Transition into employment for young people
A qualitative study

A technical report prepared for the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation

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We honour the memory of the inimitable Associate Professor Allison Milner who had a passion for building evidence to improve the mental health of young people.

Executive summary

Young people (aged 16-25 years) are recognised as priority area in the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation's (VicHealth) Mental Wellbeing Strategy 2019-2023. Evidence indicates that youth (12-17) and young adulthood (18-25) are characterised by a series of critical transitions during which mental wellbeing can be compromised. The transition from education to work is one such example. VicHealth has supported three related studies that seek to understand and support the mental health of young people, going through this transition. This report is the third of the series.

VicHealth commissioned the University of Melbourne to conduct a qualitative study to explore how young Australian workers experience employment and the transition to employment. The University of Melbourne team worked with the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVIC) to recruit 10 young people, who shared their experiences of securing employment and transitioning from education to employment. The interviews also investigated the psychosocial job quality of young workers, including reported levels of job control over working hours and conditions, job insecurity, feelings of discrimination, and perceived social support at work. The researchers used thematic analysis to analyse interview data.

The results of the qualitative study suggested that young people felt ill-prepared for employment after leaving education. Results also suggested a mis-match between what young people expected from potential employers, and what employers actually reported they needed from prospective employees. Participants reported that schools focused on getting young people into higher education (e.g., university) and provided little to no information to students who perhaps wanted to take a gap year, or who decided to work instead of continuing schooling. Participants suggested that this focus particularly disadvantaged younger people from underprivileged backgrounds. Career guidance provided by school, training centres, or online were suggested as being helpful to young people in tailoring their education and current skill set to the world of work. There is a need for more research on other factors that could help ease the transition of young people as they enter into working life.

Background

The world of work is changing, and young people are particularly affected by these changes. In Australia, young people are likely to experience unemployment and underemployment (when a person would like to work more hours in a job, but these are not offered) (1). When employed, young Australians are more likely to report adversities such as low job control, higher psychological demands, harassment, and job insecurity (2-7). These job stressors have been shown to be associated with poorer mental health (8-10).

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) has identified young people (aged 16-25 years) as a priority area in their Mental Wellbeing Strategy 2015-2019. As such, they commissioned the University of Melbourne to conduct a number of studies on work and mental health among young people. The overarching aim of these studies was to explore how the transition from education to employment impacted the mental health of young Australians, as well as to provide an overview of the link between work and mental health. The first report used HILDA data of 11,500 people under 30 years to assess the impact of entry into employment as a time when young people's wellbeing and resilience may be challenged. The second report provided a review of current research about the mental health effects of employment on young workers. This technical report provides the results of the qualitative study exploring how young Australian workers experience employment and transition to employment.

Method

The qualitative study was conducted in Victoria and most participants lived in Melbourne. The ethical values of research merit and integrity, justice, beneficence and respect guided the design and conduct of the research (National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, & Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2007 (updated May 2015). Ethics approval was granted by the Human Research ethics Committee, University of Melbourne (Ethics approval 1851355.3). The study was funded by the VicHealth (26512).

Recruitment

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVIC), which is a leading youth-based organisation in Melbourne, helped the research team to recruit participants. The YACVIC regularly provides young people paid and unpaid opportunities to participate in research and advocacy activities. The YACVIC has well established processes to ensure that young people feel they can freely choose to participate (or not) without jeopardising ongoing involvement in the organisation.

The YACVIC promoted the project through their established networks of young people, and advertised it on their e-newsletters, website and social media. In addition, the YACVIC emailed 'expression of interest (EOI)' to all people in their mailing lists. The EOI contained information about project's aims and objectives, eligibility criterion, and participation requirements. Participants were required to contact the YACVIC team if they were interested in participating in the study. Those who meet the eligibility criterion were selected for the study. A total of 20 people registered their interest in the study, of which 10 people who met the eligibility criterion were invited to be interviewed.

