

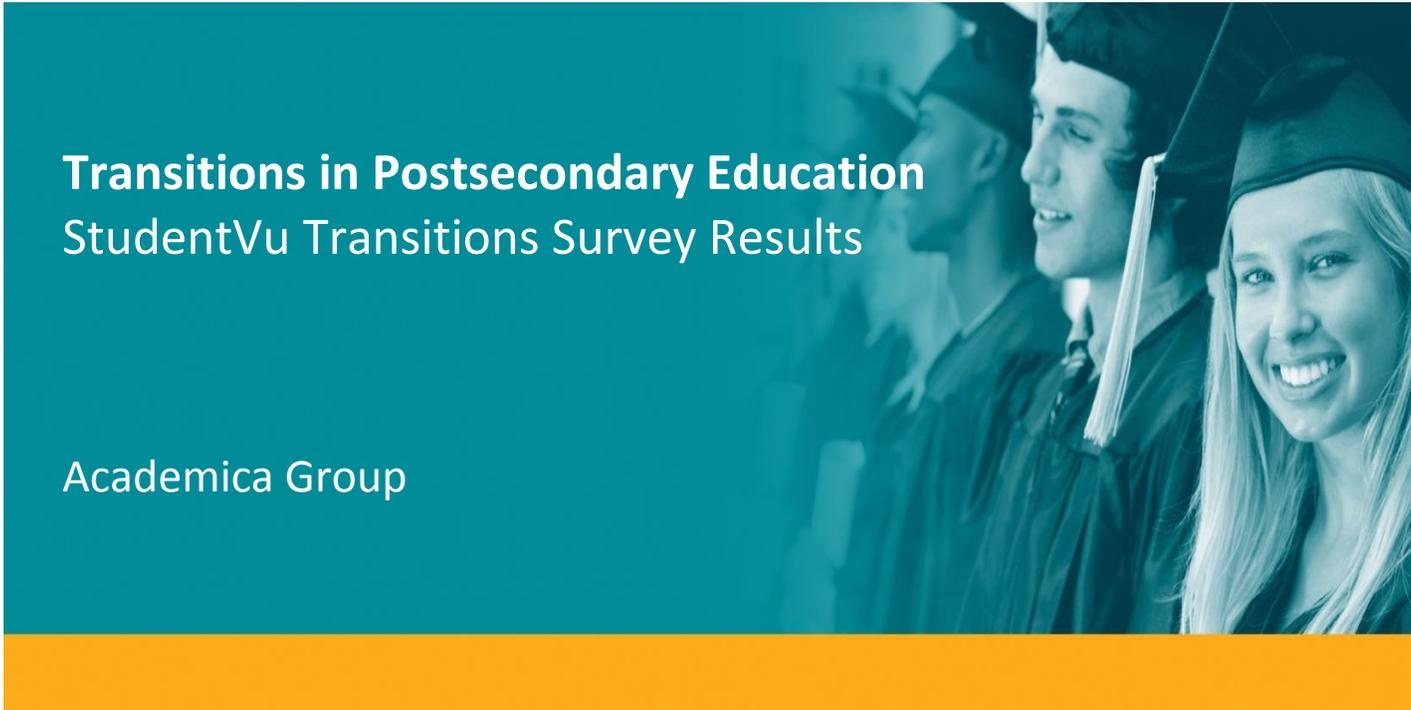


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Transitions in Postsecondary Education StudentVu Transitions Survey Results

Academica Group



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Executive Summary

This report was requested by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to support its sixth annual conference, *Transitions: Learning across Borders, Sectors and Silos*. It presents a customized analysis of findings from a survey undertaken in fall 2015 with Academica Group's StudentVu Panel to gather the perspectives of current students and recent graduates on their experiences transitioning into, through and out of postsecondary education (PSE). The report is organized around these three transitions, presenting key findings, strengths in current processes and challenges barriers encountered by students for each.

Key Findings

- Most students, especially college students, applied to and attended postsecondary education with their ensuing career in mind. This appeared to affect their choice of institution, the activities they participated in during education, and their interest in career-related events and workshops at the institution.
- Students experienced the most challenges during their application process. A lack of centralized information and a sudden change in expectations from high school were highlighted as points of difficulty for many students.
- Students experienced challenges with information access throughout their postsecondary career. Their comments and responses throughout the survey highlighted the need for more centralized and useful information about the application process, about courses and program details, and about available supports and contacts for current students in particular.
- Current students felt positively about their job opportunities and options post-graduation, and hoped that they would be able to participate in experiential learning opportunities, networking opportunities and career-related workshops at their postsecondary institution prior to entering the workforce.
- Many panelists who identified as being in or looking for a position in the workforce were currently employed in full-time, permanent positions that either moved them closer to or satisfied their career goals. They were also typically employed in roles that were either directly or indirectly related to their education, rather than in a completely unrelated field.

