The Future Is Social and Emotional

Evolving Skills Needs in the 21st Century
The Future Skills Centre – Centre des Compétences futures (FSC-CCF) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.

The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Ryerson University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada.

If you would like to learn more about this report and other skills research from FSC, visit us at fsc-ccf.ca or contact info@fsc-ccf.ca.

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Key findings

• The changing nature of work is increasing the demand not only for technical skills but for social and emotional skills (SES) like communication, leadership, cultural competence, resiliency, problem-solving, and collaboration.

• Employers often find that entry-level new hires lack these skills. This might be because these skills are tough to teach, measure, and even define, so post-secondary institutions tend to overlook them or hope students learn them indirectly.

• Most tools and resources for developing SES are designed for K–12 learners. But helping adults develop and assess these skills is an important priority when it comes to responding to Canada’s skills gaps and the future of work.

• We need to be aware, though, that not everyone has the same opportunities to develop SES in the same ways at the same time. We risk exacerbating existing inequities among vulnerable groups by placing greater emphasis on the development and assessment of social and emotional skills.

• Closing social and emotional skills gaps will set up learners, workers, and employers for career success. But it will require rethinking SES training and development in the post-secondary context, including considering it as part of a lifelong learning process.
Overview

The most in-demand skills for today’s and tomorrow’s labour market aren’t technical—they’re social and emotional. Academic research and industry surveys on skills needs indicate that social and emotional skills (SES), or human skills, are critical for employability and career success. But are Canada’s education and training systems doing enough to prepare students for work?

The answer seems to be no.

More and more, employers require new hires who not only possess specialized knowledge and technical skills, but who can also communicate their knowledge, work effectively in teams, demonstrate leadership, think critically, and adapt to changing and ambiguous circumstances—no matter their field of work.

When employers and hiring managers are asked to reflect on the skill sets of new hires, though, they repeatedly identify gaps, particularly regarding social and emotional skills. For example, fewer than 20 per cent of HR managers at Canada’s largest companies strongly agree that entry-level hires have sufficient “human skills”—the ability to problem solve, collaborate, and build relationships.1

Part of the challenge is that we have yet to establish comprehensive, evidence-based approaches for how best to develop and assess these skills in adolescents and adults, including post-secondary students. We tend to assume that students have a window of opportunity to acquire them in K–12 and emerge with a fixed set of social and emotional skills. In turn, our cultures of post-secondary teaching, learning, and work haven’t evolved to focus explicitly on human skills development, which means learners (and the workers they become) don’t always receive the training they need.

We argue here that post-secondary education (PSE) systems need to address the barriers to SES training and development, especially for vulnerable groups, and provide accessible, inclusive pathways for lifelong SES learning.

This will mean creating new tools and resources to help learners develop or upgrade their social and emotional skills. It will mean changing the way post-secondary institutions teach and assess human skills to better prepare learners for work and help Canadian businesses grow.

1 Business Council of Canada and Morneau Shepell, Navigating Change, 7–10.
Why is this research important?

It’s about access (to lifelong SES learning), equity (for vulnerable groups), and employability (for all Canadians).

Access
There is no age at which we stop acquiring social and emotional skills. They’re malleable and continue to develop over our lifetime. These skills can change in response to anything from major life-events (marriage, having children, starting a first job) to new learning environments and on-the-job demands. To date, though, research, curricula, and assessment tools for social and emotional skills overwhelmingly focus on K–12.

How well these skills transfer or can be adapted for post-secondary students, or adults more generally, has yet to be established. Post-secondary institutions routinely provide students with opportunities to develop or strengthen their social and emotional skills, but they are often limited in range (e.g., group projects, presentations, case competitions) or extracurricular, and the social and emotional skills acquisition is implied, but not assessed.

Without an intentional and applied focus on SES-based learnings and outcomes, we have no real sense of SES-based achievement or whether—and how—PSE programs and courses might be improved.

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Equity

We also know that we need to consider the unique needs of vulnerable individuals and groups, those who are typically left behind in the labour market. The concern here is that the growing demand for social and emotional skills could exacerbate existing social inequalities. Vulnerable groups tend to face the largest systemic barriers to accessing the types of training, resources, social capital, and other opportunities that cultivate SES, improve labour market access, and lead to career success.

