

Making a place in the world:

Experiences of those who took less
conventional paths from school

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1. Introduction

How do those who leave school early or take less conventional paths from school build their adult lives?¹ What enables them to find—or make—their place in the world? This report focuses on how some of these young women and men who took part in the longitudinal Competent Learners study² learnt about what they needed to do to live adult lives and build a sense of belonging. By belonging, I mean their sense of belonging to people and places that matter to them, and a sense of having a place in the world.

Young people’s relationships to people and places are a source of well-being and security, particularly in times of uncertainty. The idea of belonging refers to but transcends the policy focus on social inclusion based exclusively on participation in education and employment ... A metaphor of belonging opens up the possibility of understanding how young people build their life across time and in different locations.³

At age 20, these 19 young people had left school early, were not in employment or training, or were looking after their children. When they were 21, they talked in some depth to Lesley Patterson about what they had done since school, and why, and what their goals and hopes were for the future.⁴

When they were 26, I wanted to understand more about the experiences and perspectives of those who had been in the five different post-school situations that Lesley identified, and the role that relationships, education, and employment have played. What decisions had they made in relation to thinking about their future, and how had those decisions, coupled with their experiences, narrowed or expanded their options?

The questions investigated in this research, and which I will return to in the final section of the report, are:

¹ Significant and persistent disadvantages have been identified for those who leave school with no qualifications. See Scott, D. (2018). *Post-school labour-market outcomes of school-based NCEA*. Available at: <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/80898/post-school-labour-market-outcomes-of-school-based-ncea>

² This more in-depth report complements the first two reports from the final phase of the Competent Learners project. *Shaping adulthood* reports on all the 26-year-old participants’ relationships, values, and experiences, and what had changed since age 20, using material from all those who completed an online survey ($n = 323$) and were then also interviewed ($n = 303$). The focus of *Pathways, labour market experiences, and learning at work and beyond at age 26* is on all the participants’ work and learning. See <http://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/competent-children-competent-learners> for these two reports and those from the age 5 to age 20 phases.

³ See p. 913 of Cuervo, H., & Wyn, J. (2014). Reflections on the use of spatial and relational metaphors in youth studies. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(7), 901–915. (p. 907). doi: 10.1080/13676261.2013.878796

⁴ Patterson, L. (2011). *Tracks to adulthood. Post-school experiences of 21-year-olds: The qualitative component of Competent Learners @ 20*. Available at: <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/tracks-adulthood-post-school-experiences-21-year-olds>

- What role did learning play during emerging adulthood?
- What were the factors that expanded the range of options available to some participants and that constrained the options available to others during the decade after leaving school?
- For those who did not complete Year 13 and go directly to tertiary study and then employment, what helped them achieve a sense of belonging at 26?

Participants

Of the 29 young adults who were part of Patterson’s study at age 21, we were unable to contact nine. One further person agreed to be interviewed but subsequently took ill. The following list shows the post-school situations of the original 29 young people, and the number of them who were part of this follow-up study.

- Looking after their own child at 20 (three of the original five)
- Not employed, not in education or training (NEET) at 20 (four of the original five)
- Left school early, working at 20 (six of the original seven)
- Left school early, studying at 20 (two of the original six)
- Completed Year 13, immediate destination not study (four of the original six).

All 19 participants in this study were 26–27 years old at the time of these interviews (May–June 2016), although for simplicity I generally refer to them as being 26. Nine participants were living in Wellington, four in other parts of New Zealand, and six lived overseas.

All but one of the participants identified themselves as either New Zealanders, New Zealand European, or Pākehā New Zealanders. One participant identified as New Zealand Māori. Thirteen participants were women.

The interviews I carried out were put together with earlier information from the young adults’ participation in earlier Competent Learners’ study phases. The information I used includes material from structured interviews and online surveys in earlier phases, and the interview questions used at age 26 which you can find in the Appendix.

This information includes:

- their reasons for, and experiences of, leaving school (described in their interviews at ages 21 and 26)
- their predictions about their futures at ages 21 and 26
- what they actually did from the time they left school, until 26 (particularly learning, employment, and relationships), described in interviews
- from a survey at age 25, their formal education qualifications, advice they said they would give their younger selves about school, study, and looking for work, and regrets they expressed about their lives
- their thoughts about and experiences of adulthood, at age 26.

In our interviews, I asked the young people to look back as 26-year-olds on their experiences of leaving school and describe their learning and paid work since then. In doing so, they also describe the roles that family, friends, and partners have played in their lives during the decade after school. These relationships have been a particularly important part of their building a sense of belonging. To a lesser extent they describe connections to places which for a few, includes buying their first home. They also share their thoughts about what it means to be an adult, and their hopes and expectations for the future.

We learn from their stories how a range of young adults whose path from school was often unconventional, can make a place for themselves in the world. Some of these places are comfortable; others are not. Most have a sense of belonging, though often with some regret at not staying longer at school or gaining qualifications that would have expanded their subsequent options.

Emerging adulthood

Arnett⁵ described the period from the late teens through the twenties as “emerging adulthood”, a period characterised by diversity and unpredictability. During the period from 18 to 25 years in particular, most people make decisions that have enduring effects on their lives. “Emerging adults tend to have a wider scope of possible activities than persons in other age periods because they are less likely to be constrained by role requirements, and this makes their demographic status unpredictable.”⁶ Although not constrained by role requirements, not everyone in this age range actually has a wide scope of possibilities, as the stories reported here will show. Some did not have the opportunities to explore possible activities, and some preferred to limit their explorations.

Over the past 50 years or so, role expectations in emerging adulthood have changed and the relevance of some traditional patterns of living has decreased. For example, in New Zealand it is no longer normative to be establishing and settling into long-term adult roles before people are in their mid-twenties. Thus there has been a shift in the median age in New Zealand for women giving birth: in 1968, the median age was 25.1 years and in 2018 the median was 30.5 years.⁷ The labour market has also changed. A recent study in Australia found this was especially so for young people for whom “reaching their goal of achieving a secure, meaningful job can take up to a decade after leaving secondary school” and that young people’s work situations were more nuanced than previously.⁸ In a labour market with weaker links between education and employment, support from family becomes particularly important while young people are establishing themselves.⁹

More than linear pathways and transitions

Consistent with Arnett’s description of emerging adulthood as a period characterised by diversity and unpredictability with multiple influences on young people’s progress, we will see that changes of direction and unanticipated events were common amongst these 19 young people. Unpredictable features of their lives included becoming pregnant, inheriting money, being involved in accidents, and suffering ill health. For some,

⁵ Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480. doi: 10.1037//0003-066X.55.5.469

⁶ See p. 471 of Arnett (above).

⁷ From: <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/births-and-deaths-year-ended-december-2018>

⁸ See p. 8 of Crofts, J., Cuervo, H., Wyn, J., Smith, G., & Woodman, D. (2015). *Life patterns: Ten years following Generation Y*. Melbourne, VIC: Youth Research Centre. Retrieved 5 May 2016, from: <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A73899>

⁹ Chauvel, L. (2010). The long-term destabilization of youth, scarring effects, and the future of the welfare regime in post-trente glorieuses France. *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 28(3), 74–96.

these events contributed to a disruption of the common linear transition from secondary school to tertiary education to employment that is assumed in New Zealand policy.¹⁰ The following excerpt from the *Tertiary Education Commission Framework for youth and transitions*¹¹ illustrates this idea of transition:

While many school leavers who have gained NCEA level 2 or NCEA level 3 elect to and successfully transition directly from school to participate in tertiary education, a proportion of school leavers continue to leave school unable to progress to higher qualifications or are insufficiently equipped to contribute in the workplace.

Most of these 19 young adults' lives over the decade since leaving school were characterised by change. By age 26, they were coming to value stability and security, perhaps because they were also gaining increasing control of their lives. Two had worked in the same organisation for close to 10 years and were making headway in a financial sense. Some were less willing to have a landlord looking over their shoulder as they worked towards financial security which, for many, signalled the ability to buy their own home—a prerequisite for starting a family, in the eyes of some. Several had thrived living overseas, but others valued having a connection over an extended time to the same geographical area and the people they knew there.

Most of these 26-year-olds expressed confidence in their own abilities and a preference for self-reliance. Some took proactive decisions to help them live the life they wanted. This included identifying the need to do some study in order to change career direction, taking practical steps to improve their financial situation, or simply making their life—rather than experiencing it as something that happened to them.

The following pages traverse these young people's range of experiences and reactions related to learning, working, and belonging from school to age 26. I often use their own words, but I have given each participant a pseudonym and removed identifying details to respect the confidentiality of our interviews. A brief description of each of the participants is included in the Appendix.

¹⁰ Vocational Pathways is one example of connections between education and employment that have arisen from "... successful transition from secondary schooling into tertiary education and the workforce [being] a government priority" (p. 4 of *Career Education and Guidance in New Zealand schools*, 2009, Ministry of Education).

¹¹ See p. 3 of Tertiary Education Commission. (n.d.). *Tertiary Education Commission Framework for youth and transitions*. <https://www.tec.govt.nz/focus/our-focus/at-risk-youth/>

2. De-motivated at secondary school and unsure about the value of tertiary education

Many of the 19 participants in this study had not enjoyed a sense of purpose or belonging when they were in their last years of secondary school.

In Patterson's (2011) report, three main stories about leaving school were typified by these quotes from the then 21-year-olds:

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

Some early leavers had been de-motivated to remain at school because they saw their school learning or subjects as irrelevant to their futures. For a small number, peers influenced their decision to leave school. But although they no longer wanted to be at school, most had no clear idea what they wanted to do instead.

When the participants reflected on their departures from secondary school at 20 and 26, it was also evident that, at the time of leaving school, many had not known what they were going to do and some felt they didn't get the guidance they had needed at school.¹²

Tertiary study did not appeal if young people saw it as an extension of school, getting them into debt, or they had not identified an area of interest. Some participants were reluctant to take a student loan in order to undertake formal learning that might not necessarily lead to later employment. This left some participants with limited short-term possibilities. Others later opted to take a student loan or accept other financial support so that they could study.

Some saw school learning as irrelevant to their futures

When Tiffany, Natasha, and Nicole were at secondary school, they did not enjoy it and could not see the relevance.

Tiffany wanted hands-on learning:

¹² At the time this report was published, it was more than 10 years since these emerging adults had left school. During that time, a range of initiatives have been implemented to support stronger links between secondary school learning and post-school destinations, intended to help more young people find a place in the world where they feel they belong. For example, the Tertiary Education Commission initiatives include Gateway funding for secondary schools, Vocational Pathways, and Trades academies. For details, see <https://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/funding-and-performance/funding/fund-finder/gateway/>. These are widening some school options.

I'm more a practical learner, like I'm not very good at listening ... I'm more, you know, a hands-on learner I think. And I wasn't really doing any classes that had hands-on, except sewing, and everything else was, you know, like I was horrible at English. Well no, I was good, I was smart, but I just didn't like listening.

Later Tiffany found practical learning and gained a fashion design qualification that made a difference to her: "I didn't bring anything back from school, so having this is pretty cool, like, I don't feel as bad (laughter)."

Natasha left school at 15, part-way through Year 12. She hadn't enjoyed learning at either of the secondary schools she attended:

They wanted to kick me out of school when I was 14 because I liked to wag school and go to the classes that I felt I needed in my life, kind of thing. I didn't need English, I only needed maths and cooking because I wanted to be a chef ... It's too much book work and too much writing for me. I can't learn like that, I need hands on. Show me how to do something and man, I'll do it ... I love doing things with my hands. I can build desks and cabinets and things like that as well. I've learnt those kinds of skills from my family.

At 16, mid-way through Year 12, Nicole had left school with no qualifications. She had seen her school subjects as irrelevant to her future career:

Pretty much from when I was little I always wanted to do hairdressing ... I always thought that if I wanted to do hairdressing, what's the point of being at school because science and maths have nothing to do with it, that if you want to do something you go do your training. You don't really need school.

Later, she reflected on how her secondary school teachers might have seen her: "Probably really naughty and just rebel and talk back to teachers. So it's so stupid because now I feel so stupid. Like, even when I didn't feel school was for me, I still should have gone back."

For a year, she was "around home doing nothing really, and hanging out with friends, kind of social life".

The influence of peers

For some participants, peers had a significant influence on their experiences of secondary school or decisions to leave.

Eddie talked about his social relationships at the time being a greater focus than his education in the longer term:

I was immature. I didn't have really any focus or drive in education at all so was more worried about my social life and pretty much just didn't really look into the future at that stage of my life at all.

The influence of a boyfriend who had already left school helped Rebecca make the decision to leave school herself:

My boyfriend was my life ... And I was very serious with him and, you know, we'd lived together and everything. So when we got completely serious and I was living with him by 15 ... Because he left school when he was 15 and, yeah, so wasn't the best support for me to finish at school, I guess.

A peer had persuaded Tiffany to leave the school she was attending and enrol at a different school, which did not work out well for her:

I just met a dumb girl that convinced me to come to [school name], you know, like horrible, big regret. I wish I'd stayed there, I wish I'd stayed at [previous school], it was really cool there.

Tiffany left the second school when she was 15 and began an apprenticeship. By the time she had been working at this for 6 months, her friends were beginning to leave school. Tiffany talked about how wanting to spend time with them, combined with having saved some money, and having difficulty as the only woman in her workplace resulted in ending her apprenticeship:

But I left because then I met, I started hanging out with my friends that were now leaving school, so I kind of had so much money that I was able to take some time off (laughter). I wish I'd stayed at that ... I was the only [young woman], which I think was kind of another reason why I left, 'cause I couldn't really socialise with everyone 'cause I wasn't able to go out to the pubs which is what, you know, tradesmen do, so that was kind of hard.

Many didn't know what to do after leaving school

Although the young people left school for various reasons and at different times, many did not know what to do next. While some seemed to feel a strong push to leave school, they did not necessarily also feel a corresponding pull towards further learning or work.

Thomas, for example, left secondary school at the end of Year 13 with National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 3 and with no plan for what to do next. He was not alone in leaving school with no clear direction: "... my immediate group of friends, none of us had any clue what we were going to do when we left school, like, we were all in the same boat there."

