

Rebuilding the Strengths of Modern Youth: The Award Canada Way

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Modern youth face a convergence of crises—declining resilience, civic engagement, and moral orientation—exacerbated by digital saturation and social fragmentation. This paper synthesizes evidence from global frameworks to re-examine **Kurt Hahn's Six Declines of Modern Youth** through contemporary research from the **OECD, UNICEF, ILO, McKinsey, RBC, and McCrindle**, linking historic concerns about character and fitness to today's deficits in transferable skills and well-being. The **Duke of Edinburgh's International Award – Canada (Award Canada)** is presented as a scalable, evidence-based model that integrates experiential learning into formal education. By embedding the Award within **Specialist High Skills Major, Dual Credit, OYAP, and apprenticeship pathways**, students earn recognition for developing teamwork, adaptability, and purpose alongside academic credentials. This co-curricular approach directly implements **Canada's Global Competencies**—critical thinking, collaboration, communication, innovation, and global citizenship—while addressing systemic inequities in access and employability. The analysis positions Award Canada as a **national framework for resilience and skills development**, transforming non-formal learning into measurable educational outcomes that bridge the gap between schooling, trades, and civic life.

Keywords: experiential learning, co-curricular integration, resilience, transferable skills, global competencies, youth employability, civic engagement.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Kurt Hahn, co-founder of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award framework ("the Award"), identified **Six Declines of Modern Youth** (fitness, initiative, imagination, craftsmanship, self-discipline, and compassion) which emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to concerns about the weakening of youth resilience and character in increasingly industrial and sedentary societies. Modern developmental science provides renewed justification for these principles, particularly through Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks such as the 5Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, caring) and the ARC model (autonomy, relatedness, competence). The Award remains the only international and widely accepted, structured framework of accreditation for experiential, holistic youth development.

MODERN FRAMING OF DECLINES

Hahn's **Six Declines of Modern Youth**, still relevant today, but are shaped by new dynamics: digital saturation, fragmented attention, climate disruption, artificial intelligence and rapid labour market transformation.

In today's society, Hahn's themes manifest differently:

1. Decline of **Resilience & Grit** – reduced tolerance for discomfort or failure.
2. Decline of **Deep Focus & Attention** – fractured by digital distraction.
3. Decline of **Civic Engagement** – passive "clicktivism" vs. active participation.
4. Decline of **Outdoor Play & Fitness** – declining due to screens and urbanization.
5. Decline of **Face-to-Face Social Skills** – diminished through reliance on online interaction.
6. Decline of **Moral/Spiritual Anchors** – eroded sense of shared purpose and values.

GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS & FUTURE SKILLS RESEARCH

Leading education-focused research organizations have produced updated research and labour market reports in the last 5 years that address contemporary global education concerns – with strong alignment to the Six Declines.

- **OECD's** Learning Compass 2030 identifies agency, resilience, and global competencies as essential outcomes for students navigating uncertainty.
- **UNICEF's** transferable skills framework highlights creativity, critical thinking, empathy, and cooperation.
- The **International Labour Organization (ILO)** emphasizes the importance of adaptability and lifelong learning in addressing skills mismatches in volatile labour markets.
- **McKinsey's** Skills Revolution (2023) and Spark and Sustain (2024) reports stress rising demand for social-emotional and digital skills, predicting that resilience, adaptability, and purpose-driven learning are the most valuable competencies.
- **RBC's** Future Skills report warns of a 'quiet crisis' in which Canadian youth are overqualified academically but underprepared practically.
- **McCrindle's** Education Future Report emphasizes persistence, adaptability, and intergenerational connections. Their report, Seven Disruptors Impacting the Future of Education, emphasizes the role of Artificial Intelligence, Teacher Burnout, and Individualization of Learning as additional considerations.

What employers are signaling:

- **Canada is shifting from a jobs economy to a skills economy;** foundational, transferable "human skills" (communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability) are rising in value across sectors. (RBC)

- **Foundational skills** across cognitive, interpersonal, digital and self-leadership strongly correlate with employment, income, and satisfaction. (McKinsey)
- **Skills-based organizations** are replacing rigid “job” models; matching talent to work via skills to boost

productivity, but employers lagging, creating room for credible youth skills signals. (Deloitte)

- **Artificial Intelligence era:** Canada needs faster skills adoption and credible pathways to apply them (RBC Growth/AI work).

