

# EMPLOYER INVESTMENT IN WORKPLACE LEARNING: REPORT ON THE EDMONTON ROUNDTABLE

## WORK AND LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

February 2009

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This report was prepared by Ron Saunders of Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) for the Canadian Council on Learning's Work and Learning Knowledge Centre with financial support provided by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). It is issued by the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre as a basis for further knowledge exchange. The opinions and conclusions expressed in the document, however, are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre's members.

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This publication is available electronically on the Canadian Council on Learning's Work and Learning Knowledge Centre's website at [www.ccl-cca.ca/WorkLearning](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/WorkLearning), and on Canadian Policy Research Networks' website at [www.cprn.org](http://www.cprn.org).

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Cite this publication in the following format:

Saunders, Ron (2009). Employer Investment in Workplace Learning: Report on the Edmonton Roundtable. Work and Learning Knowledge Centre and Canadian Policy Research Networks: Ottawa, Canada. 17 pages.

Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français sous le titre *Les investissements des employeurs dans la formation reliée au travail : Rapport de la table ronde de Edmonton*.

The Canadian Council on Learning is an independent, not-for-profit corporation funded through an agreement with Human Resources Development Canada. Its mandate is to promote and support evidence-based decisions about learning throughout all stages of life, from early childhood through to the senior years.

# Employer Investment in Workplace Learning: Report on the Edmonton Roundtable

## Introduction

The issue of employer investment in workplace learning has been the subject of recent discussions at the national level. However, since the nature of the labour market and the institutional structure of education and training systems vary across provinces and territories, it is important to gain an understanding of these differing provincial, territorial or regional perspectives. The Canadian Council on Learning's Work and Learning Knowledge Centre (WLKC) partnered with Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) to convene a series of roundtables on employer investment in workplace learning, involving senior government officials and senior representatives from business, labour, colleges/universities, Aboriginal organizations and NGOs from a particular province, territory or region. The goal of the roundtables is to identify practical steps to ensure that the quantity and quality of workplace learning in Canada matches the needs of the economy and maximizes the potential of Canadian workers.

The first of these roundtables was held in Toronto on December 6, 2007, the second in Halifax on February 18, 2008, the third in Yellowknife on May 21, 2008, and the fourth and final one of the series in Edmonton on November 18, 2008. This report presents the highlights of the discussion at the Edmonton roundtable.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

Investment in developing the skills and knowledge of Canadian workers is becoming increasingly important, for several reasons. One is the demographic imperative. The aging of the baby boom cohorts will bring about a slowing of labour force growth. We can no longer rely on large youth cohorts to renew the skills of the workforce: most of the people who will be in the workforce in 2015 are in it today, so it's becoming more urgent to make the best use of the workers we have now. A second reason for the growing importance of workplace learning is the rapid pace of change in technology as well as the demands of the global knowledge economy, resulting in higher and frequently changing skill requirements on the job. In addition, changes in the labour market also point to the increased importance of workplace learning. On the one hand, skill shortages are being experienced in some sectors or regions, while other sectors or regions experience layoffs and/or sustained high levels of unemployment. Alberta's boom economy has meant that, in recent years, skills shortages have been intense in that province, with acute shortages of tradespeople and other skilled workers. The demand for labour is now ebbing in light of the widening economic crisis and the decline in demand for energy in the United States. However, even now, skills training

