

Getting to Post-Secondary Studies

The Argument:

What factors explain whether an individual chooses to pursue an education beyond high school? In recent years, due in large part to the availability of new and often complex data, we have seen a growing number of studies that focus on, first, measuring the gaps in post-secondary participation between certain groups and, second, explaining the reasons why certain groups—e.g., Aboriginal Peoples, boys, youth from low-income families—are under-represented in post-secondary institutions. The Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), among others, contains a wealth of data enabling a better understanding of young people’s transitions and educational pathways.

We examine the issue of predictors of participation by distinguishing between five major groups of factors, which are inter-related to various degrees:¹

- 1) Individual characteristics such as gender and age;
- 2) Familial socio-economic factors, including parental level of education, family income, family structure, parental employment, mother tongue and ethnic or cultural origin;
- 3) Factors linked to academic performance: having a high school diploma, having taken the prerequisite courses for admission to a given program (e.g., advanced mathematics) or having a grade average enabling individuals to be admitted to the program of their choice;
- 4) Individual behavioural factors such as motivation, aspirations, preferences and types of activities engaged in;
- 5) Factors related to the environment in which youths live: friends, distance from home to a post-secondary institution, institutional accommodation capacities

and requirements, economic conditions in their region, availability of information, availability of guidance counsellors, tuition fees and student aid policies.

Of course, we cannot resolve the issue of access to post-secondary education by addressing only one of these five major groups. Further, depending on the group of individuals studied, a given factor can play a more or less important role.

What’s New:

In this chapter, we summarize the knowledge gained both by the research community and as a result of policies favouring access to post-secondary studies. We draw out key messages from various recently published studies on the determinants of access, focusing on what factors are important and to whom they are important, and attempting to establish which factors can be influenced.

Key Facts:

- Unequal rates of participation by men and women in post-secondary studies have become a notable preoccupation in Canada and in several other OECD countries as well—and they are a cause for concern. As a recent study by Torben Drewes points out, although admission to university does not take into account the gender of the applicant, the fact that it is based on one’s academic record may result in a widening of the gap between males and females: if, as we have seen, boys tend to have lower averages than girls, they are less likely to be admitted from the start.
- Descriptive data suggest that there are several factors that may explain the gaps in university

1. This classification differs somewhat from previous editions of *The Price of Knowledge*: Junor and Usher (2004) and Berger, Motte and Parkin (2007) group barriers into categories related to information, motivation, academic performance and finance. These groupings were mainly based on answers provided by survey respondents to explain why they might not participate in post-secondary studies. All of these barriers are present in one form or another in the groups of factors listed here.

participation across income quartiles. Frenette uses regression models to isolate the contribution of each of the factors to the 29 percentage point gap observed in the rate of university participation between youth in the first and fourth income quartiles. The three key factors emerging from the analysis are: parental education (responsible for 29.9 percent of the gap); reading scores (responsible for 19.7 percent); and GPA (responsible for 14.3 percent). Financial barriers ranked fourth (responsible for 12 percent of the gap), followed by parents' expectations (responsible for 11.6 percent).

- Two questions are of particular interest in the case of Aboriginal youth: what are the main factors explaining the gap in high school completion rates, and what factors explain participation in post-secondary studies? A study by Frenette (forthcoming) is able to explain 53 percent of the gap in high school completion rates and 90 percent of the gap in university attainment rates. In both cases, academic results are a strong determinant, explaining 25.4 percent and 44.7 percent of the respective gaps. Family environment and income also play a role, although they are less significant.

