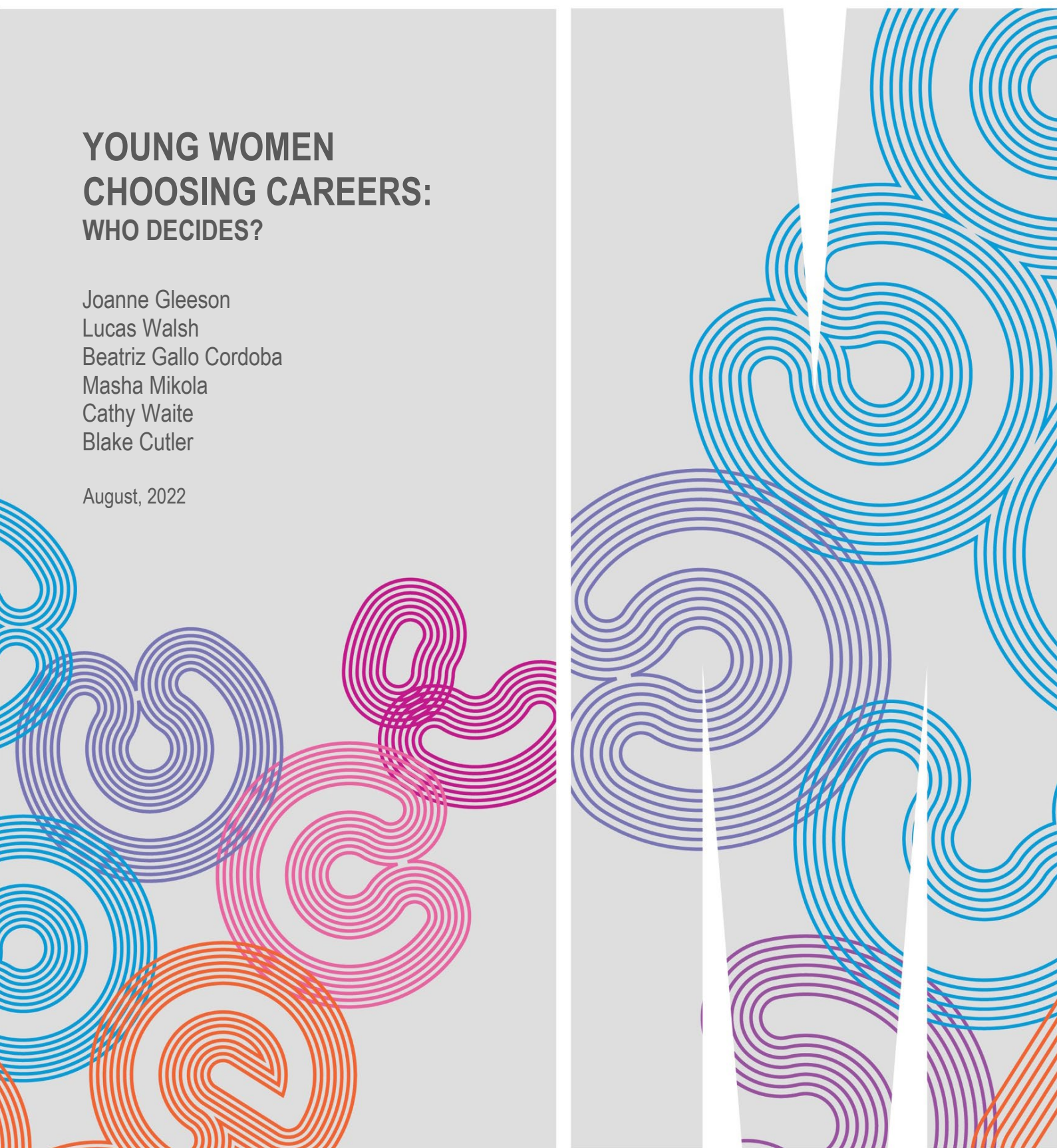# YOUNG WOMEN CHOOSING CAREERS:
WHO DECIDES?

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ABOUT US

The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) is a multi-disciplinary research centre based in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. We undertake research into the social, political and economic factors, forces and trends that affect young people's lives. By focusing on issues that affect young people, and on developing policy and educational interventions to address youth disadvantage, CYPEP aims to identify the challenges to, and opportunities for, improved life outcomes for young people today and throughout their lives.

About the authors

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INTRODUCTION

It's not uncommon to hear the catchcry 'women can do anything they choose'. Now is a time when young women are doing well educationally and, alongside changes to the structure and timing of families and other life stepping stones, appear to have greater job and career opportunities than previous generations. Young women are increasingly representing themselves as an unsilenced and assertive group, particularly around issues of respect, inclusiveness and equality. There are widening calls for women to have stronger voices and leadership representation in business, politics and in their communities. Now more than ever, there appears a sense that they have unlimited life choices.

But how much choice do young women really have and who shapes their choices?

This paper is a narrative about young women in Australia, their career choices and attendant anxieties. The data presented provides a window into young women's experiences when choosing their career destinations in school, and how their transitions to post-school life are enmeshed in long-term social, political and economic change. The backdrop to this narrative is society's valorisation of choice—having choice is desirable, and the more of it the better. Choice is closely associated with mobility and self-determination, and is sometimes taken to be synonymous with freedom. Our young women want choice, they want options, but how they understand and navigate such choices are constrained by the advice they are getting in their immediate lives, the wider changes in contemporary labour markets, and the uncertainty that hangs over them.

Uncertainty pervades the zeitgeist, more so in the context of the current pandemic, which has been very effective at shattering plans. We know that plans are important to young people[1] as they are confronted with very big decisions upon completing school. We also know that planning is disrupted by a pervasive sense of uncertainty associated with the growing fluidity and precarity of work, and by the unsettling of conventional social milestones that assist with planning, such as starting a family and purchasing a house. These signposts are decreasingly helpful to many young people. In our recent Australian Youth Barometer research, for example, nearly half of all participating young people reported experiencing significant stress due to 'feeling stuck in life', with young women feeling more vulnerable than young men.[2]

In this narrative, our young women have clear and ambitious career plans. More young women see themselves going to university and then pursuing a prestigious professional career, such as medicine or law, than young men, but they experience heightened anxiety when making these plans. Approximately one-third of young women are experiencing a high degree of career stress, often feeling down or worried about choosing a career. Career uncertainty and indecision are major contributors to these stressful feelings. More than one-third are concerned about ever achieving a real career and, despite making plans, a similar percentage feel that they have no career direction. Worries about future job availability and perceptions of constrained career choices because of 'who they are and where they come from' are also closely associated with feelings of career stress.

The narrative is a timely reminder of the extent to which young women's career choices, and the development of their future selves, are constructed by others. Indeed, the expectations and pressures from others seem to be a major reason why young women nominate a chosen career. Slightly less than half make choices based on the expectations of others, such as parents and carers. More than half are concerned that others will not approve of their choices, with a similar percentage making choices to please others. Concerns about other people's expectations of their choices are strongly connected with feelings of career stress.

Overall, the narrative presents itself as a conundrum: for parents, carers and educators, who want the best for our young women on one hand, yet, consciously or otherwise, based on their own limited knowledge, pressure young women and narrow their choices with the advice that they proffer and the influence they exert; for policy

makers, who want young women to be able to actively participate in society and the economy; and finally, for the young women themselves, who seem to understand that, in pursuing what they perceive to be a real career, actually have a restricted set of choices, beyond which lies uncertainty. Even more concerning are the contradictions in our young women's responses that point to a frailty of their future possible selves, and a lack of confidence in their social contexts to help them resolve this.

It is difficult to comprehend that, despite being better educated and more ambitious than previous generations, the young women who participated in our research seem far from liberated. This needs to be addressed. We hope this paper helps to deepen conversations about young women's career education and decision-making while at school, and that these conversations will ultimately help give young women confidence when planning their post-school lives.

Key concepts

Youth transitions in transition

This paper is primarily focused on young women in their final years of schooling and their post-school study and career aspirations. The paper draws on the responses of more than 1,300 young women who were students in Years 10–12 (the final years of compulsory schooling in Australia) in 2018 at four schools in the southern Australian state of Victoria. In the original survey sample of young people, 1,339 identified as female, 1,331 identified as male, and 99 preferred not to say. The schools included: a co-educational government secondary school located in an outer metropolitan area designated as low socio-economic status (SES) (n=266); a regionally located, co-educational Catholic secondary school designated as low to mid SES (n=521); one campus of a co-educational independent P–12 school located in a metropolitan area designated as high SES (n=100); and an all-female independent P–12 school located in an inner metropolitan area designated as high SES (n=452).

