



Future of Canada Centre | Centre pour l'avenir du Canada

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Bold bets for our country: the case for disrupting the status quo in education

Since early 2017, Deloitte has spoken with business and government leaders across the country about their vision for a future Canada. These conversations have convinced us that while Canada has made great strides in achieving a high quality of life over the last 150 years, by the next big anniversary in 25 years, Canada should be in a class of its own—not *one* of the best but *the* best place to live and work in the world.

As we note in our recent report, [*Bold bets for our country: It's time for deliberate action*](#), Canada's highly educated labour force has long been one of our sources of growth, competitiveness, and prosperity. We boast one of the world's highest educational success rates, rank highly on international measures of student success, and possess post-secondary institutions that are among the best in the world.ⁱ

But this knowledge advantage is eroding at precisely the time it is needed to support economic participation and growth. While emerging market countries in Asia and elsewhere are boosting their secondary and postsecondary completion rates, rapid advances in technology have greatly shortened the expected shelf life of key skills.ⁱⁱ The rise of automation, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things threatens a world in which even the most educated workers will have difficulty competing.

Despite efforts to address these issues—including roughly \$14 billion in government programs and available tax credits at the federal level alone—the evidence suggests Canada's skills gap is expanding and already acting as a drag on growth.ⁱⁱⁱ To equip our graduates with the skills needed for a knowledge and technology-driven economy, both government and business need to step up to make fundamental changes to how we educate, train, and retrain our workforce.

Recommendations

1. Focus on lifelong learning

Our education system was originally designed to meet the 19th- and early 20th-century ideal of “work” and “career”. It was based on static curricula and had a primary focus on highly specialized learning housed in silos. However, in part due to the shrinking shelf life of skills, the rise of worker automation, the rise of the gig economy, and an aging workforce, the fundamental nature of “work” and “career” are changing—we must adjust our approach to education accordingly. For our country and our businesses to succeed in a more challenging environment marked by rapid and widespread technological disruption, we must eliminate the distinction between pre- and post-career training and work together to educate and train Canadians not only for their first job, but throughout their careers.

2. Forge partnerships across sectors to expand experiential learning models

Post-secondary educational curricula needs to be reinvented to embrace interdisciplinary learning, and offer opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills and apply them to the world outside of the classroom. Governments and businesses must forge a new relationship to expand experiential learning models—such as apprenticeships for the skilled trades, articling for law, residencies for medicine, or practicums in teaching and accounting—to a broader range of professions. To meet growing demands for accreditation, we also need to broaden our thinking in the ways that accreditation can be achieved (i.e., course completion, training hours, work placements, standardized testing), and empower a wider range of organizations to deliver it.

3. Put more retraining dollars in the hands of employers

We also need twenty-first century solutions to pair job-seekers with job-creators, and it is time to think bigger than job banks and grants.^{iv} To better help displaced workers successfully re-enter the job market, we need to put more retraining dollars in the hands of employers, who know first-hand the training needed to meet job market needs and address skills gaps hindering company growth. Government can accomplish this by transferring funding that would have been paid in employment insurance benefits and training for the job seeker to the new employer to defray the cost of training.

Prioritizing employer-led training will better link training to job market needs, address skills gaps hindering company growth, and instill a learning-focused culture among employers. And this has been proven through success stories like Riipen, a cloud-based platform started in 2014 by a Vancouver team of technology, academic, corporate, marketing and customer service experts to manage connections between post-secondary students and graduates, their institutions, and businesses. Organizations post short-term, skills-specific projects or paid work opportunities for students. Employers provide feedback and skills ratings, so that whether the student is hired more permanently or not, they continue to build their virtual portfolio—the diverse resume that allows them to stand out in the job market.

Today, Riipen has over 12,000 student members, and has been engaging BC's fastest-growing tech firms at hackathons and career fairs as well as their virtual job market. The "LinkedIn for students" is a win-win-win: students get real-world experience honing employable skills, with opportunities responsive to market demand. Educators engage with experiential learning, establish industry involvement in class projects, and build industry connections. Employers get access to top emerging talent, with the assurance that the graduate can and will perform.^v To date, a total of 24,000 students deriving from 130 academic institutions have received an experience through Riipen's platform, having been connected with over 2,600 employers.

