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**TRANSITION AFTER COMPLETION OF A PSE PROGRAM TO SELF OR OTHER  
EMPLOYMENT**

Challenge Paper Prepared by

Ken Snowden, Senior University Advisor  
Universities Branch, Ministry of Education

*The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Council of  
Ministers of Education, Canada*

## I. Introduction

What interventions are most effective in helping graduates quickly enter the labour force and earn enough to be self-sufficient?

This question arises from what appears to be growing concern about unemployment and/or under-employment of PSE graduates and, given concerns about debt loads of graduating students, a growing interest in having students move as quickly as possible into the labour market after graduation.

This “challenge paper” addresses the question by providing an overview of the PSE sector in Ontario and then moving on to review what we know about the current transition of graduates into the labour market with reference to national and provincial information. The final part of the paper then turns to the role of universities and colleges, governments, private sector and students in improving the transition experience.

## II. Overview of PSE in Ontario

The PSE sector in Ontario is comprised of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT's) , Universities and private postsecondary education and training facilities of various types. There are seventeen universities, twenty-five CAAT's, agricultural colleges, colleges of health sciences and of art, a military college, privately funded degree-granting institutions, and registered private vocational schools. By far, the largest proportion of students in the PSE sector are in the CAAT's and the universities. College enrolment is approximately 135,000 full-time students and 85,000 part-time students. In Ontario's universities, full-time **undergraduate** enrolment totalled approximately 200,000 with a further 65,000 **undergraduate** students enrolled part-time. Full-time **graduate** enrolment totalled approximately 28,000 with a further 9,500 **graduate** students pursuing part-time studies.

## III. Current employment situation

In terms of employment data for recent graduates, there are various sources that provide information about the success of the transition from college or university or private vocational institutions into the labour force. Readers will be familiar with the National Graduate Survey (NGS) conducted by Statistics Canada that provides an overview of employment patterns for graduates from across the PSE spectrum and the country. Surveying specific graduating cohorts (1982, 1986, 1990, and 1995) the NGS provides a survey two years after graduation and a follow-up three years later.

Annually, in Ontario, the Colleges and the Ministry of Education and Training jointly produce *Employment Profile: Graduates of Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology* providing detailed information about College graduates six months after graduation. Additionally many universities now engage in surveys of graduating students where employment related information may be part of the survey. Some

provinces are now surveying graduates on an annual basis or engaged in the development of surveys that will have an employment experience component. Finally, there are Labour Force surveys that - while not focused on the PSE sector - provide employment information by age-group and other characteristics such as educational attainment.

Based on the Labour Force surveys it is clear there is a strong correlation between the level of educational attainment and likelihood of employment. The NGS suggests that transition into the labour force can take some time but improves considerably with time - that is the unemployment rate for graduates decreases markedly from two to five years after graduation. In Ontario, approximately 90% of the Class of '90 (colleges and universities) were employed within two years from graduation and approximately 95% were employed within five years.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of graduates from the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, data from the most recent survey available indicates that

“Six months after their graduation, 17,566 or **81.7** per cent of the 1995-96 postsecondary college graduates responding to the survey were in the labour force and employed.”<sup>2</sup>

The fact is that, as noted elsewhere,

“By many criteria post-secondary education is success story.

- Canada has one of the highest postsecondary participation rates if the 18-21 age group among OECD countries
- Postsecondary graduates have higher employment rates than secondary school graduates
- Postsecondary graduates have maintained their level of earnings in recent years despite (a) the increasing number of graduates and (b) the general decline in youth income.”<sup>3</sup>

#### **IV. Considerations in Evaluating the Transition Experience**

Before turning specifically to measures (interventions) for improvement it is important to note five key factors:

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<sup>1</sup>M. Paju, “The Class of '90 Revisited: Report of the 1995 Follow-up Survey of 1990 Graduates”, Education Quarterly Review, 1997, vol.4, No 4. p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education, *Employment Profile 1995-96 Graduates of Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology*, February, 1998. p.7.

<sup>3</sup>CMEC, *Learner Transitions and Pathways in Postsecondary Education: Background to the Issues* (July 21, 1998 Draft p.5.)

- ✓ many graduates pursue additional education after graduation and thus may have quite different job expectations during the pursuit of those additional studies;

Based on data from the NGS approximately 50% of graduates from all of the PSE sector pursued additional education during the immediate five years after graduation and 30% actually completed an additional degree, diploma or additional qualification in those five years.<sup>4</sup>

The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission *Atlantic Canadian University Survey: Class of 1996* indicated that 37% of the graduates “returned to school in order to complete a program or take courses for credit.” In Alberta, again, 37% of graduates had “enrolled in further post-secondary credit programs at some point the following two and one-half years. Most of this further formal education was on a full-time basis, indicating that for many students one degree is a stepping stone to another.”<sup>5</sup>

At the College level in Ontario, the CAAT Employment Profile for 1995/96 indicates that six months after graduation approximately 20% of the graduates were engaged in full-time educational pursuits. Clearly, the pursuit of additional educational qualifications is a major factor that needs to be considered when examining the transition from PSE to the labour market.