The paper is interested in the nature of these young women's transitions. These transitions, and the way that youth researchers come to understand them, have changed dramatically during the last 70 years. Previous research has changed how we think about youth transitions, which were once framed in relation to adult identity development and conventional markers of transition to adulthood, some of which persist as rites of passage: leaving school, getting a job, getting married or starting a family, and gaining financial independence.[3–5] Such markers featured prominently in youth research from the 1950s to the 1970s, with the transition from school to work a key marker in the developmental phases of adolescence and adulthood.[6,7] Biological and psychological markers of development can be problematic.[8,9] As the psychological youth–adult binary in youth studies has been challenged[10] sociological influences, ranging from globalisation, social structures and forms of marginalisation, have provided a more nuanced view of youth transitions.[11,12] Indeed, the notion of transitions has itself been challenged.[1,24]

In recent decades, the acceleration of individualisation and fluidity[13–16] in contemporary Western societies have prompted exploration of how young people make choices about their futures within the context of individualised, complex and prolonged transitions.[17–19] The timing and synchronization of transitions to various markers of adulthood have changed.[20,21] Adolescence has become protracted[20,22] as some conventional markers of the transition to adulthood continue well into the 40s and beyond for some people.[5,10,23]

The pathways now taken by young people are more complex and varied. Demographic and economic change have seen homeownership and starting families postponed if not abandoned. Fertility rates have fallen to the lowest level on record, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, but rooted in deeper, complex trends.[25] In 2018, young women were less likely to give birth than in the previous decade, with more women having their first child at older ages.[26] Other factors affecting birth rates include how young people see the future. Our 2021 Australian

Youth Barometer survey of young Australians aged 18–24 found that 31% were pessimistic or very pessimistic about living in a world in which environmental issues are addressed effectively, and almost a quarter (24%) felt pessimistic or very pessimistic about having children. At the same time, most young people said they wanted to live in secure housing, even when access to affordable housing is beyond their reach.[2]

Although adulthood was once "largely taken for granted as an endpoint of youth pathways"[35(p.80)], the metaphor of a transition to adulthood as a linear destination is problematic.[9] However, the transition metaphor still has currency by incorporating the non-linearity of life experiences.[11,27,28] Transition retains a common-sense notion—young people continue to get older and negotiate different stages of life, constituting a perceived "'reality' that the young have to manage".[29(p.219)] This paper considers the transitions of young Australian women in this vein.

Possible selves

A helpful theoretical frame for understanding our young women's education and career aspirations and their transitions from school is that of 'possible selves'. The theory of possible selves pertains to how individuals think about their potential and their future and about how they make sense of their lives in their own contexts.[30(p.954)]

Adolescents' possible selves are socially constructed, based on personal experiences and encounters with, and influences from, others, both within and beyond their control.[30,31] Adolescents' social contexts provide important feedback to them on whether a possible self is positively or negatively valued.[32] These contexts then shape adolescents' beliefs about what they would 'like to be': desirable or aspirational possible selves, those that are probable, more likely or expected, and those possible selves that are feared or to be avoided.[30,33]

Feelings, motivations, and actions in the present are closely connected to adolescents' imaginings of possible selves. When possible selves are 'elaborated', that is, they are vivid, detailed, and fully-formed, they can have a powerful motivating effect on adolescents' actions.[34] These possible selves can act as a roadmap for adolescents, guiding their steps towards a hoped-for possible self or away from a feared possible self.[35]

Within the career development domain, the theory of possible selves bears semblance to the career decision-making theory of 'horizons of action'.[36] That is, adolescents take actions and make decisions within social arenas that both limit and enable what careers appear possible, desirable or socially appropriate. What can be 'seen' within a young person's horizon can be considered as either spatial or temporal. For example, adolescents make career decisions through interactions with 'familiars'—family, friends, teachers at school, coaches, employers and mentors.[37] These people are 'close in distance' to young people and have a huge influence on their thinking and knowledge about different study and career pathways.[38,39] Distance can also be considered as temporal. A Year 10 students selecting senior school subjects based on aspirational tertiary study pathways, for example, may reject or not consider knowledge about competitive and precarious future employment markets because graduate employment is not relevant at their stage and seems too far into the future to be of concern.[40]

These theoretical perspectives allow us to explore the complexities involved in how our young women develop and navigate their possible career selves. There are many angles to how young women shape their career preferences and decisions, and to how they feel about their choices and take action in the present.

In our study, young women:

- Prefer tertiary education pathways that lead to traditional professional careers

- Imagine only a narrow range of possible selves, which represents real risks for eventual realisation given current employment market realities

- Feel constrained in their career choices and lack confidence about realising their possible selves given 'who they are or where they come from'

- Lack career direction and knowledge about what careers best suit them, despite their imaginations of possible selves

- Feel a high degree of career stress, triggered by career uncertainty, indecision, worries about job availability, and perceptions of constrained career choices

- Rely on others (family, peers, school communities) to help make career decisions and craft their possible selves

- Worry about others' approval of their career choices and possible selves

FINDINGS

Choosing traditional professional career pathways

The sociocultural contexts of our young women shape the number of possible selves that might have meaning for them through the normative values that make some outcomes acceptable, and some unacceptable.[30] For example, Australian schools have been shown to disproportionately focus on and promote students' academic outcomes and tertiary education destinations over and above other outcomes.[41–43] Careers advice provided to students while at school has been found to perpetuate this, implying that going to university will result in a 'good' career, while not going to university will result in a 'bad' one.[37,44–47] Such advice has also been found to demote vocational pathways, positioning them as second-tier options[41] or associated with the career aspirations of young men and students from low SES schools.[45,48] One consequence of this is that students aspire to and enrol in university degrees without knowing why they are doing so, which courses are best for them, or what types of employment can result from their qualifications.[49–51]

More young women envisioned going to university than young men

More young women articulated a career preference than young men

Young women appeared more ambitious and aspired to professional careers in greater numbers than young men

Career preferences revealed gender differences, gendered career stereotypes, and socio-economic differences

In our study, we see these sociocultural influences shaping the decisions that our young women are making about pursuing tertiary education and undertaking traditional professional careers.

Not unexpectedly, more young women envisioned going to university (83.4%) when compared with young men (75.2%) (see Figure 1). Since the 1990s, young Australian women have been more likely to hold university qualifications than men, and continue to obtain such qualifications in greater proportions.[52,53] Young women from high- SES schools were more likely to envision going to university (94%) than young women from mid (72.4%) and low (83.1%) SES schools.

Although female and male respondents were equally likely (both 3.8%) to intend to undertake a vocational course at a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college, young men were more interested in doing an apprenticeship (3.6%) than young women (0.7%) (see Figure 1). This is consistent with previous Australian research.[54–56]

A majority of young men and women (60%) named at least one future career preference when asked. More females articulated a career preference (64.7%) than males (55.2%). Respondents from low SES schools (66.2%) were more likely to nominate a career than students from mid (64.8%) or high SES schools (53.6%). A minority of respondents (7.6%) nominated a second or third career option ('I want to be a nurse/midwife, but would be a cake maker/decorator if I can't achieve that', or 'A sport teacher for me, but I might not get that so a personal trainer would be second'), with no significant differences between young women and men. Students from low and mid SES schools were more likely to nominate alternative career paths (10.5% and 7.8% respectively) than students from high SES schools (6.3%).

Figure 1: Further education aspirations
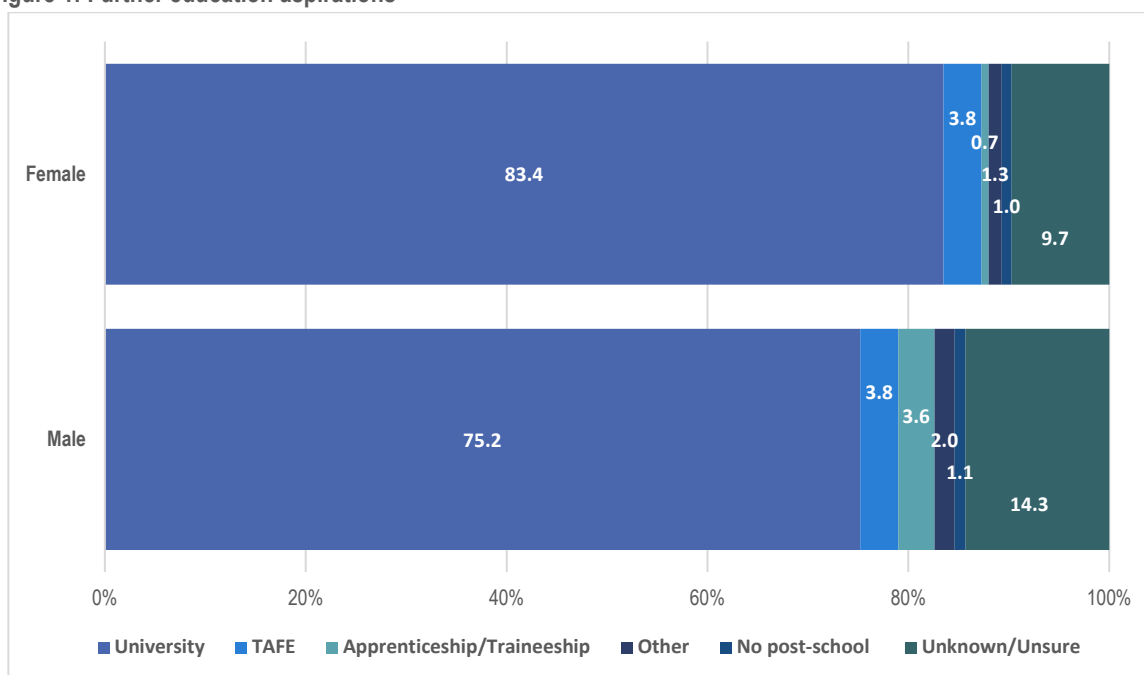
Young women appeared more ambitious than their male counterparts, with 81.8% aspiring to professional careers, compared with 67.6% of young men. In the OECD's recent international study of more than 600,000 teenagers' career aspirations, Australian teenagers were found to be more ambitious in their career aspirations compared with those from other countries. For example, more than half of participating young Australians (51.5%) expected to be in occupations that were classified as managerial or professional in their working futures, compared with, for example, Swiss (24.6%) and Dutch (44.2%) teenagers.[57] In the same study, Australian girls were found to be significantly more ambitious (57.4%) when compared with Australian boys (45.9%). These findings are similar to those of recent Australian studies, where higher numbers of young women have been found to aspire to tertiary education and professional career pathways than young men.[58–60]

The sociocultural contexts of our young women also shape their expectations of and for their future lives. These expectations may be a combination of objective, subjective and personalised elements. For example, a young woman might have a good understanding of graduate employment opportunities relative to her preferred tertiary study pathways (objective), but feel that she won't be competitive for such opportunities given her disadvantaged background (subjective), yet be unwilling to invest in different co- or extra-curricular activities to improve her employability due to limited resources (personal). Or a young woman from an advantaged background with parents who are both in professional roles (objective) will expect that she will achieve her career goals because of this (subjective), and as a result, reject or not consider advice from others about future employment opportunities and the need to develop her employability more broadly (personalised).

