

Theorising and Preparing Students for Precarity: How can leaders and educators better prepare students to enter an increasingly insecure workforce?

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Abstract

Workforce insecurity has significant implications for the role of school leaders and teachers preparing students for changing worlds of work. For educators to better prepare students to enter an increasingly casualised labour workforce, there first needs to be an acknowledgement of how students perceive themselves in relation to post-school life.

Drawing on a study of approximately 2500 secondary school students in the Australian state of Victoria, the figure of homo promptus is presented as a figure of youth to understand the real and imagined characteristics of students as workers-in-the-making. Homo promptus is entrepreneurial and strategic, yet on ‘standby’ as short-termism problematises future planning. This figure is overlaid onto students’ perceptions of their own career identity relative to post-school aspirations and transitions. For some students, homo promptus is a conscious and lived identity, while it appears a surreality for others who believe that their post-school transitions will be unaffected by precarity. School leaders, teachers and school-based careers advisors have obligations to not only acknowledge the emergence of homo promptus themselves and the broader labour and education landscapes from which this conceptualisation has been developed, but to ensure students and their parents are fully aware of the future possibilities for precarity.

Introduction

Schooling in Australia focuses on supporting “young people to realise their potential by providing skills they need to participate in the economy and in society” (Education Council 2019, 3). One of the implied promises of a better material life through education is its ability to pave pathways to meaningful work. But what if these pathways are eroding, or at the very least, shifting in seismic ways? How do school leaders respond to a world of work beyond the school gates that is fast becoming transformed by casualisation, insecurity and emergent constructs such as portfolio careers?

This paper aims to provide a way of thinking about youth subjectivities in relation to their working lives following school. Understanding what perceptions students have of themselves in relation to their post-school lives can inform how school leaders help them to better navigate transitions from school. The theoretical concept of *homo promptus* (Black and Walsh 2019) provides a lens through which such insights can be gained. Drawing on the findings from a large-scale study of approximately 2,500 secondary school students in the southern Australian state of Victoria, the figure of *homo promptus* as entrepreneurial and strategic, yet on ‘standby’ as short-termism problematises future planning, is overlaid onto students’ perceptions of their own career identity. The findings suggest that for some students, *homo promptus* is a conscious and lived identity. For others, *homo promptus* is a surreality, and either through denial or some form of false optimism, these students believe that their post-school transitions will be untainted, or at worst, lightly touched by precarity.

It is argued that school leaders, teachers and school-based careers advisors have obligations to not only acknowledge the emergence of homo promptus, as well as the broader labour and education landscapes from which this conceptualisation has been developed, but to ensure students and their parents are fully aware of and accept the ramifications of future precarity. From an historical perspective, this is currently not the case and is evidenced by out-dated approaches to careers education that over-emphasise student academic outcomes and post-school tertiary education pathways, and rely largely on traditional conceptualisations of careers as “20th century, and even 19th century, occupations” (Mann et al. 2020, 12). Students’ insights then are important to help inform effective careers education in the future (Jackson and Tomlinson 2020). They also make a significant contribution to the literature focussing on students’ internalisations of current employment conditions, the value of higher education (HE), their own employability and career decision-making (Scurry and Blenkinsopp 2011).

Employment and careers

Rapidly changing employment landscapes have impacted young Australians disproportionately (Walsh and Black 2018). The current COVID-19 pandemic has decimated employment opportunities for young people, many of whom were already engaged in precarious casual work. Teenagers and those aged 20 to 29 years have been most affected, and are now not only unemployed, but have little prospect of their jobs returning post-pandemic (Earl 2020; Jericho 2020). Even prior to this economic downturn, casual work was pervasive, with one in four Australian workers employed in a casual position, many of whom reported having no guaranteed hours, nor opportunities to convert their uncertain work

contracts into more stable and fixed employment arrangements (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2019). Australia's rate of casualised work was and is one of the highest when compared with other OECD countries (OECD 2019). Leading into the pandemic, over half of all young Australian workers were engaged in casual employment, reporting lower working standards, remuneration, entitlements and job security than older employees (Dhillon and Cassidy 2018). One in three Australian youth suffered unemployment or under-employment (OECD 2019), with these rates likely to increase and be the worst experienced in decades (Wright 2020).

