

DEBUNKING MYTHS: THE B.C. STUDENT TRANSITIONS PROJECT

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BRITISH COLUMBIA'S Student Transitions Project (STP) is challenging long-held myths about the movement of students through the education system in that province and may become a catalyst for re-examining commonly held ideas about students' transition to post-secondary education across the country.

The STP is a collaborative effort among B.C.'s Ministries of Education and Advanced Education and the province's public post-secondary institutions. The British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) is also a partner in research emanating from this initiative. All students entering the Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) system in B.C. are assigned a nine-digit personal education number (PEN), and this unique identifier follows them throughout their education in the province. The STP links the student PENs between the K-12 and public post-secondary education systems, tracking student transitions while protecting personal privacy. The goal of the STP is to provide reliable information at predictable times and in a timely manner to assist school districts, post-secondary institutions, and government in planning programs and managing access to higher education.

The STP began in 2005 and has produced a number of reports on student transitions in the province, including the flow of high school graduation cohorts into public post-secondary institutions over multiple years, the movement of those cohorts among public post-secondary institutions over multiple years once they enrol, and the movement of transfer students from colleges to universities to complete their degrees. As a result of this initial work, we are beginning to build a much better understanding of the patterns of student movement over time, and this understanding is helping to challenge some long-held beliefs about student transitions.

MYTH #1: The immediate transition rate from secondary to post-secondary is only about 20 percent.

At a regional meeting of B.C. school superintendents in the of Fall 2007, where STP research findings were being presented, attendees were asked to estimate how many high school graduates went on immediately to post-secondary education. The answer received was 19 percent.

This response may stem from statements made in B.C. about 'university' transition rates, which are in the 20 percent range but exclude transition to other types of public post-secondary institutions. The figure may also arise from a possible misinterpretation of the following statement in a 2004 Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation publication: "British Columbia's post-secondary participation rate of 22.4% in 2002-03 was the country's lowest, well below the national figure of 33.9%." Elsewhere the article states that "High enrolment growth was offset by high population growth."¹ Thus, a figure in the 20 percent range has been used, albeit for measuring post-secondary participation rates, rather than transition rates. Furthermore, the same article provides low rates of participation among B.C.'s 18 to 21-year-olds at the university and college level (at 13.3 percent and 9.1 percent, respectively).

THE REALITY

The misconception about low transition rates may be attributed to a misunderstanding of the difference between participation and transition rates. *Participation rates* typically measure full-time students in post-secondary education as a percentage of the overall population, whereas *transition rates* measure high school graduates in post-secondary education (both full-time and part-time) as a percentage of the high school graduation class.

The STP has traced the enrolment of each high school graduating class in B.C. public post-secondary institutions beginning with the 2001/02 graduation cohort. Table 1 shows that 51 percent of the 2001/02 graduation cohort transitioned to post-secondary within 12 months of graduation. Furthermore, there is remarkable consistency in the number of immediate-entry students from each of the next four graduation cohorts (between 50 and 51 percent).²

EN BREF Le programme Student Transitions Project de la Colombie-Britannique remet en question des mythes au sujet de l'évolution des élèves dans le système d'éducation de cette province et pourrait catalyser le réexamen d'idées reçues concernant la transition des élèves aux études postsecondaires partout au pays. Le projet constate que plus d'élèves qu'on le croyait passent directement aux études postsecondaires, que le retour aux études au niveau postsecondaire est plus courant qu'on le pensait, que les taux de participation au palier postsecondaire n'augmentent pas et que les étudiants autochtones diplômés du secondaire sont presque aussi susceptibles de poursuivre des études postsecondaires que leurs pairs non autochtones. Ce type de données aide les gouvernements et les établissements à concevoir de nouveaux programmes, à rejoindre les étudiants potentiels et à mieux appairer la demande et l'offre de places dans les différents programmes.