4. Empower a wider range of organizations to provide education and training for accreditation to meet growing demand

New approaches are also needed to provide maximum flexibility in the pathways Canadians can take to obtain accreditation, including degrees, certificates, and professional designations. These must include expanding experiential learning models—such as apprenticeships for the skilled trades, articling for law, residencies for medicine, or practicums in teaching and accounting—to a broader range of professions, allowing accreditation to be achieved in a variety of ways (e.g., course completion, training hours, work placements, standardized testing). This means empowering a wider range of organizations to provide education and training for accreditation to meet growing demand, including through online learning platforms and corporate training programs that better reflect the myriad ways knowledge skills and capabilities are acquired today.

Singapore has taken note of this and introduced the SkillsFuture Credit in 2015. The program provides all citizens above the age of 25 with a credit of SGD\$500 (CAD\$478) that can be used to access education and training opportunities supplied by a series of approved providers. In 2016, the first year of the program, more than 126,000 people made use of the credit to access 18,000 approved course offerings through more than 700 training providers, including Udemy, Coursera, and the National University of Singapore. Information technology-related skills were the most popular offerings across all age brackets in 2016. While it is too early to evaluate the success of the SkillsFuture Credit in enhancing Singapore's economic competitiveness, it is clear that the

incentive has tapped into a deep desire on the part of the country's citizens to take advantage of opportunities for lifelong learning and professional growth.^{vi}

Canada has an opportunity to leapfrog Singapore's SkillsFuture Credit model by striving to truly transform our education system to be about lifelong learning. In this educational reform effort, procurement of funding will be a necessary first step, but funding alone will not be sufficient—meaningful structural changes to our education system will be required to achieve the educational and career outcomes we desire for our people.

By leveraging our existing education and technology assets, Canada can be home to the world's best and most innovative learning organizations—global powerhouses for workforce retraining and reskilling. The world's greatest knowledge-based economies are already moving in this direction—Canada cannot be caught flatfooted.

About Deloitte's Future of Canada Centre

Deloitte, one of Canada's leading professional services firms, provides audit, tax, consulting, and financial advisory services. The Future of Canada Centre is Deloitte's premier thought leadership centre. The Centre performs original research and publishes reports, articles, and papers that provide insights for businesses, governments, and academia. Our *Canada at 175* multi-year initiative is a platform to spark thought and action around the challenges we face and the future we want.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Canada's adult education level is one of the highest in the OECD overall and the highest when measured by percentage of adults with tertiary education. See OECD Data, Adult education level, Tertiary, % of 25-64 year-olds, 2015, <https://data.oecd.org/chart/4Nag>, (accessed April 25, 2017); In the most recent PISA assessment, Canada ranked 10th in math, 7th in science and 3rd in reading out of 72 countries assessed.
- ⁱⁱ See: Deloitte Canada, "Canada at a New Crossroads: 25 Years Later" (Deloitte Canada, March 2017), 13. World Economic Forum, "The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution" (World Economic Forum, January 2016).
- ⁱⁱⁱ For data on skills training see Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy, "Skills and Innovation: Where's the Money?". For the relationship between skills and growth see Richard Blackwell, "Canada's Skills Gap Widening, Survey Shows," *The Globe and Mail*, October 17, 2013.; Gillian Livingston, "Skills Gap Hurting Top Economies," *The Globe and Mail*, March 2013.
- ^{iv} Tavia Grant, "Job Retraining: No 'Magic Bullet,'" *The Globe and Mail*, November 29, 2010
- ^v "Riipen," accessed April, 2017, <http://riipen.com/talent/>.; Kirsten Armour, "Riipen: The LinkedIn for Students," *Vancity Buzz*, March 20, 2015, <http://www.vancitybuzz.com/2015/03/riipen-ubc-tech-showcase/>
- ^{vi} *The Economist*, "Equipping People to Stay ahead of Technological Change," January 14, 2017; SkillsFuture, "Steady Progress in Implementation of SkillsFuture Credit" (SkillsFuture, January 8, 2017)