Aide-Memoire: Understanding learner transitions from secondary school, learner research

To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education
From:	Nina Ive, Deputy Chief Executive (Acting), Strategy and Design, Tertiary Education Commission
Date:	12 July 2022
Reference:	AM-22-00295

Purpose

1. This aide-memoire provides you with an overview of the Transitions from Secondary School research project conducted by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).

2. We recommend that this aide-memoire is proactively released in full.

Background

3. The Transitions from Secondary School project is a foundational piece of national research which provides the TEC and education sector with an evidence base about a crucial group – school leavers. It provides a detailed understanding of how school leavers decide what to do when they leave school, what they choose to transition into, their needs and the barriers they face. It also makes recommendations, based on the insights, for the TEC and sector on how to support these learners.

4. The research project incorporates four research elements:

    - Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) and other administrative data

    - a literature review

    - a nationwide survey (which received over 500 responses from school leavers, weighted to reflect the population)

    - in-depth interviews with 56 school leavers around Aotearoa.

Research findings are informing a range of strategic and operational initiatives at the TEC

5. This research is a key enabler of the Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) and the TEC strategy. The TEC has already used the insights to inform key strategic and operational initiatives across the TEC including:

    - **Tahatū** (the online career planning solution): providing learner voice and context to support the development and direction of Tahatū products and tools

- **National Careers System Strategy**: incorporating learner voice; increasing equity-mindedness of our view of the state of the current system; mapping touchpoints school leavers have with the careers system and synthesising their needs from the system.

- **Vocational Education and Training (VET) marketing campaign**: providing evidence that people who influence school leavers' decisions (e.g. parents, family and whānau) should be a key audience

- **Fees Free campaign:** sharing specific findings about perceptions of the Fees Free website with the Steering Group to inform the 2020/21 Fees Free campaign.

6. TEC and the sector will also apply findings to other initiatives:

- **Unified Funding Scheme (UFS):** Understanding the specific challenges faced by priority groups can support the learner component of the UFS, to make sure these needs are served.

- **Investment planning:** Specific analysis of the needs of learners on different types of pathways can inform investment planning priorities, as can an understanding of what motivates learners to follow specific careers, and what gets in the way of different choices.

- Sharing findings with the Ministry of Education and other partner agencies is underway to feed into work on supporting learner success and curriculum development.

Key research findings

7. The key findings from the research project are summarised below. Appendix A contains a short slide deck summarising the full report.

The school leaver population is changing; proportions of Māori, Pacific, Asian and MELAA (Middle Eastern, Latin American and African) learners are growing

8. The population of school leavers differs to Aotearoa's general population, and Māori, Pacific, Asian and MELAA learners are a growing proportion. Twenty-five percent of school leavers are now Māori, much higher than the general population proportion of 16.5%. The TEC's work to address systemic biases and barriers across the system will have increasing impact as these learner groups grow.

Many school leavers aim to do something they enjoy, but learners with other values can feel shut out of the careers system

9. School leavers' definitions of a fulfilling life and career are often centred on doing what they enjoy, and the careers system speaks well to this value. However, many learners have other important values and, for some, these are more important than enjoyment. For example, Pacific learners are much more likely to value supporting their family over individual enjoyment, and neurodivergent and disabled learners are more likely to value stability in their life. These values are not as well validated by the careers system and so learners can struggle to find an 'in' to engage with career planning and decision-making.

Systemic biases continue to impact success for priority group learners

10. Despite representing one quarter of all school leavers, only 12% of Māori school leavers go to university. Similarly, Pacific learners represent 13% of school leavers but only 9% of school-leaving university-goers. The barrier to entering university is achieving University Entrance (UE): 20% of Māori and 23% of Pacific school leavers get UE, compared to 51% of non-Māori non-Pacific leavers. When learners do gain UE, the rate of entering university is much closer: 61% of Māori and 70% of Pacific school leavers who get UE choose a university pathway, compared to 72% of non-Māori non-Pacific school leavers.

11. Disparities also exist between men and women, who can take different pathways to achieve the same career. For example, women are much less likely to enter apprenticeships than men (75% of school leavers entering apprenticeships are men). Even when they are pursuing similar careers, women may be more likely to do so through provider-based study pathways than through work-based pathways. This can have implications for future debt, skills required and employability.

12. These examples demonstrate how the system enables some learners over others, and it is TEC priority learner groups that are disproportionally impacted. Barriers and inequities result in learners making different pathway decisions.

Learners need four types of knowledge to make a fully informed decision

13. Learners' decisions include a need for four types of information, which together enable a range of options and a less overwhelming experience. We should ensure learners receive all four types of information, ideally in the following order:

- Orienting (my guiding direction and values)

- Tailoring (what jobs and careers might suit me)

- Deep (what a pathway is "really like" for me)

- Logistical (the practical steps to make it happen).

14. School leavers also receive information from a variety of sources. In particular, parents and other family/whānau members have a strong influence over school leavers' decisions due to their close interpersonal relationships. However experiential sources which provide deep information (such as work experience, open days and placements) are particularly valued by learners and are often a pivotal point in their decision-making.

Even with a full set of information, school leavers also need to be equipped with the appropriate decision-making skills for making the first complex decision of their life

15. School leavers find transition decisions challenging, and we should look for opportunities to build their skills to make complex decisions. Even with a full set of information, school leavers need specific decision-making skills to be able to use it most effectively. This need is demonstrated by the large proportion (48%) of school leavers who found the transition decision difficult, and the key reasons why it was difficult:

- 44% didn't know how to choose between options or weigh different options

- 38% did not know what they wanted from the decision

- 23% struggled with the weight of the decision.

16. The school-leaving transition is often the first time that learners have to make a *complex* decision: where there are no right answers, their choice can impact others around them, it feels like a 'make or break' point in their lives, and it must be made with imperfect information. For learners to make decisions that lead to a fulfilling life, they need to be equipped with the appropriate decision-making skills for such complex decisions. These include the ability to choose between several types of options, process information even under pressure and stakes, and assess and weigh different kinds of information.

A lack of confidence is one of the biggest barriers learners face; it increases the difficulty of their decision and effectively shuts down options

17. Almost half (48%) of school leavers said a lack of confidence was a barrier to doing what they wanted. This lack of confidence came in two forms. Firstly, learners lack confidence about the transition overall because it represents an overwhelming change. Secondly, learners can lack confidence in their own abilities, questioning whether they have what it takes to succeed.

18. Confidence-building can occur through effective provision of information to support their decision, but 'champions' are also key. People who provide support, guidance and tailored information integrated with what they know about the learner have an instrumental impact on learners who might otherwise struggle to take a next step.

Communication of the research is underway

19. The TEC has begun sharing this research across the sector.

20. The team are engaging with the Ministry of Education via their Education and Employment Board (EEB) and Curriculum Committee, as well as with the Employment, Education and Training (EET) Secretariat (DCE level).

21. The report will be published on the TEC website in July 2022, and we will invite partner agencies and stakeholders to an online hui to share the findings.
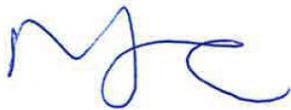
Nina Ive

Deputy Chief Executive, Strategy and Design

Tertiary Education Commission

12 July 2022

Hon Chris Hipkins

Minister of Education

18 / 8 / 22