



Developing Skills Through Partnerships

Symposium Report

Developing Skills through Partnerships: Symposium Report

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1. Executive Summary

In November 2005, the province of Ontario and the federal government signed two historic agreements – the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Development Agreement and the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Partnership Agreement. One year later, on Nov. 24, 2006, key labour market stakeholders, including users, delivery agents and government came together to collectively take stock of progress and to explore how partners can help governments move forward with successfully implementing the agreements.

The symposium, *Developing Skills through Partnerships*, was co-hosted by Colleges Ontario, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, ONESTEP, and the Canadian Policy Research Networks.

The symposium was intended to raise awareness of the importance to Ontario's economic and social well-being of a highly skilled workforce and to help foster partnerships that will help to ensure Ontario has the structure and capacity to meet the needs of the 21st century economy. Participants were invited to engage in a dialogue on a longer-term (five-year) vision for Ontario's new client-centred training and employment system, and to identify next steps toward better partnerships and cooperation in building that system.

Speakers and participants from approximately 150 organizations from across Ontario voiced broad consensus that creating a highly skilled workforce for the province is critical to our present day and future economic and social prosperity. Participants were keen to capitalize on the unique opportunity that exists as we begin implementing the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Development Agreement and integrating federal programs and services into Ontario's new Employment Ontario system.

Although there is a wide range of ideas of how to best get there, Ontario's labour market partners see the ideal new employment and training system as one that serves clients according to their need, regardless of funding source, and one where employers play a leading role in developing the workforce. There is consensus that this best can be achieved through partnerships at all levels – provincial, regional and local – among government, business, labour, trainers, service providers and clients.

Participants also believe that the resources committed in the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Partnership Agreement must be directed in a timely way to meet the needs of the many workers, both employed and unemployed, who are not eligible for EI benefits and programs.

1.1. Summary of Recommendations from Symposium Participants

1. We need a unified vision that is shared by all providers and partners of a seamless, streamlined labour market development system which is client-centred, community-based, locally responsive, flexible and adaptable to change.
2. The shared vision must include both economic and social objectives, such as the need of all individuals, including those in under-represented groups, to have the opportunity to reach their potential and contribute to the province's critical requirement for a skilled workforce.
3. The system must be supported by a network of collaborative relationships among the various partners in the system – provincially, regionally and locally.
4. The system must have adequate, stable, and long-term funding and a strong, well-defined regulatory framework.
5. It must have knowledgeable intake people at all points of access.
6. Information must be easy to access for all types of clients.
7. We must work to raise awareness, buy-in and advocacy among employers.
8. First Nations training providers must be recognized.

2. Keynote speeches

2.1. The Honourable Christopher Bentley, Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities

Ontario's Vision for a Client-centred training employment training system

If Ontario is to position itself as an economic leader in today's world, it can only do so by having the most highly skilled, innovative and creative workforce possible, according to the Hon. Chris Bentley, Ontario's Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities. In his presentation, which opened the symposium, Minister Bentley stated that we must act quickly and with a clear plan to:

1. Strengthen the network and parts of the system
2. Fill in the gaps, where they exist, and
3. Ensure that the network is responsive to and can anticipate the needs of the market.

The *Developing Skills through Partnerships* forum was noted as one opportunity to help begin this process.

The province of Ontario is making significant investments in postsecondary education – \$6.2 billion over the next five years – to ensure that more Ontarians can take advantage of postsecondary education opportunities. This will help an additional 86,000 people access the postsecondary system and result in 12,000 more graduates. The challenge will be to maximize the value of that brain power.

With demographic pressures and worldwide competition for skilled labour, the situation is urgent, stated Minister Bentley. A key strategy must be to strengthen the interaction between colleges, business and labour to answer critical questions such as: How do we ensure that the programs we are investing in are the types of programs that we will need in five and 10 years' time? How do we know what business needs? Ontario has 470 different employment and training providers in 900 different locations serving half a million Ontarians. But where does a business in need of skilled workers begin to look? Where does a worker looking for training or skills upgrading find that information? And what if their first language is not English or French, as is increasingly the case?