TABLE 1 Student Transition Matrix from B.C. High School Graduation to B.C. Public Post-Secondary Education

Grad School Year	Data	Post-Secondary School Year					Cumulative Trans. Rate	No Trans. Yet	Grand Total
		2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007			
2001/2002	# HS Grads	22,076	4,593	2,116	1,220	857	31,222	12,138	43,360
	% of HS Grad Class	50.9%	11.4%	4.9%	2.8%	2.0%	72.0%	28.0%	100.0%
2002/2003	# HS Grads		22,704	4,885	2,127	1,203	30,919	13,417	44,336
	% of HS Grad Class		51.2%	11.0%	4.8%	2.7%	69.7%	30.3%	100.0%
2003/2004	# HS Grads			21,155	4,539	1,932	27,626	14,686	42,312
	% of HS Grad Class			50.0%	10.7%	4.6%	65.3%	34.7%	100.0%
2004/2005	# HS Grads				21,991	4,711	26,702	17,062	43,764
	% of HS Grad Class				50.2%	10.8%	61.0%	39.0%	100.0%
2005/2006	# HS Grads					22,848	22,848	22,130	44,978
	% of HS Grad Class					50.8%	50.8%	49.2%	100.0%

These data only include entry to a public post-secondary institution, not to private or out-of-province institutions, because the PEN does not allow us to track those students. Finally, over the five years of cohort data, 19 percent of the graduation cohort entered a university immediately after graduation while 32 percent entered colleges, university colleges, or institutes (see Figure 1).

MYTH #2: If you don't attend post-secondary immediately after high school graduation, you are unlikely to do so.

This is another statement that we often hear from parents and educators. It is a commonly held belief that students who do not make the transition to post-secondary immediately risk not attending at all.

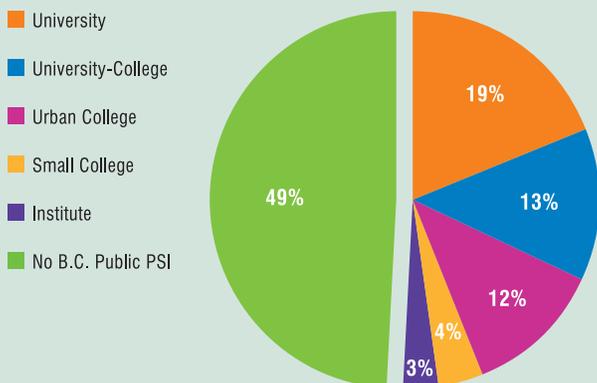
THE REALITY

While there is definitely a drop in the percentage of students who attend post-secondary education after one year out from graduation, they still enrol in large numbers. Table 1 shows that of the 2001/02 graduation cohort, over 11 percent enrolled after a one-year delay, a further five percent after two years, three percent after three years, and two percent after four years. Thus after five years, 72 percent of the 2001/02 cohort had enrolled in a public post-secondary institution in B.C. There is also remarkable consistency in those delayed entry numbers for other graduation cohorts. So students do continue to make their way into post-secondary education, even after taking one or more years off following high school graduation.

However, there are differences in delayed entry patterns among students. For instance, delayed-entry students are more likely to have graduated with lower academic qualifications than immediate-entry students and are therefore more likely to attend a college or institute than a university. Aboriginal high school graduates are also more likely to delay their entry to post-secondary education in B.C. (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 1 Post-Secondary Destinations of B.C. High School Graduates Who Made an Immediate-Entry Transition to B.C. Public Post-Secondary Education, 5-Year Average (2002/03 to 2006/07)

Immediate Entry Destinations, 5-Year Average



MYTH #3: Post-secondary participation rates are increasing.

A recurring assumption in post-secondary enrolment planning is that post-secondary participation rates in Canada are rising. This was a key premise in the post-secondary enrolment projections prepared by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) in 2007.³ Claire M. Morris, president of AUCC, defends the report's methodology in a statement to the Ottawa Citizen: "Our study, *Trends in Higher Education*, showed that participation rates are, in fact, much more significant drivers of enrolment increases than population change and illustrated that all indicators point to a continued climb in the percentage of Canadians seeking university degrees."⁴

Rising participation rates are also cited in research reports at the regional level in British Columbia: "There is no reason to believe that participation rates will decline in the Fraser Region. At a minimum, they will stay constant. Our expectation is that they will actually increase because of trends in high school graduation rates, skill and knowledge needs in the labour market, the experience of other jurisdictions, and the rising economic and social status of the population in the Fraser Region"⁵

THE REALITY

Participation and transition rates are not synonymous, but they are related. Participation includes both transition and retention of students divided by the overall population. Therefore, if participation rates of university-age students were rising, transition rates of this age group would likely be rising at the same time. Furthermore, since post-secondary enrolments are largely comprised of recent high school graduates, any increases in overall participation rates are likely to coincide with rising transition rates from high school. However, STP reveals that transition rates of high school graduates are not rising.

