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

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

By

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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 work force: with declining labour force growth, it is important that everyone, including older Canadians, have a chance to fully contribute to the economy and to their communities. It is further reinforced where there is a sustained economic boom, as is currently the case in Alberta (and, to a lesser extent, the other western provinces), such that skilled workers are in short supply.

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: nine million Canadians aged 16 to 65 have literacy skills below the level considered necessary to live and work in today's society. As the chart below shows, the proportion of the population with weak literacy skills is relatively lower in the western provinces, but still high, and very high for the Aboriginal population.

**Percentage of Population Aged 16-65 with Scores at the Bottom Two Levels
of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey**
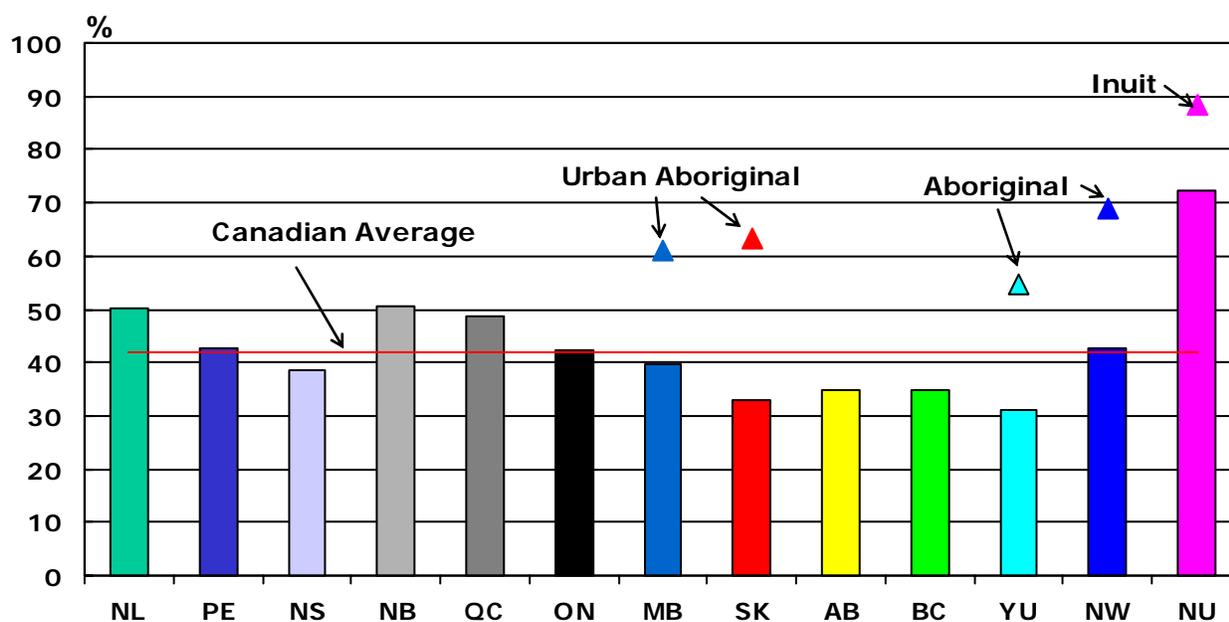
Source: *Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey 2003*, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and Statistics Canada, 2005.

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.[1] 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 sponsored 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 involved government officials, educators, representatives of the business and labour communities, and researchers.

The first of these roundtables was held in Halifax on November 13, 2006, the second in Toronto on January 12, 2007, the third in Montreal on February 16, 2007, and the fourth in Calgary on April 16, 2007. This document reports on the highlights of the discussion at the Calgary roundtable. Participants in Calgary came from all four western provinces.

Too Many Left Behind: Key Conclusions

At the Calgary roundtable (as at the three preceding ones), Patrice de Broucker, co-author of *Too Many Left Behind*, provided an overview of the conclusions and recommendations of that report. Patrice noted 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.

The **vision for adult learning** systems set out in *Too Many Left Behind* is 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 an important and worthwhile investment.

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[1]   By "less educated", we mean those without a high school diploma or equivalent, or those with a high school diploma and no further credentials (whether a degree, diploma, trades certificate, or certificate from an essential skills program). We are also concerned about adults who may have one or more of these credentials but have poor literacy skills.

Too Many Left Behind recommends the following steps to move towards this 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.

