



# Tracks to Adulthood

Post-school experiences of 21-year-olds:  
The qualitative component of Competent Learners @ 20

By Lesley Patterson

New Zealand Council for Educational Research

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NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH  
TE RŪNANGA O AOTEAROA MŌ TE RANGAHAU I TE MĀTAURANGA  
WELLINGTON



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# Executive summary

## Research context and approach

This report presents research exploring the transition to adulthood of 29 young people (aged 21) focusing on their experiences since leaving school, their current circumstances and the futures to which they aspire. Participants were selected from the larger sample of the Competent Learners @ 20 phase of the Competent Learners study.<sup>1</sup> That study found that, for many young people, the transition to adulthood now often follows a “well-lit path” from school to tertiary education. The transition to adulthood of young people who had *not* followed this well-lit path is the focus of this report. Some left school early (by age 17); others completed Year 13 but did not go on to tertiary study. At age 21, some had been mainly working since leaving school, some were participating in or had completed post-school education and training, some were mothers and some were unemployed.

Recent changes in the type and timing of young people’s experiences of the transition to adulthood means there are now “no hard and fast rules about young people in transition” (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006, p. 90). The transition to adulthood now occurs in the context “a choice biography”, a new biographical norm which requires individuals to make choices and piece together “a life of one’s own” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. xxii). This differs from the biographical norm of the recent past, “the standard biography”, in which people’s lives were “laid out before them like tramlines: people’s origins decided which lines to follow and which destination or destiny they led to” (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005, p. 415).

## Summary findings

The 29 young people reflected on their lives since leaving school, as well their future plans and aspirations. Their transit to adulthood was analysed in relation to key domains of their transition experience. These are described as “biographical fields” in this research and include leaving school, post-school education and training, employment, living and personal circumstances.

In talking about their experiences, the young people identified past decisions and choices that had consequences for later events or decisions and choices, and sometimes in other fields (for example, getting a job enabled them to then leave home; or enrolling in a course required them to then work part-time). Sometimes they talked about these experiences in relation to their future plans and aspirations. In this research, these temporal connections between experiences are described as “biographical momentum”. Momentum captures the dynamism that characterises the young people’s lives, and the active engagement of many young people in “moving their lives forward”, making decisions about what they should do next in the context of what has already happened.

The 29 young people shared similar aspirations for their future. “Independence” and “security” were the two major themes that framed their aspirations and plans. They wanted to be financially independent and secure (and some already were). They also aspired to secure personal lives: owning their own home, typically with a present or future partner; and forming families of their own.

Variations were apparent in the young people’s experiences of their transition to adulthood, and of their momentum towards the independent and secure futures to which they aspired. The research identified three key fields which,

<sup>1</sup> The 401 young people in that study were first interviewed just before age five, at age six, then at two-yearly intervals until age 16 and again at age 20. For further information about the study, go to [www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ece/2567](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ece/2567)

combined in different ways, explain their current situations (employed; in education or training; mothers; unemployed) and which coalesced into seven biographical patterns. The three fields were:

#### **Key field 1: Leaving school**

Young people who left school early (by age 17) were more likely to recall that “School was not for me”. A much smaller group of early-leavers remembered leaving school as incidental to other things happening in their lives (for example, family issues may have been paramount at that time). Young people who left school at the end of Year 13 remembered leaving school simply because “It was time to leave”, as did a small group of early-leavers.

#### **Key field 2: Post-school education and training**

In the period between leaving school and age 21, some young people had enrolled in post-school education and training. Some completed courses that led to comparatively secure employment and vocational identities valued by the young people. Some completed courses but could not find work in related fields. Those who completed courses at NZQA Level 4 or above had more momentum towards the independent and secure futures to which they aspired than those who enrolled in or completed courses at NZQA Levels 1 to 3.

#### **Key field 3: Employment**

In the period since leaving school and age 21, all of the young people had some experience of paid work. Some had a history of insecure work (which was sometimes also part-time and short term), working *any and many jobs*, and working *in* (for example, “in hospitality”), working *at* (for example, “at the supermarket”) or working *for* (for example, “for my uncle”). At age 21, some had secure, full-time work, working *as* (for example, “as a nanny” or “as a web designer”). Some young people were not in paid work at age 21; some were unemployed, and while some had a history of paid work until recently, others’ experience of paid work since leaving school was marked by discontinuity and a yo-yo pattern of employment, unemployment and low-level courses that did not lead to related work. Some of the young people were mothers; none of them were in paid work at age 21, but all had worked before becoming mothers and all aspired to paid work in the future.

The seven biographical patterns identified were:

#### **Pattern 1: Working at age 21, no relevant post-school education and training**

Some young people had been in paid work since leaving school and were still working at age 21. They had not enrolled in any post-school education or training, yet were in comparatively secure work, often full-time, working *in* (for example, “in retail”) or *at* (for example, “at The Warehouse”). Work gave these young people biographical momentum in other fields as they transited to adulthood: they could go flatting with other young people; socialise with their friends; and save money for future goals such as a house deposit or an overseas holiday. These young people recalled leaving school because “School was not for me” (all early-leavers) or because “It was time to leave” (some early-leavers and some school completers). Some had completed post-school education and training but in areas unrelated to the jobs they had at age 21.

#### **Pattern 2: Working at age 21, post-school education and training**

Some young people enrolled in post-school education and training sometime after leaving school. Qualifications at NZQA Level 4 and above and which are “close to industry” (for example, provided by a specialist college or training school) gave some young people a “fast track” (or trajectory) to adulthood as their vocational identities consolidated. These young people were secure and independent at age 21, and have clear future goals to consolidate their independence and security.

**Pattern 3: In education with a career goal at age 21, returned to learning**

Some young people left school early because “Lots of things were happening in my life”. Although they left school with no or low qualifications, they had “returned to learning” after completing a Certificate in University Preparation, and were enrolled in degree-level courses with a career goal in mind. Young people with this biographical pattern had university-educated mothers. They also had experience of working *for* and working *at* in the years following leaving school, and through paid work had already achieved some independence and security. At age 21, biographical momentum appeared to be accelerating as they moved towards the careers to which they aspired.

**Pattern 4: In education with a career goal at age 21, gap year**

One young person took a gap year between finishing school (at the end of Year 13) and starting degree study. At age 21 and enrolled in a degree programme, biographical momentum towards the career to which they aspired was apparent.

**Pattern 5: Not employed or in education or training at age 20, studying or unemployed at age 21**

Some young people had a post-school transition experience that followed a yo-yo pattern. This pattern means they have moved between work, unemployment and training courses, but the courses they have completed have not led on to related work or education and training at a higher level. Insecure and low-paid casual work characterises the “working” phase of the yo-yo transition pattern. When unemployed, they seek work or enrol in low-level courses to improve their circumstances. Biographical momentum is thus contingent. All of the young people who experienced this transition pattern were early school-leavers, and all remembered leaving school because “School was not for me”.

**Pattern 6: Recently unemployed**

Some young people were recently unemployed. All had been early school-leavers, and all remembered leaving school because “School was not for me”. None had completed post-school qualifications at Level 4 or higher, although some had completed NZQA Level 1 or Level 2 immediately after leaving school. Some had experienced comparatively secure, full-time employment since leaving school, but they had worked in industries where job losses were occurring because of the recession. Some were young people who had until recently been in *any and many* jobs, more or less continuously since leaving school, but these jobs were getting harder to find. While these young people had experienced momentum across fields in the early years after leaving school (for example, many had left home and had been living independent “adult” lives), new contingencies were arising.

**Pattern 7: Mother at age 21**

All of the mothers at age 21 had left school early, and all remembered “School was not for me”. Although they had been employed before their children were born, their post-school transition typically followed a yo-yo pattern. Some were moving towards more secure employment before they became mothers. All were not in paid work at age 21 but were considering how to get back to work. These young people had taken a fast track to adulthood: their social identities had been irreversibly transformed (from young person to mother), and although now adults, their aspirations for secure and independent futures were complicated by their responsibilities for care.

**Overview of key issues**

The seven biographical patterns identified illustrate that young people who leave school early, or leave school at the end of Year 13 but do not go on to tertiary study, follow diverse pathways which, in turn, offer varying degrees of momentum towards the futures to which they aspire. Some transitions are comparatively “fast”; others less so. Policy responses that attend to the diversity of young people’s post-school transition experiences are further complicated by the following:

- Young people's lives are situated by what has already happened to them; by the resources they can draw upon to enact choices and decisions as their lives move forward; and by broader social forces that enable or constrain choices and decisions at a wider societal level.
- The choices and decisions made by one young person might not have the same effects or consequences if made by another. For example, leaving school early might result in a yo-yo transition pattern, but it might not. Biographical patterns do emerge over time, but these patterns are not deterministic.
- The choices, decisions, events and experiences young people have in one field (for example, "employment" or "post-school education and training") have effects and consequences in others. Sometimes these effects and consequences accelerate biographical momentum; sometimes they slow it. For example, for some young people, personal relationships enable momentum towards a shared future (through the shared aspirations of home ownership and family formation). For others, relationships constrain choices. For example, they might result in a young person "withdrawing" from school early, or limit the capacity for the young person to realise opportunities for participation in paid work or further education and training.
- The choices young people make may not have clear or immediate effects on momentum; the consequences may be temporally delayed, and sometimes contradictory. For example, some young people completed post-school education and training in low-level courses that did not lead on to congruent work or higher level courses. Although young people were often disappointed at not finding related work, some young people also described course completion as a positive experience in itself. It gave them a sense of personal achievement, and for some young people who had left school because it "was not for me", a subsequent and more positive learning identity was emerging which countered their earlier more negative memories of formal education, or of themselves as learners.

In the context of these complexities, the research raises issues important to consider in a policy environment that seeks to improve young people's post-school transition experiences. The research offers insights in regard to four aspects of the emerging model of youth transition (and consistent with the new biographical norm, a choice biography). These are:

1. The risk of inactivity after leaving school
2. Life-long earning and learning for life
3. Young people as decision-makers, taking and making opportunities for themselves
4. Adulthood marked by periods of combined employment and study through life, and commitment to marriage and parenting later in life (Vaughan et al., 2006, p. 2).

### **1. The risk of inactivity after leaving school**

For policy makers, "inactivity" is likely to be synonymous with not being in paid work but for young people, unemployment does not mean they are "inactive". This is in part because paid work is important for young people as it makes possible momentum across biographical fields. Young people want to be in work because working *and* earning are fundamental to their sense and realisation of independence and security. Thus, young people experience unemployment as a time to take action; "unemployment" requires them to *act*. When unemployed, young people act to move their lives forward, towards the futures to which they aspire. They look for jobs, they work *any and many* jobs and they enrol in courses they hope will lead to paid work. Young people who are unemployed at 21, or have been unemployed at some time since leaving school, rarely use the term "unemployment". They describe periods of unemployment as the periods "between": between jobs, or between work and study. However, they struggled to move their lives forward if they did not have access to paid work.

The main way young people do seek to improve their employment opportunities is through post-school education and training. Sometimes this is successful and especially if courses are completed at NZQA Level 4 or above. However, young people who take this “path” usually move *from* employment and *to* a course, or continue to work part-time while studying.

Young people who are not working enrol in courses they hope will lead to work. These courses are usually at NZQA Level 1 to Level 3, and the young people choose these courses because they appear to have a vocational focus (for example, a “pre-trade course” or an “introduction to service course”). Young people enjoy these courses but they rarely lead to congruent employment, or to education and training at a higher level. Young people’s engagement in these courses is also gendered. Young men enrol in courses that are congruent with male-dominated occupations (for example, automotive- and construction-related courses); young women enrol in courses congruent with female-dominated occupations (for example, hospitality- and beauty-related courses).

For some young people, courses that do not lead directly to employment can have positive consequences, or may do into the future. For example, it may be the only qualification the young person is currently carrying forward and has symbolic importance because of that. Some young people complete qualifications and then later move into work in an unrelated area.

Unemployment is shaped by, and has consequences, in other fields. For example, some young women spoke of personal relationships that constrained momentum in the fields of education or employment but enabled them to experience some momentum in their personal lives. For some young women, motherhood was a consequence; for others a yo-yo transition pattern consolidated over time.

## **2. Life-long learning and learning for life**

Young people generally see post-school education and training as important for employment opportunities, and especially so if they aspire to employment working *as*, or if their transition experience has followed a yo-yo pattern when courses offer them hope for future work in an area related to the courses they choose. A few young people in secure jobs had participated in workplace training and were positive about this, and tended to work in industries (for example, IT) in which ongoing learning was both expected and encouraged.

Some young people had aspirations to undertake formal learning and complete qualifications in the future. However, how young people remember leaving school had influenced their engagement in post-school education and training to date, as well as their future plans. Generally, learning remained a positive biographical resource for the young people who left school because “It was time to leave” or because “A lot of things were happening in my life”. They saw learning as something they could formally embark on at *any time*.

For some young people, learning and working are lightly tied within their biographies. Some young people who remember leaving school because “School was not for me” frame formal learning as something that is already “over” for them. Although future “choices” to undertake formal learning may be imposed on them (for example, as a condition of benefit receipt), this is *not* the future to which they aspire. For these young people, practical work they can master through doing (rather than “learning”) is a valued biographical experience, and one they hope will continue. Their concern about “formal” learning in their futures tracks back biographically to their negative experiences of learning at school.

## **3. Young people as decision-makers, taking and making opportunities for themselves**

Young people make decisions about what to do next by reflecting on what has already happened to them and their future aspirations and goals. However, the choices young people make are socially situated and reflect the resources young people can draw upon. Two issues related to “career” decision-making were raised in this research: the

experience of career education while at school; and young people's skills in regards to taking and making "career" opportunities once they have left school (and especially in choosing courses and qualifications that might result in momentum towards the futures to which they aspire).

"Career guidance" while at school was experienced unevenly by the participants. Young people who left school early had no formal career guidance while at school; and those who left at the end of Year 13 remembered career guidance as something they "did", rather than as skills that they acquired. It appears that early-leavers received no formal guidance because career education is offered as "classroom task" to students in Year 13. Some early-leavers who were "pushed" from school recalled receiving some support and guidance, but this was from school counsellors who helped them get into post-school education and training courses, usually to learn "hands-on" skills.

Young people choose to enrol in post-school education and training at any time. Post-school education and training is not seen by young people as something one does on leaving school. For example, when young people do not like their jobs or they are unemployed, they seek ways to improve their circumstances by engaging with post-school education and training. Most young people make choices in the context of the information they gather from the providers of education or training courses, and/or sometimes in discussion with family members or friends. Many young people explore their "options" with little additional support and guidance as well as with little evidence of acquiring career decision-making skills, either when they were at school or forwards into the present. While young people are active decision-makers, it does not mean they are equally skilled or resourced to "know" *how* to decide what to do next, including assessing the consequences (that is, the likely degree of momentum) of the choices they make.

In addition, the choices young people are situated by their social backgrounds. For example, the early-leavers who later went to university had university-educated mothers; and young men choose courses congruent with male-dominated occupations while young women choose courses congruent with female-dominated occupations. Young people do not experience pressure from their parents when they choose courses; they frame those choices as their own. However, they do talk with their parents about the choices they are making and young people (and their parents) seek and make sense of provider information in this context. The young people's social backgrounds are not "tramlines" determining the choices young people make. However, some influence is apparent.

#### **4. Adulthood marked by periods of combined employment and study through life, and commitment to marriage and parenting later in life**

New temporalities across the life-course characterise a choice biography, and key life events and experiences occur at different ages and life stages than in the recent past. For example, the average age at which women become mothers has increased, as has the age of retirement. These new temporalities have particular implications for the contemporary transition to adulthood. Secure employment immediately after leaving school is rare, and continuity in employment is contingent on multiple personal and structural factors. What might have once been common (for example, motherhood by age 20) might now be less so; and what might have once been less common (leaving school at the end of Year 13) is now the norm. In addition, these changing connections between "age" and "stage" have attracted new meanings (for example, "young motherhood" or "early school-leaver"). It is in the context of new temporalities, especially in regard to education, employment and family formation, that young people "lead lives of their own".

Young mothers' lives do not follow contemporary biographical norms, because of their (biological) *age* when they become mothers, and because their (biographical) *stage* is inconsistent with the expectations of temporality that govern the lives of most. Getting young mothers "back on track" may be particularly challenging, especially given that the young mothers in this research were all early-leavers, all remembered school as "not for me" and their choices as they move their lives forward are shaped by the practical demands of motherhood. Powerful stereotypes continue to position young mothers as seeking "lifestyles" to avoid paid work. This stereotype does not hold in relation to the young

mothers in this research. Before pregnancy and childbirth, their lives were moving forward through paid work, and after becoming mothers they do not imagine futures in which they are not working *because* they are mothers. Nevertheless, as *young mothers*, opportunities for momentum towards the futures to which they aspire are now constrained by their responsibilities as *adults*.

### **Concluding comment**

Young people do make choices; they decide what to do in relation to what has already happened in their lives and in relation to their future plans and aspirations. However, their choices are situated, biographically and socially. *Tracks to Adulthood* demonstrates how diverse biographical patterns now characterise the transition to adulthood, and these patterns reflect differences in the situated experiences (and consequences of those experiences) of young people over time. Because similar choices can result in very different consequences, refining the policy mix to enable momentum towards the independent and secure futures to which young New Zealanders aspire is likely to be most effective when one is sensitive to how these situated choices might play out differently in young people's lives.



# 1 Youth transitions and biography

*Lives are lived forwards yet understood backwards<sup>2</sup>*

## Introduction

What happens when young people leave school and begin “lives of their own”? How do the “choices” they make in the context of the experiences and events that have already happened in their lives shape their futures? And as their lives unfold, how do the particularities of their social circumstances enable or constrain the realisation of their goals and aspirations over time? These are important questions because the choices young people make, and the lives they “piece together”, have consequences—both for the young people as *individuals*, and for the *communities* in which they live.

