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Report on the National Roundtable on Learning

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Report on the National Learning Roundtable

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Introduction

Learning is a societal project that requires a bold new policy framework to guide the actions of all stakeholders. This is the main conclusion reached by the 45 participants, from a wide range of organizations and backgrounds, at the National Roundtable on Learning convened by the Canadian Policy Research Networks on behalf of Human Resources Development Canada. Roundtable participants called for immediate, transformative actions on many fronts in order to achieve “lifelong learning for all.”

The purpose of the Roundtable was to engage in open dialogue on three major themes: assessing learning and skill needs; removing barriers and accessing opportunities; and identifying learning outcomes. A background paper highlighted key issues and questions on these themes. Participants worked hard in small groups and plenaries to develop a vision of learning for Canada, guiding principles, and recommendations for immediate action.

The Hon. Lyle Oberg, Minister of Alberta Learning, and the Hon. Jane Stewart, Minister of Human Resources Development Canada, launched the Roundtable on a note of optimism. As Minister Stewart stated in her speech, “we’ve got an extraordinarily good education system here in Canada, and we should be proud of it. But we can’t rest on our laurels... there are things that we have to change, to improve upon, to imagine and implement that are reflective of our new reality in the 21st century.”

Canada’s Vision for Learning

Participants proposed a Vision for Learning as a way to address the widely expressed concern at the Roundtable that Canada is not moving fast enough to increase learning opportunities and to remove barriers to learning. Acknowledging our past successes in education, the vision is a strong commitment that learning in the future must occur throughout a person’s life. This is vital not only for the well-being of the individual, but for a healthy society and economy. A comprehensive learning system has four linked priorities:

- 1) Valuing and supporting universal early childhood education, making it an integral part of the learning system so that all children develop the literacy skills they need to become lifelong learners.
- 2) Investing in high quality, universal, publicly delivered primary and secondary education.
- 3) Ensuring excellence, equitable access, and program diversity within Canada’s higher education system. Programs must provide a balance of technical, analytical and people skills. Universities must equally value and invest in humanities-based and science and technology-based disciplines. Educating the whole person and training for specific skills will occur simultaneously.
- 4) Enabling all adults to have ongoing opportunities to maintain and enhance literacy and learning skills. A wide range of disadvantaged groups – whose needs have been

well documented – will require new resources to participate fully. Accordingly, greater recognition to prior formal and informal learning will facilitate the development and fuller use of people’s talents.

While there was not enough time to reach consensus on every word of this vision, it does capture the tone of the Roundtable. Work remains to be done on a number of contentious issues. For example, there was no consensus at the Roundtable about the role for private institutions in the educational system or on the best mechanisms for improving access to post-secondary education (e.g., through tuition fee reductions, RESPs, learning accounts, or other means). Nor was there agreement on the right balance between individual responsibility for learning and the responsibility of governments and private actors, particularly employers.

Despite broad consensus at the Roundtable that disadvantaged groups deserve immediate attention, there was no agreement reached on which groups should be on this list. However, participants often pointed to the barriers faced by Aboriginals, adults with low literacy, people with disabilities, high school dropouts, and poor single-parent mothers. In the end, the Roundtable suggested incorporating these and other disadvantaged groups into a comprehensive learning policy framework, rather than continuing current piecemeal interventions.

Even so, the convergence of political and economic trends in the country created a palpable sense of urgency at the Roundtable to move from discussion to sustained actions. The next 18 months will be the right time to launch a learning agenda. However, participants emphasized that action is complicated by the lack of a “national guardian” on learning issues – an observation that led to calls for leadership across all stakeholders to initiate joint actions.

Highlights of Roundtable Discussions

This vision emerged after intensive discussion, and debate, in breakout groups and plenary sessions of the three themes described in the background paper. The following summary of these conversations provides the backdrop to the vision, principles and recommended actions crafted by Roundtable participants in the plenary sessions.

