

Council of Ministers of Education, Canada
Postsecondary Expectations Project

Learner Pathways and Transitions

SUMMARY REPORT

January 1999

Introduction

In the spring of 1998, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), initiated a consultation on public expectations of postsecondary education. As part of this consultation, ministers also approved a number of thematic initiatives in postsecondary education to be conducted as well. One of these thematic initiatives was on learner pathways and transitions, a subject that was also the focus of CMEC's Third National Forum on Education, held in St. John's, Newfoundland, in May 1998.

The learner pathways and transitions project was designed to look at four different sets of transitions for learners: first, between secondary and postsecondary education; second, through postsecondary education; third, from postsecondary education to the labour market; and fourth, between educational institutions, particularly those in different educational sectors (e.g., college-to-university, university-to-college). This project addresses the first three sets of transitions; the fourth set of transitions, which has its own specific data requirements, will be the subject of a separate report by the government of New Brunswick.

The purpose of this report is to provide policy makers and other stakeholders with both an overview of the main issues currently facing learners in transition and a list of suggested policy interventions to improve certain aspects of these transitions. In order to provide the best possible advice to policy makers, this report has attempted to tap a wide variety of talented and informed sources from across the country.

The first step in preparing this report was the commission of a background paper on the general topic of learner transitions and of nine separate "challenge" papers on specific topics within the field of learner transitions. The authors of the challenge papers were selected so as to represent a wide variety of views on the postsecondary sector, including students, recent graduates, public servants, academics, and administrators. While the challenge papers cover nine quite different topics, they were not intended to collectively be a fully comprehensive review of the full range of transition issues. Thus, some areas of concern were inevitably left underdiscussed compared to others.

The second step in preparing this report was the organization of three regional multi-stakeholder roundtable meetings to discuss issues in learner transitions, using the background and challenge papers as a starting point for discussion. Participants in these meetings were chosen because of their knowledge and interest in transition issues, with an eye to maintaining a balance among stakeholders (students, recent graduates, teachers, administrators, the business community, and the K-12 sector) and ensuring adequate regional representation.

This report is thus divided into three sections. The first summarizes the challenge papers and their recommendations. The second section describes the outcome of the three roundtable sessions and makes thematic summaries of the common issues that arose. The third section outlines possible avenues for intervention by policy makers in order to improve learner transitions.

The Challenge Papers

1. *The background paper*

The background paper, by Norman Henchey, entitled *Learner Pathways and Transitions*, informed the overall debate on transitions by

- providing a theoretical framework for categorizing policy interventions. The background paper notes the differences between individual, environmental, systemic (that is, related to the nature of the education systems), and institutional factors that pose barriers to access;
- providing a review of available literature on transitions in Canada, including statistical data. This review concludes that we know very little about the nature of transitions, and suggests how data gaps might be filled.

Statistics Canada and the Centre for Education Statistics provided useful assistance by preparing a report entitled *The Evolving Information Base for Learner Pathways and Transitions*. While this document does not contain any new statistical data, it presents a useful overview of new initiatives that are being undertaken in order to fill the current data gaps in the field of learner pathways.

The challenge papers

Nine challenge papers were solicited from contributors with expertise in various areas of postsecondary education. The papers dealt with specific aspects of the three transition points. Authors included students, recent graduates, faculty members, administrators, and government officials.

2.1 *The transition from secondary to postsecondary education*

Three of the challenge papers (those written by Kelly Foley, Tom Collins, and Alex Usher) dealt with various aspects of the initial transition from secondary to postsecondary education.

- Foley argues that student decisions on careers and postsecondary education are taken with insufficient knowledge of career and educational opportunities, and urges better methods for providing secondary students with better and more realistic information on the subject.
- Collins argues that students entering university are lacking in basic literacy skills and that entrance standards have declined over the past twenty-five years. He suggests that secondary schools must improve the teaching of the “fundamentals” and that universities must pay more attention to upgrading skills weaknesses before allowing students to enter into disciplinary studies.

