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POSTSECONDARY LEARNER TRANSITIONS AND PATHWAYS

Challenge Paper Prepared by

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In an era of economic globalization that places a premium on knowledge, Canada should be a leader. Indeed, we possess many ingredients of a knowledge-based economy. Canada has the highest post-secondary enrolments of any OECD nation. By the mid-1990s, over four in ten adults (25 - 64 years old) had achieved a post-secondary credential. Compared to many other nations, we have a flexible and open post-secondary system that, in principle, is accessible to any group regardless of age or socio-economic status. And despite the economic turbulence of the 1990s, recent post-secondary graduates have faired relatively well in a competitive job market.

However, this positive image masks other trends within the post-secondary system and among its graduates that, if unchecked, could have negative social and economic consequences. Five issues stand out as posing public policy challenges that demand informed responses:

- developing a more comprehensive perspective on post-graduation transitions and outcomes;
- addressing the negative consequences of rising post-secondary education costs;
- removing barriers to life-long learning;
- encouraging post-secondary institutions to respond effectively to growing demands for 'employability skills'; and
- addressing the underemployment problem among graduates.

A Comprehensive View of Transitions and Outcomes

The key question is whether youth are able to launch over time fulfilling and productive lives as workers, citizens and parents. This requires a more holistic view of transitions from post-secondary education than the present limited focus on labour market outcomes. Researchers studying graduates' transitions increasingly use a "life-course" perspective, which shows how decisions about work, further education and training, living arrangements, family formation, and personal development are linked.

Since the early 1980s, transitions from school to work have become more prolonged, risky and non-linear. We need to think in terms of multiple and sequential transitions, given that more individuals are making several transitions between post-secondary programs and the labour market. In this regard, it is important to note the age variations in the graduating classes from different post-secondary institutions. In 1990, almost 2 in 5 trade and vocational program grads were age 30 or older, compared with about 1 in 4 university grads and 1 in 6 college grads. Future demographic trends suggest that the over-25 age group will become even more important as a source of post-secondary recruitment. These older students face quite different constraints and challenges from their younger counterparts, both in terms of accessing programs and in post-graduation labour market transitions. The labour market success of older graduates partly depends on how effectively their programs built on previous work experiences, a resource younger graduates lack.

To capture the full diversity and complexity of post-secondary transitions, it also is crucial to track students' movements more systematically. We know very little about what happens to students who leave a program prior to completion. This is the gray zone of post-secondary education. Knowing the reasons for not completing, tracking over the long-term whether non-completers in one institution complete a program elsewhere, and documenting the benefits of partially completed programs for individuals would be useful for institutional evaluation and planning. Similarly, the benefits of investing in post-secondary education vary substantially by field of study as well as (and in combination with) a graduate's region of residence and socio-demographic characteristics. Women, aboriginal persons, and persons with disabilities continue to face disadvantages in the labour market. Equity and efficiency would be well served if we had a more complete understanding of the barriers these groups face.

Cost and Accessibility

The rising cost of post-secondary education has generated much public concern. This problem is most visible in the rising debt loads that encumber growing numbers of graduates (for example, 57% of 1994 graduates from Alberta's four universities had student loans and other education-related debts, which averaged $15,293). Nationally, average university tuition has almost doubled since 1989. Students, university administrators and experts are calling for an overhaul of the entire post-secondary student loan system, but there is no consensus on the ideal replacement. So we risk pushing post-secondary education beyond the reach of a growing number of young people from families of average or below-average financial means, as well as adults seeking further education.

The affordability crisis has other consequences for graduates' transitions. Most notable is prolonged dependence on parents, as rising numbers of students live at home to cut costs. This option is not available for young people who live in communities that do not have local post-secondary institutions, thereby creating another barrier to access. Living with one's parents - the so-called 'cluttered nest' phenomenon - is economical, but it delays the transition to adult independence, marriage or co-habitation, and raising a family. More generally, we know little about how education-related debt influences postgraduation decisions about work, further education and personal life.

Life-Long Learning

According to public opinions polls, Canadians have a strong "education ethic", viewing training and education as the best insurance in an uncertain job market. Life-long learning could become a national objective, but we need a clear and measurable definition of exactly what it means. According to the 1995 National Graduate Survey (NGS), more than 1 in 3 university graduates and 1 in 4 college graduates in 1990 obtained another post-secondary credential. An important motivation for this further

study is career advancement. The public policy challenge is to ensure easy and equitable access to such opportunities. This will require concerted joint efforts by post-secondary institutions, employers and governments. Graduates often leave the system for a short period and then return. Most returning adults prefer part-time studies, so why have part-time post-secondary enrolments been declining since 1991/92? How can this trend be reversed, assuming that expanding opportunities for part-time post-secondary study is viewed as a centrepiece of a learning society?