“Decline”	OECD framing	Employer signal	PYD lever	Award Canada Way lever
Resilience & grit	Agency; self-regulation	Self-leadership skills correlate with jobs & earnings	Confidence/ Competence via mastery	Long-term challenges, progressive development (Bronze, Silver, & Gold) & persistence (13, 26, 52 week challenge) Sustained goals across sections; expedition adversity
Focus & attention	Metacognition; persistence	Cognitive skills (problem-solving, mental flexibility)	Goal scaffolding & feedback	SMART goals weekly; time-on-task evidence. sustained effort, self-reflection
Civic engagement	Responsibility; social capital	Teamwork/communication valued in all sectors	Connection/ Character	Voluntary Service section with outcomes + reflection
Outdoor activity	Whole-child well-being	Stamina/discipline, reliability	Healthy behaviors protect learning	Physical & Adventurous Journey (planning, risk, teamwork, mental health)
Face-to-face skills	Social/emotional competencies	Interpersonal skills are core	Caring/Connection	Group AJ & Gold Residential collaboration
Moral anchors	Values & purpose	Integrity & judgment trusted signals	Character & Purpose	Purpose, values, Reflection logs translating values to choices

Chart 1: Comparison of Declines of Modern Youth, OECD framing & Employer Signaling with Positive Youth Development & Award Response

INTEGRATING THE AWARD CANADA WAY

The revised Modern Six Declines (**Chart 1**) effectively outline the range of concerns that continue to need to be addressed in support of Education Transformation. Hahn’s original concerns, the updated declines, research and reports from leading education and labour research organizations, all collectively support and reinforce the Award’s positioning as a platform for cultivating resilience, skills, and civic purpose in modern learners. The Award Framework, especially the updated 7 Elements of the Award Canada Way, are a fit for purpose framework that, when integrated into the high school sector in a cocurricular approach, can effectively support the system to address the key declines of youth

The strong alignment of the Award to the 6 declines is relatively unique, and in a World that is recognizing the need for holistic and well-rounded skill development for adolescents, is a timely aid to education transformation. Where many youth organizations and sports, provide a more singular focus on skill development, e.g. physical wellbeing or social skills development, the Award is unique in providing a more complete antidote to each and all of the 6 declines of modern youth in a non-competitive manner further reducing barriers to adoption and completion.

COCURRICULAR INTEGRATION

Award Canada’s co-curricular model embeds experiential learning into formal education systems. High school integration aligns with Student Success frameworks, enabling credit recognition and equitable access. The Award, when paired with Specialist High Skills Majors (SHSM) or similar trades-based curriculum, allows students to link Award activities with sector-focused certifications and/or trades qualifications. Dual Credit integration permits students to earn post-secondary credits alongside Award achievements. Apprenticeship pathways integrate experiential learning into trades preparation.

Colleges and universities increasingly recognize Award portfolios and micro-credentials in admissions and scholarships. Equity-deserving groups such as Indigenous youth, women in trades, and newcomers benefit from systemic integration, addressing barriers to participation. This co-curricular model directly addresses modern declines in resilience, civic engagement, and purpose by making experiential learning a mainstream strategy.

CANADIAN GLOBAL COMPETENCIES CONTEXT

In 2016, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) developed a framework of Global Competencies to guide

what young people need to thrive in a rapidly changing, interconnected world. These six competencies are meant to go beyond traditional subject learning and focus on transferable, future-ready skills. The study recognized that a whole-systems approach was required for the transformation and development of specific tools to better meet the emerging needs. The six CMEC Global Competencies are:

1. **Critical Thinking and Problem Solving:** Ability to analyze complex issues, evaluate evidence, think creatively, and generate solutions.
2. **Innovation, Creativity, and Entrepreneurship:** Ability to turn ideas into action, take risks, design new processes or products, and adapt to change.
3. **Learning to Learn / Self-Awareness and Self-Direction:** Ability to set goals, reflect on progress, adapt learning strategies, and take responsibility for one's own growth.
4. **Collaboration:** Ability to work respectfully and effectively with others, leveraging diverse perspectives and skills toward a common goal.
5. **Communication:** Ability to express ideas clearly and effectively across different media and to different audiences, including digital fluency.
6. **Global Citizenship and Sustainability:** Ability to engage with diverse cultures, act responsibly for a more inclusive and sustainable world, and demonstrate ethical awareness.

