

The Misguided attack on arts and science degrees

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It's wrong for governments to shift funding to more practical trades or technical colleges, away from universities. We need both.



The B.C. government's new education plan will see primary and secondary students getting more "hands-on learning," while post-secondary funding will be redirected towards practical professions.

A dangerous and growing urban myth in Canada is that university students enrolled in liberal arts and science programs are acquiring skills employers don't need. This is bogus.

The most recent myth apparition is the British Columbia government's [plan to re-engineer the education system](#) to focus on skills and the immediate demands of labour markets. "We celebrate the poets," said B.C. Education Minister Peter Fassbender witheringly. "We also celebrate the welders, the carpenters and the pipefitters."

Primary and secondary students will have more "hands-on learning," and post-secondary funding will be redirected towards practical professions. Similar moves are happening across the country.

This is profoundly misguided for two reasons. First, the purpose of education is not only to train workers. Considering challenges such as climate change, economic turmoil and international conflict, we need workers who are also knowledgeable citizens.

We want Canadians to be critical thinkers and innovators, to have a passion not just for their professions but for being good parents, community builders, global participants and for effectively choosing, challenging and engaging their governments.

Moreover, brains need constant development. In yesterday's economy, workers' lives were divided into two periods: one when they learned, one when they worked. They went to school or university, learned a

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competency, trade or profession, and were set for life. No more. Learning is now continuous. Careers must be constantly reinvented or they will go sour.

The second mistake is thinking employers no longer need recruits with a well-rounded, university education. Yes, we need to encourage the trades, and higher education is not for everyone. However, increasingly Canada has an innovation-based, knowledge economy that relies on brain not brawn.

It's true that we create much wealth through resource extraction and manufacturing, but a growing number of these jobs require higher education. In resource-based Alberta, 40 per cent of new jobs require university credentials and another 26 per cent require college. That adds up to a whopping two thirds of all new jobs.

But we should aspire to be more than just hewers of wood and drawers of oil. We need large and small companies that can innovate and compete globally. The private and public sectors require a workforce that can think critically, solve problems, have big-picture awareness and learn lifelong.

One of Canada's biggest manufacturing companies is the \$8-billion Toronto-based Celestica. More than 50 per cent of its Canadian plant employees have a college diploma, and 40 per cent have a university degree.

Critics assert that students that have more practical training find better jobs than those with a well-rounded education. The implication here is that there is a glut of liberal arts students and science graduates flipping burgers.

But there is no such glut. Employment rates for grads from both colleges and universities today are exactly the same as they were in 2007. University and college have about the same chance of getting a relevant job. And salaries have risen for both at the same rate.

The so-called economy-wide "skills gap" does not exist. There may be short-term mismatches in some locations. But a [TD Economics survey](#) found there has been no change in recent years of firms reporting difficulty finding skilled employees. We have an oversupply of skills, not a shortage. There are two million unemployed and underemployed versus 200,000 job vacancies.

Even the trades increasingly require higher education. Auto mechanics are swapping wrenches for a mouse. The car is becoming a bunch of computers connected to networks. Increasingly cars are diagnosed through technology and fixed by installing new software.

Yes, we need "STEM" (science, technology, engineering and math) graduates. But what we really need is "STEAM," adding in an A for arts. Perhaps web developers and programmers should have some English, psychology, ethics and business courses. Perhaps every English or history student should know how to program a computer, build a website or understand biology.

In fact, the only skill most young people are short on is experience. The real problem in Canada is the lack of a persistent demand for labour. Our chronic youth unemployment rate is well over 15 per cent. Any discussion of a skills gap effectively blames the students, their families and workers for the problem of unemployment. This is not a problem of skills; it's a problem of public policy.

The route to job creation is encouraging entrepreneurship. Fully 80 per cent of new jobs come from companies that are five years old or less.

Schools and universities should nurture entrepreneurs. Ryerson University President Sheldon Levy wants one-fifth of Ryerson students to graduate with a company — not a business plan but an actual incubated company. This would help students learn how to think, problem solve, collaborate, understand the big picture, convince investors, motivate employees, write and communicate.

So it's wrong to shift to more practical trades or technical colleges, away from universities. We need both. OECD data ranks Canada number one in the world in college graduation, but we rank a poor 15th in university degree attainment. We should be finding additional resources to strengthen universities if we want to compete.