

Research Results

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The Dynamics of Post-Secondary Participation and Completion: A Fifteen Year Portrayal of BC Young Adults

Lesley Andres, Department of Educational Studies, University of British Columbia

The British Columbia post-secondary system is articulated or “seamless” in that it allows for students to make dynamic transitions into and through the system. But what types of transitions do students actually make? What level of student debt do they incur? What credentials do they earn and how do these credentials help them to secure employment? The *Paths on Life’s Way* project has been following 733 BC high school graduates from the Class of 1988 since they graduated from high school.



As with all longitudinal studies, sample attrition has occurred. In 1989, 74% of the sample were post-secondary participants and 26% were non-participants. By 2003, these figures had changed to 81% and 20%, respectively. The sample is also biased slightly toward women. In 1989, 57% of the sample was comprised of women; in 2003 this figure was 60%. There is remarkably little bias by parental educational or occupational background or geographic location.

The Paths project is unique in that it traces students through the post-secondary system¹ – both provincially and extra-provincially – and follows them as they moved from post-secondary education into work. To date, data have been collected at five year intervals (1989, 1993, 1998, and 2003). In this report, some of the key findings from the 15 year follow-up study in 2003 are highlighted.

Table 1 (next page) provides an overview of the initial post-high school destinations of Paths respondents and their post-secondary completion status 15 years later.

Table 1. Initial Education Destinations and 2003 Attainment

	Post-school Destinations 1 Year Out (1989)						Educational attainment in 2003											
	Non-participant		Non-university		University		Non-participant		Non-completer		Non-university credentials		Bachelor's degree		Professional & Grad degree		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Female	78	18	228	52	132	30	22	5	36	8	149	34	124	28	110	25	441	60
Male	64	22	117	40	114	39	21	7	31	11	86	30	94	32	60	21	295	40
TOTAL	142	19	345	47	246	34	43	6	67	9	235	32	218	30	170	23	733	100

Within the first year of leaving high school, approximately 20% of the sample were post-secondary non-participants. About half of the sample commenced their studies at non-university institutions with the remainder enrolling in universities. Males were 10% more likely to enter universities directly from high school, whereas women were 12% more likely than men to enrol in non-university institutions.

By 2003, only 6% of Paths respondents remained post-secondary non-participants, and slightly less than 10% had not completed any post-secondary credential. Despite gender differences in the types of institutions initially attended, by 2003 equal proportions of women and men had earned bachelor's, professional, and graduate degrees.

Table 1 is merely a snapshot of post-secondary attainment over a long time span. Table 2 demonstrates the movement of students in five year intervals. It is evident that those who remained post-secondary non-participants five years following high school tended to stay in this category. The proportion of those who had not completed any credential dropped dramatically over 15 years, which suggests that a 10-year horizon for assessing post-secondary attainment is too short.

Table 2 demonstrates that apprenticeships remained the purview of men. However, very few opted for this educational route. Also, few respondents completed associate degrees. By 2003, approximately 35% of women and 25% of men earned non-university certificates and diplomas.

Table 2. Highest Credential Earned by 2003

	5 years later (1993)		10 years later (1998)		15 years later (2003)	
	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Non-participant	5	8	4	5	4	5
Non-completer	32	44	10	16	8	11
Certificate	20	13	18	13	17	13
Diploma	16	11	18	11	17	12
Associate degree	n/a	n/a	1	1	1	1
Ticket/apprenticeship	1	6	1	6	1	7
Bachelor's degree	21	17	29	34	28	32
Professional degree	6	1	16	10	16	11
Master's degree	0	1	3	5	8	8
Doctoral degree	0	0	0	1	1	1
N	437	287	433	281	441	292

Female and male 1988 high school graduates initially chose different educational routes, but they earned university degrees at similar rates by 2003.

Over time, the largest gains were made by those who earned bachelor's, professional, and graduate degrees. That is, in 1993, 27% of women and 19% of men had earned bachelor's degrees or higher. By 2003, this proportion had increased to 53% of women and 52% of men. Also, equal proportions of women and men (9%) had earned master's and doctoral degrees.

