Youth Workforce Development in the Columbia Basin-Boundary Region

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth are vital to the success of rural communities and regions, however rural youth can face a range of challenges. As part of a project entitled *Training, engagement, and retention: a 'learning region' approach to rural youth* consultation was done in November-December 2015 in the West-Kootenay Boundary region to gather information specific to the local youth population in order to inform next steps related to youth workforce development. Consultation included 5 youth focus groups and 11 expert interviews focused on a series of qualitative questions related to education/training, employment, and engagement.

Findings are divided into two categories:

1. **Responses to questions** – general responses derived from the original questions, including the target population, employment, youth leaving the region, engagement, needs, and challenges.

2. **Common themes** – common themes found within the responses, including perceptions & influences, active engagement & awareness, required skills, networks, and conflict & change.

CONTENTS

This research confirms the difficulty of accessing and understanding the target population, while also highlighting that there is no single approach or single solution to addressing youth issues, but rather a clear need for a range of youth specific resources, supports, and programs that are consciously and collaboratively established to be accessible to and to serve the needs of youth.

This research began with the question of what action is needed to address youth training, engagement, and retention on a regional scale? To this there is no

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single, clear, straightforward response. However these consultation findings suggest while currently there are programs, resources, and supports, an initial challenge appears to be related to raising the profile of what exists and enhancing access, followed by identifying gaps within what exists. This includes enhancing regional collaboration and communication among key players. While differences in context and need suggest that a blanket approach will not work, increasing the flexibility of programs, resources, and supports could allow for regional scale initiatives that can be tailored to local needs and conditions.

This consultation process and results provide a broad overview related to youth training, retention, and engagement. However, more specific and in-depth exploration is warranted. For example, looking at how the needs of 'first jobs' versus 'real jobs' differ is one option. Others include questions like how can collaboration be encouraged and supported between organizations where mandates are restrictive or lack alignment, or how can workforce development efforts balance and integrate economic and socio-cultural needs? What is clear is that youth training, retention, and engagement are not the responsibility of one single organization or person. There is clearly a role for multiple players, including a role for youth themselves.

In addition to the consultation summary, the project produced a series of Knowledge Briefs that summarizes academic literature on topics related to **youth engagement**, **retention**, **training and education**, and **youth workforce development**. Additionally select **examples** and **resources** are available.

INTRODUCTION

Youth are vital to the success of rural communities and regions for many reasons [1–3]. However, it is well documented that rural youth can face a range of challenges related to education and employment. These challenges can contribute to youth outmigration, negatively impact rural communities and regions. As part of a project entitled *Training, engagement, and retention: a 'learning region' approach to rural youth* (the project) consultation was done in November-December 2015 in the West-Kootenay Boundary region (the region) to gather information specific to local youth. A specific segment of the youth population was targeted where is currently little information (i.e., 17-25, remained in the region, under or unemployed). This consultation was done to inform next steps related to youth workforce development, as well as to inform the following overarching research questions:

1. What are the key relationships between youth and regional development?

2. What are the critical issues related to training, retention, and engagement that face youth in rural regions?

3. What action is needed to address youth training, engagement, and retention from a regional scale?

This document provides a summary and discussion of the consultation methods, data, findings, and key points. In addition to this consultation summary, the project produced a series of Knowledge Briefs that summarizes academic literature on topics related to **youth engagement**, **retention**, **training and education**, and **youth workforce development**. Additionally select **examples** and **resources** are available.

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METHODS

'Youth' can be defined and divided in different ways (e.g., K-12 students, post-secondary students, returners to the region). The advisory committee for the project identified that little is currently known about youth that meet the following criteria: age 17-25, who went to high school in the region and have remained here, have not gone to or have not finished post-secondary school, are currently under or unemployed, and are unsure of future career paths. As a result of this information gap, consultation efforts attempted to target this specific sub-set of the youth population.

INITIAL DATA COLLECTION PLAN

Qualitative questions related to education, training, employment, retention, and engagement were developed to relevant to the project objectives. The proposed data collection plan involved 7 focus groups, as well as additional interviews with youth from within the target population. Initial participant recruitment was done via posters distributed through contacts at Work BC locations, Community Futures, and other networks and organizations within the region. Interested individuals were asked to contact the researcher for details. Use of the 'snowball' method would allow for participant referrals. **However, initial focus group recruitment received little to no participation. Of the initial 4 focus groups, 1 was canceled, 1 had zero participants, and the other 2 each had 1 participant. As a result, data collection methods were revised.**

REVISED DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Two additional focus groups were held, but set up through identified high school contacts as opposed to recruitment posters. Not all youth participants met the all of the specified criteria, resulting in general as opposed to targeted data. Additionally, a series of targeted expert interviews were conducted with professionals that interact with youth in the region including, but not limited to, interaction with the target population. As a result of time constraints the original questions were kept, but re-phrased as needed. Initial contacts and the 'snowball' method were used to identify the experts interviewed.

