

Canada must develop people with the skills the modern job market requires

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A top priority for the new federal government must be to bolster Canada's modest economic growth and ensure that it's inclusive, so more than just those at the top end of the income distribution enjoy the benefits.

Aging of our work force combined with the recent anemic pace of productivity growth will likely only produce about 1.5-per-cent GDP growth over the next few decades. That won't be sufficient to create many jobs, won't allow for rising real incomes and won't fund public services without tax increases.

One focal point of a broader and deeper plan for economic growth should be a new skills agenda. Put simply, a robust, globally competitive Canadian economy requires a steady supply of workers with the knowledge, skills and competencies required by an increasingly knowledge-based economy. According to recent research by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, better matching of skills is key to raising productivity and narrowing income disparities.

One of Canada's greatest assets is its highly educated population. And it is unquestionable that Canada's postsecondary institutions are fundamental to educating Canadians to prepare them for the work force. Yet, we are plagued with endless debates questioning whether Canada is producing graduates with the right skills. One thing is for sure: The benefits to the individual and the country won't be realized unless the skills students acquire are aligned with the present and future needs of the labour market.

A host of recent employer surveys identify a set of skills considered critical for the modern workplace. Of greatest interest to employers are general skills and competencies – such as literacy, numeracy, communication, critical thinking, problem solving and various personal attributes such as resilience, creativity and being effective in teamwork – that are not specific to a particular discipline.

There is a great deal of intuitive appeal to these findings. More workers are being asked to perform a range of tasks not directly related to the discipline they studied. Somebody beginning work now will likely have many jobs and even several careers before they retire. General competencies provide the fundamental and foundational skills that are transferable across jobs.

A new skills agenda requires better alignment between the skills and competencies of the modern workplace and the education provided in our postsecondary institutions. We suggest three specific actions to advance this alignment.

First, we need much better information on the relationship between labour demand and supply and graduates' outcomes. From 1978 to 2011, Canada did not even have a survey of job vacancies and then, the only information available was too highly aggregated to be useful. Periodic surveys of how college and university graduates fare in the labour market only look a few years out. And the results rarely make their way into the hands of young people and their parents when they are considering education and career options.

There are encouraging signs. A new job vacancy survey by Statistics Canada provides more detailed information on where and what kinds of jobs are available; employer groups are surveying their members to determine the skills they most value; and more long-term analyses are being done of the outcomes of specific postsecondary programs. The more these surveys and career tracking go beyond knowledge specific to disciplines and focus more on general competencies, and are accessible to students, their parents, and the general population, the better.

Second, there needs to be a more rigorous, evidence-based understanding of the specific skills, including the "new skills" discussed above, that lead to successful outcomes in the work force. Furthermore, success should not just be measured in terms of employment and income, but also broader outcomes such as job and career satisfaction. The results should inform the nature and desired outcomes of postsecondary programs.

Third, postsecondary institutions have to do a better job of measuring and credentialing the general cognitive and transferable skills that have been identified as important to the labour force, and identifying which teaching practices and schooling experiences most help in the development of these skills.

While postsecondary institutions typically claim that their graduates are literate, numerate, resilient, problem solvers and good communicators, recent evidence suggests that much more could be done. The good news is that the trend to measure, credential and foster these learning outcomes is a growing trend in higher education.

Some progress is being made in better matching skill development and skill requirements across Canada. But much more would be accomplished by a co-ordinated strategy. Individual provincial and territorial governments, business and education institutions working together helps and collectively might even provide a national perspective. But education and the labour market cut across provincial, sectoral and occupation boundaries.

It would be better if the new federal government played a more active role in collaboration with the provinces and territories. A new skills agenda is simply too important to the future of Canada to be left to piecemeal, unco-ordinated strategies and actions.