1) Assessing Needs:

This theme focused on defining and assessing the learning and skills needs (current, medium-term, or long-term) of specific groups of individuals, sectors, and types of employers.

A starting point for Roundtable discussions was the shared recognition that skills, knowledge and innovation are the key drivers behind Canada’s economic and social prosperity. This begs two closely linked questions: How can the benefits of prosperity be most widely shared? And, how can we foster prosperity by ensuring that all citizens have a chance to contribute? Indeed, for most Roundtable participants, the answer is that sharing

prosperity depends on an inclusive approach to learning right from an early age. In the words of one delegate, “How do we make sure that nobody gets left behind in a learning society?”

Disadvantaged groups. Participants gave many examples of disadvantaged groups that do not have the resources or basic skills to engage in lifelong learning. These include: individuals on welfare; adults with low levels of literacy; the working poor; Aboriginals; new Canadians whose credentials are not recognized; and individuals with disabilities. Participants noted the well-documented links between the conditions of poverty, on the one hand, and low levels of literacy and educational attainment, on the other hand. The ability to learn is created in childhood. So for children from poor families, the effects of their background are cumulative – as they grow older, these individuals risk being left further behind and the challenges of overcoming obstacles to learning grow. This discussion underscored the importance of viewing learners as individuals who are part of identifiable groups.

Barriers to adult literacy. Roundtable discussions of literacy coalesced around three key points. First, children need good basic literacy and numeracy skills if they are to succeed in school and become adaptable lifelong learners. Second, many adults who want to improve their literacy skills face barriers, including how literacy training programs are organized, difficulty accessing these programs, and the stigma attached to not being able to read. Third, the skill content and design of jobs requires more attention if we are to ensure that higher-level literacy is put to use, so these capacities are not lost.

Broad-based access. By recognizing the learning needs of everyone, we can create a learning society. The Roundtable emphasized that we know the learning needs of disadvantaged groups and therefore are in a position to act on these immediately. But unlike the past, such interventions cannot be just “another program,” but must be part of an integrated framework to promote widespread access to learning opportunities. The challenge is to enable all Canadians to learn in family, formal education, employment and community contexts. If we assume that all Canadians have the right to learn and to be educated, then we can look at where and why this does not happen as a way of meeting the goal of equal opportunity.

Learner diversity. One of the discussion groups identified different groups of learners based on age, ability to learn, situation, education level, or socio-economic status. The group concluded that there is no “standardized learner.” A continuum of learning exists from young children to working age and seniors, and individuals’ needs at each stage in their life will vary depending on their resources and socio-economic circumstances. While there is a lot of research regarding child psychology/development and assessing children when they are young, these tools do not exist to assess the diversity of learner profiles throughout various life-course stages.

Transition challenges. We therefore need different ways of promoting and enabling learning across the life course. It is essential to recognize that individuals must be adaptable to cope with transitional periods, such as moving between levels in the educational system, moving between jobs, retirement, moving in and out of the workforce, and responding to changing skill requirements in rapidly changing workplaces. While learning

can contribute to successful transitions, people may require support and assistance to reduce disruptive effects.

Universal access to what? While education must be accessible and affordable, Roundtable participants considered how to expand universal education at both ends of the age spectrum – to help children develop foundational literacy skills and to support the growing numbers of adults with learning needs. Because the evidence suggests that children who take part in early childhood education programs prior to starting school will learn better in school, there was much discussion, and agreement, regarding the need for universal access to early childhood education. However, participants did not insist that early childhood education should be compulsory, since many Canadians believe that starting regular schooling too early is not necessary for their children’s success.

Valuing formal and informal learning. After critically assessing common definitions of learning, training and education, participants suggested the following revisions. We can, and should, educate and train at the same time, which requires mechanisms for linking workplaces and schools. We also must recognize the contribution of informal learning to economic and social achievement. As a society, we must place more value on informal learning. Institutions such as community libraries and the Internet have opened up new frontiers in this regard, so they need to be strengthened.

