

# What happens to students with low reading ability after school?

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New research suggests teens who read below the national standard aren't disadvantaged in the job market after school. Credit: Jisc/Google Image

Australian teenagers with poor reading skills are no worse off than higher-achieving schoolmates when it comes to employment later on, a new study has found.

The research, which looked at more than 12,000 students, suggests 15-year-olds with low reading proficiency had very similar job outcomes

by age 25 as those with medium proficiency.

There was no statistical difference in all four employment categories, including full-time, part-time work, study or neither employment or study. No significant difference was also found in job earning capacity.

The research, by the University's Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, is understood to be the first of its kind, employing longitudinal data that has only just been made available in Australia.

"These results were very surprising, particularly given the well-established fact that low reading proficiency in adulthood equates to poorer job outcomes," co-author Dr Chris Ryan said.

"It shows that knowledge and skills are never frozen and there are opportunities for students who don't perform so well academically."

The authors have written an article for PURSUIT on their study, which is available [here](#).

Additional data showed that those with low [reading ability](#) – including those who dropped out of high school – invested more heavily and more wisely in VET compared with their schoolmates.

Around 58 per cent undertook VET study, 15 per cent higher education study and 14 per cent both. In contrast, those from the medium group focused more on higher education—42 per cent, 36 per cent VET and 15 per cent both. Importantly, among those who went down the VET pathway, on average, the low proficiency group chose courses with better graduate prospects.

"It seems that having a lower academic performance by 15 sends a signal

to them that they have to prepare early," co-author Dr Cain Polidano said.

"They're focused on what they are going to have to do later to get a job, rather than worrying needlessly about academic performance.

"It really underlines the importance of Australia's VET sector and measures, such as early career counselling, to support VET course choices."

The study analysed individual information on numeracy and literacy proficiency from the 2003 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and post-school development from the 2003 Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth.

Low reading proficiency was defined in PISA as below level three, which assesses the student as being 'unable to perform the kind of moderately difficult reading tasks required to meet real-life challenges'.

But the authors warn that the results did not mean reading proficiency was irrelevant.

Rather, that it matters more at the upper-end of the proficiency distribution by age 25, especially for the chances of attaining a high paid job.

**More information:** What Happens to Students with Low Reading Proficiency at 15? Evidence from Australia:

[www.melbourneinstitute.com/dow ... series/wp2016n33.pdf](http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/dow...series/wp2016n33.pdf)

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