

Teenage dreams are just fantasy

Lack of reality due to TV

EXCLUSIVE
Susie O'Brien

Students bingeing popular TV hospital, courtroom and police drama shows are inspired to be doctors, lawyers and cops, with many believing they don't have to go to university first, new research shows.

A study of 690,000 15-year-old students from 81 countries by the OECD shows girls in 2022 (the latest figures available) want to be doctors, teachers, lawyers, psychologists, police officers and actors. Boys want to be IT professionals, engineers, sportspeople and managing directors.

But one in five students is "misaligned" in their career thinking, the international report says. They are "expecting to work in a job that typically requires a university education, but not expecting to complete tertiary education".

Penne Dawe, CEO of the Australian Centre for Career Education, said top-rating TV shows such as Law And Order, Grey's Anatomy and Suits were having an impact on the career choices of teenagers.

"They are watching a new forensic detective episode and then end up wanting to be forensic investigators," she said.

"They think such shows give them realistic information about what that job is like."

Ms Dawe said there was a "postcode divide" in such thinking, with students from more disadvantaged backgrounds less likely to have realistic expectations.

The OECD report shows nearly one in three Australian students from a disadvantaged background has a mismatch

between career aspiration and the expected further education this job involves. But it's less than one in 10 of students from more wealthy backgrounds.

Career aspirations have changed little in the past two decades, with girls no longer wanting to be keyboard clerks, hairdressers or writers in 2022 and more boys wanting to be managing directors and CEOs.

On average, half of all girls and 44 per cent of boys expect to work in 10 jobs, with professional choices dominating.

In Australia overall, 65 per cent of such jobs make up less than 20 per cent of the labour force. Although service and sales assistants are the most popular occupational category making up 16 per cent of jobs, only 5 per cent of young people want to work in those areas. All up, 39 per cent are uncertain about what job they want to do at the age of 15. This has not changed over two decades.

Kate Flaherty, national president of the Career Development Association Australia, said there was "nothing wrong with young people having lofty ideas about their careers as long as it's part of a process".

"These days, if they want to be a psychologist, they may head to TikTok and watch psychologists talk about their job, which may not be realistic," she said. "It's far more important to actually meet people and talk to them about what they do."

Trevor Black, careers teacher and chair of the Australian Centre for Career Education board, said the OECD report "reinforces the importance of all students having access to individual quality career advice" from qualified sources.