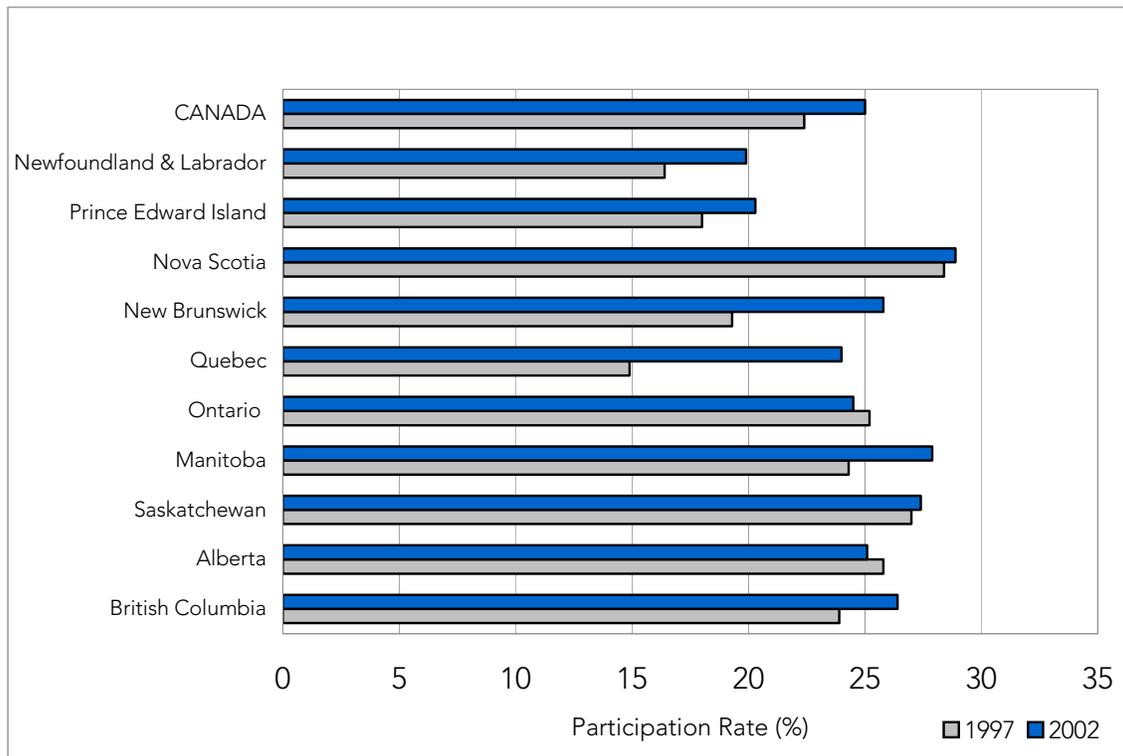
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<sup>1</sup> The agenda for the day is provided in Appendix 1.

can help prepare people to meet skill needs of the economy once recovery takes hold again.

Canada’s performance in workplace learning has been mediocre. Less than 30% of adult workers in Canada participate in job-related education and training, compared to almost 35% in the United Kingdom and nearly 45% in the United States (Goldenberg, 2006). The participation rate in Alberta in 2002 was the same as that for all of Canada.<sup>2</sup> (On the other hand, Alberta is a leader in apprenticeship training. Its share of apprenticeship completers in Canada in 2007 was over double its share of the labour force.)<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 also shows that there was little increase in employer-sponsored training in Canada as a whole between 1997 and 2002, though there were sizeable gains in the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick.

Figure 1  
Employer-sponsored training in Canada



Source: Reproduced from Peters (2004). *Working and Training: First results of the 2003 Adult Education and Training Survey*, Statistics Canada.

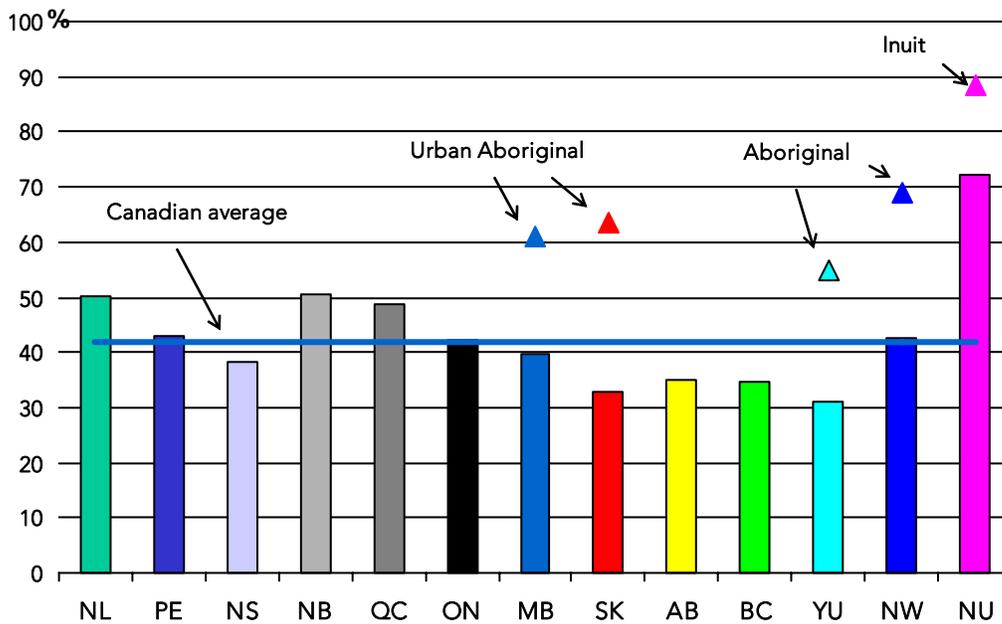
<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the last available data from the *Adult Education and Training Survey* are for 2002. As some participants at the Edmonton roundtable pointed out, it would be helpful to have more recent data.