Valuing hard skills and soft skills. The Roundtable also called for a broad, liberal definition of education and learning that emphasizes citizenship, the arts, and critical and creative thinking. While education is crucial for employment, we need to celebrate its human/social/citizenship value. Innovative workplaces require a wide range of “people” and intellectual skills, in addition to technical skills. Yet, employers are not equipped to develop these broadly-based competencies, so the public education system will continue to play a crucial role in this regard, in particular through the liberal arts.

Valuing multiple learning contexts. Effective policy responses to the diversity of learning needs must acknowledge the multiple contexts in which individuals learn. For example, higher education is not just about going to university. In fact, while Canadians value post-secondary education there is a bias in favour of universities. As a result, skilled trades do not receive adequate recognition, or in fact have a negative image, so young people often do not have the information they need to make informed decisions. These public perceptions must change.

Individual and collective responsibility. Striking the right balance between individual and collective responsibilities for learning surfaced as a contentious issue. How do people take responsibility for their learning, from early childhood on? What motivates people to become actively engaged as learners, teachers and mentors? What role should employers play in encouraging learning among employees? As these questions were debated, several participants argued that it is not helpful to blame individuals for not taking responsibility for their own learning or to blame schools for failing to meet certain educational goals.

2) *Barriers and Opportunities*

This theme addressed two related issues: the barriers that specific individuals or employers face in meeting their learning needs, and actual or potential opportunities that can enhance an individual's or organization's capacity to meet learning needs.

Roundtable participants noted that while individuals sometimes are unaware of what skills they lack or possess, this type of individual barrier to learning is far overshadowed by contextual, institutional and systemic barriers. Even though barriers took up much of the discussion time on this theme, Roundtable participants pointed to the many opportunities for advancing a learning agenda, especially by building on our existing strengths.

Cultural barriers. The contexts in which people learn largely reflect our cultures. Some of the most prevalent barriers to learning, in the view of Roundtable participants, therefore, are cultural in origin. This point generated a lively discussion of the characteristics of a learning culture. Several participants asked: "How do you create a lifelong learner? Where do we put money to ensure this?" Furthermore, cultural barriers reduce the learning opportunities available for specific groups: Aboriginals, immigrants and rural students. Aboriginals, in particular, face cultural barriers other Canadians do not understand, including quite different learning styles. The bias toward traditional classroom and institution-based learning acts as a barrier to other less formalized approaches .

It was generally agreed that successful lifelong learning activity requires individuals to possess solid general skills, and governments have a key role in this regard through public education, but governments' role is less clear when it comes to providing specific skills. Beyond this, some provocative points were raised. One suggestion was to offer a certificate to show lifelong learning skills. However, others observed that such an approach may be inconsistent with the assumption that lifelong learning involves empowering individuals to make choices about what they want to learn. This perspective raises the further issue of how learning opportunities could, or should, be directed at the skills most needed by the economy at any given time. Certainly there is more to be said along this line.

Institutional barriers. Well-designed educational and training institutions can be powerful enablers of learning. Yet, institutions have been slow to develop the flexibility and choices learners need. Also lacking are effective policy incentives to sustain and develop partnerships among institutions – a prerequisite for inventing new approaches, in the view of participants. Furthermore, mobility within the post-secondary system is hampered by existing credential recognition procedures. Residents outside the large urban centres have limited opportunities for continuing education and learning. And it is unclear how the Internet and "e-learning" will offer solutions, given the "digital divide." Moreover, on-line learning content may not be relevant to specific groups. A potential barrier to post-secondary education for some students is rising tuition costs. Within workplaces there are many barriers to learning. For example, lifelong learning will require people to take time off work, but most employers have not developed ways to support this.

Systemic barriers. Many of the greatest barriers to learning are systemic. Discussions of these barriers focused on societal conditions, specifically how poverty and socio-economic disadvantages stand in the way of literacy development. Equally crucial, for Roundtable participants, were systemic barriers arising from a lack of integration among the institutions that make up the learning system. The problem, for many participants, is that Canada has a highly decentralized system of education, training and learning.