The interview

The interviews explored young people's views and experiences of securing employment, the transition from education to employment, and maintaining employment. These interviews were very informal and were guided by a template of prompts, which included facilitators and barriers of a successful transition into employment. In addition, we asked participants questions about role of technology, the importance of school counselling and about university level initiatives designed for job seekers.

The interviewer was a young person. This ensured that participants felt comfortable sharing the stories with someone who shared similar life experiences. The interviews were conducted between May and June 2019. All participants were offered free counselling services, however, none of the participants used the service. Participants were given a $33 voucher as a token of appreciation of their time to this study. To ensure participants' confidentiality, no participants names or potentially identifiable information were provided in this report.

Data analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyse interview data (11). The first set of deductive codes was used by the researchers for the first round of coding. In the second round, both inductive codes derived by line-by-line review of verbatim transcription and deductive codes were combined to finalise the coding structure (11). Two researchers individually reviewed a selection of interview transcripts to further develop and refine the coding frame and identify important themes. Iterative categorisation was then applied to the coded data by the first author (12).

Results

Interviews were conducted with ten young people age 16-25 years who were Victorian residents and currently employed or actively looking for work. All interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed. Participants completed a short questionnaire before the interview to capture their demographic characteristics (see Table 1). The interview duration was in between 30 to 50 minutes.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Employment status	Field of work
Participant 1	Female	20	Year 12	Part-time	Hospitality
Participant 2	Female	18	Year 12	Part-time	Admin
Participant 3	Male	23	Diploma	Casual	Hospitality
Participant 4	Female	18	Year 12	Unemployed	
Participant 5	Female	25	Graduate Diploma	Part-time	Legal
Participant 6	Female	19	Undergrad Year 1	Part-time	Social work
Participant 7	Male	18	Year 11	Unemployed	
Participant 8	Female	20	Undergrad Year 1	Part-time	Retail
Participant 9	Female	24	Bachelors	Part-time	Social work
Participant 10	Female	22	Bachelor	Casual	Technology

Findings from the interviews

The interviews explored young people's views and experiences of securing employment and transitioning from education to employment. The interview also covered job quality, such as reported levels of job control over working hours and conditions, job insecurity, feelings of discrimination, and reported social support at work. We used thematic analysis to analyse interview data.

Themes that arose throughout the qualitative interviews can be seen in Table 2 and are further discussed below. Every participant recognised hardships in finding employment. The problems identified by study participants in gaining employment included a lack of preparedness at the high school level (e.g., in year 12) and employers' preference for experienced workers. For those who were currently employed, participants stated that they experienced low job control, job insecurity, and poor supervision as key challenges. Young people reported a lack of knowledge about occupational health and safety (OHS) and their legal rights as employees. Internships, volunteer work, and job placement experiences were reported to increase young people's chances of being employed in their field of choice.

Table 2: Qualitative analysis framework of transition into employment

Theme 1: Barriers into successful transition into work
1.1 lack of preparedness at school level
1.2 employers' expectations
Theme 2: Facilitators of successful transition
2.1 university level initiatives
2.2 living with parents
2.3 placement, volunteer work, and internship programs
Theme 3: Young workers employment experiences
3.1 low job control
3.2 discrimination
3.3 job insecurity
3.4 not knowing about working rights
3.5 poor supervision
3.6 mental health of young workers and job seekers

Theme 1: Barriers into successful transition into work

Young people found the transition into employment difficult. Most participants indicated that they were unemployed for a period of roughly six months after leaving school in year 12. The situation was tougher for young people in regional Victoria where there may be limited temporary jobs opportunities, and where commuting to city wasn't practical on a daily basis.

> *It took me about oh, I want to say six months to land this job. It was verging onto seven months.*

> *I would say roughly six months but there has been a gap ... Like, I was looking for work earlier, I would say I've been looking for work for six months.*

Participants stated that applying for jobs was not only stressful but also time consuming. This was particularly hard for unemployed young people who had no other income.

