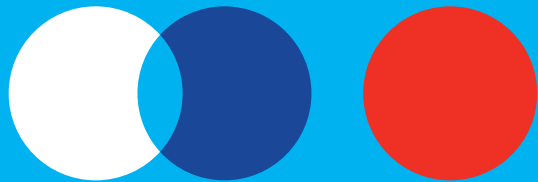


What Are Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions Saying and Doing?

Social and Emotional Skills





The Future Skills Centre – Centre des Compétences futures (FSC-CCF) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.

The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Ryerson University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada.

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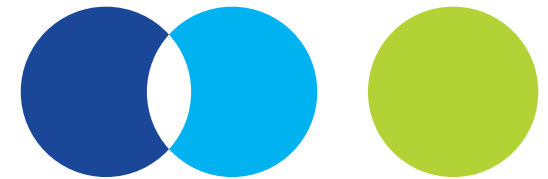
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Key findings

- Despite strong employer demand for social and emotional skills (SES) like creativity and problem-solving, post-secondary institutions (PSIs) as a whole aren't prioritizing them. We analyzed Canadian PSIs' strategic plans. Just over half identify SES as an important part of student success.
- Only one in five post-secondary strategic plans mention holistic SES development. This suggests that SES remain under-recognized at Canadian PSIs as a core part of learning.
- The PSIs that do mention specific SES tend to highlight the same ones that employers say they look for in new hires. This suggests alignment between employer demand and PSI priorities.
- It's hard to know how many activities or programs PSIs offer that focus on SES development. But we found examples in all regions of Canada where SES are an explicit part of curricula and, better yet, form part of their learning outcomes.
- To prepare students for career success, PSIs must give more weight to social and emotional skills development. To do this, they need to translate SES priorities into applied training and assessment.



Context

Workers with strong social and emotional skills (SES) have better employment outcomes.¹ Until recently, though, employers tended to hire and reward workers based on their technical skills, with less emphasis on SES.² So it's no surprise that post-secondary programs and initiatives designed to improve employability have focused less on SES and more on technical skills and specialized knowledge.

As employer demand for SES grows,³ to what extent are Canadian post-secondary institutions (PSIs) prioritizing SES development? There's good news and bad news.

Here's the bad news: When we analyzed the strategic plans of public PSIs in Canada, we found that only slightly more than one in five (30 of 131) mention SES or similar catch-all terms (see Appendix B). If strategic plans are meant to identify institutional priorities and guide academic programming, this result suggests that, despite the importance of these skills to an individual's overall employability, they are not yet a strategic priority for most PSIs.

The good news is that more than half (70 of 131) of PSI strategic plans mention one or more specific skills that fall under the umbrella of SES, even if they're not explicitly recognized as such in the strategic plan. For example, critical thinking appears in 36 plans, creativity in 24, problem-solving in 23, and leadership in 22 (see Appendix B).

