

How to build a strong economy

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Meet Nicolas Drouin, a 19-year-old chef-in-training from Quebec City. He earned the highest score of all 850 competitors at the World Skills Competition in Japan in November, as well as the gold medal in cooking. Quebec candidates accounted for 10 of the 14 Canadian prizes in such skills as welding, Web design, electrical installations and dress making.

Nicolas acquired his passion for cooking while working as a dishwasher at Le Saint-Amour, a highly regarded restaurant where he still works. He qualified for the World Skills Competition in 2006, when he won the Skills Canada competition for cooking. He then trained like an Olympic athlete to get ready for Japan, with intense coaching from his former teachers and his Saint-Amour colleagues.

The World Skills winners now have a credential that should lead to a good career. But, as I wrote in my last column on Dec. 31, the pathway from school to work in Canada is still a long and chaotic journey. Too many apprentices are dropping out. And the average age of a new apprentice is 28, when they could start 10 years earlier if more schools and employers offered that option.

Readers of that column argued passionately that Canadians devalue vocational trades. “NOBODY,” said one, “wants to shoulder the burden of training.” They pointed their fingers at:

Inadequate provincial funding for vocational programs at both secondary schools and colleges. This inhibits collaboration and articulation of programs from one level to the next;

Public schools which continue to cut trades programs because of the high cost of equipment and lack of trained teachers;

Employers that do not offer hands-on learning experiences through apprenticeships or other forms of work placements;

Guidance counselling that ignores vocational choices. (This led one reader’s son to drop out in despair, though she was proud to report that he eventually found success as a chef).

Meanwhile, employers are crying out for workers with strong vocational and technical skills. They know many of their existing employees will soon retire and that fewer immigrants with these skills are coming to Canada. Yet employers are not mobilizing to solve the problem, and there is no hope of success until they do.

Education systems around the world have expanded academic programs rapidly over the past 50 years, responding to a growing need for academic skills to fill the new managerial, professional and service jobs. In the 1950s, the premium credential was a journeyman’s ticket, now it’s an academic degree.

But the pendulum may have swung too far. A knowledge-based economy needs an extraordinary diversity of skills – including the practical, vocational skills that keep both homes and businesses operating. Broad vocational training is also essential for incremental innovation in work processes.

Even Germany, where 50 per cent of young people still opt for the vocational track, has had to make substantial changes to its famous dual-track system to adapt to the changing nature of work. There is more emphasis on team work now, and highly specialized occupational profiles have been merged so that students gain competency in a broadly defined occupational area over a three- to four-year course. What hasn’t changed is the mix of school and workplace training. Every student must still have a training contract with a company and attend classes two days a week.

Jean Charest, Professor of Industrial Relations at the Université de Montréal, says that the only countries that have successfully adapted their vocational systems are those, like Germany and Denmark, where the “social partners” – business and labour – were deeply involved in design and delivery.

So far, he sees no signs of renewal in Canada. At least three provincial governments are trying to strengthen vocational options at the high school level – B.C., Alberta and Ontario. But change only happens on the ground if schools, colleges and local employers develop and sustain the programs.

Canada’s core problem is that education is highly decentralized and there are no strong institutional linkages to the labour market. Only 49 out of 300 apprenticeship programs in Canada have nationally-accepted vocational standards through the Red Seal program. Most Canadian businesses and labour unions are not engaged in design and delivery of vocational training, although 30 sectoral councils of business and labour co-ordinate on their industry’s training issues.

There will be no real progress on vocational training in Canada until employers begin to take this on in a big way. They have to put themselves on the line – offering workplace experience to students and supporting schools to deliver the right programs. Only business leaders have the political clout to call educators, unions and provincial governments to account for gross neglect.

Nicolas Drouin had to go to Japan to prove his mettle, future students should be able to win their vocational spurs right here in Canada.

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