



NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

TE RŪNANGA O AOTEAROA MŌ TE RANGAHAU I TE MĀTAURANGA

# Young People Producing Careers and Identities

The Executive Summary of the first report  
from NZCER's *Pathways and Prospects* project

*Karen Vaughan, Josie Roberts, and Ben Gardiner*

## Executive Summary

This is the first major report from the Pathways and Prospects research study about pathway and career-related experiences and perspectives of young people after leaving school. It investigates how young people make decisions about their careers and working life, including any part that indecision and “changes of heart” might play in that. This investigation raises some issues about the framework used in thinking about how to support young people in transition. It suggests we take more of a focus on *career and identity production*.

Pathways and Prospects is a 4-year longitudinal study that asks: How do young people describe what they are doing and what it means in their lives? How do they see themselves in relation to their pathways? And what can we learn in relation to policies and practices, and where they might usefully go from here?

The research was prompted by our interest in the way young people tend to be seen as the problem of transition through a “pathways framework” coming from three system-wide shifts in New Zealand (Vaughan, 2004)—a largely deregulated tertiary system, a National Qualifications Framework, and an increase in career development support for a wider range of post-school careers, particularly vocationally-oriented ones. It was also prompted by an interest in the different responsibilities and insecurities faced by young people than previous generations, particularly the way they are now required to engage in a continuous series of decisions, beginning at school, that will shape their lives and careers, their pathways (Vaughan, 2003).

We therefore wanted find out more about what a pathways framework meant in practice, testing the assumptions behind the policy and research approaches that typically track young people's

post-school *activities* and then draw conclusions about the state of their *transition*. We also wanted to learn about how different young people actually experience and make sense of transition. We were interested in what Raffe (2003) refers to as “the relationship between pathways and navigations”: the process and lived meaning of pathway learning and career-related things people do.

In taking this approach, *Pathways and Prospects* highlights that an understanding of identity production and career production is crucially missing in much transition policy and research.

## Young people and participation

We conducted semi-structured and unstructured interviews with 114 young people who had left school during or at the end of 2003, and had opted into one of the following recognised post-school study, training, and/or employment programmes in six major pathway organisations:

- Modern Apprenticeships (trade; public sector);
- The New Zealand Army (officers; soldiers);
- Polytechnic courses (cookery; foundation health);
- University degree programmes (arts; science; teaching);
- University bridging programmes (arts or science specialism); and
- Youth training courses (business administration/computing).

Accessing young people through these pathway organisations gave us a mix of vocational fit, fee-paying and earning-while-learning arrangements, entry requirements, course length, institutional structures, and participant living environments.

At this point in the study, nearly all participants have been interviewed twice. One hundred and fourteen were interviewed early in 2004 as they began their new programmes and 103 of them were interviewed again 10–15 months later.

The interviews asked young people to tell their stories of negotiating pathways, describe and reflect on choices and choice-making processes, and share their opinions about goal setting, being a particular age, work/life balance, and their hopes and fears for the future.

## Analysis approach

This report focuses on the processes and meaning of pathways choices. To see patterns around this more clearly, we took an innovative approach to analysing the interviews narratives. We used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse the interviews in terms of the major choice themes of *security* and *exploration*. Through quantitative analysis, the dimensions of security and exploration clustered into Exploration, Contingent Security, and Secure Commitment factors, and the interviews clustered into four groups with distinct profiles.

The clusters are used in the report as a lens through which to examine different young people's perspectives, trajectories, motivations, and outlooks. The indicators, factors, and clusters are not designed as checklists to categorise young people. However, they are useful for making sense of young people's narratives and for thinking about the different pushes and pulls they experience. The clusters also challenge accepted ways of thinking about security and exploration in youth transition. They point to fresh possibilities for supporting young people in career development.

## **The Hopeful Reactors: Contingent Security**

The Hopeful Reactors constituted 14 percent of all interviews and were the smallest of the four clusters. There was a notable over-representation of people with few or no school qualifications who were also taking the less prestigious pathway options when compared with other clusters (just over half had no school qualifications and less than 20 percent achieved NCEA Level 2). Youth trainees and army personnel, mainly soldiers, were over-represented, as were Pacific peoples, Māori, and women. There were no university students.

Interviewees tended to be concerned about a lack of options and lack of planning leaving school, financial security, and the possibility of experiencing failure. Their pathway options tended to represent an escape from, or avoidance of, something negative or potentially damaging in their lives. They tended to describe having entered their pathway as a result of being directed into it by their school and sometimes their family and friends, after finding they had few or no real alternative pathway options. Although Hopeful Reactors had low ratings for "career identity" and often little sense of long-term purpose or interest in their pathway option, they were very committed to finding that purpose with its reward of feeling valued, at some point. They used their pathway options to engage in a (re)construction of their "learning careers" (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000), helping them emerge into a form of adulthood that no longer depended on school achievement or other people's (sometimes limited) visions of who they were or could be. Thus "success" was in part contingent upon them remaining with the pathway, even if it was no longer engaging. Their early career development was about the development of the possibility of "career". The Hopeful Reactors' maxim could be: "I'm not going to end up a bum."

