

Making pathways? A mixed methods analysis of young women who have left school early in ‘the new work order’

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Abstract

Much research has investigated how young women with tertiary education fare in contemporary labour markets and pointed to persistent gender inequalities. However, very little is known about how young women, who leave school early, fare in the present climate. In this paper we shed light on the challenges facing these women in the ‘new work order’. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative methods, we investigate how young Australian women, who have left school before completing upper secondary education, fare and how they make choices regarding education and work as they envision their futures. Our analyses reveal a perceived and real tension between education and ‘real’ experience in the labour market. This leaves young women without upper secondary qualifications in a difficult position when making decisions about their futures.

Keywords: young women; education-to-work nexus; new work order; marginalisation; mixed methods

Introduction

This paper takes its starting point in the paradoxical situation that young women today are facing, globally but not least in a country like Australia. Over the past decades, young women have matched and, in many areas, outperformed men in terms of participation in higher education. This has in part happened as a response to a push from governments through a strong policy focus on education as the key to prosperous futures at the individual and national level (Australian Government 2008; COAG 2009). Today almost every second young woman in Australia has completed tertiary education (Author B). However, while Australia ranks number one in the world in terms of women's educational attainment, it ranks 46th in terms of their economic participation and opportunity (WEF 2018). Young women do not receive the same economic returns from education as young men (Wyn et al. 2017) and may need higher qualifications to successfully compete with them for jobs (Barry and Conroy 2013; Chesters 2018). Research also shows that women have greater odds for experiencing part-time, casual and discontinuous employment than men (Pocock et al. 2013). This is often explained by the heavily gender-segregated labour market in Australia (Pocock et al. 2013), by policies that actively prevent mothers from greater economic participation because they are by-and-large seen as primary care-givers (van Egmond et al. 2010), and by naturalised understandings of gender inequalities (Crofts & Coffey 2016).

What is often overlooked in this research is where these persistent gender inequalities leave young women who do not go on to complete higher education. Young women, who leave school early, face a double disadvantage: they are not only losing out to their male counterparts in the labour market for the reasons listed above, but also to their female peers in the educational system. As we return to below, the opportunities for early school leavers are declining in a rapidly changing labour market. In this paper we shed light on these challenges

by investigating how young women, who have left school before completing upper secondary education (Year 12 in Australia), navigate education and work in the ‘new work order’ (Kelly 2009). We address this research question with both quantitative and qualitative methods.

First, based on statistically representative household survey data we analyse how these young women fare in the labour market compared to their counterparts who did complete upper secondary education. We then use data from a qualitative study to analyse how young women make choices about education and work. We conclude that young women without upper secondary qualifications are left in a particularly challenging situation of conflicting messages and with few ideal options available to them in terms of securing a strong foothold in the labour market.

Young women in the ‘new work order’

While young people in previous decades were able to find full employment upon leaving school at the age of 16, precarity has become synonymous with today’s young jobseeker (Cuervo & Wyn 2011). On-going structural transformations in the wider Australian economy and the labour market since the 1980s (Wyn & Lamb 1996) have eroded youth employment, particularly full-time employment. This, coupled with recessions and economic downturns in the 1990s and the mid-2000s, has greatly affected the employment outcomes of young people in their late teens and early 20s (Author B). This causes particular challenges to young people who leave school early because the jobs that might have ordinarily employed them are evaporating (Cuervo & Wyn 2011). In the ‘new work order’, work is increasingly insecure, flexible, part time and temporary (Kelly 2009). Hence, the proportion of young people in Australia engaged in full-time employment has declined from 40% of 15-24-year-olds in 1995 to 29% in 2015. In contrast, part-time employment increased over the period from 20% in 1995 to 30% in 2015 (Bowman, Borlagdan & Bond 2015). For 15-19-year-olds and 20-24-

year-olds, casual employment is the now the norm rather than the exception (Author B) and underemployment has also increased (ABS 2018a). These trends are not only observed in Australia, but also internationally (Furlong & Cartmel 2007; Brooks 2009).

The broader backdrop to this ‘new work order’ is individualisation processes and the rise of neoliberal regimes across many parts of the world, including in Australia. This includes a tightening of security nets and welfare policies, a focus on fostering ‘innovative’ and ‘entrepreneurial’ skills, and an increased focus on ‘hard work’ and aspiration as the normative orientation for individuals (Mendick et al. 2018; Kelly 2009). This means that ‘making it’ becomes a matter of individual responsibility and conversely, not making it indicates individual failure (Harris 2004). Young women in particular have been heralded as the “ideal neoliberal subjects” (Crofts & Coffey 2016: 2), or as ‘can-do girls’ who are, as Anita Harris puts it, “the most likely candidates for performing a new kind of self-made subjectivity” (Harris 2004: 6). This story of female success focuses on the women who have pursued the opportunities that an expanded educational system and restructured labour markets have provided them with and it depicts them as the majority of young women today. This, however, leaves a gap in terms of understanding how young women without upper secondary education, let alone tertiary education, orient themselves in this landscape. Are they simply the ‘at-risk’ girls, whom Harris identifies as the popular counter-image to the successful ‘can-do’ girl; girls who risk their future by engaging in ‘inappropriate behaviours’, lacking ambition or having the ‘wrong’ ambitions such as early motherhood (Harris 2004)? We return to this question in the Discussion section.

