



Victoria University at the University of Toronto, St. George Campus.
For The Globe and Mail

Universities should educate – employers should train

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Published Tuesday, Sep. 03, 2013 06:00AM EDT

Last updated Tuesday, Sep. 03, 2013 07:29AM EDT

The trajectory of most individuals in their education and careers is seldom linear. Few people at 17 or 18 have a crystal-clear idea of what their job will be at 40. And for those lucky ones who do, it is unlikely they will pursue a linear path to that end point and stay in that career until retirement. This is simply not the pattern of the modern workplace.

Yet there seems to be an increasing – and in my view mistaken – expectation that graduates are entitled to land a high-level and highly relevant job right out of school. This is unrealistic in today's rapidly shifting employment landscape.

Universities are not, and should not be, in the business of producing “plug and play” graduates – workers who can fit immediately into a specific job in which they will spend the rest of their lives. Rather, universities must provide the kind of broad intellectual and personal development that enables graduates to thrive in a world that is constantly changing, a world that demands innovation and adaptability, a world in which they will change jobs frequently between the time they enter the work force and the time they retire.

Last year was dominated by the discussion of the so-called skills gap, a phenomenon recently found not

credible by economist Don Drummond. If indeed the statistics don't bear out a serious mismatch between skills and jobs in Canada, the conversation should move away from turning universities into job training centres and toward the role employers can play in preparing graduates for jobs.

Employers, I believe, have a responsibility to be partners in this process. Specific job training should come primarily from the workplace, building on the broad educational foundation developed through the university experience.

Nearly all of us discover our passions and talents through exposure to ideas and experiences and opportunities, whether educational or employment. The ideal first job is often not readily available at the moment of graduation, but there is plenty of evidence to show that a university education and broad experience frequently lead to a rewarding career.

Universities are primarily in the business of positive human development. They focus on enhancing the abilities of our graduates to communicate clearly and effectively, to analyze, to confront ambiguity with clear methods and confidence, to break down problems into manageable parts, to think critically and to question deeply.

All of this has real value in the workplace. When a university graduate is recruited, the employer has in their new hire an experienced communicator, an adept researcher, a problem solver and a critical thinker – skills that have long been valued. In the past, most employers expected to train employees for job-specific tasks. There would often be orientation, training by human resources or senior managers, a period of job shadowing, a trainee-mentor relationship involving experienced staff, regular feedback and, if necessary, retraining.

But in the modern workplace, more and more employers seem less willing to invest in training new staff. Instead, they call on universities to tailor curriculum ever more precisely to meet specific workplace needs, and routinely advertise for candidates with two or more years of experience in hopes that another employer has prepared a young person for the demands of the workplace.

When employers do this they risk valuing cookie-cutter workers, eventually hurting their own growth. Businesses – and regional and global economies – flourish when fresh, creative ideas are allowed to flow freely and employees at all levels are encouraged to think critically and be innovative. The university experience enhances self-awareness and personal competencies. This breadth of development provides the kind of intellectual flexibility that enables employees to more easily move from this career to the next, and even into careers we can't yet imagine will exist.

Our economic health depends on the critical thinkers our universities are graduating. The next generation of leaders in our knowledge-based economy will emerge from these institutions and can only truly be great if employers understand and value a university degree as a broad education, not specific skills training.

Oversimplification of the line between education and employment does not serve individuals or society well. Employers, universities and governments need to recognize this and invest appropriately in their respective roles in education and job training.

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