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Socio-Economic and Gender Differences in Post-Secondary Pathways in the UK, Germany, and Australia

Wojtek Tomaszewski [1,2], Hans Dietrich [3], Golo Henseke [4], Ning Xiang [1,2], and Ingrid Schoon [5]

[1] Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland, Australia
[2] ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families Over the Life Course, The University of Queensland, Australia
[3] Institute for Employment Research (IAB), Germany
[4] Department of Education, Practice and Society, University College London, UK
[5] Social Research Institute, University College London, UK

Correspondence: Wojtek Tomaszewski (w.tomaszewski@uq.edu.au)

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Abstract

This study investigates variations in school-to-work transitions (SWTs) by socio-economic status (SES), gender, and socio-cultural context. Leveraging data from three nationally representative longitudinal panel studies, we compare the experiences of young people coming of age in the 21st century (2011 to 2023) in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia. We examine the role of different support systems that scaffold the SWT process along various post-secondary pathways, including university, further education/vocational training, and employment tracks, with a particular focus on variations by parental education and gender. Utilizing longitudinal data from the Understanding Society Panel in the UK (N = 15,692 observations), the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP; N = 5,464), and the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (N = 5,759), we track synthetic cohorts born between 1993 and 1995 from ages 18 to 27 in the three countries. We employ linear probability models to conduct a cross-national comparative analysis, identifying variations in post-secondary pathways across the three country contexts. The choice of countries is motivated by their shared status as developed economies with distinct features in their SWT systems—contrasting the neoliberal deregulatory frameworks of Britain and Australia with Germany's employment-focused dual system. The findings reveal significant effects of parental education on post-secondary transitions, as well as the differing roles of gender across various educational policy contexts. These results underscore the complexity of SWT when considered in different national settings. The insights generated by this analysis highlight the importance of dedicated policies to support low-SES youth and promote gender equality in education and employment outcomes.

Keywords
Australia; cross-national comparative analysis; gender; Germany; post-secondary pathways; school-to-work transitions; socio-economic status; UK

1. Introduction

School-to-work transition (SWT) is a key developmental stage in the transition to adulthood, ranking highly in importance, complexity, and relevance for later outcomes (Schoon & Bynner, 2017; Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019; Zacher & Froidevaux, 2021). SWT generally spans the phase between completing full-time education or training, entering paid employment, and establishing oneself in a labor market career. A problematic start in the labor market, indicated by low-level qualifications or prolonged experiences of unemployment or inactivity, can have long-lasting and detrimental impacts on future career development and later life outcomes, including health and well-being (H.-P. Blossfeld et al., 2008; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017). This study aims to better understand the institutional structures that support a successful SWT by comparing post-secondary pathways taken by young people coming of age in the 21st century (2011 to 2023), specifically examining the experiences of 18–27-year-olds born between 1993 and 1995 in three different countries.

The lives of young people are shaped by the economic circumstances and social contexts in which they live. Their education and employment transitions have been significantly affected by the 2008 recession (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Schoon & Bynner, 2017, 2019) and, more recently, by the economic and employment consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic (International Labour Organisation, 2022). For example, the global youth unemployment rate has increased since the beginning of the millennium, spiked after the 2008 recession, and reached its highest level during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 (World Bank, 2023). Although these major global events affected all young people, they did not impact everyone equally. Variations in pathways arise due to socio-demographic background characteristics, including family socio-economic status, gender, age, and migration status, as well as country-specific institutional and structural arrangements that shape transition processes and outcomes. While the overall and country-specific effects of the 2008 recession (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Schoon & Bynner, 2017, 2019) and the Covid-19 pandemic (Deng et al., 2022; World Bank, 2023) on education and employment outcomes are well-documented, less attention has been given to cross-country variations.

This study takes a life-course perspective, drawing on nationally representative panel data from Australia, Germany, and the UK to follow young people aged 18–27 and examine the relevance of SES and gender for post-school transitions. From a life-course perspective, the SWT is a key *status passage* in the institutionalized life course, where longitudinal trajectories are shaped by available support structures and institutional channeling or canalization (Heckhausen & Buchmann, 2018; Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). The choice of the three countries is motivated by their shared status as developed economies with distinct features in their SWT transition systems—contrasting the neoliberal framework of Australia and the UK with Germany's employment-focused dual system. Another important factor in selecting these countries was the existence of broadly comparable national household panel studies, which enable the generation of robust evidence for individual-level comparisons of experiences in different age cohorts transitioning after the Great Recession and during the recession following the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Conceptualizing SWT

2.1. The Role of Institutional Structures

SWT has been defined as a "sequence of educational, labor-market, and related transitions that take place between the first significant branching point within educational careers and the point when—and if—young people become relatively established in their labor-market careers" (Raffe, 2014, p. 177). Transitions from school to post-secondary education and to work occur within a particular socio-cultural and socio-economic context, referred to as a "transition regime," which can be defined by the "relatively enduring features of [each] country's institutional and structural arrangements that shape transition processes and outcomes" (Raffe, 2014, p. 177).

Countries differ in the institutional structures guiding the transition from school to work. Comparative research on youth transitions has focused particularly on the role of welfare regimes, labor market regulation, and the nature of the linkage between educational systems and the labor market (H.-P. Blossfeld et al., 2008; Breen & Buchmann, 2002; Müller & Gangl, 2003). These institutional factors are assumed to influence and channel transition behaviors by offering a diverse set of opportunities and constraints (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019), which are defined by national contexts, including aspects of the education and training system, the labor market, the welfare system, family structures, and other institutions (Raffe, 2008, 2014; Walther, 2006).

2.2. Transition Regimes

Countries differ markedly in the institutional structures of their education and training systems and labor markets (Brizinsky-Fay, 2007; Gangl, 2000; Pastore, 2016). Walther (2006) differentiates between sub-protective, universalistic, liberal, and employment-centered transition regimes. This differentiation has been highly influential in European comparative youth research, although more recent approaches have advanced a welfare mix approach to clarify the different contributions made by the state, the family, and the labor market in shaping youth transitions (Antonucci et al., 2014). Here, we concentrate on features of liberal and employment-centered transition regimes, given our focus on the UK, Australia, and Germany.

