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THE PATHWAY FROM SCHOOL TO WORK: SMOOTHING THE BUMPS

THE MID TO LATE TEEN YEARS ARE ABOUT AS TUMULTUOUS as life can get. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that so many of our young people seem to fumble their way through high school, maybe drop out altogether, and then stumble on their pathway to finding a good job. The evidence now is that it's taking even longer for many young people to go from school to work.

The problem was identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2000. The OECD speculated that the delay was partly due to the pathways from school to work being too narrow, too obscure, or too inflexible. And, it found that in countries where solid institutional frameworks exist to help young people along those pathways, the transition to work is much more successful.

The way young people move from education to working life has become a focus for policy makers in many OECD countries – including Canada.

Canadian research suggests that we can do more to help young people identify their options along those pathways – and that we should be paying more attention to non-

university routes.¹ Provincial ministries of education appear to recognize this and have introduced initiatives in recent years to improve the school-to-work transition process for youth.

This article summarizes key trends in transition initiatives across Canada, provides a comparison with Australia, and raises issues for further discussion. A more detailed report, *Pathways for Youth to the Labour Market: An Overview of High School Initiatives*, has been published by Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) and is available on the CPRN website (<http://www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=1643&l=en>).

TRENDS ACROSS CANADA

An examination of provincial policies related to providing career education and preparing young people for transitions to PSE and work in Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia suggests several trends.

All four provinces are paying more attention in recent years to vocational education and training (VET), but they are doing so primarily by enabling initiatives by particular schools or school boards, rather than through a concerted effort. (The federal government has had little involvement



in this kind of initiative in recent years.) Table 1 below provides some examples:

All four provinces emphasize the need for local partnerships between schools, post-secondary institutions, and employers. Two (Ontario and Alberta) have financially supported provincial organizations to help promote partnerships. This is consistent with the international trend for governments to stimulate the creation of intermediary bodies as brokers between educational institutions and employers.²

All provincial governments are interested in enhancing flexibility and mobility in learning and some provide opportunities for high-school students to gain post-secondary credits and/or industry certification. For example:

- Career and Technical Centres (CTCs) in British Columbia allow students to earn both a secondary graduation and post-secondary certificate in a broad range of trades and technology areas.
- In Ontario, the School/College/Work Initiative (SCWI) was established in the late 1990s to link more secondary school courses with college programs. A key goal in recent years has been to expand participation in dual credit and/or dual program pilot projects to all colleges and boards.³
- A school in St. John's Newfoundland has also established a Student Transition to Education/Employment Program (STEP) that enables students to access university and college courses in their high school years.
- Three of the four provinces (all but Newfoundland and Labrador) have established a high-school apprenticeship program in which students can earn on-the-job hours toward a provincially recognized trade along with high school credits. Apprenticeship Programs currently attract a small number of students (e.g., less than three percent of the eligible population) and this group is mostly male. In countries like Australia, school based apprenticeships are offered in a much wider range of occupational areas.

These examples suggest that the idea of K-14 education is becoming more common in Canadian schools, although only a small number of students is involved in dual credit programs to date.

Further, three of the four provinces (all but Alberta) have mandated that secondary school students participate in some form of community involvement for a set number of hours as a requirement for graduation. Provinces also offer opportunities for students to make links between school and workplace learning and to gain work experience in high school through cooperative education and work experience courses. One reason for encouraging off-campus career development is the fact that all provinces are struggling with the need to constantly update technology curriculum and facilities and to hire qualified teachers in vocational areas.

AUSTRALIA

The Australian system of secondary education is similar to the Canadian system in several ways. For example, states and territories have responsibility for delivery of education and training and school qualifications. As well, Australia has been described as having loosely connected systems of education and employment. And, like Canada, the growth in vocational education and training (VET) in schools since the 1990s is attributed to increasing school retention rates,

EN BREF Malgré la turbulence des années d'adolescence, les décideurs, éducateurs et autres parties prenantes pourraient faire plus pour que l'école secondaire assure un meilleur départ dans la voie du travail. D'après un examen des initiatives école-travail émanant des écoles secondaires de quatre provinces, bien que les étudiants qui continuent vers l'université ou le collège tendent à être bien encadrés dans des directions claires, les jeunes qui s'engagent dans des programmes d'apprentissage ou qui commencent directement à travailler doivent encore, pour l'essentiel, trouver leur propre voie. Les initiatives sont plutôt fragmentées et le financement gouvernemental, irrégulier. Une comparaison établie avec le Queensland, en Australie, met en évidence l'absence de rôle fédéral dans la mise au point de politiques de transition école-travail au Canada. Il est important de fournir du soutien institutionnel à tous les jeunes, surtout lorsqu'on tient compte de l'évolution du marché du travail vers l'augmentation des postes à temps partiel, à contrat et de nature temporaire.

