



Addressing the Catch 22: RBC Career Launch Applicants Recommendations for Improving School-to-Work Transitions

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RBC helps communities prosper, supporting a broad range of community initiatives through donations, community investments, sponsorships and employee volunteer activities. In 2015, we contributed more than \$121 million to causes around the world.

The RBC Career Launch Program is a year-long career experience for college and university graduates aged 24 and under across Canada. The program is a unique paid internship opportunity designed to help address the "no experience-no job" cycle many youth face upon post-secondary graduation. It combines practical hands-on business and community experience with learning, mentorship and professional networking opportunities.

CCDF

The Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) is an internationally renowned centre of excellence and innovation in the field of career development. Established as a non profit charitable organization in 1980, CCDF has targeted expertise in career development policy, research, resource development and capacity building, and is committed to ensuring Canadians of all ages are better prepared to navigate an uncertain labour market and develop their careers across the lifespan. For more on the work of CCDF, please visit ccdf.ca

For this project, CCDF was pleased to work with its associate organization, the Life-Role Development Group Ltd., a national career development consultancy.

Context to the Study

CCDF was commissioned by RBC to conduct an analysis of applications to its Career Launch Program for the first three years of its operation. The research within the report is based on a random sample of approximately 5,800 applications submitted during the three years that the RBC Career Launch Program has been accepting new graduates into paid internship positions. The applications received from recent post-secondary graduates (24 years old or younger) provided data on applicants' education, work and volunteer history and, in the essay portion of the application, their perspectives on what can be done to improve school-to-work transitions in Canada.

The essay question for each year has differed slightly:

- (Year 1: 2013) Finding a meaningful first work experience remains a challenge for many youth across Canada. What solutions would you propose to help more youth gain the experience they need to accelerate their careers?
- (Year 2: 2014) Making the transition from school to work can be very challenging for young college and university graduates. What suggestions would you make for how government, post-secondary institutions and corporate Canada could collaborate to help solve this challenge?
- (Year 3: 2015) Making the transition from school to work can be very challenging for young college and university graduates. What suggestions would you make for how young people can help to address this challenge?

As such, each year's cohort was treated separately in the thematic analysis. This whitepaper is an excerpt from the larger research paper of the same name. The full research paper is available by emailing careerlaunch@rbc.com.

A message from
Zabeen Hirji,
Chief Human
Resources
Officer, RBC

“We believe by helping young people unlock their potential and launch their careers we can assist them with building a stronger future for themselves, and a more prosperous Canada for all of us.”

Young people have a big stake in shaping our future and they have the ambition to do so. We need to engage them, delve deeper into both their shared and individual experiences and keep asking them the question – what is transitioning from school to work really like, and how could it be better?

Providing work-integrated learning, co-ops, internships and summer opportunities are just some ways to help young Canadians prepare for the new world of work, navigate the critical transition from education to employment and break the “no experience, no job” cycle they feel trapped in.

I’m inspired and energized by the students and recent grads I meet at RBC and in the community. They are curious, love to learn and want to make a difference through the work they do. And I continually learn from them.

In partnership with the Canadian Career Development Foundation, we are bringing forward the voice of youth in this research as a way of stimulating very important conversations about the future of young people.

At RBC, we are guided by our purpose to help clients thrive and communities prosper. And we believe by helping young people unlock their potential and launch their careers we can assist them with building a stronger future for themselves, and a more prosperous Canada for all of us.

Our future depends on it.

Zabeen



Introduction

There is a clear need to improve the school-to-work transitions and the labour market attachment of youth in Canada. For over a decade, the group at risk of not making this transition has expanded beyond those who have typically been the focus of research, policy and programming – those who have left school without a credential. Research is now shining a spotlight on a growing population of youth labeled Poorly Integrated New Entrants (PINES). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines PINEs as “young people [who] often have qualifications (diplomas or degrees); they frequently go back and forth between temporary jobs, unemployment and/or inactivity, even during periods of strong economic growth” (OECD, 2010, p.13). In Canada, PINEs include a growing group of post-secondary graduates increasingly having difficulty transitioning from school to work.

