

Career Management Skills: Learning about Abilities and Opportunities

Presented by

**Professor Paul Dalziel
(AERU Research Unit, Lincoln University)**

In the next decade, the largest ever group of young New Zealanders will make the transition from secondary schooling into tertiary education and the workforce. ... This is a strategic opportunity to ensure our workforce can compete with the best in the global economy.

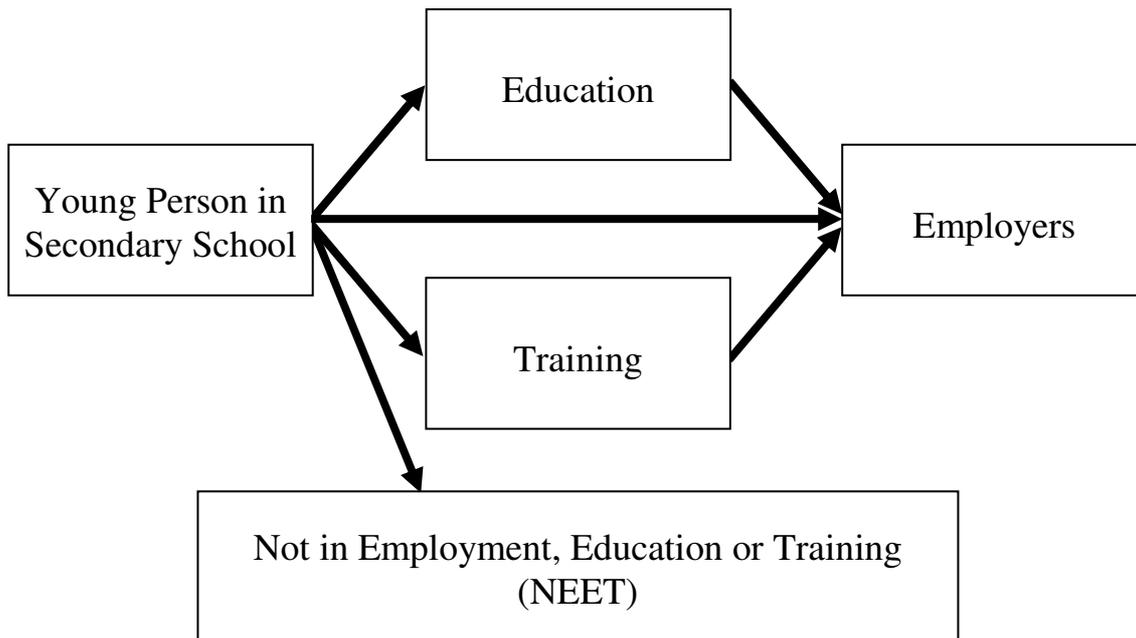
Developing the Second Tertiary Education Strategy, 2007/12
(Wellington: Tertiary Education Commission, 2006, p. 11)

The education employment linkages research programme (EEL; see www.eel.org.nz) is a five-year research programme funded by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. It brings together research strengths in the AERU research unit at Lincoln University, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research and He Pārekereke at Victoria University of Wellington. The research is motivated by studies that suggest many young New Zealanders experience difficulties linking their education and employment choices during their transition years as they move from school to work. For example, the Labour Market Dynamics Research Programme, led by Professor Paul Spoonley of Massey University, has reported from its work that 43 per cent of people aged 15-34 feel their current job is not very closely related, or is not related at all, to their educational qualifications (Dupuis et al, 2005; Cunningham et al, 2005).

Figure 1 on the next page is a stylised picture of the issue. Each year, large numbers of young people leave school and engage in further training and education that they expect will have benefits for their later employment opportunities. When they make these choices, how do these young people understand the linkages between education and employment? This is the focus of the EEL research programme, which addresses the question: How can formal support systems best help young New Zealanders make good education employment linkages to benefit themselves, their communities, and the national economy?

The research team is made up of four senior researchers with backgrounds in the disciplines of economics, sociology, education and indigenous studies, with each spending one-third of their time on the project. The first year has produced an integrated literature review (Higgins et al, 2008), documenting what international researchers in our disciplines already know about how young people make education and employment choices. That report is available from the EEL website at www.eel.org.nz/reports.html. This presentation (1) introduces the EEL programme (more detail can be found in Dalziel et al, 2007); and (2) explains one of the recent themes in the international literature about “career management skills” of young people.

Figure 1: School-to-Work Transitions



The overall framework for the literature review comes from the different ways “choice” is understood by economics, sociology, education and indigenous studies. Sociology recognises that young people have agency, but are often acting within bounded ‘horizons for action’ influenced by structural constraints associated with class, gender and ethnicity. Sociologists emphasise that decision-making is not a one-off event, but is a social process, taking place in interaction with others. During a young person’s transition years, there are distinct ‘turning points’ when education and employment choices must be made.

The education literature recognises that educators have a critical role to play in helping young people at their turning points. Educators can help young people navigate the ‘landscape’ of choices. They can help young people imagine different options (or ‘horizons’) they might not be able to see from their point in the landscape. They may also help young people not limit themselves to making decisions based on very short-term considerations.

The indigenous studies literature recognises that indigenous communities emphasise strongly collectivist approaches to decision-making. Indigenous students may be more motivated by contributing to the community than by earning high future incomes. Educators may consciously or unconsciously reinforce ethnic stereotypes in the advice they give their students. It can be a positive decision for a young indigenous person to drop out from an education system that for him or her is not ‘culturally safe’.

