Returns to ambition: The role of early career plans in the transition from education to work

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Abstract

Although the literature on educational plans and attainments of youth is comprehensive, less is known about the role which specific career choices, formed early in high school, may play in attaining high status professional occupations. This is mostly due to lack of longitudinal data, as rarely do high school students get asked about their plans and then, years later, about their actual jobs. However, the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth of students who were in Year 9 in 1998 do have the information on career plans of students and their later occupational attainment. Thus it is possible to compare early choices and the actual jobs held by LSAY respondents who were surveyed every year until 2008. This analysis focuses on the relative importance of individual plans versus family background and academic achievement in enabling Generation Y, as this cohort is known, to realise their early ambitions. I find that adolescent career plans are consequential even after plans to attend university and the actual university completion have been taken into account. This is important as clearly stopping at planning to go to university is not enough. Returns to early vocational ambitions are more evident for employment defined by respondents as “career related”.

Introduction

Social scientists of various creeds have long been interested in the importance of adolescent plans as determinants of educational and occupational achievements. While research in this area dates back several decades and traverses many disciplines, it has flourished in developmental psychology and in social stratification research (Alexander, Bozick, and Entwistle 2008; Buchmann and Dalton 2002; Ojeda and Flores 2008; Saha and Sikora 2008; Schultheiss 2008). Developmental psychologists took lead from John Holland’s theory of
vocational choice in which school counsellors were given the role of helping students to match vocational plans with their particular personality traits (Holland 1997). The sociological tradition of research into educational and occupational attainments gained momentum with the publication of the influential Wisconsin study, which, based on the Blau-Duncan model of intergenerational occupational mobility, pointed to the influence of significant others as well as occupational and educational aspirations as predictors of future employment (Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969). Both traditions saw adolescent career plans as crucial for later employment, but it is not clear whether the findings which pertained to the generations of baby boomers apply to the experiences of Generation Y in 21st century Australia.

As labour markets become more flexible and volatile, the life long career model no longer applies to most young people (Blossfeld, Mills, and Bernardi 2006) and thus questions arise as to the consequences that adolescent plans and expectations have in these new contexts. It is important to draw a conceptual distinction between less realistic aspirations and more realistic expectations. This had been recognized by both sociologists and development psychologists (Saha 1997). The more recent empirical research focused mostly on the expectations (e.g. OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment). This was because expectations had been argued to be better predictors of eventual career destinations (Goyette 2008). Developmental psychologists posited that although vocational knowledge developed at all stages of childhood, the expectations formed in secondary school are of particular significance not only because this is a time at which important decisions about the future are made, but also because this is when young people are most aware of structural constraints likely to impinge on their chances of success (Helwig 2008). Therefore much empirical literature in this area and this study too, focuses on adolescents who approach the end of their compulsory schooling (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005; Mello 2008; Patton and Creed 2007; Rindfuss, Cooksey, and Sutterlin 1999; White 2007).

One feature of this very broad and interdisciplinary field is that in contrast to educational expectations, occupational plans have attracted relatively little attention. Studies which empirically assess the impact of occupational plans on attainments in early adulthood are relatively rare (but see: Mello 2008; Rindfuss, Cooksey, and Sutterlin 1999). This is mostly due to paucity of suitable longitudinal data which would provide the necessary information for younger cohorts of students. Recent studies add another reason why this research gap
requires urgent attention. They pinpoint the possibility of “decoupling” between educational and occupational expectations and their outcomes (Goyette 2008; Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, and Sischo 2006). One line of argument proposes that educational expansion leads to the situation where university completion becomes less of a guarantee of obtaining high status employment (Goyette 2008: 465), particularly in times of economic crises. Therefore occupational plans may or may not be salient as determinants of attainments and thus need to be investigated in their own right (Rindfuss, Cooksey, and Sutterlin 1999). Importantly, given the more flexible and less predictable trajectories of employment, in investigating the link between plans and attainments, workforce participation and the status of jobs need to be considered over a period rather than at one point of time.

This paper is based on data from a young cohort of Australians and I consider the impact of early career plans on occupational attainment over time. While mine is not the first ever study of this topic, as similar studies have been conducted in the USA and the United Kingdom, it is, to the best of my knowledge, the first one of this type based on large representative longitudinal surveys of Australian youth. It is a study of a very recent cohort of high school graduates, whose transition from education to work took place in socio-economic conditions vastly different from those experienced by older generations.

