



Exploring Challenges to Accessing Post-Secondary Education for At-Risk Youth/Young Adults

Executive Summary

Prepared for Employment and Social Development Canada

Supplier Name: Phoenix SPI
Contract Number: G9292-191868-001-CY
Contract Value: \$79,987.05 (including HST)
Award Date: 2018-10-31
Delivery Date: 2019-02-15

Registration Number: POR 062-18

For more information on this report, please contact the department at: nc-por-rop-gd@hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca

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Final Report

Prepared for Employment and Social Development Canada
Supplier name: Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc.
February 2019

This public opinion research report presents the results of qualitative research conducted to explore challenges to accessing post-secondary education for at-risk youth and young adults

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PDF

Cat. No.: Em20-119/2019E-PDF
ISBN: 978-0-660-29462-9

ESDC

Cat. No. : POR-103-02-19E

Étudier les défis auxquels font face les jeunes et les jeunes adultes à risque pour accéder aux études postsecondaires.

Rapport final

Préparé pour Emploi et Développement social Canada
Nom du fournisseur : Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc.
Février 2019

Ce rapport de recherche sur l'opinion publique présente les résultats de la recherche qualitative menée afin d'étudier les défis auxquels font face les jeunes et les jeunes adultes à risque pour accéder aux études postsecondaires.

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PDF

N° de cat. : Em20-119/2019F-PDF
ISBN : 978-0-660-29463-6

EDSC

N° de cat. : POR-103-02-19F

Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary.....	4
1.1. Background and Objectives	4
1.2. Methodology	4
1.3. Key Findings	5

1. Executive Summary

Phoenix Strategic Perspectives (Phoenix SPI) was commissioned by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) to conduct qualitative research to explore challenges to accessing post-secondary education.

1.1. Background and Objectives

Post-secondary education (PSE) provides both individual and societal benefits and is becoming a baseline requirement for success in the labour market. However, certain groups, such as youth and young adults from low-income families, face challenges with accessing and persisting in PSE. Recent research by Statistics Canada (2017) indicates that only 47 percent of Canadian 19-year-olds in the lowest income quintile were enrolled in PSE, compared to 79 percent in the highest income quintile.

The purpose of this research was to gain insights into awareness, attitudes, and behaviours related to barriers to PSE access faced by vulnerable, at-risk youth and young adults in Canada. Research results will be used to facilitate policy and program development related to helping more at-risk youth transition from high school to PSE, and transition to the labour market. It will also help identify remaining gaps with respect to early interventions to support young people at risk. Specifically, findings from this research project will be used by ESDC's Learning Branch for the following: to inform policy and service design as well as to strengthen recommended policy options; to identify interventions that could be scaled-up through current programming or new initiatives; and, to develop a knowledge base and lessons learned on new and innovative ways of delivering services.

1.2. Methodology

To meet the research objectives, qualitative research was conducted with Canadians 16 to 25 years of age from a mix of the following sub-audiences:

- youth (16-18 year olds) and young adults (19-25 year olds) living outside of urban centres;
- first generation immigrants, including refugees and those who arrived in Canada as older children;
- youth and young adults with disabilities; and
- young adults at-risk.¹

The research included focus groups (in-person and online) and in-depth telephone interviews. Six in-person focus groups were conducted with young adults in Toronto and Montreal (three groups in each location), with groups in Montreal conducted in French. One group in each location was conducted with first generation immigrants, persons with disabilities, and young adults at risk. Four online focus groups (two English, two French) were conducted with youth and young adults living outside of urban centres. One group in each language was conducted with youth (16-18 year olds) and the other with young adults (19-25 year olds). In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with Indigenous youth and young adults from across the country, and with youth and young adults with disabilities. In

¹ This included individuals with parents who have not completed any PSE, individuals who did not complete high school on time or at all, individuals who started a PSE program but did not complete it, individuals who are low-income, and Indigenous youth/young adults living off-reserves.

total, 10 interviews were conducted with Indigenous youth and young adults and five with persons with disabilities.

The in-person focus groups lasted 90 minutes each and were conducted December 3-4, 2018. The online focus also lasted 90 minutes each and were conducted on December 11, 2018 in English and January 3, 2019 in French. Telephone interviews lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes and were conducted between December 15, 2018 and January 5, 2019. Participants were paid an honorarium to thank them for taking part in the research. Persons with disabilities were paid \$150 and all other participants were paid \$100.²

All steps of the project complied with *The Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Research*.