Leaving school early in the Australian context

The education system in Australia is decentralised and varies from state to state. The qualitative research for this paper was conducted in Victoria where school is compulsory until age 17/Year 10. Students who complete upper secondary schooling (Year 12) receive either a Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) or the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). While VCE is the more academic track, preparing students for tertiary education at university level, VCAL with its applied focus is preparing students for trades-based pathways and work. Compared to other Australian jurisdictions, Victoria, dubbing itself ‘The Education State’, has higher than average outcomes on measures such as literacy/numeracy, school retention and completion rates (Banks 2005). When we combine qualitative data from Victoria with Australia-wide quantitative data we bear in mind that the outcomes reported in the quantitative analysis are national averages and might have looked somewhat better in terms of educational participation if we looked at Victoria only.

Post-compulsory education covers higher education and vocational education and training (VET). In Australia, as in many other countries, the proportion of a cohort who obtains university-level qualifications (BA or above) has grown significantly over the last decades, with 31.4% of 20-64-year-olds holding a degree in 2018 (ABS 2018b). Of particular importance for the analysis in this paper is the VET sector. Vocational education is offered by both public TAFE (Technical and Further Education) institutes and private providers in a competitive market (Myconos et al. 2016) and while some courses are freeⁱ, students pay tuition at varying ratesⁱⁱ. Students can enrol in a single course or combine different courses at varying levels to build more comprehensive qualifications.

Since the 1990s, youth policies in Australia have had a strong emphasis on education and training. Cuervo and Wyn (2011: 16) note that the recession of the 1990s “produced a

generational change in culture with young people becoming aware that without a secondary or tertiary qualification they had minimal chances to gain access to meaningful and/or rewarding employment”. This generational shift permeates both contemporary governments’ thinking about young people who should be “earning or learning” and the mindsets of young people as they chart their educational and employment pathways (Cuervo & Wyn 2011; Woodman & Wyn 2015). While there is some debate within the literature about which subgroups of the youth population benefit from school completion (Marks 2007), completing school still remains a significant policy issue. This is all the more true given the slow progress in school completion rates over the past decades. The proportion of students who complete upper secondary schooling continues to sit at around 74% (Lamb et al. 2015), still far from the government goal of 95% (te Riele 2004).

Young people who have left school early are a distinct and vulnerable group (Wyn & Lamb 1996; Lamb et al. 2015). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, Indigenous students and students from rural and remote communities are overrepresented (Lamb et al. 2015; Marks 2007). Girls are slightly more likely to complete Year 12 than boys (78.5% of girls versus 69.5% of boys (Lamb et al. 2015: 6)). However, when considering young people not fully engaged in education or work at age 24, young women are overrepresented. This, combined with the patterns described in the Introduction, warrants a closer look at the pathways of young women who leave school early. Before we turn to the analysis, we introduce the methods and data.

Methods and Data

Quantitative data

We draw on data (2001-17) from the *Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA) surveyⁱⁱⁱ, a household panel study to provide a statistical profile of how young women who do not complete upper secondary education fare in terms of labour market outcomes. For this paper, the sample was restricted to all responding women aged between 15 and 29 (n=6,378) in any year between 2001 and 2017 across all states to provide a broad profile of how Australian young women fare as the context for the qualitative study. We include both women who completed upper secondary education (Year 12) and those who did not to compare the impact of completing upper secondary education on young women's labour market outcomes later in life. The analytic sample was constructed to include individuals who enter and exit over the course of the survey. Respondents may exit the survey due to household dissolution, death or a desire to no longer participate in the study. There were no missing data on either the dependent or explanatory variables.

Measures and analytical approach

To examine young women's participation in education and work over time, we constructed a categorical 'main activity' variable derived from respondents' labour force status and respondents' 'main activity during time spent neither working nor looking for work' at each wave. A respondent could have only one main activity at each wave: (1) employed, full-time (>35 hours/week); (2) employed, part-time (<35 hours/week); (3) unemployed; (4) not in the labour force (NILF); (5) homemaking and care duties; (6) combined employment and study; and (7) study-only. While homemaking and care is a subset of NILF, we separate it out because of the gendered nature of this category. To describe young women's attainment of educational qualifications we derived a series of dichotomous variables from respondents' educational qualification history. We do not report a table of sample descriptives as this information can be derived from Figures 1.