Figure 1 — Participation in Post-Secondary Education by PISA Score and Family Income

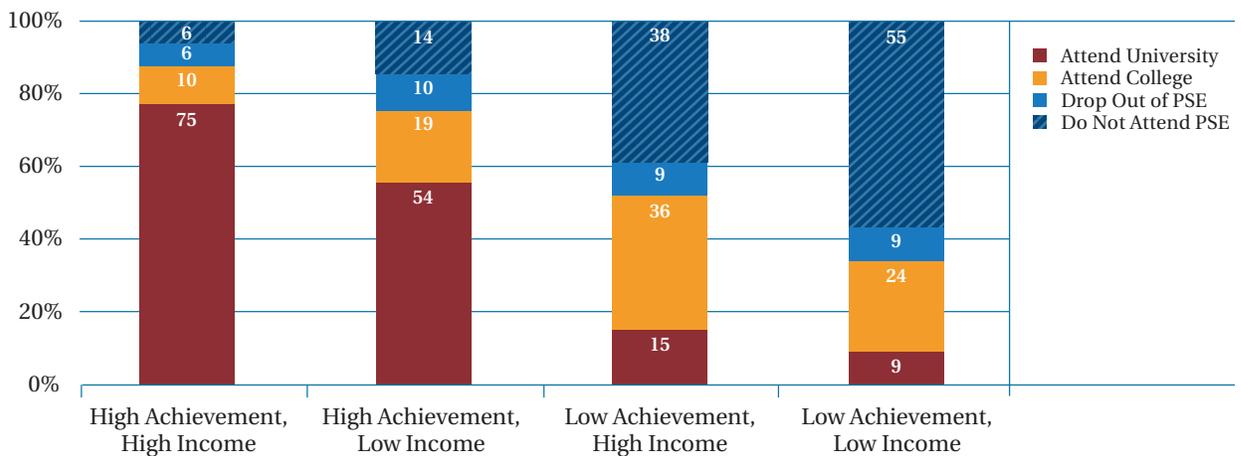
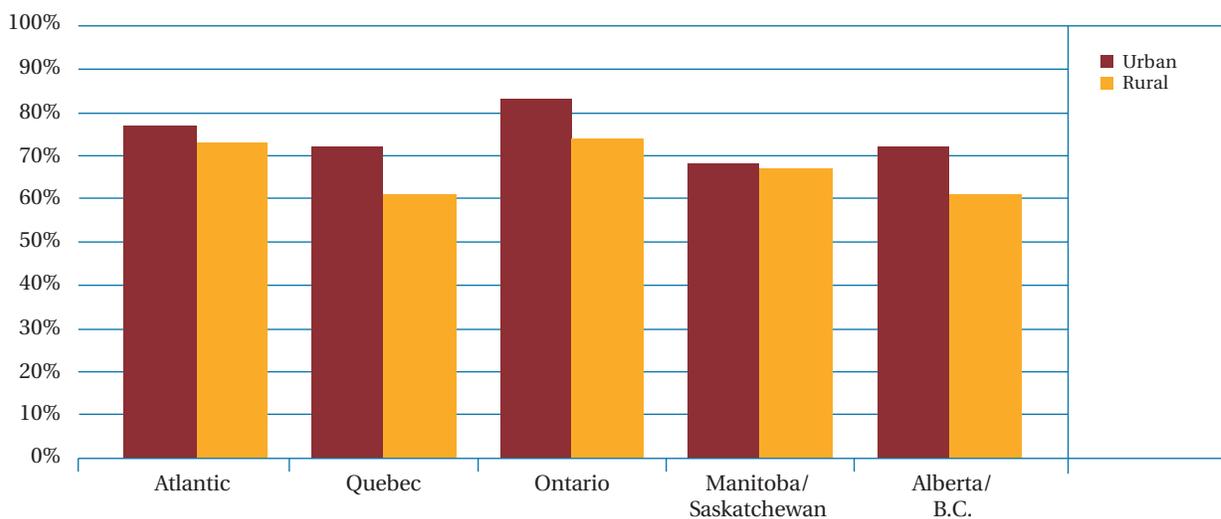


Figure 2 — Rates of Post-Secondary Participation by Region and Urban/Rural Status



Source: Looker (2009).