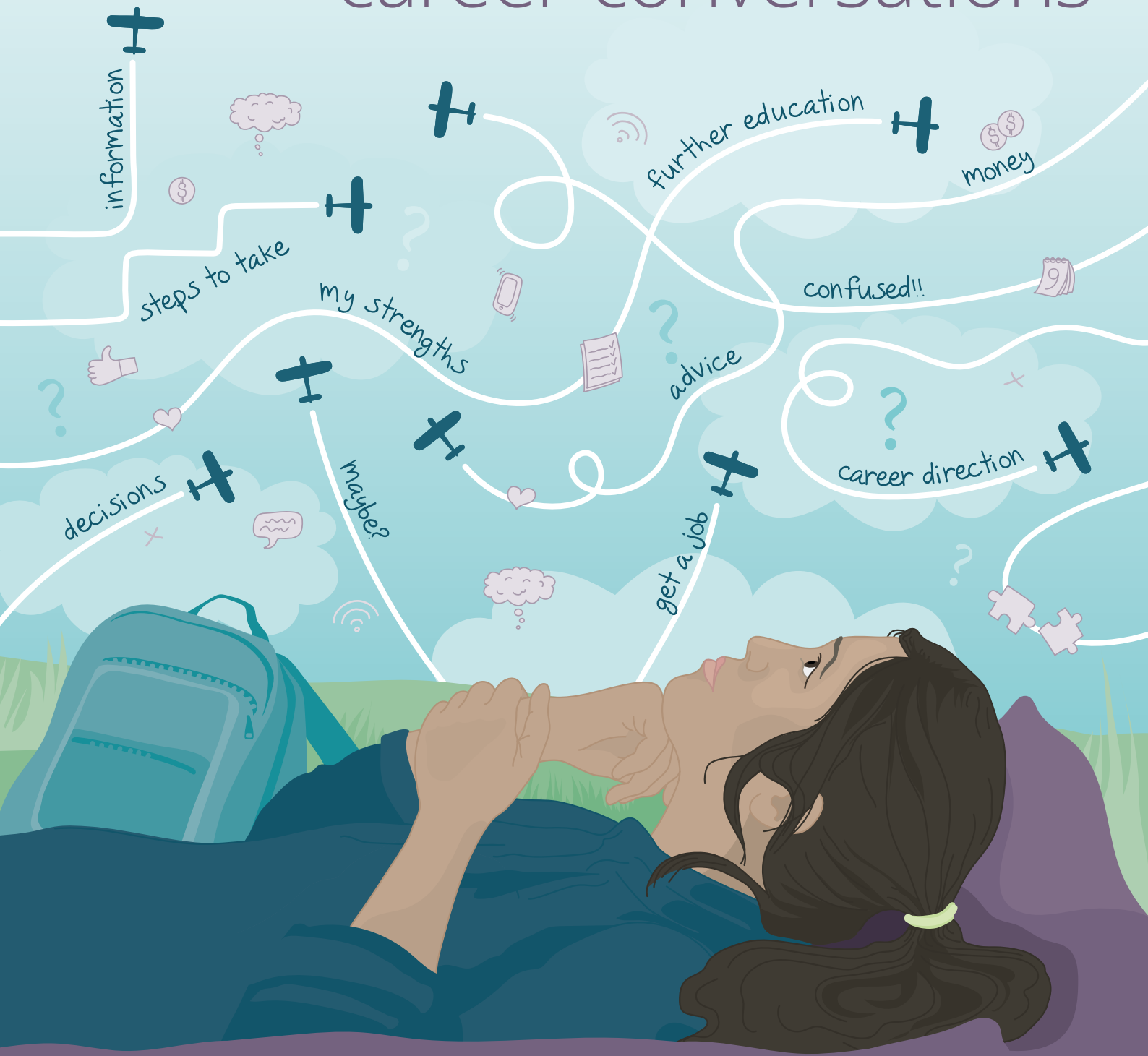


Managing career uncertainty and anxiety: the power of career conversations



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When young people are not certain, or struggle to make decisions about their future careers, they can feel anxious or concerned. These types of feelings can be a common cause of stress in educational settings.