To begin, we describe the main activities of young women at three age ranges: 15 to 19, 20 to 24 and 25 to 29 for women who completed upper secondary school and those who did not in Figure 1. Based on information about respondents' current study status and highest level of completed schooling (excluding equivalent completed post-schooling) we created a binary variable indicating membership to one of these two groups: 0 indicating that they did not complete upper secondary school and 1 indicating they did complete. Respondents aged 15-19 who were currently studying for a secondary school qualification (e.g. Year 11 or 12) were excluded from the sample because we are unable to determine whether they will complete or not. Respondents aged 15-19 not currently studying for an upper secondary qualification were coded as 0. Respondents who completed Years 7 to 11 or indicated that they "did not attend secondary school but finished primary school" or "attended primary school but did not finish" were also coded as 0. Respondents who completed Year 12 were coded as 1.

Following this we move on to a multivariate analysis, using a logit model with random effects to account for the repeated observations found in the longitudinal data to predict the odds of being in full- and part-time employment for young women who complete upper secondary schooling and for those who do not. To ensure a point of comparison for the activities and outcomes of the group in focus, we compare young women who did and did not complete Year 12 throughout the quantitative analysis.

Qualitative data

The data for the qualitative analysis stems from ongoing, longitudinal research in Victoria, Australia, conducted by the first author. The project investigates the everyday lives and

imagined futures of young women who have left school before finishing Year 12 (upper secondary education) or otherwise have had their transitional pathways interrupted. The 31 participants in the first wave of the study were predominantly recruited through service providers assisting young people looking to reengage with education and/or work. Five participants were not in touch with any service provider and were recruited via a Facebook advertisement. Research participants were invited to participate in up to five interviews over the course of two years, but in this paper we focus on the first wave of interviews as this was the only wave that was fully completed at the time of writing.

The wave 1 sample is aged 15-24 and from a mix of social backgrounds. While a couple of participants' parents held jobs that require higher education degrees, the majority spoke of parents who worked in unskilled or low-skill jobs (bus/truck drivers, supermarket/retail, cleaning) or who were unemployed. In the analysis we focus on the 25 participants who had not completed Year 12 at the time of the first interview. The research is based in three different locations, two on the urban fringe of Melbourne and one in a regional area around 160km from Melbourne. All three locations are placed in the first or second quintile of the SEIFA 2016 Index of Relative Economic Disadvantage (IRSD). They have above average unemployment rates, lower than average incomes, and lower proportion of the population who has completed Year 12. This speaks to the general level of disadvantage in the communities. However, their youth unemployment rates are not markedly different from state averages, in part because youth unemployment is generally higher (around 10%). While local labour markets are central for young women's opportunities, an exploration of this dimension is beyond the scope of this paper.

The interviews were conducted in meeting rooms in local libraries or other local facilities. The interview guide covered everyday life activities, growing up including a life chart exercise, relations with family and friends and finally, hopes and dreams for the future. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research follows conventional social science ethical guidelines, including seeking informed consent for each wave. Participants received a \$30 voucher as an acknowledgment of their time. Names and other identifying characteristics are changed to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The research is approved by XX University Human Research Ethics Committee (YY number). The interview data were coded thematically for all passages relating to work and study, with subcodes on present experiences and future plans. It quickly became apparent that these topics were often intertwined and interdependent, which is reflected in the analysis. The quotes in the analysis are chosen as they are illustrative of the general patterns in the sample, while also adding nuance to these patterns.

We adopted a sequential approach to the mixed methods analysis (Creswell & Creswell 2017), meaning that we first analysed the qualitative data for overall patterns and then used the findings here to inform the quantitative modelling and analysis, before turning to the qualitative data again to explore the nuances of the broader dynamics here. Below we first present the quantitative analysis, which gives a broad overview and context for the qualitative analysis that follows, before we reflect on the findings in the Discussion.

