

# Participation in Post-Secondary Education: Recent Trends

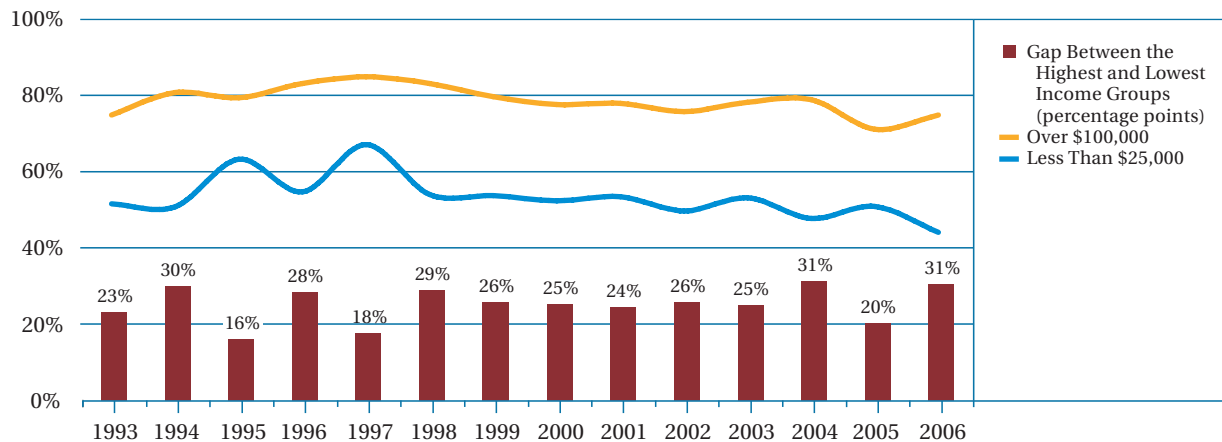
## The Argument:

Canada has the highest level of educational attainment among OECD countries. A majority of Canadian youth report attending some form of higher education by age 24, whether it be a university, college or apprenticeship program. This fact should be celebrated, but it should not deflect us from examining the question of participation in post-secondary education more closely. Of particular concern is the fact that the country has made little progress on narrowing the access gaps that affect young people from different

backgrounds. Wealthier Canadians are twice as likely to go to university as poorer ones—this was true 15 years ago, and it is no less true today. Other gaps, such as those separating the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, have remained stubbornly persistent. As a result, youth from low-income families, children of parents with little or no post-secondary education and Aboriginal peoples remain considerably underrepresented in higher education.

## Key Myths Challenged:

Myth	Fact
Recent increases in the number of students enrolled in college or university is evidence that post-secondary participation is rising every year.	According to the evidence presented here, participation rates have been falling.
Participation in post-secondary education—particularly university—is gradually becoming more equitable with the passage of time.	In fact, access gaps have not been narrowing.
Canada leads the OECD in educational attainment.	This is true, but it is primarily due to Canada's relatively large college sector. Canada's college attainment rate is highest, but its university attainment rate is closer to the middle of the pack. Meanwhile, the educational attainment of many of Canada's OECD peers is growing at a quicker pace.
The typical student moves directly from high school into college or university and on to the labour market armed with a diploma or degree.	In fact, this "typical" educational pathway is only a reality for about one-third of Canadian youth.
The correlation (or the lack of correlation) between tuition fee levels and enrolment rates in Canada is easy to observe.	As we will demonstrate, assertions about the link between tuition and enrolment are often based on an inaccurate or incomplete reading of the data.

**Figure 1 — Post-Secondary Participation Rate by Select Family Income Levels among 18- to 24-Year-Olds, 1993–2006**

Note: Sample is restricted to individuals residing with at least one parent when surveyed; Statistics Canada used an augmented sample, exploiting the longitudinal nature of the dataset, to verify the reliability of the data. The method used replicates Drolet's approach, described in Drolet (2005, 14–15).

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics, custom tabulation.

## What's New:

This chapter provides new data on post-secondary participation rates and reviews the latest data on enrolment and attainment.

## Myth: The Continuous Post-Secondary Pathway

Statistics Canada's *Youth in Transition Survey* offers robust longitudinal data on the pathways of youth beginning as early as age 15. It has allowed Canadians to gain their best ever insight into the dynamics of educational pathways. Analysts such as Hango and de Broucker (2007b) have examined the educational and labour market pathways of youth beginning at ages 18 to 20 and ending at ages 22 to 24, only to find that much of what might have been considered typical is far from it. As they note, only one in three young Canadians went directly from high school to post-secondary education and were either enrolled or had graduated once they reached age 22 to 24.

- Nine percent of all youth went directly from high school to college and graduated by age 22 to 24.
- Eight percent of all youth went directly from high school to university and graduated by age 22 to 24.

- Two percent of all youth went directly from high school to college and were still enrolled by age 22 to 24.
- Twelve percent of all youth went directly from high school to university and were still enrolled at the undergraduate level by age 22 to 24.
- Three percent of all youth went directly from high school to university and were enrolled at the graduate level by age 22 to 24 (Hango and de Broucker, 2007b, 21–24).

The “typical” pathway, then, only applies to about one-third of youth, almost half of whom have not completed post-secondary education by the time they reach age 22 to 24, approximately four to six years after high school. Thus, if few students begin post-secondary education “on time,” even fewer complete it on schedule.

While the YITS dataset used to construct this pathway analysis does not contain information about family income, it does offer information about respondents' parental education, as well as their Aboriginal status. Unsurprisingly, the likelihood that an individual will enrol directly in post-secondary education from high school increases with parental education. Similarly, Aboriginal youth were much less likely than non-Aboriginal youth to pursue the “traditional” pathway.