These expectations exert a powerful influence over what young women believe is probable in their futures. When the focus of careers advice from both parents and schools is on occupation selection, as is the current norm in Australian adolescent contexts[61], then certain career images and expectations are reinforced. Recent Australian reviews of adolescents' education-to-employment transitions have found that careers education in schools, as well parental advice, are trapped in old paradigms of occupations and work that promulgate a long-term, single-profession career as the ideal.[47(p.57)] The recent OECD study of teenagers' career aspirations also revealed that many held hopes for 'dream' careers that were largely "20th century, and even 19th century, occupations".[62(p.12)] Such careers were viewed as prestigious and were assumed to promise financial security and longevity. From this study, 52% of Australian girls and 42% of Australian boys expected to work in one of the ten most commonly

cited jobs by age 30, including doctor, business manager, engineer, lawyer, veterinarian, architect or psychologist.[62]

Consistent with these findings, the career preferences of young men and women in our study were concentrated in a few areas (see Figure 2). More than half of all males (50.3%) and nearly two-thirds of females (65.4%) nominated careers that aligned with the ten most popular occupations identified by the OECD study. Nine out of ten of these career pathways require tertiary qualifications.

Figure 2: Career preferences
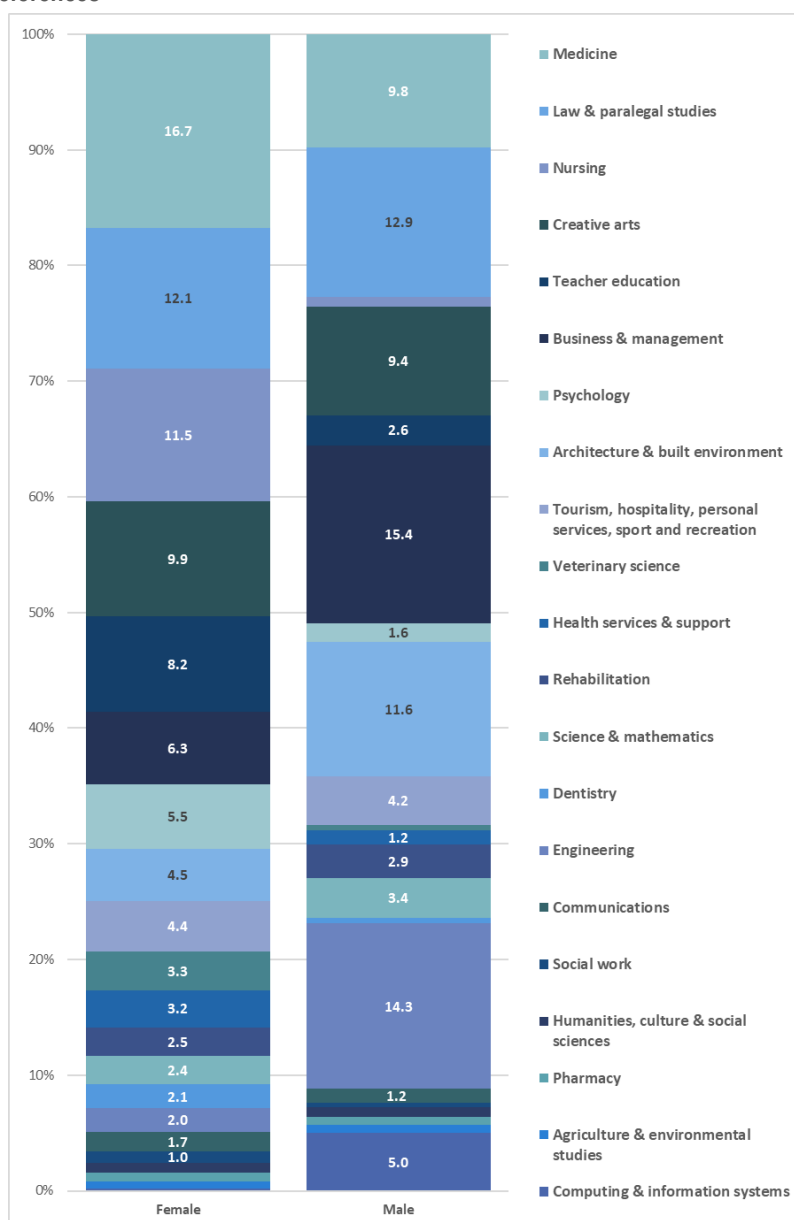
Gender differences were evident in nominated career preferences (see Figures 1 & 2). More than half of our young women (50.3%) chose careers concentrated in areas such as medicine (16.7%), law and paralegal studies (12.1%), nursing (11.5%) and the creative arts (9.9%). In comparison, more than half of young men nominated careers (54.1%) in areas such as business and management (15.4%), engineering (14.3%), law and paralegal studies (12.9%), and architecture and the built environment (11.6%). Confirming previous Australian research[55,58,63], career choices also reflected gender stereotypes. Very few young men nominated nursing (0.8%) and teaching (2.6%), which have traditionally been seen as careers for women, and only 2% of young women nominated engineering as a career choice.

Although only 4.2% of young men and 4.4% of young women nominated careers related to the broad category of 'tourism, hospitality, personal services, sport and recreation', these choices again revealed gender differences. Of the respondents nominating careers in this category, 61.3% of young men aspired to be sportspersons, compared with only 5.3% of young women. Young women were more likely to nominate being a beauty therapist (23.7%), travel attendant (15.8%) or hairdresser (13.2%). There were no young men interested in these careers at all.

Respondents' nominated career preferences also reflected socio-economic differences (see Figure 3). Young women from high SES schools were more likely to nominate medicine as their preferred career (25%), than female students from low SES (14%) and mid SES schools (11%). Females from low and mid SES schools were more likely to nominate nursing (19% and 13% respectively) than their counterparts from higher SES schools (5%). Although young men, irrespective of SES, favoured business and management, engineering, and medical careers, students from higher SES schools were more likely to select business and management (20.4%) and medicine (15.7%), with engineering the top choice for males attending mid SES (17%) and low SES schools (21%).

Figure 3: Career preferences by SES
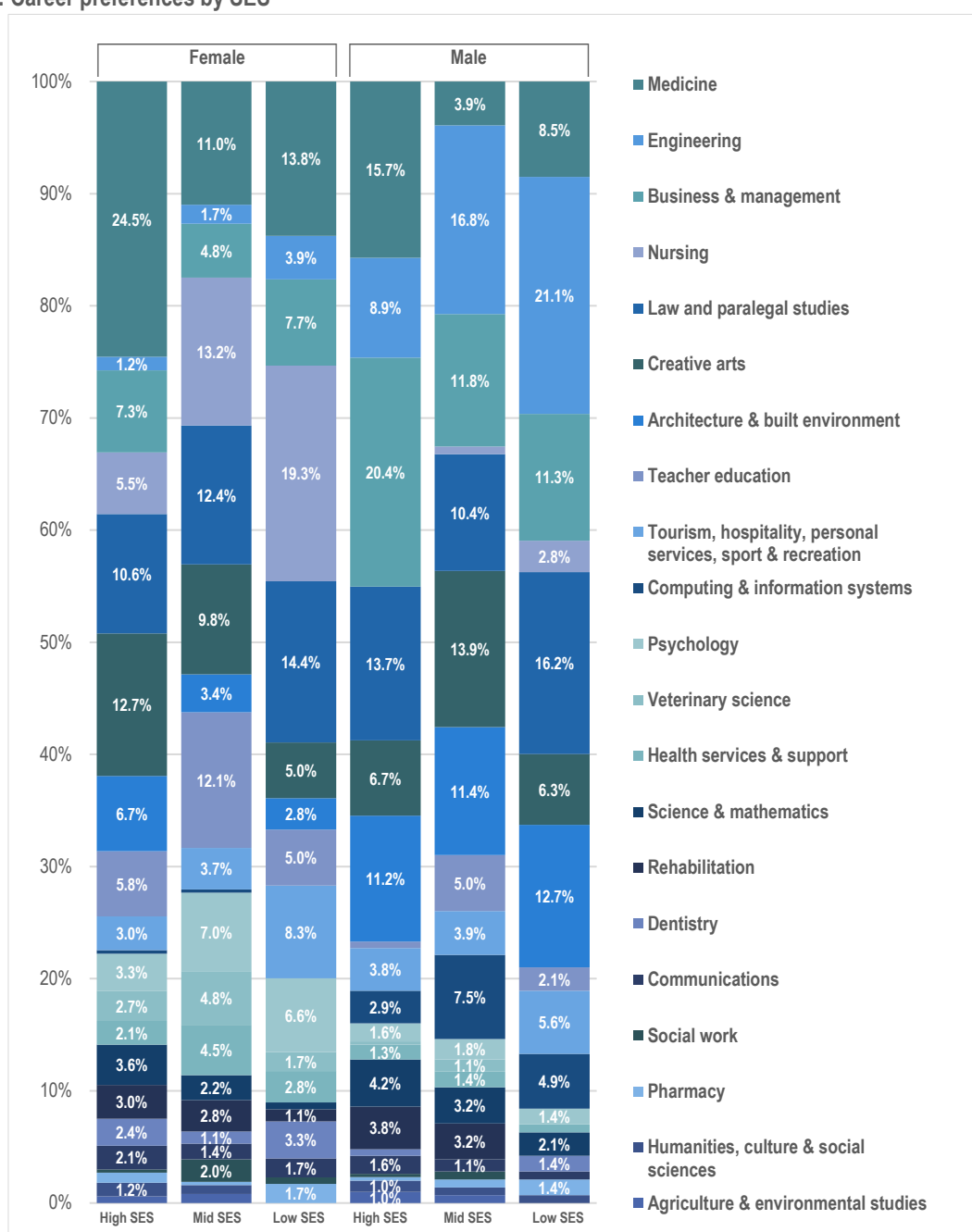
Careers out of control?

