4% of respondents who were aged 12-15 years old, 12% who were aged 19-22 and the remaining 7% were aged 23-30 years old. Of those who provided their gender (n=301, the question was not compulsory), 82% were female, 15% were male and 4% were 'other', reflecting the high response from KHL service users who tend to be female (77% of KHL contacts in 2018 were female).

Of those who provided their cultural background and stated whether they speak a language other than English at home (both n=301), 5% were Aboriginal, 12% had a culturally and linguistically diverse background (CALD) and 83% were not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or CALD. Nearly one fifth of respondents (19%) spoke a different language other than English at home, which is just short of being representative of the national figure (21%).[4]

Although the survey is not representative nationally, it has identified many important areas for further research.

- **yourtown recommendations**

Below are our recommendations to the Review.

> **Recommendation 1.** That COAG instigate a review into the delivery of literacy and numeracy education across the school system. The review should seek to establish what needs to be changed to ensure that every student leaves the education system with the required level of literacy and numeracy needed in all post-school pathways (e.g. checkpoint systems).
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> **Recommendation 2.** Review the current provisions concerning professional and life skills development within the National School's Curriculum – including obtaining a drivers' licence – and consider how to both expand the current development of these skills and to accredit them (e.g. through micro-credentialing).
>
> **Recommendation 3.** Comprehensively equip all students at an early age with help-seeking skills to support their mental health and wellbeing.
>
> **Recommendation 4.** Educate students about employers' expectations, the local labour market and how to find work and connect them with employment support services in school to help minimise periods of unemployment.
>
> **Recommendation 5.** Provide accessible and appropriate information about all post-school pathways at school.
>
> **Recommendation 6.** Increase investment into vocational study to create a world-class VET system.

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[4] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017). *Census reveals a fast changing, culturally diverse nation:* https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/Media%20Release3

Recommendation 7. Deliver information about post-school options regarding employment, further education and apprenticeships/traineeships commencing in Year 10.

Recommendation 8. Create a single online platform that hosts information in relation to post-school pathways in collaboration with children and young people, and employer, university and VET representatives.

Recommendation 9. Provide one-on-one careers advice at school that is tailored to the needs of each student.

Recommendation 10. Provide a greater range of work experience opportunities at school so students can test a range of different roles and careers to help inform their selection of a post-school pathway.

Recommendation 11. Schools should work closer with the local community, including local employers, training providers and employment support providers (e.g. jobactive) and invite them into school to help prepare students for their post-school transition.

Recommendation 12. Seek to educate parents about all post-school pathways to reduce negative perceptions and/or lack of knowledge about some options so they can best support their children.

Recommendation 13. Implement a national review of school systems focusing on the quality of education, support and outcomes they deliver to disadvantaged students. The review's objective should be to establish how to ensure that no student leaves school without the skills and confidence they need in life, and to succeed in post-school pathways. The review should consider:

- What schools can do to successfully engage all children and young people to obtain a senior level of education.
- Identification of the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities that young people need to succeed in life.
- How all skills, knowledge and capabilities – academic, vocational, professional skills, life skills and community activities and achievements– should be assessed and accredited.

yourtown submission

The structure of our response is based on the structure of the Discussion Paper and the five sections and questions that it presents.

1. **Skills. What are the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities students should expect to leave senior secondary schooling with to help them succeed in their post-school lives?**

Many young people leave school equipped with the skills, knowledge and capabilities to succeed in their chosen career and their life more generally. For them, the school system effectively complements and builds on their existing skills, talents, interests and support network. However, we know that too many young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds - leave senior secondary school not appropriately prepared for their next steps in life. Through our work in education engagement and in supporting young people to find work, we see the challenges and barriers that these young people face, with not having the necessary skills, knowledge and capabilities being a key challenge/barrier. We set out some of the key skills, knowledge and capabilities that we believe every school leaver should have but that, in our work, we see many leaving school without.

- **Basic literacy and numeracy skills**

Many of our clients in our education engagement and employment services lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. Indeed, many of the children and young people with whom we work have, year after year, moved up a school year without having gained the requisite levels they need in these subjects as well as other subjects. We frequently find that this is the case even where they have graduated from Year 12, and that their parents – who are very proud of this achievement – are unaware that their children do not have these skills. This is despite a significant proportion of entry-level jobs (e.g. in retail and hospitality) requiring functioning levels of literacy and numeracy.

Although parents can help increase skill levels in these areas (when they are in a position to do so), ensuring that children and young people are acquiring the basic literacy and numeracy skills they need is a responsibility that sits with schools. Yet, for too long, too many young people have been effectively barred from acquiring these skills as school and our education systems are not sufficiently tailored to meet their learning needs, and/or to accommodate and support the many other significant challenges that these young people may be confronted with; be they family, peer, financial, health and wellbeing or complex intergenerational issues.

Whilst over the years, we have seen schools seek to provide more support to children and young people who are not thriving in the school environment (such as teaching assistants or through linking with service providers such as **yourtown**), we believe a major rethink is required. The onus should be on schools working more flexibly to accommodate different learning styles whilst ensuring that their students are accessing the other support services they may need whether they are accessed inside or outside the school gates.

To this end, we believe a fundamental review of schools' literacy and numeracy work with children and young people who are struggling or disengaging with school is needed, framed in an understanding and wider review of how to best engage and support disadvantaged cohorts of children and young people at school. In terms of the provision of adequate literacy and numeracy skills, the review should seek to establish the best ways to ensure that no young person leaves school without the basic levels they need to effectively participate in society. We think that the Discussion Paper's suggestion of the introduction of mandatory minimum standards for literacy and numeracy skills could be part of this solution and the idea merits further exploration.

- **Professional/'soft' skills and other life skills**

Many of the employers with whom we work tell us that regardless of the skill-level or qualifications that the young people may have acquired, many young jobseekers lack important professional or 'soft' skills required to interact effectively with their colleagues and clients and to undertake their duties. A number of employers tell us that they are simply seeking these skills in their employees and that any further knowledge can be gained on the job.

These skills include communication, positive attitude and work ethic, interpersonal skills, social and emotional intelligence, collaboration and teamwork, problem-solving and conflict resolution, resilience, adaptability and flexibility, innovation and creativity and time management. They are all skills with which we work with our clients in our programs to develop and which, if learnt and recognised at school, are not only transferable to the work place or future study but also in personal relationships - including with peers at school which would help reduce incidences of bullying and conflict/challenges in family life.

We acknowledge that many of these skills are taught or learnt in the school setting through, for example, various subject matters, learning exercises and school rules. However, due to a myriad of complex reasons students, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, are less likely to absorb them at school in this way and hence different ways to provide education on these issues that are tailored to their needs and preferences must be adopted. Leaving school without these skills further compounds disadvantage and its effects on young lives, leaving them un- or poorly equipped not only for their future educational and/or work pathways but also for the wider relationships that they have over the course of their lives.

In addition, in our survey with clients about post-school pathways, some respondents called for education at school in the skills they need to survive in life more generally such as practical skills in relation to budgeting, living independently and in where and how to seek help.

> Don't just teach us about school work, teach [us] how to live a life outside of school to make the transition easier.
>
> Employment support services client - working (male, aged 22)

> Useful things such as, how to manage money, setting up tax file numbers, what to look for in a bank (i.e. interest rates etc.) and much more aren't really taught unless you specifically elect to do a business class otherwise your pretty much thrown into the deep end.

KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

Teach[...] us useful life skills, like what employers are looking for, how to write a CV, how to pay bills, apply for a loan or make a bank account. Maybe even giving us work experience so that we can put something on our resume.

KHL service user – unemployed/jobseeker (female, aged 17)

These days schools aren't teaching enough useful information, things such as buying a home, a car, loans, taxes, businesses, even adequate manners and how to present are things teenagers do not know and unfortunately aren't being taught.

KHL service user – studying at school, Year 10 (female, aged 16)

These are again skills of which we see a dearth amongst our clients and some basic education at school in practical life skills would help ensure that all students gain an insight into many areas of day-to-day life, which may be lacking at home. This would also help instil confidence in those students who are less academic or less-interested in academic subjects and build their esteem so that they realise they have valued skills and contributions to make. Many of our clients suffer from low confidence and self-esteem which hinders them – and in some cases severely – in many aspects of their lives. They manifest strikingly in day-to-day life with many of our clients unable to make eye contact with others or unable to converse with adults they do not know or trust. Clearly, confidence and self-esteem are important attributes that young people need when leaving school if they are to succeed in any aspect of their life and it is tragic that so many young people leave school without these attributes. In addition, broadening the skills students learn at school in this way would provide many employers with the types of employees they need, and ensure that all young people are equipped with a myriad of skills and knowledge to prepare them for their next pathway whether that be further education, apprenticeship or work, or living independently or parenthood.

The lack of a driving licence is a notable life skill that prevents many of our clients from successfully accessing employment (and hence we deliver a driving school in Port Pirie in South Australia), as many employers screen applicants out if they do not have one, and/or clients simply cannot get to interviews or work without one. Having to complete their logbook of driving hours is a barrier to obtaining their licence given the cost of lessons and that they may not have a suitable family member or friend to help them get the hours they need. We would therefore like to see supported pathways to enable students to obtain their driving licence at school to be amongst the life skills education schools deliver.

- Help-seeking for mental health issues

Whilst mental health issues can affect anyone from any background at any stage in their life, they typically start in people's younger years. Half of all lifetime mental illnesses develop before the age of 14,[5] and 75% of all mental health problems first appear before young people reach 25 years old.[6] In fact, mental ill-health is the top health issue facing young people worldwide.[7] In Australia, one in seven students aged 4-17 years have experienced a mental health issue in the previous 12 months,[8] 1 in 10 adolescents have engaged in self-harming,[9] whilst suicide is the leading cause of death of children and young people.[10] Furthermore, the prevalence of mental ill-health amongst this cohort is rising across a number of different indicators, with concerns relating to mental health to our Kids Helpline service (KHL), continuing to be the top reason why young people seek counselling from our KHL counsellors (27% of counselling contacts in 2018 concerned mental health).