## **The Confident Explorers: Exploration**

The Confident Explorer interviews constituted 29 percent of all interviews, the second largest cluster. They had a fairly even distribution of interviews from youth trainees, university, and bridging participants. The Confident Explorers' combination of the Exploration and the Secure Commitment factors illustrated how particular aspects of exploration behaviour and mindsets emerge from goal-driven dispositions and a genuine commitment to following a pathway. The interviewees in this cluster expected and sought personal and career challenges and were dedicated to exploring within and beyond their current pathway option, adjusting their pathways in the direction of unfolding interests. Most saw a range of options open to them after school, and

their interests often guided their decision-making, even when they were not highly successful at school.

They saw career in a wide sense, approaching it through *themselves*. They were the most short-term committed to their current pathway of all clusters on average but they did not have a clear career identity that could be mapped to a specific career. They *did* have a clear sense of purpose and made detailed plans about their current pathways and their anticipated future ones. Their overall framework was generally not attached to a particular job, vocation, or profession; it was attached to being a particular kind of person with a range of high-level and adaptable skills. They seemed to have grasped the idea of uncertainty through a certainty that they and their jobs would change over time and that they could prepare for this—not by guarding against change but by embracing the challenge and stimulation of change. By exploring and creating linkages between different possibilities in their lives, they saw potential to “tune” their learning and qualifications to their interests, motivations, and talents, and then to the current and future labour market (Wijers & Meijers, 1996). They did not manage a specific career in the sense of vocation; they managed themselves as an ongoing enterprise. The Confident Explorers’ maxim could be: “I’m creating my self for my future.”

## The Anxious Seekers: Exploration

The Anxious Seekers cluster was almost as large, constituting 24 percent of all interviews. Youth trainees and bridging participants comprised the majority of interviews and there was a similar number of army interviews compared to the Hopeful Reactors and Confident Explorers. There was a small number of university interviews and a similar number of apprentice interviews to the Hopeful Reactors.

As their cluster name suggests, they were the most apprehensive and restless of the clusters. They were the most dissatisfied with their current pathway option and about three-quarters of the interviews were rated highly for seriously considering, if not actually formally committed to, a different pathway than the one they were currently pursuing. Sometimes the original pathway option was not what they had expected and sometimes they had entered it somewhat reluctantly in an effort to meet family expectations.

The Anxious Seekers were characterised by a pervasive sense of doubt about their lives and pathway choices, and they engaged in pathway costs-benefits analyses which weighed heavily upon them. Many felt overwhelmed by the decisions they needed to make or information they needed to take into account. They were concerned about losing out—either by sticking with a pathway option that was not right for them or by changing to another one that might turn out to be worse. Their doubt about choices and how to “maximise” them (Schwartz, 2004) meant they tended to avoid making detailed plans lest these contribute to expanding possibilities and further doubt. If one pathway did not lead to fulfilment, they tended to see it as confirmation of its unsustainability and sought something entirely different as its counterweight. Career was a

process fraught with confusing change that they longed to “pin down” to a specific recognisable job title. Their maxim could be: “I don’t know which way to turn.”

## The Passion Honers: Secure Commitment

The Passion Honers’ interviews constituted 34 percent of the interviews and it was the largest cluster. They were dominated by army participants and with a relatively even distribution of interviews from apprentices, university, bridging, and polytechnic participants. It had the smallest number of interviews from youth trainees across the clusters.

These interviewees were happy, enthusiastic, and certain about their pathway choice, and pleased with the decisions they made. Few were exploring widely beyond their pathway option, though some were considering how they might take their interest further through specialisation or into a related opportunity. The Passion Honers were largely contentedly attached to a specific vocation, having used existing, and sometimes emerging, interests to gain a foothold into a specific field or industry. They are probably the best example of success within a typical early career development model, although they also drew attention to the complexity of career development in action, showing that it is not a static thing but a dynamic process.

They tended to have a fairly coherent picture of themselves, incorporating apparent contradictions in their feelings (e.g. their reactions to difficulties) towards the greater goal of success in their chosen pathway. However, their more narrow view of career-as-vocation was to some extent offset by an emerging view of career-as-process in terms of their identities as learner-workers. Most of the interviews in the cluster were from young people who were either in options that challenged the traditional education/employment split, such as earning-while-learning apprenticeships and army careers (which included some apprenticeships), or short-term vocation-specific learning, such as polytechnic courses in cookery, health, and nursing which moved people into ongoing workplace development. Consequently a high proportion of this cluster was employed and earning National Qualification Framework credits. They were therefore engaged in career management in its most formal and traditional sense of taking opportunities, many of them structured into their jobs, to increase skill levels within a specified field. The Passion Honers’ maxim could be: “I’m becoming something in a secure career.”

