

Pathways, Engagement and Transitions:

Experiences of early
school leavers



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Executive summary

Year 12 completion matters

Educational attainment is associated with positive **social and economic outcomes** across the life course, including greater income and job security, occupational choice, physical and mental health and active participation in the community.

Young people who **leave school without completing Year 12** (early school leavers), or those who do not achieve an equivalent qualification, can find the post-school transition difficult. The range of **post-secondary** work and study **pathways** available to early school leavers is increasingly **more limited**. Many courses and jobs require Year 12 completion and nine-in-10 of the newly created jobs in the next decade will require a post-secondary qualification.

Over the last decade, Year 12 completion rates in Australia have seen at least one in five young people not completing Year 12. The completion rate declined from 79 percent in 2021 to 76 percent in 2022, meaning that a **quarter of young people did not complete Year 12** in 2022.

Young people experiencing **socioeconomic disadvantage**, who identify as **Aboriginal** and/or Torres Strait Islander, who are living with a **disability** or reside in **non-metropolitan** areas, have lower completion rates than their peers. In 2022, the Year 12 certification rates for young people living in high socioeconomic areas was **83 percent** compared to **70 percent** for those in low socioeconomic areas.

Understanding and mitigating the factors contributing to early school leaving is critical to improving young people's longer-term outcomes.

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions study

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study aims to understand the post-school pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage. It examines:

- Their level of **engagement in work** and/or **further study**
- The **factors** influencing their pathways
- Ways of strengthening young people's **school** and **post-school outcomes**.

Over **three years**, from 2021 to 2023, the PET study has heard directly about these topics from two cohorts of **financially disadvantaged young people**. These young people were in **Year 10 or Year 12 in late 2020** and on The Smith Family's long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*. With **COVID-19** resulting in school closures in 2020 and 2021, these young people experienced significant disruptions in their senior secondary years.

The study collected data through:

- **Three surveys** in 2021, 2022 and 2023 respectively
- **Three annual interviews** with 60 young people who completed the surveys
- Combining these data with **information** collected since these young people **began on *Learning for Life***.

This publication, the third in the PET series, focuses on the experiences of young people who were in **Year 10 in 2020**, particularly those who **left school before completing Year 12**. It draws on survey responses from over **2,000** young people who completed all three surveys, and interviews with 29 of them.

Young people from all states and territories participated in the survey, 55 percent are female, 45 percent are male, and 15 percent identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people. Thirty percent live in non-metropolitan areas, and 39 percent have a health and/or mental health condition.

Who leaves school early?

Of the young people in Year 10 in 2020, 68 percent had completed Year 12, 28 percent had left school early, and four percent were still completing school in 2023. Of those who left school early, 65 percent had completed Year 11 and 35 percent completed up to Year 10.

Within this cohort of young people experiencing disadvantage, **early school leaving** rates were **higher** for:

- **Males** than females
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander** young people than non-Indigenous young people
- Young people of **English-speaking background** than those from non-English speaking backgrounds
- Those with a **health** or **mental health** condition compared to those without these conditions
- Young people living in **regional areas** than those living in metropolitan areas.

In addition to these demographic differences, early school leaving was substantially higher among young people who had **struggled in middle secondary school**, including those with **lower school attendance** or **poorer Maths and English grades**. Well over half (57 percent) of those who missed more than 30 percent of school in Year 9 left school early, as did 45 percent of those who achieved a D or E grade in Year 9 English. These findings reinforce that attendance and achievement can act as an **early flag** to identify young people needing additional support to complete Year 12.

Why do young people leave school?

The reasons young people identified for leaving school early involved both **push** and **pull factors** and included:

- Wanting (31 percent) or getting (26 percent) a job, apprenticeship or traineeship
- Not liking school (32 percent)
- Health or mental health issues (31 percent)
- Not doing well at school or missing a lot of school (28 percent)
- Having problems with students or teachers or being asked to leave (17 percent)
- Wanting to do other training or courses (16 percent)
- Being bullied at school (13 percent).

Among those who were in Year 11 at the time of the 2021 survey but subsequently left school early, **92 percent had intended to complete Year 12**. Most early school leavers **aspire** to complete Year 12 but take a different pathway in their senior secondary years for a range of reasons. These aspirations provide a **significant opportunity** for supporting more young people to complete Year 12.

Post-school engagement in work and study

Data from the 2023 PET survey reinforces the relationship between **Year 12 completion** and post-school engagement in **work and/or study**. Two-in-three (67 percent) early school leavers, compared to three-in-four (76 percent) Year 12 completers were in **work** and/or **study** in 2023. Fifty-two percent of those who completed Year 12 were **fully engaged** (working and/or studying 35 hours a week or more), compared to 38 percent of early school leavers.

A similar proportion of early school leavers and Year 12 completers were engaged in work (56 and 58 percent respectively). Early school leavers were more likely than Year 12 completers to work full-time (24 percent and 12 percent respectively), reflecting the higher proportion of Year 12 completers **combining work and study**.

Forty-six percent of Year 12 completers were **studying** (including in combination with work), compared to 32 percent of early school leavers. Given the relationship between post-school participation in education and career progression, this gap may have **longer-term implications** for young people's life outcomes.

Young people's experiences of work

For early school leavers who were working, their **reasons for leaving school** were related to the **skill levels** of their job roles, as defined by the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations. Young people who identified that they left school because they were not doing well at school, or because of a health and/or mental health issue, were much more likely to be in a **low-skill job** than those who identified that they left school to get a job, apprenticeship or traineeship (64 percent, 55 percent and 34 percent respectively). A higher proportion of early school leavers compared to Year 12 completers were working in roles defined as mid-skill level, reflecting the decision of some early school leavers to pursue a skilled trade or apprenticeship.

Most young people who were working were **satisfied with their job**, with 65 percent of early school leavers and 62 percent of Year 12 completers rating their job satisfaction as seven or higher out of 10. However, many also experienced **underemployment**, with **44 percent** of both groups of young people wanting to **work more hours**, suggesting this is a significant issue for many young people experiencing disadvantage. Three in five young people indicated they had **left a job** in the previous 12 months, with Year 12 completers more likely than early school leavers to have left a job **by choice** (87 percent and 76 percent respectively). This suggests that early school leavers may experience a greater level of **job precarity** than Year 12 completers.

Young people's experiences of study

Young people who had completed Year 12 were more likely to study full-time than part-time (31 percent and 15 percent, respectively), while seven percent of early school leavers studied full-time and 25 percent part-time.

Among **early school leavers**, one in five had completed a qualification the previous year, while more than a **quarter** (28 percent) had **left a course without completing it**. The most common reasons for leaving a course were similar to the main reasons for leaving school early, including health or personal reasons (32 percent), the course not being what the young person wanted (28 percent), losing interest (21 percent), problems juggling study and family commitments (21 percent), and wanting to get a job, apprenticeship or traineeship (21 percent).

Perceptions of leaving school early

Three-quarters (73 percent) of early school leavers indicated they were happy or very happy about leaving early, however, perceptions varied by their level of **post-school engagement**. Only a third (34 percent) of those who were **not engaged in work or study** in 2023 were happy about leaving school early, compared to 77 percent who were fully engaged and 62 percent who were partially engaged.

Life satisfaction, health and wellbeing

Young people's **life satisfaction** was fairly similar regardless of their educational attainment. Just under half rated their life satisfaction positively at seven or higher out of 10 (45 percent

of early school leavers and 47 percent of Year 12 completers). Forty two percent of early school leavers and 45 percent of those who completed Year 12 rated their life satisfaction between four and six, while 13 percent of early school leavers, and eight percent of young people who had completed Year 12 rated it at three or less.

While three quarters of both groups of young people rated their **general health** positively, much higher proportions of young people rated their **mental health as poor or fair** (43 percent of early school leavers and 51 percent of Year 12 completers).

Financial concerns were common among young people, with 44 percent of early school leavers and 34 percent of those who completed Year 12 stating they worry often or all the time about paying for essentials. Thirteen percent of early school leavers who had left a course without completing it, had done so for financial reasons.

Strengthening Year 12 completion and post-school outcomes of young people experiencing disadvantage

The data collected over three years through the PET project from young people experiencing disadvantage, highlight a range of opportunities to improve school completion and enhance post-school work and study opportunities. These include:

- Continuous monitoring of **warning signs** throughout **school** to identify **young people at elevated risk of early school leaving**, including lower attendance levels, poor achievement, mental health issues, bullying and social challenges. These signs may emerge at any point across secondary school, including lower secondary or in Years 11 and 12.
- Providing students experiencing these challenges with more **individualised support** while **at school** to strengthen school engagement and completion. The cohort of early school leavers is **diverse** and leave for a range of reasons, and require tailored approaches to address their needs.

- Increased provision of **individualised career advice** and **support** throughout the **secondary years**, with a focus on delivering supports which help young people articulate their **post-school plans** and the steps required to achieve this plan. Such support should be comprehensive and enable young people to explore a **range** of post-school options. Support should be accessible, engaging, and meaningful to young people. Tailored support can both contribute to greater levels of school engagement and completion and stronger post-school pathways for those who do leave school early.
- Support could include helping young people to develop the **practical skills** they will need to:
 - o Obtain a job (e.g. resumé and interview skills)
 - o Manage money (e.g. budgeting, where and how to seek financial support)
 - o Thrive in tertiary education environments (e.g. time and study management skills)
 - o Obtain support post-school (e.g. where and how to seek support for various needs including pathways planning, work, study, mental health etc).
- **Increased support and information** to **parents and carers** regarding school completion and how they can support their children's **post-school pathways**. As relatives are the primary source of advice about work and study for young people, and are particularly important for early school leavers, they need to be supported with the tools and information to provide appropriate and contemporary advice about young people's options and how to act on them.
- Increased provision of **appropriate and accessible support in and outside of school** for young people experiencing **mental health issues**.

The new **National School Reform Agreement** between the states, territories and the Commonwealth, due to commence in 2025, represents a significant opportunity to implement these recommendations, and contribute to higher levels of school completion and stronger post-school outcomes for all young Australians.



Introduction



Educational attainment is associated with positive social and economic outcomes across the life course. These outcomes include income and job security, a wider range of occupational choices, better physical and mental health, and developing the skills and knowledge to be an active and informed community member (PHIDU, 2021 and AIHW, 2021).