However, despite this level of need, in 2015 it was found that 14% of 4-17 year olds had a diagnosable mental illness and only half of those had accessed services in the previous year.[11] Indeed, it has been found that there are a number of barriers to children and young people seeking help with this issue. These include finding face-to-face services daunting and intimidating, from a fear they will be judged - for those who live in rural and remote communities in particular as communities are small. Stigma was found to be the main reason that children and young people told us prevented them from actively seeking help in our research with them about suicidal ideation.[12] National research also shows that stigma and discrimination are factors playing a role in preventing many children and young people with mental illness from accessing the mental health services they need.[13]

As a result, too many children and young people are left to cope with mental ill-health alone, which has significant, detrimental effects on their education and relationships with their friends and family. Some of the respondents to the post-school pathways survey specifically mentioned poor mental health and wellbeing as a barrier to making a decision about their options. If left unsupported, these mental health issues will continue to disadvantage them in many aspects of their adult life too. Indeed, this has driven a number of the Productivity Commission's recommendations in its draft report on the Mental Health inquiry such as proactive outreach services for students disengaged with school because of mental illness, teacher training on child social and emotional development and a senior teacher dedicated to student mental health.[14]

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[5] Kessler, R.C., Berglund, P., Demler, O., et al. (2005). *Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the national comorbidity survey replication.* Archive of General Psychiatry 62 (6).
[6] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2014). *Australia's Health 2014.* Canberra: (Cat. no. AUS 178).
[7] *Global Burden of Disease Study* (2017) as cited by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office in: https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/child-and-youth-mental-health?section=
[8] *The Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing* (2013-14): https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/mental-health-services-in-australia/report-contents/summary/prevalence-and-policies
[9] Lawrence, D. et al (2015). *The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents: Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.* Department of Health, Canberra.
[10] Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2017). *Causes of Death data.* Australia.
[11] Lawrence, D., Johnson, S., Hafekost J., Boterhoven De Haan, K., Sawyer, M., Ainley, J., & Zubrick, S.R. (2015). *The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents. Report on the Second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.* Department of Health, Canberra
[12] **yourtown** (2016). *Preventing suicide: The Voice of children and young people:* https://www.yourtown.com.au/sites/default/files/document/2.%20Preventing%20suicide%20by%20children%20and%20young%20people.pdf
[13] Hiscock, H., Mulraney, M., Efron, D., Freed, G., Coghill, D., Sciberras, E., Warren, H. and Sawyer, M. (2019). *Use and predictors of health services among Australian children with mental health problems: A national prospective study.* Australian Journal of Psychology.
[14] Productivity Commission (2019). *Mental Health, Draft Report.* Canberra.

We also know mental health issues are significant challenges for those disadvantaged young people we work with in particular in our face-to-face education, employment and other support services. For example, of the 41% of young job seekers registered with employment programs,[15] it is estimated that 75% are in psychological distress. Consequently, we are increasingly tailoring our services to better support mental health issues so that it becomes possible for clients to focus on their education, finding and maintaining work, living independently or raising their children.
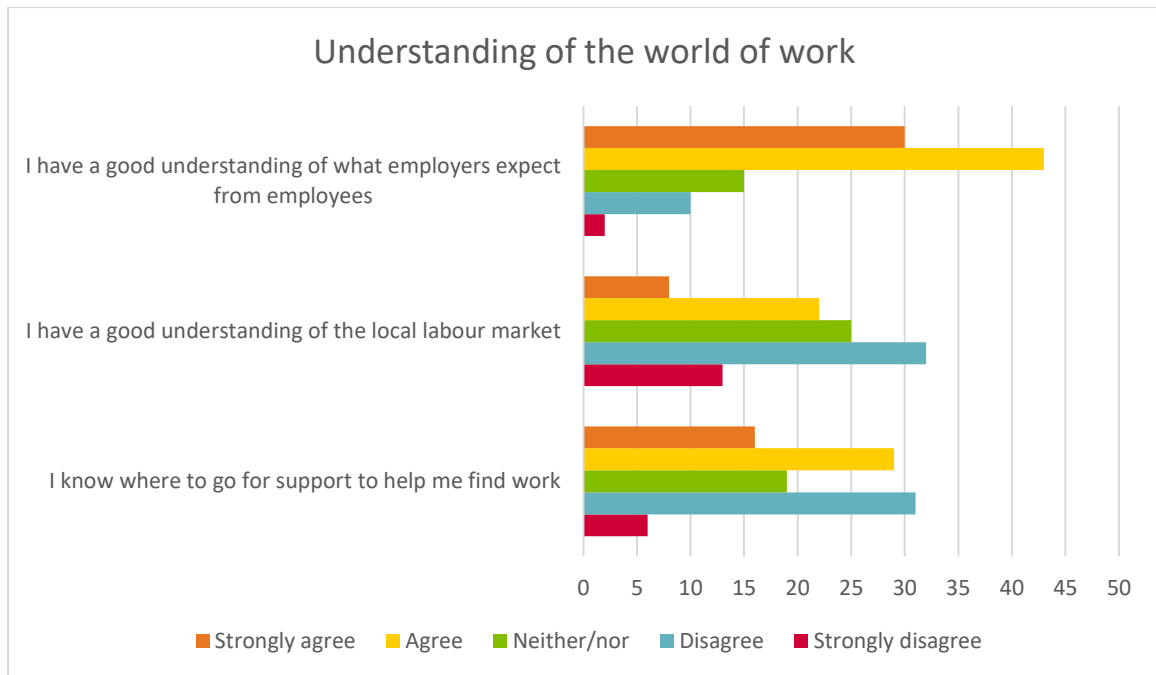
However, we know that educating children and young people to overcome barriers to help-seeking works. Students who have participated in our free Kids Helpline @ School sessions, which cover a range of topics that seek to increase help-seeking and emotional resilience, were found to feel more comfortable to seek help post session/s. Help-seeking education of this nature needs to be comprehensively provided at school so that school leavers are willing to ask for help when they are in need.

- **Knowledge and understanding of employers' expectations, the local labour market and how to find work**

As discussed above, we maintain that school education should have a wider focus and systematically include soft skills and life skills. We would also like to see more rigorous education in relation to employers' expectations, the local labour market and how to find work as well as about the different options post-school too as we believe that this is critical knowledge with which young people should leave school, particularly for disadvantaged cohorts.

In our experience and from the views that young people expressed in our survey about post-school pathways, the level of information that students receive about employers, labour markets and finding work is piecemeal, highly variable depending on school and location and insufficient. For example, whilst the majority of respondents (72%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they had a good understanding of what employers expect from employees, 13% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, and 15% neither agreed or disagreed. Far fewer respondents agreed that they had a good understanding of the local labour market (30%) or of where to go for support to find work (45%), and far more disagreed with these statements (44% and 35% respectively).

[15] Reavley N.J., Yap M.B., Wright A., Jorm A.F (2011). *Actions taken by young people to deal with mental disorders: findings from an Australian national survey of youth.* Early intervention in psychiatry. 2011 November;5(4):335-42.

Understanding of the world of work

I have a good understanding of what employers expect from employees

I have a good understanding of the local labour market

I know where to go for support to help me find work

Legend: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither/nor, Disagree, Strongly disagree

The varying ages and pathways of survey respondents cloud these results somewhat, but from our work we know that disadvantaged students are likely to be less equipped with the knowledge they need about the world of work.

Knowledge about what to expect

Many **yourtown** clients do not understand employers' expectations, and often, are not aware of basic expectations, such as that they must show up on time or keep regular hours, what to do if they are sick or running late, or what to wear. They also lack knowledge about getting paid, terms and conditions, and their rights or setting up a bank so they can be paid.

We also know that many schools are not informing students about possible pathways they can pursue in their local area. For example, there are increasing numbers of jobs in human services and aged care but these are not areas of work that schools seem to be discussing with students. In some areas in which we work, we know that advanced welders are imminently retiring but there are no suitable employees to take their place.

It would be helpful for those students who are keen to work straight after leaving school or who wish to study for a trade or particular profession that schools look to the needs of the local labour market and employers, collaborate with them and seek to harmonise expectations. This could even include the development of local courses for students to undertake after school in preparation for a specific job locally. In some areas, for example, we have worked with local employers and TAFE to develop specific training that directly meets the needs of local employers, whilst taking into account the skill base and needs of our clients.

Expectations need to also be set for students about how to achieve career goals (especially that there are different pathways to the same outcome), that work often includes continuous training and that over their career they are likely to want or have to move industry and therefor retrain.

Knowledge about where to find support

In addition, the proportion of survey respondents who did not know where to go for support to help them find work is particularly concerning as we know, for those who seek work after leaving school, that the longer they are unemployed the more challenging finding work can become.

> [My school provided me with] nothing at all, I researched jobs, job provider services; like Max employment, etc.
>
> jobactive client - unemployed/jobseeker (female, aged 22)

This is because, during the transition from school to work, spells of unemployment can mean young people get out of routines and regular habits, and for example sleep in or game all day, which can isolate them from the world outside their bedroom. Indeed, we have seen that when unemployment is long-term (e.g. when a jobseeker is unsuccessful in securing work for any period longer than two weeks for at least one year) that it becomes a barrier to employment itself, affecting young jobseekers' mental health and wellbeing in particular.

This is why, as a youth specialist employment service, we would like to be able to be invited into schools so that we can start to build the important relationships of trust with young people early and even start to work on their employability skills. This would mean that on leaving school they would know who to contact for support, if needed, and that we could seamlessly work with them to find work as soon as possible.

Furthermore, students need to have the opportunity to learn at school how to write their resumes, where to look for and apply for jobs and what to expect at interviews – all skills we currently have to spend considerable time working on with our clients, delaying their access to the job market. Many of the respondents to our survey on post-school pathways suggested that they would like to be able to trial many different job roles and sectors whilst they are at school and that the current level of work experience at school is not sufficient. Meaningful work experience would help students develop links with employers that could then lead to their first job.

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yourtown recommendations

Recommendation 1. That COAG instigate a review into the delivery of literacy and numeracy education across the school system. The review should seek to establish what needs to be changed to ensure that every student leaves the education system with the required level of literacy and numeracy needed in all post-school pathways (e.g. checkpoint systems).

Recommendation 2. Review the current provisions concerning professional and life skills development within the National School's Curriculum – including obtaining a drivers' licence – and consider how to both expand the current development of these skills and to accredit them (e.g. through micro-credentialing).

Recommendation 3. Comprehensively equip all students at an early age with help-seeking skills to support their mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendation 4. Educate students about employers' expectations, the local labour market and how to find work and connect them with employment support services in school to help minimise periods of unemployment.

2. How can we help students make better decisions about learning pathways within school?

As the Discussion Paper notes, choices about learning pathways within school can be limited by issues such as school, location, parental influence, lack of information about post-school pathways and career education, timetabling and specialist teacher availability and many respondents to the survey about post-school pathways referenced these issues. References specifically to learning pathways commonly cited a lack of flexibility or having to make decisions too early that then (from their current perspective) affected their whole lives.

