

## **Future to Discover Project – Briefing note**

The *Future to Discover* project is positioned to help Canada tackle two policy challenges it faces in the near future. These are the joint challenges of providing optimal futures to its less-advantaged youth, while overcoming a predicted shortage of skilled workers. Post-secondary education (PSE) is now 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 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, as they represent a critical driver of future labour market growth for Canada<sup>1</sup>. Those from lower income families and those who would be first in their family to attend PSE ("first-generation" students) are significantly less likely to go on to education after high school. The *Future to Discover* project tested two new approaches designed to encourage such students to access post-secondary education by addressing potential barriers, starting early in high school.

Many potential barriers to PSE access have been suggested, but little evidence exists to explain the lower rates of attendance of students from lower-income and first-generation families. *Future to Discover* focuses on two potential barriers: 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 postsecondary 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 continue until 2011, as participants may still be in transition to postsecondary 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* is being 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 are graduation from high school, enrolling in PSE, and persisting through their first year of PSE. Many interim impacts are also of interest, and presented in the *Future to Discover: Interim Impacts Report*. These include planning for PSE, attitudes towards education, and knowledge of financial aid. The benefit of employing an experimental design for the evaluation is that the change in the outcomes of the

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<sup>1</sup> Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. 2009. "Fact Sheet: Aboriginal University Education." ([www.aucc.ca/policy/priorities/aboriginal-education/documents/AboriginalFactSheet.pdf](http://www.aucc.ca/policy/priorities/aboriginal-education/documents/AboriginalFactSheet.pdf)).

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 interim impacts of *Future to Discover*, based on the analysis of data collected up until the point when the participants completed high school. At this point it is possible to report on participants' interest in seeking a post-secondary education in their Grade 12 year. For some groups, there are already indications that the interventions may be achieving their desired outcomes<sup>2</sup>:

- *Learning Accounts* raised the proportion of New Brunswick first-generation students in Anglophone schools aspiring to obtain a post-secondary credential from 87 to 96 per cent.
- *Explore Your Horizons* increased the proportion of such students who wanted to pursue an apprenticeship from 7 to 16 per cent.
- Among students from lower-income, lower-education families in New Brunswick Francophone schools, *Explore Your Horizons* increased from 45 to 55 per cent the proportion of students in their final year of high school who strongly agreed that they needed to keep studying after high school to achieve what they wanted in life. It also increased the proportion planning to apply to university from 32 to 47 per cent.
- *Explore Your Horizons* reduced the proportion of participants from lower-income, lower education families who saw a financial barrier standing in the way of their post-secondary aspirations, from 22 to 10 per cent in Manitoba and from 8 to 4 per cent in Francophone New Brunswick schools.
- *Explore Your Horizons* increased the proportion of New Brunswick Anglophone participants reporting that they were familiar with student financial aid from 44 to 53 per cent, and reduced their estimates of university tuition costs to a more accurate level (from a mean estimate of \$8,200 to one of \$7,100, at a time when tuition actually ranged from \$5,000 to \$7,000).

While there are promising signs that *Future to Discover* may have the intended impacts, the continuing tracking of these students for an additional two years will inform researchers of the effectiveness of these strategies. A full account of the longer-term impacts of *Future to Discover* – in particular, whether or not participants go on to post-secondary education – will be possible when the school records data and surveys of the participants for 2009 and 2010 are analyzed. A final report in 2011 will include any impacts detected on the types and locations of post-secondary programs that participants attend, and the financing they obtain to help them.

The final report will also include a benefit-cost analysis to determine whether the *Future to Discover* interventions are a net benefit to participants, governments, and society as a whole. 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* will provide 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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<sup>2</sup> 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.