The following data was collected:

- **Youth Focus Groups**
  - o 5 completed
  - o 1 cancelled due to weather
  - o 18 participants range in age from 13-30, with the majority of participants being in grade 12 or equivalent (age 17-19)

- **Expert Interviews**
  - o 11 completed
  - o 15 participants
  - o Sectors included: workforce and skills development, economic development, youth groups/networks/programming, education
  - o Experts were contacted across the region, but some did not return calls or chose not to participate
  - o Some individuals identified through the snowball method were unable to be included due to time constraints

- **Informal Discussions**
  - o Additional informal discussions related to the topics of interest were conducted. These were not official interviews, but focused in on a specific element of the discussion (e.g., a specific program or sector).
  - o Participants included: trades, education, workforce, economic development

All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed. Unlike quantitative surveys of a representative population, targeted qualitative interviews are not intended to provide a straightforward tally of responses. Instead, transcriptions are analyzed for commonalities and key themes using NVivo qualitative analysis software. Notes from interviews as well as notes from informal discussions were used to add context to the data analysis and discussion.

LIMITATIONS

The broadening of youth participation to include those outside the target population and the change in participants to include youth related experts resulted a broad range of data as opposed to targeted. There was also not uniform geographic coverage of participants and interviewees across the region. Additionally, the inclusion of the expert interviews changed the context in which the original questions were asked. The need to rephrase questions brought about inconsistencies in the phrasing of the questions and which questions were asked. As a result, while inferences are made specific to the target youth population, the data gathered is more broadly reflective of youth.

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FINDINGS

Consultation findings are divided into two categories: 1) responses to questions – general responses derived from the original questions, and 2) common themes – common themes found within the responses*.

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

Questions were divided into categories (i.e., introductory, education, employment/training, community engagement and retention). Once data was compiled an overarching narrative was determined using qualitative analysis techniques. This narrative, as opposed to a quantitative style tally of individual responses, is presented below.

Introductory: what do we know about youth in the initial target population?

Little is known about the identified target population. From existing statistics there are roughly 7,709 people in the 17-25 age range within the West Kootenay-Boundary region (i.e., the combined Central Kootenay and Kootenay-Boundary Regional Districts) [4]. The 5 year breakdown of population from the same year shows a drop from the 15-19 group (4,927) to the 20-24 group (3,960) [5]. This drop continues to the 25-29 group (3,728), before rebounding in the 30-34 group (4,760) [5]. However, within the estimated 7,709 people age 17-25 it is impossible to get an estimate as to how many meet the specified criteria for the target youth population.

Additionally, the challenges faced recruiting youth from the target population underscores the challenge of learning more about this group. The challenge of identifying and reaching this specific group was echoed by many of the interviewees as well. Overall while the results of the consultation process offer some insight into the target population, the project confirms that **the target population is a challenging group to understand**.

However, responses to the introductory questions provided context valuable for understanding youth generally, including the target population. Youth participants were asked questions related to their education, employment experience, and aspirations. Similarly, expert interviewees were asked who their typical clients/participants are. What is clear from the responses is that **'youth' are far from being a consistent group**. Not only are youth defined in many different ways, but that as one interviewee noted, "*there's not really anything typical about any of the youth*".

* A wide range of perspectives and opinions were gathered. While there was conflict between individual opinions there were common themes

** The two groups described are general categorizations. In reality the division between the two is not so clear.

Multiple definitions and criteria were used by interviewees to describe who qualifies as youth or youth eligible for the various existing education, engagement, and employment related resources, supports and programs. 'Youth' ranged in age from 12 – 39, with all manner of sub-divisions. Other criteria, such as being in or out of school, attachment to Employment Insurance (EI), level of need or barriers, and so on add layers of complexity to gaining a straightforward understanding of the target youth population. However, from the information gathered it is possible to make some inferences. For example, it is likely that youth within our target group face one or more individual barriers (e.g., learning disabilities, legal issues, financial issues – *see challenges, page 8*).

Several interviewees suggested that our 17-25 target group has two distinct sub-sections with differing needs, expectations, and approaches:**

1. **Youth age ~17-20:** those who are in or straight out of high school and are looking for part time, non-professional work to gain experience (i.e., 'first jobs'). This group is largely, but not always, dependent on parents/guardians.

2. **Youth age ~20-25:** those who did not transition to post-secondary, transitioned but dropped out, are currently in school, or who are finished – all of whom need work and are more likely looking for professional work (i.e., 'real jobs'). This group is more likely to be independent.

Education and training:
what are youth looking for?

Questions were asked about the needs of youth relating to education and training, as well as employment. Some identified needs are obvious, but challenging, such as the need for **more jobs** – both 'first jobs' and 'real jobs'. Many comments focused on **the need for more opportunities and options for youth to gain experience,** whether through general **youth job readiness training** for 'first jobs' or **work experience opportunities** related to 'real jobs' (e.g., job shadowing), reflecting an emphasis on the need for **experiential opportunities**.

