

Higher Education  
Quality Council  
of Ontario



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# Navigating the Transition from School to Work

The Impact of Career Development  
Activities and Services on Graduate  
Labour Market Outcomes

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## Published by:

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario  
88 Queens Quay West, Suite 2500  
Toronto, ON, M5J 0B8, Canada

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## Cite this publication in the following format:

Chatoor, K., Effah, H., Shah, H. & Kaufman, A. (2024). *Navigating the Transition From School to Work: The Impact of Career Development Activities and Services on Graduate Labour Market Outcomes*. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

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The transition from school to work is important because a graduate's earliest experience in the labour market can continue to impact their long-term career trajectory (Galarneau et al., 2023). Those entering the labour market with a postsecondary education (PSE) credential earn more throughout their careers and are more likely to have benefits, paid vacation and other markers of quality employment than those without a credential (Chatoor, 2021; Galarneau et al., 2023). But a credential does not guarantee an easy transition into the labour market, and many PSE graduates, particularly those from equity-seeking backgrounds, struggle to gain a strong foothold in the workforce (Chatoor et al., 2019; Galarneau et al., 2023).

Government, PSE institutions and students have a shared interest in this pivotal transition period. The provincial and federal governments have invested in programs aimed at supporting a successful school-to-work transition (Government of Ontario, 2021; Government of Canada, 2019). Postsecondary institutions (PSIs) want their programming to contribute to an engaged and civic-minded society, which includes educating and preparing students to be successful in meeting labour market needs. To that end, they offer a variety of activities and services intended to complement academic programming and provide support during the student life cycle, including the transition from school to work. Finally, students want their education to have a meaningful impact on their growth and development, a large part of which is their success in the labour market post-graduation. Focus on their future career begins long before graduation; in fact, students consistently report that their main reason for attending PSE is to prepare for a job or career (Academica, 2023).

There is a wealth of literature about the labour market outcomes of graduates and the positive impact of PSE on employment and earning outcomes in Canada (Reid et al., 2020; Council of Ontario Universities, 2022; Frenette, 2019; Zeman & Frenette, 2021), but a lack of research that explores the types and efficacy of support services and activities that shape graduates' transitions into the labour market. To better understand which of those services and activities are the most helpful during the school-to-work transition, we surveyed and interviewed recent graduates about their experiences. Our study found that experiential learning (EL), networking and better uptake of institutional resources, such as mock interviews, résumé-writing workshops or general career advising, benefit graduates the most in this pivotal transition period.



# Current School-to-Work Supports

Governments at both the provincial and federal levels are interested in strengthening the pipeline between school and work. The Government of Canada works to bridge gaps between PSE, youth and employers through the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS) program, which provides funding to employers to offer mentorship and work experiences to youth facing barriers to employment, and the Canada Summer Jobs Program, which provides wage subsidies to employers to create summer jobs for youth (Government of Canada, 2023). The Government of Canada's Innovative Work-integrated Learning Initiative provides funding to support short-term, high-intensity, technology-assisted work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities to PSE students through partnerships, including CEWIL Canada's iHub, Colleges & Institutes Canada: Virtu-WIL and Riipen: Level Up (Government of Canada 2022a; Government of Canada, 2024). Additionally, the federal government invested \$17.1 million to create and scale WIL opportunities for 22,300 students through the Business + Higher Education Roundtable over three years (2022–2025) to expand the number of placements available to Canadian PSE students (Government of Canada, 2022b).<sup>1</sup>

In Ontario, the Progressive Conservative Government elected in 2018 made clear its interest in the connection between PSE and the labour market through negotiated Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) between the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and each publicly assisted institution. Institutional funding is explicitly tied to graduates' labour market outcomes (Government of Ontario, 2020).<sup>2</sup> Provincial investments to support the successful transition of students to the labour market include the Pre-Apprenticeship Training Program (\$18.3 million), Mitacs (\$39.5 million), upskilling and re-skilling through Community Employment Services offered by Employment Ontario, as well as programs for internationally educated professionals and students with disabilities (Government of Ontario, 2021; Government of Ontario, 2023a; Government of Ontario, 2023b).

