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Enhancing Career Prospects and Well- Being for Canadian Youth



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Key Insights

1

Focus on early career guidance programs to introduce youth to a range of career paths, empowering them to make informed decisions with a strong emphasis on inclusivity and accessibility.

2

Utilize technology to enhance career services by offering personalized labour market information, while also integrating in-person support to provide comprehensive and effective guidance.

3

Advocate for a comprehensive and holistic approach that provides a wide range of supports in a coherent manner, e.g., upskilling and career guidance together with measures to address barriers like discrimination and mental health.

The Issue

Employment prospects and labour market outcomes of youth (typically considered aged 15 to 24) are highly cyclical in nature, i.e., during economic downturns employment among youth is disproportionately negatively affected compared to adults. Youth are often the first to be laid off during recessions and, more recently, the pandemic, primarily due to their lower levels of experience and seniority. There are also comparatively lower costs associated with laying them off. Compounding this effect, youth are often employed in sectors such as retail and accommodation that are particularly susceptible to economic downturns and those that were significantly impacted by the pandemic, exacerbating youth unemployment during these times.

The Future Skills Centre and Century Initiative collaborated to investigate youth employment, and highlighted how a sustained period out of employment or education can have lasting impacts on the future labour market outcomes of youth, notably by reducing their long run earnings potential and career progression. Lengthy periods of unemployment and inactivity are also associated with deteriorating mental health and reduced social ties, especially among already disadvantaged youth. These scarring effects are exacerbated by inefficient school-to-work transitions that often lead to under-employment – further reinforcing the negative impacts of sustained periods of joblessness. The reality is many young Canadians have fewer workforce ties and limited access to opportunities to build their networks as they transition from school to work. Many of the growing cohorts of young Canadians, especially those of a racialized background or from Indigenous communities, are often discriminated against, making the challenge of finding upskilling opportunities and quality employment even more daunting.

This is not a problem unique to Canada. A recent examination of the labour market situation among youth by the International Labour Organization highlighted that nearly one in five youth globally are not in employment, education or training (NEET). And while the share of NEET in Canada is considerably lower (approximately 12%, according to Labour Force Survey estimates, as of mid-2024), there are signs that in the past 12 months the labour market situation among youth in Canada is deteriorating and job gains have been hard to come by.

Youth unemployment rates tend to be typically higher than adults regardless of the economic cycle, but there is cause for concern. In June and July of 2024, while Canada-wide employment remained more or less unchanged, employment among youth fell by 33,000 – a staggering figure with unemployment rates among this group above 14% (compared to 6.4% for persons 15 and over). This is a considerable improvement compared to the height of the pandemic when youth unemployment rates exceeded 30%, but these recent trends are a worrying sign that, if they become entrenched, we risk undoing the progress of the past few years. Already the latest unemployment figures among youth are some 5 percentage points higher than pre-pandemic levels. Youth are particularly susceptible to a number of broader societal challenges including worsening mental health, impacts of social media, higher costs of living, housing affordability, and accelerating climate impacts.

To stem the recent downturn in labour market conditions of youth and to lay the groundwork for them to play a pivotal role in fostering growth and inclusion, it is imperative to address and dismantle the multiple and intersectional barriers they encounter. Indeed, youth in Canada are a much more diverse demographic than previous generations, influenced by the country's immigration history and the fact that Indigenous communities represent a significant share of the population growth in Canada.

What We Investigated

Across a range of FSC-funded projects, we explored how to improve the long-term career prospects of Canadian youth and their well-being, while stimulating economic growth and fostering social inclusion. To that end, projects investigated what measures are needed to promote the full and effective participation of youth in training, education and employment.

Research to understand youth in the context of a changing world of work

Our joint research with the Century Initiative investigated the multiple, structural barriers that confront youth during periods of weak economic growth. While much of the prevailing literature on youth has focused on near-term economic concerns, this research investigated the long-term effects of recessions on young people who are finishing their education, beginning their careers, or are otherwise in particularly vulnerable stages of their lives.

