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Canada's Young Drop-outs – What Needs to be Done

Ottawa – Canada is failing its young high school drop-outs compared to many other countries.

More than one in ten young Canadians between the ages of 20 and 24 have dropped out of high school and are not pursuing further education. Work, if they can get it, is low paid with little opportunity for training and advancement. They are more likely to be unemployed or under-employed. And their disadvantage is persistent. Their only prospect is more of the same.

So concludes a new study from Canadian Policy Research Networks that places Canada's young adults with low levels of education (YALLE) in an international comparative context.

Without a Paddle: What to do About Canada's Young Drop-outs, by Patrice de Broucker, Senior Researcher with CPRN's Work Network, examines the YALLE labour market experience in Canada and other countries and identifies appropriate policy responses. His analysis draws on data from labour force surveys in 25 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries.

“Our failure to help these young citizens overcome the handicap of inadequate education is tragic in its consequences, for them, their future families and for our society,” de Broucker says.

While the disadvantages facing members of the YALLE group are felt in all areas of life, de Broucker focuses primarily on those affecting job prospects, reasoning that a good job is critical to well-being.

Among his other Canadian findings:

- The employment rate for the YALLE group is 22 percentage points lower than for those with a high school or vocational school diploma, and 28 points lower than for those with a college or university diploma.
- Young men make up 61% of the YALLE group.
- 43% of the young women in the YALLE group are not in the labour force.
- Job experience does little to compensate for lack of education.
- Jobs found by the YALLE group are mostly unskilled.
- In Canada, unlike many other countries, getting a high school diploma does not improve chances of finding a skilled job.

A statistical supplement accompanying the report provides the first provincial and regional break-outs of data on the YALLE group in Canada. These tables show significant regional variations that raise interesting questions for further analysis.

“An individual's job prospects depend on a combination of their personal attributes and the characteristics of the job market,” says de Broucker. “So, we seek solutions in education policies on the one hand, and in labour market policies on the other.”

On the education policy side, de Broucker recommends:

- extending the age of compulsory school attendance;
- creating vocational options in the high school curriculum to increase the employment benefits of a high school diploma;
- improving counselling to overcome ignorance of labour market realities.

On the labour market side, he recommends that:

- employers make the educational requirements of their entry-level jobs explicit, and emphasize the importance of education to advancement;
- Canada should emulate those countries that provide on-the-job training in the workplace for workers with low levels of education;
- all actors send a coherent signal about the value of education to the future well-being of young workers and to society at large.

de Broucker also draws attention to the equity dimensions of the YALLE challenge. The differing needs of young men and women in the YALLE group need to be taken into account, as do the particular needs of immigrants and other vulnerable groups like Aboriginals.

“I would underline that all the above policy elements work best when they work together,” says de Broucker.

Extending the age of compulsory schooling, for example, won’t accomplish much if it isn’t combined with new curriculum elements that prepare students for the labour market on graduation, and that give them a reason to stay in school.

“There are roles here for governments, for employers, for schools and families,” de Broucker concludes. “All have to collaborate, if we are to equip these young people to live fulfilling lives in the workplace and in society at large.”

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CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

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