Introduction

This report was requested by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to support its sixth annual conference, *Transitions: Learning across Borders, Sectors and Silos*. It presents a customized analysis of findings from a survey undertaken in fall 2015 with Academica Group's StudentVu Panel to gather the perspectives of current students and recent graduates on their experiences transitioning into, through and out of postsecondary education (PSE). The survey was designed to gain a better understanding of these three key transitions in the student experience from a student perspective, and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of current processes and support systems presently in place.

Method

The StudentVu Transitions Survey was conducted online with members of Academica's StudentVu Panel.¹ The survey instrument, developed collaboratively between Academica and HEQCO, consisted of 48 questions separated into three categories: the transition into PSE from high school, the transition through PSE from first year to graduation, and the transition out of PSE into the workforce. This final section, evaluating the workforce transition, divided respondents into two separate streams depending on whether the respondent was a current student or a former student. Current students were asked about their expectations related to this transition, while former students were asked to reflect on their experience.

The survey opened on November 14, 2015. All panel members were sent an email invitation, followed by three email reminders to those who had not yet responded. Of the 4,659 panelists invited to participate, 1,612 successfully completed the survey, for a 35% response rate. Academica Group also collected the responses of 12 members of the future research pool and combined these cases with the StudentVu cases. The median survey completion time was 11 minutes.

Respondent Demographics

Of the 1,624 respondents, 69% were women, 28% men, 2% of another gender and 1% preferred not to answer. The respondents were mostly 18 to 24 years of age (83%), with about a tenth of respondents 25 years or older (13%). Approximately two-thirds were currently enrolled in a university undergraduate degree program (68%) and one-fifth were enrolled in a college program (21%). 1,448 panelists identified their

¹The StudentVu Panel is a national research panel composed of nearly 5,000 postsecondary students and recent graduates. These students are recruited from Academica Group's future research pool, a pool of participants from previous institution-specific or enrolment research who have expressed an interest in participating in future research with Academica. Initial registration on the StudentVu Panel requires the student to be at least 16 years of age, enrolled at a Canadian postsecondary institution and currently residing in Canada. These verified students and graduates come from a variety of postsecondary institutions and demographic backgrounds across Canada.

current primary role as students (full-time students, or returning to school in order to enter a new career/field of work), while 136 panelists identified themselves as primarily members of the workforce (not attending PSE or are attending for professional development, personal development, etc.).

The majority of current students entered PSE directly from high school, defined as attending PSE within two years of graduating high school. Students also were typically in their first year (47%) or second year (22%) of postsecondary study and were attending school full-time in an in-class/on-campus program.

Compared to Statistics Canada's summary² of postsecondary enrolment in 2013/2014, the respondent demographics show an overrepresentation of female students (69% vs. approximately 59%) and an overrepresentation of university students (approximately 72% vs. approximately 63%).

Discussion of Results

Transitioning into PSE

The transition into PSE appeared to be the most frustrating of the three transitions for respondents, as they cited a variety of challenges that they encountered during this transition. Part of the pervasiveness of these comments can be attributed to the fact that many respondents were in their first year of postsecondary study and thus had recently experienced these issues, but the emphasis on these difficulties highlights the importance of this transition and the necessity of starting postsecondary experiences off on the right foot.

When it came to student motivations for attending PSE, students were largely career-motivated. Just under two-thirds of respondents stated that one of the top three reasons that they applied to PSE was to be prepared for their chosen career (64%). This was by far the most commonly selected response, and was true for both college and university respondents. Students also commonly stated that they applied to explore options for their future (33%), an answer that was significantly more common among college students (39%).

Most students conducted their research about institutions using physical and digital materials, including institution websites (85%), viewbooks (75%) and faculty- or program-specific brochures (53%). University undergraduate students in particular used these resources in large numbers, whereas college students were less likely to report using these resources.

In terms of selecting a specific institution, the top attributes selected by respondents included having a strong reputation in a specific program area (65%) or a strong overall academic reputation (56%). College

² "Postsecondary enrolments by institution type, registration status, province and sex (Both sexes) 2013/2014" *StatsCan*. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/educ71a-eng.htm>

students were significantly more likely to say that a reputation for graduates getting good careers was an important quality, while university undergraduate students were significantly more likely to select the school's overall academic reputation as an important quality.

Location was an important factor as well, with 55% of respondents selecting this response as one of the most important qualities in a postsecondary institution. Location was also one of the most common reasons students did not attend their top choice institution (20), second only to the student not being accepted by the institution (51%).