The difficulty new graduates face during their transition has a lot to do with the labour environment that they are trying to break into. The world of work is changing. In a lean, innovation-focused, knowledge-based economy, today’s young graduates need to be able to anticipate shifts in careers, manage uncertainty, and be creative. They must also have the ability to tap into finely honed career management skills and develop an ‘always learning’ mindset. Moreover, young graduates must stay abreast of labour market trends and have the ability to cultivate relationships to gain better access to work opportunities (Bell & Benes, 2012).

This is a tall order for anyone, let alone those new to the labour market. Easing the labour market integration of graduates needs to happen to ensure Canada’s economic prosperity continues. There is a significant link between countries that have effective school-to-work transition systems and economic success (Hoffman, 2015). Fundamental to PINEs’ successful transition into the labour market is leadership at all levels and across multiple stakeholder groups – post-secondary institutions, government, employers and youth - working together to better support transitions from education to employment.

This paper summarizes the full research report’s findings including:

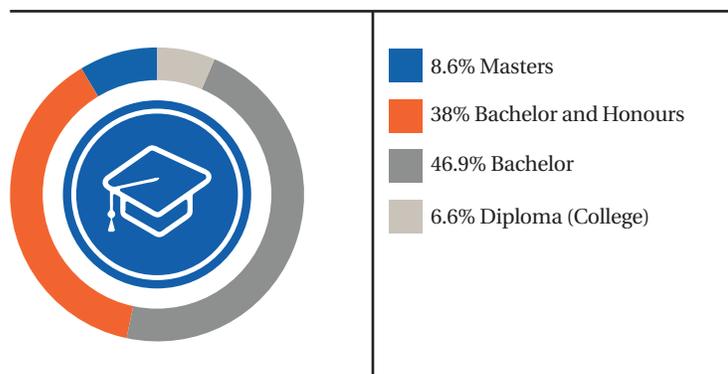
- The experience of applicants transitioning from post-secondary education (PSE) to work, situating these data in the context of research and information on school-to-work transitions;
- Applicant ideas for supporting better and more efficient labour market attachment of recent graduates; and
- Ideas for engaging employers to actively support graduates’ education-to-employment transitions.



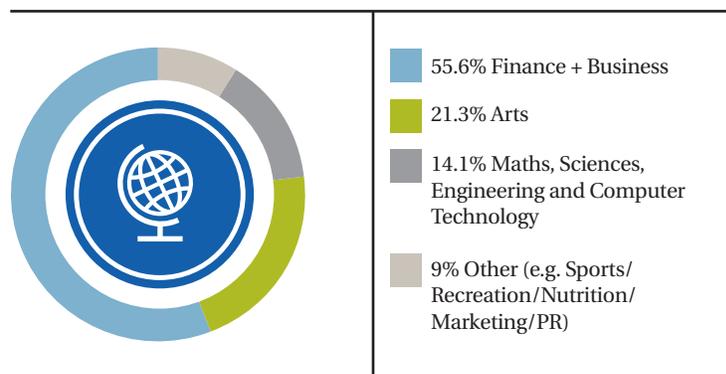
RBC Career Launch Applicants

Using the demographic details within the applications, we note that the applicants to RBC's Career Launch Program are primarily English-speaking university graduates who currently reside in urban areas in Central Canada. Just over half are finance/business graduates. We suspect that the group is diverse in many other ways, although the data are not captured in the applications. We note that over the three years the RBC Career Launch Program has been in operation, just over half of the successful applicants have been women and visible minorities. In addition, recent immigrants, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gender (LGBT) community are represented within each year. References in the essays to ethnicity, race, gender and their experiences as "an immigrant" indicate that the applicants are more diverse than the narrow variables listed within the application.

Highest Level of Education



Area of Study



Work Experience



98.8%

of applicants had one work experience



71.6%

listed three or more positions

Volunteer Experience



93.1%

of applicants listed at least one volunteer experience



50.6%

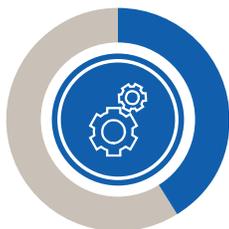
had three or more experiences

Top Themes in Applicant Essays

YEAR 1

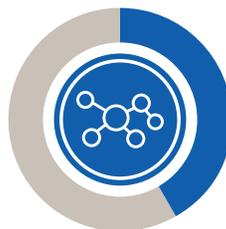
Finding a meaningful first work experience remains a challenge for many youth across Canada.

What solutions would you propose to help more youth gain the experience they need to accelerate their careers?



