



# CMEC Reference Framework for Successful Student Transitions



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CMEC is deeply committed to student success and recognizes that vital to student success is their capacity to navigate key transitions along their career pathways.

## Introduction

Transitions from education and into career pathways are increasingly complex. Students are called upon to navigate multiple career (learning and work) transitions within constantly evolving and sometimes unpredictable labour market. Pathways have become complex and some students can find it challenging to make informed, effective choices. More than ever, students need a set of advanced career-management skills and tailored supports to maneuver within and between learning and work. As a result, education systems around the world are looking to build on promising practices in order to strengthen transition supports for students and help level the playing field for under-represented/disadvantaged groups and those with complex needs, such as Indigenous students, racialized students, low-income students, and students with disabilities.

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), is deeply committed to student success and recognizes that vital to student success is their capacity to navigate key transitions along their career pathways. At their 105<sup>th</sup> CMEC meeting in July 2016, ministers discussed the importance of transitions between elementary-secondary school and postsecondary education, and from both of those education systems into work. They tasked their officials with providing a draft student-transitions reference framework by July 2017.<sup>1</sup> Ministers also reaffirmed Indigenous education as a high priority, underscoring the importance of making the history and legacy of Indian Residential Schools better known, as indicated in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC).<sup>2</sup> Informed by TRCC's *Calls to Action*, the "CMEC Reference Framework for Successful Student Transitions" (the "Reference Framework") has been developed to inform, encourage, and support jurisdictions as they respond to the changing nature of student transitions.

The Reference Framework begins with a brief review of the context surrounding student transitions in Canada. It articulates a scope, vision, guiding principles, goals, and outcome statements based on proven policies and practices from across Canada and around the world, and with input from provincial and territorial government officials from K–12 and postsecondary education (PSE) departments.

The central component of the Reference Framework is a series of benchmarks intended to support and promote good practice in student transitions. These benchmarks provide provincial and territorial governments with common reference

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<sup>1</sup> Press release: "CMEC moves forward on pan-Canadian education initiatives." Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), Toronto, July 8, 2016. Retrieved from [http://www.cmec.ca/278/Press-Releases/Press-Releases-Detail/CMEC-Moves-Forward-On-Pan-Canadian-Education-Initiatives.html?id\\_article=917](http://www.cmec.ca/278/Press-Releases/Press-Releases-Detail/CMEC-Moves-Forward-On-Pan-Canadian-Education-Initiatives.html?id_article=917)

<sup>2</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada reports. Retrieved from <http://nctr.ca/reports.php>

points to guide assessment, development, exchange, collaboration with key stakeholders, evaluation, and continuous improvement. The benchmarks form the basis for two accompanying tools:

- **Student Transition Benchmark Self-Assessment Tool:** To guide the assessment of current transition policies and programming, identify strengths/gaps and set priorities for action to ensure that students transition successfully; and
- **Student Transition Action Plan Template:** To support movement from assessment to implementation.

These can be used by the K–12 and PSE sectors and other key stakeholders to move the benchmarks from paper to practice.



## Context

Canada has a world-class education system with strong graduation rates, academic achievement, and elevated participation and persistence in PSE.

In Canada:

- 85 per cent of the general population are high-school graduates, with 92 per cent of Canadians aged 25–34 having attained at least upper-secondary education (Statistics Canada and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2015);
- the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015 results indicated that out of 72 participating countries and economies, Canada was outperformed by only one country in reading, three in science, and six in math (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2016); and
- more students are successfully transitioning and persisting through to PSE graduation, and Canada continues to have the largest share of postsecondary-educated adults among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Member countries (OECD, 2016).

These education outcomes have positioned youth to have greater labour-market attachment, especially those with a PSE credential (Statistics Canada and CMEC, 2015). Graduates in Canada have been found to earn significantly more, stay employed longer, and depend less on social assistance than those without a PSE credential (DeClou, 2014).

