Catalogue no. 81-004-X
ISSN 1710-5854

Education Matters: Insights on Education, Learning and Training in Canada

Length of Time between High School Graduation and Enrolling in Postsecondary Education: Who Delays and Who Does Not?

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^{p}	preliminary
^{r}	revised
x	suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
^{E}	use with caution
F	too unreliable to be published
*	significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

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High school graduation and eventual enrolment in postsecondary education are the norm among Canadian youth. Recent evidence suggests that the great majority of Canadian youth graduate from high school. Data from the Youth in Transition Survey, Cohort B, show that close to 80% of youth aged 18 to 20 in 1999 had obtained their high school diploma, with this share increasing to over 90% by age 26 to 28. Moreover, at age 18 to 20, about 55% of young adults had enrolled in some form of postsecondary education, with this share increasing to 81% by age 26 to 28.[1]

A typical and direct path to postsecondary education involves high school graduates completing high school in May or June of any given year and then entering postsecondary education in September, resulting in a typical gap of about three months or less. For these young adults, the path is straightforward: finish high school and immediately continue on with postsecondary studies. These students may be more academically focused, they may lack other opportunities (for paid work, volunteer work, or travel) or they may simply be under pressure by family and friends to continue their education without delay.

This article summarizes the main findings of a recent report by Hango (2011)[2] that measured median delay times between high school graduation and starting a first postsecondary program and identified the factors associated with either speeding up or slowing down this transition.

The longitudinal **Youth in Transition Survey** (YITS) provides an ideal dataset for this analysis because it tracks the same group of youth as they leave high school and transition into young adulthood. Data from Cycle 5 which was conducted in 2008 when youth were between the ages of 26 and 28 are used in this analysis, which focuses on the postsecondary education decisions of high school graduates.[3]

Box 1:
Methodology and data note

The Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) is a Canadian longitudinal survey designed to examine the patterns of, and influences on, major transitions in young people's lives, particularly with respect to education, training and work. It collects very rich information on education and provides dates of educational enrolment and educational transitions, such as high school graduation, start of a postsecondary program and graduation from a postsecondary program. Data were collected from two age groups (cohorts) of youth in the first cycle of the survey in 2000. One began its participation at age 15 (Cohort A) and the other at ages 18 to 20 (Cohort B). In this report, all five cycles of Cohort B are used, providing information every two years from 2000 to 2008.

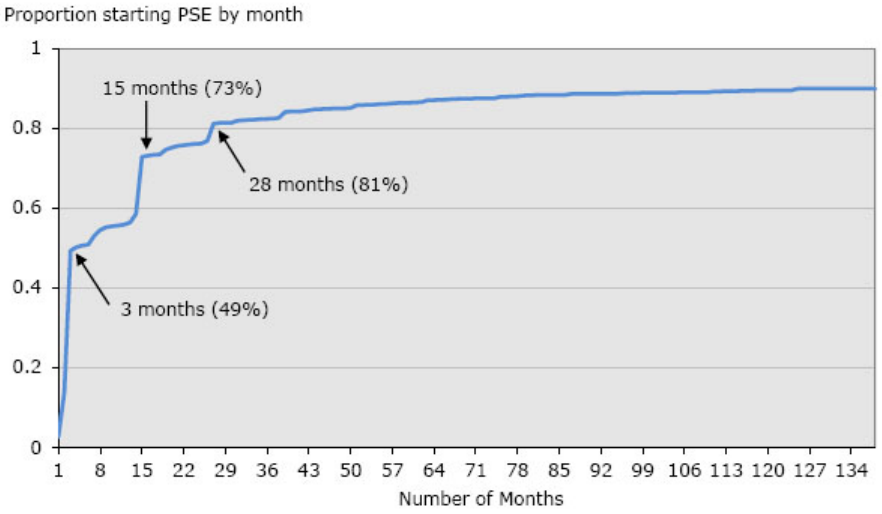
In each cycle, the Youth in Transition Survey measures the month and year of high school graduation as well as the month and year of first postsecondary enrolment. As a result, it is possible to measure the timing of the end of high school and the start of postsecondary education in each cycle until Cycle 5 when the youth were ages 26 to 28.

