

Pathways of Alberta Youth through the Post-secondary System into the Labour Market, 1996-2003

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Executive Summary

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1. Pathways for Youth to the Labour Market

- The CPRN “*Pathways*” research project is designed to profile the range of school-to-work transition (SWT) pathways taken by Canadian youth and to identify factors associated with more successful transitions into rewarding employment.
- This study describes pathways through the PSE system into the labour market taken by Alberta’s high school graduating “class of 1996” during the seven years following its exit from high school. Several caveats about the study’s generalizeability are required.
 - Alberta’s population (younger and somewhat more educated), labour market (stronger, and heavily energy-focused), and PSE system (arguably more extensive and integrated) are somewhat unique, so generalizations to other provinces are probably not appropriate. Even so, during the 1996-2003 period covered by this study, the Alberta economy was not as over-heated as it is today (in 2006).
 - By 2003, when study participants were about 25 years of age, a sizeable minority had not yet left the PSE system and many had only a few years of adult labour market experience. Hence, the long-term impacts of PSE investments were not yet apparent.

2. Alberta’s Post-secondary Educational System

- Alberta took an early lead in opening pathways between different types of PSE institutions and in situating colleges in smaller communities.
- Given its natural resource-focused economy, Alberta also has pursued an agenda of skills training, most noticeably via its apprenticeship programs, including youth apprenticeships.
- During the 1996-2003 period covered by this study, Alberta had four universities, four privately-funded university colleges that could award baccalaureate degrees, more than a dozen publicly-funded colleges that offered diploma courses (some also offered transferable university credit courses), and two large technical institutes.

3. The 1996-2003 Longitudinal Study of Alberta High School Graduates

- This report presents findings from a seven-year longitudinal study of the Alberta high school graduating “class of 1996.” Baseline data were collected in 1996 via self-administered questionnaires from 2,681 Grade 12 students in 58 high schools across the province. In 2003, when they were about 25 years old, 1,218 of these individuals were interviewed by telephone.

4. Post-secondary Educational Experiences (1996-2003)

- A very high proportion of respondents (88 percent) had enrolled in a post-secondary program at some point between 1996 and 2003. Sixty percent had acquired at least one PSE credential. One in three (32 percent) had obtained a university degree, 15 percent had acquired a community college diploma, and 15 percent had obtained a technical school diploma. Only 4 percent had completed an apprenticeship program.
 - Young women were more likely to have chosen university or a community college, while young men were over-represented in technical schools and apprenticeships.
 - Youth living in large cities were more likely to have attended university.
 - Youth from more advantaged families (where at least one parent had a university degree) were much more likely to have received a university degree themselves.
 - Immigrant and visible minority youth were also more likely to have acquired a PSE credential. Aboriginal youth were severely under-represented among PSE graduates.

5. Non-Linear Post-secondary Pathways

- A large minority of study participants had deviated from a traditional “straight out of high school, into, and through college / university” educational path.
 - One-quarter (23 percent) had returned for a second year of Grade 12 in the fall of 1996.
 - Nineteen percent of PSE participants had transferred between institutions while completing a program. Over half of these transfers (56 percent) involved students moving from a community college that offered the first several years of a baccalaureate program into a university providing the finishing upper-year courses.
 - Fourteen percent of PSE participants had completely discontinued (i.e., dropped out of) a program of study, 20 percent had changed a program, and 5 percent had done both.

6. Employment Outcomes by Age 25

- When interviewed in 2003, 71 percent of study participants were employed in a single job, 14 percent were holding more than one job, 6 percent were unemployed, and 9 percent were out of the labour force.
- Most of the employed (63 percent), but particularly those with PSE credentials (70 percent or more), were working in managerial, professional, or skilled occupations.
- Part-time employment (12 percent) and self-employment (7 percent) were relatively uncommon, although one in six respondents (17 percent) were employed in temporary jobs.
- The median (gross) monthly income for all employed respondents was \$2,500 which translates into \$30,000 per year.
 - Study participants with university and also trades / technical credentials earned considerably more than those without any PSE credentials, other things being equal. College credentials did not transfer into noticeably higher incomes.

- Women were earning, on average, only two-thirds of what men were earning. Even after statistically controlling on hours of work, type of PSE credential, and other factors, a large gender income gap remained.
- Just over half of employed study participants had received at least one promotion in their present job. About two-thirds reported receiving paid vacations along with medical and dental coverage, and almost as many could take paid maternity or paternity leave.

7. Schooling and Skills

- Study participants were generally positive about the labour market value of their education.
 - Fifty-nine percent felt that high school had helped them meet their career objectives.
 - Eighty-five percent (85 percent) of those with PSE credentials felt that post-secondary training had helped them meet career objectives. Those who had pursued technical training, or had completed professional university programs, were most positive in their assessments.
- When asked to list specific employability skills obtained in high school, 2003 study participants were more likely to provide positive answers than they had back in 1996. They were also more likely to identify specific courses (e.g., Math, English) that had turned out to be useful in the workplace.
- Most PSE graduates could identify employability skills obtained through their programs. Compared to current (2003) assessments of high school education, these evaluations of PSE programs were more likely to focus on analytic and computer / technical skills.

8. Evaluating Employment Outcomes

- One-third (31 percent) of all employed respondents felt over-qualified in their current job. Almost half (47 percent) felt that they were underpaid.
- Six out of ten (62 percent) employed respondents said they were satisfied with their (main) job, including 21 percent who said they were “very satisfied.” This is a typical level of job satisfaction for young Canadian workers. Sample members who had acquired a PSE credential were more likely to be satisfied with their job (66 percent) compared to those without a degree or diploma (56 percent).
- Less than half of the complete 2003 sample (46 percent) agreed that: “My career has worked out the way I hoped it would.” Individuals employed in managerial / professional and skilled trades jobs, positions typically obtained as a result of PSE credentials, were much more likely than those working in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs to report satisfaction with their careers.

9. Policy Implications

- This study was not designed as a program or policy evaluation, and it focuses on a somewhat unique province, but the findings still have some general policy implications.
- As many other studies have shown:

- PSE investments continue to pay off; young people who acquire PSE credentials find better jobs, earn more, and report more job satisfaction.
- Improving access to the PSE system by placing institutions in mid-sized communities and by implementing effective credit transfer policies appears to lead to higher PSE participation and completion rates.
- Even with improved access, family background continues to influence PSE outcomes. Efforts to remove systemic barriers to PSE participation, particularly for Aboriginal youth, must continue.
- Interrupted and non-linear PSE journeys are remarkably common. Some reflect barriers to PSE completion, but many are based on young people reconsidering their aspirations and options. Opportunities to reconsider PSE plans, and to change direction, should be maintained within the system.
- Employability skills of various kinds are enhanced in both the secondary and post-secondary education system. Recommendations that the balance between core curriculum and employability skill training needs to be reconsidered, with more emphasis on the latter, should be viewed with caution.