Hard Work and You Can't Get It: An International Comparative Analysis of Gender, Career Aspirations, and Preparedness Among Politics and International Relations PhD Students

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ABSTRACT Do all PhD students aspire to an academic career? Do PhD programs appropriately prepare students for the realities of the job market? There is a well-established gap between political science PhD graduates and tenure-track academic postings. The mismatch between PhD graduates and academic positions may point to alternative models of doctoral education as a possible solution. However, the survey of Canadian and Australian PhD students described in this article suggests that issues and challenges are common regardless of the model of doctoral education. Canadian PhDs report more mentoring activity, but they also are more fixated on securing academic positions. However, we find important gender differences across countries: men are more interested in an academic career and only a (disproportionately male) minority is confident that they will succeed in securing a faculty career. This raises questions about diversity in the future of the profession. This research suggests that although students have different experiences under different doctoral models, issues of academic jobs and a mismatch are common in both systems.

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The mismatch between the number of doctoral graduates and the number of tenure-track faculty positions is neither new nor localized. It is a persistent phenomenon that spans disciplines and national systems. At the same time, with the increasing "internationalization" of the academy—and political science in particular (Engeli, Kostova, and Tronconi 2022)—we need to understand the impact that different institutional arrangements can have on the development of our profession. Our research, the first international comparative survey of political science PhD students,[1] addresses students' experiences of the "mismatch"

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doi:10.1017/S1049096523000057

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and also offers insights into the different institutional settings that serve as their backdrop.

A range of issues in political science doctoral programs have recently been addressed in this journal, including students' methodological self-efficacy (Smith, Gillooly, and Hardt 2022), mental health (Almasri, Read, and Vandeweerdt 2022), and the "hidden curriculum" (Barham and Wood 2022). However, at their core, all of the researchers question whether PhD programs are providing appropriate training and whether PhD students feel equipped for a future career. This article contributes to this body of literature by examining the career aspirations, career preparedness, and satisfaction with training of political science and international relations PhD students in Australia and English Canada.

Canada and Australia provide valuable opportunities for comparison. They share a common history of British colonization and both are part of the Anglo-American political science community. However, their doctoral programs have evolved in different directions: Australia follows the British model of a dissertation-only PhD and Canada develops a PhD on the American model of coursework, comprehensive exams, and a dissertation. Although this study does not rank whether one system is "better" than the other at career training, it highlights the different effects of these contrasting models, with the goal of better equipping all programs to support doctoral students.

Based on surveys of doctoral students in political science graduate programs in Australia (in 2022) and Canada[2] (in 2021), we found that the majority of PhD students in both countries consider the training provided for postgraduate employment within their PhD program to be insufficient. We also found differences between the two countries; Canadian students report greater exposure to career-development opportunities and are more likely to link their self-worth to obtaining an academic position. Moreover, we found patterns of gender difference consistent across both cases; women report greater exposure to career-development opportunities, whereas men are more likely to express a desire to pursue an academic career as well as a confidence that they will be successful. The lower levels of interest in an academic career of female respondents and their lower levels of confidence in success in the academic job market across both systems raise questions about diversity in the future of the profession.

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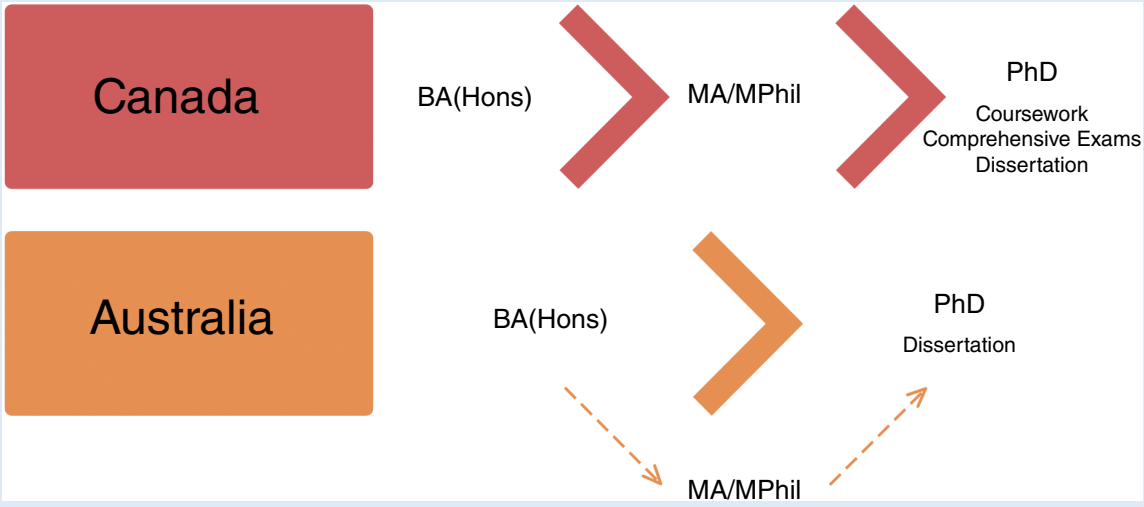
THE AUSTRALIAN AND CANADIAN CASES