While increased graduation rates, persistence in PSE, and improved cognitive outcomes are critical in supporting expedient transitions into the workforce, some indicators demonstrate that not all students share in the benefits of education equally, and many struggle in their career transitions.

For example:

- According to the preliminary findings of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (Statistics Canada/ESDC/CMEC, 2013), differences in proficiency in literacy and numeracy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations are all but eliminated at higher levels of education. However, closing the existing gap in completion rates for secondary school and rates of participation in postsecondary education between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students remains a significant challenge. More than 20 per cent of Indigenous learners do not complete high school compared to 8.5 per cent of non-Indigenous learners (Gilmore, 2010).

- Persons with disabilities are less likely to graduate from high school (80 per cent versus 89 per cent) or from university at the bachelor's level or higher (14 per cent versus 27 per cent) than persons without disabilities. Compared to their counterparts without disabilities, persons with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed (8 per cent versus 6 per cent) or not in the labour force (45 per cent versus 21 per cent) (Till, M., Leonard, T., Yeung, S. & Nicholls, G., 2015).
- Access to, and persistence in, PSE remains uneven among Canadian youth, especially for those from low-income families and those who come from families with no previous experience at the postsecondary level (Berger, Motte, & Parkin, 2009).
- Studies have shown that inadequate career education coupled with weak links between learning and skills requirements in the labour market can result in students switching programs more often and taking additional coursework, diplomas, degrees, and training in order to settle on a career direction and ultimately achieve labour-market attachment (Bruce & Marlin, 2012; Sweet et al., 2010; OECD & ILO, 2011; Bezanson, 2008; De Broucker, 2005).
- Underemployment in Canada continues to be a serious and growing challenge for youth and young adults. Recent graduates from postsecondary education, particularly university graduates, may experience challenges in finding jobs in line with their educational qualifications. Statistics Canada examined the rate of “overqualification” of recent university graduates between 1991 and 2011, and found that in 2011, approximately 40 per cent of university graduates aged 25-34 were working in jobs requiring college education or less (18 per cent in jobs requiring high school education or less). The majority of “overqualified” graduates are from humanities, social sciences, and business administration programs. Young university-educated immigrants were also more likely to be overqualified than Canadian born graduates.

These indicators suggest that transitions between levels of education and into the labour force can pose a challenge, and highlight the importance of well-organized career and labour market information and support services for all students (Sweet et al., 2010). Tailored responses and an in-depth understanding of the unique barriers faced by sub-groups of students who continue to have unequal access to PSE (e.g., Indigenous youth, rural youth, youth with disabilities, and racialized youth) are needed to improve outcomes (Till, M., Leonard, T., Yeung, S., & Nicholls, G., 2015; McCloy, U., & DeClou, L., 2013; Bruce & Marlin, 2012; Looker, 2009; Parriag, Wright, & MacDonald, 2010; Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2010). The Reference Framework is a resource for provinces and territories in their endeavour to address these challenges and position students for better transition outcomes.

## Scope

This Reference Framework targets transitions from K–12 to PSE and from K–12/ PSE to work. Other transition points, while clearly important, would need to be the subject of another process.

## Vision

Supporting student transitions is everybody’s responsibility. We all stand to gain when Canadian youth have the skills, strategies, supports, and resilience they need to transition effectively through their studies and into work. Education systems play a unique and critical role in ensuring that every student has the supports they need to transition to pursue their preferred futures.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, this Reference Framework focuses on building the capacity of the K–12 and PSE sectors. While a primary resource for these sectors, it is intended to be used by the full range of stakeholders engaged with youth and young adults, namely, policy-makers across related sectors, social-inclusion partners, community transition-support organizations, career and employment service providers, parents/guardians/families, Elders, and the business community. Active collaboration across these key stakeholders will not only strengthen their respective contributions, but will result in an extended collective impact.



Supporting student transitions is everybody’s responsibility.

<sup>3</sup> A “preferred future” is a statement or description that is personally defined to reflect how one would like to live, learn, and work. It is not a static concept and evolves throughout one’s life.