Approximately 10% of this sample of youth had not enrolled in any postsecondary education program by December 2007.

How long do Canadian youth take to begin postsecondary education after graduating from high school?

Chart 1 shows the cumulative proportion of high school graduates starting postsecondary education in each month after high school graduation. The cumulative proportion of high school graduates enrolling in a first postsecondary program increases very quickly immediately after graduating from high school – by month 3, almost 50% had started their first postsecondary education program; by 15 months, 73% had started; and by 28 months, 81% had started. Not surprisingly, significant increases were observed in the months which correspond to the beginning of the academic year, that is, in the September following high school graduation (3-month gap), in the September of the 1st year out of school (15-month gap), and in the September of the 2nd year out of high school (28-month gap).

Chart 1
Cumulative proportion of high school graduates who started postsecondary education by age 28



Note: Restricted to youth who graduated high school.
Source: Statistics Canada. **Youth in Transition Survey**. Cohort B. Cycle 5.

Demographic characteristics associated with length of the high school-postsecondary education gap

The timing of the start of a first postsecondary program is not uniform across all individuals (Table 1). Males, off-reserve Aboriginal youth and Anglophones had much higher median delay times than others. The difference was especially dramatic for Aboriginal youth and Anglophones; these groups had, on average, median delay times of about 15 months compared to their non-Aboriginal and non-Anglophone counterparts who waited only about 3 months to begin postsecondary studies.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics associated with length of the high school-postsecondary education gap

	Median number of months between high school graduation and start of first postsecondary education program
	number
Gender	
Male	8
Female	3
Aboriginal status	
Non-Aboriginal	4
Aboriginal	15
Mother tongue	
English	14
French	3
Neither English nor French	3
Province of high school graduation	
Atlantic provinces	3
Quebec	3
Ontario	15
Western provinces	13
Community type	
Rural	8
Population centre	3

Source: Statistics Canada. **Youth in Transition Survey**. Cohort B. Cycle 5.

Province of high school graduation and whether the youth lived in a rural area at ages 18 to 20 also mattered. For instance, the median lag between high school completion and the start of postsecondary education was about 3 months in the case of youth in the Atlantic provinces and in Quebec, while for youth in Ontario and the Western provinces, the median lag was longer, at around 14 months. Youth living in rural areas also tended to delay the start of postsecondary education for a longer period of time than their counterparts in larger population centres, at 8 months versus 3 months.

In large part, the differences observed between Quebec and the other provinces and between Anglophones and Francophones are attributable to the unique nature of the educational system in Quebec, where elementary/secondary education consists of 11 years of schooling, with the typical student being about 17 years old at graduation. The expected educational trajectory is for students to then enrol in a CEGEP which provides them with either a college-level education or, for students planning to go to university, a two-year pre-university program.

The contribution of background family characteristics

There is a strong relationship between background family characteristics and a student's decision to complete high school and continue on to postsecondary education. Three measures of background family characteristics were included in the analysis: parental educational attainment, parental aspirations for their children's education, and the frequency of parent-child communication regarding education and career. Each of these three indicators had an independent relationship with the length of the gap between the end of high school and the beginning of postsecondary education (Table 2).

Table 2
The contribution of background family characteristics

	Median number of months between high school graduation and start of first postsecondary education program
	number
Parents' highest level of educational attainment	
High school or less	14
Some postsecondary	13
Postsecondary graduate	3
Importance to parents that child obtains a postsecondary education	
Not important at all / slightly important	27
Fairly important	15
Very important	3
Frequency with which youth and parent talked about future education and career options	
Never	14
Less than once a year	15
A few times a year	4
A few times a month	3
A few times a week / Daily	7
Source: Statistics Canada. **Youth in Transition Survey**. Cohort B. Cycle 5.	