- Usher argues that policy makers should pay more attention to the “net price” of education, and put more emphasis on non-repayable student aid for low-income students. He also argues that a program of US-style conditional “assured access” grants to low-income students in secondary schools may increase the number of such students who go on to postsecondary education.

2.2 *The transition through postsecondary education*

Three of the challenge papers (those written by John Blevins, Janet Donald, and Kelly Lamrock) deal with the transition through postsecondary education and especially issues relating to retention and academic success. A fourth paper, written by Roland Chrisjohn, dealt with issues in transition that are specific to Aboriginal students.

- Blevins presents the perspective of provincial governments on progress through postsecondary programs. He argues that governments need to find ways to reduce the cost of education using new partnerships and new technologies, while at the same time finding ways to make education more responsive and more flexible in order to meet the needs of students and the labour market.
- Donald makes a variety of suggestions as to how academic programs may be structured in such a way as to improve student success. She argues that the most important interventions are those made closest to the student (i.e., at the course/curriculum level rather than institution-wide). These interventions are designed to ensure that students are more aware of the general skills they are acquiring, and that they are provided with a more supportive learning environment in which they can meet the academic and social challenges that they face on the road to adulthood.
- Lamrock argues that institutions must make a more concerted effort to develop the “whole student.” In particular, Lamrock focusses on the need to make sure that students have the necessary time and support to engage in extra-curricular activities that develop many of the “soft” skills, and the need to ensure a close connection between educational programs and the world of work.
- Chrisjohn argues his case on two levels. On the one hand, he suggests that institutions can improve their retention rates of Aboriginal students by introducing a number of social and academic intervention programs. However, he also argues forcefully that for Aboriginals to succeed in postsecondary education, greater efforts must be made to secure Aboriginal control of some postsecondary institutions.

2.3 *The transition from postsecondary education to the labour market*

Two challenge papers, by Graham Lowe and Ken Snowden, examine the final transition from postsecondary education to the labour market.

- Snowden says there is an urgent need for institutions, governments, and other partners to work to improve students' transition to the work force by providing more support to measures such as co-op, work-study, career services, and mentoring programs. Snowden also suggests that institutions need to be more diligent in integrating the teaching of "employability skills" into the broader curriculum.
- Lowe argues that there are many gaps in our understanding of the transition to the labour market, perhaps too many to allow us to say with precision what measures are needed to improve the situation. He suggests that there may be too little data to draw reliable conclusions in this area and therefore makes few prescriptive comments.

The Roundtables

Three Roundtables (bringing together experts and interested parties from various stakeholder sectors) were held across the country to review the discussion papers and provide additional advice on the nature of the challenges of transitions and possible solutions to these challenges. The three roundtables were held in Halifax (November 7), Calgary (November 14), and Toronto (November 21).

There were several cross-cutting themes that emerged from the roundtables.

First, and perhaps most important, was the broad agreement on the nature of the **education-career nexus**. Participants were broadly in agreement that growing up, gaining an education, and learning how to seek and maintain employment were all interrelated. They were also in agreement that these processes should be continuous and interrelated, rather than sequential (e.g., first school, then work). There was a general feeling that students from secondary school onwards need to be more exposed to the world of work in order to gain an understanding of what work is and what different types of work exist. Only through such exposure can they begin to make realistic choices about their careers, and hence about their educational paths.

Second, participants were almost unanimous in agreeing that **crucial decisions affecting the education-career nexus must be taken by students well before they enter postsecondary education**. They also agreed that secondary **students currently receive little or no preparation to take these decisions**: their understanding of educational options is limited at best and their understanding of the world of work is largely confined to their parents' experience and their own experience in the part-time labour market. Increased exposure to and preparation for postsecondary education were seen as crucial for secondary students, as was increased real-life exposure to different types of work and careers. Interestingly, however, most participants did not see co-op or work placements as the best way to give students this type of exposure. Participants seemed to feel that while single work placements may give a student a good sense of how **an** industry or occupation works, it cannot give students the breadth of exposure they need in order to make good career choices. There was also a consensus that students in secondary school had an imperfect understanding of what the different types of postsecondary education had to offer and how each related to the labour market. Again, it was felt that secondary students could benefit from greater exposure to different types of postsecondary education earlier in their educational careers.

