CHAPTER ELEVEN

YOUTH TRANSITIONS TO WORK AND FURTHER EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

The framework of 'lifelong learning for all' has been widely articulated within Australian educational policy. A recent expression of this is the report *Lifelong Learning in Australia* (Watson, 2003) in which the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) embraces the OECD paradigm of a 'knowledge-based economy' and the UNESCO position that individuals who are not lifelong learners will suffer economic and social exclusion, as will nations that are not primarily learning societies. The policy rationale for lifelong learning links the growth of knowledge-based industries with an increased requirement for educated workers who can engage in re-skilling throughout their working lives (OECD, 1996). A central assumption is that economic growth in a knowledge-based economy would be promoted by workers with particular skills. Lifelong learning is also seen as necessary in order to promote social cohesion in a society that will continue to experience rapid social and economic change.

Internationally, commentators have identified an emerging gulf between those who can navigate their way successfully through the new economy and those who are at its mercy as a 'major danger' of new economies (Delors, 1996). This gap has been identified across many countries (OECD, 2001). Summarising recent OECD thematic reviews on lifelong learning, Levin (2004) concludes that inequalities in education have become worse rather than better in the last 20 years.

> Most of the dynamics in the education system and in the labour market tend to favour those who are already successful. The education system while nominally committed to success for all, actually embodies many features that work against such success and changing these will be very difficult. *(Levin, 2004, p. 41)*

While the actual patterns of transition and engagement in lifelong learning for individual countries differ, there are broad similarities that may contribute to a

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policy agenda for the future. Firstly, unequal outcomes based on gender, socio-economic status, geographic location, and cultural minority group status will continue to be a problem because equity measures are almost always 'on the margins of existing practice' (Levin, 2004, p. 41). Funding for larger scale transformation of formal learning is not widely available and the effects of large-scale initiatives (such as national qualification systems in the UK and the USA) have yet to be researched systematically.

Secondly, understanding of the relationship of formal learning to transition processes is undergoing change. It is now recognized that focusing narrowly on preparation for specific jobs does fit well with the requirement for flexible, multi-skilled workers who can negotiate their way through new economies. The life-long benefits of tertiary learning, in conjunction with adult learning partnerships between individuals and employers, are beginning to be recognized. The problem is that the longer-term view of education (or lifelong learning) is not well represented in the education policies of most governments. The adult learning sector, which has been expanding under the influence of the idea of lifelong learning, is diverse and amorphous, leading to inadequate provision (Levin, 2004, p. 33).

This broader context sets the framework within which Australian educational reform is being shaped. The dual goals of educational reform in Australia are to increase rates of participation in education and to ensure that educational programs support the global competitiveness of the Australian economy (Ryan & Watson, 2003). In practice, this means improving young people's completion rate in secondary education, increasing ongoing participation in further and higher education and at the same time identifying the skills that the economy requires in the present and in the future. The change agenda is focused on the production of workers with the particular dispositions and knowledges that will serve the Australian economy and ensure its international competitiveness. Little attention has been paid to the nature of educational reforms that would promote social cohesion and even less has been paid to the dispositions, subjectivities and attitudes that are associated with the capacity to be good navigators through new economies.

Despite the government's policy goals of increasing school completion rates across all states and territories, not all groups of young people have responded wholeheartedly to education. Rates of school completion are uneven. Across Australia in 2001 just under a third (31 per cent) of 15 to 19 year olds were not in full-time education and 15.1 per cent of 15 to 19 year olds were not in school or in part-time work, unemployed or not actively looking for work (Curtain, 2001). The

sizeable group of young people who do not engage with or even attend school are relatively visible; there are many government programs devoted to school retention and there are a number of innovative programs which are attempting to address the needs of these young people. For example, the Victorian Government has a number of 'school retention' programs in place, involving collaboration between secondary schools, the community sector and Adult and Community Education providers in order to provide pathways back into education for out-of-school youth.

Concerns have emerged about the extent of 'fit' between secondary education and employment. It is evident that not all young people who complete their secondary education gain the economic benefits that the education system is intended to bestow (Teese, 2000). Disparities in achievement and educational outcomes are seen as one of the elements indicating that 'the state of post-compulsory education and training is problematic' (Teese, 2000, p. 55). In addition, access to higher education is far from equitable. In 1990 a government report found that there were a number of population groups that were under-represented in higher education (DEET, 1990). Despite some progress, Australians from lower socio-economic backgrounds are still half as likely to participate in higher education as those from medium and high socio-economic backgrounds (James, 2002). A study of young people's higher education choices found that on a per capita basis, for every ten people from urban locations who go to university, only six people from rural or isolated Australia do so (James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis, & Stephanou, 1999).

Against the backdrop of policy documents that identify concerns about the implications of entrenched patterns of educational inequality for both individuals and societies, this paper reports on the experiences of a cohort of young people during their transition from secondary school through higher education and into work (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001). The Life-Patterns study provides support for the view that individuals need to have the capacity to navigate their way through uncertain times. The findings highlight the impact that the post-1970 generation in Australia has had on shaping new approaches to work and learning. This point is important for educational policy, because it suggests that social, subjective and attitudinal factors as well as economic forces need to be taken into account in educational reform. The relatively underdeveloped notion of social capital and of 'attitudinal and motivational' factors that has informed policy development situates young people's changing approaches to education and work within a narrow, instrumental and economistic approach to education and lifelong learning

that may be more in tune with the industrial economy of a previous era than with the 'knowledge economy' of the present and future.