Employment Ontario is the province's strategy to make the employment and training system more client-friendly and responsive when and where individuals need help. Employment Ontario doesn't replace any service or agency, but it can direct people to an appropriate service provider. Referral networks will be the key to a *client-centred* system that can reach the people who need help, rather than requiring them to navigate the system on their own.

The minister pointed out that, historically, there has been a gap between employment training programming provided by the federal government and by the Ontario government. Every other province had long ago signed an agreement, many of which transferred federal money for training to the provincial level to build a single, integrated training system. A similar agreement for Ontario was reached in November 2005 and on Jan. 1, 2007, the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Development Agreement (LMDA) "goes live," with \$500 million in EI-funded training support transferring to the province so we can build on the Employment Ontario network. Minister Bentley stated the ministry's intention is to build on existing strengths, ensuring clients are better served through leveraging what is already there.

The minister also called on Prime Minister Stephen Harper to fulfil the commitment for an additional \$314 million for employment training contained in the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Partnership Agreement (LMPA), which was signed with the previous federal government. The LMPA funding would be targeted to non-EI eligible individuals. Currently, only 30 per cent of Ontario's unemployed workers receive EI and are eligible for EI-funded programs.

The minister urged all training providers, business and labour to work together to make the most of the considerable provincial and federal government investments. In closing, Minister Bentley stated his vision for Ontario's labour market and training system: "I look forward to the day when we can all say: there is no Ontarian who is looking for training who can't get it; and no business looking for a worker that can't find a training provider that's delivering what they need."

2.2. Judith Maxwell, Past President and Research Fellow, Canadian Policy Research Networks

Why we are here

There is a labour market crisis looming on the horizon and Ontario is not ready. That was the message from Judith Maxwell of the CPRN.

Alberta's current situation is demonstrating what labour shortages mean to an economy. The good news is that Ontario still has time to make adjustments to mitigate the effects of the coming shortages, primarily by taking advantage of currently untapped labour sources.

But Ontario faces this situation in the context of three major external challenges:

- The diminishing role of the federal government in worker support
- The growing tendency by business to shift risk to the individual worker, and
- An aging population.

The diminishing role of the federal government in worker support

Seventy per cent of unemployed workers in Ontario do not receive EI benefits and therefore do not have access to EI training. Many cannot accumulate enough insurable hours, while others, such as the self-employed, are not eligible for insurance.

Ottawa funds and promotes training but does not deliver it

and funds only a narrow range of training programs for the unemployed. Support for ESL and immigrant language training has not kept pace with the influx of new immigrants. The labour force agreement with Ontario is just beginning to be implemented. And per-student transfers to postsecondary education declined through the 1990s and have not yet returned to those levels. Meanwhile, federal-provincial-territorial labour market ministers have not met for two years, and have no plans to do so. The current climate of intergovernmental relations makes the prospects for “a big national deal” on skills development unlikely.

In short, says Maxwell, Ontario is on its own.

The growing tendency by business to shift risk to the individual worker

At the same time, workers are bearing much more risk than they used to. In the absence of federal or employer programs, more and more workers are obliged to fund their own training, while tuition costs are rising. Employers, meanwhile, are responding to global competition pressures by shifting risk through employing more casual and contract labour; by outsourcing; and by cutting back workforces and benefits.

How to balance the burden of risk will be a crucial question.

An aging population

The well-documented demographic shift to an aging population over the next century means that every working-age adult must have a chance to contribute to society. To do that, we need to create strong foundations for young workers, build opportunities for advancement for people with high skill levels, allow second chances for adults whose skills need upgrading, and exploit the great potential of older workers to contribute as mentors and teachers.

According to Maxwell, however, there are opportunities in two labour force growth areas. First, Ontario must work towards efficiently integrating immigrant workers with effective language training and better recognition of foreign credentials. Second, it must tailor education, training and skill development to the needs of Ontario’s aboriginal population. This is a relatively young population which will grow 25 per cent by 2021.