Outcomes of the Previous Roundtables

Ron Saunders briefly reviewed key outcomes of the Halifax, Toronto, and Montreal roundtables.[2] Participants in those discussions identified the following characteristics that an adult learning system should have:

Learner-centred	*Transparent**
Goal-directed*	*Accountable*
Coordinated/seamless	*Relevant**
Aligned* (programs complement each other)	*Flexible*
Collaborative	*Sustainable*
Affordable (and free for basic competencies**)	*Visible*
Equitable	*Available in community***
Attractive to adult learners**	*Respectful of adult circumstances***

* Added in Toronto   ** Modified/Added in Montreal

Actions proposed in Halifax, Toronto and Montreal to realize this vision included the following:

- *Develop a policy framework centred on the "right to learn"*
    – Promote a culture of lifelong learning
    – Establish an umbrella organization to oversee adult learning
    – Provide free access to acquisition of basic competencies at all ages
    – Extend thinking beyond "family/work" to "family/work/education"

- *Facilitate learner pathways*
    – Develop common assessment tools, a referral protocol, and plain language guides so that clients can find a suitable path wherever they enter the system
    – Governments and educational institutions work to improve collaboration/articulation among different providers

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[2]   For more detail on these, see the roundtable reports available on the CPRN and CCL Web sites.

- *Improve funding arrangements*
  - Training co-operatives to support training systems for SMEs
  - Tax credits for apprenticeships and internships

- *Foster employer investment in training*
  - Nationally extend the Quebec initiative known as the *General Framework for Skills Development and Recognition*, a partnership among labour market partners, educational institutions, community and government – possible support from EI
  - Employer associations and bipartite organizations should help identify champions and share promising practices
  - Unions should put workplace training on their bargaining agendas
  - Training providers should customize skills assessment tools and curriculum to meet the needs of particular industries
  - Researchers should examine return on investment
  - Governments should consider financial incentives

- *Establish more active collaboration between employers and the education system*
  - Link vocational preparation to labour market needs
  - Assess sectoral needs and implications for education
  - Organize work-study programs through internships

- *Increase the flexibility of course offerings*
  - Offer more evening/weekend courses
  - Provide flexibility around course load/completion time
  - Use PLAR more actively
  - Offer dual credit programs to adults

- *Enable community-led initiatives*
  - Bring key stakeholders together at the community level
  - Governments should provide funding that can be tailored to community needs; accountability requirements should focus on results

- *Take advantage of successful pilots*
  - All pilot projects should have a funded knowledge exchange component
  - Funders should plan sustained funding of successful pilots

Some of these proposed actions are directed to governments; some to schools, colleges, and universities; some to employers and employer associations; some to unions; and many would require partnerships involving two or more of these groups.

Discussion of the Vision

Participants at the Calgary roundtable were asked to comment on the vision that emerged from previous discussions, taking into account the context in their provinces. Comments included the following:

- The goals of adult learning should extend beyond labour market outcomes (employment, earnings) to include active, engaged citizens who are able to contribute to the development of their communities. This reinforces comments heard at other roundtables. However, the link to productivity remains important.

- In some cases, affordability requires income replacement.

- The system should allow for the recognition of credits offered by different institutions/ providers.

- Flexibility should be balanced by the need for structure.

- Programs need to be cost-effective from the perspective of all payers (e.g. governments, employers).

- Adult learning programs should be connected to a continuous learning system (i.e., learning for young people and adult learning should be seamless).

- Bold action is required to realize the vision in a way that will really make a difference. Small steps may be part of this, but alone they will not be enough.

With these changes, the key characteristics of the desired adult learning system would be as follows:

Learner-centred	*Transparent*
Goal-directed (individual and community goals)	*Accountable*
Coordinated/seamless	*Relevant*
Aligned (programs complement each other)	*Balanced between flexibility and structure*
Articulated (credits recognized across providers)	*Sustainable*
Collaborative	*Visible*
Affordable (and free for basic competencies)	*Connected to youth education*
Cost-effective	*Available in community*
Equitable	*Respectful of adult circumstances*
Attractive to adult learners	

Recent/New Initiatives in the Western Provinces

Government representatives and leaders from the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre were asked to identify recent policy or program initiatives that might be of interest to participants at the roundtable. Among those outlined were the following[3]:

Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre

- The Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre is working with the head office of the Canadian Council on Learning to identify **what success in learning means from an Aboriginal perspective**. A recent workshop examined how to redefine learning success for First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

British Columbia

- British Columbia announced, in January 2007, an investment of $27 million in funding for the first phase of a provincial **literacy strategy** designed to increase the number of children who enter school with the pre-reading skills they need to succeed, and to improve reading skills among school-age children and Aboriginal people, as well as in the workplace. The envelope includes $5 million to help Literacy Now address community literacy needs around British Columbia and $1 million to expand community-based adult literacy programs for learners at the lowest literacy levels, with increased focus on families and Aboriginal people.

Alberta

- Alberta is developing an **integrated career development system** to provide better access throughout life for individuals to engage in career and employment programs and services.

- The **time frame** within which eligible clients can receive **grant funding** is being extended. This will help highly disadvantaged clients, such as immigrants requiring ESL, receive the training they require in order to attach successfully and sustain attachment to the labour market.