**Prior research on occupational expectations and attainments**

Theories which provided conceptual framework to numerous studies of youth aspirations and attainments originate mostly from the RIASEC theory of John Holland dominant in psychology and status attainment model influential in sociological research on stratification and mobility. Within the latter, various middle-range theoretical approaches, allocation, risk aversion or rational action theories highlight the mechanisms and extent of occupational reproduction as well as the crucial role that education plays in access to particular occupations. Students from more advantageous socio-economic backgrounds and those who perform better at school are known to hold more ambitious expectations. Moreover, gender and ethnicity have been shown to differentiate both educational and occupational expectations within particular countries and across the world. A thorough discussion of this literature which dates back to 1930s is presented in (Saha and Sikora 2008; Sikora and Saha 2007; Sikora and Saha 2009a) and (Mateju, Smith, Soukup, and Basl 2007). The research in the stratification/allocation tradition focuses on the institutional constraints and systematic
differences between students’ plans at the systemic level. In contrast, research informed
within developmental psychology focuses on supporting individuals in overcoming structural
constraints to move up in the occupational hierarchy. The latter harmonises, to some extent,
with the more broadly conceived theories of individualisation, which emphasise the
increasing marginality of social structural factors in shaping the lives of the young across the
Western developed world (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Despite differences in emphasis, researchers in most fields recognise that macro-social
conditions such as labour market situation, stratification of education systems, school
environments e.g. selective admission policies, sector of schooling (i.e. private versus public)
or typical parents’ socio-economic status within a school are all relevant for understanding
youth's plan formation as these factors interact with students’ academic achievement levels
and a range of relevant attitudinal predispositions. But the extent to which these factors are
consequential depends primarily upon the relative importance of plans for attainments.

One prominent finding of the studies devoted to occupational expectations is that students
tend to be very ambitious and a large proportion of them expect to work in one of the
managerial or professional occupations. This is the case for both young men and women,
students of humble origins and the children of the elite, immigrants and the native stock
students. Trend comparisons indicate that, at least in the USA, ambition levels have risen
considerably among younger generations of students (Goyette 2008) and thus some analysts
warn against the possible negative consequences of these rising expectations at both
individual and societal level (Alexander and Cook 1979; Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, and
Sischo 2006). This is because the accommodation rates for young professionals are
significantly lower than what would have be the case, if all the hopefuls were to be employed
as desired (Croll 2008). In contrast some authors argue that ambitious expectations are a form
of “insurance” against dropping out of school and thus should be seen as beneficial even if
they remain unfulfilled (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005).

While young men and women have been found to be equally ambitious in more recent years,

studies devoted specifically to the implications of occupational expectations scrutinise gender
differences in greater detail (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005; Mello 2008). This is because
although young men and women might share high levels of ambition they experience
different trajectories of transition from education to work. For instance in the USA, Mello
(2008) found that ambitious occupational plans formed in adolescence boosted the chances of
early entry into professional occupations more for men than for women. One way of interpreting this finding is to conceive of women’s labour market opportunities as more constrained and thus less related to individual plans, despite their gains in educational achievement relative to men. In other words it could be that young women must strive to obtain university qualifications to access the levels of job autonomy and labour market returns comparable to what is available to men through employment in trades, facilitated by vocational credentials. This gender differentiation calls for examining the relationship between plans and attainments separately for men and women.

Data, measurement and methods

This study is based on the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth which followed the cohort of students who were in Year 9 in 1998, from 1998 until 2008 (LSAY98). The details about the study and the surveys can be accessed at www.lsay.edu.au. These surveys ask a wide range of questions regarding students’ educational and labour market experiences as young people progress from Year 9 through stages of their schooling and into the labour market. All the variables used in this analysis are described in the appendix to the paper.