The "liberal" transition regime model, predominant in Anglophone countries including the devolved contexts of the UK as well as Australia, emphasizes individual responsibilities over collective action. Education is mostly comprehensive, focused on general knowledge and skills, while labor markets are largely deregulated, with a relatively large share of lower-skilled and non-standard jobs (Breen & Buchmann, 2002; Brizinsky-Fay, 2017; Brown et al., 2011; Kerckhoff, 2000). University education provides the most direct route to professional occupations. In the UK, initiatives such as integrating work placements into university courses, promoting degree apprenticeships, fostering collaborations between educational institutions and employers, and implementing government policies aimed at improving skills development help align graduates' skills with industry needs; however, only large firms tend to participate (Roberts, 2019). Australia has also extensively integrated work-based components into university curricula—so-called work-integrated learning (WIL)—such as internships, fieldwork, and industry-based projects (Edwards et al., 2015). This setup can create stronger links between study and employment, potentially smoothing the transition from education to work.

For young people not pursuing a degree, further education (FE) colleges in the UK nations and technical and further education (TAFE) colleges in Australia provide the main post-compulsory education route for vocational qualifications and second-chance learning. In recent years, and in response to skill shortages, the UK government has promoted apprenticeships and postsecondary technical and vocational qualifications, such as the new T-levels. However, austerity-driven public funding cuts following the 2008 recession have curtailed resources for FE and contributed to significant increases in university tuition fees and the elimination of Maintenance Grants in England (Callender & Mason, 2017). Meanwhile, employment benefits (when young adults are eligible) remain relatively low, time-limited, and conditional upon active job search.

However, there are differences within the liberal cluster. Despite reforms to broaden institutional autonomy, Australia's higher education system remains relatively centralized compared to the UK, where education is devolved across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales. The UK and Australia have different school leaving ages and different higher education support systems. Oversight in Australia is largely national, with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency regulating higher education and the Australian Skills Quality Authority overseeing vocationally oriented tertiary programs and apprenticeships. Another difference within the liberal cluster relates to the cost of education. While English universities typically charge higher nominal tuition fees—capped at £9,000 and above since 2012–2013 (~US$15,000 in 2012)—Australian tuition fees, or "student contributions," have been typically capped at lower levels, although they vary by course of study. For example, in 2010, the student contribution for a bachelor's degree in sociology was capped at 5,310 AUD per year, equivalent to less than 4,500 USD at the time.

While tuition fees vary between the two countries, both the UK and Australia offer income-contingent loan systems designed to protect students from excessive repayment burdens (Barr et al., 2019). Research is mixed on whether these income-contingent models discourage participation. Some studies suggest minimal impact overall (Murphy et al., 2019), while others point to uneven effects by socio-economic background or study mode (Callender & Melis, 2022). In both countries, flexible labor market structures and an emphasis on individual responsibility—hallmarks of "liberal" regimes—shape young people's paths from school to work, although differences in governance, cost, and work-based learning may produce variations in how easily students from different backgrounds navigate these pathways.

Employment-centered transition regimes are typical in Germany and most German-speaking countries (i.e., Austria and Switzerland). Education is organized selectively, allocating young people to occupational careers and associated social positions at an early age (Breen & Buchmann, 2002; Brizinsky-Fay, 2017; Kerckhoff, 2000; Müller & Gangl, 2003). In Germany, for example, students are tracked by age 10 into different pathways leading to skilled trades, white-collar intermediate occupations requiring apprenticeships, or professional careers requiring university degrees. Participation in higher education is free or very affordable. Since 2012, Germany has officially eliminated tuition fees for most bachelor's and many master's degree students, regardless of country of origin. Nonetheless, vocational training plays a central role and is highly standardized.

Germany has built its (three-year) "dual system" of apprenticeship—work-based training in a company coupled with one or two days per week in a vocational school—for more than a century. Social partners (employers, unions, and local government members) govern and monitor the system at the local level, ensuring its institutional importance across changes in government. Enrollment in universities and dual

studies (combining VET and college) has increased following employment uncertainty created by the Great Recession.

Most liberal transition systems provide no structured path into skilled employment without college, emphasizing university education as a prerequisite for a viable career. By contrast, in German-speaking countries, vocational training is mostly company-based, offering direct pathways into employment. Despite its advantages, employment opportunities in employment-centered countries can be polarized (Rueda, 2014). In Germany, for instance, there is a differentiation between a secure "insider" workforce with generous social security provisions and an "outsider" workforce with access only to low employment levels and residual benefits (Emmenegger et al., 2012). Therefore, access to better educational and employment opportunities is not equally distributed (Brizinsky-Fay, 2017). This article explores how these opportunities are influenced by SES and gender across different transition regimes.

2.3. Youth Labor Market

The youth labor market in Germany and Australia has, at least in recent years, been stronger than the youth labor market in the UK, as reflected in higher labor force participation and employment rates, as well as a lower unemployment rate. From 2011 to 2023, when we assess young people's transitions from school to work, the unemployment rate for individuals aged 15–24 years averaged 7–8% in Germany, compared to 11–12% in Australia and 14–15% in the UK (OECD, 2024b).

Germany's currently low youth unemployment rates are due to a combination of a relatively strong economy and policies that encourage employment among young workers. Although Australia has a smaller economy than Germany or the UK, it has not experienced a recession since the early 1990s. Furthermore, while unemployment rose in Australia in the late 2000s, the country did not reach the levels seen in most other industrial nations (OECD, 2024b). Australia also has active labor market programs designed to aid unemployed youth early in their careers by implementing activity requirements as conditions for some benefits (Davidson & Whiteford, 2012). Although the UK is the sixth-largest national economy, its youth labor market has performed in the middle of the pack for many years within the OECD, with many of the most vulnerable youth remaining inactive for long periods or in precarious, low-paid employment (Schoon & Bynner, 2019)—a situation that was exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic (Deng et al., 2022). Given that the youth unemployment rate in Germany and Australia tends to be, on average, lower than in the UK, a separate question is whether inequalities by SES and gender are also less pronounced in these countries—an issue that this article seeks to address.

2.4. SES and Gender Inequalities in Post-School Transitions

Traditionally, SWT has been characterized as an age-related, normative, and linear trajectory (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Shanahan, 2000), comprising the completion of full-time education (either after compulsory school-leaving age or later graduation) followed by entry into stable, long-term employment. However, following the introduction of new technologies, a changing labor market, and frequent periods of economic boom and bust over the last five decades, SWTs have become more prolonged, diverse, complex, and risk-laden (Schoon & Bynner, 2017). Young people are increasingly required to complete higher levels of education to compete in a changing labor market, including those from less privileged backgrounds (Ashton,

2017; H.-P. Blossfeld et al., 2008). Yet, while higher education participation has increased across most countries, tertiary graduation rates across OECD countries remain below 50% (OECD, 2024a) and a significant number of young people do not participate in higher education—a group sometimes referred to as the "forgotten half" (Rosenbaum, 2001). Not all young people can afford an extended education or rely on their parents for financial support. Indeed, there is considerable diversity in the pathways young people take after completing compulsory education, which is shaped by the socio-cultural contexts in which they live, as well as by their characteristics—most notably, their SES and gender.