Maxwell stated that it is the labour market partners – their foresight and their ability to work together – that will determine Ontario’s capacity to compete in coming decades. However, Ontario’s existing skills training system has four major gaps which are resulting in wasted labour and lost productivity:

1. *High schools have too many dropouts who are not being productively directed*

In past decades we have forgotten that there are excellent career prospects in skilled trades. Introducing vocational options in high school is a good step towards keeping more students in the system, but to be successful, vocational education will require good program design with input from employers and educators, backed up with effective counselling for students and parents.

2. *There is very little opportunity for basic skills and literacy training in the workplace*

The workplace can be the ideal setting for training in basic literacy and skills. There are clear payoffs for such investments: higher productivity, reduced error rates, better health and safety, increased customer and employee retention, and more effective job-specific training. But employers – especially small and medium-sized enterprises – face a variety of barriers to providing training. There is a vital need for partnerships involving the government, employers and educators to address these issues.

3. *Inefficient job ladders for postsecondary graduates and immigrants*

New graduates and immigrants with strong credentials face barriers to finding good jobs because they have no experience. Apprenticeship has proven to be an effective way to improve access to that first rung, and Ontario needs a broader internship system to further enhance access while minimizing risk to businesses.

4. *A lack of second chances for those out of the public education system*

Six million Canadians over 25 do not have a high school diploma. It seems that we provide education and training opportunities to individuals during their developmental years, but then we abandon them. Older workers who have fallen through the cracks in the system have few opportunities to develop basic literacy skills, to complete high school, or to move on to college, vocational or university programs.

Contributions from each of the labour market partners will be needed to fill this gap and prevent such a waste of human capital:

- Educators need to provide clear information about options and an articulation of credits from high school through postsecondary education.
- Employers need to commit to basic skills training and improve job-specific training for lower skilled employees.

- Governments need to improve financial aid for tuition and living costs designed for adults, and make a clear commitment to adult education.

3. Lessons from Other Provinces

To benefit from the experiences of other provinces that signed Labour Market Development Agreements a number of years ago and that have already developed an integrated labour market system within their jurisdiction, officials from Alberta and Quebec were invited to address the symposium. Like Ontario, these provinces have LMDAs that fully devolve federal funding and delivery responsibilities to the provincial level.

3.1. Lessons from Alberta

From transition to integration: implementing LMDA

Susan Williams, Assistant Deputy Minister, People and Skills Investments, Alberta Human Resources and Employment

Alberta was the first province to sign a Labour Market Development Agreement (LMDA) with the federal government. The agreement has now been in place for 10 years, and so provides the best example of the longer-term challenges. According to Susan Williams, Alberta's experience over that time has shown that co-operation, trust and flexibility are crucial to successfully and seamlessly integrating the client services offered by two levels of government.

Ms. Williams identified a number of key lessons from Alberta's experience in implementing its LMDA with the federal government:

1. Communication is key between the partners at all levels.
2. Respect and goodwill amongst the partners allows for the open communication.
3. A positive attitude can help get through the difficult changes and transitions.
4. Flexibility and adaptability on both sides facilitate the resolution to many potential conflicts.

Challenges were related mainly to three issues: information-sharing between the two levels of government; logistics, such as organizing office space; and access to files. The eventual success of the implementation of the agreement has been attributed to the good working relationships that developed between the provincial and federal staff.

Practical matters such as merging the contracts of two unions in transferring employees to the provincial level were quite complex, but ultimately manageable. However, there still re-

main some challenges; for example, after 10 years, the partners are still working to perfect the processes regarding information sharing on EI files.

Ms. Williams indicated there were many unanticipated complexities in the transition process. Much of the problem-solving happened on the ground, with informal "on-the-fly" solutions, locally implemented. Respect and goodwill among the partners allowed for clear communication. As well, a willingness by both federal and provincial staff to be flexible and adaptable was crucial.

In spite of the challenges, Alberta clients reported high levels of satisfaction with the staff, programs and services. The integration process was organized around the concept of "one-stop shopping" – easy access, quick assessment, and rapid return to the workforce. It also allowed for aligning programs for EI and non-EI clients – simplifying eligibility and offering a common assessment process.

Over its history, the focus of Alberta Human Resources and Employment has shifted from unemployment to education, attracting workers, training and retention. An overriding lesson from Alberta's experience is that the system must be flexible, because regardless of the quality of planning and forecasting, there is no way to predict how the system may be called upon to adapt.