Prior to the severe economic impacts of COVID-19, demographic shifts, labour market regulations, macroeconomic fluctuations and technological changes have been transforming labour markets globally over recent decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, worsening global economic conditions resulted in significant organisational structure and workforce changes that shifted traditional career profiles to ones that were uncertain and insecure (Clark 2013). This led to questions at the time as to whether a single, linear, long-term, upwardly-trajectorial career had ceased to exist (Wyn et al. 2020). Fast-forward to 2020, and increasingly fluid and precarious global employment markets continue to reshape work profiles, with expansions in the number of people engaged in transient, insecure, under-employed and short-term work arrangements (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2020). Career imaginaries have been forced then to move away from occupations or a sequence of organisational roles and statuses to more 'flexible' notions (Clarke 2013; Tomlinson et al. 2018) that are hallmarked by a person's inter-organisational mobility, flexibility, temporary and multiple employer relationships, and individual accountability for adaptable career management and ambition. Terms such as 'boundaryless', 'protean', 'portfolio', and 'kaleidoscope' have entered career lexicons in attempts to capture more

effectively what a person's career looks like relevant to current employment landscapes (Gubler, Arnold, and Coombs 2014).

Of most significance to young people in this context has been the break-down of the long-held assumption that HE qualifications will lead to desirable and secure work (Chesters and Wyn 2019; Wyn et al. 2020). Recent data has suggested that even medium to highly educated young people have experienced increases in their probabilities of low-paid employment in Australia in the last decade (OECD 2019). Noting the trends in changing labour markets and traditional job profiles, not only are there fewer full-time permanent jobs available for the increasing numbers of highly qualified job seekers (Chesters and Wyn 2019), but graduates have reported experiencing labour market mismatches despite their qualifications, including skill underutilisation and poor job quality and choices (Li, Harris, and Sloane 2018). This is creating concern for young people (Wyn et al. 2020), which will only be exacerbated in post-pandemic times. They not only feel pressured to seek credentials and experiences to improve their employability in competitive employment markets (Black and Walsh 2019; Oinonen 2018), but feel disillusioned and betrayed by the trap in which they find themselves (Chesters and Wyn 2019). While higher qualifications remain crucial to securing desirable work, the sum of these trends and evidence has profound implications for how careers education needs to be conceived and implemented in Australian schools.

Careers education in Australian schools

Careers education in Australian schools though appears out-of-date in its approaches to helping students understand and prepare for post-school transitions. Academic outcomes and tertiary destinations post-school are overly-emphasised as measures of students' success

(O’Connell, Milligan, and Bentley 2019), with students then funnelled to tertiary education over and above other post-school pathways (Torii and O’Connell 2017). These practices are concerning, with Australian studies showing that many students enrol at university without knowing why they are doing so, what courses would be best for them, or what employment could result from their qualifications (Baik, Naylor, and Arkoudis 2015; Parks et al. 2017). In a vast number of cases, students enrol with no intentions of ever completing, drop out and in hindsight, believe they should not have started in the first place (Norton, Cherastidtham, and Mackey 2018).

Concerns have also been raised regarding the stratification of information and advice provided to students based on teachers’ and advisors’ preconceptions of who apparently is better suited to tertiary education pathways and who is not (Gore et al. 2017; Graham, Van Bergen, and Sweller 2015). Advice provided to students regarding alternative post-school pathways has been found at times to be untrustworthy, uneven or based on inadequate knowledge (Bisson and Stublely 2017; Wyman et al. 2017). Careers education also appears caught in “old paradigms” of occupations and work that promulgate young people’s expectations of a long-term, single professional career as the ideal (Shergold et al. 2020, 57). Students hear messages then that going to university post-school will result in a ‘good’ career, whilst not going to university will result in a ‘bad’ one (Billett, Choy, and Hodge 2020; Torii and O’Connell 2017). Despite ever-changing global employment landscapes, these preconceptions, alongside concomitant messages from parents, are so strong that many young Australians, irrespective of gender or socioeconomic status, conjure preferred career trajectories that are professional, status-oriented and secure (Baxter 2017; Roy, Barker, and Stafford 2019).