While the Reference Framework addresses transition points for all students broadly, its vision acknowledges that student transitions may require different interventions to meet the needs of specific groups of students traditionally under-represented in PSE and/or the labour market. For example, research shows that labour-market outcomes are dramatically improved for Indigenous students who graduate from PSE programs compared to those who do not attend PSE; yet, for many, limited exposure to PSE, financial constraints, and a lack of cultural awareness have impacted learner engagement, a sense of belonging, and persistence (Restoule, Mashford-Pringle, Chacaby, Smillie, & Brunette, 2013; Parriag, Wright, & MacDonald, 2010). Specialized and proactive interventions based on in-depth understanding of Indigenous students' strengths, potential, barriers, and challenges are needed to help these students transition successfully. The Reference Framework has been developed with the needs of under-represented and disadvantaged groups in mind. The Reference Framework and accompanying tools may need adaptation in order to be culturally appropriate and/or tailored to the specific needs of these students.

## Guiding principles

The Reference Framework is guided by the following principles:

- All learning and work have value;
- Programming, services, curricula, and products to support transitions are student-centred and include students in their design and evaluation;
- All students know about and have ready access to services, information, programming, and curricula that are suited to their needs, cultural backgrounds, unique strengths, and challenges, and are tailored to support them in their learning and work transitions;
- Career development<sup>4</sup> is fundamentally enhanced when students have access to multiple experiential learning opportunities from K–12 and in PSE, including direct exposure to diverse learning and work options;
- Appropriate training underpins the capacity of educators to deliver and oversee transition programs, services, and/or supports;
- Policies and programs are transparent and accessible to students, their families, teachers, employers, and other stakeholders;

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<sup>4</sup> Career development is the lifelong process of managing learning (formal and informal), work (paid and unpaid), and the transitions in between in order to move toward one's preferred future (Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training, 2015).



All learning and work have value

- Promising/best practices are shared among the provinces and territories;
- The efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of policies and programs are measured to support the development of evidence-based practice;
- Policies across government departments are examined to support coherence across transition points.

## Goals

The goals of the Reference Framework are to:

- provide a common set of benchmarks to support the assessment of current policy and practice by jurisdictions as they work to improve transition outcomes for youth and young adults;
- support informed, evidence-based decision making, targeted implementation, and accountability in transition policies and programming; and
- increase dialogue, exchange, cooperation, and coordination among key stakeholders, including governments, schools, PSE institutions, employers, and community partners on issues related to student transition.

## Outcomes

The intended outcomes of this Reference Framework include:

- improved transitions for all students from K–12 to PSE and from K–12/PSE to work;
- increased awareness of the importance of supporting stronger student transitions across provincial/territorial governments and key stakeholders (e.g., employers, parents, community groups);
- increased awareness and exchange of existing promising/best practices supporting student transitions across Canada and across stakeholder sectors;
- widespread assessment of existing transition policies and programs by jurisdictions using evidence-based benchmarks;
- The identification by jurisdictions of existing strengths, gaps, and priorities for action with respect to supporting student transitions;
- informed and accountable policies and programming based on student need and evidence;
- cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral collaboration and scaling of transformative policies and practices, where appropriate, to better support K–12-to-PSE and K–12/PSE-to-work transitions; and
- ongoing evaluation of transition policies and programs and public reporting of impact data to promote accountability and continuous improvement.

## Benchmarks for good practice in student transitions

Canada is not alone in its need to improve student transitions. Supporting youth and young adults to better manage their school-to-school and school-to-work transitions is a common preoccupation of countries across the globe. Accordingly, many evidenced-based examples of transition frameworks, strategies, and guideline documents have been developed by transnational bodies, countries, jurisdictions, and institutions. These documents, associated research reports (see Bibliography), and the expertise and experiences of the provinces and territories have shaped this Reference Framework. From these documents, common indicators of good practice (policies, programs, and implementation strategies) have been identified and included as benchmarks for supporting stronger student transitions.

