Chapter 1
School Dropout and Completion: An International Perspective

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Introduction

In most OECD countries, graduation from secondary school is now viewed as the minimum level of educational attainment needed for successful participation of young people in further study and work. This is because in most nations, secondary education serves as the foundation for entry to university and other education and training opportunities as well as preparation for entry into the labour market. Over time, it has become more and more important in deciding how economic and other life benefits, such as good health and well-being, are distributed. Despite this, in some countries, the numbers of young people leaving school without completing a relevant upper secondary qualification can be quite large. Even in nations where the numbers appear small, this does not guarantee that education systems have met all of the challenges in adequately equipping every graduate with the basic skills and knowledge necessary to take advantage of the full range of education and labour market opportunities. When it comes to rates of school completion and promoting universal attainment of upper secondary qualifications, all school systems display patterns of success and failure, which are more or less marked. Every system has 'failure' – varying numbers of young people who fail to gain an upper secondary qualification – though the level of failure may be concealed or debated, depending on the measures that are used. The social patterns of dropout suggest that in all countries, the opportunities and benefits associated with successful completion are difficult to penetrate for 'non-traditional' users. Yet, some systems have been more successful than others in promoting high rates of completion and providing programs that accommodate the majority of young people. This book offers a systematic analysis of how different school systems work and the impact of differences in institutional and program arrangements on patterns of student dropout and completion.

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There has been ongoing interest across all nations in the issue of secondary school dropout and completion and part of the reason for this has to do with the consequences. While rates of school dropout and completion vary across western nations, one thing that does not vary much is the finding that, for individuals, not completing school and failing to gain equivalent education and training qualifications is associated with poorer labour market outcomes. Consistently, research in different countries shows that dropouts are more likely to become unemployed, stay unemployed for longer, have lower earnings and over their life course accumulate less wealth (e.g., see Rumberger & Lamb, 2003; OECD, 2001; Barro, 1997; Shavit & Mueller, 1998). Dropouts also more often experience poorer physical and mental health, have higher rates of crime and less often engage in active citizenship (Owens, 2004; Rumberger, 1987). In addition to the costs for individuals, there are also social costs associated with increased welfare needs and reduced taxation revenue (Owens, 2004).

In response to these issues, governments have been seeking policies to increase rates of secondary school completion and reduce dropout. Addressing the problem of dropout, however, presents a major test for education and training systems. For any system, the challenge in encouraging more young people to remain at school is finding ways to deal with pupil diversity. In all countries, young people who leave school before obtaining an upper secondary qualification tend to come from disadvantaged social and racial backgrounds, they tend more often to have become disengaged from school, are less motivated scholastically and more often experience personal difficulties and behavioural issues that place them at risk. They also tend to have histories of school failure and low academic achievement during the compulsory years. In the past, many systems have not needed or attempted to provide for all young people in an inclusive way within the school system at upper secondary level. Encouraging more low achievers and other young people at risk of dropout to remain at school and complete an upper secondary qualification exerts great pressure on the flexibility of institutional arrangements and qualification structures.

Responses to these issues vary across nations, depending on the organisation and structure of upper secondary education. One type of response is to diversify the range of opportunities available at upper secondary level within the school sector in order to encourage young people to remain in school and graduate. This sort of approach, with a focus on accommodating young people within the school sector, involves what might be termed ‘internal differentiation strategies’, that is, strategies internal to school systems, which seek to reduce the problem of dropout by changing or expanding the sorts of opportunities available in post-compulsory programs and the requirements for entry and successful completion. Two broad types are evident:

1. Some countries have attempted to expand opportunities by offering alternative qualifications in the senior school years. This can be done in separate single-purpose schools as in China or Germany. However, even where students attend a single school type, different courses may be offered according to the students’ ability or interest, such as in Australia or New Zealand. These courses may lead to different levels of qualification and therefore, grant access to different educational

and employment opportunities. Some European and other OECD countries have made serious efforts to encourage more students to remain in secondary school and to improve qualification rates by diversifying the sorts of programs and qualifications provided in the post-compulsory years. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, Finland, Sweden and Norway implemented a number of educational reforms focusing largely on expanding vocational education options as a means of encouraging students to participate in and complete upper secondary. All three nations saw growth in upper secondary graduation rates (OECD, 2001).

