

Canada must bolster liberal arts, social sciences to remain relevant

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Canada will need to bolster the study of the liberal arts and social sciences if it wishes to compete in a 21st-Century economy, according to industry and higher ed experts interviewed by [iPolitics](#) [copied below]. A [report](#) released this month by the Business Council of Canada showed that for Canadian employers, skills like teamwork, good communication, problem-solving, and collaboration are more desirable than technical expertise when hiring a new employee. Ultimately, the broad and adaptable skill set of a liberal arts or social science graduate remains valuable “regardless of what price the oil is in a given year and sudden swings in the economy,” said Universities Canada President Paul Davidson.

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Experts say a liberal arts education is still relevant

[Selina Chignall](#) | [iPolitics](#) | Mar 9, 2016 5:48 pm |



In an era when professions in the sciences and technology are being pushed as the jobs of the future, some may question why the liberal arts should be funded, but experts say the study of humanities and social sciences is integral to the Canadian economy and society.

“I think it’s more relevant than ever before. I think it’s amazing to me the lack of appreciation that has been developing (for the liberal arts) and in some sectors of government, who have adopted that old

trope, 'what do you do with a philosophy degree?'" said David Sylvester, principal of King's University College in London, Ont.

Sylvester was one of many attendees at the Universities Canada conference, "The future of the liberal arts: a global discussion," held in Montreal, Quebec on Monday.

Although Prime Minister Justin Trudeau hasn't specifically promised funding for the liberal arts, which consists of the social sciences and humanities, he did earmark \$40 million in the Liberal platform for employers to create co-op placements for students in (STEM) science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and business programs.

However, while attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January, [Trudeau spoke](#) about the importance of innovation, technology, infrastructure and education in the coming fourth industrial revolution.

"We need education to enable people to learn, think, and adapt," he said.

Studying the social sciences and humanities can provide someone with adaptability and resourcefulness "regardless of what price the oil is in a given year and sudden swings in the economy," said Paul Davidson, president of Universities Canada, an organization that represents 97 university institutions across the country, and advocates on their behalf to the federal government.

With the Liberal government's focus on innovation, Davidson said it's an opportunity to include the liberal arts, which are often overlooked.

"Having a conversation that puts at the centre liberal arts, humanities, social sciences and the creativity industries is a way of having a conversation of what we need as a country," he told *iPolitics*.

The ability to be innovative is the bread and butter of what a liberal arts education teaches, said Jean-Marc Mangin, the executive director of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Science, an organization that represents 85,000 researchers and students in those disciplines.

"There's a framework that exposes people to different ways of thinking and viewing different perspectives ... it's a skill set that the liberal arts are able to develop," he said during the conference.

The relationship between STEM and the liberal arts is what drives innovation and entrepreneurship, said Sylvester.

According to a 2015 report by the Council of Canadian Academies, [Some Assembly Required: STEM Skills and Canada's Economic Productivity](#), the future of innovation and productivity will require workers who have both STEM and liberal arts skills.

"Leadership, creativity, adaptability and entrepreneurial ability can help maximize STEM skills and allow Canadians to effectively compete within the ever-changing global marketplace," the report said.

Getting a liberal arts education is not just helpful for the future of an innovative and knowledge-based economy — it's crucial for developing soft skills, which employers increasingly desire.

A March 2016 report from [The Business Council of Canada](#) surveyed 90 Canadian employers who said when hiring entry-level employees, skills in teamwork, communication, problem-solving and collaboration were more sought-after than technical expertise.

"We are looking for graduates who show nimbleness – the ability to navigate challenging, ambiguous environments." In a competitive labour market, applicants who display these traits are more likely to be hired and, over time, singled out for promotion," an employer said in the report.

In the past decade, Davidson says there has been a consistent message coming from the government and the business sector on the need for STEM students and those in the skilled trades "to the exclusion of any other message."

With business leaders now saying that soft skills are critical, he said the sector needs to send signals out that a liberal arts education is worthy of time and money.

Studying the humanities and social sciences is also essential to tackling some of the country's biggest challenges in navigating diverse societies, issues around the environment, and demographic shifts.

With an aging population and the Supreme Court's [mandate to legalize physician-assisted dying](#), addressing end-of-life issues has come to the forefront of Canadian society, said Sylvester.

Thanatology — the study of death — has become very popular at King's University, he said, where students enrolled in the program take a multidisciplinary approach to the study of death that includes ethics, societal and cultural differences.

"We are not looking for the answer. We are looking to ask the right questions. Those who study thanatology are right in the middle of those conversations," he said.

With the liberal arts seemingly so critical economically and socially, why is its relevance continually questioned?

"The reason people don't want to support humanities and liberal arts is because we always talk about being in a crisis. Nobody wants to invest in a crisis," said Christopher Manfredi, provost and vice-principal, academic, McGill University.

While those who graduate in the liberal arts might take a temporary job as a barista in a coffee shop, it doesn't mean they end up there.

According to the Education Policy Research Initiative by Prof. Ross Finnie at the University of Ottawa, in 2014, average earnings of someone who held a social sciences degree were \$40,000. Within 13 years, it almost doubled to \$80,000. This income was similar to those at the same point in their career and who graduated in math and natural sciences.

There is also a diversity of where liberal arts students end up in their careers. According to Statistics Canada, in 2011, 40,000 employed Canadians had a degree in history, with 18 per cent working in management professions and 25 per cent of business, finance and administration.

"We need students who are broadly based, we are preparing them for a lifetime of careers, not a career for a lifetime," said Davidson.