

Forum / Tribune

The Issue of Competitiveness and Skills-Training in Continuing Education Today

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing debate between government and industry as to the adequacy of our present educational system serves to demonstrate two key points: employer needs are not currently being met by the educational system, and prospective employees are lacking the appropriate skills, knowledge, and training to take up the many available positions.

Universities and the K-12 system are often held responsible for this situation—universities for their unbending adherence to traditional academic subject areas and content, and the K-12 system for failing to create among graduating high school students an awareness of (and, consequently, a demand for)

RÉSUMÉ

Les délibérations continues entre le gouvernement et l'industrie quant à la compétence de notre système d'éducation actuel, servent à démontrer deux facteurs clés: le système d'éducation ne répond pas aux besoins actuels des employeurs, et les employés éventuels ne possèdent ni les aptitudes appropriées, ni les connaissances ni la formation pour assumer un grand nombre de postes disponibles.

Les universités et le système de la maternelle à la 12^e année sont souvent perçus comme les responsables de cette situation — les universités pour leur stricte adhésion aux matières académiques traditionnelles et le contenu de celles-ci et, le système de la

the need for more appropriate skills training. Some have argued that continuing education units are in an enviable position to fill this gap, but not all continuing educators embrace this view. This paper attempts to address these issues by delving into the available data, the purported causes, the possible solutions, and the role of continuing education in this debate.

maternelle à la 12e année pour ne pas avoir créé parmi les finissants de l'école secondaire, une conscience (et conséquemment, une nécessité) du besoin d'une formation d'aptitudes plus appropriées. Il y a ceux qui prétendent que les unités d'éducation permanente occupent une position enviable qui pourrait remplir ce vide, mais pas tous les enseignants en éducation permanente épousent ce point de vue. Ce document essaie d'adresser ces questions en examinant les données disponibles, les soi-disantes causes, les solutions possibles et le rôle de l'éducation permanente dans ces délibérations.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization, Canada's purported role in it, the country's questionable competitiveness, and the need for dramatic change in skills training to make our workforce more competitive and in tune with global forces are matters of real concern to many Canadians. There has been pressure on universities, and especially continuing education units, to respond to these concerns. Some continuing education units have embraced the challenge, others have vociferously resisted it, and still others have labeled it as antithetical to everything continuing educators believe in. Indeed, many CE units seem divided internally on this "hot-button" issue.

THE DATA

Like it or not, the world is a global marketplace, and there is no indication this will change. At best, the global market will continue to divide itself into

regional units (such as ASEAN, MERCOSUR, NAFTA, EEC), making competition within and between them increasingly fierce. Canada is in fact one of the industrialized world's most export-dependent nations,¹ with almost 40 percent of its GNP earned from outside sources, and this ratio is increasing. Within Canada, Saskatchewan has one of the highest dependencies, with over 40 percent of its GPP derived from trade² and one of every three jobs in the province being export-related. At the same time, Canada is ranked by the International Management Institute in Geneva as one of the most noncompetitive of the 48-odd industrialized nations of the world due to its low employee productivity (ranked mid-way), percentage of manufactured exports (lower half), export of services (at the bottom), entrepreneurship (15th), industrial re-tooling, international experience of CEOs, and (most relevant to continuing educators) international education.³

Although Canada has increased its exports dramatically in the last two to three years and achieved a record trade surplus, this gain is blunted by the fact that most of this trade was to the U.S.⁴ (81 percent for Canada as a whole; 90 percent for Ontario) and due primarily to our record-low dollar, which raises the price of imports. Of even more significance is the fact that during the past decade Canada's share of the Asian import market dropped by 33 percent to a paltry 1.6 percent share.⁵ A further concern is that Canada is in last place among developed countries in terms of export diversification.⁶ We are, as Asia Pacific Foundation President Bill Saywell says, "a developed country selling third world products."⁷

Canada's present precarious international and domestic situation may only get worse. Despite recent setbacks, the "Dragon" and "Tiger" economies of the Pacific Rim continue to outstrip our competitiveness and are now becoming each other's most active trading markets, reducing even further our ability to compete in that market. There is also the possibility that Ukraine, China, and other nations that are presently our customers could end up as suppliers of wheat and other agricultural commodities (our major exports). As well, the growing Latin American economies are poised to present formidable competition for Canada, particularly in our coveted U.S. market.