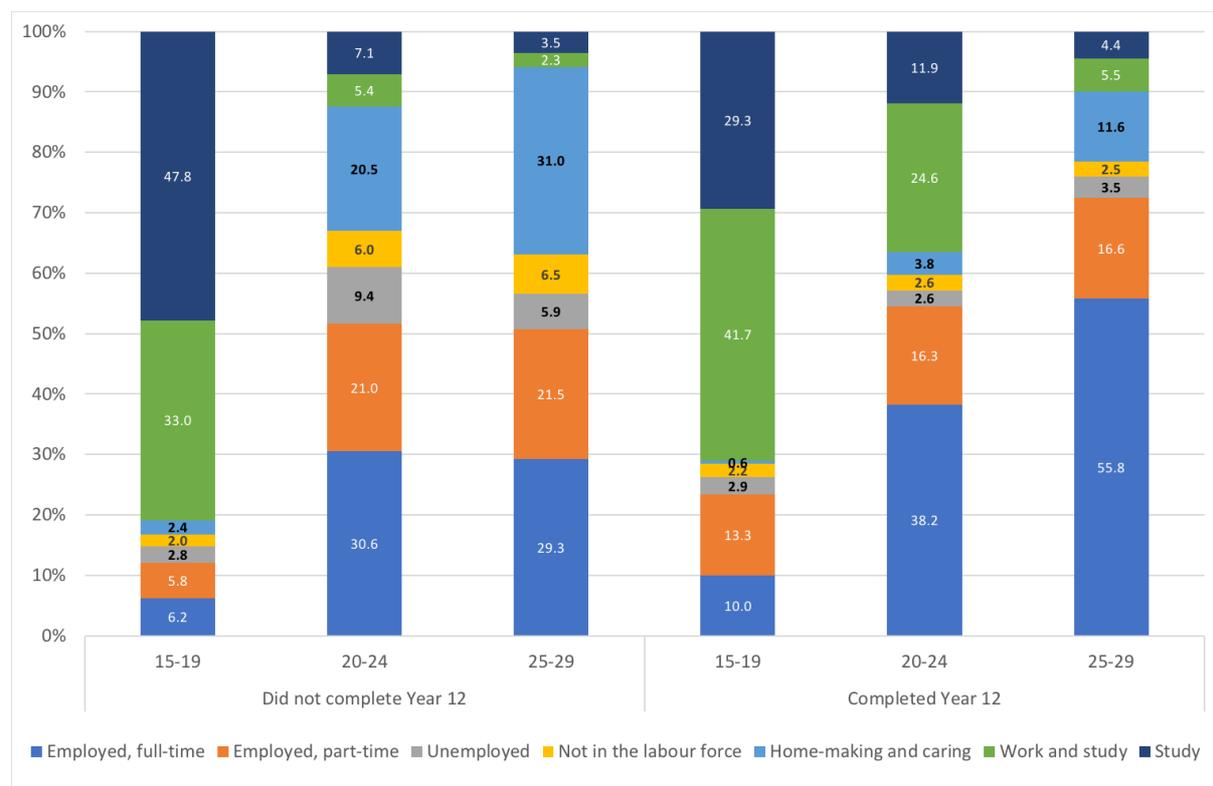
Results

Quantitative analysis

Young women's main activities

In the first step of the quantitative analysis, we consider the main activities of young women to investigate how they spend their time and how their main activities change across the different age groups. We compare young women with and without completed Year 12 schooling in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Main activities of young women with and without Year 12 qualifications (%)



Source: Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) 2001-2017.

Notes: Weighted, pooled data.

As the figure shows, the women had fairly similar activity patterns between the ages of 15 and 19, largely dominated by study and combined work and study. This is not surprising given that many in this category are still legally required to attend school. From their early 20s and onwards, the divergence in employment and non-employment activities between the groups starts. The proportion of women with Year 12 qualifications, who are in the workforce between ages 20 and 24, was significantly higher than those without a Year 12

qualification, in particular in terms of full-time work (38.2% vs 30.6%). They were also more likely to be combining work and study (24.6% vs 5.4%). Comparatively, 20% of all 20-24-year-old women, who did not complete a Year 12 qualification, were out of the labour force and in caring roles at this stage, and 15.4% were unemployed. Considering the third age group aged 25-29, these differences are reinforced. Women who completed Year 12 appear to also have completed their post-school education and instead entered the workforce in greater numbers: 55.8% of these women were in full-time work. In contrast, young women who did not complete Year 12 appear to be making little gains in workforce participation with around 29.3% being in full-time work at this stage. The proportion who are studying or combining work and study declined. Instead, for this group of women, their participation in home-making and caring rose from 20% to 30%. In short, as women without Year 12 qualifications aged into their later 20s they became less economically active compared to their counterparts, whose labour market activity only continued to rise as they got older.

We also investigated (analysis not shown here) the highest level of educational qualifications that the two groups obtained. Around two-thirds of women who have left school before finishing Year 12 qualifications never return to education or training. The remainder take up various forms of post-compulsory schooling. However, they generally clustered in qualifications at the lower end of post-compulsory educational qualifications – predominantly at the certificate-level. The highest-level qualification that most women in this group obtained was a Certificate III. Women who completed a Year 12 qualification were more likely to obtain higher-level qualifications, including a Certificate IV (5.5% vs. 4% diploma or advanced diploma (10.7%)) than those who did not complete a Year 12 qualification. They were also significantly more likely to have obtained a bachelor's degree (28.3%).