When many of these aspirations go unrealised (Billett et al. 2020; Mann et al. 2020), what results then is a career identity crisis for young people. Contradictions between cultural messages of career success, biased or ill-informed advice, and post-school employment market realities mean that students hear and internalize one thing, but potentially experience another (Verhoeven, Poorthuis, and Volman 2019). Recent research has shown that whilst young Australians accept the probability of precarious employment during their studies, they expect to not only secure full-time, permanent employment post-education (Cuervo and Wyn 2016), but that it will be ‘career-related’ (Co-op 2015). And whilst young workers in Australia and other countries may be anxious about their longer-range career prospects, this does not mean that they still don’t aspire to or want stable, long-term careers that are fashioned along traditional lines (Black and Walsh 2019; Pennington and Stanford 2019).

If schools and institutions are to assist students prepare for challenging employment landscapes more effectively, then it is argued that students’ employability needs to be framed around their own career identity development (Nghia et al. 2020). Students need to “internalise the dearth of traditional careers” (Jackson and Tomlinson 2020, 437) and be supported to connect their own career capital resources – functional, human, social and cultural capitals - with knowledgeable but more importantly, realistic perceptions of worlds-of-work. The more students can do this, then the more they will be able to imagine and make sense of themselves in future work roles and navigate post-school transitions accordingly (Skorikov and Vondracek 2011).

Method

The survey was one instrument as part of a wider study to validate a measure of adolescent career identity. Following ethics approval from the Victorian Department of Education, the relevant Catholic Diocese and the university in which both authors are based, the survey was administered in 2018 to Years 10 – 12 students (the final years of compulsory schooling in Australia) in five participating schools as a university-licensed Qualtrics-based online survey. Following consent from each school principal, student assent to participate was implied if the survey was completed.

The survey comprised three sections, the first of which focused on personal information, and the second on information regarding future study and career intentions. The final section comprised 50 items to be rated according to a 5-point Likert-type rating scale: *Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree*. The statements focused on understanding respondents' perspectives of their own career identity including: human, social and cultural capitals relative to their future study-career aspirations; career planning abilities; perceived employability and skills such as flexibility and resilience; connections with current employment conditions; and functional capital including self-awareness and self-esteem. 32 statements were worded positively, with 18 worded negatively, responses from which would be reverse coded. The survey took 30-40 minutes and was completed by 2,895 students, with 2473 valid responses. Respondent details are included in the Supplementary Material.

The conceptual lens through which data has been analysed is the figure of homo promptus. This figure is derived from Cicero "to describe a person who is ready to do whatever is needed in any circumstance... homo promptus is: entrepreneurial and strategic; expected to constantly plan for the future while living life in the short-term; not tethered to a single place; permanently in 'situational' mode; and lives in waithood" (Walsh and Black 2020, 3-4). Formulated to better understand the attitudes of a small cohort of university students in

Australia, France and Great Britain, homo promptus is a conceptual figure of selfhood that helps to describe the types of emergent sociological conditions of young people as workers or workers-in-the-making.

Threadgold (2020) identifies a plethora of figures of youth that have been conceived, including, for example, young people as figures of moral panic and revolution, representing risks to both themselves and others, as “consumer dupes”, where youth, as an image, is invoked as an “enjoyable, carefree, state of leisure”, as well as morally corrupt (Threadgold 2020, 691-696). Homo promptus seeks to elide the normative and sometimes affective associations of these images. In part, homo promptus is derived from trajectory of thought about cultivation of the entrepreneurial self which leads from Rose (1996) through Peters (2001) to Kelly (2016). It also seeks to incorporate other recent writings about youth subjectivities seeking to understand both the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ aspects of youth transitions (Honwana 2014). A novel aspect of our approach is to connect homo promptus to the testimonies of young people in relation to career identity. Drawing from the ‘meaningful orientations’ of respondents, homo promptus is presented as one way of understanding and characterising the contemporary experiences of young people in relation to employment, but it is by no means a fully representative one due to the continued diversity of young people’s experiences and perceptions, as captured in this study.

Findings

The findings are firstly unpacked in relation to how they reflect the figure of homo promptus, but it is important to highlight that not all attitudes neatly fit into the frame of this figure.