- ✓ labour markets are affected by the performance of the economy in terms of job availability, remuneration, part-time/full-time and temporary versus permanent positions;

“Labour market success depends on many factors, including previous work experience, academic achievement, field of study and location. Graduates’ labour market success is also affected by the prevailing economic climate and labour market conditions at the time of graduation. If unfavourable, any of these factors and conditions can make the transition from school to work more difficult for graduates and may prolong their entry into the labour force.”<sup>6</sup>

- ✓ Basic demographics will also influence the rate of labour market success - the larger the size of the graduating cohort the more competition in the labour market - even in a buoyant economy. The number of degree/diploma recipients has continued to trend upwards during the 90's.
- ✓ The transition experience will be influenced by the area speciality with individuals in professional programs likely to have a more direct and defined transition path

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<sup>4</sup> M. Paju, “*The Class of '90 Revisited: Report of the 1995 Follow-up Survey of 1990 Graduates*”, Education Quarterly Review, 1997, vol.4, No 4. p.14.

<sup>5</sup>H. Krahn and G. Lowe, *The 1997 Alberta Graduate Survey: Labour Market and Educational Experiences of 1994 University Graduates*, Population Research Laboratory, University of Alberta, January 1998, p.23.

<sup>6</sup>M. Paju, “*The Class of '90 Revisited: Report of the 1995 Follow-up Survey of 1990 Graduates*”, Education Quarterly Review, 1997, vol.4, No 4. p.15.

than those in non-professional programs. At the university level, for example, unemployment rates for recent graduates vary by field of study with health and education graduates registering the lowest levels of unemployment and graduates in the humanities and agriculture and biological sciences experiencing the highest rates.<sup>7</sup> However, changing labour markets due to a variety of factors - changing government funding priorities, for example, - can have a significant impact on a particular graduating cohort. For example the previous comment about education graduates was based on data from the National Graduate Survey of 1990 graduates - five years after graduation. The *Atlantic Canadian University Survey: Class of 1996* - one year after graduation - indicated that "Those graduates with the highest rates of unemployment held degrees in Education (21.7%)."<sup>8</sup> Clearly the labour market for education graduates changed dramatically in a relatively short period of time and can vary dramatically by region.

Programs intended to improve the transition from PSE to the labour force need to recognize the preceding realities. Finally,

- ✓ Despite the activities to date and the apparent increased emphasis on the transition experience there are still many unknowns about the efficacy of specific interventions.<sup>9</sup> Thus, as a matter of importance, additional effort is required to understand the many factors influencing the actual transition experience and the success of existing interventions.

Specific measures that could improve the understanding of the transition experience are:

- expansion of local studies (institutional and/or provincial) regarding employment transition experiences of graduating students and promoting publication of results.
- expansion of the survey sample in the Statistics Canada National Graduate Survey and additional analysis of the variables related to the employment transition experience - a new module added for the 1997 survey of 1995 graduates and likely to be the subject of monographs during 1998/99.
- the inclusion of additional analysis and questions regarding self-employment in institutional , provincial and national surveys

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<sup>7</sup>M. Paju, "The Class of '90 Revisited: Report of the 1995 Follow-up Survey of 1990 Graduates", *Education Quarterly Review*, 1997, vol.4, No 4. p.22.

<sup>8</sup> Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission *Atlantic Canadian University Survey: Class of 1996*, Baseline Research Inc., 1996 p.iii.

<sup>9</sup> For a review of the many unknowns refer to H. Krahn, *School-Work Transitions Changing Patterns and Research Needs*, Discussion Paper, Human Resources Development Canada, March, 1996.

- careful evaluation of labour market oriented tax expenditures aimed at increasing employment (co-op tax credits, graduating student tax credits, job creation tax credits etc.).

## V. Improving the Transition Experience

Post-secondary institutions, government, the private sector and students all have roles to play in actually improving the transition from PSE to the labour force.

**Universities and colleges** have a responsibility to provide a learning experience that equips students with the requisite skills to thrive in the labour force. That learning experience involves:

- encouraging, discussing and reinforcing the many aspects associated with employability skills (academic skills, personal management skills, teamwork skills<sup>10</sup>) both inside and outside the classroom;
- providing information about careers, assistance with career searches, and access to information about employment programs;
- providing opportunities for employment experience during their post-secondary period through work study programs, summer work experience programs, campus employment either directly related to the academic program (teaching assistantships, marking, demonstrating, research assistance) or through support services (library, computing, fund-raising, physical services, residence employment etc.) And through, where appropriate, co-op programs.