Estimating the effect of education and experience on young women's employment activities

For the multivariate analysis we restrict the sample to women aged 20 and 29 to predict the odds of participating in full-time and part-time employment respectively. In Table 1, two models are presented, which estimate the log odds and odds ratios of being in full-time employment or part-time employment for those who did not complete a Year 12 qualification and those who did complete Year 12. Each outcome variable is binary and the reference category for both variables is *not* in full- or part-time work, respectively. We report both log odds and odds ratios in the table, but only discuss the odds ratios for ease of interpretation. The odds ratios represent the likelihood of being in one particular category over another, e.g., being in full time work instead of not being in full time work. An odds ratio of less than 1 indicates a negative association and an odds ratio of more than 1 indicates a positive association.

Table 1. Estimated log odds of being in full- and part-time employment for young women aged 20-29

	Model 1A			Model 1B		
	Employed, full-time			Employed, part-time		
	<i>B</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Intercept	-0.91	0.40	***	-2.63	0.07	***
Year 12 graduate (0=No year 12)	-0.18	0.84		0.53	1.70	***
Qualifications						
Certificate-level	0.09	1.09		0.33	1.39	**
Diploma, advanced diploma-level	0.76	2.14	**	0.18	1.20	
Degree and postgraduate-level	0.74	2.10	**	0.09	1.09	
Certificate-level x Year 12	0.19	1.21		-0.11	0.90	
Diploma-level x Year 12	-0.31	0.73		0.03	1.03	
Degree and postgrad x Year 12	0.78	2.18	**	0.13	1.14	
Time in paid work	0.32	1.38	***	0.17	1.19	***
Time in paid work x Year 12	0.08	1.08	***	-0.09	0.91	***
<i>N (Persons)</i>				6,378		
<i>N (Observations)</i>				28,770		

Source: Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey 2001-2017

Notes: Pooled sample controlling for age, country of birth, relationship status, parenthood status and location.

Beginning with Model 1A (full time employment), the estimated coefficient for the intercept is the odds of a young woman without any post-compulsory qualifications, aged between 20 and 24 years of age, living in an urban area, born in Australia, single without children being in full-time work. The intercept is significant, indicating that young women in the reference category had 60% $[100-(0.40-1)]$ less of a chance of being in full-time employment than those not in the reference category. The odds of obtaining full-time employment for a young woman who did not complete Year 12 but completed a diploma-level qualification are 114% $[100-(2.14-1)]$ higher than for those who did not complete a diploma-level qualification. The odds of young women without Year 12 but with a degree-level qualification being in full-time were 110% $[100-(2.10-1)]$ higher than those who did not complete a degree qualification. The estimated coefficient for Year 12 x degree-level qualification represents the odds of young women who did complete Year 12 and went on to complete a degree-level qualification. The odds of this group being in full-time employment were 357% $[100-(4.57-1)]$ higher than those who did not complete a degree qualification. To investigate the value of labour market experience, we included time spent in paid work. For every one-unit increase in time spent in paid work for young women who did not complete Year 12, there was a 38% $[100-(1.38-1)]$ increase in the odds of being in full-time work. The coefficient for Year 12 x time in paid work represents the odds of an increase in time spent in paid work for women who did complete Year 12. For these women, the odds of being in full-time employment increases by 8% $[100-(1.38-1)]$ for every year spent in paid work. This is a significantly smaller effect of paid work experience than for those who did not complete Year 12 qualifications, suggesting that paid work experience has more of a premium for those who did not complete Year 12.

In the second column in Table 1, the odds of being in part-time employment for those who did and did not complete a Year 12 qualification are estimated (Model 1B). The intercept represents the odds of a young woman without any post-school qualifications, aged between 20 and 24 years of age, living in an urban area, born in Australia, single without children being in part-time work. The intercept is significant but negative and the odds ratio is 0.07, indicating that young women in the reference category had 93% [$100-(0.07-1)$] less of a chance of being in part-time-time employment. Those young women who did not complete Year 12, but gained a certificate-level qualification had 39% [$100-(0.39-1)$] higher chance of being in part-time employment than those who did not complete a certificate-level qualification. For every one-unit increase in time spent in paid work for young women who did not complete Year 12, there was a 19% [$100-(1.19-1)$] increase in the odds of being in part-time work. For young women who did complete Year 12, time spent in the labour market seemed to have a detrimental effect on the odds of being in part-time employment. These women were 9% [$100-(0.91-1)$] less likely to be in part-time employment for every year spent in paid work.