Variable description

This section describes the variables utilized in my model of the relationship between high school expectations and occupational achievement. Firstly, I consider occupational expectations which have been measured by a single question:

*Your future job: What job do you plan to work in when you have finished your studies? (after leaving school, or after finishing your further study or training).*

LSAY98 collected the information about occupational expectations on two occasions. Students where asked what occupation they expected to have after the completion of their studies for the first time in Year 10 or in 1999. This question was asked again in 2001, with a slight variation which included a reference to “age 25”. In this paper I assume that students in 1998 and in 2000 had the same occupational expectations as those reported in 1999. Their 2001 expectations are assumed to remain constant in 2002 and all subsequent years for which employment data is available. While measurement at two points of time is less than ideal, LSAY98 provides currently the best available information and, moreover surveys of younger
cohorts currently under way (i.e. longitudinal extensions of Australian PISA collections) do not gather information about occupational plans beyond Wave 1. Although LSAY98 lacks information about occupational plans in years following high school completion, this is of less concern, because I focus on the relationship between early occupational plans (i.e. high school plans). But since the survey does not offer insights into how these plans changed each year between Years 9 and 12, the question that arises is to what extent using only the available information in Years 10 and 12 may inflate the relationship between plans and attainments as the actual variability in plans from year to year may be underestimated. To assess that, I have conducted sensitivity analyses using educational expectations, which are known to be related to occupational plans, and found that any distortions were of negligible magnitude. The details of this sensitivity analysis are available upon request. I expect that while having more complete data would reveal more variation over time, this variation would be mostly within professional occupations but less so between professional and non-professional occupations. This is because, as these data reveal, while students’ choices tend to vary within the professions, there is little change over time with respect to switching career goals between professional and non-professional destinations.

The verbatim responses to the question about expected occupation at the end of studies have been coded first to the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006a), or for surveys earlier than 2006, to the Australian Standard Classification of Occupation (ASCO 2) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997) and then to the AUSEI06 scale of occupational status (McMillan, Beavis, and Jones 2009). AUSEI06 status scale is conceptually very close to the ISEI (Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996) but it has been calibrated to range from a low 0 which denotes unskilled occupations, such as farm hands, to a high 100, which indicates high status employment, as a medical specialist or a fully qualified lawyer.

I compare high school plans with actual occupations held by students during and upon the completion of their studies. The students were asked every year about their employment, be it a part-time job while at school or any other form of paid work. This is the dependent variable in this study. To designate these jobs which respondents considered “proper” or “career-oriented” I occasionally use as a filter the question which asked if respondents would consider their current job as a career. This is necessary to avoid concluding that youth do not realize their plans while what they do is simply engage in casual or part-time employment.
while studying or waiting for the “right” job to become available. Therefore some analyses are restricted only to responses which described the job held by the respondent at the time as definitely of the type they would consider as a career.

In assessing the impact of plans on actual attainment students’ age must be taken into account as older respondents are more likely to hold higher status jobs, partly due to accumulated work experience. Age in this analysis has been expressed in years and months. The actual year and month of birth of each student were used on the assumption, made for the sake of simplicity, that surveys were conducted each year on 1st January. Therefore a student who was 14 in January 1998 is treated as being exactly 15 years of age in January 1999, whereas a student who was 14 in March 1998 was treated as being 14.76 years of age in January 1999. This coding schema avoids assuming that there is a full year of difference between a student born in December of one year and a student born in January of the next year.

To control for gender a dummy variable coded 1 for males and 0 for females has been created. Moreover, although relatively few young people had children before 2008, a variable controlling for respondent’s number of children was added to the analysis to capture differences in family situation affecting the transition from education to work of men and women.

Educational achievement is a particularly important variable to consider as it is known that academically successful students are more likely to form ambitious plans, so much of the “ambition” is really the impact of positive reinforcement at school and only some reflects students’ determination. Students’ performance in mathematics and reading was measured by two 20-item tests. The score on each ranged from zero to twenty (the details are in Marks 2006). For this analysis each test score was standardized to the mean of 0 and the standard deviation of 1 and then averaged. The resulting composite highly correlates with its components (r=0.85). It is important to note that students were tested only once, in Year 9, and therefore educational achievement is not a time-varying variable in this analysis.