Once embedded into the world of work, we also were interested in understanding how young people experience the workplace. Together, Toronto Metropolitan University and The Better Work project, investigated the quality of work experienced by young people, using their own perspectives and descriptions. The project sought to understand, among others, how young workers assess the quality of their work and what skills and resources could help young workers improve the quality of their work environments.

Assessing the quality of career service provision and related insights

Part of the challenges confronting youth is they often lack access to the necessary information, supports, services and connections to access employment and training opportunities. In other instances, the programs available to them are fragmented in nature, making it difficult for them to navigate the myriad of potential career pathways.

Take for instance the Reboot Plus project, led by Douglas College in partnership with Douglas College Training Group, PEERs Employment and Education Resources, the Burnaby and Surrey School Districts and the Boards of Trade. The project supports marginalized young people to re-engage in both education and career development and explore fields of interest. Over the span of 16 weeks, participants engage in classroom-based and off-site activities including self-discovery and skills assessment and arranges for youth to meet with professionals and employers in their fields of interest.

Other FSC-supported projects, such as Virtual Workplace Tours, M-Power North and Experiential Learning in Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship (ELITE) took a more hands on approach to exposing youth to employment and career possibilities through workplace visits, paid internships and experiential learning.

In terms of the insights underlying career service provision, the Behavioural Insights Team used randomized control trials to explore how to better support high school students and young job seekers in making informed decisions. The project employed a mixed-methods approach, including a review of existing evidence, over 50 interviews, in-class qualitative research, and four randomized control trials. The various streams of quantitative and qualitative research aimed to answer how labour market information can assist students in choosing post-secondary education paths, identify the most useful data points, and determine the best way to present this information to them.

How career information is shared with youth is also vital to its use and take-up. Technologies that enhance labour market information access have not kept pace with the needs and requirements of youth today. The Ontario Tourism Education Corporation led Project Integrate that explored the creation of a single, technology-enabled platform to assess how new innovations can better support employment and career and career navigation for youth.

Tackling multiple, and integrated barriers facing youth

Programs targeting youth, especially racialized youth, are often fragmented and operate in silos, limiting the positive spillover effects across different support mechanisms. NPower's Upskilling Canadian youth for in-demand tech careers takes a comprehensive approach that embeds a range of supports to help disadvantaged youth. The initiative focuses on the technology sector, providing an employment solution for youth confronted with labour market disadvantages to launch into meaningful and sustainable digital careers. The program provides professional and technical skills training, direct job placement, and five years of follow-up support services, including mentorship and continuing education for career advancement. The aim of the program is to place individuals into a range of junior-level technology jobs that require digital skills. Similarly, some projects, for example Lift/Future en-tete, tested new approaches to addressing mental health, education and employment in an integrated fashion. Others, such as Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity's (CCYP) Strength in Structure and ELITE sought to shed light on the unique barriers that Black youth face when navigating career, employment and training decisions. Similarly, the Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology project, Core Skills and Rapid Response System for Shock Proofing, sought to support Indigenous youth. The project entailed a combination of competency-based micro-credentials for six core soft skills, wrap-around supports and customized curricula. The Reboot Plus initiative was designed with the recognition that the needs of at-risk youth requires an approach that considers more than just employment. Their holistic approach that offered flexible, low-pressure environments ensured that youth could learn at their own pace.

What We're Learning

The lessons from the series of FSC projects highlighted the ongoing and multi-layered support needed to improve labour market outcomes for youth in Canada. Already too many youth (nearly half) had quit a job in the past due to unfavourable working conditions. Addressing these challenges begins with expanding career options through early career guidance and exploration, which lays the foundation for young people's future aspirations. Beyond exploration, technology holds some promise for cutting through bureaucratic and other obstacles to finding information and services. In particular, new technologies for tech savvy youth that leverage simple and localized labour market information, combined with personalized support, can help meet the evolving and diverse career needs of young people. At the same time, technology is not enough on its own. In order to improve training, education and employment outcomes, information and support must be complemented by building practical bridges to the world of work to ensure a smooth transition from education to employment and support mechanisms to ensure they remain employed. Finally, to address multi-faceted barriers confronted by youth, including discrimination, it's crucial that programs and services are fully integrated, for example by providing mental health services, to provide a cohesive and comprehensive support system for young Canadians.