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<sup>1</sup> The Government of Canada also provides transition support for students from groups that have traditionally experienced barriers to labour market success: the [Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program](#), the [First Nations and Inuit Youth Employment Strategy](#) and the [Racialized Newcomer Women](#) pilot are examples. Additional federal funding is allocated to employers through the [Student Work Placement Program](#) to support PSE students in paid work experience.

<sup>2</sup> The 2020–2025 SMAs include metrics such as graduate employment rates in related fields, EL and graduate earnings.



To prepare their graduates for success, PSIs provide a wide range of services, programs and initiatives to support the school-to-work transition. Institutions offer career services through their student support centres, dedicated career departments or experiential learning/work-integrated learning departments. Resources include workshops and online self-help tools for résumé building, interview preparation and career advising/counselling. Many institutions provide job-searching tools and networking resources.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these transition-specific supports, institutions provide access to a variety of formats of experiential learning (EL) or work-integrated learning (WIL) that are program specific.<sup>4</sup> These experiences are meant to give students the opportunity to apply program knowledge in a workplace setting, developing employability and interpersonal skills. Many institutions also provide targeted services for international students or specific groups in partnership with community agencies/funders.<sup>5</sup>

Students invest in their future career success by engaging their networks and taking advantage of the opportunities provided by their institutions to set themselves up for a smooth transition from PSE to the labour market. Research indicates that social networks help people access resources and social capital (Corak & Piriano, 2011; Khan & Lehrer, 2013; Lehman, 2019) and are a valuable resource for making connections and accessing job-related information. Social networks, coupled with postsecondary credentials, offer a ‘leg up’ in the labour market after graduation (Ooka & Wellman, 2003; Graham et al., 2015; Lehmann, 2019). Labour market data indicate that students who participated in WIL or other types of EL during their PSE are more likely to find work related to their fields of study and receive higher earnings than those who do not (Finnie & Miyairi, 2017; Wynoch, 2019; Yin, 2021). Given the impact of this type of programming during PSE, it is important that campus service providers are accessible and proactive in their engagement with students, as many students who need career services do not use them (Dietche, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> Institutions support students’ networking skills development through targeted programming. For example, George Brown College and the University of Toronto have partnered with organizations such as Ten Thousand Coffees to facilitate the networking process for students. Institutions maintain alumni networks that are designed in part to help current students and recent graduates connect with alumni from their programs.

<sup>4</sup> Experiential learning includes opportunities such as co-op, field placements, internships, practicums, applied research projects, capstone projects, clinical placements, service learning, work experience and industry-sponsored research projects (CEWIL, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Examples include the [Pakistan Women Advancement Program](#) at Algoma University, the [Bridge to Success](#) program for students with disabilities at Brock University and partnerships with Employment Ontario offices at a number of colleges.



While there is little research on the impact of career resources and supports in Canadian PSE, the evidence available suggests that services and education focused on career-seeking skills — as opposed to general job information — are most helpful for students (Usher & Kwong, 2014). Our study builds on this research to better understand the activities recent PSE graduates undertake to position themselves for career success, offering recommendations for government, institutions and students to support them during this transition.

## Research Questions and Methods

HEQCO surveyed and interviewed recent bachelor's degree graduates from colleges and universities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) about their school-to-work transition. Our goal was to understand which career development activities graduates engaged in and how those activities contributed to their successful transition to the labour market. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- Which activities (such as the use of networks and resources) do graduates participate in during their school-to-work transition?
- How do these activities impact their labour market outcomes?

HEQCO developed a survey that was administered by the Academica Group in summer 2023, resulting in 271 student respondents. A series of screening questions were used to isolate a sample of respondents that had graduated from a four-year bachelor's degree at a publicly assisted Ontario college or university within the previous three years.<sup>6</sup> Respondents answered questions about their labour market preparation and outcomes, and the survey included a section on demographic characteristics and questions about workplace type, sector type, academic program and activities in the labour market. Data analysis was conducted using STATA, Excel and NVivo for descriptive statistics and coding of qualitative responses to open-ended questions. Sample sizes did not allow for holding variables constant.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> HEQCO surveyed employed bachelor's degree graduates in the GTHA to limit potential regional labour market complexities. All respondents were domestic students and most (≈90%) were university degree graduates.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to acknowledge that sample size limits our analysis. It is possible there are other effects at play that would account for some of the descriptive differences observed in this report.