Over the past several years, universities and colleges have been active in meeting the labour market requirements of their students. As noted in Anisef's and Axelrod's work in the early 1990's, institutional researchers were endorsing the need for "assessments of baccalaureate graduates and their employers."<sup>11</sup> Establishing program Advisory Boards to receive feed-back from the private sector and public sector about their graduates, expanded work opportunities on campus, establishing mentoring programs with alumni and enhancing career services are examples of measures (interventions) aimed at improving, among other things, the employability of graduates. Many institutions are now actively engaged in surveying their students (graduating students) about their learning experience and in some cases the survey includes reference to employment information and job search activities.

At the same time institutions are beginning to publicize, in a more direct way, the expected outcomes or attributes associated with a university degree. In the case of professional programs - Law, Education, Nursing, Medicine, Engineering to name a few - those attributes tend to be set by or in conjunction with professional accreditation

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<sup>10</sup>Conference Board of Canada, *Employability Skills Profile*, What Are Employers Looking For?, January 1996.

<sup>11</sup>P. Anisef and P. Axelrod, *Universities, Graduates and the Marketplace: Canadian Patterns and Prospects* in P. Anisef and P. Axelrod, eds., *TRANSITIONS: Schooling and Employment in Canada*, Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc., Toronto, 1993, p.113.

bodies. In the case of undergraduate programs in the Arts and Sciences there has long been an acknowledged set of attributes associated with those programs but more recently, some institutions have made additional efforts to ensure that students understand the link between the academic program and a set of skills/attributes<sup>12</sup> (Appendix B). Moreover, increasingly institutions are making deliberate efforts to introduce students in first year to the career services on campus and steps are underway to introduce career skills and career planning directly into the curriculum - in some cases as a degree credit course.<sup>13</sup>

The apparent increase in institutional activity in this regard must be seen as a positive development and is consistent with the added emphasis on accountability that has characterized PSE over the past several years. At the same time it is apparent the marked increase in tuition over the same time period has resulted in students taking a more active stance with respect to how tuition revenues are spent.

**Governments** have the responsibility to contribute to the funding of PSE institutions in a way and at levels that are competitive with other jurisdictions and ensure high levels of access to PSE.

Additionally, governments have long had a role in providing labour market information as part of the employment picture. While human resource planning is fraught with pitfalls, ensuring that timely labour market information is available for counsellors and students, is an important part of improving the transitions infrastructure. At the same time, governments can support pan-Canadian initiatives to develop a better understanding of the transition experience through the support of survey research on a scale that improves the reliability and breadth of the resulting data.

Initiatives such as the Leading Edge Technology Tax Credit and the Ontario Graduate Transitions Tax Credit may help provide an environment conducive to improving the labour market transition for students. Various incentives for job creation and self-employment may help the overall labour market transition but further effort is required to fully determine whether such interventions actually fulfill their objectives in an efficient and effective fashion.

Finally, as a leading employer, governments also have the capacity to expand internship and co-op opportunities that, in turn, would contribute to improving the transition experience for post-secondary graduates.

The **private sector** has a role to play in job creation and increasing opportunities for

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<sup>12</sup>See, in particular, University of Alberta, *Success By Degrees, Preparing our Graduates for Alberta's Second Century*, University of Alberta, May 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of some programs with a career planning or employability skills component range from the inclusion of such modules in a number of 4<sup>th</sup> year courses at Ryerson, the "Experience Agriculture" workplace skills program built into the degree curriculum at Guelph, a mandatory non-credit career development course in the business program at McMaster, a degree credit 4<sup>th</sup> year course for Business students at Wilfrid Laurier, and the "Career Portfolio" programme for Arts and Social Science students at Dalhousie. (Examples provided via an e-mail survey conducted by J. Kelly, Director, Career Services, Queen's University)

internships, and co-op programs. There are some stellar examples of private sector contributions and it is clear that in recent years many companies are increasing their efforts to build more inclusive partnerships with the higher education sector- partnerships that involve direct philanthropy, expanded internships and co-op placements, scholarship support, capital gifts-in-kind, and support for faculty and research endeavours.

At the same time it is clear that the private sector will benefit from expanded on the job training for specific industry related skills and thus such skills training must be regarded as an integral part of the private sector responsibility. The private sector also has a role to play in recognizing the contribution of universities and colleges to the development of the “employability skills profile” as articulated by the Conference Board of Canada, and reinforcing the concept with the PSE sector.