GLOBAL COMPETENCIES AND THE AWARD

Much like the global research conducted by OECD, UNICEF, ILO, World Economic Skills, Deloitte, McKinsey, RBC and others as noted, the CMEC Global competencies align well with the Award. Further comparison and mapping of Secondary High School curriculum with global competencies identifies areas of strong alignment for a cocurricular utilization of the Award (**Chart 2**).

Of note, each of the global competencies can be aligned to a minimum of 3 of the 5 Award Framework sections including the blend of core formal and non-formal examples both cocurricular and extra-curricular, further improving the likelihood for youth motivation and thus adoption and attainment.

GLOBAL COMPETENCIES DEPLOYMENT IN CANADA

A review of publicly available literature and policy documents would suggest that the Global Competencies framework has made some headway, but its implementation across Canada has been uneven. Many of the original ambitions (especially around measurement and system-level integration) remain works in progress. The initial expected outcomes from the original implementation were:

- Embedding global competencies across curricula, pedagogy, and assessment not just as add-ons.
- System transformation: leadership, governance, accountability, resourcing, stakeholder engagement, capacity building, infrastructure.
- Ongoing evaluation, continuous improvement, linking processes to outcomes.
- Enabling local adaptation / respect for context (e.g. Indigenous perspectives) rather than one-size-fits-all.
- Jurisdictional self-assessment of their stage of progress & development of implementation plans.
- Progressively, more systemic data on how students are developing these competencies, evidence of impact, and improvement across Canada.

While there are many positive developments reported including: Adoption of the framework / visibility; Localized initiatives, research & pilots; and Awareness of systemic challenges & approach: there are also key areas with gaps, challenges and of limited success.

1. Lack of consistent, robust measurement at scale

- Although the framework urges measurable student outcomes and evaluation strategies, there is limited evidence of large-scale, cross-jurisdictional measurement of global competencies.
- Many of these competencies are “soft”, complex, context-dependent, and do not easily map to standardized tests or assessments.

2. Uneven uptake across jurisdictions

- Some provinces are more advanced in embedding competencies; others are in early phases.
- The framework is nonprescriptive, so local systems choose how to adopt particular elements.

3. Resource, capacity, and resourcing constraints

- Transforming pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, capacity building, leadership, and infrastructure is resource intensive.

4. Governance, accountability, and coherence issues

- Embedding global competencies meaningfully requires coherence across policy levels (ministry, school boards, schools), teacher professional learning, and assessment regimes.
- Without strong accountability mechanisms, adoption may remain superficial or symbolic