> Insinuating that elective choices in year 9 must be the same in 10, 11 and 12 and not giving an opportunity to try subjects (and decide you don't like them). My subject choices I made when I was 14 were unwise considering how much I have changed.
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

> If I had my VCE time again I would rethink my subject choices as I don't think I got the most out of year 12, also my school didn't offer many classes that others across the state got.
> KHL service user –studying a school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

> My school wasn't flexible with running any of the courses I actually wanted to study. Because of this, I hated my classes and stopped going. I won't get an HSC as my next TAFE course starts in Feb. The difficulty that presented itself because of this is that many employers look for an HSC.
> KHL service user – unemployed/jobseeker (female, aged 17)

> My school doesn't offer the subjects I would like to pursue.
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 11 (female, aged 17)

> The school was unhelpful when they forced an irrelevant subject on me causing me to fail my certificate on attendance to that class.
> KHL service user – undertaking an apprenticeship/traineeship (aged 17)

> The school were very against the idea of me completing a Learning Links program, and only considered it after my counsellor confronted it.
> KHL service user – studying at university (female, aged 21)

Clearly, a number of different factors can impinge on the ability of students to make decisions about their learning pathway but notably most of these factors are outside of their realm of control and hence the search to better support them to make 'better decisions' seems misplaced. Hence, we believe that the question should be: what can school do to ensure that learning pathways do not limit but instead flexibly support students into a range of different post-school pathways? In other words, how can learning pathways be reformed?

Learning pathways reform

In part, the answer lies in schools ensuring that school leavers are equipped with the essential skills we list above as through having ways to acquire and recognise more generalist skills at school more students, regardless of their specific subject interests or career aspirations, would have the transferable skills needed to succeed in every post-school pathway. This would help ensure they

are not limited by subject selection earlier in their school career or by a change of heart, as these essential skills would leave them equipped for a new pathway with minimal disruption or effort. We would therefore welcome the exploration of the ideas for change in the Discussion Paper that could support and record this learning, including micro-credentials and work-related learning counting towards secondary school education certificates, and multiple review points in the system to allow students to change path or specialise. In addition, we have found school-based traineeships to be extremely effective for some cohorts but they are underused and can only be accessed by students who are not doing well at school. However, we do not favour the development of clearer linkages between senior secondary subject choices and future options as we believe this would further make students feel that they are bound by choices made early in their school career and limit the flexibility the new system would be seeking to support.

Directly related to this revisiting of subjects taught at school is the need to review schools' and the wider community's current fixation on academic achievement, a key issue in the debate about post-school pathways too and which we discuss in our response to question three below. For undoubtedly, the current construction of learning pathways and of school more broadly is principally set up for students to follow an academic pathway both at school and post-school, which at the very least is not helpful and indeed can be wholly exclusionary, for many students seeking to both engage at school or to make decisions about their life within and post-school.

Tailoring schools to engage all students
Fundamental to the acquisition of these essential skills, however, is the school's ability to effectively engage all students. Today, through providing education engagement services, we know that a significant number of students continue to not be engaged by or at school. We see the consequences of young people leaving school early, with them being more likely to become unemployed, have low earnings, receive welfare support, have poorer physical and mental health, higher crime participation rates, and lower levels of connectedness to community than those who complete their education.[16] This disadvantage extends throughout their lifetime and when these young people have families of their own they are less able to support their children's education, health and wellbeing, contributing to intergenerational disadvantage.[17]

Hence, ensuring that all students are engaged and leave with the essential skills they need for their chosen post-school pathway is not only an ethical and social justice issue, but is an outcome that would help limit the support services and financial assistance that governments provide by developing a generation of young people who are better equipped for their future employment. Although often misunderstood to be so, engagement with education is not an attribute of the student. Research instead shows that it is an alterable variable that is highly influenced by policies and practices of the school and its teachers, as well as by family, peer and community influences.

We know in our work and from the limited evidence that effective programs to support students who have left or are at risk of leaving school early do the following:

[16] Lamb, S, and S Rice (2008). *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion.* Melbourne: Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
[17] Hayes, D. (2012). *Re-Engaging Marginalised Young People in Learning: The Contribution of Informal Learning and Community-Based Collaborations.* Journal of Education Policy 27, no. 5 (1 September 2012): 641–53.
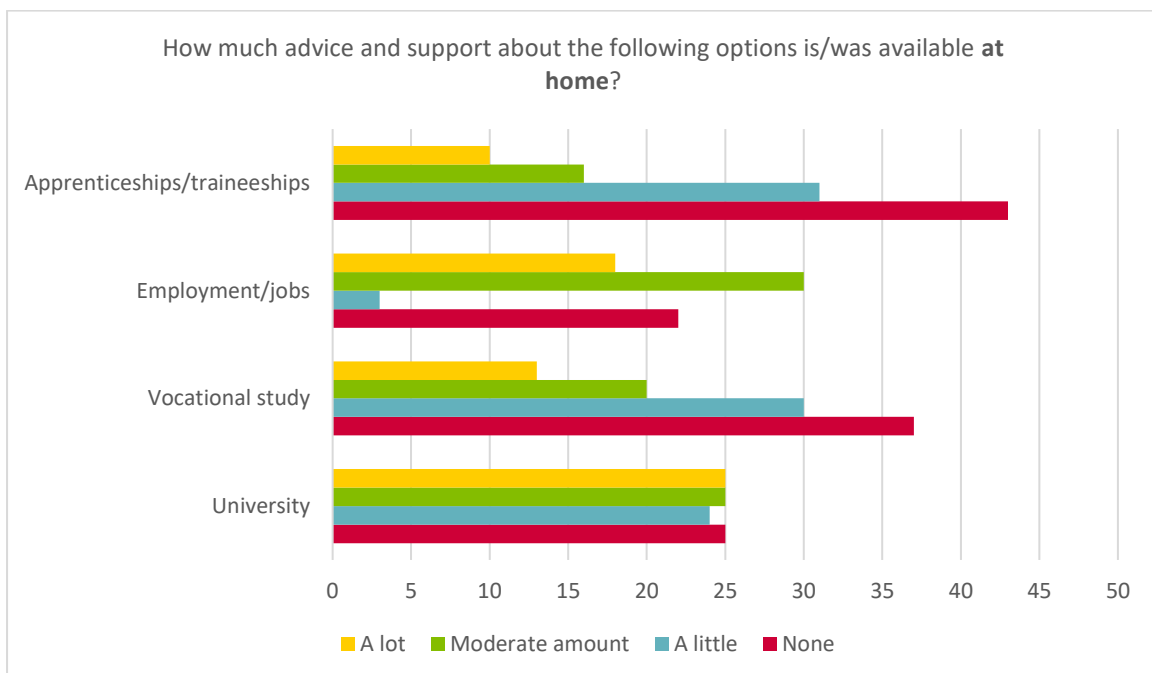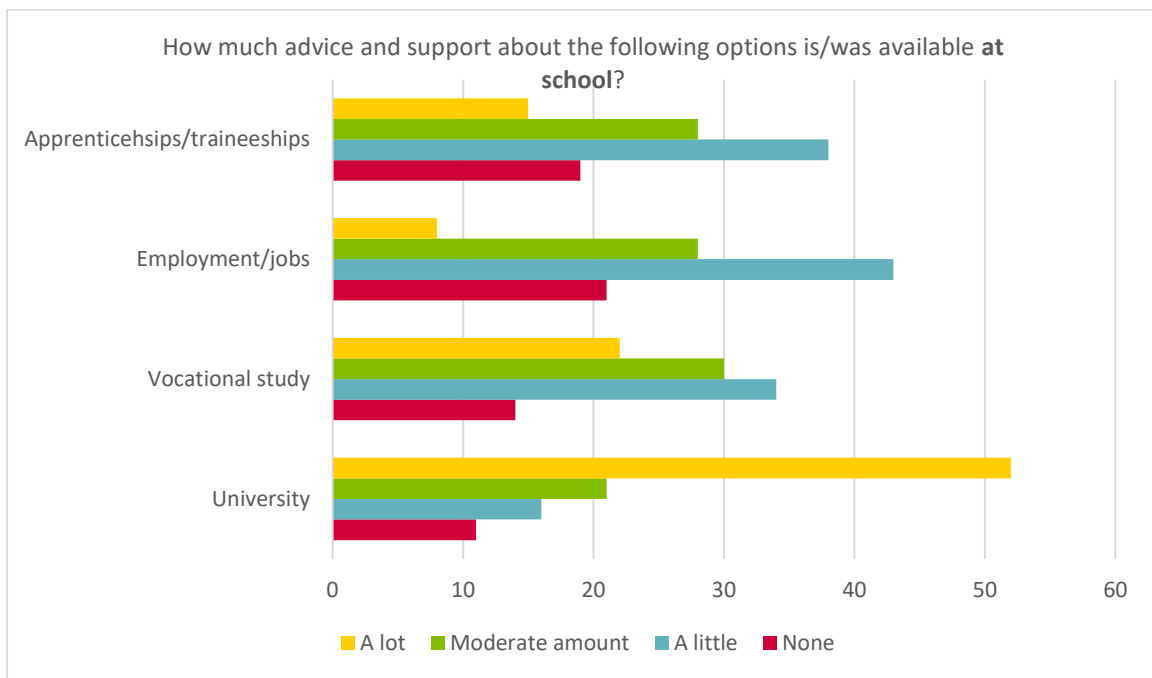
- target engagement, not merely attendance
- start early
- strengthen relationships between students and school staff
- engage families
- provide intensive, long term, individualised, holistic support for both academic and personal issues
- are strengths-based
- are tailored to the local context (school and community).

However, we believe that schools should be bolder in their approach to these students and that these students deserve more consistency in support than the current funding mechanisms allow for such programs. Indeed, we believe that schools have significant untapped potential to be able to accommodate the needs and preferences of **all** children young people, and to this end, we therefore call for a review of the education system and learning pathways, which we set out in our response to question five.

3. Sentiment. How do we change negative perceptions of certain pathways?

In the post-school pathways survey, we asked respondents a range of questions so that we might gauge the level of bias there appears to be in favour of certain post-school options, and whether there is indeed negative perceptions or at least less known about other pathways,

We therefore first asked how much information is/was available about the different possible pathway options. We specifically asked about their experiences at school and at home so that we might uncover whether there were any differences between what information they had access to in both contexts. The results are set out in the charts below.

How much advice and support about the following options is/was available **at school**?

How much advice and support about the following options is/was available **at home**?

As the charts show, although more information was generally available about options at school than at home, both at school and home:

- advice and support about apprenticeships/traineeships was found to be the least provided, with 57% and 74% of respondents stating that they had received no or little advice and support about this option at school or at home respectively,

- advice and support about vocational study was also significantly lacking, with 48% and 67% of respondents stating that they had received no or little advice and support about this option at school or at home respectively,

- advice and support about employment was found to be scarce, with 52% and 53% of respondents stating that they had received no or little advice and support about this option at school or at home respectively,

- whilst in relation to advice and support about university only 27% and 49% of respondents reported that they had received no or little advice and support about this option at school or at home respectively.