When assessing variations in SWT, it is necessary to consider the interplay between social background and gender. Significant progress has been made in expanding educational and occupational opportunities for women and individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet, although increasing numbers of relatively disadvantaged young people participate in higher education, a socioeconomic attainment gap remains (H.-P. Blossfeld et al., 2015; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013; Pensiero & Schoon, 2019), even among those with similar levels of cognitive ability (Bukodi et al., 2014; Tomaszewski et al., 2024). Furthermore, socioeconomic disparities persist in the labor market, even among those with university qualifications (Zajac et al., 2023).

Likewise, although more women are attaining degree-level qualifications and have entered the workforce in increasing numbers, including women with young children (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013), progress has stalled since the turn of the millennium (England et al., 2020)—particularly in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic (Fisher & Ryan, 2021; Kristal & Yaish, 2020; Yerkes et al., 2020). Despite efforts to reduce inequalities, including policies aimed at increasing women's participation in the labor market (such as employment equity and equal pay legislation), persistent evidence suggests that social (Carmo et al., 2018) and gender discrimination (England et al., 2020; Kowalewska, 2023) continue to affect labor market outcomes. According to the United Nations, women in particular remain disproportionately represented in low-status, low-paying occupations (UN Women, 2022).

3. The Focus of the Study

Against this background, this study examines cross-national variation in SWT across the UK, Australia, and Germany in a cohort born between 1993 and 1995 who turned 18 after the 2008 Great Recession. Specifically, we explore how SES and gender are associated with the likelihood of attaining various post-secondary life-course positions in these three countries, particularly regarding the transition from school to vocational training (here labeled "further education"), university, or high-/low-level employment, as well as the likelihood of being not in education, employment, or training (NEET) from ages 18 to 27. This section frames the study's broad aim against the discussion of the institutional, socio-cultural, and policy contexts of the three countries, as outlined in the literature reviewed in previous sections.

Germany has a highly stratified education system that tracks students into different educational pathways at an early age, usually around 10. These tracks include pathways leading to vocational training or more academically oriented routes leading to university (Matthewes & Borgna, 2025). Early tracking often amplifies SES disparities, as children from higher-SES backgrounds are more likely to be placed in academically oriented tracks that lead to university, while those from lower-SES backgrounds are more likely to be directed toward vocational tracks. By contrast, both the UK and Australia have comprehensive

secondary education systems, and most students, regardless of SES, complete schooling with the option of entering university. The expansion of higher education in recent decades has led to a significant increase in the proportion of young people attending university (van de Werfhorst, 2024), including those from lower-SES backgrounds. As such, we may expect stronger SES associations with post-secondary education choices in Germany compared to Australia and the UK.

Another aspect concerns differences in the costs of university education across the three countries. As discussed earlier, Germany has offered largely free university education (Dietrich & Gerner, 2012), while both the UK and Australia rely on income-contingent loans. However, the systems in the UK and Australia differ. In the UK, university fees tend to be higher, and support for living costs is also provided through loans. In contrast, in Australia, university fees were generally lower during the period covered by this study, and living costs were supported by government grants, resulting in lower overall student debt. These differences in education costs may influence young people's decision-making regarding further study, particularly those from low-SES backgrounds.

University graduates in all three societies are likely to achieve relatively high future earnings, enabling them to engage in longer job searches to secure well-paid employment. In contrast, less-educated individuals in weaker welfare states may be reluctant to endure extended periods of unemployment, as they would struggle to compensate for lost earnings through future high-wage work. However, in stronger welfare states, less-educated individuals may be more inclined to prolong their initial job search if welfare benefits offset much of their lost potential income or if they can remain in education at a low cost.

Given the largely deregulated labor market in Australia and the UK, with a relatively large segment of low-skilled and non-standard jobs, we expect low-SES young people in the UK and Australia to be more likely to enter lower-status, less secure jobs after completing their education or training, even if they access higher education. In Germany, while lower-SES youth may be concentrated in less prestigious sectors or trades, they are still expected to achieve stable employment through apprenticeships. Therefore, the overall gap in employment quality (e.g., as measured through occupational status) between SES groups, such as those identified through parental education, is expected to be most pronounced in the UK and Australia compared to Germany.

Finally, this study also explores gender effects on SWT. Increasing attention has been given to how gender differences are shaped and reshaped during the transition into the labor market, particularly through the role of education and training systems (Saraceno, 1997). Research suggests that horizontal gender differences at labor market entry are more pronounced in countries with higher educational stratification, such as Germany (P. Blossfeld et al., 2016). In Germany, the dual vocational system, combined with traditional gender norms, often leads to pronounced gender disparities in both education and labor market outcomes. Similarly, in Australia, the vocational education system and the prevalence of part-time work are expected to exacerbate gender disparities. In contrast, the UK's focus on widening university access and promoting higher female labor market participation is anticipated to result in more balanced gender outcomes.

4. Data and Methods

4.1. Datasets and Sample

The study leverages data from three nationally representative longitudinal studies: the Understanding Society Panel in the UK, the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP), and the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA). Each follows respondents through annual interviews and covers a range of topics, including education and labor market participation. For our analytic samples, we focus on young people born between 1993 and 1995 and track their post-school destination outcomes from age 18 until age 27.

This study is based on secondary data analysis and no new data collection was involved. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Queensland's Research Ethics Committee (no. 2024/HE000359). Access to the data was secured following relevant application procedures for academic researchers. The data was stored on secure institutional servers and analyzed by researchers based in the respective countries (UK, Australia, and Germany) using harmonized code.

The analytic sample includes 3,851 individuals in the UK, 840 individuals in Australia, and 1,849 individuals in Germany. We use an unbalanced panel design and apply weights provided with the data to adjust for sample design effects and non-response. The total number of person-year observations in our analytic sample is 15,692 in the UK, 5,759 in Australia, and 5,464 in Germany. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the analytic sample by selected socio-demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Sample descriptive statistics.

