



Educational Pathways and Paid Work: A Longitudinal Approach

Summary of Research Paper 7

Introduction and theoretical signposts

Researchers interested in postsecondary persistence were quick to turn their attention to paid work, identified by educational stakeholders as a source of academic disengagement that led students to drop out. However, findings indicate that paid work has varying effects on academic persistence and departures. While both not working at all and working long hours (i.e. a higher than average number) appear to negatively impact postsecondary persistence, working between 8 and 20 hours seems to have no such effect.

Drawn mainly from cross-sectional surveys, the data typically used by researchers do not allow any correlations to be made between persistence in study and variations in the relative amounts of time spent working versus studying, since there is no way of tracking such variations. One might surmise that students cut back on working hours or even stop working altogether to cope with academic difficulties. From this perspective, the higher exit rate among non-working students can be attributed to the fact that academic difficulties caused some students to stop working to devote more time to school. Working with a longitudinal study, on the other hand, enabled us to focus precisely on this question — the relationship between amounts of time spent working and studying — and to identify situations of adjustment within educational pathways.

Over the past three decades, students in many countries have increased the amount of time they devote to paid work. They no longer restrict their work to summer or school breaks, but instead work throughout the year. While fairly common, this phenomenon of overlapping work and studies is unevenly distributed among the developed nations. Transition to adulthood differs according to their respective models of government intervention and family culture.

Researchers in Canada and the United States have identified a dominant social logic of individual emancipation that prizes autonomy and leads young people to combine work and studies early on in the educational pathway. Young Americans started working their way through school in the post-War era, with the work/study combination becoming the norm by the 1970s. Similarly, some two-thirds of Canadian students work during postsecondary studies. In Quebec as in other provinces, the combination is seen as “the educational norm today”.

The review of literature which opens the present study deals with four main subjects and locates them in a web of theoretical considerations. These subjects are: work intensity during studies, types of work, reasons for working during studies and their respective effects on educational pathways.

Methodology

Our analysis used data from the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), a longitudinal survey undertaken jointly by Statistics Canada and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. The YITS used questionnaires to gather information on certain aspects of the lives of young people, particularly regarding education, training and work. The data were used to study a number of major transitions normally associated with this time of life, such as finishing high school, commencing postsecondary studies, entering the workforce, leaving the parental home, and so on. The questionnaires also collected data on the factors that were liable to influence these transitions, some of which (including family background and previous school experiences) were deemed “objective”, others of which (including personal goals and expectations) were considered “subjective”.

The YITS began in 1999 and the questionnaires used in Cycle 1 gathered information on that year. The questionnaires in subsequent cycles collected data over two-year periods. Thus, Cycle 2 gathered information on the years 2000 and 2001, Cycle 3 on 2002 and 2003, and Cycle 4 on 2004 and 2005 (Table 2.1). In total, the YITS traced respondents’ lives over seven years. Our panel consisted of youth born between 1979 and 1981 inclusively who were aged 18–20 on December 31, 1999. In our analysis, we focused on respondents living in the ten Canadian provinces who had participated in each of the four YITS cycles.

To conduct a longitudinal study in the sense that it is understood here, the data must include biographical information about each individual who is part of the study population. Longitudinal analysis is used to study transitions from one state to another within a given state space. Within the context of the present study, we are interested in examining university students’ transitions to the dropped-out state.

Through the YITS data, we examined how four aspects of the lives of young people influenced their educational pathways:

- Labour market participation: having a job or not, as well as the characteristics of the jobs held during periods of employment
- Social/cultural background: gender, parental educational capital, first language, visible minority status
- Living conditions: living in the parental home (or not), being a parent (or not), needing to take out a student loan (or not)
- Registration status: whether the student was registered part-time or full-time

The specificity of our analytic approach was to consider state changes in paid employment between January 1999 and December 2005, in order to identify the overall effects on dropping out (defined as leaving a program during this period, without obtaining a degree and without re-enrolling). However, it should be noted that leaving a program could indicate a process of career transition as much as a desire to leave school. Also, we must bear in mind that individuals who leave may one day resume their studies. In this sense, we might wish to make a distinction between “leaving” and “dropping out,” the latter of which is often defined as leaving school without returning for a given period (e.g. five years).

Summary of the results

A first finding confirms the importance of paid work among university students. During the period studied, more than two out of three students had a paid job while at school, with female students slightly outnumbering male students in this situation. The exit rate in a given year follows the academic calendar: students “decide” to leave their program at the end of one semester or before beginning another. From a longer-term perspective, we also noted that exits were higher at the beginning of a given program and tended to decrease with time, although we noted a renewed upsurge of the exit rate among certain student categories when studies were prolonged.

