



# Competent Learners @ 20

Summary of Key Findings

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The New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER)'s Competent Learners study has followed some 500 children from just before they started school. In 2009 they turned 20, and we returned to 401 of them. We found out:

- how they had fared since they left school
- what role their school experiences and performance had played as they made their own path into early adulthood
- what they were gaining from current study and employment.

In a follow-up study a year later, we returned to 29 of these young people, to find out more about some of the paths into adulthood that seemed less straightforward than others.

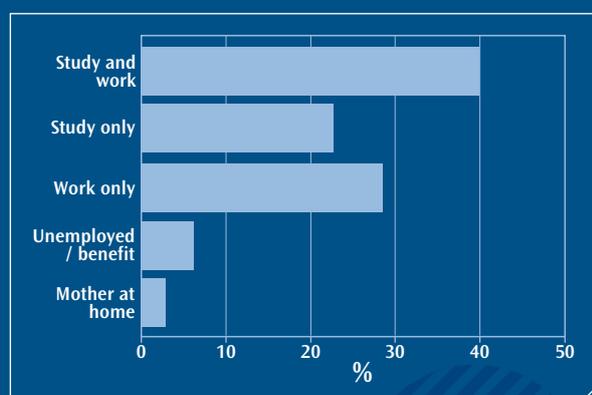
The Competent Learners study sample came from the wider Wellington region, and was not designed to be representative of the whole country. Our sample has more young people from high-income homes and high levels of maternal qualification than the country as a whole. Because young people from these homes tend to have higher school performance than others, this sample has higher levels of National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) qualifications and participation in study at age 20 than the national picture for this age cohort.

This summary gives some key findings from the age-20 phase of the Competent Learners study. If you would like to know more, please look at our main report (*Forming Adulthood: Past, present and future in the experiences and views of Competent Learners @ 20<sup>1</sup>*), and our follow-up report (*Tracks to Adulthood—Post-school experiences of 21-year-olds: The qualitative component of Competent Learners @ 20<sup>2</sup>*). The study was funded by the Ministry of Education and NZCER.

## Snapshot of the young people at 20

Most continued some study after they left school (84 percent). Often this study was combined with paid work.

MAIN ACTIVITY AT AGE 20



1 [www.educationcounts.govt.nz/101428](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/101428)  
 2 [www.educationcounts.govt.nz/101424](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/101424)

# Competent Learners @ 20

## — Summary of Key Findings

### Pathways from school

Many (61 percent) of the 20-year-olds thought it had been easy for them to move on from school. Those who left school equipped with NCEA Level 3, and to some extent, NCEA Level 2, had the most straightforward path. Most of them went on to university, and went with sound learning habits. They had built those habits through good levels of enjoyment of school and classes. They felt they were treated fairly at school and reported low levels of feeling bored at school. They had also had good support from parents and friends, and advice from their teachers on their post-school options. Their motivation levels were good—they could see that learning had its own rewards and was also useful to help meet future goals.

Three-quarters of the participants thought it was important for secondary students to get advice on how to develop good study habits (at school and afterwards) and on post-school study and career options, as well as time and money management. Most of the young people had relied on their family for advice on what to do when they left school; followed by friends. They also looked to those school staff who knew them as individuals, such as a teacher, dean or principal, followed by school careers advisers. Those who left school before they turned 17 were most likely to say no-one had given them useful advice to help them decide what to do post-school. A third of the young people could not recall any specific careers-related initiative at school.

### The value of NCEA Level 2 or Level 3

We found that gaining NCEA Level 2 or Level 3 is not just a useful qualification in terms of signalling performance levels to prospective employers or post-school study providers. It indicates that young people have built the habits of learning that they need to make the most of the independence and choices that come with leaving school. “Second chance” education often did not make up for what had not been gained at school. A quarter of the 20-year-olds had some major regret about what they had done since they left school, and some aspect of study, such as a poor choice or not persisting, was the source of more than half these regrets.

### The cost of leaving school without a qualification

The 20 percent of those in this sample who left school without a qualification, or with NCEA Level 1, appeared to have more of a challenge to find what they wanted to do when they left school, and to find study and employment that would develop them further. They were less happy with their situation at 20 than others, and less optimistic about the future. Risk behaviour, including drug use and driving while drunk, accidents and injury, and boredom were also more likely to be experienced by these young people. Major regret about what they had done since they left school was voiced by 40 percent of those without a qualification, often to do with some aspect of study, such as a poor choice, or not persisting with study. Though most of these young people who left school without a qualification did study post-school, they appeared to need more advice and support than they got, both at school and in their post-school study.



## Teachers and parents can make a difference

We had data on the participants' competency levels going back to age 5 or age 8, so we could see whether secondary school qualifications simply reflect earlier performance. The competencies we measured are reading comprehension, vocabulary, writing, mathematics and logical problem solving; and the attitudinal competencies included perseverance, communication, self-management, social skills and curiosity.