The transition to adulthood is a biographical shift from one social identity (“teenager” or “adolescent”) to another (“adult”). This transition carries social meanings and consequences, because it is symbolic of and signifies a shift from relative dependence to relative independence. While individuals make the transition to adulthood, their experiences are shaped by “the structure of society … as a whole” and “where that society stands in human history” (Mills, 1959, pp. 6–7). Until relatively recently, youth transitions were understood to be “largely linear and predictable in a stable family and labour market context, with few opportunities to exercise choice” (te Reile, 2004, pp. 245–246). Recent changes in the type and timing of the transitions young people experience mean there are now “no hard and fast rules about young people in transition” (Vaughan et al., 2006, p. 90).

Biographical sociology has been used to frame this research and has much to offer for developing our understanding of the experience of young people and their transit to adulthood. Biographical sociology explores the connections between past experiences to future goals and aspirations; it identifies social patterns by comparing individual experiences within and across groups; and it offers explanations for both individual and patterned experiences by situating biographies in a social and historical context (Thomson, 2009).

## Transitions to adulthood and biographical norms

Youth researchers have attributed changes in the type and timing of contemporary transitions to adulthood to the processes of globalisation, individualisation and the related emergence of a new biographical norm, “a choice biography” (which has replaced “the standard biography” of the earlier period) (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).<sup>3</sup> The consequences of these historical and social changes for understanding youth transitions have been summarised as follows:

The [standard biography] refers to the shaping of the life course by industrial modernity where people’s lives were laid out before them like tram lines; people’s origins decided which lines to follow and which destination or destiny they led to. In the current period … the choice biography has become the new ‘standard biography’.

Institutional changes in welfare state regimes as well as in work and education make people’s lives as individuals

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<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard (1846) in Holland and Thomson (2009, p. 464).

<sup>3</sup> In the sociological literature, the nature and degree of societal change is debated, and the terms used to describe social change vary. Theories of “risk society” (Ulrich Beck), “liquid modernity” (Zygmunt Bauman) and “reflexive modernity” (Anthony Giddens) all point to differing precursors and consequences of the rapid social change that has reshaped modern societies. Late modernity is used here as shorthand to signal the significance of this rapid social change for “the types of people who now prevail” (Mills, 1959). The debate as to the usefulness of each of these approaches for understanding contemporary social life, as well as for understanding youth transitions, continues (see Brannen & Nilsen, 2005).

less and less predictable ... Biographical development has no standard to follow ... *Individual* choices and decisions become centre stage. (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005, pp. 415–416)

From this perspective, contemporary transitions to adulthood occur within a *social context* which compels individuals to make choices about what to do next and within the *biographical context* of what has happened in their past. However, this choice biography does not mean people now have “free choice” or can freely choose their “destiny”. Choices are situated by the resources individuals can marshal at any particular point in time, as well as by social norms (or expectations) that influence what people actually do. Nevertheless, while the circumstances of young people’s lives may enable some choices and constrain others, young people *are* expected to do *something*: to choose, to act, to “piece together a life of one’s own” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Previous New Zealand research has also explored the transition experiences of young people after leaving school (Vaughan et al., 2006). In that research, two major themes, “exploration” and “security”, were identified that young people in post-school study or training programmes or paid work used to “drive and organise their narratives and navigations” (Vaughan et al., 2006, p. 85). That research explored the importance of identity for understanding how young people make sense of their experiences across different types of employment and learning contexts. Using cluster analysis, four identity-based profiles were identified: the Hopeful Reactors; the Passion Honers; the Confident Explorers; and the Anxious Seekers. The clusters (through which narratives constituting the themes “exploration” and “security” were differently deployed) differentiated the ways young people create *careers* and *identities* as a process, and the different “pushes and pulls” experienced by young people in transition. The research demonstrated the importance of understanding that careers are produced by young people as they make investments in their identity projects over time.

In *Tracks to Adulthood*, identity is less of a focus, although this is not because identity is unimportant for understanding young people’s lives. Indeed, biographical research rests on ontological assumptions in which identities are constantly “made up” through biographical processes. Nevertheless, in this research, the analytical focus has been the key experiences and events that have happened since leaving school, the socially-situated choices young people make and the relationships between these experiences and choices as they move toward the future.

## **“Biographical fields” and “biographical momentum”**

To understand the links between the social and the biographical, and the transition experiences of the young people who participated in this research, two related ideas were particularly useful—“biographical fields” and “biographical momentum”. In this report, these terms are generally abbreviated to “fields” and “momentum”.

*Biographical fields* describe separate domains of experience that together constitute an individual’s life story. For example, in this research the young people’s “living circumstances”, “relationships” and “education” were different fields. The temporal order of events and experiences within these fields (for example, within “living circumstances”, leaving home *and* going flatting) and across these fields (getting a job, *then* getting a flat) have proved important for understanding patterns in the young people’s transitions to adulthood.

*Biographical momentum* is the cumulative effect of events and experiences across biographical fields, as lives move towards the future. It propels lives, at different “speeds” and with uncertain consequences, as individuals make (and enact) choices in the context of what has happened in their past. In this research, the idea of biographical momentum is used to describe the effects of the interactions between events and experiences across fields, over time and in relation to the futures to which the young people aspire. As the young people identify the key events and experiences in their lives, and give meaning to the connections between them, the velocity of the momentum consequential to those events and experiences becomes apparent.

By focusing on the experiences of the participants as they looked back over their lives since leaving school, and as they looked forward, imagining what might happen next, it is possible to identify the “tracks” to adulthood young people leave in their stories: the temporal order of events and experiences that have shaped their lives, and the connections between those events and experiences. Tracking “what happened, when and in what context” in the participants’ accounts reveals that events or experiences in one field influence events or experiences in others. Asking young people about their futures (both within and across fields) gives some insight into what adulthood means to *them*. It allows us to consider from their perspective, what might be important for them in their transition to adulthood as they “piece together a life of one’s own” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. xxii).

*Tracks to Adulthood* reports research that explored the experiences of 29 21-year-olds since leaving school as well as the futures to which they aspire. These young people were recruited from the 401 participants of the Competent Learners @ 20 project, and selected because their immediate post-school pathway appeared to be different from their plans at age 16, or they had not taken the path on to tertiary education (which most of the Competent Learners sample had<sup>4</sup>), or they had left school before they turned 17. Some of the latter, the early school-leavers, went directly to work or post-school education and training. Some completed secondary school (at the end of Year 13) but did not go directly to tertiary study. Now, at age 21, some of these young people are (or have been) studying, some are (or have been) unemployed and some are also mothers. Most are currently working, and of those who are not, most want to “get back to work” as soon as they can.

Using the ideas of biographical fields and biographical momentum, the research found that these 21-year-olds *are* active and reflexive in ways that are consistent with a choice biography. They reflect on their experiences as they move toward the futures to which they aspire, and make choices in the context of the resources they can draw upon. These young people make biographical investments (intending to change or improve aspects of their lives), and they reflect on the outcomes or consequences of those investments for their future plans and aspirations. Importantly, the choices young people make (and the lives they piece together) are both biographically and socially situated. Some events and experiences have moved, and continue to move, young people toward their imagined futures more directly, while others appear to interrupt and slow momentum.

In reporting the research findings, the post-school experience of work (including unemployment), education and motherhood, are the focus of analysis because these are the fields through which momentum, and the events and experiences that enabled or constrained momentum, were most apparent. During analysis, it also became apparent that the experience of leaving school continues to flow forward, influencing the choices the young people have made as well as those they imagine they might make in the future. The participants aspire to futures marked by the themes of independence and security: to “lives of one’s own” in which secure personal and familial relationships, as well material security, underscore independence. Some are already some way along this path. For others, there are already considerable constraints on its realisation. By age 21, the young people’s circumstances varied, and their biographies were marked by events and experiences with the potential to slow as well as hasten momentum. In this regard, work and education surfaced as especially important for understanding the current circumstances of these young people (including the mothers) which, by age 21, appeared to be becoming increasingly diverse.

Velocity of momentum varies in young people’s lives. For some, post-school education and training made possible the realisation of employment goals, opening up “faster” transitions (or *trajectories*) and considerable momentum towards an independent and secure future. For others, the disconnections between the educational courses they have completed

<sup>4</sup> The Competent Learners sample is not representative of all New Zealanders of the same age. The sample was originally drawn to be representative of early childhood education services rather than social characteristics. The sample has “higher proportions of young people from high-income families, with somewhat higher levels of maternal qualifications, and lower proportions of Māori or Pasifika, than the national picture” (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011, p. 1).

and the employment that followed shows that participation in post-school education and training in itself does not guarantee such a trajectory. The velocity of momentum young people experience can often be attributed to effects of experiences in one field shaping experiences in another. For example, while work generally makes momentum possible, *transitions* in other fields are contingent on the type and conditions of work. The young women who have become mothers have experienced rapid transitions through biographical *transformations*. Irrespective of what had happened in their past, the transformative shift in social identity from young person to mother was an irreversible “fast track” to adulthood: a transition with particular and unavoidable consequences for their future choices. Some young people’s biographies are marked by aspirations toward shared futures with partners they already have, or hope to meet. While these relationships have enabled momentum for some, they have constrained the choices and momentum of others, across fields, including in the field of work. What has already happened in the young people’s lives means they now face different challenges as they make choices that may (or might not) move them toward the future to which they aspire.

## **The New Zealand research and policy context**

*Tracks to Adulthood* reports the qualitative component of the Competent Learners @ 20 phase. The longitudinal Competent Learners study (originally published under the “Competent Children” moniker) has followed the progress of 401 young people since they were aged near five<sup>5</sup> and explored “the contribution of education to the development of competency levels, alongside the contributions of family resources and relationships; activities outside of school; friendships; values; and experiences” (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011, p. 1). The study has been funded by the Ministry of Education and NZCER. Competent Learners @ 20 revisited the sample for the first time since the participants were aged 16. By age 20, “school was behind all the young people, and they were making their way among a range of options and pathways” (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011, p. 7).

The report of the quantitative component—*Forming Adulthood—Past, present and future in the experiences and views of the Competent Learners @ 20*—presents an analysis of computer-assisted telephone interview and online survey data collected between late 2008 and October 2009, administrative data from the Ministry of Education regarding secondary qualifications and tertiary education enrolments and qualifications, and relevant data from earlier rounds of the study. *Forming Adulthood* focused on “the pathways taken from school by the 401 participants, their current situation and experiences, including learning dispositions, and the associations with past competency levels, school engagement, school-leaving age and NCEA qualifications” (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011, p. 1).

The quantitative report indicated that many participants took a “well-lit path” from school and on to tertiary education, often in combination with some paid work. The transition experiences of young people who did not take such a path were identified as of particular interest to focus on in more depth, in this qualitative component, *Tracks to Adulthood*. The same research questions that guided the quantitative component were used for *Tracks to Adulthood*, and can be summarised as follows:

- What are young people’s experiences of learning and work since school?
- What are the influences on their experiences, and especially their decision-making, over that period?
- What is the relationship between young people’s experience of school, and especially their school engagement and achievement, and their post-school pathways?

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<sup>5</sup> Data collection continued at age six and then at approximately two-yearly intervals until the sample was aged 16.

*Tracks to Adulthood* also sought to learn about:

- the disjunctions between school and post-school for young people whose pathways seem unexpected or other than planned
- what happens to early school-leavers.

Contemporary policy approaches to youth transitions, including, for example, more subject choices and flexible qualification design and reframing learning from an early life-course activity (in childhood and early adolescence for most) into a lifelong process, reflect an emerging model of youth transition within which the wider social changes associated with the shift from modernity to late modernity and the norm of a choice biography is implicit.<sup>6</sup> This emerging contemporary model of youth transition is summarised in the following table.

**Table 1 Changing conceptions of youth transitions**

Earlier model of transition	Emerging model of transition
Rigid, defined and exclusive tracks	Linked and flexible pathways
Affects some young people, especially high-school dropouts or early leavers	Affects all young people (all high school trajectories need to be managed)
Risk of failure at school and unskilled jobs	Risk of inactivity after leaving school
Short linear step(s)	Extended linear process
Lifelong career	Lifelong learning and learning for life
No qualifications, or single qualifications obtained soon after leaving school; possible further professional qualifications	Possibility of multiple qualifications in different fields obtained over lengthy period
Adults make decisions and offer opportunities to young people	Young people make decisions, and take and create opportunities for themselves
Education solely as a public good	Education as a private investment and a public good
Learning then earning	Earning while learning
Secondary school students attain fixed-design qualifications	Secondary students have great role in designing or “producing” qualifications through choices over units and assessments
Adulthood marked by employment after study, and marriage and parenthood during the 20s	Adulthood marked by periods of combined employment and study throughout life, and commitment to marriage and parenting later in life

Source: Vaughan et al. (2006, p. 2)

Exploring young people's transitions to adulthood through the lens of biographical sociology places the idea of a choice biography at centre stage. This new biographical norm means people are required to make choices that are situated, biographically *and* socially. Indeed, although parents' social class remains the “major consistent element affecting the education and work chances of young people” (Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2007, p. 46), the lives of young people sharing similar social backgrounds do not always turn out the same. This is because:

<sup>6</sup> Furlong (2009, p. 343) has identified changes over time in how researchers have understood youth transitions through metaphors used to “summarise typical sequences of events involved”. In much of the transition research, work (an enduring symbol of adulthood) has been the primary focus. In the 1960s, for example, where psychological and developmental models were used to understand the transition to work, a successful transition was signalled by the individual realisation of a vocational identity. In the 1970s and 1980s, metaphors of routes, pathways and trajectories dominated, as researchers influenced by structural sociology attended more closely to the relationship between social structure and life chances, and the social reproduction of structural inequalities through unequal opportunities. These implied “transitional outcomes were conditioned by factors, such as social class and cultural capital … beyond individual control” (Furlong, 2009, p. 344). By the 1990s, researcher interest in individual agency saw the popularisation of navigation as a metaphor for understanding the youth transitions, and consistent with the imagery of an agentic young person making choices guided by an atlas rich in possibilities, transitional outcomes “were increasingly linked to factors such as judgement, resilience and life management skills” (Furlong, 2009, p. 344).

... transitions have always taken place within contexts that lend shape to experiences, and outcomes have always been conditioned by resources. At the same time, young people themselves have always attempted to influence outcomes, realise their aspirations and move forward reflexive life projects. (Furlong, 2009, p. 351)

## 2 Research design

*Biographical research constantly raises other questions: about the relationship between past, present and future, or between who a person has been, is and might be, and how change can be theorised.* (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 95)

The participants were asked to describe themselves and their lives “looking back” over the years since leaving school until “now”, thus producing retrospective accounts of their experiences. They were also asked to “look forward”: What might happen next? How would you like your life to turn out?<sup>7</sup> While some of these prospective accounts include relatively immediate and pragmatic goals, they also articulated a variety of desires, ambitions and identities imagined somewhat further ahead—temporally, subjectively and materially—and offer us some insight as to what adulthood means for young people in New Zealand today.

### Sampling

Purposeful sampling (sometimes called theoretical sampling) was used to select the participants. This sampling approach is used for selecting groups or categories of participants on the basis of their relevance to the research questions and is sometimes used in qualitative research when the aim of sampling is to identify specific subgroups from within larger samples and data sets. It is not a “rigid” sampling method, and is an approach whereby “the sample may change as the research progresses” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 108).

At the time data was collected for the *Forming Adulthood* report, 401 young people remained in the Competent Learners study. Of these, just over 73% left school because they had completed Year 13, and of those, most proceeded on to tertiary study, often combined with paid work. It appears that for many of those in this sample who finished school at the end of Year 13, a well-lit path<sup>8</sup> leads to post-school study, typically to university. This is very different from the early school-leavers. *Forming Adulthood* notes that the young people who left school before age 17 were more likely to move into employment without undertaking study, or to take up apprenticeships. Higher proportions of this group were likely to experience unemployment after leaving school. Higher proportions of the early school-leavers were mothers.

To explore in more detail the transition experiences of the early school-leavers and others whose post-school experience was different from this well-lit path, five post-school “pathways” were identified. Two were based on the young people’s main activity at age 20: “Looking after their own child” (all mothers) and “Not employed and not in education or training” (NEET). Two were based on the immediate post-school intentions of early school-leavers: those who were then heading to paid work, and those who were then heading to post-school education or training. The final sampling category was young people who completed Year 13, but whose immediate intended post-school destination was not university.

At the quantitative data collection phase of *Forming Adulthood*, young people were asked if they would like to be interviewed for the qualitative component. A list was generated of those who agreed to be interviewed, and who also met the criteria for the five groups of interest ( $n = 86$ ). This anonymous list also included some basic descriptive data.

<sup>7</sup> The research design, and especially the analytical approach, have been influenced by the Inventing Adulthoods study, a qualitative longitudinal study (based on annual qualitative interviews over a 10-year period), which explored young people’s experiences of “growing up” in the United Kingdom at the turn of the 21st century (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 3).

<sup>8</sup> Although many young people make this “choice”, it does not mean they share similar experiences as they move along that “pathway”. *Forming Adulthood* identifies there is considerable variation amongst this group.

From this list, 54 potential interviewees were selected to ensure variation in post-school experience within the categories that would be captured, and sublists were generated with the names and contact details of these young people. Actual selection from the sublists was in part determined by availability of the young people. Young people were invited to participate by letter. Initial attempts to make preliminary contact (to confirm both the young person's interest and their current postal address) included telephone calls, text messages and messaging through social networking sites. In addition, a \$50 petrol, book or shopping voucher was offered in recognition of the costs of participation. One young person declined after receiving the letter of invitation; some were unable to be contacted within the research time frame. Through this process, the sampling aim—to include young people with a range of post-school transition experiences—was achieved. Sample categories, and the number of potential and actual participants (by gender) are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2 Sampling categories, potential and actual participants by gender**

	A Mothers	B Not employed, not in education or training	C Completed Year 13—destination not study	D Early school- leavers— destination study	E Early school- leavers— destination work	Total
Potential interviewees	10	6	17	9	12	54
Actual interviewees	5	5	6	6	7	29
Women	5	2	5	4	3	19
Men		3	1	2	4	10

Women participants outnumber men in part because of the inclusion of the sampling category “Mothers”. The gender of the participants was not known to the researcher until the 54 potential interviews were identified, and gender was not an initial analytical focus for the research more generally. The differences in the numbers of young women and young men in different categories *might* point to the gendered nature of post-school experience; it is also likely to be an artefact of the research design.