To supplement the survey data, survey respondents were asked to take part in semi-structured, 30-minute interviews. Eleven respondents volunteered to participate.<sup>8</sup> Interviewees were asked questions about their school-to-work transition, use of resources and reflections on their own pathways. Interview responses were coded into themes using NVivo; some of those responses are included in our findings below.

## Findings and Discussion

Most participants secured employment after graduation (85%) in a job relevant to their field of study (76%) and were satisfied with their job (72%). We identified three main factors that led to better labour market outcomes.

**Experiential learning had a significant impact on employment rate and graduates' employment in jobs related to their field of studies.**

Respondents reported that paid work (69%) and EL (72%) were the activities that made them feel most prepared for the labour market. Figure 1 shows that both were associated with significantly lower unemployment rates post-graduation.

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<sup>8</sup> Demographics were not collected for this small group of interview volunteers, however, like survey respondents, they were recent graduates of a four-year bachelor's degree in the GTHA, both employed and unemployed.



**Figure 1**

*Unemployment Rate by Student Activity and Program Characteristics*



*Note.* This figure shows unemployment rate by presence of an EL opportunity or paid work during undergraduate studies. N=264

We found that EL offers a small advantage among our survey respondents. This finding aligns with the literature: Students who participate in EL gain practical work experience, develop self-efficacy, build job-readiness and develop in-demand skills that can improve their employment outcomes (McRae & Johnston, 2016; Choy, 2009; Ramji et al., 2021; Stirling et al., 2016).<sup>9</sup>

The benefits of EL extend beyond employment status. As Figure 2 shows, respondents who participated in EL during PSE were more likely than those who did not participate to be working in a job related to their program of study (83% versus 59%). Paid work did not make a difference to whether graduates ended up working in a related field.

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<sup>9</sup> A note on terminology: HEQCO's survey asked respondents about their EL activities during PSE, providing examples that align with those included in the definition of WIL and "Other" approved by Co-operative Experiential and Work-integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL) (CEWIL, 2021). Because our survey was slightly more expansive than the formal definition of WIL, we have used EL throughout this report to stay aligned with the language used in the survey.



**Figure 2**

*Survey Respondents Who Worked in a Field Related to Their Program by Student Activity and Program Characteristics*



*Note.* This figure shows those who work in a job relevant to their current studies by presence of an EL opportunity or paid work during undergraduate studies. N=225

This finding emphasizes that industry and program-focused experience really matter when it comes to students securing a job in their field after graduation. Several studies have shown that EL is associated with a higher likelihood of obtaining a sector-relevant job, though the association with better likelihood of employment is mixed (Jackson & Collings, 2018; Martin & Rouleau, 2020, Peters et al., 2014). Our study supports the notion that EL opportunities during PSE benefit graduates when they enter the labour market and reveals that while any type of paid work during PSE is advantageous to graduates, EL opportunities, which are designed to be sector relevant, provide a slight advantage.

Interviews supported these benefits. Respondents pointed overwhelmingly to the value of practical, sector-related work experiences and many specifically referred to EL opportunities such as co-op and WIL. Some of those who did not participate in EL expressed regret for not having done so, or disappointment that it was not offered in their program. Several interviewees reported that it was challenging to promote themselves to potential employers without work experience in their sector.



## Most participants do not use the institutional resources that are available; those that do prefer practical, sector-relevant workshops and activities.

Overall, 60% of respondents said they were aware of services offered by their institution to support their school-to-work transition. Of those who were aware, 57% used these services, which amounts to 33% of our sample. Graduates who engaged with these services did so at various stages of their academic career, including a majority who continued to use institutional resources after graduation (58%). Of those who did not use any services, 40% said they did not need them, 40% did not think they were helpful, 19% did not want to talk to strangers and 18% did not know how to access institutional resources. There is significant room for institutions to improve awareness of career-transition supports and services among their student population and perhaps also greater efforts are needed to clarify how and why these services would be beneficial. As one interviewee stated:

[My institution] has a further education thing where you can take classes after you graduate. That should be more publicized. A lot of people don't know you can go back to take another course or improve your grade to help in the job search. Communicating the process and timelines would be really helpful. Half of people don't know the program exists; the other half don't understand the process.