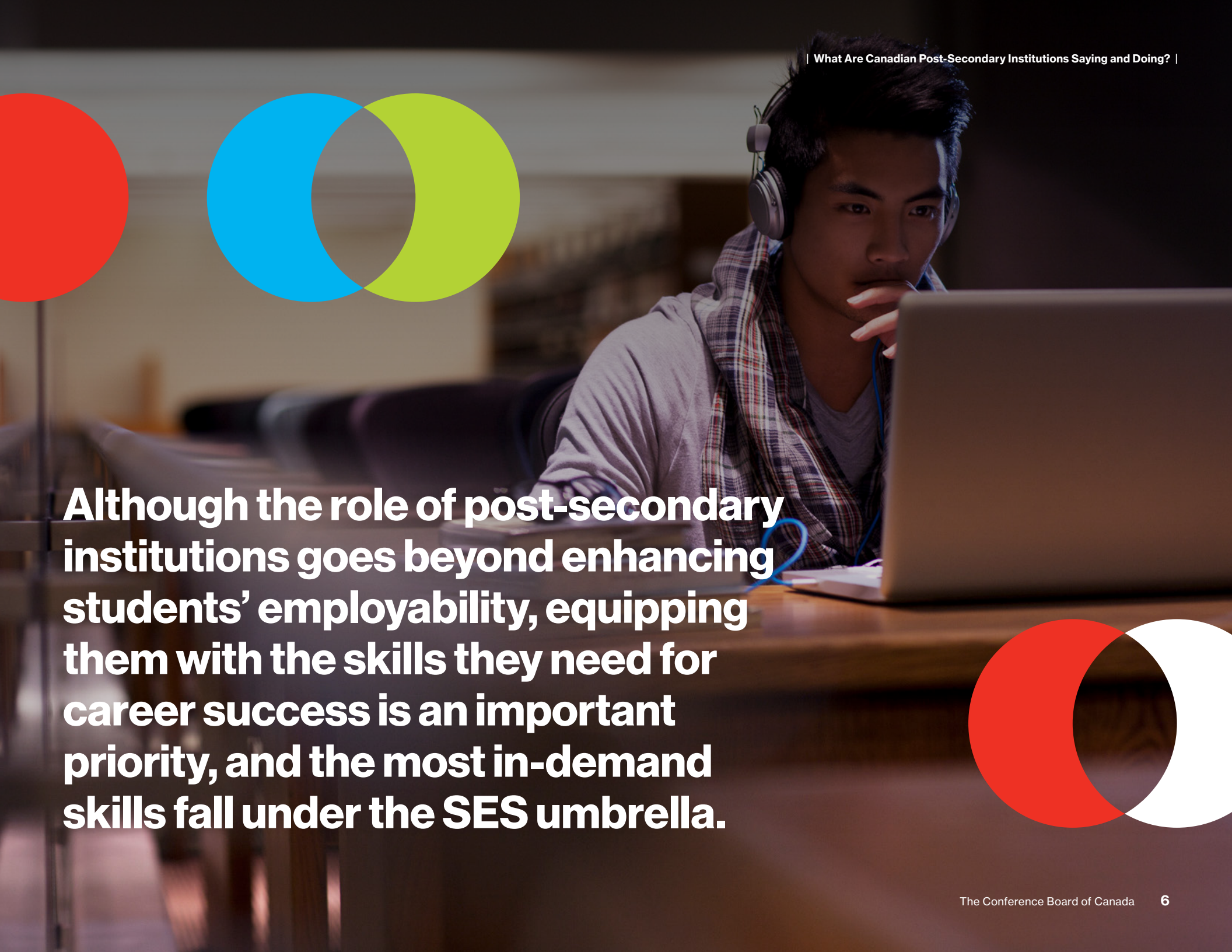
The specific skills that appear in PSI strategic plans align closely with the ones that employers prioritize in entry-level hires.⁴ One exception is resilience, which is considered one of the most in-demand skills by employers⁵ but appears less frequently than other skills in PSI strategic plans.

Alignment between the social and emotional skills mentioned in strategic plans and the skills that employers most frequently demand bodes well for the employability of graduates who participate in SES activities and initiatives.



1 Andrews and Higson, "Graduate Employability."
 2 Deming, *The Growing Importance of Social Skills*.
 3 Business Council of Canada, *Navigating Change*.

4 Ibid.
 5 Ibid.

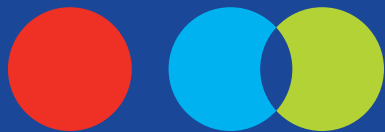


Although the role of post-secondary institutions goes beyond enhancing students' employability, equipping them with the skills they need for career success is an important priority, and the most in-demand skills fall under the SES umbrella.

Are colleges and universities saying different things?

Our analysis found that 21 per cent of university strategic plans reference “social and emotional skills” or similar umbrella-type terms, compared with 33 per cent of college strategic plans. One important caveat: About half of the references in college plans specify “essential skills”—a much broader category that also includes non-SES skills like financial literacy and digital skills. If we remove “essential skills” as a term, the percentage of college strategic plans mentioning SES falls to 21 per cent (putting them on par with universities).

Where specific SES are mentioned, we found that colleges and universities tend to focus on similar terms, with universities placing greater emphasis on critical thinking and creativity, and colleges mentioning collaboration and problem-solving slightly more often (see Appendix B).



