



## **Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper Submission from the Life Patterns Longitudinal Study of Youth Project Team**

**April 11, 2023**

### **About the Life Patterns Project:**

The Life Patterns Project research program is a longitudinal study that tracks young people from the time they complete secondary through adulthood. The data includes quantitative data collected via surveys of all participants; qualitative data generated by open text questions included in surveys; qualitative data generated from one-on-one interviews with selected participants and focus groups. The study currently includes three cohorts of school leavers: cohort 1 completed secondary school in 1991 and are now aged in their late-40s; cohort 2 completed secondary school in 2006 and are now in their mid-30s; cohort 3 are currently being recruited and are expected to complete secondary school in 2023. Life Patterns has been funded primarily through Discovery grants from the Australian Research Council. Further information about the project is available here:

<https://education.unimelb.edu.au/life-patterns>

### **About this submission:**

This submission was led by co-Chief Investigators Professor Dan Woodman (Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne), Professor Hernan Cuervo (Melbourne Graduate School of Education [MGSE], University of Melbourne) and Associate Professor Jenny Chesters (MGSE) on behalf of the Life Patterns team which includes Professor Johanna Wyn (MGSE, lead CI), with, Professor Helen Cahill (MGSE, co-CI), and Dr Julia Cook (Sociology, University of Newcastle, co-CI), Dr Quintin Maire (MGSE), Dr Jun Fu (MGSE), Professor Rachel Brooks (University of Surrey, UK, International Partner Investigator), Professor Carmen Leccardi (University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy, International Partner Investigator), Nadishka Weerasuriya (MGSE) and Maddison Sideris (MGSE). Further team detail are available here:

<https://education.unimelb.edu.au/life-patterns#the-research-team>

The submission focuses on lifelong learning in the context of a changing world of employment, with relevance to the following questions:

Q8 What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?

Q15 what changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?

Q16 what practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning and how can they be fixed?

### **Life Patterns insights:**

Preparation for the jobs of the future through higher education requires us to think about how we can prepare young people for a continually evolving, and in key dimensions, increasingly precarious labour market. Graduates will need critical thinking skills, problem solving skills and social and emotional skills. They will need to be able to adapt the skills that they develop during their higher education studies to new and emerging employment opportunities.

Training young people for the jobs that exist today is not necessarily in their best interests, especially if we are expecting them to be engaged with the labour market across the life course. Evidence from comparing the views of our cohorts 1 and 2 during their 20s shows that there has been a change over time in how young people think about their careers and expectations from employers and educators, showing greater recognition of the need for opportunities that will facilitate flexibility in the face of a changing labour market.

Further, our analysis of data collected over time from cohorts 1 and 2 indicate that Australians have recognised the importance of completing higher education and that they have embraced lifelong learning.

In 2017, when cohort 1 participants were aged around 44 years, 51% had completed an educational qualification after age 28. Of those who completed a new qualification between 2002 and 2017, 79% completed a higher-level qualification and 21% completed a lower-level qualification. Further study or training is well recognised by the participants as a necessity for accessing a promotion in their workplace, to keep up to date with new developments in their field, or, in some cases, to maintain their current position.

When asked why they were studying, men were more likely than women to indicate that their motivation was that it was an employment requirement or that it was to gain a promotion. On the other hand, women were more likely than men to indicate that they were studying to gain access to new employment opportunities.

*I aim to maintain appropriate up to date knowledge in field, essential in an area that continues to change with its environmental impacts/pressures (Cohort 1 male, Chemical engineer).*

*I want further to advance my career and ensure that I am up to date with regulations and requirements in my professional job I require advanced studies. (Cohort 1 female, Accountant)*

*An MBA seems to be the "NEW" minimum requirement in job progression. (Male, Sales manager)*

*As an osteopath, I seek to continually learn new skills and approaches as well as refresh on things I may have learnt in the past (Cohort 1 female, Osteopath).*

Some participants re-engaged with education later in life to pursue a different career to the one they had. This was the case for men and women searching for new employment challenges, those who were dissatisfied with their current labour conditions, and for women who interrupted their work for parenting reasons.

*I decided to go back to university to enable me to change my career path. It is the first time I have studied distance education (Cohort 1 female, employed in local government sector).*

*To keep up in today's society you have to be upgrading your skill base all the time. Otherwise, you will fall behind the skill base and job potential. (Cohort 1 male firefighter)*

*I feel that I need to continue to challenge myself. For improved job satisfaction and opportunities, I need to keep studying. It is a good role model for my children also (Cohort 1 female, Nurse unit manager)*

*I enjoy lifelong learning but it comes at a sacrifice to my social life and recreational life. I don't mind too much as I will get a better job as a result (Cohort 1 female, Librarian)*

*I will be returning to work after having children and while my proposed work path is closely aligned to work I have undertaken in the past, I know that a small amount of formalised study will make the transition back to work easier and display commitment to potential employers. (Cohort 1 female, Human resource manager)*

*I may need to study to get back into the workforce (Cohort 1 female, Stay-at-home parent).*

Despite an overall acknowledgement of the importance of lifelong learning, our participants identified several barriers to enrolling in higher education including family responsibilities, time pressure and the costs associated with studying.

