

SKILLS UPGRADING INITIATIVES IN CANADA:

REGIONAL CASE STUDIES

Preliminary Report

by

Richard Brisbois and Ron Saunders

*Canadian Policy Research Networks
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada*

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Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc.

600 – 250 Albert Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 6M1

Tel: (613) 567-7500 Fax: (613) 567-7640

Web Site: <http://www.cprn.org>

Introduction

A growing body of evidence supports the view that human capital development is a key factor in driving economic growth. The OECD (2002) has noted that, despite a growing recognition of the importance of human capital development to meeting social and economic objectives, low-skilled workers often find that opportunities to enhance their skills and improve the quality of their jobs are scarce. In many OECD countries, including Canada, there is a high incidence of poverty among working households. Government training programs tend to target the unemployed, especially the long-term unemployed, rather than the low-skilled, low-waged employed. Moreover, employers tend to provide more and better skills development programs for workers who are already highly-skilled.

OECD (2002) research also suggests that skills upgrading is often part of an “education” agenda related to the notion of lifelong learning, rather than simply an employment policy agenda. However, the demands and business needs of employers are often influential in the development of skills-upgrading initiatives.

Some initiatives have been undertaken in Canada at the national, provincial/territorial, and local levels to promote upgrading of the skills of less-skilled workers. The case studies presented in this chapter may shed some light on the opportunities and challenges associated with efforts to provide skills development opportunities to such workers.

The chapter focuses on case studies in two neighbouring regions of Canada; the northern portion of the Province of Alberta and the Northwest Territories. The cases presented include a diversity of initiatives that aim to reinforce the need and importance of basic, essential skills in the workplace. The chapter largely focuses on cases involving employers who, in collaboration with community colleges, have developed tools, very much based on their local labour market needs, to upgrade the skills of their workforce. These tools were developed, in part, through initiatives of the federal government.

Structure of the Chapter¹

This chapter begins with a general overview of the Canadian labour market highlighting a number of key economic indicators (Section 1). The second section provides a discussion of policy initiatives in skills development of the federal government as well as the Government of Alberta and the Government of the Northwest Territories. A brief overview of the labour markets of the two main case study regions is presented in Section 3. Section 4 provides detailed descriptions of the skills upgrading initiatives in the case studies selected for this report and provides a summary assessment of these initiatives. Section 5 seeks to present a discussion of common themes and lessons learned from the Canadian study. Finally, we provide overall conclusions to the study in Section 6.

¹ Sections 1 through 3 of this chapter (The National Labour Market, Adult Education and Training Policy in Canada, and The Regional Labour Markets) utilize the text of the background report authored by Erik de Vries of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) for the OECD Canadian Study. Some minor edits and modifications were made to the text drawn from the background report and new information was also added in some areas. We thank Mr. de Vries for permission to utilize the text of the background report in this chapter. We also acknowledge Caithlin McArton and Awo Nuuh of HRSDC for their assistance in developing the background report with Mr. de Vries.

Research Methodology

Information for this study was gathered from the following sources: a background report (unpublished) outlining the national policy framework prepared by Erik de Vries of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) for the OECD; presentations and discussions that occurred during the initial (May, 2004) site visit to the case study regions by the OECD/LEED study group; in-depth follow-up interviews by the Canadian research team with key stakeholders involved in the case studies (June, 2004); and examination of published materials and website content from the various stakeholders.