

***Best Students, Best Teachers, Best Research:
Perspectives for a Canadian Education Strategy***
Remarks for **Rajesh Subramaniam**, President, FedEx Canada
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Premiers and other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it's an honour to be here ... to share my perspective ... and to hear from others on the future of postsecondary education and skills training.

My purpose today is not to speak on behalf of corporate Canada, but to highlight some of the issues that I personally believe must be addressed in the years to come.

To this end, I'll discuss three things:

- the pressing need for an integrated strategy on education;
- critical elements of this strategy; and finally,
- ways in which government and business can advance this strategy.

By doing so, I hope to underscore that – in a world where success is defined by a nation's ability to foster innovation -- Canada must be home to the best students, best teachers and best research.

I want to provide some context for my discussion.

Good organizations spend a lot of time thinking about the way they can sustain a competitive advantage. However, more often than not, people focus on “what is” rather than “what could be.”

The same could be said about public affairs. Discussions can focus on quick fix solutions to immediate problems. These are necessary, but we shouldn't ignore our long-term national aspirations.

That's because education is a means to an end; a pathway to prosperity.

It is for this reason that I believe talking about the future of Canada's postsecondary education and training is in large part talking about the kind of society we want for our children fifteen to twenty years from now.

All of us would want them to prosper in a society that encourages curiosity and creativity; embraces intelligence and ingenuity; and inspires dedication and diversity.

But herein lies a challenge, and leads me to my first point: the pressing need for a well-considered strategy on education.

Pressing need for a strategy

This future relies on our ability to remain at the forefront of innovation. The problem is we're already falling behind.

The current innovation gap is a drag on our economic output. As the Discussion Paper for this Summit notes:

“Productivity growth¹ in Canada has slowed recently, and our business competitiveness as measured against international competitors has declined.”

¹ Higher productivity is a measure of the extent to which workers continue to produce more in the same hours worked — by working smarter, with better skills, technology, process improvements, etc.

This doesn't bode well because our standard of living relies so much on our ability to raise output per worker.

Lagging productivity is the kind of thing that discourages business from making the investments required to sustain Canada's innovative economy.

So, what does this mean for our children entering primary school today? They'll be graduating to fewer -- and far less rewarding -- careers in Canada.

The Council of the Federation rightly points out: "our success depends on a workforce that is flexible, adaptable, and innovative, with employees and employers who embrace lifelong learning."

Are we up for the task? The short answer is yes, but it's not a sure thing. Consider some facts:

For every adult Canadian with a bachelors degree, there are three without any kind of postsecondary qualifications.²

² According to the 2001 Statistics Canada census, approximately 23% of Canadians over the age of 25 had no degree, certificate or diploma. About 24% had a high school graduation certificate, 13% a trades diploma, 18% college or equivalent, and 23% a bachelor's or above.

While university enrolment has risen in almost every field of study in recent years, there's been a decline in the critical disciplines of mathematics, computer and information sciences.³ Worse still, more than a third of Canadian students in math were not capable of completing tasks above a "basic" level of complexity.⁴

The challenge is also found in the business world, with fewer than a third of Canadians participating in continuing education and training programs.⁵

All of this leads to a widening innovation gap, which uncovers our vulnerability, and underscores the vital need for government and business to develop an education and training strategy.

Three critical elements of this strategy

I consider three critical elements of a strategy: Best students, best teachers and best research.

³ University enrolment rose in almost every field of study in 2003/04. The only major field to register a decline was mathematics, computer and information sciences, where the student population fell 3.2%, the second consecutive decline. This decrease was driven by a 7.5% drop in enrolment in computer and information sciences and support services.

⁴ OECD international study states 36 percent of Canadian students in math were not capable of completing tasks above a basic level of complexity. Cited in The Conference Board of Canada Performance and Potential 2005-06, page 49

⁵ In 2002, the OECD surveyed how Canada was doing in continuing education and training compared with other major industrial countries. The OECD found only 29 per cent of Canadians participating, compared with 51 per cent in the U.S. and even higher rates in Scandinavia.

Let me begin with a story from an expert on education: Martha Piper, president of University of British Columbia. She recently recounted a meeting with the president of South Korea on the occasion of the 100th year anniversary of Korea University. The school was celebrating its status as the best in the country, yet the president only expressed muted enthusiasm.⁶

The goal, the Korean president insisted, is to be one of the best universities in the world. Only this will enhance the nation's ability to compete in the global economy.

It's time for us in Canada to articulate that kind of vision.

Being the best -- in all that we do: Our strategy must be founded on nothing less. Specifically, Canada must be known for hosting the best students, teachers and research.

That's a tall order, especially given the world around us.

Yet I'm confident we can compete on the same international stage. Canada is home to a strong R&D culture, centres of excellence and a diverse and tolerant society. All these elements can help us be home to the best students, teachers and research in the world.

The question is how do we build on our strengths? What can government and business can do to advance this strategy?

⁶ Canada's quest to be best, Martha Piper, Montreal Gazette, Tuesday, January 3, 2006, page: A17

Best students:

Let's start with students.

We must work harder to attract the brightest graduate students from around the world. This will not only enhance the quality of our educational system, experts say, but also strengthen our workforce should these graduates remain in Canada following their studies.

Let me talk about my own personal experience.

After graduating from the premier technological institution in India (IIT), I was looking forward to the opportunity for post-graduate studies abroad.