The Roundtable underscored the need to be realistic in calling for systemic transformations. Yet, concerns were expressed that we may lack the means to launch major national learning initiatives. As several participants observed, the Canadian Constitution does not encourage lifelong learning, given that the historic division of powers between Ottawa and the provinces has created separate “turf” and issue “ownership.” Federal-provincial attempts at cooperation only go so far. Thus, in early childhood education, the federal government is represented but does not play a major role; in labour market training, provinces have the mandate but often lack the resources or cooperation of other partners to follow through. Even so, bodies such as the Forum for Labour Market Ministers and the Council for Ministers of Education (CMEC) were seen by some participants as having the capacity to unite stakeholders around a societal learning project. Most participants therefore advocated a system-wide, multi-stakeholder approach to moving forward.

The thrust of this lively discussion was aptly summarized in one participant’s comment that, on a host of learning issues, there is no “guardian” for learning. Here is the conundrum: given that education is a provincial responsibility, who will be leading the way on Canada-wide commitments?

Building on strengths. Focusing on opportunities to promote learning, several participants stressed the importance of building on the emerging consensus around the public value of education and learning. Canada has been a leader in literacy research and education, strengths we continue to build on. Informal learning does not suffer from the same constraints as formal learning, so there may be opportunities to link it with formal systems. Even though Canada is a world leader in school Internet access, and use by the adult population, there was no agreement about the potential benefits of e-learning.

In terms of opportunities to seek integration across the system, sector councils were one example of a cooperative, integrated approach that kept coming up in discussions as a successful, uniquely Canadian style of stakeholder cooperation. As well, someone described the signs of an integrated approach emerging as federal, provincial and territorial governments and Aboriginal communities devise new educational arrangements. The CMEC also was cited as having the potential to create a “pan-Canadian” approach to learning.

3) *Identifying Outcomes*

This theme built on the insights generated from discussions of Themes 1 and 2 to identify specific outcomes that will enable us to design actions, measure progress, and determine roles and responsibilities.

Roundtable participants emphasized the need to move from talk to action, outlining the kinds of actions required to advance the learning vision. The Roundtable also struck a note of consensus on the need to identify principles that would help to define the roles and responsibilities of all the parties. To achieve change, one of the breakout groups advocated a new kind of “audacious leadership” on learning policy.

A new policy framework. One point emerging from the plenary discussions was the importance of developing specific programs within an overall public policy framework, with various participants giving examples of how Canadians have lived with the consequences of fragmented policy responses too long. Another participant asked: “Where are we going to find the wisdom to invest in new, innovative structures?”

This led to animated discussion in breakout groups and plenary sessions about the shape of the new “learning” model. One group developed the Vision for Canada’s Learning System described on pages 1 and 2, and repeated in the box below.

A Vision for Canada’s Learning System

1. Valuing and supporting universal early childhood education, making it an integral part of the learning system so that all children develop the literacy skills they need to become lifelong learners.
2. Investing in high quality, universal, publicly delivered primary and secondary education.
3. Ensuring excellence, equitable access, and program diversity within Canada’s higher education system. Programs must provide a balance of technical, analytical and people skills. Universities must equally value and invest in humanities-based and science and technology-based disciplines. Educating the whole person and training for specific skills will occur simultaneously.
4. Enabling all adults to have ongoing opportunities to maintain and enhance literacy and learning skills. A wide range of disadvantaged groups – whose needs have been well documented – will require new resources to participate fully. Accordingly, greater recognition to prior formal and informal learning will facilitate the development and fuller use of people’s talents.

Another group pointed out that governments are hesitant to ask questions about shortcomings in the current policy model. Yet, as several participants argued, governments will have to take the risk of initiating a new model for learning. Someone else proposed that the old model had already “blown up” and that what is new in the model being discussed at the Roundtable is its clear connection between supply (learners) and demand (the needs of society and the economy). Others countered that the old model has become destabilized, resulting in “silos” of fragmented policies and programs.

