

Teenagers who 'want to be famous' face poorer job prospects in later life

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“It’s common to hear young people say they want to be the prime minister or a doctor, or ‘famous’ in some way, but not to know what they need to get there,” says education expert Dr Ricardo Sabates. Photo: Brighton and Sussex Medical School

(PhysOrg.com) -- Teenagers who have unclear career aspirations, or whose ambitions are mismatched with their educational expectations spend more time in unemployment as adults and achieve lower wages according to a new University of Sussex-led study.

Dr Ricardo Sabates, a senior lecturer in education, together with academic colleagues at Princeton University and Penn State University, reviewed the career paths of 17,000 individuals to find a relationship between ambition in adolescence and employment in adulthood.

Although Dr Sabates was not surprised to find that the 20 per cent whose [ambitions](#) were "high and aligned" (ie the educationally able aiming for professional jobs) were more likely to achieve their goals, he and his colleagues were concerned by the fate of the 45 per cent of the cohort who set themselves unrealistic goals - or no goals at all.

"It's common to hear young people say they want to be the prime minister or a doctor, or 'famous' in some way, but not to know what they need to get there," he points out. "These are the ones who can end up with poor job prospects."

The study, published in the journal [Social Science Quarterly](#), was based on the 1970 [British Cohort Study](#), which tracks 17,000 people - all born in 1970 - at different stages of their lives. Dr Sabates looked at the [career aspirations](#) of this group when they were 16 years of age (in 1986), and related them to earnings in the [labour market](#) at 34 (in 2004).

The study found that, when all other background factors (such as social class and education) were taken into account, women with misaligned ambition were more than three times as likely to be unemployed between the ages of 16 and 34 than those with high and aligned ambition. Men with misaligned ambition also experienced more periods of unemployment, but the difference could be negated by background factors.

In terms of wages, the findings showed that women with misaligned ambitions earned 17% lower wages in [adulthood](#) than women with high and aligned ambitions. The equivalent figure for men was around 8% less. Men and women with uncertain career goals earned 17% less than those with high and aligned ambitions.

The 1980s was a time of high unemployment, mirroring the situation for many young people today. But the economic landscape is very different

now, points out Dr Sabates. "Young people are facing more and more uncertainties in their career choice. The manufacturing sector has changed, and 'employment for life' has pretty much disappeared. Yet more and more people are being encouraged to go to university, without a clear idea as to what they want to do afterwards."

He recommends that the UK looks to other countries such as Japan and Germany, which have highly structured policies to help young people with the transition from school to work. And he suggests that future research should consider the role of careers officers, teachers and parents in helping [young people](#) identify the amount of education needed for future careers goals and overcoming some of the difficulties of misaligned ambitions.

He says: "As more youth strive for post-secondary education and professional jobs, information about prospective occupations and alignment of occupation and educational ambitions become increasingly important for youths' ability to plan effectively for their future."

More information: Dr Sabates' paper, 'Ambition gone Awry: The Long-term Socioeconomic Consequences of Misaligned and Uncertain Adolescent Ambition', By Dr Ricardo Sabates, Dr Jeremy Staff and Dr Angel Harris, is published in the November 2011 issue of Social Science Quarterly

Provided by University of Sussex

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