And, like many other international students, I was focusing on the US, ultimately with the aim of finding work there.

It never occurred to me or many of my friends that Canada was a viable option in which to study and work. That's in large part because no one ever brought it to my attention.

Government invests millions of dollars to attract tourists to the country, why not scholars?

There's no better time to act. The awful tragedy of 9/11 has made it more difficult for foreign students to pursue academics in the US. Alternatives like the UK, Australia and Canada are now being considered by many of the best and brightest.

That's likely one reason that Canada has already seen a dramatic rise in foreign student enrollment in the past couple of years. They now account for seven percent of the university population, nearly double the proportion of a decade earlier.⁷

Best Teachers

Looking at teachers, one of my pet peeves is how much we overlook and undervalue the contributions made by our teachers. Attracting and retaining the best teachers is essential to our future well-being.

I'm not convinced their value is fully recognized, based on their compensation and incentives. We need to examine this issue more closely, to find new and creative ways to reward their commitment and performance.

We all had many teachers, but each of you will remember those special ones who inspired you to learn and went above and beyond to change your life.

We need more of those teachers in Canada.

Best Research

Turning to research, we need more of it, especially basic research. Government has a critical role to play here, and must do more at the university level.

⁷ Statistics Canada, 2003-04

That's because the idea comes long before the innovation. It's fundamental to our knowledge-based economy; a platform for prosperity.

Yet the very nature of this kind of work makes it difficult for business to undertake.

Gone are the days when companies like AT&T, populated with physicists and astronomers, could conjure up ideas like the Big Bang Theory of the Cosmos.

Yet pure science research cannot fall into a black hole.

The role of the government is absolutely critical, especially in areas where immediate business applications are not obvious.

Take the story of prime numbers.

Academicians have dedicated careers and indeed, lifetimes, to exploring the mysterious world of Prime numbers, which are essentially whole numbers that cannot be the product of two smaller numbers.

They've hosted conferences on how to identify them; created databases to capture the largest ones; they've even spent centuries contemplating the characteristics of prime numbers.

It's no wonder why a mathematician concluded: "God may not play dice with the universe, but something strange is going on with the prime numbers."⁸

⁸ Paul Erdős

Yet all this pontification has led to practical applications. Prime numbers, for instance, play a fundamental role in internet security, which in turn, is critical in supporting global commerce.

The role of business

To this point, I've suggested ways in which government can support a Canadian education strategy.

Business of course must bear responsibility, as we have much to gain from a highly educated and skilled workforce.

In my final few minutes, I liked to suggest two ways; both centre on the notion of diversity.

Diversity of ideas

It's my firm belief that success will only come to those organizations that can tap into the different backgrounds and abilities of their employees.

Yet there are two fundamental challenges in this regard: the first relates to the pace in which we integrate new Canadians into the workforce; the second relates to the progress we've made in strengthening the skills of those in the workforce.

Let's begin with integration.

More than 75 percent of internationally trained professionals are not working in their field of choice in Ontario.⁹

This means, each and every year, tens of thousands of highly qualified people are overlooked or undervalued by the public and private sectors.¹⁰

Far too many people are running up against a wall, for whatever reasons.

Business must help break down walls that prevent engineers from designing; doctors from treating; tradesmen from building.

We also need to break down walls that prevent any man or woman from advancing in their career, regardless of their personal, cultural or religious background.

To this end, we need to work together with regulatory bodies, professional associations, government, colleges and universities ... to reduce and eliminate barriers that prevent skilled workers from entering their field of work.

That's just the half of it. Once in the workforce, business must support life-long training programs. Yet, for many, it's still considered a perk rather than a prerequisite.

Statistics show we're a middling country when it comes to training expenditures. That has to improve, especially for

⁹ Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities "The Incredible Shrinking Workforce" HR Professional

¹⁰ More than 100,000 immigrants settle in Ontario. 43 percent live in Toronto.

part-time and low wage earners, who need to develop new skills for advancement.¹¹

We need to examine this more closely, especially as we compete with educated workers in a borderless knowledge economy.

Conclusion

A company's strategy can be determined by how it allocates its resources. I'd argue the same is true for a nation.

Are we dedicating enough resources ... people, money and time ... to ensure Canada is home to the best students, teachers and research in the world?

Evidence suggests we have more work to do. The OECD, for instance, says we earn a silver medal for investment in knowledge, and a bronze for the proportion of researchers. We must raise our sights higher.

Government must do a better job at promoting our nation as an education destination; at investing in our teachers; and at creating a firm, and long-term commitment to basic research.

Business, and other stakeholders, must do better at integrating qualified new Canadians into the workforce, and training those already in it.

¹¹ In 2002, the OECD surveyed how Canada was doing in continuing education and training compared with other major industrial countries. The OECD found only 29 per cent of Canadians participating, compared with 51 per cent in the U.S. and even higher rates in Scandinavia.

Time is of the essence. Canada's standard of living and quality of life is in large part based on our ability to deliver on the vision of the best students, best teachers and best research.

Just consider that a university graduate earns an average of \$1 million more over a lifetime than a person with only a high school education.

Imagine if we could turn our current situation upside down, so there'd be three Canadians with bachelors degrees for every Canadian without. Just think of the opportunities this would create for our children, our communities, and our country.

Thank you for this opportunity, and your commitment to our collective future.