Paid work had an appreciable effect on the dropout rate: it significantly increased such rates among male students. However, if the effect on male students was constant throughout the study period, it was only appreciable among female students toward the end of the program. Furthermore, we noted that the same factors did not influence the hazard in the same way for both genders. These differences can be summarized as follows:

- Most job characteristics increased the hazard of dropping out among male students, whereas only two were significant among female students. Among male students, all characteristics of paid work increased the hazard of dropping out, with one exception: having a professional position, which actually reduced the hazard. Among female students, working no more than 8 hours/week reduced the hazard of dropping out, while having a permanent job and a high income increased it.
- Social background appeared to reduce the hazard of leaving. This was the case among male students who belonged to a visible minority, as well as among female students who were Francophone or whose parents (one or both) had completed a university program.
- Registration status only affected the hazard of dropping out among male students. Studying part-time slowed the hazard.
- Living conditions mainly affected male students. Recent loans (and the resulting feeling of indebtedness) and living in the parental home are two factors that accelerated the hazard of leaving. Among female students, only the latter had a significant effect.

The analysis also helped us identify how the exit rate evolved over time, and to understand the development of the effects of different variables (inserts 3.2 and 3.3):

- The hazard of leaving a program varied over time: it was higher at the start of the program, subsequently decreased, and then once again increased under the effects of different variables.
- A number of job characteristics had variable effects during the period studied. For male students, these consisted of the number of jobs, job permanency number of hours worked, income level and occupational skill level. Among female students, job permanency, number of hours worked and occupational skill level also had inconsistent effects.
- Among the other parameters examined, registration status, belonging to a visible minority, being in debt, living at the parental home and having children had variable effects among male students. Among female students, three parameters had this kind of effect: belonging to a visible minority, being Francophone, and living at the parental home.
- Among male students, the dropout rate was higher at the start of a program; being a part-time student reduced the hazard at the start of a program, but this effect was no longer present after several months.

Conclusion : avenues for further research

Our aim was to identify the links between educational pathways and extracurricular activities to better understand the courses of academic careers. To do so, we examined the effect of having paid work on the tendency to drop out of university studies, while controlling this effect with those produced by other factors. Our decision to examine this issue stemmed from the fact that it is a subject of some dispute in academia. Indeed, many educational stakeholders see paid work as a source of distraction for students. Conversely, several studies have indicated that this is not the case, unless the student works many hours.

Our analysis indicates that working during studies affects the tendency to leave a first university program, and that this effect varies both according to job characteristics and with the passage of time. The effect was seen to persist when different control variables were introduced into the analysis. In this regard, since a multitude of factors and reasons can impel a student to drop out, we needed to apply multiple interpretive approaches to fully understand the findings. These approaches referred to the educational experience itself, as well as lifestyle, social background and living conditions.

The first approach concerned the educational experience itself. The hazard of dropping out varied over time: it was highest at the start of the program, declined thereafter, and was liable to subsequently resurge. Students who dropped out early on in the program may have done so as a result of failure to integrate socially and/or intellectually. Why, then, do dropout rates rise after several months have elapsed? This is quite possibly due to students' discouragement: despite strategic efforts and adjustments (e.g. deciding not to work during the school year), they may feel they cannot succeed and resign themselves to leaving.

The second interpretative approach focused on lifestyles, particularly during the transition to adulthood. Paid employment during studies may be required to meet basic needs, ensure financial independence, provide more purchasing power or prepare for a profession. Whatever the reason, the combination of paid work and studies represents a typical lifestyle choice for the majority of young people and university students.

The third avenue for interpretation concerns living conditions. If parental status did not have a constant effect throughout the period studied, it was because too few students were in this category to have any significant effect. However, living in the family home accelerated the rate at which students left school before obtaining their degree, especially at the start of a program, which is somewhat surprising or counterintuitive. We surmised that young people who experienced academic failure could more easily leave their programs if they had "insurance policies" to facilitate their transition. Living at home might well constitute such a policy, and thus facilitate academic reorientation.

Debt is another relevant aspect of living conditions. Here, we were able to identify two situations: previous debt (students who had applied for a loan in the past) and current debt. The former appeared to affect the dropout rate early on in a program, while the latter only had a noticeable influence when studies were prolonged. These findings support research indicating that it is the feeling rather than the fact of being in debt that affects the hazard of dropping out. Previous debt thus has a greater impact at the start rather than at the end of the program, presumably since the imminence of workforce entry (and by extension, the possibility of paying back the loan) reduces debt-related anxieties. Similarly, current debt begins to weigh heavily if studies are prolonged, when the prospect of having to go deeper into debt may cause some students to drop out.

Reference :

Benoît LAPLANTE, María Constanza Street, Stéphane Moulin, Pierre Doray, Julie Verdy (2010). *Educational Pathways and Paid Work: A Longitudinal Approach* (Projet *Transitions*, Research Paper 7). Montreal, Centre interuniversitaire de recherche sur la science et la technologie (CIRST).

To consult the full text of this research paper, visit our Web page:

<http://www.cirst.uqam.ca/transitions>

For more information about this research, contact us: cirst@uqam.ca