That the perspectives of young people defy neat categorisation is a longstanding finding in youth studies (Black and Walsh 2019). It is also important to note that the student sample is diverse, with regards to gender, socioeconomic status [SES] and geography in particular. The data does show differences across these demographics, but unpacking these requires a deeper analysis than is afforded here, and will form the basis of a future paper.

Overall, most respondents believed that they would be employable in the future (79.1 percent), but significant nuances emerge in their imagined future pathways. Three aspects of this are evident in the findings: a worry about the competitive nature of the job market; a feeling of need to be flexible and adaptable as a basis for preparing for working life; and a lack of readiness about future careers.

Entrepreneurial and strategic: “I am studying and taking on different activities so that I have the best skill set for my preferred career”

Homo promptus is entrepreneurial. In 2020, policy and employment market realities necessitate students’ employability narratives to be ones of ‘self-enterprise’, where they consciously and constantly better themselves and relate “to others as competitors and [their] own being as a form of human capital” (McNay 2009, 63). Many of the respondents seemed to value the development of skills and experiences to add to their perceived employability through a variety of activities. In response to the proposition that “I am studying and taking on different activities so that I have the best skill set for my preferred career”, 55 percent agreed. Further, more than half (54.4 percent) agreed that they were “gaining the work experience, skills and education that will give me the best chances of attaining my preferred

career.” A majority (75 percent) agreed that “My career choices suit my strengths and interests”, with a similar proportion agreeing that “My future career will allow me to apply all the skills I am best at” (76.1 percent).

Students’ orientation towards employability echoes previous research showing a shift in the way that young people think about careers and the support that they require. Australian students are very concerned that they don’t possess the relevant experience and skills to gain the careers that they want in current employment contexts (Marks 2017). As a result, like students in many other countries, they are taking action to gain skills and knowledge through activities external to their education including participation in extra-curricular activities, work experience and volunteering (Jackson and Tomlinson 2020). Students’ call-to-action for schools and employers is that they want better access to a broader range of experiences and skill development, as well as connections with industry (Bisson and Stubbley 2017; Down, Smyth, and Robinson 2018). Most importantly, through comprehensive and objective careers education (Torii and O’Connell 2017), they want help crafting their own employability and “career narratives” that integrate their strengths, interests and experiences relevant to future work roles (Stokes, Wierenga, and Wyn 2003, 81-82).

Of striking interest though was the finding that nearly 36 percent of all respondents agreed with the proposition that “I feel like I am studying and taking on activities without any sense of purpose or career direction” (totalling 67.4 percent when neutral/unsure responses were combined). This may suggest a type of ‘follow the leader’ behaviour or an undertone of concern that if activities are not undertaken, then students may feel ‘left behind’. As an adjunct to this concern is the finding that nearly half of all respondents (totalling 72.8 percent

when neutral/unsure responses were combined) feel that they have “missed opportunities to maximise their potential to achieve their future careers”, with lower SES students feeling most vulnerable. Whilst focused on the higher education sector, research suggests that students’ awareness and concern of competition from others motivates their involvement, or desires to be involved, in work experience and extra-curricular activities (e.g., Tomlinson 2008). Students are also “heavily influenced by a desire to conform to social norms and the normative behaviour of their peers” (Greenbank 2015, 194), which may explain their uptake of and attraction to extra-curricular activities potentially for little obvious reason. The findings may also suggest that students have an intuition that these types of ‘employability’ behaviours are necessary, but with no career direction. Whilst students acknowledge the need to differentiate themselves from others and build their employability, they may not be able to connect extra-curricular activities or work experiences with their career aspirations or plans because these are ill-defined (Thompson et al. 2013), or because ‘employment’ or ‘starting their career’ are too far into the future (Tymon 2013). Students may also be undertaking extra-curricular activities or work simply for interest or enjoyment and may not make career-related connections as a result (Denault et al. 2019). The findings may even suggest a disconnect between their understandings of employment market realities and how to respond (Jackson and Tomlinson 2020).