It is well documented in the literature that numerous factors affect post-secondary attainment. In [Table 3](#), three factors are portrayed – parental education, gender, and initial timing of post-secondary study.

For respondents for whom neither parent had earned bachelor level credentials, there are considerable differences between those who did and did not enter into the post-secondary system directly.

Those who came from homes where neither parent had earned university credentials and who did not commence their studies within one year of high school graduation were more likely than other groups to remain non-participants. Non-participants from non-university educated homes who did not begin their studies in 1988/89 were much less likely (22% of women and 26% of men) to earn university level credentials (i.e., bachelor's, professional, master's, and doctoral degrees) than were those from similar family backgrounds who entered directly from high school (54% of women and 57% of males).

Direct-entry students from university-educated families earned bachelor's degrees at higher rates than did other students.

Table 3. Initial Engagement in Post-secondary Education in 1989 by Post-secondary Completion Status and Parental Educational Background in 2003

Neither parent with a university degree

In 1989, of those who were:	Non-participants		Participants	
	Females %	Males %	Females %	Males %
Non-participant	22	22	3	3
Non-completer	18	14	8	11
Certificate	16	14	17	9
Diploma	18	8	17	13
Associate degree	0	0	0	1
Ticket/apprenticeship	2	14	2	6
Bachelor's degree	10	18	29	34
Professional degree	8	6	17	12
Master's degree	4	2	7	10
Doctorate	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	49	49	271	170

One or both parents with a university degree

In 1989, of those who were:	Non-participants		Participants	
	Females %	Males %	Females %	Males %
Non-participant	0	11	1	2
Non-completer	0	0	4	10
Certificate	11	11	10	12
Diploma	22	33	11	10
Associate degree	0	0	3	0
Ticket/apprenticeship	0	11	0	0
Bachelor's degree	11	22	42	41
Professional degree	44	11	17	16
Master's degree	11	11	11	8
Doctorate	0	0	1	0
TOTAL	9	9	79	49

Note: A small number of respondents did not report parents' level of education.

Table 4. Most Common Educational Trajectories

	Initial Post-high school destination in 1989	1993	1998	2003	Female	Male
Type of Trajectory					%	%
Non-university	non-university/non-participant	non-university graduate	non-university graduate	non-university graduate	18	14
University	university	bachelor's degree	bachelor's degree	bachelor's degree	12	12
Advanced	university	bachelor's degree	prof/graduate degree	prof/graduate degree	5	5
Transfer	non-university	bachelor's degree	bachelor's degree	bachelor's degree	10	4
Prolonged	university/non-university	non-completer	bachelor's degree	bachelor's degree	7	13
Broader	non-university	non-university graduate	bachelor's degree	bachelor's degree	3	2
Non-completer	non-university/university	non-completer	non-completer	non-completer	6	7
Non-participant	non-participant	non-participant	non-participant	non-participant	4	5

It is notable that almost none of the Paths respondents with at least one university educated parent were likely to be post-secondary non-participants directly out of high school. Moreover, those from university educated families who entered directly were more likely than any other group (71% of women and 65% of men) to earn bachelor's degrees or greater.

Table 4 highlights the dynamic ways in which the *Paths on Life's Way* respondents engaged with the post-secondary system. In total, we have identified 55 different routes that the Paths sample took through the post-secondary system.² In Table 4, the eight most common trajectories are portrayed. The two most common trajectories were the traditional routes; that is, completion of either non-university – the “non-university” trajectory, or university studies – the “university” trajectory – within five years of high school completion and no subsequent engagement with the post-secondary system.

More than twice as many women than men began their studies at non-university institutions – the “transfer” trajectory – and then transferred and completed

bachelor's degrees within five years. Conversely, men were twice as likely as women to prolong their studies – the “prolonged” trajectory – by either beginning at universities or non-university institutions but took at least 6 and up to 10 years to complete bachelor's degrees. Table 4 also reveals the persistent nature of a small group of non-participants and non-completers.