In Australia, young people who leave school without completing Year 12 or an equivalent qualification (that is, 'early school leavers') can find the transition into post-school education, training and employment more difficult (Lamb et al, 2015). These challenges lead to a greater risk of long-term unemployment, welfare dependence, social exclusion and mental health challenges (Robinson and Meredith, 2013).

Young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, or living with a disability, or who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, have lower rates of Year 12 completion on average, than their peers (Lamb et al, 2020). In 2022, Year 12 certification rates were higher for young people living in high socioeconomic areas (83 percent) than those in low socioeconomic areas (70 percent, ACARA, 2023).

The Year 12 attainment gap is related to disparities in post-school engagement in work and study, with 51 percent of 24-year-olds from low socioeconomic backgrounds being fully engaged in education, training, or work, compared to 82 percent of those from high socioeconomic backgrounds (Lamb et al, 2020).

Nine-in-10 newly created jobs in the next decade will require a post-secondary qualification, with university qualifications particularly in demand (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2023). However, Year 12 completion rates declined from 79 percent in 2021 to 76 percent in 2022 (ACARA, 2023), and just 58 percent of Year 12 completers and 36 percent of early school leavers were engaged in study in the year after leaving school in 2023. These recent trends highlight the importance of increasing efforts to improve Year 12 retention and completion, particularly among people experiencing disadvantage.

The 2020 Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training recommended multiple policy and practice changes to improve the quality of senior secondary education and improve young people's post-school pathways (Education Services Australia, 2020), however many of these recommendations have not yet been realised. The new National School Reform Agreement between the states, territories and the Commonwealth, due to commence in 2025, represents a significant opportunity to implement these recommendations, and contribute to higher levels of school completion and stronger post-school outcomes for all young Australians. This publication examines the experiences of early school leavers and reiterates the need to mitigate the factors contributing to early school leaving.

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions study

The Pathways, Engagement and Transitions (PET) study focusses on the work and study pathways of young people experiencing disadvantage over time. Over three years (2021–2023), PET followed two cohorts of young people who were in Year 10 and Year 12 respectively in 2020 and on The Smith Family's long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*.¹

The PET study aims to:

- Understand the **pathways** young people experiencing disadvantage take as they move through and beyond senior secondary school
- Explore the **factors** influencing post-school pathways
- Identify what **more can be done** to strengthen the post-school outcomes of young people experiencing disadvantage.

Hearing directly from young people is a particular strength of the PET study. It has collected a range of data through:

- Three surveys conducted in the first half of 2021, 2022 and 2023 respectively
- Three interviews conducted mid-year in 2021, 2022 and 2023, with a sub-group of 60 young people who completed the survey
- Combining this new data with information collected by The Smith Family since these young people began participating on *Learning for Life*, such as demographic, school attendance and achievement data.

By surveying and interviewing the same group of young people over three years², the PET study provides a unique opportunity to better understand the dynamics of young people's pathways over time, including what changes and what stays the same, as well as what factors influence them.

This publication

This is the third publication in the PET series and focuses on the experiences of young people who were in Year 10 in 2020 and left school before completing Year 12. It addresses the following questions:

1. **Who** is more likely to leave school early, and **why** do they leave?
2. How do the **post-school pathways** and experiences of early school leavers **compare** to Year 12 completers?
3. What **factors** promote positive outcomes in the senior secondary and post-school years?

Characteristics of the Year 10 young people

A total of 3,613 young people in Year 10 in 2020 were invited to participate in the PET study. This publication draws on the responses of the 2,019 young people who completed all three surveys.³

Key characteristics of these young people include:

- **Gender:** Over half (55 percent) are female, 45 percent are male
- **Indigeneity:** 15 percent identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- **Health and disability:** Two in five (39 percent) have a health and/or mental health condition
- **Location:** 70 percent live in major cities and 30 percent in regional areas
- **States and territories:** All were represented, with around a quarter living in each of New South Wales and Victoria, one-fifth in Queensland, and around one in 10 in each of South Australia and Western Australia. Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory together comprised six percent.

The young people who completed the surveys were broadly representative of the cohort of Year 10 students who were on *Learning for Life* in 2020.⁴

Twenty-nine young people who were in Year 10 in 2020 and on *Learning for Life*, participated in a one-hour interview in 2021, 2022 and/or 2023. Of these, 14 had left school early and 15 had completed Year 12. Sixteen of these young people are female and 13 are male. Four young people identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The interviews explored their experiences of work, study, and other activities since leaving school and the factors influencing these experiences.

1 All young people on *Learning for Life* live in a low-income family and most are recruited to the program when they are in primary school. More information on the program is available at <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/programs/learning-for-life>.

2 That is, taking an approach which is longitudinal (tracking the same people over time) rather than cross-sectional (examining a relevant group of people at any single point in time).

3 2,928 young people completed the first survey in 2021, 2,686 completed the second survey in 2022, and 2,311 completed the third survey in 2023.

4 The survey data are weighted to ensure the characteristics of young people who completed the PET surveys are representative of the characteristics of all young people invited to participate.

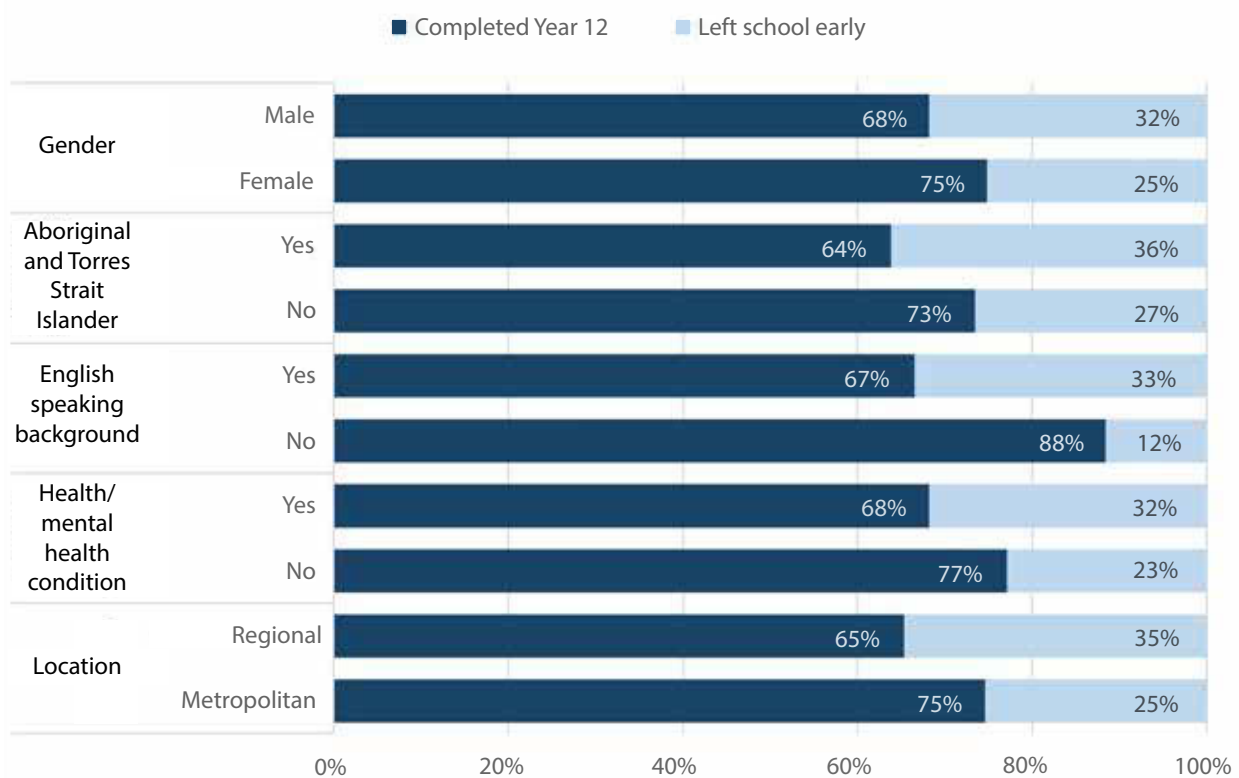
Young people who leave school early

Who is more likely to leave?

Of the young people who completed all three surveys, 68 percent had completed Year 12, 28 percent had left school early and four percent were still at school at the time of the 2023 survey. Of the early school leavers, two thirds (65 percent) completed Year 11 and one-third (35 percent) completed Year 10.⁵

Rates of early school leaving were higher among young people who are male, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, from an English-speaking background, had a health and/or mental health condition and/or who lived in a regional area. As shown in Figure 1, approximately one-third of each of these subgroups of young people were early school leavers.