Because he didn't know what he wanted to do after school, he took some time out from formal study:

So I took a gap year [after] my seventh form year, and during that time I considered a number of courses in all sorts of things ranging from visual arts to marine biology and I guess I was just having kind of a panic because my parents had always been real free with me. They'd been just like 'do what you want', 'be happy'. I'm glad they did but at the same time I wish I'd had a bit more direction ... I left high school but I didn't have the full direction I needed, so I just went, I need a job before I figure out what I'm gonna do next and, yeah, actually I did [a job] for a year and a half ... I realised that I hadn't left high school with any real ambition to do anything, like in high school we received a lot of, well they tried to point us in areas but they never, there was never quite enough description about what there is to do as a job, so we would be told things like, you could be a lawyer, you could be a doctor, you don't get told things like, doctors specialise in areas or there's GPs you know, there's surgeons, they don't branch. Like, I felt really lacking in that sort of knowledge.

Melissa also had NCEA Level 3 when she left school at the end of Year 13:

I was just gonna work that first year into the, like, have that year as a kind of 'what am I gonna do with my life?'. But, I mean, in college I was, like, a sport fanatic so heaps of people after school were, like, 'Ah, I thought you were gonna be a PE teacher' and that kind of stuff. But I had no idea.

Melissa described her only experience of careers advice: "You did this careers test and filled out stuff and it came up as I should be a scuba diver and I'm like, 'I don't like the ocean', so no."

Unsure of exactly what she wanted to do after finishing school, Erin said "it was kind of just by luck that I kind of fell into" casual office work through a family member's contacts. This developed into other fixed-term roles at the same organisation.

At age 26, some said that they would have liked to have been better prepared. Sarah reflected:

I would like to have had a better direction as a career when I was younger. I wish I didn't leave school and thought that I could, you know, rule the world basically, so I do regret that a lot. I wish I had more focus in a career than just going out and having fun ... when I was growing up a teenager and stuff I just went loose and [had some] troubled years and I lost a lot of friends, I wasn't a very nice person basically.

Going from school to university did not appeal to everybody

Some participants had decided during their secondary education that they saw no reason to enrol in university study and were not motivated to gain NCEA credits while they were at school. Eddie expressed his views about NCEA when I talked with him at 26:

NCEA's one thing but doesn't mean that you can't make a good life for yourself, you know what I mean. I could have gone to university, I could have stayed at school, done my NCEA, gone to university, got a degree but I've got quite a few friends with Bachelor's, basic degrees, even one or two with Masters who don't work in their field, so life can always throw you a curveball you know. I didn't have a clue back then, I was immature, I didn't have really any focus or drive in education at all so was more worried about my social life and pretty much just didn't really look in to the future at that stage of my life at all so.

Rachel hadn't seen any value in tertiary study when she was finishing school. At age 21, she explained:

... it would've just been sort of a waste of time at that point in my life 'cause I didn't want to be there, so I didn't really feel that I needed to complete seventh form and do the whole, you know, the whole lot ... I've never really wanted a big sort of career, like, I didn't want to be a doctor or lawyer or anything major like that ... I wouldn't want to do a whole other sort of two, three years' worth of studying.

Her decision not to study at university was supported by her mother: "She's happy as long as I'm happy really, she just wants me to do what I want. She's not one to sort of push me off to university when I didn't want to go." Rather than going straight into further study, Rachel had been "thinking that maybe I'd sort of have a couple of years working and then I'd do some sort of tourism course or something, and it just never really happened (laughter)".

The four participants who completed Year 13 and gained NCEA Level 3, resisted an expectation they would enrol at university straight after school because they thought it would be a poor decision to take on a student loan for a course of study for which they couldn't see a clear purpose. Two of them later gained tertiary qualifications which supported their future employment.

Erin had been a highflier at secondary school, taking several leadership roles and representing the school in various sports. She left school with NCEA Level 3 but chose not to go on to further study:

Growing up I always thought I was definitely going to go [to university], I was going to do that, but when I got closer to it I started thinking, well am I going, like I didn't know what I wanted to do and I didn't want to go just because everyone else was. I didn't want to be a sheep and follow everyone.

Were her family surprised she chose not to enrol at a university?

I'm not sure. I think some of them might have been surprised because I thought I'd go because they know that I have the intelligence to go but they were really supportive of my decision not to and they think it's a wise choice ...

Living overseas at 26, Erin saw some advantages to the choice she had made not to study at university. Reflecting on how her own situation compared to that of friends who went to university: "... my friends now, I mean they're either you know getting married or buying houses or they, you know, like, are in a lot of debt. Like, I'm debt free, I'm saving in both countries."

Melissa explained that her experience of secondary school coloured her thinking about enrolling for further study.

Why did I not conform to that stereotype, you know, like, of going straight to university and everything and reflecting back on it it's because I didn't enjoy school. For the style of learning that I know I do, school is really not an environment to support that and I've always, I've always had the idea that instead of schools teaching you based on what you've already learnt, i.e., tests, like they only know how smart you are by what you've already learnt, why don't they put you in classes grouping you in how you learn? To encourage you to keep on learning instead of just force feeding you information that you may or may not use. Like I'm a very visual learner and so classes that they just talk to you I just, I'd hate and I wouldn't, I wasn't engaged, I wasn't, I was just going along with it because I was told to do it. And like maths is not interesting to me at all and I think that's also like factoring in that I'm a very creative person, being told that there is only one answer it really didn't get me, where science you know, you can keep learning, keep challenging, you can keep asking questions, in art basically anything goes. I understand why some people don't enjoy certain subjects just because that's not how their brain works so why put them in a classroom and force feed them to do it, like they're just going to go through life and keep doing that. That's probably why they go to university because it's easy, they're going to be told what to do and not have to think for themselves.

While Tara was at secondary school, she worked 2 days a week after school doing basic office administration at a law firm:

And in the school holidays I worked Monday to Friday, but I only worked 10 till 2 every day. But it was quite good, 'cause it kind of, like, knowing how to work every day kind of thing and we had lunch breaks and stuff.

She thought this contributed to her decision to look for full-time employment when she finished Year 13. Although she had achieved NCEA Level 3, she didn't want to continue being a student and at that point was unsure what she wanted to do long term:

I absolutely hated school. The only thing I liked about school was PE and the subjects that I did like, but they weren't enough to interest me in a career to go to uni for. Like my favourite subject was PE, but I didn't want to do anything with that for a career and then my other favourite subject was classics and stuff, but I didn't want to do anything with that either. Also I didn't want to be a student, you know, and not have any money and stuff. I wanted to work and like get money behind me and everything.

After finishing school, Tara registered with a recruitment agency and they secured her a 3-month contract doing routine office work. When an offer was made to extend the contract, Tara declined because "it was really quite boring". In her interview at 21, Tara explained that office work "is quite easy, like, you get taught at school how to use a computer and stuff and all the software these days is so easy to pick up and everything". It seemed that easy work was also proving to be relatively tedious work.

Tara's ideas about going from school to university had changed by 25: "I wish I had told myself to go to uni. All my friends went and I worked. Saying that, I don't know what I would have studied. I may have studied something not that useful."

When I talked with Tara at 26, she explained that, while she had worked in a bank overseas, she had discovered her interest in fraud. On her return to New Zealand she made inquiries about this kind of work, but found it was difficult to get into:

I wish I had known that when I was 18. I didn't go to university because a) I didn't like school and b) I didn't know what I wanted to do. Now, in hindsight, I would've, you know, maybe gone and got a degree in criminology or something.

Researcher: Would you consider studying as a mature student?

Tara: I don't know. I just don't like the idea of how much it costs. It really puts me off.

Study was enabled by student loans and financial support

As Tara's comment highlights, tertiary study costs money. Financial assistance of various kinds enabled study for some participants. Several took a student loan to enable them to study. Craig, for instance, graduated from a 9-month course with a student loan of over \$10,000. Some had support from Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) to attend courses to help increase their employability. The course fees for Rebecca's 6-month nannying course were covered by families for whom she nannied as part of this course.

Others were reluctant to accept financial assistance, such as a student loan, that meant taking on debt if they studied. At 20, Olivia had decided against enrolling in a course she had wanted to do, because she did not want to take a student loan. "I just don't really want to get into any kind of debt in any way, I like not owing anybody money." But by 26, she had decided to agree to a loan because it was the only way she could see of being able to enrol in the full-time course:

I'd been wanting to study art for a really long time and I guess I just kept putting it off and putting it off then one day I was like there's no point putting it off, I just need to do it, so I just went and applied and got in so I, yeah, decided to go studying instead. I took a student loan which I am still paying off at the moment but it's getting down. I did it full time, so I had a student allowance as well 'cause I wasn't working, to get me through.

WINZ supported people who were receiving benefits to attend courses that were designed to increase the likelihood they would find employment. Financial support from WINZ had enabled Lauren to complete a course that she saw as advancing her future employment opportunities. This financial support meant she did not need to take on debt in the form of a student loan.

Emily had been receiving the unemployment benefit at 17 and attending short courses organised by WINZ, intended to help her gain employment. Emily explained that she stopped going to these courses, "cause I always stop things ... I just did nothing like for quite a while. Like I wouldn't really leave the house that much either." Emily was eventually diagnosed with depression and started receiving a sickness benefit.

3. Learning during emerging adulthood

After leaving secondary school, opportunities for formal learning played a significant role for some. A few participants who had left school without gaining NCEA Level 2 undertook tertiary study in their twenties. They then gained employment which was both closely connected to their qualifications and included opportunities for advancement. For others, non-formal learning had helped shape their possibilities.

Developing self-awareness and positioning oneself for opportunity can be more influential than formal career planning.¹³ Some participants successfully combined this positioning with study that was directly aligned with the work they were doing at the time or wanted to move into.

Some were motivated to return to formal learning

By age 26, people from each of the five groups identified in Patterson's study had completed some tertiary study. Two of the four who had left school after Year 13 with NCEA Level 3 and not gone on to further study by age 21 had completed some formal study by 26.

People's reasons for enrolling in formal study varied from pursuing a personal interest, which in some cases they sometimes hoped would lead to employment, to wanting a complete change of direction in their lives.

Finding the right kind of study

A personal interest in music had motivated Thomas to study in this field. He had gained NCEA Level 3 in Year 13. At 21, he had been finishing a Bachelor's degree in music. His 4-year relationship with his girlfriend had just ended and he saw the positive side of being single again as freeing up more time for his study. When asked about the prospect of employment related to his music degree, Thomas was optimistic but also pragmatic. He had a Plan B:

I'd like the opportunity to constantly make a living off being a musician without having to get an out-of-music job. Like there's all sorts of musician jobs, not just playing at events but as a session worker in studios and more technical sides on computers of all sorts. There's a lot more in marketing and things like that ... It's kind of shrinking these days, I'd just like to be comfortable and I would love to have some job security but it's kind of a, not really a sort of secure situation but then I'm fine with that. I just don't want, if I were to have a family or anything, I don't want to put them at any risk of poverty ... If I wouldn't want anything to happen it would be that the music industry continues to collapse and I can't get a job. But then I'd just get another degree anyway. Like, I'm not gonna let that stop me. I'd just find another career.

In fact, by the time he was interviewed at 26, that's exactly what he was doing. He was in the second year of a degree in another field and was enjoying the intellectual challenge this involved. He explained why he had changed direction:

¹³ See, for example, Vaughan, K., & Spiller, L. (2012). *Learning to fly: Career management competencies in the school subject classroom (Research report No. 8)* (No. EEL Research report No. 3). Lincoln: AERU Research Unit of Lincoln University.

... after coming out of the degree I came to the decision that I didn't actually want to be involved in the professional side of it, yeah it's, it was more of a, I don't know, it was sort of just pretty soul destroying.

He continued to make music, and was feeling happy and satisfied with his life:

Well, I love doing my study, it's an incredible challenge. I'm still making music and I play quite a bit, I don't know, like, with the odd, I like playing video games and collecting trading cards and that's about my entire life ... Yeah, I'm not really wanting for anything these days.

Eric had gone directly from secondary school to further study. The course he enrolled in had strong workplace links, with students spending blocks of time on field site training:

So basically, they've got a lot of businesses that they sort of lease us out to for two-and-a-half weeks. We do a hundred hours of free work ... It's one of the deals they give you, the field site, and help you get a job and all that. So that was one of the main reasons why I actually went with that course.

Another aspect of this particular course that appealed to Eric was that he could study in the evenings:

I'm much more of a night owl than a day person, so it suited me a lot better to wake up at 2 in the afternoon, come in and do the course for the evening ... A lot of my mates who are interested in IT are actually quite night owls themselves. I think it's just the sitting away playing games till the early hours of the morning thing, when you're, like, 14 sort of builds up or something along those lines.

He also liked the sequential organisation of the network engineering course modules:

You get this module, you move to the next, so I wasn't all over the place, which is something I didn't quite like about the concept of uni, is that I didn't want to have everything at once, I like to be able to focus on one and actually just go for it.

Stephanie had left school at 16 with NCEA Level 1, and worked for several years before deciding to study. At 21, she explained:

I had a bit of a start and stop with my university career. I went, because I left school early, and then had a few years off working. I wasn't very probably up to the standard that I should have been to go into university, so I did a preparation certificate and that was really good and then when I finished that I took another year off and then I went, but that was actually really helpful, and then I did the first 6 months of a psychology degree which I really, really enjoyed and was really interesting and then started doing law papers this year and realised that I absolutely love it and is way more motivating than any type of study that I've done before and I've, yeah, just taken to it in like a way that I didn't think I would.

She had graduated with a law degree 18 months before her interview at 26 and had been admitted to the bar. Stephanie had been working for a year, living in the city and single—as she put it, “heading off into the full-time career woman thing”:

Yeah well I mucked around quite a bit when I was a teenager, and didn't really think that I'd ever amount to much or do much with my life, so it's quite nice to be doing something that I worked really, really hard towards and doing something that was quite challenging, and is quite challenging and took quite a lot of dedication. I'm quite stubborn so I said I'm going to, I've never finished anything before in my life so I'm going to finish law school, and yeah so I did.

Learning opportunities fitted around other commitments

Some had enrolled in short courses, either because it fitted around caring for their children, their employment commitments, or because they did not feel ready to commit to studying full time.