Although there are many different models of PhD programs, they fit into two broad types: (1) the traditional English model, which solely focuses on producing a dissertation based on an "academic apprenticeship" (Park 2005, 193); and (2) the North American model, which combines coursework, exams, and a dissertation. To study these two types, we identified two "token" examples of these types (i.e., Australia and Canada) and adopted a "most-different" research design. This allowed us to draw out the implications of these institutional differences; an analysis of these token examples helps us to understand the types (Dowding 2020).

Both Australia and Canada have well-developed university systems. Five Australian universities are ranked in the world's top 50, as are three Canadian institutions (QS World University Rankings 2022). However, the organization of doctoral education is significantly different in the two systems (figure 1; see online

Figure 1

Path to PhD, Australia and Canada



https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

appendix A for additional details). The key differences, which were expected to provide analytical leverage to our study, were admission procedures, length of the PhD program, cost, and the regularity of part-time study.

In Australia, students are routinely admitted to the PhD program after a four-year undergraduate degree, including an honors year and 20,000-word thesis. The doctoral program generally does not require coursework or candidacy examinations; however, course requirements are becoming more common. The PhD can be completed in three to four years and no tuition is charged. Part-time enrollments are common, with approximately 30% of all Australian postgraduate research students enrolled part time. In Canada, students typically complete a one- or two-year master's degree before starting a PhD program, which requires at least one year of coursework, one or more candidacy examinations, and a dissertation. The combination of the MA and the PhD requires a minimum of five years, with most students needing six or seven years. Canadian students pay tuition fees throughout their degree work; however, they typically are offset by scholarships and teaching and research-assistant (RA) work.

Despite differences between the two systems, the comparisons are important and valid because in both countries, the PhD is the terminal degree and the entry point for the academic profession. However, earning a PhD in any national system does not guarantee a tenure-track faculty position. The American Political Science Association's annual placement survey demonstrates a steady decline in the proportion of new PhD graduates gaining tenure-track positions, from 38% in 2010–2011 to 26% in 2019–2020 (McGrath and Diaz 2021). Although neither Canada nor Australia has a similar survey,[3] it is reasonable to assume that the pattern is similar. A survey of faculty members in English-speaking, PhD-granting political science departments in Canada found that faculty members acknowledged the reality of this disconnect and expressed considerable support for reducing the number of PhD students and reforming the curriculum to ensure that graduates cultivate skills for nonacademic jobs (Berdahl, Malloy, and Young 2020).

Nevertheless, because the PhD is the traditional and exclusive path to an academic career, we anticipated that in both systems, PhD students are motivated to seek employment as professors. Given the different structures of the PhD program in the two systems, however, we expected to find differences in students' experiences of mentorship and career preparation across the two countries. We anticipated that the more-structured Canadian PhD program would be adaptable to more consistent integration of career-development programming and mentorship experiences.