Third, there was a widespread perception that **educational costs are a real and rising challenge to a successful secondary-to-postsecondary transition**. However, while cost and student assistance were regularly identified as a key transition concern, the specific concerns varied considerably; some were concerned about high tuition, others about rising student debt, still others about inadequate needs assessment. Participants commented that since 70 per cent of young people now attend some form of postsecondary institution, student assistance has effectively become a universal social program. However, participants also believed that governments do not share this view, and continue to treat

access to postsecondary education as a nuisance issue rather than a major and central piece of Canadian social policy.

Though few people advocated a general reduction in tuition, there was occasional support for making tuition free in the first and second years of postsecondary education (although generally there was a preference to see the cost made conditional on good academic performance). There also seemed to be a general preference for seeing a shift in the balance of aid from loans to grants. Finally, there was some consistent – though not overwhelming – support for the idea of providing conditional grants (also known in the US as “assured access grants”) to low-income secondary students as a means of encouraging higher participation in postsecondary education.

Fourth, there was **concern about the level of academic preparedness for post-secondary education**, and a perception that secondary schools were either unaware of postsecondary standards or simply not teaching to the standards very well. This view was more pronounced among university respondents than among college respondents. There were also some significant regional variations in opinion on this subject. The Toronto roundtable was most vociferous in its complaints about student preparedness at the secondary level. The Calgary and Halifax roundtables noted preparedness as a problem, but were less inclined to put the blame on the secondary system itself and more inclined to note a general difficulty in getting the secondary and postsecondary systems to communicate with one another about standards and expectations.

There were various solutions to the poor communication between authorities in the secondary and postsecondary sectors. The Toronto roundtable made a strong suggestion for the creation of local educational authorities that would be able to bring local representatives of the two sectors together. At the Calgary roundtable, there was a suggestion that governments needed to fund a body that would act as a catalyst to improve transitions and partnerships among many different sectors (the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers was suggested as a model). As to the question of academic preparedness, most participants agreed that the secondary curriculum suffers from a lack of focus, and supported a more standardized and rigorous core curriculum, at least in grades 9 to 11.

Fifth, **the gap in teaching styles and learning environments between the secondary and postsecondary environments** is seen as unnecessarily large, and is a contributing factor to dropouts and stopouts. There was a general consensus that while life and learning exist on a continuum, the sharp division in the education system between secondary and postsecondary imposes some unnecessary and harmful compartmentalizations on those continua. There were two very innovative solutions suggested by roundtable participants. First was a suggestion that teachers of final-year secondary classes and first-year postsecondary classes should occasionally switch places for a year in order to provide faculty from both the secondary and postsecondary domains with a better sense of the nature of the divide in teaching styles. Second was a recommendation that secondary schools should provide a more “postsecondary-like” environment in the final

year of study in order to acclimatize students to the learning environment they will face in postsecondary institutions.

Sixth, there was **near-universal support for improved credit transferability and articulation of college and university programs**. In western Canada this notion was greeted with approval but did not elicit much comment, since such practices are already widespread. In Toronto and Halifax, where credit transfers between university and college systems only exist within certain highly localized arrangements, there were significant levels of frustration with the perceived rigidity of the existing system.

Seventh, **participants believed that retention was an important issue, but were adamant that “dropouts” do not necessarily represent failure**. There was general acknowledgement that institutions have hitherto not done a very good job of preventing student dropouts. However, there was also a sense that in some cases dropouts should be seen as successes rather than failures. The problem with dropouts is that they are always calculated from an institutional, rather than a systemic perspective. A student who drops out of one institution only to reappear and successfully complete a program at another is not a “failure,” though statistically he or she would be described as one. Moreover, in the absence of proper career-education counselling in the secondary system, a large number of students will likely have to do some “searching” before finding the proper institutional “fit,” and many institutions feel it unfair to blame them for this fact of student life. In addition, a number of participants (mainly from the college sector) noted that increasing numbers of students were dropping out halfway through their programs either because they had obtained jobs, or because they obtained whatever skills they needed prior to finishing the program. Many felt that this form of dropout, far from being a failure, was in fact evidence of success.

