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Program Preview: Parity of Esteem for the Skilled Trades

With: Dr. David Burns and Laura McDonald

Polytechnic institutions play an important role when it comes to developing Canada's skilled trades workforce, training some 70 per cent of apprentices actively progressing toward certification. Even more importantly, polytechnics are considering how best to support career progression and continuous learning. At [Kwantlen Polytechnic University \(KPU\)](#), they are working to create new pathways for tradespeople into undergraduate education.

Polytechnics Canada caught up with Dr. David Burns, Associate Vice-President, Academic, and Laura McDonald, Dean of the Faculty of Trades and Technology, to learn more about KPU's efforts to foster parity of esteem for skilled trades learners.

Polytechnics Canada: How is KPU generating greater parity of esteem between trades and academic programming?

David Burns: Parity of esteem between skilled trades and undergraduate programming is about recognizing that the streams are different but equal. It's about questioning the traditional academic hierarchy and removing structural and social barriers to diverse learning experiences.

To support this, we are in the process of reviewing our administrative and academic governance language to shift away from the false dichotomy of "skilled trades vs. academic" learning, in favour of more accurate comparisons, such as "skilled trades vs. undergraduate study."

Laura McDonald: Precisely. We have also changed hidden value language in policy and institutional plans. Instead of referencing "laddering" from skilled trades to undergraduate programming – which implies linear hierarchy – we are now referencing bridging between the portfolios.

KPU is also advancing a project to allow skilled trades credentials to act as admission criteria to select post-baccalaureate programs. This step opens doors to previously untapped student populations.

PC: Does credit recognition between programs flow in one direction (to skilled trades learners) or are there elements designed to bring greater awareness of trades to other learners as well?

DB: At this point, credit recognition is unidirectional. Skilled trades learners are receiving undergraduate credits to support ongoing learning because trades learning contributes to the broad educational objectives of an undergraduate education. The relationship does not yet work in the other direction because trades curricula do not typically include breadth and elective objectives.

PC: What challenges for skilled tradespeople are you addressing with this initiative? Have other stakeholders (e.g. businesses, government) expressed interest or support?

LM: Parity of esteem initiatives change the narrative. They reposition skilled trades as desirable, respected and viable

career options in their own right rather than a secondary or subordinate pathway. Raising the esteem of trades in relation to undergraduate study also encourages recognition of the trades as knowledge-rich and intellectually rigorous. Our industry partners indicate that these initiatives are helping address the shortage of skilled tradespeople in our region.

PC: How do you foresee this initiative changing the career trajectory of skilled tradespeople, if at all?

DB: Parity of esteem changes career trajectories in two ways. First, it encourages careers in the skilled trades by better recognizing their value. Second, it encourages tradespeople to see themselves as candidates for further study that may diverge from or be supplementary to their work in the skilled trades.

LM: Exactly! Our hope is that many of our trades graduates will return to develop their skills as some of the most important small business leaders in our economy.



Image provided by Kwantlen Polytechnic University

About the authors



Dr. David Burns

Associate Vice-President, Academic
Kwantlen Polytechnic University



Laura McDonald

Dean, Faculty of Trades and
Technology
Kwantlen Polytechnic University