A GENDERED DISCIPLINE

Much progress has been made in the past several decades in relation to gender equality. The social impact of the second wave of feminism in the early 1970s also precipitated shifts within the discipline of political science that are ongoing today. Nevertheless, there are ongoing "gendering processes among PhD students" in political science departments that result from the gendered organization of graduate schools (Kantola 2008). Gender differences persist within the discipline and the broader university systems in both Australia and Canada (Canadian Political Science Association, Diversity Task Force 2012; Sawer and Curtin 2016). Men still outnumber women at senior levels, and women face challenges that include gaining access to informal networks, limits to mobility to relocate for an academic position, and combining academic careers with care responsibilities that tend to fall disproportionately to them, as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Minello, Martucci, and Manzo 2021; Rutledge-Prior and Casey 2023). As such, perceptions of barriers to women's participation in the discipline and concerns about the gendered demands of an academic career may shape the career orientation of female PhD students. We expected that women might be less likely to focus exclusively on pursuing an academic career than men and less confident of their ability to successfully embark on this career path.

METHODS

This analysis combines two online surveys of graduate students. The Canadian survey[4] was distributed from February to April 2021. The survey drew on questions from previous surveys of graduate supervisors in political science (Berdahl, Malloy, and Young 2020). The Australian survey[5] was distributed from February to April 2022. The survey drew on questions from two previous surveys (Berdahl, Malloy, and Young 2020; Kefford and Morgenbesser 2013). Both surveys were advertised in social media and emails to relevant department heads and graduate chairs who were asked to distribute the information within their institution. The Australian survey also was distributed by the Australian Political Science Association to its members. It received 109 responses from PhD students, representing approximately 25% of the target population. The Canadian survey received 99 responses (the overall target population is unavailable). The responses are nonrandom and were subject to self-selection bias, so caution should be taken in extrapolation. Further details are in online appendix B and the dataset is available through the Harvard Dataverse (Rutledge-Prior et al. 2023).

RESULTS

This section presents the results from the two surveys, first the demographics and then an analysis of views on career training, career preparedness, and academic career aspirations.

Demographics

Respondents in the Australian survey represented 18 universities. The Group of Eight (Go8) universities[6] were overrepresented (i.e., 65% of the respondents compared to an estimated 45% of the population), but responses were broadly representative relative to gender, domestic/international status, and full-/part-time status. The Canadian survey was sent to students at 17 universities, representing all political science doctoral programs at English-speaking Canadian universities.

The majority of respondents of the two surveys were full-time students (i.e., 78% of Australian and 98% of Canadian respondents); in Australia, the split between full- and part-time students was even by gender, which is representative of the population. There were only two Canadian part-time respondents. In both countries, the majority of students had domestic registration status (i.e., 68% of Australian and 82% of Canadian respondents).

The gender breakdown was similar: 44% of Australian and 50% of Canadian respondents identified as male and 50% of Australian and 44% of Canadian respondents identified as female.[7] The majority were between 30 and 39 years of age (i.e., 53% of

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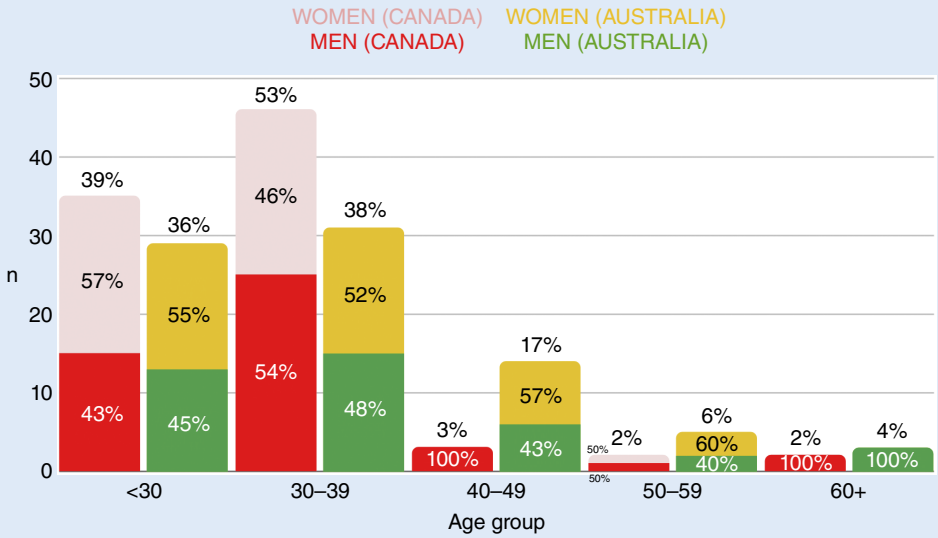
Figure 2

Age Groups of Respondents, by Gender



Australians and 38% of Canadians). The Canadian respondents skewed younger overall than the Australian respondents (figure 2).

