

Towards an Effective Adult Learning System: Report on the Atlantic Roundtable

Prepared for the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre
of the Canadian Council on Learning

By
Ron Saunders
Canadian Policy Research Networks

January 2007

Towards an Effective Adult Learning System: Report on the Atlantic Roundtable

Introduction

There is a lot of talk in policy circles about “lifelong” learning. In an economy where technologies and skill needs are constantly changing, Canadians must have access to learning opportunities throughout their lives. This is reinforced by concerns about the ageing of the workforce: with declining labour force growth, it is important that everyone, including older Canadians, has a chance to fully contribute to the economy and to their communities.

It is particularly important that those with lower levels of educational attainment have the opportunity to improve their skills, in light of concerns about the polarization of earnings and income and disturbing evidence (from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey) about adult literacy levels: 9 million Canadians aged 16 to 65 years have literacy skills below the level considered necessary to live and work in today’s society.

But how well do we “walk the talk” about lifelong learning in Canada? To answer this question, Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) undertook a study to document the availability of learning opportunities for adults, identify factors that influence the participation of less educated/less skilled adults, and assess the effectiveness of our adult learning systems. The resulting report, *Too Many Left Behind: Canada’s Adult Education and Training System*, by Karen Myers and Patrice de Broucker, finds that access to learning opportunities, whether through second chances in the formal education system, through government-funded programs in the community, or through employer-sponsored training, is generally poor for less-educated adults in Canada. The report puts forward a set of principles for reform, and recommends some steps towards a more coherent, navigable, and effective adult learning system.

The Adult Learning Knowledge Centre (ALKC) of the Canadian Council on Learning is sponsoring a series of regional roundtables to discuss the findings of *Too Many Left Behind*, develop a vision for a more effective learning system, and identify actions that could be taken to move towards that vision. The roundtables involve government officials, educators, and researchers.

The first of these roundtables was held in Halifax on November 13, 2006, with participants from across the Atlantic region. This document reports on the highlights of the discussion at the Halifax roundtable and the ideas for action that emerged from it.

Too Many Left Behind: Highlights of the Report

At the roundtable in Halifax, the authors of *Too Many Left Behind*, Karen Myers and Patrice de Broucker, provided an overview of the report. They noted that 3.7 million Canadians aged 25-64 do not have a high school diploma or higher credentials, and that evidence is emerging that second chances in education/training have a substantial impact, but that less educated adults are five times less likely to participate in structured learning than those with a university degree. Survey data suggest that many more adults would like to take such programs but face financial and other barriers, including difficulties in finding the time to participate. The authors found that, although most provinces have launched recent initiatives in support of learning opportunities for adults, adult learning systems remain complex, fragmented and incomplete, and employer support for training remains concentrated on the higher-skilled.

Myers and de Broucker summarized the **vision for adult learning** systems, set out in *Too Many Left Behind*, as follows:

- No one will leave school without a minimum set of employability skills.
- All adults will have access to learning opportunities to:
 - enhance their basic skills, and
 - maintain, enhance or transform advanced skills.
- All adults will have access to easy-to-follow information about learning opportunities.
- Counselling will be readily available; supports will be coordinated, and the system will be easy to navigate.
- The skills development of all workers will be considered important and worthwhile investments.

They also summarized their recommendations regarding steps needed to move towards that vision:

- Implement a public policy **framework** that acknowledges the “**right to learn.**”
- Develop **financial support** programs appropriate to the needs of adult learners.
- Provide **incentives for employers** to support training of their less-skilled employees.
- Increase governments’ **investment in basic skills** training.
- Develop a **coordinated approach** to respond to adult learners’ needs.

Recent Initiatives in Atlantic Canada

Participants in the Halifax roundtable shared information about recent initiatives in the region (and a few elsewhere). Among those reported were the following:

School for Adult Learning (Nova Scotia)

- Coordinates the delivery of adult learning services in the province: provides access to a continuum of services for learners over the age of 18; developed a new high school diploma for adults.

Premier's Provincial Literacy and Learning Strategy (PEI)

- Involves partnerships among government, business, and community organizations to promote learning in all stages of life, from early childhood education to adult learning.