In her early twenties, Rachel had decided to change career direction and did some online study to support this:

... the majority of work that I did since I left school was in the hospitality industry, so I kind of got to the point where I had, like I was managing a café and sort of thought that I didn't want to be doing this for the rest of my life, and I'd kind of gotten as far as I could go anyway, because I was managing, so yeah I decided I wanted to change my sort of work, so I did a little bit of study, just part time while I was still working full time because I couldn't afford to stop working. Yeah so I did, it was probably about 4 years ago maybe I did, I did small business management, got a certificate in that, and then about a year ago, year and a half ago I did another little short course, just an online one to do with accounts and computer work and stuff like that, which helped me get the job that I'm doing now.

Craig contrasted his experience during his course to his work situation at 20:

I learnt more in the first week at work here than you do in the whole course, I mean more on the computer which is what they were teaching in the course, but they were making you do things that are not even in real life, you know? That doesn't happen like that and when you do work, when I was sort of designing things for people you can do what you want, no-one has to tell you that's wrong or right. So in the course they were telling you what's wrong, what's wrong, what's wrong and 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 because they kept on telling you what was the wrong thing and here I am working doing the wrong thing every day, but it's not wrong, it's just artwork. So that's why I sort of laugh about that.

Although Melissa had intended to work for a year after finishing school, a combination of a medical event and a suggestion from her mother took her life in a different direction:

It was actually the day I went into my surgery. Me and my Mum were sitting in my room, me in the scrubs and everything and she was flicking through the newspaper and said 'Oh, have a look at this' and there was kind of 'Oh, what's fashion tech' and then it was like a month or so later I went in and talked to them and just kind of said if I start half-way through the year what would happen and I just kind of signed up just coz well, if I can't work I might as well do something that I'll use later in life or whatever.

Melissa completed a 1-year course and subsequently had a range of jobs that used the skills she developed during the course. Looking back at 26 on her experience of learning over the years, Melissa talked about "an amazing [fashion tech] tutor who challenged and encouraged me personally and intellectually" as a defining moment, "as I wouldn't have excelled as much as I did studying, or tried my hand at so many different avenues in my jobs". She had been less positive about her experience of learning at school.

Some enrolled, unsure about what they wanted to do

At 21, Patrick had begun a 2-year diploma in business management:

I had no idea what I wanted to do with anything when I started the course and I thought business is a good variety of different, you know, courses and thought I'd take up that and see if I find anything of interest.

While he was enjoying some papers, others seemed to him to be irrelevant to the workplace. Through his studies, he was also learning more about his strengths:

I'm very good at law and I'm thinking of going to law school when I finish. I'm apparently very good at law (laughter) ... I always considered myself a right side of the brain thinker, I always saw myself as somewhat creative and, you know, visual learning, but recently it's not been the case at all. I don't know if it's changed or I've just come to realise it better, I'm not sure.

After completing the diploma course he began work in the same field. When I talked to Patrick at 26, he had returned to continue his business studies and had just completed a Bachelor's degree, as well as working. He saw clear links between his work and what he had learnt in his studies.

Craig described using a process of elimination to narrow his possible options. When he was unable to find work, he decided to enrol in a 1-year course:

I didn't really know what, where to go and work and if it wasn't work it would have been a course and so we looked and I couldn't find a job so I thought a course would be good and pretty much chose one and didn't really know what it was gonna be like. And it wasn't that great. It really wasn't.

Well, I wanted to leave school. I finished the sixth form and then just did a course straight after pretty much because I didn't really know what I was gonna do at the end of it but it was just a digital graphics course and then even after I'd done it I still didn't quite know what I was gonna do but I just needed some money and just applied for a job and this one's been the one that I've stayed at.

The job was directly related to the course he had completed. Craig was still working for the same company at age 26.

Craig felt more motivated to learn than he had at secondary school: "... the course was like school really, but I knew I had to pass it because I was paying for it."

Finding the right course

Tiffany worked in cafés for about a year, then at 17 moved to another city to do a fashion design course, after reading about it in a local paper:

I wanted to make a big change in my life so I went up to [another city] to live, and my sister was going to go live there as well sometime, so we arranged it that we lived together as soon as we both went up there.

Tiffany had enjoyed the course:

It was really cool. The first 6 months, you're on a sewing machine every day, oh and you did like a bit of knitting here and there. And you pass that with Level 3 and then the next 6 months you do pattern making every day.

After she left school at 15, a suggestion from the school's guidance counsellor led Natasha to enrol in a chef's course which she had really enjoyed:

I went every day and I was there early and I enjoyed helping other peers of mine in my class, 'cause it was only a small group, about 10 or 15 of us. And like if they got stuck and I knew it, I'd be like, 'Oh, hey, this is how you do it.' And I enjoyed being able to teach them something that I knew that they didn't. And they learnt to do the same for me, if I didn't know something that they did.

Learning from experience

Since leaving school, these young adults had also done various kinds of informal learning, such as learning about their values and priorities, and non-formal learning at work.

Several of the young women reflected at 26 on learning more about themselves, over time. Stephanie talked about her situation as a single woman being different from those of her friends who had partners:

I've learnt that it's alright to be by yourself, you don't need to have somebody there, all the time, and so I think that's one of my big things. Yeah and it sucks, well sometimes it sucks, sometimes it's quite good, but the majority of my friends that are in relationships and have children so, I feel quite, like I'm the only one that's doing this at the moment, but that's not necessarily true, it's not always the way it's going to be and it changes as well, I think just learning how to be alone, and function alone, I've had to make the decision to learn how to do that, if that makes sense ... I like to have sort of control over what's going on in my life, I don't really like it if I feel like I'm not contributing to the outcome of things, and that's a you know that's another thing I've got to, I'm sort of learning how to come to grips with as well, you know making the decision that, to just like accept that some things are out of my control, that's been a big thing for me as well.

In her interview at 26, Erin sounded confident of herself and realistic about her expectations:

I've reached that point that I'm comfortable with who I am and confident with who I am that I'm happy with the life choices I make, because if I hadn't made those life choices, you know, I wouldn't have learnt from them I wouldn't have got to the point that I am now that I have these opportunities and, but sometimes you wonder, how did I let that go on for so long and you're like, well you know what, oh well it happens. Moving forward, how can you learn from that what you do? And I mean it's exciting. If I hadn't gone to the [organisation] I don't know if I would have necessarily [known] what it was I was truly passionate about 'cause I always loved writing and communication but I realised how much I like, how good I am as well, at orientating processes and developing them and coming out with plans and documentation and I'm really good at that and I like that and I don't think I would have found that necessarily if I'd gone and done the conventional route.

This comment from Erin is typical of the sense of agency, combined with a degree of tolerance for uncertainty, which was evident in her final interview:

... you can choose what you do and you choose your life path. And so I do enjoy that there is kind of that opportunity for, I guess, making your own decisions in life and being your own person.

For Eddie and Craig, their non-formal learning as part of their work had proved useful. When he was 26, Eddie was planning to establish his own business. I asked him how he had learnt about what's involved in developing a business:

Oh, to be honest I'd say just from working for different companies and just learning the way that they run their companies, and I've got one or two friends who have got, well I worked alongside for a couple of years, have gone out and started businesses themselves, so also getting advice of the way that after time, you know, the ups and downs of running their businesses and the way they do things and just sharing ideas ... I feel I've got the business side of most things down pretty well. I just, it's really, it's about keeping building and making sure that I've got work.

Craig talked about learning alongside his employer, when he started work in a small business:

... my boss was looking for someone to help, a young person. Then that was it, he just needed someone and then he wasn't actually too much better than I was because they'd just bought this business and it was already running. They'd bought it and he wanted to open up the digital side. So just as he'd done that, he hired me. Well I started working here, so we both sort of learnt together, if you know what I mean. So it was quite good rather than just getting, you know, going somewhere where everyone else knew what they were doing, it was sort of like we were both learning and customers actually knew that we weren't, we had good gear but we weren't exactly the best [tradesmen] in town. It was quite funny. But we soon learned how to do it.

4. Paid work in emerging adulthood

Almost all the 19 young people had been in paid employment at some point. Their experiences of paid work were varied. One person had worked full time in the same organisation since completing a 1-year course directly after leaving school and had advanced his position within a growing company. Still others had been in fairly constant paid employment that was related to study they had completed.

Others had more inconsistent employment records, with periods of receiving a benefit mixed with periods of unskilled work.

How do young people go about finding work, especially when they have few formal qualifications and are relatively inexperienced? To what extent do these characteristics also make them vulnerable to external economic conditions? For some participants, work carried less of their identity than it did for others, particularly if they were parents or pursuing formal learning.

Finding work

For those who had ruled out tertiary study after leaving school, finding work to occupy them and bring in some money became a focus. Olivia was one such case:

I guess after leaving school, the necessity of getting a job, because I was still living with my parents and, I mean, obviously I wanted to help them out but I wasn't really a hundred percent sure what I wanted to do, so I guess I did just apply for whatever jobs were available, to find one so that I could contribute.

But getting work with almost no qualifications and little experience was not easy. After finishing Year 13 and gaining NCEA Level 3, Thomas decided not to enrol for further study. He applied for nearly 20 jobs before he began work as a kitchen hand.

Word of mouth played a role in some participants finding the sort of work they wanted. In Eric's case, he went straight from finishing his diploma-level course to employment, thanks to an opportunity provided by one of the staff at the tertiary organisation. Eric explained what happened:

I finished my exam on the Thursday, came in on the Monday to find out and that morning, my boss had emailed [a staff member] at [the training provider] and said, 'Look, we've got a helpdesk job going, have you got any students?' And she said to me, 'Well, here you go. Go for it.' And it worked, so (laughter) one string of lucky events after another, I think ... Yeah, it fell into place perfectly.

At 21, Eric had been working at the same company for 2 years and was keeping his certifications for various software up to date. He felt more than capable of doing his support engineer work:

I'm doing stuff technically beyond what I'm there to do, it's above my level. I'm doing stuff most of the seniors would normally do and, well, they're happy for me to do it. Because over the time, I've put so much

time into learning and actually just going at it, I don't care, if I don't know it, I'm going to go and learn it and I do have a tremendous understanding as a result. And they're happy to let me go nuts on their servers, 'cause they're like, 'Well, you know what you're doing.'

When I talked with Eric at 26, he was still working at the same company, which had grown considerably since he joined them. During the almost 8 years he had worked there, Eric had advanced in his IT career:

I've worked all the way up the line, junior engineer, intermediate engineer, advanced and then senior so pretty good, not really much place I can go above from here but you know, something, maybe changing companies or something, but I'm unlikely to do that any time soon.

In fact, there seemed to be little scope for further career development within his current company unless he stopped doing what he enjoyed:

I guess last year, you know, I was building towards being a senior, trying to get towards that and I've achieved that, so technically it's kind of, I can't go up any further from here without becoming a manager, and then I stop doing the engineering stuff that I actually enjoy. It's, you know, I'm not likely to really be able to progress any further in my line of work.

He talked of shifting to a different area in IT, such as security.

Eddie's contacts gave him an entry to the work he wanted, with a positive long-term effect:

When I left New Zealand I had no qualifications but a bloke I knew, he just needed a hand with roofing back there and I sort of did a few years helping him out and then obviously when I told him I was moving to [a city], he had lived here years ago so he put me onto a bloke over here and I ended up doing my roofing ticket, my plumbing registration and everything over here so I got my, I went to [tertiary education] and did all my schooling and stuff over here and got qualified.

Craig had been clear that he did not want to work in a city:

I was pretty particular about who I was gonna go and work for. Like I don't think I would have lasted a week going into [a city] or going to [another city]. Not because of the distance or anything like that, I just, yeah, don't know about going into the city to work every day. It's not me. So I think when I found this, straight away I thought, Oh this is cool, even though I wasn't getting any money. Wasn't getting much money at all, but I've sort of stayed here and now it's all good.

Researcher: So when you say you weren't getting much money, are you getting better pay now? Has your pay increased over time?

Craig: Yeah, yeah, because at the start, yeah, I wasn't exactly making them, you know, I was just helping them out whereas now they can go away and I'm doing it here, I'm running it.

At 26, Craig had worked for the same company for close to 10 years.

Andrew's initial experience of work helped him identify the sort of work he didn't want to do:

... the [bank] job came up through school, they were taking on some graduating or finishing students and I applied for that and I got in and so I thought that I might as well go for it. At first I was travelling around the branches doing relieving for them. So people that were sick and I really enjoyed that because I got to meet lots of new people and I didn't really get tied down to one of the branches and stuck under one of the managers and then they put me in [a specific] branch and then I was there for I guess another 9 months and

it was probably the one manager there in particular that, I just really didn't like her and probably pushed me out the door a bit.

Looking back, Andrew described this job as "horrible. They just weren't very nice people to work for. I didn't really like selling debt to people." He eventually left to begin a 2-year software development course:

... and then the head of the department said that there was a company looking for a developer and it was only like three of us graduating and so I thought, well, if I can walk into a job rather than go do another year of study then that's probably pretty good. So I went for that and I ended up getting it.

Vulnerability to external economic conditions

The global financial crisis of 2007–08 continued to affect New Zealand in 2010 when these young people were 21 and was felt by some participants. After leaving school at 16, Patrick worked part time in a supermarket for a couple of years. When he wanted a change, Patrick moved overseas, spending another year working in fast-food restaurants before deciding he didn't like it, and returned home. Back in New Zealand, he was unable to find work. As Patrick explained, "that was around the time of the big recession and we were all scared, and so there was no work coming my way". He eventually decided to travel with his girlfriend instead.

He was 20 when they returned to New Zealand and got a flat in the city:

And then I guess I looked for jobs again and I thought I would have a better chance. The recession was downplayed more, but no jobs, so I figured, why not go study? If nobody is going to hire me, I might as well go learn something.

Natasha also thought the financial crisis affected her situation. Work experience at a city hotel had evolved into a part-time job there while Natasha completed her three-and-a-half-year course. She thrived on this "because I was able to take what I had learnt from the job into what I was trying to learn at the course, it made everything a lot easier". When she completed her course, she continued working at the hotel for a while. From there, she went to work at a city café. However, by the following Christmas, she'd been made redundant. She explained: "It was the recession that made me lose my job."