3.2. Lessons from Quebec

Leveraging successful partnering

Dominique Savoie, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Emploi-Québec

In Quebec, the labour market partners have a long history of working collaboratively. In the field of employment, joint action and consultation have been an ongoing tradition in Quebec for nearly 40 years. This background set the stage for the unique partnership structure established in that province in response to the 1997 Canada-Quebec Labour Market Development Agreement.

According to Dominique Savoie, the historical partnerships involving business, labour and sector councils, combined with a strong legislative framework which clearly spells out the terms and conditions of the partnerships, has created a system which is able to act effectively to respond to real workforce and business needs because it works from a solid basis of labour market information. In addition, the partnerships of the various labour market players has given Quebec's public employment services legitimacy and credibility, and allowed for improved coordination of public policy and private-sector practices.

The mission of Emploi-Quebec is “to contribute, with its labour market partners, to employment and workforce development and to the fight against joblessness and social exclusion, with a view to economic development for Quebec.” The department works on a principle of local and regional flexibility and autonomy, combined with results-based accountability. To individuals it offers free and universal services in needs assessment, labour market information, and an Online Placement service. It also provides specialized services for clientele at greater risk, including individualized integration, training and employment plans and income security. To business it offers workforce training, on-the-job training, and human resources consulting. It also provides assistance with time management and working-time reduction and consultation on large-scale economic projects.

Labour market partners are organized under the umbrella of Emploi-Quebec, each with specific responsibilities, and each with representation from government, business, labour, educators and community organizations. The primary players in the current Quebec system are the Commission des partenaires du marché du travail, 17 regional councils, and a range of committees with expertise in specific economic sectors or special client groups. There are 30 sector-based committees (including for lumber, mining, metallurgy, agriculture, food processing, aerospace, road transport, and fisheries), as well as six committees with specific responsibility, respectively, for persons with disabilities, immigrants, women, youth, those 45 years and over, and ex-détainees.

In closing, Ms. Savoie shared some key lessons for Ontario based on the Quebec experience in implementing their LMDA:

1. How responsibilities will be shared must be clearly defined, particularly regarding administrative management of public services versus policy development and planning.
2. Consultation must be structured and timed properly to avoid gaps in communication.
3. The expertise and contribution of the various partners must be acknowledged, and they must be given real power in specific spheres.
4. Finally, a legislative and political framework for partnership terms and conditions is helpful in avoiding ambiguity among the partners in their respective roles.

4. Findings of the Consultation Sessions

4.1. Overview of questions posed

Seminar participants had the opportunity to engage in facilitated dialogues in break out round-table sessions to consider key questions pertaining to the following key issues:

How do we create the best possible training opportunities for clients?

How do we help build a responsive and effective labour market?

How do we structure the required partnerships among the various stakeholders?

The first break out session focused on client accessibility to the system, specifically:

- What should be the features of a system that is accessible to all and easy to navigate?
- How do we remove barriers to opportunity where they exist?

4.2. What should be the features of a system that is accessible to all and easy to navigate?

There was a wide consensus that the system must be client-centred, serving both the employee and employer. It must be simple to engage and minimize perceived risks. It should provide both “one-stop shopping” as a source for information, and at the same time, it must have a variety of entry points. A strong referral network must guarantee that there is “no wrong door.” Early in the process, clients should encounter a knowledgeable, sensitive, patient front-line worker who can communicate with them in their own language and direct them to the appropriate service/program with the least number of steps. A useful model may be a case management system in which a coach/mentor could be assigned to clients who require that level of assistance to help guide their career choices, and direct them to training and jobs.

Participants also agreed that services should be delivered in an integrated, coordinated and efficient way with a minimum of segmentation between agencies (the client is not concerned with who provides the service). Further, services must be flexible and responsive to client and local community needs, taking into account local capacities, resources and economic and social circumstances. The system should be driven by local-level planning that is coordinated across all sectors and government ministries. It should be responsive, flexible and inter-connected.

For the benefit of all clients and partners, the elements of the system should be clearly branded and publicly promoted. User-friendly online information and database tools should be developed and marketed.

