The future is social and emotional

More and more, employers require new hires who possess not only specialized knowledge and technical skills, but also social and emotional or “human” skills.

They allow us to communicate our knowledge, work effectively in teams, demonstrate leadership, think critically, build relationships, and adapt to changing and ambiguous circumstances, no matter the field of work.

Social and emotional skills (SES) are increasingly in demand as our economies and workplaces evolve toward more highly skilled and knowledge-based labour. They also contribute to career success, well-being, and positive social outcomes for workers.

When we ask employers about the social and emotional skills of new employees, they consistently identify gaps.

Part of the challenge is that we have yet to establish comprehensive, evidence-based approaches to effectively develop and assess SES 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 education and emerge with a somewhat fixed set of social and emotional skills. In fact, these skills are malleable and can be developed throughout our lives.

But the cultures of learning in post-secondary educational institutions and workplaces don’t reflect this reality, nor did they evolve to focus explicitly on human skills development. So learners (and the workers they become) don’t always receive the lifelong SES training they need to succeed and thrive.

As demand for these skills grows, an added concern is ensuring we provide pathways to SES development for vulnerable groups. Otherwise, we risk exacerbating existing inequalities and leaving communities behind.

In our recent impact paper on the SES landscape in Canada, we focus on the role of post-secondary institutions in human skills development. We argue 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 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.
What is the Conference Board of Canada doing?

A first step in figuring out strategies for action is to identify which skills will best equip workers for an evolving labour market, and to then uncover best practices for assessing and developing them.

This is exactly what the Conference Board is doing on behalf of the Future Skills Centre.

In-demand SES in Canada

To better understand the demand for social and emotional skills, we conducted a comprehensive scan of papers and reports published in the last decade on the future of work and skills gaps in Canada. We found that the following skills and competencies are among the most important for both the present and future of work:

- communication (including oral communication, listening skills, and presentation skills)
- problem-solving
- leadership
- collaboration
- resiliency (flexibility, adaptability, and agility)
- cultural competence (cultural awareness)

A curated taxonomy of tools

We reviewed more than 40 skills-assessment frameworks to develop a taxonomy of existing skills-measurement tools and identify which ones are best suited to helping educators, employers, and individuals assess SES in youth and adult populations.

PSE strategies for SES development

We also reviewed the most recent strategic plans of every public post-secondary institution in Canada (excluding CÉGEPs) to see who is talking about SES. We found that slightly less than one-third (31.2 per cent) explicitly acknowledge social and emotional skills (or variations on the term).

What are PSEs already doing for SES?

We are actively identifying programs, initiatives, and activities that are under way at Canadian colleges, polytechnics, and universities, and are building a database of existing initiatives that focus on adult SES development, synthesizing the evidence in support of their efficacy, and supporting program development and evaluation initiatives.

What do senior education and skills stakeholders have to say?

We have interviewed close to 60 stakeholders engaged in skills training and development and are visiting every province and territory as part of the Future Skills Centre’s Regional Sounding Tour to discuss the skills challenges faced in different regions and identify opportunities to help overcome them.

Building a pan-Canadian SES hub

These activities will contribute to the establishment of a digital SES resource hub that will synthesize and identify gaps, opportunities, and solutions for SES training and assessment and help connect people with resources to measure or develop the skills they need to thrive.

That includes people from different cultures and communities. This project will explore inclusive and culturally appropriate approaches to SES development and assessment, with special attention to the role of individuals within existing systems and structures of education, training, and work.

Ultimately, this project is about creating access to opportunities for lifelong SES learning, equity for vulnerable groups, and employability for everyone.