There is considerable overlap in post-school experiences across the sample categories. For example, all of the mothers were also early school-leavers and most went on to paid work or study after leaving school. In addition, there was some movement across the categories between the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research. The time lapse between the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study made it very apparent that young people's lives change as they move from one life situation to another (for example, from working to studying). In addition, during this time (between 12–18 months) the effects of an economic recession were entering the biographies of some of the young people, especially in the form of unemployment and participation in tertiary education or training. Changes in the young people's experiences in the 12–18 months between the quantitative and qualitative phases are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3 Change and overlap across the sample categories**

Categories “of interest” identified in quantitative report	Number selected from potential interviewees (based on status at quantitative phase)	Still in category (one year later) at time of qualitative interviews	Change over time (12–18 months later)
Mothers at age 20	5	5	0
Unemployed, not working or parenting at age 20	5	2	3 studying
Early school-leavers—destination study	6	2	2 working 2 unemployed
Early school-leavers—destination work	7	5	2 unemployed
Completed Year 13—destination “not university”	6	5 (working)	1 studying
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>

### Data collection and management

Face-to-face interviews were completed at a time and location agreeable to the young person. Participants were asked about their lives from about the time they left school, what had happened since and what they would like to happen in their lives. Interviews were digitally recorded, and during the interviews, notes were taken on a life grid. The life grid noted timing through listing years since leaving school (on the *y* axis) and, by field, important past experiences and events and future plans and aspirations (noted across the *x* axis). As a co-produced annotation of the interview, the life grid enabled the immediate sequencing of life events, and for relationships between events to be further discussed if appropriate. Interviews were transcribed, and copies of the life grid and the transcribed interview were offered to participants.

Individual transcripts were indexed, initially by field, and then transposed into charts under emerging subthemes derived from the data (see Ritchie, Spencer, & O’Connor, 2003). The fields and subthemes are listed in Table 4.

**Table 4 Biographical fields and subthemes**

<b>Biographical fields</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Education: Memories of school	Reflections on school Self as learner Aspirations at school Career advice Leaving school
Education: Post-school education and training	Selecting courses Experiences of courses Achievements Constraints on learning Self as learner Finishing a course Costs and organisational details Future plans—education and training
Work	Looking for work Getting a job Learning about a job Work supported training The experience of work Conditions of work Leaving/changing jobs The benefits/constraints of work Time out of work Future plans
Living circumstances	Current arrangements Moving away from home Moving back home Future plans
Relationships	Current relationships Past relationships Future plans
Family of origin	Past relationship with parent/s Current relationship with parent/s Contact/relationships with other family Other family support
Friendships	Current friends Making friends Socialising
Interests	Current/previous interests Future plans
Health and wellbeing	General health and wellbeing Drinking Unexpected health events, crises, etc.
Motherhood (mothers only)	Having children Current living situation Employment/learning Fathers Future plans

Organising the data set in this way meant participants' accounts were kept relatively intact across each "line" of the charts, but also enabled comparison within the data set by reading down (through multiple entries) to identify shared experiences within the subthemes. Through this process, the temporal order of events and experiences structuring individual biographies could be identified; the relationships between events or experiences across fields *within* individual accounts (for example, "I was really run down" [Health and wellbeing] and "I pulled out of the course" [Post-school education and training]) could be explored; and patterns of experience could be identified within the wider data set.

### **"Choice" and biographical momentum**

The young people who participated in the research have made many "choices" since leaving school, and there is considerable variation in their biographies to date. Some young people took what appear, in retrospect, to be fast tracks to adulthood (or into life situations considered "adult"; for example, working full-time in comparatively secure jobs *and* flatting); a few seem to have been on much slower routes (for example, working a series of part-time jobs punctuated by periods out of work *and* living at home). Nevertheless, all of the young people have pieced together their lives, making socially-situated choices which, in turn, have influenced what happened next.

Implicit to a choice biography is the momentum it compels. In enacting choices, lives move from "here" to "there" as people seek to "get somewhere" or "do something". As noted earlier in this report, biographical momentum refers to the relationship between the temporally ordered events and experiences (which occur across fields), and the consequences of those events in relation to that person's plans or aspirations. The consequences of some choices (or events or experiences) may be immediate, or unfold over the longer term. Consequences might include a change of situation, of status or identity. Some choices may change the direction of a life; others may reproduce relatively unchanging, routine or everyday experiences; and events or experiences in one field (for example, "getting a flat") may have consequences for choices in other fields (for example, "developing new friendships").

### **Reporting the research findings**

Although biographies are "lived" and "told" by individuals, social scientists have "always recognised how the particular can evoke our understanding of the general" (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 184). In the following chapters of this report the particularities of young people's experiences are reported and the general conditions they point to are discussed. In these chapters, considerable attention is given to employment, post-school education and training, unemployment and motherhood; with each domain of experience situated biographically starting from about the time the young people left school through to what they are doing now, as well as their future aspirations.

Of considerable interest to researchers and policy makers are young people's experiences of employment, education and training and motherhood. How we understand each reflects dominant ideas (which change over time) about "successful" (or otherwise) transitions, as well as the "preferred" (or otherwise) transition pathways young people might be "expected" to choose. For example, some research and policies regarding youth transitions have been criticised because they position young people as "the problem" (and their transitions as "unsuccessful") *if* their lives do not "follow" expected or normative pathways (Vaughan et al., 2006, p. 4). It is not the intention of this research to identify "good" or "bad" pathways, "better" or "worse" choices or "complete" or "incomplete" transitions. Rather, the research seeks to develop understandings of young people's experiences since leaving school situated within (and in turn shaped by) the broader social context. In this regard, employment, education and training and motherhood are also important *for young people*, because they have such potent consequences across fields and for momentum more generally.

The research findings and discussion are presented in the following chapters. These include:

- A discussion of the young people's recollections about leaving school (Chapter 3 *Looking back—memories of leaving school*). In this chapter, three "leaving school" stories are identified and described: "School was not for me"; "Lots of things were happening in my life"; and "It was time to leave". During the analysis, the importance of these stories became increasingly apparent. All three stories are narratives in which momentum is implicit: these are stories of *moving* from school, *toward* the future. "School was not for me" was typically told by early school-leavers, especially those with no or low school qualifications, some of whom left school because they were "pushed" but most of whom left school to "get a job". "It was time to leave" was typically told by young people who completed Year 12 or Year 13 and who had some idea of their immediate direction, be it employment or post-school education and training. "Lots of things were happening in my life" was told by a small number of young people, all early school-leavers. Their circumstances when leaving school were varied, and leaving school was a biographical response to the particularities of those circumstances.
- A discussion of futures young people have planned or aspire to (Chapter 4 *Looking forward—towards the future*). The participants in this research generally imagined independent and secure futures across fields, and a secure and independent personal life (akin to the modern family ideal) was imagined by many. The young people imagined futures marked by comparatively modest aspirations: to perhaps travel, to partner, to own their own home and perhaps to have children. Work was implicit to this future, and many of the young people imagined futures in which they aspired to security in employment even if the nature of their future work was uncertain. For some of the young people, the future was imagined with some temporal uncertainty. Young people talked of what they wanted to happen, but the timing and sequencing of experiences or events in the future, as well as the choices that might enable momentum toward that future, were less clear to them.
- In Chapters 5–7, the research findings are presented according to the circumstances of the participants at age 20 and age 21. In Chapter 5 (*Employment—the "traditional" path to adulthood?*), the experiences of young people who were employed at age 20 and still employed at age 21 are discussed; in Chapter 6 (*Unemployment and the "yo-yo" transition*), the experiences of young people who were neither employed nor in education or training at age 20 as well as those who were unemployed at age 21 are the focus; and the experiences of young people who are currently mothers are discussed in Chapter 7 (*Motherhood—a "fast track" to adulthood?*). These chapters explore how the new biographical norm, a choice biography, is being enacted by the participants. Tables summarising the biographical patterns of participants are included in each of these chapters (see also *Appendix 1 Summary of participants' biographical patterns*).

The findings highlight that, for most of the young people, work was a key experience through which young people transition to adulthood, both when they left school and in looking back over their biographies at age 21. This is of interest especially given work *was* the traditional pathway of the standard biography of the modern period. However, in the accounts of these participants, it is apparent that participation in work does not mean their lives have unfolded in similar ways, and participation in work in itself does not provide a similarly experienced "tram line" to the future. Rather, work has been experienced very *differently* by these young people. In order to highlight patterns of post-school transitions *and* biographical momentum, the discussion in Chapters 5–7 focuses on the young people's current circumstances, and the connections between their experiences of work and education. In Chapter 8 (*Lives in context: Situating experiences biographically and socially*) the importance of young people's experiences in other fields (in particular "living circumstances" and "relationships with others") for momentum are briefly discussed.

### 3 Looking back—memories of leaving school

The length of time young people are in school shapes their experiences of schooling, as well as of leaving school. Until quite recently, leaving school clearly marked the beginning of adulthood (te Reile, 2004, p. 245). Young people are now in school longer—in part because of changes in the nature of work (with the labour market requiring different skills than in the past), and in part because the longer young people stay in school the wider the range of post-school job opportunities open to them (Furlong, 2009). Until the 1970s in the United Kingdom, for example, 70% of young people left school and entered the labour market at the minimum school-leaving age (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 46).

All of the young people who participated in *Tracks to Adulthood* did not follow contemporary school-leaving norms in that they either left school early (by age 17) or, if they completed school (staying until the end of Year 13), did not proceed on the “well-lit path” to tertiary study. Five young people in this study completed secondary schooling (to the end of Year 13) and although they all gained qualifications enabling them to go on to university the following year (NCEA Level 3) (National Certificate of Educational Achievement), none did so. The remaining 24 were all early school-leavers, of whom eight had achieved NCEA Level 1 Literacy and Numeracy; two had achieved NCEA Level 2; and 13 left school with no school qualifications. Given this diversity of experience, the “end of school” as a biographical marker was thus somewhat arbitrary. Nevertheless, the young people were asked in the interview to begin their biographies from here: an experience that was temporally unique to each, but something they had all experienced.

Accounts of leaving school vary in the young people’s biographies, in part reflecting the different lengths of time they had been in school as well as the particularities of their experiences while at school. Many of the young people recalled leaving school in terms of how they *felt* about school,<sup>9</sup> as well as how they understood themselves as learners. During the analysis of the wider data set, the significance of the stories young people told about leaving school became increasingly apparent in tracking forward through their biographies (to the present) as they recalled subsequent choices across fields. In addition, stories of leaving school appear to leave an enduring legacy in regard to how some young people think about formal education and themselves as learners at age 21: legacies that are shaping the choices they are currently facing and the possibilities for momentum that are likely to ensue.

Three main stories were told about leaving school. These stories<sup>10</sup> can be summarised as follows.

- “School was not for me.”
- “Lots of things were happening in my life.”
- “It was time to leave.”

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, te Reile (2006, p. 135) cites research by Trent and Slade (2001) with teenage boys about their experience of school. These researchers found that when boys talk of school-based experiences—teachers, curriculum, school organisation and culture, behaviour expectations, built environment and so on—“they do this as though these were inseparable aspects of one process they simply call ‘school’”.

<sup>10</sup> Each of these stories had some distinctive narrative features (for example, the use of similar tropes evoking similar imagery). There is some variation, with “stronger” or “weaker” versions of the story told. In addition, some young people talked about leaving school using narrative elements from more than one of the stories.

## **“School was not for me”**

This was the dominant story amongst early school-leavers, and especially those who left before the end of Year 12. Most young people who told this story left school with no qualifications; some had achieved NCEA Level 1 Literacy and Numeracy.

Young people whose biographies began with “School was not for me” generally remembered school as a place that did not suit them: they recalled mismatched teaching and learning styles; curricula inconsistent with their particular capabilities and skills; behavioural expectations they considered unreasonable (“I’m not one to be told to do stuff … It doesn’t work”); and alienating school cultures. In biographies beginning with this story, “school” and the “young person” were typically positioned in opposition to each other: school was “x” (for example, “too regimented”); the young person remembered themselves at school as “y” (for example, “a bit of a rebel”).

One young person “just hated the whole bloody thing” and remembered teachers treating students “like children … kind of demeaning”. Another remembered herself at school as “not being able to stick at anything” and drifting away from school during Year 11, mainly to spend more time with her boyfriend (also an early school-leaver). One young person remembered “not getting on at school very well” and leaving during Year 12 to start a pre-trade course. Three of the young people who described school as not for them were “pushed” from school: one indirectly because of “relationship problems” with the school’s principal (and at that time “always feeling like the lowest student there”); while two were more directly managed by their schools into alternative education programmes. These young people remembered school as a place where they were “forced” to do things they didn’t want to, and as a place where they felt bad about themselves. One remembered leaving school as a time in her life when, along with the frustration she experienced at school (“it was too much book work and too much writing for me”), she also had “a lot of anger issues”. “School work” added to her frustration at that time because “nothing applied to anything”.

Most of the young people who talked of school as a place that did not suit them recalled their decision to leave school as sometime before the actual date.<sup>11</sup> Several described looking for work while at school because of their parents’ expectations (“They said ‘if you want to leave school, you have to have a job’”). For some, leaving school took several attempts. For example, one young person spoke of leaving “in the middle of third form … [coming] back at the end of the third form, and then fourth form, I just left straight away in the first couple of weeks”. Another left school formally more than a year after shifting from her local secondary school to a correspondence programme:

“There was just a lot of drama at school and I couldn’t be bothered with dealing with all that, yeah. The school work was fine and everything, I didn’t mind that. It was just the atmosphere.”

All of the women who were mothers at 20 remembered school as not for them (“I wasn’t really a school person anyway”). A gradual disconnection and drifting away from school was the more typical experience of leaving school amongst this group. One left school in her early teens. She had been travelling around New Zealand with her family and enrolled in The Correspondence School (“it was hard”). She described leaving school at 14 (“I just stopped doing it”) but reflected later in the interview, “I don’t actually remember when I stopped doing correspondence. I think they just took me off the roll because I wasn’t doing school work.” One young woman started babysitting and “being around home doing nothing really” in her final year of school; another “started wagging” because she was “bored”. The actual

<sup>11</sup> Looking at the average scores by the three story groups across four selected self-report items at age 10, age 12, age 14 and age 16, those who told the story “School was not for me” were: more likely than others in *this* study to be more “tired of trying” at all ages (and got more tired of trying over time); were more bored at aged 12 (and got increasingly bored over time) than others in this study; and liked their teachers less (although, like others in this study, liked their teachers more over time). Finally, like the other participants in this study, those who told this story were more likely to agree that their teachers usually treated them fairly the older they got, and more so than the others at age 16. However, by age 16, some of the young people who told the story “School was not for me” had already left school (and those did not complete the selected items discussed here).

timing of leaving school was thus comparatively imprecise in these women's accounts, and although most drifted away, one talked of her sense of "only being noticed" [by teachers] when she was bullied.

Very few of the young people who told this sort of story recalled any career guidance at school. Some of the young people spoke of school counsellors supporting them around the time they left school, including two of the three young people who left school and enrolled in alternative education programmes.

### **"Lots of things were happening in my life"**

Young people who told this story generally left school during or at the end of Year 12, and typically had achieved NCEA Level 1 Literacy and Numeracy.

For some young people, their last year of school was remembered neutrally or secondarily to other life events, which were at that time more compelling than school. One young woman talked of leaving school to be with her boyfriend and move into a flat together. School was virtually absent in her account; her memories of the year she left were much more about getting a job, finding a flat and "growing up real fast". Another remembered deciding to leave school to enrol in a course at a local polytechnic. Planning to do the course (she never enrolled) was important for securing parental support to leave school, and leaving school meant she could spend time with her boyfriend, "to just work a bit" and go flatting. This young person remembered school positively, and especially the disappointment of "an inspirational teacher" at her decision to leave. One young woman described her last year at school in the context of a family crisis, and her life going "pear-shaped". She moved to another city ("to get away") and enrolled in The Correspondence School. She had "loved" her subject choices at her local high school, but she found learning by correspondence "boring" and was irritated by administrative issues. Although still "at school", she "actually didn't really get it done", and as other more immediate interests (flatting, and working—initially part-time) took over, school receded from her life.

Unlike the young people who remembered "School was not for me", the young people who told this type of story about leaving school generally recalled some aspect of their experience at school positively. None of the young people who told this sort of story recalled any career guidance while at school.

### **"It was time to leave"**

This story was typically told by early school-leavers who completed Year 12, as well as young people who left after finishing Year 13. The young people who told this sort of story generally remembered school as a place they were ready to leave at the time they "chose". A common feature of this story was that they were "ready" to "move on" to something else, and for some young people, that something else was never intended to be longlasting.

Those who left school at the end of Year 12 typically remembered that by the end of that year, they *knew* "university was not for me". They tended to have more neutral memories of school in general, but at least one positive memory of their experience in their final year of school. These early school-leavers often remembered some form of career guidance at school, and some left school with a clear "destination", even if it was not what they did straight away. The three young people who left school at the end of Year 12 and with NCEA Level 2 qualifications all told this type of story about leaving school. One of the young people left school at the end of Year 12 after the careers adviser brokered him a job in a bank. Another had been to a Careers Day and had found "the perfect course". A few of these young people were less specific in the plans: "I just didn't like school ... it wasn't anything in particular, I had lots of friends ... I just didn't want to be at school." One of the young people who told this type of leaving-school story left with no school qualifications.

