



Briefing Note: Competent Learners@26 – NZCER Report Releases

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Purpose of Report

The purpose of this paper is for you to:

Note that the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) will be releasing two reports from their Competent Learners Study in the week of 5 August 2019.

Summary

- The two reports to be released by NZCER present findings from the Competent Learners Study on the pathways, labour market experiences and learning as well as the relationships and experiences of study participants at the age of 26.
- The reports present a predominantly descriptive overview of the results. While the findings are not representative, they provide useful information and insight into the pathway of lifelong learning and the transitions from formal learning into employment for this cohort as well as their relationships, values and experiences.



Cathryn Ashley-Jones
Acting Deputy Secretary
Evidence Data and Knowledge

17/07/2019



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education

31/7/19

Background

1. The New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) is planning to release the following two reports from their Competent Learners Study the week of 5 August 2019:
 - a. *Pathways, labour market experiences, and learning at work and beyond at age 26: A report from the Competent Learners project*
 - b. *Shaping adulthood: Relationships, values and experiences of the Competent Learners @ 26*
2. The reports present findings from NZCER's Competent Learners Study. This longitudinal research project began in 1993, and has tracked the development of a group of learners from the Wellington region from early childhood education, through school and into adulthood. The current reports present findings from the latest data collection round at age 26¹.
3. The Competent Learners sample reflects the Wellington region where the study was carried out and, compared to the national average, has higher proportions of people from high-income families and whose mothers have tertiary-level qualifications. It also has lower proportions of Māori and Pacific people. While the cohort is not representative of New Zealand as a whole, it offers insights into the expectations, opportunities and experiences of a 'well lit' pathway from school to ongoing learning and the labour market.
4. The two reports were funded through NZCER's Government Grant (Te Pae Tawhiti). However, the Competent Learners Study was originally funded by the Ministry of Education's contract research funding. The Ministry helped with providing matched tertiary education and completion data for these two reports.

Key Findings of *Pathways, labour market experiences, and learning at work and beyond at age 26: A report from the Competent Learners project*

5. This report describes the learning and labour market experiences of 274 young adults at age 26, and the paths they took into adulthood. Data was collected from an online survey, structured telephone interview and qualifications data via National Student Number.
6. The key themes and main findings from the report were as follows.

Formal learning and qualifications post school

7. The transition from formal learning to work follows a variety of pathways. At the age of 26 almost all study participants (95%) had some form of qualification. In terms of highest New Zealand qualification, 45% had a university degree, 24% a level 1-6 certificate, and 28% NCEA.
8. Qualification levels reflect family resources. Those who spent their early childhood in middle to high income families twice as likely to have a university degree as those who came from low-income homes.

¹ The study began with near-5-year-olds in their final early childhood education service, with a next phase of data collection after their first year at school, when they were 6. At this stage, the study was called *Competent Children*. Subsequent phases occurred 2-yearly, when they were aged 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16, and then at age 20, and 26. Reports from the study are available on www.educationcounts.govt.nz or www.nzcer.org.nz, which also lists papers from the study.

9. Nearly all study participants (91%) had engaged in formal learning since leaving school, and 21% were currently engaged in formal learning at the time of their interview at age 26.
10. Just under half (46%) of those who had engaged in formal learning since school reported some regrets or disappointments about their formal learning. Some felt that they chose the wrong programme or went into tertiary education before they were ready. Others regretted not completing their programme or not being fully informed as to what employment opportunities it could lead them to.

The path to employment

11. The majority of study participants (84%) were in paid work and most reported the path to gaining employment as 'straightforward' (82%).
12. Study participants were mostly confident that their job was using the skills they had (90%), but less clear that their job was related to the areas they had studied or worked in (63%). NZCER found an overall match of 84% between qualification and occupation indicating many of the study participants were using skills they had developed through formal learning in their paid work.
13. A total of 16% (n=44) of learners were not in paid work at the time of their interview. However, only 15 of the 44 were actively seeking work. The remainder were parenting, or engaged in study or training. Most of these 44 currently not in paid work had been employed at some point over the past five years.
14. Almost all of the study participants said it was very important to them to enjoy their work, have fulfilling work, and do well at it. A total of 71% also had goals related to work for the next 3 years of their life. Most saw their current job as part of a longer term career, and not necessarily what they would keep doing.

Learning continues after school

15. Learning did not stop with school, or even with the end of post-school formal learning. Most of the cohort were learning at work and informally. At age 26, study participants were more likely to find a way to make things more interesting to learn, and to keep working on finding a way to solve a problem.
16. Over half the 26-year-olds could think of some things they wished they had learnt or known what to do when they were at school. Mainly this was related to taking school more seriously. Some wished they had been more confident to follow an interest rather than take the path they or others thought they should take.
17. The report concludes that there are a variety of pathways and experiences and even a "well lit path" from school into adulthood has to be made by each individual; the paths are often not straightforward, and rely on continual openness and learning.

Key Findings of *Shaping adulthood: Relationships, values and experiences of the Competent Learners @ 26*

18. This report describes the experiences, values, relationships, and resources shaping the lives of Competent Learners study participants at age 26. The report describes the experiences of 323 study participants who took part in an online survey.
19. The main themes and key findings from this report are explained in more detail below.

Relationships, health and living arrangements

20. The findings show that relationships are increasingly important for the study participants. At age 26, 40% lived with an intimate partner, and 20% were in a relationship but not living together.
21. School friends remained among the closest friends for 76% of study participants, and most had good relationships with their parents; 19% were living at home.
22. Most study participants reported that they were in good health or better. Overall most were happy (40%) or very happy (34%) with their life. However, just under a quarter (22%) reported that they had sought treatment for a mental health problem in the past year and 19% had thought about or attempted suicide once or more over the past year.
23. Alcohol and drug use were lower than at age 20. Nevertheless, binge drinking had occurred at least once over the past year for most of the study participants, and 45% had smoked marijuana at least once over that time.

Financial stability

24. At age 26, most study participants felt they were 'doing alright' financially or were 'living comfortably'. A small proportion (11%) of study participants owned their own home, and most were very satisfied (43%) or satisfied (38%) with their accommodation.
25. Most study participants (84%) were able to save either with a savings account (70%) or Kiwisaver (69%). However, most also had debt, with 80% reporting they owed money. A total of 58% of study participants owed money on their student loan. Of those with a student loan, 42% were comfortable with the amount they owed, and 37% uncomfortable.
26. There were gender differences in the incomes of study participants, with 27% of men earning \$60,000 a year or more compared with 15% of young women (who were not mothers).

Views of New Zealand, the world and their future

27. Most study participants viewed New Zealand as tolerant and many as fair, but also reported that the level of poverty was too high and income differences too large.
28. Most study participants were optimistic about their own future (86%) and their career path (71%), however, were less optimistic about the future of the environment and the world's future political situation.

Next steps

29. NZCER plans to proactively release the two reports the week of 5 August with a media release and social media updates (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn). A copy of NZCER's media release will be provided to your office. We will advise your office as soon as we become aware of the specific release date.
30. A third report utilising the Competent Learners @ 26 data will be released by NZCER later in 2019. This report is on young people who have had challenges in moving on from school to the adult world.

Proactive Release

31. We recommend that this Briefing is proactively released as per your expectation that information be released as soon as possible. Any information which may need to be withheld will be done so in line with the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982.

Annexes

- Annex 1: Pathways, labour market experiences, and learning at work and beyond at age 26:
A report from the Competent Learners project
- Annex 2: Shaping adulthood: Relationships, values and experiences of the Competent
Learners @ 26

Pathways, labour market experiences, and learning at work and beyond at age 26

A report from the Competent Learners project

Cathy Wylie and Karen Vaughan

Proactively Released

Pathways, labour market experiences, and learning at work and beyond at age 26

A report from the Competent Learners project

Cathy Wylie and Karen Vaughan

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Proactively Released

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Summary

The Competent Learners cohort typically had “well lit” paths (Patterson, 2011) to traverse in their journey from school into adulthood. The average income and qualification levels of the families in this Wellington region group were higher than the country as a whole. Most left school with at least NCEA Level 2. So how this group fared in their journey from school can tell us what that journey can look like for those for whom, in theory, it should be the most straightforward.

Pathways from school for most of the Competent Learners cohort to age 26 usually included continuing formal learning, often combined with work. Those who went from school to employment usually stayed in full-time work, though some added formal study by age 26. Those who took gap time before the age of 20 were least likely to return to formal study after age 20.

Gap time after the age of 20 was common (42%), mainly to travel, but also to work: a third of the group had worked overseas by the time they were 26. A quarter who took gap time said it changed their minds about what they wanted in life.

A fifth of the cohort were studying at age 26, primarily for work or a career they could not get without (additional) qualifications, or to widen their options.

Qualification levels

All but 5% of the cohort had some qualification. Forty-three percent had a university degree, 14% a level 4–6 certificate or diploma, 10% a level 1–3 certificate, and 28% NCEA (mostly Levels 2 and 3). Over a third (107 of the 274) had more than one qualification.

When we compared NCEA achievement by the end of school and post-school qualifications, we found that some with NCEA Level 1 or 2 had gone on to get a university qualification (6% and 15% respectively, compared with 67% of those with NCEA Level 3). Those with NCEA Level 1 only were most likely to gain level 1–3 certificates (29%, compared with 12% of those with NCEA Level 2 and 4% of those with NCEA Level 3).

Highest qualification levels reflected early family resources: young people who spent their early childhood in middle or high-income homes were twice as likely as those who spent it in low-income homes to achieve a university qualification. The higher their mother’s qualification, the more likely it was that they would gain a university qualification.

Work is important

Almost all the 274 people we focus on in this report thought that enjoying work, doing well at it, and having fulfilling work was very important or important. Work topped the goals they had for the next 3 years of their life.

At age 26, 84% were in paid work, usually full-time, in permanent jobs. While 82% said they had a straightforward path to their current job, this was on the back of other jobs: the median number of jobs they'd held since age 20 was 4.5, and the median number of jobs in the past 3 years was two. Just under half had known periods of difficulty finding work.

Sixteen percent were not in paid work when we interviewed them. Most of these had been in paid work over the past 5 years, and most had formal qualifications, including university degrees. Just over half of this group were actively seeking work, with the rest parenting or in full-time study, and some with ill health or travelling.

Half those in work could think of something they wished they had known earlier as they looked for work. This included acting more confidently, having more persistence and resilience, making a good CV and learning good interview skills, taking a broad approach, being open, and networking.

Formal learning since school was the most common pointer to their current work (44%). Just under 30% cited their hobby, friends or family, or previous experience in the work. Twenty percent mentioned the availability of the work, and 15%, opportunities. Very few mentioned careers resources or advice.

Most were positive about their experiences in their current job: it was interesting, worthwhile, and used their skills. Most saw their current job as part of a longer term career: and not necessarily what they would keep doing. Just over half thought this job was related to the areas they had studied. Thirty-nine percent thought they had needed their highest qualification to get the job.

Learning continues

Learning certainly didn't stop with school, or even with the end of post-school formal learning. Most of the cohort were learning at work, and informally.

Learning capabilities had grown since age 20. We found that, at age 26, this group was more likely to find a way to make things more interesting to learn, and to keep working on finding a way to solve a problem. They were happier to ask for advice or help when they weren't sure how to do something, and to think "outside the square", finding new ways to do things or solve problems.

Post-school formal learning gave benefits that were life-related as well as job and qualification-related. Most spoke of gaining a better understanding of things that interested them, knowledge or skills for living, a chance to think of what they really wanted to do in their life, as well as new friendships and networks or contacts for non-work interests.

But just under half had some regrets or disappointments in their post-school formal learning. These regrets were particularly around starting formal post-school education without really knowing what they wanted to do; or not completing a programme.

Nearly two-thirds of the 26-year-olds engaged in some form of informal learning in their everyday life. This included practising skills with a goal in mind, taking part in group activities (including sport, reading, talks, watching things, and—to a lesser extent—experimenting), voluntary work, or seeing how things worked.

Often this informal learning gave them similar kinds of benefits as they gained from their post-school formal learning.

At age 20, this group had high expectations that work would include ongoing learning. At age 26, most had some structured learning on the job in the form of feedback, and less often through workshops or seminars, scheduled mentoring, or keeping a regular record. A third had regularly scheduled classes or skills practice sessions.

Unstructured learning on the job was more common: through discussions, observing others, and reading. Just over half also gained knowledge by talking with people who did similar work in other workplaces.

Particularly significant learning experiences at work related to communicating with others; rising successfully to challenges; taking opportunities to be extended; and learning from near misses, mistakes, and accidents.

Most had good conditions for workplace learning and thought they had enough access to information and support to learn in their workplace. Nearly a third would like more learning opportunities at work, to develop particular capabilities for their present work, or to enable them to progress into other roles in the same business.

What would they change if they could go back in time?

Over half the 26-year-olds could think of some things they wished they had learnt or known what to do when they were at school. Mainly this was related to taking school more seriously. Some wished they had been more confident to follow an interest rather than take the path they or others thought they should take. Life skills and practical skills, and having better information and advice about careers or study, were also mentioned.

Only 19% of the cohort could think of no advice they wished they had when working out what they wanted to do as an adult, either because they had always known what they wanted to do and had followed that through, or because things had worked out well. Most had to discover or make a match between themselves and work options. They wished they had explored options more, been more open to change, followed their interests more, or been more confident or persevering.

So even a “well lit path” from school into adulthood has to be made by each individual; the paths are often not straightforward, and rely on continual openness and learning.

1.

Learning and work in emergent adulthood

This report describes the learning and labour market experiences of 274 young adults at age 26, and the paths they took into adulthood. These young adults were part of the Competent Learners cohort study, which has followed a group from the Wellington region since near age 5. The study's focus was on how children's and then young people's experiences in and out of formal education contribute to their educational performance, and also their wellbeing.

The study began by looking at the contribution of early childhood education to the development of competencies thought to be important to becoming lifelong learners.¹ Hence, the sample was centred on different types of early childhood education and those engaged in it. The Competent Learners sample reflects the Wellington region where the study was carried out and, compared to the national average, has higher proportions of people from high-income families and whose mothers have tertiary-level qualifications. It also has lower proportions of Māori and Pacific people.

Many of this Competent Learners cohort did well at school (56% gained NCEA Level 3),² and most went into tertiary education, often university. This group is interesting because it offers insights into the expectations, opportunities, and experiences built around what Patterson (2011) called the "well lit" pathway from school to ongoing learning and the labour market.

The young adults whose experiences and views form most of this report were those for whom we had a full set of the material we collected in 2015 in the age-26 phase of the study: an online survey, and a structured telephone interview, and qualifications data via their National Student Number (NSN). We also describe the post-school qualifications gained by 2013 by the larger group of all 401 who took part in the earlier Competent Learners study at 20, and how they relate to their NCEA levels, and early family income and maternal qualifications.

The picture in this report is largely quantitative, with some sections where we draw on the young people's own words about their experiences, and what they would like their younger self to have known.

1 The study began with near-5-year-olds in their final early childhood education service, with a next phase of data collection after their first year at school, when they were 6. At this stage, the study was called *Competent Children*. Subsequent phases occurred 2-yearly, when they were aged 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16, and then at age 20, and 26. Reports from the study are available on www.educationcounts.govt.nz or www.nzcer.org.nz, which also lists papers from the study.

2 This is higher than the 2009 national figure of 42% for school leavers. <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/indicators/main/education-and-learning-outcomes/1891>

A forthcoming companion qualitative report, *Learning, working, and building a sense of belonging in emergent adulthood*³ returns to 19 of the 29 young people Patterson interviewed when they were 21, who had taken “less well lit” paths from school, such as leaving school early, becoming young mothers, or heading into adulthood without school qualifications.

Alongside these two reports, and focused mainly on labour market experiences and learning in and out of work, *Shaping Adulthood*⁴ reports on the 26-year-olds’ relationships, values, and experiences, and what has changed since age 20, using material from all those who filled out the online survey ($n = 323$) and were then interviewed ($n = 303$; not all those who filled out the online survey also did the interview).

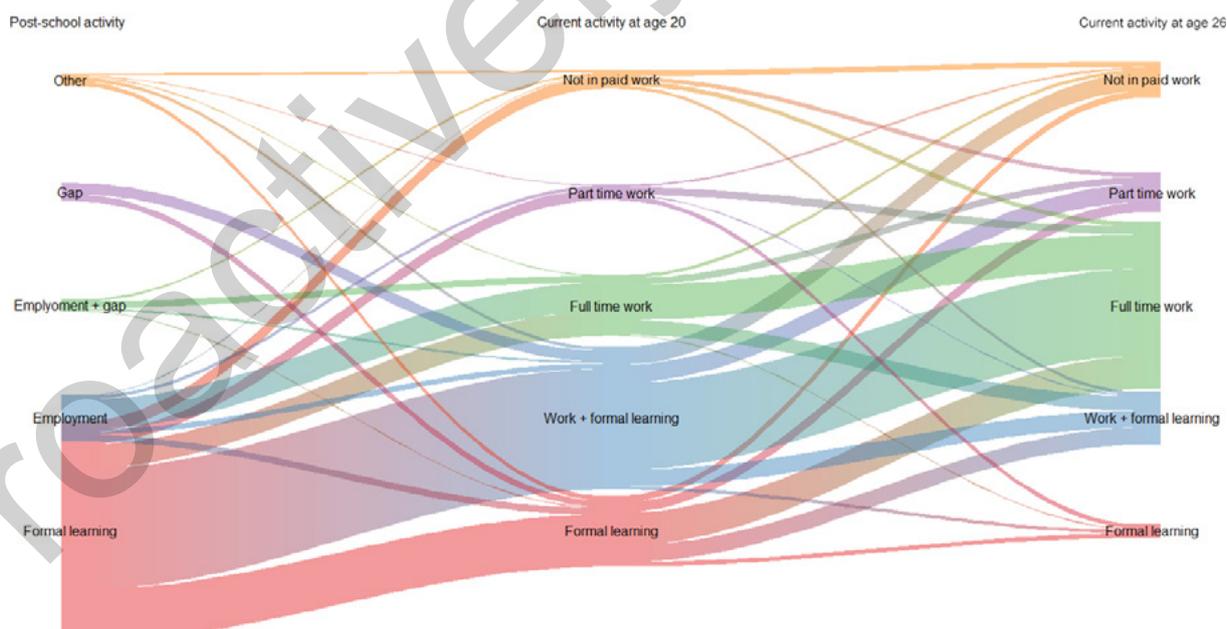
A braided river: The flows of learning and work in emergent adulthood

Figure 1 illustrates these young adults’ transition since school. It deliberately uses the look of a braided river—rivers that flow over gravel floodplains in an ecosystem linking the mountains and sea, with networks of varying channels, separated by small, often temporary, islands. The braided river metaphor has been used to imagine an ecosystem of pathways through the education system (Middleton, 2014) and labour market (Buchanan, Wheelahan, & Yu, 2016), or in relation to youth development work (King, 2015). It is an ecosystem that features multiple and flexible channels, with different entry and exit points, and options for channel crossovers or pauses on an island.

Our braided river in Figure 1 shows the flows of activity within education and employment for these 274 young adults (157 female and 117 male).

Each of the three columns of labelled points in the “river” is based on data collected at age 20 and 26. Column 1 is based on asking retrospectively at age 20 about their main activity in the 2–5 years since they left school, and column 2 is based on asking about their main activities at age 20. Column 3 is based on asking about their main activities at age 26.

FIGURE 1 Braided river of pathways for Competent Learners group from post-school to age 26



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4 Online link to come. XXXXXXX

Column 1 shows that tertiary-level formal learning was the main activity for this group between the ages of 16 and 20, but often alongside part-time work (column 2).⁵ This is pretty much what the group predicted for themselves when we asked at age 16 (in 2007). Responding to a list of possible activities for their first year after leaving school,⁶ most (75%) expected that they would study at a university and would work part-time (51%). Polytechnic study was identified by 15%, and Private Training Establishment (PTE) study by 11%. Some expected to be working full-time (15%) or “earning while learning” (17%).

At age 26 the majority (230 out of 274, or 84%) were in paid work and 88% of these had just the one job. This work was usually full-time (76%), permanent (79%), and as an employee (85%) rather than as a contractor or business owner.

Twenty-one percent were engaged in formal study leading to a qualification, just over half of them full-time. University courses were being taken by 57% of the studying group, and 24% were taking polytechnic courses leading to a qualification. Other formal study undertaken was industry training through their employer (9%), industry certification through distance education or a PTE (9%), and 5% were apprentices.

A few were in formal learning solely (no paid work), with more than half of those continuing their formal learning from age 20.

Looking at the patterns of flow, we see that most of those whose main post-school activity was formal learning were in work and formal learning at age 20, and full-time work by age 26. Some of this group stayed learning without work, with most of these in full-time work by age 26. Some of this group were in full-time employment at age 20, but returned to formal learning at age 26, combining it with work.

Most of those who were mainly employed post-school stayed in full-time work at both age 20 and 26, but some moved to part-time work by 20 before rejoining full-time work—or returning to formal learning at 26.

If people who were in full-time work at 20 returned to formal learning, it was usually in combination rather than full-time formal learning. Those not in paid work at age 20 mostly had work by age 26, some combining it with formal learning.

There are some interesting patterns for those who had “gap” time after they left school. Those who said that this had been their main activity since leaving school were mostly combining work and formal learning at age 20, or in formal learning, but quite a few were not in paid work at age 26. Those who spent most of their time between leaving school and age 20 in both employment and taking gap time were mostly in work and formal learning at age 20, but some were in part-time work or not in paid work by age 26.

Flows to employment

This group came into the workforce shortly after the 2008 global financial crisis, and their path was not without periods of difficulty in finding work for 47%.

Few had gone straight from tertiary study to their current job. The median number of jobs the young people had had since age 20 was 4.5, and in the past 3 years, two jobs.

Most participants reported an unproblematic time getting into their current job, reporting the path as being straightforward (42%) or very straightforward (40%). Some reported problems: “a few twists and turns” for 16% and a “messy/difficult” path for 1%.

5 This graphic was created by working backwards from the 274 participants at age 26. We do not know with certainty what everyone did immediately after leaving school, but we know what they reported at age 20 looking back and we have been able to infer activities from other things we know about them.

6 Responses did not add to 100% because people could choose multiple responses and, in some cases, did not respond to the item at all.

Another NZCER study following around 120 young adults over 5 years from school, through army training, apprenticeships, youth training, and university, showed that they creatively *produced* their pathways as much as following the formal further learning pathway they initially embarked on. How they produced their pathway—the “production values” they brought to it—were based in different patterns of engagement with identity and career (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006).

The Competent Learners cohort had a more “well lit” pathway but they, too, needed to make choices, try things out, and realise what they valued most, as well as what was possible in a very diverse set of occupational options which usually branch out into further pathways, rather than end in still ponds.

Experience was not limited to formal learning and work in New Zealand

At age 16, almost half (49%) expected to travel in their first year after finishing school. By age 26, 86% of this group had travelled beyond New Zealand, and 40% had worked overseas. Some had spent just a few weeks overseas, and some, years. The median length of time spent overseas was 5 months. Just over a third had worked in another country. When we interviewed them, 20% of the group were living outside New Zealand. Interestingly, most of those in New Zealand were still living in the Wellington region where they were first recruited for this study.

Quite a few (42%) had also taken some “gap time” between the ages of 20 and 26. Gap time—away from what they thought of as their main channel of becoming an adult—was mainly in the form of travel (64% of those who took it). It also included “chilling out” (30% of the group that took gap time), holidays (30%), paid work (24%), voluntary work or internships (14%), and looking after family (14%).

Gains from this “gap time” fed into their development over and above relaxation or having a break. The 26-year-olds who took this time also spoke about learning a lot about themselves, how to communicate with different people, handle different situations, learning new skills, and what they really valued. A quarter of those who took gap time said it changed their mind about what they wanted to do in life. A few found it made them restless.

Learning, work, and hindsight

Learning continued to be a strong strand in their lives, both in and out of work. We turn next to look at what their experiences were in formal and informal learning, followed by the picture of their formal qualifications, and how these relate to their NCEA and equivalent qualifications and early family resources. Next we explore the question of how well their qualifications matched the young people’s work. We take a closer look at the work they were doing, and how they came to that work. We touch on the experiences of those currently not in paid employment. We then learn about experiences of life at work, and differences related to kind of occupation. Hindsight can be a useful teacher, and advice the young people would give their younger selves is the focus of Section 8. We end with a discussion of what these perspectives and pathways suggest about the opportunities and supports provided at school and beyond.

2.

Experiences of learning since school

In this section, we describe learning outside work. Learning is central to the Competent Learners project. The overarching aim of our questions was to inquire into the idea that young adults are (ideally) lifelong learners. We were not only thinking about them achieving employment but on their development of *employability* over a lifetime, as well as their capabilities for a satisfying life in general.

We therefore took lifelong learning to be about two things. First it is about people's officially registered actions and outcomes (e.g., engaging in learning programmes and gaining qualifications). Secondly, it is about people's strategic orientation to the potential for, and deployment of, learning. As a mindset, the latter has been described as "the ultimate life skill for the 21st century" (Burgogne, 1998, cited in Carr & Claxton, 2002, p. 9) because it seems so vital in a rapidly changing world and global labour market.

As the Competent Learners participants left school and moved into tertiary education and workplace learning, we have been interested in their engagement with learning in its multiple and different forms:

- *formal* (with a designated teacher and prescribed curriculum and outcomes, and leading to a recognised qualification)
- *non-formal* (organised and intentional, with or without a teacher, but not leading to qualifications)
- *informal* (based in everyday life).

For the purposes of interviewing participants, we used terms with which they would probably be more familiar—"formal learning leading to qualifications" and "learning in the workplace". In recognition of the latter's rich potential for learning, we asked specifically about activities that were structured and scheduled, or unstructured and on-the-spot. Here we start with formal learning, then look at non-formal and informal learning together. We end this section with a picture of the young people's reports of what they enjoy about learning, and how they like to approach it.

Formal learning: Now and since leaving school

Nearly everyone (91%) in the group of 274 young adults had engaged in formal learning since leaving school. Some were doing so now for the first time. We asked those who had never engaged in formal learning why they had decided not to do so once they left school. Of these 30 young people, some said they had a job without the need for any more education ($n = 12$) and some said they were not sure what

they wanted to do or to enrol in ($n = 9$). Some had children. Some were not sure what to do. A few said they hated school or didn't like studying. A few said they couldn't afford further study or didn't like getting into debt in order to study.

I planned on having a year off, and then I started working and decided I wanted money more than study.

I wasn't sure what I wanted, so I went straight into work.

There was nothing that I had enough interest in learning to continue after school.

I don't learn out of books.

I was a young mum and couldn't afford it [study].

Current formal learning

Twenty-one percent of the group of 274 were *currently* engaged in formal learning ($n = 58$) at the time of their interview around age 26. Just over half of these ($n = 33$) were in university-based programmes towards a degree or diploma. Fourteen were in an Institute of Technology or Polytechnic (ITP) programme towards a national certificate, degree, or diploma. Five were doing industry training with their employer towards a national certificate or diploma. Another five were doing industry certification through distance education or a PTE. Just over half of the formal learning group was engaged in it full-time.

Work opportunities were the main reason why these 26-year-olds were undertaking formal study.⁷ Fifty-three percent could not get the work or career they wanted with their existing qualifications. Women reported this more than men (65%, compared with 33%). Twenty-eight percent wanted to widen their options. Formal learning was part of their job for 15%. Another 5% had found they could not get work without some qualification, and 2% had not completed their original qualification course.

Other reasons for undertaking formal learning were interest in the area (35%), that they would get bored if they stopped learning (7%), or that it was important for their identity (5%).

Some illustrations of their reasons for studying for a qualification at age 26:

I'm thinking about studying nursing or midwifery—and this [course] would help me get into these courses as I didn't do any sciences at high school—so it's like a bridging course.

Because I didn't study after school, so I'm studying now to improve my job opportunities. I have been working for many years. I would like to get a satisfying job that I can think in and enjoy, and you need a degree to do that.

I really like art and want skills for illustration work.

I've been managing retail stores and just found I came to a dead end ... so I'm studying to widen my options.

I want a career now. I travelled for 2 years, I worked for 2 years before I started my degree.

Most were satisfied (78%) with their current formal learning and 14% were a mix of satisfied and unsatisfied. Two were dissatisfied.

We asked those who were satisfied and partly satisfied about whether they had experienced any of a possible list of benefits from their current formal learning. We also asked everyone (whether currently in formal learning or not) about the same possible benefits in relation to *any* formal learning they had done since leaving school. Table 1 below compares the possible formal learning benefits since school and at age 26, grouping them by whether they are job and qualification-related or broader and life-related.

On the whole, there are similar patterns (the slight differences in percentages are not statistically

⁷ Over a third of those with annual incomes of \$30,000 or less were currently engaged in formal learning.

significant). Those *currently* engaged in formal learning were slightly more focused than others on qualifications for entry into a particular field or job, and gaining networks or contacts useful for work. They reported broader and life-related gains a little less. This may be because they were asked about the benefits from just one formal learning programme, rather than formal learning over some years, when they were also actively engaged in finding their way as adults.

TABLE 1 **Benefits from formal learning after leaving school compared with benefits from formal learning at age 26**

Benefits	Benefits from formal learning between leaving school and age 26 (n = 243) %	Benefits from formal learning at age 26 (n = 58) %
Job and qualification-related		
Specific knowledge or skills that may one day be valuable in a job	96	89
A qualification for entry to a particular field or job	80	87
A qualification that can be used in other countries	81	83
Specific knowledge or skills for my job	Not asked	62
Networks or contacts useful for work	69	74
A qualification for entry to another learning programme	79	74
Broader and life-related		
A better understanding of things that interest me	94	83
A chance to think about what I really want to do in life	87	81
Networks or contacts useful for non-work interests	65	57
Knowledge or skills for life now	89	76
New friendships	85	66

Those whose highest qualifications were NCEA were less likely than others to see gains from their formal study since school in relation to work or further study. A third of these young people had not completed their post-school courses.

