
The Class of 2003

High School Follow-Up Survey

Prepared by:

R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd.

The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation

June 2007

The Foundation wishes to thank the governments of Alberta, Manitoba, New Brunswick and Saskatchewan for participating in and facilitating this project.

Summary

Introduction

The Class of 2003 presents new research on barriers to post-secondary education (PSE)¹ in Canada. Building on the barriers identified in the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation's 2002 and 2004 editions of *The Price of Knowledge*, this survey presents new data on barriers relating to interest and motivation, finances, and academic requirements. The box below lists types of barriers to PSE which have been defined previously.

This report examines the extent to which various factors limit access to PSE and how these barriers interact. More specifically, the study presents the impact of multiple barriers on “first-generation students” (i.e., the first generation in a family to pursue PSE), and explores the PSE aspirations, attainment and barriers of Aboriginal students.

About the Survey

The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, in conjunction with the provinces of New Brunswick, Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan, initiated *The Class of 2003* survey. It was administered in the four participating provinces between May 2005 and July 2006² and intended to provide data on high school experiences and reasons for not pursuing PSE. R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. was contracted to develop and administer the survey on behalf of the Foundation. Both the Foundation and the provincial partners participated in the design of the survey.

Surveys were completed by 4,989 respondents from a valid sample³ of 9,193 former Grade 12 students, representing a valid response rate of 54 per cent.⁴ The survey does not include students who dropped

Types of Barriers

Informational/Motivational. Motivational or informational barriers are characterized either as a lack of motivation to pursue PSE or a lack of information about the importance, advantages and cost of PSE. Informational barriers may include lack of awareness of student loans or lack of understanding of career and education options.

Financial. Three types of financial barriers have been defined in previous research: price constraints (i.e., the price of education is considered too high for the expected return), cash constraints (which affect those who cannot raise sufficient money to attend a post-secondary institution) and debt aversion (where an individual is unwilling to borrow to finance PSE). Although not a financial barrier *per se*, the role of a strong job market in possibly attracting people away from PSE has also been identified as a cause of not pursuing PSE.

Academic. Academic barriers exist when difficulties meeting course and grade requirements for admission to post-secondary programs dissuade possible students from pursuing higher education.

out of high school prior to Grade 12. Data from each of the provinces were weighted to reflect differences among provinces in terms of the size of the Grade 12 student population. Details on the methodology used are presented in Appendix 1.

1. Unless otherwise noted, for the purpose of this report PSE students are defined as students in college, university, apprenticeship and trades, and private vocational programs.
2. The Manitoba survey was administered one year later than in the other provinces (June to July 2006). All other surveys were administered between May and December 2005.
3. Non-valid responses included not-in-service telephone numbers, non-qualifiers (e.g., some respondents were in one upgrading course during 2003 rather than being full-time high school students), business numbers, etc.
4. Additional screening was completed with 4,528 former high school students in Alberta in order to complete 143 additional surveys with Aboriginal students. The sample used in the additional screening was not used to calculate the valid response rate.

Barriers to Post-Secondary Education and Training

Information/Motivation

Indecision about a career or lack of interest accounted for 38 per cent of respondents having not entered a post-secondary program. Youth who had dropped out of a post-secondary program were most likely to have done so because they had lost interest in the program (27 per cent), felt the program was not what they expected (25 per cent) or were undecided on a career (13 per cent). Taken together, these findings indicate that there exists a large segment of youth for whom lack of interest or indecision regarding a career is standing in the way of PSE activities.

This group of youth is less likely to prepare for post-high school activities prior to Grade 12. Specifically, 45 per cent of respondents reporting a lack of interest or motivation in attending a post-secondary program decided on a post-secondary path after Grade 12, compared to 30 per cent of students who went on to PSE. The timing of the decision means that these youth would not have been able to prepare for PSE in terms of course requirements or marks required to obtain entrance into a particular program or institution.

Finances

Finances also played an important role in deterring respondents in *The Class of 2003* from pursuing PSE. Thirty per cent of respondents who had not pursued PSE stated that they did not pursue a post-secondary program because of financial issues. Furthermore, 21 per cent of respondents who had entered a post-secondary program but later discontinued it identified financial issues as the cause. The most common financial concern reported by respondents who had never entered a PSE program for financial reasons was concern about getting into too much debt (25 per cent). Notably, most respondents who reported a financial barrier reported *more than one type* of concern with regard to financing their education. In fact, 41 per cent of respondents who described themselves as facing financial barriers

reported that getting into debt, not being able to get enough money to attend and viewing post-secondary programs as too expensive were all concerns.

Another factor influencing youth was the attraction of the job market. One-quarter (24 per cent) of respondents who had never gone on to a post-secondary program for financial reasons said it was because they “wanted to earn money right away.” The strong job market in Alberta in particular appeared to have an effect on post-secondary transitions for *The Class of 2003*: Alberta respondents were more likely to discontinue PSE because they were working (11 per cent) than were those in the other provinces (six per cent). Respondents in Alberta were also more likely to take a break after high school to work than were respondents elsewhere.

Students who had not attended a post-secondary institution at the time of the survey but hoped to do so in future faced more responsibility for financing their own education than did youth proceeding directly from high school to a post-secondary program. Students enrolled in a post-secondary program most often described family support as their primary source of funding (28 per cent); in contrast, respondents *not* attending a post-secondary program were more likely to anticipate relying on government student loans (31 per cent) and personal savings (19 per cent) to finance their education. Furthermore, students relying on government student loans more often reported financial barriers (36 per cent) than did those relying on family support (12 per cent).

