



From School to Work:

**How can the path
be smoother?**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted nearly all aspects of life for all groups in society and has proven to be a struggle for every age group, each for different reasons. Youth employment was severely impacted by the shutdowns – the percentage of workers between the age of 15 – 24 declined to just above 38% in April 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2020). As a result, youth in Ontario are extremely at-risk when it comes to positive mental health, education, and long-term employment success. With youth employment and wellness declining through pandemic, the First Work Youth Council organized a focus group study to get first-hand information from Ontario youth on how their school-to-work transition could be improved and how COVID-19 has impacted that transition.

Through a focus group discussion, young people from across Ontario provided their experiences and insight on how to improve the school-to-work transition. Our findings indicate that youth indeed face challenges transitioning from school to work and it will take the collectiveness of employers, non-profit organizations, and the government to foster changes needed for a smoother school-to-work transition. The province of Ontario must do its part to make sure resources and funding are put into place for youth, with flexibility to ensure change are made where appropriate to address barriers with agility.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted nearly all aspects of life for all society and has proven to be a struggle for every age group, each for unique reasons. Ontario youth are uniquely vulnerable and at risk of negatively impacted mental health, education and employment as a result of the pandemic. Young people in Ontario today are graduating only to face a disrupted labour market due to the pandemic, which exacerbates the usual struggle to transition successfully from education – be it high school or post-secondary – to employment.

The transition between schooling and career can be difficult to navigate at the best of times and has only been worsened by the pandemic. In the previous 20 years, the percentage of joblessness has risen overtime, with Canadian youth unemployment falling even further behind than the general population.



AT THE SAME TIME.

**18% OF
GRADUATES**

ARE OBTAINING
EMPLOYMENT WHICH PAYS
LESS THAN THE POVERTY
THRESHOLD (OECD,
GLANCE, 2014).

INTRODUCTION

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT HAS ALSO BEEN SEVERELY IMPACTED BY THE SHUTDOWNS – WITH THE PERCENTAGE OF 15 TO 24 YEAR OLD WORKERS DECLINING FROM 58% IN FEBRUARY TO JUST OVER 38% IN APRIL (STATISTICS CANADA, 2020).

The impacts of joblessness and low wage jobs can cause youth mental and financial strain, while low wage jobs or overqualification for work responsibilities can deteriorate mental health even further. Therefore, investigation into the transition between graduation and employment must take place to identify solutions for young people advance more seamlessly from education to work. For the purposes of this report, school-to-work will be shortened to STW.

While youth have their own individual experiences, employers claim that youth struggle to adapt to work environments after graduating high school or post-secondary. The evidence suggests that the problem of poor STW transition is a complex and systemic one that cannot be addressed simply by a specific program or change in type of schooling.

The Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) has explored this topic heavily, providing insights into how youth can have excellent transitions from school to work. CCDF has completed many studies on effective STW transition approaches and are well respected in this space.

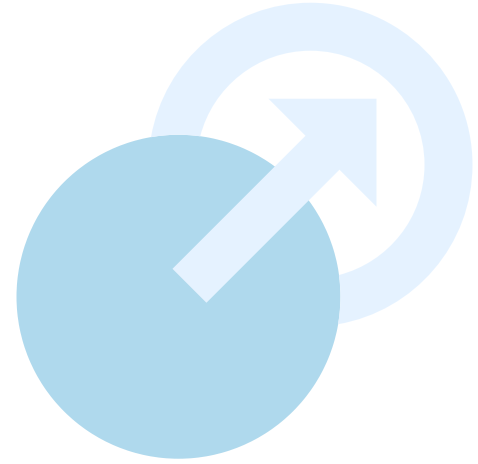
INTRODUCTION

Previous research has identified multiple causes of poor youth STW transitions, including:

- **Insufficient preparation of youth for workplace environments;**
- **Insufficient employer participation in identifying and developing the needed skills in concert with schools, and ineffective onboarding and training of new recruits for financial expediency reasons; and**
- **Employers with unrealistic expectations around skills and behaviours of recent students and graduates.**

In order to better understand how the STW transition can be done successfully and what resources should be put in place, a focus group interview was conducted. A group of 8 diverse youth between the ages of 15-25 from different neighbourhoods in Ontario took part in a one-hour discussion about their experience when it came to the transition from STW. The group included graduates from both high school and post-secondary institutions. Limitations of the study include gender, as all the participants were female.