Looking at our young women's career preferences, their expectations of linear and prestigious pathways appear stubbornly trapped in the past. In CYPEP's previous discussion paper, *Life, Disrupted: Young People, Education and Employment Before and After COVID-19*[64], we described how traditional images of stable, long-term, professional and hierarchical careers have their historical roots in the post-war global landscape of uncompetitive, long-term and stable employment from the 1950s to the 1970s. To ensure productivity, efficiency and continuity, organisations at the time secured long-term commitments from employees through the creation of career structures and systems that were imbued with a "logic of advancement".[65(p.305)] These strategies saw employees moving up organizational hierarchical ladders through well-defined positions and being rewarded with increasingly higher levels of pay and status. As such, a career was conceived as better than a job which may "not lead anywhere, it [was] just something a person [got] paid for"[66(p.52)] and inferred prestige, as well as progression and advancement.[67]

Overall, young women's career preferences appeared misaligned with the nature of current employment markets and work profiles

A high proportion of young women believed that they had taken future jobs and employment potential into consideration when making career decisions

Females from high SES schools were more likely to be worried about their future employability than those from lower SES schools

Yet, these types of career imaginaries may no longer be relevant. Even before COVID-19, other disruptions, including rapid technological advancement, climate change and, in some countries, ageing workforces, have destabilised global employment markets and reshaped work profiles. These changes have seen increasing numbers of people engaged in transient, insecure, under-employed and short-term work.[68] Contemporary careers are more likely to represent flexible, multi-role and multi-employer work portfolios as a result.[69,70]

For young women, knowledge about current tertiary education, training and employment markets, and about the challenges they need to navigate, are vitally important. Young women have been found to be more vulnerable in these markets, despite their higher levels of education and greater employment prospects than in times past. For example, in 2021, both women and men aged 15–24 years were less likely to be in full-time employment than their older counterparts; however, only 35% of young women were employed full-time compared with more than half of young men (51%).[71]

With an overall gender pay gap of 13.8%[72], holding tertiary or post-school training qualifications doesn't necessarily advantage women either. For example, in 2021, men (15–74 years) with post-school qualifications were more likely to be employed (81%) than women (75%). Of those working, men were more likely to be in full-time employment (69%) than women (45%). For tertiary qualified graduates, although short- and medium-term outcomes for men and women are similar, female graduates earn less than male graduates. In the three years from 2018 to 2021, the gender pay gap in graduate median salaries increased from 4.7% to 6.1%.[73(p.6)] Further, more female graduates reported underutilisation of their skills and qualifications (20%) than males (18%).[74(p.21)]

Once established in their careers, women continue to be disadvantaged relative to men. In 2019-20, Australian women dominated occupations that are hallmarked by higher rates of casualisation and part-time work, and are most vulnerable to severe changes in employment markets. These include roles in clerical and administrative sectors (72.7%), community and personal services (70.3%), and sales (58.1%).[52] Men were almost twice as likely to be in managerial positions (61.4%) than women (38.6%).[75]

Women are significantly more likely to alter their career aspirations, pathways and working hours to take on family roles. In 2020, for parents whose youngest child was under six years of age, three in five employed mothers (59.1%) worked part-time. This compared with less than one in ten employed fathers (7.9%).[76] Additionally, for those parents whose youngest child was aged between 6 and 14 years, almost half of all employed mothers (47.7%) worked part-time, compared with less than one in ten employed fathers (8.7%). Flexible work arrangements, coupled with rigid policies around family support, appear to entrench women in gendered roles and less secure work.[77]

How much knowledge do our young women actually have about these employment realities, and how is such knowledge, or lack thereof, influencing their possible selves? Despite employment precarity, young women do not seem to be as concerned about their future employability and employment prospects as we might expect. For example, a high proportion of our young women believed that they had thought about future jobs and employment potential when making career decisions (69.5%). Further, they expressed only some concern about their future employability and employment prospects, and were less concerned about these when compared with young men (see Figure 4). More young men (37.7%; 67.6% including neutral responses) worried they would not be employable when they finished studying than young women (31.1%; 57.7% including neutral responses). Young men were also more worried that there were not many jobs in their preferred career (31.5%; 65.2% including neutral responses) or worried that there were too many people going for the same career and jobs (29.1%; 60.7% including neutral responses). This compared with 29.5% (57.4% including neutral responses) and 26.6% (53% including neutral responses) of young women, respectively.

Figure 4: Young women's concerns about job and career prospects
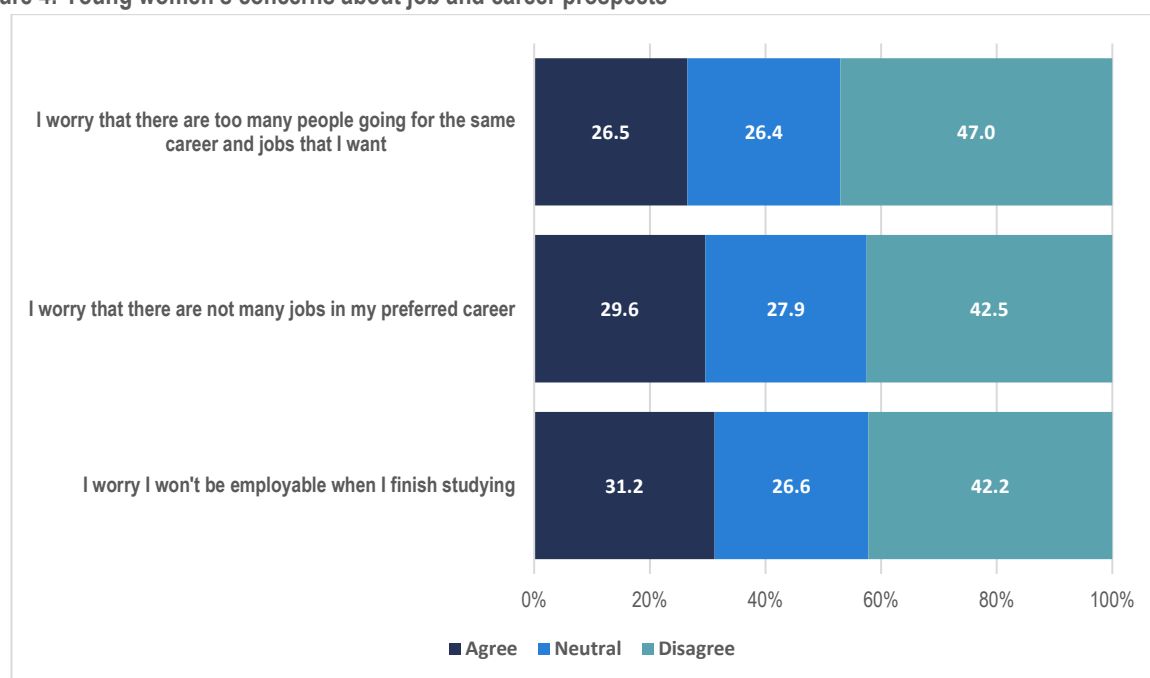
Previous research has shown that students from low SES schools appear to have greater concerns about their employability than students from high SES schools.[78,79] Yet, in our study, females from high SES schools were more likely to be worried that they wouldn't be employable (34.5%) than students from mid SES (29.4%) and low SES schools (27.6%). Students from higher SES schools may have been connecting their perceptions of their employability with the perceived status of different careers, as a higher proportion (44.4%) were more worried that their studies would not lead to a 'real' career than were students from mid SES (37.3%) and low SES schools (32.9%).

Despite lower levels of concern overall about future employment, young women who expressed concerns about job availability were also worried about their employability. More than half (55.4%) of young women who worried that there

were not many jobs in their preferred career also worried that they would not be employable when they finished studying. In contrast, only 17.5% of those who did not worry that there were not many jobs in their preferred career worried that they would not be employable when they finished studying.