> *I don't know whether I'd call myself an active job hunter but I got to the stage where I was treating job hunting like a 9-5 job so that was an interesting experience in itself, just trying to find [sic: what] I suppose you'd call an entry level job in regional Victoria.*

> *And then trying to find a fulltime job after – or not necessarily a fulltime job, even part-time, but just finding a job [that you actually want to do] long term after university can be really hard.*

Young people who could not work due to other study commitments reported challenges in gaining employment. For instance, one participant stated that they couldn't work during school days because of a long commute time from school to home. After completing school, this person was disadvantaged because they lacked previous work experience.

> *Because I was going to a city school and there was too much travelling back and forth for me. So, I decided to wait until I would get into University or until I would graduate from high school to get a job [...] and now I can't find work.*

Lack of preparedness at school level

Participants reported that that high schools did not prepare them for employment. A number of participants also stated that high schools did not promote TAFE courses as much as they promoted university, despite the fact that many TAFE courses were more accessible and were perceived to lead to employment much faster than a university degree.

> *I was always constantly pushed to go to university. There wasn't really that much about TAFE and just an assumption that I would want to go University.*

All participants said that schools could be better in helping their students with skills such as writing CVs and cover letters, knowing which jobs they should apply for, and learning interview techniques. One participant said that schools did not emphasise the importance of work experience or the skills that might be required in the current job market. Further, while some participants wanted to attend university, there were many other who desired to go straight into work and reported that schools did not prepare them for this.

> *I think just being able to help with CVs would have been really helpful, if that's what high school could offer […] There are just so many templates that are available online and it's pretty hard to choose from. I guess having a CV is the first step to apply for work, so it would have been nice if we could have some sort of help.*

> *I don't think they even explained how necessary experience was […] there is no attention towards the job market and how it wouldn't be easy as we thought […] It was very much like "get the degree" and this will get you anyway.*

In addition, school (vocational) counselling could offer useful and important support to young job seekers such as helping to identify what to look for in an employer, the skills and qualifications needed for specific jobs, and appropriate pay rates. One participant specifically highlighted problems in understanding employment contracts.

> *I feel like there could've been so much more [in schools] in terms of explaining contracts and explaining - like really warning the students about how much they should actually read through it.*

One participant also reported that school counsellors could also play a role in supporting high school graduates during the transition to employment. The transition phase was reported to be depressing and stressful for job seekers who may not have a clear pathway to work and/or studies.

> *There were quite a few people who were looking for work, whether it's part-time work or more. So, it's just like the support system after year 12 finished there isn't anything [...] anyone to help you. And I did reach out to my career's advisor [at school] but six months later I still haven't heard back from him.*

Employers' preference for experienced workers

Participants perceived that full time entry level jobs were advertised only for people with experience or people with higher education qualifications. Almost all participants raised concerns about unrealistic expectations for young people to have work experience and that employers did not prioritise giving unexperienced young workers a job.

> *All the advertisements [of entry level positions] want people with experience which I understand obviously. But it's like, well, how do you get that experience if no one's willing to give it to you?*

> *It's really hard to get a job because I think a lot of people are looking for people with experience […] I think I just want one employer to take a chance on me and I don't think a lot of people are willing to take a chance on me. It's really hard to just get your foot in the door first of all*

Another participant noted that when they applied for a senior position (Administration officer) it didn't match their skill set. Fortunately, the organisation had another position opening which was more suitable to their education and experience. The employer then provided constructive feedback about why they did not consider the participant for the original role. This was a positive experience.

> *So the [employer] gave me the feedback that they preferred someone who had a university degree and […] they said, I know you're not meant to discriminate on your age but you're a bit too young for what we're looking for […] and they said to me there are a couple of internal openings we have at*

the moment and would you like to be considered for any of them? And I was, like, yes, yes, of course and I got there eventually.

Theme 2 Facilitators to successful work transition

University initiatives

Participants suggested that universities could provide better support to job seekers. In particular, free university initiatives that helped young people find work were noted as highly useful.

