

The curricula, they are a-changin’

In an increasingly competitive and complex global marketplace, both employers and employees who display creativity, knowledge and imagination are at a premium. In a recent report, the Canadian Council of Academies explains that in order to succeed, Canadian companies must adopt strategies that emphasize innovation - the uniquely human manifestation of creativity.

To that end, business leaders increasingly rely on teams composed of those able to confront challenges and seize opportunities to enhance operations. Tom Jenkins, executive chairman and chief strategy officer of Open Text, emphasizes that in the wake of recent technological advances, the torch in the digital world is being passed from the toolmakers to the tool users - those who possess the imagination and knowledge to use technology in innovative ways to benefit business and society.

Schools around the world have been redefining curricula to integrate the transmission of knowledge with “learning-to-learn” objectives. Graduates are now expected to have developed their minds, their ability to solve problems, and their ability to adapt in a rapidly changing and unpredictable world.

At the heart of this educational transformation has been increasing attention to developing understandings of people - what they think, how they act, how societies and cultures change. One result is that the social sciences and humanities now stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the natural and health sciences and engineering in developing the talent necessary for a prosperous and resilient Canadian economy. Moreover, curricula are now bridging the traditional gap between the arts and sciences to offer students a more integrated appreciation of the distinct but complementary ways of knowing across disciplines.

Beginning in the 1970s, the medical school at McMaster University revamped its admissions criteria and curriculum to encompass a people-centered, interdisciplinary, and problem-based approach to health. Today, the incoming class at McMaster’s DeGroote School of Medicine includes students who have majored in music, accounting, history and other programs in the social sciences and humanities.

Dalhousie University, recognizing that practicing medicine requires not only knowledge of medical science but also an understanding of values, ethics and historical context, created the Humanities in Medicine program. Here a medical student’s education can include topics ranging from history and narrative medicine, to the visual arts, spirituality and music. In the United States, three out of four medical schools offer humanities courses, many of them inspired by the Canadian precedent.

The University of Windsor recently launched a program incorporating the arts and humanities into its engineering curriculum in ways that go far beyond the occasional course historically added to such programs. The Bachelor of

Engineering Arts places a premium on the role people play in systems, equipping graduates with “the creative arts and social skills...increasingly sought after in today's industrial and business world.”

New research in the social sciences and humanities is also guiding decisions related to what were once considered solely technological topics, such as how to store and retrieve digital records. For example, Luciana Duranti, at the University of British Columbia, teaches archival science to graduate students while leading an international research initiative to develop global standards for protecting the integrity and authenticity of electronic records. She and her colleagues have helped prepare more than 200 students for successful careers with organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations, the European Parliament and CNN.

In a labour market where creative, critical and informed thinking has become so important, programs in the social sciences and humanities now attract close to 70 percent of Canadian students on campus. As graduates, these students find employment not only in those expanding economic sectors that rely on social sciences and humanities inputs, but also in manufacturing, where firms characteristically hire more employees in design, marketing and accounting than in the technological part of product development. Overall, social sciences- and humanities-based industries account for over 75 percent of total employment in Canada.

In enabling talented and creative people to become leaders across the private and public sectors, SSHRC contributes significantly to the Government of Canada's Science and Technology strategy, embracing research and innovation as central to competitiveness, prosperity and quality of life. Indeed, graduates in the social sciences and humanities are now seen to be critical to Canada's success in the globalized 21st century.

In collaboration with institutions across Canada and internationally, we will continue to enhance our efforts to foster and develop those who can interpret meaning, find solutions to complex problems, and interrelate knowledge and experience to make informed decisions. Therein lies the hope for a world of prosperous and sustainable economies, diverse and strong cultures, and robust democratic institutions.

Chad Gaffield, PhD, FRSC, is president of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Copyright ©2009 - IT in Canada - <http://www.itincanada.ca>