

The future of education

The EU's education policy chief on the technology 'tsunami,' international student mobility and why PhDs are pouring coffee.

Kristen Shane

Xavier Prats-Monné is leading the European Union's education and training policy at an interesting time.

The director-general of education and culture for the European Commission speaks about a "tsunami" coming in the field of education, where an aging population, technology and globalization are all changing how people learn.

In Canada at the end of March, Mr. Prats-Monné met in Ottawa with university representatives as well as federal policymakers. And he was set to speak at an international teaching summit in Alberta.

The European bureaucrat from Spain is in charge of EU education programs for 2014-2020, including the almost \$20-billion Erasmus+ program that gives Europeans a chance to study, train and gain work experience abroad, and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions for PhD candidates and other researchers to work abroad.

Around 10 per cent of EU students study or train abroad, with public and private support, the European Commission estimates. The 28-country bloc aims to boost that to 20 per cent by 2020. Around five per cent now get an Erasmus grant.

Meanwhile, in Canada, only 3.1 per cent of Canadian full-time undergrads studied abroad in 2012-13, according to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. The group says that number remains "virtually unchanged" since 2006.

The Canadian government released its International Education Strategy in 2014 with a goal to nearly double the number of international students from 239,131 in 2011 to more than 450,000 by 2022. All these new students paying for tuition, books, food and housing, the government says, would boost the national economy by almost \$10 billion.

But the strategy didn't commit any specific number of students to send abroad or target amount to be spent doing that. Universities and colleges have been asking for federal help to carve out access for more students to go abroad.

Speaking to *Embassy* in a March 27 interview at the EU Delegation office in Ottawa, Mr. Prats-Monné talked about what he likes and would like to see more of in Canada's International Education Strategy, the importance of technology to the future of education, and how to tackle the problem of workers whose skilled are not well-matched with their jobs. The interview has been condensed and edited:

On the future of education:

"We are very, very focused on trying to understand where education is going. In other words, how the combination of demographic change—aging, basically in our societies—technology and globalization is affecting the world of education. And to try to make sure that education institutions and, indeed, countries and policymakers can exploit the potential and the opportuni-



Xavier Prats-Monné, the director-general of education and culture for the European Commission.
Embassy Photo: Kristen Shane

ties of this transformation, rather than just be its victims and suffer its consequences...

"And my personal view is that we do have, as somebody once said bombastically, a tsunami coming in the field of education. And the question is how to harness that, and how to exploit that extraordinary potential [of technology].

"Which to sum it up I would say is: with technology, you can combine the two typically contradictory objectives of education policy, which is excellence and equity. With technology you don't really have to choose. You can expand access to education and you can increase quality.

"It's just that this is not easy; it's not just done like that. But it is something that can be done."

On Canada's International Education Strategy:

"It is very, very uplifting to see how the strategy shows that Canada sees its education policy as part of the broader strategy for productivity, growth and sustainable development, which is really critically important. Because...it is through human capital and human capital development that you can achieve sustainable growth...There is a very good blend of departments that are involved, because it's not just attracting talent, it is also retaining talent in Canada..."

"There's also a very, I think, interesting snapshot of how well higher education is doing in Canada. If you look at, for example, the numbers of international students Canada is attracting, it's increased quite dramatically and, I think, it will increase. I

think having 450,000 incoming students [by] 2022, it's a pretty ambitious [number].

"There's two things though, this doesn't [touch on]. First, I think somehow the strategy doesn't focus a lot on technology precisely. It looks a little bit like something you add to internationalization. Whereas I think that technology will change the business models of higher education pretty dramatically, and therefore it's maybe more advisable not to look at it as a separate issue of open universities, or distance learning as a separate thing that you do, but rather look at the potential, for example, for blended learning [learning with some content delivery or instruction through online/digital media].

"EdX, the MIT-Harvard platform for online education, estimates that half of all courses given at the postgraduate level in the world in 2020 will be blended learning. So it's not a tradeoff between [being physically present] and online learning. It's about making sure that technology becomes part of the way people teach and learn.

"The other thing is it says nothing about the other side of the coin, which is the presence of Canadians abroad. There, it is true that, comparatively, you would have thought that you could have more students going abroad."

On whether more Canadians should study in Europe:

"Definitely yes, because I think it would be good for Canadians and for Europeans. Canada has proven to [have] a very successful education system. And I think that,

you know, what is the actual advantage of mobility? There is one obvious advantage [for] the person who moves.

"But the most important thing is what it does in terms of systemic impact on education institutions. When a student moves and comes back, maybe she sees her own university in different eyes because she has been able to compare. She has been able to compare the quality of teaching, she has been able to compare the services that the university offers.

"So I think that mobility is indisputably an interesting proposition. It can be an expensive proposition, intellectually and financially. And that's the sort of balance that one has to find.

"By the way, Erasmus grants are not a scholarship, they are a grant. And actually a grant gives a small incentive. You cannot live under an Erasmus grant. It's just an encouragement. But we feel that it is a sufficient encouragement for a huge number of students."

On the skills mismatch in the EU and Canada:

"One [way to look at this] is...how to make sure that the education system and labour-market needs match. That is a legitimately important short-term consideration, but not the most important one, and not the only one.

"First because, indeed, you cannot foresee very easily—actually not foresee at all—what kind of jobs you will be needing in three, four, five years time..."

"And number two, even if you could, you cannot change education curricula from one year to the other. So I think it's a bit of a futile exercise to try to focus exclusively on skills mismatches in the very short term. It's something that can be done, but is essentially about public employment services being more agile, being more effective..."

"And this is not to minimize the problem. We have about two million unfilled vacancies in Europe, at the same time as we have a huge number of unemployed or underemployed graduates..."

"But I think what is really critical is to make sure that we increase the relevance of what education systems and institutions produce, meaning the kind of skills that people will need, not to try to second guess what kind of specific job offers will be, but what people will need to know to function in an inevitably increasingly unstable labour market.

"And in this we are actually pretty similar, because this is a consequence of globalization. It's not a Canadian- or European-specific problem.

"And this is where I think that a lot still needs to be done...Knowledge is more and more the result of collaborative networks, which are increasingly complex working in conditions of instability. This is actually a very good definition of what a higher-education institution is not. Not very flexible, not very collaborative in nature.

"It's not that people don't want to collaborate. It's just that universities are organized by departments, they are organized by disciplines. And that is all very well for the kind of knowledge that we were used to, where essentially cognitive skills are very important. But what we see is increasingly needed, especially but not only in higher education, is a more flexible, collaborative kind of skills.

"And I think the efforts that we should make and where we have a lot to learn from each other is how to make that happen, how to make sure that there is more interdisciplinary studies, that curricula are more flexible, and that in the end universities are not just a way to produce a signal through a degree that tells you that you've been able to go through a hurdle of requirements and exams. That is not where we should be looking at education in the future."

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