> *At my university they have this thing called a job shop and it's great because […] like, you can drop in and they can check your resume for you and all that but you've got to do a couple of workshops prior to that. It's like a whole system but it's available and it's there for all students, it's free, you don't have to pay anything so it's great.*

> *I was lucky. The law school actually […] did have resume writing and, you know, CV writing workshop which I did attend I think once.*

Living with parents

Living with parents during transitional phase was found to be a facilitator in finding meaningful employment. It was especially true for young people who were in university or who had completed university level education.

> *I'm just lucky […] that I come from a privileged background where my entire family and extended family [were at] university and all of that. And like I lived at home for a while, and I was working ten hours a week in an ice-cream shop for a bit and it didn't matter, but there are people who [live at home] and come from backgrounds where their family doesn't necessarily know how to support them to go to university and all of that.*

Another participant described that more young people choose to stay longer with their parents during the transition to employment because it is less stressful. Those who moved out tended to eventually return to their parents because of financial hardship.

I just feel like it's less stressful, like you can just worry less than if you're living by yourself [...] and you've got that sort of support. Because a lot of people after they moved out [of their parents' home], like straight after, they usually move back because they can't deal with it or handle financial hardship.

Placement, volunteer work, and internship programs

Every participant recognised the importance of job placement, volunteer work and internships as a way to secure more formal permanent work. In fact, internship had led to a permanent job for one person. This particular person highlighted the importance of having a supportive team in the internship program.

I was very lucky in that I had a fulltime grad role organized before I even finished my degree. I guess because it was an internship everybody that I worked with in the HR team [...] I had a really supportive team and a supportive manager, which is really good, and I think it would've been a lot harder to make that transition from university to work if I hadn't been in a team that had reasonable expectations for me.

Another participant noted doing community work was very useful in gaining practical knowledge in her field. The participant said that they learned more during the fieldwork than in the workplace.

I'm heavily involved in my local community, so I'm involved with a lot of different groups so probably ... I guess all that experience kind of adds up and helped in gaining future employment.

Theme 3: Young workers employment experiences

Low job control and bullying

Participants described low job control in temporary jobs. This included not being able to take leave (unpaid) during exams or for assignments, or sometimes being asked to come for work at the last minute to cover for someone else's shift. Another participant stated that they were bullied and treated disrespectfully by a manager who had little or no regard about the importance of study time.

> *All fast food chains are just like they are huge bullies to young people, Its not nice. […] During year 12, I struggled so much […] I am in class and they [Manager/employer] would get to you to come in and do shifts, even if you have put in hours that you couldn't work these days and they were like 'find someone to cover for you' instead of 'oh sorry I put you on the shift that you weren't meant to be on'. It's just they knew they have an upper hand over everything, and they treated you that way.*

Discrimination

Participants described a feeling of being discriminated against when they applied for jobs. Participants also reported being paid less than the national wage rate. One participant spoke about their first few job experiences in a high stress working environment, where not only they were underpaid but experienced age-related discrimination.

> *I started on $8 an hour. I still remember, my first shift was on Wednesday night, and I can remember coming home just in tears because I found it so stressful. No one was nice to me, there was a lot of pressure. It did get easier, but I found that because I was so young it was so for people to really look down on me. I just really didn't expect the working environment to be like that, to be so rough.*

In addition, a participant indicated that it is common for employers to pay young people below the national wage. In this case, the participant mentioned that the employer did not pay superannuation for about six months.

> *I only lasted for around about six months I think after I realised that this job isn't worth it. They didn't pay my superannuation. But, yeah, I didn't really complain to the Fair Work [….] So, again, a lot of young people don't want to see the business go down or it can feel like the employer really makes them feel bad.*

Job insecurity

Participants shared their concerns about job insecurity in relation to their temporary jobs or casual work. One participant described struggles with the insecure nature of work.

