

## *Life chances and social inclusion in education*

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## **Introduction**

The Federal Government is promoting the Education Revolution as a key part of the social inclusion agenda:

*Investing in the education, skills and training of our young people and our workforce is the best way to enhance the life chances of individual Australians and boost the productivity and prosperity of our nation.* (Rudd 2009)

The Brotherhood of St Laurence's longitudinal study, the Life Chances Study, explores the experiences of a diverse group of young Australians making the transition from school to further education, training and employment. The paper draws on new data from stage 9 of the study to explore:

- What are the differences in school completion and academic achievement for the 18 year olds who have grown up in low-income families and those in higher income families?
- What are the factors affecting their inclusion in education?

The paper presents case studies, explores the effect of combining work and study and outlines the implications of the findings for promoting an inclusive policy. These include the importance of family and school resources, including adequate financial support to address longstanding inequalities.

## **The Life Chances Study**

The Life Chances Study commenced in 1990 as a population study of all children born in two inner Melbourne municipalities. It included both high and low-income families and a range of ethnic groups. Eighteen years later some 21 % of families still lived in the same area but most lived elsewhere in Melbourne and a few were in regional Victoria and other states. (Reports are available on the Brotherhood of St Laurence website.)

This paper presents some preliminary findings from recent contact with the participants of the study as 18 year olds (stage 9). In early 2009 we contacted all 138 participants about their school completion, tertiary entrance scores and future plans. In late 2008 we also undertook detailed interviews with 33 of the young people about completing school and their subsequent activities.

The study complements some of the large-scale surveys of pathways of young people leaving school and their characteristics, in particular the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (for example Curtis & McMillan 2008) and the annual Victorian 'On Track' surveys (Corrie & McKenzie 2009). While smaller, the Life Chances Study is able to provide both qualitative data and longitudinal family data.

### **Who completes Year 12?**

Completion of Year 12 has become an important policy goal with the Federal Government and COAG having a target of 90 per cent Year 12 'or equivalent' completion by 2015. The new Compact with Young Australians is said to guarantee young people a place in education or training (Prime Minister, Media Release 30 April 2009).

In terms of meeting retention targets, how one defines completing Year 12 'or equivalent' is clearly important.

For example in the Life Chances Study, of the 138 18 year olds:

- 77 % had completed Year 12 higher school certificate (Victorian Certificate of Education [VCE], equivalent interstate or IB)
- 7 % had completed other less academic Year 12 (5 % VCAL [Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning] and 2% special school)
- 6 % had done Year 11 in 2008 and were planning to complete Year 12
- 10 % had left school and not completed Year 12 – sometimes seen as the most 'at risk' group.

So for this group it could be anticipated that 90 per cent would complete some form of Year 12 at school. However it is not a representative sample, and with a higher proportion of high income students [see below]. ( ABS data for Victoria in 2008 showed 79.4 % apparent retention to Year 12, ABS cat. no. 4102.0.)

Of those who had not completed Year 12 – the early school leavers – a few could be counted as in equivalent training having settled into apprenticeships (3), or TAFE courses. A few were employed while the rest presented a more unsettled picture of unemployment, sometimes interspersed with rather unsatisfactory courses or short-term jobs. One young woman was recovering from a major car accident, another looking after her new baby. The stories of the early school leavers have been presented in a recent report (Taylor 2009).

The large-scale national LSAY data show those groups consistently more likely to complete Year 12 are females, young people with parents with high-skill white collar occupations and university education, those from metropolitan areas, from so called independent schools and with high levels of literacy and numeracy (Curtis & McMillan 2008). The persistence of these associations over time indicate where additional investment in education needs to be made if it is to be more inclusive.

The Life Chances study data generally confirm these patterns. Here we will consider family income as an important variable that has been used throughout the Life Chances Study, but is not available in some of the large-scale surveys. Low income in the study is associated with a range of other family characteristics: low-income families are more likely than others to have parents with limited education, be non-English speaking, be sole parents and have large numbers of children. The income used in the paper is family income reported by the parents when the young people were aged 16. At 18, 33 % of the young people were from low income families, 26 % from medium and 41 % from high income families. (For details of assessment of family income see Taylor & Nelms 2008, p.33-35).