How do we ensure that youth in Attawapiskat, for example, have the same access to human skills training as youth in Toronto? Or that older workers whose jobs are directly threatened by technologies can transition into in-demand jobs that work alongside new technologies? Will greater employer emphasis on social and emotional skills further disadvantage Canadians who have cognitive disabilities or developmental challenges? How will new Canadians who come from workplaces with different cultural and social norms fare?

Employability

Social and emotional skills are the skills least likely to be replaced by technologies. In fact, they're the skills that allow us to adapt to an ever-changing labour market. This is why they keep popping up on employer surveys as the most in-demand skills. If tomorrow's jobs will require more social and emotional skills—increased cultural competencies, interpersonal and relationship building skills, self-awareness, and empathy—then all Canadians will need SES tools, resources, and opportunities to learn and develop them, both during their formal education and throughout their careers.  

But it's not just about jobs. Research shows that for individuals, the development of human skills contributes to positive social outcomes, including health, civic engagement, and well-being. Moreover, “… ideological polarisation and social tensions are increasing the need for tolerance and respect, empathy and generosity, and the ability to co-operate in order to achieve and protect the common good.” In other words, by making social and emotional skills training and development more inclusive, we will also help to create more inclusive workplaces and a more inclusive Canada.

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3 Recent research from the World Economic Forum, C. D. Howe Institute, RBC, and the Institute for Competitiveness & Prosperity suggests that most job openings in the future will require aptitude in social and emotional skills.
4 Ikesako and Miyamoto, “Fostering Social and Emotional Skills.”
6 Ikesako and Miyamoto, “Fostering Social and Emotional Skills.”
In-demand skills in Canada include leadership, cultural competence, resiliency, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication.
Skilling me “softly”? What we mean by “social and emotional skills”

“Social and emotional skills” is a catch-all term that describes a wide range of skills, abilities, characteristics, and behaviours. Pinning down a precise definition, though, is challenging. SES are conceptualized differently across fields of research, and the boundaries are blurry between skills that are malleable and can be taught throughout our lives versus those that are intrinsic traits or characteristics. Nevertheless, our research confirms that there is consensus that SES are linked to employability, and specific examples like leadership, cultural competence, problem-solving, resiliency, collaboration, and communication, all fall under the umbrella of social and emotional skills.

SES are often contrasted against:

- technical skills, which relate to specific tasks, such as truck driving, software development, or research methods;
- cognitive skills, which reflect core mental capacities used to think, read, learn, and support essential skills, such as numeracy and literacy.

Other common terms for SES include professional, transferable, soft, non-cognitive, behavioural, and human skills. When we look at recent research on in-demand skills in Canada, leadership, cultural competence, resiliency, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication are among the most commonly used terms.

7 However, a range of social and emotional skills are based in our cognitive capacities, such as reasoning, critical thinking, judgement, empathy, impulse control, emotional regulation, and creativity. See Diamond, “Executive Functions”; Dumontheil, “Adolescent Brain Development”; and Thomas, Ansari, and Knowland, “Annual Research Review.”
How did we get here?

Future of work and future skills discussions often focus on automation as the cause of sudden, drastic changes. In many industries, however, the impact of new technologies and automation has been under way for more than a century. For example, agriculture employed one in three Canadians in the early 1920s. But as technology made farms more productive, fewer workers were needed, and today fewer than one in 58 Canadians work primarily in agriculture.8 Yet agriculture remains an important industry, annually contributing more than $25 billion to the national GDP.9

The manufacturing industry in Canada has been impacted by technology and automation in a similar way. Robots are now commonplace on assembly lines and, combined with the impact of globalization on the outsourcing of labour, the proportion of the workforce engaged in manufacturing is half what it was in the 1970s.10

Change in the workplace and even a growing demand for social and emotional skills are nothing new. But the pace of change seems to be accelerating.