Figure 1: School completion by demographic characteristics⁶



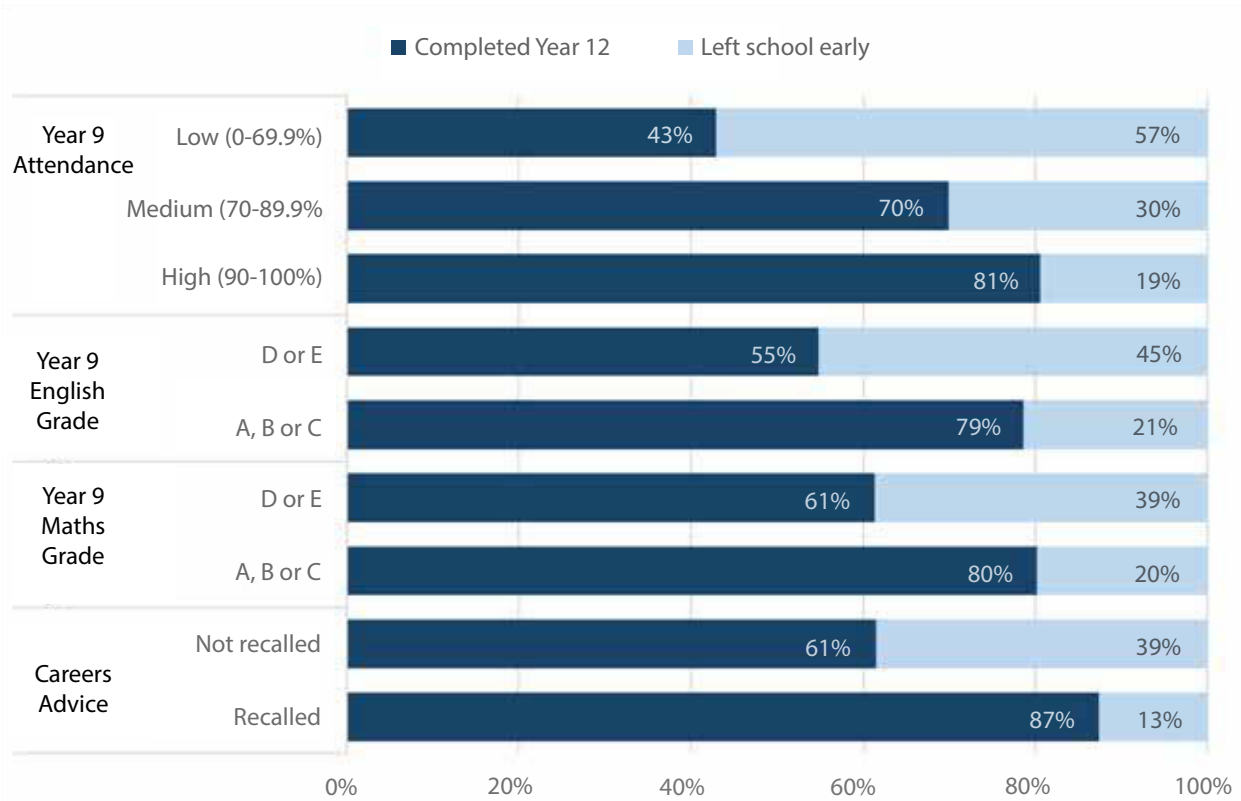
5 While all young people in this study were in Year 10 in 2020, a small proportion of early school leavers (3 percent) left school before completing Year 10.

6 Throughout this publication all figures are rounded to the nearest whole number, therefore percentages in some cases may not add up to 100.

As shown in Figure 2, rates of early school leaving were highest among young people who struggled in middle secondary school, including those who had low attendance (57 percent), and/or achieved a D or E grade in English (45 percent) and/or Maths (39 percent) in Year 9.

The 2023 survey asked young people whether they recalled receiving careers advice at school, with higher rates of early school leaving among young people who did not compared to those who did (39 percent and 13 percent respectively).

Figure 2: School completion by experiences at school



Why do young people leave school early?

In the first survey in 2021, young people who were still enrolled in school (that is, in the first half of Year 11), were asked if they intended to complete Year 12. Of those who subsequently left school early, 92 percent had intended to complete Year 12. This suggests that many early school leavers aspire to complete Year 12 but various events and factors in their senior secondary years contribute to a different outcome.

Figure 3 identifies the main reasons for leaving school, with the top three including *didn't like school* (32 percent), *wanted to get a job, apprenticeship or traineeship* (31 percent) and *health or mental health issues* (31 percent).

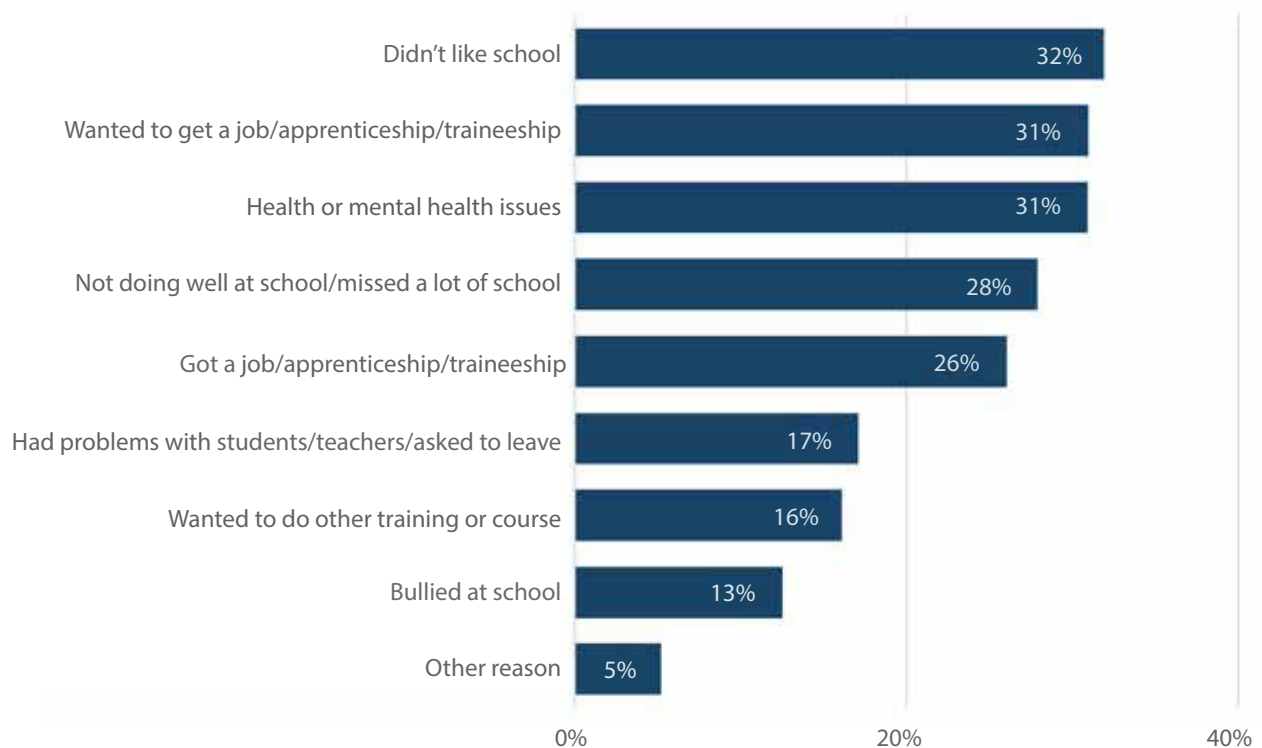
Half of all early school leavers identified multiple reasons for leaving school. Those who offered only one reason were most likely to cite having *got or wanted to get a job, apprenticeship or traineeship* (22 percent and 17 percent respectively) or having *health or mental health issues* (15 percent). Small

proportions of young people cited *had problems with students, teachers, or asked to leave* (six percent) or being *bullied* (three percent).

Among those listing multiple reasons, leaving because they *didn't like school* (54 percent), had *health or mental health issues* (50 percent), *wanted to get a job/apprenticeship/traineeship* (47 percent) and *not doing well at school/missed a lot of school* (46 percent) were most common.

Reasons for leaving school early were also linked to when young people left school. Young people whose highest attainment was Year 10 or lower were more likely to say they left school due to being *bullied at school* compared to those completing Year 11 (17 percent and eight percent respectively). Those who completed Year 11 were more likely than those who had not, to indicate they left school as they *got a job/apprenticeship/traineeship* (28 percent compared to 23 percent).

Figure 3: Reasons provided for leaving school early



Note: Young people could select multiple answers, so percentages do not total 100 percent.

The interviews with young people reflected the survey data regarding the most common reasons for leaving school. Several young people, like Brandon and Holly⁷, indicated they didn't like school.

I got good grades but I just didn't like it... I didn't really have any academic goals. I didn't really see myself in the future going into an academic pathway. – Brandon (early school leaver)

For me, it was the classroom. It was way too easy to be distracted, especially with the volume of the classroom. And the teachers... you'd never have their undivided attention. So, it was kind of hard. – Holly (early school leaver)

A number of other young people, such as George and Iqbal, preferred to pursue qualifications outside of school.

School wasn't for me. I dropped out so I could become an apprentice and get something under my name, get some qualifications. – George (early school leaver)

If I didn't have a job before I finished Year 11, I was going to do Year 12, but I found the job, so I didn't feel the need to do Year 12. I'm out of school now... I'm doing a security course and then the next step is an electrical apprenticeship. – Iqbal (early school leaver)

Other young people cited having problems with other students or teachers, including bullying, as the reason they left school early, despite wanting to continue their schooling.

I was bashed and bullied through school, so I left. I still wanted to finish some sort of schooling, so I did Year 10 and 11 through TAFE. – Jen (early school leaver)

Several young people noted their mental health challenges made it difficult to remain engaged at school.

I felt like I mentally couldn't, I was not in the right place last year. I struggled with school a lot. I was just in a really, really bad mental space. – Paige (early school leaver)

The school I was at wanted me to repeat there, and I didn't want to because I knew it will just be the same for me and I won't do anything. I struggle a lot with mental health and stuff, so instead I decided I would go to TAFE because there are smaller classrooms and not as many people. – Heather (early school leaver)



⁷ All names of young people have been changed.

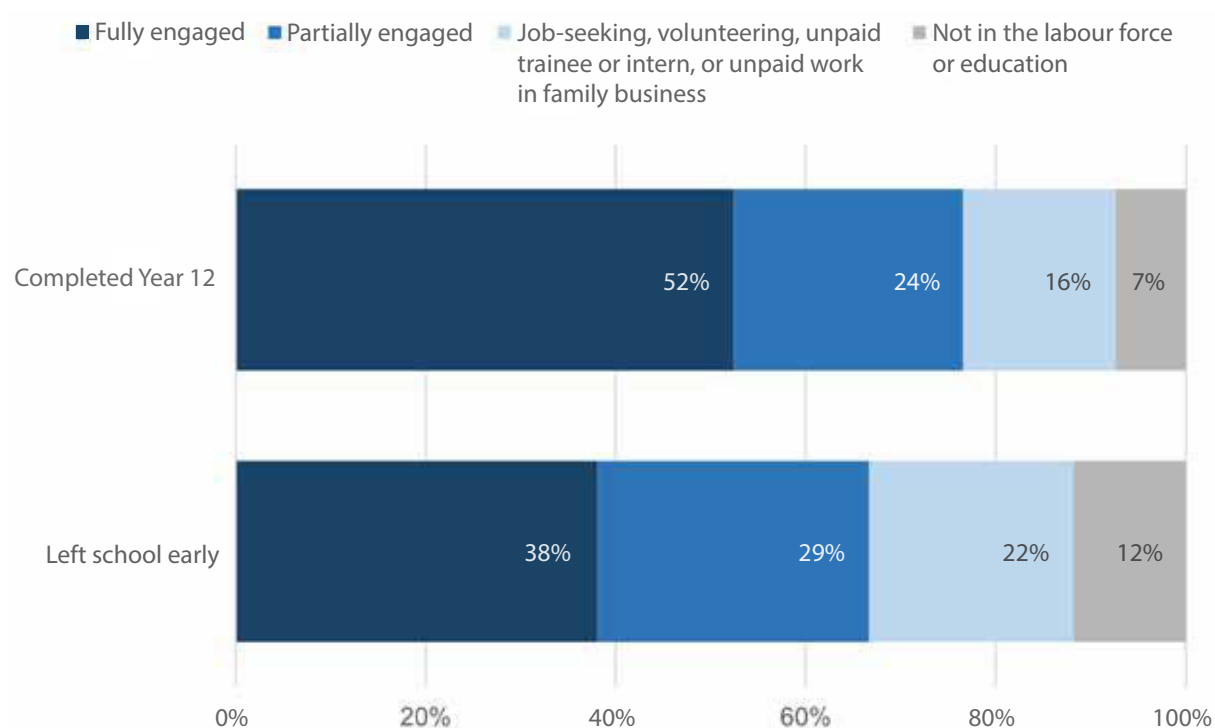
How do post-school pathways of early school leavers compare to Year 12 completers?

