

Higher Education  
Quality Council  
of Ontario



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# School-to-Work Transitions: PSE Graduates' Labour Market Outcomes Based on Identity Characteristics

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*This data brief is part of our series on the school-to-work transition. See our [full report](#), our [blog post](#) and [infographic](#).*

The school-to-work transition is both an exciting and challenging time for new graduates, guided by expectations of employment enhanced by their participation in postsecondary education (PSE). Graduates' first jobs set them up for their careers and a smooth transition into the labour market is important for Ontario's economic viability and prosperity. There is evidence of the variable labour market outcomes for PSE graduates based on their identity characteristics (Cukier et al., 2023; Hou & Coulombe, 2010; Qiu & Schellenberg, 2022; Reid et al., 2020). There is, however, surprisingly little research on the impact of identity characteristics on graduates' initial transition from PSE to the labour market. Recent [HEQCO research](#) showed that graduates who take advantage of services and supports designed to facilitate the journey from PSE to the labour market, such as work-integrated learning opportunities and networking, are more likely to secure first jobs that are better paying and more directly related to their field of study (Chatoor et al., 2024; Lehmann, 2019).

This report uses identity characteristics to explore differences in the experiences of recent Ontario bachelor's degree graduates as they transition to work. Data revealed inequity in graduates' earliest labour market outcomes and demonstrated that participation in labour-market-transition activities does not benefit everyone equally. Some respondents — such as BIPOC and LGBTQIA2+ students and those with disabilities or from low-income households — experienced unequal outcomes even when they took advantage of transition supports.<sup>1</sup> These findings can assist institutions in developing supports and services for the graduates that need them most.

Our study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do early labour market outcomes for bachelor's degree graduates vary by identity characteristics?
- How do individuals from equity-deserving groups engage with school-to-work transition activities?

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<sup>1</sup> We note that identities are intersectional e.g., a respondent could be both BIPOC and have a disability, for example. We acknowledge that some respondents may belong to several identity groups at once.



HEQCO developed a survey that was administered by Academica Group to 271 graduates in summer 2023 ([Appendix, Table A1](#)). A series of screening questions was used to isolate a sample of respondents in the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area (GTHA) who had graduated in the past three years from a four-year bachelor's degree from a publicly assisted Ontario college or university.<sup>2</sup> The survey included a section on demographic characteristics and questions about workplace type, sector type, academic program and activities in the labour market. HEQCO staff conducted data analysis using STATA, Excel and NVivo for descriptive statistics and coding qualitative responses to open-ended questions.<sup>3</sup>

To gain a better understanding of graduates' experiences of their school-to-work transition, we conducted 30-minute semi-structured follow-up interviews with 11 respondents.<sup>4</sup> Interviewees were asked questions about their school-to-work transition, use of resources and reflections on their own pathways. Staff took notes during the interviews and coded the data into themes using NVivo.

## Findings

### Graduates' early labour market outcomes differ depending on their identity characteristics

Our data showed a positive overall portrait of outcomes for Ontario graduates with a bachelor's degree but, when disaggregated by identity characteristics, revealed unequal labour market outcomes for some students and raised questions about earnings and other markers of high-quality jobs. There was wide variability for all labour market metrics by respondent identity characteristics. Table 1 shows differences in rates of

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<sup>2</sup> HEQCO surveyed employed bachelor's degree graduates in the GTHA to limit the potential for complexities caused by differing regional labour markets.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to acknowledge that sample size did not allow for holding variables constant, and thus limits our analysis. It is possible there are other affects at play that would account for some of the descriptive differences observed in this report.

<sup>4</sup> Demographics were not collected for this small group of interview volunteers, however, like survey respondents, they were recent graduates of four-year bachelor's degrees in the GTHA, both employed and unemployed.



unemployment as well as reported earnings and job quality characteristics such as satisfaction and relevance to PSE studies among those who were employed.

**Table 1**  
*Labour Market Outcomes for New Graduates by Student Characteristics*

Identity Characteristic	All Participants	Among Those Who Were Employed		
	Unemployment	Earned Less Than \$50K/Year	Satisfied in Current Job	Current Job is Relevant to Studies
<b>Men</b>	24%	19%	80%	90%
<b>Women</b>	8%	46%	66%	68%
<b>White</b>	3%	34%	78%	77%
<b>BIPOC</b>	16%	44%	61%	72%
<b>Non-first Generation</b>	13%	36%	71%	75%
<b>First Generation</b>	18%	39%	70%	79%
<b>Non-low Income</b>	14%	24%	79%	77%
<b>Low Income</b>	7%	85%	46%	76%
<b>Born in Canada</b>	18%	35%	71%	76%
<b>Immigrant</b>	8%	41%	70%	77%
<b>Heterosexual</b>	15%	33%	73%	80%
<b>LGBTQIA2+</b>	8%	56%	53%	62%
<b>No Disability</b>	14%	32%	75%	78%
<b>Disability</b>	13%	70%	41%	76%

*Note:* This table shows labour market outcomes by participant identity characteristics, including unemployment, those who earned less than \$50K/year, satisfaction in current job and relevance of current job to studies.