In general terms, life-long learning implies that post-secondary programs and their graduates keep one step ahead of the dramatic transformations in work. To cope with relentless and often unpredictable workplace change, students require a solid base of general analytic, communications, reasoning and personal learning skills (this list is by no means exhaustive). Most vocational training is not designed to provide this. However, if there is a shortage of say computer technicians, then learning institutions and the affected industries should collaborate to design programs to quickly meet such needs. Yet anticipating specific skill shortages has been notoriously difficult. What's more, the best trained computer technician also will need a 'tool kit' of basic knowledge, skills and abilities to take advantage of new opportunities.

Employability Skills

The Conference Board of Canada's 'employability skills profile' has framed the debate about relevant job skills, despite its generality and lack of measurable outcomes. On one hand, employability skills are determined by the context in which they are applied. So perhaps each post-secondary program needs its own definition of employability skills and regular assessments of how it contributes to their development. What enhances a welding apprentice's employability is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the employability contributions of an electrical engineering degree program. On the other hand, more effort must be directed to developing reliable and valid national measures of higher-level skills that are common to all college, vocational institute, or university programs. This would establish a basic framework that specific institutions could customize to meet their unique goals and students' needs.

Programs that are not organized around a specific trade or profession (such as many Arts and Science disciplines) need to show students and prospective employers how subject area knowledge and academic skills and abilities (e.g., communications, analytical and critical thinking, information management, ethical awareness, group skills, etc.) are transferable to a wide range of practical settings - without diluting the program's academic rigour and integrity. Furthermore, it is important to recognize how a post-secondary education enriches the lives of individual graduates and their communities. So far, graduate follow-up surveys have not adequately documented the personal and social contributions of programs.

In fact, assessments of program success have revolved around a small set of labour market outcomes. So it is worth illustrating the need for a wider range of employment

outcome measures designed to assist institutions to improve their programs. One would expect that with declining job opportunities in large organizations, more graduates would be setting their sights on self-employment. However, those who envision a new entrepreneurial culture among youth will be disappointed to learn that self-employment is concentrated among older males. Preliminary 1997 NGS data suggest that less than 7% of 1995 university graduates were self-employed two years after graduating compared to a labour force average of 17%. This is hardly surprising, given the experience, financial resources, business networks, and skills required for successful self-employment. While institutions could do more to provide opportunities for those who are interested to learn the ropes of self-employment, clearly most graduates spend their early careers as employees. More useful, then, would be for post-secondary institutions to inform students about the full range of work options and their advantages and disadvantages. In short, the self-employment rate is neither a mark of success or failure, but rather useful feedback that can help institutions to fine-tune student services.

Underemployment

A sure sign of a knowledge-based, high-skill economy is how well employers recruit and utilize recent graduates, providing opportunities for continual skill and knowledge development. Regardless of how well colleges and universities fulfill their mandate to provide high quality education, the organization of work and prevailing people management practices within firms prevent optimal skill utilization.

Post-secondary graduates' low unemployment and high employment rates - at least in comparison with the labour force as a whole and, in particular, with lesser-educated young people - are often taken as signs that the system is performing well. After several years in the labour market, a large majority of these graduates find their way into full-time and permanent jobs. However, a full-time job does not necessarily make full use of one's education. The 1997 Alberta Graduate Survey of 1994 university graduates in the province found that graduates were doing quite well, having experienced a fairly smooth transition into the labour force. Yet among employed graduates (excluding those who still were students), about two-thirds were in jobs requiring a university degree, and one-quarter reported feeling overqualified for their job given their education, training and experience. Nor was there extensive use of higher-level skills, such as communications, information management, creative thinking and problem solving. Other follow-up surveys of post-secondary graduates, including the NGS, document similar underemployment problems.

These are signs of underutilized human resources that negatively affect economic productivity and diminish graduates' quality of working life. Clearly, employers must assume some responsibility for ensuring the effective integration of each new class of graduates. As a start, post-secondary institutions could educate employers about the range of their graduates' employability skills and collaborate in the design of skill-intensive entry-level jobs.

Conclusion

Five key issues - defining and measuring transitions, cost and accessibility, life-long learning, employability skills, and underemployment - provide an outline for a wide-ranging debate about post-secondary policy objectives and priorities. But this debate would be incomplete if it did not take into account public concerns about the youth jobs crisis. Given that college and university graduates have been getting most of the good jobs opening up in the 1990s (graduates from trade and vocational programs less so), young people with high school or less have been the big losers. In this respect, post-secondary education is contributing to the widening gap between haves and have-nots. Six in ten youth in the labour market have high school or less and their job prospects have worsened over the past two decades. Although the high school drop out problem is not as serious as once thought, approximately 7% of the youth population today is neither in school nor in a job. The needs of these marginalized youth require urgent attention, for they risk being excluded from mainstream social and economic life. So is it more equitable and efficient to spend additional tax dollars to smooth the transition of college and university graduates into good jobs, or to help lesser-educated and marginalized youth improve their job-related education and life skills? What are the implications of not addressing the needs of these distinct groups? Thus it is important to keep this bigger picture in view so that the costs and benefits of all policy interventions can be weighted. A complex equation to be sure, but one that any comprehensive public policy debate must carefully consider.