Economists have introduced the term “human capital” to suggest that education choices are essentially investment choices, in which an individual pays costs (such as course fees) and sacrifices other opportunities (such as going directly into employment) in order to learn skills that will produce rewards in the future (especially higher incomes than someone who does not invest in further education). In this framework, students choose to continue their education until the expected benefits no longer justify the direct costs and sacrificed opportunities.

The standard economics approach modelled a *single* choice made at a single key moment during transition from school to work. If this was a genuine reflection of how the world

works, it suggests that our key policy should be to provide career information and advice to secondary school students, as they make this key choice. However, there is evidence that the idea of a single choice is now as out-of-date as the idea of a single job for life!

A key idea going back at least to Rousseau (1762) is that education allows a person to discover and develop his or her abilities. This means students have to revisit their choices as they learn about their abilities. More recent economic models have begun to recognise this by treating 'human capital' decisions as sequential choices. Altonji (1993) and Weiler (1994), for example, have models with two decisions (Periods 1 and 3):

- Period 1: Go on to higher education (or not).
- Period 2: Learn about abilities and interests.
- Period 3: Revise the original education choice.

The model of Keane and Wolpin (1997) is a very highly regarded model in the economics literature, which has students choosing one of five options every year after turning 16. Arcidiacono (2004) presents a model of tertiary education choices in two stages:

- Choose to go to college.
- Choose quality of college.
- Choose major area of study (from 4 options).
- Receive feedback on abilities through grades.
- Revise the earlier choices.
- Enter the labour market.

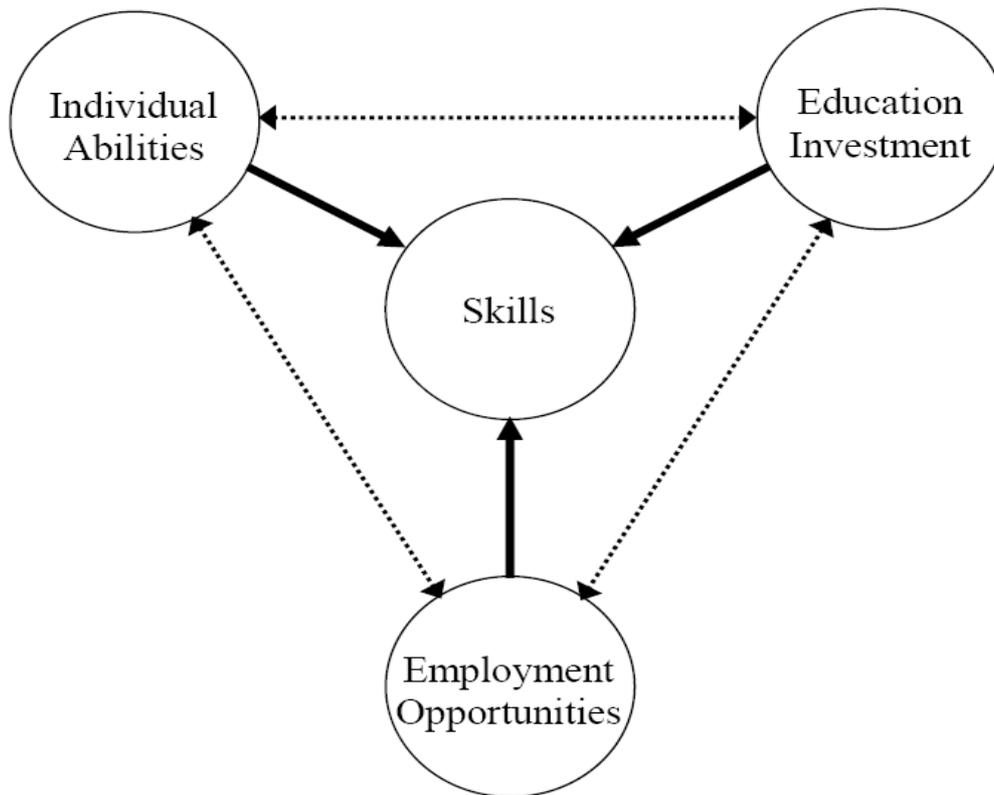
These models suggest some important implications, such as:

1. Failure in education need not be a bad outcome (if learning about abilities).
2. Persistence in failure is not likely to be a good outcome (so change plans!).
3. Obtaining a qualification without genuine ability may not be a good outcome.
4. Matching qualifications to the right job is the best outcome.

A framework that I have found useful is illustrated in Figure 2 on the next page. Its main message is that valuable skills for work come about through the matching of three items: (1) the person's individual abilities; (2) investment in education to develop those abilities; and (3) genuine employment opportunities for people with those developed abilities.

The art of combining personal abilities, education investment and employment opportunities is now being called career management (to distinguish it from concepts such as career advice or even career education). In this framework, career management is the responsibility of the individual, not the professional career advisor. It is a life-long process, not a one-off decision made before the age of 18. It means that at secondary school age, students need to learn 'career management skills', not simply receive 'career advice'.

Figure 2: Formation of Skills for Work



So what do we mean by career management skills? It means acquiring an ability to answer questions such as the following:

- How can I extend my abilities through my education and employment choices?
- Where can I discover my abilities?
 - Investment in training and education??
 - Employment in a particular industry??
- Where can I develop my abilities?
 - Investment in training and education??
 - Employment in a particular industry??
- How can I match my abilities and genuine employment opportunities?

The current National Administration Guidelines (No. 1, Part vi) emphasise specific career guidance for those students who have been identified by the school as being at risk of leaving school unprepared for the transition to the workplace or further education/training. Recent work by the OECD has suggested that teaching career management skills to students should not be considered a remedial policy for young people at risk. Instead it should be considered an essential part of a country's workforce development policies, to prepare young people for a lifetime of learning and career choices.

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