Year 12 completion varied by family income. For example, all but one young person from high-income families had completed VCE (98 %), while less than half those from low-income families had done so (44 %) (Table 1). A quarter of the low-income young people (26 %) had left school before completing Year 12, but none of those on high incomes. The other young people from low-income families had either completed a less academic 12 years at school (15 %, VCAL or special school) or were still at school yet to finish Year 12 (15 %).

**Table 1 Completion of Year 12 by family income**

<b>Family income (est. from age 16)</b>	<b>Completed VCE or equivalent  N=106</b>	<b>Completed other VCAL/special school N=10</b>	<b>Left school before completing Year 12 N=14</b>	<b>Still doing Year 12 N=8</b>	<b>Total N=138</b>
	%	%	%	%	%
Low	44	15	26	15	100
Medium	86	8	6	0	100
High	98	0	0	2	100
<i>Total</i>	<i>77</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>100</i>

### **Academic achievement**

Social inclusion in education relates not only to who stays within the school system to complete Year 12, but also to their academic achievement while at school as this determines their tertiary education options. For the students who completed a Year 12 tertiary entrance certificate (VCE or equivalent), their scores provide a key measure of academic achievement. A major study of tertiary entrance performance correlates was undertaken as part of the 1998 LSAY survey (Marks et al. 2001).

For the Life Chances Study we have tertiary entrance scores (ENTER scores in Victoria) for 92 % of those who did VCE. The scores ranged from a high of 99.7 to a low of 20.5, with a mean score of 75.6 (SD 21.8, median 81.5) . (The mean for all Victoria for 2008 was 64.22, for females 65.52, for males 62.65, VTAC 2009). There are statistically significant variations for the mean ENTER

scores in relation to family income and parental education. On average, young people from high-income families had higher ENTER scores than those from medium and low-income families (Table 2). Those with parents with tertiary qualifications had higher scores than those without.

There was little difference between the mean ENTER scores of females and males. However gender and family income have a perhaps unexpected relationship (Table 2). In low and medium-income families the young men had higher mean ENTER scores on average than do the young women. In contrast in high-income families the young women had the higher ENTER scores. While the sample size is not large, the findings are of interest. The LSAY 1998 study found no difference between males and females in relation to parental occupation (Marks et al 2001).

**Table 2 Mean ENTER scores by family income and gender (N=97)**

Family income (est. from age 16)	Male	Female	Total
Low	79.3	62.8	68.8
Medium	78.9	66.3	69.6
High	74.6	85.9	81.2
Total	76.4	75.1	75.6

### Factors affecting inclusion in education

In addition to demonstrating the continuity of some of the wider patterns, the Life Chances study can also illustrate – with individual case studies – the Minister for Education, Julia Gillard’s favoured phrase that ‘demography is not destiny’ (ABC radio 30 march 2009).

For example, two young men, both from low-income families with refugee parents who have no more than primary education, attended government high schools. They could be seen as potential early school leavers. However both completed Year 12 and went on to tertiary education. Their ENTER scores were very different: Hien had a score of 97, Tou of 33. They are discussed further below (pseudonyms are used).

There are many ways of considering inclusion in education. For a start, some see this simply as attendance at school or completion of Year 12. But it can also be seen in terms of broader inclusion frameworks which take into account, for example, resources, relationships and rights. The experience of Tou, one of the young men mentioned above, illustrates the impact a lack of resources on inclusion in education can have

### Case Study

Tou’s parents came to Australia as refugees from Laos some 20 years ago. The father had primary education, the mother no formal education at all. With the mother caring for the five children and the father mostly unemployed they have remained on a low-income throughout the study. The mother’s lack of English and the family’s difficulty in affording education costs have remained a constant over the years.

**Aged 4** Tou attended kindergarten. His mother saw this as important preparation for school although she had difficulty paying the fees. She worried that he didn’t speak enough English for school.

**Aged 6** The school said he needed special help with language and speech. His parents were finding it difficult to pay for school costs and he missed out on sport because of costs. The family had no children’s books and no-one read to the child.

