

Canadian universities, colleges expand course offerings for careers in marijuana industry

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From growing the perfect crop to marketing within restrictive rules, Canadian colleges and universities are cultivating courses for those wanting to work in the booming marijuana industry.

Kwantlen Polytechnic University started offering online courses in cannabis production, marketing and financing about three years ago after officials at the British Columbia school realized there was a need for training and education around medicinal marijuana, said David Purcell, the university's director of emerging business.

Demand is skyrocketing, prompting Kwantlen to offer the classes every four weeks instead of every eight to keep up with demand, he said.

"The uptake in the last six months or so, the demand has risen significantly as we approach recreational legalization, obviously. You can't go a day without seeing some sort of news about cannabis or regulation of the upcoming recreational market," Purcell said.

About 1,200 people have taken the classes, most of whom are between 25 and 40 years old and were working full-time in another industry, he said.

The university isn't alone in offering marijuana-related courses. Niagara College is working on a certificate in marijuana production and the New Brunswick Community College is already teaching cultivation.

There's been a void in the educational marketplace when it comes to training specifically for the burgeoning marijuana market, said Debbie Johnston, dean of the school of continuing education at Durham College in Oshawa, Ont.

"Employers are struggling to find people with that industry-specific knowledge. It's an opportunity that, quite frankly, hasn't been met and we saw it and we thought, this is a great thing to get into," she explained.

Durham College recently began offering a two-day course that provides an introduction to all things marijuana.

The first sessions were well attended, Johnston said, attracting a variety of professions, including a chef, a farmer, investors and health-care workers.

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Marijuana companies are looking for professionals, like accountants or business managers, who have industry-specific knowledge, from the terminology and history of the industry to the regulatory framework and basics of cannabis plants, Johnston added.

"What employers want is to know that people are coming in with a basic understanding," she said.

Alison McMahon runs Cannabis at Work, a recruiting agency for marijuana companies, and said completing cannabis courses can help candidates stand out from the crowd.

"I think what it signals more than anything is that somebody has been proactive and they have taken the time to take one of the courses that are on the market," she said.

Right now, there aren't a lot of job seekers with cannabis education on their resumes, McMahon noted, but that's likely to change as both the industry and educational offerings grow.

Kwantlen and Durham College are both planning to expand the variety of marijuana classes on offer.

A course teaching responsible retail sales, safe handling and strain identification will soon be offered through Kwantlen, and the school is also working on a cultivation course that will see students go out and work with cannabis plants at licensed production facilities, Purcell said.

Durham College, meanwhile, is working on an elective about marijuana legalization and a class for medical professionals focused on cannabis in health care, Johnston said.

The new courses will likely be joined by many more down the road as the college prepares workers for the emerging industry, she said.

"It's growing by leaps and bounds. This is where the jobs are," she said.

Education will be vital to fighting generations of stigma around the soon-to-be legal product,

Purcell said.

"In order for the industry as a whole to gain legitimacy, people really need to know what it's all about," he said. "We have to alleviate the stigma and the way to do that is really teaching people what the industry's all about."