Combining work and further learning

Both Eddie's and Rachel's experiences illustrated how employment and formal learning could be combined to help them progress in their chosen directions. Eddie had found work he enjoyed, and then completed the related trade qualification. He had paid attention to what was involved in running the businesses he'd worked in over a number of years. Collectively, these experiences positioned him for starting his own business.

Rachel was also proactive about ensuring she had the skills she saw were needed for the roles she wanted in her local area. She enjoyed office work and completed several short courses to keep her skills and knowledge up to date and strengthen her employability.

Combining work and being a parent

The arrival of children had postponed any career plans the mothers among the participants might have had and also impacted the direction their work lives might have taken. Two women had combined their childcare

responsibilities with part-time study that they hoped would lead to employment. A third woman was working full time at age 26.

Lauren had completed a short course just before we talked to her at age 21. At that point, she had intended to combine caring for her two young children with continuing with the same line of study. By age 26, she had done no further study and was enjoying caring for her family: "Yeah, at the moment I'm just enjoying being able to stay at home and be a housewife and do those kinds of things, and yeah, we'll just see what happens."

When I talked to Nicole at age 26, her child was at primary school and she was doing a short course intended to lead to work. Over the preceding years, she had enrolled in several courses and had to withdraw, largely due to relationship difficulties. Nicole was no longer in a relationship at 26 and had support from her family to attend her course. She sounded optimistic about the future: "I'm hoping that I follow through on this and then get a job, either part time or full time."

By 26, Tiffany's daughter had started school, and Tiffany was working full time in hardware sales. She was pleased she was no longer reliant on receiving a benefit:

Yeah, well I wanted to be independent. I hated being hassled by Work and Income all the time, about little things and having to keep them up to date with, like, really stupid little things ... Now I can do what I want. It's my money ... I didn't know it was going to feel so amazing.

Having an income and paying low rent seemed to have given Tiffany more confidence about making some headway with things she wanted to do:

I guess one example, recently for a long time I was looking for a new vehicle for me and the kids because we had this really old cruddy car, and so to get that I had to make a lot of changes. And it was for the best 'cause now we're in a nice safe vehicle which you can take on holidays and stuff quite nicely.

5. Building a sense of belonging and a place in the world

Almost all of these 26-year-olds expressed a sense of belonging and having established a place in the world. Relationships made a significant contribution to their sense of belonging—their relationships with family, partners, and friends, and for mothers, their relationships with, and responsibility for, their children. Several of the young women talked about challenges they had faced in maintaining their own wellbeing during emerging adulthood.

For some, having a degree of financial security helped them establish a place in the world. In several cases, this included home ownership. Having a strong connection with places also helped build a sense of belonging. Some had long-term connections to particular places or regions, while others were exploring various places overseas.

The importance of family, partners, and friends

Many expressed a strong sense of connection to people who matter to them. This was most evident among the women I spoke with, whose relationships had played a large and significant role in shaping their lives. Illustrations of this include mothers who prioritised their children's needs over their careers, the parents of one who changed their lifestyle to give their daughter and grandchild a stable home, and a young woman caring for her siblings so that her mother could care for another family member. Some of the women had changed their own plans to accommodate their partner's plans or had experienced relationship problems that disrupted the direction they had been taking. Around half the women were in steady relationships at age 26 and almost all had experienced at least one long-term relationship.

About half the young men also described being in steady, supportive relationships. Family relationships tended to play a less significant role for the men than they did for the women. In their interviews, few of the men mentioned family relationships without being prompted to talk about them. Instead, they talked about spending leisure time with their friends. Craig was an exception, talking about close relationships with several family members and how he enjoyed helping them.

Friends were important for both women and men in the decade after leaving school. Most talked about friends who had been supportive of them—providing them with somewhere to stay when they needed it, being their companion when they left New Zealand or went on holiday, and encouraging them to pursue their dreams. For those who were mothers, friendship seemed to play a smaller role than family members, at least when the children were very young. As time went on, these women were again able to give some attention to friendships. A small number talked about friends who had a less positive role in their lives, such as linking their secondary school friends with their own rebellious behaviour as a teenager, as in Nicole's case.

In addition to relationships with family and friends, several participants talked about people—typically older—whose interest in them had made a difference. Emily had been befriended by one of the women who ran a shop where Emily had done some voluntary work and she appreciated being included in social events. In Rebecca's role as a nanny, she developed close relationships with the families she worked for. A parent in one of her families had

noticed Rebecca's interest in learning about wellbeing and nurtured her interest by putting her in touch with a health professional working in this area.

Family relationships

Parents continued to play an important support role for many of the participants, many of whom had moved in and out of their parents' home during the decade after school at times when they had no work or experienced relationship difficulties. For the mothers in this study, parents provided practical help as well, helping with supermarket shopping or caring for the children after school.

Family relationships were very important to Sarah, " 'cause I know what it's like to lose them and to regain them again so that is really important to me, family life is, yeah it means a lot". Although during her teenage years especially she had had difficulties in her relationship with her parents, she had regularly returned to her parents' home when she was between flats, as she explained at 21:

... no matter what, I was always going to be allowed to come home ... and then there was the time I moved out, I would've been twenty and I moved out and I stole my mum's credit card and I maxed it out. And so we didn't talk again for about a year. And then my partner was on the scene at that point and he said to me, 'You need to contact your parents', and I did and yeah, I said sorry and I went home and he came with me ... We go up there all the time for dinner and it's a completely different relationship now.

Erin had been living overseas for several years. Two main factors had contributed to her decision to leave New Zealand: a relationship break-up and sometimes feeling a bit lost in her large family. She thought that leaving New Zealand would help her establish her own identity and described how this meant she had to be responsible for herself:

... especially 'cause I'm so far away as well from my family, I'm not, I don't have that safety net that you can just fall back on and be like, oh I can't do it today, I can't deal [with it], just someone be an adult for me.

Erin's family relationships were still very important to her. Her mother was due to visit her soon, to go travelling together. She was also looking forward to a return visit to New Zealand for a sibling's wedding at which she would be a bridesmaid.

A number of the participants talked about how they valued the support their families—especially parents—had given them since leaving school. A smaller number talked about the support they had given their families.

At a family wedding when Natasha was 18, her mother learnt that another family member was very ill. As the eldest child, Natasha's response to this family crisis was to move home, take a job at a petrol station for 6 months and care for her three younger siblings, enabling her mother to go and nurse her relative during the final months of her life. "Mum said that she didn't really know what she would've done without me, but ... I've always been her mini-me, little sidekick and if she can't deal with a situation, I will." A couple of years later, Natasha and her boyfriend at the time went to live with his mother for a couple of months when "she was due to have another baby, so we just decided to go out there and help her around the house and be supportive and that kind of thing". Sometime later, and on her own again and without paid work, she went to live at her grandmother's house. Her grandmother had been diagnosed with a serious illness a year earlier, and Natasha helped her by doing the housework.

Craig's family was important to him. When he wasn't working on his own house, Craig was enjoying spending time helping an aunty with some work on her house: "I go over there a lot and I've been enjoying that, helping her on

her place, as well. Aunty's got a big old villa over there." Craig also talked about appreciating his grandparents: "... as they're getting older, you know, as I've been getting older, I realised how important they really are."

Supportive relationships with their parents had benefited each of the women who had been mothers at age 20 and their children. All three had been a single parent at some point, and their children's fathers had different levels of involvement in their lives.

Tiffany spoke positively about the difference having her children had made to her life: "It made me get my act together with my life, and it gave me purpose for it, so that was great." Her parents were very supportive of her. For about 5 years, she and her children had been living in a house owned by her parents, giving them stability. Her children were cared for after school either by their grandparents or at an after-school programme. Tiffany also had a small circle of close friends.

Lauren had her first child at 15. At that point, her family ended their itinerant employment and settled in one place to give mother and child some stability. Lauren and her baby lived with her parents, whose support had been vital to her:

I had their support the whole way, which was really good ... and then mum and dad got my own place in a different house in [a provincial town] and they found me that house and got me all set up and that.

At 26, the support of Nicole's parents played a significant role in her life and that of her 8-year-old son. By then, they had been living at her parents' home for a year-and-a-half:

I still really want to get back out and get my own place again but there's always cost to that. There's no rush, I like being at home. I've got the comforts of home and then help for looking after my kid. Where I live, it's such a good area, like it's close to town and close to everything.

Relationships with partners

Ten of the 19 young people were living with their partners at age 26. One young man was married for the second time. Not surprisingly by this age, others had also had more than one long-term relationship since leaving school.

By the time she was interviewed at age 26, Rachel and her partner had been together for nearly 10 years. The family of Rachel's partner lived nearby, contributing to their strong social network.

Not everyone had enjoyed positive relationships with their partners. Tiffany talked about the end of a relationship, when she was 25: "I was in a relationship where I was really unhappy, so I got out of that one. That was positive 'cause I walked away from it and I'm with someone now who is, you know, for the future." Her current boyfriend was living overseas and returning to live in New Zealand in a few months' time when she hoped the relationship would develop.

Relationship problems had permeated other aspects of Emily's life:

... that's why I didn't really have a job sort of, like 'cause we'd always sort of argue and I'd get upset at work and stuff like that. So I never like had a job that lasted long and then after like a few of them, I sort of just stopped.

A few months prior to her interview at 21, the relationship had ended after Emily saw that he had received texts on his phone from other young women. This coincided with Emily beginning a part-time course. "And I don't reckon I could've done the course properly if I still went out with him, 'cause I'd be, like, all arguing probably all the time and stuff."

Nicole had considered leaving her partner but thought she wouldn't be able to manage on the domestic purposes benefit, and was worried about the prospect of a custody battle for their son. On top of that, her partner had been aggressive towards her in the past. Neither did she know where she would be able to live, if she was to leave the Housing Corporation accommodation. Her situation was also causing tension between Nicole and her parents, who were aware of her relationship issues and had been encouraging her to leave.

Nicole's partner liked to control her social contact: "Like if he goes out, I'm allowed to go out with him, but if I want to go out by myself with my friends I'm not allowed to." She was scared that her partner might become violent if she challenged him on this:

It's, you know, the only time I'm allowed to go is like to do shopping or get stuff from the dairy ... and like if I go out anywhere I have to take [our child] and he never takes [the child] when he goes. He'll never ever take him to the park or anything like that.

When I interviewed Nicole at 26, she was no longer in this relationship. She had "finally just realised it wasn't working ... I just felt a bit trapped in that relationship and I couldn't really be myself and go where I wanted to. It just wasn't enough." She talked about her ex-partner:

He was quite controlling, so I couldn't really do what I wanted. It just got to a point, where after a couple of years, I was just like, there's no point being with someone that's not going to make you live the life you want to live or do what you want. It's just that I'm better off on my own and ever since then, I've actually had a life.

Friends and social networks

Friends and social networks played a prominent role in some of the young adults' lives. By age 26, some participants had accumulated large groups of friends from secondary school, flats they had lived in, multiple workplaces, and places they had studied since leaving school. Some had holidayed in New Zealand or travelled overseas with their friends.

For nearly 5 years, Eric had been living in the same large central city flat, originally with a group of his friends. He estimated that during that time he'd had 35 different flatmates and clearly enjoyed the social aspect of flatting:

... courtesy of living with so many people, there's always people around and people to talk to, you know I make a lot of friends through there so I mean a lot of the time we're just hanging out at the flat, because people just show up, it's a bit of a social hub, it's pretty good for that but yeah most of my time is spent doing that, I guess I'm a regular drinker so that's my other part-time hobby outside of work.

Eric was the flat's lease-holder:

... the one with the power, which is good and bad. Usually I run into problems like one I have right now, where I had a flatmate who unexpectedly had to leave ... that's the downside of it, I end up having to pay the extra rent because I'm the lease-holder, but on the plus side, if anybody you know screws around and tries not to pay the rent or anything, I can just kick them out. It's quite good. I mean otherwise you get eight people squabbling over who's right, who's wrong and I can just put my foot down and go no, shut up this is right. I don't have to do that very much, I pick my flatmates pretty well.

Eric had been in his current relationship for 18 months, with a woman who had been a flatmate. She had moved to a smaller flat a couple of months before I talked with Eric. "Well, I mean, my flat as you can imagine can be pretty intense with the number of people, and things are going on, I think she needed a break from it anyway, and just wanted to change the scene."

Living in the same region all her life, so far, had helped Rachel build and maintain friendships:

I've had sort of one good friend that I've been friends with right through since the beginning of primary school. We're still really close and, yeah, quite a few friends from school, but then I'm still friends with quite a lot of people from over at the [shop] that I worked with there, and we get on really well at work as well, at the [pub].

Eddie had travelled overseas with one of his friends:

... a mate of mine was pretty interested in travelling as well ... and a couple had gone up to [a city in another country] so I wanted to go somewhere different so we sort of decided on [a different city].

Tara moved overseas with friends who wanted to take a year's break from their studies, but things didn't quite go to plan:

... four of my other, still my best friends, they were going to move to [a city in another country] and I wasn't going to go cos I was with this boy blah, blah, blah and then I was like, literally a week after we broke up, I made a decision and just did the decision and I went with them. And then when we did move over, it was just like really hard, because there was five of us, we all wanted to do different things. Like we couldn't even agree on what part of [the city] to live in. Like some people wanted to live in [one suburb], some people wanted to live in the city, you know, like. And then they all were like, their part-time jobs when they were students, was like cafés, bar work and stuff. So they wanted to be in [one suburb], but there was no work for me there, like I had to travel into the city every day if I wanted to get a job. And I just was really homesick and I just didn't really enjoy it, like it was, yeah, I just didn't like it. So I left to [another city] with two of them. And like nobody agreed, like it's different when your friends are out of, like when you see them once a week or whatever, it's different than living with them and being in another country and trying to set up your whole life for the year.

In an overseas city that was new to her, Erin took a proactive approach to connecting with other people. She built networks for herself, and others, by using social media to set up a "brunch club" that met monthly for brunch:

I think because everyone is in the same boat here people are more kind of open to making these connections and making new friends and just seizing the opportunity because everyone has these days that they don't, yep, I mean I set up a brunch club last year think it was that is just like a group that I run through Facebook that, like, anyone can be a part of it, like, people can add their friends so started off kind of just me and my friends and then we slowly, like, if someone can add someone else so basically if you add someone else you're vouching for them was the original concept that, like, once a month someone would take a turn at organising it. It all started off that I was organising them all. But we just do like a once a month, pick a place and we'll go there we'll, like, have brunch, give me a chance to meet some new people, make some new friends [...], and there was just kind of a way for people to get to know some other people when they're feeling a little bit lonely, feeling like they don't really know what to do, just come over here.