**Aged 11** He loved to go fishing with his father and camping with family friends but he missed out on school camps and excursions because of costs. His mother could not afford a

home tutor or school uniforms. She was unhappy that she could not help her son with homework because of her lack of education and English 'I just feel like a useless mother'. The boy complained about noise and lack of study books at home. One of the questions we asked at that stage was what the children would do if they had \$50. He was quite unusual in saying he would buy school books. His teacher said he had special language learning needs and received small group instruction and an ESL aide.

**Aged 16** He said he looked forward to school, had good friends and got on well with teachers, although he sometimes skipped school. He felt his English was not as good as his peers. He wanted to do Year 12 and go to university to do accounting, medicine or IT. He felt extra tutoring might help him.

**Aged 18** He had completed Year 12 but with a low ENTER score of 33 was not able to do accountancy at university as he had hoped. Instead he was undertaking a two year advanced certificate in IT at TAFE and hoped, when that was completed, to be able to go on the university.

He was disappointed in his ENTER score. He pointed out that his school had a low average ENTER score and felt there was an education problem at the school. He didn't get the help he needed from teachers. He explained '*I got help but not enough help. If you ask for help, like you don't usually get the help you needed, then you stop asking because it seems like there isn't any point in it*'. He said costs of books and of revision materials were a problem. He never had paid work while at school. He didn't look for work in Year 12 because doing VCE was more important. He had a very limited social life because of lack of money: '*If I stay home and save the money then I can go out once every month or two months*'.

What are some of the factors affecting Tou's inclusion in education? These can be outlined in terms of family resources, including income, and school resources.

#### *Family resources*

Tou's parents valued education highly, but lacked financial resources for his full participation in school or for alternative tutoring, and they lacked the educational background and English to help their children at home. In terms of income support, receiving Youth Allowance helped to some extent financially but was not sufficient.

#### *School resources*

His schools had provided extra assistance, for example, with language at some stages, but did not ensure that books, excursions, camps and so on were affordable; his secondary school did not provide sufficient support at Year 12, either with teaching or with access to revision materials; and the school had a low proportion of tertiary offers (the implication of this needs further exploration).

The provision of resources, both for families and for schools, to overcome such barriers are an important aspect of investing in inclusion in education.

## **Combining work and study**

This section of the paper examines the question 'does combining work and study assist young people with their education?' National data show about half (52 %) of 17/18 year olds in full-time education have a part-time job (LSAY 2009).

Of the 33 participants interviewed in late 2008, one third were early school leavers and two thirds had completed Year 12. Half of those who had achieved their secondary school certificate had not engaged in paid work during Year 12 whilst the other half had. The majority of the latter were from high-income backgrounds while three participants were from low and medium-income families.

All the participants from higher income backgrounds, bar one, quit their job mid-year, reduced their weekly working hours or limited paid work to school holidays and long weekends so to concentrate on their studies. There was a general consensus that balancing long hours with the commitments of Year 12 study was causing them unnecessary stress. Their earnings were 'pocket money' and were thus seen to be more expendable in light of study pressures.

The two participants from medium-income families worked steadily throughout their Year 12. We will call them Mike and Maria. While Mike limited his working hours to Friday evenings and weekend shifts, Maria averaged a 35 hour working week. This entailed working every night after school and a full day on either a Saturday or Sunday. Although they worked different amounts, both participants admitted to rarely doing homework and only occasional study on the eve of their exams. Yet Mike, who worked the lesser of the two felt that his job and lack of study did not negatively impact upon his school work. Instead working allowed him the 'freedom' to spend money. Whereas Maria believed that working full-time significantly contributed to her low ENTER score.

As indicated above there is a considerable difference between the mean ENTER scores of those from high income families and those from medium-income families (81.2 and 69.6 respectively). This pattern holds for the participants who undertook paid work during Year 12. While our high-income participants sacrificed part or all of their financial freedom to better ensure academic success, balancing the demands of work and study appear to have had a detrimental effect on the school engagement and achievement of our middle-income participants.

However, for the one low-income participant of the group, the motivation to combine paid work with Year 12 study led to a very different outcome.

