

## Stakeholder Summary

### Drop-outs More Likely in First Year but Numbers Lower than Previously Thought

The first year of postsecondary education (PSE) is a critical time for students, with most “drop-outs” taking place during this period. However, simply looking at an institution’s “drop-out” figures only tells a part of the story, missing students who switch programs or institutions, or those who return to resume their education after some time away.

A new study published by the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)** finds that overall leave rates are lower and graduation rates are higher when looked at from a system-wide perspective that acknowledges the diversity of pathways for students once enrolled in PSE. *Patterns of Persistence in Postsecondary Education: New Evidence for Ontario* says programs and initiatives aimed at improving persistence, also known as student retention, should examine the issue from this viewpoint, and not solely look at institutional “drop-out” rates as these can be misleading.

### Project Description

The study is based on data from the Youth In Transition Survey (YITS-A), which is designed to track major transitions in young people’s lives, particularly with respect to education. The students who participated in this national study were initially recruited at age 15 (1999) and follow-up surveys were undertaken every two years until they turn 22-23. Previous studies of postsecondary retention, meanwhile, have typically been restricted to following students only at a given institution from the time they entered into their second year. The use of YITS-A data allows for a much longer-term analysis, and permits a greater number of factors to be considered, including identification of underrepresented and minority groups, background information like family income and links to performance on the standardized Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test, which was also completed by the study participants at age 15.

### Findings

Among both college and university students, switching and leaving rates are highest in the first year of PSE and decline substantially over the course of the program. However, the overall leaving rates for college and university are quite different when compared to the rest of Canada. For college students, 23 per cent of those who start a program in Ontario leave without graduating or directly switching to another program within the first three years, which is slightly higher than the national average. Conversely, the leave rate for Ontario university students is significantly lower than the rest of Canada, with only 7.4 per cent leaving PSE entirely by their fourth year, as opposed to 18.4 per cent nationally.

By far the most common reason given for leaving or switching programs was “Didn’t Like It/Not For Me”, accounting for nearly 50 per cent of college students and just over 35 per cent of university students.

Financial constraints were much further down the list of concerns, behind health/personal reasons, marks that were too low and wanting to enter the workforce.

At both the national and provincial level, certain identifiable groups appear to have significantly higher leave rates than others. College and university students with disabilities and those from low-income or single parent families show greater risk of leaving PSE altogether. In addition, university students from rural backgrounds, Aboriginal students and those whose parents did not attend PSE, also known as “first generation” students, show greater risk of leaving.

Because of the breadth of data in the YITS-A survey, the study identified a variety of factors affecting persistence, which typical institutional data could not. This analysis can allow for more effective policy/program creation by treating students like individuals who may be influenced by a number of factors. However, access to this type of information is increasingly difficult with fewer of these in depth, multi-year surveys taking place.

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