- **ESL** delivery is being **expanded in rural locations** through partnerships between community colleges and local community providers.

- Information on **training outcomes** will be accessible by Web, enabling current and potential learners to see variances by institution and program and allowing institutions to compare their results with a provincial average.

Saskatchewan

- Saskatchewan has established a Literacy Commission to develop and coordinate a new **literacy strategy**. The Commission aims to increase literacy levels for youth and adults through coordinating the human and financial resources dedicated to literacy across educational, economic and community sectors. A new program for family literacy was launched in April 2006, and new funding for community literacy programming was announced in October 2006.

- Funding has been provided for **additional programming for First Nations, Métis and northern learners**, as well as for additional immigration, **foreign credential recognition** and settlement programming. **Prior learning recognition** initiatives have been funded to help facilitate transitions from learning to work, and work to learning.

- Significant investment in **technology-enhanced learning** since 2000 has enhanced the quality and flexibility of learning opportunities, particularly for learners in rural and northern communities.

- Funding has been provided to establish **inner city skills and trades centres** to improve education and labour market outcomes for young adults and others, including better linkages to local employers.

Manitoba

- Developed and launched a **screening tool** for Adult Learning Centres (ALCs) to assist intake advisors in determining if applicants who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) have sufficient **language skills** to manage high-school level ALC coursework.

- In November, tabled the *Adult Literacy Act* (currently at second reading). This act, if passed, will require the development of a provincial **Adult Literacy Strategy**.

- Recent cross-department initiatives include the development of an **Aboriginal Education Action Plan,** a **Labour Market Strategy for Immigrants,** and a **Career Development Framework.**

Examples of Promising Initiatives

Karen Myers, co-author of *Too Many Left Behind*, presented a selection of examples of promising initiatives in Canadian provinces or the United States to improve learning opportunities for adults or to better connect learning programs to what employers are looking for in the labour market. The examples outlined by Myers were as follows:

Improving coordination

- **Articulation:** facilitates transfer of course work and credits between participating institutions (British Columbia)

- **Formal referral protocols:** ensure that learners receive advice about programs best suited to their needs (Nova Scotia, Quebec)

- **Adult Learning Centres:** provide one-stop access to adult learning (Manitoba)

Sharing information

- **Telephone hotlines:** provide program information by phone and referrals for face-to-face counseling (Quebec)

- **Service centres:** provide one-stop information and referrals (Alberta)

Providing financial support

- **Income support programs:** provide income support to low-income adult learners who meet specific requirements (Alberta)

- **Bursaries:** The Millennium Adult Learner Bursary provides assistance to low-income learners who are pursuing post-secondary studies (Manitoba)

Creating learner pathways

- **Dual credit programs:** allow adult learners to pursue a PSE credit at the same time as they are pursuing a high school credit (Manitoba, Nova Scotia)[3]

- **Career ladder and pathways:** Several community colleges in the United States have partnered with local labour market intermediaries to map out pathways that show low-income individuals how different programs of learning lead to career opportunities in the labour market, with career progression as different levels of learning are completed**.**

Ideas for Action

Participants at the Calgary roundtable were asked to identify, through small group discussions, ideas for action (by government or other stakeholders) regarding adult learning in the western provinces that would help realize the vision outlined above.

The ideas put forward centred on five themes:

1. Develop a more integrated adult learning system.

   - Governments should establish an overall policy framework, possibly through legislation.

   - All players should work to foster partnerships among all levels and departments of government, aboriginal communities, providers of learning programs, sectoral organizations, business, and labour. Build on existing mechanisms wherever possible (e.g. the Forum of Labour Market Ministers, the Council of Ministers of Education, the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre). Government leadership is needed at the highest level to drive this.

   - Governments and educational institutions should work to provide better articulation among learning programs (including better connections between the K-12 and post-secondary systems).

   - Governments should develop a pan-Canadian career development strategy.

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[3]   Manitoba recently collected feedback from both high school students and adult learners participating in dual credit programs. While both groups were positive in their appraisal of dual credit courses, adult learners identified the greatest benefits. In addition, about 50 percent of adult learners stated that having a dual credit influenced their decision to pursue a post-secondary program.

2. Address financial barriers to participation in learning opportunities.

- Reform the financial aid system for post-secondary education to make such aid more appropriately designed for, and accessible to, adult learners.

- Consider the use of EI to provide income support to individuals (including employed workers seeking to upgrade their skills) participating in learning programs.

- Governments should provide long-term funding to community groups to allow successful programs to be sustained.

3. Address non-financial barriers to participation.

- Non-financial barriers include lack of time (conflicts with work and/or family responsibilities), unwillingness to admit need/stigma associated with identifying oneself as an adult with low literacy skills, lack of information about opportunities, and lack of pre-requisites.