Of the five young people who "completed school" and left at the end of Year 13, only one young person described how she "hated school". She remembered how she "couldn't wait to leave and get a job", but she also talked of how she

“loved” two of her Year 13 subject choices. School had something going for it for all of these young people, although all talked of knowing while at school that they did not want to go on to university. For a couple of the young people, finishing school was akin to sticking it out and “staying to the end”. Most of the young people in this group remembered their last year of school positively, and most remembered having many ideas at school about what they might do in the future. All of these young people recalled either teachers talking with them about their future plans, or talking with careers advisers, and most in this group recalled both. Most remembered teachers *and* careers advisers as privileging going on to university as *the* post-school pathway. One remembered going to talk with a careers adviser:

“You had to go and see them … and then as soon as you say you’re not going to uni, they’re like, OK then. They just wanted people to go to uni, so they didn’t really help me.”

For these young people, careers advice was mainly information distribution but there were also attempts at “career matching”:

“You did this careers test and filled out stuff and it came up I should be a scuba diver. I’m like ‘I don’t even like the ocean!’ … Everyone was on computers and it was just like do this and see what comes up and then you can play around with it … It wasn’t exactly like [the adviser] goes around and talks to you individually. It was just do it and see what happens.”

Most of these young people had ideas about what they might do and were taking time to consider their options. For some, going to university was a choice with significant biographical consequences: it would take time and money and they did not want to commit to such an undertaking until they were sure about their subject choice or the benefits of a university degree for *them*. One young person took a “gap year”, but others were very firm that university was, at that time, *not* a pathway for them. Most of these young people “just wanted to work”.

## Discussion

The three school-leaving stories described above are very different “starting points” in the young people’s post-school biographies. Young people who remembered “School was not for me” have tended to work in (*any and many*) low-skilled and low-paid jobs, and some have fast tracked to adulthood through motherhood. The young people who are currently unemployed, as well as those who have had episodes out of work since leaving school, tended to tell this “school-leaving story”. Although continuing to make choices about what to do next, their momentum is constrained by their limited opportunities for (and in) paid work which, in turn, has a consequence across other fields. In contrast, young people who remembered leaving school because “It was time to leave” or as a time when “Lots of things were happening” have typically experienced momentum across fields, toward the secure and independent futures they imagine.

In the following chapters, the young people’s leaving stories re-emerge, both as the young people look back over their post-school lives and as they look toward their futures. Rather than differentiate between “early-leavers” and “school completers”, these stories point to the significance of memories of school for young people’s transition experiences. By age 21, those young people who were early-leavers *and* who remembered “School was not for me” were less likely to have experienced post-school education and training leading to secure employment, and more likely to have no experience of post-school education and training. The young people who were early-leavers *and* who remembered “It was time to leave” or “Lots of things were happening in my life” were more likely to have experienced post-school education and training as a biographical event closely tied to subsequent employment, although not in all instances. And although some of the young people who left school at the end of Year 13 (all of whom told “It was time to leave” stories) have no experience of post-school education and training yet, this remains a possibility for most in future. As the young people look toward their futures, their leaving stories do frame how they see choices around future education and training, just as they appear to have influenced what has already happened in their lives.

## 4 Looking forward—towards the future

*I'd like to have my own house and, you know, the white picket fence with the children and the dog and the whole shebang. Because of the fact that my partner is a lot older than me, I do have to consider how I'm going to go about it. Because when I was younger, I always thought I'd get my degree, I'd work and then I'd have kids. But now, it might be a bit different, because he is older and I don't really know how I want to do it, I just know that's what I want to have done in 10 years time.*

(Early school-leaver, unemployed at age 21)

In telling biographical stories, people make sense of their lives. “Looking back” produces a life story through which personal experiences can be biographically situated (for example, “after that, I …”), and through which people can give meaning to what has happened to them (for example, “it was because …”). Looking back and connecting what might appear to be disparate events and experiences produces biographical coherence. Biographical coherence also requires a sense of a future through which (socially situated) ideas and aspirations as to what one’s life can and should be are framed. Asking young people about their futures locates their stories in these wider social and temporal contexts.

In imagining their futures, the young people drew upon current dominant ideals about how lives should be lived, and how such futures might be realised. The young people talked about the future in two distinctive ways: sometimes they described more immediate and sometimes already “concrete” future plans; sometimes they described their aspirations and dreams—their imagined futures in the longer term. Some of the young people had immediate plans connected temporally and experientially to what they were doing at the moment. These more immediate plans were distinctive because they were upcoming life events where decisions had already been taken. For example, several young people spoke of their plans to move into new flats within weeks of their interviews, one young person was about to start a new job and several had overseas holidays planned.

The young people also talked about their aspirations in terms of how they would like their lives to turn out. Although these imagined futures are not prophetic in terms of what will happen, they are of interest because they point to “the significance and consequentiality of investments [that is, the ‘choices’ young people make] in the here and now, for their future lives” (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 29).

As noted earlier, a choice biography differs from the standard biography of the modern period when people’s lives were laid out before them “like tram lines”. In longitudinal research with Swedish young people, Bernhardt (2001, p. 105) found that by the time they were aged 22–30 years, over 80% of her participants “considered the ability to support oneself the most important condition for being regarded as an adult”, with leaving the family home being seen as much more important to their transition to adulthood than family formation. So, the centrality of economic independence for how young people understand adulthood is of interest, especially considering the changing nature of work globally and the implications of global changes for the labour market locally. In this regard, Vaughan et al. (2006, p. 90) have noted: “The challenge for individuals shifts from securing a job at one point in time and then keeping it, to finding jobs over and over again throughout life.”

In addition to changes in the labour market, changes in family life mean that it is now much less likely that a “lifelong” marriage (or relationship) will structure individual experiences of future intimate and personal life. In addition, gender is now considered to be less important than previously in terms of life chances, and theoretically at least, a choice

biography compels *individuals* (rather than men and women) to piece together their lives. This means participation in paid work is especially important as a normative expression of adulthood for individuals, and is increasingly considered an obligation of working-age people, men and women, and upon which the social rights of citizenship are conditional (Lister, 2001, p. 96). These changes in relationship, gender and citizenship norms are important to consider, especially as young people aspire to what might be considered more traditional futures. Research with young New Zealanders (aged 16 to 18) found they typically imagine their future family life will be based upon an enduring and emotionally satisfying lifelong relationship. They also imagine themselves enacting traditional gender and citizenship norms within their future families, with young men *and* young women imagining men becoming family breadwinners and women becoming family caregivers (Patterson, Peace, Campbell, & Parker, 2007).

### **Independence and security**

The young people imagined independent and secure futures across fields. Adulthood was not imagined simply as “having a job” and “going to work”, but a future marked by employment was important for many because of what it might make possible in terms of future independence and security. Many young people imagined futures in which they owned their own home (an especially strong theme); some imagined establishing a family. In imagining their futures, the young people foreshadowed possibilities shaped by the temporal opportunities and restrictions they envisaged, as well as connections between “choices” (both past and future) and “consequences” (both real and imagined) across fields. Some things were imagined as ideally coming before, or after, others (for example, “travel” *before* “children”, a “good job” *after* “a degree”, a “house” *before* “parenthood”).

For some young people, dynamic futures in which they would need to actively engage in deciding what might happen next were imagined. For others, the future was imagined through recourse to an idealised imagery of family life similar to that associated with the standard (and gendered) biographies of the modern period. Consumption aspirations were common in the young people’s futures, especially the desire to travel “sometime soon”, typically to experience a place as a tourist and holidaymaker, rather than to embark on an “OE”. Nevertheless, imagining what might happen next (or how they might like their lives to turn out) was already constrained (although in some instances enabled) by what had happened to them since leaving school, and the independent and secure futures imagined by many of the young people were almost unimaginable to a few.

### **Temporal order and a choice biography**

Some of the young people imagined their futures as spanning a range of possibilities, especially in regard to future work. One young woman, a school completer, aspired to a “really stable life”, but in terms of employment said she was “open to anything”. For this young person, *not* having children “in the next seven to 10 years” was the key to security and independence. Young people who spoke of “many options” appear to imagine futures consistent with the narratives of “Confident Explorers” identified by Vaughan et al. (2006, p. 18). Although seeking independence and security in their futures, these young people were also confident about engaging with future uncertainties and making changes in their lives as required. They were confident about their personal capacity to respond. Young people who imagined their futures in this way tended to have completed Year 12 or Year 13, and were more likely to imagine that at some stage in their future they might “go to university” (but only after they had worked out what *they* really wanted to study).

For many of the young people, independence and security were imagined in the context of a life course that followed a particular temporal pathway constituted through the order and timing of future significant biographical events. While establishing a family was imagined by many young people, future family life was situated in a temporal context through which financial independence and security should be achieved first. For many of the young people, home ownership was imagined as a marker of personal independence and security, and a prerequisite to having a family. The temporal

order of “home” then “children” was imagined by young people who were not currently partnered, as well as those who were:

“I’d really like to get married and have babies in the next five or six years … eventually I will probably only ever work part-time. Like, I will dedicate myself to full-time [work] for a while but just in the theme of having a really busy life, I’d probably like to do part-time law work as well as having kids … I think that’s ultimately to buy a house as well, I really want to buy a house …”

(Early school-leaver, currently studying, not partnered)

“I do really want to buy a house. That’s the major thing we’re working towards. I mean, I have thought of having kids, but I wouldn’t … once you get the house sorted first, get it all settled … be a bit more qualified if I do want to go back to work afterwards … if I had kids, I would want to be a mum, so I’d sort of just [work] a couple of days a week, just some part-time stuff …”

(Early school-leaver, currently working, living with partner and saving for their first home)

“… I want the house to come before the kids and the financial security to come before the kids as well. So, I need to be earning enough so that [partner] can stay at home and I’ll still be able to afford to pay the mortgage. So that needs to happen first, so it’s a few years away.”

(Early school-leaver, currently working, engaged)

These futures illustrate that adulthood means more than having a job, but that for these young people, employment enables other experiences that symbolise what adulthood means *to them*. By age 21, some of the young people had considerable momentum toward the futures they imagined across multiple fields. They were living with partners—being an adult means being in a secure relationship; saving for their first home—being an adult means building financial security, as well as living independently; and planning weddings or future children—being an adult means having a family. Some of the young people foreshadowed temporal uncertainty ahead, and “fitting it all in” as well as getting things “in the right order”, are likely to be an ongoing biographical “challenge”.

How the young people imagined their lives might turn out was shaped by the current circumstances of their lives as well as by what had happened in their lives since leaving school. Two of the participants, both early school-leavers, had recently become unemployed. One had a serious injury and had been unable to work for several months. What he wanted to happen next was “to get better and just to get back to a normal life”—and the security and independence work had afforded him. The other young person wanted “a job that pays heaps”. This young person had been working for several years. Since leaving school, he has been both independent (flatting and “making a living”) and secure (working in the same industry). Unemployment had knocked him off track; his aspirations *now* are to get back on *that* track again.

Generally, the young people whose lives were already marked by precarious employment (for example, they were or had been unemployed) or family life (for example, their relationships with their family of origin, or in some instances, current partner, had broken down) imagined futures that were different from those imagined by young people who had been in work more or less continuously, who were flatting or who were in relationships that seemed to be “heading somewhere”. Security and independence were still important symbolic markers of adulthood for these young people, but realising those futures seemed to require luck or fate to “restart” their lives; to move them “forward”. For example, one young person who had been unemployed for some time was very concerned about his future. He had completed several “pre-employment” courses, his most recent job had been unpaid so he could “learn more” (about the work), but the workplace had closed as a result of recession. He remembered leaving school as “School was not for me”, he liked “hands-on” and “practical” work and he did not want to do any more courses. When asked about what he would like to happen next, he replied:

“... win Lotto! So I can invest ... Maybe I could invest in something and just sort my life out. [So] I don’t have to worry about my future.”

*Do you worry about your future?*

“Yeah.”

*What do you worry about*

“Money.”

*Why do you think you need money?*

“Get a house ... a nice car.”

*Say you don’t win Lotto?*

“Yeah, (laughter), just get a decent paying job.”

The futures young mothers imagined were similar to the other young people in that they also imagined security and independence, but for them, independence meant providing for *themselves* (and their children), and typically by imagining getting back to work in order to be able to move on:

“I want to be able to do a course, something that I enjoy, and then be able to move on from that and get a job and get my own things, you know nice things, have a bigger house. Yeah, that’s what I want really.”

(Mother at 20)

The experiences of young mothers at age 20 are discussed in more detail later in this report. However, at this point, it is important to note the young mothers were all early school-leavers and all remembered leaving school through the story “School was not for me”. Tracking back through these women’s biographies suggests they now have limited opportunities for momentum towards the independent and secure futures imagined by most of the participants. It is not surprising then, when one young mother was asked how she would like her life to turn out, she responded by “joking”:

“... get married and have heaps of money and own a house and (laughing) have a farm (laughing), flash cars (laughing). I don’t know, I just take each day as it comes, but that would be cool, owning a house and having a car, a good car, and having some land ...”

(Mother at 20)

## Imagined futures and biographical momentum

How young people imagine their future is shaped by what has already happened in their lives, which in turn, shapes the choices they might take to realise their aspirations. Enacting a choice biography compels young people to make decisions oriented toward *their* future. But these choices are also situated by social context. This seems to compel the replay of some older norms associated with the standard biography, especially in terms of gender and social class. Young men and young women do imagine different futures, and especially in regard to future employment and parenting. And young people already marginalised by their experience of school and who have weak employment histories and/or prospects do seem to imagine more contingent futures, with aspirations focused on the shorter term and with less certainty as to what might be possible for them.

How young people imagine their future also gives us some insight into what adulthood means to them. In this research, two key themes were apparent in the imagined futures of the participants—*independence* and *security*—and these were generally imagined through work *and* a family-oriented personal life. Although independence was imagined as the “freedom” to live “a life of one’s own” this was imagined in the context of having “money of one’s own”, and for some young women, “a family of my own”. Independence and security were imagined as financial self-reliance, although, for a few, self-reliance was imagined as a familial rather than individual accomplishment. Security was imagined in emotional terms, and especially in relation to future family life. For many young people, future home ownership was

symbolic of security *and* independence, as was an enduring intimate relationship on which an imagined future family life was premised.

Work is a key field for these young people, especially as participation in paid work shaped the young people's experiences in other fields *and* momentum toward the secure and independent futures they imagine. In the next chapter of this report, the experiences of young people who were in work at age 21 are the focus, as well as those who were in work at age 20 but at 21 were in education and had a career goal; and the connections between young people's employment and post-school education and training are explored in more detail.



## 5 Employment—the “traditional” path to adulthood?

Until relatively recently, “youth transitions” or “the transition to adulthood” referred to the transition from school to work for most, and to further education then work for a few. Amongst the wider Competent Learners @ 20 sample, employment without formal study was the main activity for 28% of the young people, and 63% were enrolled at tertiary institutions, albeit typically in combination with paid work (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011, p. 7). The average age at which a young person in New Zealand “finishes education” increased steadily during the second half of the 20th century<sup>12</sup> (Rea & Callister, 2009, p. 14), and thus, as a “traditional” path to adulthood then, employment appears to have been displaced (and delayed) by post-school education or training.

However, the temporal relationship between employment and education or training and the transition to adulthood is complex, especially as “work” and “study” are often experienced simultaneously, including while at secondary school. Amongst the participants in *Tracks to Adulthood*, work features as a key path to adulthood that many of the young people “choose” upon leaving school, even if they had future education or training in mind. For most of the participants in this research, finding a job (in order to leave school early or at the end of secondary school) was important as work gave the young people momentum towards their (adult) futures. Others chose a post-school course to get a particular job (but this rarely coincided temporally with leaving school), and some chose post-school education when they could not get a job.

Looking back over the biographies of the young people who were employed at age 21, as well as those who were employed at age 20 but were in education or training with a career goal at age 21, various patterns emerge. For these young people, work has provided opportunities for momentum across fields, but there is considerable variation both in their experiences of work to date, and their current circumstances. This suggests that while employment may have once been a “traditional” path to adulthood and characterised by beginning work *after* finishing school, the young people in this research have enacted multiple and different “choices” along their *individual* employment paths, as they move towards the future to which they aspire.

In this chapter, the biographies of the 12 young people who were in work at age 20 and age 21 have been further grouped into those who are currently working but who have not completed any post-school education and training relevant to their current job ( $n = 5$ ), and those who are working and who have completed relevant post-school education and training ( $n = 7$ ). The biographies of three young people who were working at age 20 but who at age 21 were in education or training with a specific career goal ( $n = 3$ ) are also included in this chapter.

### In work at age 21, no (relevant) post-school education and training

Five of the young people interviewed for *Tracks to Adulthood* had been “mainly working” since leaving school, were in work at the time of the interview, and since leaving school had not participated in education or training related to their current job. Of these, two were early school-leavers (both with NCEA Level 1), and both had told “School was not for me” stories about leaving school. Three had left school at the end of Year 13, and spoke of leaving school consistent with the story “It was time to leave”. The biographies of these five young people are summarised in the following table.

<sup>12</sup> An analysis of six different birth cohorts using administrative data published in the annual editions of Education Statistics of New Zealand (1964–2006) showed that 20% of those born in the early 1950s were enrolled in education institutions at age 20. In comparison, over 50% of those born in the early 1980s were enrolled in education institutions at age 20. The cohort born in 1972 had a different pattern, and their higher rates of enrolment at ages 19–21 have been attributed to high rates of youth unemployment at that time (see Rea & Callister, 2009, pp. 14–15).

**Table 5 Biographical pattern: In work at age 21, no post-school education and training**

The past Leaving school	The present Doing now	Tracking back Education	Tracking back Work	Biographical momentum
"It was time to leave" or "School was not for me"	Working at age 21	No related post-school education or training  Some informal learning at work  Some formal training through work	Comparatively secure and full-time employment  working in ... working for ...	Transitions across biographical fields

All the five young people working at age 21 but with no relevant post-school education or training were young women. All worked in occupational fields dominated by women (retail, clerical and personal services); four of the five had worked for the same employer (three had changed jobs while working for the same employer<sup>13</sup>) for most of the time since leaving school. One young person described in very positive terms the general training opportunities<sup>14</sup> available in her workplace (a large government department); the others learned to do the work they were doing informally, "on the job". One young woman was employed "on a fixed-term contract"; the others spoke of their jobs as relatively secure. One young person (a school completer) had worked in several offices since leaving school, and had experienced a brief period of unemployment when her previous employer had "gone under". Some of these young people had participated in post-school education and training but were not working in related fields.