When we asked those who had done some formal learning post-school if there was anything else that stood out for them about what they had gained, some common themes were gains in understanding, in thinking, in writing and other ways of showing understanding or producing knowledge, in being organised and persevering, and becoming independent. It gave them some close relationships as well as useful networks. Post-school formal learning also gave young people more clarity about what work they wanted or could do (not always what they initially chose or got their first qualification in).

Regrets about formal learning

Just under half of those who had engaged in formal learning since school (112 of the 243) reported some regrets or disappointments about their formal learning. Fifty expressed regrets about not really knowing what they wanted and having chosen the wrong programme or gone into tertiary education (usually university) before they were ready, describing themselves as “naive” or “just jumping in”. The following quotes illustrate some of the comments, including a vague sense of dissatisfaction for some:

It would have been good to get more knowledge of career paths and get more knowledge from university about careers.

I regret that I didn't do a wider variety of courses at the start, explore more options. I probably pre-judged some courses which in hindsight might have been more valuable.

The options I chose, I wonder if it all could have been different. I question the opportunity lost. I wonder what could have been.

The degree I did didn't lead to a particular job—a BSc—which was too unspecific. I felt somewhat pressured by parents and social pressure to go straight to uni. I wish I'd taken more time to consider options.

I wish that I had begun my Bachelor of Arts later rather than starting straight out of school. I think I would have approached uni work with a more mature attitude. I treated the uni work like a chore, like I did with schoolwork. Maybe travelling before studying would have helped in that way, helping me grow up a bit.

I wish that I hadn't done what I did back then. They were just certificates and I wish I had done something more significant. I didn't know what I wanted to do, and they were certificates that weren't really going to get you anywhere.

Twenty-three comments described regret at not completing their programme. Some wished they had had more knowledge about what they could do, and what their choice meant in terms of what was covered and where it could lead in terms of paid work. Some wished they had taken programmes with a broader focus; others wished they had taken programmes with a narrower or more specific focus. Several wished they had gone on to do an Honours year in their degree. Others regretted doing a course that did not really interest them or had not been well considered. Some regretted not taking it seriously enough or doing enough work. Several regretted having had poorly taught courses.

Informal and non-formal learning

Nearly two-thirds of our group reported engaging in some informal learning over the past year. This is three times the number engaged in formal learning. The informal learners had gained new skills or knowledge through:

- practising a skill with a goal in mind (55%)
- taking part in things with other people, such as sports, discussions, group projects (49%)
- reading (47%)
- talks, seminars, or workshops (47%)
- watching, such as YouTube or DVDs (39%)⁸
- trial and error or experimentation (22%)
- voluntary work (19%)
- taking things to bits or working out how something worked so they could fix it (11%).

⁸ Women mentioned this more than men (48%, compared with 27%).

Also mentioned were looking things up on the internet, podcasts, online courses or tutorials—including MOOCs⁹—courses, talking to people, or being shown things by others.

Table 2 compares benefits reported by those in *formal* learning now with benefits reported by those who had done *informal* learning over the past year. Learning in both spheres gave knowledge and skills related to work, though formal learning gave more job-related networks or contacts. Informal learning at this age gave somewhat more knowledge and skills for life, and more non-work networks or contacts. Formal learning towards a qualification at age 26 gave those who were engaged in it somewhat more of a chance to think about what they wanted to do in life. However, this was still a benefit for a high proportion of those engaged in informal learning. This perhaps reflects on this period around age 26 as one of continued exploration and self-development.

TABLE 2 **Benefits from informal learning over past year, compared with expected benefits from current formal learning**

Benefit	Informal learning (n = 178) %	Formal learning (n = 58) %
Specific and job-related		
Specific knowledge or skills that may one day be valuable in a job	90	89
A qualification for entry to a particular field or job	Not asked	87
Something (informal) or qualification (formal) that can be used in other countries	87	83
Specific knowledge or skills for my job	65	62
Networks or contacts useful for work	57	74
A qualification for entry to another learning programme	Not asked	74
Broader and life-related		
A better understanding of things that interest me	89	83
Knowledge or skills for life now	88	76
A chance to think about what I really want to do in life	73	81
New friendships	69	66
Networks or contacts useful for non-work interests	67	57

Twenty-four participants in informal learning also commented on using it as a way to get ahead, seeing a link between informal learning or volunteer work and employability enhancement—for example, gaining mediation or public speaking skills. Another fourteen described enjoying following up on interests or hobbies, with a few mentioning a link to employability. Two mentioned financial benefits with low-cost courses that allowed them to negotiate for a higher pay rate.

Twenty commented on enjoying the method or approach involved—for example, being able to choose when and where you learnt and being able to follow up something you were genuinely interested in. Some commented on how informal learning was “a whole lot of fun” and “way more interesting” because you could do whatever you wanted.

⁹ Massive Open Online Course, open to anyone.

Another 20 referred to gaining life skills—for example, in dealing with stress, financial management, learning to look after their health better, developing confidence, and learning cooking skills. Fifteen described using informal learning as a way to broaden horizons and explore themselves and their place in the world—for example, “re-evaluating priorities”, “finding out what I value in life”, getting “life perspective” and “participating in community”.

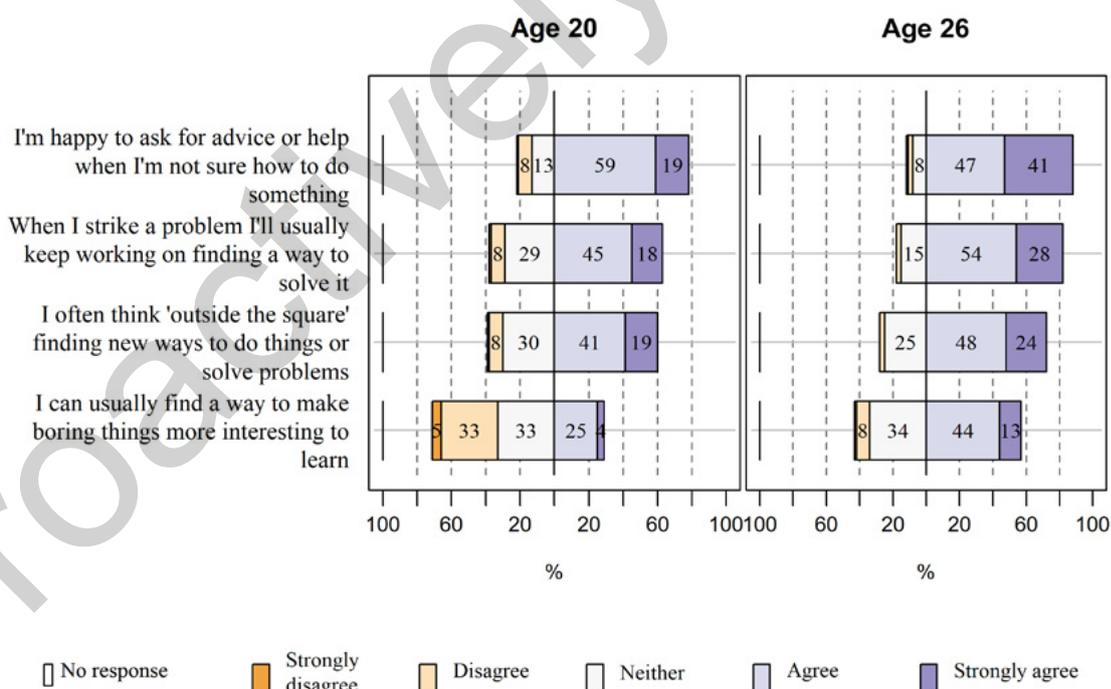
Approaches to learning

The *New Zealand Curriculum’s* vision is “young people who will be confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners”.¹⁰ While the current curriculum came into effect after the Competent Learners cohort completed most or all of their schooling, the concept that compulsory and post-school education should support the capability to keep learning through life is not new. Indeed, when we began the Competent Learners study as the cohort was ending early childhood education, we included competencies related to communication, problem solving, and curiosity because we thought that one of the key purposes of early childhood education was to provide good grounds for ongoing learning.

Learning capability has become increasingly important in a world of continual change. We therefore included a set of questions about approaches to learning, seven of which we had also asked when the cohort was aged 20.

Figure 2 shows that there has been growth since age 20 in four of these aspects, possibly reflecting more time spent in work environments that matter. Three of the other aspects we asked at age 20 stayed much the same between age 20 and age 26: enjoyment of new experiences or challenges; liking to find their own ways of doing things; and turning up to appointments on time. How the 26-year-olds thought about these aspects at age 26 is included in Figure 3.

FIGURE 2 Growth in learning capacity since age 20



10 Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand curriculum* (pp. 7–8). Wellington: Learning Media.

Figure 3 includes the items from this set with which a third or more strongly agreed, and about which around 20% or fewer were neutral or disagreed. It shows that learning was generally enjoyed, something that built on what was known, and could be shared with others.

FIGURE 3 Most common approaches to learning

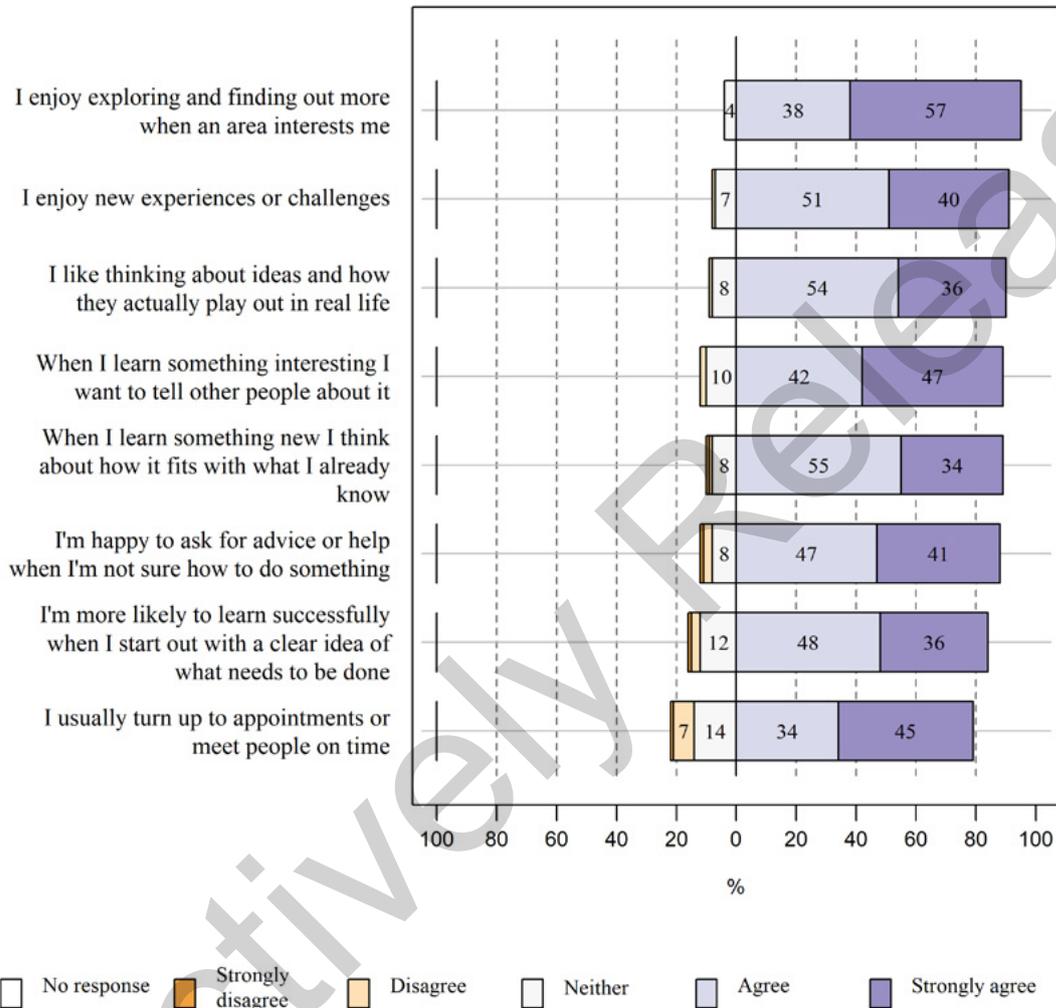
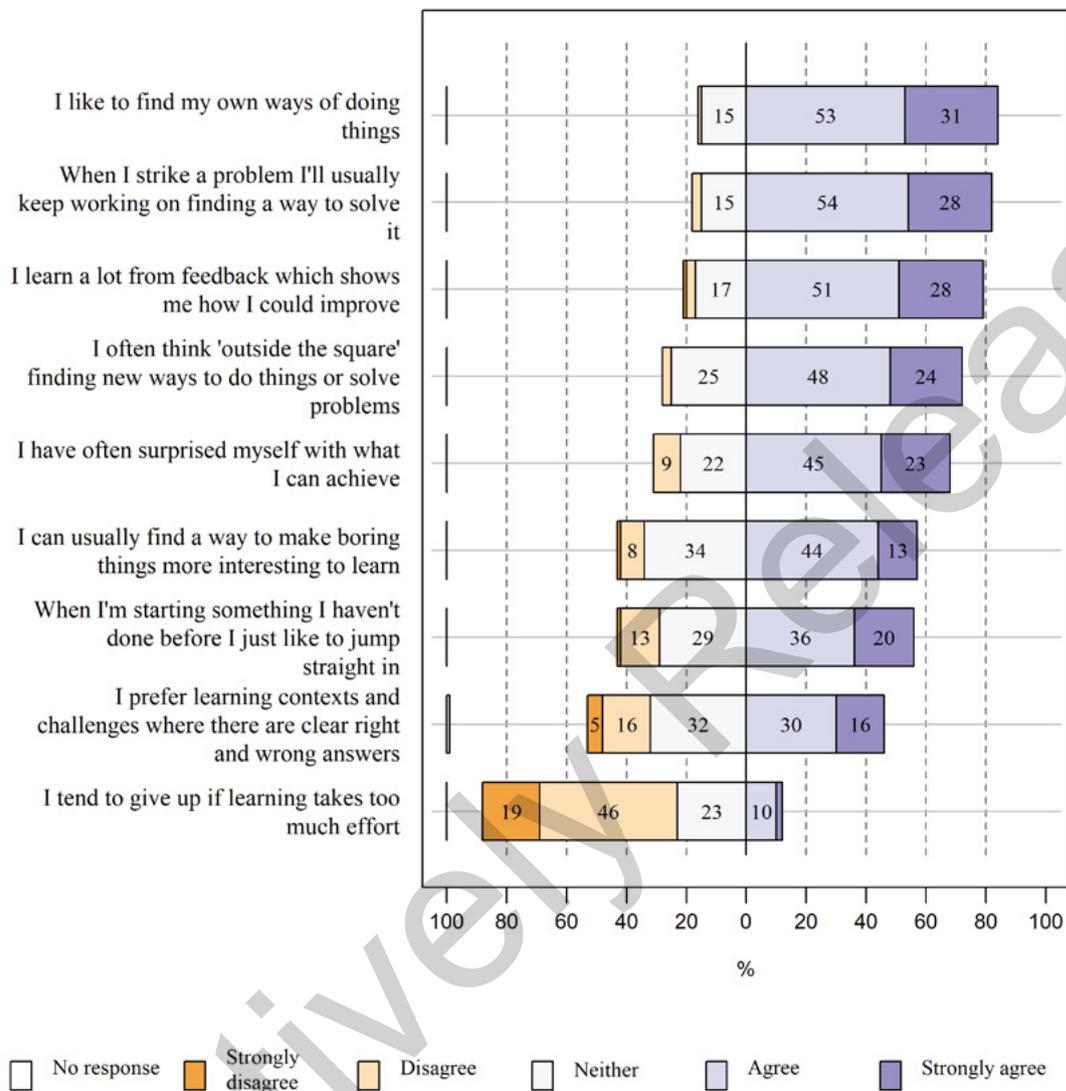


Figure 4 shows the approaches to learning with less strong agreement among the Competent Learners cohort, though there is still a majority who show agency and confidence in their learning, and who have enjoyed its gains, and the sense of achievement. Few give up if learning takes too much effort. Just under half prefer clear-cut learning, with right and wrong answers.

FIGURE 4 Approaches to learning—items with a wider range



We found some differences in approaches to learning related to occupation. Managers, professionals, and technicians and trades workers reported higher levels of enjoyment, agency, and confidence in learning, and sales and clerical and administrative workers reported somewhat lower levels.

3.

Formal qualifications gained by the end of 2013

For this section, we draw first on data for all 401 members of the Competent Learners study for whom we have qualifications data up to the end of 2013. Then we look at how different post-school qualification levels are related to NCEA achievement, early family resources, experiences of unemployment, taking gap time between school and age 20, main activity at age 20, motherhood, and gender.

We then return to the sub-group of 274 participants at age 26 who are the main focus of this report, and look at the range of their courses, what kind of institutions they studied in, and the continuing impact of student loans taken out to enable study.

Formal qualifications gained by the end of 2013

Most of the Competent Learners cohort had gained some qualification by age 25. Table 3 shows their highest qualification level.¹¹ Forty-three percent had a university qualification, 24% a tertiary certificate or diploma, 28% an NCEA level, and 5% had no qualification.

¹¹ Participants in the study at age 20 gave their consent to our using their NSN to provide the Ministry of Education with an anonymised list so that the Ministry could provide us with their New Zealand qualifications history at the end of 2013. The Ministry supplied a database of completed tertiary qualifications, another of each individual's registration history at tertiary level (from a database intended primarily to cover registration numbers in courses with different providers by year, not completed qualifications), a database of qualifications from Industry Training and NQF certificates. This meant we needed to go carefully through each individual's record and in some cases make decisions where several courses could have been the highest qualification. In some cases, we were able to infer qualifications had been achieved in 2013 from registrations recorded—for example, someone able to register for an Honours degree must have completed the Bachelor's degree first). This dataset did not include NCEA qualifications, so we used the NCEA qualifications information we had at age 20. Some of the young people had studied overseas, and this picture does not include overseas qualifications.

TABLE 3 Highest New Zealand qualification level by the end of 2013 (n = 401)

Qualification level	Number	%
None	21	5
NCEA ¹²	112	28
Certificate levels 1–3	41	10
Certificate or diploma levels 4–6	54	14
Bachelor's degree or graduate certificate or diploma	128	32
Honours degree/postgraduate certificate or diploma/Master's	45	11

In our age-20 Competent Learners' project report, we looked at the relationship between NCEA level achievement, and some key resources and prior experiences. Now we look at the relationship between the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) qualifications, most undertaken since school, and NCEA, early family resources of income and maternal qualification levels, people's main activity at age 20, experiences of unemployment between ages 16 and 20, gap time undertaken between ages 16 and 20, motherhood by age 20, and gender.

We include experiences of unemployment and motherhood because we found that they had a bearing at age 20 on experience of further study.

Relationship between highest level of New Zealand qualifications and NCEA

We looked at the relationship between NCEA achievement by the end of school and people's highest level of qualification by the end of 2013. NCEA qualifications at Level 3 put two-thirds of those who achieved this into a degree qualification pathway, a much higher proportion than those who achieved NCEA Level 2. A few who achieved NCEA Level 1 nonetheless went on to gain a university qualification by the end of 2013. There were also sizeable proportions with NCEA qualifications who did not go on to attain a further qualification: 45% whose highest NCEA qualification was Level 1; 49% of those whose highest NCEA qualification was Level 2; and 20% of those whose highest NCEA qualification was Level 3.

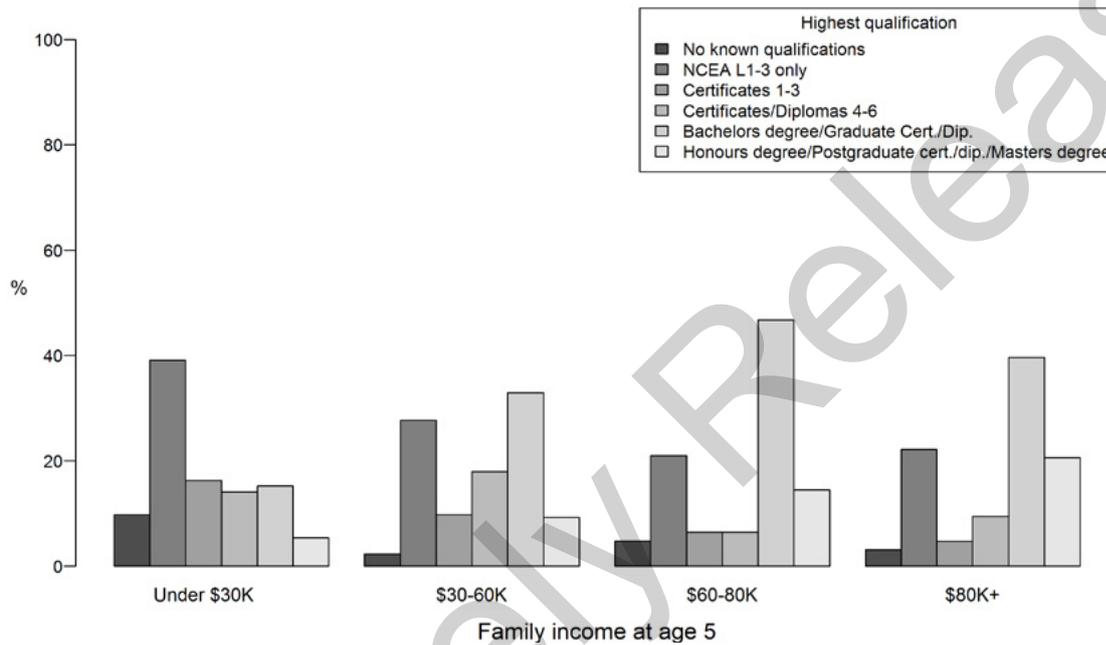
- Fifty-five percent of those whose highest NCEA qualification was **Level 1** at age 20 went on to gain a further qualification, primarily certificates levels 1–3 (29%), and certificates/diplomas levels 4–6 (20%). Six percent had achieved a university qualification.
- Fifty-one percent of those whose highest NCEA qualification was **Level 2** went on to gain a further qualification, with 12% gaining certificates levels 1–3, 24% gaining certificates/diplomas levels 4–6, and 15% a university qualification.
- Eighty percent of those whose highest NCEA qualification was **Level 3** went on to gain a further qualification, primarily a university qualification (67%, with most achieving a Bachelor's degree/graduate diplomas or certificates, 49%, and 19% achieving an Honours or higher degree). Eight percent of this group had gained certificates/diplomas levels 4–6, and 4%, certificates levels 1–3.

¹² Of the 112 whose highest qualification was NCEA, 46 had NCEA Level 3, 44 had NCEA Level 2, and 22 had NCEA Level 1.

Relationship between highest level of qualification and early family resources

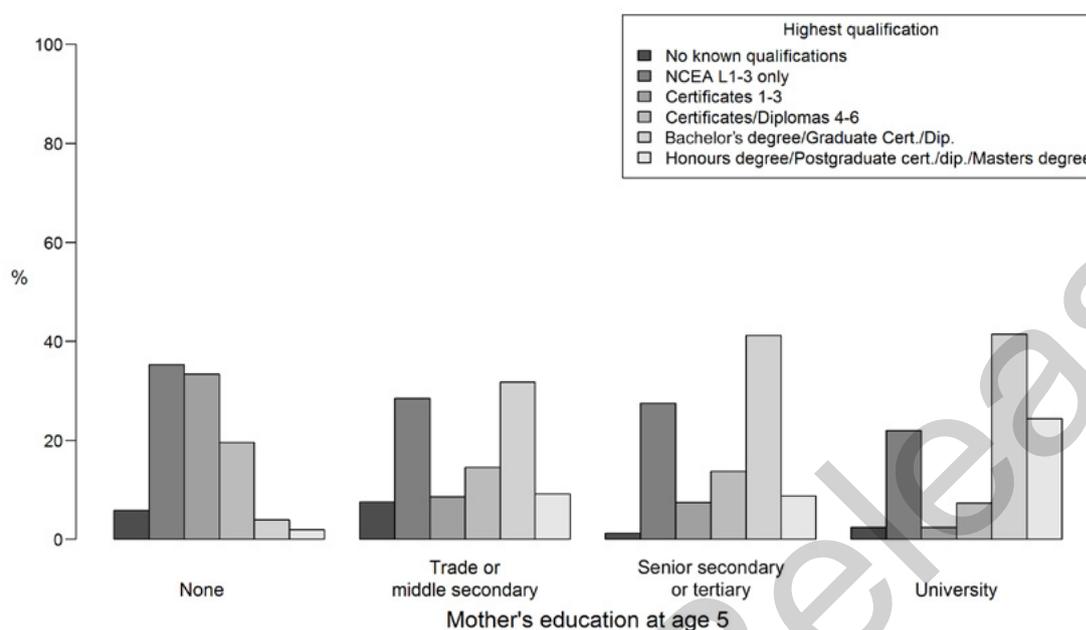
At age 20 we found associations between early family resources and qualifications gained at school. The pattern continued when looking at New Zealand qualifications gained by the end of 2013. We used the data we had from when the study cohort were aged 5 looking at family income and maternal education separately. Figure 5 shows that young people who had spent their early childhood in middle- or high-income homes were twice as likely as those who spent their early childhood in low-income homes to achieve a university qualification.

FIGURE 5 Early family income and highest New Zealand qualification by the end of 2013



Most of the young people whose mothers had no qualifications themselves when the young person was aged 5 gained some qualification, primarily NCEA or certificates levels 1-3. The higher their mother's qualification level, the higher the proportion in this cohort who had gained a university qualification, as shown in Figure 6.

FIGURE 6 Maternal qualification and child's highest New Zealand qualification by the end of 2013



Unemployment and gap time by age 20, what people were doing at age 20, and qualification levels

Forty-four of the 401 in the Competent Learners study at age 20 had experienced unemployment by age 20. They were more likely to have no qualification by age 25 (16%, compared with 3% who had not experienced unemployment by age 20). If they had qualifications, they were more likely to be at levels 1–3 (32%, compared with 4% of others), though 9% had gained Bachelor's degrees (compared with 41% of others), and 5% Honours degrees or postgraduate certificates or diplomas (compared with 11% of others).

Sixty-six had taken some gap time between the end of their schooling and age 20. Forty-one percent of this group's highest qualification was NCEA, compared with 25% of others who had not taken gap time at this stage. While there were similar proportions who went on to gain an Honours or other post-Bachelor's qualification, fewer obtained a Bachelor's degree (20%, compared with 35% of others).

Table 4 shows differences in the highest qualification of young adults by the end of 2013 related to their main activity at age 20. Most of those whose main activity was paid work at age 20 had either NCEA or a certificate or diploma as their highest qualification by the end of 2013. Those who had been caregiving for their children or family, or receiving a government benefit at age 20 were spread between having no qualification and certificate levels 1–3. Students at tertiary institutions other than universities were spread between NCEA and Bachelor's degrees. University students at age 20 mainly had degrees by the end of 2013. Note, however, that 16% of those who had been university students and 19% of those who had been tertiary students at age 20 had not gone beyond NCEA by 2013 (though some might have gained overseas qualifications).

TABLE 4 Highest New Zealand qualification level by the end of 2013 in relation to main activity at age 20
(n = 401)

Qualification level	At home/ on benefit (n = 36) %	Working (n = 114) %	Tertiary student (n = 58) %	University student (n = 193) %
None	25	8	5	0
NCEA	39	49	19	16
Certificate levels 1-3	25	22	12	0
Certificate or diploma levels 4-6	11	19	38	3
Bachelor's degree or graduate certificate or diploma	0	2	26	58
Honours degree / postgraduate certificate or diploma/Masters	0	0	0	23

Motherhood, gender, and qualification levels

Twenty of the Competent Learners cohort had become mothers by age 20. Their additional responsibilities are likely to have lessened their opportunities to gain qualifications. A quarter had no qualifications by the end of 2013, none had university-level qualifications, 30% had levels 1-3 qualifications, and 35% a level 4 qualification.

Just over half those with children at age 26 either had NCEA as their highest qualification, or none. Another 15% had a level 1-3 certificate as their highest qualification.

Overall, there were no gender differences evident in relation to qualifications obtained by the end of 2013.

Qualifications and study for the sub-group of 274

Returning to the sub-group of the 274 young people we focus on in this report on pathways, learning, and work, we see a higher qualification profile than for the whole Competent Learners cohort that they are part of. Just over half of this group of young adults had gained a university qualification by the end of 2013. Table 5 shows their highest qualification level.¹³

¹³ This group of 274 of the Competent Learners cohort has higher qualification levels than the 127 for whom we have qualification levels but who did not also complete both their interview and self-report at age 26. This shows up at either end of the qualification spectrum: in the group of 127, 26% had a university qualification, and 15% had no qualification.

