



57% of young Australians say their education prepared them for the future. Others are not so sure

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When we talk about whether the education system is working we often look at results and obvious outcomes. What marks do students get? Are they working and studying after school? Perhaps we look at whether core subjects like maths, English and science are being taught the “right” way.

But we rarely ask young people themselves about their experiences. In our [new survey](#) launched on Tuesday, we spoke to young Australians between 18 and 24 about school and university. They told us they value their education, but many felt it does not equip them with the skills, experiences and support they need for future life.

Our research

In the [Australian Youth Barometer](#), we survey young Australians each year. In the latest report, we surveyed a nationally representative group of 527 young people, aged 18 to 24. We also did interviews with 30 young people.

We asked them about their views on the environment, health, technology and the economy. In this article, we discuss their views on their education.

‘They don’t teach you the realities’

In our survey, 57% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed their education had prepared them for their future. This means about two fifths (43%) didn’t agree or were uncertain.

Many said school made them “book smart” but didn’t teach essential life skills such as budgeting, taxes, cooking, renting or workplace readiness. As one 23-year-old from Queensland told us:

They don’t teach you the realities of life and being an adult.

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I'll pitch in

This may explain why 61% of young Australians in our study had taken some form of online informal classes, such as a YouTube tutorial. Young people are looking to informal learning for acquiring practical skills such as cooking, household repairs, managing finances, driving and applying for jobs.

Some interviewees discussed how informal learning – outside of formal education places – was a key site for personal development. One interviewee (21) from Western Australia explained how they had learned how to fix computer problems online: “I’ve learnt a great deal from YouTube”. Others talked about turning to Google, TikTok and, more recently, ChatGPT.

A key question here is the reliability of these sources. This is why students need critical thinking and online literacy skills so they can evaluate what they find online.

‘This is so much money’

Young people in our survey echoed wider [community concerns](#) about the rising costs of a university education. As one South Australian man (23) told us:

I was looking at the HECS that came along with [certain courses] and I was like, this is crazy, this is so much money.

One woman (19) explained how the fees had been part of the reason why she didn’t want to go to uni.

Truthfully there was nothing at uni that interested me, any careers that it would be leading me to [...] also because university is so expensive, I wouldn’t want to get myself in a HECS debt for the rest of my life.

‘Why don’t I know anyone?’

For those who did go to uni, young people spoke about how they were missing out on the social side of education – partly due to COVID lockdowns, the broader move to [hybrid/online](#) learning and changes in campus experiences. As one Queensland 19-year-old told us:

For the past year and a half I kind of just went to class and then went home again and I was like, 'Why don't I know anyone? Why do I have no friends?'

While some students reported online study saved time, others told us they found it impersonal and disengaging. As one Victorian (23) told us:

It's more like I'm learning from my laptop, not by a university I'm paying thousands of dollars to.

Another 23-year-old from NSW said students would complain but learn more if they had face-to-face classes:

[online is] more flexible but it means it's harder to turn off and on [...] more traditional university would be nice.

Some young people are worried

One of the key roles of education is to provide pathways to desirable futures. But 40% of young people told us they were worried about their ability to cope with everyday tasks in the future. Almost 80% told us they thought they would be financially worse off than their parents, up from [53% in 2022](#).

Education alone can't address all the challenges facing young people, but we can address some key immediate issues. Our findings suggest young people believe education in Australia needs to be more affordable, practical, social and engaging. To do this we need:

- more personalised career counselling and up-to-date labour market information for school leavers and university graduates – so young people have clearer ideas about what study or training can lead to particular jobs and careers
- better ways of ensuring [online learning](#) enables connections and interactions between students and students and teachers – so learning is not as impersonal and there are more opportunities to learn in person or deliberately social online ways

- more investment in campus clubs, student wellbeing programs and peer support so young people have more opportunities to make friends and build networks.

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Young people and wellbeing

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