In short, many participants were uncomfortable with the notion of relying too heavily on crude measures of “dropouts” to determine success. While institutions noted many strategies they could themselves pursue to reduce the dropout rate, several participants suggested that government could play a useful role by introducing some sort of tracking system that would allow better monitoring of students’ movements from institution to institution.

Eighth, with respect to improving retention, **there was wide support for altering existing curricula to give greater centrality to student development**. There was a feeling that arts and social science programs in universities in particular do not do a very good job of explaining the relevance of their programs to students, and that many programs suffer from being too focussed on the preferences of faculty rather than the needs of students. Many also said that academic and social support mechanisms need to be more integrated into the curriculum.

However, while most participants were of the view that while these measures need to be taken, few believed it was an appropriate area of action for governments. There was some support for providing financial incentives for institutions that showed leadership and innovation in this area, but generally speaking participants felt that this was an area where

institutions must take the initiative. Government intervention in these matters would, according to most participants, amount to unwelcome micro-management.

Ninth, with respect to labour market transitions, participants believed that **more attention needed to be paid to helping students with their job-searching abilities**. Participants firmly believed that all students graduate with skills that make them employable. However, there was also a sense that they did not always have the skills to *find* work after graduation. The problem was described in three different ways. First, students often do not know what skill sets they possess and therefore cannot explain them to employers. Second, students – especially those in arts and sciences – do not always know the wide range of careers their skills might allow them to pursue, and so the range of students’ job searches is often unnecessarily limited. Third, students’ job searches seem geared towards large employers rather than small business or self-employment and entrepreneurship, which again limits their range of job possibilities.

Participants suggested several solutions to these problems. First, institutions need to do a better job of developing students’ “soft” skills and to take more time to explain to students what skills they are learning and how they might be employed in the work place. Second, ways should be found to encourage entrepreneurship in students, perhaps by establishing centres of entrepreneurship in each institution, each with a mandate to encourage the development of entrepreneurial skills and spirit throughout the institution. Government was seen as a possible catalyst for this intervention. Third, attempts should be made to make students more aware of the opportunities available in the small business sector. This was also seen as an area for possible government intervention, because small businesses on their own are not able to devote the resources necessary to recruit on campuses.

Tenth, there was a feeling that **employers need to do a better job articulating their human resource needs**. One participant noted that employers frequently are of two or even three minds on the issue of employee skills. While CEOs may praise “soft” skills, the companies’ human resource professionals – who have more operational control over hiring – may have different views on the necessary balance between “soft” and “hard” skills. Companies’ actual recruiting agents may have yet another view (likely more geared to specific “hard” skills) on the matter, thus further complicating the picture. Moreover, many educators believe that some employers have unrealistically high expectations of graduates.

Lastly, there was some unease among participants about the relationship (and potential contradictions) between a “transitions” agenda and a “lifelong learning” agenda. While participants were sensitive to the desire of governments and others to promote “learning efficiencies,” there was a perception that this agenda might not amount to much more than pushing students to get in and out of postsecondary institutions as quickly as possible. Many felt that this was inconsistent with the need to promote lifelong learning (which implies multiple short stays in education throughout one’s life) and with the realities of student life and the labour market. For instance, is it wrong for students to delay graduation from university or college by working part-time or even full-time while studying, thus lowering their need to borrow, and increasing their labour market

experience? In short, while there was much support for removing transition-related barriers to successful completion of programs, participants seemed to feel that too strong a focus on reducing times-to-completion might cause more harm than good.

Possible Actions

Introduction

This section combines the recommendations of the challenge papers with the feedback of the discussion groups to create a kind of “toolkit” for public policy makers and educators interested in improving student transitions.

It should be noted that participants in all three roundtables believed that the first set of transitions – that is, from secondary to postsecondary education – was the most crucial. If this set of transitions does not go well for students, then it is unlikely that the other two will go well either. Participants were also of the belief that much of the work in this area must be done long before students arrive at postsecondary institutions.