Finally, there should be clear outcomes for the client.

There were additional useful suggestions for consideration such as:

- Organizing information and resources by “occupations” or “sectors” for clients and employment training centres/services to access. This could include sources to connect job information, salaries, training, apprenticeship, certification and employers.
- Electronic tracking of clients to allow efficient access to the database for all service providers and administrators, enabling information retrieval and updates. Some sort of universal client card may be helpful in this regard.

4.3. How do we remove barriers to opportunity where they exist?

Many participants felt that one key to eliminating barriers is ensuring that there are knowledgeable and networked people at all points of access. In addition, the system should encourage and facilitate relationship-building between service and client, and there should be easy-to-follow information available through multiple sources and awareness campaigns.

Common themes were the need to remove duplication and gaps in service and, where necessary, the provision of other supports, such as child care, housing, special needs assessments or income supplements. Also, there was consensus that geographic barriers must be addressed and partnerships could facilitate access to apprenticeships in remote areas.

In addition, the system must be sensitive to a wide range of cultures and languages, and provide training for staff to address service gaps where they exist.

Some felt strongly that Ontario needs to recognize an aboriginal training strategy that includes upgrading and literacy components designed and delivered by aboriginal trainers/training institutions. This would require recognizing First Nations postsecondary institutions as training providers, and improving information about and access to the network of services available for aboriginals, including Métis.

Additional comments included the need for timeliness of intervention and a suggestion to make more use of providing service access clusters for clients with similar needs.

4.4. How does the system identify and develop skills that are in demand in the workplace? How does it facilitate the utilization of skills that are developed?

While there was recognition by many participants that the current system has some strengths and is providing valuable help to many individuals and employers, there are a number of key shortcomings:

- The system has inconsistencies based on geography and the sharing of information
- The current model does not support long-range planning
- It is difficult to identify needs and develop skills when the system is so broad
- Government priorities are not always clear to all partners.

To identify skills needs:

There was broad agreement that we must identify skill demands in a collaborative way (including youth, colleges, other providers, workers, employers, government, etc.) and with an emphasis on human resource planning and forecasting. Also stressed was the need to ensure that the data gathered is accurate, well-informed, and efficiently communicated to relevant stakeholders (labour, education, community).

Further, we must serve the needs of the majority without losing sight of the needs of individuals. Some also felt that, ideally, the system should function within the broader context of a National Jobs Strategy.

To develop needed skills:

There was considerable discussion about the need to address literacy and basic skills needs at earlier stages, i.e., the primary and secondary school levels, and also to teach basic, transferable “employability skills.”

Many felt that we must promote continuous, lifelong learning and create a system with the necessary flexibility to do that. For example, access to opportunities for older workers could be enhanced by broadening the eligibility criteria for OSAP or offering some other type of open education and training loan that could be paid back over time.

Some participants spoke to the need for seamless delivery of programs and services among providers and also to the need for those programs and services to be held to clear and consistent standards of achievement. It was also suggested that partnerships among training providers should be combined with appropriate community-based supports as required by various clientele to make the most of all resources within a community.

Finally, there was considerable discussion about the need to adjust our perception of “success” to include careers in the trades, beginning by restoring their place and status in the primary and secondary school systems.

To best utilize the developed skills base:

Participants felt that the system must decrease response time between recognizing skills needs and filling them to the greatest extent possible; ideally, programs would provide skills training on a “just in time” basis. It was suggested that we could look for benchmark models for programs in other provinces and internationally.

Reflecting the critical role that employers play, there was agreement that we must create a culture where employers embrace responsibility for providing training, backed up with incentives for employers for providing “co-op” internships, apprenticeships, etc. It was suggested that, in addition to the economic benefits of training, an understanding and promotion of the social benefits, such as an enhanced ability of individuals to play a stronger role within their families and in their communities, would help instil such a culture.

4.5. Developing Partnerships among Stakeholders

The question posed to participants was: What types of structures and relationships are required among governments, employers, service providers and other organizations to provide the best service both to the client and to industry?