However, it is difficult to use the data collected to identify gaps in education and training because of a **disconnect between youth and existing**

programs. Some expert interviewees that felt it is fair to say that many opportunities exist but are unused, "*you can take a horse to water but can't force them to drink… So the youth that says 'I didn't know about it', they didn't try to find out either.*" This disconnect was demonstrated in examples of needs identified by youth that match an existing program they were unaware of. Youth also acknowledged this disconnect as well, "*there is lots to do and lots to figure out about education, but the kids have to take the initiative. Which is, there's going to be that couple of kids that like to do that, because they like school and that's what they want to do. But the people that are on the fence about it… [there's nothing] pushing you to go do that.*" Efforts to **better inform youth and link them with existing programs** may serve to avoid duplication of existing efforts, as well as allowing a more accurate gap analysis.

However, it also may be fair to say that what exists could be improved, particularly when it comes to youth access. There is an identified need for **consolidation of information** to help youth identify and access the volume of existing information and programs that currently exist related to training, scholarships, loans, employment opportunities, etc. Part of this includes **space and supports specifically designed to meet the needs of youth**. For example, a youth noted that "*there's websites that have all the jobs for like adults now… What about for people who are still in high school?*" Or, as noted by an interviewee, there is a need for youth specific employment spaces, "*employment centres there are really intimidating. It's not very approachable for youth. And any time they go in they feel like they're not supposed to be there. They feel like it's not for them.*" The youth specific element came across as critical. While supports, resources, and programs may exist, the platform, delivery, or access may not be suitable for youth. This relates to the engagement discussion below and the need to consider what is the incentive for youth? Is it something they want/need, or something being pushed on them?

There was no shortage of comment on **specific needs related to skills and job types** (*see skills discussion, page 11*). Some interviewees highlighted the need for training for future jobs, as opposed to those jobs available right now. Some youth participants noted a need for better transition support. One youth said, "*I feel like a lot of the time*

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people, like adults, as they get older they learn all these things and then they forget once they're older that young people don't know what they know. And they forget how they learnt it… But we have no idea how to do a lot of things that might come automatically." Another youth felt *"there's no middle stage where you have to like slowly ease into it so you know what you're doing."* To this end youth, as well as some interviewees, felt that employment related initiatives earlier in their education would be beneficial.

More broadly and intangible are identified needs associated with **equity** – ensuring programs are accessible across the region, particularly at the high school level. It was noted that it is easy to find out what other places have and question why you do not have access to such a program, or, why there are disparities in salary between places for the same job. There is also a need for equity in terms of reducing barriers for at risk youth who may face so many barriers that programs that do exist are not in their purview.

Other intangibles included the need to better **integrate supports and services related to youth** (e.g., linking organizations, schools, and employers). While there examples of collaboration and integration (e.g., the CBT youth coordinator network, employer linked training programs), there are also many barriers that need to be addressed (*see systemic challenges, page 9*). The need for innovation and adaptation also came across relating to changes in institutional or program structure (e.g., offering alternatives, increased flexibility). Interviewees highlighted a need for more consistent support and stability.

Employment: what is wanted versus what is available?

All youth participants and expert interviewees were asked questions related their/their clients' ideal jobs, existing employment experience, employment expectations, and available jobs. It is important to note that conversations included both the 'first jobs' and 'real jobs' as described above.

When asked about **future employment goals** the youth who participated listed a wide range of ideal jobs from plant operator to artist to doctor. Interviewees added additional jobs, such as bartender, construction worker, general labourer,

and so on. Observationally, the responses of those youth who more closely met the target criteria were more heavily weighted toward careers in the trades. However, there not enough youth participated to accurately compare the two groups. Overall there was a broad range of skilled and unskilled aspirations.

There were a range of responses to discussions relating to the influence of visible opportunities (e.g., working at Teck) versus non-visible opportunities (e.g., remote or home based work) on youth employment aspirations. Overall there was a clear indication that **there is a lack of awareness of the full range of employment opportunities available in the region** (*see influences, page 10*). Many interviewees indicated that most youth they interact with do not know what they want to do. This uncertainty was echoed by some youth participants. However, many youth expressed a desire to explore possibilities, being unwilling to commit to something without a better understanding of what that entails, and acknowledging the likelihood that they will likely have multiple careers (*see conflict and change, page 13*).

Many youth who participated have work experience, as well as employment related certifications (e.g., first aid, serving it right). Often their experience was with 'first jobs' (e.g., summer employment or part time), but some also had professional or 'real job' experience. While there are opportunities available for 'first jobs', various training and certifications, and volunteer opportunities, youth participants were quick to identify a gap between these opportunities and what is needed to get a 'real job'. Specifically **they felt that local employers want extensive and specific experience** (*see challenges, page 8*). One youth noted that "*everyone around here wants a high school diploma and 10 years of prior experience before you can even get into it…*" Youth participants and expert interviewees noted growing competition for jobs, which typically works against youth who have had less time to gain experience and can favour those from outside the region coming in with greater experience. One interviewee raised the point that the economy has changed and where previously "*the employee had the power in the relationship to be able to job hop or choose what they wanted. In the last few years the employer has the power in that relationship now*".