Global Competency	Examples from Canadian Public Secondary High School Curriculum	Alignment with The Duke of Edinburgh's Award
Critical Thinking & Problem Solving	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) courses Social Studies, Civics, and Careers (e.g., analyzing social issues) Environmental Studies (e.g., researching climate change, sustainability projects)	Service Section: Leading sustainability initiatives, engaging in conservation efforts, or participating in civic engagement programs. Skills Section: Learning coding, problem-solving through chess, robotics, or debate. Adventurous Journey: Planning and executing a challenging outdoor expedition, analyzing local ecosystems
Innovation, Creativity & Entrepreneurship	Business & Entrepreneurship courses (e.g., SHSM Business, DECA) Arts & Design programs (e.g., music, digital media, fashion, woodworking) Technology courses (e.g., robotics, app development)	Skills Section: Learning music production, photography, filmmaking, graphic design, or digital storytelling. Service Section: Launching an entrepreneurial project for social good (e.g., fundraising, social enterprises). Gold Project: Organizing a creative community initiative such as an art exhibit or business pitch competition
Learning to Learn / Self-Awareness & Self-Direction	Career Studies (developing personal goals, self-assessment) - Health & Wellness courses (growth mindset, resilience training) Student-led learning projects (e.g., Independent Study, Capstone Projects)	Physical Recreation: Setting personal fitness goals, training for a sport, or engaging in mindfulness practices - Adventurous Journey: Developing resilience and adaptability through outdoor challenges. Skills Section: Building self-discipline by learning a new skill (e.g., cooking, car maintenance, public speaking)
Collaboration	Cooperative Education (Co-op) and Work-Integrated Learning Group Science Projects, Model UN, Debate Clubs Leadership & Peer Mentorship Programs	Service Section: Volunteering in teams for community projects, mentoring younger students, or organizing school events. Adventurous Journey: Developing leadership and teamwork in outdoor group expeditions. Gold Project: Working with a team to plan and execute a long-term community or social initiative
Communication	English Language Arts (e.g., essay writing, media literacy, journalism) French & Indigenous Language Programs Digital Communication & Social Media Ethics	Skills Section: Learning public speaking, storytelling, writing, or digital communication (e.g., podcasting, video editing) Service Section: Advocacy work, community engagement, or cultural exchange programs Adventurous Journey: Storytelling in Real-World Exploration, journey reflection through writing and observation by capturing the journey through sketches, stories or a multimedia presentation.
Global Citizenship & Sustainability	Geography, World Issues, and Indigenous Studies Environmental Science (e.g., conservation, renewable energy research) International Baccalaureate (IB), SHSM Environment, Global Learning programs	Service Section: Engaging in local or global volunteerism, leading sustainability projects, or working on social justice initiatives Skills Section: Researching environmental policies, learning about sustainable business practices Adventurous Journey: Exploring the impact of climate change through fieldwork and data collection
Mathematics & Financial Literacy	Financial Literacy & Business Math Economics, Personal Finance, and Budgeting Fundraising and Social Impact Programs	Adventurous Journey: Budgeting and financial planning for expeditions Service Section: Fundraising for community projects or charitable causes Skills Section: Developing financial literacy through investment simulations or personal budgeting challenges
Outdoor Education & Physical Well-being	Physical & Health Education Outdoor Leadership and Camping Skills Mental Health and Well-being Initiatives	Physical Recreation: Participating in sports, dance, martial arts, or wellness activities Adventurous Journey: Gaining outdoor survival skills, navigation, and first aid training - Service Section: Coaching younger athletes or leading recreational programs for others

Chart 2: Alignment of Award Canada's Framework with Canadian Secondary High School Curriculum & CMEC+ Global Competencies (incl. Literacy & Outdoor Education & Well Being).

With a strong alignment of the Award framework as well the relative ease of adoption and implementation of the Award model into schools, it is not an unreasonable hypothesis that the Award Canada Way can make a strong case that the

Award is not just “adjacent” but actually a system-level enabler for the implementation and adoption of the Global Competencies across Canada, consistent with OECD and employer research (e.g. McKinsey: **Chart 3**)

CMEC Global Competency	Alignment with Duke of Edinburgh’s Award	OECD Transformative Competencies	McKinsey Skill Groups
Critical Thinking & Problem Solving	Service (sustainability initiatives); Skills (debate, problem-solving); Adventurous Journey (planning, navigating)	Creating new value; Reconciling tensions & dilemmas	Critical thinking; Mental flexibility; Problem-solving
Innovation, Creativity & Entrepreneurship	Skills (arts, tech, entrepreneurship projects); Gold Project (enterprise initiatives)	Creating new value	Creativity & imagination; Communication; Entrepreneurship
Learning to Learn / Self-Awareness & Self-Direction	Physical Recreation (personal fitness); Skills (self-discipline); Adventurous Journey (resilience)	Self-regulation; Agency; Responsibility	Self-control; Achievement orientation; Courage; Self-leadership
Collaboration	Service (team projects); Adventurous Journey (team expeditions); Gold Project (group initiatives)	Reconciling tensions; Building social capital	Teamwork effectiveness; Empathy; Collaboration
Communication	Skills (public speaking, digital storytelling); Service (advocacy); AJ (reflection, journaling)	Responsibility; Agency; Values	Communication; Storytelling; Influence
Global Citizenship & Sustainability	Service (local/global volunteering); Skills (researching sustainability); AJ (climate impact)	Responsibility; Values; Creating new value	Networking; Cross-cultural competency; Civic responsibility
Mathematics & Financial Literacy	Adventurous Journey (budgeting/logistics); Service (fundraising); Skills (financial planning)	Responsibility; Creating new value	Planning & organizing; Resource management; Financial literacy
Outdoor Education & Physical Well-being	Physical Recreation (sport, health); Adventurous Journey (survival, navigation); Service (coaching)	Well-being; Agency; Resilience	Discipline; Courage; Physical endurance