Getting their first job was an important marker of their transition to adulthood. For example, one young woman (an early school-leaver) who worked *for* a nation-wide retail chain talked of "*still*" being in her "first job". She had applied for a job online, and had initially worked part-time (five hours per day) until her "boss asked if I wanted to do more hours". She remembered starting work as time to assert a new (adult) self in an environment she experienced as more supportive than school had been:

"I think mostly it just got me out of my comfort zone, I was quite scared to go places by myself and to talk to people on the phone ... but yeah, since working there I just gained some independence, started travelling on my own, you know, catching the train to and from work. Just the atmosphere at [workplace], the family atmosphere is quite cool, all the people I work with are nice."

(Early school-leaver)

Retail work has proven to be secure for this young person at this stage in her life. She has acquired self-confidence and learned skills *because* she is employed (although not through formal workplace learning). She spoke of enjoying working and continuing to acquire more self-confidence (and new skills), informally learning from her co-workers in the Craft Department:

"I did a little bit of sewing and painting before I started there [then] I learnt how to knit and how to scrapbook and they are teaching me how to crochet at the moment ... I kind of dabble in everything just to try it, because I have customers asking me questions ..."

(Early school-leaver)

<sup>13</sup> These were job changes, not promotions.

<sup>14</sup> These were either organisationally focused (for example, opportunities to learn about the structure of the organisation) or skill focused (for example, learning how to use a specific software package more efficiently).

This young person has no immediate plans to change her job, and the prospect of future formal education and training is unattractive, mainly because she is “not too keen on the idea of getting a student loan”. Being employed, working full-time and in a workplace with a supportive culture (at least, compared to this young person’s experience of school) has provided a platform for momentum through an emergent sense of independence in this and other fields.

For the young people in this group, work was a routine, everyday experience. It did not define them through specific vocational identities, but they were “working adults”. Work was something they were engaged in, and most spoke of their work in positive terms. And despite the absence of (relevant) post-school education and training, they described their work as requiring some specific skills which they recognised themselves as having acquired over time:

“I picked up a lot of [office administration] skills as I went along. Like, I didn’t do computers at school … you know, you can teach yourself anything and I didn’t want to waste a subject on that … Yeah, everything that I’ve had to do, I’ve just picked up, that’s how I’ve got the skills now, just doing them and learning them and then continually using them so you don’t forget them.”

(School completer)

Generally, the young people in this group described their experience of work as “working *in*” (for example, *in* retail) or “working *for*” (*for* an accountant, or *for* a government department). These young people tended to see their futures as focused in other fields. Most importantly, work was a source of financial independence (“I wanted to work and get money behind me”) which enabled momentum in other fields (for example, buying a house with their boyfriend, or travelling in weekends to see their friends living in other cities), and an activity through which an independent and secure future could be imagined *and* realised. For some, work was also a “stop-gap” activity: something to do while they “figure out what … to do next”:

“I have my job until at least July next year when the project comes to an end … Until then, I’m insecure job-wise, but after it finishes it’s kind of time for me to start thinking, do I want to go to university? … hopefully I will have decided before my job finishes …”

(School completer)

Two of the young people in this group had completed post-school education and training but were not employed in related work as they could not earn enough to maintain momentum in other fields (for example, they could not afford to rent a flat). These two young people (one an early school-leaver, the other a school completer, both of whom remembered leaving school as “It was time to leave”) enrolled in full-time vocationally focused courses the year after they left school. One enrolled in a year course for veterinary nurses, the other a half-year course in hospitality. Both had found out about the courses themselves (“on the Internet”) and both had taken student loans for course fees and living costs. Both realised *during* the courses that their qualifications would not give them access to secure work, or to incomes with which they could realise their future aspirations. One described coming to the realisation during her course that she “wouldn’t be able to survive” on the hourly rate paid to vet nurses:

“… all of the students did work placement. That’s when you get in and talk to the other nurses who are doing the job … I realised [the pay] wasn’t that great, but I still wanted to finish the course because I’d started it … If I could afford to work there, I would, because I loved it. But, yeah, I just can’t afford it at the moment.”

(School completer)

One young person talked of spending “six thousand dollars on a certificate that basically says this girl can make coffee”. After completing the course, she got full-time work as an administrator in a business owned by a family friend. She expressed considerable regret at doing the course, and especially the money she had spent on it. However, as an early school-leaver who had “just wanted to work … just wanted to get a job and just know how to do my job and just do my job”, she had left school with no qualifications. Her aspirations are to become an early childhood teacher, and the

fact that she *did* complete the course, she hopes will stand in her favour when she applies to a training provider: “I left school with nothing. It does look good that I’ve done something else and completed it, so I’ve got that on my side.”

For the young people in this group, work was important in their transition to adulthood across fields. However, it was not the sole field in which they had, and were experiencing, momentum. Some had partners with whom they were planning joint futures, others were considering future education and training options. Nevertheless, that they had comparatively secure jobs, and working *in* or working *for* was propelling them forward, toward the various futures to which they aspired.

### In work at age 21, post-school education and training

This section focuses on the experiences of young people who were working and who had completed relevant post-school education and training at the time of the qualitative interview. They were employed in jobs it is unlikely they would have been in if they had not completed any post-school education and training. Their biographies are summarised in the following table.

**Table 6 Biographical pattern: In work at age 21, post-school education and training**

Memories of school	Current pathway	Post-school education and training	Experience of work	Biographical momentum
“It was time to leave”  Or  “Lots of things were happening in my life”	Working at age 21	Completed qualification at Level 4 or above  Qualifications “close to industry”	Previously working <i>in</i> working <i>at</i>  Now, secure employment working as	Trajectory-like transition into vocational identity  Security and independence consolidating across biographical fields

Two of the young people who were working at age 21 and in jobs congruent with their post-school education and training experiences had completed Year 13 and five were early school-leavers. Of these five, three had told stories of leaving school consistent with “It was time to leave”; the experience of leaving school for the other two was consistent with the story “Lots of things were happening in my life”. It is notable that in this group of young people, *none* remembered leaving through the story “School was not for me”.

Most of the young people in this group described themselves as “working *as* ...” (rather than working *in* [for example, *in* hospitality] or working *at* [for example, *at* Burger King]). Since leaving school, some of the young people had gone from working *in* or *at*, to working *as*, and this shift was always a consequence of their experience of post-school education or training. For these young people, their initial pathway after leaving school was work, but the jobs they did then were by no means their “destinations”, and were described as either stop-gap measures, or as simply necessary given what else was going on in their lives at that time. Six of the seven young people in this group have completed qualifications since leaving school (ranging from New Zealand Qualifications Framework [NZQF] Level 3 to Level 7), although only two of these six went directly from school to a course. One young person (an early school-leaver) had recently begun formal work-based training, and was being mentored by her employer in a management role. She had gone from working “*in* hospitality” to working “*as* a manager”. For the other young people, the shift from *in* to *as* was tied to the vocational identities acquired through completing post-school education and training started a year or two after leaving school and in courses closely linked to the “industries” in which they were subsequently employed.

Tracking back through these young people's biographies, the temporal path leading young people from school, through into education or training, and on into work congruent with that education or training experience is not defined by chronological age. However, these young people do experience what appears to be "a trajectory" into adulthood; a transition experience *in retrospect* characterised by a clear association between one experience (for example, education) and another (for example, employment) which speeds up momentum towards future aspirations and goals. For example, an early school-leaver went straight from school into a NZQF Level 6 design course, although he had not planned to go from school to a course. He recalled his decision to enrol as shaped by not having found a job, not really knowing what he wanted to do, but having an interest and aptitude ("I passed all the way through [college]"') in art:

"I didn't really know ... I couldn't find a job so I thought a course would be good and pretty much chose one, and I didn't really know what it was going to be like."

Compared to the other young people who were working in jobs congruent with their post-school education or training at age 21, this young person was least positive about the relationship between their post-school education experience and their current job:

"They were making you do things that are not in real life, you know, it doesn't happen like that [at] work. When I design things for people, you can do what you want, no one has to tell you what's right or wrong ... I'm still doing the wrong thing now. It's not wrong, it's if people like it or not. So that's probably why I think the course wasn't that great [...] I learnt more in the first week at work here than the whole course."

(Early school-leaver)

Nevertheless, in retrospect, looking back over this young person's biography, although the transition from school to work through education may not have seemed like a "path" going forward (indeed, he was "surprised" he found a job), it tracks back as a trajectory, opening up employment opportunities not available to an "untrained" early school-leaver.

The three other early school-leavers had strong vocational identities by age 21: two were working in the IT field, and one was working as a nanny. They described their work affectively and talked of doing jobs they "loved". One had worked for a year in a bank (and "hated every minute") after leaving school, then completed a course to become a web developer. Reflecting on his decision to leave a full-time job and study full-time he said:

"I decided I wanted to get a qualification ... I guess I thought there's only so far you can get without a qualification—you can work your way up through a job but it takes a lot longer. Whereas, getting a qualification you can walk into a pretty good job and you can go from there."

(Early school-leaver)

Another young person had been to a Careers Day while in Year 12 and "discovered" an IT course offered by an industry provider. He remembered knowing immediately the course was what he wanted to do, but worked several part-time jobs for a while, staging his transition from school to post-school education through work. By the end of Year 12 he knew he wanted to leave school and felt he was "sort of losing ... interest and motivation" although he "enjoyed being there". In the summer holidays he made further enquiries about the course ("I went and had a chat to them, and I was just like, yip, this is exactly what I want and I went for it"). Over the next six months he worked in a retail job, taking time to decide when to best begin the course (which had flexible starting dates). While studying, he worked part-time *in* retail, and as the course was finishing, was offered a role with the company where he was doing a "work placement". This biographical pattern, from school to work, to education and training, to employment, suggests post-school education and training can provide a trajectory (via a vocational identity) toward a secure and independent adulthood.

"Leaving school" makes possible relatively immediate "pathways" into post-school education and training for some young people. But for some, experiences in other fields mean leaving school may be incidental in relation to the other,

more important, things happening in their lives. For one young person in this group, leaving school was much more tied to moving in with her boyfriend and getting a job to pay for their flat. She worked in casual hospitality jobs for a few years before going to Nanny College. “Nannying” had been embedded in her imagination as a possible job when, as a child, she had watched a film about a globe-trotting nanny. As a young low-paid worker, nannying was a definite “step up”:

“I left school when I was 16 ... working in a coffee shop. I didn’t want to be working in a coffee shop for the rest of my life and I just thought, what’s next? I wanted a job, you know, a job that I thought I might be interested in. So I saw the advert ... and I started the course on my 18th birthday. It was only for six months, and I fell in love with it.”

Biographical momentum “into adulthood” was initially a consequence of her relationship. Leaving home to live with her boyfriend was the event that enabled her initial “transition” but, over time, employment became a more central focus for independence and security. Training to become a nanny enabled a shift from working *in* to working *as*, and her “choice” to embark on this “pathway” gave her considerable momentum toward the future to which she then aspired—a job she “might be interested in”.

The early-leavers in this group all talked of their current jobs as providing them with secure employment into the future, although this did not preclude them from imagining changes to their future working lives, or of significant shifts in other fields. For these young people, working *as* (albeit in different jobs) has made considerable independence possible in other fields. They have moved away from home (although one has recently returned home to help care for an ill family member), and tended to imagine familial as well as vocational futures. One was engaged. His future as a provider for his imagined young family was “imaginable” because of his employment (congruent with his post-school education), and the continuing training opportunities he saw in that industry toward the future. For these young people, post-school education and training and congruent work continues to open up trajectories towards futures in which they *are* both independent and secure. Importantly, while these futures are not necessarily imagined as doing what they are doing now, they typically build on what they have already done.

In some respects, these young people’s biographies are suggestive of the “Passion Honers” identified in the Pathways and Prospects study (Vaughan et al., 2006). They did seem to be “pulled by their dreams and interests, and moved toward something tangible in their careers” (Vaughan et al., 2006, p. 90). They had vocational identities because they had “found” a vocation, typically consistent with “existing” or “emerging interests”, and were “happily settling into it” (Vaughan et al., 2006, p. 92). Nevertheless, their current employment was not something they saw continuing *endlessly* into their futures. Change was envisaged, and usually linked to their aspirations in other fields.

There are some important contrasts between the early-leavers in this group and the two young women who completed Year 13. The latter had decided university was not for them, and had completed vocationally focused courses in the year after they left school. One was working *in* hospitality, although hoping to find work *as* an events manager (her specialty area). One was working *in* several jobs, and in each using skills she had acquired through a garment-making course. Both of these young women were in work in which their post-school education and training was relevant, but neither was in their “dream job”. While their sense of connection to their work seemed weaker than the early-leavers who had developed strong vocational identities, they were young people with employment options. In this sense, these two were like the “Confident Explorers” identified by Vaughan et al. (2006). The future *was* uncertain, but both had work experience in jobs using skills they had acquired, and they seemed comfortable to *actively* figure out what they might choose to do next. This might mean a university course in the future: that “choice” was one *they* would make on their terms and in their own (biographical) time. Having skills (rather than having the “perfect job”) gave these young people “choices”, and moving on to new and better jobs soon, perhaps more congruent with their specific interests and skills, seemed likely for both.

Although work is important for momentum, young people's experience of work is situated both biographically and socially. For example, both of these young people were living with partners, and their "choices" were situated in the context of those relationships. One was living in a small town with her partner, and if there was a possibility of relocating for her "dream job", a joint decision would be required. Although being in a relationship was perhaps constraining her future employment options, it was also enabling her aspirations to start a family sometime in the next few years.

### In work at age 20, in education or training at age 21

At age 21, three young people were in education and training at the time of the interview connected to their career goals. All three had been in paid work since leaving school, and all three had worked in part-time, low-skilled jobs working *for* ... (for example, "for McDonalds") or *at* ... (for example, "at the supermarket"). They are now enrolled in degree-level programmes, and all described future career plans. All aspired to professional jobs, although one was less certain about the future of "the industry" he hoped to work in.

Two of these young people were early school-leavers, and their experience of leaving school reflected the story "Lots of things were happening in my life". Their biographies are summarised in Table 7.

**Table 7 Biographical pattern: Returned to learning at age 21**

The past Leaving school	The present Doing now	Tracking back Education	Tracking back Work	Biographical momentum
"Lots of things were happening in my life"	In education with a career goal  Returned to learning	Completed "preparation for university" course  Educational pathway, "close" to experiential context	Increasingly secure employment over time  working <i>for</i> working <i>at</i>	Transitions across biographical fields  A trajectory towards working as

One had completed school, and had taken a "gap year". This biography is summarised in Table 8.

**Table 8 Biographical pattern: Gap year**

The past Leaving school	The present Doing now	Tracking back Education	Tracking back Work	Biographical momentum
"It was time to leave"	In education with a career goal  Gap year	Enrolled in Level 7 qualification	"Gap year"  working for working at	Transitions across biographical fields  A trajectory towards working as

Most of those studying at 20 in the larger age-20 group described in the quantitative report had left school with NCEA Level 3, and most were studying in universities (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011, p. 67). The three young people in degree programmes who were interviewed for *Tracks to Adulthood* had somewhat different experiences. The young person who had taken a gap year was studying at a polytechnic because it provided the specialist programme he was interested in, and the early school-leavers had left school with either no or NCEA Level 1 qualifications.

The young person who had taken a gap year appears, in many respects, to have followed a variation of the well-lit path from school to degree-level study. Looking back at his biography, his intention was always to "do a degree" but he left

school uncertain of where, and in what field. He purposely “took a gap year” to decide what to do next. In a sense, he had gathered resources in preparation for degree-level study while “transiting” to adulthood in other fields. While he explored course options, he worked at casual jobs and moved into a flat, and established his independence as an “adult”. When he finishes his course, he plans to start “a career in the music industry”.

In contrast, the two early-leavers have both taken some time to “get back” to study. Looking back, both their biographies appear to begin with the makings of a yo-yo<sup>15</sup> transition to adulthood: a metaphor for transitions whereby young people “piece together” a portfolio of vocational courses, which might in fact lead nowhere, whilst also working in dead end jobs” (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 43). Several years after leaving school and working *any and many* jobs, both completed courses designed to prepare them for university study. Contrary to the typical yo-yo transition pattern, they did well in these courses *and* progressed to further study at higher levels. Their lives when leaving school had been fraught, and both recalled personally challenging experiences. However, both had some positive memories of school, of subjects they enjoyed, and of affirming relationship with teachers. “Returning to learning” as “adult students” was in a biographical sense a “getting back on track” and a reconnecting with their previous experiences as successful learners. Both described the courses as being experientially “close” to their subsequent learning experiences, and completion and subsequent enrolment in degree programmes gave each considerable momentum toward the independent and secure futures they imagined.

So, is there anything in particular in the biographies of these two young people that has enabled (or constrained) the “pathway” they now appear to be on? As early-leavers, neither had any memory of career guidance while at school, and neither had clear post-school employment or educational goals when leaving. On leaving school, both were “active” in other fields: establishing flats, exploring relationships, “partying”, and for one young person, working through a complex family crisis which was experienced as personally debilitating for some time. In the educational literature, much is made of cultural capital,<sup>16</sup> and especially the consequences of the *lack* of cultural capital of marginalised young people. For these young people, it might be that the *presence* of (a particular form of) cultural capital enabled momentum over time and through which they could “escape” the yo-yo pattern of transition into educational trajectories typically not open to early-leavers with no or low-level school qualifications. Both of these young people had mothers with university qualifications; both spoke of their mothers as their “friends”, of being supportive and guiding and of talking with them about their futures in aspirational *and* practical ways. Their biographies are strongly suggestive of a transfer of cultural capital, as well as the inoculating effect of some forms of cultural capital when life perhaps doesn’t turn out as planned. Both of these young people now have considerable momentum across fields: they are flatting with other young people; they have friendship networks comprising old (school) and new friends; they are working part-time, enjoy their jobs for the money they earn and the social connections work offers them; and they are combining a university education with paid work, like many of their peers. Their return to learning was also enabled by policy settings that supported access to university for people without NCEA Level 3, as well as to courses that provided a (biographical) bridge that was meaningful for these young people. The lives of these young people do seem to be going forward, and although situated by the particularities of the social context in which they live, they do appear to have some agency in “choosing” what they might do next.