Overall, there appears to be a disconnect between our young women's career preferences and views of their employability, and the realities of uncertain future employment markets and changing work profiles. We don't know whether young women expect to achieve these actual aspirations. What we do know is that their imaginations of possible selves are narrow and represent a real risk for them and their eventual realisation of career goals.[37,80]

Constrained career choices

Our young women expressed some concern about their perceived control over career choices. Approximately three-quarters believed that their career choices suited their strengths and interests (76.5%) and reflected who they wanted to be as a person (73.1%). Yet responses across other items appeared to contradict these feelings of control and confidence (see Figure 5). More than half of all young women in our study (57.8%; 80.9% including neutral responses) believed that they had fewer career choices because of who they were or where they had come from. Of these respondents, nearly half (44%) also believed that their 'career choices did not suit their strengths and interests', and more than half (58.3%) did not believe that their family, friends, culture or background would help them achieve their career choices. Further, less than one-third (30.9%) of all young women expressed confidence in their culture, background and beliefs being assets in their future careers.

Young women were not confident that their background was an asset that connected them to their future careers

More than half of young women believed that their career choices were constrained because of who they were or where they had come from

Unexpectedly, young women from higher SES schools were more likely to be concerned than others

Responses also reflected socio-economic differences. For example, students from lower SES schools felt the least inhibited by their backgrounds and the range of career choices that they felt they had. Nearly two-thirds of females from both high (61.8%) and mid SES schools (63.9%) felt that they had fewer career choices because of who they were or where they came from, while a little more than one-third of females from low SES schools felt the same (37.8%). Almost half (48.5%) of the young women from low SES schools expressed a strong belief that their personal networks helped them to achieve their career goals. This proportion was slightly higher than that of females from high SES schools (47.9%) and substantially higher than that of females from mid SES schools (32.4%). Past studies may help to explain these confidence levels. Previous research has shown that adolescents from low SES schools can use social and cultural capitals transmitted through their family, school and community networks to counteract perceived social and economic constraints, and can aspire to and achieve 'unexpected' education and career outcomes.[81–83]

Nevertheless, there were some young women who felt that they had missed opportunities to maximise their potential to achieve the career they wanted (27.4%; 59.8% including neutral responses). Contrary to expectations, females from higher SES schools felt this more keenly (32.1%) than their counterparts from low SES (21.8%) and mid SES schools (25.2%). Irrespective of SES, a high proportion (77%) of respondents who felt that they had missed opportunities to maximise their potential to achieve the career they wanted also worried that they had fewer career choices because of who they were or where they had come from.

Figure 5: Perceived constraints on young women's career choices
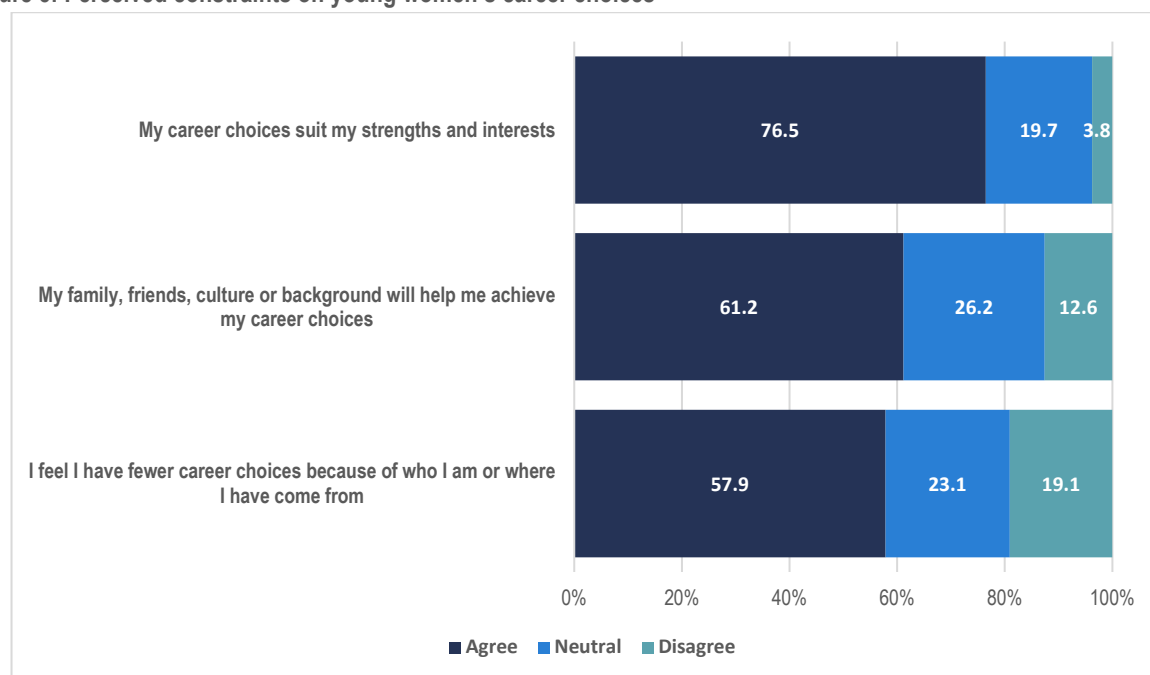
The certainty of uncertainty

Nearly one-third of young women expressed strong concerns about their future career direction and their knowledge of what careers best suited them

Young women from high SES schools were less confident about their career direction than those from lower SES schools

Despite concerns about their career direction, most young women felt capable of making different career decisions when faced with uncertainty

As transitions have become non-linear and labour markets more competitive and fluid, uncertainty has become more prevalent in the lives of many young people. A recent OECD study of teenagers' career aspirations[80] defined career uncertainty as the inability, as a teenager, to articulate a career ambition or occupational expectation for adult life. The study found that uncertainty in career paths had become much more common among young people over time, with disadvantaged students more uncertain than advantaged students, boys more uncertain than girls, and lower academic performers more uncertain than higher performers.[57] Although disadvantaged and low-performing students were found to be most uncertain in their career paths, career uncertainty of young people from the highest socio-economic backgrounds and the highest quartile of academic performance had grown most rapidly between 2000 and 2018.[80]

In our study, young women's career uncertainty was expressed in varied ways. At face value, most of our young women presented as confident about their futures, with 60.1% feeling confident that their studies would lead to a future career and 76.5% believing that their career choices suited their strengths and interests. Yet, contradictions in their responses across items hinted that this confidence was possibly a facade, masking deeper feelings of uncertainty and confusion and a frailty of their possible selves. For example, while confident they were heading in the 'right' direction, one-third (33.5%) reported not knowing

what careers best suited them (57.9% including neutral responses). Further, many expressed strong concerns about future career directions, with 39.3% (63.6% including neutral responses) worried that their studies would not lead to a 'real' career and 40.1% (66.3% including neutral responses) often feeling they had no career direction.

Contrary to the OECD findings, those from high SES schools appeared slightly less confident about their futures when compared with their peers from other schools. For example, more females from high SES schools were worried that their studies would not lead to a 'real' career (44.4%) than those from low (32.9%) or mid SES schools (37.3%). They were also slightly more likely to often feel they had no career direction (40.5%) compared with others from low SES (39.6%) and mid SES schools (39.9%). Of interest, although females from high SES schools were more likely to report that their family, carer or guardian had provided the information and support they needed to pursue their career choices (66.4%) than those from low SES schools (54%), they were also more likely to report contradictory feelings of often not having enough information to make a career choice (32.4%) or of being overwhelmed by the career information and choices that they faced (22%). In contrast to previous Australian research[45,84], fewer females from low SES schools reported often feeling that they don't have enough information to make a career choice (22.6%) or feeling overwhelmed by the career information and choices that they faced (17.3%).

Contrary to previous research that connects individuals' career-related confidence and expectations with engagement in career-oriented activities, such as information seeking and skill development[85], there appeared a degree of senselessness to our young women's participation in similar activities. More than one-third of our young women (34.1%) felt that they were studying and taking on activities without any sense of purpose or career direction. A high proportion of these respondents (70.4%) were also more likely to report often having no career direction. Past studies may help to explain how extra-curricular or employability-related activities can be undertaken by adolescents without any connection to career preferences or future employment markets.[40,86–88]

Slight differences were observed based on socio-economic background, with students from high SES schools more likely to feel that they were studying and taking on activities without any sense of purpose or career direction (36.1%) compared with their counterparts from low SES (28.8%) and mid SES schools (34.6%). This may be related to greater proportions of students from high SES schools being able to afford, access and undertake different employability-related activities than those from lower SES schools.[89–91]