Beyond agriculture and manufacturing, the automation of tasks previously performed by humans is becoming common across industries. In retail, automated checkouts are common, just as is ordering and paying for food by smartphone. Algorithms perform in seconds what once took legal clerks hours or days. Driverless vehicles are actively being developed and tested on Canadian roads, which could have broad impacts across myriad industries.

But changes to industries and the types of jobs available haven’t led to a decline in jobs.

Instead, they’ve contributed to a shifting jobs and skills landscape. For example, the share of the population that works in professional or office settings has grown, while work that was once largely rural and male-dominated is today far more urban and diverse.

In the last half of the 20th century, the language used to talk about workplace skills in Canada and peer countries became more sophisticated and demand for workers with less training or education steadily fell. At the same time, demand for those with specialized knowledge and skills, including human skills, steadily grew. In short, jobs that once required fewer skills now require more and different skills.

The trend toward an increasing workplace emphasis on social and emotional skills was pronounced in the U.S. labour market, where, between 1980 and 2012, jobs requiring high levels of social interaction grew by 12 per cent.11 At the same time, jobs involving numerical skills, including many positions in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, shrank slightly.12

9 Statistics Canada. “Agriculture.”
10 Statistics Canada, Table 14-01-0022-0.
12 Ibid.
Anticipating the consequences of these changes, and identifying ways to prepare for them, is a priority for students, educators, and employers. It’s also a hot topic for researchers and “future of work” advocates.

There is no shortage of recent reports focused on disruptive technology and the future of work, with broad consensus that the pace of technological change will have significant impacts. The Brookfield Institute reports that as much as 42 per cent of the Canadian labour force is at “high risk” of being impacted by automation in the next 10 to 20 years. An RBC report projects that more than 25 per cent of Canadian jobs will be “heavily disrupted” in the next 10 years, while the Mowat Centre predicted that 1.6 million jobs could be lost over the same period.

But when these same reports and others talk about the future of work and future skills demands, more often than not the in-demand, job-saving skills they identify are social and emotional skills. The World Economic Forum highlights creativity and critical thinking as increasingly vital skills in the evolving workforce, and a recent report from the McKinsey Global Institute finds that workers of the future will require “more social and emotional skills and more advanced cognitive capabilities, such as logical reasoning and creativity.”

In the Canadian context, several recent studies, including the C. D. Howe Institute’s Future Shock, RBC’s Humans Wanted, and the Institute for Competitiveness & Prosperity’s Teaching for Tomorrow concluded that most of the job openings through to 2021 and beyond will require aptitude in social and emotional skills.

A first step in figuring out strategies for action is to identify top in-demand skills that will best equip workers for an evolving labour market. A review of close to three dozen papers and reports on the future of work and skills gaps published in the last decade showed that skills like communication, problem-solving, leadership, collaboration, and resiliency are among the most valuable skills and competencies for both the present and future of work. The visual in Exhibit 1 provides a snapshot of how frequently terms appeared in the literature.

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13 Lamb, The Talented Mr. Robot.
14 RBC, Humans Wanted.
15 Johal and Thingood, Working Without a Net.
16 Jackson, “These Are the Skills You’ll Need.”
17 Manyika and others, Jobs Lost, Jobs Gained.
18 Oschinski and Wyonch, Future Shock?
19 RBC, Humans Wanted.
20 Institute for Competitiveness & Prosperity, “Teaching for Tomorrow.”
21 Iterations of the Wordcloud can be developed for different time points to highlight changes in in-demand SES over time. Refer to https://fsc-ccf.ca/ for updates.
Exhibit 1
SES Wordcloud

Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Statistics Canada.
Defining in-demand social and emotional skills

Based on the frequency with which different terms appear in Canadian reports on future skills and the importance of cultural competence in Canadian society, The Conference Board of Canada developed definitions for the skills listed below. These definitions are intentionally broad and inclusive and are informed by existing Canadian and international definitions. They also primarily reflect how these skills are described in workplace settings.