The analysis finds that youth whose parents were postsecondary graduates themselves tended to go immediately on to postsecondary education, while those who had parents whose highest level of education was high school had longer gaps, on average. Possibly even more important than the level of parental education is the importance parents convey to their children of having a postsecondary education. For instance, the children of parents who felt this was very important were more likely to start a postsecondary education program in the September immediately following high school completion, whereas the median number of months waited by youth with parents who felt it was not important at all or only slightly important was 27 months.

At the same time, parental education may not be as effective in the absence of good parent-child communications. High school graduates who spoke very infrequently or never with their parents about their future waited about 15 months, on average, to enrol in a postsecondary education program. However, the analysis also suggests that the shortest gap is found in families with a moderate amount of communication on this issue. For instance, youth who spoke with their parents about their future educational plans 'a few times a year' or 'a few times a month' tended to go immediately to postsecondary education following high school graduation, while those who had 'daily' or 'weekly' communications with their parents about this issue had a median gap time of 7 months. It may be that this more frequent communication is capturing those relationships where parents feel their adolescents need extra persuasion about the merits of a postsecondary education, which may be reflected in the longer median gap time.

Factors related to academic performance and commitment to education

Greater educational commitment should indicate, all else being equal, that students are serious about their education, in both the short and the long run. How engaged students are in high school and their academic performance can therefore indicate both ability as well as aspirations for higher education.

Four measures were used to tap into academic performance and commitment to education during the last year of high school: marks, frequency of skipping/cutting classes, frequency of school extracurricular activities, and educational aspirations (Table 3).

Table 3
Factors related to academic performance and commitment to education

	Median number of months between high school graduation and start of first postsecondary education program
	number
Grade-point average in last year of high school	
High (80% to 100%)	3
Medium-high (70% to 79%)	8
Medium (60% to 69%)	19
Low (59% or less)	59
Frequency skipped/cut classes	
Never	3
Less than once a month	3
Once / twice a month	7
About once a week or more	15

Number of hours spent per week in extracurricular school activities	
Zero	15
1 to 3 hours	3
4 to 7 hours	3
8 or more hours	3
Highest level of education youth would like to obtain	
Undecided	15
High school or less	79
Some postsecondary	15
College/trade or other diploma	15
Bachelor's degree or higher	3
Source: Statistics Canada. **Youth in Transition Survey**. Cohort B. Cycle 5.	

With regard to marks in the last year of high school, respondents who had a high academic average did not delay entering postsecondary education at all, while the median wait time for those with medium-level marks was 19 months and for those with low marks, the median wait time to begin postsecondary education was close to 5 years (59 months). In other words, having very low marks in high school is indicative of a very low chance of going onto postsecondary education and this is reflected in the relatively long median wait time.

The frequency of skipping/cutting classes can be seen as an indicator of commitment to education. Youth who skipped high school classes once a week or more, on average, had a median gap of 15 months, compared to a median gap of 3 months for youth who had never skipped classes.

Another indicator measuring commitment to education is the frequency of participation in **school-related extracurricular activities**. While many of these activities may not be directly related to academics, participation in such activities is an indicator of school involvement. Youth who did not participate in any extracurricular school activities had a longer median gap than youth who had participated: 15 months versus 3 months.

Last, in terms of educational aspirations beyond high school, students who aspired to a university education did not delay going on to postsecondary education, while those who were undecided about postsecondary studies or who aspired to either college or 'some post-secondary education' had a median gap of 15 months. Meanwhile, youth who aspired to high school completion or less at most had such a low chance of ever going onto PSE by the end of study date that their median wait time was 6.5 years. In fact, the number of youth who pursued postsecondary studies beyond the 6.5 years median was very small.

Potential barriers

Factors that can act as barriers to further education are numerous. Some are related to student and family-background characteristics, while others are related to the cost of attending postsecondary education or to other factors (Table 4).