Training the Trainer (New Brunswick – Université de Moncton)

- Offers a certificate program in Adult Education, designed to train adult educators to deliver programs in ways that are sensitive to how adults learn.

Distributed Learning (Newfoundland and Labrador – College of the North Atlantic)

- Uses telecommunications technology in combination with other media to make learning opportunities accessible on-line to learners who may be constrained by time and geography; has facilitated adult access to learning: the average age of distributed learning students is 27.

National Adult Literacy Database

- Provides a portal for access to information about adult literacy services and initiatives, and a library of resources that can be used in the design and delivery of adult literacy programs.

Dialogue on Key Characteristics of an Effective Adult Learning System

Roundtable participants were asked to imagine what an effective adult learning system would look like. In particular, they were asked to address the following questions:

- What would an effective system look like from the point of view of the client? What would they experience at any entry point? How would their needs be identified and met?
- What would the system look like in terms of relationships among the various players in delivery (governments and service providers)? What kinds of partnerships would be in place?

The ensuing discussion, first in small groups and then in plenary, generated a remarkable degree of consensus on a vision for adult learning. The vision would result in an adult learning system with the following features:

Learner-centred

- Educational institutions have a client-service orientation.
- Individuals are able to choose their own path (supported by accessible information and advice).

Coordinated/Seamless

- Learners are able to enter the system at any point and be assisted in finding their way to the service that is appropriate for them.
- Consistent needs assessment tools are in place across the system.

Collaborative

- Deliverers of adult training and employment services work together (and with clients) to meet client needs.

Affordable

- Financial assistance allows individuals seeking learning opportunities to be able to participate, whether or not they are eligible for Employment Insurance (EI).
- Employers are offered financial incentives to invest in learning programs.

Equitable

- There is active outreach to disadvantaged groups to facilitate their participation in learning activities.

Accountable

- Learning programs are evaluated and outcomes are reported.

Flexible

- Courses are available at times and places convenient for adult learners. (For those who have jobs, this means availability of courses at the workplace.)

Sustainable

- There is adequate and stable funding to support a comprehensive, integrated adult learning system.

Visible

- There is widespread awareness of adult learning opportunities.
- People know where to go to enter the system.

Supportive Culture

- Governments have made a commitment to a “right to learn” for everyone.
- Employers who have made a strong investment in training act as champions vis-à-vis other employers.

It was also suggested by some that it may be helpful to develop an adult learning strategy that spans the Atlantic region, rather than four separate strategies. There was also a suggestion for a pan-Canadian discussion, perhaps convened by the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC) or the Council of the Federation. At the same time, there was a view that any framework has to allow creativity to flourish at the community level.

Dialogue on Actions towards an Effective Adult Learning System

Roundtable participants were then asked to propose actions to move adult learning systems in the Atlantic region towards the kind of vision that they had articulated. They were guided by the following questions:

- What can and should each “community” do, on its own initiative, to move us toward the kind of adult learning system we want?
 - governments
 - colleges
 - school boards
 - community service providers
 - employers
 - unions
- What actions can and should be taken in partnership among various players?

Proposed Actions for Governments

- Develop, in collaboration with all stakeholders, a policy framework for adult learning that includes recognition of the right to learn. Engage community groups in the process (and in ongoing policy development).
- Increase investment in learning programs. Provide stable, long-term funding, including financial assistance to those who participate as individuals as well as financial incentives to employers. (The federal government could use the EI fund to provide premium credits to employers who train.)
- Coordinate labour market policy across government departments within provinces as well as across provinces.
- Use the media, as well as champions at the community level, to help promote a culture of lifelong learning.

Proposed Actions for Schools, Colleges, and Universities

- Offer more courses on evenings and weekends.
- Increase access to individual courses without requiring that students commit to a diploma or degree program.
- For those who do want to complete a program, offer more flexibility around course load/time to complete.
- Use prior learning assessment and recognition more actively.
- Provide more support for distance education; establish satellite operations in rural areas.
- Work with employers and employer-organizations to customize skills assessment tools and curriculum to meet the needs of particular industries.

