

Harvey P. Weingarten – Postsecondary education and jobs: It's a question of skills

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This week, we released a study examining the relationship between the supply of graduates from six regulated professions – medicine, law, teaching, architecture, engineering, nursing – and the labour demand for these graduates. The historical evidence provided in that analysis is clear – we never get it right! We either oversupply or undersupply.

This conclusion is no revelation to anyone who follows past attempts to link postsecondary education to jobs. There is no privileged or direct pipeline between specific fields of study/programs/degrees and specific jobs. This conclusion is reinforced by HEQCO [analyses](#) that students from particular fields of study go into a wide range of jobs and conversely that people in specific jobs come from a wide range of postsecondary fields of study and degree programs. At a conceptual level, this inability to match programs with specific jobs should not be surprising.

Programs represent how postsecondary institutions structure themselves administratively and occupations are often categorized by federally established National Occupation Classifications (NOC). While these entities had some historical validity, there are considerable dynamics and drift in fields of study and the jobs out there.

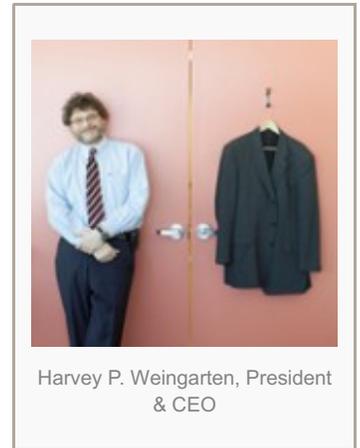
The evidence – no matter how much policy makers, politicians and students would like it to be otherwise – is compelling and incontrovertible. Given the ways we now approach the problem, it is impossible to figure out how many people we should enrol in a specific postsecondary program to fill, but not overfill, the expected number of specific jobs. If we can't do this in regulated professions, as our current paper demonstrates, we certainly can't do it in political science, chemistry or management.

So, do we just abandon trying to understand the relationship between postsecondary education and the workplace? Absolutely not. A primary reason governments support a public postsecondary system is to graduate students who will feed the economy and fill available jobs. Every student survey I know shows that the dominant (not necessarily the exclusive) reason students attend postsecondary is to get the credentials necessary to get a good job.

It is time, though, to accept the evidence and start to ask different, smarter, more contemporary and more relevant questions about the alignment between postsecondary education and jobs. These promising questions centre on skills.

Skills represent the common vocabulary that can align what is learned in postsecondary education and the demands of current jobs. The good news is that we are moving in this direction. A host of recent surveys have demonstrated [remarkable consensus](#) and convergence about the skills employers believe are most essential for success in today's jobs. [Measurement of skills](#) is becoming increasingly prominent in postsecondary education, as are attempts to link skills, such as critical thinking, to jobs and labour market outcomes). To move forward – to solve the alignment problem between postsecondary education and jobs and to solve the skills gap– we need colleges and universities to do a better job of measuring and credentialing skills (not just the traditional transcript of what courses a student took, the grades they obtained and the credential they received) and employers to do a better job of identifying the specific skills necessary for success in particular jobs.

Talking the common language of skills can fix the current misalignment and confusion about what goes on in our postsecondary institutions and jobs and labour markets.



Harvey P. Weingarten, President & CEO

Talking about skills has the added advantage of allowing us to answer important questions about the labour markets of the future if we want Canada's economy to be robust, competitive and successful. Questions such as:

What skills should students acquire in their postsecondary education given that they are to change jobs five to seven times during their working careers?

What skills should students acquire in their postsecondary education given that a high percentage of jobs these students will have in their working careers have not yet been created or contemplated?

What pedagogical techniques or student experiences are the most effective ways of students learning necessary job-related skills?

The past ways we have asked the important question about the relationship between postsecondary education and jobs have not been helpful. I know it is hard to forget how we [acted in the past](#). It is time, though, to ask questions that can give students, governments and employers the information and answers they seek. That turns us to the promising perspective of skills.

Thanks for reading.