Competition, uncertainty and contingency: “I am flexible and can deal with different challenges to achieve my career goals”

Homo promptus also embraces uncertainty and contingency, and understands the need to be “constantly ‘on the move’ and seeking to position themselves competitively” (Black and

Walsh 2019, 96). As a corollary of pursuing activities seen to be strategically beneficial to imagined careers, current economic and employment conditions necessitate students to be agile, flexible, resilient and adaptive to change (Duarte, da Silva, and Paixão 2017; Smith 2018). The vast majority of respondents agreed that “I am flexible and can deal with different challenges to achieve my career goals” (76.9 percent). Most also accepted that their career path “will not always be clear and known” to them (64.4 percent). And if their preferred career choice was not possible, they felt able “to make different career decisions and move forward” (52.3 percent; 83.8 percent when neutral/unsure responses were combined). Further, just over half believed that their career “will be made up of different jobs and roles” (56.6 percent agreed; 90.2 percent when neutral/unsure responses were combined). Mindful of employment competition, most claimed that they had “thought about future jobs and employment potential when making career decisions” (66.4 percent agreed).

A thread running throughout responses though was a concern, if not anxiety, about future opportunities. Just over a third (33.9 percent) agreed that “I worry that my studies will not lead to a ‘real’ career”, with over half (52.7 percent) worried “what will happen if I can't meet my career goals exactly as I have planned”. These concerns about career certainty, control and security were skewed heavily towards female respondents from all schools, irrespective of geography or SES. Many respondents (43.1 percent) were worried “that there are too many people going for the same career and jobs that I want” (72.4 percent when neutral/unsure responses were combined), with a notable proportion worried “that there are not many jobs in my preferred career” (38.9 percent agreed; 69.7 percent when neutral/unsure responses were combined). Pressure to compete for employment with others was a concern for lower SES respondents especially when compared with high SES counterparts. Overall, similar feelings

of anxiety about future employment opportunities are consistent with other Australian data (e.g., Wyn et al. 2020), and are only likely to worsen post-pandemic (Headspace 2020).

Mutable futures: “My career path will not always be clear and known”

There is also an aspect of *homo promptus* which sees the future as “mainly unknowable” (Black and Walsh 2019, 98). Studies show that young Australians are inhabiting a ‘continuous present’ (Bone 2019), whereby future uncertainty is normalised and abilities to plan are curtailed (Cuervo and Chesters 2019). How well individuals cope with this ‘unknowing’ depends on many things including, amongst others, SES background, support networks, personal dispositions, skills, knowledge and resources. At face value, respondents reflected both an expectation of and confidence in change, with most acknowledging that their career choices and plans would shift over time (59.5 percent). They indicated a sense of agency, feeling that when faced with different career options, they could “pick the one that best suits me” (66.3 percent). Most also accepted that their career path “will not always be clear and known” to them (64.4 percent), with just over half feeling “able to make different career decisions and move forward” if a preferred career choice was not possible (52.3 percent agreed; 83.8 percent when neutral or unsure responses were combined). These findings potentially show students as having ‘career malleability’, that is, an acceptance that career futures cannot be predicted coupled with a confidence that if circumstances change, they can “rewrite or refashion their career narrative” (Skrbiš and Laughland-Booŷ 2019, 202). Careers in this light are viewed as flexible, with unknown futures not something to fear or uncertainty not a negative emotion that needs to be reduced (Zinn 2006).

Yet, counter to this are young people who have or show career insecurity, hallmarked by an unknown career future that erodes present confidence and abilities to plan or set goals (Skrbiš and Laughland-Booÿ 2019). Just over 40 percent of respondents did not know what careers best suited them, with significantly more feeling unprepared, unclear and purposeless. This, in turn, was causing feelings of stress and anxiety. For example, many respondents often felt down or worried about selecting a career (40.6 percent agreed; 70.9 percent when neutral/unsure responses were combined), or that their “career path will not always be clear and known” to them (46.7 percent agreed; 78.3 percent when neutral/unsure responses were combined). Further, over half felt “stress or pressure to select the ‘right’ career” (55.4 percent; 80 percent when neutral/unsure responses were combined), with a high proportion concerned that they would not be employable post-school (37.2 percent agreed; 65.7 percent when neutral/unsure responses were combined). Female respondents, particularly those from high SES backgrounds, felt most insecure and pressured about career decisions and future pathways.

