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Research Summary: The Skills Gap Agenda in Canadian Higher Education

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Research Summary

Knowledge Mobilization & Impact



The Skills Gap Agenda in Canadian Higher Education

Background

The issue of the 'skills gap' is an important discussion in higher education policy both in Canada and internationally. The idea of the skills gap is that there is an inconsistency between the skills of graduates and the needs of the labour market. The problem here is that there is no agreement about the nature of the skills gap, or that a skills gap even exists. Given that there is no agreement surrounding the issue of skills, we ask: What should we make of the different representations of the skills gap, and how are post-secondary students positioned in this issue?

The Research

We began by mapping key actors involved in the discussion surrounding the skills gap agenda in the Canadian postsecondary policy landscape. To identify organizations and institutions with policies surrounding the skills gap, we used digital methods of "search as research" to repurpose common search engines for social research. We narrowed these organizations to four actors representing different sectors: (1) Business Council of Canada, (2) Conference Board of Canada, (3) Universities Canada, and (4) Mitacs, and collected documents from these actors that directly referenced the skills gap. These actors are significant within the discussion surrounding the skills gap because they are dominant in the public discourses about the skills gap in Canada. We then applied Bacchi's series of analytical questions known as the 'What's the Problem Represented to be' or the WPR approach.

The Findings

Each of the policy actors, and their associated documents, presented the issue of the skills gap in a different way:

- As a problem of lack of labour market information data
- As a problem of quality skills education in higher education
- As a problem of low engagement in post-secondary education
- As a problem of a lack of experiential learning opportunities for post-secondary students

Although these policies and their problem representations are all authored by different actors, they are rooted in the same assumptions that present post-secondary students as the subject of homo economicus: a student who is informed, invested in the education, performs well on skills audits, and is experientially educated.

We demonstrate that discourses presenting post-secondary students as an economically-driven factor can be questioned by examining data that recognizes the diversity of the Canadian post-secondary education student, and the barriers they face in the skills gap agenda.

We recommend pathways for the disruption of these homogenizing discourses and the recognition of the diverse nature of Canadian post-secondary students, looking to universities as actors to contribute this perspective during the policy making process.

Next Steps

Results from this study suggest that equity is a considerable issue within skills gap discourses, that should be taken up more seriously by all policy actors. The issues of equity are essential in the role of post-secondary education's role in educating for democracy. Further research is required to understand the way student skills and employability drive policymaking and governance in post-secondary institutions.

See related Projects and Research: [Mind the Gap: Mapping Skills in Higher Education](#), [Student Employability in COVID-19](#).

Researchers

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Key Points

Solving the skills gap is a difficult task due to the differing opinions on the subject. Even though these opinions may be different, they are all driven by the same assumptions that students are primarily motivated by economic reasoning in what they choose to study. We think that's a problem, because there are many reasons that motivate students and not all students have equal access to economic resources.

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