


The problem of youth unemployment: Predicting the changing future of work

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Demographics, globalization and technological change are transforming Canada's labour market. Workers are looking for jobs, businesses can't seem to find the skilled people they need and the game-changing disruptive tech – from artificial intelligence to machine learning – is still at an early stage. As baby boomers leave the labour force and technology becomes more sophisticated, the skills challenges will only intensify.

The changing nature of work will create additional challenges for young Canadians who are already experiencing suboptimal labour market outcomes. Precarious youth employment is on the rise, as jobs for young people are increasingly contractual or temporary. Work in the "gig" economy is increasing, too, and will likely continue in the decades to come.

The challenges are more urgent and more complicated yet for vulnerable youth, including rural, remote and low-income youth, Indigenous youth, youth with disabilities, LGBTQ2S and racialized youth and newcomers to Canada.

A key question, then, is how to support Canada's young people? Despite having one of the most educated populations in the OECD, Canada is not producing enough skilled graduates to sustain and enhance the country's economic and social well-being or its innovation capacity. It will take broad co-ordination and collaboration among public and private sector stakeholders to enable our education and skills sectors to prepare learners and workers for the future of work.

Which is why governments, postsecondary education institutions, think tanks and employers are working hard to figure out not only what skills our economy needs today, but the skills it will need a decade from now and beyond.

The federal government's Advisory Council on Economic Growth recommended the establishment of a FutureSkills Lab to identify, develop and assess the skills workers will need. The 2016 budget also launched the Expert Panel on Youth Employment, with a mandate to examine the barriers to employment for vulnerable youth and identify best practices to improve youth employment.

The Expert Panel's final report, *13 Ways to Modernize Youth Employment in Canada*, was released earlier this year and contributed to a discussion that remains critical to the future of Canada's education systems, labour market and economy.

The Conference Board of Canada's own [Centre on Skills and Post-Secondary Education](#) has been studying these issues for the past five years and a number of findings from this initiative are worth highlighting.

Defining youth as ages 15 to 29 is too wide a range. It is important to think about education as a continuum from youth through adulthood. But challenges related to school attendance, skills development, skills requirements, employment expectations and labour market outcomes differ greatly within those 14 years.

The future of [learning and work](#) will require new competencies and skills, such as social and emotional intelligence, virtual collaboration, foresight, creativity and adaptability. This will place new demands on teaching and learning throughout Canada's education systems. The changing economy will also disrupt the way businesses are run, which will alter how workers will need to be trained and developed.

The youth panel spoke with employers, researchers, career counsellors, service providers and governments. This was the right move. Our research has found that support mechanisms and services don't happen organically. We must invest in these services and train people to do the work. These jobs, too, cannot be precarious.

Too few students have opportunities to accumulate direct work experience while pursuing their credentials – both to better prepare them for employment and to provide experiences for reflection and analysis when they return to the classroom.

As a result, youth struggle to get a foot in the door after graduation and default to taking short-term, contract and precarious work. The gig economy may be good for segments of the population – for example, it offers flexibility for students and options for baby boomers easing their way out of full-time work – but for recent grads, it can hamper career development, constrain income growth over time and often involves working without benefits. For vulnerable youth, it can exacerbate social inequalities.

This is not just a youth problem or a blame-the-millennials phenomenon. Youth unemployment, underemployment and underutilization undermines their own ability, and Canada's, to plan for the future. Today's underemployed and vulnerable youth won't have the financial security when they're older and ready to retire.

We may not need more oversight committees or expert panels. But we do need broad co-ordination and collaboration between our education and skills sectors and the governments that support them to understand the future of work, close the experience gap for youth, including marginalized and vulnerable youth and remove the barriers to transitioning from school to work.