

In Conversation with Students: The Job Outlooks They Want

Key Findings

- Through a series of in-depth discussions with young Canadians at the crossroads of high school and post-secondary education (PSE), we sought to better understand the type of information about future job openings they needed to support their decision to attend PSE and to help them choose a program and a career path.
- Students want forecasts of future job openings to help them identify job prospects in their ideal occupation and to understand the level of competition they may face when joining the labour market.
- When considering data about future job openings by occupation, location, industry and training, the students preferred more detailed information on occupations. Their second most preferred choice is job openings by location.
- Students prefer to receive data on the expected number of new jobs that is tailored to the timeframe for when they expect to graduate from PSE. This includes a two-year timeframe for students in two-year programs, and a five-year timeframe for those in four-year programs.
- When presented with three popular formats for providing occupational outlooks to Canadians, students prefer the detailed list with a wide range of variables and observations.

Introduction

The Labour Market Information Council (LMIC) partnered with [Refresh Market Research](#) to conduct an online qualitative study of first-year college and university students. We spoke to 35 young Canadians to learn why they chose to pursue PSE and how they selected their field of study and institution. The questions were related to identifying the types of labour market information (LMI) that could be helpful in making these decisions. The group discussed

three types of LMI: job outlooks, [skills](#) and [wages](#). This LMI Insight Report focuses on job outlooks and how they can support students in making informed decisions about PSE and career pathways. Job outlooks or occupational outlooks estimate the number and composition of future job openings, including positions that will be newly created or become vacant as current workers leave the job market.

This study builds on the findings of the **public opinion research** that LMIC previously conducted on nine survey groups of Canadians. The survey on students revealed that future job openings were among **the five most** sought after types of LMI. The same study aimed to identify why this type of LMI is useful and how providers of LMI can better structure this information to support the decision-making of first-year students (see **Box 1**).

For this study, discussions with students were conducted from May 23 to 25, 2019, through an online forum. Prior to the discussions, participants were given exercises to prompt them to think about their educational journey — from when they initially considered a career to selecting their field of study and enrolling in a post-secondary institution. Thirty-five individuals were selected to participate. The participants included individuals aged 17–20 who were in their final year of high school and enrolled in a PSE program, or who had just completed their first year of PSE in the spring of 2019. Ten of the 35 individuals were just completing high school in the spring and had been accepted to a PSE program for the fall of 2019. The remaining 25 had completed their first year of post-secondary education in the spring of 2019. Two of the participants planned to attend or were attending a technical/vocational college, five a community college, and the remaining 28 a university. This distribution represents the Canadian participation rate in post-secondary education.¹

Each participant contributed roughly an hour or more each day over the three days, to the discussion. In this report, we identify and discuss the types of job outlook information that students want, as well as their preferred timeframe and format for receiving such information. Other LMI Insight Reports focus on **skills** and **wages**.

Box 1: Online Qualitative Study Methodology

We partnered with Refresh Market Research to engage first-year post-secondary education (PSE) students with an in-depth online discussion forum focusing on their use of labour market information to make choices about their PSE and career pathways.

In total, we recruited 35 participants aged 17–20 who had just completed their first year of PSE in the spring of 2019 or were completing their last year of high school and were enrolled in a PSE program starting in the fall. As shown in the table below, efforts were made to ensure that participants represented a broad range of regions and institution types.

| Distribution | Categories | Number of participants |
|-------------------------|---|------------------------|
| Geographic Distribution | North (Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut) | 5 |
| | West (British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan) | 9 |
| | Ontario | 6 |
| | Quebec | 7 |
| | East (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador) | 8 |
| Education | Technical/Vocational College | 2 |
| | Community College | 5 |
| | University | 28 |

Occupation is the Key

The future of work is currently a trending topic, with **numerous publications** discussing the creation, destruction and transformation of jobs. Canadians, including students, can be overwhelmed by the volume and sometimes conflicting nature of this information. Our qualitative study was designed to identify the labour market information most relevant to them.

Students were presented with future job openings sliced in four ways: by occupation, by industry, by training (i.e. job openings that graduates from their program could fill) and by location (i.e., province

or city). They were asked to rank the information from very important to not important at all, and

to explain their choices.

The students indicated that future job openings by occupation is the most relevant information,

followed by job openings by location, then by training and last by industry.

When asked to elaborate, the students said that knowing job openings by occupation is particularly important in the final year of high school to help them identify career prospects in their ideal occupation and the level of competition they may face when searching for work. Although occupational breakdowns were most important, the students also wanted that information broken down by region.

Future job openings by location was ranked as the second most important after job openings by occupation. Participants in the focus group reported that having this information is important because moving for work is a possibility for many. Better information on future opportunities in different regions can help motivate students to

find information on the cost of living, quality of life and other conveniences in locations with good job prospects.

“Having such information [on job openings by occupation] would motivate me to become more competitive in the job market.”

By knowing “the availability of jobs in desirable locations I would like to work in, I can plan accordingly and move if need be.”

Job openings by training was ranked as the third most important type of job outlook information. Students indicated that this information is important in helping them identify the type and level of education and training required to stay ahead of the competition in landing a job. While participants felt this information was useful for those looking to land their first job, outlook by industry was least relevant to their educational and career decisions.

Tailored Timeframes Needed

The “future” is subjective, meaning different things to different people, so we inquired about the ideal timeframe for job forecasts. Students prefer to receive data on the expected number of new jobs when they expect to graduate from PSE and join the labour market. We asked them to rate each timeframe — two, five and ten years —

Job openings by industry are “less important to me because most skills and training that people possess can be transferred across industries.”

from very important to not important at all and to explain why. **Table 1** shows the breakdown of the overall importance of job openings for the three timeframes.

