EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is widely recognised that early school leavers experience difficulty in making the transition from school to productive activities in adulthood, particularly post-school education, training and employment. This study examines the experiences of early leavers from the United States and Australia in the first two years beyond high school.

Unlike most studies of early school leavers, an early leaver is defined in the current report as any student who ever dropped out of school. By defining early leavers in this way, it is possible to examine not only which students leave school early, but which ones ultimately return and complete school through various alternative means. In the United States, at least, a high proportion of early leavers ultimately complete secondary school.

The analysis is based on comparable longitudinal surveys. The United States data were drawn from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988, a longitudinal survey of 25,000 Year 8 students in the United States. Australian data used in the study were from the 1975 cohort of the Youth in Transition (YIT) surveys, with over 70 per cent of the sample of 6,500 students in Year 8 in 1988.

The results show that similar percentages of students left school early in the United States and Australia - 21 per cent in the United States and 22 per cent in Australia. And in both countries, early school leaving rates were substantially higher for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, for students attending public or government schools, and for students with low achievement levels. It would seem that the social and school-based factors influencing the rates of early leaving are similar in both the United States and Australia.

But there were substantial differences between the two countries in when early leavers left school and, more importantly, whether they eventually finished school. In Australia, about half of all early leavers left school at Year 10 and most of the rest left at Year 11. In the United States, the majority of leavers left in Years 11 and 12, with only about one-third leaving in Year 10 or earlier.

There are major differences in later completion of school. Almost half of early leavers in the United States had completed high school within two years of normal high school graduation, most by acquiring a General Educational Development credential, which is recognised by most employers and post-secondary institutions as equivalent to a high school diploma. In contrast, fewer than 10 per cent of early leavers in Australia complete secondary school.

A reason for differences in rates of completion is the difference in post-school education and training opportunities. Australian early leavers had more opportunities to pursue post-school education and training than their United States counterparts. In the United States, nine out of ten early leavers who never completed high school had not participated in any post-school education or training during the first two years after high school. In Australia, about two in three male early leavers had participated in post-school education or training. For most, this was in apprenticeships or other vocational education and training programs. The situation for females was slightly different, with only about one in three female early leavers in Australia participating in any formal post-school education or training program. The rate was still more than five times that of females in the United States.
In terms of getting jobs, in both countries early leavers had more difficulty in securing productive employment than those who completed Year 12. But the disparities were greater in the United States than in Australia. Two years after high school graduation, 45 per cent of all early school leavers in the United States who did not complete high school were not working at any job or enrolled in post-school education and training, compared to only 8 per cent for students who had graduated from high school. In Australia, only 17 per cent of early leavers who did not complete secondary school were not working or enrolled in post-school education or training, compared to 5 per cent for those who had completed Year 12.

In relation to employment, there was an examination of the quality of jobs held by young workers in full-time jobs. Here the results show some similarities between the United States and Australia. Differences between early leavers and graduates were relatively small, but differences between males and females remained large. In both countries, young workers who completed school were more likely to be employed in white collar occupations whereas early leavers were more likely to be employed in skilled trades and labouring jobs. But the differences were not substantial. Therefore, it is not surprising that earnings were fairly even among groups, given that wages at ages 19 and 20 are subject to training and youth-wage awards.