In terms of employment expectations the discussion was split. For younger youth looking for 'first jobs', expectations are generally thought to be low, although some conflict was apparent as to whether or not minimum wage was 'acceptable'. At the older end of the age range there appears to be a jump in expectations in terms of the type of work that is/should be available and the level of compensation expected (e.g., starting at $30 or making $100,000/year, *see perceptions, page 10*). However, discussions of expectations ranged a great deal. Youth participants appeared to accept low paying 'first jobs' to some degree, while holding high expectations of 'real jobs', including what 'entry level' jobs would entail. Some interviewees felt there is a disparity between compensation expectations and effort required by youth. This was often highlighted by examples of youth expecting to skip the 'entry level' and jump immediately into a high skilled, more experienced, higher compensated position – **illustrating a disconnect in expectations**. Some interviewees noted higher, more unrealistic expectations among those youth who face higher levels of barrier and risk. Disparities in expectations were also noted for employers – high expectations with low compensation.

Regarding available jobs the dominant feeling was **that there are no or few jobs**, both for teens ('first jobs') or entry level positions for 'real jobs' (e.g., apprenticeships). When asked what jobs there are available common responses included a lack of steady employment (e.g., seasonal, part time, or on-call), low skill (e.g., fast food, retail), or trades based positions. Casual work (e.g., baby-sitting, general labour), as well as under the table work and illegal work were all noted as potential youth employment opportunities. Some interviewees and youth participants noted that jobs are there, but are unadvertised (*see networks, page 8*). Many identified a need for more jobs, while some felt there were simply too many people in the region for the number of positions and that without growth in the economy they would have to leave (*see leaving the region, page 8*).

Community engagement and youth

Several questions related to the engagement of youth within the community. Overall the discussion indicated that that youth are not engaged and are often disconnected from the community. One youth responded that, *"I think [youth are] engaged in the [bar] on Saturday nights until 2 am. I think they're engaged in partying and hockey games and social things. When it comes to giving back to the community and making a difference it's just in one ear…"* Another expressed complete detachment to the community, *"…play around in the snow, play around in the mountains. Right? That's the only reason people live here. They don't like the town. They don't like the people in the town. They just like being able to go out and do what they want when they want."* However, when it came to youth and community engagement there were a range of perspectives and some disagreements. Some interviewees and youth participants pointed to examples of well attended youth functions and existing examples. Others felt that it depends on the level of engagement considered. For example, youth are seen as being busy and engaged in their lives (e.g., school community), which does not necessarily cross over with that of the larger community. One interviewee pointed out that the majority of adults are equally disconnected.

Most expert interviewees acknowledged a gap in engagement and felt there was a need to do more or to do better at engaging youth. It was also recognizing that this is a challenge not unique to rural areas and that the issue of engagement goes both ways, "[youth] *don't necessarily want to be involved in something that much greater than their own world"*. Some felt that opportunities for engagement are noted to exist, but that these opportunities require initiative on the part of the youth. Many challenges related to engagement were brought up, such as communication (*see active engagement & awareness, page 10*). Many interviewees pointed to **the need for youth driven engagement** focused on those activities, experiences, and places important to youth. This is in contrast to expectations that youth should become involved in adult dominated activities that have no importance to youth, to token youth involvement, to events or decisions related to youth being made without quality engagement of youth, and youth being taken advantage of.

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It is worth noting that from the information gathered it is likely that those youth within the target population are more likely to be disconnected, disengaged, and disenfranchised – owing in part to the barriers faced. "*A good portion of the youth that I worked with were high risk. And so day to day survival was kind of where they were at*" (*see influences, page 10*).

Retention: youth leaving the region

Youth were asked if they would they leave the region if they could not find the education/training or job opportunities, while interviewees were asked about general youth migration trends. Overwhelmingly **the trend described is one of youth leaving the region**. There are indications of youth that wish to stay or wish to return, but that have to leave to attend post-secondary school or gain employment experience. One youth participant noted that there seems to be little point in growing the local workforce without growing the economy, and that they felt the region itself was a barrier to employment, *"Where I live… That's always the biggest challenge I face. There's lots of jobs and lots of things that I think I could, you know, could quite likely fit into but if I'm not willing to move…"*

Youth migration is not a uniform concept and is difficult to track. For example, among the population numbers given above, it is unclear if this includes post-secondary students who are away. There is also an important distinction between traditional out migration (i.e., youth that leave to pursue opportunities such as education, employment, travel) and transience (i.e., youth that drift around and in and out of the region finding temporary jobs). Both groups were noted within the region.