concerns about the employability of drop-outs, and concerns about increasing general skill levels in the country.⁴ Finally, concerns expressed about VET in schools in Australia resonate with issues raised in Canada; those include resource challenges, shortage of qualified teachers, debates over the quality of training provided by different institutions, low status of programs, and questions about the educational and market value of VET in schools.⁵

But there are also differences. First, in Australia there appears to have been greater federal involvement in the VET system in the past decade, and therefore greater federal influence on VET in state schools. The financial control exercised by the federal government means it is able to persuade state governments to increase programs in vocational education by using grants that stipulate certain requirements to qualify for the money.

Table 1

Province	Initiative
Ontario	Student Success Strategy allows students to complete a minimum bundle of courses in a specific career area (a 'Specialist High-Skills Major' in business, arts, construction, information technology, etc.).
Alberta	'Career Prep' programs in Alberta focus on developing students' workplace competencies in broadly defined occupational strands. Work is also underway to develop eight different clusters of senior high Career and Technology Studies courses using National Occupational Classification (NOC) codes.
British Columbia	High school courses are organized into eight focus areas (e.g., business, fine arts, trades and technology). The intent of these initiatives is to encourage students to engage in career planning in high school while making pathways from secondary school to further education and work more transparent.
Newfoundland and Labrador	To encourage more students to stay in school by increasing the relevance of technology curriculum, the provincial government committed \$4 million (\$2.5 million in 2005-06 and \$1.5 million in 2006-07) to piloting a skilled trades and technology program for high-school students.

THE COMPARISON WITH QUEENSLAND AND AUSTRALIA HIGHLIGHTS

THE LACK OF FEDERAL ROLE IN CANADA IN RELATION TO SCHOOL-TO-

WORK TRANSITION

Second, VET in Australian schools is more closely tied to national vocational qualifications than in Canada. Students earn credit towards a qualification within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Although there has been discussion in Alberta about using the National Occupational Classification to organize technology curriculum and career pathways for students, this is in its infancy.

Third, during the “senior phase of learning” (Years 11 and 12) in Australia, young people choose to either stay on in secondary schools or shift to Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges or to other Registered Training Organizations (RTO) to pursue vocational education.⁶ One disadvantage of this is that it makes the pathway to work more complex for youth since they may have to navigate their way across multiple institutions. In contrast, in Canada, the options for young people aged 16 to 18 are limited to high school only, since Canadian colleges and technical institutes generally require completion of Grade 12 for entry to most programs.

DISCUSSION

The four provinces have expressed a commitment to doing more in the area of school-to-work transition. However, aside from mandated community involvement, only a

small proportion of secondary school students is involved in off-campus career-related training. There is concern, as well, that the sustainability of activities is questionable in all jurisdictions given the historically variable funding support both across and within provinces and the piecemeal nature of initiatives.

Governments have tended to be reactive in their approach, waiting for locally-developed models to emerge. While this has the advantage of ensuring that programs are tied to local labour market realities, it is problematic if there is insufficient attention paid provincially to fostering and supporting local partnerships, to ensuring that equal access to similar types of programming is provided across the province, and to ensuring that students who are most likely to face challenges in their transitions are supported – Aboriginal youth or students from low-income families, for example. Although this is changing slowly, provinces have also given scant attention to collecting data related to secondary school initiatives and to evaluating them in terms of whether they helped students along the pathway to work. Data related to access, enrolments, learning processes, and student outcomes should be more readily available in Canada, as they are in Australia and Queensland.

The four provincial governments differ in their level of involvement. Governments in British Columbia and Ontario have recently begun to play a more active role in secondary school and college programs. In Newfoundland and Alberta, there is local interest but a lack of provincial coordination of dual credit initiatives to date. Provinces vary also in terms of their levels of institutional support for student transfer within the post-secondary education system. Finally, while provinces are becoming more aware of the resources and commitment needed to foster sustainable partnerships in vocational education and training, they vary in their levels of financial support as well.