The transition from secondary to postsecondary education

The first obvious place for action is in **creating a greater alignment between secondary and postsecondary educational institutions**. This would address two key concerns expressed at the roundtables and in the challenge papers, namely academic standards of first-year postsecondary students, and the difficult gap in required learning styles at the secondary and postsecondary levels.

There are different ways of creating this kind of communication. One suggestion was to create “local education authorities,” made up of local (or in smaller provinces, provincial) college and university presidents, high school principals, and school board members. Ideally, such a body would also have representation from the business sector and the broader community, in order to allow it to address the work-related aspects of transitions, as well as represent the societal investment in education and young people.

The goal of such a partnership would be to break down the (largely artificial) barriers between different education sectors. Ten years ago in the United States, the American Association for Higher Education created the Education Trust, a non-profit group devoted to improving academic standards at all levels of education. This group, which among other things promotes academic partnerships between high schools, colleges, and communities, has a motto worth following – “College Begins in Kindergarten.” The Education Trust’s mission of supporting local initiatives to raise academic standards is indeed one possible working model for some kind of local authority.

The second place for action is providing secondary students with **better information on the career-education nexus**. This subject area, dealt with in detail in the challenge paper by Kelly Foley, was unanimously endorsed as an action priority by roundtable participants.

A successful initiative on this front would concentrate on giving three kinds of information to secondary school students and their parents. First, it would provide information about

different kinds of careers and career planning. Second, it would provide information on how different types of education can lead to different kinds of careers, and how students should structure their high school course load to meet their goals. Third, it would provide detailed information on different types of educational opportunities, free of at least some of the bias that exists in the institutional promotional material that now forms students' only source of information about universities and colleges. This type of information should be given to students on a recurrent basis from grade 8 or 9 onwards.

An excellent example of this type of program is the Indiana Career and Postsecondary Advancement Centre (ICPAC). ICPAC provides all 8th grade students with four newsletters a year on careers and education, provides a major career-education guide and career self-assessment test to all 9th and 11th graders, and distributes one of its sixty free publications every two weeks to all 11th and 12th graders. It is also linked to the state's "Twenty-First Century Scholars" program, which is a form of "assured access grant" (see below). This conjunction of student aid and student information appears to have been remarkably effective in encouraging higher postsecondary participation rates in the state of Indiana.

The third action area is student assistance. As government finances permit, **the balance of aid provided in grants and loans should be shifted towards grants**, thus reversing the dominant funding trend this decade. There is also some support for **experimenting with "assured access grants."** These grants offer academically successful low-income secondary students with financial support for postsecondary education. In Indiana for instance (one of over half a dozen US states with such programs), the Twenty-First Century Scholars program offers free tuition at in-state colleges to students who maintain a B average or better through high school and who qualify for the national school lunch program. The program is intended to send a message to low-income students who might not have ambitions for later study that the state is interested in their well-being and will help them succeed provided they make a significant academic effort on their own. Approximately 11 per cent of Indiana ninth-graders currently are enrolled in the program.

The transition through postsecondary education

Participants identified three action areas in improving students' progress through postsecondary education.

The first – and most unambiguous – recommendation is for **improved credit transfer arrangements**, especially between the university and college sectors. In the Toronto and Halifax roundtables, there was great frustration at the inability of students to move freely between institutions.

The second area for action is that **institutions must improve the learning environment for students**, in particular by providing more assistance for the individual learner and clarifying learning outcomes for the learner. In particular, institutions were seen as being too wedded to the single lecturer model – the oldest teaching technique in the world – which was seen as inadequate to help a diverse group of students with varied learning

styles and strategies acquire the numerous “hard” and “soft” skills necessary to function in modern society. A need was also identified for institutions to find ways of helping students to combine school and work and to provide an improved extracurricular atmosphere in order to better develop the “whole student.” Governments were seen as having a secondary role in this sphere; they should provide encouragement and perhaps some financial support to institutions that demonstrate excellence in this area.

