About the research

Post-school education and labour force participation in Canada and Australia

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A recent report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2008b) into youth labour markets in OECD countries highlights that, in 2006, half of all young people aged 20 to 24 years in Canada held a post-school qualification, in contrast to 38% in Australia. This is a difference that deserves closer examination, especially when Australia is seeking to considerably increase participation in tertiary education.

Using data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth and the Canadian Youth in Transition Surveys, this report focuses on the post-school pathways and outcomes for young adult men and women in Australia and Canada. Austen and MacPhail find distinct differences in the characteristics of students who participate in Australia’s vocational education and training (VET) system and Canada’s college—as distinct from the university—system.

It needs to be noted, however, that there are marked differences between the two systems, which may impact on the post-school choices young people make. In general, the Canadian college system provides students with the choice of two distinct pathways: a vocational or career pathway via vocationally oriented programs, or an academic pathway to university via pre-university programs. The Australian VET system provides vocational education and training, although there has been increasing attention given to articulation between VET and higher education.

Key messages

- The authors speculate that the Australian VET sector provides students with low educational outcomes or who are from less advantaged family backgrounds with educational opportunities that are not present in the Canadian system.
- In contrast to the Canadian college system, the Australian VET system is not considered an educational pathway of choice for higher achieving school students or those from more advantaged backgrounds. Perhaps this is because Canadian colleges offer a clear pathway to university.
- High educational attainment helps protect young women against withdrawal from the labour market once they become parents. This increased attachment to the labour market is likely to have an impact on employment and earnings chances over the life course.

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