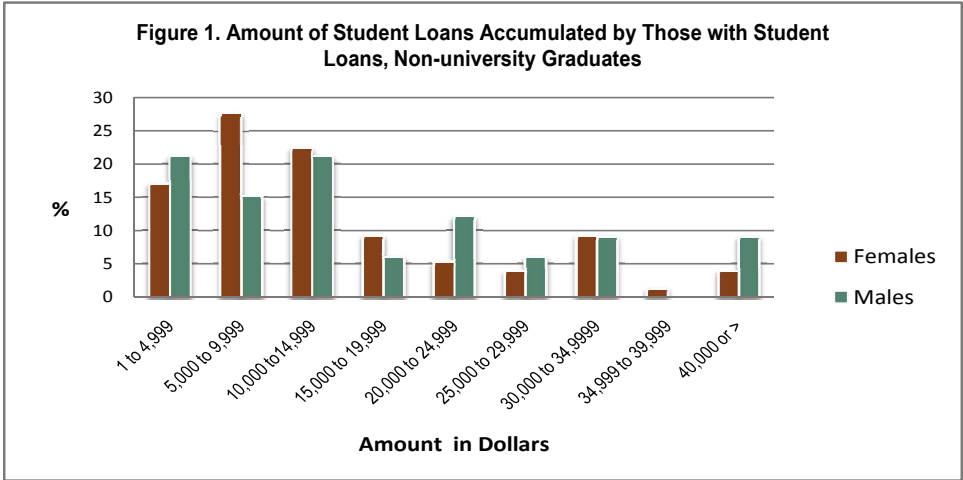


Student Debt

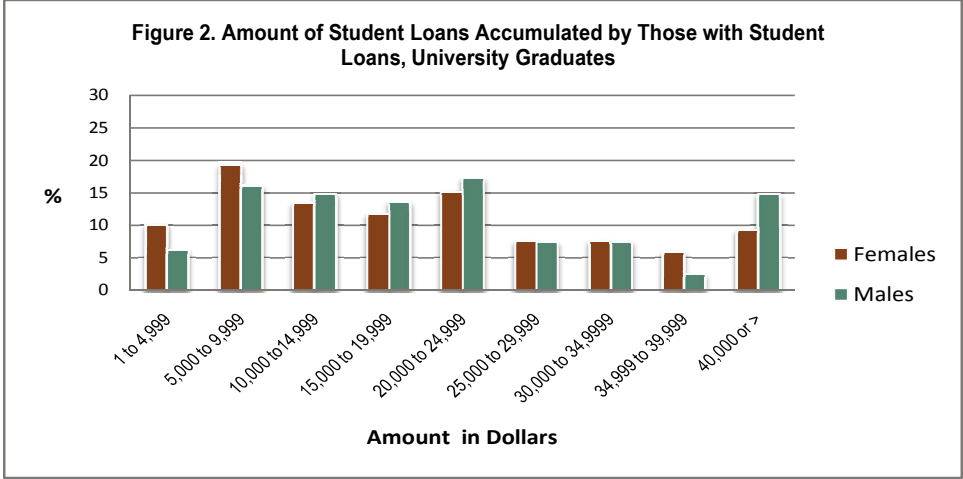
As would be expected, graduates from university were more likely than those who graduated from non-university institutions to accumulate student debt. Only 28% of males and 41% of females with non-university credentials took out student loans to complete their studies. In contrast, 54% of males and 52% of females with university credentials incurred student debt in the form of loans.

In Figures 1 and 2, the amount of student debt accumulated over 15 years by non-university and university graduates (of those with loans) is portrayed. Not surprisingly, given the shorter duration of study the majority of non-university graduates with debt (67% of women and 58% of men) had accumulated less than \$15,000 to finance their studies. The comparable proportion of debt for female and male university graduates is 43% and 37%, respectively. However, the majority (57% of women and 63% of men) of those with loans borrowed \$15,000 or more to finance their studies.

University graduates accumulated higher debt than non-university graduates.