Discussion

The figure of homo promptus helps to outline the shape of contemporary career identity as a sociological phenomenon. Our analysis reveals that at face value, students appear to expect – if not embrace – the precarious futures that lie ahead of them, expressing confidence in their entrepreneurialism, strategic thinking and agile decision-making and planning abilities to pivot when needed. Cognisant of current employment conditions, they appear savvy investors and believers in their own employability. Yet, this may all be bluff. Strong tones of concern and uncertainty are woven through students’ responses, revealing that they may not actually

be able to reconcile career precarity with their own aspirations or future expectations. These dichotomies are telling. Homo promptus might therefore loom large for some students, casting shadows because of his reality or students' own unpreparedness and lack of abilities to internalise his persona. For others, the spectre of homo promptus is unrelated to their aspirations and confidence in themselves and not necessary to internalise at all. And somewhere in the middle, students warily perceive homo promptus, reflexively describing mantras of flexibility and individuality expected of them, but potentially not really believing them, or if they do, not knowing or accepting fully the reality of what homo promptus has in store for them.

Several insights gained from our analysis are important to be able to position careers education differently for young Australians. First, similar to previous research, young people prepare for future employment landscapes and craft their career-selves in complex and often contradictory ways that mix confidence and anxiety, optimism and pessimism (Woodman 2011). Untangling the 'real' perceptions that are influencing individual students' own career identity is a critical task for school leaders. It is therefore not acceptable to continue making assumptions about or ignoring the realities of different occupations, career pathways and employment markets, applying these preconceptions to students as a 'job-lot' and then expecting them, individually, to be able to navigate post-school transitions effectively. For example, drawing on data from the research study featured in this paper, when asked about the appropriateness of proposed career identity survey questions intended for administration to students, one school leader stated:

Students in our school will not believe that labour markets or future jobs are relevant to them...Information or knowledge of current labour markets is not something we

believe they need to think about or incorporate into career decision-making whilst still at school (Senior school leader; all female, P-12 independent, high socio-economic school).

That students are placed in positions where they hear and internalise irresponsible messages such as this is problematic. School leaders should be cognisant that the basis of career identity is changing, but more-over, that education should focus on more than just preparing young people to tread water in the choppy seas ahead, but to navigate and reimagine for themselves the very basis of how work relates to their individual identities. Effective careers education also needs to be nuanced to the contexts in which students live, accounting for factors such as their SES and gender identification for example. Careers education needs to be deeply attuned to where young people are in their present lives and their imagined futures.

Further, short-termism, flexibility and fluidity, whether acceptable or believable or not, are normalised within current employment market realities. Rosa (2015) argues that when futures are “unforeseeable and uncontrollable, ‘situational’ or present-oriented patterns of identity dominate” (146). Yet, coping with and planning around the unknown and embracing career malleability goes against the very notions of forward planning and aspiring to long-term career trajectories that hallmark current school-based careers education (Adam, 2010).

Helping students balance and reconcile situational decision-making and contingent career planning such that they don’t feel that their futures are happening *to them* rather than be crafted *by them* are challenges that need to be confronted by school leaders. If students leave school feeling not only under-prepared but out of control, then their ‘present’ uncertainty and anxiety is at risk of being drawn-out (Bone, 2019).

Conclusion

Homo promptus is presented as a figure of youth to understand the real and imagined characteristics of students as workers-in-the-making. While experiences of homo promptus are varied, this figure can shed light on how educators can critically engage with the preparation of students for employment during a time of precarity. Following this, students themselves are ideally able to critically engage with their lives post-school and, where necessary, imagine better alternatives. School leaders and their communities may then be better placed to work with young people to shape their post-school lives, rather than be subject to the imagined and real demands of flexibility, contingency and uncertainty. To this last aspect, further research is needed into the extent to which the uncertainty that underpins much of the discourse around contemporary work is potentially manufactured by employers (e.g. by proponents of the so-called ‘gig economy’) to deliberately harness workforce docility and drive down wages and entitlements. Furthermore, navigating the contemporary workforce requires more than the skills to navigate uncertainty: it requires a deep knowledge of what has transpired before combined with the critical faculty to imagine lives beyond homo promptus.

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