41.3%

Work integrated learning provides an opportunity to gain work experience



41.9%

Networking to build connections



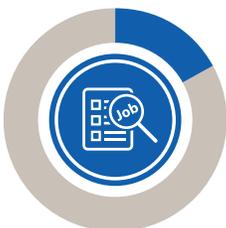
37.9%

Take advantage of volunteer opportunities to gain experience/develop new skills.



18.6%

Government provision of financial incentives to employers



17.5%

Job search and career development strategies



15.1%

Mandatory work integrated learning and career courses



Top Themes in Applicant Essays



68.7%

Pre and post-grad work experience programming



61.9%

Mandatory career courses or work placements during education



58.3%

Increase youth awareness of job availability



50.4%

Government provision of financial incentives to hire new graduates



47.2%

Businesses should hire more recent graduates into more entry level positions



45.8%

Increase collaboration amongst business, schools, governments and youth

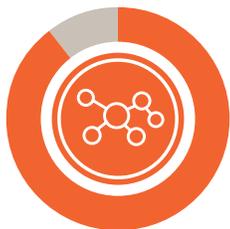
YEAR 2

Making the transition from school to work can be very challenging for young college and university graduates.

What suggestions would you make for how government, post-secondary institutions and corporate Canada could collaborate to help solve this challenge?

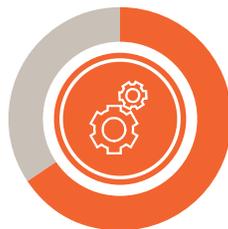


Top Themes in Applicant Essays



89.6%

Networking and connecting with others



65.8%

Gain work experience and build transferable skills



57.9%

Set goals and make a plan



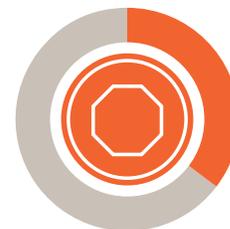
54.5%

Take the time to learn about the career paths and labour market



39.9%

Consider self-care and work-life balance



35.3%

Find opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge learned in school

YEAR 3

Making the transition from school to work can be very challenging for young college and university graduates.

What suggestions would you make for how young people can help to address this challenge?



What Themes do Applicants Cover in their Essays?



Hiring criteria

Businesses need to hire more at the entry level and revisit their hiring criteria.

Employers should mitigate their expectation of finding the “perfectly” skilled graduate and invest in nurturing “potential.”



Collaboration

Increase collaboration amongst stakeholders to support work integrated learning or post-graduate work experience programs is critical.

PSE supports the development of key theoretical knowledge and skills development; this needs to be connected with applied learning or work experience.



Career learning

More promotion of PSE career centres, earlier and mandatory career education in public and post-secondary schools.

More information about careers, career pathways, skill requirements, and career management skills needed.



Awareness of the labour market

Greater access to and awareness of the labour market.

PSE institutions need to become better connected to the skill demands and trends in the labour market.



Networking

Networking is a “game changer” and a significant way to get your foot in the door.



Volunteer, volunteer, volunteer

Volunteering is an important way to gain skills, experience and a wider network.



Open mindedness

Youth should be open and not “picky” about opportunities that present themselves.

How Comparable is the Applicant Transition Experience?

A scan of the available information shows a wealth of data analyses and literature reviews on the subject of PSE-to-work transitions (see Benes, Bell and Redekopp, *Improving the School-to-Work Transitions of Youth in Canada: Literature Scan*, 2016). There are numerous interviews for newspaper reports and one or two extensive surveys of graduates (see McKinsey, 2015) but certainly there is limited work on capturing the voice of Canadian PSE graduates and their lived experience of the transition. To our knowledge, there are no Canadian ethnographies (a study of people in their own environment using participant observation and face to face interviewing) on the subject. Although the experience and sentiments captured in these applications do not necessarily represent the full emotional journey of the applicants (they were putting their best foot forward in order to get into the program), the applications do give a sense of their experience of transition, the depth of their work experience and what they feel they need(ed)/is needed to make their and other graduates' transitions better.

Applicants see the transition as challenging but largely felt that time would yield a positive outcome and that it was important to remain optimistic throughout the process. Without the benefit of other Canadian ethnographies on the school-to-work experience, it is hard to determine if graduates overall feel more discouraged than hopeful. There are some indications in the literature that graduates may feel unprepared, more anxious about their future transitions than previous generations and overwhelmed by their current state of underemployment.