Given not all students want to or can follow a university pathway, it seems quite surprising that schools and parents are providing so much advice and support about it, rather than all options so students can make informed choices. Furthermore, these views were similarly pronounced across all respondents regardless of their current activity (studying at school or university, working or undertaking an apprenticeship/traineeship).

Knowledge of university versus vocational study
However, to cross-check that this lack of advice and support at school and at home translated into a lack of knowledge (and that they were not receiving the support elsewhere) and, conversely, whether more advice and support about university in these environments resulted in more knowledge about it, we asked respondents if they understood enough about the university and the vocational study systems (e.g. what is required to get into them and what benefits each can have).

The chart below sets out their responses.

Knowledge of university versus vocational study
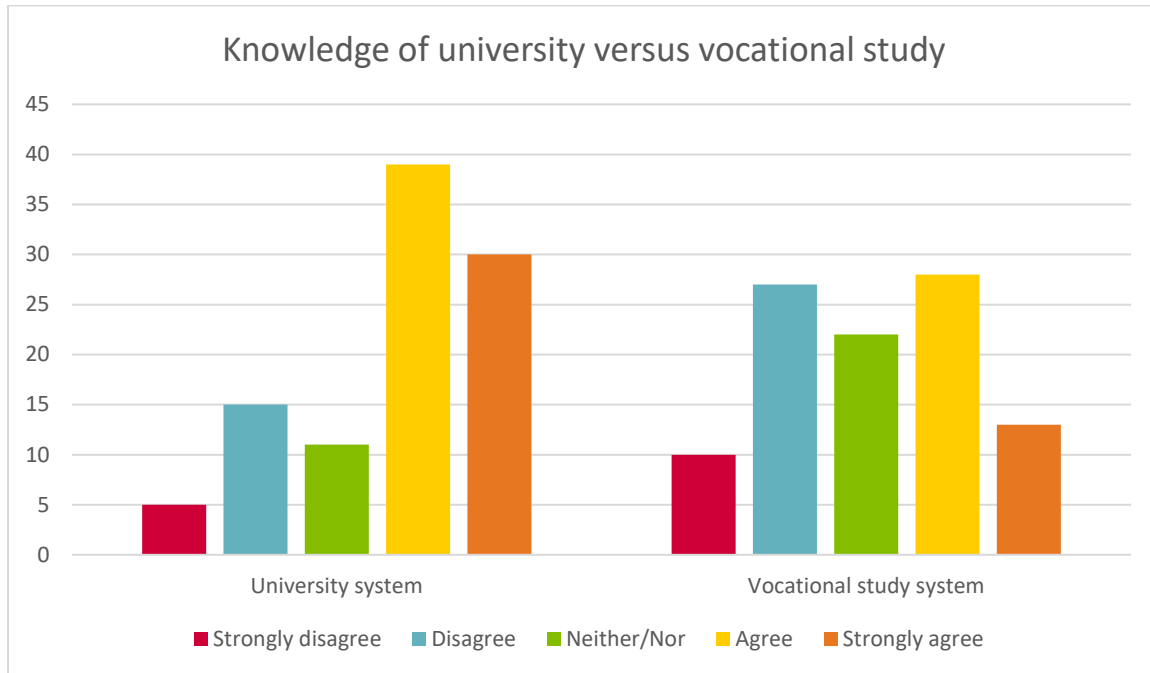
Some 69% of respondents felt that had a sufficient understanding of the university system, whilst only 41% felt the same in relation to the vocational study system. Hence, it would seem that young people are being significantly better equipped about knowledge about university than other options. Many respondents' open answers further highlighted this discrepancy:

> From my experience at school, the teachers seemed to only be focused (to the point of nearly tunnel vision) on university and jobs that are only attainable by the very high achievers in school.
>
> jobactive client - unemployed/jobseeker (male, aged 22)

> Yes 100%, the 'straight to university' pathway is pushed and explained a lot by my school, but other things like VCAL/TAFE or apprenticeships are not even talked about, they're seen as an exclusive and 'lesser than' options. As to why that is- honestly I don't know.
>
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 11 (aged 17)

> I didn't receive much information at all about anything but uni and for someone who is undecided about the future this would limit their options. Giving more information about pathways would be good.
>
> KHL service user – unemployed/jobseeker (female, aged 17)

> [My school] focused mostly on uni. No info about apprenticeships or traineeships. Had no idea about certain careers or pathways. Zero information about self-employment. No information or focus on actual individual strengths or interests.
>
> KHL service user – working (aged 18)

> They have only talked about one pathway, which is university
>
> KHL service user - studying at school, Year 12 (male, aged 17)

The effects of a university-centric approach

According to many respondents of the post-school survey, this university-centric approach in school significantly affected the choices they made and how they felt about their future, and at times this induced anxiety and stress:

> They wouldn't allow me to undertake a school based apprenticeship that I was offered for my ideal job.
>
> Employment support services client – working (female, aged 18)

> I feel a lot of pressure is put on students to do ATAR and go to university rather than individually finding their strengths and helping them find a pathway or course best suited to that individual.
>
> KHL service user - studying at school, Year 11 (female, aged 17)

> I felt pressured to go to university. I'm interested in a creative pathway (specifically visual art and character designing) and there aren't many options for people like me, so uni was pressured on me. However, you don't have to have a qualification to get into the creative art industry.
>
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 11 (male, aged 16)

> At my school, uni was very highly valued so it was challenging to ask for other help with career plans because I knew I wouldn't be able to go to uni… which really demoralised me.
>
> KHL service user – unemployed/jobseeker (aged 22)

> I feel pressured to choose university by my school and peers. I've often got good grades throughout high school and have been top of the class and get a lot of pressure to be "smart" and follow something highly regarded even if this isn't what I want to do. I was discouraged from a bachelor of social work and a gap year by a teacher as my ATAR would be "way too high for that - do something smarter".
>
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 11 (female, aged 17)

> When considering other options, my English teacher said to me, "Are you sure you want to go to Tafe? Is that your dream?" It was an ignorant response that only elicited shame. The school were very against the idea of me completing a Learning Links program, and only considered it after my counsellor confronted it. My parents had rigid expectations that I would obtain a high ATAR and go straight into university. They were very close minded about alternative pathways.
>
> KHL service user – studying at university (female, aged 21)

> They make it seem like I will fail at life if I don't go to uni. University is what is drilled into me as the only option by teachers in every class particularly as I go into Year 12.
>
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 11 (female, aged 16)

Respondents suggested an array of different reasons for why schools and parents pushed a university pathway including the idea that:

- people can go on to earn more by studying at university and parents in particular value this potential,
- university is the only way to have a "successful and fulfilling" career or "achieve happiness",
- if students do well academically then they should follow an academic pathway regardless of interests or goals,

- university is more prestigious and held in higher regard than other options, and particularly with regard to some university subjects (e.g. medicine, engineering, sciences, law). Hence, schools with higher academic attainment outcomes are more highly regarded - "it makes their statistics look better". Indeed, since the recent introduction of ATAR in Queensland, some **yourtown** education engagement staff reported that our clients were effectively being pushed out of school since they were not achieving academically, which was believed to stem from concern about the school's ATAR outcomes and reputation.
- university must be better as students need higher academic grades to get into it,
- teachers only know a university pathway themselves so they push what they know, and
- a lack of understanding about the job market, post-school pathways and that they are not linear, and a belief that jobs require degrees nowadays.

Location of school

It is also important to note that there were a small group of respondents who stated that their school gave them considerable amounts of information on vocational study and very little about university. Cursory analysis shows that these respondents came from regional areas or some schools in areas of disadvantage. This is clearly of concern given that some reported wanting to go to university and were not feeling supported to do so.

> [Schools don't give] all the students equal opportunity in post school pathways. I had to mostly search for information and find pathway programs to participate in myself to get the information that I need... Vocational training and apprenticeships, I got a lot of emails in my school email inbox about that. Rarely anything on university. It is ironic as most students aim to enter university.
>
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

> Vocational pathways and apprenticeships are preferred at my school. I'm from a regional town so these pathways are abundant and more sought out
>
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

Addressing negative perceptions or bias

In terms of what can be done to address unhelpful perceptions about certain options, we would suggest that being provided appropriate information about the range of options students can follow equally would at least go some way to addressing any negative perceptions they or others might hold about an option. This will include educating parents about the range of options available, and we discuss this and how best to deliver information as per the preferences of young people in the next section.

In addition, the reforms we have previously suggested in our submission would help rebalance this heavy focus on academic pathways at school and at home by cultivating and appropriately acknowledging a range of different skills and learning pathways in their secondary school education certificates which students can have pride, and which they can celebrate with their teachers, peers and family. We believe that this would help shift the academic-centric focus within our communities. Furthermore, through leaving school with more appropriate skills, knowledge

and capabilities appropriately recognised by a school qualification, school leavers would be equipped to quell the thirst of a competitive labour market for academic attainment and instead would offer employees a wider range of different and more appropriate qualifications, which they can use for recruitment.

However, we do not believe that developing a single tertiary education sector that blends both VET and higher education would go far in helping to prevent negative perceptions about options other than university. The same perception of VET courses is likely to persist amongst students and schools (and particularly if no reforms to broaden and support wider learning and skills at school take place) at great cost. That said, we do believe that significant resources should be channelled into developing a world-class VET system. Currently, the VET system is uncoordinated, highly variable in quality and organisation, all issues that tar its reputation. The development of a VET system of which Australia can be proud should be a national priority.

Support them to follow their interests

Finally, to address negative perceptions of options, many respondents stressed the importance of schools and parents simply supporting students to follow pathways into their interests and what they would like to do, rather than what might be more prestigious or earn them more money.

> Focus on what they want. Let them make the decision and then help them finds mentors and people in that field who can help them get to where they want to be
> jobactive client -unemployed/jobseeker (male, aged 20)

> Students should remember that, even if you choose one path and you realise you're not happy with it, there's nothing stopping you from changing to something else. And, most importantly, choose something that you love and find joy in doing.
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

> Just [tell them] that any pathway is good as long as you are doing something and that's what we were never told which I wish a lot of people could of heard.
> KHL service user - working (female, aged 17)

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yourtown recommendations

Recommendation 5. Provide accessible and appropriate information about all post-school pathways at school.

Recommendation 6. Increase investment into vocational study to create a world-class VET system.

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4. How can we support young people to make decisions about their post-school pathways?

To provide the Inquiry with a deeper understanding of the experiences of students, in this section, we present both the barriers and facilitators that respondents to the post-school pathways survey identified.

- **Barriers to making decisions**

In the post-school survey, we asked respondents what is making and what had made (depending on whether they were still studying at school or not) it hard for them to choose what to do after school. Their responses are set out in the charts below and with much overlap. The top five issues for those currently studying were 1) access (e.g. cost, transport, location of course/work) 2) health and wellbeing 3) grades or subject choices 4) parent/guardian and 5) lack of information. The top five issues for those who have left school were 1) health and wellbeing 2) access 3) grades or subject choices 4) parent/guardian and 5) school issues.