Successes

Secondary schools appear to be doing a reasonably good job of preparing students for the postsecondary application process, with over half of students feeling completely or mostly supported by their secondary school in identifying and completing the prerequisites for their postsecondary program of choice (57%), navigating the postsecondary application process (54%), and selecting postsecondary institutions and programs to apply to (53%). In addition, one-third of respondents stated that they had no difficulties with the postsecondary application process (35%).

Challenges

Financial matters appear to be a key challenge in the transition into PSE. In the application process, one-third of students indicated that they experienced difficulty when applying for financial aid (33%), making it the most commonly experienced application difficulty. Financial matters, such as paying fees and finding financial aid, was also mentioned as the greatest obstacle in the transition for one in ten students (9%), and it was an area where students felt least supported by their secondary school.

Finding the right information presented another challenge. While students relied on a wide variety of resources to research postsecondary institutions, with institution websites and viewbooks the most popular choices, many students had difficulty finding the information they needed about the application process (27%), what to do after accepting an offer (24%), and about schools and programs (20%). This may indicate an inefficiency in how institutions display information, and students suggested that institutions improve the application process by ensuring that information for applicants is clear, easy to find and centralized in one document or on one website.

A third challenging area for students was adapting to the new life and academic expectations of PSE. These were in fact the most commonly selected greatest obstacles to the transition into PSE, with many struggling to adapt to living away from home (19%) and having difficulty meeting academic expectations related to workload and grades (16%). The adaptation to living away from home was an area that students felt their secondary school where supported them particularly poorly, with 54% stating that they felt barely or not at all supported by their secondary school in developing the necessary stress and health management skills for PSE.

Transitioning through PSE

The difficulties that students had with the transition into PSE were so pronounced that students continued to discuss these challenges and their ensuing effects on their postsecondary experience in the second set of questions. As discussed in the Challenges section below, students focused on ways that the institution could better orient them with and prepare them for the demands and processes of PSE.

Just under one-tenth of respondents had transferred institutions during their PSE (9%). Of these students, most had only transferred once (79%). Overall, they were more likely to report receiving either full or partial transfer support from the institution into which they transferred (81%) than from the institution from which they transferred (66%). Of the 5% of students who said that they had applied to transfer but did not transfer between institutions, about half said that they simply changed their mind about the transfer (49%). Other common responses included that the new institution would not accept their credits (20%), that they could not afford the transfer fees and associated costs (13%), or that a personal event such as a change in health had deterred them (12%).

Successes

Students participated in a number of different experiences to complement their learning during their postsecondary studies, with students commonly reporting that they had previously and/or were currently completing personal research (65%), participating on extracurricular teams (60%) and volunteering in their academic field (40%). Activities in which students commonly planned to participate in the future were work-integrated learning (54%) and a volunteer opportunity in their field (48%). These opportunities may fulfill the desire for more experiential and workplace-related training through the institution, which is noted later in the report regarding their expectations for institutional support when transitioning into the workforce. Of the 9% of students who had transferred between institutions, about half were satisfied with the overall speed (54%), cost (51%) and credit for completed courses (50%) related to the transfer.

Challenges

Students were still struck by the difficulty of the transition into their academic career and had a wide variety of suggestions for how their postsecondary institution could improve their first year in PSE. The pervasiveness of this comment can be attributed in part to the fact that many respondents were in their first or second year of study. However, the widespread nature of these comments indicates a need to focus on student orientation and ensuing efforts to help students acclimatize and succeed in PSE. Suggestions included improving the quality and accessibility of information for applicants (8%), improving first-year orientation through academic success workshops, increased variety of events, etc. (7%), changing the first-year workload to make for a smoother, slower transition from high school (3%), and connecting students with older students or mentors (2%).

Students were also looking for increased support throughout their academic career, both by making academic advisors a more proactive and accessible part of PSE (5%) and by better advertising mental health support and making it more accessible (3%). Some students recommended improving the institution's

communication methods, especially its website, to make it easier to find answers to questions (4%). Communication between institutions also had the lowest satisfaction score across students who had transferred in the middle of their program.

Finances still posed a challenge to students at this stage. Students largely relied on their own savings (66%) and/or their families (70%) for financial support through PSE, and over half worked while completing their PSE. In comparison with areas such as academic success, career development, and personal physical and mental wellbeing, students felt like they had less support from their school when it came to financial aid than in nearly all other areas with the exception of support in finding a job.

Transitioning out of PSE

Since the majority of participants in our surveyed panel is currently enrolled in PSE and has not yet graduated, the examination of the transition into the workforce is divided into two streams. The first set of questions gathered the expectations of the 1,448 panelists who identified themselves as current students, while the second set targeted 136 panelists who identified themselves as members of the workforce who could reflect on their transition out of PSE.

