

Making career decisions: How influencers can help

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What did you want to be when you grew up? Who gave you the advice and ideas to support your aspirations? Your family may have kickstarted your career conversations by reciting the 16th Century British nursery rhyme 'Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor'. You may have been curious about these old professions and fantasized about your own future. Modern parents might do well to adapt the words to 'blogger, coder, database administrator' to fit today's career choices.

Career conversations

As we grow and develop, our parents and carers influence our educational and career decisions as do our teachers and friends. Throughout our life we have career discussions with significant others but the most important are those we have in our high school years, especially when we are starting on pathways to either vocational education and training or university study.

Recent research indicates that our career conversations aren't shifting in line with the rapid changes in the working world – seven-year-olds and 17-year-olds continue to have similar (often traditional and profession-based – i.e. doctor, teacher, police officer) career aspirations and they are often strikingly gendered.

It is important to note that educational and career aspirations are often shaped by how young people think they will fit in with others and by the expectations of their influencers, including parents, teachers and peers. Across Australia, research has consistently shown that the academic and career aspirations of secondary school students are high. However, it is often the expectations and experiences of the people around them that ultimately shape their academic pathway and career decisions.

A recent longitudinal study undertaken in New South Wales confirmed that the gap between student aspirations and actual career pathways was stark, with a much higher percentage of students surveyed aspiring to a university pathway than actually pursuing one.

What is possible?

As students start to make career choices, they begin to discuss 'what is possible'. For example, a young person living in Kalgoorlie in Western Australia (eight hours from the city) might aspire to become a doctor. They may discuss this with their parents who explain that they can't afford for them to live away from home, so that option is no longer viable – even if they have the academic ability. So they turn to their friends to discuss their options. These friends might know someone who did the available, close-by nursing course at the Kalgoorlie regional university campus. They consider the realities of this option with their friends (and parents – in a feedback loop), and now they expect to do a nursing course. Had they talked to their career counsellor or teacher – who had information about scholarship opportunities and support grants – the outcome may have been different. Instead of their choices leading to nursing, they may have considered that studying medicine, with scholarship support to study away from home, was still 'possible'.

A reliance on outdated perceptions or partial knowledge of an industry may also limit what is 'possible', as a recent study undertaken in rural Australia found. Nowadays a student wishing to pursue a career in farming, for example, will need an advanced knowledge of mathematics, physics and chemistry. However, without an understanding of the high-tech nature of modern agriculture, a teacher may struggle to demonstrate the relevance of these subjects. A student is likely to fall back on the advice of friends and family, which may be no better informed.

Research conducted in Western Australia asked 527 high school students about their career and educational discussions with parents, teachers and their friends. It found:

- Students discussed career and academic aspirations with their parents and peers more than with their teachers and counsellors.
- Students who discussed university more frequently with others were more likely to consider going to university when they finished high school.
- Students with a high frequency of discussions about vocational and educational training pathways believed it more likely they would pursue vocational education than a university degree.

Discussing careers at the right time

The importance of frequent career discussions with teachers, parents and community members cannot be emphasised too much. High aspirations need to be supported and maintained by influencers. However, these influencers, whether teachers, parents or friends, need the time, skills, knowledge and access to up-to-date career information in order to advise young people in their communities. Their advice must be accurate, frequent and timely. Sometimes messages are not relevant to students, and they don't 'stick'. But, at other times 'the penny drops' and information is used to make important decisions that lead students on a particular trajectory. Increasing the frequency of discussions helps reinforce career messages and ultimately aids with career decisions.

Back to our young person living in Kalgoorlie. If young people are having frequent academic and career conversations with their parents and friends as this person was doing, then teachers need to make sure they raise the profile of career information for parents and the community. This will ensure this young person, no matter where they live, can reach their full potential.

Policymakers, teachers and parents need to realise the importance of increasing the levels of discussions around career pathways to influence students' expectations of what is possible when they transition from high school, empowering them to pursue their desired education and career pathways. Students need to be able to make informed choices for their future pathways, whether it be in vocational training and education or studying at university.

How influencers can support informed choices

Just as influencers in social media build a rapport with their audience by posting up-to-date information or expert commentary, parents and community members can make sure they know how to access accurate and up-to-date career information.

There are also a great number of scholarships (through charitable foundations and industry) available to support vocational or university study, but they are often under-utilised.

For unbiased information on career pathways and prospects, seek out an independent career information website, such as myfuture. Funded by the federal and state governments, myfuture provides tailored, research-based career information to students and career influencers:

- teachers and career practitioners page – draws together a variety of resources to use with students to explore options, plan career pathways and discover possibilities
- parents and carers page – features activities, animations and articles devised to help them support and encourage their child or another young person with their career decision-making.

To find out about scholarship opportunities, start here:

- universities and vocational education institutions – most have a web page detailing the scholarships they offer and how to apply for them
- federal and state government departments offer a variety of scholarships in specific study areas
- charitable foundations offer scholarships for particular groups of students
- local councils offer scholarships for residents
- local industries offer study opportunities for their workforce or community.



Sign up to the myfuture newsletters for regular updates. There are newsletters for teachers and career practitioners, parents and carers, and students with content relevant to each state and territory.

Influencers, particularly parents and carers, are an essential part of the career information network for young people. To make your influence count, visit an independent career information website, find out about scholarship opportunities related to career interests, and help create a portfolio to address scholarship conditions.

Explore and download all myfuture Insights papers via the teacher and career practitioners and/or parents and carers pages at www.myfuture.edu.au

Got a question?

Contact us via the myfuture website www.myfuture.edu.au

Connect with us on social media



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