Engagement outcomes

The PET survey tracks young people's engagement in work and study after leaving school. Young people are defined as *fully engaged* if they are working and/or studying for 35 hours a week or more. Those working or studying for fewer than 35 hours are defined as *partially engaged*. Young people who are not participating in any paid work or study are defined as *not engaged*, though they may be looking for work, in unpaid work or volunteering.

In 2023, fewer early school leavers were fully engaged in work and study (38 percent) compared to their counterparts who completed Year 12 (52 percent). Early school leavers were more likely to be partially engaged (29 compared to 24 percent) or job seeking, volunteering, an unpaid trainee or intern, or in unpaid work in a family business (22 compared to 16 percent), or not in the labour force or education (12 compared to 7 percent), compared to young people who completed Year 12 (see Figure 4).

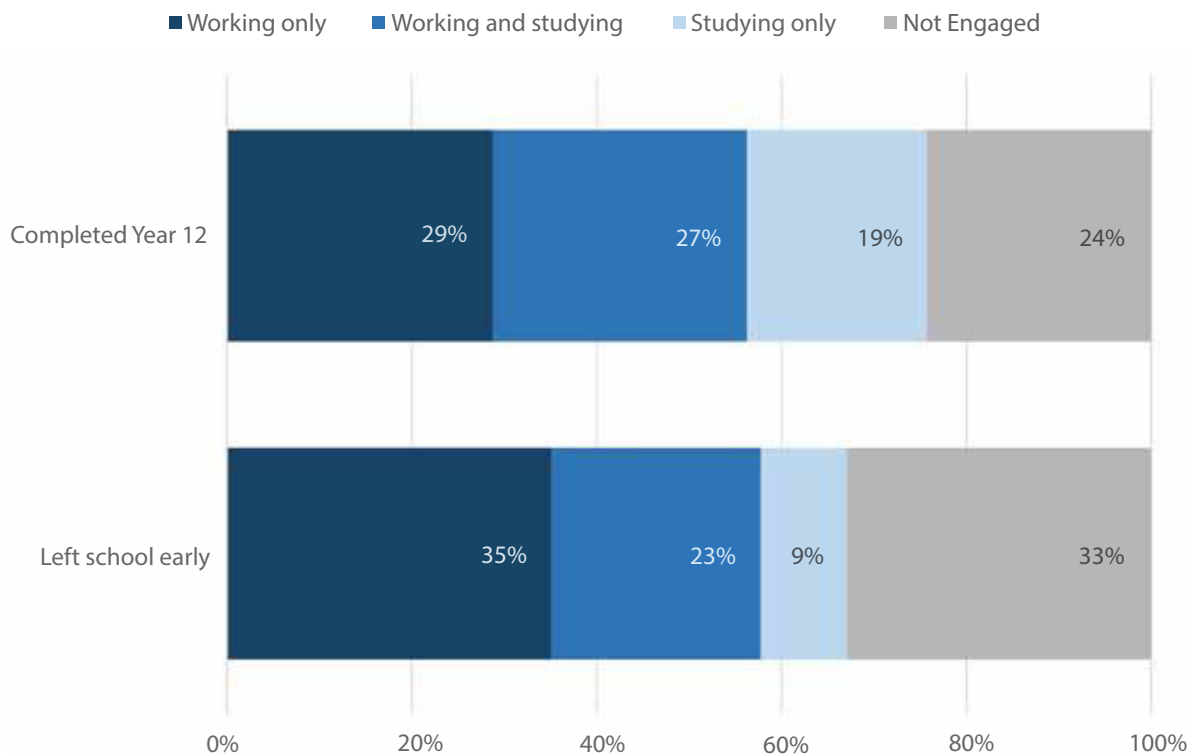
Figure 4: Engagement outcomes by school completion



Early school leavers were more likely to be working only (35 percent) or not engaged (33 percent) compared to their counterparts who completed Year 12 (29 percent and 24 percent respectively) (see Figure 5). Conversely, young people who completed Year 12 were more likely to be working and

studying (27 percent) or studying only (19 percent) compared to young people who left school early (23 percent and nine percent respectively). Just under half (46 percent) of Year 12 completers were engaged in study compared to only a third (32 percent) of young people who left school early.

Figure 5: Work and study participation by school completion



Note: Participants looking for work and volunteering, unpaid trainees and interns, those in unpaid work in a family business and those not in the labour force or education, together make up the young people classified as not engaged.



Experiences with work

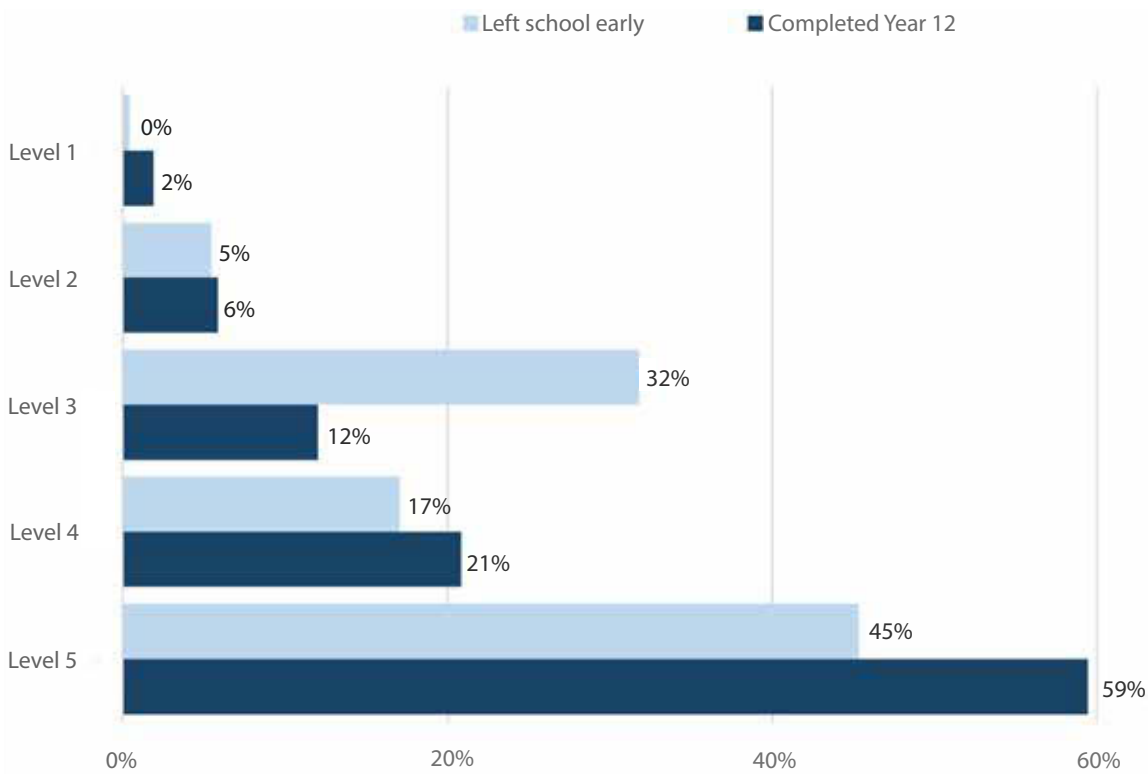
As shown in Figure 5, similar proportions of early school leavers and Year 12 completers were engaged in work in 2023 (58 percent and 56 percent respectively). However, a higher proportion of early school leavers than Year 12 completers were working full-time (24 percent compared to 12 percent), reflecting the higher proportions of Year 12 completers combining work with study.

Young people who were working were asked about their occupations, and these were grouped against the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations which defines the skill levels required to complete the

role (ABS, 2022). Skill levels range from one to five, with one being the highest and five being the lowest skilled occupations.

As shown in Figure 6, for young people who were employed in 2023, those who completed Year 12 were most commonly working in Skill Level 5 and 4 roles (59 and 21 percent respectively), while young people who left school early were most commonly in Skill Level 5 and 3 roles (45 and 32 percent respectively). Of the young people in Skill Level 3 roles, the majority (77 percent) were undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship.