Collaborative governance. There was much discussion, and in the end general agreement, about creating a new form of governance for addressing learning and skills development – in short, a new policy paradigm. One group’s recommendation for “transformational change” – in contrast to incremental change – captured the imaginations of participants in

plenary discussion. Another group elaborated on this point, suggesting that lifelong learning is itself a transformational strategy, given its potential to change how, where and what we learn across the life course.

Participants emphasized the importance of having an authoritative body design this new policy framework and machinery. A number of individuals called on the federal government to take the lead by enunciating what is needed for learning policy nationally. Yet, as Judith Maxwell, the Chair of the Roundtable, reminded participants in her opening remarks, “No single policy actor controls this agenda.” So successful action requires broadly based collaboration.

Principles to Guide Action

Roundtable discussions coalesced around three guiding principles, which underpin the Vision for Learning and can serve as guides to action:

- 1) All Canadians need opportunities to learn throughout their lives in order to develop their potential and fully contribute to society. Such opportunities also ensure an innovative, globally competitive economy driven by an adaptable, highly skilled workforce.
- 2) Lifelong learning, as a process, must be both inclusive and diverse. Canada must strive to be an inclusive knowledge-based society in which nobody is left behind. And it must value and encourage diverse formal and informal learning activities in a range of contexts.
- 3) Governments must take the lead, providing supports, incentives and infrastructure, and convening the stakeholders. Action plans must be integrated, coordinated, evidence-based and contain accountability measures. The complexity of learning barriers and opportunities and the highly decentralized nature of the learning “system” make a collaborative approach necessary.

Priority Actions

Moving to action depends on strong leadership by existing organizations, such as the CMEC, which can generate a collaborative policy framework. We need to identify “heroes” of lifelong learning, widely share best practices and the benefits of learning investments, and develop action inventories. A further catalyst for action can be creative thinking about the appropriate incentives to get employers actively involved in promoting learning and new government funding mechanisms tied to strategic alliances. Perhaps most crucial, we must now plan long-term social investments in order to bring the most disadvantaged groups in society up to a level where they too can benefit from lifelong learning.

Roundtable participants recommended a future learning agenda based on specific actions and guided by the above principles. Here are the priorities enunciated in breakout groups and plenary sessions:

Early childhood

- Designate 1 percent of GDP to early childhood education by 2005.
- Strike an Early Childhood Education Task Force to create a national action plan, with the federal and provincial governments taking the lead and the active participation of providers and other stakeholder groups.
- Quadruple number of trained early childhood education instructors by 2008.

Disadvantaged groups

- Address the largest gaps in learning opportunities by removing barriers faced by specific disadvantaged groups, specifically Aboriginals, low-literacy adults, children in poor families, the working poor, and high school dropouts.
- Increase the supports to enable Aboriginal people to succeed at all levels of the education system. These supports could include targets for increased high school completion rates and easier access to the initial stages of higher education.

Target setting

- Commit to providing all individuals with basic literacy and numeracy skills. A specific goal is to assist all adults who currently lack basic education to achieve high school equivalency within five years.
- Set higher targets for participation and completion rates in high school and post-secondary educational programs and a timetable for meeting these targets.
- Ensure that the quality of our learning systems is recognized internationally as being “world class.”
- Set targets and timetables for job-related skills upgrading and training.
- Build benchmarks, annual goals and accountability mechanisms built into all new investments in learning.

Expanded opportunities and choices

- Help people make informed choices about learning by clearly outlining the full range of learning opportunities.
- Develop and implement a lifelong learning training plan for trades/vocational training. Develop a communications plan to better inform and promote trades and vocational training system-wide.
- Value a wide range of skills, knowledge and competencies, from the specific to the general, from the technical to the intellectual and intuitive.

Financial resources

- Develop a learner financial support system that is universal, responsive, affordable, flexible and simplified.

- Address post-secondary education-related student debt loads by assisting students and graduates find paid work.