Views on Career Training in the PhD Program

Australian and Canadian survey respondents had similar views on the career training provided in their program: both groups agreed that the training was insufficient. The Australian survey asked respondents to indicate whether the professional-development training they had received was sufficient for the academic and the nonacademic job markets. For the former, 55% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their preparation was sufficient; for the latter, 69% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Only a minority of respondents believed that their job preparation was adequate, whether for an academic or a nonacademic career.

The Canadian survey asked similar questions but distinguished between professional development provided by central university providers (i.e., the graduate faculty or the university career center) and by their own department. In terms of preparation for an academic career, 32% stated that central university offices provided too little and 37% stated that their department provided too little. For nonacademic careers, 37% stated that central university offices provided too little and 57% stated that their department provided too little. It appears that Canadian doctoral students are somewhat better served in terms of career preparation than their Australian counterparts; however, they believed that their department was not doing enough to prepare them for a nonacademic career. This may be attributed to the view of Canadian faculty members that departments should assume only a modest role in career preparation (Berdahl, Malloy, and Young 2020).

Career Preparedness

We found substantial differences across Australian and Canadian PhD students in terms of their experiences working with supervisors and other faculty members. We asked respondents whether they had engaged in a range of career-development activities, either with a supervisor (Australian survey) or a faculty member (Canadian survey). On each of the following activities, Canadian respondents reported higher levels of experience than their Australian counterparts:

- coauthoring (Canadians 41%; Australians 34%)
- included as co-investigator/collaborator on a grant application (18%; 8%)
- consulted on a grant application (25%; 12%)
- employed as an RA (74%; 46%)
- funded to attend a conference (44%; 14%)
- encouraged to attend nonacademic events (e.g., policy forums) (49%; 39%)

At least in part, the higher percentages of the Canadian survey respondents can be a result of the fact that they were asked whether they had engaged in such activities with any faculty members rather than with their supervisor(s) specifically. However, the findings also may reflect the incentives embedded in research grants from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, which provides funding for students and rewards applicants for their role in training graduate students.

In both countries, women are more likely to report having engaged in these activities, with particularly significant differences in experience working as an RA and in coauthoring with a faculty member or a supervisor (figure 3).

This finding of women's greater involvement is further supported in the Australian data, which indicate that 75% of female students have worked in a teaching role compared to fewer than 56% of male students. Moreover, female students are spending more time doing so: almost half (45%) reported spending more than 10 hours giving and preparing for tutorials compared to only 27% of male students. This may be a reflection of women