Our internal finances do little to brighten our competitive picture; our rate of investment in research is only 1.6 percent of our GNP, last among the G-7 nations. And even though our unemployment rate is now in single digits and GNP is slated to rise to between 2.6 and 3 percent this year (it only rose 1.6 percent in 1995-96),⁸ these are still poor indicators when balanced against the impressive growth rates of Latin American (5-8

percent in 1997–98) and other growing economies.⁹

The 9.5 percent unemployment rate also obscures the fact that Canadian youth (18–25) are the hardest hit; their unemployment rate is almost twice the national average (17.6 percent).¹⁰ The ramifications are obvious: given our dependence on exports and other financial inflows for almost half of our GNP, the threat to this half is real, and there is little to take its place within our economic picture. This is where the role of university and continuing education takes on significance.

THE CAUSES

The private sector has been especially vocal about the relationship between unemployment and Canada's non-competitiveness, arguing that jobs do in fact exist, but remain unfilled due to the absence of skills and/or skills mismatch. As previously indicated, the picture is especially bleak for youth; data indicates that the "job-readiness" gap is growing and that 145,000 jobs were lost in 1995 for people with only a high school education.¹¹ Almost half of the new jobs created between 1990 and 2000 will require 16 years of education and training. Skills deficit is a real, not imagined, problem, and the consequences are dramatic. Indeed, the skills deficit situation is so serious that the federal government is relaxing immigration rules to allow foreign workers with skills in software engineering, computer technical, biomedicine, and other areas into Canada, as well as giving the provinces more power to bring in the skilled labour and expertise they require.¹² However, even with these initiatives, in 1997, jobs continued to drop, despite low interest rates, increased housing starts, and a general growth in the economy. Companies are simply not hiring.¹³

Employer concerns regarding skills deficits tend to centre on sector-specific skills such as those involving hospitality/tourism and cultural industries, the energy sector, home care, mining and forestry, agricultural processing, and services industry.¹⁴ The specific skills that are needed include information processing, new ventures development, several management competency areas (e.g., self-employment, facilities, hotel energy, small business, sales and service, health), finance, and budgeting. There are also broad basic skills required such as general academic competence, and skills in problem-solving, interpersonal relations, life-skills development, information technology, communications, critical thinking, team work, initiative, independent learning, numeracy, and job search.¹⁵

The Regina Chamber of Commerce undertook a survey of employers in 1995 relating to employability skills and attitude. The survey results identified problem areas in reading and writing skills, continued learning, initiative, setting goals and priorities, and identifying/contributing to the organization's goals.¹⁶

In Canada in 1995, an average of 16 percent of working adults participated in work-related training; 35 percent took part in some form of adult training, whether personal or work related. Alberta had the highest participation rates for work-related training (21 percent), and Atlantic Canada the lowest (12.8 percent). While Saskatchewan had the lowest west of Quebec (17.5 percent).¹⁷ In comparison, in 1992, the percentage of working adults participating in adult education in Canada was 37percent¹⁸; the fact that this statistic has remained static (in fact, slightly declined) is troubling, especially given workplace needs. Considering that the estimated shelf life of a technical degree earned today is only five years, and that by the year 2000, 75 percent of the workforce will need to be retrained just to keep up, the figure is disappointing.¹⁹

NEEDS, CHALLENGES, AND CHANGES

Much of the blame for this unsettling situation has been placed on universities, which, it is argued, continue to focus on either professional or liberal arts programs while ignoring skills training and other programs that lead to "nonprofessional" careers. Although vocational and technical institutions provide the front-load (sometimes unfortunately termed "low end,") training, a gap is seen to exist between this training and "high end" university education. The Saskatchewan Minister of Education and Skills Training referred to the post-secondary education system in stating recently that the serious skills deficit problem has been "made more difficult by institutions that have not been responsive to the needs of the labor market in the past."²⁰ It is not unreasonable to argue that universities are in the best position to close this gap, especially considering that the most pressing dearth in skills training—essentially the six broad areas of resource allocation, interpersonal skills/teamwork, communications/information, systems/organizations, technology, and finance²¹—are surely all within the scope of universities to provide. In order to do this, however, universities will need to overcome two major challenges.