In the following sections, the paper describes current patterns of youth transitions through further education and employment and summarises the policy context for postcompulsory and lifelong learning in Australia. Next, the paper presents findings from the Australian Youth Research Centre's Life-Patterns study on young people's experiences of transition into further education and beyond and their changing approaches to education and work. Finally, the implications of these findings for Australian policy development in post-compulsory education and lifelong learning are discussed.

YOUTH TRANSITION PATTERNS

Changes to the economy and shifts in the labour market over the last two decades have created a new demand for higher education and lifelong learning. As Australia has shifted towards a post-industrial economy higher education has become the new mass education sector and post-compulsory education has become the norm for Australian youth. Between 1951 and 2001, the number of higher education students increased from 31,700 to 614,100 (ABS, 2002). Over the period 1991–2000 there has been a 30 per cent increase in the total number of higher education students (only 19 per cent of which is constituted by domestic students) (DEST, 2002, p. 57).

During the same period, the part-time and casual share of employment among young people has increased dramatically (Wooden & VandenHeuvel, 1999). Part-time jobs are overwhelmingly taken by full-time students (Wooden, 1998). For the quarter of Australian school age youth who are not in education, however, casualisation of the youth labour market is a long-term problem. The part-time and casual workforce is characterised by high levels of job insecurity, a lack of union representation and a lack of access to training and promotion opportunities (Sweet, 1995; Wooden, 1998).

Consideration of those who are unemployed or not in the labour force raises further concerns about the precarious labour market situation of many young people. In May 2003, 12 per cent of teenagers (age 15–19) and of young adults (age 20–24) were neither in full time education nor in the labour market (ABS, 2003). In May 2003, 16 per cent of teenagers and 10 per cent of young adults not attending full time education were unemployed (ABS, 2003). The loss of full-time jobs, and an increase in part-time and casual work has made it increasingly

difficult for early leavers to find permanent, full-time work—and even part-time work given the competition from full-time students (Irving, Maunders & Sherrington, 1995; Wooden, 1998). Analyses of this group often conclude that all young people in this situation are disadvantaged in the labour market (McClelland, Macdonald & MacDonald, 1998).

There is however emerging evidence that even for this group of young people there are diverse outcomes. McMillan and Marks found that non-school completers are 'more likely to be in full-time employment, receive higher hourly earnings, display greater job stability, and report being in the job they would like as a career' than school completers who do not enter higher education (2003, p. xiv).

Many studies report that, measured against other criteria, school non-completers were in the group most likely to be unemployed and female non-completers were more likely to be not in the labour force (Lamb, Dwyer & Wyn, 2000; Teese, 2000). However, over time these patterns are less clear. Marks and McMillan have found that despite the link between school non-completion and higher unemployment rates in the early post-school years, in the later years the picture becomes less clear. After controlling for a range of social background and educational factors, 'the odds of completers being unemployed were not significantly different from those of early school leavers, other things being equal' (McMillan & Marks, 2003, p. xii).

While completion of senior secondary education continues to reduce the risk of unemployment, it is not sufficient for economic security. Around half of those school completers who do not apply for entry to tertiary education are in 'an economically precarious situation' nine to ten months after completing mainstream Year 12. Based on his research on educational outcomes for Victorian youth, Teese concludes:

> The link between the senior certificate and employment is often weak. Credentials inflation is eroding employment opportunities and imposing on young people not only school completion, but post-school education and training as well. This trend has major equity implications. For it places increased pressure on young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to raise their levels of achievement to secure entry to tertiary education. During the 1980s and 1990s the pressure was to finish school to get jobs. Now this is not good enough. *(2000, p. 53)*

Further pressure on young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds is mounting through new arrangements to allow universities more freedom in charging fees to students, adding further financial barriers to participation in tertiary education. The proportion of tuition costs paid by students rose when a fee

system (the Higher Education Contribution Scheme) for university students was introduced.

However, there is evidence that the longstanding gap between those who participate in education and training and those who do not is widening. Participants in higher education and lifelong learning tend to be underrepresented in the lower socio-economic groups. James reports that Australians from lower socio-economic backgrounds have roughly half the likelihood of participating in higher education than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds (James, 2002, p. ix). An analysis of lifelong learning in Australia shows that 'Australia's capacity to achieve higher levels of educational participation may be undermined by a widening socio-economic gap between individuals who participate in education and training and those who do not' (Watson, 2003, p. 38).

Recent research on Australian's participation in education and training reveals that overall levels are high. Participation in education and training involves 72.4 per cent of the Australian population aged between 15 and 64 years and 80 per cent of wage and salary earners are engaged in both formal and informal learning (Watson, 2003, p. 26).

However, the labour market has experienced growth in both high skill jobs that require high educational levels and ongoing educational improvement and in low skill jobs. There appears to be evidence for a 'disappearing middle' in the skill composition of the Australia workforce (Watson, 2003, p. 18). The widening socio-economic gap has been identified as one of the most significant elements constraining Australia's capacity to achieve higher levels of educational participation (Watson, 2003, p. ix).