She also connected with Kiwis in the same city via other social media sites. Volunteer work was yet another way she connected with people, drawing on her willingness to help others—as she put it, "I want to give back". She attributed her desire to help others to growing up in a large family where her parents had modelled a strong ethos of caring for others.

Not everyone had well-established close friendships at 26. Emily had spent most of her time since secondary school without paid employment and had only recently begun some study, and therefore had not had opportunities to form friendships in these contexts. Emily explained why one of her friendships had ended:

My family is important, my friends are but I don't have very many friends, so I don't actually like I haven't caught up with any for a while. I can't be bothered really, like my main one moved away, like they used to live just a few houses away, and then I used to smoke and that and now I don't, we used to just catch up and have a smoke and I don't smoke so, and now they've moved away and got a boyfriend and that, so it's just like I haven't seen them in ages.

Anchored by their children

The mothers I talked to had a strong sense of belonging that centred around their children and their own parents and families, who had provided them with practical support. One mother in particular had shown considerable courage in a difficult situation, with her parents' support available if she needed it. The women who were mothers were very clear about the people who mattered to them: their children were their top priority, and often were also what they most enjoyed in life. This meant putting any career plans aside, at least while their children were young. The mothers also wanted eventually to live in their own homes.

At age 26, four of the young women had either one or two children of their own, another was pregnant with her first child, and one had step-children. None of the young men was a parent.

Having children had altered the priorities of each of the women who were mothers. At 17, Tiffany had finished a design course when she unexpectedly became pregnant and was faced with a decision:

Tiffany: And all my friends at the time, they have all had abortions and it was really scary. I didn't know what to do.

Researcher: Yeah, who did you talk to?

Tiffany: My mum. She's one of my best friends. Not in the way that we go out drinking together and stuff like that, but you know, she's amazing ... I went through the whole process of having an abortion. I think it was [inaudible] on my mind. And then when we were at the clinic on the day for the operation, I sort of sat there and I was like, 'No, I want to keep this baby'. So we just went and I had my baby.

During her pregnancy, she finished full-time work and made changes to her lifestyle, with her baby's health in mind. This was a difficult time for her and—encouraged by her mother—she sought counselling:

... it was a really low point, and that was when I had to part myself away from my friends and that was really sad, that was so hard. I mean, I probably didn't have to, but I did have to get away from all the partying and stuff ... I don't really think I'm depressed, I think I just get really deep into my thoughts. I think that's not depressed though. But I found it really good. I mean, I find this really good right now, just talking. I think going to counselling actually helped me practise talking about myself, 'cause I never really did.

As well as making the decision on her own about whether to have her son, Tiffany had decided it would be better for her not to tell his father that the baby was his:

I didn't really know what was happening, you know, I didn't know what it was like to have a baby and blah, blah, kind of lied to him a bit about it 'cause I didn't really like him and I didn't want to be stuck knowing someone and all of that. So I lied to him and it was quite traumatic, but not really, 'cause we didn't really know each other. But I just told him he wasn't the father, so that was kind of good ease off my shoulders 'cause I was like, I can just do this on my own. And then he was born and he was a little bit older, I felt really guilty, so I had to get back in touch with him and that was so intense.

The father now has an ongoing relationship with her son.

At 21, Tiffany had had a second child and her plans to establish a clothing business became a lower priority:

You know, I just need to get into it and do it. But I was like, just have these damn babies, get them grown up and I can just go nuts at it, 'cause you really have to ... I think when she's sort of one, I'll be able to be in the [sewing] room a lot more. 'Cause you have to have like an ongoing thing with sewing, you have to be in the mood for it, it has to be like continuous. It's really hard to go in and out, 'cause you lose focus on what you're doing. But I mean, right now, I can just do drawings and things.

When she was 21, Nicole's main goal was to make a good life for her son. Her partner had been out of work for a couple of months. Nicole was doing a business administration course and was also about to start a part-time job: "It's not the best job but, you know, I'm just thinking about my son." The hours of work combined with caring for her child were clearly going to be a strain on her:

... in October it's gonna be a hassle because it's 8 at night till 4:30 in the morning and he starts playschool at 10, so I'm gonna have to have, like, two-and-a-half hours' sleep, get him ready, take him to playschool, come home, have a sleep, pick him up in about two or three hours ...

When asked about her partner's role in helping with their child, Nicole said:

I wanted to be with someone who does their own stuff and now it's just like well crap, you know, I went with you because I thought you want to help out and it's like he doesn't pull his weight. And he thinks looking after him is just giving him a book and just leaving him, it's not what you do. He's not really a social person with kids. He still doesn't even know his [son's] favourite things or what he wants.

Lauren learnt she was pregnant when she was still 14:

I just, I found out that I was pregnant with [my first son] when I was four and a half months pregnant ... I don't regret anything about having [him], I thoroughly love [him], I think he's changed my life for the best and I had him two months early, he was eight weeks prem. That was a total different life change there.

Between being interviewed at 21 and 26, Natasha had had two children and had separated from their father. At the time, Natasha had decided not to take up the option of living with her mother, who had said "she wasn't going to babysit me or babysit my child ... I decided that I wasn't comfortable living under her roof anymore because I enjoyed my freedom so much." Instead, she had made her own living arrangements.

Natasha's mother provided her with practical support, coming each week to help with shopping because Natasha didn't have a car. The children's other grandmother spent time with them once a week, too.

The arrival of her children had affected Natasha's freedom and her social life:

That really kicked me up the bum and made me feel like an adult because it meant that I couldn't go out anymore, I couldn't do whatever I wanted, my money wasn't my money—I had to share it. I got a very little social life after I got them and I lost a lot of friends.

One woman was expecting her first child when I talked with her at 26. Tara had married her partner of 8 years and was to become a mother in a few months:

I just feel like I am a bit limited now. Like, the baby's the primary focus and I guess I know that means that it might have a better life if I'm in a better job or career or whatever.

Looking after their own wellbeing during emerging adulthood

Six of the young women talked of wellbeing issues related to either mental health or alcohol and drug use.¹⁴ One young man had overcome a serious physical injury during his teenage years, and one woman had recovered from injuries sustained in a car crash.

By 21, Emily had been diagnosed with depression and was receiving a sickness benefit. She had attended counselling on and off, she said, since primary school. When asked at 26 to talk about the main things that had happened in her life since leaving school, she responded: “I feel like I’ve just sort of been failing sort of since then, like I can’t even think of something good.” In fact, it emerged that she had recently made several positive changes in her life, including giving up smoking and taking up a team sport.

Emily described herself as being “not independent like I thought you should be at my age” and still needed support from her family:

And like, sort of, I still rely a lot on my nana who I live with like if she was not here I would not have a clue on what to do, how to like pay rent or household bills and stuff like that, yeah so I’m really reliant on that, like I don’t function in the real world properly.

Emily was gradually improving her health and wellbeing. She had attended several courses since leaving school and undertaken voluntary work to gain work experience. However, getting off the sickness benefit and gaining paid part-time work continued to elude her:

... because I’m on a medical that means I don’t have to get a full-time and just look for, sometimes my doctor gets annoyed at writing them out, once he’s, like, what are you doing to fix this? Because he just writes ‘depressed’ and he’s, like, well what are we doing to change it? But it’s, like, it’s not just that, like, I am doing everything WINZ wants me to do, but he’s not seeing that side. Like, he’s just seeing that he’s just writing ‘depressed’ and he’s not fixing it and, like, and I’ve seen a counsellor to fix it but it’s, like, it is because of that and because I don’t think I can handle a full-time job. It’s a bit confusing because I asked WINZ can I change benefit since I am looking for a job but they said the other one is you have to look for full-time, so I’m, like, oh well, I’ll keep seeing my doctor, but he gets a bit annoyed, thinking I’m not, I’m just on the benefit, yeah.

At 26, Rebecca maintained a strong interest in fitness, health, and learning about nutrition. Doing well in a fitness competition the previous year had strengthened her resolve to learn more about mental and physical wellbeing, and what works best to make people—herself included—happy. Over time, she had also focused on overcoming her identified mental health issues, and that had motivated her to help others experiencing similar difficulties. Her thoughts about future careers were becoming more tangible:

I have to find a career where it will challenge me, keep me stimulated yet not affect my wellbeing, so there’s a few options out there for me. I’m looking into, again, fitness and nutrition, very passionate about those. I love the idea of being a counsellor or I guess a support worker within the mental health issues I’ve had, or recently one of the other ones is become a PE teacher because I love to, I love children ...

When asked about the main things that had happened in her life since leaving secondary school, Rebecca

¹⁴ Some of the young men in the study might also have experienced struggles related to their wellbeing, but did not talk about it.

responded:

I have overcome handfuls of mental health issues, mental health illnesses. I have done a lot of self-work to change unhealthy habits and things that had been programmed in me since a child. I've surrounded myself with different people, and I think the thing that I can say that has happened since school would be how much I've changed, the determination and strength I've accumulated over the years, and overcome so many obstacles that were inhibiting me from really discovering the best possible life for myself.

Rebecca explained a bit more about this:

I was very unwell mentally throughout my late teens and early twenties and I was broken and unhealthy, dysfunctional, and I just thought that that was life and then I just said that's enough, and I've done everything since that point to really change my life to be here, be present, and to really get the best and strive for a better life. I tried to commit suicide and I'm not ashamed of that, that happened and I started to realise behaviour within me, and wasn't happy with who I was, and at that point I said enough was enough and then started my journey to wellbeing, and it's been a very long hard slow journey and I'm still getting on there, but it's the best one I've been on, yeah. So if I can say one thing it's just that I didn't start living until I was about 23, 24.¹⁵

During her first year of full-time study, Stephanie had identified that she needed help with depression. At 21, she talked about a number of positive changes she had then made in her life:

This year has been a huge, huge year for me. Lots and lots and lots of self-development, like development of myself stuff and doing stuff for myself. I decided this year that I wasn't gonna keep living my life for other people anymore because it was getting really, really, really, really, really hard for me and at the end of last year and the start of this year I had like a major, major depressive episode and so my first move was to put myself in counselling ... I just thought I had to do something. Like me and Mum have been talking about it for years because it's been a repetitive thing but I just decided that I had to do it. And so that got me into learning coping mechanisms with her and being put on medication and stuff which just makes everything a hell of a lot easier and from there I've just gradually been able to just taken baby steps into where I am now which is being a lot more self-aware and just, yeah, completely changing my lifestyle and being generally a bit happier and not worrying so much about things I think. And I joined the gym as well this year which is good, something I've wanted to do for ages. Stopped smoking after like 5 years.

In his interview at 26, it came to light that Andrew had had a significant injury in his teenage years. He was involved in an accident and, looking back, was philosophical about having the life-changing decision he'd had to make:

... at that age it was a really good lesson to learn in acceptance and that, you know, sometimes life can just throw you a curveball and, you know, maybe there's not anything you can do about it other than, you know, get on with it.

In the survey he completed for the wider Competent Learners study about a year after the accident, he indicated he was always optimistic. His resilience in this testing situation might also have contributed to his fairly relaxed attitude to a number of things at 26.

¹⁵ If you think you or someone you know may be thinking about suicide, support is available by calling Lifeline New Zealand: 0800 543 354.

Andrew had a work life that supported his wellbeing. When he moved overseas about 6 months before his interview at age 26, he'd been able to continue working for the same New Zealand-based IT company. Andrew saw the advantages of the time difference between New Zealand and the country where he was living:

... when I'm working I'm the only person that's not in the New Zealand office and because of the time difference it's quite flexible so I can work whatever hours I want. I don't have to go in to an office or anything like that so it means that my days are pretty unstructured and I can sort of do whatever I like.

His more flexible work hours also suited his lifestyle: "I work kind of ad hoc ... and I generally sort of work for six months or something like that and then I go travelling somewhere." Andrew valued having the freedom to structure his days as he wanted to, to accommodate his work's needs as well as his current interests (computer games, cooking, coffee, yoga).

He had been considering a career change:

I don't really enjoy the IT stuff anymore, I haven't for a few years. Yeah, I suppose I'd probably say that I haven't changed it because I am attached to the ease of access to money ... I'd actually really like to be a barista. Yeah, I really enjoy mucking around with coffee and, yeah, [it would] be quite a change.

Several participants described the effects alcohol and drug use had had on their lives since they left school. At 18, Sarah had moved to a city where she worked in the hospitality industry. She developed alcohol and drug problems, culminating in an overdose before she was 20. Following this experience, she avoided drugs, but her alcohol use worsened:

And I was then trespassed from my favourite place for two years and that was just, that, oh, that killed me, because I wasn't allowed to go in. I was passed out every night, outside the pub, the bar, yeah, and so they just were like, 'You can't do that.' And I went to AA after that. When I got trespassed, a week later I was in AA.

Initially, she had thought of attending AA simply as a way to regain entry to her favourite bar:

And then when I got to AA, I actually realised I was the youngest person there by far and I actually had a bit of a problem, 'cause I was drinking every single night. And I was, you know, getting to the point where I was shaking and needed a drink ... I'm not religious and it's all about finding God and all that and I didn't really, I wasn't totally agreeing with that. But it was more just, I felt like I was with people who understood and I didn't have that, because no-one understood why I was drinking and why I, you know, why, just how I felt when I drank. And they understood and they were able to communicate with me a lot better because they got it and that's why I think that I liked it and that's why I stayed and I completed it. And it was probably the best thing I ever did.

In Natasha's case, drugs and alcohol were associated with her final years at school but not with her subsequent work in hospitality. As Natasha explained, she felt her last school:

... didn't want me. They turned around and said to me, when I was 14, 'We have no place for you in our school anymore.' And I was like, 'What? What?' And they said, 'Well, this is why, you know, you're wagging and you're being a disruption to the class and you're abusive', and that kind of thing. And because I was, I did have major anger issues and I was drinking very heavily, and I was also taking drugs very heavily. And I left that, had a whole lot of problems with my Mum, went through counselling, moved out of home and stayed with a family friend for about 6 months, while I was doing that.

