



Pathways for Youth to the Labour Market: An Overview of High School Initiatives

Alison Taylor

Executive Summary

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The transition from education to working life has become a focus for policy makers across most OECD countries in recent years. A study of transition systems across 14 OECD countries (OECD, 2000) suggested that effective transition systems are characterized by well organized pathways that connect initial education with work and further study and widespread opportunities to combine workplace experience with education. They provide good information and guidance and tightly knit safety nets for those at risk. In Canada, writers suggest that while examples of successful vocational programs exist in most parts of Canada, more attention is needed. A more effective Canadian system would require strong political leadership, a focus on curriculum, improved counselling, addressing the attitudes and expectations of parents and students, and engaging business and labour communities (de Broucker, 2005).

The CPRN “*Pathways*” research project is designed to profile the range of school-to-work pathways taken by Canadian youth and to identify factors associated with more successful transitions into rewarding employment. This report identifies institutional and policy structures that appear to support or hinder the ability of young people to find pathways leading to rewarding work in four provinces across Canada: British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Newfoundland/Labrador. Information from Australia and the State of Queensland is also included for comparative purposes.

The key questions addressed in this report are:

- How have approaches and roles of different groups involved in school-to-work transition within secondary schools changed over time?
- To what extent is preparation for skilled work available in secondary schools?
- What initiatives/programs are available for youth not bound for college or university and what proportion of youth are engaged in these?
- To what extent do provincial policies aim to help students identify feasible and rewarding career pathways and allow mobility between programs/pathways?

British Columbia

Curriculum: As in most provinces, BC students take core courses (e.g., English, Math, Science) that place them on pathways toward university, college, or the workplace. However, streaming occurs on a course-by-course basis rather than by program and so students may take different levels of courses. In an attempt to make curriculum more relevant to future education and work, the BC Ministry of Education introduced Applied Academics courses in 1997; however, there was resistance from universities, and the number of students taking these courses is small. Interested students also have opportunities to take optional technology courses and work experience courses to gain skills and experience related to particular occupational areas. A career education course, Planning 10 is required for graduation as is the completion of a Graduation Portfolio, aimed at encouraging students to engage in career and life planning.

Career Programs: Provincial policy-makers are interested in better articulating high school programs with post-secondary education and training through secondary school apprenticeship, Accelerated Credit Enrolment in Industry Training, and cooperative education. Just over 4 percent of grade 9 to 12 students participated in career programs in 2004/05. The Ministry of Education has provided funding and set targets to increase enrolments. Career and Technical Centres encourage such articulation and students can earn dual credit for high school and post-secondary courses.

Links to PSE: The college transfer system in BC has played an important role in increasing PSE enrolments and providing mobility within the system.

Alberta

Curriculum: Students take core courses that direct them towards university, college, or the workplace. Courses that are part of the Integrated Occupational Program (now called Knowledge and Employability courses) lead to a Certificate of Achievement, which requires fewer credits than a high school diploma. All secondary school students are required to take the Career and Life Management course, which includes a component related to career planning. They may also take optional Career and Technology Studies courses, which are currently being restructured to link more closely to National Occupational Classification codes. These courses are modular and account for approximately 14 percent of the total high school credits granted in the province.

Career Programs: The Registered Apprenticeship Program is offered by school districts across the province to high school students and the number of participants has increased since its introduction in 1991. Students are able to earn hours toward an apprenticeship certification and high school diploma, although they generally enrol in the in-class apprenticeship training after high school. Students in participating school districts can also enrol in Career Prep – a program that combines school and work-based learning and promotes articulation between high school and college curriculum. These programs enrol less than 5 percent of secondary students.

Links to PSE: Like BC, Alberta has a college transfer system which promotes mobility for young people between secondary schools, colleges, and universities in the province. However, technical institutes do not offer formal university transfer programs.

Ontario

Curriculum: In 1999, Ontario reduced the secondary school program from five to four years so the program now includes grades 9 to 12. Along with this change, the introduction of new high school curriculum in the same year has raised concerns about a drop in high school completion rates. New grade 11 and 12 core curriculum directs students toward work, college, and university destinations. Students are now also required to pass a literacy test (usually taken in grade 10) and to complete 40 hours of community involvement to graduate. Interested students can take optional Technological Education courses and Cooperative education courses to learn work-related skills. As in other provinces, technology course offerings vary across schools and districts, and schools have difficulty finding qualified teachers. Credits in these courses

represented approximately 9 percent of all high school credits in 2004/05. Cooperative education is more popular with almost 17 percent of high school students participating in 2004.

Career Programs: The province has placed increasing emphasis on providing clearer articulation of routes from school to college, for example, through the School/College/Work Initiative (SCWI), which may involve dual credit and dual programs in some sites. More recently, it has introduced High Skills Majors to allow students to bundle course in particular occupational areas and to earn external credits and industry certification. The Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program allows students to begin apprenticeship training while earning a high school diploma.

Links to PSE: Concerns have been raised about the province's "ad hoc" approach to transfer. However, initiatives like the School/College/Work Initiative and High Skills Majors promote partnerships between schools and post-secondary institutions to provide more coherent pathways for students.