OBJECTIVE



The purpose of this study is to **better understand current challenges youth have in making the transition from school to work**. The aim of this study is to **recognize the different barriers youth in Ontario face when making the adjustment from STW**. First Work is determined to “equip organizations and businesses to support young people and adopt youth-friendly programming and engagement approaches” and it is this core responsibility which prompted the initiation of this research. This research was conducted on the central question of **how service providers can fill in the gap between school and work**. Participants were asked questions focused on challenges and experiences they faced in their careers. This highlighted what worked for them and what did not, and showcased that youth face different barriers in finding a job and smoothly transitioning into one.

INSIGHTS & FINDINGS

Participants from the study identified numerous concerns which have been acknowledged by previous research from other organizations. For example, the CCDF has found many unique insights, including that youth are battling with

Qualification Dissonance

meaning they are either under qualified or overqualified for a job. During the pandemic, Ontario saw 355,300 people exit the workforce. With many industries letting go of their employees, many job seekers had to learn new skills to find work, further delaying their entry into the workforce. The tech industry, online marketing and online content creation are newly in-demand, requiring new skills that people have had to learn in order to earn money (Ontario, 2021). This skills-mismatch amidst a changing labour market is only the beginning of a list of problems youth face. The following section will showcase these problems in further detail.

TALENT COMPETITION AMONGST GRADUATES



The focus group participants indicated the large concentration of graduating candidates in bigger cities posed the threat of unemployment. Additionally, there is indication that the well-connected students or the outstanding candidates usurp employment opportunities. Students from minority communities feel they suffer the most because employers see them as less qualified compared to students from non-visible minority candidates. Those less privileged students, who do not have connections with professional contacts or recruiters to lean on, can only apply to a job online. This also leads to the broader problem of competition between labour pools, which is one of the main issues youth identified in the focus group.

The large number of graduating students each year leads to competition for the few work opportunities available where only the most qualified candidates -- or those who are most connected -- get the job.

TALENT COMPETITION AMONGST GRADUATES

Students from minority communities often do not have connections in corporate institutions because a lot of them are the first in their families to graduate from school.

“I AM THE FIRST IN MY GENERATION TO ATTEND HIGH SCHOOL IN CANADA AND THEN UNIVERSITY, SO I AM THE FIRST TO EXPERIENCE AND LEARN WHAT IT IS LIKE TO DEVELOP A CAREER IN CANADA.”

One of the participants said that she completed her degree from a less competitive institution, yet she continued to work at Starbucks two years after she finished her degree because she could not find a job in her desired profession. This demonstrates that youth who are coming out of education who may be qualified – or even overqualified for positions are being overlooked, affirming the need for stronger STW transition supports.



RACISM: A BARRIER TO EMPLOYMENT

The research compiled from the focus group paints a clear picture of racism being a barrier for youth facing unemployment or lack of career advancement, as discussed by focus group participants many times. For instance, participants indicated there may be an assumption that those who have ethnic names are not as qualified for a position due to name-bias. One participant expressed:

"Some students have had to change their names so that it sounds more white to increase their chances at being called for an interview, otherwise they are passed for the next candidate from a possibly more privileged community."

The participants noted that they believe some of these jobseekers could be missing out on an opportunity to prove themselves due to this bias.

RACISM: A BARRIER TO EMPLOYMENT

One of the youth in the focus group discovered through research that the people who work in her neighborhood were all hired from other neighborhoods.

“I was so shocked when I came across the data we had collected. BIPOC youth are not getting any chance of employment, even within their [own] community.”

Similarly, youth from lower socio-economic statuses believe themselves to be at greater disadvantage once it comes to work. Youth expressed they feel that they have to work extra hard just to keep their job, noting they often feel defeated and undervalued because of their race, gender, and class. One female participant said:

“My workplace is constantly a battle,” because of the environment and social class around her. “It is very intimidating to have white middle class male co-workers. I always have to work twice as hard to prove I deserve the same job.”



SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The pandemic has shifted the world in many ways, including what employers are looking for in their potential candidates. For example, the demand for soft skills such as:



Time Management



Zoom Ethics



**Maintaining
Healthy Lifestyle
During WFH**

Have increased significantly since the pandemic as people continue to work remotely. Additionally, soft skills development is one way to continually improve employability as they are transferable from workplace to workplace and in most-demand by employers. Some of the typical skills you would need at a job can be harder to develop when you are not in an actual work environment. For example, participants of the focus group expressed that they are not confident with their time management skills and believe this has been affecting their work ethic and life in general. **“In high school you are told what to do and when to do it.”** Participants noted that when youth struggle with time management, it is much harder for them to succeed in different parts of life including education and employment. This is also the same case for self-regulation skills.

SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Focus group participants also expressed that teaching self-regulation skills to youth at a young age is necessary in order to know how to handle conflict in the workplace. **“I can only speak for myself, but I find it hard to recognize unhealthy habits and even harder to change when I’m told. I think this is because we get so used to a habit for so long that it just becomes the normal.”** Another participant said, “I think some youth get defensive when they are in the wrong because they’re never held responsible as much as they should have been growing up.” These habits and ideas are a part of the reason it can be hard for new graduates to transition to work environments, making successful, retained employment difficult.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the focus group study, participants highlighted solutions to address some of these problems within the STW transition. One suggestion provided was that employers should begin providing feedback to youth following being rejected from a job application so they can further develop into better professionals. For example, the focus group participants **voiced that they would like feedback after getting rejected from a job, as many people have different learning styles.** This feedback should be to help them learn and gain the skills employers are looking for to get a career within their company. Youth are willing to learn how to gain their dream careers and they learn best from direct feedback.



STRENGTHENED INTEGRATED-WORK AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES



Government should mandate integrated work and personal development opportunities to be prioritized for youth during their education journey. Hands-on programs where youth can get to experience careers firsthand is very important in transitioning them from school to work. These programs give youth confidence in experiencing different careers and can help them decide what they want to do in the future. These experiences lead to a softer STW transition, because youth have had the chance to mimic their career of interest, giving them relevant, hands-on experience.

More programs such as these would be useful to the youth of Ontario for many reasons:

- It allows youth to develop skills that are both relevant to work and life in general. Youth claimed that these skills boost their confidence to try new things;
- They can teach youth how to communicate and further develop relationships within their community; and
- It opens up more opportunities for youth to take part in other activities.

According to the focus group participants, peer mentorship programs should be initiated in education systems to allow peer counselling and coaching between university and high school students. By doing this, high school graduates will join university being better prepared for the job market. Senior students in colleges and universities can also share their wealth of knowledge from internship and co-op experience to junior students. In the process, junior students can learn techniques on how to effectively apply for jobs.

STRENGTHEN POLICY TO ENCOURAGE CONVERSATION AROUND EMPLOYMENT RACISM

The government should support the implementation of policies to further encourage conversations about racism in the workplace, as the youth focus group participants have affirmed that racism does occur within employment and educational institutions. Oftentimes, youth remain quiet with their experience and are afraid to bring awareness to this subject while they suffer silently. This is why stricter policies need to be in place by employers to make their place of work safe for everyone. Employers need to encourage their employees to speak up about work racism at work, as greater consequences for offenders can restrict employers from openly participating in racism. Everyone deserves to be given an equal opportunity to prove their ability, and youth from minority communities should not be denied this right.

SUPPORT THE UPTAKE OF NATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS

The Federal government should prioritize the creation of a national framework to better support STW transitions so everyone has a fair opportunity of getting a job. This recommendation, supported by Canada Career Development Foundation research, could increase opportunities for youth transitioning to the workforce. As most corporations are managed privately, the existence of national policy from the federal government might provide a fair ground and increase the employment of students from diverse backgrounds. Promoting policies such as equality will open more opportunities for minorities as employers will be required to adhere to these policies.



CONCLUSION



This report showcased how **young people in Ontario are extremely vulnerable and at risk when it comes to mental health, education and employment.** “School to Work: How can the path be smoother?” has many valuable findings, insights and recommendations to further help youth service providers implement programs to help youth develop professionally. This report has found that youth face many problems such as racism in the workplace, developing in-demand skills, and qualification dissonance. Most of these problems start from different stages and effects all youth differently. All the recommendations put forward in this report are developed from the direct feedback from youth who took part in the study. Some of the recommendations that are highlighted is to **encourage conversation around employment racism, to promote employer feedback and to support the national framework policy of the STW transition.** All youth deserve a fair chance at creating their future, and it's up to all of us to work together to help make it happen.

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ABOUT FIRST WORK

First Work is Ontario's employment network: a leading membership organization bringing together the best providers of employment programming and services, business leaders, academia, and government to develop and advance evidence-led solutions for employment. Our membership community positions us at the bridge between job seekers and employment, bringing innovative partnerships with industry partners to the workforce development space. Our direct engagement with job seekers, youth and employment services providers ensures our services are relevant, timely and apply an intersectional lens. Our continued advocacy at all levels of government supports progressive policy development for the benefit of all job seekers.

ABOUT FIRST WORK'S YOUTH COUNCIL

First Work's Youth Council is comprised of a diverse group of young people (under 30) from across Ontario. This council convenes bi-monthly to ensure First Work's dedication and work for young jobseekers is reflective of their wants and needs. This cohort has supported the development of First Work's first ever full-day Youth Summit, which took place at Futures: National Workforce Development Conference in 2020. This cohort has also supported the development and design of career exploration events through First Work's youth-voice, Aspire.



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