At 21, Natasha was working in the hospitality area:

Researcher: And is it, you know, there's that sort of reputation around the hospo industry around drugs and alcohol, but you've learnt skill to manage that in your life?

Natasha: Yeah, yeah. Well, I don't need alcohol and drugs to have fun in my life, because I don't know, I guess I'm a hyper natural person anyway, so yeah. I don't know. I find it really hard to keep still, if you haven't noticed that (laughter). But, nah, I love running around and fast pace is good, so that's why I like the hospo industry.

Drugs had played a part in Emily's life, too, as did depression:

... and like WINZ has tried to help out in different ways, just like because I was just in this slump, like smoking marijuana and stuff every day, and staying home, like, sometimes for days not even leaving the house, speaking to no-one for days apart from my boyfriend and my Nana or something, and then so they were getting me to see like a drug person, and then so they would help out with different things.

At 21, Nicole had lived with a partner who used drugs. She had been becoming increasingly concerned about how this might impact their young son:

... we haven't really had Christmas for the last two years because he kind of has money for himself. Like, he'll get money and then he'll just spend it on himself on his drug habit or his smokes and that and it's just so, you know, well we need a Christmas. He's coming into a time when he understands everything and, I don't know ...

She explained that her partner's behaviour was not unusual where they were living:

He's kind of like most of his friends. They grew up with their partners doing everything and they do nothing. That's why I don't really like [the area] because the environment, it's just all the friends are on drugs or in jail and then they beat up their missus and don't look after the kids and then he's trying to be like them because he's like the little one out of the pack.

Eric described himself as a "regular drinker so that's my other part-time hobby outside of work". When I asked Eric at 26 if he had had any holidays in the last couple of years, he responded:

Nothing too major, I've gone up to Auckland with a couple of mates. It's kind of hard whether you'd call it a holiday because we kind of just got drunk and acted like idiots the whole time. I mean it was great fun and it was a great break from work, but it wasn't exactly just sitting in the sun, you know. We try to do it yearly, we've done it the last 2 years in a row and we're hoping in September this year.

Gaining a financial foothold

One thing that could contribute to a young adult's sense of belonging was feeling some financial security. By age 26, three of the men and one woman were homeowners. Patrick and his partner had bought a house about 3 years before. "That was a sort of now or never type thing. The housing market isn't getting any better at the moment." They also co-owned a café that his partner managed. Looking ahead, they were planning to reduce their loans and then expand the café business: "You know, be my own boss type thing, might be a little bit more appealing than what I'm doing at the moment." He felt he was living comfortably at 26.

Craig had bought a house around age 19, helped by money he inherited, and had been spending time renovating it himself. At 26, the house was tying him down somewhat:

... you see, for the last year like, it's been such a state. I haven't actually been able to leave, even if I did want to leave, not that I have any plans to go or anything but it means I could rent it out and actually go somewhere but I guess that will change, once it's at a finish point. I have been tied down to it because it hasn't been in a finish[ed] state and it will give me a few more options and when that happens, I might then think of something that I want to do.

Eddie said he was very happy with his life overall, and agreed he was optimistic about his future and his career. When asked how he was managing financially, he said he was living comfortably. For example, he said he had been enjoying an overseas holiday at least once each year. Eddie and his partner had bought a house and were upgrading it, room by room. He talked about buying their house as an adult thing to do:

Oh, it's just a step forward in the right direction I guess, and it's, I don't know, it's like a, not that it's a social expectation or anything, but it's, but I've actually personally always wanted to do.

Eric was also in a comfortable situation financially when he was 26, and was renting a large house that he shared with flatmates:

... money's good, I earn enough to be comfortable and can do, you know like, I can't just be like screw it I'm going to Fiji for the weekend or something like that, but enough that I can be like oh you know what I'm going to spend tonight and get me some takeaways.

Others were finding their financial situation less comfortable. Sarah and her husband were living overseas. They had first gone there together 3 years before when they were struggling financially and felt forced to do this:

... it was a last resort for me ... Yeah it's like they've got all these debt collectors, I've got no money, I can't earn any money here, what do I do? So I did go back and pay for it all which is something that only adults do. But yeah, it wasn't exactly a choice of mine, it was more forced, I had no other option.

Sarah said she was earning more money in doing reception work overseas and that in New Zealand "it's such a low minimum wage and then the type of jobs that I apply for are non-qualified jobs, you get treated like you're very replaceable". She didn't see this role as part of a long-term career path. As she explained:

It's cheaper to live here, the living costs, the rent, all of that combined, cheaper to live and you get paid more so sometimes you just need to make a decision that's about the money.

At 21, Nicole's financial situation was causing her stress. Her list of weekly expenses included loan repayments:

Have you heard about loan sharks? They're like real hard. We got \$1,500 and we're having to pay back \$2,500, so an extra thousand ... I've got a car now but we've got no warrant or reg on either of our cars because it's just too much. Like when we pay one bill, another bill comes up and now I've got a hole in my radiator. It's just like crap, everything's happening at once and there's no money to support us, it's really hard.

By 26, Nicole and her son had moved home to live with her parents and she was doing a course that she hoped would help her find work.

A sense of belonging to places

Having a strong sense of belonging to place was evident for fewer people than a sense of belonging to people. Rachel had lived all her life in the same region, and valued the stability associated with this. With this stability also

came continuity of her family relationships and one friendship that continued from primary school. "Place" was a more specific notion for Eric, whose large central city flat was a focal point for establishing a large number of friendships.

Also contributing to a sense of belonging to a particular place is owning property there. Craig had bought a house in the town where he worked. While this contributed to his fairly settled life, Craig also talked about selling his house once he had completed the renovations it needed:

... maybe in a couple of years see if [I can] try and make some money off it, but sell it and get a bit of land somewhere, which is what I was trying to do but just didn't quite have. I could have got a piece of land but not what I wanted to keep forever. So I want to get a bit of land and it will be, the land will be, well, I won't plan on selling it. I just will, yeah, just keep it forever. And people used to say 'Oh, you'll never do that' but that's what I'll do. Yeah. Just one big bit of land, as much as I can get. I've been thinking, it's either probably around here or the Marlborough Sounds which is what I've kind of been thinking lately. So, I go down there every year and there's just so much to do down there right in the Sounds and every year I'm just looking at bits of land that I ... dreaming you know? But, yeah, that's where I'd ideally want to get a piece of land but it might have to end up being here. I might have to still be working. (@20)

He had enjoyed family holidays in the Marlborough Sounds and clearly felt a strong connection to this part of the country:

We've always gone there. But it's not one place or anything, it's just the Marlborough Sounds are what we've always gone and done something cool down there, so with the boats and the fishing and yeah, all sorts.

Some had travelled overseas. Four had established themselves to live and work in other English-speaking countries. Three had left New Zealand after long-term relationships had ended. Each had developed their own social networks in their new places. Although they were enjoying living overseas, most maintained a strong link with New Zealand due to their family ties here.

6. Being responsible and making your own decisions: Thoughts about adulthood and the future

At age 26, what does adulthood look like?

These young adults tended to talk about adulthood as being characterised by being responsible for themselves and able to make their own decisions, which most saw as positive. Other characteristics included becoming a parent and being committed to a relationship or getting married. Participants also talked about their experiences of financial considerations relating to paid employment or buying a house.

Being responsible for themselves

Overall, most said they liked having greater control of their lives as adults, and the increased freedom to make their own choices. What many did not like about being an adult was being responsible for managing their own finances.

Several expressed some uncertainty about seeing themselves as adults, as Erin describes here:

I mean there's days where yeah I am a little bit immature and I won't necessarily react in the way I should but in general I mean I pay my bills, I pay my rent, got my furniture that I need, I set up you know my doctors' appointments when I need to, I see myself as an adult I mean ... I'm getting there, I'm figuring it out just like everyone else but I might not do it right all the time but I'm doing my best job.

Olivia made a similar comment:

Sometimes I feel like I'm kind of just, what's the word I'm looking for, kind of fluking things I guess but yeah no I think so like I'm responsible for myself, I'm responsible for feeding myself and rent payments and things like that which all come fresh with being an adult, I guess.

As Olivia said, there were downsides to having adult responsibilities: "I guess sometimes it would be nice if I did have, like, Mum and Dad to go home to when I wasn't feeling so great, just to look after me."

And what did Olivia like about being an adult?

I guess not really having to, well, not answer to everyone, I don't know, I guess I don't have to run anything by anybody, if I want to do something I can think and evaluate myself if I want to do it and if it's a good idea, I can make those decisions myself, I don't need to get the answers from somebody else.

Eric also saw adulthood as having the freedom to make his own choices:

The freedom to do whatever is quite nice, within reason obviously, yeah the freedom to make my own choices and more or less control my own life, is probably the thing I enjoy most about being an adult, yeah mostly just because, like, you know parents can be a bit controlling, I'm happy to be away from that.

Self-reliance and financial independence were the main reasons Eric saw himself as an adult:

I rely pretty much exclusively on myself, I pay for everything in my life you know, I don't rely on my parents, living on my own to an extent, live by myself, I'm supporting myself, full-time job you know sort of integrated into the adult world.

One particular aspect of his life as a young adult remained, alongside other markers of full adulthood:

... it would be the only thing stopping me from saying 'yes, I'm a full adult'. I'm still kind of living like a student, that's the only thing that would stop me, that's what we always say, like, when we finally leave this flat for good, we're going to have to grow up and stop having parties ... We do kind of have a little bit of a joke going at my flat though. We're all like wondering when we're one day going to finally end it, we all kind of recognise that when we finally end this flat is when we all have to truly grow up, because we can't just be reckless student kind of drinking idiot kind of people ... I mean, we've established quite a special thing, so much so that one of my flatmates, one of my best friends has a tattoo of our flat, our number, he's got a tattoo for it. I'm going to get one, one day.

Thomas describes a sense of responsibility for making his life the life he wants to live:

I find thinking about myself as an adult to be kind of funny because nothing really changes aside from responsibility and perspective, so I do find it really interesting that, like, a lot of people sort of, when they're growing up they expect to have some sort of revelation, or some grand change happen, that's what I think about when I think of myself as an adult. I realise that no grand change has happened but there's, I just realised that if I want my life to be the way I want it to be, I have to, I have to enact it, I have to live the life I want to live, and that's what being an adult is to me.

Andrew thought of himself as an adult and explained what this meant to him: "I'm self-sufficient, I have some life experience, I suppose a career, having had a career feels like you know something that is adulthood, yeah." He liked the freedom he had as an adult to make his own choices: "You can choose what you do with your life, with your time, you can choose what you do, how you spend your money, that kind of thing." He was less keen on the responsibility that was associated with adulthood, "though I don't have very much of it". At 26, he said he was "getting old, feel like my body's getting a bit old, not that I feel old, I just mean that I can notice the difference compared to when I was 18 years old".

Relationships with children and partners

For the women who had children, their views of adulthood included being responsible for the children and prioritising their children's needs. For Tiffany, adulthood was clearly linked with parenthood: "When I had my first child, I was definitely an adult straightaway."

At 26, Lauren was focused on raising her children with her partner of more than 10 years. She sounded satisfied with her life and valued her role as a mother: "Yeah, at the moment I'm just enjoying being able to stay at home and be a housewife and do those kinds of things and, yeah, we'll just see what happens." She talked about still being able to steer her life in a direction she wanted to go—in fact, she saw this as an advantage of becoming a parent at a young age. Establishing the career she talked about had been delayed by the arrival of her children, and she had not yet taken any practical steps to re-enter paid employment.

To Lauren, being an adult meant being mature and independent, and above all, "being a good role model for your children". Having greater control of her life was what Lauren said she liked about being an adult:

Being independent, being able to do everything your parents did. If you can understand that, yeah, being able to control your life. Or, you know, think about your future, have your goals, yeah.

Marriage had helped Tara feel like an adult: "So to get married just felt like we grew up a bit. Yeah, even I feel like all grown up, like oh 'my husband' instead of 'my boyfriend'."

Financial considerations

By 26, three men and one of the women had each bought a house. Others were hoping to do this before having children.

Tara talked about home ownership being part of being an adult for her:

Ah, it's going to sound so stereotypical, but I think like owning a house. I know that's so dumb because technically you're renting anyway but, you know, I just think having a house is being a symbol of being an adult.

Stephanie's ideas about adulthood were associated with paid employment and the stability that gave her:

Stability I think, and good routines yeah all of that sort of stuff, I guess how I saw my parents when I was little, which was having a house and kids and jobs and stuff, I guess I'm getting there yeah. Work, work makes me feel like an adult, work's going to be a lot of my adult job, I've got a lot of responsibility and getting hired to give people legal advice is pretty adult.

Some challenges during emerging adulthood

Tara's response to a question about what she didn't like about becoming an adult described the pressures she felt to achieve particular milestones:

The pressures of having to do stuff, like have a kid and have a house 'cos even though sometimes you put that on yourself, it is a society thing. It's like, oh you're renting, you're 26, you're renting? I'm like, yeah, just the pressures and then when we got engaged, everyone's like, you just have pressure on you about all those milestones in life. So when's the wedding? It's like we just got engaged. You get married, a lot of the speeches at our wedding, I kid you not, were like, can't wait for the babies! We were like going to have them quite soon afterwards anyway. But, that's your own personal decision, you don't need it from everyone else. So I don't like about an adult, everyone else's opinions of where you should be and just the pressure of that.

An increase in work responsibilities had also led Tara to feeling that being an adult also placed limits on personal freedom:

I was one of the senior bankers so it was like personal bankers would come to you and be like, how do I do this? I was kind of like, oh my gosh, 'cos I was really struggling with my own work. But, it was easy to help them because I knew how to do their stuff. It was my stuff I didn't really know and I was just like, ah, and people were coming to you for mortgages which is one of the things I said, I think defines being an adult. So it was like, oh, you're helping these people get their finances in order to get their house. You know, you're dealing with lawyers, you're dealing with, you know, stuff like that. So, that's probably one time and I also felt quite trapped there whereas like I said, I normally could just go and do what I wanted to do and that's kind of why I define myself as not an adult because I can just up and leave but I felt really trapped there. Like, it wasn't something that I could walk away from and yeah, that's probably the most I felt like an adult ... I'd never felt like that until I went to [the bank]. I never really felt like I had hard days at work and really. Yeah that's so bad to say that my only adult experience was a really bad experience. So it's like, do I want to be an adult? I feel like being an adult is like being trapped.