TABLE 5 Highest New Zealand qualification level by the end of 2013 for the Pathways group (*n* = 274)

Qualification level	Number	%
None	2	1
NCEA	71	26
Certificate levels 1-3	26	10
Certificate/diploma levels 4-6	34	12
Bachelor's degree or graduate certificate/diploma	100	37
Honours degree / postgraduate certificate or diploma/Master's	39	14

Fields and places of study

Completed qualifications covered a broad range. The fields of society and culture (17%), management and commerce (16%), the natural and physical sciences (12%), and creative arts (10%) headed the list of qualifications gained. Other fields included engineering and related technologies (6%), food, hospitality, and personal services (6%), architecture and building (4%), and health (4%). Two percent to 3% each of the qualifications were in mixed field programmes, information technology, education, and agriculture, environmental, and related studies.

Sixty percent of the qualifications gained were through learning programmes provided by universities. The next most common providers of qualifications—but some way behind universities—were ITPs (23%) and then PTEs (15%).

Over a third (107 of the 274) had more than one qualification, usually a Bachelor's degree followed by a postgraduate qualification, or multiple certificates and/or diplomas across one or more fields of study.

Although we have not analysed in which order the qualifications were gained, some combinations seem obviously aimed at developing more skill and knowledge in a particular area, sometimes as a professional requirement (e.g., taking a professional legal studies programme at a PTE to prepare for the bar exam following a law degree) or enhancing theoretical and practical aspects of a field (e.g., gaining a National Certificate in Multimedia Journalism and a Bachelor of Communications or gaining a Bachelor of Design and Certificates in Pattern Design and Garment Making).

4.

Do qualifications and occupations match?

Findings from the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills suggest that New Zealand has higher levels of mismatch—workers with higher or lower skills proficiency than required by their job—than other OECD countries (Ministry of Education, & Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2016). Mismatch has implications at the policy level, at the institutional level, employer level and, of course, individual choices of learning and expectations of what that learning could lead to.

In this section we explore the match of qualifications with the occupations of the sub-group of 274, at age 26, in the early years of their working lives. We start with a description of the occupations of those in paid work, followed by a broad-brush look at occupational groups related to highest qualification levels, and then a finer-grained look at how their occupational group related to the specific area of their qualification.

Occupations and paid work arrangements

Eighty-four percent of the Competent Learners group were in paid work, and 88% of those in paid work had just one job. Their paid work was usually full-time (76%), permanent (79%), and as an employee (85%). Fewer women had permanent jobs (73%, compared with 86% of men), and more women had casual work (15%, compared with 2% of the men). Thirteen percent had part-time work, and 10%, casual work.¹⁴ Seven percent were employed as contract labour, 5% as independent contractors. Two percent ($n = 5$) owned their own business and four people employed others.

Most participants worked in the private sector (72%). Twenty-three percent worked in the public sector (including education and health jobs) and 4% worked for not-for-profit or local government organisations. The median number of people in their workplace or worksite was 27.

We asked participants for their job titles and a very brief explanation of it or description of their work. Most job titles were established ones with which most of us would be familiar—for example, bank officer, nurse, commercial diver, junior doctor, HR adviser, and carpenter. However, there were also some job titles which, while becoming more familiar, have only emerged in recent years—for example, front-of-house barista, anti-money laundering analyst, museum host, dog walker, photography stylist, and 3D story artist.

¹⁴ Part-time and casual work was mostly among those earning less than \$30,000 a year, though a third of the low earners worked full-time. Forty percent of this group did not have permanent work.

We coded the job titles against the Australia and New Zealand Statistics Occupational Categories (ANZSOC). Among this group, with higher qualification levels than for their age group nationally, the most common occupational category was *Professional* (37%). The next most common occupational category was *Clerical/Administrative* (22%), followed by the *Technical and Trades* (12%) and *Community and Personal Services* (12%), *Sales* (9%), *Managers* (6%), and *Labourers* (3%) categories. Young people working in community and personal services, sales, or as labourers had lower rates of full-time work. More women than men worked in clerical/administrative work, and more men than women in technical and trades occupations.

Match of qualification levels and occupational groups

Most of those in professional occupations had university qualifications or were near completing them—but not all. The other occupational groups included a wide range of qualification levels. The substance of the qualification is more likely to show a match, as we show next.

Match of qualifications and occupations

Matching of qualifications and occupations is not an exact science. The OECD Survey of Adult Skills determined “skills proficiency” through the proxies of qualification and field of study. So mismatches were defined as when either the qualifications are higher or lower than required by the job or when people work in a sector or job unrelated to their field of study.

We explored matching of qualifications and occupations by looking at, first, the young people’s view of whether their highest qualification was necessary for their current job, and, second, analysing the match between their qualification area and their occupational category.

The Competent Learners at age 26 were mostly confident that their job was using the skills they had (90%), but less clear that their job was related to the areas they had studied or worked in (63%). Forty-two percent thought that “I couldn’t have got this job without the highest qualification I have”. The difference between their sense that their qualification level was essential to gaining their job, and that their work was related to what they had studied or previously worked in may say something about their sense of the weight their employer had given to their highest qualification in relation to all their qualifications (given that, overall, more than a third had more than one qualification), or other information about their work history (including references), and how they had presented themselves in an interview.

In our analysis of the relationship between qualifications and occupations, we used people’s job titles and descriptions of what they did. As we went through each person’s qualifications and job titles/descriptions, we considered it a “match” if the job was related to the qualification’s broad field of practice. Some of these were obvious—for example, a Bachelor of Fine Arts with the job of illustrator or a Level 2 Certificate in Hairdressing with the job of hairdresser. Others were less obvious—for example, a Bachelor of Arts with the job of museum host but the job description provided showed the relevance. We also considered it a match where someone was in paid work but had no formal qualifications, on the basis that it was likely that the employer had considered the young person’s previous job history, attitude, or demonstrated skills. In four cases, we were simply unsure.

This analysis showed an overall match of 84% for the 220 young people for whom we had relevant data. Table 6 shows that the best matches between qualification area and work content appear to be for professionals, technicians and trades, and managers, where qualifications are often specified.

TABLE 6 Match of qualification area with occupation

Occupational category	Match	No match	Unsure	Total No.	Match %
Professionals	81	2	1	84	96
Technicians and trades workers	22	1		23	96
Managers	12	1		13	92
Clerical and administrative workers	39	9	2	50	78
Community and personal service workers	17	8		25	68
Labourers	4	3		7	57
Sales workers	10	7	1	18	56
Grand total	185	31	4	220	

We did not (and could not) consider match in terms of whether the *level* of qualification was actually needed for particular jobs. This is really a question of labour market workings—for example, supply and demand, competition, business models and decisions, networking, and sheer luck. However, Table 7 does show a greater likelihood of a match for higher certificates, diplomas, and degrees.

TABLE 7 Match of qualification level and occupation

Qualification	Match	No match	Unsure	Total	Match %
Bachelor's degrees	64	15		79	81
Certificates levels 1-3	10	4	2	14	71
Certificates level 4	8	8		16	50
Certificates/diplomas levels 5-7	12	1		13	92
Graduate certificates / diplomas	5			5	100
Honours degrees / postgraduate certs/dips	21	3	2	24	87
Master's degrees	1			1	100
Grand total	121	31	4	152	

Interestingly, it was the most typically “vocational” (field or industry-specific) qualifications at levels 4 and below that had the least likelihood of a match. These certificates were in a wide range of areas including hospitality, travel and tourism, music, automotive engineering, nannying, animal care, and fashion. Since some of these certificates are gained through apprenticeships and work-based learning, this lower match raises some questions that this study cannot answer. For example, had some of the young people moved from work where their qualifications had matched, to new fields? What influenced their choices: availability of work, workplace relations, financial reward, or personal and professional satisfaction?

Drilling down into mismatches for qualifications above level 4, we found none with the Bachelor of Arts degree, which is designed to be applicable to a very wide range of jobs. Commerce degrees also have wide application and of the 14 Commerce degrees gained, just one seemed mismatched to the job. Science degrees told a different story with 10 mismatches, including for four with Honours and/or additional postgraduate diplomas in science.

Caution needed about claims of mismatches between qualifications and paid work

Our analysis makes us cautious about more general claims of mismatching between qualifications and paid work. It may be hard to be decisive about it with just information on qualifications and occupational levels. And even our analysis is limited to a specific point in time, rather than the work people do through their lives.

What is interesting is that most of this group thought that their current jobs used skills they had, skills that develop through both formal learning, and learning at work. As we saw in the previous section, learning through work, leisure activities, and participation in voluntary or communal purposes also plays a part in the skills people develop and are part of the opportunities a society can provide to develop its members' capabilities.

How people decide or find work also plays a role in what they do, beyond qualifications. In the next section, we focus on work experiences, including how employed young adults found their current job.

5.

Paths to work

In this section, we explore how young adults in work at 26 saw the path to their current job, and how they had found their current job. We also describe the situation of those currently not in work, most of whom had been in work in the past.

The lead-in to current paid work

Most commonly, the young adults reported that learning programmes taken since school had led to their current work (44%).¹⁵ Some way behind that, the next most common influences cited were an interest or hobby (29%), friends or family (29%), and previous experience of the work (27%). After that came the availability of work (20%), and opportunities (15%).

Learning programmes since school were reported less by those who were working in sales or clerical and administrative work. Personal interest was cited most by labourers, professionals, and managers.

Table 8 shows that very few reported planning or use of careers advisory services or resources (6%, made up of approximately 1% advice from school; 1% careers resources; 1% Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) help; 1% private careers advice or life coach, and 1% tertiary careers centre advice). School subjects were rarely seen as a direct influence on the lead-in to current paid work, though they are likely to have been related to tertiary-level courses.

¹⁵ We asked those with more than one job to answer in terms of the job that was most important to them. We also asked them why they chose this job as the most important to them: their main reasons were that it was the work of most long-term value to them, which held the most interest for them, or had the best pay.

TABLE 8 Influences leading to 26-year-olds' current work

Influence	n = 230 %
The courses I took after leaving school	44
Interest or hobby of mine	29
My friends or my family	29
Previous experience with this work or employer (including volunteer work)	27
Availability of work in this field	20
Opportunities sought (career, challenge, lifestyle, or travel)	15
Needed to work/money was a consideration	9
Careers advisory services or resources	6
Chance	5
Subjects I did at school	4
I planned on having work like this when I left school	2

The lack of career planning is not surprising. First, this group has come through a time when school-based career education has too frequently been inaccessible, marginalised, or not fit-for-purpose for 21st century careers (Vaughan, 2011). Secondly, research has shown that formal planning is not as influential in the approach to career as developing self-awareness and positioning for opportunity (Bezanson et al., 2008; Lo Presti, 2009; Savickas et al., 2009; Vaughan & Spiller, 2012).

Table 9 shows responses to a question about how people found their current job. It shows that more than half of the group found their job by approaching the employer, responding to an advertisement, making a direct approach, or by having an interview set up for them. We are not able to clarify what occurred after a "friend or family told me about the job" but it was possibly a prompt about, or acting similarly to, seeing a job advertisement.

In total, 27% reported using pre-existing contacts or experience either through prior work experience or a personal connection.

TABLE 9 How 26-year-olds found their current job

Source	n = 230 %
Proposition or application	
Friend or family told me about the job	32
I responded to an advertisement	30
Interview set up by recruitment firm / skills broker / careers adviser	12
I was approached by someone from the workplace	10
I approached the workplace	9
I heard about the job by chance	4
Pre-existing contacts or experience	
I knew the employer through my interests/hobby, previous work, or voluntary work	10
Progression within same organisation	8
Friend or family offered me the job	5
Networks (not family or friends)	4

While 12% reported that a recruitment firm, skills broker, or careers adviser set up a job interview, only 3% earlier reported careers advice being an influence that led them to their current job. It may be that participants see a distinction between careers advice and getting a job. This was also reflected in their responses at age 16 to questions about what they anticipated they would find easiest and hardest about leaving school. Students rated “finding a job” as easier than “establishing a career”. They also rated “working out what I want to do” as harder than either of those (Vaughan, 2008a).

Nearly everyone had an unproblematic time getting into their current job, reporting the path to it as straightforward (42%) or very straightforward (40%). There were “a few twists and turns” for 16% and a “messy/difficult” path for 1%.

Getting into their current job was less straightforward for those who were technicians or tradespeople, managers, or labourers. Those in sales, community, or service roles were most likely to say it had been extremely straightforward.

Two-thirds of those who had not experienced a straightforward path to their current job had experienced times when they could not find work since they left school, compared with 39% of those whose path was straightforward. They were also less likely to have had only one job in the past 3 years (15%, compared with 27% of those whose path was straightforward). There were no differences between these young people and those whose path was straightforward when it came to what they saw had led them into their current field of work or how they had found their current job.

The members of this group were also no more likely than others to express some regret about their formal learning since they left school—so the choices or experiences in that learning were seen as providing more possibility than obstacles. However, these young people were more likely to say they had done some informal learning over the past year (74%, compared with 62% overall).

Participants currently not in paid work

Sixteen percent of the young adults ($n = 44$) were not in paid work at the time of their interview around the age of 26 years. Some of the same people were not in paid work at age 20 too but some were formerly in paid work or formal learning (or both).

Based on our snapshot in time, there were more people *not* in paid work at age 26 than at age 20. Governments around the world are concerned with those not in employment, education, or training (NEET). However, some NEET time is fairly common, particularly for people around this age. Earle (2016) found that 34% of 22-year-olds (the age he focused on) have some NEET spells during a year. Just under half of all the 274 young adults (46%) had some experience of actively looking for work, and not being able to find it, since they left school. Three months was the median for the longest time of looking for work and not being able to find it.¹⁶ Almost a quarter of the 274 had looked for 6 months or more before being able to find work at some stage since they left school.

Earle (2016) notes that not all young people who are NEET are on a benefit and not all people on a benefit are NEET, and that some are likely to be parents and caregivers (and therefore not seeking paid work).

Our group were similarly mixed. Just 15 of the 44 were actively seeking work, with the rest mainly occupied with parenting or full-time study or training. Several were coping with poor health, and some were travelling. Most of those not actively looking for work expected they would look for work again in the next 3 years.

Most of the 44 ($n = 33$) had been in paid work at some point over the past 5 years, with the most common period of time out of paid work between 3–12 months at the time of their interview. Most of these 44 people not in paid work had formal qualifications (35). Most commonly these were at degree level or higher ($n = 25$), with nearly half ($n = 12$) of these in the field of science.

The active work-seekers sought work in areas in which they were interested and had experience or qualifications. Half had relevant qualifications for the kind of work they sought; some said the work did not need qualifications. Most of the active work-seekers were not receiving a government benefit, either living off savings, or saying they were not eligible.

¹⁶ We did not ask how many times people had looked for work and not been able to find it, or to give us a total number of months without work—we thought this could be difficult for people to work out in the course of an interview.

6.

Experiences with work

Work is foremost

Almost all the young people said it was very important or important to them to enjoy their work, do well at it, and have fulfilling work.¹⁷ Eighty percent of the young people had definite goals for the next 3 years of their life. Work dominated these goals: they were work-related for 71%, compared with 43% around travel, 33% around finances, 29% around study, and 24% around family. Work goals usually also had plans to support them: 70%, much higher than the existence of plans for other aspects of life. Planning was in place for 46% of those with a goal to travel, 33% of those with financial goals, 29% of those with study goals, and 24% of those with family goals.

What is work like?

We asked those in paid work about 17 aspects of their work experiences and the role of work in their life. They rated each on a 5-point scale of agreement. By running a statistical factor analysis, we could see where people gave similar ratings to the same items. Table 10 outlines the three factors identified in this analysis. They account for 14 of the 17 aspects we asked about. The Alpha rating describes the degree of consistency between the items: an Alpha rating of 1 means that all items were rated the same by each individual.

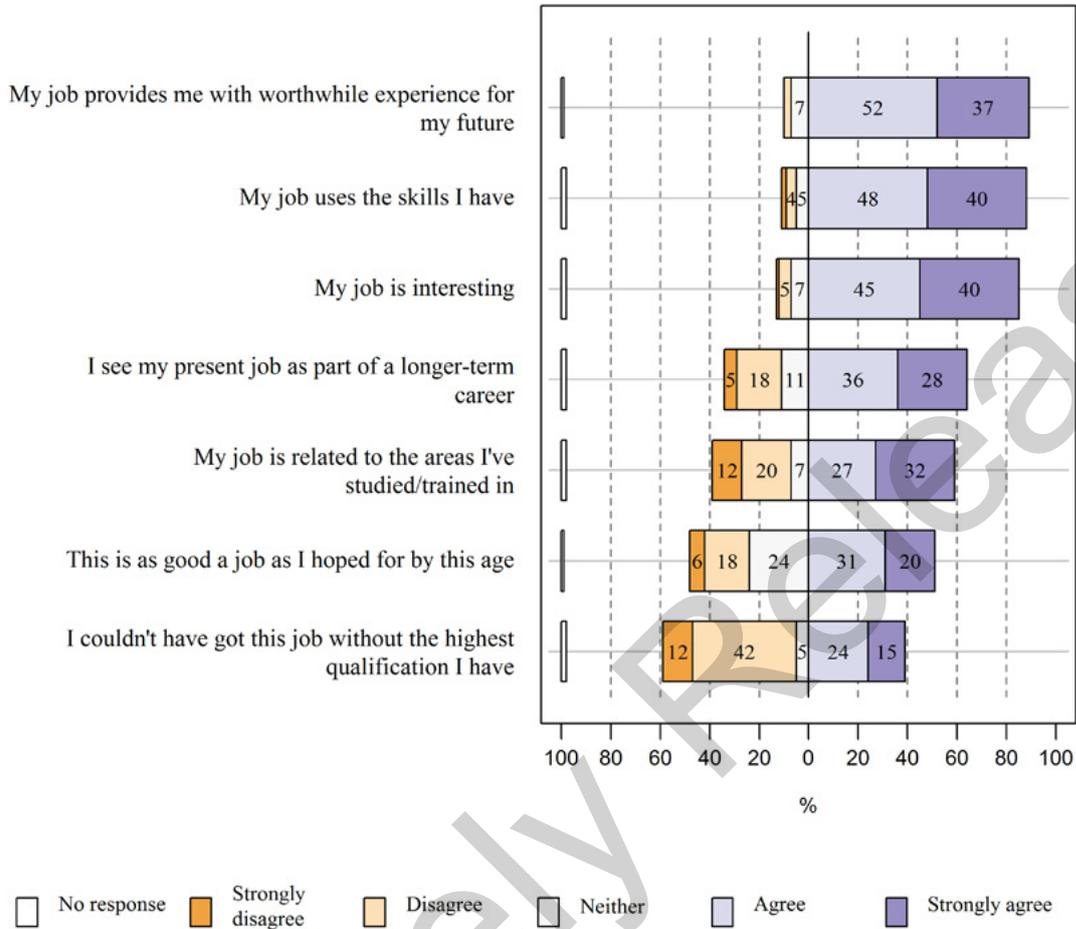
¹⁷ The full picture of what was important to the whole Competent Learners @ 26 cohort is given in the companion report, *Shaping Adulthood* available at [XXXXX](#).

TABLE 10 Factors and items related to age-26 work experiences

Factor names	High agreement with items
Purposeful and satisfied alignment: planned pathways and job satisfaction <i>Alpha of 0.85</i>	My job is related to the areas I've studied or trained in My job provides me with worthwhile experiences for my future I see my present job as part of a longer term career My job uses the skills I have I couldn't have got this job without the highest qualification I have My job is interesting This is as good a job as I hoped for by this age
Worthwhile and secure <i>Alpha of 0.70</i>	My job is worthwhile My job is secure There are promotion prospects for me in this job My job makes a contribution to society
Good relations: good workplace relationships <i>Alpha of 0.69</i>	I get on well with the person I report to / my immediate boss I get on well with my colleagues/workmates There's someone here who looks out for me and thinks about my future

Figure 7 shows that most of the young people had interesting work that used their skills—though not necessarily related to the areas they had studied or trained in. More people thought they had not needed their highest qualification to get the job than thought they had needed it. Most work felt as if it was connected to future opportunities—though not necessarily as part of a longer term career.

FIGURE 7 Purposeful and satisfied alignment



Those whose highest qualification was NCEA were less likely than others to think that their job used the skills they had, or was related to the areas they studied or trained in.

Those earning less than \$20,000 a year were least likely to see their job as interesting. Together with those earning between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year they were also less likely to see their job as using their skills, providing them with worthwhile experience for their future, or to be as good a job as they hoped for by this age.

Most were positive that their job was worthwhile, secure, and made a contribution to society, as shown in Figure 8. The lowest paid were the least likely to agree with these statements.

FIGURE 8 **Worthwhile and secure**

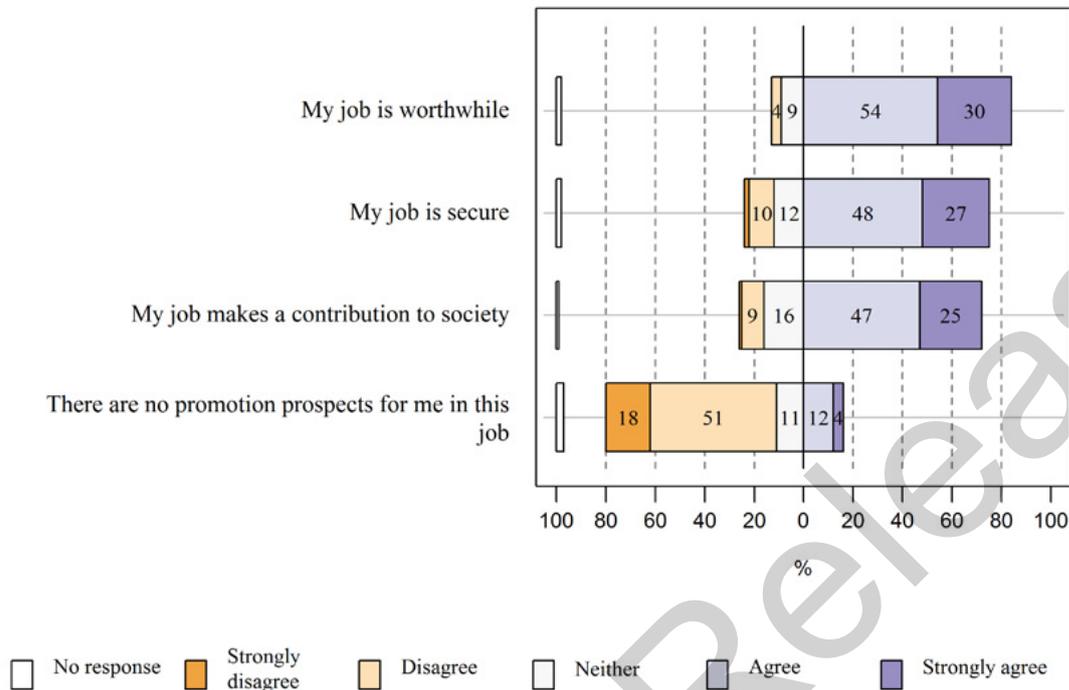
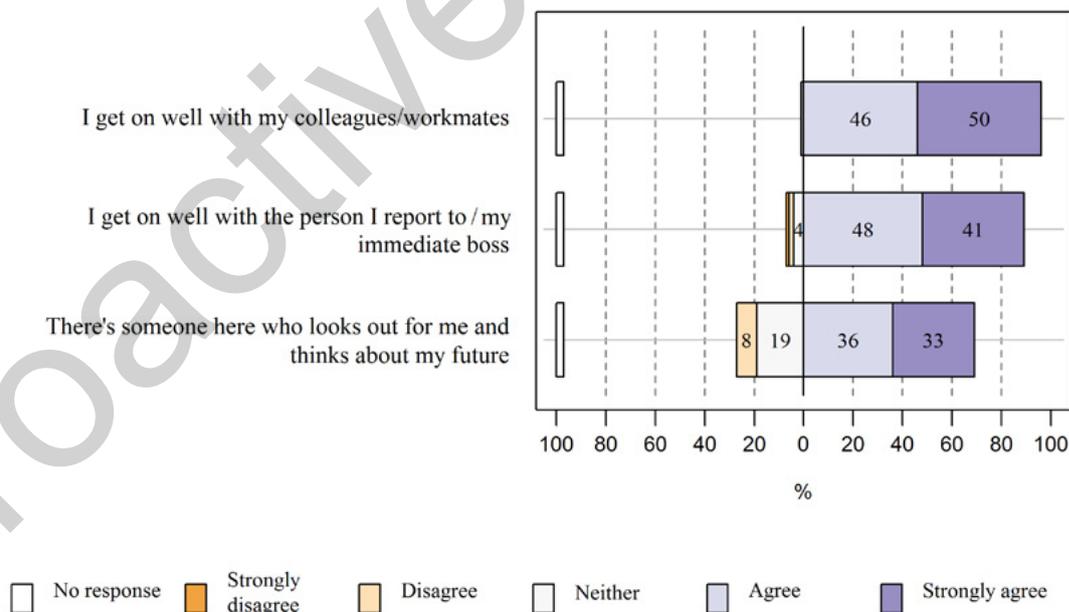


Figure 9 shows that relations with workmates and their immediate manager were generally good, and many had someone in their workplace who looked out for them and thought about where they could head in their work.

FIGURE 9 **Good workplace relations**



Three aspects did not fit into any of the three factors above because how people answered these was not highly related to their responses to the items within each of those factors.

Two of these aspects of work experience show how work and qualifications have become intertwined, rather than qualifications acting as a single stepping stone to work.

- *I need more qualifications or training before I can get the job I really want*
Just under half thought they needed more qualifications or training before they could get the job they really wanted (12% strongly agreed, and 32% agreed).
- *I see my present job as a way to supplement my income while I study/train for my future career*
Thirty-one percent saw their present job as a way to supplement their income while they studied or trained for their future career (10% strongly agreed, and 21% agreed).
- *I am satisfied with the level of pay for the job that I do*
Fourteen percent strongly agreed and 49% agreed that they were satisfied with the level of pay for their job. Twenty percent were neutral about this. Eighteen percent disagreed, and 12% strongly disagreed—a total of 30% who thought their job was underpaid. Those who thought they were underpaid included people from all income levels, but at much lower proportions for those paid over \$60,000 a year.

Satisfaction with pay was unrelated to the views of the work described in the three factors. This is consistent with research about the relationship of satisfaction with pay and satisfaction with work (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013; Judge, Piccolo, Podsakoff, Shaw, & Rich, 2010).

Perspectives on work differ with the kind of work

Do perspectives on work differ according to the kind of work people do? We analysed the relationship between the types of work the young people were doing, and their scores on the three factors, and the three items above that did not fit one of the three factors.

We found some relationships between the kind of work people do, and their views of that work, including whether people saw their current job as a way to supplement their income while they studied for their future career; but not in relation to satisfaction with pay, or whether they would need more qualifications to get the job they really wanted.

People with community and personal service jobs and those in sales jobs stood out as seeing their current job in temporary terms before a future career (59% of the former and 50% of the latter strongly agreed or agreed that their current job was mainly a support for their study and a different career).

Figure 10 below shows the highest median score on the Purposeful Alignment factor for those working as professionals, followed by technicians and trades workers. This may reflect plannedness in their pathways and the greater likelihood of their tertiary education leading into work that uses the skills and qualifications they have gained. The managers' category median comes next.

Sales workers had the lowest rates of agreement with the items in the Purposeful Alignment factor. These jobs tend to offer less security. Notably, more people in this group reported their jobs as temporary and a means to an end, for money while engaged in part-time tertiary education or while making life changes.

In between come community and personal service, and clerical and administration workers. Both groups had the widest range of ratings. Clerical and administration workers in our group include customer service representatives, advisers, and co-ordinators. The wide spread may reflect differences in industry area and/or work environment, making for an experience of meeting customer needs that is more or less satisfying. The community and personal service group includes diverse occupations that may account for its wide range: hospitality workers such as chefs, baristas, and waitstaff; teacher aides; nannies; and less common occupations such as dog walker, museum host, and professional bridge player.

FIGURE 10 Occupational category and agreement levels for the Purposeful Alignment factor¹⁸

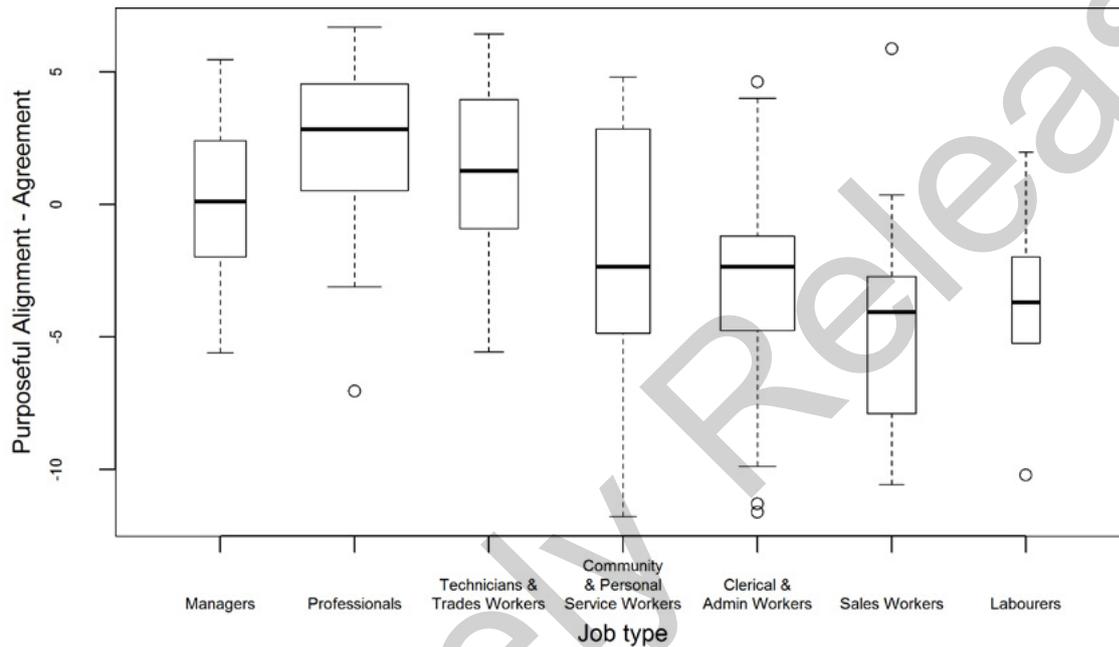


Figure 11 shows that the medians across the occupational groups are more similar for the Worthwhile and Secure factor, though those in the professional group had a higher median than others.