	UK (Understanding Society Panel)	Australia (HILDA)	Germany (GSOEP)
SES			
Graduate parents	955 (24.8%)	340 (41.6%)	260 (21.5%)
Non-graduate parents	2,896 (75.2%)	477 (58.4%)	951 (78.5%)
Gender			
Male	1,889 (49.1%)	413 (49.2%)	638 (52.7%)
Female	1,960 (50.9%)	427 (50.8%)	573 (47.3%)
Location			
Metro	3,194 (83.0%)	745 (88.7%)	844 (69.7%)
Rural	655 (17.0%)	95 (11.3%)	367 (30.3%)
Ethnic/minority background			
No	2,542 (66.9%)	749 (89.2%)	951 (78.5%)
Yes	1,260 (33.1%)	91 (10.8%)	260 (21.5%)
Poor health/health limitation			
No	3,318 (86.4%)	645 (76.8%)	1,094 (90.7%)
Yes	522 (13.6%)	73 (8.7%)	113 (9.3%)
N (individuals)	3,851	840	1,849

Notes: Weighted data.

4.2. Key Variables

In our analyses, we focus on the educational and labor market destinations of young people in the UK, Australia, and Germany. Specifically, at different ages, we construct the following mutually exclusive categories of activity:

- Being enrolled in university;
- Being in further/vocational education (or still in upper-secondary education at earlier ages) but not enrolled in university;
- Being employed in a managerial or professional occupation (and not in education);
- Being employed in a routine/service occupation (and not in education);
- Not being in education, employment, or training (NEET).

For each of these possible outcomes, we examine SES and gender associations while controlling for a range of other sociodemographic variables. SES is measured using parental education levels, as previous studies suggest that parental education is a better predictor of post-school choices compared to parental occupation (e.g., Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013; Tomaszewski et al., 2024). We distinguish between graduate parents (at least one parent graduated from university) and non-graduate parents. Gender is self-reported in all three studies as either male or female.

In our analyses, we control for a range of factors based on the literature. Specifically, previous research indicates inequalities between the native population and ethnic minorities or migrant groups in terms of educational attainment (Blanden, 2020; Strand, 2014) and employment outcomes (Quillian & Midtbøen, 2021). Rural or regional locations, compared to urban settings, have been shown to limit young people's educational and employment choices (MacDonald et al., 2005; Stockdale et al., 2018), while poor health or disability has also been demonstrated to impact educational and labor market outcomes (Fialho et al., 2022).

4.3. Analytic Approach

We estimate a series of linear probability models in the unbalanced panels independently across the three countries. Indicators of young people's education and labor market activities are regressed on parental education (graduate parents vs. non-graduate parents), with interactions for age and gender to capture age-specific variation in how gender and social inequalities manifest across different destinations in SWT. A small set of sociodemographic (birth cohort, ethnic minority status, non-English-speaking background, health, and disability) and geographic (urban versus rural) controls account for additional differences in opportunity structures.

Linear probability models are appropriate for binary dependent variables when the focus is on average marginal differences in the probability of an outcome, as in the current study. We use survey weights to adjust for unequal sample selection and non-response at various levels. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level to account for correlated error terms within the same individual over time.

5. Results

5.1. SES and Gender Inequalities

We first present the results from the linear probability modeling of SES and gender associations with SWT across the three countries. As noted in the methods section, we use parental education as our SES measure, distinguishing between young people with a graduate parent and those whose parents do not have a university degree. Table 2 presents the effects of having no graduate parents and being female on educational and employment outcomes, relative to having a graduate parent or being male.

In all three countries, we find significant SES effects associated with having a graduate parent. However, gender effects appear to be more attenuated.

In the UK, having no graduate parent reduces the likelihood of staying in education, particularly university education ($\beta = -0.133$; $p < 0.001$), but also non-university education ($\beta = -0.016$; $p < 0.05$). This indicates that young people with non-graduate parents in the UK are more likely to enter employment rather than remain in education. However, there are also significant SES effects on employment pathways, as those with non-graduate parents are significantly less likely to enter managerial or professional occupations ($\beta = -0.04$; $p < 0.01$) and much more likely to enter routine or service occupations ($\beta = 0.11$; $p < 0.001$). Additionally, young people with non-graduate parents are markedly more likely to be in the NEET category ($\beta = 0.082$; $p < 0.001$). Gender inequalities are more attenuated; however, females in the UK are slightly more likely than males to enter university ($\beta = 0.02$; $p < 0.05$).

Table 2. Differences in SWT by SES and gender across the UK, Australia, and Germany.

	FE	University	Managerial/professional occupation	Routine/services occupation	NEET
UK (18–27, *N* = 15,692, weighted)					
Non-graduate parents	−0.016* (0.008)	−0.133*** (0.011)	−0.041** (0.013)	0.108*** (0.018)	0.082*** (0.012)
Female	−0.006 (0.007)	0.021* (0.009)	−0.012 (0.012)	−0.001 (0.017)	−0.002 (0.013)
Australia (18–27, *N* = 5,759, weighted)					
Non-graduate parents	0.053*** (0.017)	−0.169*** (0.024)	−0.055* (0.023)	0.122*** (0.025)	0.050** (0.014)
Female	−0.048** (0.017)	0.074** (0.023)	0.063** (0.023)	−0.092*** (0.024)	0.003 (0.016)
Germany (18–27, *N* = 5,464, weighted)					
Non-graduate parents	0.074*** (0.018)	−0.242*** (0.024)	0.002 (0.006)	0.117*** (0.018)	0.050*** (0.010)
Female	−0.012 (0.015)	−0.001 (0.018)	0.021 (0.005)	0.007 (0.016)	−0.014 (0.011)

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; average marginal effects of parental education and individual sex at birth on job market outcomes; LPM estimates; results weighted using cross-sectional weights; age interacted with parental education interacted with sex; controlled for birth cohort, rural location, general health, ethnicity (UK, GER), nation (UK), Indigenous status (AUS), and Non-English-speaking background status (AUS).