This chapter has explored the experiences of the 15 young people who were in work at age 21, as well as those who had been in work at age 20 but at age 21 were in education with a career focus. Of these young people, two remembered

<sup>15</sup> This transition pattern is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu developed “cultural capital theory” to explain class differences in educational achievement as the outcome the formal education system reproducing the dominant culture. Cultural capital is unequally distributed by class. Formal education builds on the differential skills of knowledge (cultural capital) children internalise before they begin school, which in turn unequally “unlocks” learning in the classroom. Middle-class children generally do better at school as they have more cultural capital (mainly because middle-class culture is so akin to the dominant culture) whereas working-class children generally do less well because the education system is simultaneously biased towards the dominant culture and against working-class culture (see Haralambos & Holborn, 1995, p. 756–758).

leaving school through the story “School was not for me”. The others left school because “It was time to leave” or because “Lots of things were happening in my life”. For all of these young people, the post-school experience of work has provided momentum as they have moved toward the futures to which they aspire. For some, post-school education and training has provided trajectory-like transitions into vocational identities, enabling the consolidation of independence and security into their biographies across fields as they move toward the future. Some are “back on track” and moving towards their career goals through returning to learning at age 21. For others, the “lack” of post-school education and training was not (yet) a barrier to the momentum, with relatively secure jobs enabling “transitions” across fields to the futures to which they aspired. Some had completed post-school education and training, but were not in congruent work. Although this disconnection between “courses” and related employment is explored in more detail in the following chapter, it is important to note these two young people were in relatively secure work. Across the biographies of the young people explored in this chapter, there is a sense they are each “moving forward”, albeit at different rates, and that each is “piecing together lives of their own” in the context of the resources they have accessed and the futures to which they aspire.



## 6 Unemployment and the “yo-yo” transition

This chapter focuses on the experiences of young people who at the time of the data collection for *Forming Adulthood* had been neither employed nor in education or training (NEET) at age 20 ( $n = 5$ ), as well as four young people who, although recruited in other categories, were unemployed when interviewed for *Tracks to Adulthood* ( $n = 4$ ). All left school early with either no or NCEA Level 1 qualifications, and all remembered leaving school in ways that were consistent with the story “School was not for me”.

Unemployment is often seen as “one of the most pressing problems of youth across western countries” (te Reile, 2006, p. 132). At the time of the data collection for *Forming Adulthood*, 36 young people from the wider sample were identified as neither employed nor in education or training at age 20. However, at the time the data for *Forming Adulthood* were collected, none of the early leavers had spent most of their time unemployed since they had left school, and only one mentioned benefit receipt. Importantly, the young people’s experiences of post-school employment began before the current recession. At age 21, the recession is the social context in which their biographies are unfolding.

The experience of young people not in employment, education or training is of particular interest because contemporary citizenship norms position participation in paid work as the primary citizenship obligation of individuals, and because, for the young people in this study, participation in paid work across their adult life course is a core “ingredient” in the independent and secure futures they imagine.

### The “yo-yo” transition pattern

Five young people were NEET at age 20. By age 21, three were studying courses at NZQF Levels 1–4, another had started but stopped degree study and one was making plans to move to Australia to find work. Although these young people had less continuity in their “main activities”<sup>17</sup> over time, this was not because they were inactive. Their post-school experiences are, in retrospect, marked by movement between low-paid and low-skilled work, low-level vocationally-focused courses and unemployment. This movement does not necessarily make possible momentum toward the futures to which these young people aspire. These young people were piecing together their lives; they were enacting choices oriented towards secure and independent futures (primarily, although with some difficulty, through paid work) but, rather than propelling their lives forward, their choices rarely had the biographical consequences anticipated. In looking in and across their biographies, a “yo-yo” transition pattern was apparent, as summarised in the following table.

**Table 9 Biographical pattern: The “yo-yo” transition**

The past Leaving school	The present Doing now	Tracking back Education	Tracking back Work	Biographical momentum
“School was not for me”	NEET at age 20, studying or unemployed at age 21	Low-level course/s (Level 3 or below)  Completed qualifications do not lead on to related work, or to education or training at higher levels	Any and many jobs  Insecure employment  working <i>in</i> working <i>at</i> working <i>for</i>  Connections between jobs weak	Contingent transitions across biographical fields

<sup>17</sup> For example, “working” is a main activity, as is “studying”.

Yo-yo transitions are marked both by particular experiences of employment, and by particular types of post-school education and training. In the United Kingdom, social commentators describe a secondary labour market characterised by low-paid jobs with few opportunities to move to the next step as the “new” employment context for working-class people (including young people)—creating a “cycle of no-pay/low-pay job insecurity” (Toynbee, 2003, as cited in Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007, p. 598). Research in working-class communities in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s found no young people who had “followed ‘mainstream’, orderly transitions” and that “the experience of [British] youth is increasingly divided and polarised [by social class] between those who make ‘fast-track’ and ‘slow-track’ transitions to adulthood” (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007, p. 599).

New Zealand does not have a strong tradition of class analysis as an explanatory framework for social inequalities. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these young people in the NEET category came mainly from families with low and medium family incomes when they were aged near five, and that their mothers’ highest qualifications were either “none” or at the “trade/mid-secondary school” level (both measures are proxies for social class). In addition, across the larger *Forming Adulthood* sample, young people who were not studying or working at age 20 “carried less with them … particularly in terms of a sound platform for resuming study in another form, or taking employment that they enjoyed” and they found it harder than others to “decide what they wanted to do, to find a job or establish a career, and they were more likely to experience boredom” (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011, p. 76). Compared to other groups at age 20, these young people had “the least continuity between their main activity since they left school and what they were doing at age 20” (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011, p. 77).

All these five young people remembered leaving school early because “School was not for me”. Despite this, they all had engaged with post-school education and training, although none had completed courses above NZQF Level 4. In addition, all had worked since leaving school. Most worked in part-time, low-paid jobs, and most experienced considerable insecurity from working in jobs with nonstandard hours and poor conditions. One young person described his employment history as “working random jobs”; another listed the jobs she had had since leaving school:

“… second-hand clothing store … check-out … a telemarketing job … fish and chip shop, yeah, that’s all. And they were all really short term, like the longest was six months.”

(NEET at age 20, studying at age 21)

One young person worked in a supermarket after leaving school. Getting a job in hospitality seemed to open up better opportunities, and after getting work “as a glassie” in a new venue she “moved up and up” and began “managing” the shifts of other young workers (“The place was just opening, and they needed staff … they sort of sifted though the good people and I kept my job”). Despite gaining experience “managing” and a sense of “moving forward”, the precariousness of both the industry and her employment conditions meant work gave her little real security. When the venue closed within months of opening, the young person was again “unemployed”.

None of these five young people remembered any career guidance at school. Employment since school had typically been a series of *any and many jobs*. Most sought or had been offered jobs through their social networks—working *for* friends or family. One young person who found work this way compared finding work in the years after leaving school with his current experiences when jobs are scarce:

“I have a few mates who know some people who are hiring, and they’re like ‘such and such is hiring’. It’s like, OK, yeah … [but] probably over two years now, it’s been really tight trying to find work. It took me about eight months to find this one, and it took them about three months to get me started there.”

(NEET at age 20, studying and working part-time at age 21)

Unemployment was experienced by all of these young people, on multiple occasions, often as a short-term interlude between “a job” and “a course”. Nevertheless, they rarely used the term “unemployed”. They described these periods in their lives as “looking for work” or as “between …” (between jobs, or between courses and jobs). Some young people framed time not working or studying as “time off”; others described taking “time out”. One young person had been looking for full-time work, and decided to “travel” because of lack of work. He “quit” his (part-time, low-paid retail) job and went overseas for a month or so:

“… then I guess I looked for jobs again and I thought I would have a better chance. The recession was downplayed, but [no jobs] so I figured, why not go to study. If nobody is going to hire me, I might as well learn something. That’s when I enrolled at the course.”

(NEET at age 20, studying at age 21)

For some, the yo-yo transition pattern began on leaving school and “doing a course”, rather than taking a course when jobs were scarce. One young person left school and completed a pre-trade certificate, but was unable to find any work in that area. After a spell of “doing nothing” he found low-skilled work through a family member (“My uncle just said come along and learn as you get paid sort of thing”). He worked for a year or so in a trade-based workshop before losing his job when the workplace closed “because of the recession”. Now unemployed, and despite looking at further courses, he had decided against further study:

“I’ve been around … and I’ve had a look at a few courses, they’re all charging money. I don’t really want to get a student loan. If I get a student loan and I get this qualification and *I don’t get a job*, you know, that’s how I’m thinking.”

(NEET at age 20, unemployed at age 21)

For some young people, unemployment was also situated in the context of other things happening in their lives. For example, one young person had yo-yoed between jobs, courses and unemployment since leaving school. Looking back, in addition to experiencing “poor work” and low-level courses with little purchase in the labour market, she had also been in a long-term relationship which appeared to constrain (rather than enable) any momentum. She commented:

“I don’t reckon I could’ve done the course properly if I still went out with him … because [we’d] be arguing all the time and stuff. That’s why I didn’t really have a job … because we’d always argue and I’d get upset at work and stuff like that. So, I never had a job that lasted long, and like, after a few of them, I just sort of stopped. This course is the first thing I’ve done for a while, yeah.”

(NEET at age 20, studying at age 21)

A striking pattern that emerges looking back at the biographies of these young people, and tracking their transition experiences in which they yo-yo between work, study and unemployment, is the gendered nature of both the work and study they undertake. This pattern contradicts assertions that gender is not relevant in regard to a “choice biography”. The young men aspired to or sought entry into “the trades” and tended to enrol in “pre-trade certificates” (some had completed several of these). And although some had worked in *any and many jobs*, the jobs they enjoyed were *as* “labourers”, “mates” or “hands” in male-dominated industries, and typically working *for* a family member or family friend. The young women had worked in feminised jobs, primarily hospitality or retail, but they had enrolled in or aspired to “personal grooming” courses spanning a range of qualifications and “therapies”. Across their biographies these lines are not fast, but the gendered pattern of their experiences (and aspirations) suggests that their choices are situated in the context of a gendered (secondary) labour market as well as a gendered post-school education and training market.

*Forming Adulthood* noted that young people reported the “gains from these [low-level] courses, and experiences from them, were largely positive” (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011, p. 94), even if they did not necessarily result in employment. Of

the young people in *Tracks to Adulthood* whose post-school experiences followed the yo-yo pattern, none gained ongoing congruent work after completing low-level courses, or indeed, moved on to further post-school education or training at a higher level. Nevertheless, they often “liked” the courses they had enrolled in because they had experiences they would not have had otherwise (for example, working with specialist trade tools to “make things”, or learning techniques and processes to “do things”); they saw some of these as valuable skills they could personally use sometime in the future (for example, repair *their own* car, or do *their own* make-up); and for some, doing a course was better than doing nothing:

“I didn’t really know what course to do … if I wanted to do something it would be with beauty or make-up. The one I’m doing is the shortest one, so I just picked it. It’s alright … but I don’t think I want to be a make-up artist. I just did it so I’m doing something. I don’t know what I am going to do after, because it finishes quite soon.”  
(NEET at 20, studying at age 21)

Looking back at the biographies of these young people there does seem to be a disconnection between the apparent “vocational” focus of these courses and the reality of employment opportunities for young people with these low-level qualifications. Despite the disconnection between the vocational focus of some low-level courses and subsequent employment opportunities, the young people recruited in the NEET category returned to these courses over time (and in some instances were directed to them) primarily *because* of their “vocational” promise. However, these courses seemed to offer limited opportunities for momentum towards independent and secure futures to which the young people aspired. They did not provide “trajectories” from *any and many* jobs into other more secure forms of work, and this disconnection is exacerbated by current economic conditions.

By age 21, some of these young people did express some ambivalence about the ongoing disconnection between employment and the courses they have taken. For some young people, the *disconnection* (rather than course content or their learning experience) had become a disincentive to re-engage in *any* future education or training. Some were beginning to articulate their experience of the disconnection between post-school education and training and employment as a consequence of the impact of the current recession on the labour market and the “disappearance” of the jobs they wanted, and thus questioned the value of further education or training. As one young person noted:

“[Other young people] have done that course, and they’re doing another course, and then they finish … and they’ve got these qualifications. But they really can’t get anywhere with these qualifications, there’s no people wanting apprentices, and it’s really hard to find a job even.”  
(NEET at age 20, unemployed at age 21)

As already noted, young people recruited in the NEET category were all early-leavers, and none recalled any career guidance while at school. Given the apparent disconnection between low-level vocational courses and employment in the biographies of young people marked by the yo-yo transition pattern, how do these young people “choose” these courses? Looking back over their biographies, some patterns emerge. Some of these young people tended to remember an enduring interest in *things* (for example, cars), and (continue to) choose courses that matched these (often singular) interests. Others choose to do *any* course because of biographical timing: because they were “between jobs” or had “just turned 20” and they needed to “do something”. One young person had chosen a course to get “qualified” in an area in which he already had some work experience but found no one would hire him without “the ticket”. Most found out about courses from their friends or family and most got more information “on the Internet” from course providers.

Finally, these young people who had been NEET at age 20 tended to imagine their futures with less precision and certainty than others. Nevertheless, they continued to enact choices and to “piece together their lives”, but they also seemed to be making little headway towards better jobs or better conditions of work over time. Insecure employment constrained their momentum across fields. For example, these young people often lived at home, and if flatting, had

returned home when times were tough. Nevertheless, some do imagine futures in which their lives turn out well, but by age 21, in fields other than employment and education. These young people did not imagine futures where they are *not* working. Rather, their futures are marked by a sense of security and independence through “joining forces” with a partner, and moving toward an uncertain future together. Two young people talked of recently forming relationships in which both could see better futures unfolding. Despite precarious circumstances threatening to prevent one of them from completing the course he was enrolled in, he commented:

“Everything’s going pretty sweet as it is. I’m just loving life as it is at the moment.”

*What’s making it so good now?*

“I’m definitely going to have to say my partner. She’s a big part of my life, and yeah, just the way everything is going ...”

## The recently unemployed

Four young people became unemployed between the quantitative and qualitative data collection phases. All were early-leavers, and remembered leaving school because “School was not for me”. They had all been in work since leaving school: two worked in the same type of work with the same or similar employers; two worked in *any and many* jobs. All had worked in low-skilled jobs, and none had completed any post-school education or training. Unemployment had interrupted what were initially “fast-track” transitions to adulthood through apparently secure work, and all were looking for work in a labour market where unskilled jobs in areas where they have experience appear to be in short supply. The biographies of these young people are summarised in the following table.

**Table 10 Biographical pattern: Recently unemployed**

The past Leaving school	The present Doing now	Tracking back Education	Tracking back Work	Biographical momentum
“School was not for me”	Recently unemployed	Low-level course immediately post-school  or  No post-school qualifications	Any and many jobs, insecure employment  or  Secure employment  working in working at	Contingent transitions across biographical fields  or  Rapid transitions across biographical fields, but new contingencies emerging

Two of these young people had been “pushed” from school, and both had completed pre-employment courses before their first jobs. Both recalled these courses as positive experiences, providing them with a platform to move into work. Both of these young people had a biographical pattern of continuous employment in *any and many* jobs working *at* (for example, Burger King), but at the time of the interview, their employment prospects had changed. Work was scarce and both were “not working”. Both have “moved around”—shifting towns, shifting flats and moving in and out of various living circumstances in response to changing personal and family circumstances. Both preferred to work near where they were living, and had previously been able to find jobs to suit their changing circumstances.

Until recently, it might have appeared they had both made a surprisingly “smooth” post-school transition (especially given they both experienced school very negatively). However, looking back, their jobs did not “connect” in any way; they had no further experiences of post-school education and training, and their employment “choices” seemed to be made in the context of what they could do “in the moment”. Both imagined they would soon be back in work (as has

been the case in the past), although one was considering starting a vocationally focused course in the near future. In these two young people's biographies are the marks of economic change, and the impact of the shift from comparatively low unemployment at the time they left school, to rising unemployment and recession at age 21.

In contrast, two other two young people unemployed at 21 had experienced considerable continuity of work and employment security since leaving school. They had left school for work, and worked for a few employers doing the same type of work over time. Neither had completed any post-school education or training, but had acquired skills as labourers. Their lives seem closer to "tram lines" of the standard biography: they had moved from school to work, and through working, achieved independence in other fields—flatting, forming relationships, getting on with their lives in what appeared (until recently) to be a "standard" and "orderly" transition. For both, unemployment has been a "fateful moment" (Holland & Thomson, 2009, p. 453): a biographical turning point compelling a re-evaluation of how they think of themselves, and their futures. Both were reframing their futures but in different ways. One was concerned about having to do *any* course; the other is acquiring specific work skills "through WINZ" (Work and Income New Zealand) to give him an edge for finding work "when the economy picks up". For both, "learning" and "working" had been separate domains of experience, and they had experienced little evidence of a (continuing) connection between them. Both imagined their immediate futures as "getting back to work".

## 7 Motherhood—a “fast track” to adulthood?

In this chapter, the experiences of five young people who were mothers at age 20 are explored. Their transition to adulthood is especially marked by their responsibilities as mothers, the transformative effects of motherhood on their biographies to date, as well as the futures they imagine. In many respects, the lives of these young people since leaving school are very similar to those young people who have experienced “yo-yo” transitions. However, these young people are now “piecing together” their lives *as mothers* (rather than *as individuals*), a personal and social identity which in turn is likely to enable and constrain momentum in very different ways.