Stephanie grappled with thinking of herself as an adult in the absence of customary markers such as children:

... because I'm 26 I think I probably should consider myself an adult but not really. I spend a lot of time thinking about where I am in my life for my age, and where I thought I'd be. I don't feel like an adult, like I don't have any children and I'm not in a long-term relationship, and I don't have my finances under control and all of those things that you consider that make you an adult, you know don't own any property, you know I'm just kind of, I still feel like I'm still getting to grips with living life outside of studying, and you know so I think that coming to grips with how to just function in my day-to-day life as my own person, when I don't know if anyone ever feels like they're doing that properly but I feel like that might make me feel a bit more like an adult.

Emily described markers of adulthood that she had yet to reach and the support she received to help her along the way:

Just like, how everyone has their own like routine and with a job, moving out of home, just the normal stuff that most, like all my friends or whatever have done, and like normal relationships where they can, they don't argue all the time and have fights, and yeah and they go to work every day, they don't feel like, depressed and hide away for days or whatever, and yeah they don't have to rely on their parents or whatever for everything.

Hopes and expectations for the future

Most of the young adults readily identified what they would like to happen for them over the next couple of years. Some were working towards greater financial security and some were expecting to establish a new occupation or advance in their current role. Learning was included in the plans for several, often to increase their employability or to develop a personal interest. Overseas travel was on the wish list for some. Others simply wanted enough income to live happy fulfilling lives.

Having enough, being happy

Erin's hope for the future was that she would "be happy and just to, you know, do whatever makes me happy and whatever makes me feel that way". Being happy would supposedly be supported by having the wherewithal to provide Erin with what she needs to live. However, like a number of other participants, Erin was not ambitious to advance in her work or to acquire financial wealth, beyond what she needed. A sustainable lifestyle that enabled participants (and for some, their children) to live the happy, fulfilling life they wanted was their preference.

Thinking about his future possibilities, Craig observed that the small business where he worked was making sufficient money to be sustainable but was less lucrative than those in bigger metropolitan areas. However, he did not aspire to have more than he needed and had decided against moving into a city. In the future, he saw himself doing "just something that's making enough money, that's all":

I could see myself owning something like this round somewhere like this, this sized town or, you know, it wouldn't exactly be trying to be bigger and better than this, just something that's making enough money, that's all. I don't want to be working too long hours and I don't want it to be doing work that I'm not happy doing. So when we're printing all this sort of, like, artwork that's cool. You could do that all day long, you could work hard at that all day long and you'd be happy, but if you're doing other sorts of signs, just real estate signs then you don't get anything from it, you know? Yeah, that's the sort of difference there.

Rachel explained that during the decade since she left school, she had lived in the same region with the same partner, and her stable life had been what she had expected:

I never sort of planned at school to do an awful lot, I was never keen on sort of going to university or, you know, moving to Australia, or doing anything like that, I was always quite happy just working and proving myself, and trying, you know, to sort of stepping up job-wise, like, my partner and I have been together for almost 10 years now so we did get together when I was quite young, so I guess he's sort of been there for quite a while for me, so it's always been like I've always just, yeah, imagined it to turn out the way it sort of has.

The best thing about her life as a 26-year-old was:

... just that I'm stable, like, I know that we're going to be living where we are for quite a while, and I know my partner is going to be in a job that he's in for quite a while, and I'm happy with my job and there's no sort of uncertainty coming up, yeah, I just like feeling that everything is going good and should be going good for a while.

Patrick described himself as settled, when I asked him about what he'd like to happen in the next year or two. "Still more of the same, to be honest. If you'd asked me a year ago, it would be complete study or get a promotion at work. That type of thing, but as of now, I'm settled."

Melissa prioritised her personal development over other future plans such as property ownership:

I think the realisation of like being able to own my own house I think that's something that was a goal but I think I'm just being more realistic and I think realistically I'm probably going to be someone that moves around a lot so a house is probably not [a] smart investment I think. Yeah, so I don't know, I think it's more goals of like who I am as a person instead of achievements, I guess.

In response to a question about what was really important to him in life, Thomas responded: "I like to be warm and fed." At 26 he was living in a city apartment with his partner of 2 years. He was working part time in the power industry and said he was doing alright, financially. It was important to him to be satisfied with the work he was doing: "I know I'm obviously going to be having to work, that's something I wish wasn't a reality, I want to be fulfilled in my work." He aimed to continue developing his career in coding and software design.

He had a proactive attitude to life: "I also understand that my fun comes from what I do, not what comes to me, so I'm always looking to be doing something instead of just waiting around for something to change." He didn't feel he needed to set goals for his future: "No, no clear plan. I'm usually quite happy with the way things are, and it happens quite easily for me, as long as I feel I am moving forward somehow and I'm getting the things I need and want."

Goals related to their financial situations

When participants talked about their goals, a number mentioned financial considerations. Some were looking ahead to being able to buy their first home, while others had plans to establish or expand a business.

Sarah planned to start her own business in New Zealand—what kind of business was yet to be decided. Finances figured in the plans she and her husband had, too:

Yes, so we've got plans, like, numbers to hit that means we, like, we want to have a certain amount of money in the bank before we do have children because we want to obviously support them and the same with the business.

She recognised that it might help her business to “do something online, you know, like open polytech or something just for general business management”. At the same time, she was clear that “I’m not going to go and complete a four-year degree to own my own business.”

Patrick’s goals related to being his own boss:

I mean, at the moment we’re still sort of paying off business loans on the café. Paying it off and maybe expanding, focusing more on that. You know, be my own boss type of thing, might be a little bit more appealing than what I’m doing at the moment. Once I’ve paid off the loan, expand just a little bit more and just spend my time focusing on that.

Rachel had bought one house herself and she and her partner were saving to buy a second, when she was interviewed at age 26. Financial security was an important aspect of Rachel’s stable life: “I think buying sort of, you know, buying houses as well, I mean, it’s always going to be quite sort of stable I feel, like, people are always going to need places to live.”

Saving for another house meant starting a family was postponed:

[In the] next year or so, probably hoping to get another house, within that timeframe that’s sort of our plan, and then I guess, like I’m wanting to get another house before having children, but then I guess once we’ve done that, that would definitely, kids would definitely be on the cards ... I’ve always thought, like, I’ve always wanted to be able to sort of plan to have kids, rather than have it happen.

Owning her first home was still a goal for Olivia, who explained:

It would be nice to buy a house I think, yeah, owning a home would be quite ideal for us especially with three children so make things a little bit easier, a bit more space for everyone to run around. Maybe investment properties would be nice, and also running a good business full time.

At age 26, Eddie was still living overseas and working as a roof plumber for a large company. He often worked all weekend, sometimes doing a small amount of work for his weekday employer, but more often working for himself as part of his long-term plan of transitioning into his own roofing business:

Well my plan at the moment is to work the rest of the year out and ... at the end of this year giving my resignation and start up from next year fresh on my own ... I’ve registered a business under my name and made my business uniform, work cards, got an accountant, all that sort of thing but I mean so it’s mainly just being comfortable enough to know that I’ve got enough work to keep me going all year round and then once I’ve done that sort of had to grow it until I can take on workers and grow it from there.

Occupation and career possibilities

When asked about what they would like to be doing in 5 years’ time, some participants did not describe a direct progression from their current situation; some were hoping for or expecting a distinct change. Because the word “career” tends to be associated with notions of pathways and continuity rather than deliberate changes of direction, I also refer here to “occupation” possibilities.

Craig, for example, was working out how to make his metal-working hobby a full-time occupation at some stage in the future:

The metal work is probably more of what, I think, I’d like to be doing because I’ve got a good workshop at home which I could work out of, but I just don’t know how it’s going to go down. Working just with mild steel

and welding, so it's, sort of forge work; blacksmith work. That's just a hobby of mine and I've done quite a few big jobs for people like that. That's ideally what I want to be doing but it's a hard one to cross over, with the regular income [of his current job].

By the time he was 26, Craig had sold a few commissioned pieces of work, but not yet enough to provide a reliable income.

Melissa seemed relaxed about the prospect of doing a variety of different jobs during her working life:

I would kind of love, I think it's just a life of choices I think, like not being limited to one thing or another so yeah, I can't even remember when I heard this but maybe out of college someone said that the average person has an average of seven jobs or seven careers and I think that has made me so much more relaxed in what I'm doing because I know that I should just do what makes me happy at that time. Instead of focusing on I need to do something that I can work towards in five or ten years. Because I'm going to be a different person in ten years so I'm going to enjoy different things and other things so I shouldn't really focus on that version of myself; I should focus on what I enjoy right now. So I think like for looking towards the future I'm kind of looking at what can I equip myself with and learn right now so that I'm a better person in ten years instead of, you know, career focused and family focused and things that are beyond my control.

When I interviewed her at 26, Lauren was optimistic about her future possibilities:

I'm still really young myself so I still have a whole future ahead of me where I can change my path on where I want to go and what I want to do myself. So I am a qualified [technician] but I haven't stuck with that. I can do that if I want but, yeah, so I'm kind of at the point where, you know, where I can choose what I want to do, kind of thing.

When the subject of NCEA was mentioned by the researcher, Lauren responded:

You know, it can make it hard not having Level 1, 2, and 3. But, I mean, how I see it, there's always, you know, ways around it, you know, always follow what you want to do and there'll be a way you can do it.

Olivia could see opportunities for career development in the company she was working for:

I guess, yeah, what I have now is pretty great, maybe like to further a little bit more my career with [a retail chain], 'cause, yeah, there's lots of opportunity with them so I'd like to see where my current role can take me once I get more embedded in to it.

Stephanie was very clear about the direction she would like her law career to take. At age 26, she realised that there were potential career advantages to her being single with no dependants and no mortgage: "... if that opportunity did come up, I could just go". She talked about wanting to work overseas:

I'd like to have [a life] where I travel and work, and make a difference in my field so, privacy law is a human rights area in New Zealand. I'd really like to continue working in human rights, I've got a really big interest in it, so I'd like to make some big changes. I'd like to work for [an international organisation]. I'd like to work in [a city overseas] ... I'll always keep my eyes out for opportunities, and I look at jobs at the [international organisation] on occasion and I look at jobs in [another country], and I'm always taking opportunities at work that will set me up to broaden my experience, and, you know, sort of gearing it towards what I might want to do next.

Ultimately, her ambition was to become a judge:

I'm going to be a judge one day. That's what I want to end up doing, that's what I've wanted to do forever, so that's something I'll make happen, unless there's some job that's better suited for me, but that's, I don't know. I think I see quite massive advancement in my career, it's something I'm quite dedicated to, and I think even just from the first year of my job, reflecting I've made some massive progress already, so I think that that's going to be something that's definitely part of my future ...

Learning they would like to do

When they talked about their hopes and expectations for the future, some of the young adults identified specific learning they wanted to do. Sometimes this was to gain a qualification, and sometimes to pursue an ongoing personal interest.

Olivia planned to get her full driver's licence in the near future and could see how this could increase her independence. One of Eric's goals was also to get his driver's licence and then to buy a car. Living and working in the central city, this hadn't been a priority for him. His girlfriend didn't drive either, and they hadn't enjoyed being reliant on buses when they were away on holiday. At 26 he said: "That's the last freedom that I don't really have, I don't have ease of transportation."

Natasha was planning to start a 9-month budgeting and finance course soon after I interviewed her at age 26, "mainly to help with the budget at home, and it will also lead to me having my own business later". She intended to "have a food truck and I'll have a truck stop" and—also related to food—she was writing recipes for her own cookbook. Running her own business was in her plan for the next 10 to 15 years:

I still have to be realistic because I've got children so I need to, you know, work in the budget, yes I've still got children to fork out for as well as my own dream that I'm wanting to do.

In the shorter term, she was looking forward to both of her children being at kindergarten and completing her budgeting and finance course.

Melissa was already learning sign language, in which she had a personal interest, and planned to learn additional languages:

... in the next two years I really want to learn one or two languages so I've kind of half started learning Spanish so I started learning that like five years ago and kind of just it's still there but I need a refresher course kind of thing.

Night classes and online courses that can like, you know, just test you and stuff. But I'm finding that the online is, like I've got the base there from the classes but online is just as easy so I'm just doing that now. And my Mum and I are learning sign language as well. I don't know, I feel like learning, keeping my brain thinking I guess. My Mum is partially deaf, like when she was 30 she was told she would probably be deaf when she was like 35 so she's always had hearing aids and that kind of thing so I think it's just been something in my life that I've always wanted to do and I think Mum has been wanting to learn it because I think she's, I mean she hasn't said it but I think there's the concern that she could become deaf at a certain point, when she gets older.

Erin also wanted to strengthen her fluency in another language, having learnt Japanese for 5 years at school:

I'd like to do a refresher course in Japanese because I haven't used it for so long that I'm quite rusty. I used to be quite fluent so that would be nice to, like, do something either a refresher course in Japanese or maybe even learn something new. I just think it would be quite nice to get those skills back that I spent so long learning and really enjoy that I don't utilise any more though, I just don't remember as well.

Looking forward to future relationships and family events

People who mattered to the participants featured in participants' plans for the future, particularly partners and children. Major family events were on the horizon for some.

Melissa was clear about how she viewed any future relationships:

I've always had the mind-frame of I don't really, like a goal of mine is not to have a partner and kids because what if I'm happy single for the rest of my life, am I a failure? No. Like it's not, that's an add-on that shouldn't be a goal.

Tiffany's plans for the future revolved around a new relationship:

I want to be with my boyfriend and maybe make some more babies and just have, like, a really cliched Kiwi family. Yeah, maybe we all grow up and all the kids grow up in one solid house, like we both did when we were kids. I would just like to be a fun-loving family in the future.

Eddie and his partner owned their own home overseas and wanted to build a large garage and add a deck to the house. Starting a family was also in their 5-year plan. In the future, the sort of life he wanted to have was: "Similar to the one I've got now, probably with some children in the future."