Newfoundland/Labrador

Curriculum: Students select different levels of core courses in high school leading to work, college, or university. The Ministry of Education recently introduced new technology education courses and has provided funding to revitalize school equipment and facilities. Enrolments in technology courses represented approximately 7 percent of all senior high school courses in 2005/06. Interested students can participate in co-operative education courses although the number of students participating has declined with cuts to funding. Students are required to take a career development course as part of their graduation requirements starting in 2005. They are also required to develop an employability skills portfolio and to complete a 30 hour community contribution component (similar to Ontario and BC).

Career programs: Partnership initiatives appear to be more local than provincial. For example, a Community Career Centre operated between 2000 and 2003 in St. John's, and Student Transition to Educational Programs (STEP) were developed to link high school students to apprenticeship training and PSE programs at Memorial University and the College of the North Atlantic. There is provincial interest in formalizing a high school apprenticeship program in the future. It is apparent that here, as in other provinces, initiatives depend on the sustainability and adequacy of resources.

Links to PSE: As in other jurisdictions, steps have been taken to increase mobility and transferability of credits across educational institutions.

Appendix 2 summarizes key provincial initiatives discussed in this report.

Australia

Like Canada, education is not a federal responsibility in Australia and systems of education and employment are described as "loosely connected." Also like Canada, growing interest in vocational education and training (VET) in schools is attributed to concerns about the employability of school leavers and the perceived need to increase skill levels across the

population. Unlike Canada, VET in Australian schools is more closely linked to a national system of qualifications, the learning system for young people aged 15 to 17 is not confined to secondary schools, and the federal government seems to have played a larger coordinating role in terms of VET in schools in recent years.

In the State of Queensland, over half of senior secondary students participated in VET in schools between 2000 and 2003. School based apprenticeships and traineeships in a wide range of occupational and industry areas are available. Since 2006, Queensland also requires that all youth between the ages of 15 to 17 be involved in some type of educational or training program which provide credits toward an education certificate. Funding appears to be available for VET in schools at State and Federal levels and schools are required to report on outcomes.

Trends Across Canada and Policy Issues

The following trends are apparent in provincial policies related to providing career education and preparing young people for transitions to PSE and work:

- All four provinces have placed increased emphasis on career planning in high school as part of the secondary school program. Some require that students prepare an employability skills or career portfolio.
- Three of four provinces have mandated that secondary students participate in some form of community involvement for a set number of hours as part of their high school graduation requirements (BC, Ontario, and Newfoundland).
- Three of four provinces have established a high school apprenticeship program (BC, Alberta, and Ontario). A small proportion of the high school population participates and the majority of this group is male.
- All provinces emphasize the need for local partnerships between schools, post-secondary institutions, and employers. A couple (Ontario and Alberta) have supported the development of provincial “brokers” to promote partnerships.
- All provinces have promoted a decentralized “market” approach to vocational education and training with varying degrees of intervention in coordinating institutional arrangements. There has been little federal involvement in recent years.
- All provincial governments are interested in increasing the career pathways for students and enhancing flexibility and mobility in learning systems. Some have gone further than others (e.g., BC and Ontario) in providing opportunities for high school students to earn post-secondary credits and/or industry certification. To date, these initiatives involve a small proportion of the high school population.
- All provinces are struggling with the need to constantly update technology curriculum and facilities and to hire qualified teachers.
- Few provinces collect information about program outcomes, and enrolment information is not readily available or easily comparable across jurisdictions.

The following questions require further discussion:

- What role should federal and provincial governments play in terms of partnership facilitation, support/funding, and coordination of high school initiatives? To what extent should initiatives be driven locally?
- Which group/s should be accountable for the effectiveness of student transitions to further education and work? How should school-based programs be evaluated?
- What roles should post-secondary institutions and industry play and how can they be encouraged to participate?
- How can students be encouraged to make realistic career decisions without prematurely streaming them or locking them into particular educational and occupational choices? How can governments ensure that initiatives are accessible and equitable?
- How can we ensure that credentials and certifications provided in formal education have currency in the labour market?

The analysis in this report provides some tentative responses to these questions. It is clear that governments are key players in ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of VET. Disadvantages of the quasi-market approach in Canada include fragmentation, lack of sustainability of initiatives, and potential inequities in opportunities and outcomes for students. Evidence from other countries (OECD, 2000) suggests that there is greater employer participation and the quality of school-organized workplace experience programs is higher when supported by appropriate institutional arrangements. In Canada, articulation between secondary and post-secondary programs is growing but more attention could arguably be given to links between vocational education in high schools, apprenticeship programs, and tertiary education. Given the high educational aspirations of youth and an interest in raising skill levels overall, more attention should be paid to making transitional arrangements inclusive and ensuring mobility within the education and training system. Finally, it is very important that a balance be struck between providing job-specific training to high school students to increase their short-term employability, and ensuring that they are exposed to general knowledge that will help them to progress in a career and develop as citizens.