There are some very encouraging findings:

- More than half those with low performance at age 8 went on to gain NCEA Level 2 or Level 3. That means that children's support from teachers and parents, the learning opportunities they had in and out of school and their interactions with teachers, parents and peers, enabled them to make real progress.
- Those who gained NCEA Level 2 did not necessarily have higher levels of mathematics, reading, writing or logical problem solving at age 14 than those whose highest qualification was NCEA Level 1, or who did not gain any qualification. But they did have higher levels of perseverance, communication, social skills, curiosity and self-management.
- The quality of learning opportunities and experiences seemed particularly important for those who had had low levels of perseverance, communication, social skills, curiosity and self-management at age 8, if they were to progress to achieve NCEA Level 2 or Level 3.

These findings suggest that it is important for teachers and parents to respond to low performance levels, and work actively to improve them, at all age levels. They also suggest it is important to pay attention to the development of attitudinal competencies as well as literacy and mathematics. Earlier work in the Competent Learners study showed how important it was to provide learning that gave children and young people "two sides of the coin" experiences, weaving together the learning of reading, writing and mathematics with development of attitudes such as

perseverance, communication and self-management. *The New Zealand Curriculum*, which schools now use to frame their programmes, encourages this productive interweaving.

## Risks to achieving a satisfying pathway from school

We identified some signs that a child could be at risk of not achieving a satisfying pathway from school into early adulthood — a pathway into study or employment that yields interest and reward.

None of these signs on their own are decisive. For example, simply having low achievement at age 5 is not enough on its own to lead to difficulties in late adolescence.

The period from age 10 to age 14 appears to be a time when it is particularly important for teachers and parents to watch for signs that children are turning away from school and learning. This applies as much to high performers at school as low performers. The follow-up study showed how deeply memories of school at this time can colour later attitudes to learning.

These signs include:

### Performance and interests over time

Low levels of mathematics performance at age 5 and onwards

Low levels of reading and writing at age 5 and onwards

Low levels of reading enjoyment—in one's own time as well as in school

Lack of a clear leisure interest, or else overinterest in electronic games

Low levels of perseverance, communication, self-management, social skills and curiosity from age 6

Experience of bullying—whether as a victim, bully or both

### School experiences

Low levels of enjoying learning at school at age 14

Low levels of feeling supported and treated like an individual at school at age 14

Low levels of positive views of the learning opportunities experienced at school at ages 14 and 16

Low levels of motivation at age 14

Low levels of satisfaction with the range of subjects taken at age 16

### Leaving school

Thinking of having “time out” after leaving school, particularly if there are no plans for that time out

Leaving school at age 15 or 16

Low levels of useful advice about what to do post-school

### Relationships, values, goals and resources

Risky behaviour at ages 14 and 16: experience with alcohol, sex, trouble at school

Friendships more likely to be with those who have risky behaviour; less likely to be challenging and talking about hopes and plans for the future

Family relationships more likely to be problematic

Values more likely to be focused on “standing out”—how one appears to others

Having goals is less likely to be important

Low family income in childhood and adolescence

### Studying after leaving school

Young adults who had studied since school (84 percent of this sample) were largely positive about their learning experiences. Most had supported their study through employment and loans. Most of those studying at 20 were at universities. Most thought their course would be value for money. Around 70 percent

thought their post-school teachers worked hard to make their subjects interesting, provided helpful feedback on progress and were good at explaining things. Around the same proportion also thought their study was developing their problem-solving skills, ability to plan their own work and written communication skills.

Nineteen percent of the sample had already gained some post-school qualification, mostly at certificate level, and largely to get a job they wanted, or get onto another course. The skills and knowledge gained from the study done to get this qualification were usually practical, specific to a particular job or study area, communication skills or study skills. Developing problem-solving skills and ability to plan their work, and work as a team member, were also common.

### What lies behind not completing a post-school course: the role of school and post-school experiences

Eleven percent of the 401 participants had embarked on a post-school course without completing it. Most of these courses were at certificate level. Loss of interest was the main reason they said they left a course without completion. Some left when they became mothers. Though this 11 percent did not have a qualification from their course, some thought what they had done had given them general communication or social skills. But those who had left a course without completion were more likely than others to have a major regret about what they had done post-school, usually around their study choice or lack of completion. They had had less advice about what to do, both at school and in their post-school choice, yet they needed more support to learn. They had also found it harder to make career decisions and find employment when they left school, and wanted more guidance on their school subject courses. They had shown less enjoyment of school and classes, more boredom and less sense of being supported and treated as an individual in school.

The follow-up interviews with 29 young people whose pathways from school had not been straightforward



showed that course information could be misleading, and that it was useful to find out more about the pay and conditions of the career the course was about.

## Overall views of study and approaches to learning

All but a few of the 401 young adults thought they would need to undertake further study towards a qualification in their adult life. Many saw such further study as a way to keep gaining new knowledge and skills. Gaining new knowledge and skills appeared to be valued by many.