<sup>3</sup> The National Apprenticeship Survey looked at the status in 2007 of people registered in apprenticeship programs in 2002-04. Alberta’s share of “completers” in 2007 was 24.9%. (See Ménard et. al, 2008, Table A.1.1.3.) Data from the *Labour Force Survey* for 2007 show Alberta’s share of the Canadian labour force as 11.3%.

Evidence is emerging that employers who do invest heavily in learning programs for their employees usually experience a high rate of return on that investment (Bailey, 2007).

Access to learning opportunities for less-educated adults, whether by returning to the formal education system through government-funded programs in the community or through employer-sponsored training, is generally poor in Canada (Myers and de Broucker, 2006). Yet approximately 40% of adult Canadians lack the literacy skills they need to live and work in today’s society.<sup>4</sup> As shown in Figure 2, the percentage of adults at the lowest two levels of the international adult literacy scale is lower in Alberta than the Canadian average, but still high enough, at about 35%, to be of concern.

Figure 2  
Proportion of 16-65 year-olds with low level of literacy skills



Source: Building on Our Competencies, 2005 (IALSS).

In 2006, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) commissioned CPRN to prepare the discussion paper, *Employer Investment in Workplace Learning in Canada*, which was authored by CPRN Research Associate Mark Goldenberg. This paper sets out data on Canada’s performance (as summarized above), reviews what is done in Canada and elsewhere to foster investment in workplace learning, and reports on interviews with leaders in Canada from business, labour, government, and the education sector. Its key findings include the following:

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada (2005). *Building on Our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*.

*There are barriers to doing more*

- Employers (especially small- to medium-sized firms) are concerned about “poaching,” time off the job, and whether the returns to training justify the costs.
- Sometimes they lack information about how to find/organize training programs that would meet their needs.
- Workers question the commitment of government and employers to substantive initiatives in workplace training.

*There are many ideas to overcome the barriers and there are promising practices here and in other countries. These include such proposals and practices as:*

- partnerships among firms, workers, unions, governments and educational institutions;
- active advocacy by business organizations to encourage a training culture;
- a tool box with a wide variety of supports and initiatives and the flexibility to tailor their application to specific needs and circumstances;
- awareness campaigns and the collection of evidence to convince employers about the benefits of investing in workplace learning; and
- enhanced government financial incentives to firms (e.g. tax credits, matching training funds, levy systems as in Quebec) and/or individuals (e.g. training leave, vouchers, learning accounts, use of Employment Insurance to provide benefits to workers on training leave), especially with regard to basic skills/literacy training.

Similar ideas were expressed at a national roundtable in the fall of 2006 and at the WLKC’s Second Annual Symposium on Workplace Learning held in June 2007.

These findings provide a backdrop to the discussion at the regional roundtables on employer investment in workplace learning.

## **Highlights of the discussion in Edmonton**

Thirty people participated in the Edmonton roundtable. They came from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives: employers; labour; sector councils; provincial government; municipal government; and educators. A list of the participants is provided in Appendix 2.

The roundtable began with a welcome from Alex Stephens, coordinator of the WLKC. Alex described the mission of the WLKC and the origins and progress of the series of regional roundtables on employer investment in workplace learning.

Alex noted that, on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, Literacy Alberta hosted an event called, “Immigration, Employment and Your Business.” Janet Lane, Executive Director of

Literacy Alberta, who was unable to attend the WLKC/CPRN roundtable in Edmonton, prepared a brief report on the Literacy Alberta event that was distributed to participants on November 18<sup>th</sup>. Presentations and discussion at the Literacy Alberta event focused on the provision of literacy and essential skills training in the workplace and highlighted the importance of creating a culture of learning, integrating literacy and learning into all workplaces, at all levels.<sup>5</sup> Literacy Alberta plans to compile (funding permitting) a comprehensive list of resources and supports for English as a Second Language, Literacy and Workplace Essential Skills Training in Alberta.