- All players should work to build a culture of learning and literacy.

- The promotion of adult literacy and skills upgrading programs needs to emphasize meeting aspirations and fulfilling potential, not redressing deficits.

- Educational/training institutions should improve the flexibility of their programs to improve access on a part-time basis.

- High schools and colleges should offer a mix of academic and technical/vocational programs with bridging between streams.

- Program providers should work with unions and employers or employer associations to develop learning programs that are linked to career ladders (as a complement to, not replacement of, existing structures such as apprenticeship programs).

4. Develop systems of recognition/accreditation.

- Improve systems of prior learning recognition (recognition of competencies) and promote their active use by learning institutions. Develop pan-Canadian tools.

- Establish/improve accreditation systems for adult educators and volunteers working to deliver literacy programs.

5. Develop learning programs that address communal and societal goals, as well as individual objectives.

- Develop programs that foster life skills and active citizenship, and not just job skills.

- Develop curriculum and delivery processes that draw from the community, are sensitive to cultural context, and reinforce a sense of community, particularly with regard to Aboriginal learners. Federal and provincial governments need to work more collaboratively with Aboriginal communities in this regard.

Suggested Next Steps in the Five Action Areas

For each of the action areas outlined above, a small group developed ideas for next steps. The key steps proposed were as follows:

Developing a more integrated adult learning system

- Each sector (e.g. school boards, colleges, universities, community providers, employers, unions, government) should work on principles to promote a more effective and integrated adult learning system from the perspective of their sector. Then, representatives of each sector should come together to work on a common action plan.

- Examples of successful initiatives at the provincial or local level should be showcased.

Addressing financial barriers

- The current financial aid system for adult learners is complicated and doesn't work. It needs to be reviewed and simplified. This requires looking at EI, the Canada Student Loan program, and provincial financial aid programs.

- Start from the principle that everyone should have access to learning opportunities in approved programs. Point to the productivity imperative for greater participation in learning activities by adults which is linked to declining labour force growth, the ageing population, and the emergence of skill shortages.

- Availability of loans should not be contingent on income or assets. The rate of payback of loans could be contingent on such considerations.

Addressing non-financial barriers

- Provincial governments should co-operate to launch a pan-Canadian promotional campaign on the importance of adult learning.

- Literacy/Essential Skills curriculum should be embedded in other learning activities.

Developing systems of recognition/accreditation

- Develop tools to assess learning that occurs through informal means.

- Establish a system of credentialing for deliverers of adult learning programs.

- A sound accreditation system relies upon a more integrated/collaborative adult learning system.

Developing programs to meet communal and societal goals

- Build into the mandate of all institutions of learning a responsibility to contribute to the development of community and social well-being and hold them accountable for meeting this part of their mandate (require them to report on their plans and achievements in this area).

- Governments should articulate parameters for community-based learning projects, then provide long-term funding to support such activities.

- Governments should provide funding for programs that involve active engagement of citizens in public issues.

So Now What?

The Calgary roundtable was the last of four regional events to discuss how to move towards a more effective adult learning system. An overall report on the series of roundtables is being prepared. Participants at the roundtables are encouraged to bring forward the ideas discussed and promote them within their sector. The possibility of a further, pan-Canadian event to move the agenda forward is under consideration.

Appendix A. Roundtable Agenda

Calgary Roundtable: Towards an Effective Adult Learning System
Delta Calgary Airport, McConachie Room, Calgary, Alberta, April 16, 2007

Purpose: To identify specific steps to improve access to high quality learning opportunities for adults.

Agenda

8:00   Continental breakfast

8:30   Welcome and introductions
  ➢ Adult Learning Knowledge Centre
  ➢ Canadian Policy Research Networks

9:00   Brief overview by the authors of *Too Many Left Behind*
  ➢ Key conclusions of the report
  ➢ Outcomes of previous roundtables
  ➢ Purpose of the Calgary Roundtable and anticipated outcomes
  ➢ Q and A by participants to clarify the goal and their role

9:45   Discussion of the vision for the adult learning system

10:15   Brief update on policy/program developments in the region

10:45   Break

11:00   Outline of purpose of small group discussions: to identify steps that will make a
                difference; examples of promising initiatives

11:20   Small group discussions

12:10   Reports back from small groups: key ideas for action

12:45   Lunch

13:45   Identification of themes from the morning discussion

14:00   Small groups: identifying concrete steps towards realizing priorities for each
                theme

15:00   Break

15:15   Reports back in plenary

15:45   Final comments

16:00   Adjourn

Appendix B. Roundtable List of Participants

Lorri Apps
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First Nations Adult and Higher Education
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