In conclusion, there are two factors that are affecting young people's transitions from secondary school: young people's educational outcomes are directly related to socio-economic status and the widening gap between low-skill and high-skill jobs. Young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to undertake higher and further education than their peers from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In the short term this does not mean that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are necessarily more likely to be unemployed. But in the longer term, the effect of the 'disappearing middle' range jobs and the widening gap between low-skill and high-skill jobs and the positive link between higher skilled jobs and lifelong learning means that new inequalities are emerging.

THE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY CONTEXT

The pressure on young people to complete senior secondary education and even higher education, as outlined above, has gone hand in hand with an increased emphasis on individual investment in education. As Australia is perceived to be moving towards a knowledge economy, there has been an increased emphasis on investment in human capital. While this involves investment by government and private industry, increasingly individuals are expected to invest more in 'knowledge', mainly through gaining more and higher educational qualifications (Taylor & Henry, 2000). Research shows that young people seem to have adopted this belief in individual responsibility (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001). An Australian study of Year 9 and 10 students found they rated individual attributes and abilities for success in schools and in working life (such as hard work, positive attitude and abilities/talents) much more highly than factors outside their own control (such as parents who are rich or highly educated, incompetent politicians or global economic changes) (Cooper, 2000).

Educational policies in Australia have embraced the apparent link between high levels of education and training and economic growth. In January 2001 the Government launched a $2.9 billion innovation statement, *Backing Australia's Ability* (DEST, 2001). The underlying rationale for this initiative was that innovation—developing skills, generating new ideas through research, and turning them into commercial success—is the key to Australia's further prosperity (DEST, 2001).

The most recent Government review of higher education, *Higher Education at the Crossroads*, (DEST, 2002) has resulted in a very broad framework for the provision of higher and further education in Australia. The purposes of higher education are primarily seen to be for the benefit of individuals 'to develop their capabilities to the highest potential', and to 'enable individuals to learn throughout their life' (DEST, 2002, p. 1). The benefits of individual learning for the economy are acknowledged, particularly with respect to the goal of enabling 'individuals to adapt and learn, consistent with the needs of an adaptable knowledge-based economy' (DEST, 2002, p. 2). Lastly, mention is made of the contribution that higher education and lifelong learning might make to promoting 'a democratic, civilized society' and 'tolerance' (DEST, 2002, p. 2). The most significant outcome of this review has been the adoption of a funding framework that continues to shift the costs of education from the Government onto individual students and their families. The increases in educational costs that are borne through mass participation in higher and further education have effectively been

passed onto individuals through the capacity of Australian Universities to increase their fees on Government subsidized courses. Universities are also increasingly generating revenue through full-fee paying courses and through research, commercialization and product development. In summary, the characteristics of the lifelong learning agenda are that it is both formal and informal, self-motivated learning, self-funded and universal.

Despite the reliance on education for economic growth, Australia lags behind other OECD countries in terms of national spending on education as a proportion of GDP. Australia also has relatively low rates of secondary school completion and participation in higher education (Watson, 2003, p. 17). Watson argues that the stated emphasis on the role of individuals in co-financing their own learning 'appears to contradict its stress on lifelong learning as a remedy for social exclusion. Given the many factors inhibiting participation in education and training for less-skilled individuals in low-wage jobs, governments should play a greater role than generally acknowledged in the literature in breaking the nexus between low skills and non-participation' (2003, p. 38).

At a wider level, policy analysts point out the complex political discourses within which these claims for educational reform are made. Dominant neo-liberal discourses frame educational policy (including Third Way politics) with an assumption of the antipathies between state and market (Taylor & Henry, 2000). In seeking to find a new way to conceptualise the relationship between the individual and the community, systemic social relationships, such as poverty and disadvantage are obscured, to be replaced by the language of 'choice' and 'individual characteristics' (e.g. employability). Policy issues such as educational outcomes can, from a neo-liberal approach, ignore the deep-seated structural inequalities of late capitalism, to focus instead on social exclusion and individual employability.

The difficult task of linking an understanding of structural and systemic inequalities with the individualism inherent in the policy frameworks of neo-liberalism, has generated interest in concepts such as 'social capital' as a new focus for the development of educational, social and welfare policy. Thomson (1999) has pointed out that this concept is attractive, because it relates to the educational goal of developing human capital for purposes of national competitiveness. She points out that this concept also recognises the need for a certain level of 'social cohesion, stability and trust' for economic success. But perhaps most importantly, she notes that 'many people are de-coupling economic success from a sense of well-being' (1999, p. 2). This last meaning of the concept of social capital recognises an emerging trend amongst young people

towards the creation of 'balance' in life and a shifting emphasis towards valuing education for personal and social development as well as contributing to economic security.

The multiple meanings that Thomson identifies within current uses of the term social capital highlight an emerging contradiction for educational policy. The framing of educational policy in terms of the contribution that education makes to international economic competitiveness places education within a narrow, instrumental framework of education for work. The 'de-coupling' of economic success from a sense of well-being by individuals creates new challenges to educational policy to broaden the frame of educational goals.