Figure 6: Occupation skill level by school completion for young people in work



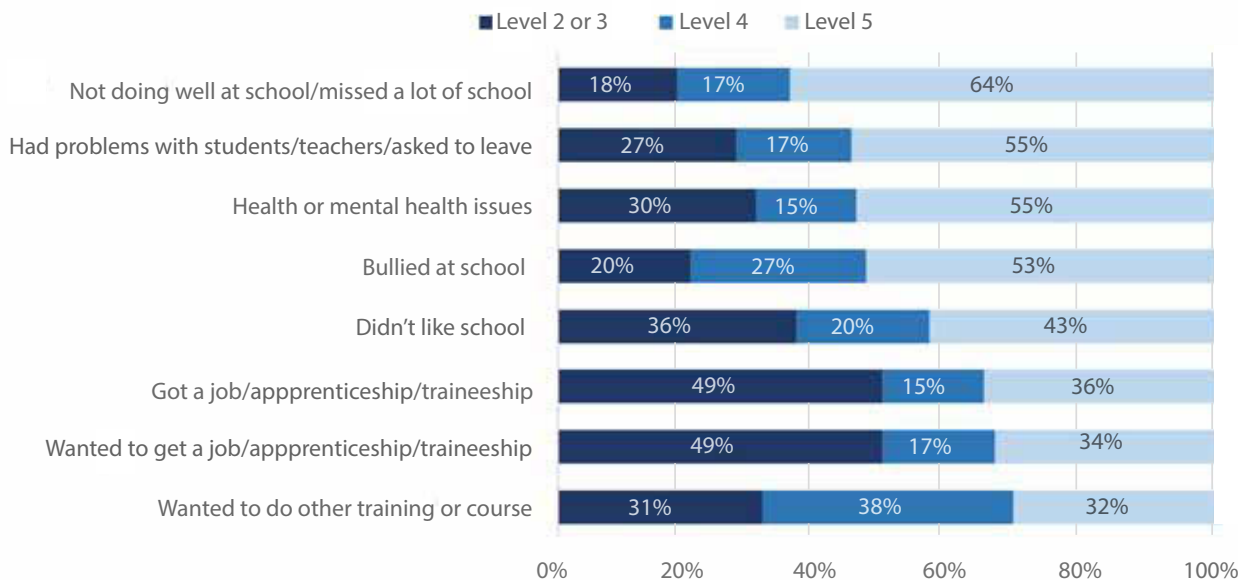
Note: Level 5 is the lowest skill level and Level 1 is the highest skill level occupation.



The reasons for leaving school early were also related to the skill level of their occupations. Those who left school due to having got or wanted to get a job/apprenticeship/traineeship were more commonly working in higher skilled roles, while

those who left school due to *not doing well at school/missed a lot of school, having had problems with students/teachers/asked to leave and health or mental health issues*, were more commonly working in Skill Level 5 roles (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Occupation skill level by reason for leaving school early for young people in work

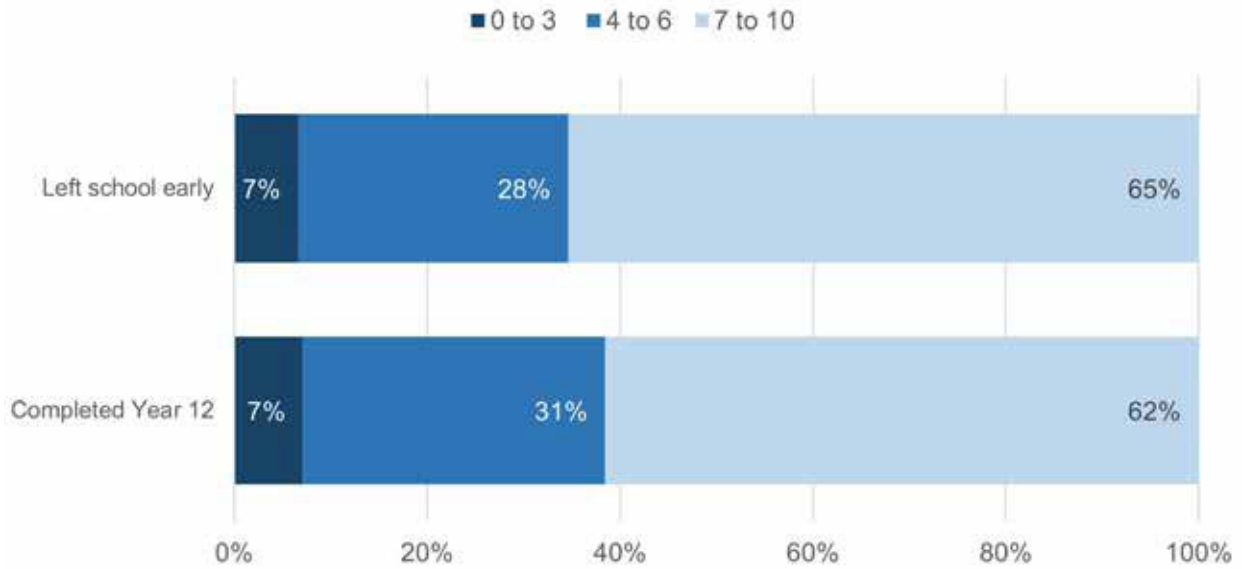


Work hours and job satisfaction

Of the young people in work, two in five (44 percent) wanted to work more hours than they currently were, with similar responses for both early school leavers and those who completed Year 12. This suggests underemployment⁸ is a significant issue for many young people experiencing disadvantage, regardless of their educational attainment.

Similarly, early school leavers and Year 12 completers expressed similar levels of satisfaction with their jobs, with 65 percent of early school leavers and 62 percent of Year 12 completers rating their job satisfaction at 7 or higher out of 10 as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Job satisfaction by school completion



⁸ Underemployment refers to someone who is currently employed, but is not working full-time and would like to, and is available to work additional hours (ABS, 2021).

Interviewees, Rosie and Piper, both expressed strong satisfaction with their jobs:

My work situation is great. I'm the person who runs the floor and does all the stock selling stuff, but then we also get to go out into the field a lot, and you're with people all the time doing that. I enjoy it because it's kind of a lifestyle, and it's a passion. – Rosie (early school leaver)

I work casually at a kitchen supply store. It's not exactly what I want to be doing, but it's good money, I like the people I work with and I'm constantly learning new things. I really love my job. As soon as I get there, it's my happy place, really. – Piper (Year 12 completer)

In contrast, Liam felt his role wasn't the best fit for him:

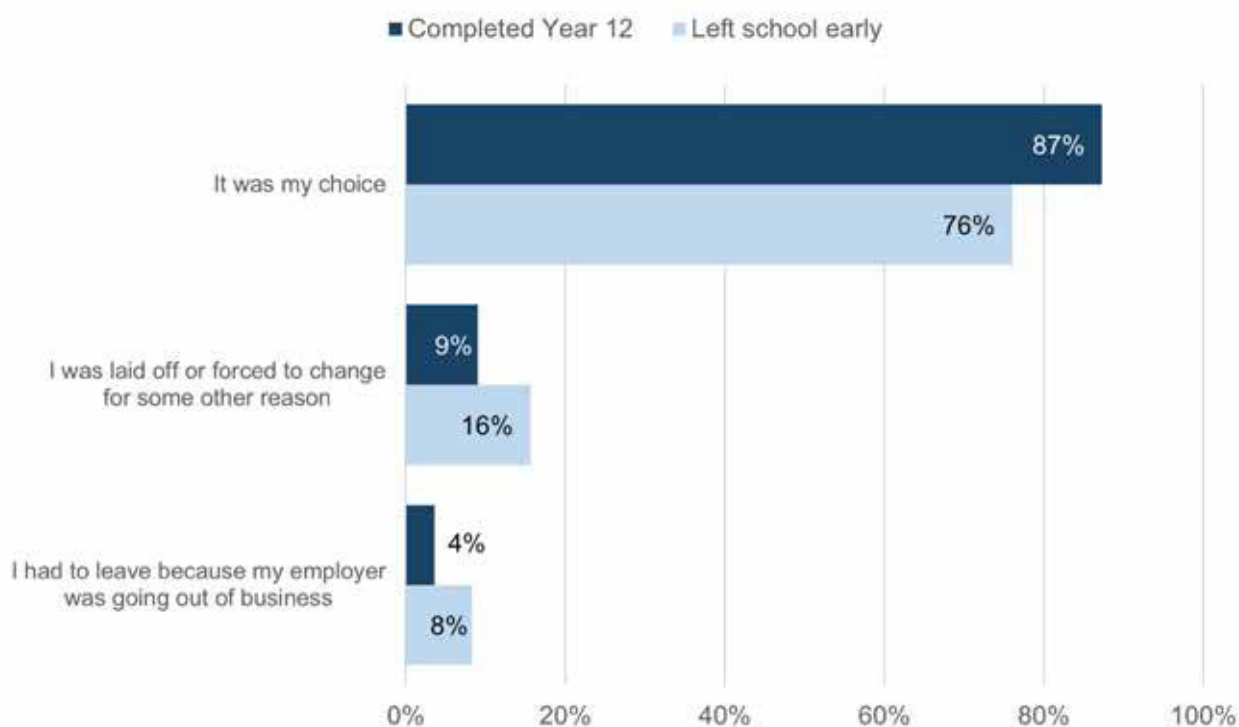
I'm just working as a warehouse operative. So, just mostly helping with deliveries and sort of moving stock around, that kind of thing. I hate it, it's not fulfilling at all. – Liam (early school leaver)

Job precarity and employment experiences

A high proportion of young people – around three-in-five, had changed jobs between 2022 and 2023, with similar proportions of early school leavers (61 percent) and Year 12 completers (64 percent) having done so.

However, early school leavers were less likely to leave a job by choice, (76 percent compared to 87 percent, see Figure 9). This suggests they had moved into more precarious roles than Year 12 completers. Early school leavers were more likely than Year 12 completers to have changed jobs due to being laid off or forced to change for some other reason (16 percent compared to 9 percent), or due to their employer having gone out of business (eight percent compared to four percent).

Figure 9: Changing jobs in the 12 months prior to the 2023 survey, by school completion



The survey findings point to a number of employment challenges for young people in 2023, particularly for early school leavers, and these challenges were reflected in the interviews. For example, Angela felt she needed to find another job due to bullying, Liam was made redundant from his role, Jen had held a series of short-term low-skill roles since leaving school and Brandon's casual gardening job had uncertain hours.

