

Future to Discover Project – Briefing note

Post-secondary education is a requirement for a majority of jobs in today's labour market, and although Canada enjoys one of the highest rates of post-secondary education (PSE) attainment in the world overall, high rates of PSE attainment are not shared by all Canadians. The solution lies in part in increasing access among those who are currently less likely to access PSE: those from lower-income families and those who would be first in their family to attend PSE ("first-generation" students). The *Future to Discover* project tested two new approaches designed to encourage such students to access post-secondary education by addressing two of the potential barriers these students face: a lack of adequate information about the benefits of PSE, and a perceived lack of financing to afford it. In response to these barriers, two new programs were designed for testing:

- *Explore Your Horizons* addresses the information barrier by offering students enhanced career education planning through a series of workshops from grades 10 through 12. It aims to facilitate participants' development of their post-secondary plans based on their passions and interests. The program engaged parents and guardians as allies and existing post-secondary students as role models. *Explore Your Horizons* operated while two cohorts of study participants were in high school, from 2004-2008.
- *Learning Accounts* tackles the financial barrier by promising Grade 10 students from lower-income families a bursary of up to \$8,000 for PSE once they finish high school. Payouts for this intervention continued until 2011, as participants took up their post-secondary studies. *Learning Accounts* is unlike other programs that make early commitments of aid in that the bursary does not have to be repaid and is available regardless of students' academic achievement in high school, other than successful graduation.

Future to Discover has been evaluated using an experimental research design. Over 5,400 students from 51 high schools in New Brunswick and Manitoba consented to take part in the study and were then randomly assigned to a program group or comparison group. Because the two interventions were being tested both independently and together, the random assignment of students was to one of four groups: *Explore Your Horizons*, *Learning Accounts*, both *Explore Your Horizons* and *Learning Accounts*, or a comparison group. All groups of students are tracked through time, and their educational outcomes compared to one another through data collected from surveys and school records. The main outcomes of interest were graduation from high school, enrolling in PSE, and persisting through their first year of PSE. Many interim impacts of the interventions are also of interest, such as on students' attitudes and achievement while in high school, and these are available in an interim impacts report (published in 2009) and in a working paper based on school records data, also published today. The benefit of employing an experimental design for the evaluation is that the change in the outcomes of the participants receiving the program, relative to the outcomes of the comparison group, can be attributed to the program under test.

The new report presents the post-secondary impacts of *Future to Discover*, based on the analysis of data collected to a point two and a half years after the participants completed high school. For some of the most traditionally disadvantaged groups when it comes to post-secondary access, the interventions achieved their desired outcomes:¹

¹ Note that in New Brunswick there exist two parallel school systems for the two linguistic groups: Anglophone and Francophone. Analyses are conducted separately for each linguistic sector.

Enhanced career education in the form of *Explore Your Horizons* (EYH)

- Many more students applied to go to post-secondary education in both sectors in New Brunswick as a result of *EYH*. In Manitoba, college applications increased for some groups.
- When the cross-section of all students offered the program is considered, the offer of *EYH* raised post-secondary enrolment in the Francophone sector in New Brunswick, as intended. Among students from lower-income lower-education families, *EYH* increased post-secondary enrolment rates in both sectors in New Brunswick. However, there was no significant impact across the Anglophone sector as a whole in New Brunswick or in Manitoba. The increase in enrolment in the Francophone sector was concentrated at the university level.
- When high school graduation is taken into account, educational attainment rose as a result of *EYH* in all jurisdictions and sectors: in Manitoba and both linguistic sectors in New Brunswick. The intervention raised high school graduation rates in Manitoba and in New Brunswick's Anglophone sector.
- *Explore Your Horizons* was successful in disseminating career information in New Brunswick. As a result of *EYH*, students in the Francophone and Anglophone sectors of New Brunswick were less likely to claim that they did not have enough information about their career options to make good decisions about their education while in high school.