Additionally, those that stay in the region are not a uniform group. A distinct difference was observed and noted between those that have the opportunity to leave temporarily or longer term and those that do not. Being stuck somewhere was noted by one expert interviewee as being very different from choosing to be there, *"I actually feel more sorry for the youth that I work with that haven't been able to leave…you kind of see them looking like they're just going to be kind of stuck here…their attitudes don't seem as positive as the youth who have left and are really experiencing some great things."*

A few interviewees and youth participants also identified that there can be negative perceptions of those youth who stay, by choice or otherwise, as well as those who stay being 'forgotten' or 'ignored'. Several examples illustrated the difference in perception of those youth that leave, often perceived as the 'best and brightest', and those that stay (*see influences and perception, page 13*). One interviewee noted that, "*some of the youth that are here have … kind of a depressed attitude. Of like there's nothing here. There's no work here. What am supposed to do? I can't get a job. But yet they don't want to leave home.*" The potential for youth to leave was also cited as a barrier to employment, that employers may be less likely to hire youth who may leave the region, although this was a disputed point.

Youth leaving the region was often cited as a positive, offering new opportunities and experiences. The majority of expert interviewees were in favour of youth having the opportunity to leave, "*I don't think that it's necessarily important for them for us to expect them to stay here. I think travel and other education and other work experience is incredibly valuable. And when they have an opportunity and they're ready to come back, they're going to want to come back and they're going to embrace it.*" However, interviewees also noted that there needs to be something for youth to return to. Continuing from the quote above, "*…but if they grew up in a community where there were no services for young people, there were no opportunities of meaningful engagement, then their memories of that community are going to be pretty poor. And when they're then thinking of ok I want to settle down, I want to have kids, coming back to their hometown is not going to be the first place that they think of.*"

Overarching youth challenges

Youth participants and expert interviewees were asked questions surrounding what challenges youth face when it comes to education, training, employment, and community engagement. Challenges were also noted throughout responses to other questions. These challenges can be broadly split into two categories:

*** While not deeply explored through the consultation it is suggested that the more individual barriers an individual faces the more difficult systemic barriers are to overcome as getting accepted into education/training programs as well as employment requires a base level of function and ability. As noted it is also more likely that our initial target population face one or more barriers.*

1. **Individual barriers youth face***
- Poverty and related socio-economic barriers
- Negative institutional experiences (e.g., schools, foster system, legal system)
- Negative or lacking role models (e.g., parents, friends)
- Mental health issues - diagnosed and undiagnosed
- Addiction and substance abuse
- Learning disabilities - diagnosed and undiagnosed
- Gaps in basic literacy and financial literately
- Financial issues (e.g., lack of financial support or income, debt, cost of living, cost of leaving, cost of post-secondary)
- Housing
- Transit
- Individual capacity
- Lack of skills and experience (*see skills, page 11*)

2. **Systemic barriers impacting youth**
- Institutional mandates and structure (e.g., not allowing for inter-organizational collaboration or integration)
- Program limits and requirements (e.g., cannot be in school, must have EI attachment)
- Bias against youth / youth stereotypes (although it should be noted that several interviewees argued there is no bias against youth – *see perceptions, page 10*)
  - o Lack experience / not being given a chance
  - o Assumption they will leave
  - o Workplace ethics, etc.
- Change in economy
  - o Change in jobs available, training needed
  - o Increase competition for jobs – suggests that employers may be less willing to train if they can find more experienced employees
- Outdated linear model (school –> single career –> retirement) and outdated approaches/programs based on this model
  - o Slow or no change/adaptation in institutions and programs (*see conflict & change, page 13*)
- Shaping needs versus meeting needs (*see engagement discussion, page 7, 10*)

- Gaps within the education system
  - o Lack of general application of knowledge
    - - From one youth, *"Well this is to do with, well the mathematics they show us how to do everything right? But they don't show us how to apply it to our everyday lives when we're older. So we know how to do everything but we don't know when to apply it."*
  - o Existing careers and transitions programs not meeting needs
    - - Lacking set up for 'first jobs'
    - - Missing hard and soft skills (*see skills, page 11*)
    - - Focus on single 'career' model (*see conflict & change, page 13*)
    - - Over focus or lack of focus on certain areas (conflicting opinions and examples of university, trades, etc.)
    - - Careers/planning/transitions classes seen as ineffective or note taken seriously
      - › *One student noted, "I'm not going to be prepared I'm just going to be mildly annoyed by the time I graduate."*
    - - Not being offered or not being aware of the full range of options
  - o Disparities between schools and classes
    - - Teacher's background and capacity
    - - Resources and supports
  - o Support gap following high school

- Program use by youth and employers

For both types of barriers there is the additional **challenge of the diversity of youth and contextual differences across organizations and across the region**. Many interviewees noted the differences between communities. For example, *"what a youth face in Grand Forks or the boundary area faces is going to be different than what they face in Casltegar or Nelson or Trail."*

There is also a challenge related to **responsibility**, particularly given the complexity of the topics discussed. As one interviewee noted, *"it's not the elementary school or the high school's responsibility. Or just the elementary school and the high school. It's not the daycare's responsibility. It's not post-secondary. It's not the parents. It's not the child. It's that philosophy that it takes a community to raise a child, it takes a community to raise an employee and a businessman... I think it's looking at that we all have a role to play in that."*

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COMMON THEMES

From the data collected several overarching key themes emerged, further discussed below.