> *I feel like it's been quite easy to get casual work. I have no problem there, I think that's because of my age, like I'm generally the cheapest for companies, so I think that's probably the easiest. I've always had a job throughout school, but it's always been casual. I found it really hard to find job security.*

Most of the participants were doing casual work and reported that employers did not guarantee ongoing shifts or time off work for study.

> *I know a lot of people doing exams have put their part-time jobs on hold and then they ended up badly, because they took so much time off ... I don't know whether they got fired as such but when they came back there wasn't a job there for them anymore.*

Job insecurity was particularly highlighted by older participants in that group (>20 years) who found that casual work or being on shorter contract was a constant worry. One participant stated that they were concerned about the end of their part-time work contract.

> *I recently went back to XYZ employer […] my [other] contract ends in August and I am like I don't have a secure job after this […] and I feel like everything is getting out of control. I need to pay for things that I have and it's like going back to XYZ and realising how messy it is, and especially after*

> *having this experience [of working in a good environment] then going back*
> *to a place like XYZ is just awful.*

Participants expressed their concerns about how working in casual and temporary jobs impacted on decisions such as moving out of their parents' home. Those who were studying felt that they were under constant pressure. One participant shared that while their mother's wanted them to become financially independent and move out of the house, this was impossible due to unemployment. Another participant said that they were able to obtain more secure work with leave but had to compromise on pay.

> *I feel as though the pay is a lot less, like a lot less. I was on about $19 an hour*
> *at the casual, and then moving into this I'm on $14 an hour now, like $5 an*
> *hour jump. But I find that being able to be paid the sick leave and having*
> *annual leave and having guaranteed shifts is so much more worth it than*
> *having an extra $5 an hour.*

Not knowing about working rights

Participants felt that young people were able to be easily exploited because of a lack of knowledge about their working rights. Many were afraid that complaining about their treatment could lead to job loss.

> *I would say not knowing our rights is the biggest challenge for young people*
> *[…]we don't know how to hold people accountable … we think we owe it to*
> *them, like they are still paying us, you know! Like that's the vibe, everyone*
> *[young people] feels that when they walk in to work, that at least I got a job.*

> *It feels like young people can do any job and basically forget about their*
> *rights. They [young people] are too scared that the employee might do*
> *something to them, or they would sack them when this is the job that they*
> *really need.*

One participant highlighted the importance of legal literacy. This participant suggested that perhaps school could provide education on this point.

> *I didn't get any of that and I was just so excited to get my first job, I just*
> *signed the contract, without realising. I was sometimes getting two and a*

half hour shifts and I thought that was ridiculous and when I questioned it

they were like: well it's in your contract, and I was like: oh.

On the contrary, knowing worker rights and negotiating with employers about working hours and conditions was reported to have positive outcomes. Participants also stressed that young people faced similar financial pressures as older people, in terms of housing and living costs.

During interview my I said to her [employer] that I was only applying for

this job because I want job security - I made that so clear. I was like I'm a

student, I have bills to pay and all that sort of thing. I don't want to keep

jumping between jobs and end up being promised ten hours a week and

then getting three. So I made that really clear, I was like: I want at least 15

hours just to survive.

On a different occasion, the same participant described their experience with a supervisor who rostered them during university lecture times, despite the fact the participant had asked for this time off to study. The participant contacted higher management, who later intervened and fixed the issue. This is one example of the positive effects of knowing about employment rights.

In my last job, when I had started I tried to make it clear that I was starting

university in March and that I wouldn't be able to work at the store that I was

working at[…] and I requested them a transfer to Suburb B, and they were like:

yeah, yeah no worries[…] and then by the time it came around it was as if no

one remembered that it was supposed to happen […] my manager had

rostered me three whole weeks during March on weekdays even though I had

explicitly said: I can't do this. I was like: I'm not going to be stuffed around.

I contacted higher management and she fixed it straight away.

Poor supervision

Two participants identified poor supervision as being one of the greatest challenge young people face when they begin employment. Many young people do not necessarily bring the experience required for a job, therefore require clear instructions and support.