Academic

Not surprisingly, respondents with reported grades of 80 per cent or higher were unlikely to report academic difficulties in gaining access to a post-secondary program. More telling is the percentage of respondents with lower grades who reported having difficulties meeting entrance or program requirements. Almost one-half of respondents with reported grades of less than 60 per cent and 27 per cent of respondents with grades in the “C” range (i.e., 60 to 69 per cent) reported academic difficulties in gaining entry to or continuing PSE.

Most respondents from *The Class of 2003* felt that high school had not prepared them sufficiently in some way for PSE or work (83 per cent). The most common areas where respondents felt that high school had not adequately prepared them for post-high school life were study habits (35 per cent), information about career choices (20 per cent) and academic preparation for PSE (18 per cent). One of the most common suggestions from respondents was that more information should be provided about post-secondary options (16 per cent).

Interacting Barriers

First-Generation Students

First-generation students (i.e., those youth who are the first in their family to attend a post-secondary program) did not report notably more barriers to PSE than did children of parents with some PSE experience. However, examination of first-generation students' primary source of financial support for post-secondary education activities reveals that first-generation students were twice as likely as students

whose parents had some PSE experience to rely on government student loans to finance their education.⁵ Furthermore, first-generation students were more likely to face academic barriers—youth whose parents had not attended a post-secondary program were less likely to report grades of 80 per cent or higher (25 per cent) than were youth whose parents had some PSE experience (39 per cent).

Access to Post-Secondary Programs for Aboriginal Students

Aboriginal students enrolled in a post-secondary program generally reported educational aspirations which were similar to those of other students, although Aboriginal post-secondary students were more likely to aspire to a certificate or diploma. However, Aboriginal youth were less likely to have participated in PSE: 54 per cent of Aboriginal youth surveyed were participating in or had completed a post-secondary program, compared to 73 per cent of non-Aboriginal youth. Reasons for this difference include geographic barriers, financial barriers and social barriers.

5. It should be noted that the data are not controlled for the effect of income, as income was not captured in the survey.

Summary of Findings

The *Class of 2003* survey was implemented to establish the following information:

- a) factors supporting students in their transition to PSE
- b) reasons for non-participation in PSE among former Grade 12 students from the class of 2003.

Highlighted below are the key findings for these research questions.

What factors were most important in explaining post-secondary attainment?

Based on a regression model, the following represent the most important factors influencing whether youth go on to enter post-secondary programs:

- a) *High school grades*: high school grades of 80 per cent or higher virtually assured participation in the post-secondary system.
- b) *Dependants*: respondents caring for dependants were less likely to pursue PSE.
- c) *Parents' education*: respondents reporting at least one parent with some PSE experience were more likely to enroll in a post-secondary program than those reporting parents with at most elementary- or high school-level education.
- d) *Support from parents and other significant role models*: parents were the most influential group in terms of post-secondary decisions, ahead of friends, teachers and other relatives.
- e) *Gender*: females were more likely to attend a post-secondary institution than males.
- f) *Aboriginal status*: Aboriginal respondents were less likely to pursue post-secondary studies than non-Aboriginal respondents.
- g) *Disability*: individuals who reported a disability were much less likely to enter the post-secondary system than individuals not reporting a disability.

What are the barriers to obtaining a post-secondary education?

The following barriers to participating in PSE were identified:

- a) *Informational/motivational*: The *Class of 2003* identified new information about the impact of a variety of informational and motivational barriers to pursuing higher education. Specifically, respondents not pursuing PSE were less convinced about the benefits of such an education and did not report the same level of planning for post-secondary activities as PSE continuers. Lack of information about student loans appeared to be an important barrier to PSE: a significant proportion of respondents who felt that they faced financial barriers did not know how to get information about student loans.
- b) *Financial*: The reality of financial barriers is illustrated through the types of financial support available to youth not attending a post-secondary program. Respondents not yet attending a post-secondary program were half as likely to expect to rely on non-loan family support as youth already in a post-secondary program. Concern about getting into too much debt was the greatest financial barrier to non-attendees who cited financial barriers to PSE (25 per cent), although a similar percentage decided not to pursue PSE because they wanted to earn money right away through employment.
- c) *Academic*: Course and grade requirements were described as a barrier by 27 per cent of youth who did not go on to PSE. Only 45 per cent of respondents with grades lower than 60 per cent went on to a post-secondary program, compared to 89 per cent of respondents with grades of 80 per cent or higher. Also, students with lower grades were more likely to attend a college, vocational or apprenticeship program.

d) *Social*: parents and guardians were the most important social influence on youth decisions about post-secondary activities, with over 90 per cent of respondents reporting that their parents or guardians encouraged their decision to pursue PSE.

What research questions should be pursued?

This study found that the majority of individuals not pursuing PSE wished to do so in the future. Despite this desire, data from the *Youth in Transition Survey Cycle 3* indicate that only one-quarter of youth not originally attending a post-secondary institution in 1999 were in a PSE program by 2003.²⁴ As a result, further research needs to be done to better understand what influences PSE take-up among students who do not proceed to PSE directly from high school. The current research underlines the fact that individuals are far less likely to undertake a post-

secondary program once they have children (44 per cent compared to 72 per cent of respondents without children). One would expect that barriers to PSE would increase as time passes after high school, but few studies follow youth five to ten years after high school.

It would also be beneficial to conduct more research on the effects/effectiveness of career development programming. Emerging career development theory recognizes a combination of lack of exploration and validation of one's own interests and abilities, along with lack of information about careers and education/training pathways, as among the most powerful underlying factors behind lack of "motivation" or "interest." Given the finding in this report that career indecision/lack of interest was a key issue in not accessing and persisting in PSE, further research on the influence of career development planning would help to understand barriers associated with motivation or interest.

24. *Follow-up on Education and Labour Market Pathways of Young Canadians Aged 18-20—Results from YITS Cycle 3.*