Early career exploration can generate new possibilities

A number of initiatives sought to foster greater awareness and accessibility to diverse career options and empower youth in making informed decisions about their professional futures. For instance, the 3+ Economic Development Corporation (that has since transitioned to the Southeast Regional Service Commission) initiated a pilot project, Virtual Workplace Tours, that enabled high school students in the greater Moncton area to explore in-demand careers through worksite tours. Between 2021 and 2023, the 3+ Corporation team completed 14 virtual tours across 7 sectors in both French and English. In total, these tours were attended by 4975 students from 33 English and 166 Francophone classrooms. Similarly, Career Trek's M-Power North, is a career exploration and career development program designed for young moms aged 15-25, living in Northern Manitoba. The program provides hands-on, experiential lessons, spanning a number of sectors including trades, technology, natural resources, STEM and healthcare. It also provides participants with the opportunity to explore and learn about career and

education/training options to ensure they have the necessary tools to make informed decisions about their future. The Reality, Education, Applied, Life (R.E.A.L.) School project by Urban Rez aimed to develop a learning program that aligns Black and racialized youth with careers based on their interests, personality traits, and skill sets. It did so by leveraging popular culture as an accessible entry point for youth to discover careers that match their interests. The University of Alberta's ELITE program closed workforce disparities by equipping Black youth with practical skills in high-demand areas like robotics, automation, and advanced manufacturing, by integrating technical training and paid internships.

The qualitative evidence from students, teachers and industry partners across these projects has been favourable and showcases that experiential learning, career exploration and work placements are valuable tools to support informed career decision-making and exposes students and teachers to new industries and employment opportunities. Such approaches have also been shown to positively impact employers' views of hiring young people from diverse backgrounds.

Technology is a means but not the end: Keeping labour market information simple and personalized

Our research brought to the fore gaps in supports and services for young people as they often have limited access to career guidance and support services, especially after leaving formal education systems. Where career services and training programs exist, they are often outdated and may not meet the unique needs of young people. Indeed, despite the increasing tech-savviness among today's youth, the tools and technologies available in the career space have often lagged behind, failing to fully harness this demographic's capabilities and expectations.

The Ontario Tourism Education Corporation led Project Integrate, which found that many platforms and services still lack the agility and user-centric design necessary to effectively cater to the dynamic career needs and aspirations of young individuals. Against this backdrop, the project tested a range of career-oriented digital tools with more than 2000 young job seekers to gain insights on how digital tools can support the career decisions of young Canadians and facilitate the work of employment service providers. However, while youth reported value in using a variety of tools, rather than a single "one stop shop", given the complexity of career and education choices for young people, in-person support was found to provide significant value in the delivery of career and training guidance. Technology alone didn't meet the needs of youth. Similarly, participants in NPower's Upskilling Canadian youth for in-demand tech careers also expressed a desire for more hands-on learning and support. In the case of the R.E.A.L. School project, individualized coaching, from persons with extensive experience with BIPOC youth, to Black and marginalized youth in the GTA was provided as part of the overall initiative.

Many FSC-supported projects focused on career exploration had to transition to virtual delivery due to the pandemic. However, there was a consensus amongst partners that in-person engagement still had value, and moving forward this would be prioritized. There was still recognition that hybrid models, with some form of virtual engagements, such as workplace tours and experiential training, can help to expand reach, especially those youth in remote areas or dealing with familial responsibilities, but that relationships and meaningful support is best done in-person.

At the same time, technology is only as good as the information underpinning it. There is some evidence that the simpler the better. Our joint project with the Behavioural Insights Team, through the execution of a number of randomized control trials, tested how best to inform, empower, and engage young Canadians when it comes to making decisions about work. The project found that for high school students, simple and localized labour market information was critical to helping inform their choices about postsecondary education.