Figure 6: Young women's concerns about career direction
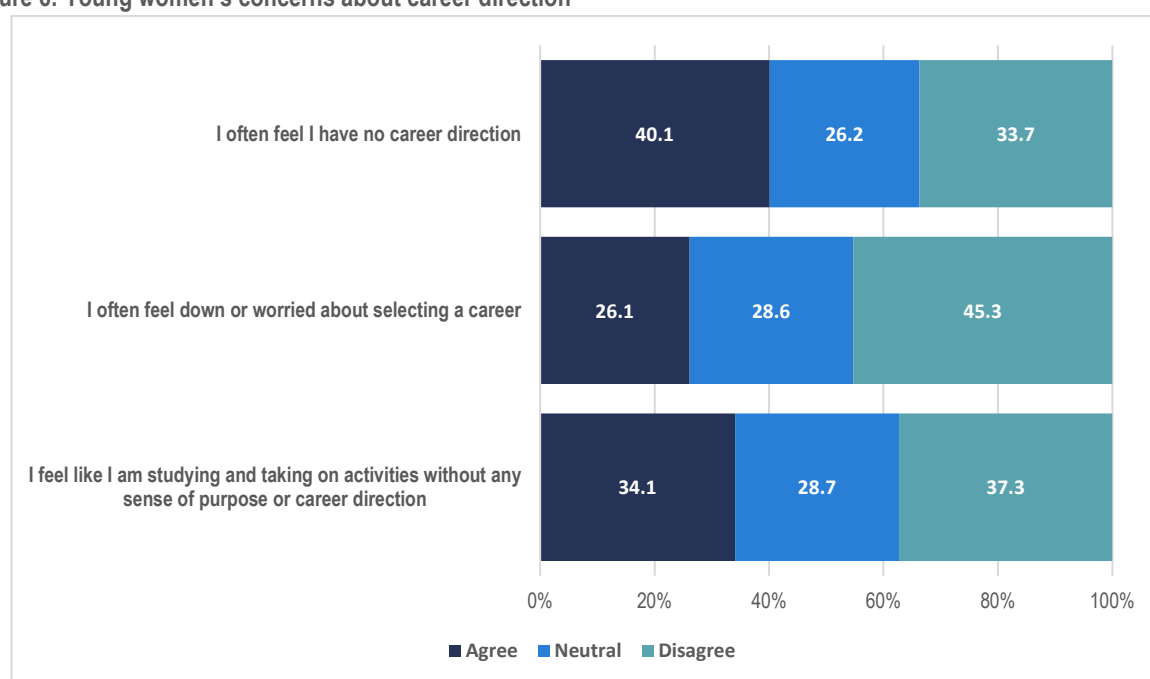
A proportion of young women in our study (35.3%) chose not to articulate a preferred career, and using the OECD's definition outlined above, may be suffering career uncertainty because of this. Yet, being able to name a preferred career was not necessarily associated with positive feelings of having a career direction or being decisive. As shown in Figure 7, of those young women who believed that they had a career preference in mind, more than half (55.6 %) agreed that they often felt they had no career direction. No SES-related differences were detected in the relationship between career preferences and career direction and certainty.

Figure 7: Proportion of young women often feeling they have no career direction according to whether or not they have identified a preferred career

'I often feel I have no career direction'

■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree
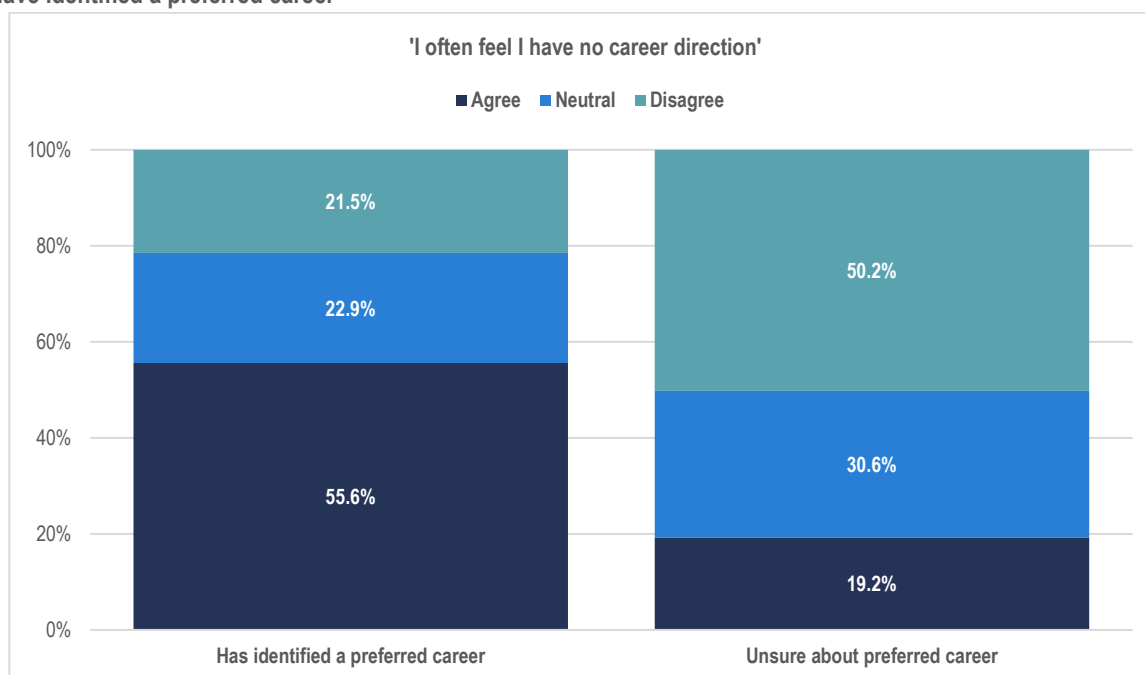
Given their concerns about career direction, it would be expected that our young women might be concerned about the precarity of future employment markets and their 'mainly unknowable' futures.[94(p.98)] Yet, similar to the relative lack of concern about future employability, there was only some concern that career paths would not always be clear and known (20.2%). There were no differences according to SES. There was even less concern from young women about what would happen if they couldn't meet their career goals exactly as planned (15.4%). Young women from high SES schools were slightly more concerned about this (16.9%) than were those from mid (15.2%) and low SES schools (12.8%). Further, more than half (58.8%) of young women who declared that they accepted that their career path would not always be clear and known, also felt able to make different career decisions and move forward if their preferred career choice was not possible. Even the young women who did not accept that their career path would not always be linear (45.7%) felt able to make different career decisions and move forward if their preferred career choice was not possible. Similarly, 62% of young women who felt able to make decisions about their future career also felt able to change their career choice if their preferred one was not possible.

Of interest, females from low SES schools reported less acceptance of future uncertainty and lower levels of flexibility about future career decisions than their counterparts from higher SES schools. For example, 70.5% of females from high SES schools and 66.6% of those from mid SES schools accepted that their career path would not always be clear and known, compared with 57.7% of respondents from low SES schools.

Stressed out

Career distress can be a by-product of many career-related activities including career indecision or uncertainty, needing to compromise career aspirations, job loss, poor career preparation, feeling unprepared to make career decisions, a perceived lack of support from others, or having unrealistic career goals that don't match individual capabilities.[95] Career distress can be a common cause of stress in educational settings and involves a range of negative feelings such as "helplessness, depression, stress, lack of purpose, anxiety, blame and despair".[95(p.733)]

Nearly one-third of young women expressed a high degree of career stress

Having career aspirations did not necessarily mitigate feelings of career distress

Feeling pressured to select the 'right' career was associated with feelings of career stress

Perceptions that helpful opportunities had been missed or not experienced, or of senseless activity with no career direction, were also associated with feelings of career stress

In our study, young women expressed career distress in varied ways. Overall, nearly one-third (26%; 54.6% including neutral responses) of all female respondents expressed a high degree of career stress, reporting that they often felt down or worried about selecting a career. Those from high SES schools (27.2%) were slightly more likely to have concerns than their counterparts from low SES (22.8%) and mid SES schools (26.6%).

Previous Australian research has shown that adolescents' career indecision and uncertainty are associated with career concerns and anxiety.[96–98] Similarly, in our study, career uncertainty was associated with career stress. Young women who reported not knowing what careers best suited them (33.5%), or who worried that their studies would not lead to a 'real' career (39.4%), or who felt that they had no career direction (40.1%), were also more likely to 'often feel down or worried about selecting a career (46.1%, 39.7%, and 50.9% respectively). Further, although only 17.8% of our young women reported feeling stress or pressure to select the 'right' career, more than half of these respondents also often felt down or worried about selecting a career (59.1%). There were no statistically significant differences noted by SES.
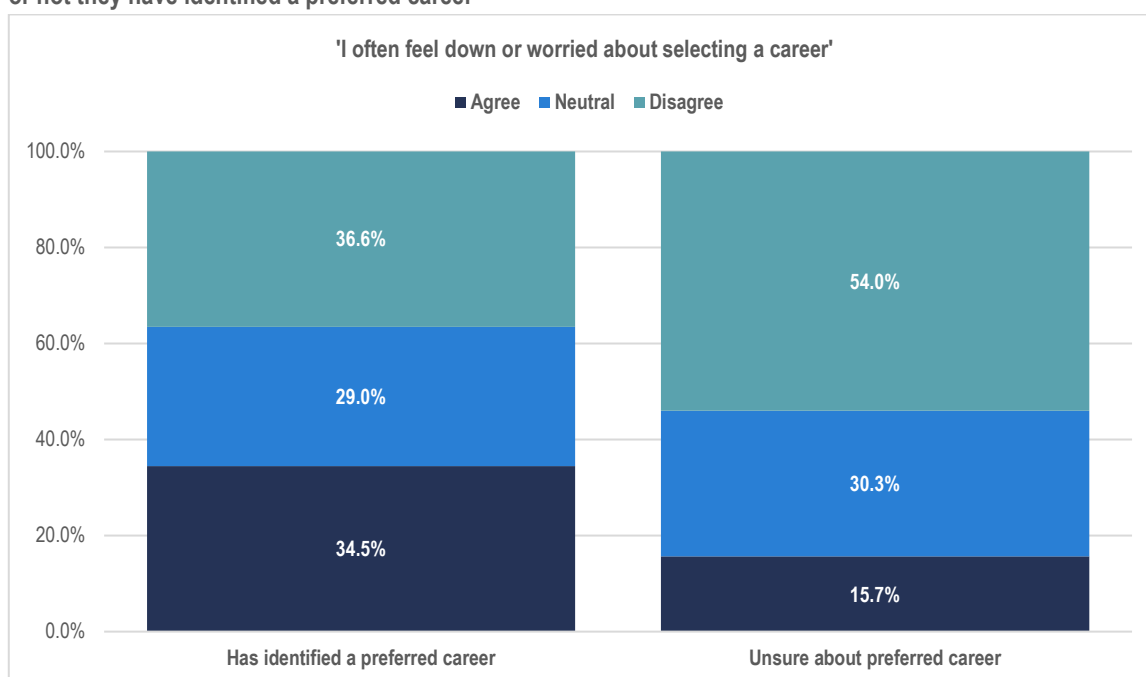
Contrary to expectations, having career aspirations did not necessarily mitigate feelings of career stress. More than one-third of young women (34.5%) who had a preferred career also reported often feeling down or worried about selecting a career (see Figure 8). Again, there were no statistically significant differences noted by SES.