Post-school pathways
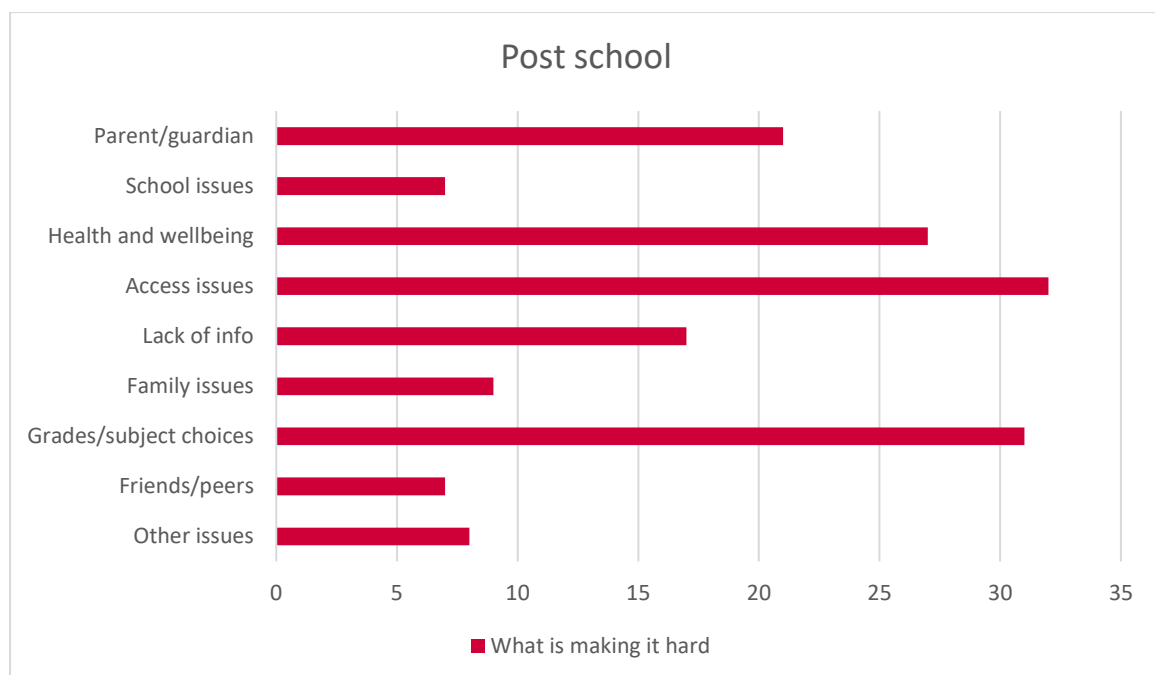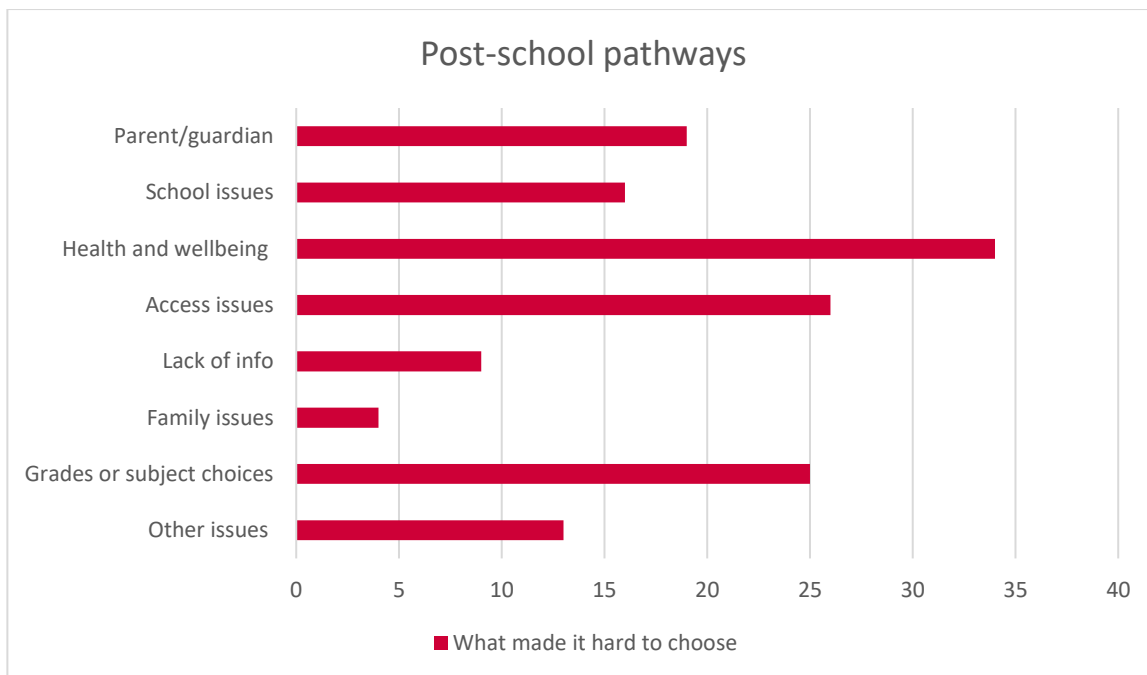
Interestingly, there was considerable variation depending on respondents' current activity as to what issues most affected them. For example:

- 27% of those who were studying at university who responded to this question stated that their parents made it hard for them to choose what to do after leaving school (compared to 15% of those respondents working), with grades or subject choices also being a key concern amongst this cohort (31%) although on average 25% of all respondents noted this as a challenge.

    I struggled with the workload of ATAR and as a result would skip school and turn in assignments late. This impacted my grades and I didn't do as well as I know I'm capable of. This has unfortunately impacted my ability to deal with university work.
    KHL service user - studying at university (female, aged 19)

- Contrastingly, 27% of those undertaking an apprenticeship/traineeship found school issues made it hard to choose what to do after school, and some 18% of those unemployed agreed compared to 12% of those respondents studying at university. That those in this survey who had left school found school issues to be more influential than those who were still at school is likely to be somewhat influenced by the fact that more of these respondents come from our education engagement and employment support services, whereas many of those who are still studying at school are from KHL, which is a national and mainstream service.

    My school did not help me when knowing what to do after school. I left school because of bullying when I was in grade 9 and when they were informed that I was leaving we asked what was out there waiting for me as in work or help after school and I was told that there was nothing out there for me as I am not completing school and then was told I will be jobless and homeless. However, I proved them wrong. I did not complete school but I do have a job and I am now looking for a house.
    KHL service user – working (female, aged 17)

- Access issues were noted as problematic for those respondents who are working (34%) although on average 26% of all those who responded to that question found access issues made it hard to choose what to do after leaving school. Issues raised included cost of accessing courses, particularly in relation to living rurally and having to afford to move away from home. Some respondents also stated that the course they wanted to do was in another state, with one respondent saying that her school did not support inter-state study.

> Courses costed a lot more than my family could afford.
> jobactive client – unemployed/jobseeker (female, aged 25)

> Uni things are really expensive and needing to finance yourself is difficult at a vulnerable time.
> KHL service user – unemployed/jobseeker (female, aged 18)

> I live in the country so it's a long way to drive to the city everyday and I wouldn't be able to afford living whilst studying.
> KHL service user – working (female, aged 17)

  We also know from work with our clients that they do not know about the financial support they can access in relation to courses and we work them to identify these sources of support and assist them with applications. In addition, respondents who had sought to apply or applied for university courses said that the cost of applications was an issue, as was the fact that states had separate websites and application fees for their universities.

- Lack of information was also reported by those working as a key challenge (32%) although again this was an issue reported to be a challenge by all groups in that question (25% on average). The lack of information is discussed fully in its own section below as the survey provided significant information on this issue.

- Parents were reported to have made choosing what to do after leaving school most commonly by those respondents studying at university (27%) and those working (22%), compared to only 15% of those respondents who are unemployed and 13% of those undertaking apprenticeships/traineeships.

> If schools and parents weren't so hard on their child's career path and [instead] just accepting of their child's talents or careers they desire to do, [then] maybe looking for a career pathway after school wouldn't be so stressful and life taking.
> Employment support services client – working (female, aged 18)

> Having teachers and family members help and be there for [students[to make them be where they want to be and to help them with what they are willing to do after school and make them feel confident in themselves, that they'd go a long way instead of bringing them down.
> KHL service user – unemployed/jobseeker (female, aged 17)

- Some 17% of respondents who were working reported family issues made it hard.

> [I] was kicked out of home... lived out of my car shortly after leaving school
> > Employment support services client - working (female, aged 18)

Across the board, of those who responded to these questions, high proportions of all groups (34% on average for those who had left school and 27% for those who were still at school) reported that health and wellbeing issues made it hard to choose what to do after school, with poor mental health and lack of support with it being an issue.

> I did and do suffer from depression quite bad and this affected my decisions and abilities.
> > Employment support services client – working (transgender, aged 27)
> My mental health made it hard for me to choose a path after school since it really impacts on
> > how able I am to do schoolwork.
> > KHL service user – undertaking an apprenticeship/traineeship (female, aged 17)

Finally, some respondents simply highlighted that their age was a barrier to making decisions about their post-school pathways.

> It's hard to choose what you want to do for the rest of your life while you are so young
> > jobactive client – unemployed/jobseeker (male, aged 28)

Access to any information

Access to information is clearly a barrier to students making decisions about their post-school pathways. However, this is not simply about having access to, a broader range of, and more balanced, information about all options. Some respondents stated that they did not receive any information about what they could do after school.

> One unhelpful thing was not educating or discussing with us our pathways. Some students have finished their classes only to apply to uni or else where and find out they didn't take the classes needed.
> > KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 18)

> They didnt do that much to help us. They gave out uni booklets and things like that but never really sat down and said what our individual qualities might mean we would be good at.
> > KHL service user – unemployed/jobseeker (female, aged 17)

While 63% of survey respondents stated that they had been given information about possible options after school, 23% said they had but only when they had asked about it and 14% said that they had not been given any information about post-school options. That 14% said they had not received any information is clearly of concern and particularly as the highest proportion of those in this group were unemployed/jobseekers (29%), arguably the most vulnerable group of students who are in need of help with this transition;.[18]

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[18] 23% were working or undertaking apprenticeships/traineeships, 13% were at university and 7% were at school. In addition, 38% of respondents who said they had not received any information were under 15 and a high representation of this age group in this response is perhaps to be expected.