What are post-secondary institutions doing to develop SES?

Beyond what institutions are *saying*, we also wanted to understand what they are doing to develop student SES.

Post-secondary activities that promote SES development fall into two categories: extra-curricular or embedded within programs and curricula. We scanned PSI program and departmental websites to find examples from across Canada.

More often, these activities are extracurricular, layered on as components of existing post-secondary programs or stand-alone optional initiatives for students.

At Queen’s University, the International Centre and Four Directions Indigenous Student Centre partner to offer an intercultural awareness certificate, where students participate in workshops that “will help them to recognize that gaining intercultural awareness requires a commitment to life-long learning.”⁶ Workshops include interactive activities like the Kairos Blanket Exercise to help students better understand Indigenous culture and the history of colonization.

6 “Queen’s University International Centre, “Intercultural Training.”

At Vancouver Island University, an optional course for criminology students partners with B.C. Corrections to bring them together with inmates to study as peers. The Inside-Out program is designed to help inmates (or “inside students”) integrate with the community while building understanding and empathy among “outside” students.⁷

For greater impact, however, it’s important that SES activities and initiatives are not only available as extracurricular options for interested students, but also embedded into program and course curricula and learning outcomes. Some institutions are making SES components integral to existing academic programs or creating interdisciplinary programs that prioritize SES development.

Centennial College, for example, requires graduate certificate students who want to pursue a co-op option to complete a course that teaches “the importance of soft skills in job search, and how an applicant can improve his/her soft skills, including communication skills.”⁸ The course outline also highlights the development of interpersonal skills and cultural competence.⁹

And at Dalhousie’s Medical School, the Communication Skills Program prepares medical students for a range of communication issues they are likely to encounter as doctors. These include best practices in breaking bad news to people, expressing empathy, communicating across cultures, and communicating professionally with peers and colleagues.¹⁰

These are only a few examples. It’s hard to know exactly how many activities or programs specifically focused on SES development are offered at Canadian post-secondary institutions, as they aren’t always publicized or promoted, or their impact on SES development may be implicit.



7 Vancouver Island University, “Program that Brings Inmates.”

8 Centennial College, “Course Outline: BUSN 702.”

9 Ibid.

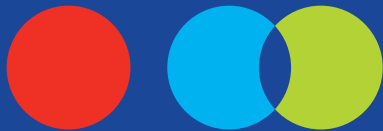
10 Dalhousie University, “Communication Skills Program.”

What does all of this mean?

Although the role of post-secondary institutions goes beyond enhancing students' employability, equipping them with the skills they need for career success is an important priority, and the most in-demand skills fall under the SES umbrella.

The fact that only one in five post-secondary strategic plans mention SES (or similar terms) suggests that the importance of these skills remains under-recognized at Canadian PSIs.

If strategic plans identify institutional priorities and help guide academic programs and initiatives, more needs to be done to ensure that our colleges and universities consider the importance of SES when they make strategic decisions around programs, courses, activities, and pedagogy.



What are we doing about it?

The Conference Board of Canada is developing a website to highlight new tools and resources for institutions that want to develop or strengthen SES in their students. Future analyses of PSE strategic plans will allow us to measure whether we see a rise in the number of PSIs that prioritize SES. We will also engage in benchmarking activities to better understand how successful PSIs are in their existing efforts to develop student SES.

To learn more about SES development and to access tools and resources, keep an eye on our [webpage](#).

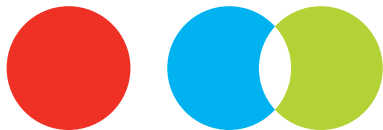


Appendix A

Methodology

We analyzed 131 PSI strategic plans (70 college and 61 university), which was every college and university with a current and publicly available strategic plan. We used text-based analysis software (NVivo) to find references to social and emotional skills (and synonymous terms) in the context of student skill development. We searched for both broad categorical terms and references to specific skills. Terms were counted once per plan, not cumulatively (i.e., where "collaboration" was mentioned multiple times in a given strategic plan, it was counted only once).

