YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

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PRUDENTIA
INSTITUTE

YOUTH KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

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ABOUT PRUDENTIA INSTITUTE

Prudentia Institute is a purpose-driven, charitable research and development organization dedicated to empowering and supporting the development of youth in Atlantic Canada. The Institute advances education through youth-centred research, knowledge mobilization, and the design of educational programs for youth and youth-serving organizations. At the heart of its work is a commitment to inclusive development and to nurturing self-belief, autonomy, personal power, and independence in young people, enabling them to reach their full potential.

Founded in 2020 and incorporated as a registered charity in 2024, Prudentia Institute conducts primary research and develops evidence-informed programs and resources that strengthen youth confidence, foster community connection, and advance equity and inclusion. The Institute is home to the award-winning Student Research Lab, where young people act as peer researchers using participatory action research to study issues that affect their lives and communities. Through its research and development work, Prudentia Institute focuses on some of the most pressing challenges facing youth today, including equity, security, health, connection, and protection.

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ABOUT THE STUDENT RESEARCH LAB

The Student Research Lab is a youth-led research program that positions young people as knowledge creators rather than research subjects. Hosted by Prudentia Institute, the Lab was created to address a persistent gap in youth research: young people are frequently studied, but rarely meaningfully involved in producing, interpreting, or sharing knowledge about their own lives. The Lab offers a structured, ethical, and supportive environment where youth are trained as peer researchers and engage directly in real-world research on issues that matter to them.

Through a youth participatory action research approach, students take part in all stages of the research process, including developing questions, conducting interviews, analyzing data, and sharing findings. Research conducted in the Lab has examined youth empowerment, engagement, work and underemployment, and youth advocacy and activism. Across studies, findings consistently show that youth are thoughtful, capable, and deeply aware of the systems shaping their lives, while also facing structural barriers that limit voice, inclusion, and opportunity. The Student Research Lab produces rigorous, youth-informed evidence that supports more inclusive policies and practices, while also contributing to young people's confidence, skills, and sense of agency. In this way, the Lab functions as both a research initiative and a developmental space, generating knowledge and strengthening youth leadership at the same time.

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ABOUT THE STUDY

We were inspired to talk with young people about their experiences of finding and keeping work, and the challenges they face navigating unemployment and underemployment. While youth are often told that work is essential for building skills, confidence, and future opportunities, many young people experience barriers that limit their ability to fully participate and thrive in the workplace. Our intention is to share what we learned from youth themselves, in order to inform employers, educators, policymakers, and other young people navigating similar challenges.

We took an action research approach, which means we were as concerned with understanding young people's lived experiences of work as we were with contributing to solutions. Youth were engaged not only as participants, but also as peer researchers, helping to shape the questions, collect data, and interpret what we heard. As part of this approach, we also examined the systems and workplace practices that shape youth employment in Canada, including how power, age, and organizational norms influence opportunity, inclusion, and development.

Youth unemployment and underemployment remain persistent issues, even after decades of policy attention and employment programs. Our findings show that these challenges are not simply about a lack of motivation or readiness among youth. Instead, they reflect structural and organizational barriers that limit access to meaningful work, mentorship, recognition, and progression. These barriers affect not only economic outcomes, but also identity development, confidence, wellbeing, and long-term attachment to the workforce.

Our findings highlight both the enduring nature of youth employment barriers and the ways young people actively cope, adapt, and demonstrate leadership within constrained environments. This research contributes insight into how youth experience work today and identifies pathways to improve inclusion, support development, and strengthen employer readiness, with the goal of enabling young people's full participation in work and society.

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ALIGNMENT WITH THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

This study aligns closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by advancing our understanding of how young people experience access to decent, inclusive, and meaningful work. In particular, it contributes to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by highlighting the barriers youth face in securing stable, developmental employment, and by reframing underemployment as an issue of workplace inclusion and organizational readiness, rather than as an individual deficit. By centering youth voices, the study draws attention to the quality of work (not just access to jobs) and underscores the importance of mentorship, recognition, and progression in supporting sustainable labour market participation.