Whether this finding was because these respondents had disengaged from school, had no support networks to turn to for this information, had other issues that preoccupied them at the time or simply cannot remember being given the information, we undoubtedly must reflect on what can be done to ensure this group receive the information they need, and that when they do it is memorable and/or that information can be easily accessed if not retained. Although resolving unemployment is much more complex than simply providing such information in an appropriately engaging way, they are arguably the group who could most benefit from it and it seems to signal that they travelled through school without the support they required.

In addition, for many of those who did receive information – and often as it was university-centric – they suggested that it was not useful to them. As a result of the lack of (useful) information, some 20% and 37% of survey respondents stated that they did not have a sufficient understanding of university and vocational study systems respectively.

- **Facilitators to making decisions**

The range of barriers to students making decisions about post-school pathways points to the range of different responses or supports that students need to help them make decisions. A key theme throughout responses to the survey was that respondents would like access to more information and particularly in relation to all pathway options as well as support available to help them achieve their goals.

> [It would helpful to know] that there were so many other options other than university. And also knowing about HECS and other things to help get into uni and pay off tuition and get help with financial stuff.
>> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

> I think the one thing that would help most students about making a choice about their pathways after school is by educating them about what options are currently out there, and not shunning those who take a path different from University.
>> KHL service user – undertaking an apprenticeship/traineeship (female, aged 17)
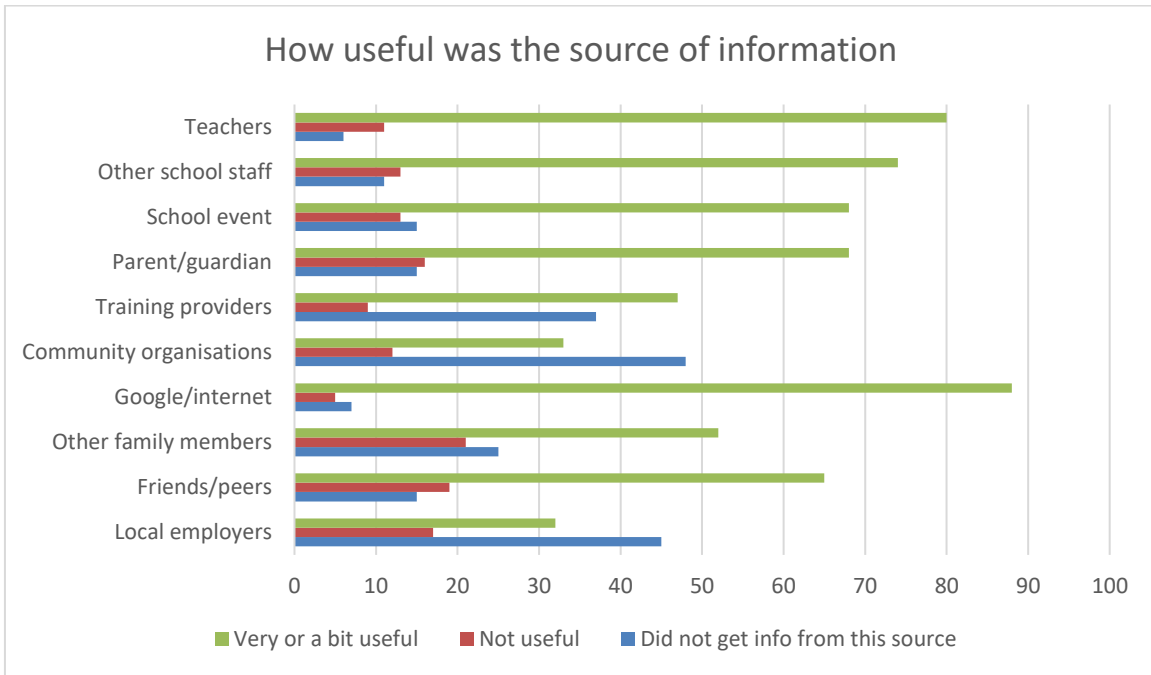
To uncover further what types of support students require, we first asked survey respondents about a range of sources of information in relation to post-school pathways, and whether they accessed or been given information from this source and, if they had, how useful they found them to be.

Preferred sources of information
The top five sources of information respondents found to be most useful were:
1) Google/other internet sources
2) Teachers
3) Other school staff
4) School event
5) Parent/guardian

The chart below sets out their responses more fully.

How useful was the source of information

Legend: Very or a bit useful | Not useful | Did not get info from this source

We also asked respondents to state from what sources of information they would prefer to access information (if they were available). The top five sources of information that were preferred across all respondents were:

1) Google/other internet sources
2) Teachers
3) School event
4) Parent/guardian
5) Training providers

Preferences of sources of info

Legend: Most prefer | Least prefer | Neutral/NA
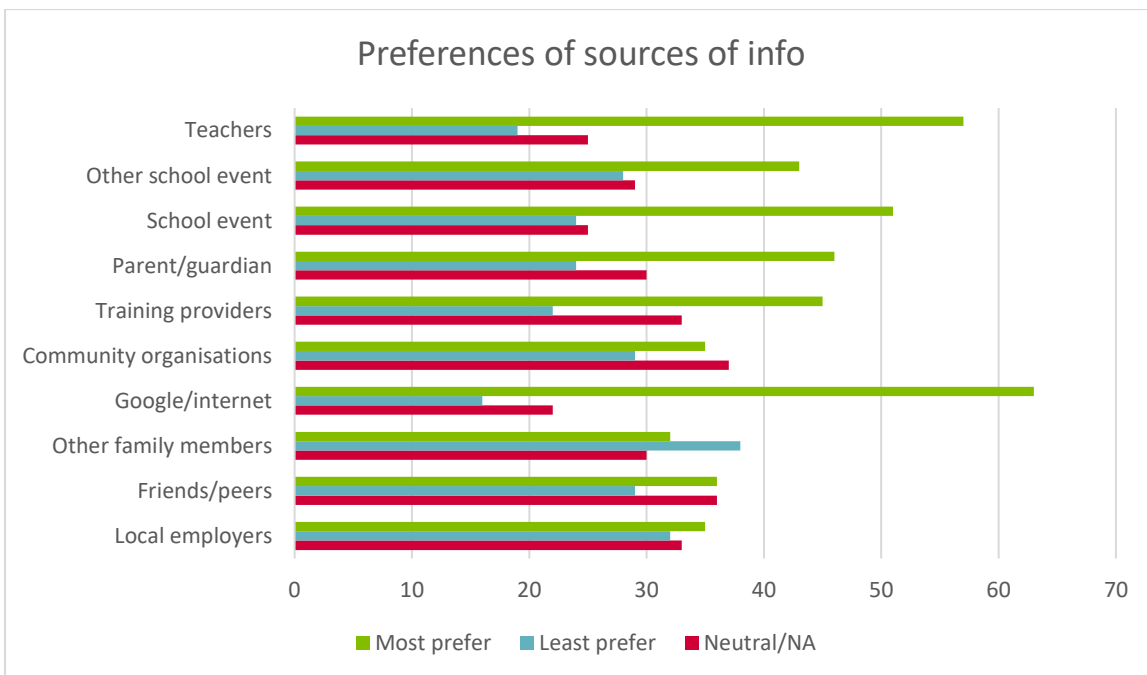
However, there were some significant variations amongst respondents depending on their current activity:

- Those who are undertaking an apprenticeship/traineeship reported teachers to be less preferred than others groups (47% noted them to be their least preferred source of information whilst the average across the groups was 19%) and the same group much preferred a parent/guardian as source of information than other groups (80% compared to an average across the groups of 49%).[19]

- Those undertaking an apprenticeship/traineeship also much preferred gaining information from local employers than other groups (60% compared to 40%) and much less rated getting information from their friends/peers (6% compared to 39% preferred this source of information).

- Respondents who reportedly spoke another language at home other than English were more likely to prefer getting information from their teachers and other school sources than those who did not, and were less likely to favour getting information from their parents than those who did not but conversely preferred getting information from other family members, friends/peers, training providers and community organisations more than those who did not.

The considerable differences amongst the groups highlights the importance of ensuring that there are a number of different channels from which students can seek information and advice.

Preferred time to receive information

Some respondents felt that they were not given sufficient time during school to contemplate their future options, and that the timing affected their study.

> They didn't give us time during school to ever sit down and consider it. We had to find time outside school and work around schoolwork to figure out what we wanted to do.
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

> Education needs to be a priority. Whilst it is important for students be informed [about post-school options] it shouldn't come out of times when they are most needed in class. Do it at the end of a term when nothing is on and not in the middle when everyone's stressed. Depression and anxiety are already high amongst seniors, don't aid it by making their lives harder.
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

> If students had more time and information—preferably experience in different settings—they would be better equipped to make a decision also.
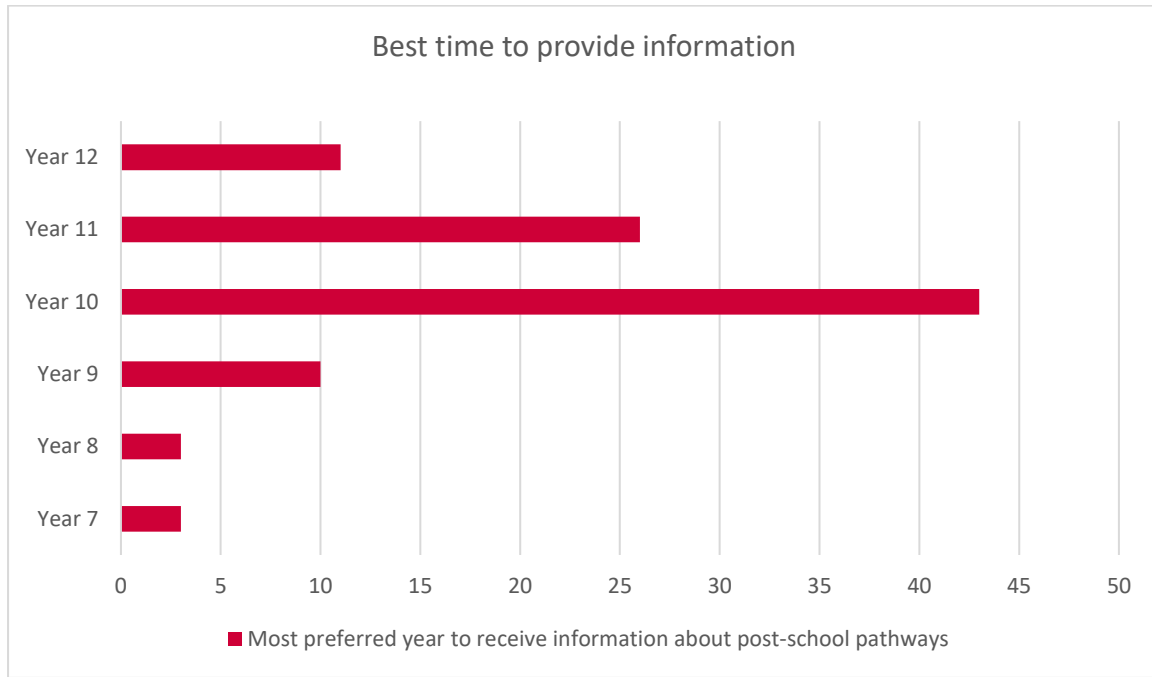> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 11 (female, aged 17)

> There was a lacking in enforcing students to think about their pathways carefully, with the decision still catching a large majority off guard and seemingly lost with what they want to do. It may not be something necessarily at fault of the school, but the added stress had caused many students to leave school prematurely which I found disappointing.
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

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[19] The numbers in the apprenticeship/traineeship group were small.

