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## **A High Return on Investment: Adult Education in Canada**

Ottawa – Canada is losing ground where adult education is concerned. Many of its competitors are doing a better job of ensuring their citizens become more productive.

The evidence is clear: adult learning can increase productivity, incomes and our competitiveness. Federal and provincial governments acknowledge this. But the number of less educated workers taking part in skills and knowledge upgrading has barely improved in the past five years. Why?

A new study from CPRN provides answers and makes recommendations to improve the effectiveness of Canada's adult education systems. ***Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System***, by Karen Myers and Patrice de Broucker, documents the availability of formal adult learning opportunities in Canada and the factors influencing the participation of less educated/less skilled workers. The authors pinpoint gaps and suggest ways to overcome them.

The size of the challenge is daunting – 5.8 million Canadians, 25 years and older, have not completed high school, and 9 million Canadians, aged 16 to 65, don't have the literacy skills demanded by today's workplaces.

The benefits of meeting this challenge are correspondingly enormous. Recent research shows that the *returns to investment in skills upgrading of less educated workers are three times as great as for investment in physical capital*. But the upgrading is not taking place.

“Though workers with less than high school education would benefit most from upgrading their skills, we find individuals with a university degree are five times as likely to participate in adult learning opportunities,” says de Broucker. “Less educated workers are increasingly disadvantaged over their working life as a result.”

Myers and de Broucker find that participation in skills upgrading is affected by such things as economic growth (the lure of immediate job opportunities, even for the less-skilled), lack of interest, lack of confidence, lack of awareness, an unresponsive learning environment and cost and time. Research shows, however, considerable unmet demand for upgrading opportunities by the less educated.

“If this demand were met,” says de Broucker, “participation in high school completion programs would double!”

The authors also find barriers to those who wish to pursue post-secondary education later in life. Perhaps the most significant is a financial aid system suited to students on the traditional path from high school to university or college, and not appropriate to the needs of older students, especially those with dependents.

Finally, they find that Canada lags behind other advanced nations in job-related training. Employers focus their support for training largely on their higher skilled workers. Some employers gain their competitive edge from low-cost, low-skilled work and have little incentive to invest in skill development. And Canadian governments have few policies that encourage employers to train their employees, let alone their less skilled ones.

What is to be done?

Myers and de Broucker propose a vision for an adult learning system characterized by the following principles:

- No one will leave school without a minimum set of employability skills.
- All adults will have access to chances to upgrade their basic skills and maintain, enhance and transform more advanced skills.
- Accessible information about learning opportunities, and counseling, will be readily available to all adults. The system of supports will be coordinated and easily navigable.
- All adults willing to upgrade their skills will get appropriate assistance.
- Skills development of all workers is an important and worthwhile investment.

To implement their adult learning vision, the authors suggest five steps:

1. Implement a policy framework that acknowledges an adult “right to learn”
2. Develop financial support programs appropriate to adult learners’ needs.
3. Provide incentives to employers to support training of less-skilled employees – a complex challenge needing further research to determine the most effective levers.
4. Increase governments’ investment in training for basic skills – directing investment to individuals most in need and to new and innovative programs.
5. Develop a coordinated approach to respond to adult learners’ needs – provide a single point of access, accessible information, guides to learning opportunities, information on costs and benefits and face-to-face counseling.

“In Canada, we have a strong consensus that a publicly funded education is the cornerstone of a fair, productive and socially cohesive society,” says de Broucker. “There is every reason to believe that the social and economic benefits of publicly funded *adult* education will be equally profound.”

**Note:** CPRN is also releasing a companion report, *Self-assessed Returns to Adult Education: Life-long Learning and the Educationally Disadvantaged*, by Karen Myers and John Myles. The report assesses the efficacy of adult learning in meeting the needs of less educated or less skilled adults. Its main findings are incorporated in the Myers and de Broucker study.

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CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public dialogue and debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

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