In sum, the two groups of young women – those who completed Year 12 and those who did not – have similar activities at younger ages, but from their mid-20s there are noticeable differences in terms of labour market participation that are reinforced throughout their 20s. As the multivariate model demonstrated, labour market outcomes vary by educational qualification and work experience, but in different and intricate ways for the two groups of women. For young women who have not completed Year 12, qualifications matter for gaining full- or part-time work, but so does experience, more so than for their counterparts who had completed Year 12. In the qualitative analysis, we explore how this tension between

educational qualifications and work experience plays out when we unpack how participants weigh up the different options they see ahead of them.

Qualitative analysis

Negotiating educational aspirations

Three participants were envisioning plans and careers that involve studies at university level, but for most of the participants the educational programmes they were considering were vocational tracks, either certificate- or diploma-level programs (as the quantitative analysis illustrated). A significant number of participants had started one or more of these courses and while some had completed, many had left before finishing. A number of participants had a fairly clear idea about what they wanted to study and some were already studying (full or part time) at the time of the interview. For instance, Freya (19 years old) left school in Year 10 and was on maternity leave with her first baby at the time of the interview. Before the baby came, she worked in the local supermarket, where her mum and sister also work, and she plans to return to this job after her leave. However, she also has plans to study:

Interviewer: So, what's the- what is it that you want to study?

Freya: The first course I'm starting off in is, uh, Cert 4 in mental health. And then, when I finish that I wanted to go and do a diploma in community services and then just wanna go from there [...] yeah so do that and start working and then once I get the diploma in community services, probably start looking for a job. And then, maybe leave [the supermarket] from then [...] Mental health wasn't the main aspect of it [the career she imagines] but I wanted it under my belt so that I had that

knowledge, so I thought I'd do the Cert 4 and then once I'd finished that do a diploma in community services and hold them together.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Freya: And then, I figured, I keep working in [the supermarket] because they have been pretty good with me and they are pretty flex, like, they'd be able to work around me studying and all that stuff.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, okay.

Freya: Um, and then yeah. I suppose once I secure myself a job in that industry I could leave [the supermarket].

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Freya: 'Cause, I suppose, it's always, the smartest thing to do is get the [new] job first before you go and leave [the old job], so, that's why I figure I'd do the study and I'd still work so I still be making some money.

The way in which Freya has thought carefully about how the courses she is considering would supplement each other makes her one of very few participants with this kind of overview of different courses and understanding of how they might work together. Most participants have a less clear idea about how courses they are interested in might fit together into a coherent profile, for instance Courtney (19 years old) who was enrolled in a certificate in childcare at the time of the interview, but ultimately wants to be a zoo keeper and work with animals. Freya has to combine work and study to make money to support her new family (her partner is currently unemployed), and she is happy to return to her supermarket

job after her maternity leave. However, while the quote above demonstrates a quite elaborate plan and a clear rationale behind this, her confidence is less clear in other parts of the interview. She also describes how her mum has warned her to be “realistic” in her planning and not get ahead of herself, and she says of her mum, who got both her and her sister their supermarket jobs, that “she's done that for us, which is got us a stable job that will last us”. This implies that staying on in the supermarket job is also an option, and maybe one that feels more ‘realistic’. Despite her careful planning, then, Freya seems to still be weighing up different options for her future, balancing her own aspirations against her mother’s. Freya is not the only participant who displays some uncertainty in relation to her study plans. A number of the young women speak of potential challenges to their educational aspirations, either in the form of financial constraints (only being able to enrol in a given programme if they are able to save up beforehand), mental health constraints (being well enough to engage in their studies and handle expectations) or ‘motivational’ constraints (doubting if they can maintain their interest in the course because of their previous, negative school experiences).

However, while educational credentials were generally seen as important for a future career, some participants saw these as only second-best in comparison with ‘real’ experience. In the quote below, Kyla (20 years old) describes her reflections on this. Kyla was looking for work for 10 months and two weeks before the interview she started a job as a kitchen-hand in a restaurant, which is in line with her aspirations to become a chef.

Interviewer: So, becoming a chef, you're thinking like, more like working your way up than going into ... Like, you talked about the courses early on, or certificates, and stuff?

Kyla: Yeah.

Interviewer: But it, that's not so much the way you're looking to go [now]?

Kyla: Uh, I don't know if I would go back to school to do a certificate. Like, I may. They're apparently becoming free next year, so I may go back and do a course, but I guess it depends, like, how much [the restaurant] wants me, and that kind of thing. Like, if they want to keep me on, because that's actually probably better, because it's real experience. Instead of a course. So, I guess that helps me more than going through the whole course. So, if that was ... Like if I was to continue there, and they actually really liked me after the three months, because I think there's still a three month trial thing, then yeah, I would, I guess I would stay there, and that would help me, and the longer I stay there, the better it looks for other employees.