> We had a staff member who specialised in helping students get on some alternative pathways, but this advice was only presented to me after a long decline in my grades.
>
> KHL service user – studying at university (female, aged 21)

Asked when was their most preferred school year to be given information, as the chart below shows, there was a strong preference for Year 10.

Best time to provide information

Year	
Year 12	11
Year 11	26
Year 10	43
Year 9	10
Year 8	3
Year 7	3

■ Most preferred year to receive information about post-school pathways

Google/other internet sources

There was a lot of agreement amongst the groups that obtaining information about post-school options from Google or other internet sources was a preferred option, and that it was useful. However, those respondents who were not working were much less likely to rate this as a preferred option than other groups (49% compared to 65%), which is important for the Federal Government to reflect on in its reform of jobactive and a move to providing less face-to-face support in favour of more internet-based support.

What came across strongly from respondents comments about websites they accessed when searching for information about what to do after school was that:

1) there was no single (national or state) website with all the information about all the options, as well about funding assistance
2) websites for university were state-based, all had application fees and there was no one website to search and apply for courses in all or many different states
3) vocational study websites had the same issue and it is a difficult study system to access information about given state variations and the number of providers. We find there is also little knowledge amongst our clients that some TAFE courses are free to Year 12 students.

> The TAFE website is a hedge maze, it's difficult to find a clear answer on how long courses go for and which TAFEs provide certain courses
>
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

Hence, we would support the creation of a single online platform hosting information to support young people to commence making decisions. To ensure that the portal is as useful as possible, it should be developed in collaboration with children and young people, as well as employers, not just university and VET sector representatives. However, as we know that some students prefer different sources of information, a portal should not replace other key sources of information but rather complement them.

School and teachers

A key message from respondents was that teachers need to diversify the information they provide to students about possible options after leaving school: university is not and should not be for everyone. In addition, respondents asked that the information be given in more accessible and basic formats so they can engage with it.

However, it is important to note that there were many examples given by respondents about when teachers, schools and school events had effectively supported their decisions about their next steps.

> [My teachers] helped me look for all the options that I was considering, looked at the benefits and negatives of each, did further research for me, made phone calls, generally just supported through me through the whole process....My school is supportive in what each individual student wants and will do everything they can to support.
>
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

> [School provided] helpful careers advisor, careers lessons, student mentors
>
> KHL service user – studying at school – Year 11 (female, aged 17)

> [My school] helped with everything, told me where I could also get a school apprenticeship
>
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (aged 17)

> [My teachers] continually provid[ed] talks from different universities about pathways after school and they were especially helpful as they not only talked about the university pathway but also trades, apprenticeships and also TAFE courses.
>
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

> Certain teachers made an effort to help me sort out what ideas I had about what I wanted to do and helped me to research pathways.
>
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 18)

> Building up pathways during earlier years (going into year 10) was incredibly helpful as it allowed for a better insight into how to scaffold our pathways after high school. Work experience, one on one consultation with careers coordinators, careers expos and community

education days helped expose and enlighten a lot of pathways for a large variety of students. The VCAL, VET and VCE studies also proved beneficial as it allowed a variety of students to pursue high school education tailored to their personal goals. The teachers as well were very insightful and helpful when discussing possible pathways and what they believed would be valuable information.

> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

The variation in students experiences demonstrates how more should be done at a system level to ensure that all students have access to information, advice and support.

One-on-one careers advice

Although many respondents did not feel that they received the right information from their teachers, there was significant support for them to be a source of relevant information. There was also strong support for this timely advice to be one-on-one and tailored specifically to the individual student's strengths and interests. This could be from a teacher – although some level of education about post-school pathways would be needed – or specific career counsellors at school. Indeed, in our experience working with clients and their schools, school counsellors do provide specialist and personalised information where they exist but the problem is there are too few and careers' departments are under-resourced.

> [It would be good if students had] regular meetings with careers counsellors to help figure out their strengths and interests and getting into course that best suit that individual and their preferred pathway after school.
>
> KHL service user - studying at school, Year 11 (female, aged 17)

> If every student was made to sit down with a careers counsellor I feel that would help a lot.
>
> KHL service user - studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 18)

> Our careers advisor was very helpful when guiding us on the right path with choosing our subjects. It would be better if we were able to consult with our careers advisor earlier on in high school to help us choose our subjects based on our interests and career goals.
>
> KHL service user - studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

> The careers advisor of our school showed me many option on how to go about things and what I'm able to do. My year advisor cheered me on with my dreams. They both helped me very much.
>
> KHL service user – unemployed/jobseeker (female, aged 17)

> I think having the right support and encouragement would help students to think about their ideal pathways after school. Having a career advisor in school that talks to the students and gives realistic advice, information and support to achieve what is desired is extremely important and effective.
>
> KHL service user – unemployed/jobseeker (female, aged 17)

We would therefore support the Discussion Paper's suggestion that every senior secondary student should be assigned an advisor – be they a trained teacher or school counsellor - who has a relationship with that student, and is able to investigate career options specifically tailored to that student.

Work experience

A number of respondents highlighted the need for more work experience opportunities at school, including not just in one field but in many so that students could get an idea of what option most suited them.

> Experience, having the option to "try before you buy" which I understand isn't always able to be done in all cases but I think students by the time of finishing school have a very limited "taste" of life and what careers are actually out there and what they like. There is such an emphasis on getting into a course and getting into a career that will "define the rest of your life" but not much on finding what you actually enjoy doing and are good at.
> KHL service user – studying at school, Year 12 (female, aged 17)

> My work placement through the school lead to a full-time apprenticeship and help[ed] me to understand my pathway.
> KHL service user – undertaking an apprenticeship/traineeship (aged 17)

Information at school about local labour market and employment support services

As previously mentioned, in our work, we see that there is a disconnect between what employment opportunities exist for students to undertake in their local community, and the pathways that schools are setting them up for. We would like to see schools working much closer with local employers and training providers to ensure that local students are being equipped with the skills they need for existing jobs.

In addition, we would like to see collaboration between schools and community service providers such as **yourtown** so that seamless transitions to support when students are looking for work are embedded within the system, rather than allowing students to leave school without work and slide out of important routines.

Parents/guardians

As highlighted above in the results about respondents' preferred sources of information and what they find to be useful, parents are an important source. However, too often they do not have sufficiently broad knowledge about all post-school options – with their knowledge often skewed by their own chosen pathway or by a societal bias in favour of certain options – and do not understand that there are many ways for their children to follow their preferred career paths. From our work, we also know that often students from disadvantaged families have parents who have less knowledge about the range of opportunities that their children can consider.

> My parents reached out to the careers advisor. The school didn't do much to help me at all.
> KHL service user – undertaking an apprenticeship/traineeship (male, aged 16)

> My school had little to no support whereas my mum always told me to do what I want to do and helped me where she could.
> KHL service user – working female, aged 22)

In the past, we have been involved in successful school programs whereby schools work with student's parents to deliver training to them about career guidance – for example, the Parents as Career Transition Support.[20] Providing such training at school not only provides a convenient and central location for it but also can build on existing relationships it has with parents. However, for

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[20] https://youthconnect.com.au/career-transition-programs/pacts/

parents who may not have engaged with schools themselves, outreach work may be necessary or local community services with established links to these parents can be utilised.

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yourtown recommendations

Recommendation 5. Provide accessible and appropriate information about all post-school pathways at school.

Recommendation 6. Increase investment into vocational study to create a world-class VET system.

Recommendation 7. Deliver information about post-school options regarding employment, further education and apprenticeships/traineeships commencing in Year 10.

Recommendation 8. Create a single online platform that hosts information in relation to post-school pathways in collaboration with children and young people, and employer, university and VET representatives.

Recommendation 9. Provide one-on-one careers advice at school that is tailored to the needs of each student.

Recommendation 10. Provide a greater range of work experience opportunities at school so students can test a range of different roles and careers to help inform their selection of a post-school pathway.

Recommendation 11. Schools should work closer with the local community, including local employers, training providers and employment support providers (e.g. jobactive) and invite them into school to help prepare students for their post-school transition.

Recommendation 12. Seek to educate parents about all post-school pathways to reduce negative perceptions and/or lack of knowledge about some options so they can best support their children.

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5. How can we make sure opportunities are available and support is tailored to the needs of the young people?

Much of our submission has already been based on our experience of working with disadvantaged cohorts of young people and the views these clients directly expressed in the post-school pathways survey. This is because we believe that their needs deserve particular focus in this Review as, in the main, the present school system is not set up to effectively support them and today society largely accepts that their outcomes in this cohort will continue to be poorer than those of their more advantaged peers. Yet, at the same time, we know that investment into the needs of disadvantaged students would undoubtedly pay dividends in terms of preventing the lifelong social and economic effects of intergenerational disadvantage.

The relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and education

Students growing up in socially disadvantaged environments, both in Australia and internationally, are more likely to experience poor social and educational outcomes, including lower academic achievement, behavioural and emotional problems, and non-completion of school.[21] In Australia, educational gaps between more and less advantaged students are evident from the early years. At school entry, almost 85% of children from the most advantaged families are ready to learn, compared to only 68% from the most disadvantaged families. At Year 7, 87% of those with a university-educated parent are on track academically, compared to only 50% of those whose parents' highest level of education is less than Year 12. By the end of high school, approximately 60% of the most disadvantaged students have completed Year 12, compared to approximately 90% of the most advantaged.[22]

Although socioeconomic status (SES, typically measured as a combination of income, occupation, and education) is often used as an indicator of disadvantage, disadvantage is in fact a broader multi-dimensional concept. Disadvantaged families are often unable to access the kinds of goods and services that society perceives as essentials, and are cut off from the labour market, education, health and other social services, and social networks.[23] Growing up in circumstances of disadvantage is also associated with exposure to more stressful life events, higher levels of family dysfunction, less access to educational resources such as books and computers, more frequent changes of school and lower school attendance rates, all of which are linked to poorer school outcomes.[24]

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[21] Attar, B. K., and Guerra, N.G. (1994). *Neighborhood Disadvantage, Stressful Life Events and Adjustments in Urban Elementary School.* Journal of Clinical Child Psychology 23, no. 4 (December 1994): 391; Duncan, G.J., and Brooks-Gunn, J (2000). *Family Poverty, Welfare Reform, and Child Development.* Child Development 71, no. 1 (1 February 2000): 188; Lamb, S., Dwyer, P. and Wyn, J (2000). *Non-Completion of School in Australia : The Changing Patterns of Participation and Outcomes.* Camberwell, Vic. Australian Council for Educational Research; Sirin, S.R (2005). *Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Review of Research.* Review of Educational Research 75 (Fall 2005): 417–53.