Beyond Training: An integrated and comprehensive approach to tackling the barriers confronting youth

Ongoing employment and career support

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health project, *Lift/Futur en tête* tested a model to support young people facing mental health and substance use challenges. Instead of following the traditional approach of pre-employment training, Lift/Futur en tête adopted a model that prioritizes placing clients in jobs quickly and subsequently providing them with training and ongoing support to help them sustain employment. During the evaluation period, a total of 542 youth participated with over 40% of all participants successfully securing employment. The project highlighted how being employed can have positive spillover effects on other aspects of the lives of youth. Youth in the program reported improved mental health and wellness, enhanced self-awareness and improved confidence.

The NPower project is notable for providing program graduates with five years of post-program support, including ongoing job placement service, coaching, mentorship and networking supports to help graduates find their next employment opportunity or to improve the quality of their employment. Results from an independent evaluation of the Junior IT Analyst program and the Junior Data Analyst program – targeting unemployed and underemployed individuals from equity deserving groups – found that employment rates among participants increased from the time of program application (baseline) to the 12-month follow-up survey by 254 percentage points. Moreover, earnings increased over the time frame by nearly 67% from \$24,000 to \$40,000.

In other programs, we see similar dividends from comprehensive investments in wrap-around supports. Reboot Plus participants, which had reached 186 students as of December 2023, reported increased confidence in tackling life situations, more positive feelings, and better clarity about their career-related goals as a result of the program. The ELITE program participants developed, through cutting-edge internships, essential technical skills and established professional networks that fostered career growth and economic empowerment.

Employer engagement and awareness

A number of FSC-supported projects identified that young people still encounter significant barriers to workplace inclusion. This requires addressing barriers and obstacles with employers and making workplaces more welcoming to young people. The Reboot Plus project intentionally engaged employers to better understand youth talent and develop specific onboarding strategies and tools for them. The results indicate that the program was effective in expanding the perspectives of employers to view youth as a potential source of talent. In fact, 87% of participating employers agreed that they would support youth in attaching to the workplace and 86% agreed that they would be willing to introduce such youth to their colleagues.

The Canada Green Building Council project, *Workforce 2030: Rapid Upskilling for Green Building Occupations*, revamped curricula design with education partners to help vulnerable workers, including youth, transition into green building roles. Early on it was clear that vulnerable groups and youth require support –above and beyond training – to transition into employment or further upskilling. Participant feedback emphasized the need for additional assistance, including direct interaction with potential employers. In response, the project team pivoted by organizing two career fairs and engaging industry and union partners. These initiatives resulted in 52 participants securing interviews, with 14 individuals subsequently hired either for full-time positions or paid internships.

There is also a need for a more inclusive workforce development ecosystem that reflects an understanding of systemic anti-Black racism in the labour market. The *Strength in Structure* project developed a toolkit to improve delivery of services to meet the needs of Black youth job seekers. The toolkit distilled research findings into a set of resources and recommendations for Black-led, Black serving and Black-focused organizations. The toolkit's objective was to strengthen capacity, enhance social and cultural responsiveness and deepen relationships with clients. It allows for a flexible approach that leaves room for organizations to modify resources according to their circumstances.

More generally, as our research on racialized youth highlights, it is important to apply a diversity lens to policy and program design and delivery and that it is critical to address the ways in which bias and discrimination are embedded in policies, programs and processes. This work requires flexibility from program providers, patient and agile funding supports, and data-driven program delivery for continuous improvement.

Wrap-around supports

The vast majority of the projects that worked with vulnerable youth also pointed to the importance of wrap-around supports to enable youth to take advantage of employment and training opportunities. It wasn't enough to make training available – supports had to be provided to ensure youth could enroll in and/or complete training. This was particularly prominent in the *M-Power North* project supporting young mothers in Northern Manitoba. For this program, wrap-around services such as childcare and transportation were crucial components to improving the integration of vulnerable youth. By addressing these holistic needs, the program created a supportive environment where young people can thrive in their lives and careers. Similarly, the ELITE program in Alberta emphasized the need for holistic support for Black youth pursuing post-secondary education and entering the workforce, including wellness coaching to build resilience. At NPower, a dedicated team works to establish strong partnerships with local and national agencies to ensure that youth have access to services and resources such as housing, food and clothing and child care. Wraparound supports are critical to enabling the participation of youth, especially those at risk, in programs supporting their employment.