### The hierarchy of maternal legitimacy

Although motherhood may be an important identity marker for women, the experience of mothering occurs within a hierarchy of maternal legitimacy in which not all mothers are “equal” (Patterson, 2009). Historically, “good” and “bad” mothers have been differentiated by the conditions of their lives as well as the effects of their parenting. Motherhood is understood through social norms and, over time, social expectations change about who should mother and under what conditions. In the shift from the modern period to the late modern period, new motherhood norms have emerged. Until relatively recently, the transition to adulthood for young women often included becoming a mother. Now, motherhood is more likely to be described as a “risk” for young women, and as young motherhood is associated with “educational underachievement and poor economic circumstances” (Collins, 2009, p. 5), *young motherhood* is often constructed as a pressing “social problem” (Wilson & Huntington, 2005).

Early and near-universal marriage and childbearing shaped the biographies of many New Zealand women from the 1950s through until the 1970s. Early marriage is now the exception and new fertility norms as a consequence of the “reproductive revolution” have emerged.<sup>18</sup> Women now have fewer children and give birth later in the life course than women of their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations (Wilson & Huntington, 2005), and there are now more first births to unmarried couples than married couples (Patterson, 2010). In addition, over the same period, women’s participation in higher education and professional or skilled work has consolidated as a normative biographical experience for women.

Changes to citizenship ideals sit alongside these changes in relationship, reproductive and gender norms. In contrast to the gender-specific “tram lines” idealised in the historic male breadwinner–female caregiver family model, participation in paid work is now the defining marker of contemporary adulthood *and* citizenship. *Individuals* are expected to make choices about their lives, and *choosing* to parent is increasingly situated as a biographical decision with the potential to interrupt, but not arrest, paid work across the adult life course.

Given the social changes outlined above, the social category of “mother” is less prescriptive than previously, and women’s experiences while mothering considerably more diverse. Motherhood has become individuated: mothering is seen as a choice, but one that requires individuals to choose under particular conditions (and especially as self-reliant citizens). “Working mothers” (considered a “social problem” in the 1950s) are now the norm. The current construction

<sup>18</sup> The fertility rate for young New Zealand women is high when compared to other countries in the OECD, but the range in rates is wide and the use of simple country rankings exaggerates the New Zealand position (see Statistics New Zealand, 2003). In 2006, just over seven percent of live births were to women aged 19 or under, and less than five percent of live births were to women aged 18 years or under (Statistics New Zealand, 2010).

of young motherhood as a social problem reinforces widely held cultural ideas that, unlike other mothers (who make “the choice” to become parents), young women who become mothers make the *wrong* choice.<sup>19</sup>

### **From “young person” to “young mother”**

At the time of data collection for the *Forming Adulthood* report, 20 (10%) of the young women in the Competent Learners sample were mothers.<sup>20</sup> *Forming Adulthood* noted that, of these women, 40% had left school without a qualification (compared to five percent of women who were not mothers) and 37% of women who left school before the age of 17 were mothers at age 20 (compared to six percent of women who left school at age 17 or 18) (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011, p. 109). School attendance by pregnant and parenting young women can “reduce the negative consequences associated with teen birth” (see Collins, 2009, p. 8).

Young mothers not in paid work contradict the citizenship obligation of participation in paid work (Lister, 2001). In New Zealand, young mothers who are also single mothers have lower participation rates in paid work than other mothers, and this exacerbates the perception that they are *less* self-reliant and *more* dependent than other mothers, and other citizens.

The five mothers who were interviewed for *Tracks to Adulthood* all remembered leaving school through the story “School was not for me”. Some of these young women appeared to be getting “back on track” some years after leaving school, perhaps reflecting the finding from *Forming Adulthood* that the mothers had learning dispositions *similar* to other young women. However, the mothers’ experiences in other fields seemed comparatively contingent and fragile, especially in regard to personal and familial relationships. Motherhood appears to not only have transformed these women’s lives, but also their futures, especially because participation in paid work or study or forming a satisfying adult relationship is now considerably more complex. The biographies of the mothers at age 20 are summarised in Table 11.

**Table 11 Biographical pattern: Mother at age 20**

<b>The past Leaving school</b>	<b>The present Doing now</b>	<b>Tracking back Education</b>	<b>Tracking back Work</b>	<b>Biographical momentum</b>
“School was not for me”	Mother at age 20	No post-school qualifications completed  or  Completed qualifications (Level 4 and above) but weak links to congruent employment	Any and many jobs  working at working for  Insecure employment (sometimes increasingly secure over time)  working at working in	[Before motherhood]  Contingent transitions across biographical fields  [As mothers]  Transformation, irreversible fast track to adulthood

Although sharing the social identity of “mother”, the lives of five young women who participated in the qualitative interviews are diverse in terms of both their current circumstances and their imagined futures. Nevertheless, their

<sup>19</sup> For example, young people who participated in *Tracks to Adulthood* who are not parents typically imagine future parenthood in the context of imagined security and independence and in the context of an intimate couple relationship, home ownership and participation in paid work by one or both parents as the source of family security. This reflects current norms.

<sup>20</sup> In New Zealand, approximately 10.5% of live births are to women aged 20 years or under (Statistics New Zealand, 2010).

transitions from school into adulthood were marked by some strong similarities. The similarities and differences are important to note, especially in the context of powerful social stereotypes that position “young mothers” as if “they” (as a collective defined by their apparent similarity) are different “in nature” from other mothers and other women.

Two women had two children at the time of the interview; three had one child. None of the women had become mothers while at school, although one had become a mother at the age of 15. None of these women had any qualifications when they left school. None had attended a Teen Parenting Unit; they all became pregnant *after* they had left school (either formally or practically). Before becoming mothers, two had completed Level 4 qualifications, and one had completed a WINZ-sponsored, non-NZQF course while pregnant.<sup>21</sup> This was through a private provider, and although completing the course was a very positive experience for her sense of self (as a mother and a learner) it is unlikely to offer much, if any, momentum towards realising this young person’s imagined future in the area of employment to which she aspires. Three had enrolled in post-school education and training programmes they had not completed for a variety of reasons, although not because they were pregnant or parenting. At the time of the interview, four of the women in this group were living in rented homes. Of these, two were living with partners, and one was flatting with a friend (who was also a parent). All articulated future aspirations in terms of paid work (including further education or training for work) although in each instance these were mediated by the particularities of their current circumstances.

There are some similarities in the leaving-school experiences of these young mothers and the young people who experienced yo-yo transitions. “Leaving school” marked a transition to adulthood because it was the beginning of a post-school life in which these young women (as learners) were no longer subject to the irrelevant or unachievable expectations they associated with school. However, unlike the other early-leavers, these young women typically “drifted” from school, although most did find work upon or soon after leaving. The jobs they worked in after leaving school tended to be part-time, casual and typically working *for* a family member or friend. All but one had some experience of paid work since leaving school. At the time of interview, none were in paid work, one had a job starting the following week, two had plans to work from home sometime in the future and two were planning to return to study (as a “pathway” to work) in the next year or so. All of the women had children aged under two years.

Tracking these women’s experiences of work since leaving school, most had *any and many* jobs before becoming mothers, but with little opportunity to engage in work where positive work-related or learning identities might consolidate. Generally, they worked in part-time, low-paid, low-skill jobs, and their experience of work was very similar to that of the young people who had experienced yo-yo transitions. Often the “jobs” these young women did were the same or similar to part-time jobs other young people in *Tracks to Adulthood* had when they first left school, and finding these jobs had been relatively easy. One commented: “I’ve had a few jobs”; another “I’m fine with getting jobs.” None of these young women described experiences of work in which they (positively) experienced a specific vocational identity in the sense of working *as*; indeed most described any employment experience through the generic title of “job” and themselves as having had “a job *at* ...”.

Motherhood provided some hindsight for these other people. Some were “embarrassed” about their lack of school success. One young woman who had just found some shift work in a local retailer realised her employment options were limited because of her lack of recent work experience and limited educational success. In retrospect, she commented:

“... in a sense, now, you kind of need school. But then, I always thought that if I wanted to do hairdressing, [then] what’s the point of being at school because science and maths have nothing to do with it ... if you want to do something, you do your training, you don’t really need school.”

<sup>21</sup> One is also recorded in the Ministry of Education data as previously enrolled with a post-school provider, but made no reference to this experience during the interview.

With hindsight, another young woman described her regret at leaving school early:

“...leaving school and not sticking to anything was really, really disappointing. I just think the whole thing didn’t need to happen.”

*What might have changed that do you think?*

“[N]othing could have changed it. I don’t think anyone could have changed the way I thought. I really don’t, I was just too young and just shouldn’t have left school, [but] I just wanted to.”

Like the young people whose transition experiences followed the yo-yo pattern, some of these young women had some post-school education and training, and some had enrolled in several courses over time. Some did not complete these courses, especially those they enrolled in soon after leaving school. One “quit” an apprenticeship (in a family business) after a few months, and went on to work in a range of part-time and casual jobs. Two young women became trainee hairdressers after leaving school: one began a “course”, the other an apprenticeship, but neither completed. As with their experience at school, both “drifted away” from these courses: their attendance waned, the work became too difficult and they both “dropped out”. Both of these women remembered other “things” happening in their lives that had become overwhelming. One had a boyfriend, living some distance away, and if she stayed with him overnight, she could not get to class the next day. One remembered getting very involved with the “social side” of her workplace, going out late at night and frequently missing both work and classes as a result. Both talked of “not finishing” with some regret.

Two young women had completed vocationally-oriented courses before becoming pregnant, and one had completed a training course in a specific beauty therapy she hoped to develop as a business from home. One completed a one-year full-time industry-based course in garment manufacture. The course had no academic prerequisite, it had a strong “hands-on” focus and the tutors “were really good at teaching”. Another young woman talked of how she had “enjoyed” an office administration course completed some years after leaving school and through which she had “got back on track”. Interestingly, while both these young women had some experience of learning success post-school, neither secured jobs in congruent fields (although in both instances, the courses they had completed had strong vocational orientations). One worked in retail to get experience of “that side” of the fashion industry, then became pregnant. The other did get a job in an office, but “it was too hard, I couldn’t do it ... it was full-on and it was just over my head ... it just freaked me out”. She left within a month and “did nothing” for some months before getting a job in retail, and “just loved it”. For both these women, consolidating their adult identities as “workers” took some time after leaving school but they both ended up working full-time in jobs they “loved”. For all three women who had completed post-school education and training, their “success” was important for their sense of self-worth as people, and as young mothers. As one young woman said, “I didn’t bring anything back from school, so having this [qualification] is pretty cool, like I don’t feel so bad.”

As noted, looking back at these young women’s lives, there are some similarities between their post-school experiences and young people whose transitions through employment and education have followed a yo-yo pattern. However, over time things improved for some of the women *before* they became mothers, especially as their connection to paid work strengthened (typically following the successful completion of a post-school qualification). Traces of this earlier momentum accorded through completing a course or finding work were important touchstones in these women’s accounts. There was a sense that, over time, their transition to adulthood had smoothed, their sense of agency had been “cycled up” and their lives seemed to have begun to “move forward”.

For these women, motherhood was not experienced as a “backward (biographical) step”, but the momentum some had begun to experience (mainly through paid work) did slow, at least temporarily. Pregnancy for all of these women was unplanned, but not necessarily unwelcome. Motherhood transformed their social identities as a “fast track” to

adulthood, although without “attaining” the other temporal and symbolic markers of adulthood often associated with contemporary parenthood.

Why do some women whose post-school transitions yo-yo become mothers while others do not? And why do some young women have children just when their lives appear to be “getting back on track”? United Kingdom researchers have found young mothers from working-class communities “tended to value parenthood, reject abortion, and invested in the values and responsibilities of good motherhood” (Turner, 1964 as cited in Henderson et al., 2007, p. 148). Amongst the young mothers in *Tracks to Adulthood* one had decided against termination while at the clinic and expressed “pro-life” views, and another continued with pregnancy because her boyfriend’s family were “really against abortion”. All the women had family support during pregnancy, and all had their first child in a brief returning “interlude” at their parents’ homes. The young women all made strong moral claims about motherhood, and all seemed to be positive and connected parents, although there were some dire circumstances (one was living in a violent relationship and saw no way out; another was working through the consequences of a violent relationship she had managed to leave). Nevertheless, motherhood was also experienced as a positive biographical transformation, and an experience that had given them focus and purpose:

“[motherhood] changed my life for the better, for both me and my partner. We both don’t smoke anymore, we don’t drink ... I think if I didn’t have kids I’d be here, there and everywhere ... I wouldn’t have what I have to show for myself. [The first child] settled my life down, and [the second child] has done that. That’s what I like about it.”

Motherhood had effects across fields for these women. It did complicate future “choices”, especially in regard to paid work and post-school education and training. Pregnancy and childbirth also sometimes interrupted intimate and friendship relationships. Their living arrangements and friendships before pregnancy and motherhood differed from other young people in *Tracks to Adulthood*, in that these young people generally seemed to have small friendship networks after finishing school, networks that seemed to get smaller over time, and especially once they were mothers. Some of the young women who became mothers recalled previous intimate relationships marked by considerable intensity and tended to “go flatting” with their boyfriends early in the relationship.<sup>22</sup> Most talked of intense relationships with fathers of their children that began positively, but generally ended badly. Some of the young mothers were trying to disentangle themselves from these relationships, but this was difficult as most also wanted the father of their children to remain connected to their children’s lives.

So how did these young women see their futures? Like the other young people in *Tracks to Adulthood*, most had ideas about how they wanted their lives to turn out, but these were shaped by their responsibilities as parents and as the primary carer of their children. One young mother had a supportive and engaged partner involved in the day-to-day care of their children; the others did not. The young women who seemed to be “getting back on track” before becoming mothers were more articulate about their future plans, and were planning further courses and to “get a job”. Nevertheless, these women were conflicted about combining motherhood with employment. They did not want to use childcare, especially centre-based and full-time care, but some were considering part-time courses and childcare (as steps towards work) in the next year or so.

While motherhood had transformed their identities and they had fast tracked to adulthood, these women were grappling with futures in which their momentum was constrained by their responsibility for care. These young people did seem comparatively socially isolated. They had few friends (and some spoke of “losing” friends as a result of motherhood), and their social support networks were generally comprised of family members. Those living in flats were “being

<sup>22</sup> Some of the other young people in *Tracks to Adulthood* also lived with boyfriends or girlfriends, but generally these young people lived in flats shared with other young people (or lived at home with other family members).

adults” in that they were living independently, but their future security seemed precarious. They seemed to have very little, if any, access to advice about what to do next, or how to manage the challenges in the present. Like some of the young people whose transitions followed the yo-yo pattern, some of these women seemed to be grasping at future “options” unlikely to result in much momentum. For example, those thinking of doing “courses” had sometimes talked with friends or family about their plans, and the few with Internet access tended to make decisions on the basis of information they collected from the websites of educational providers. For some, there did seem to be a “disconnect” between what they wanted to do, what they could do and how they thought their lives might “move forward” as a consequence.

Research with young mothers attending Teen Parenting Units found that being “in school” gave the women opportunities to build positive maternal identities, as well as to identify concrete and practical steps they might need to take to “sort their lives out” (for example, getting a driver’s licence, establishing a flat, completing qualifications) (Patterson, Forbes, Peace, & Campbell, 2010). The young mothers in *Tracks to Adulthood* did not have any similar institutional source of support. As motherhood has become increasingly individuated, their opportunities for future security and independence are especially constrained given the dominance of social norms that prescribe employment as the primary marker of adulthood and citizenship, as well as important for enabling choices (and momentum) across fields. Although motherhood gives these young people access to an adult social identity as mothers, they are *individuals* who, in enacting the choice biography, are compelled to piece together their lives as *mothers* in circumstances very different from the other young people.

## 8 Lives in context: Situating experiences biographically and socially

The experiences of the young people who participated in *Tracks to Adulthood* suggest the transition to adulthood is neither linear nor unidirectional, and multiple experiences and “pathways” criss-cross in unexpected ways. Looking back at the young people’s experiences since leaving school until age 21 are the tracks of the different transitions that have enabled or constrained the particularities of the momentum each has experienced. On leaving school, the young people’s biographical “starting points” were already quite varied. Importantly, though, at the point of leaving school, the young people’s lives were *not* laid out before them (“like tram lines”). What young people do and the “choices” they make does influence what might happen next, but it is also apparent that how lives turn out is shaped by social context.

The young people’s biographies are socially situated in that the “choices” they make occur within the context of social structures and relationships, and the resources young people can draw upon. In looking back over the young people’s lives, as well as looking forward at what they hope might happen next, the salience of other fields becomes very apparent. Although the findings presented in this report have focused on the young people’s experiences (since leaving school) of work, post-school education and training, unemployment and motherhood, young people’s lives unfold across fields. Other fields and the connections between them are briefly discussed below: relationships with others (young people’s friends, families, their boyfriends and girlfriends and partners); and living circumstances, in particular, the transition from living “at home” to “flatting” and living with others.

For many of the young people, moving away from home was an important event in their transition to adulthood and an assertion of personal independence. Most of the young people moved from home when they had acquired the (financial) resources to do so and some of those still at home identified moving out as something they were planning to do once they had “secure” jobs and more reliable incomes. For most, flatting was a “fast track” to adulthood, although rarely linear. Some of the young people had returned home at least once because of the expense, or because of the poor condition of the flats they lived in. Some of these young people talked of moving back home “to save”: typically to buy a house, although some were saving for other goals, usually a holiday overseas.

Some young people were “still living at home”. Some lived at home because they simply could not afford to leave, and this seemed especially the experience of young people whose transition experience followed the yo-yo pattern. For others, living at home was an active choice. These young people (typically the school completers) tended to be in work and to be living “at home as adults”.

Young people in more secure jobs and who were flatting seemed to have more settled living circumstances than young people whose jobs were less secure. Young workers tended to be in shared flats with other young people, sometimes including their partner. Almost all of these young people saw themselves as now “independent”. And just as some young people’s experience of work followed a yo-yo pattern, some young people moved in and out of flats and family homes *depending* on what else was happening in their lives. These young people were often in part-time or casual jobs, and where and how they lived was closely tied to where and how much work they had and vice versa.

