Nobina Robinson: Skill mismatches and over-qualification block job opportunities for Canadians

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Statistics Canada recently released its comprehensive reports on education, covering a wide range of topics, including overall education attainment and the skills mismatches and earnings potential of those with bachelor's degrees. There was good news and bad news.

StatsCan reported that in 2016, 54 per cent of Canadians aged 25 to 64 had either college or university qualifications. Canada continued to rank first among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in the proportion of college and university graduates. That's good news.

Yet despite our high level of qualifications, a consensus is also forming that those looking to enter or re-enter the workforce will face challenging labour market conditions in the coming years. Skills mismatches, automation, displacement, underemployment, unemployment and over-qualification are all a concern.

The over-qualification rate for bachelor's degree holders exceeds 20 per cent in several fields of study, according to StatsCan. So, how can we ensure that graduating with a bachelor's degree is complemented by successful navigation of the labour market?

One way is to realize that not all bachelors' degrees are the same – many are general and theory-based but some are applied, connecting knowledge and know-how. More important, we need to realize that universities are not the only higher education institutions that offer bachelor's degrees.

Degree-granting colleges, and all of Canada's Polytechnics, offer over 180 stand-alone bachelor's degrees that are publicly funded, have the full quality assurance of the provincial education authorities and build important workplace skills. They link learning to career preparation and are designed to meet specific current and future workforce needs.

At a polytechnic, for example, the curriculum reflects labour market demands through the guidance of program advisory committees. Comprised of employers, practitioners and recent graduates, the committees identify current and future industry trends and shifts in the skills graduates need to meet employer demands and actively participate in the development of new programs.

There is also a difference in who teaches bachelor's degree courses at Polytechnics. Skilled practitioners in their field of study prepare the students, not lifelong academics. They are experienced industry leaders and subject matter experts, such as Neil Cox at the B.C. Institute of Technology.

Cox is the program head for the Bachelor of Electrical Engineering and teaches several courses. He previously worked in the industry for over two decades, focusing on the commercialization of digital signal processing and communications systems. He also founded a telecommunications product development company.

Cox's teaching philosophy is based on helping students answer the question, "why?" He encourages his students to go beyond memorizing and solving equations and to really understand the problems that companies face.

The learning-by-doing model of education also means that polytechnic students deepen their knowledge gained in workplace settings. Work-integrated learning is an important component. Of the 183 stand-alone bachelor's degree offered by the 13 members of Polytechnics Canada, over two-thirds have a work integrated learning component.

It is work-integrated learning opportunities such as these that contribute to strong graduate employment outcomes. The graduate employment rate for bachelor's degree holders from Polytechnics Canada's members was 91 per cent in 2015-16.

Census data releases, such as the latest on education, will be the evidence used to guide education and labour market policy in Canada moving forward. So while we celebrate the success of degree attainment, we must differentiate and harness programs that have a positive

impact on the labour market too. Some degrees do make a difference.

Nobina Robinson is the chief executive officer of Polytechnics Canada, a national association representing the leading polytechnics and colleges in Canada.

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