Government reports identify 'attitudinal factors' as one of the two most significant areas affecting Australian higher education and lifelong learning participation rates. (The other most significant area is the nature of educational funding.) When asked to identify the most positive features of learning, individuals across very different segments of the market cited personal benefits (such as a sense of achievement, personal growth, the pleasure of learning and interaction with students) more often than reasons related to the acquisition of skills (ANTA, 2000). These 'attitudinal and motivational factors' represent more than just an approach to study. There is emerging evidence from the Life-Patterns study that they also represent a shift in approaches to career and work. For this reason, more needs to be known about the perspectives of young people on education, career and work.

In the following section, I argue that research on young people's transitions through higher education is important for the generation of new policy frameworks that have a closer fit with the reality of young people's lives in post-industrial economies. The increasing significance of attitudinal factors in young people's participation in higher education means that it is crucial that their perspectives and experiences are taken seriously. Their subjective understandings and experiences provide an important insight into how some groups do successfully 'navigate their way through the new economy' rather than being left at its mercy.

LIFE-PATTERNS STUDY

The Life-Patterns project is a longitudinal, panel study of young Australians from the State of Victoria who left secondary school in 1991. In that year, 29,000 young people left school. They were surveyed in 1992 to follow up their progress after leaving school and a representative sample of 11,000 young people was

constructed. In 1996 the Youth Research Centre surveyed a smaller, representative sample of this data set of 2,000, maintaining consistency within the sample of gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity and geographic location. This sample has formed the basis of our Life-Patterns study, which has followed the progress of this group of young people until the present (Dwyer, Smith, Tyler, & Wyn, 2003).

The young people in the Life-Patterns project were in their last year of secondary school when the project began in 1991. They are now more than ten years out of school. Their experiences and the ways in which they tell their stories provide a useful insight into a generation that faced very different circumstances from their parents. The study provides an insight into the specific experiences of the post-1970 generation. Young people born in the early 1970s came to the end of their compulsory years of schooling in the mid 1980s. This group represented the first generation of Australians in which the majority completed secondary schooling. Significantly, this new 'educated' generation was also confronted with a new phase in educational policy and public attitudes to education and work. By this time the youth labour market had collapsed and there was an emerging expectation of increased participation in further education and training to escape unemployment. Even though university graduates would be experiencing employment uncertainty, the post-1970 generation began to face the prospect of paying increasing university fees (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001, p. 77).

The Life-Patterns project has recorded the ways in which these young people have responded to their changing world. Of necessity they are actively and positively developing their own responses to these circumstances. The use of a participatory methodology has meant that the researchers have been challenged to re-think our assumptions about transitions from youth to adulthood, the role that education plays in gaining employment and the meanings that both education and work have in their lives. Through the use of questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews, the project has been able to link broad patterns across the cohort with in-depth studies of individual trajectories. In the following section I draw on the interviews to introduce the two individual stories of Nat and Frank[1], before describing the broader patterns. The study reinforces the significance of 'attitudinal and motivational' dimensions to young people's outcomes (Watson, 2003). The dispositions and subjectivities that shape their approaches are a key element in the extent to which they plan and navigate pathways through education and employment. The subjective dimension is also evident in the extent to which a central component involves the expression of new approaches to both education and work and the crucial implications of learner identities.

Two Young People

Nat

In 2003, Nat was twenty-nine years old, and was employed by a large advertising company as the Manager of Trade and Marketing for Australia and New Zealand. This is not where she expected to be at this age. In fact sales and marketing were the areas she thought herself to be least interested in. Her story begins at the end of Year 12 when she missed out on her first preference for university (medicine). With her score she would have been successful the previous year, but the Tertiary Entrance Result (TER) scores had increased across the board for university entrance in 1992 and she did not qualify for entrance to her chosen course.

Nat's next plan was to get into a science course at the university and then to transfer to medicine at the end of her first year. However she 'lost focus' at university and did not get the results to transfer. She admitted that she wasn't too devastated, as she was still unsure if it was medicine that she really wanted to do. In her third year she did a triple major: cell biology, botany and anatomy. She particularly chose anatomy to help her work out if this direction was right for her. She concluded that anatomy was really about having a good memory and not about learning good people skills. The realisation that there was a disjunction between her goals and her present course of study led her to take on extra subjects to help her work out what direction to take, including accounting and philosophy of science. However, on completing these subjects, she still did not feel she could make a decision.

What made the difference was her work over the summer. Nat had worked for many of the years that she was a student as an occupational health officer for a petrol company in a regional city in Victoria and for a petrochemical company in Tasmania. She also had a spell working as an accounts file clerk and in customer service with a bank. It was this last job that revealed to Nat that she enjoyed working with people, not science!

When she graduated, Nat started looking for work in the 'people' arena and took a job with a large advertising company that offered her the kind of scope she wanted. She said that the company appeared 'broad-minded' and that they regarded her science background as an asset. She started in the sales area, on the understanding that the company 'would teach her the rest.' Over the next five years, she has moved up the ranks in the company and in 2002 was in charge of 60 million dollars worth of business export interests. She says 'I like it, you get to influence things, you work out how things come together and you can influence the direction of the company.'

Today Nat defines her career as not a job but 'a *mindset* of what I do every day, it's about what I learn, the journey I am on, the big chunks of learning and the relationships I develop'. She does not describe her job as permanent because she realises that the company could be the subject of a take-over bid 'tomorrow.' Although she has worked there for the last five years, she was only planning to stay for two years in the first instance, because 'any less wouldn't look good on the resumé', but the company has kept her interested. She feels she has *chosen* to stay where she is.