¹⁸ In these box-and-whisker plots, the overall median score on each factor is given as 0. For each occupational group, the median (mid-point of data) shows as a bold line dividing the box into two parts. Half of the ratings are greater than or equal to this value (i.e., the top half of the box up to the top of the “whisker”) and half are less (i.e., the bottom half of the box down to bottom of the other “whisker”). Each whisker represents ratings outside the middle 50%, which are usually over a greater range than what is in the box. Dots represent outliers. The width of the box is proportional to the number of individuals represented (the largest group is the professionals, and the smallest is the labourers).

FIGURE 11 Occupational category and levels of agreement with the Worthwhile and Secure factor

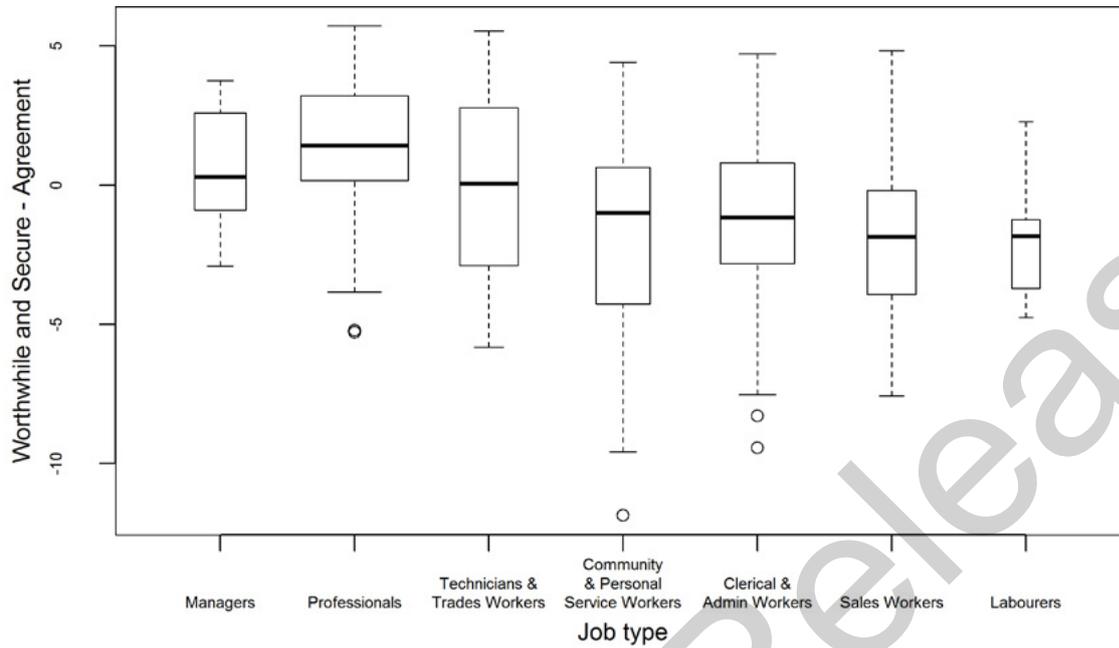
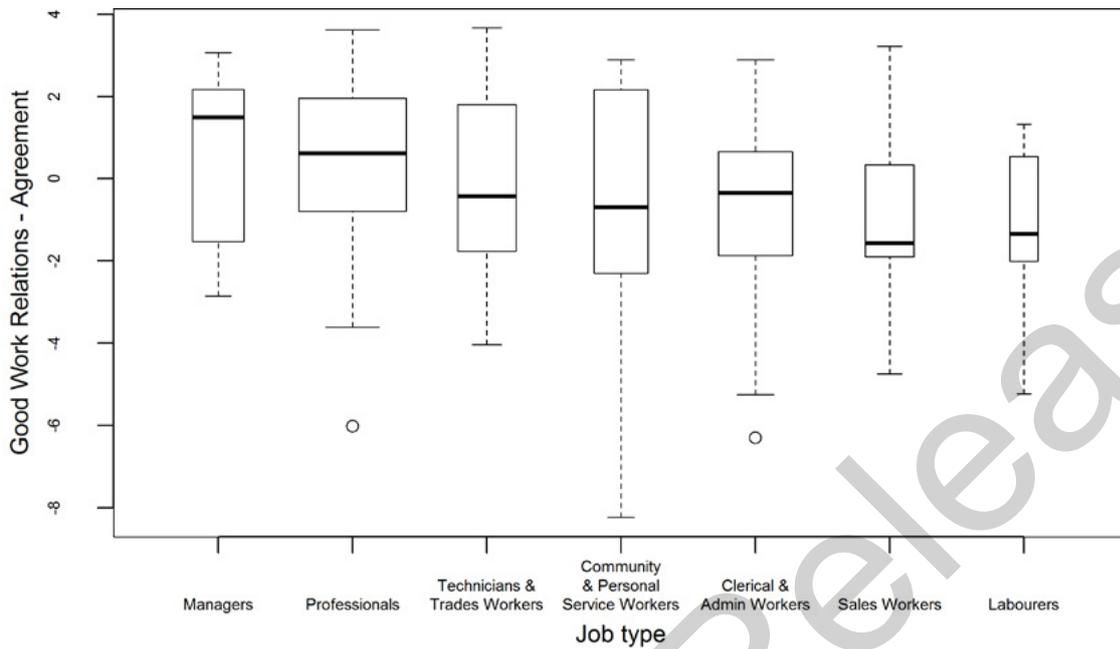


Figure 12 shows that the managers category had the highest median level for the Good Work Relations factor. This may reflect their comparatively more powerful position in relation to others in the workplace. People may perhaps defer more to them, giving them a rosier picture of their relationships. The higher median could also be because managers are well positioned to set a good tone for relationships and workplace culture as decision makers in individual worksites or across multiple worksites. Several people in this group also owned businesses or were self-employed.

Professionals came next, followed by those in the technicians and trades, community and personal service, and clerical and administration work. Sales workers and labourers had the lowest median ratings on the Good Work Relations factor.

FIGURE 12 Occupational category and levels on the Good Work Relations factor



7.

Learning opportunities at work

Expectations that work would include ongoing learning were high at age 20 (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011). In this section we describe the kinds of learning that the 26-year-olds experienced at work, the desires of a third or more for greater opportunities to learn on the job, and experiences that had been particularly significant for their learning.

Asking about different kinds of learning activities at work allowed us to acknowledge the growing importance of informal and non-formal learning, often occurring through social and participatory practices in workplaces (Billett, 2004; Cole, 2016; Janssens, Smet, Onghena, & Kyndt, 2017; Manuti, Pastore, Scardigno, Giancaspro, & Morciano, 2015). This learning in workplaces is crucial for developing the kind of “soft skills” and dispositions now needed for capability in many fields (Vaughan, 2017). Asking about learning activities, rather than categories of learning, also allowed us to acknowledge that the boundaries between formal, informal, and non-formal learning nearly always overlap in real life. For example, learners invariably draw on informal learning as part of any formal or non-formal learning undertaken, whether in an educational institution or a workplace (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2002; Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008).

We asked about aspects of learning that could be structured into a job. Table 11 shows that most participants reported regularly giving and receiving feedback. More than two-thirds occasionally attended workshops or seminars. More than half had regular one-to-one mentoring though fewer provided such mentoring to others. Half were encouraged to keep a work record. Around a third had perhaps the most structured opportunities of all—regularly scheduled coursework, classes, or skills practice sessions.

TABLE 11 Structured learning in the job

Form of structured learning	n = 230 %
Receive regular feedback from work colleagues, employer, or clients	78
Give regular feedback to work colleagues, employer, or clients	70
Occasional one-off workshop, conference, seminar	69
Scheduled one-to-one mentoring for advice and support	55
Encouragement to keep a regular record about your work (e.g., portfolio)	50
Give scheduled one-to-one mentoring to workmate	39
Regularly scheduled coursework, classes, or skills practice sessions encouraged by your employer or an education institution	34

Professionals and managers had more structured learning on the job than those in other occupations.

Unstructured learning was even more common. Table 12 shows that discussion was reported by nearly everyone and observing others was also very common. Just under three-quarters engaged in professional or technical reading as required. Just over half also gained from their contacts in other companies.

TABLE 12 On-the-spot unstructured learning in the job

Types of on-the-spot learning	n = 230 %
Taking on occasional feedback from colleagues, employer, or clients	96
Talking with workmates about questions you have or something you need help with	96
Offering occasional feedback to colleagues, employer, or clients	90
Observations of other colleagues or workmates as they work	84
Professional or technical reading when required	71
Talking with people in other companies that do similar work	56

Professional reading was most common among managers, professionals, and those in the trades/technical occupations. Contact with people in other companies was lowest for salespeople, and those with clerical and administrative roles, or caregiving and personal care roles.

The workplace as a learning environment

Research on workplace learning has shown that successful learning in the workplace does not happen by accident and is not simply the work of individual learners/workers. Employers and workplaces provide the particular conditions that support the availability and uptake of learning opportunities and the means to consolidate that learning into practice. We used a workplace learning model of pedagogies and structures developed from research (Vaughan, 2008b; Vaughan, O'Neil, & Cameron, 2011) to ask our participants about their experiences of a range of elements involved in good workplace learning.

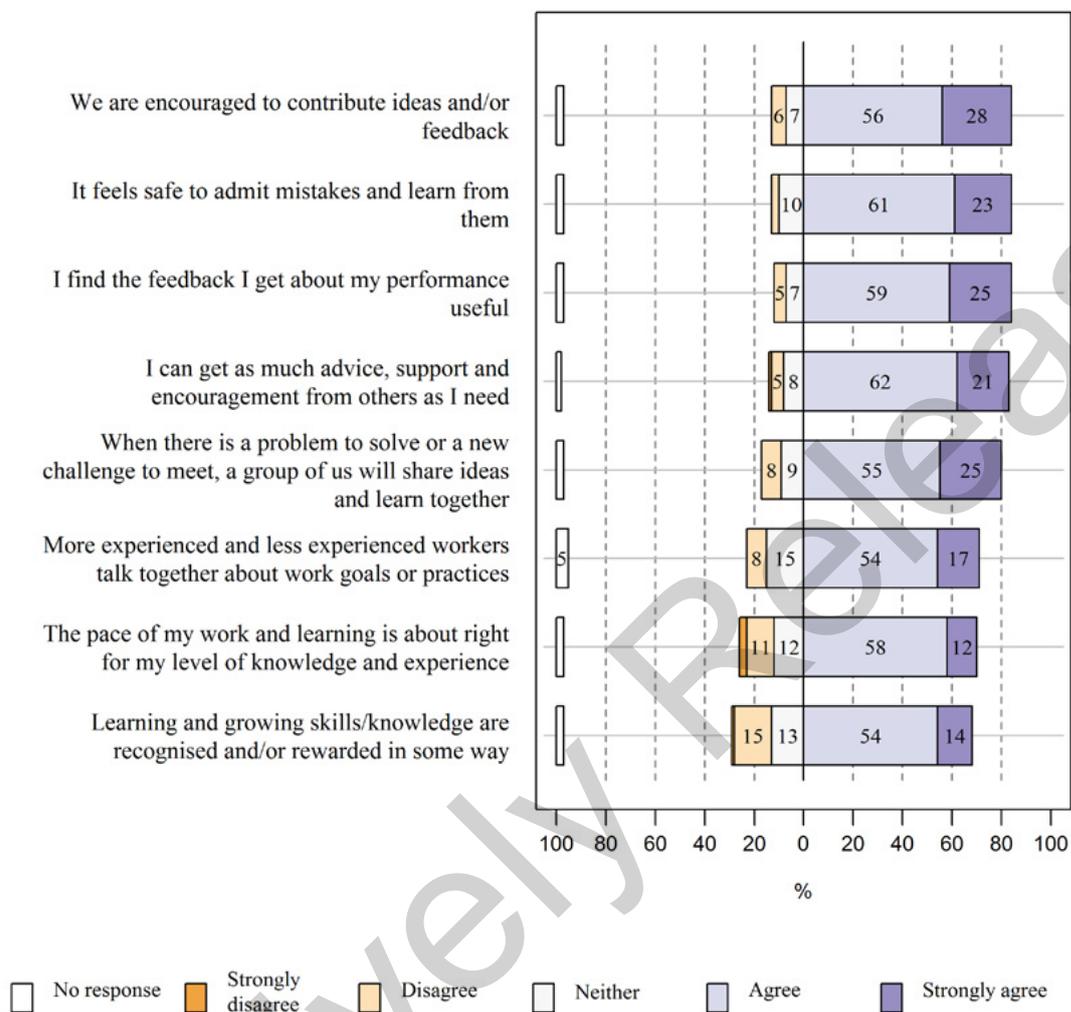
Once again, we undertook a statistical factor analysis so that we could see how experiences were related to different kinds of work. Table 13 shows the one factor that emerged from this analysis, relating to workplace practices.

TABLE 13 Learning-enabled workplace factor

High agreement with items	
Learning-enabled workplace: workplace practices that foster learning Cronbach's alpha: 0.84	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are encouraged to contribute to ideas and/or feedback • When there is a problem to solve or new challenge to meet, a group of us will share ideas and learn together • More experienced and less experienced workers talk together about work goals or practices • I can get as much advice, support, and encouragement from others as I need • I find the feedback I get about my performance useful • It feels safe to admit mistakes and learn from them • Learning and growing skills/knowledge are recognised and/or rewarded in some way • The pace of my work and learning is about right for my level of knowledge and experience

Figure 13 shows that most of the young people felt they had supportive conditions for workplace learning—about a quarter strongly agreeing they had most of these conditions.

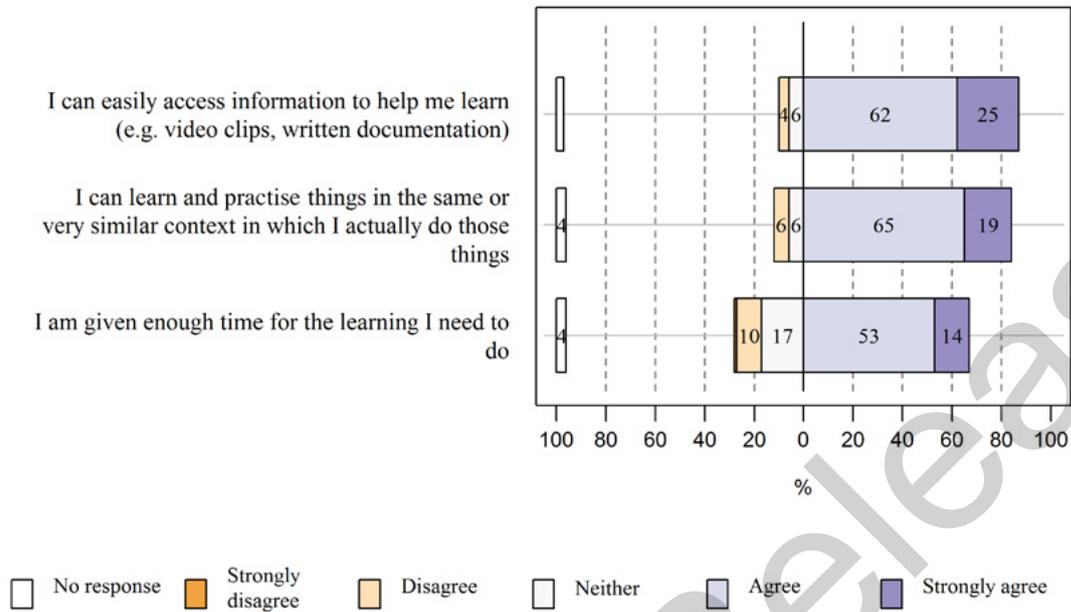
FIGURE 13 Experience of supportive conditions for workplace learning



More women than men thought that, in their workplace, more and less experienced workers talked together about work goals or practices (75%, compared with 65%).

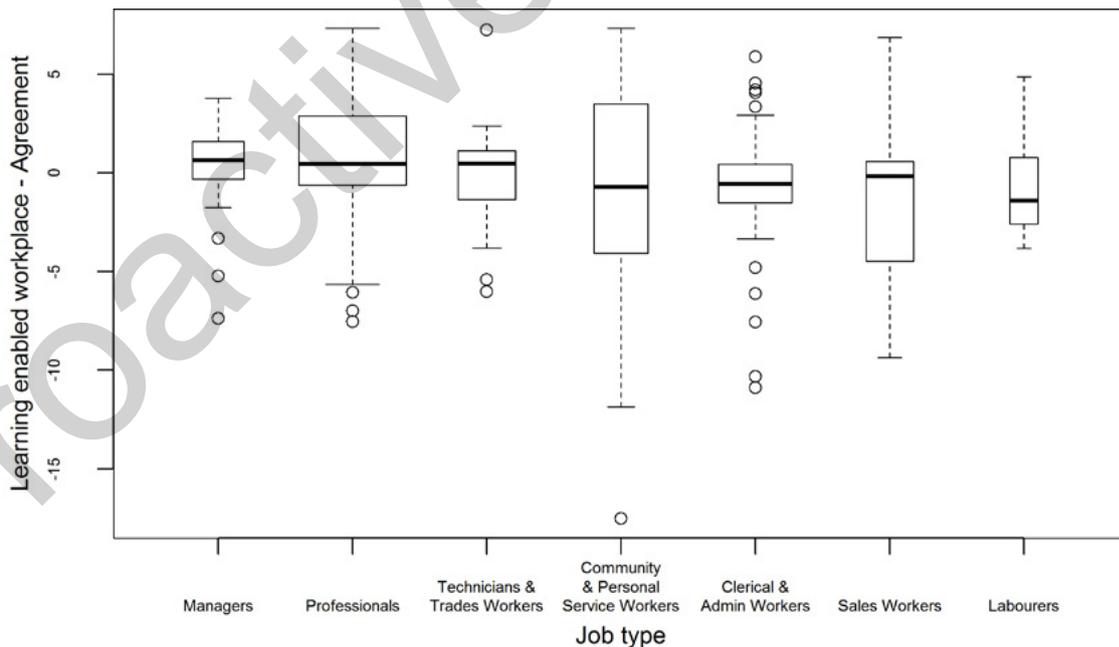
Figure 14 shows that most of the young people agreed that they had enough access to information and support to learn in the workplace.

FIGURE 14 Experience of good conditions for workplace learning



Our factor analysis across the different occupational groups shows that most groups are in learning-enabled workplaces. Managers, professional, and trades and technical workers agree most that they have these opportunities and conditions for learning, and labourers the least. Figure 15 shows quite a few outliers within each occupational group, and wide ranges for the community and personal services, and clerical and administration workers, suggesting differences in opportunities and conditions related to particular workplaces, or different individual understandings of the items we asked.

FIGURE 15 Occupational differences relating to Learning-enabled workplace factor



Business size in relation to workplace learning

Seventeen percent of our participants in work were in small businesses (1–5 employees), 25% in businesses with 6–19 employees, 19% in businesses with between 20 and 49 employees, and 37% in businesses with 50 or more employees. In New Zealand, a third of the businesses with fewer than 20 employees are less than 5 years old (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2017), with a 10-year survival rate from 2007 to 2017 of just 26% (Statistics New Zealand, 2017).

Smaller businesses are therefore probably less likely to be able to offer opportunities for formal learning towards qualifications in work time because they are in a more precarious position in the market (e.g., at greater risk from defaulters or disruptions). However, it is theoretically possible for any business to be organised in ways that support learning in the workplace. Indeed, participants who worked in businesses with 1–5 employees gave the highest ratings for the items in the factor Learning-enabled workplaces. Those in workplaces with between 6 and 19 employees gave the lowest ratings.

There were higher levels of agreement about *individually managed* learning opportunities and conditions across all the business size categories, though lower among those in workplaces with 20–49 employees.

Length of time in the job and workplace learning opportunities

People's views of their learning opportunities and conditions were largely unrelated to the length of time they had spent in the job. Those who had been in their current job for over 3 years seemed slightly more likely on average to be in learning-enabled workplaces. Those who had been in their work for 6 months or less were somewhat less likely than others to have good individually managed learning opportunities and conditions. This may be because they were less aware of such opportunities or were not yet being offered them.

Nearly a third would like more workplace learning opportunities

We also asked participants about any learning opportunities they wanted—but did not have—in their workplace. Just over two-thirds did not have any suggestions although, within that group, a few commented on the opportunities they already had or how they could learn more from a change in existing practices.

Several also commented about learning opportunities not being relevant to them. They reported that their job was “just a job”, “for extra money”, “for the money while travelling”, and that they were “just a temp”.

Almost one-third (31%) indicated that they wanted learning opportunities that they were not getting. Most specified an area of capability they would like support to develop, or a programme of learning that would help them in their job. Most also specified areas directly related to their current role in the business or a role they were interested to move into within the same business. But some wanted to upskill to meet demands they already faced—for example, “people management because I manage a team informally”.

Almost half of this group sought learning opportunities that would lead to—or support—progression into other roles within the same business. Management skills were a notable common theme.

I would like something to do with people management. I put forward my interest to my boss a while ago, because supposedly they encourage education in the workplace, but nothing happened.

I have been in management for 4–5 years and feel would like training to move up to regional or training manager.

I want to go the whole management route.

About a third of the desired progression-related learning opportunities were ones that might provide participants with a better sense of where their role fitted in the “big picture” of the business and its line of work.

I would like to ... go out on the road with the ambulances to see the other side of what we do (we work in the comms centre dispatching the calls and services. Same with the other services—police and fire communications centres or the nursing/healthline workers. We are supposed to go visit but we are short staffed.

I want more understanding of the technical side of the company. It is an electrical company and I want to understand more about what they do.

Some wanted learning opportunities to move into a *different* business or career. Some comments indicated that the scope of the business they worked in was too limited or that they wanted to specialise in a particular area but there was no capacity for that. Several mentioned that the employer would only support or fund training directly related to the job they already did.

Some responses did not specify the learning opportunities desired. They instead took the opening provided by our question to express disappointment and frustration over the lack of learning opportunities.

There are limited opportunities to learn new skills and they are not given to everyone. It's based on who you are. There are different levels of the job and some levels require different expertise and these are allocated to mates, and not always shared out fairly. I tend to miss out.

I wanted to finish an apprenticeship as that was promised in my interview but he mucked me about and abused me.

When I applied for the job, there was more in the job description than what I now do—it was drafting reports, research. But I am doing nearly all admin. I would like to do more of the other, to up my skill base.

We don't do many seminars now. We used to.

I am often thrown in the deep end and just have to make it work at the time.

Becoming more effective: Significant learning experiences at work

To find out more about learning at work, we asked if there was a particularly significant work experience that really stayed with them—where they learnt something important.

Most of the young people could think of something—though quite often it was not a single experience but a crystallising of understanding that made them more effective in their work. There were four themes in what they described:

- communicating with others
- rising successfully to work challenges
- taking opportunities to be extended
- learning from near misses, mistakes, and accidents.

Communicating with others

Learning how to listen, and to think of what they could do in response to others' needs and emotions stood out for many in what they had learnt through their work.

How to deal with frustrated people. Often when frustrated they say things that aren't a true indication of what they're like.

Customer service skills, conversation manner, talking and expanding, asking right questions, transparency.

People management is the major thing I've learnt and developed, managing different personalities. In my industry we have designers and engineers who don't always see eye to eye so finding a way to bridge the gap and tell a story is something I have developed.

Did a course on conflict resolution and dealing with complaints and learnt about different types of people and their learning styles, listen to understand rather than listen to respond. This has helped me approach people differently.

The biggest thing is to have patience. When I first started I found it difficult with some customers. I grew to learn to be more patient because my attitude reflected on them.

I did a course on dealing with difficult customers and conflict and after that I had to deal with a very angry customer and I was able to deal with it well and talk the customer down and come to an agreeable solution. The course was really helpful with this.

Rising successfully to work challenges

Work challenges in which the young person had succeeded showed them their own ability, as well as gaining them others' recognition.

I was shipped down south to host and run a seminar which was a big challenge for me. A positive experience.

One of the first projects I worked on in this job, my colleague helped me to deliver my first website which was really well received, got good feedback from the customer. Helped me realise how much I knew and consolidated my skills.

My first meeting with a business that wanted to wholesale my products—it was a very good experience learning to negotiate with external parties/clients and ultimately it was a good experience learning that I could refuse to wholesale products. It was quite scary to go into a meeting as a newcomer who hasn't had that experience before with someone who has been in business for a very long time. In that 2 hours I learned that I didn't have to do what they said just because they had more experience than I do.

Given opportunity to co-curate exhibitions which were not in my job description, but were great opportunities to rise to the challenge and see my work appreciated by the public.

I learnt the value of hard work. There was a period in the business a few years ago when the recession hit. We all worked really hard and brought it together and came out the other end shining.

I was given the task of rolling out a new computer program—trained everyone, including a lot of experienced people—showed I could hold my own with workers reluctant to do the training.

Taking opportunities to gain new knowledge or skills

These opportunities were sometimes on the job itself, sometimes with more senior people taking time to work with them, and sometimes being sent on a course.

Being thrown on the grader. I wasn't expecting it, it was something I wanted to get into.

Assisting different stylists, seeing different ways you can problem solve on the same type of work.

The person I sit next to is really big on technical analysis, he is really receptive to help me analyse and reflect on data patterns ... this is an informal arrangement and really helpful.

I learned a complicated process about inventory control—it was good to learn as not many can do it.

When I worked at ___ the head of division was quite old, there were only four or five of us under 45, so he took us younger ones aside every week for 6 weeks to pass on his knowledge of sales and investment, a bit of a master class to upskill us. It was an important learning and knowledge and confidence building experience.

They sent me to another centre to watch how other teachers do things and that is really helpful especially around behaviour management strategies.

Near misses, mistakes, and accidents

There was some powerful learning reported from getting things wrong. Some of this learning was around safety; some was around preparation and double-checking details, not assuming things would be there or had been done. Some was around their own actions, and some around the actions of others. Some learnt about themselves by realising they were in a situation that did not suit them.

All of the things that have ever gone really badly or wrong, I've learned things from them. Making mistakes teaches you more than always doing it perfectly. For example, when orders haven't been checked and they go out to places and they have the wrong things, that's very serious as if there is anything wrong, they don't pay for any of it and that's serious for a small business.

If you upset a client, you learn not to do it again. I've made a few mistakes, came from my lack of understanding. I went out of my way to learn what to do, so I would not make them again.

Letting emotions get the better of you. I got snippy with a colleague and ended up yelling at them and realise now to take a step back and cool down and stop and think.

My previous job I made a mistake on the live system which taught the importance of being professional and double-checking. Luckily it was able to be rectified. At the time I didn't realise how serious it was.

When I was a chef, there were times when if you didn't take the time to be as prepared as you could be it would throw you back for the whole service. One particular night when I was new I hadn't gone through the fridges to check I had everything I needed. I learnt from this and since then I always triple check.

There was a big management shake-up, so I learnt the importance of communication. They didn't communicate well and I saw how bad it got, which led me to look for another job.

I remember one significant case where a patient wasn't given the correct treatment. So it really makes you think about being on the ball and making sure you know what you are doing all the time.

A cooking oil aerosol can exploded after being too close to the grill, it was loud, scary and dangerous ... no one was hurt and we all learnt from it.

First project I worked on was a very poorly run project by a lazy project manager who wasted a lot of time and money. I learnt heaps from it!

8.

Hindsight

What perspective do 26-year-olds have about their younger selves: about the connections they see between how they tackled life, and how they live now?

We asked them whether there was any support or advice they would give themselves—things they wished they had learnt or known about or known how to do when they were at school, and when they were working out what they wanted to do as an adult. And what advice would they give themselves about looking for work?

Advice to a younger self at school

Making more of school was the main theme here, along with a desire for more knowledge—of themselves, their interests, and of what was possible. Some looked back and would have liked a more signposted future; in contrast, others wished they had been able to ignore common signposts.

Thirty percent wished they had applied themselves more—taken school more seriously, paid more attention, learnt to focus. Some of this hindsight was about the value of having school qualifications; some around the importance of good habits of learning.

To pay attention to feedback and advice—I did too much talking, leaving things to the last minute. Would have become more disciplined.

Wish I had stayed at school instead of leaving quite young—wish I had passed my NCEA. I dropped out with no qualifications.

Wish I'd stuck till end of 7th form rather than leaving midway, I wish I'd asked for help.

Pay more attention in the IT class—many jobs are all computer based these days.

Wish I worked harder, concentrate a lot more, see things through.

Put your head down, arse up and work harder. I cruised along and just passed.

Pay attention more in certain classes, don't stress yourself out about the other ones. I didn't realise what I really needed to focus on. Stop going on Facebook at school.

Wish I'd addressed my lack of motivation and encouraged myself not to give up. Not put things off.

Don't mess around, focus—but I would not have listened!

Have goals, figure out a plan. Doesn't matter if it changes, it will help you achieve.

Fifteen percent wished they had had more confidence, to follow an interest rather than what they or others thought they should be doing, or to leave earlier when they knew what they wanted to do, or to simply be less worried about who they were or what they should do. Some of the thoughts here also expressed the desire to have known more about the range of work available when they were at school.