In addition to students’ characteristics a measure of parents’ socio-economic status was created by averaging standardized measures of fathers and mothers’ education and occupation. Prior to that, exploratory analyses revealed no differences in the impact of mothers’ or fathers’ characteristics on sons or daughters’ attainment. Gender socialization
theory expects mothers’ characteristics to be more salient for daughters than sons (Marks 2008a) but this prediction is not supported in LSAY98 with regard to respondents occupational achievement or plans. Therefore, mother and father’s characteristics were equally weighted and where one was missing, the other was used.

Since my goal is to establish the effect of specific occupational goals net of other influences I also control for expectations of university completion which are not attached to specific vocation. A student’s intention to attend university is captured by a dummy variable which records a plan to study at university between 1998 and 2002 when most students were in Years 9, 10, 11 and 12.

Educational attainment was measured by a dummy variable which indicated if a student ever completed university. For someone who graduated in 2004 this indicator was coded 1 during 2004 and all subsequent years.

**Omitted variables**
This analysis neither controls for school sector, nor for urban or rural residence of respondents. This is due to the conditions under which LSAY data is made available to users. Privacy protection policies stipulate that data can be accessed with either the sector or region suppressed or with the information on academic performance suppressed. Given this, a decision was made to use the version of the data which contains measures of academic achievement and to forego the information about sector, although it is usually important in the Australian context as close to 30% of all students in primary and secondary schools attend non-government schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006b). Variables such as the perceived expectations of parents’ and peers’ plans have also been omitted because they were measured with respect to only educational and not occupational plans, at only one point of time, and, moreover, turned out to be almost perfectly correlated with students’ own intention to study at university which is included in the analysis.

**Method**
To utilize the full range of information available in LSAY98 I employ, in addition to simple descriptive statistics, regression on person-year data. The information about each student, in the LSAY data I use, is not limited to one point in time, but covers an ‘observation window’ which spans the period between 1999 and 2008 or a part of that period during which a student
provided information. While the goal of the surveys was to interview all students in all years, sample attrition problems shortened the duration of observation periods for some students. But it is preferable to consider all observations, i.e. those longer and shorter, as using only the final wave data would lead to considerable selectivity bias. The person-year data for all waves have been analysed using the xtreg procedure available in Stata 10. All estimations presented here have been performed with the use of robust standard errors (option vce(robust)). This is because the main dependent variable is occupational status of employment which is a continuous variable and such estimations are less sensitive to deviations from the assumptions underpinning regression models for continuous dependent variables (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2005). To reduce the loss of information in multivariate models, missing data on predictor variables have been imputed with the use of Stata's ICE procedure for multiple imputations of missing data (Royston 2004), although no values have been imputed for the dependent variable. After the imputation the analyses were performed on five sets of imputed values and the estimates were combined using the Rubin rules (Royston 2004).

Results

Just like their peers in other countries (Croll 2008; Goyette 2008; Sikora and Saha 2007), Australian adolescents born around 1984, expected to work predominantly in professional occupations. While in Year 10, most students had a strong desire to work in professional occupations, a preference which was significantly stronger amongst girls than boys. While many students realized their plan of entering a profession by age 25, other hopefuls worked as clerical and administrative workers, salespersons, machinery operators, drivers and labourers. Their entry into the professions was, at least, delayed. Given that over time the proportion of professional jobs in the labour market has grown, it may be desirable to have a large pool of young people aspiring to professional employment. But even when the expansion of professional employment is considered, the demand for this type of career among youth appears high, particularly among young women. It is also evident that many hopefuls missed out on realising their plans, although some students entered managerial occupations that did not feature prominently on the list of expected careers.
The heavy concentration of plans on the professions is particularly significant in the Australian context because beginning from the 1990s the federal and local governments embarked on implementing various policy measures to enable and encourage young Australians to obtain skilled vocational qualifications without dropping out of university preparatory courses (Groves 2007). Moreover, a national public awareness campaign was launched to popularize vocational credentials (apprenticeships) in light of skill shortages in industries such as building, hospitality (cookery), electrotechnology, automotive servicing and engineering (Dumbrell and Smith 2007). Unlike in other countries, Australian tradesmen...
are relatively well paid and enjoy high levels of autonomy and job satisfaction (Sikora and Saha 2009b), but the perceived advantages of professional employment are evidently much greater, particularly among girls. The contrast between the distribution of preferences and the actual accommodation rates provided in the right panel of Figure 1 attests to a mismatch between young people’s expectations and the realities of the labour market. Evidently a non-trivial proportion of students will not work in professional occupations. This mismatch has been also found in the UK and the USA, so it is not specific to the Australian workforce or education system. While high levels of discrepancy between expectations and occupational reality have caused a considerable concern (see for a discussion of “revolution of raising expectations” Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008; Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, and Sischo 2006), it is by no means clear that “overambitious” adolescents suffer negative consequences of their unrealized plans. Firstly, specialized services sectors grow overtime and thus accommodate more managers and professionals. Moreover, ambitious expectations may act as propellers at some stages in life to be then successfully “cooled out”. My additional analyses not reported here indicate that young Australians who fail to realize their occupational plans report satisfaction levels comparable to those of their more successful peers.