When I realised I wanted to look for another job, because I was being bullied, I got really depressed and triggered, and I had a panic attack. I'm going to try and apply for jobs, but I'm still very anxious about that. – Angela (early school leaver)

I got made redundant and got a little bit of a payout from it. I got a new job straight away, same pay and everything, so it was going well but the company I'm working for now isn't very good. They've cut back my hours and messed me around a bit. – Liam (early school leaver)

I worked at a fast-food chain for two and half, maybe three years, then I worked at a pub for about a month before moving to Sydney. After that, I got a job as a delivery driver delivering spare parts to mechanics. It wasn't too bad but didn't last long because I got a bit uncomfortable with the boss, he was very rude. I've been at this new job now for two months. – Jen (early school leaver)

At the moment I'm doing this gardening job for this guy. And he pays twenty bucks cash in hand an hour, which is pretty good... Usually it's once a week. But lately it's been every couple of weeks. – Brandon (early school leaver)



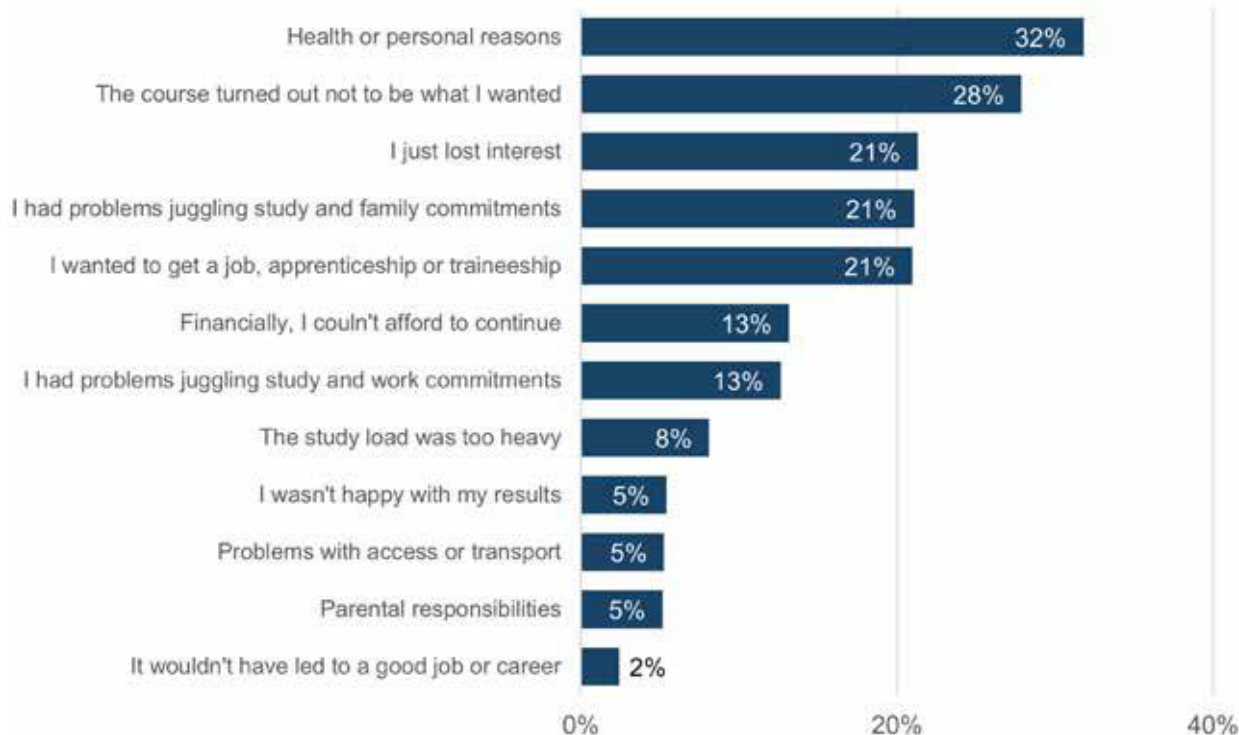
Experiences with post-school study

As shown previously in Figure 5, around half (46 percent) of all young people who completed Year 12 were engaged in study in 2023, compared to one third (32 percent) of early school leavers. Young people who completed Year 12 were more likely to be studying full-time (31 percent) than part-time (15 percent) in Bachelor degrees (53 percent) and certificate-level courses (23 percent). In contrast a higher proportion of early school leavers were studying part-time than full-time (25 percent and 7 percent respectively) in

certificate-level courses (75 percent). In 2023, one in five early school leavers had completed a qualification, five percent had deferred their course and 28 percent had left a course without completing it since the 2022 survey.

The most common reasons early school leavers gave for having left a course prior to completion were health or personal reasons (32 percent), the course not being what they wanted (28 percent), losing interest (21 percent), problems juggling study and family commitments (21 percent) and/or wanting to get a job, apprenticeship, or traineeship (21 percent) (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Reasons early school leavers gave for leaving a course without completion



Note: Young people could select multiple answers, so percentages do not total 100 percent.

Satisfaction with post-school study

As shown in Figure 11 and reflected in the interviews, both early school leavers and young people who completed Year 12 expressed positive sentiments regarding:

- The **study choices** they had made thus far
- The likelihood they would **complete the course** they were studying
- Their confidence that the course they were doing was **preparing them for work** they want to do in the future.

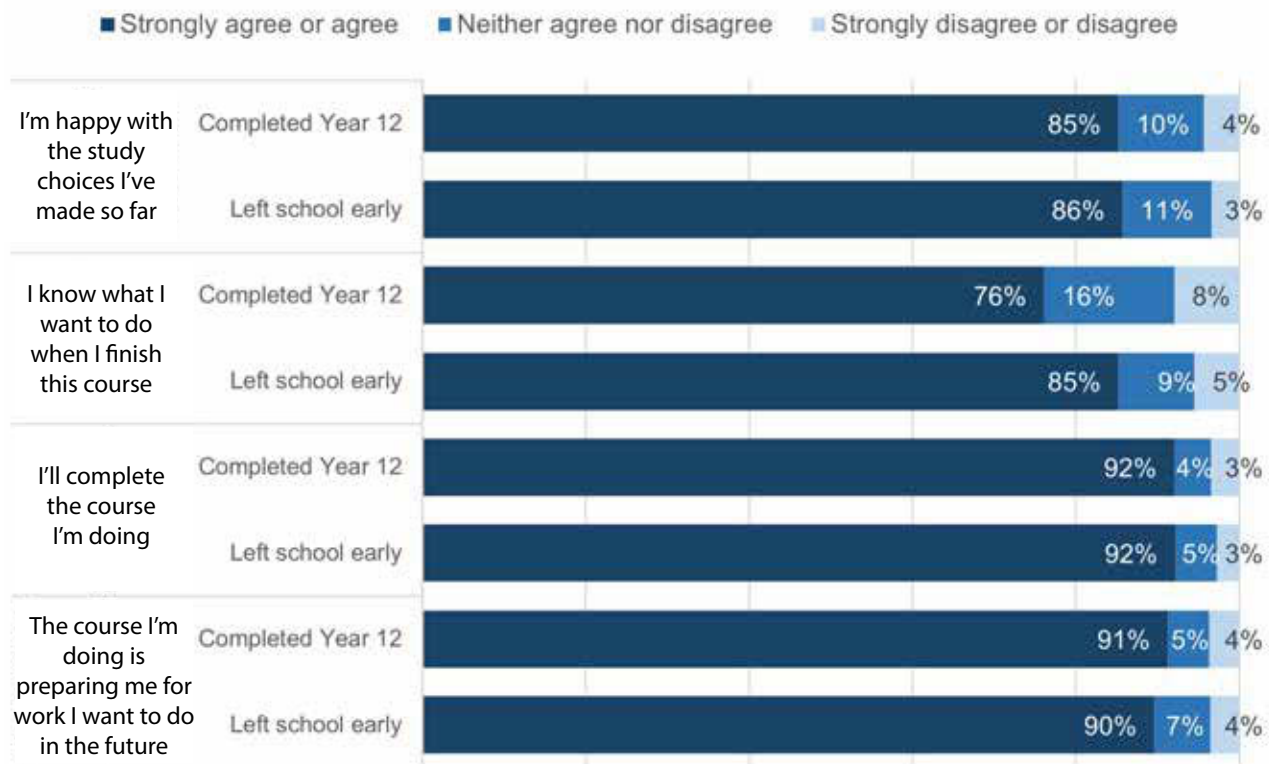
I've really enjoyed the adult learning environment. The freedom, the flexibility, I like that everyone there wants to learn, whereas in school, there were also lots of people that didn't want to be there. It's a much better environment, I think, for learning. – Liam (early school leaver)

Early school leavers were more likely to strongly agree or agree with the statement 'I know what I want to do when I finish this course' (85 percent) compared to young people who completed Year 12 (76 percent), however, this is likely related to differences in the types of courses early school leavers were studying. Young people were more likely to agree that they knew what they wanted to do when completing their course if they were studying certificate-level courses (81 percent) compared to those studying a bachelor's degree (74 percent), like Ali:

I knew I would go into the engineering field; I chose the subjects to get into that field, but even now I don't know what I want to major in. – Ali (Year 12 completer)

Overall, while young people who completed Year 12 and left school early typically chose different post-school study pathways, their equally positive sentiment indicates they generally see their courses as the right 'fit' for their respective interests and needs.

Figure 11: Reflections of post-school study by school completion



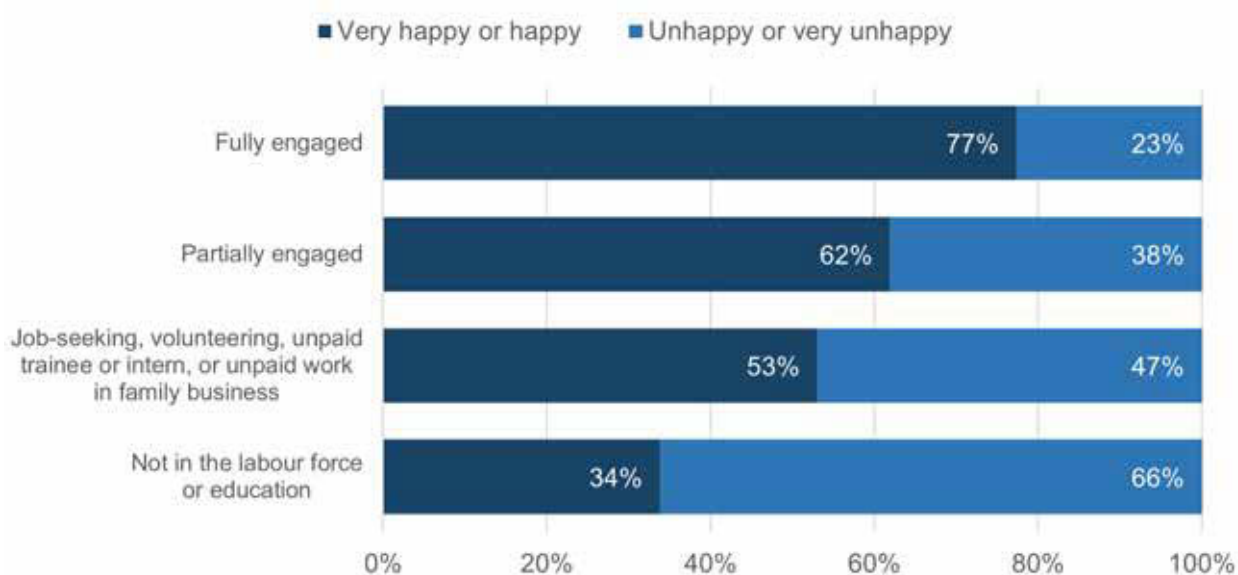
Early school leavers' perceptions and experiences

Perceptions on leaving school early

Early school leavers were asked in the survey the year after they left, how they felt about leaving school. Overall, three-quarters (73 percent) of early school leavers indicated they were happy about having left school early, with 48 percent saying they were *happy* and 25 percent *very happy*. The remaining 27 percent said they were either *unhappy* or *very unhappy* about having done so.