Respondents were asked to describe which services they found helpful. They identified practical services directly related to job seeking, rating mock interviews (72%), résumé writing (71%) and technical skill workshops (69%) as the most useful. Graduates were less likely to identify career counselling (43%), undergraduate thesis projects (51%) and coursework (57%) as helpful for labour market preparation. Follow-up interviews with respondents revealed that these activities were deemed too general (i.e., non-sector specific). Interviewees also noted that lecture-style workshops without interactive or industry-specific content did not help them gain a better understanding of how to navigate the labour market. Respondents felt that career counselling and workshops would have been more helpful if they were tailored to specific programs and sectors.



## Networking has a significant and positive impact on the school-to-work transition.

In addition to institutional resources, students identified networking as a crucial element in finding satisfying employment in an industry related to their field of study.<sup>10</sup> Figure 3 shows differences in some labour market metrics depending on whether a respondent networked as part of their school-to-work transition. Compared to those who did not, graduates who networked had significantly lower unemployment rates (13% to 24%), were significantly more likely to work in a job related to their program (80% to 55%), significantly more likely to be in a job that met their expectations (52% to 37%) and significantly more likely to be satisfied in their current job (74% to 48%). Providing PSE students with opportunities to engage in networking while on placement can contribute to a sense of belonging in the professional space (Garant-Jones et al., 2024). The impact of networking was discussed in interviews as well, with respondents saying it was critical not only to land a job, but to get one they actually wanted. The value of individual networking was summarized by one interviewee:

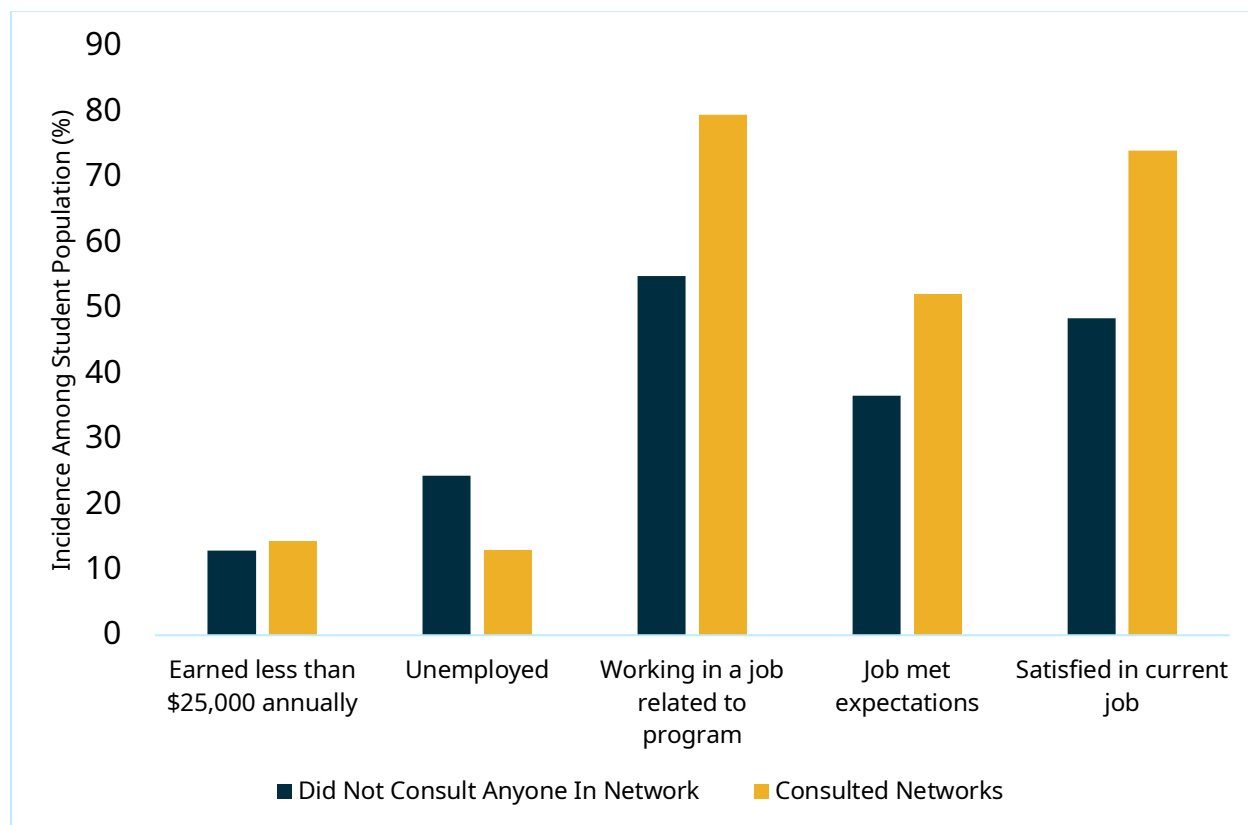
Everyone stresses higher education and how it should be easy to land a job, but once you have your degree, you realize education isn't everything, it's hands-on experience and networks [that matter]. The importance of the practical component was not emphasized enough during my degree.