Given this, it may not be surprising that the theme of well-being/work-life balance came out throughout applicant essays, emerging much more strongly in Year 3 in which applicants typically wrote their essay as if writing to a peer.

There is a wealth of research on the career expectations of Millennials, such as this group of applicants; most arguably fueling unsubstantiated stereotypes about the generation. An article in the *Washington Post* (McClennen, 2016) states that Millennials may be “the most publically denounced generation of all time.” McClennen suggests that rather than understanding the complex challenges and realities facing Millennials as reflective of the social issues we all face, there is an increasing tendency to “privatize” these problems as belonging to Millennials to which an edict emerges that this generation needs to stop complaining and become more resilient. Lyons, Ng and Schweitzer (2011), in their generational survey of 3,000 Canadians, found that Millennials have high hopes for starting salaries, salary growth and advancement. They also have a strong desire for self-improvement, to learn and to have challenging work. Millennials in the survey also “had the lowest levels of self-efficacy, career

identification and relied more on the career advice of others” (p. 4) than any other generational grouping that they surveyed. Given that they are the newest generation in the labour market and have less experience in developing their careers, these findings are not unexpected.

These results, along with the reflection of the RBC Career Launch applicants, send a message that schools, employers, career education and service providers need to find a way to engage students in career development. Whether acquired via career education, career services or WIL experiences, applicants recognized the importance of career management skills. Current research supports the idea of career management competencies as central to successful transitions.

Earlier this year, findings of the first phase of the multi-national Learning And Decision making Resources (LEADER) project were released on “Career Management Skills” (Neary, Dodd & Hooley, 2016). Of the many findings in this report, two are particularly relevant to this study. First, all participating countries saw the value of career management skills in preparing youth (and adults) for a changing work dynamic. Second, the language of “career management skills” is poorly understood. This is an area in Canada for which a substantial competency infrastructure exists (Canada’s *Blueprint for Life/Work Designs* (Haché, Redekopp & Jarvis, 2006)) but virtually no resources for promotion and implementation.



How Do Applicants Feel about the School-to-Work Transition?

Overall there was a relatively low frequency of “feeling” themes within applicant essays with slightly more mention of negative versus positive feelings. This is not surprising given the context. It seems reasonable that individuals applying for positions would temper their emotional comments. Also, the essay questions sought solutions and recommendations regarding school-to-work transition issues versus focusing on the actual experience of making the transition.

The highest mentions of negative feelings focused on youth being uncertain, unprepared and “anxious” about the school-to-work transition. This theme included feelings of anxiety, stress and worry. The obstacles that concern them the most are:

A Catch-22 – Applicants referred to the problem of not being hired because of not having relevant work experience, and not having relevant work experience because no organization will hire them. This paradox is anxiety-provoking for many because they feel it is beyond their control. They report doing what they can to prepare, but that they can’t change the hiring practices of employers.

Competition – They recognize the competitiveness of the workforce environment they seek to enter and worry that a successful school-to-work transition may require a competitive edge such as relevant work experience, a unique educational background or a broad network.

Debt – Many applicants referred to student debt as being a restrictive burden that impacts their employment choices. The vast majority of applicants who mentioned debt did so in the context of how it created competitive disadvantages (e.g. forcing individuals to accept underemployment for the sake of a paycheck).

What Do They Recommend to Other Youth?

The advice offered by applicants to their peers is largely a reflection of the reality of the transition in Canada. It is challenging, discouraging, and not necessarily meeting expectations; new graduates will need to look for a variety of opportunities to build their careers — many of which will not pay well or, in some cases, pay anything at all. They will have to make tough decisions that will likely affect work-life balance. As a measure for their peers not to get too overwhelmed by it, applicants proposed that students and new graduates “get experienced,” stay positive, be resilient and keep their expectations in check on what is a challenging road ahead.



What Do They Say They Need to Successfully Transition from School to Work?

Transferable Skills

Youth recognize the importance of transferable skills in facilitating their transition from school to work, regardless of discipline or industry. In fact, many see transferable or soft skills, as equalling or surpassing the importance of technical or hard skills. These skills are perceived by youth as serving to increase an individual's confidence, marketability and competitive edge.