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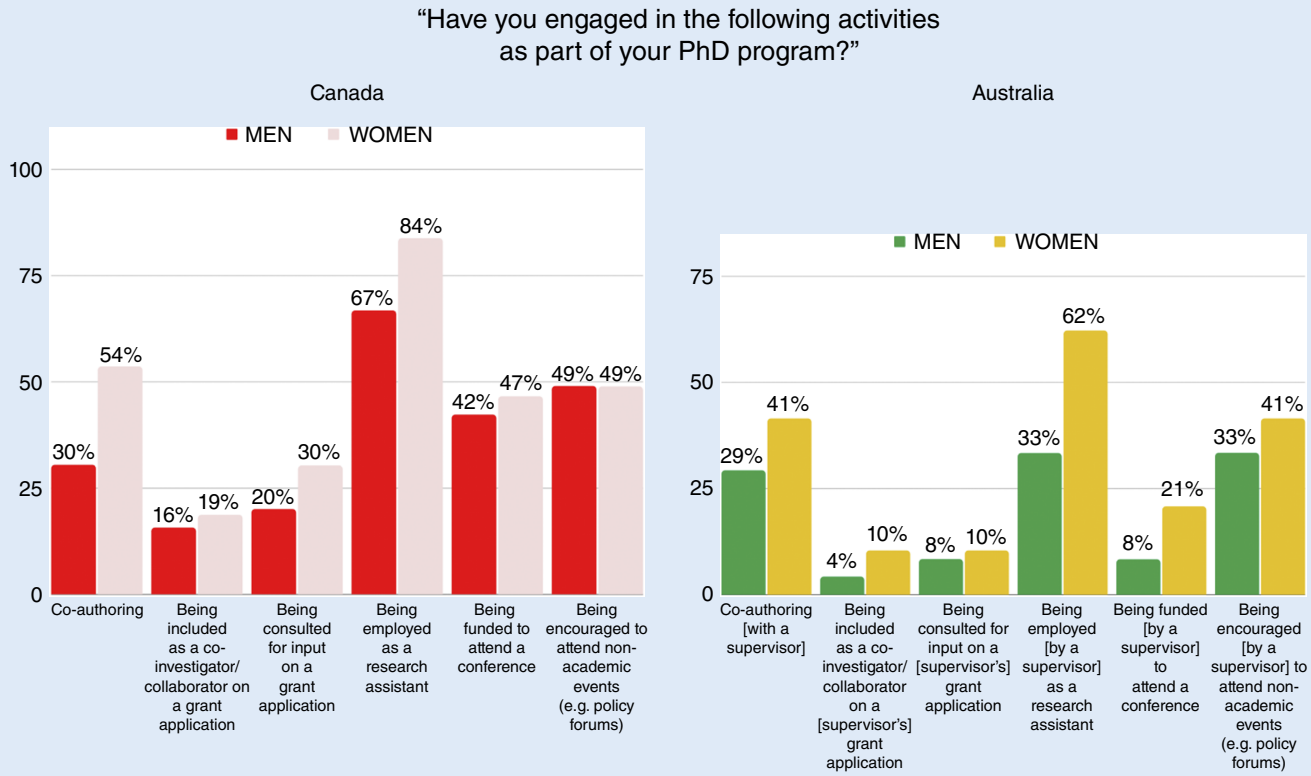
Figure 3

Experience with Career-Development Activities, by Gender



perceiving that the academic job market is more challenging; therefore, they may be more likely to invest in opportunities to build their CV by accepting opportunities to work as an RA or a coauthor.

Academic Career Aspirations

Although we expected that most students in both countries would be motivated to pursue an academic career, we found that Canadian respondents were notably more likely to express a clear desire. Whereas 73% of Canadian respondents agreed with the statement, "I am primarily interested in pursuing an academic career," the same was true of only 46% of Australian respondents (table 1). Similarly, 54% of Canadian but only 21% of Australian respondents agreed that they "measure [their] own success in terms of whether or not [they] successfully obtain an academic position." This difference may reflect the less-structured Australian PhD program, which does not inculcate students in activities (e.g., coursework and comprehensive examinations) that often are oriented toward developing their breadth of knowledge in a discipline in preparation for teaching.

In both surveys, most respondents reported being aware of the limited academic job prospects before beginning their degree program: 87% of Canadian and 76% of Australian respondents indicated their awareness of this reality. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that only 29% of Canadian and 16% of Australian respondents indicated that they believed they would be successful in the academic job market. At the same time, however, only about 33% in each survey *disagreed* with the prospect that they would be successful, leaving a substantial group in each survey indicating that they "neither agree[d] nor disagree[d]." This ambivalence suggests that many PhD students are unsure about their job prospects while still holding out hope that they will overcome the statistical odds.

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Table 1

Interest in Pursuing an Academic Career and Predicted Success in the Academic Job Market

	Interested in Pursuing Academic Career (% agree + strongly agree)	Convinced I Will Be Successful in the Academic Job Market (% agree +strongly agree)
Country		
Australia	46%	16%
Canada	73%	29%
Gender		
Australia		
Male	51%	23%
Female	43%	12%
Canada		
Male	79%	38%
Female	70%	19%
Age		
Australia		
<30	60%	17%
30–39	47%	13%
40+	26%	23%
Canada		
<30	78%	30%
30–39	74%	30%
40+	57%	0%
Stage in Program		
Year of Program (Australia)		
First	50%	36%
Second	59%	18%
Third	45%	5%
Fourth	46%	15%
Fifth or Above	15%	8%
Year Started (Canada)		
2020	77%	32%
2019	73%	40%
2018	73%	43%
2017	71%	12%
2016 or Earlier	72%	24%
Institutional Affiliation		
Australia		
Group of Eight	43%	15%
Other University	50%	17%
Canada		
U3 University	79%	35%
Other University	71%	27%
Program Intensity		
Australia		
Full Time	51%	16%
Part Time	30%	13%
Canada		
Full Time	73%	29%
Part Time	50%	0%