Not worry so much about the credits and focus on doing what I enjoyed.

You don't need to know what it is you want to do, only what you're interested in. Everyone stresses out about what they are going to do after high school. I think a more useful approach is to think about what you are interested in.

Keeping an open mind to everything you might be interested in. Trying to identify what interests you.

Don't just go to uni or study because everyone else is.

I'd tell myself to leave school a bit earlier rather than staying on till 7th form when I really wasn't getting much out of it.

How broad the working landscape is, there is a wide range of opportunities—do what you are good at.

Life and practical skills such as budgeting, time or project management, writing CVs and job applications, or how to communicate with people in work environments were mentioned by 14%.

I wish schools had life lessons—not just social studies. How to budget, how to go shopping, things you need to know as an adult but no one tells you. My advice to myself would be to be more independent.

Budgeting and life skills, practical communication working in professional environments.

Basic life skills—writing a CV, learning about taxes, interviewing for jobs, that sort of thing.

Better information and advice about careers and study were mentioned by 12%.

Get the right careers advice. The stuff I got wasn't really helpful, became overwhelmed with possibilities, some advice to help me discern a path.

Would have been nice to know what is required for a uni degree (some tried to scare me) ... a lot more was required than I expected.

Maybe, more guidance about what careers are actually out there—the full range—would have helped with study selection (e.g., not just artist, but the different types of art work available).

Wish I'd known more about how to job search ... and had solid career advice throughout high school tailored to our strengths throughout high school.

More support in choosing where you wanted to go after school, careers advice, my experience was that they made a real conscious effort to push you into something ... should be more about what you want to do, and find out what you want.

Some mentioned particular curriculum areas that they wished they had pursued—or not.

A few looked back and wished they had been able to be more relaxed about where they belonged at school, or that they belonged: to have had a sense of a wider world in which they would find themselves.

Advice to a younger self when working out what they wanted to do as an adult

Nineteen percent could think of no advice they would give themselves in hindsight, quite often because they had “always” known what they wanted to do and followed that through, or because things had worked out well. Eight percent said they were still unsure what they wanted to do.

For others, their hindsight advice was mostly around exploring options or following interests and trusting yourself.

Explore options

Twenty-nine percent put the emphasis on exploring options, finding out what was possible, and being open to change—not taking the self as definitely known, or the study or work path as fixed once started.

Be patient with self and explore options before making decisions.

Talking to people and exploring options especially people in different roles to gain understanding of the outside world.

Take the time to think about what you want to do, because I felt pressured, went straight in to beauty therapy—wish I had explored more options.

Explore options so you know what you don't like to help figure out what you do.

Don't be scared to try different things.

Keep an open mind, you have several jobs over a lifetime. Develop transferable skills, be a lifetime learner, have an open mind.

It doesn't have to be one decision for your life. You can change what you do. At school we were told that you have to make the big career choice, when in practice you can change as time goes by.

In the IT sector there is not much info about careers and opportunities out there. It's very male focused and no clear pathways, so talk to more people to access what roles there are out there.

Try to find people in my generation to ask, rather [than] in the older generation when jobs were easier to get.

Remain open minded, don't feel afraid by the prospects or that plans may change. Setting goals is OK and they may change which is also OK.

To know that things aren't permanent and it's OK to give things a go. I think there is a feeling when you finish school that you have to know what you want and that caused me anxiety and I would tell myself it's OK not to know.

Follow your interests

A slightly different take on this matching of self and work or study was advice to follow what interests would sustain attention and motivation, and to trust your own instinct (26%).

I would tell myself that what you are good at is worth doing. Play to your strengths and not worry about what other people are doing and focus on what you are good at.

Put yourself out there and try things, give it a good go and see if you like it or not, make decisions based on what you want, not just [to] follow friends.

Try not to feel pressured to have a career that looks good but that you're not interested in.

I always knew what I wanted to do—my advice would be to just do what you want to do. I worked in a job I didn't really want to do for a few years and wish I had followed my guts with that.

Go with my gut. Always wanted to have my own business but was always too afraid as I didn't think I had enough experience working for other people, but none of the people I work with have experience and it's successful and it just feels right.

Wouldn't care so much about what my parents wanted.

I wish I had known not to be so stressed about it, just let it work itself out. I think that's how I ended up studying something I wasn't interested in. Maybe I would have tried studying something that wasn't so ambitious careerwise but that I enjoyed a bit more.

Some could identify specific skills or qualifications or grades they wished they had gained (9%), and others talked of the value of perseverance, of confidence, or pushing themselves (7%).

Hindsight around looking for work

We asked participants to imagine they could advise their younger selves, based on what they had learnt since. What did they wish they had known about, or known how to do, or what had turned out to be useful, when they were looking for work? Half thought of something, and typically it was about something they had not realised at the time or had learnt the hard way.

Their advice focused on individual qualities or dispositions (40%), practical measures (27%), or taking a broad approach to developing a career (27%).

Act with more confidence and resilience

This advice to their younger self focused on the individual qualities or dispositions they would bring to bear now on any job search. Overwhelmingly, the comments were about acting with more confidence, persistence, and resilience.

Don't be nervous; it's not the end of the world if you get rejected.

Don't try to be something you are not at the interview—it's about fitting into the organisation and it's as much about you as the employer.

In terms of the work culture [I learnt] to expect something a bit different, to be tougher and not take things personally.

[I learnt about] trusting myself more to go for higher level jobs, to not underestimate my abilities.

Develop a good CV and interview skills

Practical measures they would suggest to others or now use themselves in looking for jobs were also a theme. Advice here focused on having knowledge of how to make a good CV, including designing them to stand out and make up for a lack of experience. There were other suggestions about having interview skills and a few about starting a job hunt sooner now that they knew how long it really took or how hard it really was.

Network and be open

A broad approach to fashioning a career was also recommended. Quite a few mentioned cultivating networks or recognising their value. For example, "the more networks you have, the more doors open"; "it's who you know"; "make the right friends"; and "knowing which contacts and networks to use".

Some expressed regret at the pathway taken and wished they had been more open to other options. Some said they simply had not known what they wanted and lacked the experience to make their choices. Overall, the nature of these comments aligned with taking a longer term and more open view of things.

Keep options open and keep trying, keep networking with other people even if you accept a job, don't close doors.

Take opportunities as they present themselves. You don't always get your first choice. Any role can lead to some other, unconsidered future. Take something you're unsure about because it is never too late to change.

Do something that interests you rather than makes the most money.

I should have explored more options.

I wish that I had gotten a part-time job in school so that I had customer experience so it would have been easier to get the jobs I wanted to do. Or maybe studied something better, more useful, or with a better qualification.

When I finished university, my degree was quite broad and I didn't know what I wanted to do with it and I went on to do postgrad. I wasn't sure what path to take when finishing university. I think I should have looked closer at what my degree would give me in terms of career path, treated the degree as a ticket to a better job *eventually* rather than be focused on a particular job.

9.

Discussion

What can we learn from the learning and work journeys these young adults have made? Among this cohort are many who can be thought of as starting on a “well lit” pathway from school (Patterson, 2011), equipped with NCEA qualifications that allowed them a good choice of post-school formal learning towards qualifications that would then open work pathways. This report shows young adults need to make decisions all along the way—the path may be well lit, but for many it is not a single path but one with branches and changing horizons. This suggests that where they are at age 26 may not be where they are at age 30. The work world is changing rapidly and becoming more complex.

Others in the cohort were more attracted to employment than continuing formal learning when they left school. Some found a clear pathway in their chosen field; others have seen the need for formal learning as their horizons change.

The New Zealand Curriculum's overarching vision is for “confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners”. What we see with the Competent Learners cohort is just how important ongoing learning is, and how valued it is in leisure as well as work. Since age 20 there was growth in some key aspects of learning capability which reflects not just ongoing formal study, but challenges and opportunities in work and interests.

Only a fifth of the Competent Learners had a clear sense of what they wanted to do when they started their post-school journey to adulthood. When they looked back, they would have liked more understanding of different options, and more confidence to think about them. Sometimes this was related to understanding what post-school study could open up for them. Sometimes it was related to being more confident to follow their interests.

The call continues to grow more support for school students and young adults to have better information about the full range of careers now available, and the qualification pathways that lead to different job clusters. The more varied nature of work and qualifications is adding branches to traditional pathways. The high cost of post-school qualifications is an added penalty for those who choose courses that do not lead to good work options. The experiences and views of the Competent Learners cohort underline the need for better information of this kind.

Their experiences and views also point to the need for career management competencies,¹⁹ to make sense of personal priorities and options, and to make good decisions. They reinforce the importance of *The New Zealand Curriculum's* key competencies, since these are aligned with the “soft skills” increasingly emphasised by the community, including, and especially, employers. These key competencies need to be more to the fore in our schools, and soft skills development explicitly included in post-school formal learning in tertiary institutions and apprenticeships (Vaughan, 2017).

¹⁹ Developing self-awareness, exploring opportunities, and deciding and acting (Ministry of Education, 2009).

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Summary

How do New Zealanders in their mid-20s live? What matters most to them? We have some data from official statistics, media and online surveys, and research on particular issues. This report breaks new ground in providing a fuller picture of the experiences, values, relationships, and resources of young people shaping their adult lives.

These young people are part of the longitudinal Competent Learners study. We first met them when they were in their last few months of early childhood education in the Wellington region. They came from a wide range of social backgrounds, allowing us to see what role these played over time, but they are not a representative group of all New Zealanders—they are mainly Pākehā, and many continued formal education after school. In their mid-20s, they have somewhat higher qualifications and incomes overall than their peers. But they include people without work and people on low incomes—they broadly span the range of situations young people are in. They can give us some insight into the lives of this age group in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand.

In 2014, 323 of the Competent Learners participants took part in an online survey, 303 a phone interview, and 19 in longer interviews. There are three reports from this phase. This report focuses on their values, use of leisure time, relationships, financial situation, wellbeing, and thoughts about New Zealand and their own future. *Pathways, Labour Market Experiences, and Learning at Work and Beyond at Age 26*¹ focuses on work and learning. *Learning, Working, and Building a Sense of Belonging in Emergent Adulthood*² gives us insights from 19 young people who made their way from school into adulthood in ways that were not as “well lit” as others (Patterson, 2011).

Some key findings

Health, work, and relationships matter a lot for this cohort at age 26. Work goals were most frequent, followed by travel, financial, study, and family.

Most had good friendships where they were listened to, encouraged to do well, and given ideas. School friends remained among their closest friends for 76%, almost twice the proportion of close friends who came from work, through friends or family, shared accommodation, or study after school. Friends were least likely to be made online.

Forty percent now lived with an intimate partner, and another 20% were in a relationship without living together. Twenty-one percent of the women were parents, and 9% of the men.

1 Web link to come
2 Web link to come

Most had good relations with their parents, felt comfortable with them, respected by them, and able to talk with them. Around a fifth lived with their parents.

Leisure time was often spent with friends and family, more in informal activities than formal. Internet use was important or very important for two-thirds, mainly to find things out, bank and buy and sell, and keep up with family and friends. Reading for enjoyment was still frequent for around two-thirds. Those who hadn't enjoyed reading between the ages of 8 and 14 mostly read only sometimes or rarely—as did a third of those who had enjoyed reading over those earlier years.

Three-quarters thought they were doing alright financially or living comfortably. Most had some savings, but most also had debt: only 20% did not owe money on either a student loan or other debt. Student loan debts coloured thinking about further formal learning, moving overseas, or buying property. Sixty percent were paying more than a quarter of their income in rent.

Around two-thirds lived in the Wellington region, where most had lived at age 20. About a fifth were living overseas, half in Australia. All but 16% had been beyond New Zealand, mainly for holidays. Twelve percent thought they would not spend their adult life in New Zealand, mainly because of work opportunities. Another 25% were unsure.

Overall, most reported that they were happy with their lives, and in good health or better. Twenty-four percent had a health problem requiring ongoing care.

The findings in relation to mental health highlight, perhaps more than any of the other findings, that both the participants and the society in which they live have changed over the period of the study. Discussion about mental health has become much more open in recent years, as has the acknowledgement of New Zealand's high suicide rate. Twenty-two percent had sought treatment for a mental health problem over the past year, up from 14% when they were 20. It is not possible to say if this is a function of greater incidence of mental health problems, greater self-awareness, or societal acceptance that mental health is an issue. Nineteen percent had thought about or attempted suicide once or more over the past year, with 2% thinking about it or attempting it quite often or more. This is much the same as at age 20.³

Around a third had experienced bullying or hassling at least once over the year, with a quarter being hassled over their body size or shape. However, fewer said they had felt pressured to do something they didn't want to over the past year than at age 20.

Alcohol and drug use were lower than at age 20; but binge drinking had occurred at least once over the past year for most 26-year-olds, and 45% had smoked marijuana at least once over that time.

Informality characterised a lot of the 26-year-olds' leisure activities, and it also characterised discussion and participation around social issues and politics. Most saw New Zealand as tolerant, and many as fair—but poverty seemed too high, and income differences too large for many. Views were divided about whether people their own age would do as well or better than their parents. They were not optimistic about the world or the environment. But most were optimistic about their own future, and many about their career path.

3 A very useful research-based discussion about youth suicide concludes that it “needs to be seen as the result of a state of *stressed, impaired, or underdeveloped self-control* in which mental health, emotional and brain development, alcohol, sociological, economic, and other factors interact to put some young people at greater risk”. (Gluckman, 2017, p. X).

Were these young people's experiences, resources, and views different given their qualification or income levels, and their gender? While there were some differences related to qualifications and income, it was gender that stood out.

Women placed more value on being with family, having children, being helpful or kind—and feeling good about how they looked. They took part in more music and making visual art. They read more widely. They used the internet more to keep in touch and share photos. They seemed to have closer and more supportive friendships. They were closer to their parents.

Twice as many men than women earned more than \$60,000 a year, and more men felt comfortable financially. Men placed more value on humour and interests beyond work, team sports, and working on mechanical things, and using the internet for gaming. More men than women were drinking, taking drugs, and being pressured to do something they didn't want to do.

1.

Introduction

When the Competent Learners study began in 1993, our participants were in their last months of early childhood education. We were funded by the Ministry of Education to follow them into school, to understand how differences in student “outcomes” were related to their earlier educational and family experiences and resources. We thought that “outcomes” related to education should include communication skills, self-management, curiosity, and perseverance as well as the traditional reading, writing, and mathematics. Over the next decade, we were funded to return to the children every 2 years, interviewing them, their parents, and their teachers, and assessing their competencies until they were 16. Most, but not all, were in school at age 16.⁴

By the time we returned when the Competent Learners participants were 20, many had moved on into tertiary study. Most were also employed, often to support their study. Employment for some was in occupations that they saw as providing them with a durable pathway into their future; for some related to their study, but for others it was in work that was available. A few were parents. We could see how their earlier experiences, views, and outcomes were related to what they were now doing and how they felt about life. We could see how some had a relatively smooth pathway, while others did not. We could identify some “indicators of risk” to making a satisfying pathway from school to early adulthood, and how these indicators are not singly determinative, but can compound each other (Wylie & Hodgen, 2011).

We were curious to know what happened next: What did the tertiary qualifications lead to? What role did the student loans many had taken out to get these qualifications play now? With paid work replacing study as a major framework for people’s daily lives, what happened to their values, interests, and relationships? Were they exploring or taking risks less than they had at age 20? What did young adulthood look like in New Zealand today?

Would the high expectations the 20-year-olds had of learning opportunities at work be met? Would they be taking opportunities to learn in their own time as well? What would they look back on and want to change if they could? What advice would they give to their younger self that could be useful to others?

Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2000) has characterised the period between 18 and 25 years old in current Western society as “emerging adulthood”, a “distinct period of the life course”, rather than a brief transition from formal education into long-term adult roles. These are “years of profound change and

⁴ Originally, the project was called Competent Children, but as we followed the participants over time, they were no longer children. The project publications can be found at <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/competent-children-competent-learners>

importance. During this time, many young people obtain the level of education and training that will provide the foundation for their incomes and occupational achievements for the remainder of their adult work lives ... It is for many people a time of frequent change as various possibilities in love, work, and worldviews are explored." (p. 469).

Adulthood was described by emerging adults as feeling responsible for themselves and independent rather than by the more traditional markers of the long-term commitments to job, partner, children that most would have embarked on at the same age a few generations back. Yet, as Cuervo and Wyn (2014) found in Australia, a sense of belonging and social relationships also matter.

We were fortunate to be funded for this final phase of the Competent Learners study, so we could return when the participants were 26, in 2014.

Contacting the participants was more complex for this phase, with many changes in the contact details given to us at age 20, when 401 took part.⁵ The online survey was completed by 323, and then 301 of these were interviewed. Nineteen who had followed a not "well lit" path from school (Patterson, 2010) and who had been interviewed at age 20 were interviewed again in more depth.

Fifty-seven percent of the age-26 survey and interview completers were women (at age 20, 52% of the participants were women). Ethnic proportions were similar to those at age 20. Most identified as Pākehā/ European (87%), with 7% identifying as Māori, and 2% each as Pacific or Asian. These are not representative of the New Zealand population, since the Competent Learners study drew its original sample from Wellington region early childhood education services in 1993.

Findings from this age-26 phase are described in three reports from the age-26 phase.

*Pathways, Labour Market Experiences, and Learning at Work and Beyond at Age 26*⁶ shows the "braided river" of different pathways young people took from age 16 to age 26, investigates the role of qualifications in relation to work, and unpacks the continued importance of learning in and out of work.

*Learning, Working, and Building a Sense of Belonging in Emergent Adulthood*⁷ gives us insights into the options and choices made by 19 young people whose path from school to age 20 was less "well lit".

This report describes what mattered to the young people, how they spent their time, and the changes in their relationships since they were 20. It also shows that gender differences were more evident than differences related to a person's highest qualification level or current income.

This report starts with describing what mattered most to the 26-year-olds. Relationships are important. Section 3 focuses on relationships: partners, children, friendships, and their birth and wider family. Living arrangements and housing costs follow in Section 4. Section 5 looks at their financial situation. Section 6 shows how they used their leisure time. Section 7 describes the 26-year-olds' health and wellbeing. Section 8 gives their views of New Zealand and the world. Some key aspects are commented on in the conclusion.

5 The Competent Learners study began with 307 children and full material collected from the children, their parents, and teachers, coupled with ratings of their early childhood education (ECE) service quality, and another 767 children in the "light" survey, for whom we had less material, from their parents and ECE services. At age 8, when it was clearer that the study would continue, we drew some of these 767 children into the full sample to increase its size, giving a total of 523 children.

6 weblink to come

7 Web link to come

2.

What is important to 26-year-olds?

To see what was most important to the young people, we asked them about a set of 22 values ranging through aspects of work, ways they related to others, ways they took part in the world, and their health. We also asked them about their goals. Differences related to gender, income, and qualification levels are reported.

Health, relationships, and work matter most

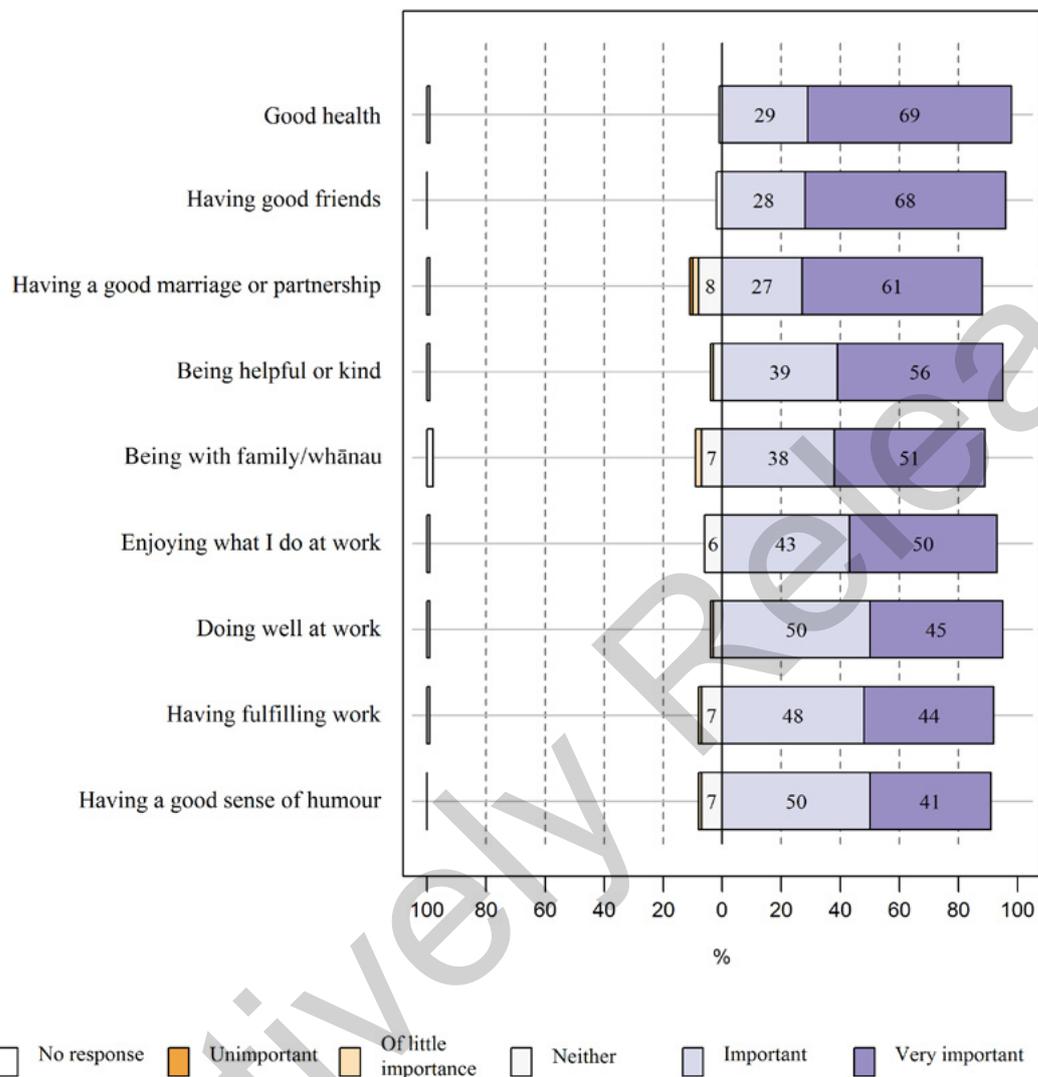
Good health, good relationships, being helpful or kind (part of sustaining relationships), and work were the things that the 26-year-olds thought were most important of the aspects of living that we asked about. Having a good sense of humour was also important.

Figure 1 gives the picture of the things that were rated as very important by more than 40% of the young people.

Most of these items were also ones we had asked at age 20, but with broader wording for the work-related items to include study, since that was the main activity for many of the 20-year-olds. The overall picture of what was important for this group was much the same at age 26 as at age 20.

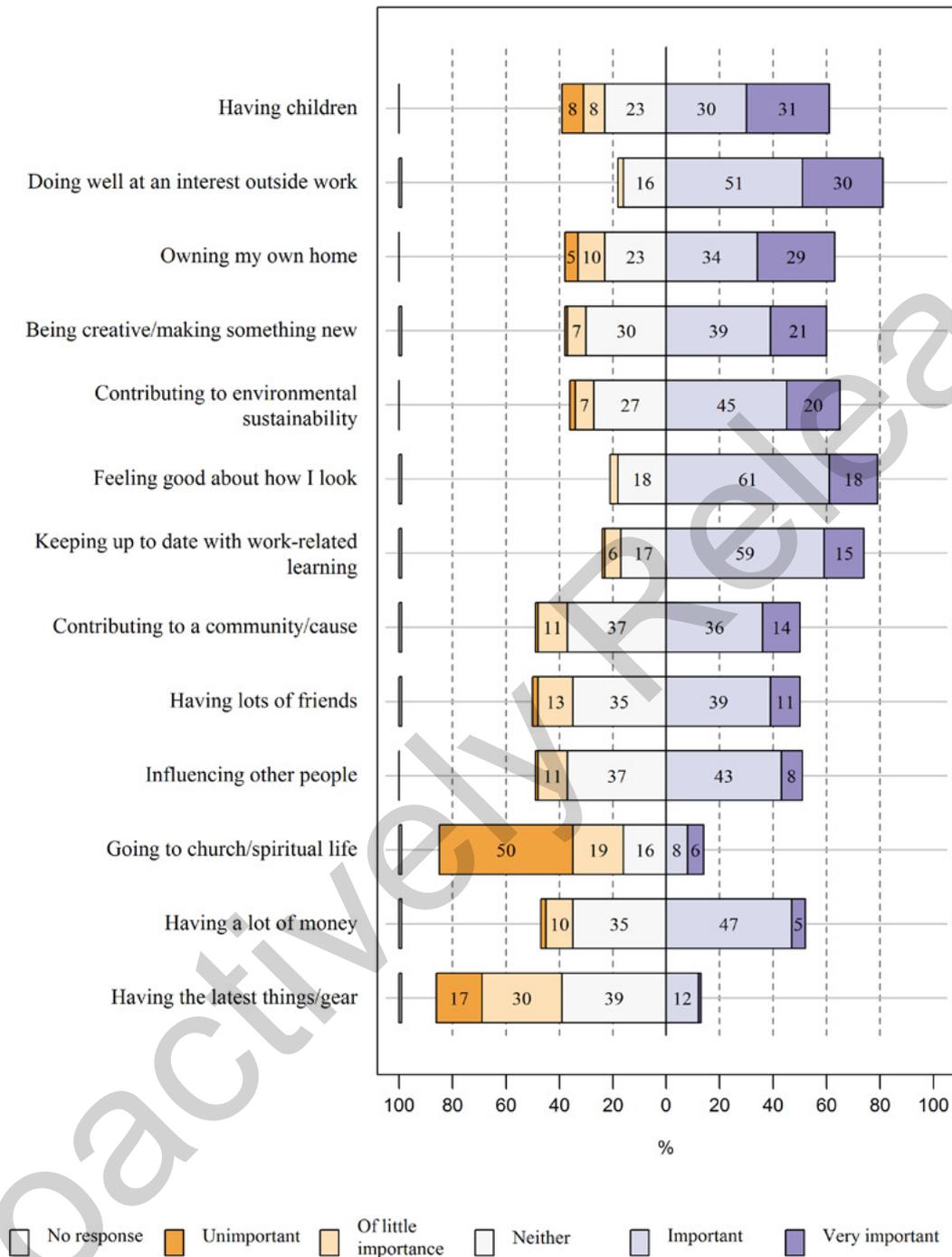
2. What is important to 26-year-olds?

FIGURE 1 Things that mattered most at age 26 (n = 323)



Other things were often important too, but for less than 40% of the 26-year-olds. Having children was very important to 31%. Doing well at an interest outside work and owning their own home were also very important to around 30%. While friendships were very important to most of the 26-year-olds, it was not so important to them to have lots of friends. They were slightly less interested than at age 20 in having the latest things or gear. Contributing to a community or cause was of somewhat more interest at age 26 than at age 20. Figure 2 shows the things that were less commonly important.

FIGURE 2 Other things that matter at age 26 (n = 323)



We also asked how often people had taken action about something that concerned them over the past year—which could be personal, or to do with situations they saw others in, or wider issues. All but 14% had acted in response to a concern: 22% quite often or lots of times; 52% sometimes; and 11%, once. This was much the same pattern we saw for this group at age 20.

Differences related to gender

Table 1 shows differences between young women and men in what they regard as very important, that indicate the continuation of some traditional associations between gender and role or meaning. Being helpful or kind, being with family or whānau, having children, and feeling good about how they looked were very important to around twice the proportion of young women than men. Young men placed more importance than young women on doing well at interests outside work, and having a good sense of humour.

TABLE 1 Gender differences in very important values

Very important value	Young women (n = 184) %	Young men (n = 139) %
Being helpful or kind	65	44
Being with family/whānau	64	34
Having children	39	25
Having a good sense of humour	35	50
Owning my own home	32	25
Feeling good about how I look	23	10
Doing well at an interest outside work	21	42

It is interesting also to see gender differences in how the 42% who had some “gap time” between age 20 and age 26 spent that time. While men and women were just as likely to have taken this time out from what they saw as their main journey, young men were more likely to travel (71%, compared with 51% of women), chill out (45%, compared with 16% of women), or do paid work (29%, compared with 16% of women). Young women were more likely to look after family (32%, compared with 2% of men) or do voluntary work (22%, compared with 2% of men).

Differences related to qualifications

What mattered to young people was largely unrelated to their highest qualification level, with some exceptions:

- Being creative or making something new was very important or important for 69% of those with a degree or level 4–6 certificate/diploma, compared with 47% of those with level 1–3 certificates, NCEA, or no qualification.
- Having fulfilling work was most important to those with post-Bachelor’s degree qualifications (62% rated this very important, decreasing in relation to qualification levels to 40% of those with a level 4–6 certificate/diploma, and 23% of those with no qualification).
- Keeping up to date with work-related learning mattered least to those who had no qualification, and to those who had a level 1–3 certificate as their highest qualification (46% and 42% respectively rated this as of little or no importance to them, compared with 22% of others).
- Owning their own home was least important to those with either the highest or lowest qualification levels. Twenty-eight percent of those whose highest qualification was a post-Bachelor’s degree university qualification thought that owning their own home was of little or no importance, as did 31% of those whose highest qualification was a level 1–3 certificate. Only 11% of those with qualifications in between thought home ownership was of little or no importance to them.