2. Other countries provide alternative options within the same qualification to address pupil diversity. Within a school type, the students may be directed towards different tracks leading to a similar qualification. Some countries offer upper secondary diplomas based on satisfactory achievement in a core of common subjects, a block of subjects specific to the chosen area of study and a range of elective subjects. The requirements for qualification can vary substantially across systems. Sweden and the United States offer credit-based models, in which each course provides a set number of points that may be accumulated over the course of the program towards high school graduation and the attainment of a high school diploma. Other systems, such as those in England and many jurisdictions in Australia, require students to successfully complete a set minimum number of subjects to qualify for a school certificate, even if the specific subjects can vary substantially across types and fields of study.

In terms of the different approaches to the provision of senior school programs and qualifications, there can be substantial variation within as well as across countries. Federated systems, such as those in the United States and Australia, can have different approaches, qualifications and completion requirements across jurisdictions. For example, the recent introduction of exit exams in California as a hurdle requirement to graduation sets this state apart from others in the United States. Similarly, in Australia, the state of Victoria provides an alternative senior school certificate to the mainstream diploma, while other states and territories do not.

School-based diversification strategies are not the only focus of efforts to respond to non-completion. Some countries provide alternative pathways to work and adult life for young people who are no longer at school and who left without gaining a qualification. This reflects more of a focus on ‘external diversification strategies’ to provide alternative opportunities for young people, particularly dropouts. These strategies can include extended opportunities for school graduation through recovery programs or study in alternative settings, provision of a breadth and depth of alternative qualifications and study opportunities through further education colleges, provision of work-based indentured training contracts such as apprenticeships, and alternative routes involving combinations of work, training and study.

It is possible for countries to employ both types of approaches – to encourage young people to remain in school and gain a qualification through the provision of more diversified senior school offerings and to strengthen the range of post-school pathways available to those who leave without at first gaining a qualification from

school. Such approaches are evident in several systems and reflect the continuing tension between effort to prevent school dropout and strategies to assist those who have already dropped out. One facet of this tension is the potential for successful alternative pathways outside of the school system to act to encourage larger numbers of young people to leave school before completing a qualification. This sort of counter-effect needs to be considered in assessing the value, impact and importance of alternative pathways.

Countries differ in the upper secondary school programs that they offer and how these are provided. The aim of this book is to compare and evaluate various approaches by evaluating their impact on rates of dropout and completion. It involves an examination of different approaches to provision and how well they work in delivering mass completion rates while maintaining high and even standards. Case studies of national systems will be used to highlight the different approaches including institutional arrangements and the various alternative secondary school programs and their outcomes. The evaluation will be based around several key questions: What are the main approaches? How do they work? For whom do they work? And, how successful are they in promoting high rates of completion and equivalent outcomes for all?

Defining and Measuring Completion and Dropout

Central to this book is a comparative analysis of school dropout and completion across nations. In some respects, this is a difficult and challenging task. The very terms present major issues when comparing national systems. For example, the term ‘dropout’ is used mainly in the United States and Canada to refer to young people who leave school without gaining a high school diploma. It is a term used rarely by the statistical agencies, education authorities and research centres of other countries. Other nations have similar concepts, such as ‘early school leaving’ and ‘not in education, employment or training’ (NEET), but these are measured differently. This also applies when looking at the notion of ‘school completion.’ This is referred to as ‘graduation’ in some contexts, while other systems tend to employ measures such as ‘retention to the final year’ and ‘obtaining an upper secondary certificate or equivalent.’ In some systems, such as in England and Scotland, there is no concept of school completion or graduation. After a young person reaches the end of compulsory schooling, usually at the age of 16, the level, duration, mode and content of learning vary widely and until recently, there has not been a standard or benchmark by which to judge whether an individual completes secondary education or not (Raffe, 2010).

Despite these differences, there is consensus around the need to measure educational productivity based on completion and there is shared understanding of some of the principal concepts, such as dropout or early school leaver. To illustrate this point, Table 1.1 shows how a dropout is defined by researchers from different countries who wrote case study chapters for this book and were asked to use

Table 1.1 Definitions of a dropout used by researchers in 13 different countries

Country	A dropout is defined as someone who
Australia	leaves school before Year 12 (the final year of secondary school) or begins Year 12 but leaves without obtaining an upper secondary qualification
Canada	has not successfully completed high school and is not enrolled in education or in a work study program
England	does not hold an upper secondary qualification and is no longer in education, employment or training
Finland	does not hold an upper secondary qualification and is no longer in education, employment or training
France	is no longer in school and did not reach the recognised standard of achievement in the final year of their academic or vocational study
Germany	leaves school without gaining any official upper secondary qualification or certificate
Iceland	by the age of 24 has not completed an upper secondary qualification
Norway	left upper secondary education before the final year or who remained to the end, but failed to fulfil the graduation requirements
Poland	has not completed an upper secondary qualification in the 'regular' or specified period
Scotland	does not hold an upper secondary qualification and is no longer in education, employment or training
Spain	enrols in the *baccalaureate* or in vocational training but does not complete it
Switzerland	as an 18- to 24-year-old has not successfully completed post-compulsory education and does not enter another type of training
USA	does not complete a high school diploma or equivalent credential

national data to reflect national circumstances and institutional arrangements. When looking at the table, it is quite clear that all of the definitions actually share a similar understanding of a dropout and that is of a person who is no longer at school and does not hold an upper secondary qualification. While there may be classificatory distinctions based on current activity at the time of being measured (whether being in further education, employment or training), there is a broadly comparable view on who a dropout is.