**Students** also have a major responsibility in that they must avail themselves of the opportunities and explore various avenues for employment. Building networks is an important part of the transition. Volunteer work, and part-time employment along with extra-curricular activities contribute to the development of a skill set that will prepare students for careers and improve the transition experience. At the same time students need to be aware of the skill sets they are acquiring throughout their academic careers, develop and refine them and take the initiative to become better informed about career possibilities.

## **VI. Concluding Comments**

To determine whether some specific suggested measures are effective will require the greater utilization of some existing evaluation data such as the National Graduate Survey and publication of that data in a timely fashion. Ultimately the employment rate by age and level of education attainment will remain as a key indicator that needs to be monitored with adequate recognition of other related factors such as the performance of the economy. For each of the major participants - colleges/universities, governments, private sector and students - there are a set of responsibilities that need to be reinforced and/or acted upon and the CMEC project is the first step in that process.

In sum, the current transition experience is reasonably good and needs to be acknowledged and publicized more widely with prospective and graduating PSE students. To improve the situation there are some specific measures that should be considered to both

- A) better understand the transition experience (p.4/5), and
- B) to improve the transition experience further (Appendix A).

However, there is no single measure. The recipe for improvement involves universities, colleges, governments, the private sector and students (and their families) and a host of measures - as noted previously - that recognize the role and contributions of each important ingredient.

## References

1. P. Anisef and P. Axelrod, eds., *TRANSITIONS: Schooling and Employment in Canada*, Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc., Toronto, 1993.
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3. Conference Board of Canada, *Employability Skills Profile*, What Are Employers Looking For? January, 1996 <http://www2.conferenceboard.ca/nbec/pubs.htm>
4. Council Of Ontario Universities, *Ontario Universities - 1997, Resource Document*, March, 1998.
5. H. Krahn and G. Lowe, *The 1997 Alberta Graduate Survey: Labour Market and Educational Experiences of 1994 University Graduates*, Population Research Laboratory, University of Alberta, January 1998.
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7. Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, Atlantic Canadian University Survey: Class of 1996, MPHEC, 1997. <http://www.gov.nb.ca/ael/lmab/product.htm> for various labour market related publications.
8. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Employment Profile 1995-96 Graduates of Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology*, February, 1998.
9. M. Paju, "The Class of '90 Revisited: Report of the 1995 Follow-up Survey of 1990 Graduates", Statistics Canada, Education Quarterly Review, 1997, vol.4, No.4.
10. Statistics Canada, *Survey of 1995 Graduates*, Information Manual, May-June 1997 <http://www.statcan.ca/> for general Statistics Canada material.
11. University of Alberta, *Success By Degrees, Preparing our Graduates for Alberta's Second Century*, University of Alberta, May 1997. <http://www.ualberta.ca/~senate/SUCCESS.HTM>

**Specific measures to improve the transition experience:**

- greater emphasis in academic program development and delivery on key employability skills - academic skills, teamwork skills, personal management skills (universities and colleges)
- where appropriate, introduce/expand co-op elements into the curriculum (universities, colleges, governments, private sector)
- provide additional work-study opportunities for students (universities, colleges, government and private sector)
- introduce students to career services early in the university/college experience and increase the profile of career services on campus (universities and colleges)
- publicize labour market information (governments)
- establish mentor programs or linkage programs with alumni (universities, colleges, private sector).

Excerpt from University of Alberta, *Success By Degrees, Preparing our Graduates for Alberta's Second Century*, University of Alberta, May 1997

“Dr. Rod Fraser, has outlined eleven skill sets which he believes every University of Alberta student should strive to have by the time he or she graduates:

- **Critical thinking** ability
- **Communications skills** (including the ability to work in teams)
- **Independent judgment**, and the self-confidence in that judgment
- Solid, in-depth **knowledge** about at least one area of study
- The ability of **knowing how to learn**, especially concerning the understanding and capacity for carrying out a research project
- A significant **international experience**.
- Familiarity and confidence of use of **information/communications technology**,  
as a byproduct of the learning process
- The unleashing of inherent **creative** and **entrepreneurial** talents
- **Development of the whole person**, in academic study, personal fitness, cultural environment, student involvement on campus and in the broader community
- The self-knowledge and self-confidence that our students will be **citizens and leaders of tomorrow**
- The ability and confidence to **compete successfully** with the world's best.

In the best universities, students develop these universally applicable skills and abilities no matter whether they are learning about anatomy or archaeology, about chemistry or education. These skill sets are extremely useful throughout life, because they are unendingly adaptable and are exactly what today's employers are looking for when they hire.”