Influences & perception

While there were specific questions asking about educational and employment influences, indications of influences were often found in the answers to other questions, as opposed to direct responses. Multiple influences could be identified throughout the data collected, as well as links between influences and perceptions. While the bulk of the discussion focuses on the influences and perceptions of the youth themselves, it is worth acknowledging that various influences, including lived experience, likely influenced the opinions expressed by expert interviewees.

Various factors were seen as influencing, both positively and negatively, the decisions and actions of youth related to employment, education, and engagement. Schools, family/parents, and friends were prominent and direct influences, as was socio-economic status. Influences from local culture and lifestyle were also noted, but were relatively less prominent. What is perhaps most important to discuss it the impact these influences can have. Consultation data reviled a range of perceptions related to employment options (e.g., job type, availability), lifestyle, success metrics, needs, gender, and of youth themselves. As noted in the challenges section, while not uniformly expressed there are negative perceptions of youth, particularly related to employment. This is acknowledged by some expert interviewees (e.g., noting employers potentially having a bias against youth) and is exemplified by others (e.g., noting a general lack of work ethic among youth), as well as being identified and exemplified by youth participants. Commonly identified stereotypes about youth focused on poor work ethic, sense of entitlement, and lack of initiative. As noted above there are negative internal and external perceptions associated with staying in the region. Additionally, there was an identified stigma associated with use of supports and employment services, potentially acting as a barrier to program use.

The data collected suggest that the stories youth are told matter – particularly those stories told by trusted influences. **These stories shape and can skew attitudes and perspective, determine actions, and inflate expectations, creating a conflict between perception and reality**. The narrative surrounding 'high paying, easily accessible' oil fields jobs are a prominent example. Another is the narrative that there are no jobs locally and youth have to leave, or that the only available jobs are in the trades. The sense of entitlement and high expectations held by youth have a starting point, from someone telling them or them knowing someone. For example, youth participants provided examples of family or friends telling them they will be hired at $30/hour with constant raises, that they are "*worth $X*", or that they will have a guaranteed position because "*I'll get you in*". Such narratives are hard to change.

Active engagement & awareness

There are resources, programs, and services available for youth related to training/education, engagement, and employment. While there are various challenges, a critical area for improvement appears to be active engagement and raining awareness. There those who point to resources, supports, and programs being accessible, however comments related to use and input from youth suggest the need to raise the profile of existing programs and generate interest and excitement. Active engagement, and subsequently awareness of existing supports, appears to be lacking.

One example of this was youth participants indicating a desire for school-based work experiences, something some thought was not available, but that their teacher noted are in fact available. **Face to face interaction was noted as the key element of active engagement**, by youth participants and expert interviewees alike. One youth noted that *"it's up front and personal honestly. You put up flyers no one is going to read them. We don't care. You post things on Facebook – just another ad, scroll through. What you do is you take the [students] … and you make them sit through a lecture and a presentation and then you tell them what they can do and say come see your guidance councillor after that… And I think you sit there and you jam it into their brains… That's the thing about those programs, there's no hype. There's no one making it exciting."* Another youth noted that unless you were actively seeking supports they are likely to be overlooked, *"I don't know it seems*

that you're actively looking for them when you need them and then you know, after that you don't care as much. So I guess as far as an advertising standpoint, I don't hear about it a ton. I've heard about [group X] but that's mainly because I have them on my Facebook page link, so it pops up. But if you're not actively seeking it, it might go overlooked."

Expert interviewees felt similarly. Some felt that there are too high of expectations that posters and social media will attract youth participation – a mistake made and experienced with the initial focus groups in this research project. Again, the importance of face to face efforts were noted, particularly on the part of teachers. Several examples were given of teachers bringing in people (e.g., experts, guest lectures) and introducing programs and projects from other organizations (e.g., Junior Dragon's Den). It was noted that if the results of posters and social media are contrasted with the results of having an active champion (e.g., a teacher), the active engagement element results in greater participation because *"without a champion in the school it's a poster on the wall. And nobody cares."*

An additional element is the active engagement between organizations that offer resources, programs, and supports for youth. As noted in the challenge section, organizations or programs can be blocked or hampered by their mandates or structures from working with other organizations. For example, the fee for service model and restrictions requiring that participants not be in schools appears to prevent Work BC, an employment resource, from doing outreach and engagement with schools. This has consequences like preventing the introduction of programs and services through a familiar channel. This is important because youth need a point of contact or a place that is within their world. One interview said, *"some program that's more approachable inside of a school that they already know so they don't have to go seek it out, not sure who's gonna be there. I think it's a lot more inviting for those youth are interested in getting it… And there are those youth that want just the initial contact or confidence getting skills or doing it before hand and getting those people to support and be like yeah, no actually this is here for you... Yeah I think that definitely, putting it inside something that they already know is a really big step. Instead of having a separate entity."*

The consultation results reiterate not only the need for a diversity of youth specific supports and spaces, but that **youth need to be interested**. This means that supporting and guiding ideas come with substantial input youth, as opposed to expecting them to adapt to or commit to external ideas. Several interviewees felt that there has to be more than token input from or representation of youth. For example, one interviewee noted that having a single youth on a board is unlikely to change or influence the direction, while others pointed to youth advisory committees or councils that are ignored or are not listened to as being more damaging than not including youth at all.