Early guarantee of a grant in the form of *Learning Accounts* in New Brunswick

- Post-secondary application rates were much higher among participants in both linguistic sectors offered *Learning Accounts*. This suggests that *Learning Accounts* raised demand for post-secondary education in both sectors.
- The offer of *Learning Accounts* raised post-secondary enrolment in the Francophone sector in New Brunswick, as intended. The increase was highly concentrated in college enrolment.
- The impact of *Learning Accounts* on post-secondary enrolment was felt across all subgroups in the Francophone sector. In the Anglophone sector, students from lower-income and lower-education families and boys saw improvements in enrolment.
- *Learning Accounts* may have displaced other non-repayable sources of post-secondary funds. Despite increased enrolment rates in the Francophone sector and no decline in the Anglophone sector, those offered *Learning Accounts* experienced a decrease in other kinds of non-repayable aid.
- *Learning Accounts* significantly raised high school graduation rates among all groups in the Anglophone sector, except for girls. In the Francophone sector, students from lower-income lower-education families were more likely to graduate high school as a result of *Learning Accounts*.

The combination of *Explore Your Horizons* and *Learning Accounts* in New Brunswick

- The combination of *Explore Your Horizons* plus *Learning Accounts* improved post-secondary education application rates in general and university application rates in particular in both the Francophone and Anglophone linguistic sectors in New Brunswick. Application rates rose among students from lower-income lower-education families in both sectors.
- *Explore Your Horizons* plus *Learning Accounts* helped raise post-secondary enrolment among students in the Anglophone linguistic sector of New Brunswick. University enrolment increased as a result of offering the combined interventions in both linguistic sectors.

- *Explore Your Horizons* plus *Learning Accounts* increased high school graduation rates and lowered dropout rates in the Anglophone linguistic sector in New Brunswick. High school outcomes in the Francophone sector were generally unaffected by the combined interventions.
- Students in the Francophone linguistic sector in New Brunswick were more likely to report that they knew how to get information about student financial aid as a result of the combined interventions. Similar impacts were seen in the Anglophone sector during Grade 12 but had dissipated by two and a half years later.
- The combination of *Explore Your Horizons* and *Learning Accounts* was successful in disseminating career information. As a result of the combined offer, students in both linguistic sectors of New Brunswick were less likely to claim that they did not have enough information about their career options to make good decisions about their education while in high school.

Future to Discover was evaluated for economic viability through cost-benefit analysis. The analysis assigned dollar values to *Future to Discover's* interventions' effects and resource costs, wherever possible, either through direct measurement or estimation. Costs and benefits were estimated from the perspective of the average participant (from the program group) and the perspective of all levels of governments. The sum of the net costs or benefits attributable to participants and governments was considered the net cost or benefit to society as a whole.

Cost-benefit analyses of *Explore Your Horizons* and *Learning Accounts* found:

- *Explore Your Horizons* was found economically viable among some participants in New Brunswick, particularly those from a lower-income, lower-education family. It was not found economically viable in Manitoba. The combination of higher program costs due to a smaller-scale operation and the lower impacts of the program in Manitoba resulted in no net social benefit.
- With relatively low administrative costs, *Learning Accounts* was very effective. It generated \$2.00 to \$3.40 benefit for each dollar cost to government. Its cost effectiveness was driven in part by large post-secondary participation impacts among the targeted group of students from lower-income families. Compared to *Explore Your Horizons*, it was delivered to fewer students who would have enrolled in post-secondary education anyway.
- Combining *Explore Your Horizons* with *Learning Accounts* did not produce any additional increase to the net social benefit compared to either program on its own. However, the combined *Explore Your Horizons – Learning Accounts* program was still economically viable. It generated \$1.51 to \$1.75 benefit for each dollar cost to government.

It is anticipated that the benefit-cost estimates will be of particular interest to policy-makers as they are faced with decisions about how to spend limited government funds. Through rigorous evaluation, *Future to Discover* is providing much-needed knowledge to inform the selection of programs that deliver the most benefit to Canada's economy and support all youth in having the opportunity to achieve their potential.

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