- Having children was more important to those without a qualification, or whose highest qualification was NCEA or a level 1–3 certificate (43% of this group thought it very important, compared with 23% of those with a level 4–6 qualification, 26% of those with Bachelor’s degrees or diploma-level equivalents, and 12% of those with post-Bachelor’s degrees).

The links we see here between what is important to someone and their qualification level could reflect a range of things: the work and income situations open to those with different qualification credentials, the interests and confidence that can be gained through ongoing formal learning, or the reasons that led individuals to ongoing formal learning that gave them a credential.

Differences related to income level

Income levels were largely unrelated to what young people valued. The two exceptions were owning their own home (39% of those earning more than \$60,000 a year saw this as very important, compared with 20% of those earning \$30,000 a year or less), perhaps reflecting what seemed achievable given the soaring cost of home ownership; and contributing to environmental sustainability (32% of those earning \$30,000 a year or less saw this as very important, compared with 15% of those earning more than this).

Most have definite goals for the next 3 years

At age 20, 87% of those who took part in the study at age 26 had some definite goals for the next 3 years, and 79% of those with goals had plans to achieve them. At age 26, most thought it was very important (64%) or important (25%) for people their age to have goals, a shift up from age 20 (51% and 35%, respectively). Eighty-one percent had some definite goal(s), and 89% of those with definite goals had plans to achieve them—somewhat higher than at age 20.

Table 2 compares the areas where goals were held at age 20 and age 26. Work has overtaken study as the prime focus for many. Financial and family goals have increased by a large amount, and travel goals to a lesser extent. The proportion of 26-year-olds with lifestyle-related, friendship or partner-related goals was double that at age 20.

TABLE 2 Goals at age 20 and age 26 (for those who have them)

Goal area	Age 20 (n = 249) %	Age 26 (n = 244) %
Work	42	71
Travel	33	42
Financial	14	34
Study	70	30
Family	6	26
Living arrangements	12	15
Lifestyle	5	11
Friends	4	7
Activities outside work or study	10	7
Partner	2	5

Other goals for 26-year-olds included work–life balance (3%), and 1% each mentioned a goal around voluntary work or people other than family, friends, or partner.

Were these broad areas of goals related to what people thought was important to them? Cross-tabulation showed no associations.

Gender, qualifications, and income differences

The only difference in goals related to gender was that more men cited goals to do with lifestyle (18%, compared with 6% of women). Qualification levels were unrelated to goals—either having them, or their nature. However, 26% of those with the highest qualification level, a post-Bachelor’s degree university qualification, were either neutral about the importance of having goals, or thought they were unimportant.

Income levels were not associated with goals other than financial. Ten percent of those with annual incomes less than \$20,000 had financial goals, increasing to 21% of those with annual incomes between \$20,000 and \$30,000, and 41% of those with annual incomes over \$30,000.

3.

Relationships

Family and friends have always been important to most of the Competent Learners cohort. They continued to play significant parts in their lives at age 26. Closest friends often included friends from school. This may have been easier given that many stayed in the same region, or returned to it after study, jobs elsewhere, or travel. What has developed since age 20 is the growth in intimate relationships, and the addition of children.

Growth in intimate relationships

At age 20, 11% were living with a partner. By age 26, many more were living with an intimate partner: 40% in total. Thirty-four percent lived in a de facto relationship, and 6% were married or in a civil union (6%). Another 20% were in a relationship without living together. More men described themselves as in a relationship and living separately (28%, compared with 15% of women), and more women described themselves as single (45%, compared with 31% of men).⁸

Over half those who were married or in a de facto relationship had been with their partner for more than 4 years (56% of this group), and another 17%, for the past 3 years. Thus many of these relationships were formed when people were in their early twenties.

Children have entered the picture for some

Sixteen percent of the 26-year-olds had children: 21% of the women, and 9% of the men. Half of these had one child, 35% had two, 4% had three children, and one person had four children. Four of those with children did not say how many they had.

The median age for the first child was 4 years, with a range from less than a month old, to 10 years old. Most parents had responsibility for their child, with 7% sharing the responsibility with another household member. All but one of the mothers lived with their child or children, but just over half the fathers. Sixty percent of those with a child were married, in a civil union, or de facto relationship.

Half the mothers were in paid work, compared with 85% of other women. Just over half the mothers who worked were in full-time jobs. More mothers described themselves as very happy (56%, compared with 27% of other women).

⁸ In response to this interview question: "What is your relationship status?"

School friendships remain important

Friends made at school were still the main source of friends, and of closest friends at age 26—even more so than at age 20. Table 3 also shows that work was a key source of friendship, as were friends made through family or other friendships. While online activity is common (see Figure 12), it did not make as much contribution to the creation of new relationships as other realms of life where people are spending time together in activities such as work, study, pursuing interests, or living in the same space.

TABLE 3 Friendship sources (n = 323)

How friends were met	Friends include %	Closest friends include %
At school ⁹	88	76
At work	82	44
Through friend or family	78	43
Shared accommodation	63	39
Study after school	60	40
Interests outside work	57	27
Online	17	7

Friendships appear to be stabilising. New friends were common: 25% had made a new friend lots of times over the past year, 28% quite often, and 37% sometimes. However, fewer were making new friends a lot of times than at age 20 (40%). Half had also lost one or more friends over the past year. This is less than the 64% who had lost one or more friend at age 20.

The value of informal activity with friends

Spending time in each other's company, talking, and sharing what they watched or did in informal ways characterised most 26-year-olds' friendships, as shown in Table 4.

⁹ At age 20, 60% of the respondents said that their closest friends had come from school.

TABLE 4 Spending time with friends (*n* = 323)

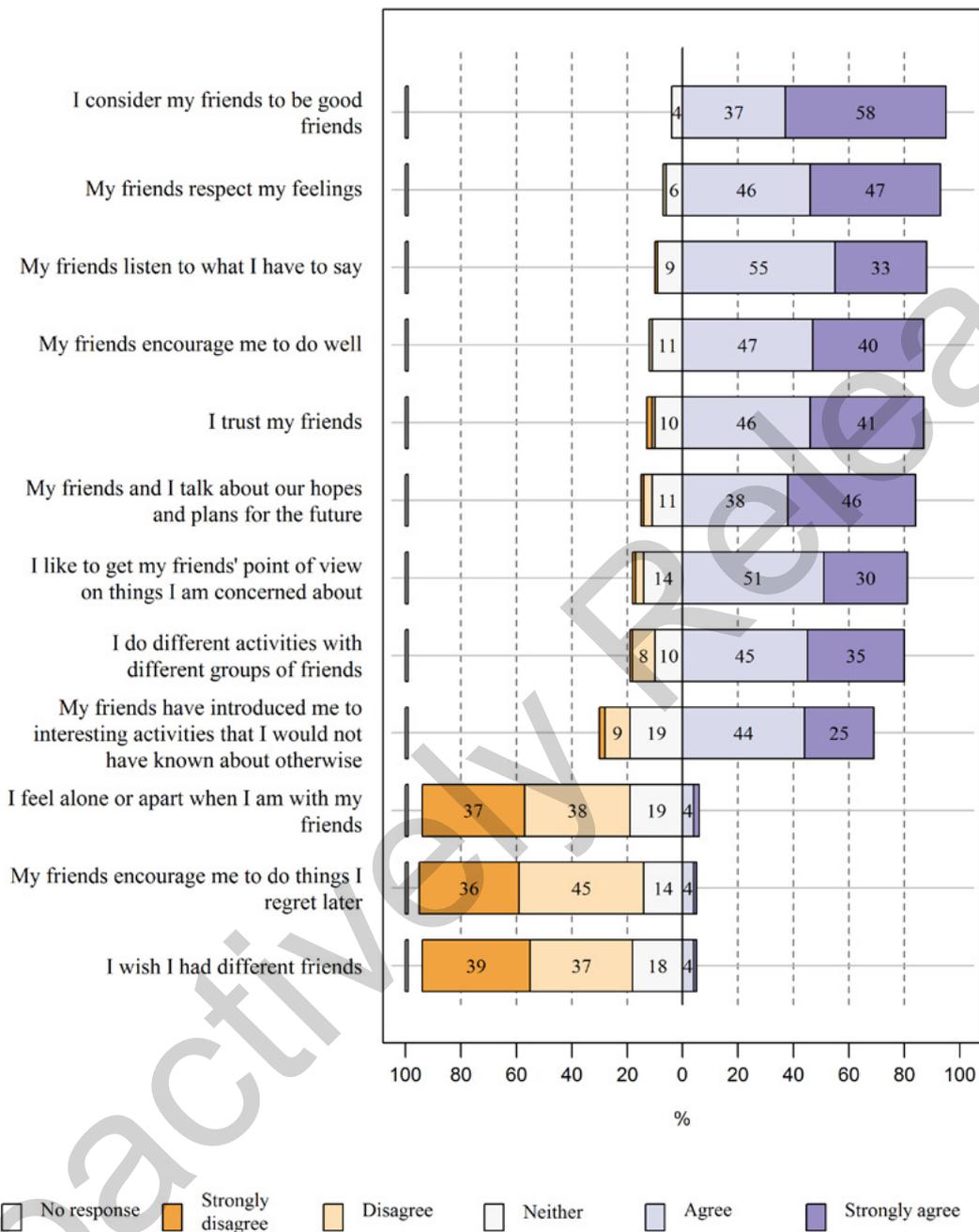
Activity	%
Going out for entertainment (e.g., movies, meals, bands, pubs/bars, parties)	89
Hanging out with no fixed plan	81
Visiting each other / having meals at each other's places	77
Texting / talking over phone / skypeing	70
Watching TV / DVDs / online streamed material	58
Physical activity / exercise	48
Holidays	44
Work	38
Hobbies	35
Shopping	34
Organised sports	28
Playing card/board games	26
Playing computer/online games	16
Church/spiritual events	7
Community/volunteer work	7
Take part in music / drama / dance performances	5

Friendships provide support and offer possibilities

Most of the 26-year-olds had good friendships, where they were listened to, encouraged to do well, and given ideas. Friends were also the path to new activities of interest for many, and most did some different things with different friends. Figure 3 has the details. The patterns here are much the same as they were at age 20.

3. Relationships

FIGURE 3 26-year-olds' views of their friendships (n = 323)



Gender differences

Table 5 shows gender differences in six of the 16 activities we asked about. Women were more likely to spend unorganised time with each other, or shop. Men spent more time doing things with their friends in structured activities and hobbies.

TABLE 5 **Activities with friends—gender differences**

Activity	Young women (<i>n</i> = 184) %	Young men (<i>n</i> = 139) %
Visit them at home	86	65
Text/phone/skype	81	55
Shopping	54	8
Hobbies	27	47
Organised sport	14	46
Play computer games	3	34

Young men and women alike associated their friendships with trust, and did not on the whole want different friends. They had similar experiences of their friends introducing them to activities they would not have known about—expanding their world—but young women seemed to have closer and more supportive friendships, as shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6 **Friendships and gender differences**

View of friends—strongly agree	Young women (<i>n</i> = 184) %	Young men (<i>n</i> = 139) %
I consider my friends to be good friends	64	50
My friends and I talk about our hopes and plans for the future	57	32
My friends respect my feelings	55	36
My friends encourage me to do well	51	25
My friends listen to what I have to say	42	22
I like to get my friends' point of view on things I am concerned about	36	22
My friends encourage me to do things I regret later	10	30

Young women and men were similar in how they had met their friends, with the exception that more young men had met friends through interests outside work (67%, compared with 50% of young women); recall that doing well at an interest outside work was more important to young men than young women. However, there was no gender differences in how they had met their closest friends.

Qualification differences

The few young people without qualifications were more likely than others to go to church with their friends, and less likely to go out or watch TV with them. Not surprisingly, they were least likely to have friends they had met while studying (though a quarter had), and they counted these among their closest friends.

Income differences

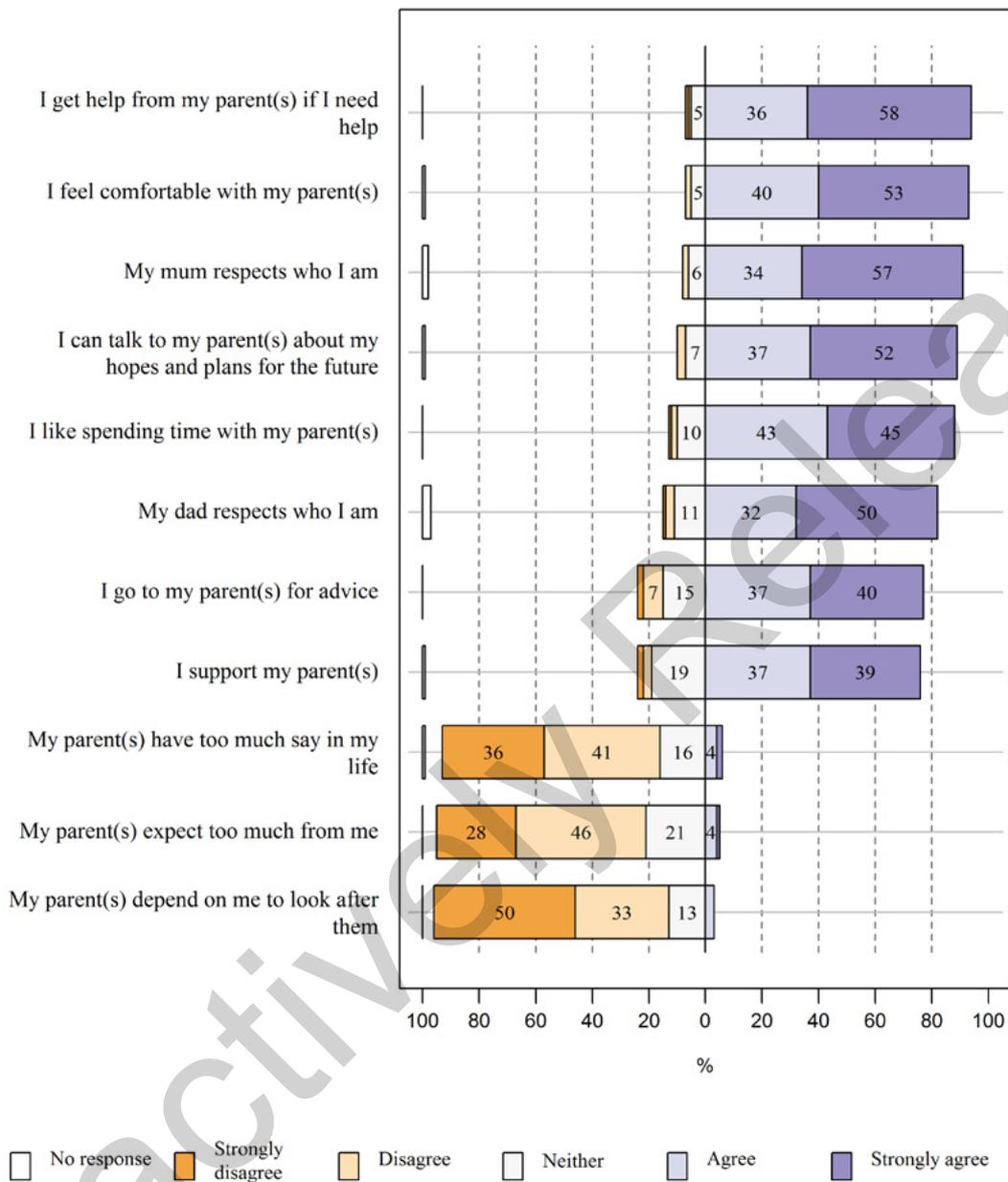
Holidays with friends were linked to income, with those earning up to \$30,000 a year reporting this less than others (31%, compared with 51% of those earning more).

Sources of friends showed two income related differences: more of those who earned \$20,000 a year or less reported meeting them during post-school formal study (84%, compared with 56% of others), and 73% said some of their closest friends came from this source. Work was less a source of friends for those earning \$30,000 or less (68%, compared with 89% of those earning more). However, close friends were just as likely to have come from work for those with low incomes as high.

Relationships with parents are largely comfortable

At age 20, just under 60% lived with their birth families. By 26, only 19% did so. Most of the cohort at age 26 had good relations with their parents—they were comfortable with them, felt respected by them, and could talk with them. Figure 4 shows that about half strongly agreed with the items we asked. Only a few indicated problematic relations, though between 13% and 21% gave neutral answers in relation to parental expectations and whether they would seek advice from their parents. The overall picture is much the same as it was when they were 20.

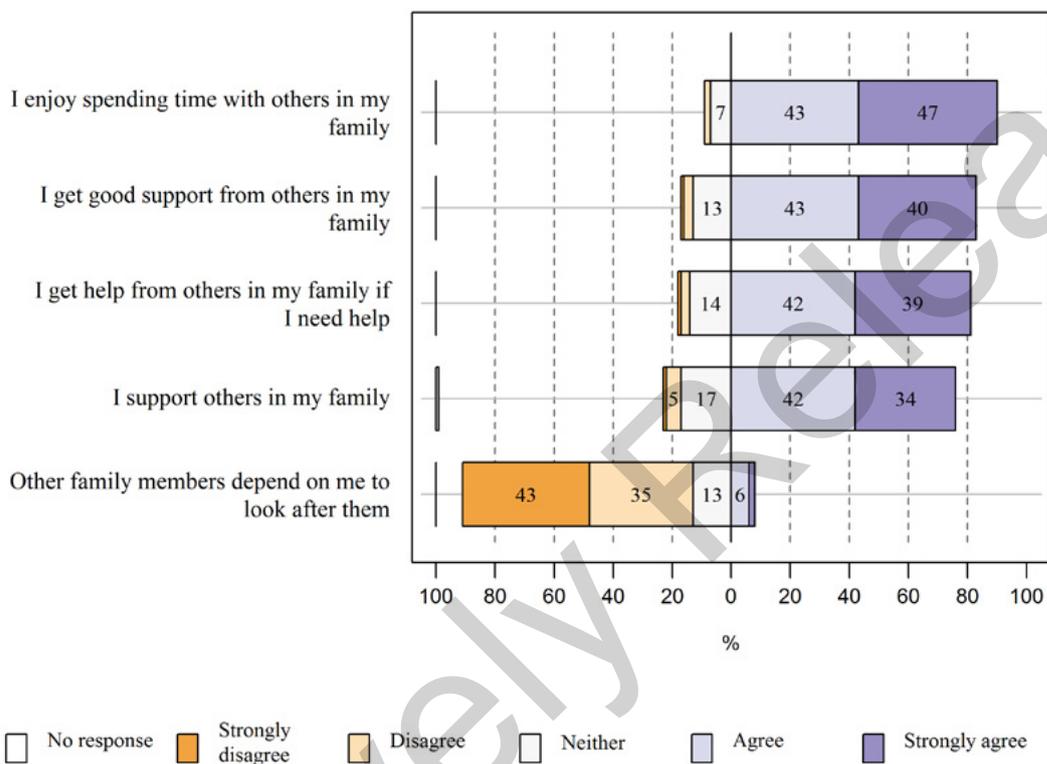
FIGURE 4 26-year-olds' relationships with their parents (n = 323)



Relations with others in the family or whānau are generally supportive

Most of the 26-year-olds also had good relations with other family members. Figure 5 shows that they felt supported, and themselves gave support, to a slightly lesser extent. Most enjoyed spending time with other family members. A few had family reliant on them to support them.

FIGURE 5 Relations with family or whānau (n = 323)



Gender differences

Young men and women were equally likely to feel respected by their parents, but Table 7 shows that more young women were closer to their parents. This fits with young women's somewhat stronger interest in family, and emphasis on communication in their friendships also.

TABLE 7 Relationships with parents and gender differences

Strongly agree	Young women (n = 184) %	Young men (n = 139) %
I get help from my parent(s) if I need help	66	48
I feel comfortable with my parent(s)	61	42
I can talk to my parent(s) about my hopes and plans for the future	58	44
I like spending time with my parent(s)	55	31
I go to my parents for advice	45	33

A similar pattern comes through when we look at relationships with others in the family. Table 8 shows that young women were more likely to enjoy their company, and feel supported by them.

TABLE 8 Relationships with others in the family or whānau and gender differences

Strongly agree	Young women (n = 184) %	Young men (n = 139) %
I enjoy spending time with others in my family	57	35
I get good support from others in my family	46	32
I get help from others in my family if I need help	46	30

Qualification differences

Only one difference related to qualification levels was evident. Just under half the young people who had no qualifications said their parents depended on them to look after them (compared with 4% overall), and just under half also had other family members dependent on them (8%).

Income differences

Just one aspect of relationships with parents showed an association with income. Fewer of the highest income earners (over \$60,000) strongly agreed that they felt comfortable with their parents (36%, compared with 57% of others).

4.

Living arrangements and housing costs

It was interesting to see how many of the Competent Learners cohort were living in the Wellington region when we interviewed them at age 26. Most were renting, and most satisfied with their accommodation. Accommodation costs when we interviewed them in 2014 were taking more than a quarter of their income for just over half. While that seems substantial, I suspect that the picture of costs and satisfaction would look worse for many now, after the Wellington housing market has become tighter and more expensive.

Many came back to or remained in the Wellington region

Around two-thirds of the cohort lived in the Wellington region, where around 80% had been living when they were 20, and where many had undertaken post-school study.

Around a fifth of the young people ($n = 67$) were living overseas when we interviewed them. Half were in Australia ($n = 33$), a quarter in the UK ($n = 17$), and the rest in Europe, North America, Asia, South America, or travelling between countries.

They mostly lived in urban areas: 19% in the inner city, 39% in inner suburbs, and 26% in outer suburbs. A few lived in rural areas (4%), small towns (5%), or a provincial city (4%).

All but 5% lived with other people: most commonly flatmates or their partner, and sometimes with both their partner and flatmates. Twenty-one percent lived with friends, 19% with parents, 17% with other relatives or whānau. Fourteen percent lived with their own children, and 2% mentioned others' children. Most (70%) had argued or fought with another household member at least once over the past year.

Few were in their own home (11%, all with a mortgage). The rest were renting, or living with parents, and 3% had accommodation with their job.

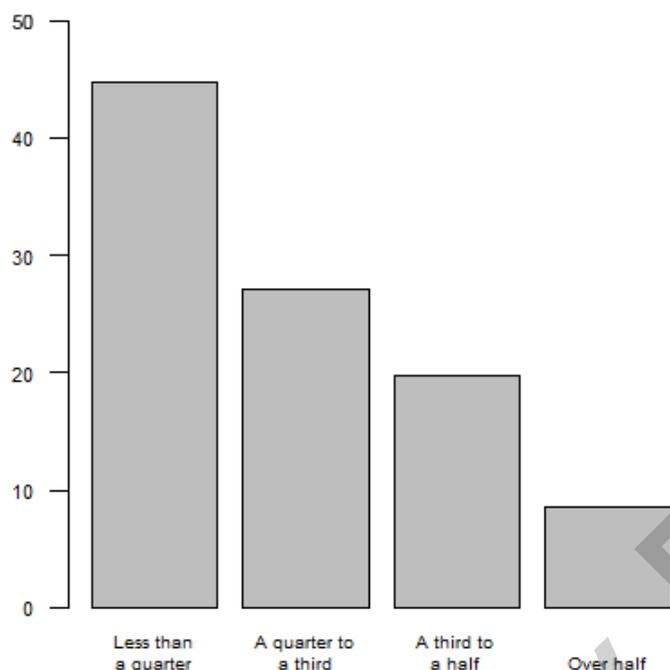
Most were satisfied with their present accommodation: 43% were very satisfied, and 38% satisfied. Dissatisfaction was highest among those with the least income.

More of those with children were in their own home (17%, compared with 10% of those without children), and they were paying a higher proportion of their after-tax income on housing (45% paid a third or more of their after-tax income, compared with 26% of those without children). Their satisfaction with their housing was similar to those without children.

Housing costs took more than a quarter of their income for many

Figure 6 shows that around 60% were paying more than a quarter of their after-tax income for housing.

FIGURE 6 Proportion of after-tax income spent on housing



Not surprisingly, more of the low earners were paying more than a third of their income for housing: 55% of those earning up to \$30,000 a year, compared with 6% of those earning at least \$60,000 a year.

Housing costs for around half of the married or de facto couples were being met equally by both partners. In other couples, one partner was paying more than half.

5.

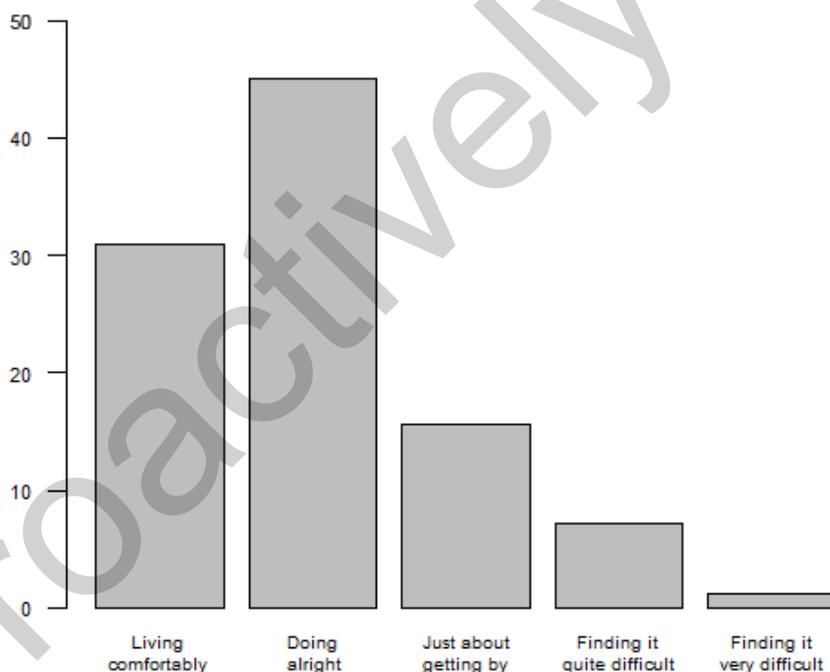
Financial situation

We wanted to get a broad picture of how this group of 26-year-olds were faring financially, including their income levels, savings, and debt, particularly student loans.

Most felt they were doing alright financially

Three-quarters said they were doing alright financially, or were living comfortably, as shown in Figure 7.

FIGURE 7 Financial health (n = 323)



Pre-tax annual income for the 2013–14 tax year for the 26-year-olds ranged from zero (2%) to over \$100,000 (2%), as shown in Table 9.¹⁰ Over half the 26-year-olds had pre-tax incomes of \$40,000 or more. This was somewhat more than the national 2013 Census figure for the age group 25–30. This may be because this group has somewhat higher qualifications as a whole, and we found that most of those without qualifications earned less than \$40,000 a year. Possibly also the higher income level for this group reflects higher incomes earned by those working overseas.

TABLE 9 Pre-tax annual income 2013–14 tax year (*n* = 309)

Pre-tax annual income	%
\$20,000 or less	17
\$20,001–\$30,000	11
\$30,001–\$40,000	18
\$40,001–\$60,000	31
\$60,001+	19

Most were able to save—but also carried debt

Most of the 26-year-olds were not living day-to-day: 84% had some savings, most often in the form of a bank account they tried not to use (70%) and KiwiSaver (69%). They were saving in every income bracket, ranging from 75% of those with annual incomes of \$20,000 or less, to 95% of those with annual incomes of \$60,000 or more, who were most able to save regularly (79% did so).

Twenty-nine percent were saving short term for a particular item. Money had also gone into term deposits for 14%, and a retirement fund for 6%. Just over half saved on a regular basis (56%). Eleven percent said they saved only when they needed to, and 15% said that they did not have enough money to save.

Sixteen percent said they found it hard to control their spending in order to save. Having difficulty controlling spending was not related to the amount of money they earned.

Debt was also common: only 20% did not owe money on either student loans or other debt, 45% owed money other than on a student loan (for example, on a credit card or overdraft), and 26% owed money on both a student loan and other debt.

How did the 26-year-olds feel about the amount of money they owed other than their student loan? Views were divided, with 42% of those who owed money comfortable about the money they owed, 16% neutral, and 37% uncomfortable with how much they owed.

When we asked the young people to rate how well they were managing financially, only 35% of those who had debt said they were living comfortably, compared with 63% of those with no debts. However, the same pattern did not show when we looked at having a student loan: those with one were just as likely to say they were living comfortably as those without one.

¹⁰ Information on incomes is from 309 of the young people. Five did not answer this question, and nine ticked the option “I’d rather not say”.

Just over half owed money on student loans

Seventy-three percent of the 26-year-olds had had or currently had a student loan, ranging from 39% of those who had no qualification, to 90% of those with a post-Bachelor's degree qualification.