Nicole's optimism came through during her final interview: "I'm hoping that I follow through on this [hospitality course] and then get a job, either part time or full time but just definitely something in hospitality, and keep making my friends. I keep making a lot of friends lately." Sometime in the future, she also hoped to "Get married on a nice day, have some more kids."

Several talked about family occasions they were looking forward to. For Erin, a sibling's wedding was approaching:

... my little sister is getting married in October, so I'll be back in New Zealand again to be a bridesmaid for the first time. So I'm really excited about that, I mean I'm going to be missing one of my friend's wedding unfortunately, because she did get engaged first and she did set her date first but then my little sister kind of skewed those plans by getting engaged, so they set their date for like for nine months after her and I was like I can't come back for both weddings. I was like, sorry, sister trumps friend especially 'cause I'm her bridesmaid.

Before that, her mother would be visiting Erin:

And I'm really looking forward to February next year because my Mum is going to come back over for like maybe a couple of weeks.

Travelling overseas

Wanting to see more of the world was included in the goals of some. When asked what she predicted would happen for her over the next year or so, Melissa's response was:

Experience, like I think I will see the world, so I'll have a better view of the world, I guess, like more experience and knowledge where all I've ever known is New Zealand. So, yeah, learning cultures and maybe I'll become wiser and fall in love with a small country you know little town in a country somewhere and go live there or something, I don't know, just adventures.

Erin was more specific about her ambitions for travelling:

Well I wouldn't know if I'd call it like a plan but essentially a goal is I would like to visit every country in the world. I'd like to go to not necessarily to live in every country but I would like to visit every country. I just find it so fascinating to experience the different cultures and to see how things are done and I mean a lot of the places they've got in Europe, some of them are just like you can go for a weekend and some of them I might go for like a week or two and so it, yeah, I would like to see more of the world.

Leaving New Zealand was something Emily had yet to do and was included in her goals for the future:

Kind of what I think an adult should be, like have a job, a partner that we get on with like a normal couple, like get on well or whatever, and then hopefully like maybe travel or have a family maybe ... I just want to sort of get a job, stick it out and maybe go to a different country for a holiday because I haven't done, I haven't left New Zealand ever, so yeah, because I feel like everyone's done that as well, they all work and save and then they end up going on, like, a little holiday. I haven't done that.

7. Concluding thoughts

I started this research with these questions:

- What role did learning play during emerging adulthood?
- What were the factors that expanded the range of options available to some participants and that constrained the options available to others during the decade after leaving school?
- For those who did not complete Year 13 and go directly to tertiary study and then employment, what helped them achieve a sense of belonging at 26?

Learning during emerging adulthood

In the decade since they had left school, these young people had all been involved in combinations of formal and non-formal learning. Some of those who felt they could not learn well at school had subsequently experienced success with their post-school learning. The majority of those who had completed a course of at least 1 year's duration were working in an area related to their qualification at age 26. One person had completed two Bachelor's degrees in unrelated areas, when the first did not lead to reliable employment. A number had taken short courses to increase their employability, with mixed success.

Motivation to study was sometimes from purely personal interest. More often, they saw formal study as a prerequisite for future work, or extending their current employment possibilities. A sense of responsibility for their children motivated some of the mothers to undertake part-time study that fitted around their parenting commitments. Study was enabled by supportive family and friends, and by loans and other financial assistance.

Non-formal learning included learning through observation in work contexts and talking to people. For some, it included learning about themselves through sometimes difficult experiences, and identifying what they needed to do to live a better life.

Factors that expanded or constrained options

How had these young adults' lives been affected by the decisions they had made and experiences they had had since leaving school? Staying at school until the end of Year 13 to gain formal qualifications, and then completing tertiary study is likely to result in a wider range of genuine choices than, say, leaving school at 16 with NCEA Level 1. However, some participants in situations with fewer choices identified an option they wanted and were able to pursue, resulting in positive outcomes that varied from getting a foothold on the property ladder, advancing their career, or—perhaps most significantly for some—achieving a stable life that made them happy. They were able to achieve these things because they had identified the place they wanted to occupy in the world and applied themselves with motivation and focus to get there. Additional factors that helped some build a sense of belonging included gaining a well-chosen post-school qualification, and being enabled along the way by practical support from family or financial support from government agencies. Others had made their way largely independently.

The outcomes for a small number of 26-year-olds were less positive. The lives of some of the young women had been affected by wellbeing issues related to either mental health or alcohol and drug use. Not all of them had fully overcome these issues by age 26. Some of the women, in particular, had experienced relationships that had affected them in adverse ways, including being unable to continue studying and having to leave jobs. Experiences of work were mixed for those who went into the workforce after leaving school early.

Some of the young adults had chosen to move to a different part of New Zealand or a different country. In some cases, moving away had enabled them to “re-set” their life following a difficult experience, such as a relationship ending.

Many ways to belong during emerging adulthood

Most of these 26-year-olds were quite contented with their lives. Their benchmarks of belonging and having a place in the world were often a stable life over which they had some control, financial security, secure housing, fulfilling work, good relations with others, and for some, happy and healthy children.

Relationships with the people who mattered to them were integral to most of the women’s accounts of the decade since leaving school, sometimes more than their employment and career. The men, on the other hand, tended to talk more about their work and study, and their financial plans for the future.

Support from parents provided the young women with children with a more stable lifestyle than they might otherwise have been able to achieve while their children were very young. With some of their children starting primary school, the women were considering their futures. To take on full-time paid employment would likely rely on continued practical support from their parents for some in the form of childcare before and after school.

By age 26, these young people have mostly moved away from the homes they grew up in. Several had thrived living overseas, but others valued having a connection over an extended time to the same geographical area and the people they knew there. They have experienced a greater freedom, as well as the need to find themselves in a world that does not always have a neat slot for each individual. Most expressed confidence in their own abilities and a preference for self-reliance.

While becoming an adult has elongated in time with so many going on from school to tertiary study before full-time employment and careers, it is interesting to see that the pathway to creating one’s own family—a mark of full adulthood for many of these young people—was often still framed in the sequence of: buy a home, then start a family. With New Zealand’s high real estate prices and housing shortages, home ownership is becoming beyond the reach of young adults. The period from school to starting a family may further elongate if people prioritise home ownership as a prerequisite for having children. Over time, this might also erode a value held by some that home ownership is a marker of adulthood.

What is a good life?

Writing about the shaping of these young adults’ lives has made me question, what *are* the markers of a successful life, or for that matter, a good life? The accounts of these people’s experiences of the period between age 16 and age 26 illustrate a diversity of outcomes resulting from different combinations of choices, life events, and relationships they had during that time. Although not every person has had positive outcomes, many of their

stories suggest a sense of having found their place in the world, and knowing where they want to head in the future and what they need to do to get there.

I hope some of these young adults' accounts of their experiences of the decade after leaving school provide some reassurance that doors are not closed for those who take less conventional paths from secondary school. At the same time though, many of the participants voiced their regret at not staying longer at school and gaining qualifications that would have expanded their future possibilities. Their disengagement with school raises some questions about what could change in secondary schooling to make it more of a place where they felt they belonged and could grow.

Appendix

1. A summary of the participants at 26

Looking after their own child at 20

Tiffany had completed a programme of study before the arrival of her two children. At 26, her children were Tiffany's priority and she worked to support herself and her children. Her supportive parents were a constant in her children's lives. Tiffany enjoyed being a mother and valued the stability of the life she had with her children.

Lauren had a strong sense of identity as a woman who was proud of her role as mother to two children, at 26. When she first became a parent at 15, her parents had provided her with lots of practical and material support. She had no secondary school qualifications, constraining her future options. Lauren was living with her partner whom she met through her work.

Nicole left school with no formal qualifications and had a child by the time she was 20. Her relationship with her child was central to her life. Prioritising her child's needs and feeling backed by her parents gave her the courage to leave a controlling partner after a long-term relationship. At 26 she was living at home, enjoying the support of her parents, and working part time. Nicole was taking deliberate steps to improve life for herself and her son, strengthening her confidence and sense of self-worth.

Not employed, not in education or training at 20

Patrick resented the lack of autonomy he experienced at secondary school. After an unsettled period in his late teens, he completed a degree that enabled him to be engaged in work he found fulfilling. At 26, Patrick was in a settled relationship and had strengthened his financial position, owning a home and a business with his partner. He was confident of his own abilities and expressed a high need for autonomy.

Natasha had experienced a tumultuous life in the decade after leaving school and showed great resilience. She had two children in her early twenties. By 26, she had separated from their father, and had practical help from her mother. It was clear that family was important to Natasha. She had cared for her siblings so that her mother could spend time with her ailing grandparent.

Emily continued to find it difficult to get off the sickness benefit she had been receiving over an extended period for mental illness. She relied heavily on her grandmother. Meanwhile, her friends had developed adult lives that she saw as typified by independence, employment, and being able to travel. All of these markers of adulthood seemed to still be beyond Emily's reach.

Sarah described herself as a rebellious teenager and had been involved with the police. She had taken responsibility for the effects of her behaviour and had taken action to overcome issues with alcohol and drug abuse. At 26, she had been in a long-term relationship and valued her stable life. Sarah and her partner had decided to live overseas where they could earn more money to achieve their financial targets, before starting a family.

Left school early, working at 20

Craig completed a 1-year programme of study that led to the job he was still in at 26. One day, he hoped to be able to make a living from the technical craft he enjoyed in his spare time. He had used an inheritance to buy a house, and had been renovating this himself. In addition to having his own place to live and stable employment, Craig had a strong attachment to people in his wider family.

Olivia had pursued her keen interest in art by completing a 2-year course of study and then doing night classes to continue her own self-development. At 26, she was enjoying working in retail, which provided her with opportunities for career advancement and work-related travel. She was living with her partner, whose children stayed with them regularly.

Eddie left New Zealand after a relationship ended. He completed a trade apprenticeship overseas and at 26 was in the throes of setting up his own business in the same field. Financially, he had also made good progress, having bought a house and still having money for overseas holidays. His work–life balance included enjoying time with his partner and friends.

Eric was very sociable, and enjoyed the company of his many friends and flatmates. He recognised that his flat and the lifestyle that went with it were somewhat at odds with other aspects of his adult life, especially his career. Eric had earned a qualification and applied himself to advance his career within the organisation he was working for.

Rachel liked to plan ahead and valued stability and predictability in her life. She bought a house in her early twenties, in the same region she had lived all her life to which she had a strong attachment. Rachel was living with her long-term partner at 26. She did office and reception work and had taken short courses that she saw would enhance her employment opportunities.

Rebecca had overcome mental health issues by undertaking “self-work”, combined with her sheer determination and strength, while working as a nanny. By 26, she had experienced the deaths of two people close to her. The nature of her nannying work meant she was very involved in the lives of the family she was with, and she had appreciated their support and understanding. It was through one of these families that Rebecca was encouraged to follow her interest in a career that will enable her to help others stay well, too.

Left school early, studying at 20

Andrew had a track record of optimism and resilience. His early adult years had been eventful: by 26, he had been married, bought a house, divorced and sold the house, moved to another country, and married again. After he realised he’d be unlikely to advance in any line of work without doing some tertiary study, he completed a diploma course that led directly to employment.

Stephanie chose not to go from secondary school straight to tertiary study, but completed a degree in her early twenties. She has clear ambitions for her law career. Perhaps because she studied later than some of her peers, Stephanie felt she was still in the process of setting up her life as an adult. In recent years, Stephanie had recognised she needed help to deal with depression, and a combination of counselling and medication had helped her to improve her wellbeing and develop coping strategies.

Completed Year 13, immediate destination not study

Melissa left school with NCEA Level 3, and didn’t go directly to study. A broken arm interrupted her work and she changed direction. She’d been interested in clothing and fashion since childhood, and completed a related course before working in this field for a couple of years. When the novelty of working in the New Zealand fashion industry began to wane, Melissa decided to move overseas. At 26 she was still there, staying with family, and using her garment construction skills to earn a living.

Erin left New Zealand after a relationship ended, to establish her identity. She had grown up in a large family, and helping other people was a value she said her parents had taught her. She was living overseas and doing office work.

Thomas was living with a partner at 26. When the first degree he completed did not lead to employment, he took a pragmatic decision to enrol in a second degree—which did lead to work.

Tara disliked secondary school. She left with NCEA Level 3, and did no further study. Her early ambitions of joining the police and becoming a sports umpire had not eventuated. She had travelled overseas with her partner, to whom she was now married. She was living with her partner at 26 and expecting their first child. She had a close network of family and friends.

2. The interviews

The interviews were semi-structured, and, where appropriate, included the interviewer making links with what a participant had said in their interview at 21. The key themes of the interviews were looking back on their lives since they were 21, their present situation, and their aspirations and expectations for the future. As part of the informed consent process, participants were sent the following list of topics that would be covered in the interviews:

Your life now

- What you are doing
- Where you are living
- What you are enjoying in life
- What the best thing about your life is now
- What is really important to you in life
- Anything you would like to change
- Some of the big decisions you've had to make

Becoming an adult

- Thinking about yourself as an adult
- Things that have helped you to feel like an adult
- What you like and don't like about becoming/being an adult

Looking ahead

- The sort of life you would like
- Any plans or goals you have, related to that
- What you see as your options
- What you think will happen for you in the next year

The 19 interviews ranged from 20 to 60 minutes in length. Generally, the men's interviews were shorter than the women's. Fifteen participants chose to be interviewed by phone, three via Skype, and one interview was conducted face to face. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed in full.

In the information that was sent to potential interviewees, they were offered a NZ\$50 gift card as an appreciation of their time, plus a copy of their interview transcript if they would like it. Those who were living overseas were happy to take up our suggestion to have their voucher sent to a family member in New Zealand.

Because the focus for this study was participants' post-school lives, the transcripts of their interviews at 21 and 26 formed the main dataset. Additional information was drawn from summaries of individual participants' information from their participation in the full Competent Learners' study, from ages 5 to 20, inclusive, that had been compiled to inform their interviews at 21. Their responses to the full study online survey and scripted phone interview at 25 were also drawn on.¹⁶

¹⁶ Findings from the online survey and phone interview can be found at:
<https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/competent-learners-26-summary-key-findings>