For Kyla, securing a job has made her reconsider her earlier plans to enrol in a certificate as a step towards her dream to become a chef. In her view, an actual job has more value in the eyes of 'other employers' than a specific course would have, thereby putting her in a more competitive position. She also tells how her aunt has advised her that she "would learn more with an apprenticeship instead of spending thousands of dollars to get one certificate". This means that she is focusing her efforts on making it in the job. The problem, however, is that her current job is not an apprenticeship, but a casual job.

Finding work and the value of 'experience'

Most participants in the sample either were or had been looking for work. For some this was to support their studies (as none of them could afford to not work while studying) while for others this was a pathway in itself. Regardless, finding work was difficult and for most of them this was why they were in contact with the service-provider in the first place. Jennie (19 years old) told how she had applied for a number of retail jobs and pick-packing jobs but had not been successful in securing any work. She has a certificate in hair-dressing and had applied for jobs in this field as well but without any luck and had therefore broadened her search. She described the challenge that most participants faced: their lack of ‘experience’:

Jennie: I’ve had no luck in getting a job. Like, no luck at all. I’ve applied to so many jobs. Like, I could even show you them. I have applied to so many jobs and not one person has gotten back to me [...] Like, because everybody wants experience. Everyone wants three years of experience or something like that. But they want some, a junior, but you have to have this much experience.

Interviewer: A junior with experience.

Jennie: Yeah. How are you gonna get experience though, if you can’t get a job anywhere?

Jennie’s story is illustrative of many of the participants, who find that the key thing which employers value is previous ‘experience’ in a given sector (see also Moore 2019). This means that the main challenge and focus becomes getting *a* job – and thereby experience to put on the CV, as a stepping stone for the next job – rather than getting a ‘good’ job. Apart from a few exceptions, the participants who held or had had jobs were on casual contracts with few

or no guaranteed shifts per week. The jobs were mainly in ‘feminised’ sectors such as hospitality (cafes, fastfood, waitressing and kitchen help in restaurants etc.), retail (stacking shelves in supermarkets) and cleaning. The salaries were often low and if participants had to pay for public transport to get to their workplace, the actual earnings were minimal.

Other participants were trying to line up a few different future options. Teresa (17 years old) had recently interviewed for a job in a call centre and was waiting to hear back from that. At the time of the interview she did not feel ready to enrol in education because of mental health problems, but she might in the future. She explains:

Teresa: I wanted to be a travel agent, I wanted to do the course, the tourism and travel course. Which hopefully is in the near future. And I could still do that. Or I might, you know, get the job at the call centre and kind of move up that way.

Interviewer: So, it’s a bit, you feel it could go both ways with that, work and education? [...]

Teresa: Yeah, it’s kind of, at this point, it’s kind of just making pathways for myself. So, one pathway would be doing the travel and tourism course [6 months course], the other way, you know if that doesn’t work out, kind of moving up through the call centre and moving up that way. Or the other [third] pathway is nothing (laughs).

Interviewer: Oh, what do you mean by that?

Teresa: Oh, probably going to work at McDonald’s somewhere for the rest of my life (laughs).

Rather than seeing further studies as more secure and ‘future-proof’ than finding a job, Teresa is trying to envision different ‘pathways’ for herself and in that way have alternatives ready if one pathway does not ‘work out’. ‘Moving up’ the ladder in the workplace is a central aspect of what she considers a worthwhile job and she makes a distinction between jobs that she believes have the potential for making a career in this sense (the call centre job) and jobs that are ‘nothing’, or without career prospects (McDonald’s, where she previously worked). Hence, while the formal difference between a call centre job and a job at McDonald’s are minimal – both are non-skilled, can involve non-standard hours and often involve casual employment conditions – the call centre is seen as holding more opportunities for the future. However, her last comment about ‘probably’ working at McDonald’s indicates that while she has different plans lined up, there are still significant uncertainties tied to each of them as a viable option (can she manage studying, will she get the call centre job) and McDonald’s can at times seem the most probable pathway.

Teresa is not only illustrative of the participants’ struggles in finding a (good) job in the first place, but also demonstrates a belief in meritocracy; that it is possible to ‘move up’ the ladder once she gets a foot in the door, for instance in the call centre. Other participants mention similar beliefs in the value of ‘hard work’ and merit, or as another participant, Josie (23) says, “you can do whatever you want to do as long as your mind is open”. As mentioned, this belief is argued to be pervasive today (Mendick et al 2018) and is also visible in the qualitative sample. While a full exploration of this is beyond the scope of this paper, the data indicates that even though not all participants express such orientations, the faith in meritocracy and the value of hard work is common in the sample.