> *In my first two days on the job I had no idea what I was supposed to do,*
> *and then people [supervisor] get frustrated. And I was like, but I don't*
> *know, I just started today.*

The same participant also highlighted the importance of training supervisors in how to support their staff. In the retail and hospitality industries, supervisors are also often young people who do not have the necessary training to manage people. Another participant noted that matters related to occupation health and safety (OH&S) had not been discussed by supervisors. They stated that young workers were often scared to ask their supervisors questions about OH&S as it may demonstrate their lack of knowledge and could lead to job loss.

> *I think the challenges for the young workers is […] when they do transition*
> *to work, they do find it quite hard enough I think like, sometimes they are*
> *very unsure who their supervisors are or like, can they say things? There's*
> *not a lot of talk about like, the importance of OH&S.*

Mental health of young workers and job seekers

Participants described feeling of being hopeless, helpless, and depressed when they were unemployed or when they were employed in precarious work. These concerns were particularly reported among those persons who had left school and were not in further education. In contrast, those who were studying found it hard to find jobs that offered them flexible hours that allowed them to manage work and study. Young workers reported being underpaid and being exposed to age-related discrimination. All of these experiences impacted the mental health of young workers.

> *It's just - it's a bit disappointing. It's difficult too - especially if you're just*
> *trying to find a new job, it's [being in the transition to employment] really*
> *difficult I would say for me to deal with.*

> *The transition is hard after the high school. I know quite a few of my friends*
> *have faced this as well because all ties are just cut off and …. we're left*
> *there, twiddling our thumbs, like how are we going to do this [the*
> *transition into work] because… no-one really felt adequately prepared.*

Contrary to that, being able to secure an annual job contract with leave provisions, as well as those jobs with high levels of support were clearly reported as being beneficial to mental health. Young people with higher job control were satisfied with their work life balance as compared to those working in precarious working conditions.

> *I feel pretty confident that I can get to where I need to go.*

> *I mean, I'm confident that it will work out at some point and it will be fine .*

> *I feel confident now that I have a contract and job security that I'm going to be ok through university.*

Discussion and recommendations

The limitations of this study are that it is only based on a limited number of qualitative interviews and is mainly representative of young people residing in metropolitan areas who had finished school. At the same time, the strength of the study is that the interviewees were representative of different industry groups and sectors, gender and socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were interviewed by a young person, which allowed a greater and more open discussion about the challenges of employment during late adolescents and early adulthood.

The results of the qualitative study suggest that young people feel ill-prepared for employment after leaving education. A range of basic skills were reported as being lacking in the education system, including how to make resumes, how to prepare for job interviews, and how to identify suitable jobs. Participants reported that schools put more focus on getting young people into higher education (e.g., university) and provided little to no information to students who perhaps wanted to take a gap year, or who decided to work instead of continuing schooling.

Young people from more disadvantaged background who had no financial means or academic ability to attend university level education were reported as being at the greatest risk of being unemployed and had the poorest mental health. It is therefore essential that this group is provided with counselling support and assistance to gain stable employment. Career guidance (either face to face or online) could help young people in tailoring their

education and current skill set to the world of work. At the same time, these tailored activities could be helpful to mental health by providing a sense of social support. We would also suggest the import when of targeting government policies and programs for this group.

The young people in this study suggested a mis-match between what was expected from potential employers, and what employers actually reported they needed from prospective employees. This was most clearly reported in the expectations around work experience and qualifications. One possible explanation for this is that young people are not applying jobs that matches their skillset. We saw one example where an employer provided constructive feedback to a participant after their interview and guided them to apply for an entry level position. Ultimately, this mean that the young person was able to secure a job. This example suggests the importance of applying for the right job and ascertaining feedback from employers about the appropriateness of a young person's fit in a job. While it may not be possible for employers to provide feedback to all job applicants, some sort of feedback to young workers would be helpful.

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