

Decisions and Direction: The Crucial Role of Career Exploration



Education
Services
Australia



myfuture
Shape your future

In senior secondary school, young people feel pressured to make career decisions. Well-meaning adults ask them what they plan to do after school and guide them – gently or otherwise – to make up their minds. However, young people are seldom equipped with the self-awareness or knowledge of the world required to make confident, appropriate decisions. They lack these foundational career development resources because they may not have yet had the opportunity to develop them through sustained career exploration and reflection.

Career exploration is a dynamic process of self-discovery and learning about the world of work that unfolds throughout a person's life (Flum & Blustein, 2000; Jiang et al., 2018; Kleine et al., 2021). With experience, people reflect on and develop their knowledge of who they are as a person: their values, personality, interests, skills and aspirations. They also learn about the occupations, industries and work environments that interest them, the educational and employment opportunities available to them, and the various constraints they may face.

Reflection is the most crucial element of career exploration, as it links past knowledge and experience to future intentions and behaviours. Reflection helps people set career goals, make informed choices and adapt to change. Most importantly, reflection helps people understand elements of their career identities (Flum & Blustein, 2000; Jiang et al., 2018; Kleine et al., 2021).

Career exploration can be driven by purposeful actions, such as researching career information or engaging in work experience, and through unplanned experiences that might offer flashes of insight. Similarly, reflection may be a conscious, intentional process of evaluating newly gained knowledge and experience, or it may be more intuitive and guided by emotions such as excitement, fear, fascination or disgust (Healy, 2023).

The Social Cognitive Career Theory model of career exploration

Social Cognitive Career Theory explains that career exploration is not simply a one-time event but rather a continuing process of observing, reflecting and adapting, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Ireland & Lent, 2018; Kleine et al., 2021).

When people set out to learn something, their confidence and motivation is influenced by their sense of self-efficacy and the outcomes they expect to achieve. As they take actions and reflect on the resultant experiences and outcomes, their self-efficacy and outcome expectations adjust and feed into the continuing cycle of exploratory learning.

Students' personal characteristics and contexts influence the career exploration process. For example, optimistic students will likely interpret experiences more positively, while more anxious or pessimistic students might be more easily discouraged or frustrated (Healy, 2023).

The experiences and knowledge resources available to students will be limited by socio-economic conditions or other barriers to education and work (Kenny, 2024).

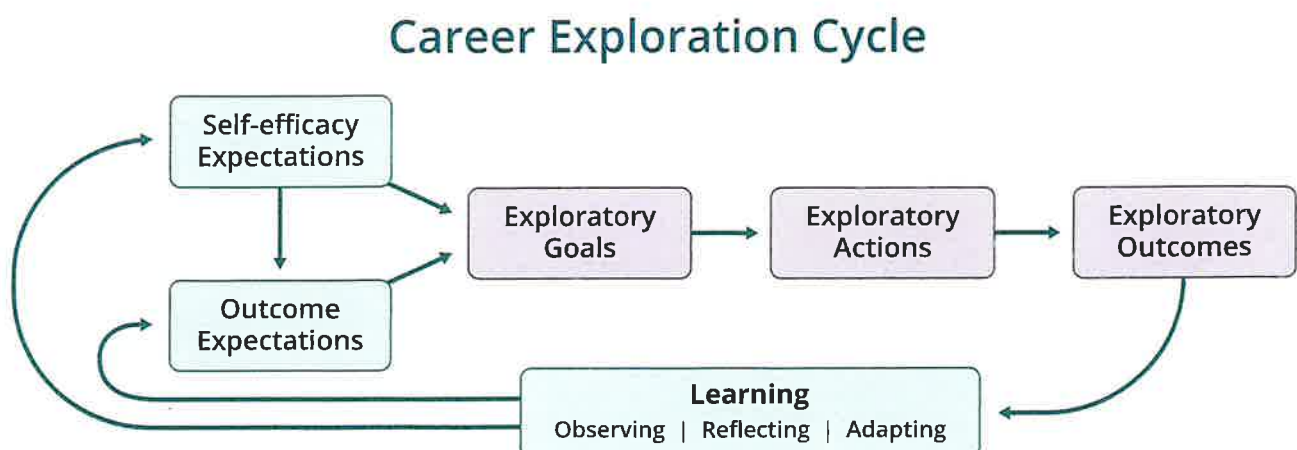


Figure 1: Social Cognitive Career Theory model of career exploration (adapted from Ireland & Lent 2018).

Career directions, rather than career decisions

While some young people know exactly what they want to do from a young age, many – perhaps even most – do not. Strongly steering undecided young people towards career decisions or goals only causes them stress and this stress may cause them to not fully consider a variety of options. An alternative approach, which encourages exploration and prioritises adaptability, is to ask them to set a career direction.

Where decisions and goals are fixed and inflexible, directions are inherently adaptive, open and flexible. Directions also impel action, with forward progress bringing the horizon incrementally into greater focus, and promote an attitude of monitoring, evaluation and course adjustment. Further, alternative options can remain viable, so long as they remain within the boundaries of the set direction.

A career direction can take many forms. It may be a general description of an industry or profession, for example, health, teaching, law or IT. It may describe an action or achievement, maybe to build things, solve problems or help people. It may include elements of life design, such as being one's own boss, travelling the world, or maintaining work-life balance. A key goal of career exploration is to add detail and nuance, layering different elements to articulate a clear direction while maintaining openness and flexibility.