Several indicators were used to measure potential barriers to going on to postsecondary education. First, in line with past research, the results of the analysis suggest that working a lot in high school (more than 20 hours a week) is associated with a longer gap between high school completion and the start of postsecondary education. The median gap for these individuals was 15 months, in contrast to a median gap of 3 months for youth who worked fewer hours per week while in high school.

Table 4
Potential barriers

	Median number of months between high school graduation and start of first postsecondary education program
	number
Number of hours of paid work per week in last year of high school	
Zero	3
1 to less than 10	3
10 to less than 20	4
More than 20	15
Number of hours spent per week in non-school extracurricular activities	
Zero	8
1 to 3	3
4 to 7	3
8 or More	7
Number of close friends planning to go to postsecondary education	
Most or all	3
None or very few	15
Barriers specific to academic aspirations (Is there anything standing in your way of going as far in school as you would like?)	
No barrier	3
Financial situation	9
Marks	14
Wanting to work	15
Caring for children	16
Source: Statistics Canada. **Youth in Transition Survey**. Cohort B. Cycle 5.	

Time spent in extracurricular activities external to school highlights a somewhat different relationship than that associated with activities organized within schools. Youth who spent either no hours or 8 or more hours per week in **non-school-related extracurricular activities** had a longer median gap between the end of high school and the start of postsecondary education than youth who took part in a moderate amount of non-school extracurricular activities. On the one hand, spending no time in nonschool extracurricular activities may indicate a general lack of engagement on the part of the student. On the other hand, spending too much time (8 hours or more) per week in nonschool activities could signal that a student is overly engaged in activities unrelated to school, leaving little time for pursuits more connected to the school environment.

Next, research has shown that the influence of friends on educational decisions is quite strong; youth tend to follow a similar pattern to their close friends. This observation holds in these data as well: youth with close friends who were planning on going to postsecondary education had a median gap of 3 months; however, if none or very few of their close friends planned to go, the median wait time was 15 months.

The last set of barriers to education directly addresses obstacles by asking the question: "Is there anything standing in your way of going as far in school as you would like?" When no barrier was reported, the median gap between high school graduation and the start of postsecondary education was 3 months. Those who cited finances as an impediment had a median gap of 9 months; concerns about marks were associated with a 14-month gap; wanting to work was associated with median gap of 15 months; while youth who said that caring for children was a factor had a median gap of 16 months.

Conclusion

This article analyzed the timing of going on to pursue postsecondary education for a sample of Canadian high school graduates who were tracked longitudinally to the ages of 26 to 28. Almost half of high school graduates started postsecondary education within three months of graduating from high school, while by fifteen months, close to three quarters had enrolled in a postsecondary education program.

The length of the gap between high school graduation and the start of postsecondary education varied across different groups, with longer gaps noted for males, off-reserve Aboriginal youth, youth from Ontario, and youth whose parents did not have a postsecondary diploma or degree. Equally important were characteristics during the high school years. For example, youth with low marks, who worked many hours in paid employment while in high school, who skipped classes regularly, who took part in a either no or a lot of extracurricular activities not organized by the school, and whose close friends said they were not planning on going to postsecondary education had longer median gap times.

Finally, youth were asked to report any barriers or obstacles they saw as affecting their educational decisions following high school graduation. Median gap times were longer for those who cited financial factors, concerns about marks, wanting to work and child-care responsibilities.

Notes

1. Shaienks, Danielle and Tomasz Gluszynski. 2009. **Education and Labour Market Transitions in Young Adulthood**. Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics – Research Papers. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 81-595-M — No. 075
2. Hango, Darcy. 2011. **Delaying Post-secondary Education: Who Delays and for How Long?** Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics – Research Papers. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 81-595-M No. 090.
3. This restriction leaves out young adults who have not graduated from high school, some of whom do go on to postsecondary education. However, because youth are followed until their mid-to late 20s, the analysis includes youth who may have previously left high school before graduating, but who later returned to complete their high school diplomas.