Required skills

Many discussions focused on skills, ranging from soft skills (e.g., communication, presentation) to life skills (e.g., punctuality) to hard skills (e.g., specific experience, technical skills). Youth participants appeared to focus on their lack of hard skills (e.g., work experience) as a barrier to employment, highlighting that they feel that the opportunities to gain hard skills applicable to their lives are lacking within the school system. For example, one youth felt that *"by planning 10 I had already had like 3 jobs and resume was a huge part of it. It was just kind of a filler course. I would like to have seen more about taking out loans. How to prepare for student loans. And more info on scholarships."* Additionally when asked about existing school based career programs several students pointed out that the available options are mostly trade related and do not provide options for students looking to explore other careers to gain related skills (e.g., law, medicine, biology). The need for 'job readiness' training, particularly for younger youth related to 'first jobs', was identified by several interviewees, *"I mean because [training and support for job applications and interviews] are things that kids don't have either. Right? They don't know how to write a resume and they don't know how to do an interview. They may need some coaching."* This may suggest that what currently exists in the schools is perceived as inadequate in some way (e.g., offered too late, contextually inappropriate).

There was general agreement among expert interviewees that youth lack critical 'soft skills'. However there was conflict and little consensus over why this is. For example a lack of modeled

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and learned behaviour was noted, *"because again, how you dress for an interview. To network. To cold call. It makes a huge difference, especially in a small town. But that role modelling isn't there. It's not there from the parents. It's not there from the teacher."* Another example points to a gap in the education system, *"For me what I see is that they don't have life skills. Yeah. It's the communication skills. It's the how do I budget? How do I live by myself? How do apply for school? Things that you really should know when you're done high school. In my opinion, but that youth are coming out and they still don't have those basic skills."*

Building on the above there is also a lack of consensus among interviewees and youth participants regarding hard skills. Employers were noted as requiring both technical hard skills directly related to a job, as well as soft skills. Among some interviewees there was debate and polarization over which skills and which type of skills are critical for youth as well as who is responsible for teaching them. Some felt that youth need to develop a specific skills base (e.g., a trade), while others favoured more general hard skills (e.g., first aid and other certifications useful at multiple jobs). Conversely some felt that the pace of change (*see change & conflict, page 13*) means that it is more important to teach youth to become lifelong learners, focusing on critical thinking, self-teaching, entrepreneurship, and innovation. One interviewee noted, *"I think we tend to crank out workers. People who are going to work for somebody else. And more of that entrepreneurial focus would be really good."*

The importance of networks

Youth participants and interviewees were asked questions regarding their knowledge of and the accessibility of existing programs, resources, and supports. Several expert interviewees pointed to the importance of having a web presence and a perceived tendency for youth to prefer online. However, as noted above, web presence or advertisement alone is less likely to be effective. In addition to the importance of active engagement, the importance of networks and word of mouth came across clearly. When asked where or how youth found out about supports and resources, while websites were among the responses, the more common response from youth participants, as well as expert interviewees, was word of

mouth (e.g., friends, parents – *see influences, page 10*), physical visibility within the community (e.g., signs or business fronts), and reputation. Parents in particular were highlighted as bringing employment services to the attention of youth.

Networks were highlighted as a key part of the functioning and managing of youth groups and getting information circulated to youth. Critical within these networks is the role of a 'hub' person or place. For example, the role of coordinators – *"she's the hub. And she's then using what she's developed to get that information out. So she's gathering it and trying to compile it and then get it out there to the teens that she's working with."* Another interviewee noted, *"if you tell the right kid… if you find that one popular… Whatever it is, that one kid that you know will spread the word, and go well yeah, I'm going."* Other examples included youth using word of mouth to raise their own profile within the community through volunteer work and so on – becoming known within the community in order to better their chance of employment.

In terms of access to employment the role of nepotism was noted by some, where family members (e.g., uncles, grandmothers, mothers) are able to 'get people in' or where family reputations can help youth. One youth participant observed differences in the employment opportunities available to a well-connected local youth versus a newcomer. Social and professional networks were highlighted as well. One expert interviewee felt that from an employment perspective that, *"it is a mistake…to think that the only jobs that are out there are advertised…it's anywhere between 20 – 30% of the jobs that are advertised. Everything else is not advertised."* Similar thoughts were echoes by an interviewee who noted that knowing where to go is critical, and that knowledge is often only available to networked people, *"Because most people might not even know [about that opportunity] or if you moved here and you were looking for a job. Where do you go? There's no job posting board. There's no board with like entrepreneurial opportunities. Basically your only way is to go out and pound the pavement and ask people what exists around here for jobs."* Overall the importance of building relationships and broad networks is critical.