Chart 3: Alignment of Award Canada’s Framework with Global Competencies, OECD Transformative Competencies and McKinsey Skill Group

THE AWARD CANADA WAY AS A SYSTEMS ENABLER

Mapping the gaps and recommendations in Canada’s Global Competencies framework (uneven uptake, lack of metrics, limited system coherence, challenges in pedagogy, etc.) against the Award Canada Way cocurricular model, there is a strong case that the Award can be a system-level enabler to global competency adoption and success.

Lack of consistent, robust metrics and outcomes

- The Award already generates evidence of competency development through its structured framework (Skills, Service, Physical Recreation, and Adventurous Journey) and ORB logging, micro-credentialing and accreditation.
- Goal-setting and reflection tools (e.g., SMART goals, participant progress journals, digital record books) provide observable, reportable growth in competencies.

- In partnership with school boards and ministries the Award can function as a **living assessment model** for competencies schools cannot easily measure.

Uneven uptake across jurisdictions

- Because the Award is national but delivered locally (e.g. schools and youth groups), it offers a scalable, voluntary platform that works across diverse educational contexts.
- By integrating as a recognized co-curricular credential (e.g., SHSM in Ontario, or graduation credits in BC), it provides policy hooks for provinces at different stages.
- The Award provides a “plug-and-play” pan-Canadian cocurricular framework that provinces can align to without reinventing the wheel and allows local adaptation

Resource, capacity, and resourcing constraints

- The Award is youth-driven, reducing teacher load (educators act as facilitators, not sole deliverers).
- The updated Award Canada Way approach is cocurricular in nature and is designed not as something "extra," but as something complementary aligned with the values, goals, and outcomes already within public education.
- It leverages community partnerships (employers & volunteers), easing reliance on limited school resources.
- Corporate/philanthropic partnerships can offset cost burdens and link directly to skills pipelines (e.g., Fanshawe aviation SHSM, women in trades).

Governance, accountability, and coherence

- The Award operates with clear standards, levels, and international benchmarks, creating a consistent accountability framework.
- National data collection and reporting (via ORB and other systems) already provide the potential for governance dashboards.
- The Award's structure (Bronze, Silver, Gold) provides a transparent, portable credential recognized by universities, employers, and governments globally.

Teacher readiness and pedagogical transformation

- The Award is experiential and learner-led by design—teachers facilitate but do not need to overhaul classroom pedagogy.
- Provides professional development opportunities for teachers as Award Leaders, equipping them with coaching and mentoring skills aligned with 21st-century learning.
- The Award is a low-barrier professional practice shift that models what “competency-based learning” looks like in action.

Indigenous perspectives, equity, and inclusion

- The Award's flexibility allows youth to pursue culturally relevant activities (language revitalization, land-based learning, community service in Indigenous contexts).
- Equity of access is a core principle: reaching newcomers, rural youth, Indigenous, and youth with disabilities.

“Add-on” vs. systemic integration

- By linking with graduation credits, trades pathways, microcredentials and employer partnerships, the Award embeds competencies into internationally accredited, credentialed, valued outcomes.
- The cocurricular model ensures competencies are not “add-ons” but central to a young person's personal growth and employability pathway.

CONCLUSION

The implication is clear: the Award is both a timeless and timely intervention. The convergence of theory, global frameworks, and empirical evaluations supports the Award as a durable, adaptable model for youth development. It offers a balance of physical, social, and civic development that counters modern declines. Its impact is maximized when embedded in ecosystems of reflection, mentoring, and community partnerships

Positioned as a national platform or National Cocurricular Framework, the Award can catalyze global competency adoption and capability development beyond resilience, skills, and purpose for Canadian youth. By embedding experiential learning into schools, trades, colleges, and universities, Award Canada addresses modern declines in resilience, focus, civic engagement, and purpose. This

The Award Canada Way moves the Global Competencies from *aspiration* to *implementation* — equitably, measurably, and sustainably, positioning the Award not only as a program for personal growth, but as Canada's national model for future-ready, equitable youth development.

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