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<sup>10</sup> HEQCO's survey asked respondents which networks they accessed when transitioning from school to work (e.g., parents/siblings, extended family members, peers, previous employers, professors/undergraduate instructors, undergraduate career services, other, nobody).



**Figure 3**  
*Labour Market Outcomes by Student Networking Activities*



*Note.* This figure shows labour market outcomes (those who earned less than \$25k, were unemployed, were working in a related field, whose job met their expectations and who were satisfied in their job) by graduate networking activity. N=271

These findings may connect to the positive impacts of WIL participation generally. EL experiences, such as WIL, provide opportunities for students to engage with employers and mentors that can provide advice and make introductions when students are looking for a job. Graduates can also seek out and engage in their own networks and access networking programs and activities facilitated by their institutions. However, most respondents in our study did not use their institutional services. This suggests that students and recent graduates can take advantage of the transition supports offered by their institutions, and that it is important for institutions to make sure more students know about them.



# Recommendations and Conclusions

Graduates' first jobs set them up for their careers, so it is important to understand how to best support and facilitate the school-to-work transition. Students' ability to effectively shift from school to the labour market matters for Ontario's economic viability and prosperity. Our study shows that while many graduates achieve early career success, participation in EL, support from networks and practical, sector-relevant career development programs offered by institutions contributed to better labour market outcomes. We offer three recommendations toward that goal.

**Ensuring that every PSE student can participate in program-specific WIL and EL programs will improve their labour market outcomes.**

This study reinforces the labour market advantage of participation in WIL or EL during PSE. Respondents who had participated in EL during PSE were more likely to be employed and more likely to be working in a job related to their program. Further, while any type of paid work during PSE is advantageous, EL opportunities are more advantageous, as they are designed to be sector relevant. By continuing to invest in providing high-quality EL opportunities relevant to students' fields of study, governments, institutions and employers will contribute to improve labour market outcomes for students.

**Developing career-preparation services and networking opportunities that are practical and specific to industry needs is an effective way for institutions to support students and graduates.**

General career-development workshops were not considered helpful by the graduates in our study, who indicated that practical, sector-relevant workshops were most helpful to their school-to-work transition. Sector-specific activities provided opportunities to develop professional networks, practice self-advocacy and promotional skills and develop an understanding of the world of work in their field or industry. Helpful activities



include industry-specific résumé-writing workshops, information on work etiquette and practices, mock interviews and facilitated networking opportunities (such as Ten Thousand Coffees) with employers in the relevant sector.

## Increasing efforts to make students aware of existing school-to-work programming would benefit both students and postsecondary institutions.

Most institutions have programs in place to support students during the transition from PSE to work, but many students in our study were unaware of them, and some did not use them because they were not convinced they would be helpful. Bolstering efforts to advertise workshops, tools and support services could help students better take advantage of them.

Examples of institutional services highlighted by students include skills workshops related to work etiquette and practices, résumé and cover letter workshops, language/writing centres, academic advising, mock interviews, career advising, accessibility offices and campus mental health services. Institutions can focus on increasing awareness and building programming that is relevant and useful, but students also need to seek out and meaningfully engage with the programming offered by their institutions.

Our study adds context to the research around the school-to-work transition for PSE graduates and the importance of getting a solid start in the labour market. The positive labour market outcomes for bachelor's degree holders did not hold steady for all respondents in our sample. Our data reveal significant differential outcomes for respondents with particular identity characteristics, such as graduates with disabilities and those who self-identified as coming from low-income families. This important finding deserves additional research and analysis and forthcoming work from HEQCO will provide a detailed breakdown of findings by individual identity characteristics.





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