In Australia, having non-graduate parents is negatively associated with the likelihood of pursuing a university degree ($\beta = -0.169$; $p < 0.001$) but positively associated with taking the vocational route ($\beta = 0.053$; $p < 0.001$). Having a non-graduate parent also reduces the likelihood of entering a professional or managerial occupation ($\beta = -0.055$; $p < 0.05$) while increasing the likelihood of entering routine or service occupations ($\beta = 0.122$; $p < 0.001$) or being NEET ($\beta = 0.050$; $p < 0.01$). Compared to the UK, gender differences are more pronounced in Australia: being female is positively associated with pursuing a university education ($\beta = 0.074$; $p < 0.01$) and entering a professional or managerial occupation ($\beta = 0.063$; $p < 0.01$) but negatively associated with taking the vocational route ($\beta = -0.048$; $p < 0.01$) or entering routine or service occupations ($\beta = -0.092$; $p < 0.001$). There is no significant gender effect on the likelihood of being NEET ($\beta = 0.003$; $p > 0.05$).

In Germany, SES effects are similar to those in Australia: having no graduate parent reduces the likelihood of attending university ($\beta = -0.242$; $p < 0.001$) but increases the likelihood of enrolling in vocational education ($\beta = 0.074$; $p < 0.001$). Having non-graduate parents also increases the likelihood of entering routine or service occupations ($\beta = 0.117$; $p < 0.001$) and being NEET ($\beta = 0.05$; $p < 0.001$). Interestingly—and perhaps surprisingly—there are no gender effects with respect to any post-school destination based on our German data.

In the next step, we tested for cross-country differences in the aforementioned effects by running a meta-analysis using Stata's meta command. This meta-analysis allows us to compare country-specific effect sizes and assess whether we can reject the null hypothesis that the coefficient sizes are the same across the three countries. Table 3 presents the results of the meta-analysis, testing the cross-national variation in SES and gender effects for each post-school destination.

The results suggest significant cross-national differences in how social disadvantage shapes educational pathways and transitions into professional work. Specifically, the relationship between parental education (i.e., having a graduate parent or not) and the likelihood of pursuing post-secondary or higher education or entering managerial or professional roles varies markedly across countries. Conversely, the impact of SES on the risk of being NEET (not in education, employment, or training) or entering routine or service work appears more consistent across the three countries.

Significant cross-national differences in gendered SWTs are also evident. Tests for homogeneity indicate variation in gender effects across countries for higher education participation, entry into professional work, and routine or service work. This suggests that gender disparities in these pathways are not uniform across the UK, Australia, and Germany.

Table 3. Results of meta-analysis to test the significance of cross-national variation in effect sizes.

	SES effects	Gender effects
FE	$X^2(2) = 29.2$, $p < 0.001$	$X^2(2) = 5.1$, $p = 0.078$
University	$X^2(2) = 17.5$, $p < 0.001$	$X^2(2) = 15.0$, $p = 0.001$
Work—managerial/professional	$X^2(2) = 13.55$, $p = 0.001$	$X^2(2) = 10.5$, $p = 0.005$
Work—routine/service	$X^2(2) = 0.2$, $p = 0.887$	$X^2(2) = 13.0$, $p = 0.002$
NEET	$X^2(2) = 4.8$, $p = 0.092$	$X^2(2) = 0.08$, $p = 0.962$

Notes: Test of homogeneity after a random-effects meta-analysis.

The final set of results focuses on SES and gender inequalities along the age dimension, comparing SWTs across the three countries over the observed life course (i.e., ages 18–27). To illustrate this, we plot a series of predicted probabilities of entering different post-school destinations over time (along the age dimension) obtained from the models (Figures 1–3). The figures show predictions for different subgroups of young people in the three countries (male vs. female) and low SES (i.e., non-graduate parents) vs. high SES (i.e., graduate parents) at different ages.

In the UK (Figure 1), SES gaps in FE are minimal, with young people who have non-graduate parents tending to leave the sector at slightly younger ages. However, there are pronounced SES gaps in university participation, which peak during the critical ages of 19–21—when most young people in Britain complete their first degree—and narrow in the later age bracket, when postgraduate study typically occurs. Unequal access to university is mirrored by an uneven transition into managerial and professional jobs. By age 27, around 40% of males with graduate parents work in managerial and professional jobs, compared to about 20% of their peers with non-graduate parents. SES differences are less pronounced for women, with an apparent convergence in access to managerial and professional jobs between high- and low-SES groups as they age. SES disparities in routine or service occupations are less pronounced and continue to converge over time. Finally, young people with non-graduate parents face consistently higher risks of being NEET. The SES gap is evident for both men and women and persists with age.

In Australia (Figure 2), young people with non-graduate parents appear somewhat more inclined to take up vocational education, although these differences are largely not statistically significant. By contrast, there are marked SES differences in university enrollment, with the gap being more pronounced early on (until about age 21). After this point, the gap narrows slightly and remains relatively stable, aligning with the typical age for postgraduate studies. Some SES differences exist among males in terms of employment in both managerial or professional and routine or service occupations, which either remain stable or increase with age. These differences are less pronounced among females, particularly in managerial or professional occupations. However, SES disparities in NEET status in Australia are more pronounced among females than males, particularly in the latter part of the observation period (ages 23–27).

In Germany, the results highlight the central role of apprenticeship training (Figure 3). SES gaps in FE participation (particularly apprenticeship training) remain relatively stable between ages 19 and 24, then decrease slightly as young people transition out of education. There are significant SES gaps in university participation, which continue to widen until around age 23 for males and 25 for females. These gaps then narrow, as those who remain in education are likely to pursue postgraduate studies. Because postgraduate students are more often selected based on academic aptitude, SES influence diminishes at this stage. Given the small proportion of young Germans in managerial or professional occupations, SES gaps in this group are not statistically significant, further indicating the delayed labor market entry of German university graduates compared to their peers in the UK and Australia. In contrast, SES disparities in routine or service occupations are pronounced and tend to increase with age, unlike in the UK. Additionally, SES gaps in NEET status for both males and females widen between ages 20 and 23–24—though at a relatively low level compared to the UK and Australia—before narrowing thereafter.