**Multivariate analyses**

To go beyond the examination of occupational attainments in only the last wave of LSAY98 it is necessary to consider the information available in LSAY98 in terms of person-year observations to explore the rich information about diverse employment paths of young people. The LSAY98 data provided 45155 person-year observations for over 8000 students (Tables 1 and 2). This means that on average I have over 5 years of students’ history which contains some information about their employment. But when only employment deemed to be “career related” is considered, in the second part of my analysis, the average history of employment shrinks to about 3 years. Table 1 lists the descriptive statistics for variables used as predictors in the multivariate analyses. To ensure that intercepts in the estimated models are of interpretable magnitude, the age of students has been centred at 18, so the minimum value of -3 is indicative of 15 years of age. The difference between observations for age, which has no missing data and the counts for particular variables illustrate the extent of necessary imputations, which were not extensive, as respondent tended to provide comprehensive information for years in which employment data were provided. As I have not imputed the data on the dependent variable, this analysis conveys no information about
students who did not work for pay at any time between 1999 and 2008. In the last wave of LSAY98 there were less than 10% of such students.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for LSAY person-year data 1999-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N of person-year observations</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent's occupational status</td>
<td>45,151</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>45,053</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational achievement in Year 9</td>
<td>45,000</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents' socio-economic status</td>
<td>41,541</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>-1.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>45,151</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>-3.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected university degree</td>
<td>38,102</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected status of the first job</td>
<td>37,760</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent's number of children</td>
<td>41,340</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: LSAY98

With this information to hand I examine the relationship between expectations and occupational attainment expressed in AUSEI06 scores (McMillan, Beavis, and Jones 2009: see Appendix for more details) in models separate for men and women. Firstly I consider all employment histories and next, bearing in mind the flexible and fluid nature of life course employment and macro-economic conditions, I examine only these employment spells which respondents themselves define as “career-related”. While some of these young people may never attain the type of employment they desire it is necessary to consider the possibility that employment trajectories of young people are diversified by their choices with respect to pursuing “career” options as opposed to “paycheck” employment which might be acceptable at a certain stage of life. Marks (2008b) illustrated this issue in his analysis of youth experiences in which spells of unemployment are positively related to the likelihood of subsequent high status employment. He refers to this pattern as “shopping around” for better jobs. Failure to attain long term employment goals can be temporary and voluntary or more permanent and involuntary, but in any case it is informative to consider the contrast between “career” and other jobs.
The key finding of the multivariate analysis is that adolescent occupational plans play a moderate yet significant role in helping to secure higher status employment (Table 2, Panel “All employment”). This is the case for both men and women although the coefficient for women is only marginally significant. The important facet of this analysis is that this holds even after educational plans and the actual university completion is controlled for. By far the largest effect is that of university completion. Early intentions to go to university matter only to the extent to which they facilitate obtaining a university degree. Good academic performance has also a positive effect, as does a more privileged socio-economic background. All of these effects are similar to patterns found in earlier American and British studies as well as studies of status attainment. Starting a family early impedes women but has no effect on men, which is also in line with what has been established in overseas studies. While overall the positive effect of early ambitions persists into the young adulthood, its relative importance appears moderate. However, both types of expectations, i.e. educational and occupational, have a relatively stronger relationship with the attained status of employment when only “career jobs” are considered.