[22] Lamb, S., Jackson. J., Walstab A., and Huo, S (2015). 'Educational Opportunity in Australia 2015'. Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute.

[23] Saunders, P. Naidoo, Y. and Griffiths, M (2007). *Towards New Indicators of Disadvantage: Deprivation and Social Exclusion in Australia.* Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, University of NSW.

[24] E.g. Attar, B. K., and Guerra, N.G. (1994). *Neighborhood Disadvantage, Stressful Life Events and Adjustments in Urban Elementary School.* Journal of Clinical Child Psychology 23, no. 4 (December 1994): 391.

Why do some students leave school early?

In Australia, early school leavers are defined as young people 'who exit the school system without completing Year 12 or taking up an alternative pathway',[25] As is the case for many negative life outcomes, there is a long list of risk factors for early school leaving, including: poor school attendance, behaviour and grades; low SES; minority status; child abuse and neglect; family violence; household stress or poor family functioning; conflict between home and school culture; learning difficulties and disability (including behavioural, emotional and intellectual); poor mental health; and risky behaviour (e.g., smoking, misuse of drugs or alcohol).[26] The usefulness of risk factors for predicting early school leaving is, however, limited as early school leavers are not a homogenous group.[27]

Numerous theories attempt to explain why some students drop out of school early, but the concept of **engagement with education** or school is common to most[28] and early school leaving is generally accepted to be the end point of a long gradual process of disengagement from education, rather than an event occurring at a single point in time.[29] Leading academics have stated that engagement 'is, quite frankly, the bottom line in interventions to promote school completion'.[30]

Why is engagement with education important?

Engagement with education is widely accepted as a key to breaking cycles of disadvantage. Children growing up in socially disadvantaged environments are more likely to experience poor social and educational outcomes, including behavioural and emotional problems, lower academic achievement, and non-completion of school. Poor educational outcomes are then associated with a range of negative outcomes across the lifespan including unemployment, low earnings, reliance on welfare support, poor physical and mental health, participation in crime, and low levels of connectedness to community. When these young people have families of their own, they are less able to support their children's education, health and wellbeing, contributing to intergenerational disadvantage.

Engagement with education refers to 'the extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, and participate in academic and non-academic school activities'.[31] That is, it is more than just attendance at school, which in no way guarantees that learning will take place.[32] The process of disengagement often begins in primary school and most students demonstrate

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[25] Australian Institute of Family Studies (2013). *Family Factors in Early School Leaving.* CFCA Paper: https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/family-factors-early-school-leaving/early-school-leaving.

[26] E.g. Balfanz, R., Herzog, L. and Mac Iver, D.J (2007). *Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions.* Educational Psychologist 42, no. 4 (2 November 2007): 223–35.

[27] Glogowski, K. (2015). *What Works in Dropout Prevention: Research Evidence, Pathways to Education Program Design, and Practitioner Knowledge.* Pathways to Education Canada.

[28] Plasman, J.S. (2018). Caree*r/Education Plans and Student Engagement in Secondary School.* American Journal of Education 124, no. 2 (2018): 000–000.

[29] Dale, R (2010). *Early School Leaving: Lessons from Research for Policy Makers.* European Commission;

[30] Christenson et al., 'Best Practices in Fostering Student Engagement'. Janosz, M., Archambault, I., Morizot, J. and Pagani, *L.S. School Engagement Trajectories and Their Differential Predictive Relations to Dropout.* Journal of Social Issues 64, no. 1 (2008): 21–40.

[31] Willms, J.D. (2003) *Student Engagement at School: A Sense of Belonging and Participation: Results from PISA 2000.* OECD.

[32] Lamb, S, and S Rice (2008). *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion.* Melbourne: Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

relatively consistent levels of engagement from early primary through to high school.[33] Disengaged students of any age typically find little interest or enjoyment in learning, see little value in education, invest minimal effort in school work, may be disruptive in class, are often absent, and are disconnected from others in the school environment. They may also exhibit low achievement, which is both an outcome of disengagement and a contributor to disengagement, each influencing the other in a cyclical way.[34] However, while disengaged primary school children usually comply with rules requiring attendance at school, high school students are more able to skip class or drop out completely.[35]

The role of schools

Schools and the school system more widely therefore have pivotal roles to play in the engagement of all students with their education. Indeed, we believe that schools, as they have access to all children from early ages and for sustained periods of time, have significantly untapped potential to play a greater role in effectively preparing and supporting disadvantaged children and young people for further education, employment and life in general and – in this way – to seriously tackle intergenerational disadvantage.

To this end, we would like to see schools:

- diversify the education that they deliver to students (as we outlined in our response to question one) to include important professional and life skills that disadvantaged cohorts will lack as a result of the complex and interrelated challenges that confront them at home, and ensure that these are appropriately assessed and recorded so students can leave with a greater range of achievements and skills that lead to a range of pathways.

- review approaches to delivering education to ensure that the learning styles of all students are accommodated so that no student leaves school without the basic levels of key skills they need to survive in life.

  > [School] didn't know how to teach me to my ability to learn since I have difficulties to learn but not disabled to have an EA to help me.
  > KHL service user – unemployed/jobseeker (aged 18)

- develop processes to ensure that the holistic needs of disadvantaged students – including in relation to financial issues they may experience at home, homelessness, mental health and health, drugs, and alcohol use, and young parenthood and importantly, including the support needs of their parents – are met so that the myriad of issues that disadvantaged children and young people face in their day-to-day lives no longer affect their ability to engage at school, and to succeed in life more generally.

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[33] Janosz, M., Archambault, I., Morizot,J. and Pagani, L.S. (2008). *School Engagement Trajectories and Their Differential Predictive Relations to Dropout. Journal of Social Issues* 64, no. 1 (2008): 21–40.
[34] Chase, P.A., Hilliard, L.J., Geldhof, G.J., Warren, D.J.A. and Lerner, R.M (2014). *Academic Achievement in the High School Years: The Changing Role of School Engagement.* Journal of Youth and Adolescence 43, no. 6 (June 2014): 884–96.
[35] National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004). *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn.* Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press.

Meeting the holistic needs of students

In relation to meeting the holistic needs of students, we would like to see schools work collaboratively with their local communities to find ways to facilitate access to local support services that students need. There are existing examples of schools acting as community hubs (for example, we work with the Woodridge Community Hub pilot[36]), which seek to provide students (with no upper age limit), families and the local community with an easily accessible facility to access information and support services they may need to support them in their daily lives. Through working on a range of different activities, community hubs can help overcome the stigma of families reaching out for help and can provide training to parents too, on issues such as post-school pathways, so they can better support their children.

Other approaches that could be rolled out more widely to the benefit of disadvantaged students include the Geelong Project in Victoria. The project is 'an innovative place-based model for supporting vulnerable young people and families to reduce disengagement from education and early school leaving and to help where family issues are heading towards a crisis and possible homelessness as well as other adverse outcomes'.[37] It began as funded research into youth homelessness by Swinburne University and morphed into a place-based 'community of schools and services' (COSS) collective impact model. The ultimate aim is that 'young people achieve sustainable employment and a capacity for independent living'.[38]

The COSS model is underpinned by a belief that both school improvement and better support for families is required to improve educational outcomes for students. Key characteristics of the program include:

1. **Community collaboration** - joint decision making by schools and youth/family support workers, referral decisions are data driven and evidence-based, collaboration is supported by MOUs
2. **Population screening** for risk of homelessness, early school leaving and mental health problems in order to deliver support proactively before crises arise, uses a survey instrument complemented by brief interviews and information from school staff
3. **Flexible and responsive practice framework** with three levels of response - active monitoring, short term support, and wrap around case management for complex cases; case work is youth focused and family centred with the young person, their family, schools and agencies working together from the same care plan
4. **Embedded longitudinal outcomes monitoring and measurement of change** for the cohort of vulnerable young people across the community.[39]

A comprehensive evaluation is being undertaken by Swinburne University and an interim report was released in February 2018. According to that report:[40]

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[36] http://www.communityhubs.org.au/hubs/woodridge-north-state-school-hub/
[37] MacKenzie, D. (2018). *The Geelong Project Interim Report 2016-2017.* Melbourne, Vic.: Barwon Child Youth & Family; Swinburne University of Technology.
[38] Ibid
[39] Ibid
[40] Ibid

- there has been a 20% reduction in the number of adolescents (12-18 years of age) in the pilot schools leaving school early
- there has been a 40% reduction in the number of adolescents (12-18 years) entering the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) system
- prior to the program, 60% of young people entering the SHS system came from the pilot schools and that has decreased to 20%.

The evaluation report concludes that proactively reaching out to families when risk is identified and maintaining an emphasis on education and training have been key to success.

We recognise that schools have a considerable number of competing priorities, and that they already overwhelmed with their existing roles, new areas of focus and extracurricular activities. We also acknowledge that the current school system is well suited to many students. However, we remain convinced that disadvantaged students will continue to miss out on acquiring the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities that they need to transition to their chosen post-school pathway unless there is a significant shift in the way that schools provide services to them. Presently, their engagement needs, learning styles and interests are largely ignored and the focus of schools is too narrow in terms of academic achievements and the post-school pathway for which they are preparing students.

In addition, too many students are left to manage the effects of intergenerational disadvantage inadequately supported and at the detriment to their education and future employment outcomes. It can simply be no longer acceptable that our schooling systems continue to overlook the deep and persistent issues that effectively exclude some children and young people from successfully engaging at school and with post-school pathways. We therefore call for a national review of the system to address these significant gaps in provision.

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yourtown recommendations

Recommendation 13. Implement a national review of school systems focusing on the quality of education, support and outcomes they deliver to disadvantaged students. The review's objective should be to establish how to ensure that no student leaves school without the skills and confidence they need in life, and to succeed in post-school pathways. The review should consider:

- What schools can do to successfully engage all children and young people to obtain a senior level of education.
- Identification of the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities that young people need to succeed in life.
- How all skills, knowledge and capabilities – academic, vocational, professional skills, life skills and community activities and achievements– should be assessed and accredited.