The surveys also revealed an association between whether students predicted that they would be successful in an academic career and whether in fact they desired such a career. Perhaps it is not surprising that the survey results indicated that in both Australia and Canada, those students who were interested primarily in an academic career also were most convinced that they would be successful in attaining one (figure 4). Similarly, across both groups, those students who were least interested in this career path were those most convinced that they would not succeed in trying to follow it. Nevertheless, even of those most interested in an academic career, only 33% of Canadian and 26% of Australian students believed that they would be successful.

A similar positive association across the two country groups was revealed when we looked at whether students measure their success in terms of gaining an academic career. Students who agreed that they measure their success in this way were more likely to predict future success in the academic job market than those who did not (see figure 4).

Finally, knowing that graduates of more "prestigious" institutions often have better success in the academic job market, we distinguished between types of university. For the Australian survey, we compared the Go8 with non-Go8 universities and found that students enrolled in the former were *less* likely to indicate a desire for an academic career. However, there was no marked difference in their estimates of the likelihood of that occurring (see table 1). In the Canadian survey, we found that students in what we termed the "U3 English Canadian Universities" (i.e., University of Toronto, McGill University, and University of British Columbia) were somewhat *more* likely to indicate a desire for an academic career and to believe that they would be successful.

In addition to the differences observed across countries, we found other differences in the ambition for an academic career and estimates of success relative to gender. In both countries, male respondents were more likely than female respondents to indicate their desire for an academic career and were more likely to believe that they would be successful on the academic job market (figure 5).

Of the four groups, Canadian men were most likely to agree that they were primarily interested in pursuing an academic career, that they measured their success in terms of whether they successfully obtained an academic position, and that they were convinced that they would be successful in the academic job market. By contrast, Australian women were the group least likely to agree that they wanted to pursue an academic career and least likely to believe that they would be successful in doing so. It is

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Figure 4

Respondents' Belief in Their Future Success in Academia, by Feelings Toward Academic Careers