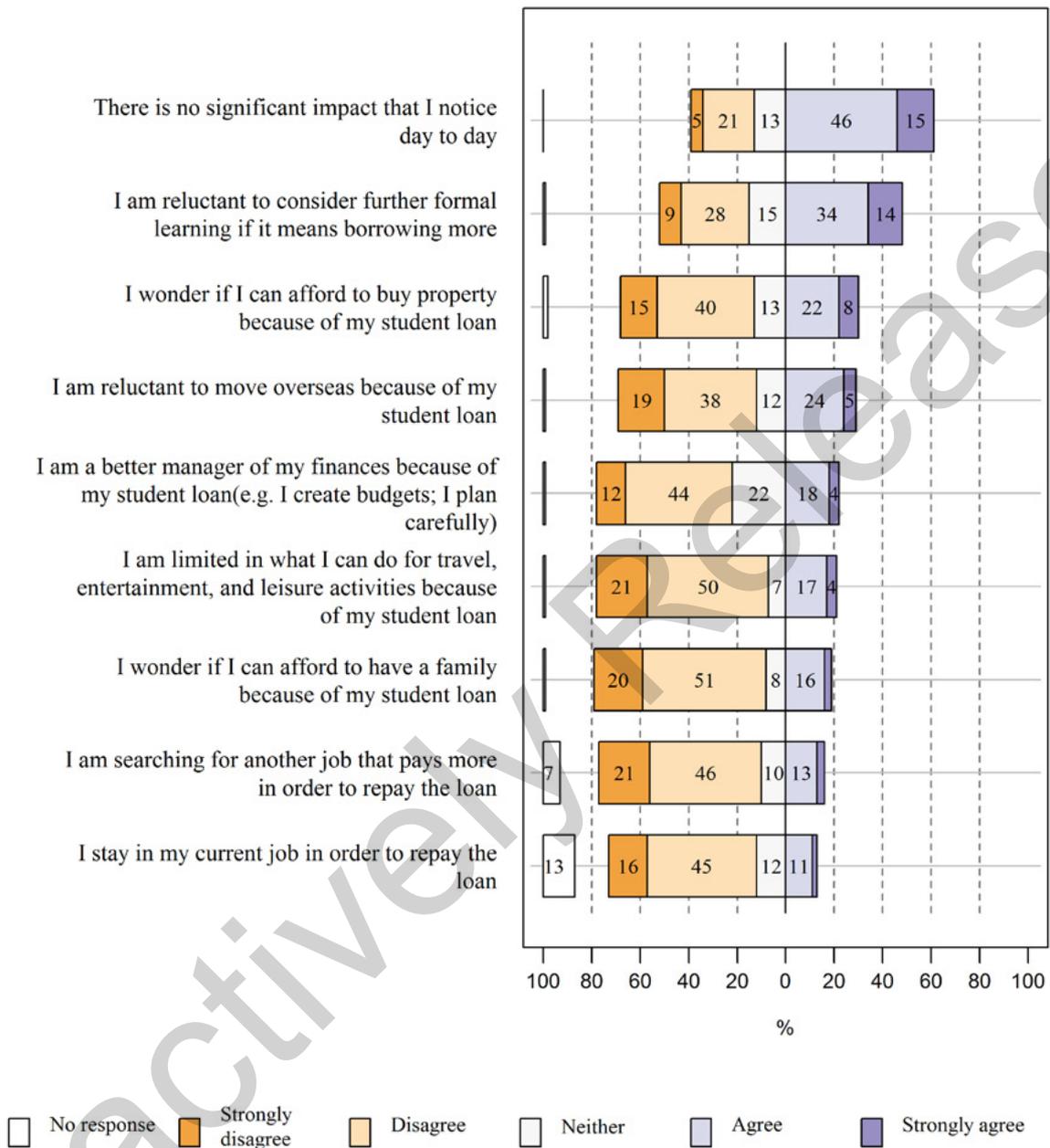
Fifty-eight percent owed money on their student loan, ranging from 89% of those with annual incomes of less than \$20,000, to 67% of those with annual incomes of over \$60,000. Close to half owed \$20,000 or less, 36% owed between \$20,000 and \$40,000, and 21% owed more than \$40,000. Young people on low incomes were just as likely as those on high incomes to owe \$30,000 or more.

On the whole, the young people were pretty sanguine about their student loans (Figure 8). But owing this money did have a negative impact on their thinking about any further formal learning (close to half of the young people), moving overseas (close to a third), buying property (close to a third), having a family (around a fifth), and leisure activities (around a fifth of the young people). So student loan debt does have an impact on openness to further formal learning, with implications for work and career options.

Interestingly, it was only in relation to property ownership that the larger the amount owed, the more likely it was that young people saw that the loan might have an impact (24% of those who owed up to \$10,000 wondered about this, rising to 55% of those who owed more than \$50,000).

Also of interest is that most did not think that having their student loan had helped them manage their finances better.

FIGURE 8 Impacts of owing money on a student loan (n = 174)



Gender differences

More young men earned \$60,000 a year or more (27%), compared with 15% of the young women who were not mothers, and 6% of those who were mothers. Thirty-nine percent of the young men felt comfortable financially, compared with 28% of the young women who were not mothers, and 8% who were mothers.

Wondering if they could afford to buy property because of their student loan occurred somewhat more for young women (34%) than young men (25%).

While similar proportions of mothers and other women owed money on student loans, mothers were more likely to also have other debt (64%, compared with 44% of other women).

Qualification differences

Only 8% of the young people without a qualification said they were living comfortably, compared with 31% overall. A few of this group still owed money on a student loan, and 46% had no money saved. However, this small group without qualifications spanned the income range, with 15% earning more than \$60,000.

The higher the qualification level, the less other debt existed: 81% of those with a level 1–3 certificate had debt other than their student loan, falling to 26% of those with a post-Bachelor's qualification. This may simply indicate longer access to student loans.

Income differences

Few young people earning \$40,000 or less a year felt they were in a comfortable financial position (11%, compared with 39% of those earning \$40,001–\$60,000, and 68% of those earning \$60,001 or more a year).

Not surprisingly, having savings increased with income, from 75% of those on the lowest incomes, to 95% of those in the highest incomes. The latter group had more young people with retirement savings (14%). Saving on a regular basis rose from 41% of those on the lowest incomes, to 79% of those on the highest incomes.

Money owed on student loans was also linked to current income levels: 80% of those with the lowest income owed money on a student loan, decreasing to 47% of those with the highest income.

6.

The use of leisure time

The Competent Learners study focus on learning has always included an interest in how children, then young people, spend their leisure time. Since reading is often both a route to accessing knowledge and skills as well as expanding one's world, we have also asked questions about reading in each phase of the study. The world became increasingly digital as the Competent Learners cohort grew up, so we have included questions about digital use. This section describes the main things the 26-year-olds did in their own time, whether they enjoyed reading and what they read, and how they used the internet.

Leisure time is mostly used in informal pursuits

Exercise and music that were in their own control, eating and drinking out, and exercise with others were the most frequent activities among the Competent Learners cohort at age 26, shown in Figure 9.

FIGURE 9 Most frequent leisure activities (n = 323)

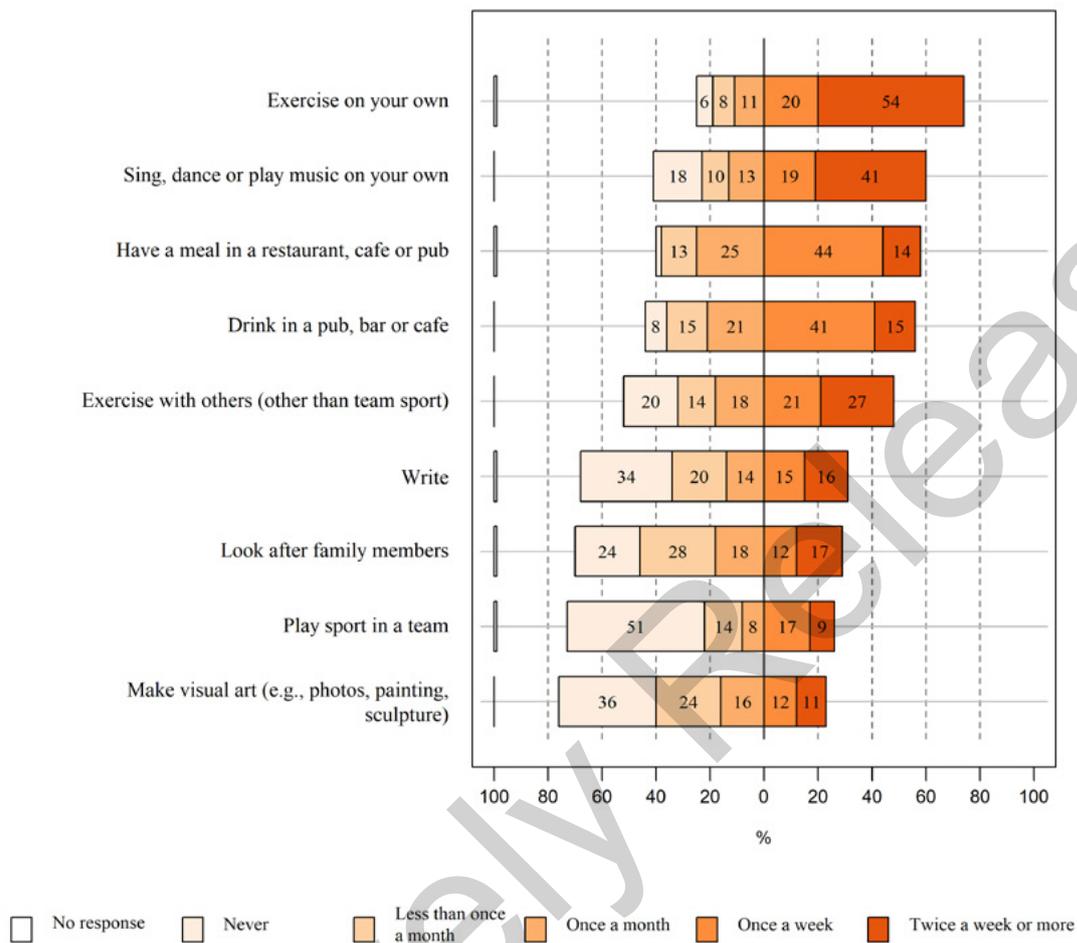
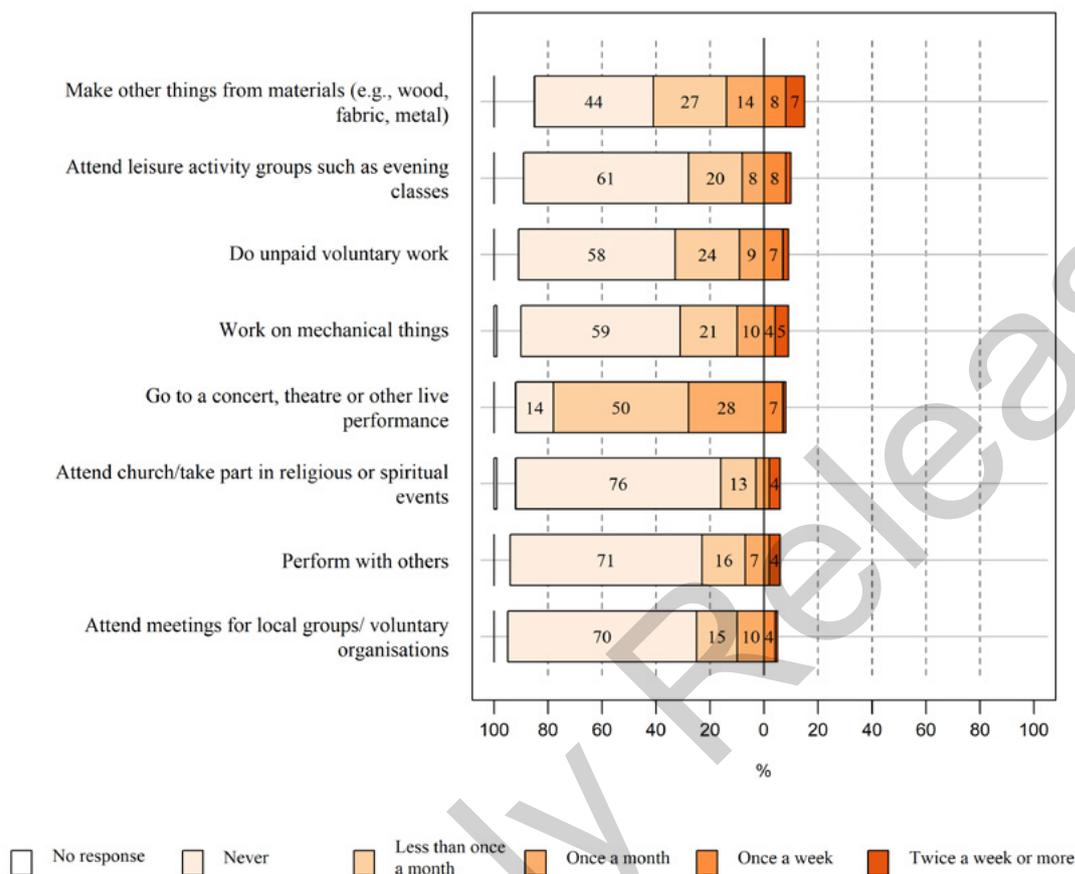


Figure 10 shows that structured activities were less common. In terms of creative activity, writing and visual art occurred more often than working on mechanical things or making things from wood, fabric, or metal—this may reflect the higher proportion of women responding to the survey at age 26.

FIGURE 10 Less frequent leisure activities (n = 323)



Only a fifth felt they had never been bored or had nothing to do over the past year. Fifty-three percent had felt they had nothing to do sometimes over the past year, and 18%, sometimes or quite often. This is much the same picture as at age 20.

Differences related to gender

Young women and men showed some differences in their use of leisure time that also indicate the continuation of some traditional associations with gender, though some convergence also in relation to looking after family members. Table 10 shows these differences, looking at overall participation including twice a week or more to less than once a month.

Young men took part in team sports; young women exercised more on their own, or with others. Mechanical things were more likely to interest young men, and music and the visual arts, young women. We asked them how often they took part in activities, and Table 10 below reports totals of all those who said they did the activity.

TABLE 10 Gender differences in leisure time use over the past year

Participation in activity	Young women (n = 184) %	Young men (n = 139) %
Sing, dance, or play music on your own	91	57
Exercise with others	84	74
Look after family members	80	71
Make visual art	74	50
Exercise on my own	43	30
Play sport in a team	34	65
Work on mechanical things	30	55
Perform with others	25	34

Differences related to qualification levels

There were no differences in what the young people did in their own time.

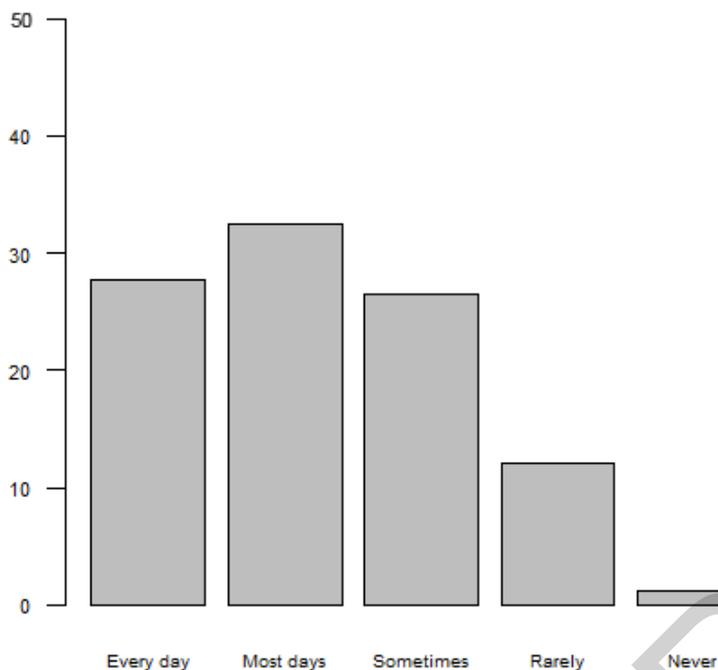
Differences related to income levels

The highest-paid had the highest rates of exercising on their own twice a week or more (71%, compared with 50% of those earning \$60,000 or less a year). They also had the highest rate of drinking in a pub, bar, or café—only 8% did this less than once a month, compared with 14% of those earning \$30,000–\$40,000 a year, and 31% of those earning less than \$40,000 a year. A similar pattern was evident in relation to having a meal in a restaurant, café, or pub.

Reading for enjoyment was still common

Low levels of reading enjoyment have been a key indicator of risk of not achieving school qualifications that we have found in previous phases of the Competent Learners study. At age 20 we asked about reading in terms of enjoyment alone: 36% strongly agreed, and 29% agreed that they enjoyed reading. We asked the 26-year-olds about the frequency of their reading for their own enjoyment or interest. Figure 11 shows the spread, with 61% saying they read for enjoyment or interest most days or every day.

FIGURE 11 Frequency of reading for enjoyment or interest (n = 323)



Those who hadn't enjoyed reading between the ages of 8 to 14 mostly read only sometimes or rarely—as did a third of those who had enjoyed reading over those earlier years.

Reading material covered a wide range (see Table 11 below). Very few of the cohort read only one genre for enjoyment or interest. On average, they enjoyed around six kinds of written material. Those who enjoyed a wide range of reading material were more likely to read every day (39% of those who enjoyed at least six different kinds of material read daily, compared with 23% of those who enjoyed four to six kinds, and 11% who enjoyed one to three kinds of reading material).

Fiction and news were most popular, followed by short pieces—in blogs or magazines—relating to individual interests. Reading about current affairs and politics was reported by only a fifth.

TABLE 11 Reading genres enjoyed at age 26 (n = 323)

Genre	%
General fiction	57
News	57
Blogs about my interests	47
Magazines about my interests	44
General non-fiction	41
Biographies	32
Fantasy fiction	30
History	30
Science	30
Detective/crime fiction	29
Magazines about people	28
Science fiction	25
Romance	24
Adventure/action fiction	24
Blogs about current affairs	23
Short stories	22
Travel accounts	22
Magazines about current affairs	22
Politics	21
Blogs about people	20
Urban fiction	8

Gender differences in reading

Young women and men had similar patterns of how frequently they read for interest or enjoyment.

Women generally had a wider range of reading: 51% read at least six different genres or topics, compared with 32% of men. Differences in what they read for enjoyment are shown in Table 12. Science material is the only genre enjoyed by more men than women.

TABLE 12 Genres read for enjoyment—gender differences

Genre	Young women (n = 184) %	Young men (n = 139) %
General fiction	71	40
News	64	48
Blogs about interests	52	40
Magazines about your interests	48	38
Magazines about people	45	6
Romance	40	2
Crime fiction	38	17
Science fiction	34	18
Biographies	28	14
Blogs about people	28	9
Magazines about current affairs—what is happening in the world	27	16
Science	23	40
Urban fiction	12	4

Differences related to qualification levels

How often people read was unrelated to their highest qualification. What they read showed some differences:

- General fiction was read less by those whose highest qualification was a level 1–3 certificate (38%, compared with 57% overall).
- General non-fiction was read most by those with a post-Bachelor's degree university qualification (59%, compared with 41% overall).
- Blogs about interests were read most by those with a post-Bachelor's degree university qualification (61%, compared with 47% overall).

Differences related to income

Action fiction and urban fiction were read most by young people who earned \$30,000 or less a year. Science fiction was read most by those with incomes under \$20,000 a year (36%) and least by those with incomes of \$60,000 or more (15%). Short story reading followed a similar pattern, read most by those with incomes up to \$30,000 (38%), and least by those with the highest incomes (10%).

Science was read most by those who earned more than \$60,000 a year (47%, compared with 26% of others).

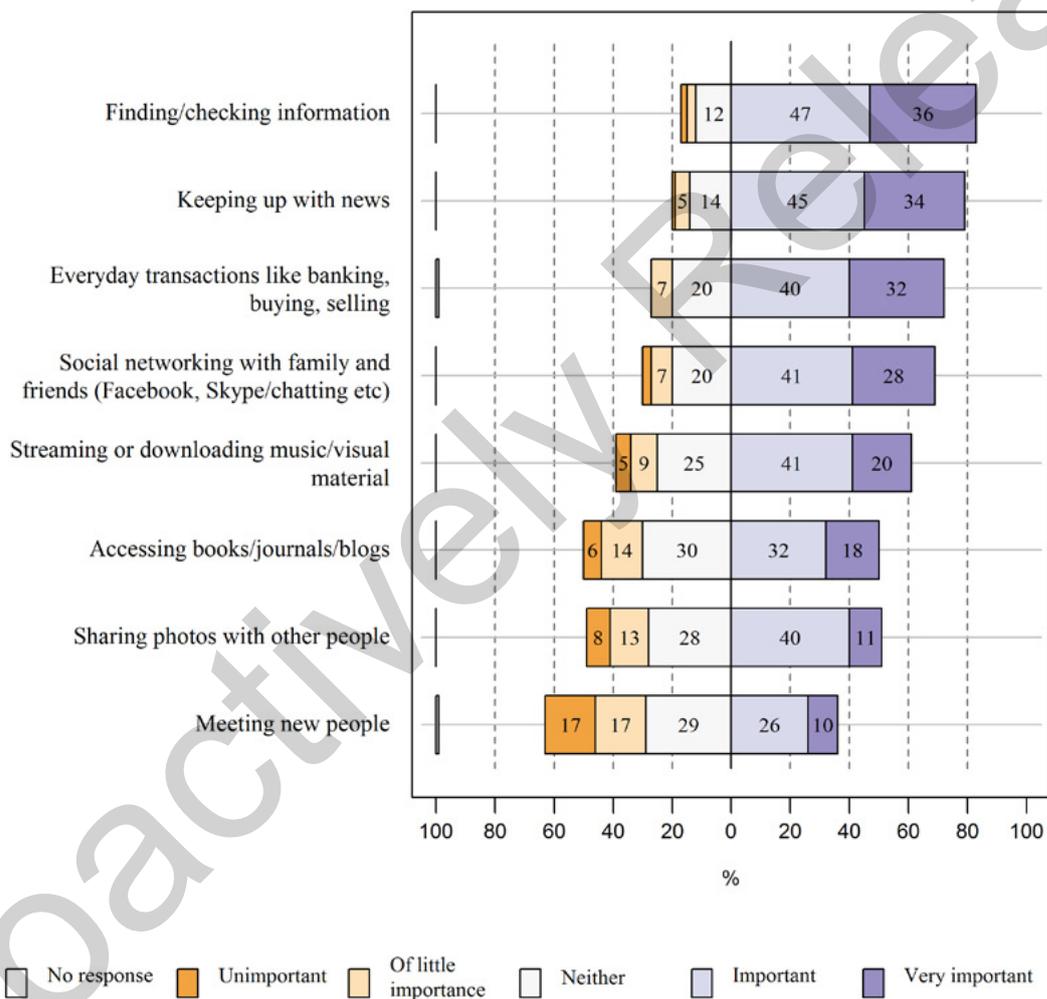
Magazines about people were read more by those who earned between \$20,000 and \$60,000 a year than those who earned less or more than this.

Reading about current affairs was also most popular at either end of the income scale. Magazines about current affairs were read most by those who earned \$20,000 or less (38%; next highest were those earning the most, 24%). Blogs about current affairs were read by 38% of those who earned \$20,000 or less, and 31% of those who earned the most.

Most used the internet

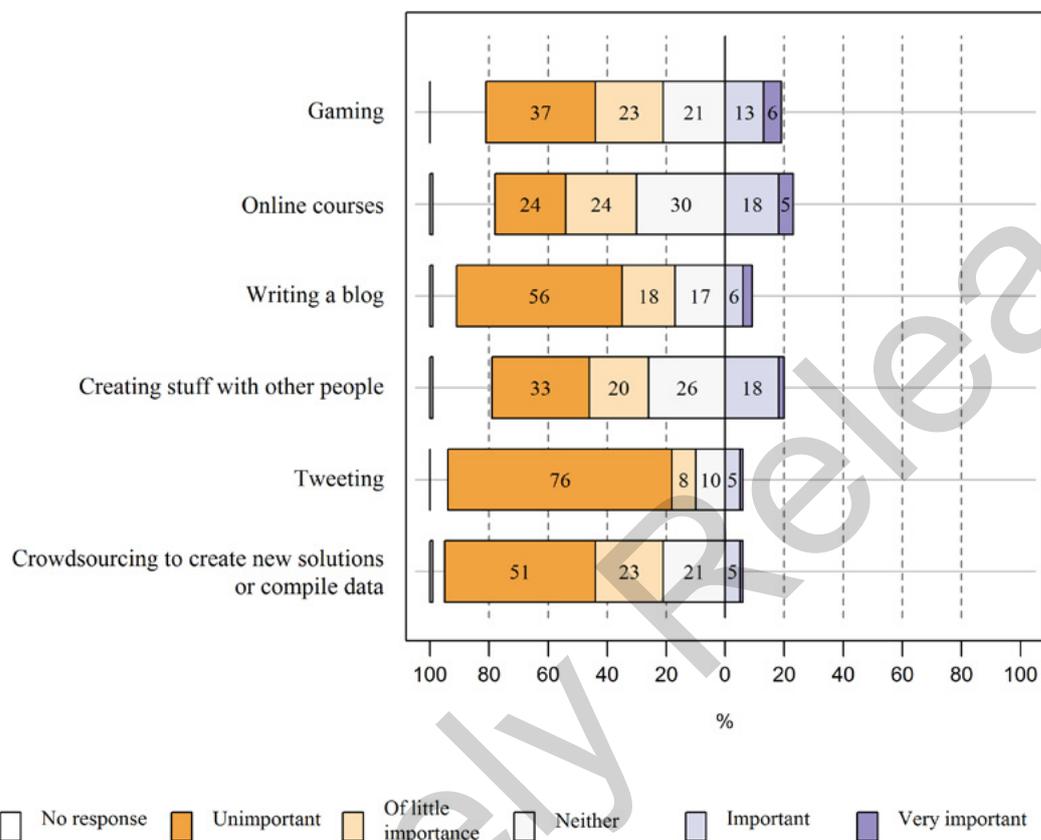
Internet use was very important or important for around two-thirds or more of the 26-year-olds to find things out, bank, buy and sell, and to keep up with family. Around a third also thought the internet was very important or important to meet new people, as Figure 12 shows.

FIGURE 12 Most important internet uses outside work (n = 323)



However, other uses of the internet that involve more interaction were less important for many of the 26-year-olds, as shown in Figure 13.

FIGURE 13 Interactive internet uses were less important (n = 323)



Gender differences

Women used the internet more to connect with others and read; men, to take part in games (we didn't differentiate between solo gaming and games that included others). Table 13 has the details.

TABLE 13 Internet activity—gender differences

Internet activity	Young women (n = 184) %	Young men (n = 139) %
Social networking with family and friends	79	56
Sharing photos	63	35
Accessing books/journals/blogs	55	42
Gaming	7	35

Highest qualification differences

Just two internet uses showed differences related to highest qualification level.

- Finding or checking information was very important or important to 31% of those with no qualification, compared with 85% of others.
- Accessing books, journals, or blogs was most important to those with a post-Bachelor's degree university qualification (69% thought this very important or important to them, compared with 47% of others).

Income differences

The higher their income, the more important it was for young people to be able to use the internet for everyday transactions (45% of those earning over \$60,000, compared with 20% of those earning \$20,000 or less).

7.

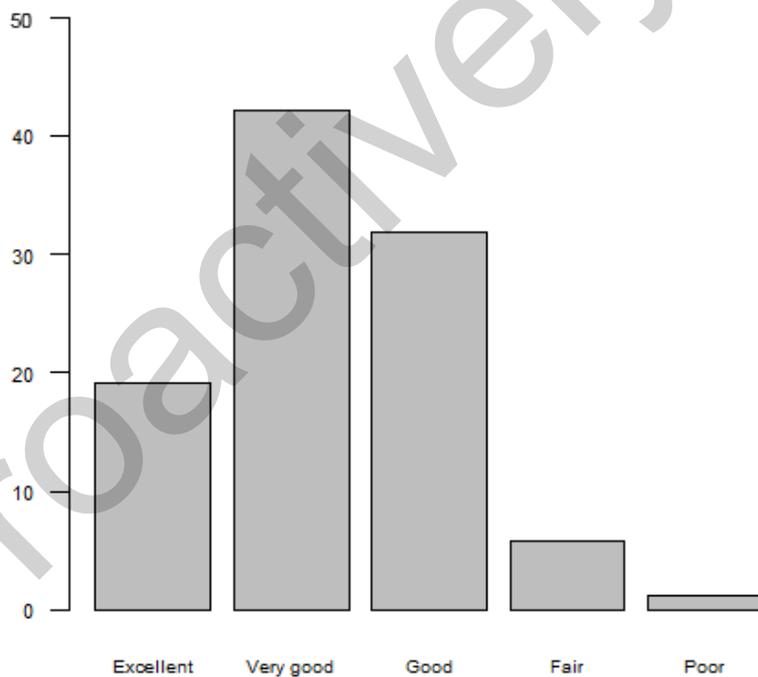
Health and wellbeing

Good health was very important to most of the young adults. We wanted to see whether physical and mental health changed between age 20 and age 26, including behaviours and experiences that are associated with wellbeing, or the converse, harm. The picture is mixed.

Most are healthy at 26, but around a fifth have health problems or experience injury

Most of this cohort reported that they were in good health or better, as Figure 14 shows.

FIGURE 14 **General health**



However, 24% had a health problem requiring ongoing care at least sometimes or more often over the past year, more than the 15% who reported this at age 20. Twenty-two percent had been in an accident or injured at least sometimes or quite often in the past year.