Most students are currently completing PSE with a specific career in mind (62%), or at least with a general field (35%). Since current students are commonly completing PSE with an eye to their career, they have high expectations for PSE's role in career preparation: Over two-thirds of respondents expect to be completely (27%) or mostly (41%) prepared for the workforce by their PSE. Many anticipated that they would need additional education to their current education, most commonly a university graduate degree (38%) or a professional degree (19%). Students currently enrolled in a university graduate program or a postgraduate certificate/diploma program were more likely to have made use of career-oriented resources than university undergraduate and college students. Those attending a postgraduate certificate/diploma or a professional degree program were more likely to have used career counselling or online career development programs, while those attending a university graduate degree were more likely to have used school-operated job listings; career workshops; co-ops, internships, and placements; and their professor/instructor office hours.

While students were largely optimistic about their prospects on the job market upon graduation, they offered a number of suggestions on how their schools could better aid them in this transition into what many described as a competitive market. Most commonly, they suggested that their schools introduce, increase or improve experiential learning opportunities for graduates in order to give them a broader network of contacts and experience. This comes as no surprise since, as noted previously, over half of students planned to participate in a co-op, internship or placement in the future.

Former students were largely employed. They had used more career-oriented services at their institution than had current students, suggesting that these services may be increasingly used near the end of students' postsecondary career. Both groups most commonly reported that they had used their professor or instructor's office hours, but job fairs, work-integrated learning opportunities and school-operated job

listings were more frequently used by former students.

Successes

The majority of employed former students confirmed that their education had somewhat or mostly prepared them for their position, though they were less likely to feel that they had been completely prepared. Students felt fairly positive about their prospects on the job market, with many saying that they felt “good” or “optimistic” about their options.

Seventy-three percent of our workforce respondents were currently hired, with many stating that they were hired prior to completing PSE (28%) or within the first six months (36%). Those who were hired were most commonly hired in a permanent, full-time position. Over one-quarter felt that this job satisfied their career goals (28%), while others felt that while it did not satisfy them, it did move them closer to their goals (55%). About half stated that their new job was directly related to their education (51%), and over one-quarter felt that their position was indirectly related to their education (28%) but allowed them to transfer skills and knowledge from their education into their field of work.

Challenges

Students largely felt that they would need help from their institution to transition into the workforce, and when we asked students what they hoped their institutions would do to help them with this transition, a desire for help finding a job (9%) and more networking opportunities (7%) were frequently mentioned. Around one-quarter of current students reported that they had attended a job fair (28%) or a networking event (23%). College students were less likely to participate in professor/instructor office hours, job fairs, networking events, career workshops and mock interviews – an interesting result considering their higher likelihood of approaching postsecondary school for the purpose of a career. Looking back, former students also wished that their institution had helped them find a job (22%) or taught them more job-related or practical skills in-class (20%). They also encouraged institutions to offer more career workshops (15%) and experiential learning opportunities (13%) to students.

Overall Conclusions

Key Observations

Key Observation 1: The K-12/Postsecondary Gap

Students expressed frustration with the difficulty adapting to the new expectations and demands of PSE. Many commented that the sudden increase in workload was very challenging, while others noted that they had trouble adapting to the new schedule or living away from home.

These difficulties led many students to comment later on how their institution could improve orientation to offer a variety of events that would be inclusive of a greater variety of students – such as quieter events for

more introverted students, faculty-specific events to meet potential classmates – and to offer workshops and classes that would teach students practical skills for success in PSE. Several students also recommended reducing the workload in first year to allow students to adapt to their new environment before gradually increasing the workload to typical PSE levels.

Key Observation 2: Missing Information

One of the most frequently mentioned issues across all three transitions was a lack of access to clear, centralized information. During the application period, students expressed their frustration with being unable to find useful information on their institutions and programs of interest, of being uncertain about how to proceed through the application process for each institution, and specifically with institutional websites that were not user friendly. Difficulties with information during the application period may have reduced applications to schools that were unclear about their offerings and application requirements.

During their time in PSE, students highlighted a desire to have improved access to academic advisors, accessibility and advertising of mental health supports, and access to centralized information about their current program, including program requirements. Improvement of the organization and clarity of these information points would improve students' experiences transitioning through PSE.

Key Observation 3: The Career-oriented Student

Both in their selection of a postsecondary institution and in their decisions made while at the institution, students reflect a career-based purpose in attending PSE. They selected schools that offer the best reputations overall and in their specific field of interest, and largely participated in or planned to participate in activities that would give them hands-on experience and knowledge in their field. Many students encouraged an increased connection between students and advisors to ensure that they were on the correct path throughout their postsecondary career.

This interest in a career led to an increased demand for access to career-oriented resources, such as job fairs, work-integrated learning opportunities, networking opportunities and job sites. The different frequencies at which current students and recent graduates reported accessing these opportunities suggest that students most commonly use these resources as they approach the end of their academic careers.