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Conflict & change

While not related to a specific question the theme of conflict and change was prominent within the discussions. The pace of change was noted as being rapid, with general acknowledgement that the world has and will continue to change. One example of this is in the change to the idea of a linear single career model to the increasing likelihood of a nonlinear model and multiple careers. One expert interviewee noted that, *"It's like you might do something at 25 and you might do something entirely different at 30. You don't lock into one career any more. That model is completely outdated."* Another observed that, *"we have a generation coming up who are looking, not only looking for work, but the people already in current jobs have this whole other level of uncertainty about what that landscape is. The likelihood that you will be with an employer until you retire, so 25 years is a joke."* This was echoed by several youth who saw this being at odds with the pressure for them to know what they are going to do, *"they need to stress or move away from a school system which says that you need to know what you want to do starting in grade 8. The mentality that you need to know what you're interested in or what you want to do. Like you need an awareness, but you don't need that until like 11, 12. I feel like the school system puts so much pressure on us to know... There should just be options. There should be the availability where if you don't know what you want to be then you can have, go do these things to maybe get a certain area or narrow it down. Like not saying he has to pick and then stick with that. Just like be able to have that option all through high school to be able to go and see."*

This is made more complex by the changing nature of the employment landscape, that those jobs existing and in need today may not exist tomorrow. Some interviewees raised questions of whether youth are being encouraged to go into sectors where jobs may not exist once they are trained. Several interviewees feel that large institutions (e.g., universities, colleges) are rigid in their structure and too slow to change – creating a huge barrier at a time when flexibility and fast adaptation are critical.

Also discussed was conflict along generational and cultural values, particularly related to employee expectations. The increasing popularity of having a balanced lifestyle was noted to conflict with past (and sometimes present) employer expectations of employees working any and all hours. Changes in socio-cultural factors (e.g., two parents working) and economic factors (e.g., increased cost of living) were also noted as changing the landscape of the workforce and creating conflict. Some interviewees raised the point of youth looking for more out of employment (e.g., meaning, social elements), something at odds with the more traditional values of some employers. These conflicts link with the above discussion on skills (e.g., which types are more important to learn and push), as well as the above discussion on perceptions (e.g., negative and positive perceptions of youth and employers). While this theme is intangible, it is important. As one interviewee noted in the face of change it is important to get beyond conflict, *"because in actual fact there's so much we can learn from both parties. And support each other."*

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DISCUSSION

As demonstrated throughout this summary there is a wide range of knowledge and opinions relating to youth education/training, engagement, and employment. While lacking in uniformity or consensus over specifics, the broad themes of active engagement and awareness, perception and influence, skills, networks, and change are constant throughout the consultation results.

This research confirms the difficulty of accessing and understanding the target youth population, while also highlighting that there is no single 'type' of youth. This diversity, as well as contextual differences means that no single solution will work, but rather there is a clear need for a range of flexible, youth specific resources, supports, and programs that are consciously and collaboratively established to be accessible to and to serve the needs of youth. Responses from those youth that best matched the target population and those experts who worked most closely with target youth suggest that this population faces a different context in terms of perceptions, abilities, expectations, and barriers. Early identification and removal of barriers is likely a critical piece of addressing the needs of the targeted youth population.

Youth participants expressed desire for more experiential opportunities (e.g., work experience, job shadowing, job fairs, and skills fairs) in order to identify and test employment options, identify skills and aptitude, and gain experience. While many such options exist, data collected suggests that youth needs are not being met, suggesting a disconnect between youth and existing support, as well as other potential gaps which are some gap or disparity in execution and implementation. More broadly there is a need for more adaptation and flexibility within institutional structures and mandates.

This research asked the question of what action is needed to address youth training, engagement, and retention on a regional scale? There is no clear or straightforward answer. However this consultation suggests while there are currently programs, resources, and supports there appear to be challenges related to connecting youth to what exists. Addressing this disconnect and enhancing access may be required in order to better understand what gaps exist without duplicating what does. This includes enhancing interregional collaboration and integrating key players. Differences in context and needs suggest a blanket approach will not work. There is a need to increase the flexibility of programs, resources, and supports, allowing them to be tailored to local needs and conditions.

While this consultation process was intended to provide a detailed look at a specific youth population, the data collected provides a broader overview of youth in the West Kootenay-Boundary. Future research that is specific and in-depth is warranted. For example, responding to questions like how do the needs of 'first jobs' versus 'real jobs' differ? How can collaboration be encouraged and supported between organizations with conflicting or restricting mandates? How can workforce development efforts balance and integrate economic and socio-cultural needs? The training, engagement, and retention of youth is a web of multiple, complex topics and is not the responsibility of one single organization but a collaboration among multiple players, including a role for youth themselves.

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