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## Stephen Hume: Canada's skills, labour shortages a myth

BY STEPHEN HUME, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST OCTOBER 23, 2013

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Federal studies show skills mismatches affect only a minority of businesses, and a recent TD Bank report confirms this.

Photograph by: Don Healy, Regina Leader-Post

Once again a popular business mantra arises:

Universities are out of step with the job market. They churn out unemployable graduates with useless humanities degrees when engineers and computer scientists are in demand. They should trim liberal arts programs producing artsy people that industry doesn't need and graduate more with the training business wants.

This rhetoric represents less job market reality than ideological talking points from people who really should do some research before regurgitating received wisdom.

Mind you, research seems a low priority for Canada's corporate aristocracy.

Federal studies show skills mismatches affect only a minority of businesses. And a recent TD Bank report confirms this. It corroborates a BMO study that found 30 per cent fewer businesses currently report skills shortfalls than have over a 15-year average.

Furthermore, Canada's universities punch above their weight in producing the innovative graduates needed to be competitive in the global economy. Canadian universities rank seventh among all OECD

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countries for research and development investment.

By comparison, Canada's business sector ranks 20th. Our entire private-enterprise sector invests in R&D at about half the rate of Finland, population smaller than Toronto.

According to the World Bank, Canada's share of annual GDP directed to R&D is about half what Sweden or Korea invest.

This strategic ineptitude is reflected in another key area — patent applications. Canada ranks with Poland in this key indicator for innovation. We recorded just over 4,000 patent applications in 2011. Japan registered 287,580. The economically beleaguered U.S. registered 241,977.

In percentage of exports comprising high-tech, Canadian business ranks with Estonia at 13 per cent. Iceland, on the other hand, matches the United Kingdom with more than 20 per cent.

This indicates problems not with universities and the students they graduate, but in how Canadian business leaders perceive and deploy the available talent.

Most regurgitated nostrums regarding the employability of university graduates are just wrong. First, there is no shortage of Canadian engineering and science graduates. Second, liberal arts graduates have valuable job skills in communication, critical thinking and contextualizing — witness the Bank of Canada's discovery that its economics specialists have woefully inadequate communication skills. Recently employed liberal arts graduates, on the other hand, say their schooling provided excellent preparation for what the job market really requires.

Another U.S. study ranked unemployment by university degree obtained: The jobless rate for information technology specialists was 14.7 per cent, for architects 12.8 per cent, for economists 10.7 per cent, for accounting 8.8 per cent, for computer science graduates 8.1 per cent, and for business management 7.8 per cent. Theatre arts graduates, by comparison, had unemployment rates of 6.4 per cent.

Liberal arts graduates, at 8.1 per cent, had the same unemployment rate as mechanical engineers, and were only marginally worse off than electrical or civil engineers at 7.6 per cent.

However, English majors employed in their first job earn more than business hospitality services majors. And if they obtain a graduate English degree, they double that income.

Finally, Canadian universities are not falling behind in recruiting and retaining undergraduate students in science and engineering.

Post-secondary enrolment in the life sciences, engineering, computer sciences, math and the physical sciences increased every year from 1999 to 2009.

The number of doctoral students in engineering and natural sciences more than doubled over the same decade. Enrolment in Canadian medical schools has doubled since 1970.

So what's going on? The problem, it seems, is not that there is a dearth of talent, but that business leaders expect universities to provide what only their businesses can provide — practical experience.

A 2012 study reports that while there is an abundance of young engineers in Canada, employers are demanding of new hires the same experience levels as the retiring engineers they wish to replace. This is just dumb strategy and incompetent human resources management.

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This month marks the 200th anniversary of a remarkable series of seldom-remembered events in the War of 1812 that changed the course of history on the West Coast of North America. Indeed, they created the British Columbia we inhabit today. The curious story of the war's role in shaping Canada west of the Great Lakes has largely been overlooked in the mainstream. Attention has focused on generals and their dramatic battles in Ontario and Quebec. Yet had those events not occurred, the shape of Western Canada might have been entirely different. Oregon, Washington and Idaho might have been part of what's now British Columbia. Or they might have become a separate Canadian province in their own right. Or most of B.C. might have become American states. So, let's revisit those historic days, observing them through the eyes of people who were present. On March 10, 1813, American-born Daniel Williams Harmon was at Fort Dunvegan. The cerebral fur trader from Vermont was enjoying a conversation — rare on the far frontier — about current ideas with his convivial colleague Colin Campbell and catching up on his reading.

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Frankly, business leaders should stop their tiresome bleating, start hiring smart young people who have shown their ability to learn, and begin mentoring the talent that will empower their companies to compete in the increasingly competitive global marketplace for decades to come.

[shume@islandnet.com](mailto:shume@islandnet.com)

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