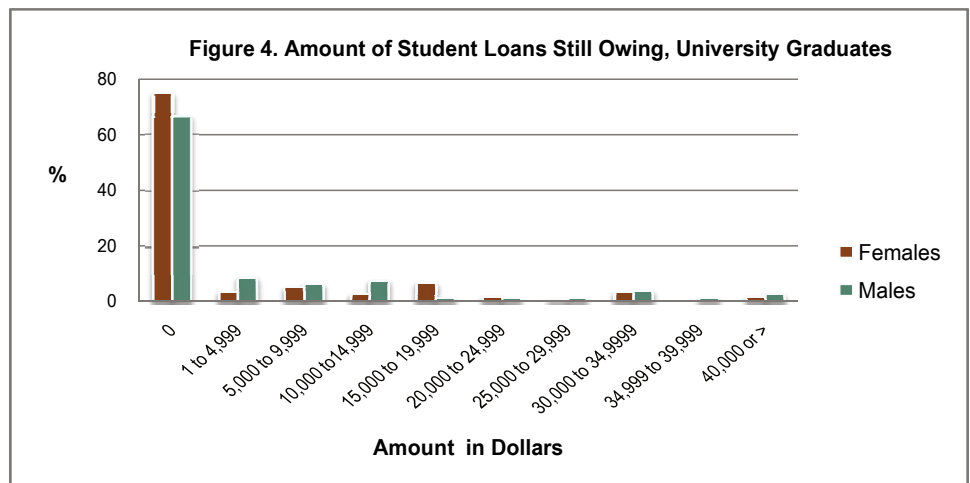
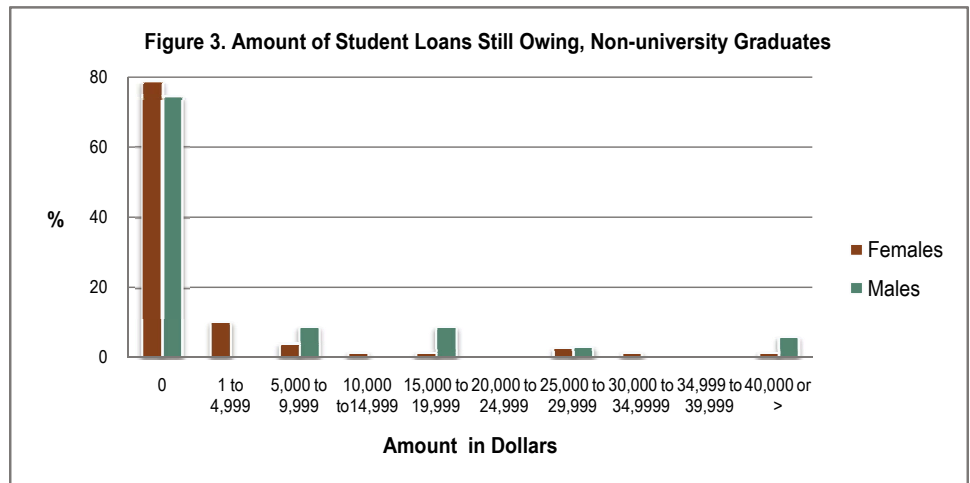
Most respondents who took out student loans had paid off their loans by 2003.



Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate that 79% of female and 74% of male non-university graduates have paid off their student loans as have 75% of female and 68% of male university graduates.³

Employment

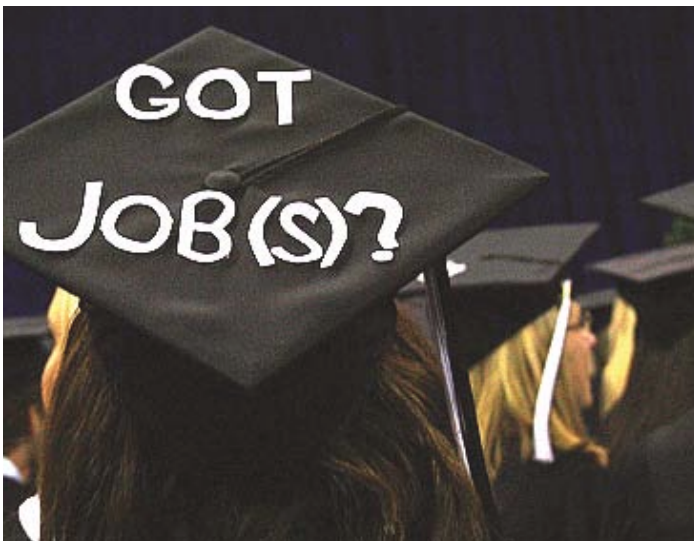
In Table 5, the occupational status of Paths respondents by post-secondary completion status is portrayed. Ten years out of high school, 72% of women and 95% of men who had never attended post-secondary studies were concentrated in the unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled occupational categories. The comparable proportion of non-university graduates employed in these categories is 66% (both women and men). Less than 30% of both male and female university graduates worked in unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled jobs. University graduates were much more likely than the other groups to be employed as semi-professionals or professionals.



