

Don Cayo: Graduates falling behind because education out of step with rapidly shifting workplace

BY DON CAYO, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST JANUARY 10, 2014



BMO Financial Group vice-chairman Kevin Lynch says Canada's economic success depends on Canadian graduates surging to the head of the pack globally. Instead, they're falling behind.

Photograph by: DAVE CHAN, Vancouver Sun

Post-secondary institutions in Canada are stuck in a world of out-dated educational models that fall short of the country's and their students' needs, says Kevin Lynch, a man whose career has taken him to the highest echelons of government, business and academia.

"In a profoundly changing world, the one strategy that doesn't make sense is to keep doing what you've always done," Lynch told me when we chatted not long before he delivered a lecture at a UBC Public Policy Forum on Friday.

"That's not to say it was a bad strategy for the past. But it's not a good strategy for the future."

The result, he said, is that Canadian graduates are falling behind at a time in history when our economic success depends on them surging to the head of the pack.

Lynch is currently vice-chairman of BMO Financial Group. But until 2010 he was a federal bureaucrat, serving as deputy minister of both finance and industry, and ultimately as Clerk of the Privy Council — the top civil service job in Canada. In addition, he chairs the Board of Governors at the University of Waterloo, and he's chancellor of University of King's College in Halifax. And, oh yes, he sits on a whole bunch of boards.

From all these perspectives, he said, Canada's labour market challenges look just as alarming.

He's worried, for example, by scores in international tests that show Canada slipping from eighth to 13th in math as well as dropping further behind other countries in language and science.

He's worried that less than half of Canadian high school graduates complete Grades 11 and 12 level math and science courses — an essential foundation if they're to excel in careers that demand technical skills.

And he's worried that educators don't seem to get it. He cites a survey that found four-fifths of school administrators pleased with the job they're doing, while two-thirds of employers were dissatisfied with the skills of their new hires.

It's not possible to train people specifically for jobs of the future because no one knows what the opportunities are going to be, and they're bound to change.

"But you can see what the skill sets are going to be. It will be technological literacy. Numeracy. Much more adaptability than you and I had to worry about in our day, because we know the nature of work is going to change. And workers will need to be more entrepreneurial because the jobs won't be with the big old established companies, but with the start-ups.

"You can train for entrepreneurship," he added. "But how many universities do?"

And, "Not a single university in Canada today requires a second language for students not in language programs. When I graduated in 1972, it was needed for a degree, but we've regressed."

Job opportunities are already polarizing in Canada, he said, and technology and global competition will ensure this trend continues.

"For a long time, we had well-paid, middling-skilled jobs, but technology is making them obsolete. Either they're done by machines or they've gone offshore.

"This is part of the reason income inequality is increasing. Jobs are either getting better if you have the skills, or worse if you don't."

To improve the balance of good jobs to poor ones, he said, Canadian companies must focus on higher-end markets.

"If you provide a non-standard product that meets needs in a unique way, people will pay a premium for it.

"But if you're trying to sell a standardized product — a commodity service — then customers will pick the lowest price. And it's very hard for a Canadian firm in a global economy, with our higher costs, to compete just on price."

But — back to his main point — — for companies to compete on uniqueness and quality, they will need graduates of an education system that keeps pace with technology and globalized markets.

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