Nat fiercely defends her life beyond work and has consciously decided to pursue her own interests and goals as an individual. She has put a lot of effort into designing and supervising the building of her own home. While she feels there has been pressure on her to find a partner and marry (before building her own home) she believes that her own personal development has been more important than waiting for someone to shape her life for her. 'I'm going to be in life—not wait for it to happen! In my 20s I was searching but now I know myself much better. I am much more confident'.

* * *

Frank

Frank has never seen further education as a priority: 'I enjoy writing reports but I have never been much of an academic, I don't seem to retain things very well.' Frank has pursued work rather than study after leaving school. At first he began working at Pizza Hut as a driver doing deliveries, but 'the cost of the fuel meant it just wasn't worth it', so he quit. From here he helped out a friend of a friend who was building a factory. He stayed in this job for 11 months, mainly employed as a light factory hand with a bit of engineering 'thrown in.' He enjoyed the work but was frustrated by what he saw as poor management and a lack of clear roles of responsibility. However he did not have to put up with this situation for long. He said:

For a time there was not much work coming in and we were told we could be laid off, when they ran out of money it was a big relief as it was freezing in winter and sweltering in summer, in other words not a comfortable place to work.

After a period of unemployment Frank came across a bus driving job which he still has. He thinks it is more difficult to work out what it is to be an adult today than it was in his parent's day. Both of his parents were 21 when they married, and they worked on a farm.

Life wasn't so much of a rush then, admittedly you would have your busy times when the crops came in but then there would be a lull and there was real time to spend with your family and friends.

He believes it is 'harder now' as there aren't the opportunities there were back then.

I feel I am always on the run, 2 or 3 different jobs a day, I don't like it, it takes away from your life and the time you have to think about what you want to do.

Frank describes himself as 'a follower, grabbing the tail rather than the horns', which means that he is 'not as forceful or as ambitious as I'd like to be.' Frank loves his bus-driving job; he says he loves 'the practical jobs which benefit people'. He wants to direct more of his energies into truck driving, but admits he only wants to do it for a few more years. There is some impetus he says for him to earn a better income, as he has been living with his brother and his brother's girlfriend has just moved in and 'you know the story, three's a crowd, so I need to get out and find my own home'.

He would like to have more time to spend with his family although he admits that he does enjoy learning from his numerous work places. 'Each job offers

> something different, and I like becoming more versatile, it helps to also stretch you so you can find your own limits. It's just difficult getting the balance right!'

* * *

While the outcomes for these young people are different, their stories have in common a recognition of the challenge that choice and decision-making plays in their lives. They are reflective about their past decisions and both are concerned to 'get the balance right', focusing on their own personal development, finding their own limits, extending their capacities and making the most of their lives. They are both aware of the need to 'navigate' their own course. One approach to understanding the differences in their biographies is to explore what their narratives reveal about their 'learner identities' (Rees, Fever, Furlong, & Gorard, 1997).

Nat and Frank both express the desire to continue learning as a key element in their lives and especially in their employment situations and both are reflective about the conditions under which they and their generation are attempting to make a life. At the outset Frank explains that he has felt marginalised from formal learning and he does not see formal education as a way of improving his life situation, despite the fact that 'stretching his limits' is important to him. Nat's experience of formal education is not entirely straightforward either. She has taken a number of different educational pathways in order to find the area of study that suited her. Despite these complexities, her narrative reveals a determination to use formal education to her advantage and she sees education as a means to support her quest for employment that will allow her to develop personally. Frank appears to be trapped in a cycle of precarious employment and unemployment but remains hopeful that he will be able to improve his situation.

Contrasts between the situations and learner identities of young people have also been noted by other youth researchers (Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000; Evans, 2002). These researchers argue that contemporary social and economic circumstances have created the need for a shift in focus in education, towards facilitating young people to shape their own lives—and developing pedagogies that make a better fit between young people's identities and curriculum. The disruption of traditional education and employment pathways has created new social and economic 'landscapes' in which young people are active agents. Evans points out that 'where they go depends on how they perceive the horizon' (2002, p. 265), creating a need to shift education from focusing on the attainment of sets of knowledge and skills towards a recognition of the role of learner identities.

These approaches confirm earlier work by Wexler on the relationship between education, inequality and young people. He also found that 'educators…have concentrated on cognitive skills, curriculum or knowledge, to the neglect of identity' (1992, p. 156). Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) also comment on the role that formal education plays in creating 'damaged' learner identities that ultimately restrict young people's capacities to gain the qualifications that would assist them to reach their goals.

THE POST-1970 GENERATION

In 2004 the Life-Patterns participants are aged 28–29 and the majority has established themselves in their adult lives. Despite the diverse makeup of the participants, we found common themes emerging in their attitudes to education and work and their idea of self. These themes are summarised in the following way:

- striving for balance in life
- new meanings of 'career' (valuing flexibility and mobility)
- personal autonomy
- reflexivity

At the outset, the subset of the participants who went through an education track after leaving secondary school displayed a trend towards non-linear pathways. Just over half the cohort experienced some sort of change to their study arrangements. A quarter changed courses, a further 20 per cent changed institutions and more than a quarter either had an interruption to their study or discontinued. As illustrated through Nat's experience, many found that the course of study they entered was not suitable, and others found that other aspects of life took on a higher priority or influenced their decisions.