The extent to which early school leavers were happy about leaving school was closely tied to their level of engagement. As shown in Figure 12, young people who were fully or partially engaged were more likely to state they were *very happy* or *happy* with having left school (77 percent and 62 percent respectively) compared to those who were job-seeking, volunteering, an unpaid trainee or intern, or in unpaid work in family business (53 percent). Of those who were not in the labour force or education, only one-third (34 percent) were *happy* or *very happy* about having left school early.

Figure 12: Early school leavers' responses to "Are you happy you left school without completing Year 12?" by engagement outcomes



Life satisfaction, health and wellbeing

Young people's life satisfaction was fairly similar regardless of their educational attainment. Just under half of young people rated their life satisfaction positively at seven or higher out of 10 (45 percent of early school leavers and 47 percent of young people who completed Year 12). Forty two percent of early school leavers and 45 percent of those who completed Year 12 rated their life satisfaction between four and six, while 13 percent of early school leavers, and eight percent of young people who had completed Year 12 rated it at three or less.

While most young people interviewed had a positive outlook on their current and future lives, Sienna, Heath and Angela highlight the spectrum of perspectives young people may have in their post-school years.

I'm happy with where my life is at the moment. – Sienna (early school leaver)

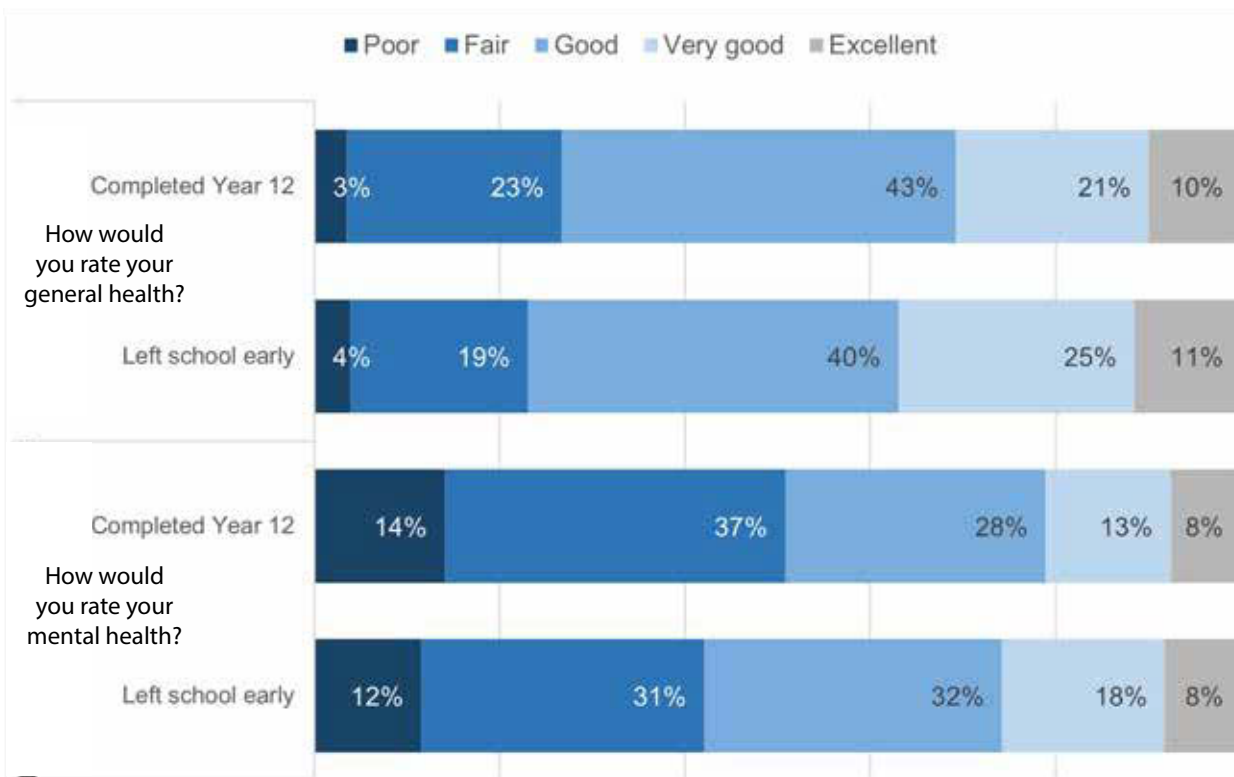
I'm not where I wanted to be this time last year, but I think, considering the setbacks I've had, I'm starting to get back on track. – Heath (Year 12 completer)

Sometimes I just feel like a burden. It's felt like an endless cycle of having to work, being so depressed and disconnected, but I have to do that because I've got to pay rent and eat food. It just gives you a really dark view about life. – Angela (early school leaver)

Most young people regarded their general health positively, with three quarters of both early school leavers and young people who completed Year 12 identifying their general health as *good, very good or excellent* (see Figure 13).

Young people’s perceptions of their mental health were less positive, with 43 percent of early school leavers and 51 percent of young people who completed Year 12 indicating this was *poor or fair*.

Figure 13: General and mental health ratings by school completion



Mental health concerns were raised frequently in the interviews with young people. Some, like Angela, attributed their mental health challenges to the circumstances they found themselves in. Others, like Lily and Liam, had been living with mental health challenges for some time. Their experiences highlight that despite having moved into a new stage of their life and developed skills to manage their mental health over time, their day-to-day lives and ability to engage are still impacted.

Just recently I had a psychosis again, that was a bit scary. It hadn't happened for a while, but I was able to identify what it was, what triggered it, and I definitely felt more capable to work through it. Makes you realise how easy it is to fall back into those dark places. – Liam (early school leaver)

Well, I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety a few years back and I did kind of fall into a rut earlier this year because I took myself off my medication which I know was a stupid idea, but I went back on the medication and I'm a lot better now." – Lily (Year 12 completer)

My mental health hasn't been so great... I'm in a lot of uncertainty with my life at moment, but I guess I'm taking it one step at a time. My anxiety definitely gets increasingly worse when I am uncertain, and don't have stability or a back-up plan. So, my anxiety has definitely gotten worse lately. – Angela (early school leaver)

Financial concerns

Financial concerns were common among young people, with 44 percent of early school leavers and 34 percent of those who completed Year 12 stating they worry *often* or *all the time* about paying for essentials. As shown in Figure 10, 13 percent of early school leavers who had left a course without completing it, had done so for financial reasons. Similarly, concerns about managing finances were frequently raised in the interviews, by both early school leavers and Year 12 completers. While many young people were struggling to make ends meet, their ability to manage financial challenges varied. Some young people, like Rosie and Heath, felt confident to manage these challenges, while Angela and Liam were struggling.

I don't get any other pay outside of work because unfortunately my apprenticeship isn't registered so I'm really tight with my money, I just spend it on rent and food. I have \$10 extra every week which I build up over a few weeks if I want to buy a record or something. I'm super confident managing my money. I trust myself.
– Rosie (early school leaver)

I'm pretty confident with managing money. My entire life, we've lived on a tight budget. Mum has taught us how to manage and how to figure out which things were cheapest, and how to make things stretch. How to turn one night's worth of meals into three nights' worth of meals, and how to budget. – Heath (Year 12 completer)

I don't have enough money to buy groceries. I'm waiting until I get paid next, and I'm not eating properly. – Angela (early school leaver)

Financially it's a bit tough at the moment. I still live at home with Mum and Dad, it's cheaper than renting somewhere. My income is quite low, and most of it goes on bills. There's been a few pays where I was a bit short, struggling to make ends meet. I got through it, just had to live a little bit tighter at times. I guess I have to get used to living off a lower income. – Liam (early school leaver)

Factors affecting outcomes in the senior secondary and post-school years

School completion

With COVID-19 resulting in school closures in 2020 and 2021, both Year 12 completers and early school leavers experienced significant disruptions in their senior secondary years. For some, these disruptions and the lack of engagement with online learning were key drivers for leaving school. For example, Heather pointed to these disruptions as the main reason why she had 'given up' on Year 10, and Talon found the lack of digital access to be a major barrier to learning until the school provided a device and internet dongle.

I couldn't go to school because we were in lockdown and I couldn't get the work done, because my computer is really bad. I had to get workbooks, but I couldn't do the workbooks because I didn't have anyone helping me and it was just a lot and I just couldn't do it. So, I pretty much just gave up that year and was like, this is pretty much a chunk of my life that I'm not going to get back and I will need to try again next year. – Heather (early school leaver)

Sometimes, it's just 'cos I don't have a laptop available to me, so I use my phone so it's just there are some things I can't access on my phone, I've got to do it on the computers at school and things like that. Do what I can't do, you know what I mean? – Talon (Year 12 completer)

Beyond the impacts of COVID, interviewees were asked what would help young people to achieve their goals in study, training and/or work. A number pointed to improvements that could be made to increase student engagement and enjoyment of school.

Sienna and Heath, for example, highlighted the importance of schools focussing on learning, and providing students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in life after school.