Worries about a range of different career-related factors were closely associated with feelings of career stress. These included worries about future job availability and perceptions of constrained career choices. More than half (55.4%) of young women who worried that there were not many jobs in their preferred career also worried that they would not be employable when they finished studying. Almost one-third (32%) of young women who felt that they had fewer career choices because of who they were or where they had come from also felt down or worried about selecting a career.

Perceptions that helpful opportunities had been missed or not experienced, as well as feelings of senseless activity with no career direction, were also closely associated with feelings of career stress. Of those respondents who believed that they had missed opportunities to maximise their potential to achieve the career they wanted, nearly half (49.7%) also felt down or worried about selecting a career. Further, of the young women who felt that they were studying and taking on activities without any sense of purpose or career direction, a high proportion (70.4%) were also more likely to report often having no career direction, and more than half (51.2%) reported feeling down or worried about selecting a career.

Figure 8: Proportion of young women often feeling down or worried about selecting a career according to whether or not they have identified a preferred career

'I often feel down or worried about selecting a career'

■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree

Has identified a preferred career: Agree 34.5%, Neutral 29.0%, Disagree 36.6%

Unsure about preferred career: Agree 15.7%, Neutral 30.3%, Disagree 54.0%

Expectations and influence of others

Young women's career choices and decisions are strongly influenced by others

*Other people's expectations of young women's career choices often translated into a lack of career direction*

More than half of all young women were worried others wouldn't approve of their career choices

Less than half of all young women expressed confidence in their personal networks helping them to achieve their career goals

There is a large body of existing research into the strong connections between social influences, particularly by families, and adolescents' career choices and decision-making.[99] In our study, these connections were obvious, with approximately half of all female respondents reporting that they based their career choices on what others expected of them (49.1%; 74.7% including neutral responses) or were choosing certain careers to please others (54.6%; 79.8% including neutral responses). These responses appeared to contradict young women's relatively strong beliefs that others trusted their ability to make the right career decisions (68.3%) or that they felt in control of their own feelings, emotions and decisions regarding career choices (68.5%). Perceptions of self-control and trust from others were more likely to trigger career decisions that met other people's expectations or pleased them. For example, more than half of respondents who felt that they had others' trust were also more likely to base their career choices on what others expected of them (51.9%) or choose certain careers to please others (57.8%). Further, a majority of those who felt in control of their own career decisions were also more likely to base their career choices on what others expected of them (58.8%) or to choose certain careers to please others (64.5%).

Previous research has found connections between family pressure or interference and poor career visioning and decision-making abilities.[100,101] In our study, other people's expectations of young women's career choices often translated into a lack of career direction. More than half (51.5%) of young women who thought that their career choices were based on what others expected of them also felt they had no career direction. In contrast, only 28.1% of women who did not think that their career choices were based on what others expected of them felt this way. Similarly, more than half (52.6%) of those who reported choosing certain careers to please others also felt they had no career direction. Only 27.7% of those who did not choose certain careers to please others felt this way. These associations held regardless of school SES.

Figure 9: Young women's perceptions of the extent to which others influence their career choices
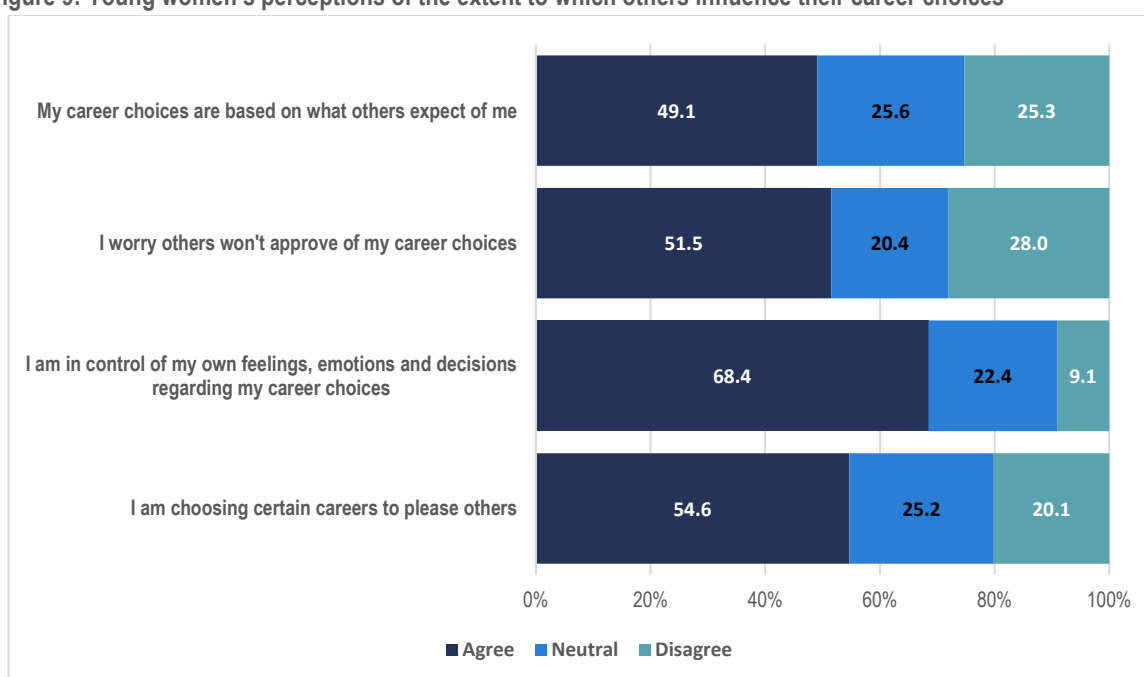
Less than half of all young women in our study expressed confidence in their personal networks helping them to achieve their career goals (42%). Unexpectedly, and contrary to previous research[102], females from high SES schools were slightly less confident in their personal networks (47.9%) than those from low SES schools (48.5%).

Previous research has highlighted how influences from others about young people's career choices can be positive, or can exert negative pressure and result in feelings of stress and anxiety.[103–107] For example, a study of Canadian adolescent females reported specifically on the pressure exerted by parents during career conversations with their daughters that resulted in the girls feeling 'frustrated, confused and inferior'.[108(p.158)] A US study of adolescent females from high SES backgrounds, found that both the school and family environments exerted pressure on young women to reach 'their maximum potential' by achieving certain career goals that were expected of them, resulting in feelings of anxiety.[109(p.14)] In our study, female respondents expressed strong concerns about the career choices that they were making and the reactions of others such as parents, teachers and peers, with more than half worried others wouldn't approve of their career choices (51.5%; 72% including neutral responses).

Concerns about other people's expectations were also strongly connected with feelings of career stress. More than one-third (39.3%) of the young women who worried others would not approve of their career choices, also reported often feeling down or worried about selecting a career. Additionally, 70% of young women who often felt down or worried about selecting a career also often worried their career choices were based on what others expected of them. Similarly, 76.1% of young women who often felt down or worried about selecting a career also reported that they were 'choosing certain careers to please others'.

DISCUSSION

This discussion paper reveals the complexities involved in how young women develop and navigate their possible career selves. It also highlights the diverse career-related emotions, beliefs and experiences they have as they do this. In one sense, the findings are not unexpected. Previous research has shown that young people prepare for future employment landscapes and craft their career selves in complex ways that mix confidence and anxiety, optimism and pessimism.[110] However, what is concerning are the often deep contradictions in our young women's responses. These contradictions suggest that their possible selves are fragile and that they lack confidence in their social contexts to help them resolve this.

At face value, the young women in our study have clear career preferences that are ambitious and professional in nature, and they appear confident in their decisions. They report feeling largely in control of their own decision-making—that their choices suit their strengths and interests, as well as reflect who they want to be as people. Most also indicate that they understand future employment markets, and that they have taken these into consideration when choosing careers. Their future employability, in the main, appears of little concern, as does the likely uncertainty of their future employment. They feel agile and able to make different decisions as needs arise. This may be assuredness, or it may be naivety.

