

Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

*Postsecondary Education Project  
Learner Pathways and Transitions*

**THE EVOLVING INFORMATION BASE  
FOR LEARNER PATHWAYS AND TRANSITIONS**

A Background Paper prepared for the  
Postsecondary Education Expectations Project by

Statistics Canada

*The opinions expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Council of Ministers of Education,  
Canada*

## **The Centre for Education Statistics**

The Centre for Education Statistics at Statistics Canada conducts annually a comprehensive program of pan-Canadian education statistics and analysis in order to inform debates on educational policy and program management, and to ensure that accurate and relevant information concerning education is available to the Canadian public and to other educational stakeholders.

Since the mid-1970's, part of the Centre's program each year has been devoted to collecting information about student transitions and learner pathways through the education system. Early investigations concentrated on the transition from the completion of postsecondary education into the labour force. However, as the demand increased for more information related to other transitions and to educational pathways, additional work was undertaken to add these dimensions to the program. At present, the Centre provides information on the transition from secondary school to postsecondary level education; the flow of students through different programs at the same institution; the flow of students between different types of institutions: trade, college, university; the flow between full-time and part-time studies; and the geographical movement of students between jurisdictions; all in addition to transitions into the labour force and back again to school. More recently, the increase in alternative forms of education, such as: distance education through the Internet, specialized private business colleges and trade schools, companies combining the marketing of products with associated education support packages, have added new dimensions to data collection pertaining to transitions and learner pathways and methodologies to address these data gaps are being considered at this time.

Much of the Centre's work on transitions and learner pathways has been, and continues to be, funded by other federal departments, principally Human Resources Development Canada. In this brief introduction to the Centre's program, it has been divided into the efforts devoted to 1. transitions from postsecondary education to the labour force, 2. transitions from high school to postsecondary education, and 3. student flows (pathways) through postsecondary education considering program selection, geographic mobility, mobility between types of institutions, and changing status with respect to intensity of study. For each area, a brief description of past activities and their objectives is provided followed by a description of additional information needs that have been identified by the Centre in consultations with stakeholders and, finally, a description of the Centre's plans to address these data gaps.

### **1. Transition: Postsecondary Education to the Labour Force**

Graduate follow-up surveys were conducted by the Centre as early as 1976 although the earliest iterations of such surveys were only conducted for one or two provinces. The first national survey (NGS) interviewed 1982 graduates two years and five years after their graduation (1984 and 1987). Subsequent cohorts of graduates were chosen in 1986, 1990 and 1995, all of whom were surveyed or will be surveyed with the same elapsed time of two years and five years. The principal objective of these surveys was to explore the relationship between

education program and the resulting labour market outcome but they included many sub-objectives, such as: exploring problems encountered in the transition; determining satisfaction with education program; and investigating determinants of education program selection.

Recent consultations revealed a greater demand for information on transitions than is currently being met by the graduate follow-up surveys. This demand has led to a number of jurisdictions conducting their own graduate surveys on a more frequent basis, often with larger sample sizes for the institutions involved, and with tailoring of the survey content to the particular needs of the jurisdiction. Concerns about duplication of efforts in this area were noted as were concerns about the loss of data utility due to lack of comparability. At the same time, the focus of current surveys solely on graduates was felt to be a limitation, with the surveys providing no information on the significant numbers of students leaving their program prior to completion. A great deal of concern was also expressed about the so called "brain drain" phenomenon, not only with respect to its magnitude and concentration in particular fields of study, but on factors underlying the decision to leave the country.

The need for more information concerning the skills required by employers and the roles of both employers and the education system in skills development was also noted.

To address these information needs, a new Postsecondary Transition Survey has been proposed to replace the NGS (commencing with a survey in 2001 of 1999 graduates and leavers). Features of the new survey would include: increased frequency with a new cohort every two instead of every four or five years; inclusion, in addition to graduates, of those leaving their program prior to completion; the follow-up and interview of students who leave the country; and improved flexibility for institutions and/or jurisdictions to fund sample size augmentations in order to obtain institutional/program specific estimates and flexibility for content additions to respond to particular needs of jurisdictions.

To gain a fuller appreciation of the relationship between education and the labour market, demand side information from employers is needed to complement the supply side information on skills being developed by the education system. Information on the number and qualifications of recent hirings, on the skill sets of those individuals and the remuneration they are receiving, is necessary for a more complete understanding of labour force demand and is planned for inclusion in a Life-skills Survey (not scheduled as yet). In addition, the need was stressed for more clarity concerning responsibility for developing different skill sets. Industry may be better placed to provide certain skills through on-the-job training where others are more suited to development within the education system. The Centre proposes to obtain information from employers on how they feel the division of skill training should be organized.