However, shared understandings tend to fall away when it comes to measuring how many dropouts there are. There are few common measures. While systems may have a similar view about what dropout is, they do not share a similar way of measuring it. Even within countries, there is sometimes little consensus on how to measure dropout and completion. In the United States, for example, different agencies and jurisdictions often use different definitions of dropout. There are three different measures that tend to be used: the event dropout rate, the status dropout rate and the cohort dropout rate (Laird et al., 2006). The event rate measures the percentage of a specified or given group (such as students of a particular age enrolled in high school) who drop out of school in a particular time period, such as a single year. The status dropout rate measures the percentage in a population or sub-population (such as 16- to 24-year-olds) who are not enrolled in a high school

program and do not hold a high school diploma. The cohort rate refers to the rate of dropping out within an age or grade cohort over a specified period of time, such as the percentage of students in Grade 8 who had not attained a high school diploma by the age of 20. Each measure can produce different estimates and lead to different conclusions about the dimensions of dropout and completion.

Measuring dropout and completion across nations is also made complex by the levels of diversification involving programs (certificates and qualifications) and institutions. In some systems, such as the United States, Canada and Sweden, students who fulfil the graduation requirements for upper secondary education receive a diploma that permits them, theoretically at least, to continue their studies in higher education in both academic and vocational programs. However, this is not the case in a range of other countries where only a proportion of those who complete upper secondary education will receive qualifications enabling access to higher level academic programs. In the Netherlands, for example, the majority of students complete upper secondary education, but only a minority (about one third or less of all students) become qualified to enter university study. The reason is that upper secondary education is divided into separate tracks, often located in different types of schools, leading to different qualifications: academic (*voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs* or VWO), vocational (*voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs* or VMBO) and technical (*hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs* or HAVO). The diversity of programs and qualifications raises issues of equivalence in cross-national comparisons, of whether graduation or completion in one system provides the same foundation, and means the same, as in another.

This issue is often a source of debate within, let alone across, systems. For example, there is considerable debate within the United States about the role of the General Education Development (GED) certificate as an equivalent to the high school diploma, because research suggests that the earnings and employment returns to those with the GED certificate are significantly less than the returns to those with the regular high school diploma (e.g., Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2006). Therefore, should dropouts who attain the GED be counted as high school graduates or not? The same issue applies in comparative analyses of systems that offer vastly different types of upper secondary qualifications. Should shorter cycle upper secondary vocational qualifications available in some systems be treated as equivalent (in terms of the quality of learning and levels of skills acquisition) to longer cycle upper secondary programs provided in the same system, as well as to those in other systems? Students who complete vocational programs in upper secondary education in some systems are often qualified to enter higher-level vocational programs or seek entry to the labour market but not to pursue academic higher education leading to the professions. These differences need to be considered in making cross-national comparisons.

It is also the case in comparisons of dropout and completion rates that these terms are not necessarily complementary or equal opposites. It is possible for young people who drop out of school to later ‘complete’ by either returning to school or finishing their study in another setting. It is also possible for some young people to remain at school until the end of their school program and in some

systems, therefore, be counted as completers, yet they fail to complete the requirements for graduation. In some systems there is also a level of flexibility allowing young people to change programs or undertake their study in alternative settings without age restrictions. Graduation and dropout rates will then vary depending on the point or age at which they are measured.

The point or age at which dropout and completion are measured is important when comparing systems. The modal age at which young people complete upper secondary programs varies across systems, but in most systems, it is between 17 and 20 years of age. However, some systems provide flexibility in study options, in length of time to complete and in provision for study in alternative adult settings outside of secondary school systems. Therefore, if a modal completion age, such as 19 years, is used as the point at which to count those who have completed an upper secondary qualification or not, this might underestimate real completion levels and overestimate dropout rates in those systems. It is possible to make a distinction between 'initial' or 'modal time' estimates of dropout and completion based on measurements using modal ages and grade cohorts (notwithstanding differences in grade repeating) and 'later point' estimates, which are based on a delayed or older age for measurement (such as age 24 or more), in order to take account of varying arrangements (as illustrated in Fig. 1.1). In systems that have more flexible arrangements, later point estimates are likely to reveal lower dropout rates and higher completion rates than those obtained as initial estimates. The differences between initial and later point estimates are themselves likely to reveal important cross-national differences in the organisation and arrangements of programs and institutions and in opportunities.