REDUCED INEQUALITIES

This research also supports SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by foregrounding age as an under-examined dimension of inequality in the workplace. Findings show how structural norms and power dynamics can marginalize young workers, limit voice, and normalize precarity at labour market entry. By identifying these systemic barriers, the study contributes evidence needed to reduce inequalities within organizations and across employment systems.

QUALITY EDUCATION

The study also advances SDG 4 (Quality Education) through its youth participatory action research approach, which positions research itself as a form of high-quality, experiential learning that builds skills, confidence, and agency. Together, these contributions support more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable pathways from education to work, benefiting youth, employers, and society as a whole.

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

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STUDY OVERVIEW

This study explored the following overarching research question: **"How do youth experience work, in conditions of unemployment and underemployment, and what does this reveal about employer readiness and inclusion?**

This study was conducted using a **youth participatory action research approach**, which means young people were actively involved in the research process rather than being treated only as research subjects. Youth participated as peer researchers, helping to shape the research questions, collect data, and make sense of what they heard. This approach allowed us to centre youth perspectives and generate insights grounded in lived experience, while also supporting learning, confidence, and leadership among the youth involved.

The study took place in Atlantic Canada between fall 2024 and winter 2025. A team of 10 youth researchers, aged 15 to 21, conducted 30 in-depth interviews with other young people about their experiences of finding and keeping work.

Interviews focused on topics such as job access, working conditions, support from employers, learning and development, and how work fits alongside school and other responsibilities. All participants provided informed consent, and the study received formal research ethics approval through our university partner, Acadia University.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a qualitative approach focused on understanding lived experience. Youth researchers worked collaboratively with adult researchers to identify key themes, patterns, and shared experiences across the interviews. This process emphasized reflection, dialogue, and careful interpretation, ensuring that findings remained grounded in youth voice. By combining youth-led inquiry with systematic analysis, the study produced insights informed by the realities of young people's working lives.

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OUR FINDINGS

Benefits of Work

Beyond income, work offers young people important developmental benefits. Participants described gaining people and organizational skills, access to training, and opportunities to build social and professional networks. Work also opens pathways to future employment or education and provides financial resources that support independence and participation. These benefits make early work experiences consequential, shaping not only short-term outcomes but longer-term trajectories.

Identity Development

Work plays a significant role in identity formation. Youth described workplaces as environments where they actively contribute to their own development, learning who they are, what they are capable of, and how they fit into adult roles. Work was viewed as just as formative as school, sports, or other structured activities. As a result, workplace experiences can strengthen or undermine confidence, self-worth, and a sense of competence, depending on the level of inclusion, recognition, and support youth encounter.

Competing Demands

Youth experience work alongside a wide range of other valuable commitments, including school, co-operative education, extracurricular activities, volunteering, and family responsibilities. Balancing these competing demands often requires difficult trade-offs. Participants noted that employers are not always supportive of the full scope of activities that contribute to healthy youth development, creating tension between work and other growth-promoting opportunities.

Organizational Readiness

While policy and practice have long emphasized preparing youth for work, findings from this study point to the need for greater employer readiness. Youth experiences suggest that workplaces are not always equipped with inclusive practices that support young workers as learners and developing contributors. Shifting attention toward organizational readiness, including mentorship, recognition, flexibility, and pathways for growth, is critical to improving youth employment experiences and outcomes.

OUR FINDINGS

Karim – "These experiences have helped me build character and improve my work ethic. It has also helped me understand the workforce better."

Francesco – "They've taught me to become more mature and work better with money and help save money for after I graduate high school."

Sophia – "I think especially working at the grocery store, it really taught me, like, how to overcome, but also how to speak to people and how to stand up for myself in that sort of position. It's made me a much stronger advocate for my, my wellbeing and my work."

Claire – "It can be challenging with like, having school, sports, and other responsibilities to actually like be able to commit fully to them and do it."

Dana – "I think there needs to be more promotion of youth working in jobs, because I feel like some places don't exactly want youth in their workspace."

Rory – "Yeah, so a lot of businesses don't want people without experience, and that makes it extremely hard for someone to start their working journey."

Intervention strategies related to youth readiness though heavily relied upon for decades are not resolving the issue of youth unemployment. Focus on organizational readiness may be one way to improve employment rates. Such interventions should be youth informed.

