Involving social sector organizations in students' experiential learning allows students to develop important skills, and this can also serve as a community engagement and capacity-building strategy. (Pexels/Fauxels)

# THE CONVERSATION

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# How social sciences and humanities programs can prepare students for employment

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*A forum on [Skills and Knowledge for Innovation and Societal Impact](#) will be held at McMaster University on Oct. 12-13, organized by [The/La Collaborative](#) and [the Canadian Science Policy Centre](#).*

Future graduates face complex global challenges like climate change, as well as ethical, social and cultural implications of emerging new technologies like artificial intelligence.

The urgency of these challenges — and the complexity of skills and capabilities needed to address them — has prompted a revisiting of the role of social sciences and humanities programs in equipping students for civic engagement and as future leaders.

As a professor of philosophy at McMaster University, I'm also project director for The/La Collaborative, a pan-Canadian research network concerned with how social and human research can be used to build skills and capacity for innovation in the social sector and beyond. The social sector includes organizations that operate for the public benefit, such as co-operatives, non-profits, registered charities, social enterprises or unincorporated community groups.

My team's research shows universities should rethink internships and work-integrated learning for social sciences and humanities students in a way that helps community partners build capacity for innovation. Such a strategy would mutually benefit students, universities, organizations and our society as a whole.

## Vocations requiring adaptability

Evidence shows social sciences and humanities degrees can equip people for vocations that require high levels of adaptability and the capacity for continuous learning.

But how does this resonate with findings by organizations concerned with what employers need?

We examined 43 reports directly relevant to discussions of the future of work from bodies like the Conference Board of Canada, the British Academy of Science, the Advisory Council on Economic Growth, Institute for the Future of University and the World Economic Forum. We sought statements where both private and public stakeholders described the skills they believe employees need.

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Our analysis of 166 statements showed when research bodies talk about foundational skills, they tacitly group them together in various ways.



With good planning, both students in social sciences and humanities programs and organizations can benefit from students' work placements in the social sector. (Pexels/Julia M Cameron)

We also noted organizations consistently associate these groups of skills with two crucial outcomes: the capacity for organizations to innovate and the ability to foster work environments that are socially, ethically and emotionally intelligent. In another phase of our research, soon to be published, we also asked social sector agencies about how they see necessary skills for the future of work.

## Rarely mentioned: emotional intelligence

To identify the capacity of social sciences and humanities to foster skills currently known to be important for the future of work, we skimmed the web pages of all social sciences and humanities departments in every public Canadian university. We examined only BA and/or MA programs to understand how these programs articulate and communicate their capacity to foster different skills.

We learned that most social sciences and humanities programs are eager to promote their ability to foster foundational skills associated with innovation and adaptability, including critical thinking, problem solving, analytical skills and creativity.

However, departments rarely mention skills associated with social and emotional intelligence, especially teamwork, integrity and self-management.

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Social and emotional intelligence ranks highest among the skills cluster that employers see as essential.



Social and emotional intelligence ranks highest among the skills cluster that many employers see as essential. (Pexels/Jopwell)

## Role of experiential learning

An effective way to bridge the gap between what students learn in classrooms and what they can bring as future employees is experiential learning: internships and work-integrated learning through which students acquire knowledge and skills.

Experiential learning involves learning through practice and reflection over a period of engagement, observation and/or immersion.

***Read more: Beginners 101: How to confront and overcome the discomfort of starting something new***

Some students in the social sciences and humanities access experiential learning opportunities through city labs and city studios — agencies that create partnerships between campuses and local municipal governments.

Such agencies are able to cater specifically to the skills needs of social science and humanities students.

## Interviews with non-profits, students

But what other opportunities exist to equip social sciences and humanities students for work? And more importantly, why don't more opportunities exist?

Recently, our team drew on evidence gathered through interviews with managers from non-profits in Hamilton, Ont. and social science and humanities students who had participated in experiential learning with some social sector agencies. We sought to better understand students' and employers' motivations, drivers and barriers to experiential learning in the social sector.

The resulting report is intended to guide how universities can design and implement experiential learning programs and initiatives that bring campuses and communities together and create value for both.

We learned reciprocity is crucial to successful experiential learning partnerships in the social sector. We also learned of a main challenge in this: Student placements almost always need to be tailored to each student's needs, interest and skills. This puts demands on the student and the partner that don't exist in other fields like engineering or medicine.



Universities have to consider how social sector organizations will benefit from ongoing relationships. (Pexels/Jopwell)

## Experiential learning as community engagement

To better support experiential learning for social sciences and humanities students, universities can begin by thinking of experiential learning as continuous with community engagement. Universities should see instructors who offer experiential learning courses as contributing to their university's community engagement mandate and support them.

Universities need to ensure institutional support exists for students' engagement with social sector employers, so that, for instance, connections between an instructor and agency aren't severed if the instructor changes jobs or when a student's internship ends. Universities have to consider how social sector organizations will benefit from ongoing relationships and how they can be re-engaged.

More generally, the development of experiential learning initiatives should integrate students' and social sector concerns about reciprocity. This might require that universities pay more attention to community partners' capacities to supervise students, and to spend more time equipping students' with social and emotional skills that can enhance experiential learning.

## Attention to reciprocity

It is important to shift universities' expectations about experiential learning for social sciences and humanities students. Being intentional about increasing social sector partners' capacities by investing time and resources in understanding their needs would improve community partners' sense that there was sufficient reciprocity.

New models of experiential learning programs might require new investment or a redistribution of resources from post-secondary institutions or their affiliates. But they would also create new attractive opportunities on both ends.

Internships and work-integrated learning allow students to develop and hone skills that help them transition into employment. But experiential learning can also be a community engagement strategy that increases post-secondary institutions' capacity to contribute to social innovation.

Universities can be anchors of their communities if their connections to non-profits, charities, social enterprises and other community groups creates value on all sides.