Strengthening infrastructure

- Sustained support for public education.
- Support more research into how we effectively teach and learn.
- Equip teachers and instructors with leading-edge skills so they can fully exploit new e-learning technologies.
- Invest in a common information base, including a new survey of formal and informal learning, a glossary of terms, and a database to track quality and outcomes for the education system from kindergarten to post-secondary.

Roles and Responsibilities

Progress on the learning vision requires, first and foremost, clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all major players. Regardless of which organization takes the lead on particular initiatives, it is essential that an inclusive view of “stakeholders” be used so that now-marginalized groups can contribute to creative learning solutions.

Governments. Governments have both individual and collective roles to play in achieving the Learning Vision set out in the final plenary session. To meet their collective responsibility, the Roundtable recommended that the CMEC could play an instrumental role if it had a mandate from First Ministers, launching a process designed to engage all the stakeholders. Federal-Provincial Action Teams could disseminate best learning practices, nationally and internationally, consolidating these into an inventory for use by all.

Employers. Employer support for learning is essential. This support could be mobilized by documenting the benefits of diverse forms of learning for innovation and competitiveness, organizational performance, and recruitment and retention. Employers and governments can jointly take the lead in recognizing prior learning experience. Another suggestion was to engage industry to support educational initiatives within their communities.

Other institutions. Sector councils are effective at achieving multi-stakeholder cooperation, so all levels of government should foster these. Existing bodies, such as the National Literacy Secretariat, should seek more effective funding and delivery models. Furthermore, there is much scope for post-secondary institutions to work together on learning, with the federal and provincial governments using their leverage to encourage this greater cooperation.

Individuals. Individuals too have a responsibility for learning. But the general sentiment at the Roundtable was that governments and employers, in particular, must work jointly to help provide the enabling conditions.

The Way Forward

Nobody at the Roundtable had any illusions about the completeness of the vision set out in the box above. It is best seen as a starting point for a bold Canadian project. A number of participants looked around the room and asked “Who else should be at this table?” or “Which groups are not here but should be?” They identified a need for more representation from marginalized groups and a far greater role for employers.

Of course, a single Roundtable of this size cannot be fully representative. Nor can it possibly cover all the angles on relevant issues. So the Roundtable participants want to invite wide debate on their recommendations as a vital step in the process of building a national learning agenda.

Contentious issues remain to be resolved: the right balance of individual and public responsibilities for learning; support for public education in the context of lifelong learning; accepted standards for learning outcomes; forging a consensus around the public value of learning; and specific policy instruments such as learning accounts. Undoubtedly the largest unresolved strategic issue at the Roundtable is the next step – or as stated by one of the breakout groups, “who should call the party” that would convene all stakeholders.

Reflecting on the themes in the Roundtable transcripts, one can see a route forward.

- *First*, there is a need for a dialogue at the highest levels on roles, responsibilities, goals and targets. This dialogue could begin with the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada, which could prepare a document for discussion by First Ministers – much like the *Report to Premiers* prepared in 1995 by the Ministerial Council on Social Policy Reform and Renewal. First Ministers could then set out goals and invite all the stakeholders to come forward with their commitments to a new way forward.
- *Second*, First Ministers could begin to mobilize their own governments and the key stakeholders to work on the implementation of these goals for Canada’s learning system. To do this, First Ministers could mandate a number of working groups, involving all the stakeholders – governments plus employers, education and other institutions, and citizens – to provide advice on particular challenges that cross the borders of jurisdiction.
- *Third*, provinces and territories need to establish targets that turn the goals into realistic goals, and then to forge their own action plan for achieving those targets. Since the provinces and territories are at different starting points and face rather different financial and socio-economic challenges, they need to set their own pace and their own priorities.

These three steps will launch the kind of change sought by participants at the Roundtable. In this way, we can provide a concrete answer to a question posed by one participant: “There has already been lots of talk. How will tomorrow be different?”

For further information on the reports of the National Roundtables, visit the following Web sites or contact:

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