

Universities are essential to health, social development of Ontario: report

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Ontario universities are integral to the health and social development of the province, says a new report that positions postsecondary institutions as an important element in the upcoming provincial election.

Governments, employers and universities must partner to ensure the province has a strong talent and research pipeline, says [the report that is being released Tuesday morning](#). It commits postsecondary institutions to working more closely with employers and asks the province for sustained funding to ensure small and medium-sized companies can offer experiential training.

Universities' ability to graduate students who find jobs that match their level of education has been questioned for years. The report shows universities' move to respond to those criticisms by turning to partnerships with business but maintaining control over their curriculum.

"We are not training for a job, we are training them for a career," said David Lindsay, the CEO of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), the advocacy group that released the report. But universities are now looking to increasingly partner with business through co-op and experiential learning terms to ensure that all students are able to find a first job, he said. "After that first job, there will be subsequent changes and we need to give students resiliency to be able to adapt in a changing world," he said.

In recent years, schools have been advocating for experiential learning opportunities for students in every discipline as a way to cross the divide between the classroom and the workplace. Co-ops are widespread in engineering and

technology fields but still an exception in the humanities. The federal government is spending \$221-million on creating 10,000 paid internships.

The report is based on surveys with thousands of parents and hundreds of employers, online and at workshops held across Ontario in the past year. It shows that in some areas, the expectations of families and employers are at odds.

For example, while students and their parents believe that technological skills and knowledge are extremely important to finding a job, only half of employers polled in a similar survey share that view.

Instead, business is looking for new graduates with communication and teamwork skills, and values relationship building more than creativity and technological literacy.

Many of those polled in the COU survey are anxious not only about the quality of jobs that are awaiting the next generation and the impact of technology on employment, but also the physical and mental health of different communities, including Indigenous Canadians.

"Throughout the document we are trying to demonstrate how what we do in universities is an important part of the social and economic infrastructure of the province," Mr. Lindsay said.

With an election just over six months away, universities and colleges will be competing with many other sectors for promises to increase funding. While the Liberal government introduced reforms to financial aid that are leading to increased postsecondary participation, universities and colleges have argued that their institutions still receive among the lowest per-student funding among Canadian provinces. And caps to increases in tuition fees have left the postsecondary sector with funding shortfalls, they say.

Added to long-standing criticisms about universities' ability to graduate students with employable skills, are new questions about how they are fostering and protecting the exchange of ideas on campus and the freedom of expression of diverse students.

Those kinds of questions make the discussions that brought people physically together to talk about universities more valuable, Mr. Lindsay said.

"We should not be shying away from debate," he said. "The principle of critical thinking is what universities are all about and it's a good platform for the question of how do we manage critical thinking in this rapidly changing world."