## **2. Transition: High School Students to Postsecondary Education Programs**

Other than documenting the number of students annually who continue their studies in a postsecondary program immediately following high school completion, work on exploring facets of this important transition phase for young adults did not get underway until the early 1990's and then it was concentrated on those leaving the education system.

A 1991 survey initially interviewed 10,000 young people aged 18 to 20 to document their characteristics and the circumstances of school leavers. Four years later, the 1995 School Leavers Follow-up Survey re-interviewed about two-thirds of the same respondents, by then aged 22 to 24. This survey was designed to examine transitions not as a one-way movement from school into the world of work but as a variety of movements that can occur between education, training and the labour market.

Recent consultation again revealed a demand for outcome information on youths - both high school graduates and school leavers. The need was expressed for information on: educational and labour market pathways and factors influencing those pathways, including the completion or non-completion of high school, interruptions and subsequent return to studies, participation and non-participation in postsecondary education; the contribution of schooling, work experience programs, part-time jobs, and volunteer activities to skill development and transition to the labour market; and attitudes, behaviour and skills required of young people entering the labour market.

To address these information needs a Youth in Transition Survey has been proposed and is under development (initial surveying to commence in 1999). It will be a longitudinal survey designed to follow a sample of youths over a period of years to gain insights on the factors which determine their success, or lack of success, in the labour market and society at large. Plans are for data to be collected every two years, starting with samples of two cohorts of youths aged 14-15 and 18-20. This initiative would build on previous ad hoc experiences with the 1990 School Leavers Survey and the 1995 follow-up survey.

### **3. Postsecondary Student Flows**

Individual student record systems have been maintained by the Centre since 1971 for individuals studying at Canadian universities and since 1980 and 1990 respectively for those studying at colleges and trade schools. These systems provide a cross-sectional view of enrolments each year and, along with demographic information, they contain data elements which identify program of study and prior educational experience. The latter was included to identify whether students had studied at other types of postsecondary institutions or other similar institutions, either in the same province or outside the current province. In the early years, no attempt was made to link these annual records in a longitudinal database but recent attempts have been made to do this with limited success.

The recent consultations pointed to the need to improve the utility of the student record systems to provide more comprehensive information on education pathways and outcomes.

To achieve this, the Centre plans to create a longitudinally linked database of student information that will track students movements between institutions and across jurisdictions, in order to provide the specified information on educational pathways, such as: geographic mobility, institutional and program mobility, retention and completion rates (pilot surveys are being completed in 1998). In addition the resultant database will provide frames for sample surveys of student transitions, avoiding current costs of separate frame construction, while more efficiently targeting groups of most interest, and allowing the development of flexible hybrid data exploiting the comparative strengths of both administrative and sample survey data.

In addition, it has been proposed that a survey be developed to obtain information on students studying in programs provided by relatively new, non-traditional providers (company schools providing education to non-employees/clients, cyber schools outside Canada) that have never been included in the regular enrolment surveys (1999). Objectives would be to show the incidence of training occurring outside the regular public education system and to monitor the degree to which individuals are choosing different pathways to obtain a basic education or to upgrade their skills and knowledge. In addition, the information will be used to profile participants, to describe over-all participation of the population in these activities, to describe the variety and changing structures of programs offered through these activities, to determine accreditation practices and funding sources and to provide information so that participants can be included in sample surveys that monitor youth transitions to and from the labour force and to other types of education.

#### **4. Cost of Education**

Through the 1980's and 90's the relative share of university and college revenue made up of government grants and student fees has shifted markedly. A similar trend has occurred with government loan and grant programs. More recently provincial governments have announced deregulation of tuition fees. In combination these changes have and will continue to impact the cost of education to students. Indeed, significant increases in student borrowing and resulting debt-load have been the subject of public discussion. The National Graduate Survey has provided to date information on student borrowing through the Canada Student Loan Programs as well as information on repayment and repayment difficulties. The most recent survey of 1995 graduates will provide information on borrowing from all sources. With the introduction of the Postsecondary Transition Survey borrowing and repayment information will be available for both graduates and non-graduates. This information should contribute to a better understanding of the impact of increased cost to students.