Integrated delivery

Programs targeting youth and racialized youth are often fragmented, usually due to various funding streams targeting a specific aspect of youth's lives. Nonetheless, the initiatives FSC has supported overwhelmingly show that integrating various programs and services such as training, job search assistance and mental health support is essential for ensuring the comprehensive and successful integration of vulnerable youth into the labour market. An integrated approach, and one that encompasses the much-needed wrap-around supports, helps to address the multifaceted needs of young individuals as they transition from education to employment.

For example, the *Lift/Future en tête* program highlighted that addressing mental health, education and employment in an integrated fashion led to positive labour market and social outcomes. By breaking down silos and fostering collaboration across these multiple and interconnected domains, youth are better equipped with the coping mechanisms and resilience needed to navigate ongoing challenges, thrive in their careers, and contribute positively to the economy and society. This type of integration in service delivery also makes functional sense. The *M-Power North*, *Virtual Workplace Tour* and *Workforce 2030* projects all underscored the importance of adding program elements, e.g. green skills, to existing delivery mechanisms. This approach not only enhanced outcomes for participants but improved overall efficiency.

Why It Matters

A sustained focus on workforce development for young people is essential, especially as recent trends show worsening labour market conditions for youth. Addressing these issues is crucial not only to mitigate immediate effects of rising unemployment, but also to stem the tide of a protracted period of joblessness to prevent more severe, long-term consequences. Addressing these issues proactively will help prevent these negative outcomes, foster economic resilience, and ensure a more robust and inclusive workforce for the future.

The series of projects offers valuable insights into effectively supporting youth by identifying key strategies and principles that underpin successful programmatic interventions. These insights encompass a range of best practices and contribute to a deeper understanding of how to design and implement interventions that address the diverse needs of youth, ultimately leading to more impactful and sustainable outcomes.

What's Next

In FSC's most recent round of funding initiatives, a number of the programs referenced here, including Reboot Plus and NPower received additional investments in an effort to gain more insights. In the case of Reboot Plus, the program was recently expanded to three new cities, allowing for a comprehensive test of the portability and scalability of the approach to different contexts. The upcoming final report will deliver an in-depth analysis of the program, offering valuable insights and recommendations for future iterations. Additionally, the evaluation for this latest investment round will include the perspectives of youth who do not complete the program, as well as to collect further information on participation and engagement rates.

Regarding NPower, a forthcoming final report will present the comprehensive results of the randomized control trial that compares program participants with a benchmarked group of non-participants. While preliminary findings indicate positive outcomes in employment and earnings for program graduates, it remains to be seen whether these improvements can be directly attributed to participation in the NPower program. The final report will address this issue by comparing the employment and earnings increases among participants with those of the comparison group. Additionally, it will evaluate the program's impact across different program streams and assess variations based on socio-demographic factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, and immigration status. Expected in early 2025, the report will also explore how well the program has scaled to different regions across Canada, and any impact this has had on outcomes.

How to Cite This Report

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Remerciements aux communautés autochtones

Le Centre des Compétences futures est conscient du fait que les Anishinabés, les Mississaugas et les Haudenosaunee entretiennent une relation spéciale avec le territoire dans le cadre du pacte « plat à une cuillère » (Dish With One Spoon) où est situé notre bureau, et qu'ils sont tenus de partager et de protéger le territoire. À titre d'initiative pancanadienne, le CCF exerce ses activités sur le territoire traditionnel de nombreuses nations autochtones de l'île de la Tortue, nom donné au continent nord-américain par certains peuples autochtones. Nous sommes reconnaissants de pouvoir travailler sur ce territoire et nous nous engageons à apprendre notre histoire commune et à contribuer à la réconciliation.

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