Career directions allow a person to experience indecision not as a flaw or weakness, but as a virtue, as described by John Krumboltz in his article, 'The wisdom of indecision' (1992):

'We should keep in mind that being undecided might really mean that one has adopted a profound philosophical perspective that some believe leads to health and happiness. Open-mindedness can be viewed as a virtue. Keeping one's options open may be far preferable to stating goals which may or may not be possible of attainment and which could lead to frustration and unhappiness' (p. 244).

Sam's journey towards a health career

Sam is a 15-year-old interested in a career in health, but is unable to decide which of the many specific health professions may best suit them. They may not even know about many health professions, with a vocabulary limited to doctor, nurse or physiotherapist. Sam may not know the difference between an ophthalmologist and an orthoptist or may lack awareness of these occupations at all.

However, for Sam none of those details matter. Setting a career direction for 'health' is enough. That will prompt them to study health, biology and chemistry at school, to explore health courses at university or TAFE, and to browse health career information resources, such as the occupation profiles on myfuture.edu.au. They may be motivated enough to speak to health professionals or engage in activities hosted by relevant organisations.

In exploring the direction toward health careers, Sam will learn about themselves and the world of health work. Some things they learn will excite them and others they will find less interesting. When decisions become necessary,

for example, university applications, graduate program applications, they will be more prepared for them.

Most importantly, Sam will be more adaptable to changes in their circumstances or priorities. For example, should they find science subjects too challenging or uninteresting, they may realise that non-clinical professions such as public health, health information management, or health administration and management remain within the broader scope of their direction. As such, they only need a minor correction to the direction they are heading, rather than a complete re-evaluation of their career decision.

Strategies for supporting career exploration in schools

Start early

Career exploration takes time. Ideally, it begins in primary school (Hooley, 2021b). Children's understanding of the possible careers available to them coalesces at a very young age, and these mindsets and attitudes can be challenging to shift later in life (Watson & McMahon, 2017).

Repeat often

Many young people are unlikely to explore their career direction independently. Occasional workshops or career conversations are not enough to sustain the career exploration learning process. Career exploration should be promoted and supported through the entire school curriculum, from the beginning (Hooley, 2021a; 2021b).

Integrate exploration of self and opportunity

Exploration of self and the world of work are not different things that can be done separately. Self-exploration should always take into account the context of the students' current and future life. Similarly, world-of-work exploration should always be pursued with knowledge of self in the foreground, to allow for the possibility of genuine and personally meaningful conclusions.

Promote self-construction

Career exploration is not simply gathering information to help 'choose a career'. Instead, exploration should be a tool students use to understand themselves better and to create a personally meaningful career path that aligns with their evolving concept of self. Support students to understand their sense of purpose (Kenny, 2024).

Support appropriate consultation

Consultation with informed others provides students with valuable insights, support and guidance. You can help students identify and access mentors and informants. Students may also need help to manage those who seek to influence their decisions, such as parents and peer groups.

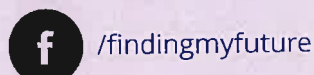
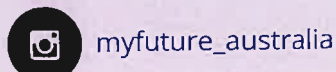
Conclusion

Supporting career exploration requires patience and trust – trust in the often uncertain process of exploration, and trust in young people's capacity to construct meaningful career directions for themselves. The reward for this patience is seeing students develop not just career goals and plans, but the confidence and adaptability they'll need to navigate an increasingly complex world of work.

Explore and download all myfuture Insights papers at www.myfuture.edu.au/assist-others/insights

Got a question? Email us at careers.esa.edu.au

Connect with us on social media



Publication may be cited as Healy, M. (2025). *Decisions and Direction: The Crucial Role of Career Exploration*. myfuture *Insights* series. Melbourne, Education Services Australia.

References

- Flum, H., & Blustein, D. L. (2000). Reinvigorating the study of vocational exploration: A framework for research. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 56(3), 380–404. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.2000.1721>
- Healy, M. (2023). *How emotions influence motivation and behaviour in career development learning*. myfuture *Insights* series. Education Services Australia. https://myfuture.edu.au/docs/default-source/insights/how-emotions-influence-motivation-and-behaviour-in-career-development-learning.pdf?sfvrsn=501145db_1
- Hooley, T. (2021a). *Career education: Every teacher has a role*. myfuture *Insights* series. Education Services Australia. <https://myfuture.edu.au/docs/default-source/insights/career-education-every-teacher-has-a-rolef42e4e89-15f0-4f41-a5f3-4e8bae6ebc27.pdf>
- Hooley, T. (2021b). *Career education in primary school*. myfuture *Insights* series. Education Services Australia. <https://myfuture.edu.au/docs/default-source/insights/career-education-in-primary-school.pdf>
- Ireland, G. W., & Lent, R. W. (2018). Career exploration and decision-making learning experiences: A test of the career self-management model. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 106, 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2017.11.004>
- Jiang, Z., Newman, A., Le, H., Presbitero, A., & Zheng, C. (2018). Career exploration: A review and future research agenda. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.08.008>
- Kenny, M. E. (2024). *Transformative career development education: Enabling equal access to decent work*. myfuture *Insights* series. Education Services Australia. https://myfuture.edu.au/docs/default-source/insights/transformative-career-education-enabling-equal-access-to-decent-work.pdf?sfvrsn=1f1f23db_1
- Kleine, A-K., Schmitt, A., & Wisse, B. M. (2021). Students' career exploration: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2021.103645>
- Krumboltz, J. D. (1992). The wisdom of indecision. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 41(3), 239–244. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791\(92\)90025-U](https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(92)90025-U)
- Watson, M., & McMahon, M. (2017). *Career exploration and development in childhood: Perspectives from theory, practice and research*. Routledge.