Communication (including oral communication, listening skills, presentation skills)
To communicate effectively is to share ideas or convey meaning in a simple, clear manner. This includes verbal (e.g., writing, speaking) and non-verbal forms of communication (e.g., tone, eye contact). Communication is also a two-way street; active listening and trying to understand others are critical parts of strong communication skills. Good communicators adapt to different audiences and accommodate diverse views, knowledge, perspectives, and backgrounds.

Problem-solving
Problem-solving includes flexibility, creativity, critical thinking, and the ability to draw on different perspectives and approaches to understand problems and reach solutions. Skilled problem-solvers can look at a challenge and break it down into its parts. They ask the right questions to identify the problem and why it exists. They can brainstorm solutions, think deeply about how to find the best solutions, and evaluate the inherent risks and opportunities.

Leadership
Good leaders demonstrate initiative—they are not afraid of a challenge, actively seek responsibilities, and take charge when it comes to making decisions. Leaders cultivate a collaborative and inclusive vision for their teams. They set and meet substantial goals and help others do the same. They influence and motivate their colleagues to do good work. How? By communicating openly and effectively, providing guidance, and acting with integrity and empathy—especially in the face of conflict.
Collaboration (teamwork, working with others)
Collaboration is all about effective teamwork—how to “mesh minds” to create and achieve shared goals. Skilled collaborators seek opportunities to work with others. They appreciate the value of differing opinions and approaches, and they work cooperatively and constructively within teams. Empathy, problem-solving, and clear and open communication go a long way in supporting collaboration.

Resiliency (flexibility, adaptability, agility)
Resiliency is about being flexible, coping with unexpected stressors, adjusting to changing environments, and thriving through unpredictable circumstances. It’s the ability to seek appropriate supports and to “bounce back” when tough times hit. Resilient people can pivot and adapt to evolving demands and the changing nature of work.

Cultural competence (cultural awareness)
Cultural competence encompasses respect for different cultural practices, as well as the willingness to understand without judgement and to adapt to various perspectives and ways of knowing. It requires a curious, empathetic, and compassionate outlook on the diverse experiences of other people. In Canada’s increasingly diverse workforce, sensitivity to cultural differences is both valuable and imperative. Cultural competence can create inclusive environments where innovative work and forward-thinking ideas can thrive.
What are the challenges with social and emotional skills training and assessment?

Both the value of and the trouble with the term “social and emotional skills” is that it’s a catch-all term to describe a wide range of skills, abilities, and characteristics, which themselves can be further compartmentalized. Social and emotional skills frameworks attempt to clarify which skills or abilities are included and help to illustrate how they relate to one another and what they mean across different educational and workplace environments.

For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Study on Social and Emotional Skills, which is currently under way, seeks to provide participating cities and countries with information and insights on the social and emotional skills of students aged 10 and 15. To support this study, researchers utilize a competency framework based on “The Big Five Model,” a taxonomy of personality traits and model for understanding how traits develop. The Big Five Model clusters specific social and emotional skills under five main categories of personality traits, and also identifies “compound” skills that cross category boundaries. (See Exhibit 2.)

Exhibit 2
The OECD’s structure of social and emotional skills

Sources: OECD, Social and Emotional Skills: Well-being, Connectedness and Success; The Conference Board of Canada.
Although there are many tools that assess social and emotional skills throughout K-12, there is far less research on how to continue the process into adulthood.
In adopting this framework, the OECD researchers explained that the Big Five model is comprehensive enough to include a majority of social and emotional skills, and that evidence supports the applicability of the framework across regions and cultures.\textsuperscript{22} Given the focus of the OECD study on youth, though, the applicability of this framework for the social and emotional skills of late adolescent and adult learners remains unclear.

This challenge is not unique to the OECD’s work. A 2017 study of more than 130 distinct social and emotional competency frameworks found general problems in their applicability across individuals, groups, and systems. There is also a lack of consideration for the experiences of youth with disabilities or trauma, and few models consider key distinctions across age groups and into adulthood.\textsuperscript{23}

That means that it’s unclear which frameworks can be adapted for post-secondary students or adult learners. And even if you know on which sets of skills to focus, a second challenge comes in assessing them. This is because, like competency frameworks, assessment tools tend to be designed for children and youth. Although there are many frameworks and tools that help to develop and assess an individual’s social and emotional skills as they proceed from kindergarten through to high school, there is far less research on how to continue the process into adulthood.