Changes to curriculum content and approach in terms of skills training is the first major challenge to be overcome in the face of the innate resistance

to change that exists within many university faculties. Often the argument against such a change in content centres around the “prostitution” of education, “being in the pockets of industry,” and flying in the face of the traditional academic mandate of a “lively exchange of ideas.” None of these shibboleths explains why a university cannot embrace both the “lively exchange of ideas” and the teaching of skills that can lead to required and satisfying careers. An examination of certificate programs offered by continuing education units at 10 universities in Western Canada²² indicates that of the 150-plus certificate programs offered, the majority are in the areas of specific professional upgrade (e.g., gerontology, counselling, community development, health) or particular industry certification (LGA, real estate, public administration, occupational health and safety, security management, criminology, public relations, etc.), but few are in the six broad-based skill areas mentioned above. Offerings in Central Canada show a slightly larger number of programs in these six areas, likely due to stronger market demands and numbers. In the area of non-credit programs across Canada, the majority of offerings are in the social sciences, humanities, and health, with enrollments in these at a six-fold ratio over those in, for example math and computer programs.²³

The other challenge lies in the content delivery; the changing nature of the content requires outreach into working sites and outside of the immediate catchment area. Hence, effective use of the new technologies is essential as these technologies not only train learners in their use but also deliver programs in the most convenient and practical way possible. The stress should be on interactive and high performance learning, and there is now a plethora of new media methods being tried out—utilizing televised and computer-based learning—with (at last count) over a dozen synchronous and asynchronous tools. The challenge lies in the proper pedagogical and learner-centred use of these technologies to deliver skills training to an adult constituency. Part of the delivery equation involves program delivery format, and change here is needed as well, if only for the convenience of learners who would otherwise have no way of accessing such programs. The innovative programs of institutions such as Royal Roads University, which offers Bachelor degrees in Entrepreneurial Management and Environmental Science and an M.A. in leadership and training based on distance technology and modular formats that give access to mid-career and part-time students²⁴ are exciting models from which all universities can learn. There has also been recent and welcome movement towards Saturday classes, weekend seminars, intensive/immersion

programs, and other format variations that appeal to adult learners from the private and public sectors.

THE ROLE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION

Clearly, these needs, challenges, and changes lie squarely in the field of continuing education. Although many continuing educators have embraced the challenge, many still resist it, and this appears to be borne out by the extant course offerings at extension units across Canada.

The issue of skills training strikes at the heart of the role of universities: Do they exist to train people for “jobs,” to educate them for “professions,” or to be a focus for the lively exchange of ideas? Unfortunately, the debate tends to revolve around absolutes—we exist to do “either this or that”—rather than a consideration of doing all three, which for the most part are complementary rather than exclusive. Interestingly enough, non-continuing education faculties have in many cases seized on the opportunities inherent in skills-based programs for both profit and community support, adopting such programs with more alacrity than their continuing education counterparts.²⁵ The irony of units devoted to continuing education and lifelong learning not being aggressively at the forefront of the need to be more relevant to local community requirements is disconcerting to many. The perceived threat seems to reside midway between the fear of losing academic credibility or “excellence” on one side, and the fear of being perceived as “voc-tech” on the other. However, to the community and employers, the debate can smack far more of academic arrogance than a legitimate defence of continuing education’s role or mandate. It is interesting to note that both issues stressed in this paper—responding to changed community/employer needs and the global economy, and the increased use of diverse delivery technology—were the primary issues of serious concern identified by the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA) at its 1997 assembly, on its association surveys, and in its focus groups.²⁶

Responding to society’s changing demands is critical to institutions retaining the public’s confidence and support....no institution can permit outmoded structures, policies and bureaucracies to deprive it of the chance to rise to the challenges posed by the knowledge age.²⁷

The reluctance by universities to respond promptly to industry needs has resulted in a growing number of so-called “corporate universities,” that is, learning centres set up by industry in the U.S. and Canada to provide

training unavailable at universities. It is estimated that North American universities are losing out on \$70 billion a year that corporations are now spending on their own in-house programs to fill in the gaps.²⁸ It should not be difficult to argue that our mandate is to respond to community learning needs in whatever way our universities' competencies allow us. If this is not sufficient motivation, the real possibility of irrelevancy should provide the stimulus. If we are striving to become virtual adult educators, facing virtual realities is an obvious first step.

ENDNOTES

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3. *World Competitiveness Report 1996*, pp. 77, 80-82.
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5. *Ibid.*, (February 14, 1997), p. A7.
6. *World Competitiveness Report 1996*, p. 44.
7. *Ibid.*
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