By age 21, many of the young people had friends who had moved away for work or further study, and their friendship patterns were changing. Some of the young people had established new friendship groups in addition to school friends they remained in contact with, and new friends tended to be people they met through work or through their living circumstances. Nevertheless, by age 21, some of the mothers seemed especially isolated and their friendship networks

were comparatively small, perhaps reflecting the constraints of parenting alone and its immobilising impact on social interaction more generally.

Looking back over all the young people's biographies, many of the early experiences of leaving home and flatting are tied to stories of socialising and a sense of freedom to live a life of one's own. Some of the early school-leavers spoke of socialising as an important dimension of their post-school experience, especially "drinking" and "partying all the time". For most, this became less frequent as they got older. Some positioned their former "younger selves" as "party selves", and themselves at 21 as more "settled selves". Turning 21 was a watershed: a time to reflect on one's life to date which sometimes compelled personal changes and the assertion of a more "mature" self.

By age 21, some of the young people were in settled, intimate relationships and on trajectories to futures focused on forming their own families. Others were in intimate relationships that were less "traditionally" focused, although important in their lives at the moment, as well as how they saw their futures unfolding. Close, intimate relationships were the source of considerable momentum for some young people: they were moving toward *shared* secure and independent futures with their partners.

For other young people, intimate relationships had, and continued to, constrain the choices they could make. Some of the young people had experienced relationships that were markedly immobilising. Several of the young women spoke of "not doing anything"—not going to school, or to work or maintaining their friendship groups—because of the expectations or demands of their boyfriends. Two of the mothers at 20 had experienced violent intimate relationships, and one young woman in a violent relationship saw few "choices" ahead.

Nevertheless, many of the other young people imagined futures in which intimate relationships and having a family were implicitly or explicitly envisaged. These futures are also marked by gender norms that enable and constrain *individual* "choices" in other fields such as education and employment. The contradiction between modern gender norms and late modern choice is not unique to young people in New Zealand. In regard to young Europeans, Bernhardt (2001) has noted:

"… young men and young women navigate quite differently because they anticipate different future life-course patterns—because, in many ways, they set different priorities in life, at least in relative terms [...] especially with regard to paid and unpaid work … [some] women show a more tenuous attachment to the labour market for a substantial part of their life course, and they put greater importance on family care work in their life, be it as a reality or as an anticipated future situation." (p. 106)

## 9 Discussion and concluding remarks

*Tracks to Adulthood* has focused on pathways between school and early adulthood that appeared less straightforward than the path to tertiary education, where school-leavers have taken less with them in the way of school qualifications, or where they have moved rapidly into employment or motherhood.

The key findings from this research are:

- Most of the young people imagined futures—as adults—marked by *independence and security*. Work is central to this imagined future. Many aspired to owning their own homes, then forming families by having children. For some of the young people, work has already moved them some way along this path. Those in secure work are generally also flatting, some are saving to buy a house and some are living with partners and imagining a shared secure and independent future. For others, working *in* or *at* was secure in the past, but unemployment (and the recession) has interrupted momentum toward their imagined future across fields.
- *Biographical momentum* is socially patterned. Differences in momentum accorded by similar events and experiences illustrate that individual biographies are socially situated, and vary according to the resources young people can draw upon as their lives move forward. For example, those who were “returning to learning”—going to university some years after leaving school—had the strong support of mothers who themselves were university graduates. The biographical patterns identified in this research are summarised in Appendix 1.
- Young people’s memories of leaving school continue to shape their biographies at age 21. As young people move towards their futures, memories of leaving school continue to influence how they see themselves as learners, as well as their aspirations in regard to futures as workers *and* learners (for most), or as workers rather than learners (for some):
  - The young people who left school because they remembered “School was not for me” (all early school-leavers, including all five mothers at age 20) have tended to work in *any and many* jobs with little job security. They tend to have either no post-school education and training or to have completed low-level courses that have not led to related employment or on to courses at higher levels.
  - The young people who remembered leaving school because “Lots of things were happening in my life” (all early school-leavers) or because “It was time to leave” (some early school-leavers and all the school completers) have tended to move into more secure work over time. Although they may have worked *in* (for example, “*in retail*”), *for* (for example, “*for McDonalds*”) or *at* (for example, “*at the supermarket*”) when they left school, some are working *as* (for example, “*as a nanny*”) by age 21. For these young people, post-school education and training at Level 4 or above speeds up momentum, offering a trajectory to adulthood and a transition experience through which independence and security have already consolidated in their lives to date.

These findings illustrate the connections between individual biographies and social context. Young people’s experience of the transition to adulthood is also in the context of the transition system and the policies in place to assist young people as they piece together their lives. The OECD (2003) identified six key ingredients of a successful transition system as:

- a healthy economy
- well-organised pathways that connect initial education with work and further study
- widespread opportunities to combine workplace experience with education
- tightly-knit safety nets for those at risk
- good information and guidance
- effective institutions and processes.

Importantly, neither transition systems nor individual biographies are static; both are situated by wider economic and social conditions. Indeed, the current recession is changing the direction of some young people's lives. While some young people continue to successfully navigate some well-organised educational pathways (and benefit from the momentum earlier pathways afforded them), post-school education and training does have uneven consequences. There is incongruence between some courses and subsequent employment, especially if those courses are "low-level". Although for some young people opportunities to combine workplace experience with education are available, these do seem to be limited to and accessed mainly by young people moving toward working *as*.

At a broad societal level, effective institutions and processes mean transitions across fields are possible (for example, post-school educational opportunities are available for young people; the labour market is regulated in terms of wages and conditions), safety nets for those at risk are in place and young people do use them (for example, a few of the young people had recently registered as unemployed). And when young people "get stuck" (for example, experience unemployment) *they* do find ways to "move on". The participants in this research were piecing together their lives, and making choices about what to do next in the context of the past, the futures to which they aspired and the resources they could access.

In addition, the biographies explored and patterns identified offer some insight into four aspects of the emerging model of youth transition in relation to the New Zealand transition system. These are:

- the risk of inactivity after leaving school
- lifelong learning and learning for life
- young people as decision-makers, taking and making opportunities for themselves
- adulthood marked by periods of combined employment and study through life, and commitment to marriage and parenting later in life.

These four aspects are discussed in turn.

### **The risk of inactivity after leaving school**

If "the risk of inactivity" is understood by researchers and policy makers *as* unemployment, "unemployment" is often understood by young people as requiring them to *act*, to do something. For the participants in this research, unemployment and inactivity did not endure over time as synonymous and simultaneous biographical experiences. If unemployed, these young people did seek to do something, and to make and enact choices to move their lives forward, towards the futures to which they aspired.

The participants in *Tracks to Adulthood* are *active* in piecing together their lives. Irrespective of their current situations, their biographies are marked by events and experiences, the temporal ordering of which then moves their life forward. Nevertheless, despite their activity, for some young people,

momentum may be constrained. The sense of their lives moving toward the futures they imagine slows if they do not have access to paid work.

For some young people, inactivity (in the form of unemployment) is related in their accounts to “choices” in other fields. Some young women spoke of intimate relationships that constrained momentum in the fields of education or employment but enabled them (at least, from their perspective) to experience some momentum in their personal lives.

It is also important to note the experience of young people who become mothers in relation to the “risk of inactivity”. Powerful stereotypes continue to position young mothers as seeking “lifestyles” to avoid (for example, participation in paid work). This stereotype does not hold in relation to the young mothers who participated in *Tracks to Adulthood*. In addition to being active caregivers for young children, these women are seeking ways forward towards the futures they imagine. Before pregnancy and childbirth, most were moving toward those futures through paid work, and after becoming mothers they do not imagine futures in which they are not working *because* they are mothers. Nevertheless, as young mothers, their ways forward are now constrained by their care responsibilities. In this sense, they are not “like” other young people: the “choices” they make and enact will require specific and additional resources, and they will have consequences for them, and their children, as their lives unfold.

### **Lifelong learning and learning for life**

The young people who participated in *Tracks to Adulthood* are all experienced learners. Nevertheless, how they understand themselves as learners as well as the place of learning in their biographies (and their imagined futures) is marked by considerable variation. This is important, because lifelong learning and learning for life are related processes through which researchers and policy makers sometimes infer that if individuals were, for example, “lifelong learners”, they will be able to adapt to the changing (and as yet unknown) economic and social circumstances that are likely to shape their future working lives.

While some of the young people’s biographies suggest they understand learning as a skill and a lifelong process (rather than an sequestered biographical “event” through which there is an attempt to transfer “knowledge” to them), for some young people, learning and working are, at best, lightly tied within their biographies, *as yet*. It does seem that some young people who remember leaving school through the story “School was not for me” frame formal learning as something that is already “over” for them, and that although future “choices” to undertake formal learning may be imposed on them, this is *not* the future to which they aspire. For these young people, practical work they can master through doing (rather than “learning”) is a valued biographical experience, and one they hope will continue. Their concern about “formal” learning in their futures tracks back biographically to their experiences of learning while at school, and negative experiences at school (of the culture, or the curriculum or pedagogy) do seem to reach forward into these young people’s lives.

The relationship between learning and working seems to be bifurcated between those early-leavers whose post-school biographies are marked by continuous employment (and comparatively rapid “transitions” to adulthood across fields) and those marked by the yo-yo pattern of employment, unemployment and “courses” (and the other contingent “transitions” they tended to experience). For the first group, learning and work are two separate and opposing fields, until a biographical event, typically unemployment, makes this separation *personally* troubling. These young people have histories of secure jobs where formal learning has not been a priority. They learn and develop skills as workers, but this does not necessarily have consequences in terms of how they see themselves as learners.

For the second, “yo-yo” group, new learning experiences structure their biographies through their enrolment in what appear to be vocationally focused courses. While for this group learning and working

seems tied in their decision-making (doing a course to get a job); it remains *untied* biographically. While they may get jobs, they are rarely linked to what they have been “trained” in; and if they go on to do further courses, these are not at a higher level or do not necessarily build on what they have done previously. And as the connections between learning and working remain (or become) compromised as their lives unfold (albeit for different reasons), notions of luck or fate might be called in to make sense of what has happened and what one should do next. Luck (imagining winning Lotto) could “smooth” the futures of those unable to connect their learning with employment (because in their experience, they do not connect); and fate (losing one’s job when an employer “goes under”) can interrupt what might have been secure employment and compel young people to revisit the place of learning in their futures in ways in which they may hitherto have thought unnecessary.

For young people who left school because “It was time to leave” or because “A lot of things were happening in my life”, learning does seem to remain a biographical resource. Some young people who leave school and “work *in*”, “work *at*” or “work *for*” (and especially those who end up “working *as*”) see learning as something they can formally embark on at *any time*. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there are some similarities in the ways these young people’s biographies unfold and the identity claims of both the “Passion Honers” and the “Confident Explorers” identified in previous transition research (Vaughan et al., 2006). Although the biographies of participants in *Tracks to Adulthood* diverge after leaving school, some carry with them, through their memories of school, positive learning identities that continue, or are reigned, as their lives unfold.

### **Young people as decision-makers, taking and making opportunities for themselves**

*Tracks to Adulthood* shows that being in work is important for young people. Work makes possible the futures they aspire to across fields. Thus, young people make “choices” about work: some develop vocational identities that open-up trajectory-like transitions into security and independence across fields; others seek *any and many* jobs or secure jobs working *in* or *for* that also give momentum, albeit sometimes contingent, in fields important for the young people themselves.

Young people who have “less work” in their biographies to date (for whatever reason) also have less momentum more generally towards the futures they imagine and aspire to. For some, the consequence of “less work” in the past is futures envisaged as more contingent and provisional than those of other young people. This pattern across biographies suggests that if young people’s lives are to turn out well, then participation in secure work is important for independence, in the present as well as in the longer term. This does not mean that all young people want the secure work that gives rise to vocational identities. But young people do want jobs that enable them to enact choices in other fields with some security as they move forward from the present (for example, to live in their own flat [and know they can pay the rent] or to save to buy a house [and know that saving is possible]).

When young people experience insecure work they seek ways to improve their circumstances by making decisions about changing jobs or engaging with post-school education and training. An important finding from this research is that many young people explore their “options” with little additional support and guidance as well as with little evidence of acquiring career decision-making skills, either when they were at school or forwards into the present. Most young people make choices in the context of the information they gather from the providers of education or training courses themselves, and/or sometimes in discussion with family members or friends. While young people are active decision-makers, it does not mean they are equally skilled or resourced to “know” *how* to decide what to do next, including assessing the consequences of the choices they make.

From the young people's perspective looking back, "bad" choices included choosing vocationally-oriented courses that either did not lead to congruent work, or led to congruent work with low pay or poor conditions, and which then compromised momentum in other fields.

Not all similar choices have the same consequences. For some young people, courses that do not lead to employment can have positive consequences, or may do into the future. They may be the only qualification the young person is currently carrying forward and have symbolic importance because of that. They may simply feel better about themselves, the things they can do or the processes they understand, as a consequence of course completion. This greater confidence becomes a biographical resource supporting a sense of personal agency to enhance momentum.

The young people's biographies suggest that a gendered labour market and a gendered education market are two important contexts within which they piece together their lives. This is contrary to the assumption that gender is less relevant in a choice biography. The gendered labour market and gendered education market are important to acknowledge because they enable and constrain the choices young people make, as well as the futures they imagine. It is important to think about the consequences of resilient gender norms that still press upon some young men in ways that privilege modes and forms of work that are fast disappearing. Similarly, it is important to consider the ways in which young women "invest" in education and training, or participate in paid work in particular ways, because they simultaneously imagine family life as the primary field in which they hope their futures will play out. Gendered labour and education markets do "channel" young people into masculine and feminine futures. At the same time, some of the young people do imagine futures in which they aspire to lives akin to the gendered tram lines of the past.

### **Adulthood as marked by periods of combined employment and study through life, and commitment to marriage and parenting later in life**

Although the transition to adulthood may no longer be shared experiences at approximately the same age for young people from similar backgrounds, multiple "transition" possibilities still privilege an idealised life course in which key events occur in the "correct" order, at about the "correct" time and in the context of particular conditions. Nevertheless, individual lives do not necessarily unfold in orderly and timely fashion. The temporal order of events or experiences in our lives shapes our choices, and the resources we can draw upon to enact them as we move along the life course. More importantly, we all make sense of our lives in the context of prevailing biographical norms; the widely shared expectations about how lives *should* unfold.

Young mothers' lives do not follow contemporary biographical norms, because of their (biological) *age* when they become mothers, and because their (biographical) *stage* is inconsistent with the expectations of temporality that govern the lives of most. Contemporary biographical and citizenship norms in which participation in paid work is *the* pathway to future independence and security are at variance to temporality which characterises young mothers' biographies. Getting young mothers "back on track" may be particularly challenging, especially given that the young mothers in this research were all early-leavers, all remembered school as "not for me" and their choices as they move their lives forward are shaped by the practical demands of motherhood.

Powerful stereotypes continue to position young mothers as often seeking "lifestyles" to avoid paid work. This stereotype does not hold in relation to the young mothers in this research. Before pregnancy and childbirth, their lives were moving forward through paid work, and after becoming mothers they do not imagine futures in which they are not working *because* they are mothers. Nevertheless, as *young mothers*, opportunities for momentum towards the futures to which they aspire are now constrained by their responsibilities as *adults*.

Understanding how young people's lives unfold in the context of the contemporary biographical norm—a choice biography—is important, because the choices young people make have consequences for them, as well as for the communities in which they live. The diversity of biographical patterns identified, and the fact that similar choices can result in very different biographical consequences, means that refining the policy mix to enable and maximise momentum to an adulthood that is both independent and secure will need to take account of this diversity.

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# Appendix 1: Summary of participants' biographical patterns

The past Leaving school	The present Doing now	Tracking back Education	Tracking back Work	Biographical momentum
" <i>It was time to leave</i> " <i>or</i> " <i>School was not for me</i> "	Working at age 21  No relevant post-school education and training	No related post-school education or training  Some informal learning at work  Some formal training through work	Comparatively secure and full-time employment  working <i>in</i> working <i>for</i>	Transitions across biographical fields
" <i>It was time to leave</i> " <i>or</i> " <i>Lots of things were happening in my life</i> "	Working at age 21  Post-school education and training	Completed qualification at Level 4 or above  Qualifications "close to industry"	Previously working <i>in</i> working <i>at</i>  Now, secure employment working <i>as</i>	Trajectory-like transition into vocational identity  Security and independence consolidating across biographical fields
" <i>Lots of things were happening in my life</i> "	In education with a career goal  Returned to learning	Completed "preparation for university" course  Educational pathway "close" to experiential context	Increasingly secure employment over time  working <i>for</i> working <i>at</i>	Transitions across biographical fields  A trajectory towards working <i>as</i>
" <i>It was time to leave</i> "	In education with a career goal  Gap year	Enrolled in Level 7 qualification	"Gap year"  working <i>for</i> working <i>at</i>	Transitions across biographical fields  A trajectory towards working <i>as</i>
" <i>School was not for me</i> "	NEET at 20, studying or unemployed at age 21	Low-level course/s  Qualifications do not lead on to related work, or to education or training at higher levels	Any and many jobs  Insecure employment  working <i>in</i> working <i>at</i> working <i>for</i>  Connections between jobs weak	Contingent transitions across biographical fields

<b>The past Leaving school</b>	<b>The present Doing now</b>	<b>Tracking back Education</b>	<b>Tracking back Work</b>	<b>Biographical momentum</b>
"School was not for me"	Recently unemployed	Low-level course immediately post-school  or  No post-school qualifications	<i>Any and many</i> jobs, insecure employment  or  Secure employment  <i>working in</i>  <i>working at</i>	Contingent transitions across biographical fields  or  Rapid transitions across biographical fields, but new contingencies emerging
"School was not for me"	Mother at age 20	No post-school qualifications completed  or  completed qualifications (Level 4 and above) but weak links to congruent employment	<i>Any and many</i> jobs  <i>working at</i>  <i>working for</i>  Increasingly secure employment over time  <i>working at</i>  <i>working in</i>	[Before motherhood]  Contingent transitions across biographical fields  [As mothers]  Transformation, irreversible fast track to adulthood