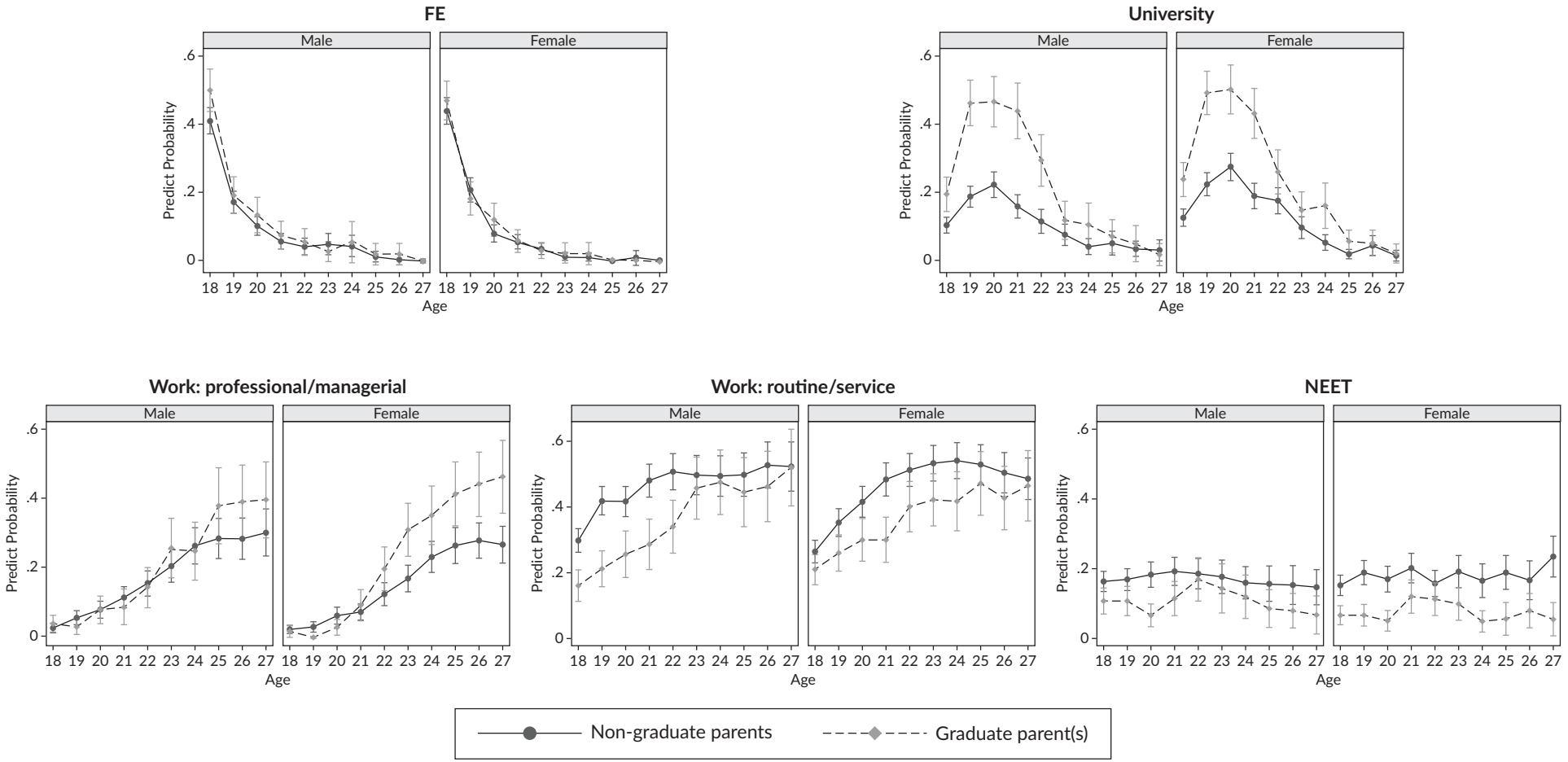

Figure 1. United Kingdom: Predicted probability of post-school destinations by parental education and gender over age.

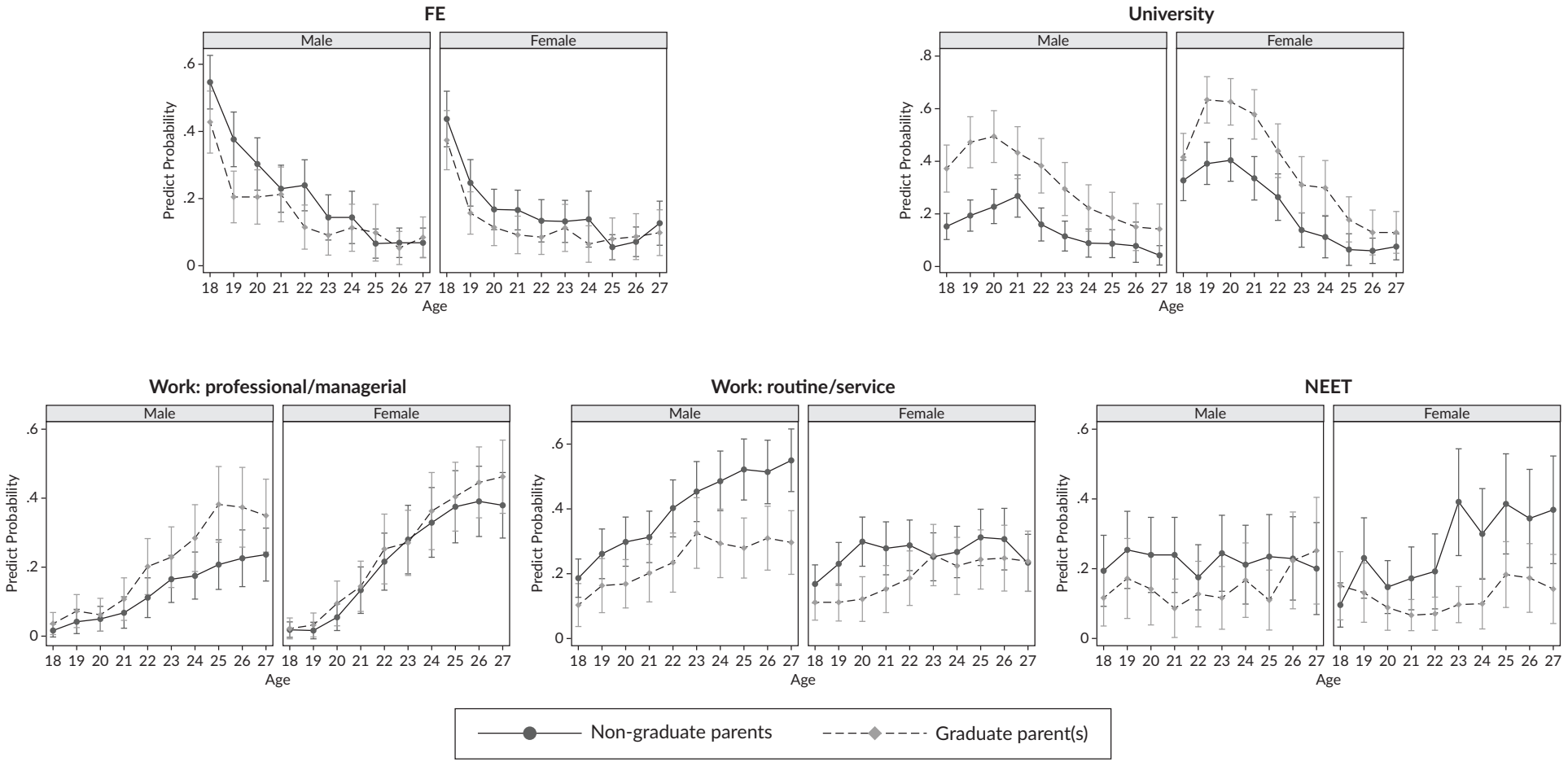

Figure 2. Australia: Predicted probability of post-school destinations by parental education and gender over age.