It was widely agreed that partnerships must be co-ordinated, their efforts collaborative; their policies coherent, and their processes consultative. There can be no silos. All partners must be equally valued, respected and benefited. All partners need to share the same vision, and buy into the process equally. Partnerships should be accountable to clients, communities, funders and other partners. At the same time, duplication must be reduced, and a culture of co-operation rather than competition should be encouraged. There should be incentives to refer and to share successes.

Discussions tended to emphasize partnership relationships, rather than formal structures, and there was consensus that all partners must acknowledge the client as the common focal point. Partnerships need to be outcome-focused and based on client needs. Also, relationships must help remove barriers to participation faced by businesses (especially small-medium-sized enterprises) and reduce the concern of business risks associated with hiring people who need additional support.

The importance of an appropriately funded and stable system was stressed, so that the focus can be on delivering services. Also, we need to encourage relationships that foster regular community planning to address skills development needs. Relationships among the partners must support a simplified, accessible system and work together to create better public awareness of the available opportunities. And some participants raised the benefits of articulation agreements among and between the various sectors of service provision and employment.

There was agreement that relationships among partners need to acknowledge and support the delivery of different services and supports needed by different clients. As well, individual learner-clients’ skills and experiences need to be recognized and accommodated, encouraging mobility and transferability of skills, including immigrants’ offshore credentials and experience. And it was suggested that aboriginal educational institutions need formal recognition through partnerships with recognized colleges and aboriginal communities.

5. Priorities: immediate action

There was enthusiastic and wide-ranging dialogue concerning possible first steps for the partners to move quickly to begin the building of an ideal new training and employment system for Ontario. Other than the need for the federal government to quickly implement the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Partnership Agreement, and the need to continue to maintain service delivery during the LMDA transition phase, no consensus emerged concerning the top few priorities for immediate action. However, there was no shortage of suggestions for consideration for early steps that fell in several broader categories:

Partnership structures/relationships

- Identify all relevant stakeholders and bring them together in regional/local committees for strategic planning, including outcomes while building relationships, trust, and communications across the sector.
- Develop a model for how everyone will work together, including creative, innovative funding mechanisms for working partnerships and flexible delivery models for training programs.
- Develop an inventory of resources available and make it available to service providers.
- Identify current mechanisms, committees, and organizations, and then identify duplicates and prioritize gaps.

- Develop a specific strategy for aboriginal people.
- Establish a structure (similar to the Quebec model) with legislation and funding.

Skills Training

- Assess current needs and available programs and services: needs assessment/benchmarking, industry-specific, geographical, shortages/surpluses, literacy, basic skills, and how best to develop accurate labour market information.
- Study and learn from other jurisdictions.
- Increase the kind and number of pilot programs and bridging programs.
- Increase opportunities for literacy programs for francophones and other non-English-speaking clients.
- Establish definitions of clear outcomes for recognizing credentials.

Marketing and Outreach

- Create a marketing campaign to publicize the service to job seekers, employers and other partners.
- Create more opportunities to connect with stakeholders; develop links with employers through pro-active outreach.
- Get key information into a user-friendly online directory.
- Institute mandatory information sessions for the newly unemployed concerning all programs available to them.

6. Priorities: longer term

A significant portion of the facilitated dialogue sessions were focused on identifying the best use of partners' resources and efforts in the longer term. The following paragraphs highlight some key suggestions about how the partners could help to facilitate a move to the ideal system over then next five to 10 years.

Government

It was suggested that government needs to set the policy framework after thorough consultation with the other partners and commit to providing adequate, stable long-term funding (minimum 10 years). In this context, funding from the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Partnership Agreement will be critical to success. As well, the development of a national strategy for training and job creation could lead to a more coherent, efficient and effective use of public funding

nationally and in each provincial and territorial jurisdiction in the longer term.

There was also wide agreement that government must drive inter-ministerial coordination and collaboration (including the Ministries of Education; Training, Colleges and Universities; Citizenship and Immigration; Community and Social Services; and Health) and foster a culture that values cooperation, information-sharing and building coalitions. Participants felt that government should work to minimize red tape, maximize incentives, and be a clearing house for sharing best practices. Government funding to support subsidized wages, income support for training and improved social supports was also considered essential to avoid the need for those in training to drop out to take the first available job that comes along.