The data provide a snapshot of labour market experiences for groups whose outcomes are often not reported separately. Graduates in our sample had complex outcomes: Some groups, like first-generation students, experienced relatively little difference in outcomes compared to non-first-generation students. Immigrants generally experienced similar outcomes to those born in Canada and even reported lower unemployment than those born in Canada.<sup>5</sup> Other groups, however, experienced outcomes that were not equal to those of their counterparts.

For example, we found that men were 16% more likely to be unemployed than women (24% compared to 8%). However, employed women were more likely to earn less than \$50,000 per year compared to men (46% compared to 19%); women were also less likely than men to be satisfied in their current job and to work in a field relevant to their study. So, while male graduates seemed less likely to find a job within three years of graduation, those that did had much higher-quality jobs than women. This finding supports previous research related to the gender gap in employment and suggests that inequity in early labour market outcomes between men and women is quite complex.

BIPOC<sup>6</sup> participants had worse labour market outcomes than white participants for almost every metric studied. BIPOC participants were much more likely to be unemployed than white graduates (16% compared to 3%), to earn less than \$50,000 per year (44% compared to 34%) and to be less satisfied in their current jobs (61% compared to 78%). That BIPOC graduates experience higher employment rates and worse quality jobs even when employed warrants further investigation to understand the circumstances that might influence these outcomes.

Some of the most striking disparities in outcomes were observed for participants from low-income families.<sup>7</sup> Despite having half the unemployment rate of students who were not from low-income families, 85% of employed low-income graduates were working in jobs that paid less than \$50,000 per year compared to just 24% of those from non-low-

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<sup>5</sup> Due to limitations of the study methods, we were unable to disaggregate immigration by race, years since immigration or immigration category (e.g., refugee status). There is considerable literature about the outcomes of immigrants to Canada and research that demonstrates the importance of disaggregating employment/labour market outcomes by factors such as race and immigration status (Block & Galabuzi, 2018; Bonikowska et al., 2011; Clarke & Skuterud, 2013; DeVoretz et al., 2004; Galabuzi, 2001; Qiu & Schellenberg, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Our sample size was too small to allow for disaggregation of BIPOC respondents.

<sup>7</sup> Income was self-reported. Familial low income refers to respondents who reported that their parents earned less than \$50,000 per year.



income families. Respondents from low-income families were also far less likely to say they were satisfied in their current job (46% compared to 79% of non-low-income participants). This observation raises questions about the social and economic mobility of students from low-income families who, despite completing a similar credential to their peers, do not enter the labour market on equal footing.

LGBTQIA2+ graduates, a group whose outcomes are often not collected or reported, also saw unfavourable labour market outcomes compared to heterosexual graduates. While LGBTQIA2+ graduates were less likely to be unemployed than heterosexual graduates (8% compared to 15%), those who were employed were more likely to be earning less than \$50,000 a year (56% compared to 33%), less likely to be satisfied in their job (53% compared to 73%) and less likely to be working in a field related to their studies than heterosexual respondents (62% compared to 80%). Given the lack of research and data on LGBTQIA2+ students, these data offer a starting place for researchers and policy makers to investigate the experiences and needs of these students.

It has been well documented that people with disabilities experience some of the most unequal labour market outcomes; our findings echo these disparities (Chatoor, 2021; Gatto et al., 2021). Despite similar employment levels and the likelihood of working in a field related to their studies, graduates with disabilities were more likely to earn less than \$50,000 per year and were less likely to be satisfied in their jobs compared to participants without disabilities (70% compared to 32%). Our sample did not allow for investigation of outcomes by disability type; research in this area would improve our collective understanding of how people with disabilities fare during their early years in the labour market.

An important takeaway from our findings is that there is no singular experience of the transition into and early years in the labour market. The experience of inequity for graduates from various identity groups is complicated. For example, study participants from some historically underrepresented groups would at first appear to be in a strong labour market position thanks to lower unemployment rates, but they reported lower quality jobs across the other labour market metrics we measured. On the other hand, some groups, like BIPOC graduates, experience worse outcomes across every metric. These observations raise complex questions that cannot be easily answered without strong, system-wide administrative data and replications of this study to confirm our observations.