\textbf{The challenge for post-secondary institutions: gaps in perception}

Until recently, the market primarily hired and rewarded technical job-specific skills, while social and emotional skills were considered “nice to have.”\textsuperscript{24} In response, insofar as post-secondary programs have been developed with employability in mind, they have tended to prioritize technical skills and specialized knowledge, with less emphasis on social and emotional skills.

This might explain why a 2018 Business Council of Canada survey of 95 large Canadian private sector employers found that, while new graduates appear to have the right foundational skills, they lack “human skills” and “basic business acumen.”\textsuperscript{25} Less than 20 per cent of those surveyed strongly agreed that entry-level hires have “human skills”—specifically, the ability to collaborate, build relationships, and work in teams.

There are also apparent gaps between educator, employee, and employer perceptions when it comes to how well Canadian students are prepared for the labour market. A 2018 working paper by the Institute for Competitiveness & Prosperity found that most educators in Canada believe students are sufficiently prepared for the labour market, yet less than half of Canadian youth and only a third of employers feel the same.\textsuperscript{26}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, \textit{Social and Emotional Skills}.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Berg and others, \textit{Identifying, Defining, and Measuring Social and Emotional Competencies}.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Deming, “The Growing Importance of Social Skills in the Labor Market.”
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Business Council of Canada and Morneau Shepell, \textit{Navigating Change}.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Institute for Competitiveness & Prosperity, “Teaching for Tomorrow.”
\end{itemize}
All of which may help to explain the gap between the skills that post-secondary graduates possess and the skills that employers demand.

**What are post-secondary institutions doing to close the gaps?**

The institutional and disciplinary response to social and emotional skills development varies. A 2014 Conference Board report found that across post-secondary institutions and programs, there are varying levels of emphasis placed on the development of different categories of skills. The institutional and disciplinary response to social and emotional skills development varies. A 2014 Conference Board report found that across post-secondary institutions and programs, there are varying levels of emphasis placed on the development of different categories of skills. 27

Our 2019 scan of post-secondary strategic plans and annual reports (not including CÉGEPs) reveals that slightly less than a third (31.2 per cent) explicitly acknowledge social and emotional skills (or a variation on the term).

These skills are often embedded in post-secondary courses and programs, but instructors usually stop short of articulating to learners how or why these skills are being developed, let alone consistently or explicitly assessing them. Students may not make the connection between course activities and the development of social and emotional skills.

In addition, many post-secondary programs have specific learning outcomes and accreditation standards that impede changes to programs or curricula in response to evolving skills demands. Any changes, especially for highly technical programs and curricula, must rightfully be rooted in evidence with strong support from relevant research and/or professional associations.

Because of challenges associated with incorporating human skills development into courses and programs, initiatives designed to develop or strengthen these skills are often extra-curricular. This observation was highlighted in the 2018 Conference Board report *Are Canada’s Business Schools Teaching Social and Emotional Skills?* The report surveyed and interviewed more than 1,000 business school students, faculty, deans, careers office staff, recent graduates, and employers across Canada. 28

In some cases, extra-curricular activities are mandatory components of post-secondary learning. At the University of Alberta, for example, incoming graduate students are required to complete a self-assessment to determine strengths and areas for development across seven competencies: creativity, communication, confidence, scholarship, ethical responsibility, critical thinking, and collaboration. 35 Students then develop plans to strengthen areas of apparent weakness. (See “This is how we skill it” for a snapshot of other SES-focused initiatives in Canadian post-secondary education institutions (PSEs).

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27 Munro, MacLaine, and Stuckey, Skills—Where Are We Today?
28 McKeen, Are Canada’s Business Schools Teaching Social and Emotional Skills?
This is how we skill it: Case studies in SES development at post-secondary institutions

At Aurora College in the Northwest Territories, the Northern Leadership Development Program helps workers in industrial settings develop the social and emotional skills needed to take on management, supervisory, or leadership positions. With sponsorship from their employer, individuals participate in nine multi-day, in-person training modules, focusing on the development of in-demand skills, such as leadership, communication skills, problem-solving, decision-making, conflict management, and presentation skills. All materials, case studies, and activities focus specifically on the industrial workplace setting, and a mentorship component helps the participant apply what they learn in their place of work, while providing support and encouragement.