Table 1: Overall Importance of Job Openings by Timeframe

| | Very important | Somewhat important | Not important at all |
|---|----------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Expected number of new job openings in 2 years | 18 | 13 | 4 |
| Expected number of new job openings in 5 years | 17 | 17 | 1 |
| Expected number of new job openings in 10 years | 15 | 10 | 10 |

The most preferred timeframe for students was the expected number of new jobs available in five years' time. This is not surprising since most participants (28 of 35) planned to graduate from university in three to five years. Thirty-four participants rated this timeframe as very important

“In five years, I’ll be out of school and looking for a career — so knowing these numbers will motivate me to ensure I will have a career in the industry I want.”

or somewhat important. This was true for participants enrolled in both two- and four-year programs. Those in four-year programs said

that the five-year horizon tells them the potential number of jobs when they enter the labour market.

The students also thought that two-year forecasts were useful. Thirty-one participants rated this timeframe as very important or somewhat important. Those in two-year programs said it aligns with the start of their job search, whereas participants in four-year programs said it can help inform whether to change their field of study. Conversely, the ten-year timeframe was the least preferred among the participants. Ten rated this timeframe as not important at all, saying that it was not reliable and could not be trusted to inform career planning. One participant said that the timeframe could be useful, but only for “those in longer-term educational programs.”

The Most Preferred Format

Job outlooks come in a variety of formats. To identify which is most useful, we presented participants with outlooks in three commonly used styles:

1. **A statement** on the number of future job openings for a specific occupation and location
2. **A rating system** (e.g., “good,” “fair,” “limited”), presented as a 3-level star assessment
3. **A list** of the top in-demand jobs for a specific location

Figure 1 presents the example that students were shown and asked to evaluate and discuss.

Figure 1: Three Formats for Providing Job Outlooks Tested

STATEMENT

750 jobs
will open for professionals
in marketing in Quebec
in 2020

STAR SYSTEM

| OCCUPATION | JOB OUTLOOK |
|------------------|-------------|
| Child Specialist | ★★★ Good |
| Police Officer | ★ Limited |
| Carpenter | ★★ Fair |
| Psychologist | ★★★ Good |

LIST OF MOST INDEMAND JOBS

Preferred Format

Most in demand jobs in Quebec for the 2018-2020 period:

- #1 Professional occupations in health (except nursing)
- #2 Professional occupations in nursing
- #3 Assisting occupations in support of health services
- #4 Paraprofessional occupations in legal, social, community and education services
- #5 Technical occupations in health

Respondents preferred the list of in-demand jobs over the other two formats. The ordered list of jobs provided more context than the other two options,

“In my experience, when I am researching job markets, I am not skimming over headlines or just casually browsing. It is something I would like to sit down and focus on, so the more information the better. I find this list too short and would prefer one with up to 20-25 items in length with actual metrics.”

they told us. However, they also said that they would like to see each occupation accompanied by data such as the number of expected job openings and the degree of uncertainty associated with

the forecast. Students also wanted a longer list of occupations than the five provided. They suggested that a list of 10 or more occupations would provide a clearer picture of the future job market.

Students were also presented with a statement on the projected number of job openings for a profession in a specific location. This information they found to be precise but lacking in context. They had mixed opinions as to whether the information provided showed a good or bad outlook. For example, some felt that 750 jobs available for marketing professionals in Quebec in 2020 sounded rather promising and represented an opportunity for new graduates or those unemployed. Others reported that “it’s not very many jobs compared to the number of people in marketing positions in Canada.”

Finally, participants found the star system format unhelpful. Given the importance of students making informed career decisions, presenting data in a manner that does not lead to false assumptions is paramount.

“The [star rating] chart was overly simplistic, childish, unreliable and inaccurate.”

The Way Forward

Often, first-year college and university students are just beginning to think about the specific job opportunities that will be available to them in the future. Since most have several years before launching their careers, job forecasts can be particularly beneficial. Our conversation with them confirmed that assumption. Moreover, we learned that students want more detailed, customizable information (i.e. specific to their field of study and career path) supported by reliable data. The students were also aware that they might have to relocate to find a job in their ideal occupation,

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For more information about this LMI Insight Report or other LMIC activities, please check our publications page. You may also contact Bolanle Alake-Apata at bolanle.alake-apata@lmic-cimt.ca or Tony Bonen (Director of Research, Data and Analytics) at tony.bonen@lmic-cimt.ca. Check out the Survey Results by Population Groups [dashboard](#) and previous [LMI Insight Reports](#) on the types of [wages](#) and [skills](#) information that students need.

End Notes

- 1 Statistics Canada, Table 37-10-0015-01, Postsecondary enrolments by program type, credential type, age groups, registration status and sex.

and wanted information to help them prepare for that change.

Our findings reveal important considerations to providers of job demand forecasts. First, young Canadians want information on future job openings that aligns with the timeframe for when they expect to graduate from PSE and enter the labour market. Far off forecasts (e.g. 10-years) were deemed too uncertain to be useful for career decision making. Second, students want more detail and context about the job outlooks presented.

LMIC will be working with its federal, provincial and territorial colleagues, as well as its non-governmental partners, to fine-tune these recommendations to better support LMI producers and, ultimately, to promote best practices in communicating labour market information to Canadian students.