In exploring how student transition outcomes are improved, it is clear that there is no straightforward solution or single answer; rather, consistent achievement of good-practice benchmarks and the demonstration of improvement based on outcome evidence (Holman, 2014) are essential.

Many of the framework documents reviewed articulated evidence-based benchmarks for supporting strong student transitions with specific performance indicators to support implementation and evaluation. Inspired by these models, this Reference Framework provides performance indicators associated with each benchmark, which also serve as the basis for the associated assessment tool and action plan template.

This Reference Framework centres on 11 benchmarks for student transitions (policies, programs, and implementation strategies) based on international and national evidence-based research. Quality transition policy and practice are grounded in the following:

1. **Stable and student-centred career programming is provided:** Career education and career development are central to learning across K–12 and PSE. Career education<sup>5</sup> is provided to all students throughout their education pathways. Stakeholders, including youth, educators, families, and employers, are involved in the design and are made aware of, understand, and support programming. Career education and career development are recognized as integral to the curriculum, with its outcomes connected to required learning.
2. **Career-management skills<sup>6</sup> (CMS) are actively developed:** The competencies (skills, knowledge, and attitudes) required to effectively navigate learning systems and the labour market are clearly defined and articulated in a competency framework that promotes development. They are integrated as core-curricular outcomes in schools and career services. Youth are assessed on their development of these competencies.

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<sup>5</sup> Career education is the composite of school-based activities and experiences designed to prepare and engage individuals in their career development.

<sup>6</sup> Career-management skills are skills that people need to have in order to effectively respond to a rapidly changing labour market. They include skills of personal management (self-awareness and building a positive self-image and the ability to interact effectively with others, and to change and grow throughout life), learning and work exploration (the ability to participate in lifelong learning, research labour-market information and use it effectively, and understand the relationship between career goals and society/economy), and life/work building (secure, create, and maintain work, make life/work-enhancing decisions, maintain a balance between life and work roles, understand the changing nature of life and work roles, and understand, engage in, and manage one's own life/work building process). Historically, in Canada, the *Blueprint for Life/Work Designs* has been used as the model for the delineation and development of these skills. The Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training (CAMET) is reviewing the articulation of these skills with the intention of publishing a revised CMS taxonomy focused on the Atlantic region in 2018.

Appropriate professional learning ensures that educators/service providers understand CMS and are equipped with instructional strategies to creatively foster and assess students' competency levels.

3. **Career and labour-market Information is accessible, and its effective use is supported:** Every student, parent/guardian, and educator has access to information about a diverse range of learning and work options and up-to-date and readily accessible labour-market information. All are supported in making career sense of this information, and students are actively supported in applying it to their personal career-planning process. Appropriate professional learning ensures that educators and service providers understand the connections between education pathways and associated labour markets.
4. **Policy and programming recognize, and are tailored to, the diverse and specific needs of students:** Services and programming to support transitions are tailored to individual student needs and interests. Student diversity is considered, programs are respectful of cultural perspectives (e.g., the Indigenization of curriculum), address attitudinal barriers that implicitly or explicitly limit career choice (e.g., young women's entry into STEM careers). Wraparound supports (e.g., supports that are community-based, culturally relevant, individualized, strength-based, and family-centered) are made available to disadvantaged/marginalized groups (e.g., Indigenous youth, immigrant youth, low-income students, and learners with a disability). Career-education programming actively seeks to challenge stereotypes and raise aspirations among disadvantaged and under-represented groups.