Employers who participated in the 2015 survey by the Business Council of Canada show strong agreement with these applicants on the importance of soft skills (such as collaboration and teamwork, relationship-building, communication and problem-solving) for entry-level positions. "Large companies are increasingly looking to recruit or develop employees with strong soft skills. These skills are particularly important when identifying and developing future leaders." (p. 18, BBC & AON, 2016)

Applicants, however, were not necessarily adept at articulating the skills they have acquired from their experience. For example, when asked to describe their work experiences and what they learned, transferable skills were not often referenced.

Practical/Meaningful Experience

Applicants felt that they need more experience in order to make a successful school-to-work transition and this was the most frequently cited need across all the applicant cohorts. They clearly understood the importance of experience, as reflected in their essays, and they appear to be actively pursuing opportunities to gain experience. Almost ninety-nine percent of applicants reported having at least one job and for many, this work experience was related to their field of study thus contributing to its practicality and meaningfulness. Another 93% reported volunteer/extracurricular experience.

It's not clear from the research how much and what kind of experience employers value most. A recent Business Council of Canada survey of 90 large employers (BCC & AON, 2016) demonstrated that 32% of the respondents required 1 year of full-time relevant experience, 17% at least 2 years and 9% at least 3. Interestingly, 38% from the 2016 Business Council of Canada survey indicated that no relevant experience is necessary, which would not reflect the experience of many of the applicants in this study. A better understanding of employer expectations in this area is needed, for example, the value of volunteer versus paid experience.

Unlike the multitude of opportunities youth consider available for developing transferable skills, options for acquiring experience are deemed much more limited. Suggestions provided by applicants were limited to co-op programs and internships, volunteering and summer or part-time jobs. There was some discussion of unpaid internships. Most applicants who referenced unpaid internships felt they should not exist and that they were unfair to students who could not afford to take positions where they were not paid. On the flip side, applicants felt that if the unpaid internship offered career advancement then one should consider it.

The bottom line is that applicants felt powerless to break the Catch-22 of no experience-no job/no job-no experience. Only employers can remove the bind, either via paid internships or by hiring individuals with no direct experience.



Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

Applicants in all years saw the need for more work experience and recommended making WIL (specifically co-ops and internships) much more readily available to the full student body. Many (specifically in Years 1 and 2) spoke of the need to make work experience opportunities like co-ops and internships requirements for graduation.

Many youth believe post-secondary educational institutions, corporate Canada and government could do more to create meaningful work opportunities both during studies and following graduation. For example, post-secondary educational institutions could ensure WIL programs are available to all students (regardless of program of study) and instructors could incorporate more practical assignments in their courses. Government could provide funding to employers to support hiring. Employers could be more open to hiring new grads and could offer rotational programs that not only provide meaningful experience but also enable grads to explore an organization, network and enhance skills.

This desire for more WIL experiences/opportunities is consistent with international studies. Mourshed, Farrell and Barton (2012) found in their extensive international 25 country survey of over 8,000 youth that about 60% see on-the-job training and hands-on learning as the most effective instructional techniques, but that fewer than 30% are actually enrolled in programs with this kind of learning. Limitations in access to WIL-type programming can be found in other research stating that there is not enough programming to meet the need (McKinsey, 2014).

Members of the Canadian Business / Higher Education Roundtable feel the same, setting an ambitious goal that 100 per cent of Canadian post-secondary students will benefit from some form of meaningful work integrated learning before graduation.

Although access to more WIL opportunities was a significant theme throughout, applicants did not refer to it as the magic bullet in resolving the challenge of school-to-work transition.

Career Education and Developing Career Management Skills

The provision of career education (i.e., classes) and career services (e.g., counselling, guidance, work search facilitation) often go hand-in-hand in countries with active career education systems. Many applicants discussed the need for mandatory career education; others noted the importance of direct transition assistance in the form of specific programs. These recommendations contain a distinction between the idea that skills need to be developed to manage transitions (i.e., “teach them to fish”) and the notion that direct help with transitions is needed (i.e., “give them a fish”). Overall, the applicants did not discuss this differentiation in detail; “both are needed” would be the safest conclusion to derive from their recommendations. This disconnect between addressing a clear need and not filling the need is worthy of further exploration. Applicants mentioned that their “career studies” courses were not relevant at the time they took them. What did emerge was the need for a variety of career development activities and interventions and the requisite for these to be far more accessible to a greater number of students.