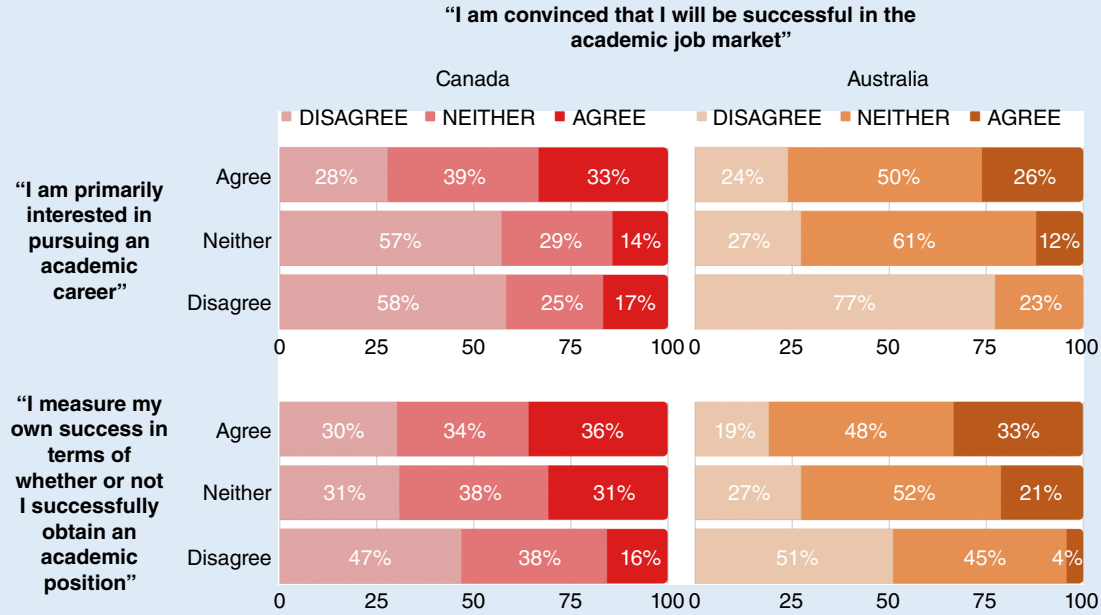
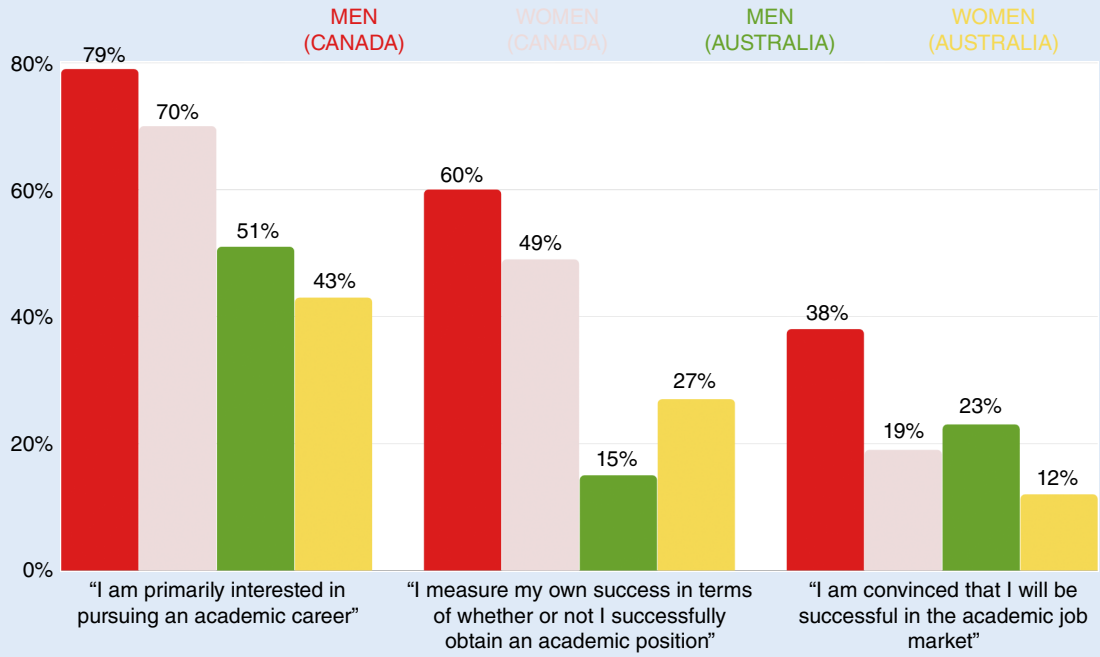


Figure 5

Views on Careers in Academia, by Gender



interesting, however, that they were almost twice as likely as Australian men to report that they measured their success in terms of whether they obtained an academic career, whereas the men were least likely of the four groups to do so.

DISCUSSION

The lower interest among Australians in pursuing an academic career can be linked to systematic differences. The opportunity cost of completing a PhD in Australia, in terms of both time and

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money, is significantly lower. This is reflected in that Australian PhD students are both older and more likely to be part time than Canadian students. Approximately 30% of Australian domestic-commencing PhD students are part time,[8] whereas Canadian programs may not offer any part-time options (at least at the beginning of a program). The lower costs in Australia may allow older people to return to study, undertaking a PhD program while employed or after retirement. This has the advantage of bringing industry experience into academia while also diluting the link between PhD training and academic careers; many older students expect to return to their previous employment. The link between graduate school and the academy is much stronger in Canada due to its longer and more-structured programs; it is further reinforced by more explicit and widespread mentoring and training. Canadian students report higher levels of participation in these types of activities across the board, from coauthoring with and acting as RAs to faculty, to receiving funding for conferences.

The lower costs in Australia may allow older people to return to study, undertaking a PhD while employed or after retirement. This has the advantage of bringing industry experience into academia while also diluting the link between PhD training and academic careers; many older students expect to return to their previous employment.

For those scholars who perceive the primary purpose of the PhD program as training the next generation of faculty, the Canadian/American model is clearly preferable. At the end of a lengthy period of structured training and formal and informal mentorship, graduates are well prepared to compete for elusive academic positions. However, for those who perceive the primary purpose of the PhD program as educating researchers—many of whom might go on to work outside of the academy—the Australian/British model arguably has greater attractions. It can accommodate students with divergent career objectives and it does not impose the same opportunity costs. Although neither approach is necessarily "better," this sets up an intriguing conundrum, given that Canadian institutions in general are trying to accelerate doctoral completion times, sometimes by reducing or simplifying requirements. Australian universities might consider enhancing their approach to provide more robust academic experiences and broader training.

