

How do we better support students in times of transition?

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Any time a student moves from high school into postsecondary education, or from postsecondary into the workforce, stakeholders on either side of the transition seem to say to the other side, “You got this, right?” Postsecondary institutions might say that secondary schools need to better prepare students for PSE, while employers might argue that higher ed does not produce enough “job ready” graduates. But these gaps are not necessarily any one group’s fault, as the entire school-to-work journey has been siloed into a number of distinct services that are in dire need of bridging. With no group focused on the spaces between the silos, it should come as little surprise that these points of transition represent some of the most challenging times in the school-to-work journey.

To be fair, PSE providers have used a number of resources to support their students’ transitions into and out of postsecondary through initiatives such as first-year orientation programs and career services. Some employers also invest in internships and co-ops that can lead to employment, and offer job-specific training to help incoming staff transition smoothly from school. Yet as we hear more each year about student mental health and adjustment challenges, as well as PSE-to-employment challenges, discussions about these transitions become increasingly necessary.

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) will shine a light on these points of transition in their upcoming conference, [Transitions: learning across borders, sectors and silos](#). In preparation for the conference, they checked in with Canadian students to learn more about their actual experience of these transitions.

A Student Perspective

Working with HEQCO, we chose to start at the very beginning, and asked: Is there really a problem? To do so, we reached out to our [StudentVu panel](#), an online community of over 5,000 high school, college, and university students from across the country. We began by asking what proportion of PSE students thought that their secondary school had adequately prepared them for the postsecondary experience.

Survey says... about half!

We then broke the discussion down into a series of potential transitional challenges and outcomes, which gave us the following findings:

Students were lukewarm about how well their high schools had prepared them for the more concrete aspects of transitioning into postsecondary education. Only 54% of respondents said that their secondary schools had “Completely” or “Mostly” supported them in navigating the PSE application process, with 51% saying their schools had similarly helped them select institutions and programs to apply to.

Students having trouble with academic, practical, and emotional transition to PSE

These numbers in the neighborhood of 50% show that high schools could do much more to make students feel supported in the PSE application process. Yet this is only half of the story, because knowing how to apply to PSE is just one important step in ensuring that students properly choose and get into the programs they want. A potentially bigger issue can be found in how well students are prepared for life *after* acceptance. Every month, you can find more stories about the emotional and financial challenges faced by today’s PSE students—challenges that end up pushing many of them to leave higher ed altogether.

Our work with HEQCO found that less than half of PSE students felt that their high schools had "Completely" or "Mostly" prepared them for the academic expectations of PSE (incl. the quality and quantity of work expected from them). This number dropped to 35% when students were asked if high school had given them the "soft skills" (e.g. study habits, time management) they needed to succeed in PSE. What is perhaps even more concerning, however, is that only 18% of students felt that their high schools had "Completely" or "Mostly" helped them develop the stress and health management skills needed for life in PSE.

TAKEAWAY: In collaboration with PSE institutions, secondary schools need to focus more resources on helping students select and apply to PSE, and on helping them develop the soft skills and stress/health management skills they'll need to face the challenges of transitioning into higher ed.

Turning students loose

No student transition receives more attention today than the transition into the workforce. In the past, it would have been very common for graduates to obtain a single degree, certificate, and/or diploma and get a permanent, full-time job almost immediately afterward. HEQCO's results show, however, that students no longer expect this to be the case. Of all students currently attending PSE, four out of five indicated that they expected to take further PSE after graduating from their current programs. And it's not like these students were in their programs simply to explore and decide what to do next: 62% of respondents said that they had entered PSE with a specific career already in mind.

So did these students' hopes for a career turn into a fulfilling job? Among the panelists who had graduated from or left postsecondary education, only 61% reported finding a permanent job afterward. When asked what their institutions could have done to better transition them into the workforce, panelists' responses were mixed: 22% replied that having their institution play a direct role in helping them find work would be most valuable; 20% thought that teaching more practical or job-related skills would be most important; and 15% thought that more professionalization workshops would be most helpful.

The mixed nature of these responses suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all service that institutions should provide to their students. Instead, institutions would best serve their students by offering a variety of the options mentioned, creating new options, and collaborating directly with employers whenever possible to help transition students into the workforce.

TAKEAWAY: PSE institutions, students, and employers must work together and mobilize all of their available resources to help students find stable, meaningful employment after graduation.

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