5. **Learning is explicitly linked to labour-market applications:** Career education is not limited to a single course or educator. Career education is a whole-school responsibility, and all educators make linkages between subject-learning and labour-market applications.
6. **All students participate in work-integrated learning opportunities:** Students have multiple opportunities over the course of their education pathways to learn from employers and in workplaces about the realities of diverse work environments, and to develop the skills needed for labour-market success. Community partnerships are developed with employers and businesses as key contributors in the process. Employers and businesses have access to resources and training to assist in the onboarding of students from disadvantaged or under-represented groups (e.g., cultural awareness tools and information regarding accommodations for students with disabilities or mental-health concerns). Targeted programming is available to specific student populations (e.g., Indigenous, youth with disabilities, youth from rural or Northern communities) to provide more equitable access to work-experience opportunities.
7. **Students learn about all PSE pathways:** Students understand, have exposure to, and have the supports to consider the full range of postsecondary learning opportunities that are available to them. Programming and approaches address equity of access for under-represented groups.
8. **Youth have access to career and transition services:** Students and graduates have free and ready access to career services in the community and in K–12 and postsecondary institutions. Schools, PSE career centres, and employment services for youth collaborate and coordinate in order to provide students with seamless support.
9. **Implementation, impact, and quality assurance are underpinned by adequate training of providers:** Career educators and those providing career services require the competency-based, role-specific training that is key to the implementation of the other 10 benchmarks. Career educators and pre-service teachers who may become career educators are encouraged to become certified career-development practitioners and to tap into the supports and professional-development opportunities available through the professional association for career development practitioners in their own jurisdiction and/or the Canadian Council for Career Development (3CD).
10. **Career education and service provision are assessed:** Provinces and territories promote and support the regular collection of data related to common indicators such as user-benefit, satisfaction, impact, and equity of access (particularly for Indigenous students, racialized students, students

with a disability, and students living in rural and remote areas). An evidence-based culture is actively promoted and there is public reporting of results.

11. **Continuous improvement is guided by evidence and return on investment:** There is accountability for the use of funds, and measures to indicate the cost-effectiveness of programming, services, and product provision are coordinated across participating sectors. Participation of, and impacts on, under-represented and marginalized groups are tracked through voluntary self-identification parameters; the use and interpretation of those data are then informed by a thorough understanding of, and appreciation for, any relevant historical or contextual background information. Collection of data clearly states to those providing them how they will be used. Data on the use of resources and expenditures are collected to track efficiency, to flag under-resourced priority areas, and to evaluate impact. Return on investment is used to guide plans for continuous improvement.

These benchmarks can be used at pan-Canadian, provincial/territorial, and local levels by stakeholders as a starting point for strengthening transition policies and programs. To support stakeholders in this task, this Reference Framework is accompanied by two assessment and action-planning tools, as noted in the Introduction:

1. **Student Transition Benchmark Self-Assessment Tool**, to guide the assessment of current transition policies and programming, identify strengths/gaps, and set priorities for action to ensure that students transition successfully; and
2. **Student Transition Action Plan Template**, to support movement from assessment to implementation.

Each of these tools can be accessed on-line and used as required.

## Accountability

The ministers of education in each province/territory are responsible for setting their own priorities, deciding on associated actions to be undertaken, and monitoring the impact of each action. This Reference Framework and the benchmarks articulated herein are intended for use by provinces/territories as they evaluate their current transition policies and programs and undertake targeted actions to address identified gaps and priorities. CMEC recognizes the critical role of evaluation in supporting the implementation of student transitions policies and programs in the K–12 and PSE systems. CMEC encourages provinces and territories to use the accompanying assessment and action-planning tools to support their ongoing efforts to improve student transitions.

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## **CMEC Reference Framework for Successful Student Transitions**

Transitions from education and into career pathways are increasingly complex. Students are called upon to navigate multiple career (learning and work) transitions within constantly evolving and sometimes unpredictable labour market. Pathways have become complex and some students can find it challenging to make informed, effective choices. More than ever, students need a set of advanced career-management skills and tailored supports to maneuver within and between learning and work. As a result, education systems around the world are looking to build on promising practices in order to strengthen transition supports for students and help level the playing field for under-represented/disadvantaged groups and those with complex needs, such as Indigenous students, racialized students, low-income students, and students with disabilities.