In the Maritimes, Mount Allison University recently introduced a certificate program to help students strengthen their cultural competencies. Any Mount Allison student can add the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Certificate program as part of their degree curriculum. The program places strong emphasis on the development of cultural competence, leadership abilities, and critical thinking in students. Its courses teach students about the disadvantages faced by vulnerable groups and examine the effectiveness of policies and practices that seek to promote equity and inclusion. Applied projects encourage students to develop strategies that facilitate social inclusion. Workers in sectors such as health, policing, and education inform students about their challenges, and students help develop training programs to address them.

On the west coast, Vancouver Island University offers a Workplace Essential Skills and Training certificate program. Designed for students with developmental and cognitive disabilities, the program focuses on developing the technical, social, and emotional skills needed to obtain and maintain employment across sectors. The courses focus on a range of topics and skills areas, including workplace attitudes, problem-solving, and community engagement. Students take 33 courses and six practicums over a two-year span, with flexibility for those who are unable to enrol in all modules within the time frame. Student competencies are assessed and graded through evaluation tools like assignments, group work, tests, and role-play activities.
PSE–employer partnerships

In addition to on-campus activities, a growing number of PSE programs are partnering with industry to incorporate work-integrated learning (WIL) into curriculum design. The Business/Higher Education Roundtable (BHER), for example, connects Canada’s largest companies with universities, polytechnics, and colleges to collaborate around creating opportunities for young people, with the goal of providing 100 per cent of PSE students with a WIL opportunity during their studies for their first diploma or degree.

A 2016 survey of PSE students and recent graduates found that students who engage in WIL activities such as co-ops or internships are more likely to self-report that their education prepared them with in-demand social and emotional skills, such as collaboration, interpersonal abilities, and communication skills, among others—in part because experiential learning provides students with applied opportunities to develop these skills and to reflect on them upon completion of the work term.29

The challenge, then, is to ensure that WIL is part of PSE programs across the board and available to all. Currently, WIL is disproportionately accessed by students in STEM programs, while international students, students in the social sciences and humanities, and students facing physical, mental, or social challenges may face difficulties in accessing WIL opportunities.30

The good news is that partnerships between PSEs and businesses are increasingly common in Canada. Among large businesses, more than one in four are reportedly involved with curriculum or program development, and organizations such as BHER are leading the charge to increase partnerships that create more skill-building opportunities for a broader range of students.

Reconnecting with workers

Post-secondary institutions and work-integrated learning can play an important role in supporting lifelong SES development. But not everyone has the time or resources to access two-, three-, or four-year post-secondary programs, PSE-based WIL, or training resources provided through an employer. Encouraging Canadians to engage in lifelong learning activities is an important piece of the skills puzzle, but post-secondary institutions will need to provide more flexible and responsive SES training and accessible education tools and resources to set up learners and workers for career success.

Workers will increasingly look for ways to adapt to changing roles and demands through online and modular learning resources (via PSEs and non-PSEs), as well as community resources, like public libraries and community employment and training centres.

The challenge will be how to recognize new ways of learning and assess the outcomes. For example, proof that a worker watched a

29 Abacus Data, Work Integrated Learning and Post-Secondary Education.
series of instructional videos that have not been vetted by credential bodies does not necessarily indicate to an employer that someone has the knowledge or skills they need for a job. Yet, the completion of an online continuing education course provided by a college or university may be perceived as valuable. The emergence of micro-credentials (competency-based digital forms of certification) will complicate matters further still, particularly around the overall quality and value of the credential.

The lifelong learning challenge is perhaps more apparent in the context of social and emotional skills. Just as post-secondary institutions and businesses struggle with SES, individuals wishing to improve their human skills face challenges finding legitimate resources for the development and self-assessment of SES, further limiting their ability to signal to employers what skills they have.