Discussion and conclusion

While the quantitative analysis showed that only around one third of those who leave school without completing Year 12 actually return to the educational system, considerations about further education were prominent in the qualitative study. Or the other way around, while for many participants (vocational) education was still on their ‘horizon of action’ (Hodkinson & Sparkes 1997), statistically only one third will return to education. This study goes some way in exploring the process behind these transitional choices as it demonstrates how for the participants, further education was indeed seen an option, but only one amongst other options. As the qualitative analysis suggests, not continuing with further studies was in some cases a deliberate choice rather than a result of not ‘making it’ in school. This is an important finding that supplements the dominant narrative of all young people, and women in particular, as intensely invested in, or seeing the value of further or higher education (Archer & Hutchings 2000).

However, these choices were not straightforward for the participants. Central in both analyses was a tension between educational qualifications and work experience when trying to ‘make pathways’ to desirable future jobs. Most participants in the qualitative study believed formal qualifications were important for securing a good job, but in contrast to policy discourse, the participants did not perceive of a simple, linear relationship between more education and better odds in the labour market. Rather, the value of educational programmes chosen seemed to lie in the extent to which they included practical components and hence provided concrete skills for later employment (cf. Fuller and MacFadyen 2012); indeed, this may also explain why these women left formal education early in the first place. The tension between education or ‘real’ work experience as the ‘best’ pathway to securing work later on may be the result of a conflicting messages: On the one hand, policy-makers, teachers and popular

discourse emphasise the value of education. On the other hand, family and employers are described as placing more value on 'experience'. Combined with the neo-liberal, individualist discourse of meritocracy and aspiration (e.g., Mendick et al 2018), the 'work experience' discourse in some cases seemed to foster a belief in the possibility of 'climbing the ladder', once you have a 'foot in the door'. With the multivariate analysis in mind, there may be some sense in looking for work rather than paying to enrol in a certificate at a lower level, at least considering the odds for securing full time work in the longer term. However, the problem is that the types of jobs available to young women without formal qualifications are often precarious and casual and are rarely a stepping stone in terms of career advancement. This brings associations to Lauren Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism', i.e., the idea of being aspirational and desiring success in a context where this is increasingly hard to obtain due to structural and labour market changes (Berlant 2011).

The findings in this paper shed light on important dimensions of ongoing social and gender inequalities. Statistically speaking, young women with and without upper secondary qualifications can expect quite different trajectories in terms of economic participation as they move towards adulthood, suggesting that completing upper secondary education plays a key role in young women's overall ties to the labour market. Our research also demonstrates that care comes to take up a central part in the lives of many of young women without Year 12 qualifications, either in the form of unpaid care work in the domestic sphere (for around one third) or via the educational programmes and jobs they are aiming for. While unpaid care work is important and valuable in terms of social reproduction, it also reproduces "both class and gender subordination", as Skeggs (1997: 51) argues. Unpaid care work is detrimental to all women's futures, and can leave them in a vulnerable position later in life, as they become economically dependent on potential partners. However, for women who do not complete

Year 12, its impact may be more significant given that the care work begins early on. Interestingly, these ‘statistical futures’ do not seem to mirror the expectations of the women in the qualitative study (who belong to the first two age groups in the quantitative analysis). Few envisioned futures as stay-at-home mothers or in other ways as carers in the longer run. Those for whom this was their present situation in most cases made a point of emphasising the temporary nature of this status. This demonstrates how pervasive the neoliberal discourse is. Instead, the dominant majority saw themselves as active in the labour market, whether with or without formal qualifications. In that sense, while the participants may fit the ‘at-risk girl’ stereotype (cf. Harris 2004) in terms of having left school early, their orientation towards reengaging with education and ultimately finding work questions that stereotype. Instead, as we have demonstrated above, the participants seem to be ‘good’ neoliberal subjects who have come to articulate ‘acceptable’, if not ideal (in terms of education) aspirations and who take individual responsibility for ‘making pathways’ for themselves. They are keen to ‘invest’ themselves (cf. Järvinen and Ravn 2018), the question is rather where to make those investments; in education or work. This, however, does in some ways make the seeming mismatch between their own expectations for the future and the futures that are likely, judging from the quantitative analysis, more significant. In that sense, there is no ‘easy win’ for young women without Year 12 qualifications, who are left in a challenging position both in terms of concrete labour market outcomes and attractive subject positions.

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ⁱ In 2018 the Victorian government announced that 50 courses would be free in 2019 in high demand industries (<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/free-tafe-expanded-as-latest-tech-school-opens/>).

ⁱⁱ The fees vary from less than \$100 to several thousand dollars, depending on eligibility for concession, provider, and type of course. As an example, the average course fee for a Certificate III in Hairdressing is \$12,250, while a Certificate III in Early childhood education and care costs \$3,632 on average (myskills.gov.au). Loan schemes are available.

ⁱⁱⁱ See <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/hilda>