It's not the risks of future employment precarity or uncertainty that are shaping young women's career narratives. In fact, most have possible selves that seem disconnected from current and future realities in some way. Theoretically, this disconnect could be between the individual and the global - 'two track thinking' - when it comes to envisioning the future.[111,112] Our young women may not yet realise the need to reconcile future education and employment challenges with their possible selves, or even know how to do this.[87] Or, it may be that the horizon of starting graduate employment is just too distant in the future to trigger elaboration of their possible selves.[40]

So, if it is not these macro-level contexts[113,114] that are influencing young women, what is?

We know that our young women are significantly influenced by the people immediately around them—they are telling us this themselves. This is not necessarily unexpected. Previous research shows that girls' possible selves are more sensitive to their social contexts.[32] However, in the face of others' influence and expectations, our young women are also telling us that they are feeling career stress and uncertainty. Let's unpack this a little more.

Misinformation is preventing our young women from making the connections between macro-level contexts, such as changing global markets and emergent new areas of work and their possible selves. Their possible selves have little chance of being explored, narrowed and elaborated to become probable selves if the information they receive about their career options is limited or not correct. As has been reported elsewhere[64,115], advice provided to adolescents through careers education in secondary school must improve. One school leader at a high SES, all female secondary school 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 while still at school.*

Placing our young women in positions where they hear and internalise such messages is problematic. We urge school leaders to challenge their school communities' assumptions about the realities of different occupations, career pathways and employment markets and to consider how they apply these preconceptions to young people.[64] We also urge them to reject common practices of funnelling post-school education and career-related information to students in ways that bias for gender, socio-economic status, academic performance or race.[37,44–46]

Poor or limited information passed to our young women through relations with others 'imposes' possible selves that are limited in and of themselves. For example, the career preferences favoured by a high number of our girls reflect the effects of gender stereotyping. They also speak strongly to images of success, security and prestige that can only emerge from the normative values of their social contexts. These messages also need to change. It is incumbent upon school communities and families to broaden their notions of what constitutes a career, as well as what constitutes success.[116–118] We suggest that young people are better served by meaningful discussions and interventions that "further [their own] self-making, identity shaping, and career constructing".[119(p.15)]

Contradictions within the young women's responses provide us with an opportunity to wonder whether, in some ways, they know that their possible selves may be impossible. The young women tell us that they are on track with their career decisions and have clear preferences, yet they also have strong concerns about lacking career direction. They tell us that they feel their possible career selves suit their strengths and interests, but also feel they have constrained career choices, or don't know what careers actually do suit them. It is important to note that we are not suggesting that our young women shouldn't have possible selves that may be impossible in the first instance. Research suggests that aspirations are an important part of exploring and questioning possible selves, before narrowing and elaborating probable selves.[120] But why are these possible selves creating feelings of uncertainty, low self-esteem and stress?

The answers lie within the findings that involve the influence of others. A majority of our young women admit to choosing careers because of other people's expectations or reactions, with these choices not necessarily resulting in positive feelings of having career direction or confidence. Further, concerns about others' expectations or reactions are strongly associated with feelings of career stress. As discussed previously, aspects of these findings are not necessarily new. Past studies have associated school and family pressure about achieving certain career goals with young women's feelings of stress and anxiety.[108,109] What may be new, though, is the perspective of deceit. The findings suggest that our young women's possible selves are not their own, but are actually someone else's. The contradiction lies in the young women owning these selves, but being aware, on some level, that it is a ruse—that their possible selves are not honest, or ones they want, or believe in, and it is this that is causing them stress.

We are not certain that our young women are being deceitful, but when you bring together all of the macro-, meso- and micro-level factors and consider them as a whole, our young women need help to craft their career narratives and their transitions from school.

That help starts with better informed, broader and more comprehensive careers support from school communities and family.

A different way of thinking about careers support

One way to understand and respond to the multidimensional nature of the formation of young women's future selves is the graduate capital model.[113] While this has been applied mostly in higher education contexts, the model has salience here. It describes five forms of capital related to graduate employability: human capital, social capital, cultural capital, identity capital, and psychological capital. Human capital refers to "the knowledge and skills that graduates obtain to prepare for employment." Social capital refers to "social relationships and networks with significant other[s], including family, peers, higher education institutions, and social organisations that graduates use to access the labour market. Cultural capital refers to "cultural-valued knowledge, dispositions and insights typically valued within organisations and which graduates need to embody in order to signal their attractiveness to employers" such as their "'personality package' that includes accent, body language, and humour." Identity capital is "how individuals are able to make active self-investments towards their future employment. Their efforts could be used to form their personal identity and are also presented as form of narrative", such as in their curriculum vitae. Psychological capital "includes

capacities that enable graduates to overcome barriers, adapt to new situations, and respond proactively to inevitable career challenges", which is "increasingly important because of the intense competition and uncertainty regarding employment in today's labour market".[121(p.396)]

These forms of capital provide signposts to how we might respond to the challenges facing young women today by asking the following questions: Is their human capital encompassing knowledge and skills for employment aligned to current job markets? What is the nature and influence of social capital in shaping their constructions of future selves, including family, peers, schools? To what extent are they cultivating cultural capital in the form of knowledge, dispositions and insights valued by imagined employers? Are these soft skills being adequately developed during their schooling? What sort of opportunities do they have to make active self-investments towards their future employment and to form their own identity? To what extent are they developing resilience (psychological capital) to respond to their anxiety and bounce back from adversity, and what role can others have in supporting them to bounce back?

An additional factor in the negotiation of employability is agentic capital. This capacity encompasses "a capacity to identify one's strengths and weaknesses and know how to interlink various resources to sell their ultimate image . . . evidenced to be determined by the graduates' goals, identities, beliefs, and interests".[122] According to studies into older students, having a "clearer career goal could actively decide how to overcome constraints imposed by their personal circumstances and workplace characteristics".[122] Our findings suggest developing such goals is fraught with misalignments—between the expectations and advice of familial, school, and social networks, as well as between the students and their understanding of the future job market. Arguably, targeted efforts across all forms of capital could be beneficial, particularly in enabling young women to construct their own future selves.

Nevertheless, real social and economic challenges remain, some of which continue to be deeply baked into contemporary society. Such challenges extend from labour market fluidity and persistent gendered differences in the ways young Australians experience worlds of work. At times, the dynamics of the labour market and gendered differences coalesce resulting in young women experiencing different work outcomes from men.

CONCLUSION

The results of this survey are complex and dense. They suggest a multiplicity of forces and factors shaping the development of our young women's possible selves. It is worth reflecting on just a handful of them and the implications for those engaged in youth policy and education practice. Many careers educators throughout Australia work in a dynamic and rapidly changing environment shaped by wider forces, such as the changing labour market. It is difficult to keep up with developments in areas such as automation and artificial intelligence, the breakdown between educational qualifications and desirable and secure and stable work, and a rapidly changing global labour market. OECD data suggest that careers educators, students and their parents and carers are struggling to keep up with such changes.[57]

Despite the emergence of new areas of work, such as in the digital economy, the career aspirations of young people throughout the OECD have changed very little in recent decades. Our survey affirms OECD data from more than 40 countries, according to which most young people expect to work within just one of 10 popular fields by the age of 30. Nine of these are considered professions, including being a doctor, a teacher, a veterinarian or a business manager. Approximately two-thirds (65%) of young women in our study who nominated a career chose one within the 10 popular occupations. This suggests a lack of awareness of new fields of work.

As Dev Mukherjee from the National Youth Commission Australia so eloquently suggested: 'you can't be what you can't see'.[123] So how do we make this changing landscape more visible to students, careers educators, parents, and carers? Targeting parents and carers is fraught because of longstanding boundaries between schools and the private domains of families. Developing better ways of informing parents and carers should not necessarily reside exclusively within schools, but is something that could be done in concert with other policy-makers, government departments, jurisdictions and actors seeking to work with families.

Current efforts to provide careers education to students come up against forces designed to improve their transitions from school to post-school life, but which instead shift the centre of gravity away from developing young people in holistic ways towards very narrow measures. Assessments at the end of schooling are arguably distorting best efforts to educate about careers. Centralised, top-down approaches to assessment in the following years of schooling are typically blunt and narrow, and limited in what they measure. They are by no means the only ones available. We assess what we value, so what signals are we sending to young women in their final years of schooling? Could we draw from frameworks such as the types of capitals outlined above? And what about the social purposes of schooling and wider benefits of knowledge beyond readiness to work and perceived economic need?

Sometimes, educators need to work to provide opportunities to understand the world post-schooling and what it looks like, because young people can't be what they can't see.[123]

Given the OECD data mentioned above, we shouldn't be surprised to learn that there is a misalignment between young women's career preferences and the current labour market. However, a large number of young women genuinely felt that they had taken future jobs into consideration. This raises questions about whether they understand the nature of emergent occupations and whether there are particular motivations leading them to pick jobs within the same 10 occupational fields. It is quite possible that they are nominating these fields because of their associations with social status and security. They might be choosing these jobs because they can see them.

But what lies beyond what they currently see in relation to future employment? What structural barriers will they encounter that put them at a disadvantage compared with men? If we are to #breakthebias, we need to start early. Young women in Australia deserve this.

We will have more to report when we release the 2022 Annual Youth Barometer later this year. Stay tuned.

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