

Executive summary

In 2021, about one in ten young people in Australia were not in employment, education or training (NEET), compared to an OECD average of around one in seven. This report explores how educational, pre-employment and vocational interventions targeted at 12-16 year-olds might reduce the prevalence of the NEET status among older teenagers and young people in their early twenties. Among young people who are NEET, a higher share are unemployed rather than inactive, potentially making it easier to guide them to employment or education or training. Lower educational attainment, health problems and limitations, and Indigeneity are all associated with a higher likelihood of being NEET. These characteristics need to be considered when designing NEET prevention policies.

Educational policies and interventions can mitigate the chances that young people become NEET. By acting during compulsory schooling, effective policies and interventions can support transitions between primary and secondary education and prevent young people leaving school early. In terms of the long-term trajectory of young people, promoting educational attainment through relevant educational policies and interventions indirectly supports the transition into employment. A range of direct prevention interventions can be implemented to prevent early school leaving, including: i) early warning systems to identify students who are at risk of leaving school early; ii) additional support to at-risk students that emphasises inclusive learning environments; and iii) curriculum interventions that set out guidelines of what at-risk students should be taught and take away from their studies. Such interventions can be complemented by indirect prevention interventions to promote student engagement motivation and learning, such as: i) promoting a whole school approach, explicitly addressing the needs of learners not only within the curriculum but across the whole school and learning environment; ii) supporting transitions between educational levels; and iii) fostering an inclusive teaching environment.

Pre-employment interventions including career education, guidance and employer engagement can likewise make it more likely that adolescents have a smooth transition to higher education or employment. The number of longitudinal studies that demonstrate an association between pre-employment interventions and the NEET outcomes several years down the line are limited. But there exists more ample evidence that these interventions can positively influence other outcomes that are themselves associated with improved transition outcomes, such as improved educational outcomes, increased career certainty and career alignment with their occupational ambitions. A higher share of teenagers in Australia compared to OECD countries on average participate in career development activities, but the availability of such pre-employment interventions varies across types of activities, between schools and in terms of quality. Career education appears to work well when it is part of a whole-of-school strategy, adapted to the age group in question and integrated into subject matter classes, possibly alongside dedicated career learning classes. Teachers, as well as career guidance professionals, need to be equipped with sufficient resources through initial and continuous education and training, and adapted materials, to provide quality advice that recognises young peoples' interests and aspirations and puts them on the path to achieving their goals. Involving employers in pre-employment interventions is key to ensure that it is relevant to their industry and interesting to students who want to work in the industry, and interventions that involve the broader community can be helpful.

For students who favour more practical learning, vocational education and training (VET) programmes can foster their motivation and engagement with education and enable them to find a learning context that suits their needs and expectations. Moreover, by ensuring they develop the right skills demanded by the labour market, VET programmes allow them to transition into employment more easily. In order to better support learners at risk of becoming NEET in Australia, four broad areas should be tackled within VET: i) the reputation of VET (e.g. by providing easily accessible and understandable information on VET to counter misconceptions); ii) industry involvement (e.g. by strengthening work-based learning opportunities in collaboration with companies; including the industry in the development of VET curricula, examinations, and qualifications; and enhancing networks to reduce barriers); iii) support provided to vocational teachers and trainers; and iv) tailored support provided to young learners. The first two areas help improve the overall VET system and how it is perceived, making it an attractive and equally valid alternative compared to general upper secondary education, while the third and fourth areas are crucial to ensure that students have a good learning experience and receive the support they need.

Monitoring and evaluation can facilitate the design and implementation of evidence-based policies and increase the accountability and transparency of public policies. While Australia benefits from a strong data infrastructure and high-quality longitudinal datasets to track individual-level outcomes over time, cohort-specific research is still lacking for the assessment of NEET prevention interventions for adolescents. Monitoring and evaluation is also insufficiently used in Australia to inform policy making in this area, compared to countries like the United Kingdom, Korea or Mexico, which have a dedicated team or agency responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of policies across different sectors. Australia can also learn from an increasing number of OECD countries that make evaluation results public, for instance through the creation of a unique platform/repository, to encourage openness and transparency in the public sector.

Key policy recommendations

- Support primary-to-secondary transitions and incentivise participation and attainment in school by monitoring, identifying, and supporting at-risk young people through curriculum and teacher capacity interventions.
- Allow students to learn about different education and occupation options by ensuring equitable access to high-quality career education and guidance, including contacts with the real world of work through workplace visits and internships.
- Strengthen work-based learning opportunities in collaboration with companies and involve the industry in the development of VET curricula, examinations, and qualifications to improve perception of VET and make VET an attractive and equally valid alternative to general education.
- Improve monitoring and evaluation of youth policies through continued investment in data infrastructure, the development of robust ethical oversight and data privacy considerations, and the dissemination of findings through a unique platform.



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