STP has thus far focused its research on post-secondary transitions of university-age students and does not yet have evidence of possible changes in transition rates of older students (24 years of age and older). Over the forthcoming years of the project, it will be possible to make more definitive statements about transition and participation rates of the broader B.C. population.

Contrary to the Fraser Region Consortium's 2003 predictions of a likely increase, immediate entry transition rates of high school graduates from the Fraser Region into B.C. public post-secondary institutions have indeed remained constant, between 54 and 55 percent per year (see Figure 2). As well, the Fraser Region's delayed entry rates for students up to five years out from graduation have remained constant.

Furthermore, despite a strong economy, it does not appear that B.C.'s high school graduates are being lured away from post-secondary education and directly into the hot job market. If this were the case, we would see declining transition rates, but STP shows that immediate and delayed-entry transition rates remain stable in British Columbia (see Table 1).

Increasing or decreasing transition rates might still be on the horizon for B.C. for any number of reasons and, if so, the STP is well positioned to monitor this situation over the coming years at a provincial and regional level.

MYTH #4: The formation of regional community colleges in British Columbia will help to equalize post-secondary participation rates across the province.

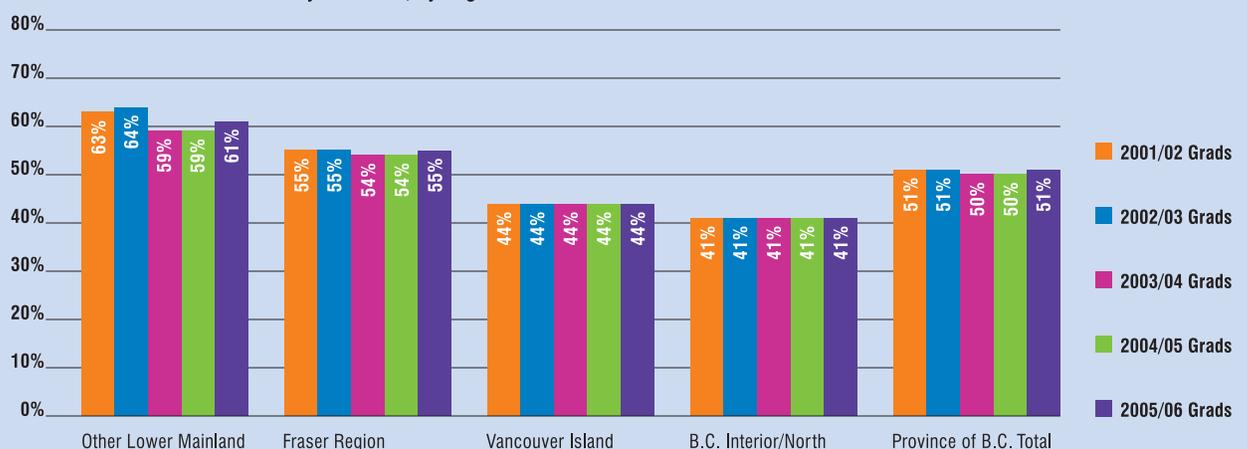
John Macdonald wrote an influential report in 1962 about the expansion of post-secondary education in B.C. One of his objectives, when he proposed the formation of a regional college system, was "to provide higher educational facilities on an equal basis throughout the Province wherever possible" in order to provide the opportunity for "every suitably qualified young person of this Province to acquire the intellectual skills which are necessary, both for his own future and the future prosperity of this Province."⁶ Five decades later, B.C. has college campuses spread throughout the province.