# Participation in school-to-work transition activities did not benefit all students equally

There are activities known to contribute to graduates’ early labour market success. Previous research has reported a positive impact of experiential learning (EL), networking and engagement in other career development and transition activities (Graham et al., 2015; Martin & Rouleau, 2020). Our study reinforced the benefits of both EL and networking. Participation in EL was associated with lower unemployment (10% compared to 24%) and a greater likelihood of working in a related field (83% compared to 58%). Networking was associated with significantly lower unemployment rates (13% compared to 24%)<sup>8</sup> (Chatoor et al., 2024). However, we found that participation in activities known to improve labour market outcomes does not benefit all graduates equally. Table 2 shows differences in the rates of participation in these activities.

**Table 2**  
*Participation in School-to-Work Activities Among New Graduates by Identity Characteristics*

Identity Characteristic	Participated in Networking	Consulted Career Services	Participated in EL
<b>Men</b>	89%	22%	69%
<b>Women</b>	83%	17%	69%
<b>White</b>	88%	20%	74%
<b>BIPOC</b>	80%	14%	58%
<b>Non-first Generation</b>	83%	16%	66%
<b>First Generation</b>	89%	26%	74%
<b>Non-low Income</b>	90%	21%	72%
<b>Low Income</b>	77%	18%	70%

<sup>8</sup> While graduates themselves must engage in networking activities, it is worth noting that many institutions have invested in facilitated networking programs and the study respondents in our sample did not use institutional services.





Identity Characteristic	Participated in Networking	Consulted Career Services	Participated in EL
<b>Born in Canada</b>	86%	19%	68%
<b>Immigrant</b>	83%	18%	69%
<b>Heterosexual</b>	86%	19%	70%
<b>LGBTQIA2+</b>	81%	19%	59%
<b>No Disability</b>	85%	17%	68%
<b>Disability</b>	90%	32%	77%

Note: This table shows participation in activities during the school-to-work transition.

Some groups in our sample were less likely to have participated in EL, such as BIPOC graduates compared to white graduates (58% to 74%) and LGBTQIA2+ graduates compared to heterosexual graduates (59% to 70%) (Table 2). First-generation graduates were more likely to have participated in EL than non-first-generation graduates (74% to 66%), as were graduates with disabilities compared to those without disabilities (77% to 68%).<sup>9</sup> While some of the differences in labour market outcomes for BIPOC and LGBTQIA2+ could be explained by lower rates of participation in EL, the same does not hold true for other groups that reported unequal outcomes. In fact, respondents from low-income families (70% compared to 72% for non-low-income respondents) and those with disabilities (77% compared to 68% for those who do not have disabilities) were *as or more likely* to participate in EL during PSE but still experienced some of the most unequal outcomes we observed relative to their peers.

With the exception of low-income graduates (77%), more than 80% of respondents from all identity groups engaged in networking, with women, BIPOC and low-income respondents slightly less likely to network than their peers. By contrast, first-generation graduates and those with disabilities were *more likely* than their peers to engage in networking activities and take advantage of institutional services but experienced some of the worst unemployment and earnings outcomes relative to their peers in our study.

Our study presents a troubling dichotomy: students from some historically marginalized groups are taking advantage of activities and supports known to pave the way to early

<sup>9</sup> Our sample showed no difference in EL participation by gender, immigration status or family income.



labour market success but are still experiencing inequitable outcomes during the transition from PSE to work.

## Implications for PSE

PSE institutions invest in supporting graduates as they transition from school to work, providing EL opportunities and on-campus career services. Students also take an active role in supporting their career development, seeking paid and volunteer work, engaging in EL during their studies and taking advantage of networking opportunities. While our study shows that participation in these activities was beneficial for all graduates, it was more beneficial for some than others and taking advantage of career development resources does not guarantee a smooth transition to the labour market, especially for historically marginalized graduates. This matters because inequity in earnings and quality of employment in the earliest stages of an individual's career can persist over time (Chatoor, 2021; Chatoor et al., 2019; Galarneau et al., 2023). Some students — particularly those from historically marginalized groups — struggle to gain a foothold in the labour market despite having taken advantage of the supports they've been told will help them on their journey. There is room for the sector to better understand and address the unique challenges faced by different groups: institutions can continue efforts to ensure that all students have access to EL during their studies, strive to improve awareness about other institutional career services available and develop and study the impact of customized interventions and supports.

These findings, drawn from a relatively small sample of survey responses, are descriptive and raise more questions than answers. The fact that we observe significant variation in outcomes by identity characteristics demonstrates why the sector needs a standardized administrative data approach to collecting robust system-wide demographic data. Doing so would help us to confidently understand these labour market inequities and support stronger and more nuanced responses to address them.