This non-linearity is reinforced by the tendency to combine study and work. Over 30 per cent of young people in both rural and urban settings combined both study and work all the time and a further 25 per cent were studying and working most of the time. We found that this reflected a preference for a mix of study and work, partly because of financial necessity and partly because it enabled young people to keep their options open. We note that this pattern is established in secondary school, with well over half of 17 year olds having held a paid job at some time. It has become normative for students in Australian secondary schools to combine study and work. In this way, these young people are learning to

manage conflicting responsibilities and taking the opportunity to learn in non-school settings.

By 1999 at the age of 24, 38 per cent of the participants said that they were in a 'career' job and a further 32 per cent were in a job that they felt had prospects for a career. As the first generation of Australians to achieve relatively high rates of school completion and participation in further education, these young people had initially held high hopes. In 1996, 81 per cent believed that there was a 'strong' link between further study and better jobs. In accordance with policy assumptions about the likelihood of young people moving through a coherent set of educational experiences leading to a desired employment destination, 72 per cent thought that they would benefit by undertaking further study by achieving highly skilled or professional careers (AEC, 1991). At that time, 66 per cent indicated an ambition for professional or management careers and 61 per cent fully expected to achieve this.

The first phase of the Life-Patterns study, which concluded in 2000, found that young people were forced to reassess their assumptions about the links between education and employment because they did not achieve the kinds of jobs that they had expected. This finding is consistent with broader trends for graduates to find that their qualifications and skills are not utilized in the jobs they get (Ainley, 1998). Two related trends became apparent: the rethinking of careers and the adoption of 'mixed patterns' of life priorities (Dwyer, Harwood, & Tyler, 2003, p. 10). Depending on their situation, young people in different locations were making 'their own assessments of how best to respond to a discernable mismatch between educational levels and job-market realities' (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001, p. 121).

By 2002, 75 per cent were in a full-time job, which is consistent with the national figures. They have experienced a lot of uncertainty and change, with 82 per cent having changed jobs since 1996 and nearly a quarter have held five or more jobs since 1996. At the same time, we have seen the emergence of some distinctive attitudes towards the idea of career. The traditional idea that career equates with full-time employment in one occupation, involving upward mobility over time, is not confirmed by their views. Instead, as illustrated by Nat (above), these young people have a subjective assessment of career as a 'state of mind' rather than an objective and visible trajectory within one occupation. Over 80 per cent of the participants stated that a career was a job that offers scope for *advancement*, offers opportunities for *commitment* and an ongoing role that offers *fulfillment*. They stated that a career is not a permanent full-time job; it is not necessarily your current job and does not have to be connected to your source of

income. While Frank did not talk about his work goals in terms of a 'career', his priority on getting involved in work that would enable him to keep learning, become versatile and stretch his limits also reflects an unfulfilled desire to link employment with personal development and advancement.

These approaches reflect a common view amongst the participants that the goal of attaining security in uncertain times can only be reached by maximising the capacity to be mobile and responsive to new market demands. Security is more likely to be attained through the capacity to be flexible and multi-skilled than through making a strong investment in one occupational area. Faced with employment insecurity, these young people believe that they will have greater security of employment if they can manage 'horizontal mobility', developing the capacity to move from one job to another, depending on their needs and interests. This skill is valued over the older emphasis on vertical mobility within one occupation.

It is important to note this shift in approach. They foreshadow a trend towards 'flexible careers' that are shaped by individuals who are prepared to invest in ongoing study to gain new skills and knowledge in response to their own assessments of their opportunities in the labour market. Their decisions are also influenced by the goal of holding work and employment in balance with other priorities in their lives. The worth of their educational investments is also assessed in terms of their well-being and the quality of their personal relationships. Their insistence on balance in their lives has, at times, been difficult for their parents to accept because, despite the educational investment in them, they have made decisions that are not necessarily been to their best material advantage in their parents' eyes (Dwyer et al., 2001).

In our 2000 survey, many of them make a clear distinction between having a secure job (92%) and one of 'high status' (34 per cent). Whether this is something unique to our sample—although there is some support in other research in America (Willis, 1998) and Europe (Du Bois Reymond, 1998), or a temporary outcome of career uncertainties at present, is difficult to say. They are obviously serious about finding ongoing careers for themselves, so if they are in fact reassessing the balance between personal fulfilment and material reward this might at first sight appear to represent a dramatic break with the past. (Dwyer et al., 2003, p. 26).

These findings lead to consideration of the extent to which there has been a dramatic shift in patterns of living and earning. The evidence of the Life-Patterns study supports a moderate position. It reveals that young people are developing new priorities that they are weighing up alongside those of the previous generation. The priorities of the post-1970 generation can be summarized as involving flexibility and the capacity to be reflexive; valuing ongoing career choice and personal autonomy and on balance between life commitments. These priorities can be placed alongside the patterns for the post-World War II generation, involving: traditional family roles, predictable career paths, collective identity and upward mobility (Dwyer et al., 2003, p. 26).