Here we share a brief questionnaire that can help young people to become more aware of their feelings associated with career decision-making.

The questionnaire can facilitate productive career conversations between them and others, such as career practitioners, teachers and parents or carers.

Career uncertainty and stress

Career uncertainty has been defined as the inability, as a teenager, to articulate a career ambition or occupational expectation for adult life (Mann et al., 2020). As transitions from school to further education, training or work have become more unpredictable, and employment markets more competitive and fluid, career uncertainty in young people, both in Australia and internationally, is increasingly common.

Australian studies have shown that young people's career indecision and uncertainty are associated with career concerns and anxiety (Campagna & Curtis, 2007; Creed et al., 2009; Skrbiš & Laughland-Booÿ, 2019). These can lead to a range of negative feelings such as helplessness, depression, stress, lack of purpose and despair (Creed et al., 2016).

In our work with nearly 2,800 Australian secondary school students¹, these types of feelings were evident. Over one-third (33.8%) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they did not know what careers best suited them, and more (40.5%) often felt that they had no career direction. This uncertainty and lack of direction was of concern to our students. Just under one-half (41.5%) worried that their studies would not lead to a 'real' career, with approximately one-third (34.3%) worried that they would not be employable when they had completed their studies. While only 29% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they often felt down or worried about selecting a career, this increased to 59.3% of all students when 'neutral' or 'not sure' responses were included.

¹ Sample includes students in Years 10 – 12 at the time of the study (2018) who identified as male or female, or preferred not to indicate a gender. See Gleeson et al. (2022) for further details about the study.

The students' career uncertainty and anxiety were caused by different factors. For example, over one-half (56.5%) felt that they had fewer career choices because of who they were or where they had come from. This included characteristics such as their socio-economic status, gender, cultural background, or living arrangements and location. Others felt pressured by the expectations of others – over one-half (50.4%) worried that others, such as teachers, career advisors, parents or carers would not approve of their choices. A similar number of students (52.1%) felt that they were choosing certain careers to please others (such as parents or carers, peers or teachers). Others (46.2%) felt they were basing their choices on what others expected of them. Some students felt that they did not have enough information to make a career choice (58.7%, including 'neutral' or 'not sure' responses).

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The following myfuture resources can be used to support career conversations:

[My career profile](#) – pick an activity that speaks to an area of uncertainty that the student is expressing (login required).

Find helpful tips in the following myfuture career articles:

[Finding work that fits you best](#)

[11 tips to increase your child's interest in careers](#)

Being aware is important

It is critical that young people build their own career awareness of not only occupational options or study pathways, but also of their feelings and the decision-making processes associated with making choices. Understanding 'why' they are choosing certain careers, or struggling to make decisions, can prompt them to explore different pathways, investigate employment market trends or reflect further on how their own strengths and interests relate to career options. Studies have shown that the more time young people invest in career exploration and career planning, the greater their career certainty and confidence become (Skorikov, 2007).

It is also important that young people acknowledge that making career decisions is a complex, ongoing process, and that the skills and knowledge that they are building through this process are beneficial to their overall career development and future employability (Tomlinson, 2017). Understanding that career decision-making will likely evoke different emotions at different times is key to managing their own wellbeing.

It is critical that career advisors, teachers, and parents and carers support young people as they explore different career pathways and make career decisions. An important role for adults is helping young people to understand that although they don't need to have all of the 'answers' while still at school, they still need to invest in career exploration and reflection.

Adults themselves must also be aware of the challenges involved in career decision-making and the many factors that can influence young people's career uncertainty and indecision (Campagna & Curtis, 2007). They need to recognise that young people may experience a range of emotions that impact, positively or negatively, their career confidence or overall wellbeing. Understanding that their own actions and expectations can impact young people's career decision-making and confidence is key to being able to support young people effectively.