There is also a need to consider starting points in making cross-national comparisons. Some countries only measure dropout and completion in the upper secondary years. In Norway, for example, official dropout and completion rates are often based on the cohort of students entering upper secondary education (Statistics Norway, 2009). Therefore, students who dropped out between the end of compulsory education and the beginning of upper secondary education are not counted. In other systems, the rates can reflect status and activities across all stages of schooling. In some systems, such as in the United States and Canada, concepts such as 'compulsory' and 'post-compulsory' education, 'lower secondary,' and 'upper

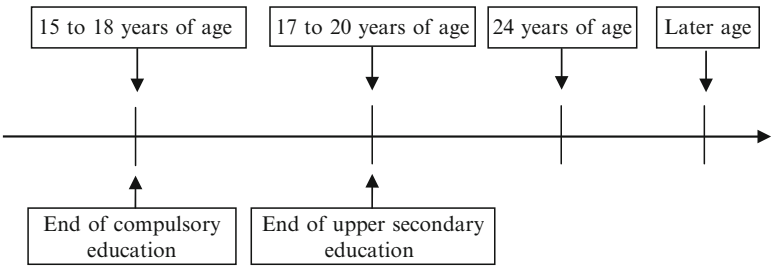

Fig. 1.1 When to measure dropout and completion?

secondary' do not have much meaning. Generally, high school covers Grades 9–12 and bridges the phases of lower and upper secondary defined in some other systems. Cohort estimates using longitudinal data often relate to those entering high school, which would be lower secondary or compulsory education in many European systems. The distinctions become an issue if in those systems where it is relevant, there are varying numbers of students who drop out of school before or at the end of compulsory schooling and who are not included when estimating the rates of dropout and completion.

While comparing dropout and completion across countries, it is, therefore, important to recognise that countries use different measures and classifications of dropout and completion. This is partly due to differences in the sorts of data that different countries employ. There are few commonly designed data sets with which to calculate comparable estimates. Some countries use administrative records while others use longitudinal survey data, data from school census returns, school leaver surveys or national population census surveys. Measures, classifications and sources of data vary. There is no common base or denominator: some use birth cohorts, others use age cohorts and some grade cohorts. Similarly, there is no common end or estimation point at which to count the numbers of completers and dropouts: sometimes it is at age 19, sometimes in the age range 20–24, and sometimes in the final school year.

Despite these differences, all systems recognise the importance of school attainment and report in a similar way on attainment levels, and most have measures of discontinuation ('early school leaving,' 'dropout,' 'NEET'). Even if there is variation in the classifications and methods of calculation, behind these differences there are commonalities making it possible to arrive at some shared and consistent understandings for comparing levels of dropout and completion across systems. Nearly all OECD nations can report on the proportion of an age group (such as 20- to 24-year-olds or a specific age, such as 20-year-olds) no longer in education or training and without an upper secondary qualification. This is often used by the European Union countries to define and report rates of early school leaving (e.g., see Van Es, 2008). It is very similar to the status dropout rate reported in the United States (see Laird et al., 2006) and age attainment rates reported in other countries such as Australia (see Lamb & Mason, 2008). Completion or graduation rates are often obtained using the same method, but not counting as completers those who are still enrolled in education or training and who have not yet attained an upper secondary qualification means that dropout and completion rates are not complementary. Of course, comparisons using such rates do not take into account equivalence of programs. Upper secondary qualifications and graduation requirements can vary in terms of quality, inclusiveness and criteria for attainment.

In this book, the aim is to use such measures to evaluate the scale and dimensions of school dropout and completion across different OECD countries. The indicator that is most frequently used in international comparisons of school completion is the upper secondary graduation rate reported annually in OECD's *Education at a Glance* (e.g., see OECD, 2008a). The rate is derived by dividing the number of upper secondary graduates in each country by the total population at the typical age of graduation (multiplied by 100). One problem with using this measure

is that it tends to inflate estimates in systems where upper secondary courses are of varying durations and can span different ages, such as in Germany, Greece and Norway. For example, the reported upper secondary graduation rate for Norway in 2004 was 100% – 86% for males and 114% for females (OECD, 2006). The rates reported by national sources in Norway place upper secondary completion at closer to 70% (Markussen et al., 2008; Statistics Norway, 2009). The preference in this book is to use published and reported estimates from recognised sources within each country rather than estimates based on international comparisons using the OECD indicator. Where available, cohort rates will be used in order to capture the number of young people of a given age or entering grade who, at a given point of measurement, have either attained an upper secondary qualification (completion) or who have not (dropout). As the focus of the book is on how different school systems work and the impact of differences in institutional and program arrangements on patterns of student dropout and completion, it will be important to obtain not only single national estimates, but also estimates for different programs and different groups. This will permit comparison of the roles of alternative programs and qualifications operating in different systems.