The comparison with Queensland and Australia highlights the lack of federal role in Canada in relation to school-to-work transition. Discussions with Canadian policy-makers and local players suggest that federal funding support for initiatives, like provincial support, has been sporadic and short term. In the absence of links to a national qualifications framework, questions about the value of different vocational credentials are also more likely to arise in the Canadian context.

POLICY ISSUES

The preceding review of school-to-work initiatives in secondary schools in four provinces raises a number of questions that should be asked by anyone involved in a policy discussion on the matter. They include:

- 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?

The market approach to VET in Canada has the advantage of responsiveness to local needs and the disadvantage of a lack of central coordination, leading to fragmentation and potential inequities. The work required to develop and sustain effective partnerships is not adequately recognized and local initiatives come and go. While a balance is necessary between central control and local autonomy, the preceding

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discussion suggests that governments could play a much more active role in ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of VET. If it is agreed that successful transitions require solid institutional frameworks,⁷ then the development of such frameworks will require greater political commitment and cooperation across levels of government.

- Which group/s should be accountable for the effectiveness of student transitions to further education and work? How should school-based programs be evaluated?

More could be done to evaluate school-to-work initiatives to ensure that they are accessible, of high quality, and contribute to positive learning outcomes for all students.⁸ Evidence from other countries suggests that employer participation is more prevalent and the quality of school-organized workplace experience programs is higher when supported by appropriate institutional arrangements, rather than left to the individual school or firm.⁹ In Canada, governments could arguably play a greater role in defining objectives and setting up a framework for the development of vocational education pathways.¹⁰

- What roles should post-secondary institutions and industry play, and how can they be encouraged to participate?

The focus on providing a mix of pathways with more emphasis on technical and vocational options may ensure that young people have a better chance of finding skilled work. Articulation between secondary and post-secondary institutions is beginning but requires governmental support. In particular, links between vocational education, apprenticeship and tertiary education could be developed further.¹¹ Research also suggests that developing effective and equitable partnerships between educators and employers requires more attention.¹²

- 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?

One step would involve recognizing that youth have very high educational aspirations and ensuring mobility between pathways to work, college, and university. Collecting socio-demographic data related to student enrolments and outcomes to ensure that programs are inclusive of the diversity of students is also important.

- How much currency do credentials and certifications provided in formal education have in the labour market?

There are increasing attempts to provide more opportunities for high-school students to attain industry certification and to earn college credits while in high school. However, most educators agree that a balance needs to be struck between providing job-specific training to high-school students that will 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. Further, attention must be given to the outcomes of VET programs that are designed for less successful youth as part of safety nets.¹³

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion suggests that Canadian high schools are developing initiatives to facilitate youth transitions to work. But while students moving to university or college tend to be well supported in pathways that are clear, those entering apprenticeships or going directly to work still have to find their own way for the most part. Initiatives tend to be fragmented and government funding is sporadic. Providing more institutional support for all youth is important, especially given changes over time in the labour market such as an increase in part time, contract, and temporary work. So yes, the teen years are bound to be turbulent – but policy-makers, educators, and other partners could do more to ensure that high school provides a better start on the pathway to work. |

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Notes

- 1 P. de Broucker, *Without a Paddle: What to do about Canada's Young Drop-outs*. (Report W/30). (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, October 2005); M. Hardy and C. Parent, "School-workplace Collaboration, An Uneasy Partnership: Experiences from Two Alternation Programs in Quebec". In H. Schuetze and R. Sweet, eds., *Integrating School and Workplace Learning in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).
- 2 OECD, *From Initial Education to Working Life: Making Transitions Work* (Paris: OECD, 2000).
- 3 Dual credit courses involve a college credit courses team-taught by a secondary school teacher, college teacher, or a certified journey person. A dual program is a program in which a secondary school student is taking secondary school credit courses taught by a teacher and college credit course taught by a college instructor in the same semester or year.
- 4 E. Smith, "Vocational Education and Training in Schools in Australia: What Are the Consequences of Moving from Margins to Mainstream?" *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 56, no. 4 (2004): 559-578.
- 5 Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), *Young People and Vocational Educational and Training Options*. Written by Davinia Woods and produced by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research for the Australian National Training Authority. Adelaide, Australia, 2004; Smith.
- 6 Ibid., Smith.
- 7 OECD.
- 8 A. Taylor and B. Watt-Malcolm, "Expansive Learning Through High School Apprenticeship: Opportunities and Limits," *Journal of Education and Work* 27, no. 4 (2007): 27-44.
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