In the absence of reliable, established pathways through education and into employment, and faced with precarious employment, these young people have learned that their own personal development, adaptability and capacity to make the 'right choices' are most important 'resources' for building their lives. The pressure on individuals to shape their own pathways favors identities that are based around their own capacities and personal autonomy. In 2000, the participants were asked what had been the major factors shaping their lives. Overwhelmingly, participants relegated structural factors, such as socio-economic status or gender to an insignificant status, and reported that their own decisions (97 per cent), their studies and their personal relationships were the most significant influences. Parental influence (80 per cent) was rated as more significant than peer influence (47 per cent).

Employment, for many, provides opportunities to extend their learning and to find out what they are good at. As one participant expresses this, 'a career is like a journey. It's the chance to sort out what it is that makes me happy. In general, the dollars are not the driving force'. Work is evaluated in terms of the contribution that it can make to their personal life. At the same time, the participants have demonstrated a complex understanding of the demands that are part of adult life and in making their choices, they take a range of non-career choices into account. Table 1 reveals that a majority of males and females who are in career jobs place a high priority on achieving a balance of commitments and a focus on the broader context of their lives.

Table 1: Post-1996 Priorities (%)

Priority for young people in careers	females	males	Total
The important thing is to pursue a career in my area of interest / expertise	18	25	20
Holding an ongoing job that provides economic security is the big thing	11	11	11
The broad context (e.g. family, lifestyle, 'field of work') is the deciding factor	27	20	24
The important thing is to rethink priorities and make new choices	5	7	5
The important thing is to keep a balance of commitments rather than just concentrate on one aspect of life	39	37	39

This approach is confirmed by their approaches to staying in the job. In response to the question 'how long do you intend to stay in your present job?' 16.5 per cent of the participants expect to move within one year and 28.3 per cent intend to move within three years. The anticipated moves are not associated with the tenure of their positions. Of the permanent job-holders, 42 per cent were intending to change their jobs within less than two years. Of contract job-holders, 48 per cent were intending to move within two years. In 2002, 82 per cent of the participants had changed jobs within the previous five years, and 55 per cent had changed jobs because of better opportunities.

The broad life patterns of our participants have provided a powerful illustration of the emergence of new subjectivities and approaches to life, as this generation has negotiated Australia's changing social and economic environment of the 1990s and 2000s. The study is one of the few insights into Australian youth in transition that does not focus exclusively on problems and failed transitions. The analysis tends to focus instead on the ways in which young people have made successful transitions and to analyse the diversity that exists within the 'mainstream' of Australian youth (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001). Nonetheless, the

processes of inequality, marginalisation and social exclusion have affected the lives of participants as well. In the following section, I highlight some of these processes.

INEQUALITY AND MARGINALISATION

Despite the apparent success of many of the participants in managing 'flexibility' and uncertainty in their employment situations, they have not been as successful in maintaining the balance in their lives. When asked about disparities between the way they spend their time and how they would prefer to spend their time, 63.5 per cent admitted to having great difficulty in balancing their commitments and 58 per cent said that 'work pressures' caused the imbalance. While the participants continued to express a positive outlook and satisfaction with life (an overwhelming 98 per cent said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their level of personal development), they did have concerns about their physical and mental health.

Just over half of the participants were prepared to say that they were physically healthy (55 per cent) and mentally healthy (58 per cent). For 16 per cent, their mental health was of concern. These figures are consistent with objective assessments of the physical and mental health of young Australians. In particular, the health statistics are showing increasing rates of mental illness amongst young people, including depression and anxiety disorders (Donald, Dower, Lucke, & Raphael, 2000).

While the young people in the Life-Patterns study have remained optimistic, positive and proactive overall, it is apparent that this is often an effort, and requires particular skills, dispositions and a degree of social support. In 2002, the 'most positive' influences on their lives were family support (49.5 per cent); self discovery (38.7 per cent), travel (25 per cent) and friends' support (23.6 per cent). For those who have the capacity to be reflexive—to make the right judgments and respond rapidly, who have the support of friends and family and the resources to 'take time out' for reflection and renewal—life can be good, if stressful at times. But for those who do not have these capacities or resources, the demands made of them appear overwhelming and, like Frank, rather than being able to make the most of their lives, they can feel trapped.

Given the significance of autonomy and reflexivity to their transition processes, we decided to explore the relationship between socio-economic background and autonomy (Dwyer et al., 2003). We found a clear correlation

between socio-economic background and autonomy: 55 per cent of young people in the high socio-economic group were high on autonomy, compared with 34 per cent of young people in the low socio-economic group. High autonomy was also correlated with type of qualification. Autonomy rates increased consistently with the status of initial qualification from 19 per cent for apprenticeship trainees, 28 per cent for TAFE qualified and 49 per cent for university qualified. The disposition towards autonomy is also associated with sector of employment. Those in higher status jobs were more likely to rate highly on autonomy than those in lower status jobs. The link between socio-economic status and autonomy was largely related to gender. Among university qualified young women, 66.7 per cent were high on autonomy, compared with 38.2 per cent amongst other groups of females. By contrast, there was no difference between high and low socio-economic background university qualified males.