Table 2. Occupational status of all jobs and jobs considered to be "career-related". Person-year analysis 1999-2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed effects</th>
<th>All employment</th>
<th>Only employment considered as a &quot;career job&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time invariant variables</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational achievement in Year 9</td>
<td>1.26 **</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents' socio-economic status</td>
<td>0.63 **</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time varying variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>2.59 **</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected university degree</td>
<td>-0.67 *</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected status of the first job</td>
<td>19.14 **</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent ever completed university</td>
<td>-3.62 **</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(constant)</td>
<td>27.70 **</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Random effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance between students</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance of student-specific observations</td>
<td>159.8</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Total R Squared]</td>
<td>[40%]</td>
<td>[28%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>4284</td>
<td>4148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** statistically different from zero at p<0.01, * statistically different from zero at p<0.05
High level of educational performance in Year 9 is a powerful predictor of access to higher status jobs, even after home environments provided by parents with higher levels of education and occupational status are taken into account (Panel “Career job” in Table 2). But these home environments continue to exert positive influence, most likely through the provision of guidance, usually associated with parents’ greater knowledge of the working of the education system, which they know well from their own experience and role modelling of professional lifestyles, for which children develop taste over time.

Of particular interest is the effect of expectations for these career-related employment spells, which is stronger for both men and women. Overall these results are based relatively short employment histories, but as entry level jobs are crucial for subsequent career paths, this analysis supports the proposition that the high achieving students or students from more affluent homes not only expected higher levels of attainment (Sikora and Saha 2007) but were also more successful in securing an early entry into high status employment. Young Australian women, as their older peers, continue to be penalised for early motherhood, so this generation is likely to delay starting a family well beyond their 30th birthday.

This analysis supports theoretical arguments which recognize individual determination to finish university and to work in a high status job as factors which can offset to some extent lack of material and social resources available to disadvantaged youth. Yet, structural determinants appear to be significantly more powerful as the influence of expectations remains modest even before all the controls presented in Table 2 are introduced to the models.

Although I do not show in these analyses employment trajectories of students who failed to report their occupational plans at any time, additional analyses reveal that students who do not answer survey questions about occupational expectations are likely to work in lower status jobs by the time they are 25. This however, is the case only for those students who had no stable plan to go to university. Those who did were not disadvantaged relative to average attainments of their peers who had occupational goals, regardless of the fact that the best answer they could give to the question about their vocational plans in Year 10 was “no idea”, “any job really” or “anything that pays well”.
Conclusion and discussion
This analysis examined the impact of adolescent occupational plans on attainments in early
adulthood among Generation Y, who were born around 1984, in Year 9 in 1998 and mostly in
the labour force by 2008, when the last LSAY survey was conducted. These young
Australians are very strongly oriented towards professional employment while in high school,
although the actual accommodation rates of professionals in the workforce are significantly
lower than the proportion of students willing to occupy these positions. The 2006 Census
found only a third of workers aged between 25 and 34 in professional or managerial
employment while close to 60% of young women and 50% of young men list some
profession as their preferred career (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007).

This pattern is typical for youth in other countries (Sikora and Saha 2009a), regardless of
their level of economic development and education system characteristics. This is relevant to
the institutionalist theories of global educational ideology which proposes that (Schofer and
Meyer 2005) the expectation of university completion and professional employment becomes
a norm among students in post-compulsory secondary education, despite, as is the case in
Australia, concerted efforts of educational policy makers to encourage youth to consider a
prospect of pursuing non-professional career paths which offer relatively attractive levels of
financial returns and autonomy. Early ambitious plans are important in facilitating
occupational achievement and while chances continue to be differentiated by unequal
endowments with economic and cultural capital provided by family environments, the
importance of supporting youth with extensive vocational counselling is vindicated in this
analysis. The question of the extent to which ambitious unrealized career plans may lead to
high levels of frustration and eventually to social dissent at a societal level remains open to
future empirical studies, as we need to understand more about “cooling out” processes which
might seamlessly integrate unsuccessful youth into the generally content body of young
workers. This understanding requires more knowledge and thus data on occupational plans
and their dynamics. For the time being, however, the classic status attainment model
continues to be relevant as a conceptual tool in understanding what Beck termed “charting
one's own life-course” in the increasingly diversified education and labour markets.
References