Social Inequality and School Completion

Despite international variations in dropout and completion rates, research undertaken in various countries reveals similar profiles of the characteristics of those who complete and those who drop out (e.g., see Rumberger & Lim, 2008, on the United States; Lamb et al., 2004, on Australia; Markussen et al., 2008, on Norway; the Applied Research Branch of Human Resources Development Council Canada, 2001, on Canada; and Traag & van de Velden, 2008, on the Netherlands). Most point to features of family background (such as socioeconomic status, family structure and parental education), demographic factors (such as gender, race, ethnicity, location), individual attributes (such as disability, health, self-esteem) and experiences in school (such as academic achievement, attitudes towards school, grade repetition or retention) as important. They also point to the impact of school context as well as community and economic settings.

The persistence of social patterns in dropout and completion remains a pressing issue because the costs of failure generated within systems continue to remain concentrated within the same social groups. This is despite the formal goals of governments to open up schooling to all. Social theories on reproduction point to the varying relations between family background and the structures of educational systems in which social power becomes embedded (e.g., see Bourdieu, 1984; Collins, 1979). To understand why inequality continues, as one study notes, there is a need to study ‘societal differences in the structure of educational systems and in the processes of educational stratification’ (Blossfeld & Shavit, 1993, p. 5).

It remains a major challenge facing all school systems in the provision of secondary education to construct and deliver programs that cater to diverse populations

of students. However, it is not only about providing space, it is also important to ensure evenness of quality so that all places generated within the structure of upper secondary opportunities deliver similar value or benefits from both a learning and outcomes perspective. Recent international comparisons of upper secondary graduation rates are revealing, both in terms of what they disclose about the success of some countries in building mass systems of secondary education capable of delivering programs to a whole cohort, and in what they conceal about differences in access and effectiveness in terms of quality of outcomes (e.g., see OECD, 2008a). In such comparisons, systems that are the most segmented in terms of provision can appear to provide the highest levels of completion, while school systems that are formally comprehensive and have advanced further down the road of democratisation can display higher levels of dropout. However, segmented systems tend to display marked patterns of social stratification across programs, while more comprehensive systems can provide greater opportunity for children from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds to qualify for university entry.

According to recent comparative studies on achievement, some nations have been more successful than others in reducing social gaps. In his work on cross-country differences in PISA achievement, Willms (2004) reports that while social differences in achievement are quite strong in some nations, others achieve both above-average levels of student achievement and weaker effects of socioeconomic status on educational success. To what extent does this apply to dropout and completion rates and what arrangements and features support outcomes leading to greater equality of educational opportunity?

Modern Growth in School Completion

There has been a marked increase in most countries in the proportion of the population that completes upper secondary education. This is evident in looking at generational differences in attainment profiles. Figure 1.2 reports the percentages of populations with upper secondary education qualifications broken out by age group: 25- to 34-year-olds, 35- to 44-year-olds, 45- to 54-year-olds and 55- to 64-year-olds. It shows that, apart from the United States, educational attainment levels are greater in younger age groups, highlighting recent growth in the numbers completing upper secondary education. The difference in attainment is quite marked in several countries, in some cases almost doubling across generations. For example, in France, about 49% of 55- to 64-year-olds attained an upper secondary qualification compared with 80% of 25- to 34-year-olds. Similar intergenerational growth is evident for Canada, Italy, Japan and the United Kingdom. Generational change has seen major increases in access to upper secondary education.