Youth identified the following benefits to work experience.

Mentorship New Skills/Experience Better Time Management Enhanced Responsibility Professional Networks Identity Development Leadership Skills

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OUR CONCLUSIONS

Young people in this study consistently described work as an important and meaningful part of their lives. Employment was seen not only as a way to earn money, but as a key space for learning responsibility, building confidence, developing skills, and shaping identity. Many youth valued the social connections and sense of purpose that work can provide, even in entry-level or part-time roles. At the same time, their experiences revealed significant challenges that limit how beneficial work can be.

A central finding is that **precarity is a normalized entry point** into work for youth. Participants commonly moved between low-wage, part-time, or short-term jobs with limited stability or progression. While these conditions were often accepted as "just the way it is," they restricted opportunities for growth and long-term planning. Youth also reported that employers were frequently unprepared to support young workers as learners and developing contributors. Limited mentorship, unclear expectations, lack of recognition, and restricted voice led many youth to feel underutilized or excluded, even when they demonstrated initiative, competence, and leadership.

Despite these barriers, youth showed considerable agency. Many described taking on informal leadership roles, training others, solving problems, and carrying significant responsibility without corresponding authority or recognition. Youth also navigated intense time pressure, balancing work alongside school, co-op placements, extracurricular activities, and family responsibilities.

In summary, these findings show that **youth underemployment is not simply about insufficient hours or wages, but about the quality of inclusion, support, and development offered in workplaces**. Improving youth employment outcomes therefore requires attention not only to preparing youth for work, but to preparing workplaces to meaningfully include and develop young people.

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INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES FOR EMPLOYERS

Findings from this study point to several practical ways employers can better support and include young workers. These strategies focus not on lowering expectations, but on recognizing youth as capable contributors who benefit from intentional support and inclusion.

1. Treat youth as developing workers, not just entry-level labour

Young people benefit when employers recognize that early jobs are formative. Clear expectations, regular check-ins, and opportunities to learn help youth build confidence, skills, and long-term attachment to work.

2. Provide mentorship and guidance

Access to supportive supervisors or mentors makes a significant difference. Even informal mentoring, such as answering questions, offering feedback, and explaining workplace norms, helps youth feel valued and supported.

3. Recognize contributions and informal leadership

Youth often take on responsibility, train peers, or solve problems without formal titles. Acknowledging these contributions through feedback, trust, or progression opportunities increases engagement and motivation.

4. Create pathways for growth and progression

Youth are more engaged when they can see how effort leads to opportunity. Clear pathways, such as added responsibility, skill development, or future roles, signal that youth contributions matter.

5. Include youth voice in everyday decisions

Inviting youth input on scheduling, tasks, or workplace improvements builds trust and inclusion. Feeling heard reinforces confidence and strengthens commitment.

6. Be mindful of competing demands on youth time

Many young people balance work with school, co-op placements, other formative activities, and family responsibilities. Flexible scheduling and realistic expectations help reduce stress and support wellbeing.

7. Challenge age-based assumptions

Avoid assumptions that youth are less capable or less committed. Treating young workers with the same respect as others fosters inclusion and unlocks potential.

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TO CITE THIS REPORT

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This study was conducted with research ethics approval: REB #23-41 Acadia University.
This study is currently under review in a peer-reviewed, indexed, academic journal.

AUTHOR BIO

Kristin S. Williams, Ph.D. (she/her) is an Associate Professor in Management at Acadia University in Canada. She is also the Managing Director at Prudentia Institute, home to the award-winning Student Research Lab. She is an interdisciplinary scholar and identifies as a polemical feminist engaged in activist writing and narrative methods. Her work has been published in a wide range of international journals, edited books and monographs. She serves in editorial roles for the journals Culture and Organization, Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management and the Journal of Management History. Kristin has received several academic awards, and she is a recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee Medal. Dr. Williams can be reached via email at: **kwilliams@prudentiainstitute.ca** or **kristin.williams@acadiau.ca.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CITATIONS & RELATED READING

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https://prudentiainstitute.ca/research/

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