Another clear divide between Canadian and Australian programs emerges relative to gender. We found that women engage more intensely in career-preparation activities than men but are less likely to express ambition to pursue an academic career and less optimistic that they would be successful in launching one. However, at the same time, women in Australia are more likely than men to measure their success in terms of their ability to obtain an academic job. It is significant that these findings hold across Australia and Canada—notwithstanding the significant differences in their PhD programs—and highlight a deeper problem across the discipline.

Although we were not able to test what is driving these differences, our findings are best understood as a rational response to the gendered opportunity structure within institutions, emerging from the theory of gendered organizations (Kantola 2008). That is, to succeed, women believe that they must be better qualified—and even then they are less sanguine about their prospects. This gendered opportunity structure also is reflected in research that shows that female academics are more likely to be asked to undertake service roles and are less likely to say "no" (Aiston and Fo 2021) as well as the adverse impacts on women's mental health (Almasri, Read, and Vandeweerdt 2022). It also may be that men are systematically overconfident and that they overestimate their chances of success (Thaler 2021).

CONCLUSION

To our knowledge, this study represents the first cross-national study of PhD students' attitudes toward career development. Although the study is limited to a single discipline, it suggests common challenges as well as interesting differences between the two countries and two systems. Whereas we hypothesize that some differences can be related to the overall differences in the two national systems, other differences are not as easily adaptable to obvious explanations; in some areas, gender is the stronger explanatory variable.

In both countries, there is a clear gap between the aspirations of PhD students for an academic position and their confidence that they will achieve it. We also found differences in mentorship and career-development experiences across Canada and Australia. This may reflect a richer research ecosystem in Canada, where more faculty hold grants specifically tied to funding students, rather than attitudinal or cultural differences. Immersion in this system, in turn, may reinforce Canadians' stronger prioritization of an academic career. Going forward, this comparative survey can be expanded to other countries and/or other disciplines to determine whether patterns are similar, particularly considering gender differences relative to a desire for an academic job; perceptions of success in the academic job market; and engagement in career-development activities.

The overall pessimism about academic careers in both countries—although students appear to be "informed customers" who enter their program aware of the difficult job market—is concerning but not surprising. Our findings fit with widespread concerns about a "PhD jobs crisis" across other disciplines and in other countries. This is the case most notably in the United States, where data are most available confirming students' pessimism. The results of our surveys suggest that challenges for PhD programs in political science run deep and that solutions of either streamlining and shortening programs *or* introducing more robust mentoring activities and opportunities may not be sufficient—at least for students who prioritize an academic position. The Canadian experience may even suggest that mentoring activities actually encourage students to valorize an academic career despite the unlikelihood. Ultimately, although

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there are cross-national variances, the mismatch between PhD graduates and academic positions is a challenge that is shared internationally.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BFDS0O.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit \http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000057.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. The survey included people across their PhD enrollment, so although the term "student" is used throughout, it is meant to include both "PhD candidates" and "PhD students."
2. We focus only on English-speaking Canadian universities, including English-speaking universities in the primarily French-speaking province of Quebec.
3. Improving the quality of data collection about staff and students has been identified as a priority by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (2021). This would remove some of the methodological limitations of this study.
4. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board and the Carleton University Research Ethics Board, with ethics acknowledgments, approvals, or waivers from other relevant universities.
5. This was approved by the Australian National University.
6. A group of Australia's highest-ranking and oldest universities: Universities of New South Wales, Sydney, Melbourne, Queensland, Western Australia, and Adelaide; Monash University; and the Australian National University.
7. A small number of "non-binary/other/prefer not to say" respondents were excluded from the analysis. In the Australian survey, one person (1%) identified as non-binary and four people (5%) preferred not to say. In the Canadian survey, six people (6%) identified as "other" and two people (2%) responded "NA." To protect respondents' privacy, no further information is being reported by these categorizations.
8. Visa conditions require that international candidates study full time.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press