This means that, in constructing new approaches to work and life, this generation is nonetheless re-creating older patterns of inequality, based on class and gender. The effect of this process is that young women from higher socio-economic backgrounds are the most likely to possess the subjectivities that enable them to benefit from the opportunities that the flexible, changing and uncertain high-skill labour market requires. These young women have both the dispositions and resources that enable them to benefit in the current environment. As Harris comments, these young women are:

> … a unique category of girls who are self-assured, living lives lightly inflected but by no means driven by feminism, influenced by the philosophy of DIY, and assuming they can have (or at least buy) it all *(2004, p. 17).*

We can see this approach reflected in the narrative provided by Nat (above). By contrast, Frank's story illustrates the situation of many of the young people employed in the low-skill labour market. Life is stressful because employment is precarious.

Of necessity, this generation is forging new patterns of life, in response to their circumstances. They are developing patterns that will endure into their 30s and possibly beyond, as they are required to continue to juggle work, lifelong learning and to try to maintain a balance between these in which leisure, relationships and personal development also have their place. The patterns of mobility that are evident for workers in the high-skill and low-skill labour markets alike may mask the extent of inequalities—in the options that are available and in the personal capacity to take up options—that are being shaped for this new generation.

CONCLUSION: EDUCATION FOR A POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

The findings of the Life-Patterns project extend a double challenge to educational policy makers and practitioners. It reveals a) shifts in 'mainstream' thinking and approaches and b) new inequalities. This means that, as Levin has suggested, it will no longer be sufficient to tinker around the edges of current educational provision. More fundamental transformations of education are required to meet the needs of both young people and new economies.

It is common to acknowledge social change within recent educational policies. Yet there has been little recognition of the effects of these changes on young people's identities and subjectivities. Because their life patterns have not conformed to the patterns of the previous generation, new terms have been coined to describe this generation, all of which imply that they have failed or been slow to become fully 'adult' according to the expectations of the previous generation. Terms such as 'post-adolescence', 'over-aged young adults', 'generation on hold' and 'extended transitions' are used in Western countries to imply that young people's transitions are faulty (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001).

Rather than failing to make a transition to adult life, the evidence is that young people are engaging with adult responsibilities and experiences incrementally, early in their lives. Instead of entering the adulthood experienced by their parents, the post-1970 generation is more likely to be entering a 'new adulthood' earlier. The trend towards part-time employment at the same time as being a school student is one element in this. But other elements include earlier engagement with sexuality, responsibility for younger siblings or parents who are not well, and familiarity with new information technologies that deliver unprecedented information and knowledge to their computer screens.

From an early age, school children are encouraged to present a portfolio of their skills and capacities, and to draw on a wide variety of experiences and learning settings to portray themselves. They have engaged very effectively with the 'project of the self', displaying a capacity to be reflective about their own lives. This is a necessary skill, because they are required to make active choices about their lives at almost every point. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have pointed out, in order to survive circumstances that change almost daily, individuals have had to become 'stage managers of their own biographies'.

Now more than ever, education is of critical importance in equipping young people to make something of their life and to 'become somebody'. The older imperative that framed education in terms of its contribution to the production of sets of skills and knowledges that would serve economic interests still exists.

Alongside this approach, new priorities are emerging. As the pace of social change makes the relationship between education and the economy much more diffuse, the industrial model of preparing young people for predictable jobs and occupations is increasingly outmoded.

The views and experiences of the young people in the Life-Patterns study support a new focus on the relationship between formal education and identity formation—in particular, learner identities. This new emphasis is one that enables young people to cope with social change, to thrive in a precarious employment environment, to be actively engaged citizens and lifelong learners. Yet, the new mass education sector, post-compulsory education, has been grafted onto the mass education system that was designed to meet the needs of an industrial society. The contrast between some key educational approaches for industrial and post-industrial society is described in Figure 1 and, in the following sections, these features of a 'post-industrial' approach are discussed.

Figure 1: Educational approaches for industrial and post-industrial societies

Industrial	Post-industrial
Mainstream and at risk	Diversity
Seamless pathways from school to work	Multiple commitments and mobility
Future citizens	Youth participation
Economic outcomes focus	Focus on 'uses' of education

These differences in orientation represent a significant shift in order for education to meet the needs of young people to navigate their own way through complex new economies. Older patterns of socio-economic inequality are in danger of being reinforced by new workforce divisions. The significance of subjectivities, learner identities and motivations tends to privilege young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds, but the pattern is not clear-cut. Engagement with work is occurring within a context of lifelong learning, personal development, flexibility and mobility. As Levin comments, 'strengthening transitions to work is in some ways the most difficult of the lifelong learning

policy challenges because it involves so many different sectors. At this point, awareness of the nature and extent of the problems is not matched by answers as to how to resolve them' (2004, p. 26).

In conclusion, the two key factors that contribute to entrenched and widening educational and employment inequalities amongst young people are educational costs and learner identities. The latter factor is almost inevitably relegated to a footnote on motivation and attitude in policy documents. It is time to give greater consideration to the significance of learner identities and the role that new pedagogies in education can play in supporting young people's transitions, as lifelong learners in post-industrial economies.

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NOTES

[1] Nat and Frank are pseudonyms chosen to protect the anonymity of the participants. Their interviews were conducted by Debra Tyler for the Life-Patterns Project.

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