## Rethinking security and exploration

The Passion Honers and Hopeful Reactors showed that security can come through *commitment to* or *escape from*, respectively. This suggests that when we talk about job security or a secure pathway, we might need to think about the kind of security being sought and the motivations for doing so. The low exploration ratings for Hopeful Reactors and Passion Honers were mainly driven by a lack of interest in, or commitment to, pathways other than the one with which they were currently engaged. Each cluster faced different risks and threats to particular identities—for

example, the Passion Honers strived to become people who “know their stuff” and the Hopeful Reactors saw themselves as people who could “rise above” circumstance. In such a context, exploration would have been a luxury for the Hopeful Reactors whereas exploration for the Passion Honers occurred only in an intra-pathway, rather the inter-pathway, sense. The different dimensions of security in Hopeful Reactors’ and Passion Honers’ narratives had a significance that squeezed out considering alternative pathways or exploring different careers.

The Confident Explorers and Anxious Seekers clusters challenged some commonly accepted ways of thinking about the role of exploration in youth transition. The first challenge came through an illustration of how exploration can come from both security *or* insecurity. The Confident Explorers used existing security to build a platform for further exploration. Their previous school achievement and entry into pathway options that they found interesting and challenging provided the impetus to pursue and explore more opportunities. For them, exploration was not something they did, perhaps through school subjects or transition programmes, in order to find out their interests or aptitudes, then choose a pathway, settle down, and stop exploring. Instead—and this is the second challenge—exploration was something that *emerged from* positive experiences and allowed them to *continue* expanding, and making, choices.

The Anxious Seekers, on the other hand, were driven to explore by a Contingent Security that looked much like *insecurity*. What could they gain—but what might they lose—by changing pathways? Exploration was not a warm, exciting, activity but was instead riven with paralysing doubt. The third challenge suggested by their narratives is that exploration need not be the product of a *lack* of information about possible options, but can be about a struggle for a framework in which to *make sense of* possible options, and find *support* in order to make decisions. Finally, the Anxious Seekers illustrated that exploration could be a frightening place, prompting attempts to create security in the form of backup plans.

## Career-as-process

The clusters underscore a need to move beyond careers education and guidance to careers *management*, in line with the idea of *career development*. The distinction between guidance, which is built on models of skill matching and vocational aptitudes, and management, which addresses the role of the learner and worker, is critical. This is because vocational matching approaches are increasingly difficult to sustain in a world of “accelerated flows” (of people, ideas, money) between nations (Appadurai, 1996), fragmenting structures (Beck, 1999), and a rapidly changing labour market. As challenges for individuals shift from securing a job once to finding jobs repeatedly throughout life (Wijers & Meijers, 1996), we need to shift away from career advice being tied to existing skills and aptitudes towards management of self and skills for careers that are possibly as yet unheard of, perhaps in hybridised fields or disciplines.

This means that “career” is now a very different thing, no longer a structure but a process (Wijers & Meijers, 1996). It also means that we need to think beyond knowledge for storing up, and instead think of knowledge in terms of what it can *do* (Gilbert, 2005) because the most important

form of knowledge is now ontological (Barnett, 2004), about how individuals can *be* in the world. This shift also means that workplaces will increasingly be seen as learning environments (Billett, 2006), as ongoing changes in the prioritising of workplace learning in New Zealand suggest.

The Confident Explorers, and to some extent the Passion Honers, already seem in step with career development directions. However, the Confident Explorers' approach is also the most likely of all clusters to be misunderstood in relation to existing policy because it appears to subvert accepted ideas about pathway trajectories and appropriately meaningful choices. They are perhaps the best example of what young people could be supported to do but it may be that those who support them—teachers, parents, policy makers—will not be comfortable with the new terms of the arrangement.

If we want policies to be better aligned with young people's actual priorities and needs, we do need to shift our thinking. It needs to move away from pathways and navigations within a simple model of transition-to-labour market to something that takes account of *identity production* and *career as process*. Young people's narratives across all clusters highlight that:

- careers decision making is not a single decision at a single point in time;
- differing levels of commitment to any pathway option may or may not be the same as commitment to a specific career; and
- similar orientations may be based on quite different, but equally valid, reasoning.

In other words, it is vital to look beyond the surface because measuring the face-value instances of activities is not enough to understand *the meaning that young people make* of those activities and their role in their lives. Young people emphasise *process* in transition. In doing so, they disrupt some commonly held assumptions about security and exploration motivations and behaviours. Understanding *identity and career production* is therefore not only an acknowledgement of *career as process* (Wijers & Meijers, 1996), but also an acknowledgement that career development is *for* a society where the roles of learner and worker continue to change.