Such growth is not as evident in the United States. The proportion of younger adults (25–34 years of age) who had completed upper secondary education was about the same as the proportion of the oldest adults (55–64 years of age). This reflects the fact that the United States had already achieved a mass system of upper

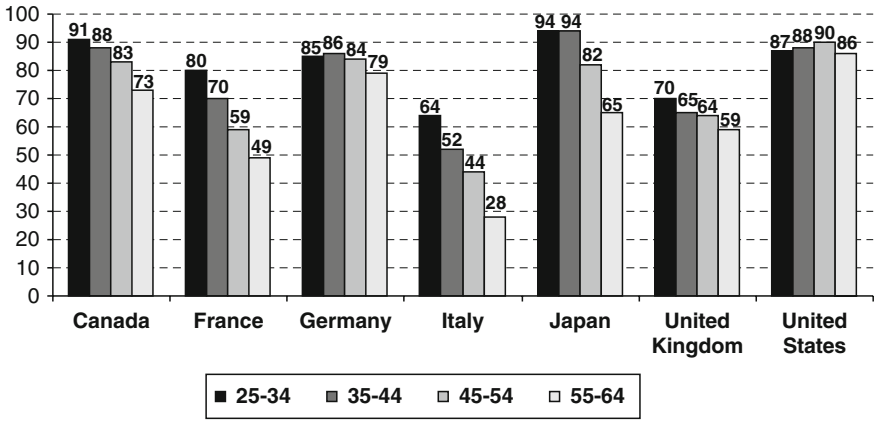

Fig. 1.2 Percentage of the population that has completed at least an upper secondary education, by age group and country: 1999 (Source: OECD, 2006)

secondary education many decades ago. Its relatively high and stable levels of access to senior schooling across generations suggests a much longer history of inclusive secondary education, at least in terms of overall levels of participation. The evident success in achieving mass participation almost two generations before many European countries, according to Goldin (2001) and Benavot (2006), has been based in part on strong public funding of education, the removal of a selective or elite model of institutional organisation and a comprehensive model of provision with a common general curriculum supplemented by a broad range of subject and course offerings. Recent concern has been expressed about the lack of further increases in graduation rates in the United States (e.g., see National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007), but history suggests stable longer term patterns of upper secondary participation when compared with other nations.

The recent expansion in upper secondary education in European as well as other OECD countries (see Lamb et al., 2004, for an outline of developments in Australia and OECD, 2006, for recent figures on other countries), representing large reductions in the levels of dropout, reflects several influences including labour market factors as well as changes in the provision and structure of upper secondary education.

Changing patterns of employment and the demands of employers for a better educated labour force have affected the demand for upper secondary education. In some countries, measured over the long term, there is a relationship between participation in upper secondary education and the state of labour markets. As Furlong (2007) has observed in the United Kingdom, as recently as 25 years ago, the majority of young people left school at the end of the compulsory phase to enter full-time jobs. However, opportunities for unqualified teenagers declined, due to both deterioration in the youth labour market, and long-term structural changes in industry and the demand for labour, which reduced full-time job opportunities for young people and led to rises in youth unemployment. Studies in several countries show long-term falls in full-time teenage job opportunities

(e.g., Lamb et al., 2004, in Australia; Furlong, 2006, in the United Kingdom). Structural changes to economies over the last 30 years have gradually, but dramatically, changed the number and types of jobs available to young people. In Norway, 31% of all young people aged 16–19 were working in 1975, while this proportion had fallen to 8% in 1990 (Grøgaard, 1992). The teenage labour market vanished and upper secondary education had to open its doors to whole cohorts. Accompanying the fall in full-time work has been the substantial growth in part-time jobs. These have been focused largely in areas (such as retail and related services) that tend to employ young people still in the education system, in jobs that are more often short-term. Such jobs are not those sought by young people wanting full-time work and careers.

As labour markets have changed and full-time jobs for young people have dried up, students have tended to remain longer at school and gain qualifications to facilitate labour market entry and career growth. In this sense, school has acted as a refuge from deteriorating teenage labour markets, leading to higher levels of upper secondary participation. One consequence of this is a decline in the value of upper secondary qualifications (qualification deflation). However, the corollary to this is that upper secondary qualifications have become, increasingly, a minimum requirement for labour market entry. Increased competitiveness for job opportunities makes dropouts and nonqualified school leavers less attractive to employers, placing pressure on students to stay on and complete school qualifications or enter alternative forms of upper secondary education and training. Upper secondary education has become the main educational point of entry into the full-time labour force across OECD countries and young people without upper secondary or equivalent qualifications increasingly struggle to find full-time work.