THE REALITY

Regional transition rates of high school graduates entering post-secondary education in B.C. remain unequal. For example, there is a 33 percentage point spread in the immediate entry transition rate of graduates from the Vancouver/Langara college region (66 percent) versus graduates from the College of the Rockies region in Southeastern B.C. (33



FIGURE 2 Immediate-Entry Transition Rates from B.C. High School Graduation to B.C. Public Post-Secondary Education, by Region



percent). Although STP recognizes that roughly three to five percent of the Rockies graduates pursue post-secondary education outside of the province over a five-year period, the transition rates are still far from equal across the province. It is likely that post-secondary education transitions are influenced not only by the presence of a college in the region but also by socio-economic factors.

MYTH #5: Aboriginal transition to and participation in post-secondary education lags behind non-Aboriginal participation.

Statistics Canada reported in the 2006 Census that 12 percent of B.C.'s Aboriginal population of 15 to 24-year-olds (versus 21 percent of B.C.'s non-Aboriginals of the same age group) have attained education credentials above a high school certificate or equivalent. A perception that Aboriginals participate in post-secondary education at lower rates than non-Aboriginals is in keeping with these figures. This perception is also supported by Geoff Plant's Campus 2020 recommendation to British Columbia to "ensure rates of Aboriginal post-secondary participation and attainment are equal to the rates for the general population."⁷

THE REALITY

Although the above perception may be true for the overall Aboriginal population, it is not true for high school graduates. STP finds that the long-term post-secondary transition rate of students who successfully graduate from high school is nearly as high among Aboriginals as non-Aboriginals. The Aboriginal post-secondary transition rate, within five years of secondary school graduation in 2001/02, lags only three percentage points behind non-Aboriginal graduates – 69 percent versus 72 percent (see Figure 3). How-

ever, it is also evident from the lower rates of university transition by Aboriginal students (6 percent within five years of high school graduation versus 19 percent among non-Aboriginal students) that more Aboriginal students enrol in colleges than in universities.

STP concludes that the significantly lower Grade 12 graduation rates of B.C.'s Aboriginal students (46 percent versus 79 percent for non-Aboriginal) is the critical barrier to post-secondary participation among Aboriginal students. This is consistent with a recent study of Aboriginal PSE by Michael Mendelson in which he notes that elementary and secondary programs have failed to serve Aboriginal children well, resulting in fewer Aboriginal high school graduates who are eligible for post-secondary study.⁸

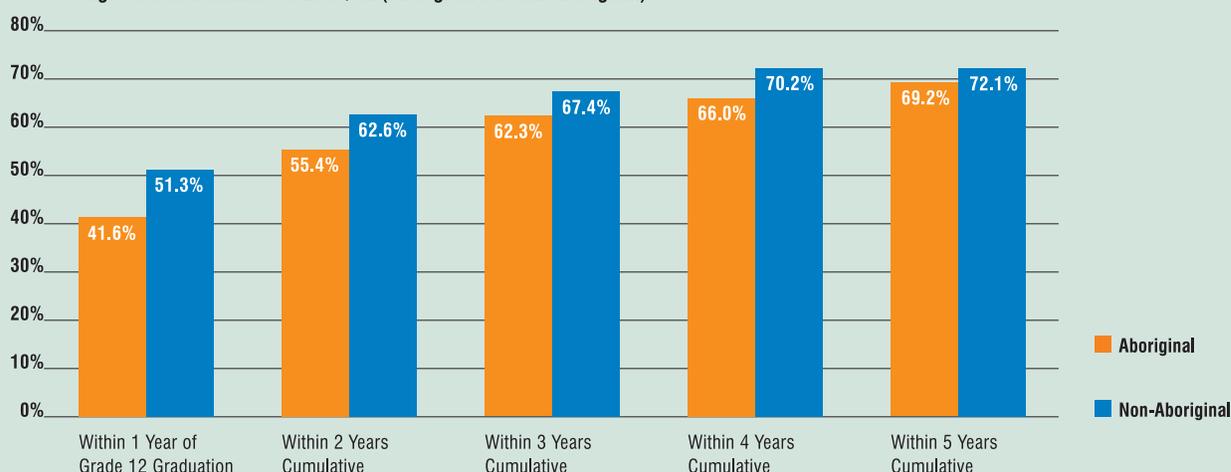
HOW IS STP DATA BEING USED?