*I always like to be studying or learning something; however, I am finding it much harder to make the time now that I have young children. Uni courses are not at all family friendly, even when courses are delivered online (e.g., try doing a 3-hour exam when I need to breastfeed my baby every three hours!) (Cohort 1 female, Project manager)*

*I don't feel like I have time to undertake university or TAFE courses due to family/ work commitments (Cohort 1 female, Public servant)*

*As a stay-at-home father of two young children, I don't have the time or energy to put into any education for myself (Cohort 1 male, Stay-at-home parent/ Musician)*

*I support and believe in lifelong learning but have no time to commit to any formal programs whilst caring for small children full-time (Cohort 1 female, stay-at-home parent)*

*I would like to return to formal learning but with a young family, it is impossible (Cohort 1 female, Practice manager).*

*I can't afford it, just way too expensive! I really would like to study though because my job has hit a real plateau since being made redundant from a large law firm a couple of months ago (Cohort 1 female, Lawyer).*

*It is very important but sometimes hard to fit into a busy schedule (Cohort 1 male, Project manager).*

In 2017, cohort 2 participants indicated that lifelong learning was now a requirement for their career development. There was also evidence of a realisation that completing one higher education degree is not necessarily a direct pathway into the profession of their choice.

*I am a doctor so my Bachelor of Medicine degree has helped me get my current job. Increasingly further degrees, particularly in research such as PhDs, are needed to secure jobs at public hospitals throughout Australia and to get into speciality training programs (Cohort 2 female doctor)*

Some graduates commented that they needed around five years of work experience to secure their dream job.

*After 5 years in the workforce since graduating from University (graduated in 2011) - this year I have managed to get a role which is completely in field of study. - The past*

*5 years have all been roles where I have been "touching" or "getting exposure" to my field of study [Cohort 2 male with a Bachelor Degree]*

*I never expected that it would take about 5 years to get a full-time paid job in my field. Even then, that is only on a six-month contract, with very little possibility of extending the contract [Cohort 2 female with a Masters' Degree]*

*I have changed careers a few times and as such have a number of qualifications. I only just got a casual job in my current field. It took over 8 months. I am doing an unrelated job part time to support myself [Cohort 2 female with a Graduate Diploma].*

These experiences highlight the need for higher education providers, employers and legislative settings to all contribute to making lifelong learning accessible and to enable an equitable return on the investment people make in study across the life course.

**This submission draws on research reported in the following publications that may be of relevance to the panel:**

Chesters, J., Cuervo, H. & Fu, J. (2020) Re-engagement with education over the life course: Motivations and barriers. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 39(2): 154-167

Chesters, J., Fu, E., Cuervo, H. & Wyn, J. (2018) *Learning across the life course*. Melbourne: Youth Research Centre

Chesters, J. & Wyn, J. (2019) Chasing rainbows: How many educational qualifications do young people need to acquire meaningful, ongoing work? *Journal of Sociology* 55(4): 670-688

Crofts, Cuervo, Wyn, Smith & Woodman. 2015. *Life Patterns: Ten years following Generation Y*, Melbourne: Youth Research Centre

Cuervo H., Crofts J., & Wyn J. 2013. *Generational insights into new labour market landscapes for youth*, Melbourne: Youth Research Centre.

Cuervo, H., Crofts, J., Woodman, D., Cahill, H., Reade, J., & Furlong, A. 2016. *Life Patterns: Comparing the generations*. Youth Research Centre, The Melbourne Graduate School of Education

Cuervo H., & Wyn J. 2016. 'An Unspoken Crisis: The "scarring effects" of the complex nexus between education and work on two generations of young Australians, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 35(2), 122-135

Woodman, D. 2012. 'Life Out of Synchrony: How new patterns of further education and the rise of precarious employment are reshaping young people's relationships', *Sociology*, 46(6): 1074-1090

Woodman, D. (2019) Continuity and change in attitudes to job security across two generations of young Australian adults', *Labour & Industry: A journal of the social and economic relations of work* 29(3): 273-288

The full list of publications is available here:

<https://education.unimelb.edu.au/life-patterns#reports-and-publications>