Applicants in Year 1 wanted to see more promotion of university career centres and earlier career development interventions at the high school and post-secondary levels. Year 2 applicants wanted to see mandatory career development courses in all programs. Admittedly, many applicants said that “most” youth ignore career preparation in university.

Top recommendations focused on the need for a greater number of work experience opportunities

And connecting with those in the labour market



Employers



Workers



Professional Associations

To learn about...



Different Occupations



Career Pathways



Work Environments

Connections: Networking and Mentoring

The young applicants in this study appear to appreciate that if no one knows what they know, work opportunities will be very limited. Beyond work opportunities, however, applicants recognize that learning opportunities, advice, guidance, reputation-building and motivation can all be enhanced through effective networks.

The career development field has long advocated networking as pivotal to transition success. Research shows clear relationships between the type and extent of one's network and one's general career success (e.g., Blickle, Witzki & Schneider, 2009; Kuijpers, Schyns & Scheerens, 2006).

Perhaps a little more surprising was the appreciation that many applicants had for mentoring. The evidence base supports this endorsement, showing effective mentorship as a strong predictor of both external career success measures (e.g., salary) and internal career success measures (e.g., satisfaction).

It seems very clear that the applicants in this study crave the abilities to figure out the work world, to effectively search for work, to be resilient when difficulties arise, and to manage their pathways through life and work. They see mentors and others in their networks as facilitators of learning these abilities, and they saw the K-12 school system and post-secondary institutions as having failed them in this regard.

A Call for Collaboration

Although applicants spoke of what post-secondary education, corporate Canada and government could do individually to better support them, the call for enhanced collaboration amongst these three key stakeholders was loud and clear. A shared understanding of the strengths and needs of each stakeholder and a collective response to facilitating school-to-work transitions is highly recommended and essential. This is perhaps most evident in the area of WIL. The desired quantity, quality, range and accessibility of WIL opportunities can best be reached through partnering between educators, employers and government with the ultimate goal of ensuring youth have the skills and experience needed to transition successfully.

Youth in Control with Support

External stakeholders have roles and responsibilities with respect to school-to-work transitions, but youth themselves can and should be in control of their own transitions. Youth could exercise more control in this regard if equipped with the requisite career management competencies early in their career development. Applicants recommended that quality career development programs and services be integrated at the secondary and post-secondary levels and marketed in such a way that students see the inherent benefits pre-graduation/transition versus in retrospection.



Conclusion

The transition from school to work is a significant milestone in a young person's life. It is challenging, difficult and, in this labour market, quite uncertain. As such, it is unlikely to go perfectly or even smoothly for many graduates. There is no magic bullet that will resolve the issues and barriers that today's youth will face as they journey through the transition from school to work. However, it is clear from these applicants, the literature, policy makers, employers and educators that we do need to do better and there is much at stake if we don't make the commitment to improve.

We need to keep delving deeper into the experience of youth. This report is a start in that direction. The developers of programming, policies, initiatives need to understand what the transition from school to work is really like. Where are youth getting stuck? Where do they find opportunity? What supports are they accessing, which ones are they not and why? And, most importantly, what do youth see as the solutions?

In the applications that were reviewed for this study, no applicant suggested that they were not the driver in managing their transition. They are ready and wanting the opportunity to shine. Many worked very hard to gain the experience they could to break out of the Catch-22. Yet despite their efforts, they are calling for more support. This should be a red flag for all stakeholders.

Yes, Canadian PSE students and graduates need more and wider access to work integrated learning. But, from the applicant recommendations and from the research, they need more than this to reduce the number of Canadian graduates struggling with underemployment. They also need ready-access to career development services, education, information, resources and/or mentors to help them build the requisite career management skills required to survive and thrive in this labour market. They need the ability to translate the skills they have gained through volunteering and part-time work into the skills employers are looking for and deem valuable. They need employers to give them a chance and provide them with decent and meaningful entry-level jobs. They need schools, governments and businesses to listen to them and step up to the plate. All stakeholders - post-secondary institutes, government, corporate Canada and youth - have a role to play; much has been delineated in this report and elsewhere (see Bell, Benes and Redekopp, 2016) on what those roles should be. It's time for everyone to act. Socially and economically, Canada cannot afford to have more and more graduates get stuck. Everyone has a responsibility in this and the time to take visionary and collaborative action is now!



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