Besides challenging widely held myths, STP research is also useful to government and institutions for planning purposes. For instance, STP research results are a standing item on joint executive meetings of the Ministries of Education and Advanced Education in B.C. Below is evidence of how the data are being used by one B.C. post-secondary institution, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, situated in the Surrey/Langley area of the Lower Mainland.

The registrar's office at Kwantlen has been closely reviewing STP data to assist with ongoing enrolment management planning. The institution looks at trends in the number of graduates from regional high schools who enrol immediately or as delayed entry in Kwantlen versus other post-secondary institutions. This information helps Kwantlen in its efforts to engage prospective students through brand management, engagement initiatives, and personalized contact. Kwantlen also uses evidence of the movement of students among post-secondary institutions and data from studies of the mobility of transfer students to determine the institution's evolving role as both a sending and a receiving institution in the B.C. Transfer System. This information helps Kwantlen with both recruitment decisions and program planning as it mounts new certificates, diplomas, and degrees to meet the needs of students in its catchment area. Thus the STP indirectly benefits students because of program decisions based on the data it provides.

The significantly lower Grade 12 graduation rates of B.C.'s Aboriginal students is the critical barrier to post-secondary participation among Aboriginal students.

FIGURE 3 Cumulative 5-Year Transition Rate to B.C. Public Post-Secondary Education: High School Graduates of 2001/02 (Aboriginal vs. Non-Aboriginal)





FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR STP RESEARCH

The STP has taken an incremental approach to its work so that it slowly builds its ability to report accurately on student transitions based on complex data sets and linked with the PEN. Now that the STP has had a few cycles of answering similar transition research questions by adding a year of data each time, it is planning to add additional data sets to further enrich our knowledge of student transitions beyond the B.C. public education system. The STP is in the early stages of conducting research on the movement of high school non-graduates into post-secondary programs and on the number of applicants who apply to, are qualified for, are given an offer from, and register at one or more post-secondary institutions in B.C. The applicant data should increase our understanding of the match between the demand for and supply of spaces in different programs. Work is also underway to link STP data to data from the Passport to Education program, which provides qualified

high school students with passport stamps towards post-secondary tuition, and to data from the Student Financial Assistance program. These two data sets will allow the STP to track mobility of students into private and out-of-province institutions. The STP is also considering linking with student outcomes data from college and university student surveys to determine the paths taken by students once they leave post-secondary.

To the best of our knowledge, two other provinces, Alberta and Quebec, have also tracked student mobility using a unique student identifier. The STP would like to be part of any initiative designed to link student level data across Canadian jurisdictions to build a better understanding of student transitions on an inter-provincial basis.⁹

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Notes

- 1 *The Price of Knowledge 2004: British Columbia*. Available at <http://www.millenniumscholarships.ca/en/research/pokbc.asp>
- 2 Immediate entry students are those who attend a public post-secondary institution within 12 months of high school graduation.
- 3 *Trends in higher education: Enrolment*, vol. 1 (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2007). http://www.aucc.ca/_pdf/english/publications/trends_2007_vol1_e.pdf
- 4 http://www.aucc.ca/publications/media/2007/citizen_letter_10_12_e.html
- 5 *At Our Doors: The Demand for Post-Secondary Education in the Fraser Region Southwestern B.C.* (Fraser Region Consortium, 2003).
- 6 John B. Macdonald, *Higher Education in British Columbia and a Plan for the Future* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1962). <http://www.bccat.bc.ca/pubs/macdonaldreport.pdf>
- 7 Geoff Plant, *Campus 2020. Thinking Ahead: The Report* (2007). <http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/campus2020/campus2020-thinkingahead-report.pdf>
- 8 Harvey McCue, *Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education. A Think Piece from the Centre for Native Policy and Research* (Centre for Native Policy and Research, 2006), http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/campus2020/documents/aboriginal_postsecondary_education_harveymccue.pdf
- 9 For more information on the STP and to review reports, please go to http://www.gov.bc.ca/student_transitions/

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