Who gets left out?

By placing greater emphasis on the development and assessment of social and emotional skills, we risk leaving out certain individuals and groups. Some vulnerable groups face systemic barriers in accessing the training, resources, and opportunities that support the development of in-demand social and emotional skills—especially when responsibility for human skills development tends to fall disproportionately on individual learners and workers.

A challenge—and opportunity—with lifelong SES learning is to distribute responsibility across educational and community institutions, employers, and individuals, and to recognize that there won’t be one-size-fits-all approaches to teaching, learning, and expected outcomes.

We know, for example, that among post-secondary students with special needs, social engagement (positive relations with peers and teachers, participation in extra-curricular activities, etc.) promotes resilience and is essential to the development of social interaction skills. However, research suggests that students with learning disabilities spend more time focused on academics and less time socializing, potentially impeding their social and emotional skills development.

Students on the autism spectrum may also face difficulties adapting to post-secondary environments or transitioning from PSE into workplaces that demand strong social and emotional skills. In a 2018 blog post, researchers Sarah Taylor and Anna-Lisa Ciccocioppo wrote that the “increased emphasis on social versus technical skills, and finding the ‘right fit’ for the team, in addition to the increased role of behavioural scenario questions in the interview process, can make it difficult for a prospective employee on the spectrum to present as a desirable candidate in an interview situation.”

31 Sweet, and others, Special Needs Students.
32 Frengut, Social Acceptance.
33 Surrey Place Centre, Transition to Postsecondary Pathways.
34 Taylor and Ciccocioppo, “Assisting Adults With Autism.”
For Indigenous persons, the effects of colonization, the impacts of generational trauma, loss of language and culture, an ongoing child-welfare crisis, cultural barriers, and outright discrimination are well-documented. These factors have contributed to difficulties in the social and emotional well-being of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children. What’s more, Indigenous ways of learning and knowing are distinct and may prioritize skills and competencies differently than Euro-Canadian education systems.

A 2012 statement from the Assembly of First Nations recognizes lifelong learning as a key attribute of First Nations learning, describing it as “a process of nurturing First Nations learners in linguistically and culturally appropriate holistic learning environments.” Similarly, lifelong learning in Inuit communities is grounded in traditional Inuit values and beliefs, just as Métis lifelong learning models include language, tradition, land, and people as sources of knowledge and knowing.

Concepts of lifelong learning must be inclusive enough to accommodate the needs of diverse learners. Otherwise, as employers demand workers with strong social and emotional skills, there is risk that the evolving economy will further disadvantage Indigenous persons and other groups that emphasize or value skills in different ways.

Women, newcomers to Canada, members of racialized groups, and members of LGBTQ2+ communities also experience systemic barriers to labour and skills development opportunities. In their report on soft skills, Wendy Cukier, Jaigris Hodson, and Aisha Omar described it this way: “Because of the way in which soft skills are learned, many segments of the population are disadvantaged in access to the coaching, training, and role models needed to develop these skills and cultural biases may play a role in the definition and assessment of soft skills…. A diversity lens is critical.”

35 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Honouring the Truth. 
36 Tremblay and others, “Aboriginal Perspectives.”
37 Canadian Council on Learning, Redefining How Success Is Measured.
38 Assembly of First Nations. “Lifelong Learning.”
39 Canadian Council on Learning, “Inuit Holistic Lifelong Learning Model: Inuit Values and Beliefs.”
40 Canadian Council on Learning, “Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Model.”
41 Cukier, Wendy, Jaigris Hodson, and Aisha Omar, “Soft” Skills Are Hard.
How can we reconcile the importance of SES with the reality that these skills might be less accessible to some vulnerable groups?
Given the unique disadvantages faced by vulnerable groups when it comes to SES, we must also be careful in our valuation and perspectives on SES and ensure that our language and treatment of SES does not further marginalize already vulnerable groups. How can we reconcile the importance of SES for the success of the future of work and our well-being with the reality that these skills might be structurally less accessible to some vulnerable groups?

So what needs to happen next?