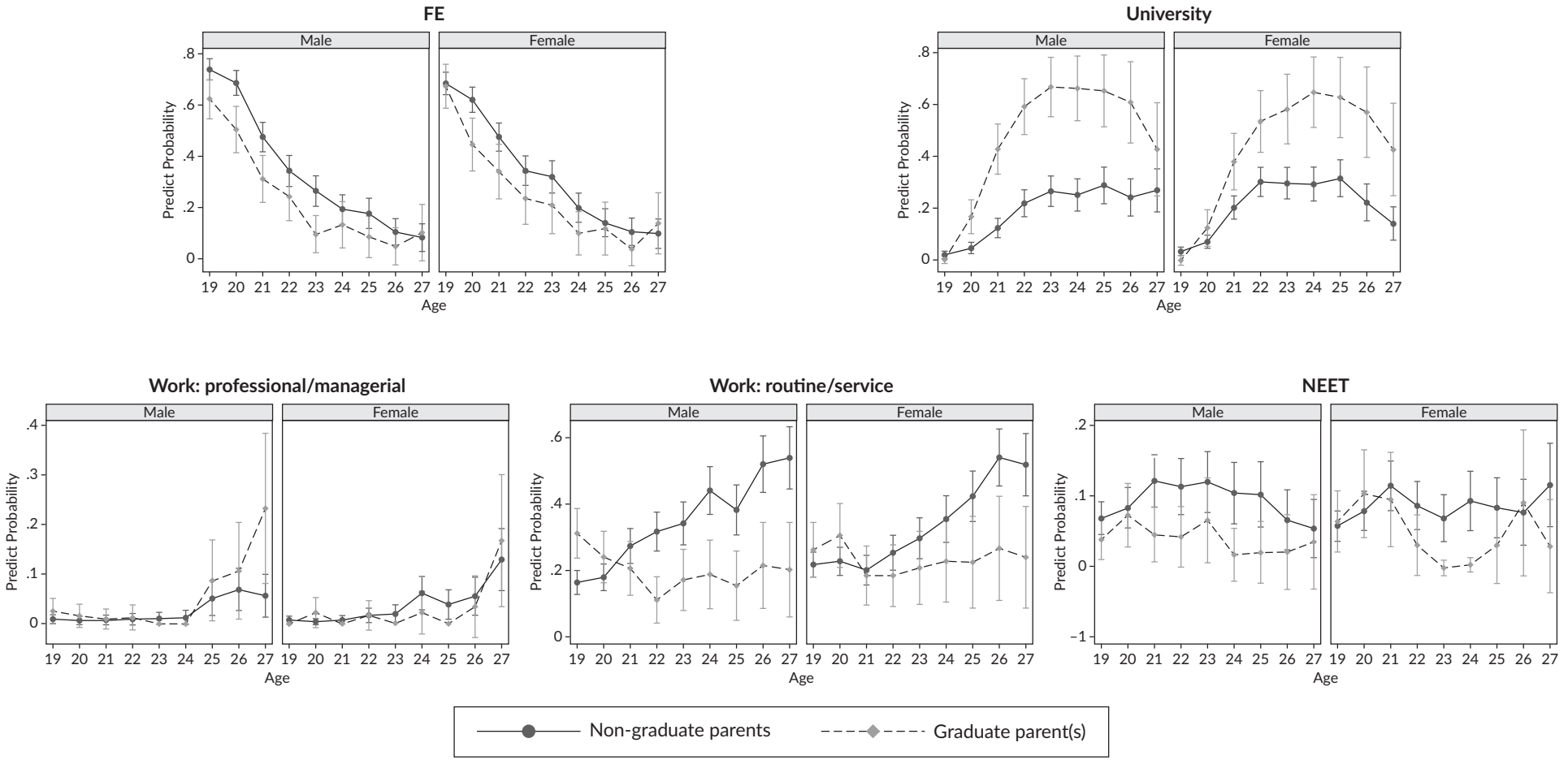

Figure 3. Germany: Predicted probability of post-school destinations by parental education and gender over age.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

This study investigated cross-national variations in SES—measured through parental education—and gender disparities in SWTs across the UK, Australia, and Germany, focusing on how these factors influence post-secondary pathways from education to employment. Given that our data cover transitions after the Great Recession and extend up to the Covid-19 pandemic, our findings provide more current evidence on the impacts of institutional contexts and educational systems on young people's transitions compared to most existing studies. As such, our findings offer additional evidence on inequalities, particularly regarding SES, as measured by parental education, that persist over time and across different country contexts.

The analysis of SES effects underscores the institutional stratification in Germany's education system, which tracks students into distinct pathways from an early age, often reinforcing intergenerational status transmission linked to parental SES disparities. Our results show that having non-graduate parents significantly reduces the likelihood of pursuing higher education across all three countries, with the strongest effects observed in Germany ($\beta = -0.242$; $p < 0.001$). This finding confirms previous evidence regarding Germany's high level of stratification (Breen & Buchmann, 2002; Brizinsky-Fay, 2017; Kerckhoff, 2000; Müller & Gangl, 2003) and supports the assertion that, compared to Australia and the UK, young people in Germany experience stronger SES effects on educational choices. The comprehensive secondary education systems in Australia and the UK allow broader access to university for young people, including those from lower-SES backgrounds.

Notably, we also find that young people from less privileged backgrounds in Germany and Australia are more likely to enter further/vocational education; however, this is not the case in the UK. This may reflect the relatively high university participation rate in the UK. At the same time, we note the relatively high likelihood of NEET status among young people with non-graduate parents in the UK, which may also explain the lower likelihood of vocational education enrollment in this group.

