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**Post-secondary Education in Canada:
A Vision from Canadian Youth**

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Executive Summary

May 2006

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On the occasion of its tenth anniversary, CPRN brought together 144 young Canadians aged 18 to 25 years, randomly selected, for a deliberative Dialogue and a Summit with 40 decision-makers from government, business, labour, and the not-for-profit sectors. The event took place in Ottawa on November 24-27, 2005. Young participants were invited to talk together about the kind of Canada they want, what choices and trade-offs they are prepared to make as citizens, and what they and others need to do to make their vision happen.

Dialogue participants talked about four issues that the Advisory Committee on Engaging Young Canadians and other youth had identified as especially important: learning, work, health, and the environment. This document reports on the discussion of **Learning** issues, and particularly, the elements of the Dialogue that touched on post-secondary education. (Reports on the full dialogue discussion are available on CPRN's web site.)

In the initial stage of the dialogue process, young people were invited to state their own concerns in the Learning area. They were broad-ranging:

- Is lifelong learning a reality? Is it affordable?
- Why is education so different across our country?
- Why isn't there a wider range of vocational preparation opportunities in and beyond high school, and better information about the existing ones?
- Why is post-secondary education so expensive, forcing many students into substantial debt loads?
- Why isn't there better quality assurance in university teaching?
- Who is responsible for ensuring that skills acquired in post-secondary education offer guarantees for jobs?

In the context of their overarching vision for Canada and the values they endorsed to guide their thinking – accountability and transparency, long term sustainability and prevention, equity and efficiency – young Canadians articulated their own Vision for education in Canada around seven pillars:

- Education is for life, not just for a job;
- Canada is a bilingual (multilingual) country;
- Canada is a diverse country to discover;
- Assessment and upgrading skills opportunities should be given to all educators;
- Access to post-secondary education and training should be guaranteed to all who qualify;
- Non-university, vocational and trades paths should be valued and supported;
- Students should be able to focus on learning.

Under the main thrust of their Vision – **No-one must be left behind** – young Canadians went further on specific post-secondary issues:

- They stressed the importance of valuing different learning paths to work, in addition to college and university, and to find some balance to the exaggerated reliance on academic performance.
- They emphasized that all forms of education beyond high school should be made accessible to and affordable for all qualified and motivated individuals.
- They called for all learning systems to be integrated and coordinated nationally, with similar levels of support provided to students and educators throughout the country.

The young participants assembled the pieces of their dialogue within three challenges under which they identified actions to be taken to start moving towards achieving their Vision for Learning. These actions would involve a range of education stakeholders (themselves and their families, governments, business and communities):

Challenge #1: Access to education

- ✓ Establish a legal ‘right to learn’ and reorient Canada’s public education systems to implement it;
- ✓ Proceed with assessment of individuals based on a portfolio – moving away from rather exclusive consideration given to academic performance, in particular for access to post-secondary education;
- ✓ Identify common core competencies required for a job wherever you train in Canada;
- ✓ Build common resources for the education system, to be shared by educators and students throughout the country.

Challenge #2: Ensure that the quality of education is the same for all Canadian citizens

- ✓ Root schools and post-secondary institutions in their communities – they should be centres of community development and access to learning;
- ✓ Establish a national curriculum (with local flavour), that promotes lifelong learning and citizenship skills;
- ✓ Finance education in a standardized way across the country on a per capita basis, with adjustments for regional needs;
- ✓ Give credit for different types of learning styles – not all young people are same, nor do they approach learning in the same way.

Challenge #3: Education for life – to be better citizens and to prepare for whatever kind of job they want to go into

- ✓ Change high-school curricula to ensure that people get the skills they need even if they don’t go onto post-secondary education;
- ✓ Establish an ongoing National Youth Ambassador Program – a youth-led and driven program to help younger students make sense of their education orientation and career decisions;
- ✓ Value different paths for learning and for preparation for work – societal values and attitudes towards the trades and vocational education need shifting;

- ✓ Develop knowledge about politics early on through civic education – education for life means education for citizenship, with schools and communities as primary players.

These actions overlap across the identified challenges; they often reinforce each other.

In addition to their group deliberations, individual opinions on key issues were collected from the young participants at the outset of the Dialogue and at the end of the event. Early thoughts were clearly firmed up for many, and the process allowed them to deepen their understanding of the issues at stake and weigh the validity and relevance of their choices.