However, women were 11% more likely than men to be employed as semi-professionals and men were 12% more likely than women to be employed as professionals/managers.

Fifteen years out of high school, the proportion of non-participant men in unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled jobs contracted to 68% (from 95% in 1998), whereas upward occupational mobility for non-participant women was minimal at 68% (down from 72% in 1998).

Female non-university graduates fared somewhat better with only 55% employed in these job categories. Between 1998 and 2003, male non-university graduates experienced little movement out of unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled jobs. The vast majority of female (79%) and male (80%) university graduates were concentrated in the semi-professional and professional/management categories. However, the gender differences noted earlier remain.



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Table 5. Current or Most Recent Occupation (Pineo-Porter-McRoberts) by Post-Secondary Completion Status⁴

	10 Years Out						15 Years Out					
	Females			Males			Females			Males		
	No PS %	Non-univ %	Univ %	No PS %	Non-univ %	Univ %	No PS %	Non-univ %	Univ %	No PS %	Non-univ %	Univ %
Total Unskilled	10	18	6	5	17	9	23	16	5	15	13	5
Total Semi-skilled	38	24	8	10	12	4	32	14	3	15	13	4
Total Skilled	24	24	15	80	37	15	13	25	13	38	40	12
Total Semi-professional	20	30	43	5	25	32	23	36	45	29	27	35
Total Professional/Managerial	10	5	28	0	11	40	10	9	34	5	8	45
TOTAL N	21	173	221	20	106	144	22	177	224	21	116	151

Conclusion

The *Paths on Life's Way* sample is certainly an "educated generation."⁵ Almost all respondents have embraced post-secondary studies, either directly out of high school or at a later point in time. The vast majority have completed some type of post-secondary credential. Those who entered post-secondary education within one year of completing high school were more likely than those who delayed entry to complete their studies and earn bachelor's degrees or higher. The majority of those who had taken out student loans have paid off their debt. Despite the cost, post-secondary education has paid off – particularly for male university graduates – in terms of jobs in the professions and high level management.



¹ In this study, the term *post-secondary* refers to participation at public or private university or non-university institutions, for at least one month, within or outside of British Columbia. Due to sample attrition, the sample is biased slightly toward post-secondary participants and women.

² For a more detailed account, see Andres, L., & Adamuti-Trache, M. (2008). *Life-course transitions, social class, and gender: a 15-year perspective of the lived lives of Canadian young adults*. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 11(12), 115-145.
http://edst.educ.ubc.ca/sites/edst.educ.ubc.ca/files/faculty_uploads/u20/Andres%20%26%20Adamuti-Trache%202008%20PROOFS.pdf

³ We discuss this in greater depth in Andres, L. & Adamuti-Trache, M. (2009). *University attainment, student loans, and adult life course activities: A fifteen year portrait of British Columbia young adults*. In R. Finnie, R. Mueller, A. Sweetman, & A. Usher (Eds.), *Who goes? Who stays? What matters? New empirical evidence on participation in post-secondary education in Canada*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
http://edst.educ.ubc.ca/sites/edst.educ.ubc.ca/files/faculty_uploads/u20/Andres%20%26%20Adamuti-Trache%202009.pdf

⁴ Non-completers are not included in this table.

⁵ See Andres, L., & Wyn, J. (forthcoming). *The making of a generation: Young adults in Canada and Australia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press for a detailed comparative analysis.



BC Council on Admissions & Transfer
709 – 555 Seymour Street
Vancouver BC Canada V6B 3H6

bccat.ca | admin@bccat.ca
t 604 412 7700 | f 604 683 0576



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