

October 12, 2015

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Investment in Post-Secondary Education Is Needed for a Strong Economy

Posted: 10/08/2015 12:21 pm EDT | Updated: 10/08/2015 12:59 pm EDT



The economy is clearly the central issue of the current election campaign, yet a vital topic has been absent from the debate so far. We've heard much talk of stimulating the economy, supporting small business and fostering innovation, but we have not heard the parties' vision for the role post-secondary education can play in driving growth across the country.

Rapid changes in the structure of the economy and the labour market make it essential that Canadians be equipped with the high-demand skills of tomorrow. As recently heard from the [Canadian Chamber of Commerce](#), more must be done to address skills gaps in Canada by aligning employers' skills needs to post-secondary education and training.

Canada's colleges, institutes, polytechnics and cégeps are ideally positioned to meet these challenges. With a presence in over 3000 communities, they are key actors in local economies across the country. They provide education and skills training tailored to the labour market needs of local employers in all sectors. Colleges and institutes also partner with many of these employers on applied research to develop innovative products, tools and processes that create new jobs and open new markets.

Together with representatives of over 40 sectors of the Canadian economy, Canada's colleges and institutes have identified four ways our political leaders can engage and empower the talent, facilities and capacity for innovation that exist in communities across the country.

First, invest more in applied research, to take advantage of colleges' unrivalled ability to partner with local businesses and organizations to drive innovation and implement new ideas. In the past year alone, colleges and institutes worked with over 6,300 partners in all sectors of the economy, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, to develop and adapt products, services, technology and processes. This also allows students to gain valuable experience that will help them become innovators in their future workplace.

These impressive results are being achieved with approximately \$60 million per year in federal government funding, matched dollar for dollar, if not more, by the partners themselves. A very modest increase in total federal funding for post-secondary research -- which stands at \$2.96 billion per year -- would substantially boost the capacity of the college sector and their partners to generate economic growth and social benefits.

Second, invest in the infrastructure and equipment that enable skills training and applied research. The enrollment capacity of colleges and institutes is a direct function of available space, facilities and equipment. In many cases, waitlists for programs in high-demand professions are growing because the existing infrastructure requires replacement or significant maintenance. In effect, over 60 per cent of existing college and institute infrastructure currently exceed their 40-year life cycle. The waitlists are limiting Canadians' access to training in high demand occupations in the trades, engineering technologies and healthcare, to name just a few.

Federal leaders can also look to Canada's colleges and institutes to play a role in reconciliation with Canada's indigenous peoples. Improved access to post-secondary education and upskilling for Indigenous peoples are central recommendations of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#). Colleges and institutes provide a path to improved prosperity for Canada's fastest growing demographic. Colleges and institutes are working with indigenous leaders and elders to offer culturally-relevant education programs and student support services and empower Indigenous youth to contribute to the economic and social development of their communities.

Finally, we believe the government should work to expand employment opportunities for Canadians by investing in better labour market information, apprenticeship completion and the employability of youth.

Providing post-secondary institutions and their industry partners with timely, high quality labour market information is of critical importance in targeting education and training investments more effectively, facilitating labour market transitions, supporting labour mobility and meeting sector-specific needs. This could be achieved by insuring sustainable funding for the recently announced Labour Market Information Council.

This would also be a positive step to deal with youth unemployment rates. Additional measures could include creating more co-op opportunities, improving post-secondary access for groups that are under-represented in the Canadian labour market, and increasing opportunities for student mobility both in Canada and internationally in order to produce graduates with national and global perspectives and skills.

Our political leaders have clearly stated that the economy is their top priority for the upcoming election. We urge them to look to Canada's colleges and institutes to support them in creating economic growth by ensuring a skilled workforce and an innovative culture. Canada's post-secondary system has earned well-deserved recognition for its strengths. In these times of volatile economies and fierce global competition we need to exploit these vital assets to the advantage of all.

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