In addition to our analysis of strategic plans, we conducted a web scrape of PSI departmental and program websites for initiatives focused on SES development (i.e., one or more SESs were identified as part of the initiative's core learning outcomes). We selected several representative examples from across regions. Of note, we did not identify or evaluate outcome or impact metrics.

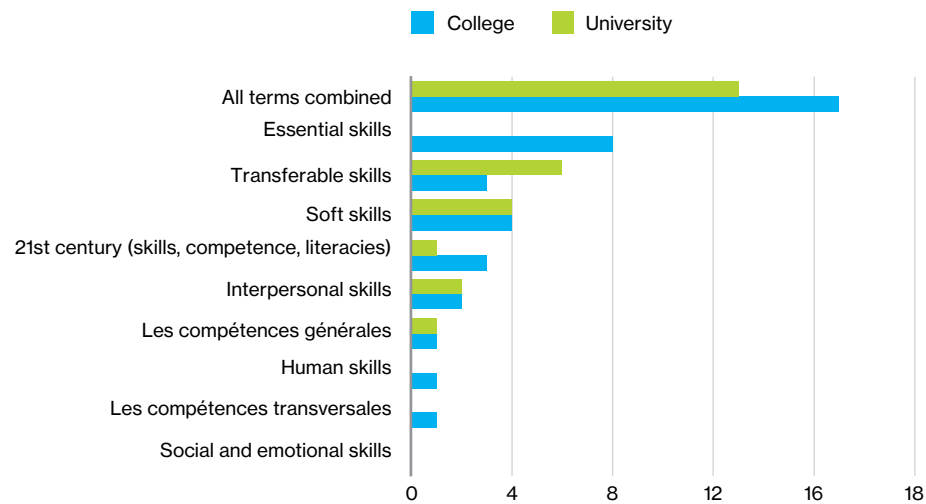


Appendix B

Results of strategic plan analysis

Chart 1

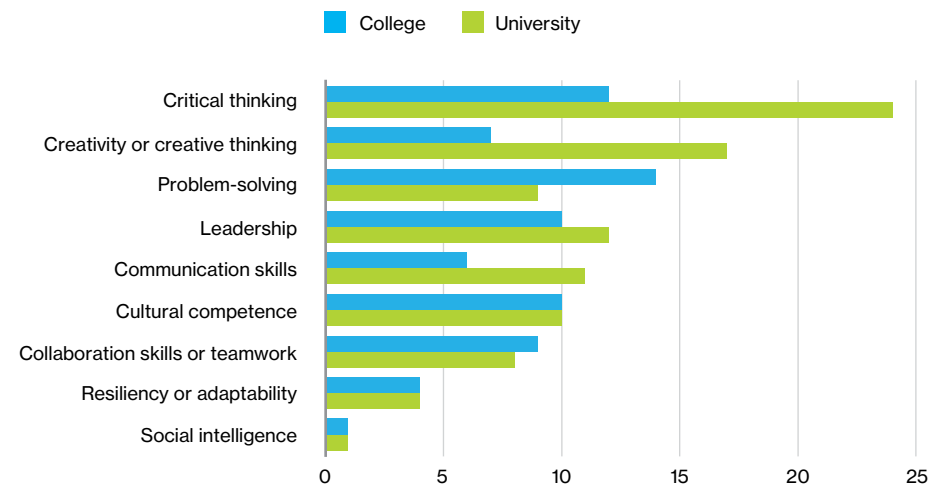
PSI strategic plan mentions of SES umbrella terms



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Chart 2

PSI strategic plan mentions of specific SES



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Appendix C

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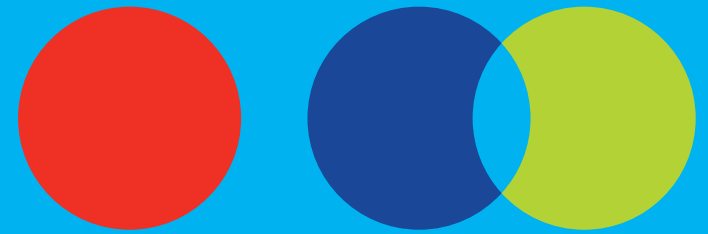
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