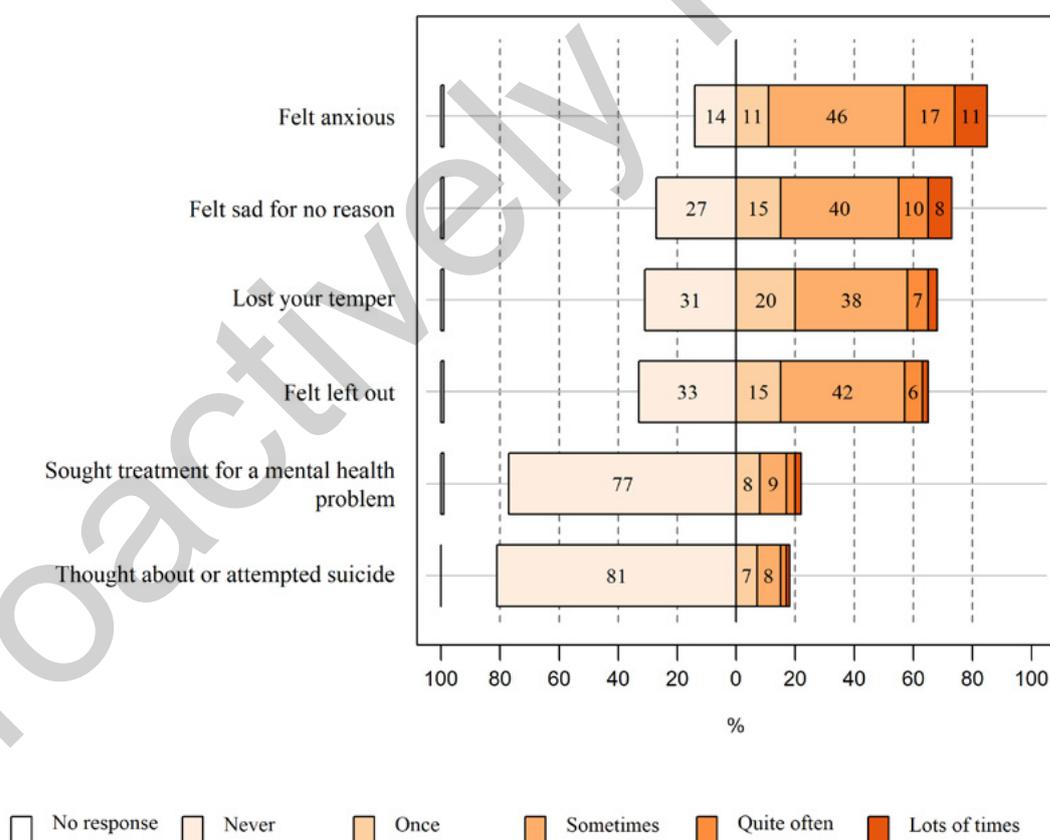
More seek treatment for mental health

Overall, most of the young people thought they were happy with their life (34% were very happy with their life, and 40% were happy). Fifteen percent felt neutral about their life, and 2%, unhappy. Nonetheless, 22% of the young people had sought treatment for a mental health problem over the past year, up from 14% when they were 20. This may indicate that some experience more difficulty as they make their own way as adults, or that earlier experiences leave marks that become deeper over time. It could also reflect the growing openness about mental health and emphasis on the value of seeking help in the same way as one would seek help for physical issues.

Most have experienced feeling sad for no reason, and only 14% had not felt anxious at some time over the past year. Around two-thirds of the 26-year-olds had also felt left out at least once over the past year, much the same as at age 20. Almost half lost their temper at least sometimes.

Figure 15 also shows that 19% had thought about or attempted suicide at least once in that time, with 2% thinking about it or attempting it quite often or more. These figures are much the same as when the cohort was 20.¹¹

FIGURE 15 Mental health at age 26 ($n = 323$)



¹¹ There is a useful discussion of the complex picture behind suicidal thoughts and suicide in Gluckman (2017).

Gender differences

Young women and men gave similar reports of their overall health, and mental health. However, 56% of the young women had never had health problems in the past year requiring ongoing medical care or hospital visits, compared with 67% of young men. More young men reported injury or accident over the year: 59%, compared with 40% of young women—perhaps related to young men playing more team sport. Young women reported more anxiety: 34% quite often or lots, compared with 21% of young men.

Qualification and income differences

Young people with university qualifications were somewhat more likely than others to describe their general health as excellent or good (68%, compared with 52% of others).

General health was income-related, with 58% of those on the lowest incomes reporting they had had health problems requiring medical care or hospital visits over the past year, falling to 26% of those with the highest incomes.

Experiences of hassling or bullying and pressure

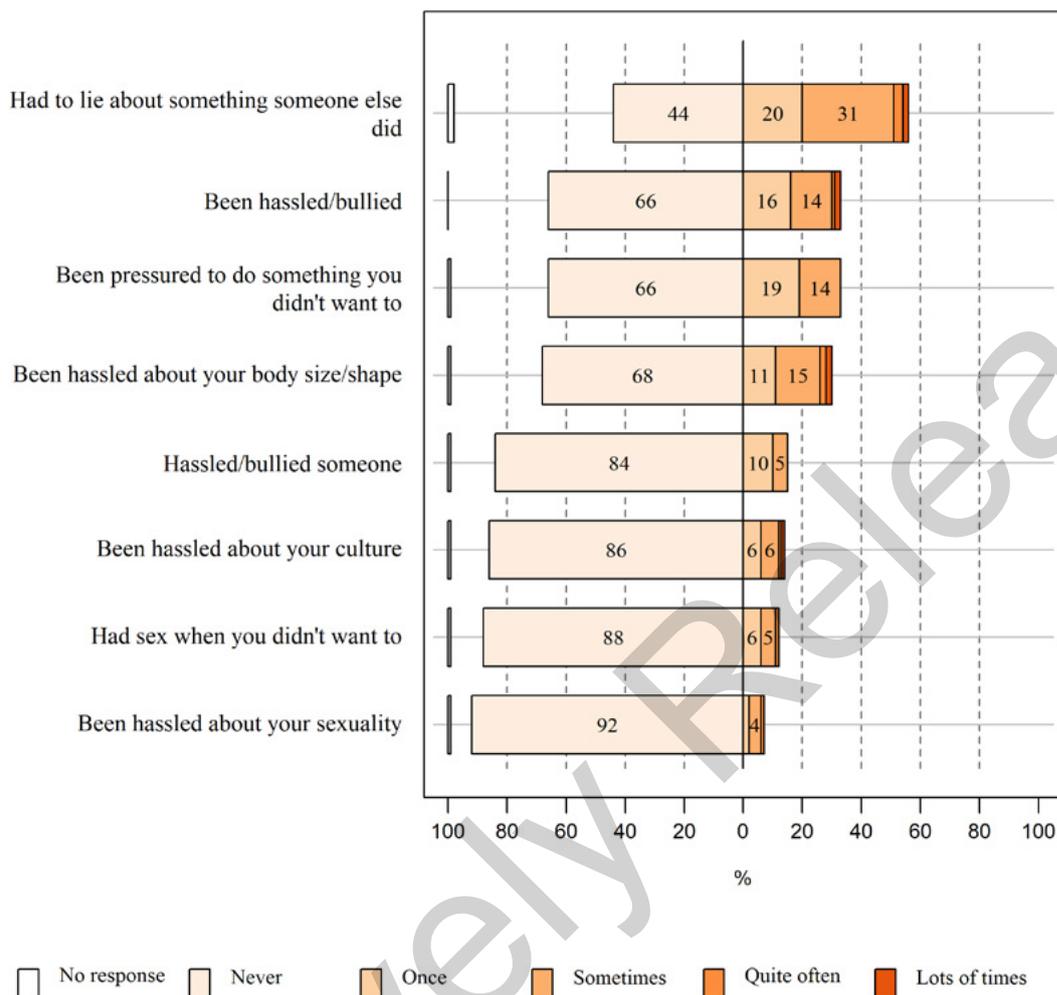
Frequent hassling or bullying was uncommon, but around a third had experienced at least one incident of being hassled or bullied over the past year, generally, or for their body size or shape, culture, or sexuality.

Figure 16 also shows being hassled about body shape or size occurred more than being hassled about culture or sexuality. This group has more Pākehā/Europeans than nationally, which may account for the lower proportions reporting being hassled about their culture. The patterns here are much the same as they were when the cohort was aged 20.

There were some changes in the other items in this set since age 20. A third had felt pressured to do something over the past year, less than the 47% who said this at age 20. Fifteen percent also reported that they had hassled or bullied another person at least once in the past year, lower than the 24% who said this at age 20. Just over half felt they had to lie about something that someone else did, a reduction from the almost three-quarters at age 20.

Similar proportions of men and women, 11% in total, had sex when they didn't want to, about the same proportion as at age 20.

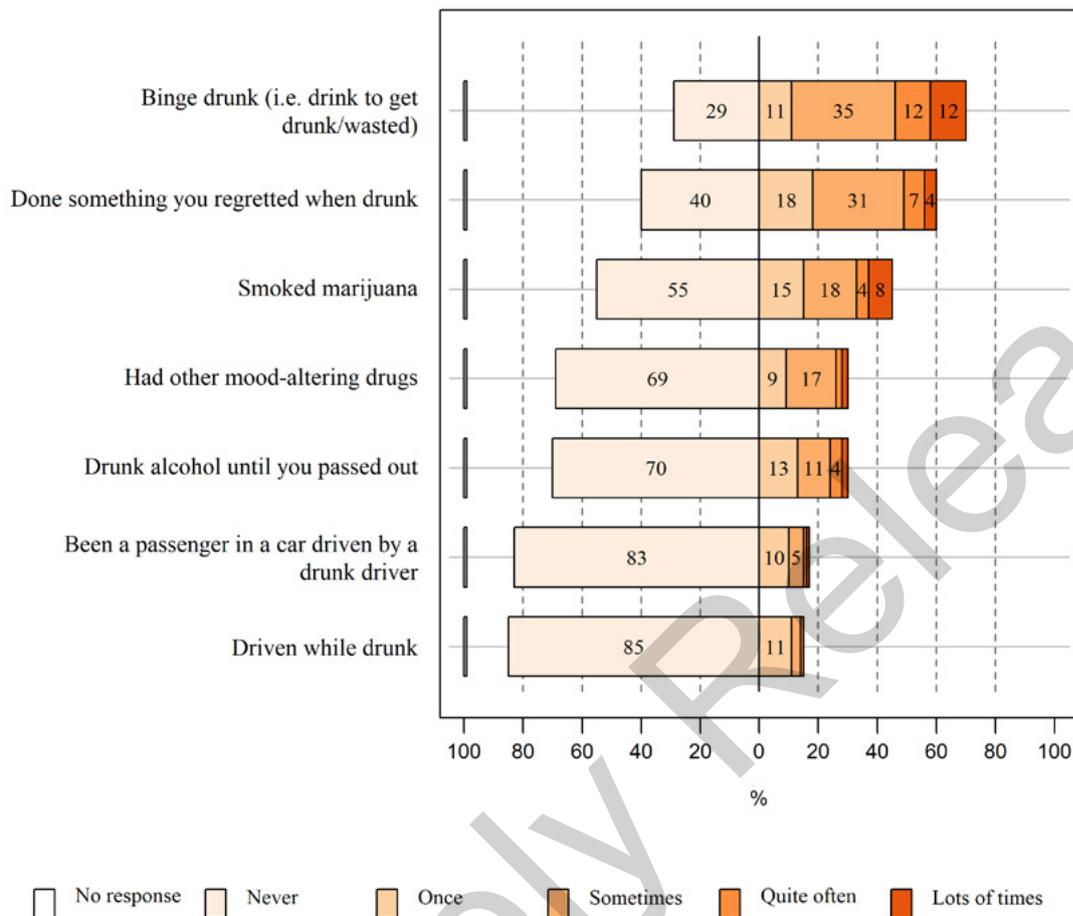
FIGURE 16 Experiences of hassling and being pressured (n = 323)



Alcohol and drug use continues but is more tempered

Figure 17 shows that many of the young people had done something they regretted while drunk, or had drunk to get drunk (binged) in the past year. It also shows that most were cautious about the effects of alcohol on driving. Just under half had smoked marijuana at least once, and around a third had taken other mood-altering drugs.

FIGURE 17 Alcohol and drug use (n = 323)



Compared with when they were 20, the cohort was more careful around being driven by a drunk driver (83% had never been a passenger with a drunk driver, compared with 73% when they were 20). At age 26, more had not done anything they regretted while drunk (40%, compared with 30% at age 20), and 29% had not binge-drunk, compared with 23% at age 20. More of the young people had not used marijuana (55%, compared with 48% when they were 20) over the past year.

Perhaps related to the overall picture of somewhat more care around the use of alcohol, and the more settled picture of relationships, only 8% had got in trouble with the police over the past year, compared with 20% at age 20. Thirteen percent had been in a physical fight, compared with 29% at 20.

Gender differences

Table 14 shows differences in behaviour and experiences relating to gender. More young men were drinking and taking drugs, and putting themselves in vulnerable situations—such as being driven by a drunk driver, or pressured to do something they didn't want to do. More young women felt tension at home that resulted in arguments or fighting.

TABLE 14 Behaviour over the past year and gender differences (*n* = 323)

Behaviour—once or more	Young women (<i>n</i> = 184) %	Young men (<i>n</i> = 139) %
Fought or had arguments with someone at home	77	61
Smoked marijuana	38	53
Been pressured to do something you didn't want to do	29	39
Drunk alcohol till you passed out	23	39
Unprotected sex—lots ¹²	13	26
Passenger in car with drunk driver	12	21
Hassled/bullied someone	10	22
Driven while drunk	10	21
Been in a physical fight	9	18
Got in trouble with the police	3	15

Qualification and income differences

One or more experiences of being in a car with a drunk driver over the past year was most common for those without a qualification (61%), as was being in a physical fight (46%).

Income showed no relationship with behaviour.

¹² This raises the question of whether young men and women were interpreting “unprotected sex” differently, or had different behaviours. We can't tell from our data.

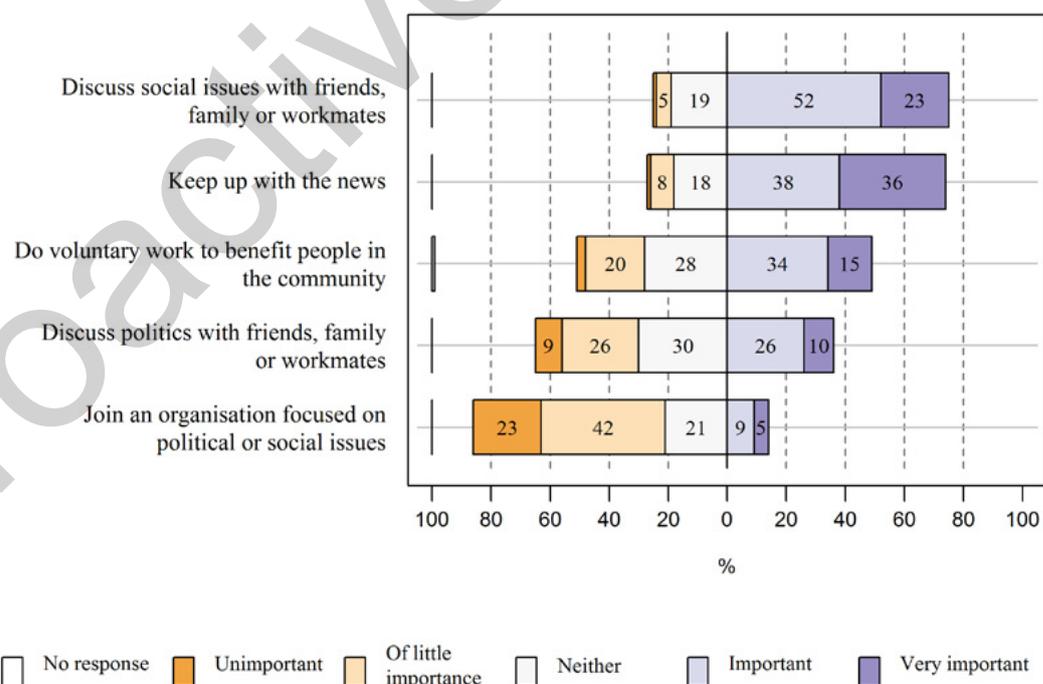
8.

Views of New Zealand and the world

Discussion and participation around social issues and politics is largely informal

The preference for informal activity over organised activity that we described in Sections 1 and 2 is also evident in how the young people formed views about social issues and politics, with more discussion of social issues than politics, shown in Figure 18. Just under half thought voluntary work to benefit others in the community was important or very important.

FIGURE 18 Participation in and talk about the wider world (n = 323)



Most vote in general elections

As 20-year-olds, 76% had voted in the 2008 general election. Returning when they were 26, we asked them about voting for the 2014 general election. We asked those we talked to before the election if they were planning to vote; and after the election on 20 September, if they had voted. Voting was slightly lower: 71% had voted or intended to vote. This may be related to the higher proportion living overseas at age 26.

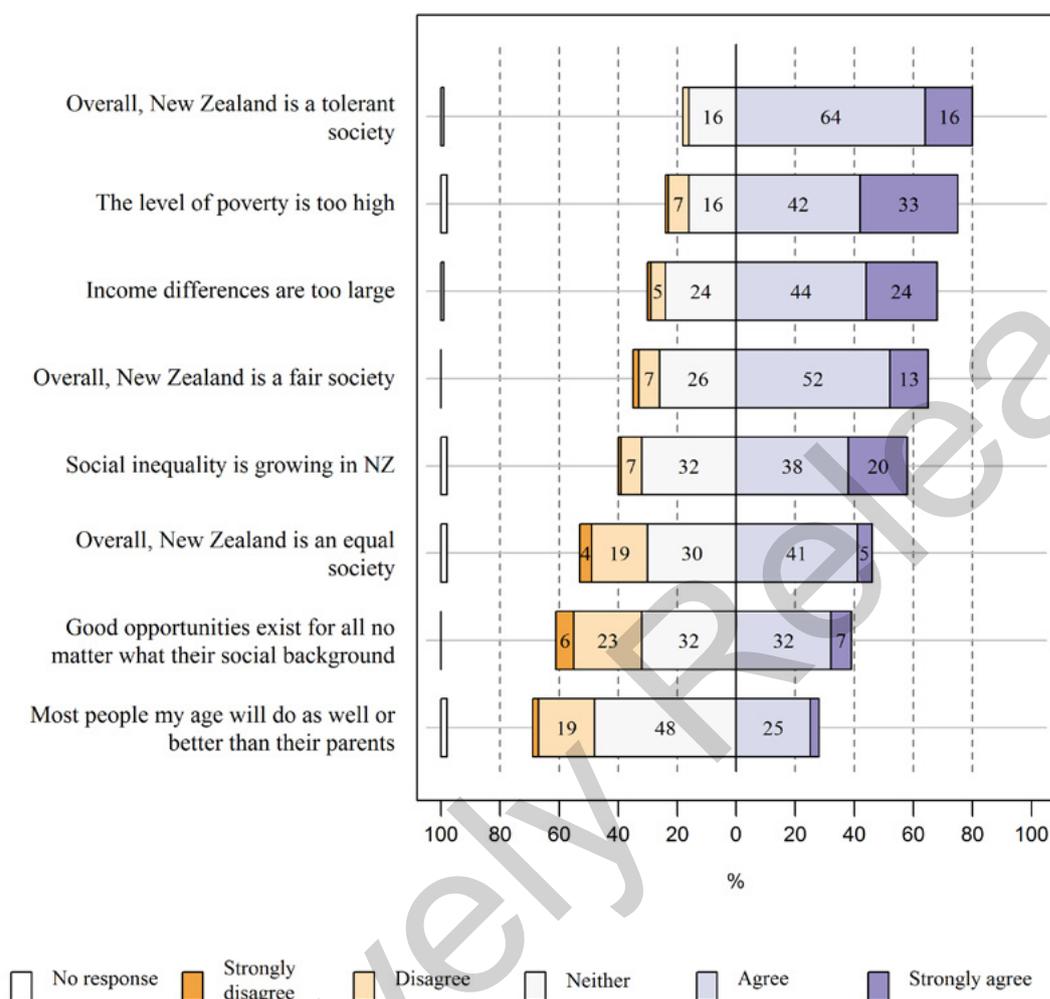
There was a stronger sense than at age 20 that it was important to vote and “to have my say”, perhaps because the Government had been in power for 6 years and was now a known quantity, perhaps because most had moved beyond study to full-time work, some were parents, and—judging by their answers on where they would spend most of their life—most expected their future would include children.

What about those who didn't vote or didn't plan to vote? The main reason was that it was not a priority: people were unaware or forgot there was an election, or were overseas or caught up in other things (39% of those who didn't vote or intend to). Just over a third did not know how to vote, were not enrolled, couldn't get the online system to work if they were overseas, or lacked transport to get to a polling booth. Fourteen percent of those who didn't vote did not know who to vote for, particularly those living overseas. Only 8% felt there was no point in voting because their vote would make no difference.

Mixed views about New Zealand

Most of this cohort saw their country as tolerant, and many saw it as fair. But Figure 19 shows that most also saw a poverty level that was too high, and income differences that were too large. Just over half saw social inequality growing. Slightly more thought that most people of their age would do as well or better than their parents than thought they would not. Young adults who thought New Zealand was an equal, fair, and tolerant society were less inclined than those who were less sanguine about New Zealand providing equality and tolerance to think there were issues with social inequality and poverty.

FIGURE 19 Views of New Zealand (n = 323)



We also asked if people had any additional comments about New Zealand society. A few noted that they had given neutral answers because they had not been in New Zealand for some years; a couple of these said their impressions came from Facebook, though one read the *New Zealand Herald* daily. Thirty compared New Zealand favourably with other countries, particularly with regard to quality of life, opportunities, safety, and openness. Fifty expressed some unease: about growing inequality, poverty, fewer opportunities, or ethnic friction. A few were critical of the poor.

We wondered whether the perceptions of those who thought they would not live in New Zealand would differ from those who saw their future here. Only one difference was evident: 54% of those who saw their future beyond New Zealand thought New Zealand was a fair society, compared with 71% of those who saw their future here.

Around a third were not committed to living in New Zealand

All but 16% of the young people had travelled to other countries by the time they were 26. Mainly they went to holiday (64% of all the group). Work attracted 34%; other purposes included seeing the world, seeing friends and family, and 11% went overseas to study, and 3% to work as volunteers, to take part

in sports or music competitions. Just under half had made more than one trip overseas since they left school.

Some spoke of the attraction of cultures or people who were different from those they had grown up with, or of getting beyond their “comfort zone”, or simply needing a break from routine.

The median time they had spent overseas was not long: 5 months. However, 23% had spent from 9 months to 2 years overseas, and 16% more than 2 years. The longer they went, the more it was to work, see the world, or study.

Many saw themselves spending most of their adult life in New Zealand (63%). It was home, their family was here, and their work. They saw it as the place they wanted to raise their children in. Some spoke of their enjoyment of Wellington, or the wider New Zealand landscape; some of the relative social peace of New Zealand.

It's my home, I'm comfortable and the family's here.

I like Wellington and my job. I've no desire to leave.

I've been to quite a few countries and New Zealand is a great country, we have it good here. Quality of living is great.

When I think about raising a family, it will be back home.

A further 25% were unsure, largely because they saw the course of their life shaped by work opportunities or relationships.

I might move to the UK, I have family over there and a work visa, would like to seek other work opportunities.

I know I have to go overseas for my career, so it depends whether there is a job for me to come back to or not.

Have lots of buddies in Melbourne and more opportunities there.

Sometimes they were unsure because they had yet to travel, and to see what life outside New Zealand tasted like.

Twelve percent thought they would not be spending their adult life here, mainly because of work opportunities—particularly in specialist roles—because of family or partner, and—for a few—more variety in sporting or cultural experiences, or warmer weather.

The music opportunities here, especially in the music I specialise in.

I've set myself up in Australia. I've bought a house and have a girlfriend.

Way better opportunities, more money, I feel I've outgrown New Zealand.

I'm in a niche field, will probably have to move overseas to get work.

Almost all of these had travelled overseas since they left school. Over half had spent more than 2 years out of New Zealand, compared with 14% of those who were unsure where they would make their future, and 8% of those who saw their future in this country.

It was work that most gave many of these young adults the ground and purpose for a future beyond New Zealand. More of those who saw their future overseas had worked overseas (67%, compared with 39% of those who were unsure whether their future lay in New Zealand, and 36% of those who thought it did). The work they did varied, but there was a higher proportion among those overseas of those working as technicians and in trades, in community and personal services, and with either Bachelor's degrees or level 1-3 qualifications.

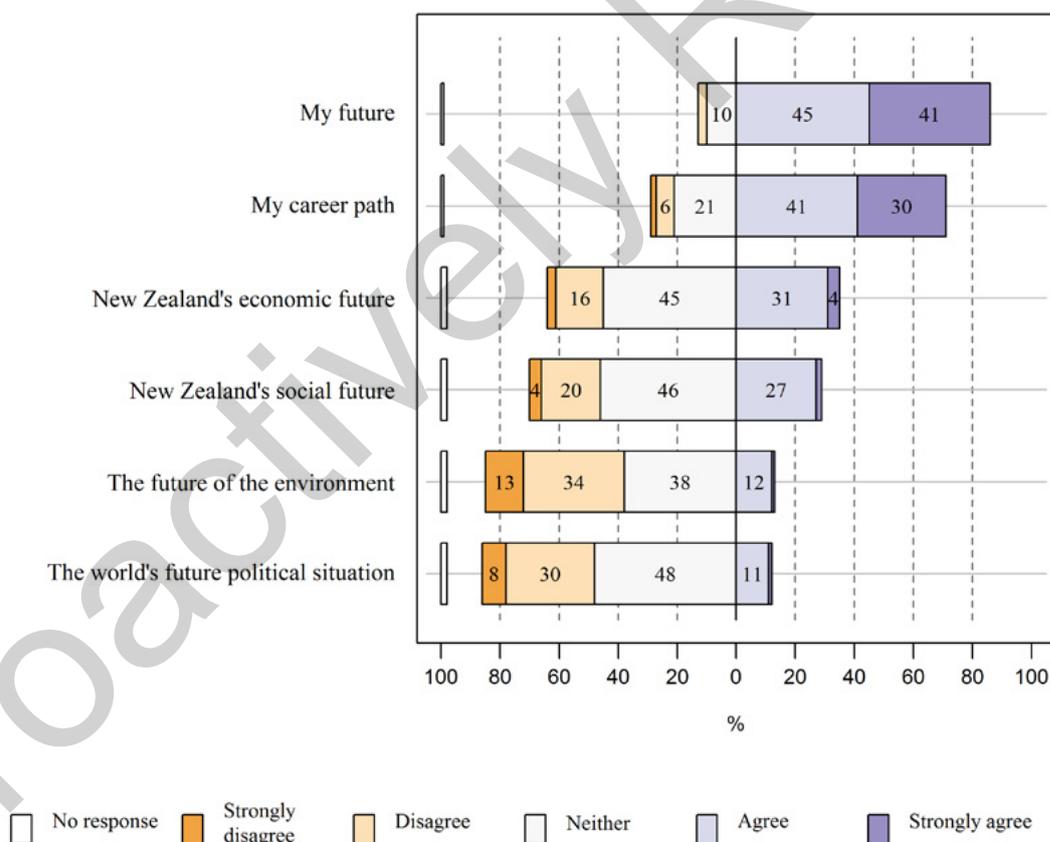
Those who thought they would spend their adult life away from New Zealand were also somewhat more likely than others to have studied overseas (24%, compared with 19% of those who were unsure, and 13% sure that their future lay here), and to have travelled to spend time with friends and family (33%, compared with 27% of those unsure, and 24% of those intending to stay here).

High levels of personal optimism but not about the wider world

Most of the young people were optimistic about their own future (86%), and many optimistic about their career path (71%). These levels of optimism are much the same as they were when they were 20. Their optimism for themselves was not matched by their optimism for New Zealand, the world political situation, or the environment, as Figure 20 shows. Around two-fifths or more expressed neutral views about the wider world, which may reflect less certainty that they know enough about it than about their own situation.

Compared with when they were 20, they were less optimistic about the world's future political situation (12% expressed optimism, compared with 30% in 2009), and about the future of the environment (13%, compared with 26% in 2009). Their views about New Zealand's economic future were much the same, however. Our question about the country's social future was a new one when they were 26.

FIGURE 20 Optimism levels (n = 323)



Gender, qualification, and income differences

There was only one gender-related difference here. Somewhat more young men agreed or strongly agreed that New Zealand is a tolerant society (87%, compared with 76% of young women).

The highest optimism about their own career path was amongst those with a Bachelor's degree or level 4–6 certificate or diploma. The least optimistic about the future of the environment were those with a post-Bachelor's university qualification.

Those on the highest incomes had the most optimism about their future (63% strongly agreed they were optimistic about this, 45% of those earning between \$40,000 and \$60,000, and 30% of those earning less), and about their career path: 50% strongly agreed they were optimistic about this, compared with 26% of others.

The highest income group was also the most optimistic about New Zealand's economic and social future.

9.

Concluding comments

These New Zealanders were born in 1988–89. Many stayed at school longer than their parents, and more continued their formal education after school, often combining study with employment. Their pathways into adulthood were accompanied by debt for study rather than debt in the form of mortgages, as it often was for previous generations who married and had families earlier, when there were more affordable housing options.

But this cohort was largely optimistic for themselves—if not for the world around them. Most were sustained by friendships and family, and many had intimate partners. Though having children was (only) very important to a minority, a fifth of the women were already mothers.

At age 26 they had more stable friendships and less risky behaviour than at age 20. However, more were seeking help for their mental health than when they were 20—perhaps because of more social awareness and openness around mental health. Around a third had experienced hassling or bullying at least once in the past year. New Zealand school students report higher rates of bullying at school than most other OECD countries, and it seems that bullying continues in the adult worlds of work, recreation, and relationships.

Though we often now talk of gender roles as “traditional” rather than current, it is striking that it was gender rather than qualification or income levels that was more likely to be related to differences in how these emerging adults spent their time, related to others, and what they valued—raising some questions about why this is so.

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