Proposed Actions for Employers and Employer Associations

- Increase investment in structured learning for employees. Declining labour force growth will push employers to make jobs more attractive, and offering learning opportunities is one way for them to accomplish this.
- Share success stories; act as champions.

Proposed Partnerships

Many of the above actions implicitly involve partnerships/collaboration. In addition, the following actions were proposed:

- Governments and educational institutions should work to improve articulation between different providers.
- Government funding formulas should foster collaboration among service providers.

First Steps

Roundtable participants discussed what could be done first to advance the agenda outlined above. Ideas included:

- Individual participants promoting these ideas within their organizations/communities;
- Convening a workshop or symposium to work on a “right to learn” framework;
- Seeking a dialogue with the CMEC on these issues.
- Developing an action kit that could be used by multiple stakeholders.
- Collecting and disseminating information on successful/promising local initiatives and incentive programs.

So Now What?

The Halifax roundtable was the first of four to discuss how to move towards a more effective adult learning system. The next is in Toronto in January, followed by roundtables in Montreal and Alberta. Each will provide an opportunity to build on the ideas developed in the earlier discussions. An overall report will be prepared at the conclusion of the series, which will identify areas of strong consensus for action, and suggest ways to achieve adoption and implementation of the recommendations.

Appendix A. Roundtable Agenda

Agenda for the Halifax Roundtable November 13, 2006

8:30 am	Welcome and introductions – Adult Learning Knowledge Centre (ALKC) and Canadian Policy Research Network (CPRN)
9 am	Brief overview of CPRN report by authors Table group discussion
10 am	BREAK
10:20 am	Overview of current/recent initiatives by governments in the region (5 minutes per jurisdiction, following the report's Adult Learning framework)
11 am	Small group discussions re: key characteristics of an effective adult learning system
11:45 am	Brief reports back to plenary
12:15 pm	LUNCH
1:15 pm	Review common elements from morning session
1:30 pm	Small group discussions – steps towards the kind of adult learning system we want
2:45 pm	BREAK
3 pm	Small groups report back to plenary
3:30 pm	Final comments and wrap-up
4:15 pm	ADJOURN

Appendix B. Roundtable Participants

Province	Name	Title-Organization
NB	John Cunningham	Executive Director, Adult Learning Skills Post-Secondary Education, Government of New Brunswick
NB	Jean-Jacques Doucet	Coordonnateur de programme, Programme en éducation des adultes, Université de Moncton
NB	Charles Ramsey	Executive Director National Adult Literacy Database
NB	Judith Potter	Executive Director College of Extended Learning University of New Brunswick
NB	Kathleen Flanagan	Coordinator Adult Learning Knowledge Centre
NB	Patrick Flanagan	Facilitator (Atlantic roundtable), Board Member Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD)
NL	Candice Ennis-Williams	Director, Adult Learning and Literacy Division Department of Education
NL	Ann Marie Vaughan	Director, Distance Education and Learning Technologies, Memorial University of Newfoundland
NL	John King	Chair of Distributed Learning College of the North Atlantic
NS	Marjorie Davison	Director of Apprenticeship Dept. of Education, Government of Nova Scotia
NS	Margan Dawson	Executive Director Association of Workplace Educators of Nova Scotia (AWENS)
NS	Ann Marie Downie	Executive Director Literacy Nova Scotia
NS	Joan McArthur-Blair	President Nova Scotia Community College
NS	Bobbi Boudreau	Director of Skills and Learning Branch Nova Scotia Department of Education
NS	Mary Morrissey	Associate Prior Learning Assessment Centre

ON	Patrice de Broucker	Author: <i>Too Many Left Behind</i>
ON	Brenda King	Facilitator (Ontario roundtable), Executive Director Association of Adult and Continuing Education School Board Administrators
ON	Karen Myers	Author: <i>Too Many Left Behind</i>
ON	Ron Saunders	Director, Work Network, CPRN
PEI	Barbara Macnutt	Manager of Literacy Initiatives Secretariat Continuing Education and Training, Dept. of Education
PEI	Audrey Penner	Manager, Adult Education Programs Holland College
PEI	Jake Baird	Executive Director Holland College
PEI	Mark Leggott	Librarian University of Prince Edward Island