Schools need to focus more on learning and educating kids, not just worrying about the little stuff, like school uniform or what shoes you wear. – Sienna (early school leaver)

Teach us how to be in the real world. I don't know how to do taxes; I didn't know how to write a résumé; I didn't know how to do a cover letter; didn't know how to apply for a job... but I do know that the red door in Shakespeare symbolises the love barrier... 'cause, you know, that's going to help me get a job. – Heath (Year 12 completer)

Some young people highlighted that Year 12 completion might be a more attractive option if they knew there were people available to help them with their struggles, and the availability of more personalised learning options at school.

I feel like they should work around people, you know? Everyone has different preferences, and if you want people to actually enjoy learning, be excited to go to school, you have to go out of your way to make it enjoyable. If kids are stuffed in a loaded classroom that's really loud... Well, most people might struggle a little bit. So, it would be nice to have some alternatives, like one-on-ones. – Holly (early school leaver)

They need to start listening to the people that have mental disabilities, physical disabilities. School works for some people, but others struggle very, very much, and it's not just because of bullies – it's because of the work. The work is hard to understand sometimes cos they're going at a very fast pace and they're not helping. I know it's hard to help individuals, but they need to do that cos we're not going to understand if it's just thrown at us.
– Heather (early school leaver)

Interviewees both acknowledged the support available through schools and the need to do more to ensure young people had appropriate and accessible supports to meet their mental health needs.

In the third term of Year 12 we had some family stuff going on, which made it hard for me and I felt like dropping out but with the support from my family and the teachers at school I went back and finished. – Helen (Year 12 completer)

They've got counsellors and stuff like that, but a lot of people are too scared to use it, they need to make it more of a comfortable setting. – Sam (early school leaver)

Support to help plan for post-school

In school

Young people felt having appropriate support at school to help them plan for post-school was important to achieving their study, training or work goals. This included personalised support, especially with regards to setting goals and making plans, and having opportunities to gain exposure to the 'real world' of university and work.

For example, Rosie and Liam highlighted the importance of having a plan to achieve one's goals.

Just having people understand what the goal is and why. And then actually helping them create – make a path. Like steps to get there. I had none of that and it would have been nice to know, oh, maybe we should do an instructor course or maybe we should do this course, and then I can go here and do that. I think you've got to have a plan with a goal, not just a goal. – Rosie (early school leaver)

I think planning is really beneficial. Setting an end goal and building everything off that. If you have a clear goal in mind, it's easier to work towards it, more manageable. When you feel that the things you're doing have a purpose, it's a lot easier to do them. – Liam (early school leaver)

Both Liam and Jayde highlighted the need for personalised support where young people could ask questions about what they need to do to embark on particular pathways:

I think it could be more useful to explore different avenues with young people; spend more time talking about the future and what they actually want to do. I think that would definitely help. – Liam (early school leaver)

If they know what they want to do, maybe ask questions about it sooner so they can get on the path to getting there. – Jayde (early school leaver)

George and Ali received this kind of support from the careers counsellor at their respective schools and found it helpful in planning for their future.

I want to become a police officer. My careers counsellor gave me two options. Either I finish Year 12 and go to uni to do legal studies, or get an apprenticeship qualification and go through recruitment and sign up. So, that's what I'm doing right now. My careers advisor did everything for me organising the apprenticeship. – George (early school leaver)

We had meetings with the careers counsellor at our school and they would ask us what course we wanted to go into or what job we wanted to do in the future, and advise us on what uni to go to and what ATAR would be required. They also showed me the different pathways in case I didn't get a high enough ATAR. I could have gotten a Diploma, Advanced Diploma, and so on. At first I had doubts I would get into the course I wanted, but that conversation helped set my mind at ease. It was very helpful so I'm grateful for that. – Ali (Year 12 completer)

Outside of school

Both early school leavers and Year 12 completers had accessed support outside of school, particularly through employment providers, with regards to study, training and/or work.

For Brandon and Sam, accessing these supports had enabled them to identify and enter study pathways they weren't previously aware of.

I started a Cert III in Hospitality this week, I found out about it from the employment agency I have through Centrelink as part of my job plan. – Brandon (early school leaver)

I'm doing a Cert III in Business... I got that through a job provider. I enquired with them, and they said, 'there's a business course we could put you through', so I started that in May. – Sam (early school leaver)

While for others, like Heath and Jen, they were provided with the resources they needed to participate in the workforce. Similarly, Angela found that having a teacher who was understanding of her mental health circumstances helped her to complete her coursework.

I'm currently going through a program that helps me with my resumé and getting stuff for work like boots, clothes and a hard hat. They also paid for me to be able to get my white card. Also, I've been able to get a few professional driving lessons, which helps me get my hours up. I've got my test booked for mid-next month.
– Heath (Year 12 completer)

The only support I had was [Job Provider]. The lady would check up on me, make sure I was okay and if I needed help with anything, she'd help me out. If I needed petrol to get to work, she'd give me a gift card to get petrol. – Jen (early school leaver)

The teacher I had in my Diploma was really great. In the first week I told her 'I have severe depression and anxiety', and she would give me extensions or do one-on-one sessions, not because I didn't understand what I was doing but more that it would hold me accountable to get the work done. – Angela (early school leaver)

Informal sources of information and support regarding work and study

When asked where do they go for advice/information about work/study, two thirds (67 percent) of early school leavers indicated *relatives*, followed by *friends* (35 percent). Young people who completed Year 12 responded *relatives* (70 percent), *teachers, careers advisor or tutor* (48 percent) and *friends* (44 percent). This suggests early school leavers may have a narrower pool of support to draw on regarding work and study.

These findings were confirmed by interviewees, many of whom commented on the support they had received regarding work and study from family and friends.

My biggest source of help would be talking to Mum and Dad, my housemate, and also just talking to myself. Kind of self-analysing stuff and working through it. – Rosie (early school leaver)

My boyfriend has been the biggest source of help for me in making decisions about study and work. He's very supportive and wants to see me succeed in life. It means a lot to me. – Sienna (early school leaver)

My two biggest sources of support in the last 18 months were my teachers and family. They didn't push me to do anything I didn't want to do; they just supported me and respected my choices. – Helen (Year 12 completer)

Barriers to work and study

Young people in the PET study indicated they are facing a range of barriers to successfully transition into the workforce and education pathways. Some obstacles were experienced by both early school leavers and Year 12 completers, including transport difficulties and the cost of further study.

I hope to get a part or full-time job in the business sector, maybe as a sales representative. Not having a car is the biggest issue for me because it's hard to get around. When I get a car, it'll be a lot easier for me to get that job.
– Sam (early school leaver)

I'm hoping in the near future to complete my Diploma of Beauty Therapy, but my main struggle is transportation. I don't have a licence and I worry about public transport. I feel vulnerable being by myself on public transport.
– Piper (Year 12 completer)

I'm not really sure when I'll be doing that sort of study especially because money wise, it costs quite a bit, a university course. – Angela (early school leaver)

I don't really have any financial challenges at the moment, but if I did get into my nursing course, then yes, I would. The course is a couple of grand to get into, and I can't afford that. – Lily (Year 12 completer)

Other barriers were more common among early school leavers, including a lack of awareness of different opportunities available to them as highlighted by Liam and Holly.

There are certain things that aren't known to young people. Like, for example, if you're on Centrelink, you can do a lot of courses at TAFE for free. There are a lot of jobs that might pay fifty, sixty grand a year, and they only require a Cert III or IV at TAFE. Centrelink can open a lot of doorways, but there's huge stigma around those things. People have a sense of pride, they don't want to take handouts, but I think the fact of the matter is regardless of how you go about achieving your dream, you only achieve it with hard work, you know? – Liam (early school leaver)

[Job provider] are helping me figure out what I'm passionate about. They help young people navigate their futures. It's definitely been a big help because before I didn't even know some things even existed, you know?
– Holly (early school leaver)

Similarly, some of the factors contributing to early school leaving also affected young people's capacity engage in work or further study. For example, mental health concerns were a common reason for leaving school and for leaving post-secondary study before completing a course.

Strengthening Year 12 completion and post-school outcomes of young people experiencing disadvantage

The insights from early school leavers and those who completed Year 12, gathered through the PET surveys and interviews, highlight several recommendations to improve school completion and enhance post-school work and study opportunities for young people experiencing disadvantage. These include:

- Continuous monitoring of **warning signs** throughout **school** to identify **young people at elevated risk of early school leaving**, including lower attendance levels, poor achievement, mental health issues, bullying and social challenges. These signs may emerge at any point across secondary school, including lower secondary or in Years 11 and 12.
- Providing students experiencing these challenges with more **individualised support** while **at school** to strengthen school engagement and completion. The cohort of early school leavers is **diverse** and leave for a range of reasons, and require tailored approaches to address their needs.
- Increased provision of **individualised career advice** and **support** throughout the **secondary years**, with a focus on delivering supports which help young people articulate **their post-school plans** and the steps required to achieve this plan. Such support should be comprehensive and enable young people to explore a **range** of post-school options. Support should be accessible, engaging, and meaningful to young people. Tailored support can both contribute to greater levels of school engagement and completion and stronger post-school pathways for those young people who do leave school early.
- Support could include helping young people to develop the **practical skills** they will need to:
 - o Obtain a job (e.g. resumé and interview skills)
 - o Manage money (e.g. budgeting, where and how to seek financial support)
 - o Thrive in tertiary education environments (e.g. time and study management skills)
 - o Obtain support post-school (e.g. where and how to seek support for various needs including pathways planning, work, study, mental health etc).
- **Increased support and information to parents and carers** regarding school completion and how they can support their children's **post-school pathways**. As relatives are the primary source of advice about work and study for young people, and are particularly important for early school leavers, they need to be supported with the tools and information to provide appropriate and contemporary advice about young people's options and how to act on them.
- Increased provision of **appropriate and accessible support in and outside of school** for young people experiencing **mental health issues**.



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Acknowledgments

We acknowledge and thank the many young people who are sharing their insights and experiences with us through participating in the Pathways, Engagement and Transitions study.

We also thank the many individuals who supported their participation, including parents/carers and The Smith Family Team members and the Social Research Centre who have supported data collection.

The Paul Ramsay Foundation

We are grateful to the Paul Ramsay Foundation (PRF) for its support of this study. PRF invests in and partners with organisations and communities across Australia that focus on enabling people and places to thrive. PRF builds the capability of organisations and the for-purpose sector and aims to influence through collaboration and advocacy.

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© The Smith Family 2024
ISBN: 978-1-876833-22-0

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