### Case Study

Hien is the youngest child of refugee parents who both have little formal education. He completed Year 12 at a government high school. He struggled throughout the year to remain engaged in school and with his study. He complained of the monotony of his classes and homework. He worked as an administration clerk to pay for his extra math, science and English tuition. The job required him to work school nights which led to him sleeping in the next day and missing classes. This started to concern him and consequently he gave up work at the start of term 4.

Like at the very start of this year I didn't have the job and I could be more attentive and concentrating on the studies. Oh once I got it, after that you get really tired after work and it becomes harder to study after work ... and like the next day I would sleep in and end up missing classes and that kinda built into a pattern I could actually feel myself doing each week on the same days that I worked, and then the next day I would actually not be able to go to class on time or I'll be skipping classes altogether.

While work had had a negative impact on his school attendance, it afforded him the opportunity of extra tuition. He found his tutors to be more motivational and encouraging than his school teachers, and the one-on-one assistance increased his understanding of the subjects.

Hien received a high ENTER score of 97.05. Unlike his high and medium income peers who worked for 'pocket money' and financial freedom, he undertook paid work to assist his with education. Whilst this paid dividends, it did add to his increasing disengagement with school.

For the 11 participants who worked while completing Year 12, there appears to have been a range of positive and negative consequences of combining study with work. Laura, the one high-income participant who did work throughout the year, chose to do so as:

It was actually good to have something different to do. It was good having some kind of income coming in so I didn't have to rely on my parents all the time. It got you out of the house and like you didn't have to think about studying or anything.

She worked for 'pocket money', and she also achieved an ENTER score of 97.1, so perhaps she had managed to strike the perfect balance.

However, Laura's family income enabled her to attend a prestigious all girls' school, and she was not expected to contribute her small wages to the household budget. To revisit our medium-income participant Maria who worked a 35 hour week, who attended her local high school and gained an ENTER of 40, her mother was a sole parent of two who earned just enough to be classified as a medium-income earner. Because of this the family was not eligible for a healthcare card nor was Maria able to receive Youth Allowance. Consequently, the pattern of full-time study and work was likely to persist as Maria enrolled in an expensive full-fee paying TAFE course as she did not qualify for a concessional rate due to her household income.

Part-time work can offer a positive distraction from the demands of study and provide the young person with the financial independence they seek from their parents. Yet the implications of combining work and study depend heavily on choice and circumstance. Our high-income participants were able to leave their job or reduce their hours while still being financially supported by their parents. However, for our case study, Hien, working to afford additional tuition was a decision made due to his family being unable to meet such expenses. His choice assisted his education yet it added extra strain to his year. For some young people such as Maria, working contributed to family income but interfered with her school performance.

To conclude, family income is a defining factor in how our participants viewed and experienced paid work. For those from sole parent and low-income families, better support needs to be made available, in terms of extra tuition and financial assistance, so that school engagement and a commitment to study can be achieved without excessive pressure and demands of employment at a critical stage in their learning.

## Conclusions

The study's findings illustrate the continuing social exclusion from education based on lack of resources, both family resources and school resources. They also highlight the different experiences of young people from different income groups, for example in combining work with study.

Our findings support those of large-scale studies, showing that, on average, young people from low-income families are less likely than their more affluent peers to complete Year 12 or equivalent, are less likely to complete VCE, and if they do, they are less likely to achieve a high score. The case studies illustrate the diversity of individual experiences and the complexity of factors influencing educational outcomes.

The challenges for policy makers and educators wanting to increase Year 12 completion and social inclusion in education include

- To ensure affordable schooling that does not exclude those on low incomes – both throughout their schooling and in Year 12 or equivalent
- To ensure the extra support for students with a variety of special needs – both throughout their schooling and in Year 12 or equivalent

- To provide adequate income support for young people from low-income families (Youth Allowance) to allow full participation in education.

Social inclusion in education is about more than removing financial barriers, but it must include this. The challenges for policy are to meet the diversity and complexity of the circumstances of both students and early school leavers. There can be no 'one size fits all' policy responses for these young people. This will be the challenge in making the new Compact with Young Australians work on the ground.

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