The data gathered through our study are valuable in that they point to the need for further research about the important long-term benefits of helping PSE graduates achieve early career success and the ongoing labour market inequities experienced by individuals from some identity groups. The more we know about these equity gaps and how they are manifesting, the better positioned the sector will be to reduce or eliminate them. A system-wide commitment to collect demographic and identity-based data would



go a long way to improving the design, implementation and uptake of programs and services tailored to the unique experiences of different populations.



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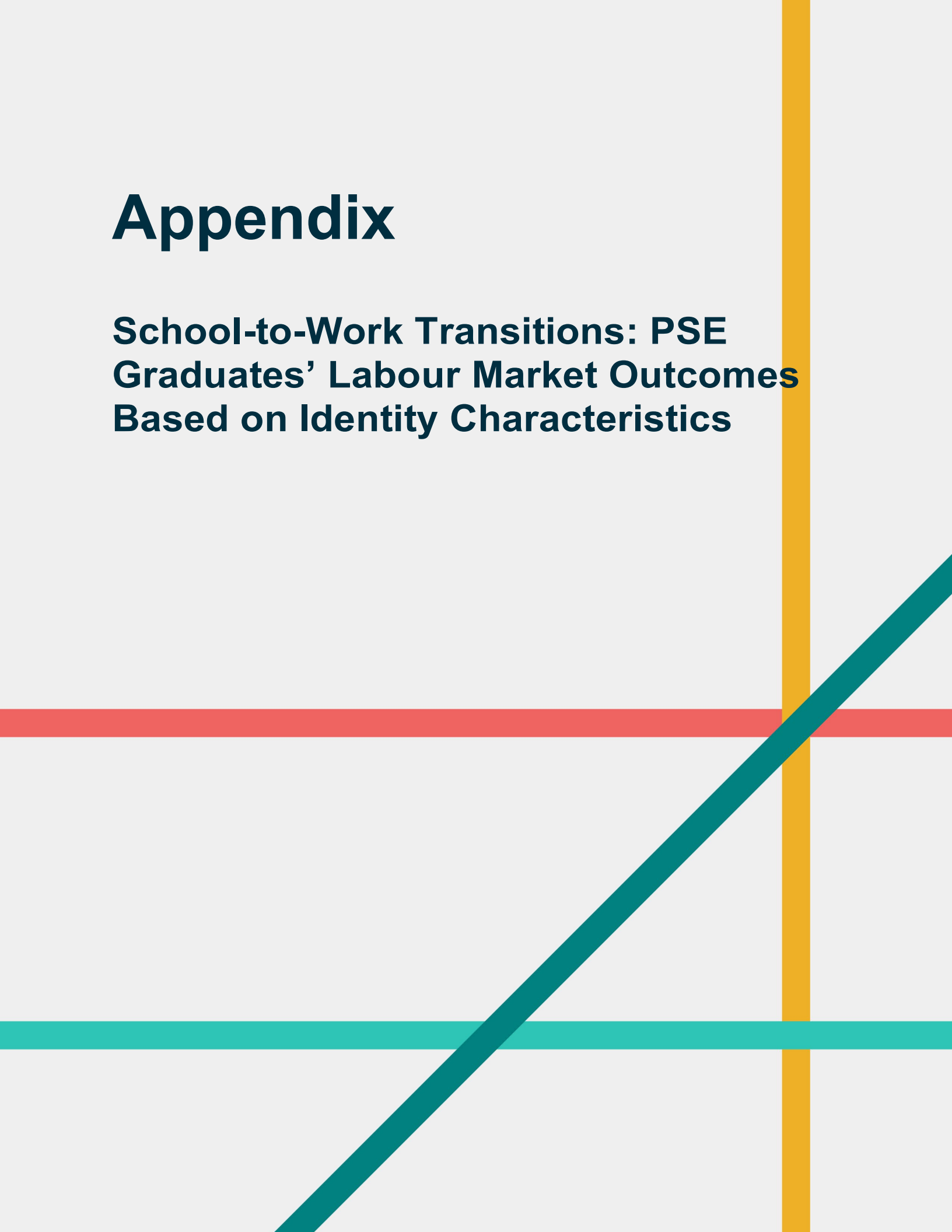
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# Appendix

## School-to-Work Transitions: PSE Graduates' Labour Market Outcomes Based on Identity Characteristics



**Table A1**  
*Sample Characteristics*

Student Characteristic	Percent of Sample
Male	43%
Female	57%
White	34%
BIPOC	66%
First Generation	31%
Immigrant	28%
LGBTQIA2+	14%
Disability	12%

Note: This table shows the proportion of graduates by various characteristics.