The power of career conversations

Career conversations are a valuable way for young people to make sense of career information and choices (Roberts et al., 2023). Recent work by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has shown that when young people have conversations with others about their careers, they have lower levels of career uncertainty and anxiety (Mann et al., 2020). These conversations can be broad-ranging and cover young people's awareness of their own interests and strengths, their career goals and preferences, their knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success of different study-career pathways, as well as their ideas about transitioning from education settings into work.

An aim for productive conversations between career advisors, teachers, parents and carers and young people is to help them **express how they feel about their career choices and the career decision-making process**. The conversations can explore:

- how these feelings may be impacting their wellbeing and what support they may need
- how these feelings may prompt additional career exploration that will benefit their career decision-making and certainty

- what further conversations are necessary to improve their career certainty and confidence. For example, young people may be encouraged by teachers or career advisors to have conversations with their parents or carers to reconcile adults' expectations with their own career choices.

A useful conversation frame

Figure 1 presents a brief questionnaire that can be used to underpin semi-structured career conversations with young people. The questionnaire comprises 13 items that focus on three topics related to young people's career uncertainty and anxiety. The three topics are:

- 1 Career direction and purpose (first four questions; dark green)
- 2 Career uncertainty and anxiety triggering factors (next five questions; mid green)
- 3 Feelings of career stress (last four questions; pale green).

Young people can select a single response to each item based on a 5-point Likert scale (*Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree*). Responses can form the basis of a conversation to explore **why** young people are feeling a particular way, **what** actions they may take to help resolve their feelings (e.g. additional career exploration activities, further conversations with others), and **what** support they may need to manage their wellbeing.

Supporting each other

These types of conversations can be challenging for all involved. Young people might not be comfortable sharing their feelings, or they may need greater support and encouragement to fully articulate their thoughts. There might also be wellbeing issues, such as existing mental health conditions, that need to be considered.

The aim is for the conversations to be safe and positive experiences for young people, where their responses are respected and they feel heard in the discussions. Co-creating action plans with young people allows them to feel as if the conversations are both purposeful and productive.

The conversations should also be safe and positive experiences for career advisors, teachers, or parents and carers, where they feel respected for their interest in supporting young people with their career decision-making. Setting some ground rules about how the conversation will occur may be a worthwhile first step. Being mindful of when to include others, such as school counsellors or school leaders, in the conversations is also crucial.

This questionnaire has been designed for adults to use when talking to young people about their careers. It has not been designed to test young people or make comparisons between them, and it is recommended not to use it in these ways.

The questions have been approved by ethics committees at Monash University, state-based Departments of Education and governing jurisdictions, and reviewed by career practitioners and school leaders for appropriate use with adolescents.

Should you be concerned, during these conversations, about the young person's mental health and wellbeing, seek additional support through their school.

Career Uncertainty and Anxiety Questionnaire

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure/ Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
*I don't know what careers best suit me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
*I often feel I don't have enough information to make a career choice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
*I feel like I am studying and taking on activities without any sense of purpose or career direction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often feel I have no career direction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am choosing certain careers to please others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My career choices are based on what others expect of me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel I have fewer choices because of who I am or where I have come from	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
*I feel stress or pressure to select the "right" career	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel I have missed opportunities to maximise my potential to achieve the career I want	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
*I worry that my studies will not lead to a "real" career	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
*I worry that my career path will not always be clear and known to me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often feel down or worried about selecting a career	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I worry I won't be employable when I finish studying	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Items validated in a construct of Career Uncertainty & Anxiety in a multi-construct instrument measuring adolescents' career identity (Gleeson, 2020). Additional non-validated items included in original study.*

Figure 1. Career Uncertainty and Anxiety Questionnaire (adapted from Gleeson, 2020)

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Publication may be cited as Gleeson, J., & Walsh, L. (2023). Managing career uncertainty and anxiety: the power of career conversations. *myfuture Insights series*. Melbourne, Education Services Australia.

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Cover Illustration: Aja Bongiorno