This point becomes apparent when looking at patterns of employment linked to educational attainment. Figure 1.3 presents the employment rates for young people 5 years after leaving initial education, by level of educational qualification, for eight OECD countries. It shows that in nearly all cases, the rates of employment are

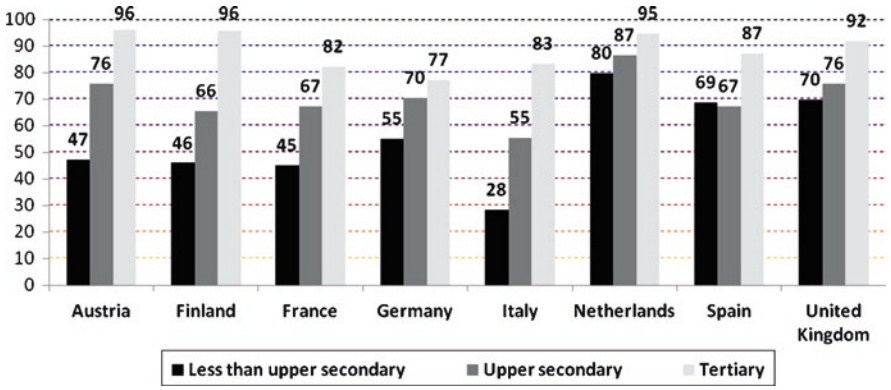

Fig. 1.3 Employment rates 5 years after leaving initial education, by educational attainment (%) (Source: OECD, 2008b)

markedly lower among those without upper secondary qualifications compared with those who either gain an upper secondary qualification or a tertiary education credential. The exception is Spain, where the rates are similar for those with and without upper secondary qualifications, though the rates are higher for those with tertiary qualifications. The pattern is consistent across nations even though the level of qualification gained varies. In the United Kingdom, for example, there was a 6 percentage point gap between dropouts (those with less than upper secondary attainment) and graduates (those with an upper secondary qualification). The gap in Austria was 29 points and in Italy, 27 points. The employment gains are even stronger for those with tertiary qualifications.

Similar patterns of returns are evident for spells of unemployment, types of occupations and earnings (OECD, 2008b).

Other works show that the returns to higher levels of upper secondary graduation relate not only to individuals. There are social and broad economic gains. The social returns to education include the monetary and non-monetary costs and benefits associated with improvements in health, family structure, fertility and child welfare, crime and environment. A range of studies suggest that higher levels of educational attainment are likely to lead to improvements in health and a reduction in poverty and associated problems (Behrman & Stacey, 1997; Levin et al., 2007). For example, while there may be debate about the exact amounts, increases in educational attainment are likely to lead to improvements in the quality of health for individuals leading to reductions in public expenditure on healthcare. There are also likely to be cost savings in other areas, such as from reduced criminal activity. Additionally, for communities, there are the broad economic gains associated with increased lifetime income and tax payments that accrue from higher levels of upper secondary graduation (see Levin et al., 2007; Hanushek, 2005).

Despite the economic and labour market pressures promoting growth in upper secondary education, the capacity for national systems of education to respond has varied depending on the structure of upper secondary provision. Growth has occurred in most systems, but not evenly. Some countries are doing better than others in promoting mass systems of upper secondary education. This is largely due to the institutional and certification arrangements that some nations have in place at upper secondary level to support broad participation.

However, even across countries that appear to have achieved mass systems, providing places for the vast majority of students and virtually eliminating dropout, it is not the case that all positions have equal value. Rather, the positions occupied within upper secondary education are not equal either across or within countries, reflecting differences in access and variations in quality of courses of study. Upper secondary programs are diverse and can include general, vocational and technical programs, with variations in entry requirements and in pathways to post-school opportunities. These variations are important to consider in order to gain a sense of which structures of provision operate to benefit the largest number and range of students. Which systems provide options that deliver not only quantity (making places available), but also quality (good outcomes for all) in terms of learning and outcomes?

Plan of the Book

This book is organised in three parts. Part One provides a comparative study of alternative pathways to upper secondary qualifications across OECD nations. The comparative study documents and evaluates some of the programs that different nations offer in upper secondary education. It examines both the range of different opportunities provided within schools and the alternative pathways provided for young people outside of school. It identifies and documents the main pathways, how they work, for whom they work and whether or not they are of equivalent value. Evidence collected from various national sources is used to examine the benefits and costs of alternatives provided in different systems. This includes a comparison of the pathways in terms of differentiation (content, rigor and graduation requirements), inclusiveness and outcomes. The comparative study notes that over recent decades many western nations have stepped up their efforts to reduce the numbers of dropouts by providing alternative pathways in upper secondary education. How systems have approached this, and how successful they are, varies. There is considerable diversification in upper secondary education.

Part Two of the book presents case studies of different educational systems. The case studies were prepared and written by educational researchers from 13 different OECD nations. The researchers have met regularly since 2005 as part of a collabouration called the *International Research Network for Youth Education and Training* (IRNYET). In preparing their chapters, the researchers agreed to address a set of common questions about dropout and completion in their country:

1. What are the main features of secondary education and training provision?
2. What are the main rates of dropout and completion, past and present?
3. Do dropout and completion vary by social background?
4. How have dropout and completion been studied and explained?
5. What alternative means are there for obtaining upper secondary qualifications for those who drop out of school?
6. What programs, policies and practices have been developed to reduce dropout and improve completion rates?