The third action area is for more attention to **monitoring and tracking students as they progress through and out of postsecondary education**. Institutions said they were simply unable to discover what happened to their students when they left the institution in mid-program. Understanding where dropouts go – whether to the labour market, to a similar program at another institution, to a different program at a different institution – is crucial to understanding the nature of attrition at postsecondary institutions. Government investment in a common student tracking system, it was suggested, would give institutions an excellent tool for addressing attrition.

The transition from postsecondary education to the labour market

The major action area is to **improve students’ job-searching abilities and prospects**. In part, this is a curriculum issue for institutions. Students need to be clearer about what skills they are learning and about the range of career options open to them once they possess these skills. In part, however, it is an issue of improving collaborations between business, institutions, and governments to assist students in their job-hunting skills. Most participants saw **improving career employment offices** on campus and **improving the quality and quantity of mentoring opportunities available to students** as the highest priorities. However, these programs require a good deal of community participation in order to function effectively. Though the responsibility for this ultimately lies with institutions, governments could still play a catalyst role in bringing greater community and business involvement in the lives of young people. A special role was also noted for promoting entrepreneurship among students and in encouraging matches between graduates and small businesses (small business often being a sector unknown to students and unable on its own to recruit new graduates owing to time and resource constraints).

The role of partnerships

Underlying many of the priority action areas is a need for **greater cooperation and partnership between institutions, governments, business, and the community**. There are currently very few standing bodies in which these groups can meet to discuss both their expectations of one another and how better use of their common resources can improve the lot of all. In the secondary-postsecondary transition, for instance, greater cooperation across education sectors and the participation of business and the community are necessary to provide students with the knowledge they need to make informed educational and career choices. In the case of credit transfers, governments must join with universities and colleges in order to ensure greater learner flexibility. In the postsecondary to labour market transitions, greater communication is needed between institutions and

business in order to improve the ability of students to learn about the labour market and find good jobs after graduation.

One possible action that governments could take in this area is to set up arms-length bodies (along the lines of the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers) to deal simply with problems of transitions, with representation from the various sectors that have some responsibility for or interest in transitions. These bodies could also play a continuing role in monitoring transitions issues, thereby acting as a kind of “early-warning system” should significant transition problems arise.

Follow-up and Next Steps

Recommendation #1 – Interested jurisdictions should create their own roundtable processes to discuss transition issues, especially the transition from the secondary to postsecondary level.

One of the remarkable things about the roundtable process that was used in the preparation of this report was the extremely positive reaction it had from participants themselves. At the end of each session, organizers solicited feedback from participants, who virtually unanimously said that they found the experience a positive one. Many said they had never had a chance to discuss these issues outside of their own institutions before, and most said that the multi-stakeholder format allowed them to significantly broaden their perspective on the issue by hearing other stakeholders' points of view. All said they would be prepared to participate in more such meetings. We believe that this demonstrates a tremendous amount of interest and good will among stakeholders on this issue, and governments could benefit from their knowledge and expertise by convening similar groups to work on transition issues specific to their jurisdiction.

At the outset of the discussions, it was not clear that the secondary-to-postsecondary transitions would be viewed overwhelmingly as the most important of the three sets of transitions. Had this been known in advance, greater effort would have been made to ensure a stronger presence from the K-12 sector in each of the roundtables. As it was, the discussions may have suffered from a lack of input from this vital stakeholder sector. Jurisdictions interested in creating their own roundtable process may wish to benefit from our experience in this matter.

Should jurisdictions choose to implement this recommendation, it would be in their mutual interest to also create a mechanism for feedback. Jurisdictions may wish to commit themselves to consulting on this issue for a period of 12 months, and then return to CMEC to share the insights and examples of best practices in transitions in each jurisdiction.

Recommendation #2 – Further work on the secondary-to-postsecondary transition could be incorporated into future work on accessibility.

Fundamentally, the issues raised by the challenge papers and roundtables and by roundtable participants on the transition from secondary to postsecondary education are issues of accessibility. They relate to young people's *desire* to attend postsecondary education, their level of *academic preparedness* for postsecondary education, and the *affordability* of postsecondary education. Should ministers choose to follow the advice of the roundtables and target this particular set of issues on a priority basis, it may well be able to do so by incorporating these themes into the upcoming thematic initiative on accessibility.