The investigators for this study were Philippe Azzie and Alethea Woods. Philippe moderated the in-person focus groups and the French online focus groups. Alethea moderated the English online focus groups. Both conducted the telephone interviews, and both contributed to the preparation of the final report.

This research was qualitative in nature, not quantitative. As such, the results provide an indication of participants' views about the issues explored, but they cannot be generalized to the full population of members of the targeted audience segments.

1.3. Key Findings

Context

Participants were asked to identify key challenges they face on daily basis as well as key challenges they expect to face in the future. The most commonly identified daily challenges related to finances and the cost of living, including finding a job/employment. The only other routinely identified challenge concerned organization and time management. When it came to future challenges, the focus tended to be on managing various responsibilities of adult life. This included finding a stable job/a successful career path, finding affordable living accommodations, acquiring basic life skills, achieving financial stability, supporting a family, taking care of parents, and managing debt.

Most participants indicated that, as they neared completion of high school, they thought about continuing their studies at the post-secondary level. Reasons for not pursuing or not completing post-secondary education tended to relate to one of three issues: preference or a deliberate choice, indecision or uncertainty about a course of study, and various challenges or obstacles. Reasons given by participants to explain why they did not consider continuing on to post secondary education included a desire to acquire practical work-related experience (something they did not think they could obtain through PSE), a desire to enter the job market as soon as possible, financial considerations and/or limitations, and uncertainty or indecision about what to study.

At some point in high school, most participants said they discussed options or plans for after they graduated. The types of issues typically discussed included: career interests, plans or preferences; whether post-secondary education is necessary or worthwhile for the

² A larger honorarium was provided to persons with disabilities in acknowledgement of the additional costs, such as accessible transportation or a personal support worker, one may incur in order to participate in the in-person focus groups.

individual, given the career path one is interested in; potentially lucrative careers/career paths and prospects of various career paths (e.g., employability, salary levels, job rates in various fields); balancing what one would like to study against the likelihood of finding a job with a degree in the area; the requirements and/or pre-requisites for acceptance to various programs, and; the ability or capacity for the individual to adapt to a post-secondary education environment.

Attitudes towards PSE

Participants were asked to complete a brief exercise as a way of exploring their impressions of post-secondary education. They were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with four statements using a 5-point scale where “1” meant strongly disagree and “5” meant strongly agree.

- There was widespread agreement that *a good job is essential to having a high quality of life*.
- In addition, most participants also agreed that *it's hard to know what to study because the job market is changing so quickly*.
- The statement, *a post-secondary degree, diploma or certificate is essential for getting a good job*, elicited a noticeably mixed reaction (some agreed with the statement and others disagreed).
- The statement, *In the future, good jobs will require more education*, tended to elicit agreement or neutrality.

When asked what attitudes or views people hold that might prevent them from continuing their education after high school, participants tended to mention the following:

- self-doubt or a perceived lack of ability/capability,
- a perceived lack of relevance of post-secondary education,
- a perceived inability to adapt to the post-secondary environment,
- the impression that certain obligations or responsibilities should take priority over one's desire to pursue post-secondary education, and
- the assumption that the costs associated with PSE outweigh its potential benefits.

Most research participants expressed interest in continuing their education at the post-secondary level, either now or at some point in the future. While a variety of specific reasons were provided to explain why, most were job or career-related. This included the view that a post-secondary degree is a requirement for one's chosen/preferred career path, or that it is a minimal requirement in a number of job fields/areas.

Barriers to PSE

Participants identified a variety of potential barriers or obstacles to continuing one's education at the post-secondary level. Among these, barriers of a financial nature were regularly identified. While financial barriers were important, a variety of non-financial barriers also were routinely identified and considered important. These included having to work and study at the same time, family/domestic issues and responsibilities, one's experience in high school, lack of emotional support or any kind of support system, barriers linked to physical or mental health issues, and self-doubt/lack of confidence.

Suggestions to help address challenges and barriers included more financial aid and assistance, such as free post-secondary education, lower tuition fees, and more financial support for people with less/lower income; more student housing or low rent accommodations; more supports at the high school level, with a focus on better transitioning to the post-secondary environment, and; more (and better) accommodations and supports for students with physical and mental health issues.

There was a virtual consensus that mental and physical health plays an important role in influencing one's plans for the future. Similarly, nearly everyone agreed that family and friends/peers play an important role in influencing one's plans for the future. That said, the influence of family, particularly parents, was seen as more important than that of friends/acquaintances.

