

## How does Australia compare?

It could be said that other countries are in fact moving beyond 12 years of learning as the key threshold experience for work and skill development. In the US for instance a national Commission on the High School Senior Year has recently suggested an even higher benchmark, proposing 15 years of learning as a new threshold. "Four generations ago, an eighth grade education would equip most Americans for the life ahead of them. As recently as twenty five years ago a high school diploma was enough. Today, and into the foreseeable future, practically all Americans will require two years or more of post-secondary education and training. An education beyond high school, once considered a luxury by many Americans as recently as 25 years ago, has become today's necessity."<sup>1</sup> Are we still struggling to achieve what Americans considered a necessity 25 years ago?

The level of school completion in Australia has remained largely unchanged during the course of the 1990s at 67 per cent, and taking into account post-school VET participation by early school leavers, the effective national Year 12 or equivalent completion rate is estimated at about 80 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

This compares to a completion rate of 84 per cent in France, 88 per cent in Canada and the USA, 91 per cent in Germany, and 94 per cent in Japan.<sup>3</sup> Fifty nine per cent of Australians between the ages of 25 and 64 have achieved a senior secondary qualification compared to 67 per cent of Britons, 76 per cent of New Zealanders, 82 per cent of Canadians and 88 per cent of Americans.<sup>4</sup>

More than a quarter of all Australian school leavers are in situations of substantial labour market risk just five months after leaving school - ie. unemployment, part-time work without being in study or not in the labour force. In 2001 over 40 per cent of early leavers were in this situation compared to 18 per cent of Year 12 school completers.<sup>5</sup> In terms of access to the labour market Australia ranks well down the list of OECD countries with the least proportion of teenagers not studying who are either unemployed or not in the labour force. We are behind countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland, Scandinavia and Canada; we rank 16<sup>th</sup> out of 26 OECD countries on this measure. The picture is better for young adults, but still countries such as France, Ireland, the Netherlands and the Scandinavians appear to be ahead.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> National Commission on the High School Senior Year, *Raising Our Sights. No High School Senior Left Behind*, Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, Princeton, 2001, pp 16-17

<sup>2</sup> Based on an average school leaving cohort in any one year of 270,000 with 50,000 not completing a year 12 equivalent education

<sup>3</sup> OECD, *Education at a Glance 2002*, Paris, 2002, Table A1.1, p 36; JW Bowbly and K McMullen, *At a Crossroads. First Results for the 18 to 20 year Old Cohort of the Youth in Transition Survey*, Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada, 2002, p 23

<sup>4</sup> OECD, *op.cit.*, Table A1.2, p 37. An estimated one in five adult Australians struggles with basic literacy, see OECD, *Literacy in an Information Age*, Paris, 2002

<sup>5</sup> Dusseldorp Skills Forum, *How Young People are Faring 2002*, Sydney, 2002

<sup>6</sup> OECD, *op.cit.*, Table C5.1, p 259