While lower-SES youth in Germany may achieve stable employment through vocational training, SES gaps in employment quality remain similar across countries, with low-SES youth more likely to enter routine or service jobs—and if anything, these gaps are relatively larger in Germany. Thus, the findings do not support our assumption that, in a country with a strong link between education and the labor market, the risk for low-SES youth to enter low-status jobs would be reduced. Instead, the results suggest a broader pattern in which socio-economically disadvantaged young people are more likely to enter low-status occupations, regardless of labor market regulation. The high segmentation, early sorting, and vocation-specific training in Germany do not mitigate the risk of low-status employment for low-SES youth compared to their counterparts in the UK or Australia (Brizinsky-Fay, 2017; Müller & Gangl, 2003).

Gender disparities in SWT are also evident across countries, although the patterns differ significantly. Perhaps surprisingly, our findings do not indicate that gender differences are more pronounced in countries with greater educational stratification, such as Germany. Notably, while our data reveal no substantial gender effects in Germany regarding post-school destinations, Australia exhibits more pronounced differences, with females being more likely to pursue university education ($\beta = 0.074$; $p < 0.01$) and enter

professional roles, yet less likely to engage in vocational training or routine service occupations. This pattern aligns with expectations about the interplay between gender norms and vocational education systems.

By contrast, and as expected, the UK—where policy efforts have focused on widening access to higher education and promoting female labor market participation—demonstrates relatively balanced gender outcomes. This suggests that policy initiatives in this area may help mitigate traditional gender disparities, even as SES gaps remain pronounced.

6.2. Policy Implications

The findings of this study have several important policy implications. First, given the significant SES effects on post-secondary education choices—particularly in Germany—policymakers should consider implementing early intervention strategies targeting disadvantaged youth. In the short term, this could involve providing additional academic support, information, and guidance to students with non-graduate parents, enabling them to make informed choices, including transitions into higher education. Over the longer term, reforms could include rethinking the highly selective system to allow for greater flexibility in secondary education, along with better integration between higher education and vocational education sectors to enhance choices and facilitate transitions.

In the UK, where young people are more likely to enter the labor market directly after completing compulsory secondary education—often without further training—enhancing vocational training programs could improve outcomes for those not pursuing higher education. Creating pathways that combine study with relevant work experience may help young people gain valuable experience while continuing their education. This need for flexibility also applies to Germany, where reforms could introduce greater permeability between tracks to allow students to transition between different educational pathways. However, it is essential to ensure that these programs integrate work that provides meaningful experience rather than trapping students in low-paid jobs that increase the risk of dropping out (Hovdhaugen, 2013; Vickers et al., 2003).

Furthermore, given the gender disparities observed in our data—particularly in Australia—policies should prioritize addressing gender stereotypes in education and training. While Australia has traditionally focused on increasing female participation in non-traditional fields such as science, technology, and engineering, recent trends show that females are now more likely to attend university than males (Tomaszewski et al., 2018). Our results confirm this pattern, with females being more likely to enter university and subsequently transition into managerial or professional positions. This shift has the potential to create new gender disparities. Therefore, initiatives should continue to encourage female participation in traditionally male-dominated fields while also promoting academic pathways for males, which are more likely to lead to high-status jobs.

6.3. Study Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The data, drawn from HILDA, Understanding Society Panel, and the GSOEP, while robust, primarily represent general population panel household surveys. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of specific subgroups, such as young people from rural and remote areas in Australia or migrants in the UK and Germany, who may face unique barriers in education and employment.

Moreover, while we used parental education as a proxy for SES, this measure may overlook other crucial factors, such as income level, parental involvement, and local economic conditions, which could further shape educational and employment outcomes. Additionally, because the study relies on cross-sectional data at specific points in time, our ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships between national contexts, SES, gender, and post-school outcomes is limited. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as associations rather than causal effects.

Future research could address these limitations by exploring longitudinal outcomes in greater depth, particularly the long-term economic impacts of different pathways for youth from varying SES backgrounds and genders. Formal causal models could also be developed to build on the descriptive patterns presented in this study.

Additionally, qualitative research could complement the existing quantitative data by examining the lived experiences of young people navigating their post-secondary choices. Understanding the motivations, barriers, and perceptions influencing these decisions could inform the design of more effective policy interventions.

6.4. Conclusion

In summary, our analysis provides new insights into how institutional contexts shape the educational and employment pathways of young people in Germany, Australia, and the UK. The significant influence of SES—measured through parental education—on post-secondary pathways, combined with the variable impact of gender across different educational policy frameworks, highlights the complexity of SWT and intersecting (dis)advantages.

These findings suggest that tailored policies are essential to mitigate the barriers faced by low-SES youth across all three countries and to promote gender equity in education and labor market outcomes. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, particularly by examining the long-term implications of national educational and employment policies on young people's trajectories and how these interact with gender disparities across different country contexts.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available:

- HILDA at the Australian Government Department of Social Service (DSS Longitudinal Studies Dataverse; https://doi.org/10.26193/3QRFMZ)
- The GSEP at the Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (DIW), Berlin.
- The Understanding Society Panel at https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk

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About the Authors

Wojtek Tomaszewski (PhD) is deputy director (of research) and a research group leader at the Institute for Social Science Research and a program leader in the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (the Life Course Centre). He has a strong research interest in the impact of disadvantage on educational and labour market outcomes in young people and has specialist expertise in quantitative research methods and advanced statistical analysis.

Hans Dietrich (Dr. rer. pol.) is a senior researcher at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) in Nuremberg, Germany, and teaches at the Friedrich-Alexander University, Erlangen-Nürnberg. His research interests include sociology of education and qualification, life course research, labor market research, school-to-work transitions and youth unemployment in Germany and Europe, and labor market policy for young people.

Golo Henseke (PhD) is an associate professor at the IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, specializing in applied economics and quantitative social sciences. He is associated with the LLAKES Research Centre and the Oxford-based Centre for Global Higher Education. His research primarily focuses on labor market dynamics, educational outcomes, and well-being.

Ning Xiang (PhD) is a Research Fellow at ISSR, specializing in education equity, longitudinal data analysis, and mixed-method evaluations. She has led policy-relevant research using LSIC, LSAC, LSAY, and HILDA to examine student engagement, school climate, and long-term education and labor market outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Ingrid Schoon (PhD) is Chair of social policy at the UCL Social Research Institute. Her research focuses on the study of risk and resilience, in particular during school-to-work transitions and regarding social inequalities in competence development.