To close the skills gap and set up learners, workers, and employers for success, SES stakeholders need to act on the challenges and opportunities for developing social and emotional skills for all Canadians. Here is what that means:

- **For learners**: It means providing quality SES resources that inform course/program selection, as well as self-led learning—resources that provide evidence of their efficacy.
- **For PSE stakeholders**: It means incorporating evidence-based SES training and development into all programs in order to prepare learners to be resilient in the face of workplace disruption and evolving skills demands.
- **For employers**: It means developing strategies to equip workers with in-demand social and emotional skills in the face of evolving job and labour market demands. It also means working more closely with PSEs and other skills training providers.
- **For all stakeholders**: It means working together to ensure that Canadians, particularly those from vulnerable groups, have access to and are equipped with the skills they need to thrive now and in the future.

What role will the Conference Board and the Future Skills Centre play?

- The Conference Board and the Future Skills Centre will bring together skills stakeholders, leaders, and research and program evaluation findings to identify best practices and resources.
- We will clarify the state of SES development in Canada, with a focus on:
  - adult learners across post-secondary institutions (universities, colleges, polytechnics, and apprenticeship programs);
  - learner pathways prior to and following PSE.
- We will establish a digital knowledge hub of SES resources to serve learners, educators, employers, and policy-makers—a digital resource that will synthesize and identify gaps, opportunities, and solutions for SES training and assessment.
- We will examine barriers to SES learning opportunities for vulnerable individuals and groups.
- We will identify ways to translate research and best practices into resources and tools that promote lifelong SES learning.

Together we will develop shared responsibilities and shared collaboration among skills stakeholders across different sectors in order to provide learners, educators, workers, employers, service providers, and policy-makers with the resources they need to respond collaboratively and equitably to the growing demand for social and emotional skills and the changing nature of work.
Appendix A

Methodology

Report methodology
This report is based primarily on a literature review and environmental scan of grey and academic literature and statistics on current and emerging SES challenges and opportunities. Key areas of focus included:

- social and emotional skills development in youth, adolescents, and adults;
- social and emotional assessment frameworks for youth, adolescents, and adults;
- international approaches and initiatives for social and emotional skills measurement;
- topics and concepts of focus regarding skills in business and human resources literature from the 1960s up to the present day;
- social and emotional skills development and assessment initiatives in post-secondary institutions in the 21st century;
- the impact of automation and technology on skills demands in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Over 200 strategic plans, business plans, and/or annual reports from post-secondary institutions across Canada were evaluated for reference to priorities around the following key terms: “skills development,” “flexible learning,” “work-integrated learning,” and “social and emotional skills,” as well as synonyms and related terms. This represents the most recently available strategic plans for Canadian PSE institutions. References for each key term, for each institution/strategic plan, were numerically coded (reference present = 1, reference absent = 0) to develop a quantitative summary of the relative focus on key skills priorities across institutions.

The content of this report also builds on the past five years of research conducted by the Education and Skills Team at The Conference Board of Canada. This research culminated in Building Connections: Platforms for Education and Skills in Canada.
Exhibit 1 Wordcloud methodology

The Wordcloud visualization of in-demand social and emotional skills is based on the social and emotional skills cited by Canadian employers and/or HR professionals in 35 research surveys conducted since 2013. Social and emotional skills cited as being in demand by survey participants were identified and tracked. Each social and emotional skill was given a frequency count for each survey in which it was cited. Common terminologies/synonyms were grouped under a single term.

The Wordcloud visualization is a size-frequency representation of the social and emotional skills cited across surveys. The frequency is a sum total of the number of surveys in which each skill was cited as “in demand.” The relative size of each word reflects this frequency sum. Skills were placed relative to each other, according to their conceptual relations. Notably, this was determined through qualitative analysis of the literature reviewed, and it does not represent a rigorous mapping of the relations between skills. As well, while the references include an array of research conducted across Canada, this is not necessarily a comprehensive representation of all studies that fall under our inclusion criteria. As noted, we therefore treat the Wordcloud as a living research document.
Appendix B

Bibliography


Wordcloud bibliography


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