Many had useful approaches to learning, particularly where their post-school study fostered good teacher feedback, good framing of learning and encouraged thoughtful work. These productive post-school approaches to learning reflected NCEA achievement and prior attitudinal levels (the two were linked), but they did not reflect prior literacy or mathematics performance, nor were they related to family resources. In other words, these useful approaches to learning can be developed by those who have struggled with literacy or mathematics, if their post-school learning opportunities are well framed.

## Employment

An ideal job for most of the young adults would be connected to their interests, allow promotion and build a lifelong career. It would allow a balanced life: time for family, and for leisure or voluntary activities; and provide a high salary. It would allow creativity and teamwork.

The young adults who were employed, whether they were also studying or not, usually had several reasons for taking their current job. Most important was finding the work interesting or useful (71 percent). Friends and family encouragement also played a role for around half. A third took their current job because they were unsure they would be offered another one. Most of the young adults who were employed were positive about their workmates and working conditions, and 70 percent enjoyed what they were doing. Most of the learning in work was informal, on the job. Just over half thought they were

learning lots of new skills in their current job. Also around half thought their pay was good. Just under half were doing what they wanted to be doing in terms of employment, and their job gave them good opportunities to progress.

Most of those who were employed at 20 did not think they would still be in their current job when they were 23. They were more likely to think they would be doing that job at 23 if they had an apprenticeship, were doing trades or technical work or had a professional or management role; they were also more likely to be doing what they wanted to do in work, and to have good on-the-job learning.

## Unemployment

Eleven percent of the young adults had some experience of being unemployed between leaving school and age 20. Experience of unemployment often dented optimism and happiness, even if they had a job at 20. The follow-up interviews with 29 young people found that they did not like to identify themselves as “unemployed”; preferring to talk of being between jobs, or looking for work. They took the initiative to find work, since work was important to them. Unemployment experiences were more likely if young people had left school without a qualification and had found it hard to work out what to do when they left school. Post-school study gave some of them certificate-level qualifications, but these were not always useful. Some young people were “yo-yoing” between study and work, without being able to connect the two and find satisfying work. Those who had experienced unemployment were also more likely to have left a post-school course without completing it. These young people seem to have needed more advice and support. They had often had low levels of enjoyment of school, and low motivation.

## Relationships

Many of the young adults reported good relations with their parents—in fact, relations were sometimes better than they had been when they were 16. Around two-thirds saw their family as a source of advice, help and support. Around a fifth were experiencing some issues

with parental expectations or sought more privacy from their family. Just over half were still living with parents, and sometimes there was some tension around this.

Friendships were important to the young adults. Most had good friends, both ones they had made since school, and ones they had known at school. At 20, more were talking with friends about future hopes and plans, and being introduced by friends to new and interesting activities, than when they were 16.

Eleven percent were living with a partner. Two-thirds reported that they had fallen in love during the past year, and 81 percent had sex over the past year.

## Leisure time and money

Spending time with friends and family was important to almost all the young adults. Around two-thirds enjoyed playing sport for fun, texting friends, reading and surfing the Internet. Over a third used the Internet on most days for email and social networking. But other Internet uses were less frequent. One reason might be the cost of broadband access. The young people found they needed to manage their money carefully. Three-quarters felt that they did not have enough money at least sometimes over the past year. While 60 percent of the young adults felt in control of their current financial situation most or all of the time, 70 percent were also using loans to finance themselves.

## Challenges

As well as the challenges of managing money, most of the young adults found they did not have enough time to do everything they wanted to, at least sometimes over the past year. Only a quarter had never got behind with their study or work. They could also feel bored, or wonder how to spend their time. Although one of the best things about leaving school was feeling more independent and having more options, half the young adults also felt they did not have enough freedom, at least once over the past year. It was not uncommon to feel sad for no reason or left out at least once over the past year, or to lose their temper: around two-thirds did. Just under half had felt pressured to do something they didn't want to do at least once over the past year. Thirty percent

had been hassled or bullied at least once over the past year, and 23 percent had hassled or bullied someone else. Fourteen percent had sought help for a mental health problem at least once in the past year.

Most of the young adults were using alcohol. Most had experience of binge drinking over the past year, and three-quarters had done something while they were drunk that they later regretted.

## Looking ahead

Most thought it was important for 20-year-olds to have goals, though not everyone who had a definite goal for the next three years matched that goal with a plan to achieve it. The follow-up research indicated that both independence and security were important to many when they envisaged their future.

Seventy-seven percent were optimistic about their future, and 67 percent about their career path. Many said they were more optimistic about the future than when they left school. But they weren't so optimistic about the future of the environment (27 percent), the world's political situation (28 percent) or New Zealand's economic future (30 percent). Three-quarters had voted in the 2008 national elections, mainly because they thought they should, or had the right to vote: only 32 percent said they voted because they cared who won the election.





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