Guidance or mentoring programs

Most participants said they met a guidance counsellor during their time in high school. Assessments of the helpfulness of guidance counselling were mixed. While assessments tended to range from neutral to moderately positive, some participants expressed dissatisfaction or disappointment with the service. Those who expressed satisfaction usually said that the meetings provided clarification. The guidance counsellor helped them confirm certain options regarding post-secondary education and/or prospective career paths or helped them clarify the requirements associated with various PSE programs of study.

Reasons for dissatisfaction among those who had met with a guidance counsellor included the perception of being treated like a unit to be processed or a problem to be dealt with instead of a person to be guided, limited access to/interaction with counsellors, and the impression that counsellors were more focused on getting them through high school than helping them prepare for PSE or a future career.

Relatively few participants recall discussing student financial assistance with guidance counsellors or being provided with information resources. Suggestions for improving counselling services included:

- having a lower ratio of students to counsellors;
- ensuring more engagement with students throughout high school, not just in the senior grades;
- hiring younger counsellors who students might relate better to;
- providing more of a focus on career planning/options;
- providing more information on potential financial services for students;
- offering a more tailored approach to dealing with students' individual needs (e.g. students with a learning disability, students with a mental health issue, students with personal problems);
- taking a more proactive approach to orientation (e.g. earlier interventions/looking for amber lights); and
- offering more linkages/connections to counsellors in post-secondary institutions to help pave the way for a seamless transition.

Feedback on mentoring programs was very limited, and relatively few participants had taken part in an actual mentorship program offered in or out of school. Many participants who

were not involved in any mentoring programs, nonetheless, said they would have been interested in taking part in one had any been available.

Among those who did take part in a mentoring program, suggested improvements included more or longer job placement opportunities, more job shadowing opportunities, and more emphasis on the development of life skills (e.g. how to do taxes, how to find appropriate housing, how to manage personal finances, managing debt).

Beyond guidance counselling and mentoring programs, the following suggestions were provided as ways of helping individuals interested in continuing their studies:

- peer support programs/services;
- co-op programs and job shadowing opportunities;
- more adaptable/flexible scheduling of classes in post-secondary programs;
- more resources devoted to emotional/psychological support/counselling;
- seminars or workshops (e.g. managing time and organization, what to know about student loans and loan repayment, getting back to school after a lengthy absence or hiatus);
- more information on transferable skills from one program of study to another; and
- support for students studying outside their region or away from home.

Financing of PSE

There was a widespread assumption that a person's financial situation is an important factor when it comes to whether or not they attend college or university. While not the only factor at play, it was routinely described as very important or one of the most important factors affecting PSE attendance.

Most participants have not taken any course or training on managing personal finances. Those who said they had identified the following as topics covered in these courses or training: budgeting, credit and loans, money management, interest/interest rates, savings, saving accounts/banking. A number of research participants said they are saving money, but relatively few are setting money aside specifically for their post-secondary education. Awareness of registered educational savings plans (RESPs) tended to be limited, and those who were aware of them tended to have very little knowledge of them.

There was widespread reluctance among participants to borrow money to finance their post-secondary education. Moreover, most participants said they had not considered borrowing money to finance their post-secondary education, either from a financial institution or from a family member or friend. The main concern when it came to borrowing from a financial institution was the ability to pay back the loan. Additional concerns included the consequences of not being able to repay the loan (e.g. carrying a permanent debt load or acquiring a bad credit rating). Reluctance to borrow from family members was most likely based on the burden this would place on family members and family members not having the financial resources.

Awareness of financial support available to people who want to attend college or university tended to be limited and general (e.g. scholarships, grants, bursaries, and loans). Asked where they would look for information about such support, participants generally mentioned the Internet or *Google*, college and university websites, and government websites. Information about financial support considered useful included the nature of the support (i.e.

a grant or a loan), amounts available, interest rates, repayment options and requirements, and eligibility criteria.

There was a widespread sense that what is available in terms of financial assistance helps address or minimize certain barriers, but that it does not eliminate them. Many participants indicated that financial assistance, such as a student loan, makes post-secondary education a realistic option for them. Many others, however, gave a qualified affirmative response, expressed uncertainty, or said no. Regarding the latter, the main reason for saying that financial assistance would not make PSE an option was uncertainty about the ability to pay back loans or unwillingness to incur debt.

The contract value was \$79,987.05 (including HST).

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