Authors were encouraged to focus on the features of their system which were most relevant to the theme of the book. The aim was to highlight the various options that nations offer students to complete an upper secondary certificate or diploma. Part of this involves a comparison of the different pathways in terms of content, rigor and completion requirements as well as how effectively they work to reduce dropout rates and deliver real benefits for those who participate. This means also considering the extent to which alternative pathways are inclusive and deliver quality learning and outcomes.

The countries are banded into three broad groups. The first group comprises countries of Western and Central Europe, namely England, Scotland, France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain and Poland. The systems in these countries represent some of the older or more traditional models of secondary education provision, often based

originally on preparing an academic elite for university study and others for a technically and vocationally skilled workforce through alternative vocational programs (see Müller et al., 1987). There is, though, considerable diversity across these systems. The second group is based on the Nordic countries and includes Finland, Iceland and Norway. The systems of these countries are sometimes viewed as forming a more egalitarian model because of the adoption of a comprehensive upper secondary school catering more broadly across the population, even if programs remain diversified. The third group of countries is loosely termed the 'new world' and includes the United States, Canada and Australia. The more recently developed systems in these countries, particularly in the United States and Canada, have promoted the comprehensive school ideal as a part of creating mass systems (Trow, 1977).

The secondary school systems examined in Part Two represent a range of different models of programs and institutions. The range is marked by several dimensions including (1) comprehensive or stratified schooling, (2) academic and vocational elements, (3) differences in graduation requirements and (4) early or delayed academic selection.

Part Three presents some key reflections based on the material presented in the national case studies. These are in the form of syntheses of findings on key topics, which are presented in separate chapters. The first, Chapter 16, reflects on the role of vocational education programs and their importance to understanding differences in rates of dropout and completion. Vocational education is delivered in different ways across countries. It is the main alternative pathway in upper secondary education in some systems and yet negligible in others. To what extent is vocational education important in the way systems work, in which systems is it important and with what outcomes? The chapter examines the various approaches from primarily employment-based systems (e.g., Germany) or systems in which employment-based provision plays a large role (e.g., Norway) to systems where vocational education, if offered, is mainly school-based and weakly structured. The focus is on the role of vocational education, how it works in different systems and its importance to understanding differences in rates of dropout and completion.

School-based pathways are not the only opportunities for young people to gain upper secondary qualifications. Some countries provide alternative pathways to work and adult life for young people who are no longer at school and who dropped out without gaining a qualification. This reflects more of a focus on 'external pathways' to provide alternative opportunities for young people, particularly dropouts. Such external pathways can include extended opportunities for school graduation through recovery programs or study in alternative settings including adult education, provision of a breadth and depth of alternative qualifications and study opportunities through further education colleges, provision of work-based indentured training contracts such as apprenticeships, and alternative routes involving combinations of work, training and study. Chapter 17 compares these opportunities and pathways across various countries and their relevance to dropout and completion.

Chapter 18 takes up the issue of school completion and social inequality. Rates of school dropout and completion vary by social background in every nation, suggesting that there are commonalities of process that wealthy nations share. Yet,

the extent of inequality and its impact can be stronger or weaker depending on the form and architecture of institutional and program arrangements. In some nations, the social gaps in dropout and completion are weaker and the chances of success for the poor are stronger. This chapter explores this issue. It draws on the national case studies to examine patterns of inequality in relation to dropout and completion. It begins by looking at research from each country on the patterns of dropout and completion and the factors that influence them. Attention then turns to an examination of the effects of social background and how this varies across nations. The final section develops a framework for examining international differences in dropout and completion and in the levels of inequality.

Chapter 19, the final chapter, examines the important issue of policy and what systems are doing to reduce dropout and improve completion rates. The case studies reveal that rates of dropout and completion vary, but also that raising school completion rates is a major policy objective in all of the countries. There is an ongoing concern to reduce dropout and increase completion rates. Some systems have even set up ambitious goals or targets aiming to achieve completion rates in excess of 90%. To attempt to achieve these goals, some systems have transformed their programs or implemented large-scale interventions to address dropout. The case studies reveal that across countries, various types of policy measures have been or are being, implemented, some of which are similar and some which are more specific and unique. This chapter draws together and compares the array of policy interventions to improve completion and reduce dropout, particularly for at-risk students. What strategies are systems employing to address the issue of dropout? With what success?

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