The provision of service to all clients based on their needs and regardless of EI-eligibility was considered an important principle to pursue. There was consensus that the funding source (provincial/federal) for the needed interventions should not be a concern for the client.

Additional suggestions for consideration over the longer term included:

- A training levy for employers (similar to Quebec's approach) combined with incentives to help business assume its training role.
- A greater role for Local Training Boards regarding priorities for program spending.
- Better meeting the needs of clients on income support, whether social assistance or EI, through enhanced coordination; in addition, some called for the federal government to amend EI eligibility provisions so that more than 30 per cent of Ontario's unemployed benefit from EI-funded financial and/or training support.

Business

The critical role of business in labour market development received considerable attention. Participants felt that employers need to become more aware of Ontario's labour market system and to buy into it. While many employers take seriously their responsibility to develop their workforce, both for their existing employees and for new hires, participants felt that a wider commitment was necessary.

It was felt this could best be facilitated by employer champions and advocates who will speak to their community and encourage its participation. Also, a comprehensive advertising/marketing campaign to help raise awareness would be helpful, not just for individual employers, but also for sector councils and business associations.

While employers were called on to provide more employee training opportunities such as internships and apprenticeship placements, training providers were urged to make available more courses with flexible scheduling or delivery models, including additional short courses or other methods of upgrading or transitioning skills that can be taken while still working.

Additional suggestions for longer term consideration included:

- A focus by employers on worker retention and keeping retirees involved to retain a knowledge base and for mentorship.
- Government funding based on acknowledging employers' commitment to training, i.e., some system of employer incentives such as tax credits for those who train and/or penalties for those who don't.

Educators/Trainers

Some participants spoke to the need for educators to make a clearer and more realistic connection between high school and future education, training and career options.

More bridges to the trades need to be built at the high school level, for example, through school visits by tradespeople or through job fairs that establish partnerships for recruiting students into trades. There was general agreement that it is necessary to engage parents, teachers and guidance counsellors who influence student career choices and change their educational biases against trades. Many participants felt that it is important to re-introduce trades options to the high school curriculum, and even to start introducing the notion of apprenticeships in Grades 7 and 8 with the re-establishment of "shop" courses in schools.

The benefits of standardizing, measuring, monitoring and honouring trades and other skill credentials was also discussed, with training providers being identified as playing an important role in this effort.

Service providers

To fulfil the mandate of providing services in a client-centred, responsive and flexible system, it was acknowledged that service providers must be prepared to be the main portal to services and to deliver services on a community basis. Their front-line workers need to identify people who face barriers and, where possible, provide supporting services, (e.g., day care).

Many also felt it was important that all service providers help build and promote awareness of services to Aboriginal Peoples.

All stakeholders

Over the longer term, it was recommended that the partners work together on an ongoing basis to:

- Manage a well-defined strategy to plan and implement labour market development.
- Jointly identify, assess, monitor and re-determine common goals.
- Improve labour market data projections.
- Invest in research and development, labour market information and training.

7. Conclusion

Speakers and participants from approximately 150 organizations from around Ontario voiced broad consensus that creating a highly skilled workforce for the province is critical to our present day and future economic and social prosperity.

Moreover, we must not squander the historic opportunity that exists as we begin implementing the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Development Agreement and integrating federal programs and services into Ontario's new Employment Ontario system.

Although there are a wide range of ideas of how to best get there, Ontario's labour market partners see the ideal new employment and training system as one that serves clients according to their need, regardless of funding source, and one where employers play a leading role in developing the workforce. There is consensus that this can best be achieved through partnerships at all levels – provincial, regional and local – among government, business, labour, trainers, service providers and clients.

Lastly, participants believe that the resources committed in the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Partnership Agreement must be directed in a timely way to meet the needs of the many workers, both employed and unemployed, who are not eligible for EI benefits and programs. These individuals are often members of under-represented groups – youth, immigrants, aboriginals, and the under-employed – who represent populations that must be given the opportunity to reach their potential and contribute to the province's critical need for a skilled workforce.

List of Participants

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