

Over Educated and Underemployed:
Challenges Affecting Canadian Youth Workers

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I was raised to believe that education equalled employment. Society further perpetuated this notion through strategic marketing making promises that gaining a post-secondary education would lead to a bright, secure and well-employed future. However, much like many other Canadian youth, once graduating with a Bachelor in the Arts degree from the University of Guelph in 2014, I realized how false this notion was. I became one of the 27 per cent of youth ages 15 to 24 who were considered underemployed, therefore working in a position that is less than full time hours and/or is inadequate based on acquired education or training (Canadian Labour Congress, 2014). As I struggled to find meaningful employment, I started to notice some of the trends that were impacting other Canadian youth workers. In particular, I will discuss how many entry level positions impose unnecessarily high educational requirements and are lacking full time work opportunities for youth employees. Then I will outline some strategies to overcome these discouraging challenges.

In 2016, 54 per cent of Canadians ages 25 to 64 had achieved some degree of post-secondary education (Statistics Canada, 2017). In response to these elevated educational standards many employers have reported increasing their educational requirements for entry level employment positions (Kolm, 2013). This is problematic for youth seeking work because, although increased education has been associated to higher levels of employability, when a majority of youth have obtained post-secondary education, it exponentially increases the competitiveness of the job market (Statistics Canada, 2017). As a result, Canadian youth are pursuing higher levels of post-secondary education including a master's degree or a doctorate which leads to further time outside of the workforce which may damper the Canadian economy (Public Policy Forum, 2013). Furthermore, for youth who do not obtain any post-secondary education gaining entry to the workforce can be even more arduous. It can also

disproportionately negatively affect certain sub-groups of young people. Of significant concern: less than 11 per cent of Canadian Indigenous people ages 25 to 64 have completed post-secondary education (Statistics Canada, 2017). Living in the Northwest Territories, a community with a large Indigenous population, this trend is deeply concerning and may increase the risk of poverty and/or homelessness.

I would use a collaborative approach to combat this issue. First, I would need to have employers shift their focus from high levels of education to implementing comprehensive training programs for new hires. One way I could do this would be ask the unions to have employers put more emphasis on training new hires in their Collective Bargaining Agreements. I would also have the unions recommend employers take advantage of programs such as Canada Job Grant which provides funding for workplaces who wish to send their employees for additional education or skills training (Government of Canada, 2017).

Also, promoting government funded programs such as the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS) which helps youth transition into the workplace may help employers see the merit in skills and experience over strictly level of education (Government of Canada, 2019). Lastly, I would have teachers encourage youth who do not wish to pursue traditional post-secondary education to get involved in programs such as Skills Canada, where they can learn a respectable trade and gain employable skills (Skills Competences Canada, 2019). Another common challenge for youth workers is finding stable employment. Since 1998, the number of temporary jobs has increased exponentially leaving youth workers with less options for full time work (Statistics Canada, 2018). Temporary employment and part time work, also known as non-standard work, is often associated with low income and lack of health benefits (Government of Canada, 2018). In addition, with the increase of temporary work comes the prevalence of

precarious employment which refers to a lack of rights and protection for employees at work (Hill Notes, 2019). Generally, individuals in precarious work positions do not have access to the benefits received by individuals in unionized or full-time work and are not covered under the same legislation for existing labour standards in Canada which puts them at risk for mistreatment by employers (Hill Notes, 2019). Due to the fact that employers are more frequently using non-standard positions with lower wages, youth may find it more and more difficult to contribute to the Canadian economy and invest in their futures by obtaining mortgages, purchasing vehicles or taking out loans (Government of Canada, 2018).

To address issues with stable employment, I would start by addressing the Government of Canada. In 2018, the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and labour highlighted the importance of establishing new labour standards to accommodate the prevalence of non-standard work positions (Government of Canada, 2018). I would contact the Minister to ask for the progress on the creation and implementation of these new labour standards. Furthermore, I would address the unions associated with the companies using temporary work. Similar to the Union of Northern Workers (UNW) near-strike action taken against the Government of the Northwest Territories, I would ask other unions to fight for better full-time, indeterminate positions and improved working conditions for their members.

In summary, it is apparent that youth face many challenges in the Canadian workforce. Decreasing societal need for high educational requirements and emphasizing training programs is an effective way to increase youth employment levels. Additionally, offering more full-time work positions is important for providing stability for youth looking to invest in the Canadian economy. Sufficient involvement and implementation from a variety of shareholders may effectively lesson or overcome these challenges.

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