Laurette Morris, Director of Strategic Policy and Supports in the Alberta Ministry of Employment and Immigration (AEI), also welcomed participants and spoke to the importance of workplace-based training for Alberta. Alisa Neuman, a Senior Policy Analyst at AEI, described the government's efforts to enhance Workplace Essential Skills Training.

## Challenges Posed by the Macroeconomic Context in Alberta

As part of the discussion of issues regarding employer investment in training (outlined in the next section of this report), participants called attention to the particular challenges posed by the economic cycle in Alberta. Typically, in boom periods, both employers and workers have difficulty finding the time for training, while in downturns it is difficult to find the funds. Specifically they noted that:

- in boom times, the immediacy of the need for workers gets in the way of longer-term thinking, such as investing in skill development;
- it is difficult to participate in training when people are working very long hours; and that
- in a hot economy, employers find it particularly difficult to justify the time for mentoring of apprentices, and concerns about poaching are heightened.

Participants in the roundtable also expressed concern that high school students who drop out to take advantage of well-paid jobs in the oil patch during boom times are not well-equipped for the labour market if they lose those jobs.

Participants emphasized the importance of finding a way out of this "Catch-22." They argued that we need to re-think strategies when the economic environment changes,

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<sup>5</sup> The Website of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) outlines "essential skills" as follows: "Essential Skills are the skills needed for work, learning and life. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change. Through extensive research, the Government of Canada and other national and international agencies have identified and validated nine Essential Skills. These skills are used in nearly every occupation and throughout daily life in different ways and at different levels of complexity." (See [http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/Understanding\\_ES\\_e.shtml](http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/Understanding_ES_e.shtml).) The nine Essential Skills are: reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, continuous learning, thinking skills, and computer use.

and that a more far-sighted approach would recognize that downturns are a good time to renew skills, both for the employed and for those who are laid off. In their view, taking advantage of the downturn will require leadership from government, but the other sectors can be partners in looking for innovative solutions.

## Issues and proposed actions

In the first of the two dialogue sessions at the roundtable, participants were asked to identify the issues, challenges and opportunities regarding efforts to increase employer investment in workplace learning in Alberta. The dialogue was conducted in small groups with a mix of people from the different sectors at each table. The key issues that were identified in this dialogue were then grouped under themes, as shown below. In the second of the small group dialogue sessions, roundtable participants were asked to identify specific steps that would be likely to increase employer investment in workplace learning in Alberta, taking into account the issues and challenges that had been identified in the first dialogue session. For purposes of this session, participants were grouped by sector at separate tables as follows: labour, business, government, and educators. *Each stakeholder group was asked to include in its proposals at least one that could be initiated on its own, without waiting for other sectors to act.* The proposed actions were grouped according to the themes that had emerged from the issues discussion.

Each of the proposed actions below includes a notation to indicate the sector that proposed it: "G" for government, "B" for business, "L" for labour, and "Ed" for educators.

## 1. Making the Business Case

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- The decision by employers to invest in training is all about the bottom line. They must have reason to believe the investment will be profitable.
- This, in turn, raises the question of how to measure investment in training and its return. Measurement of both investment and return can be challenging. For example, employers need to consider indirect costs, such as the value of the time of training participants (if the program is during work hours) as well as the direct outlays associated with training. They also need to find a way to measure the intangible benefits of training that lead to gains for the firm, and not just immediate financial returns. For example, learning that is valued by employees will increase their job satisfaction. This can eventually reduce turnover and absenteeism, and improve productivity.
- Although evidence is emerging from cases of rigorous measurement of return on investment (ROI) in training that the ROI is usually quite high, the business case

for training is not known/understood by decision-makers in the business community.

- If all businesses within a sector were to invest in training, this would help prevent poaching.

### Proposed actions

- The provincial government could launch an awareness campaign about the ROI on training, targeted to employers. (G)
- The provincial government could convene forums to promote workplace training and establish partnerships with training providers, business, and labour. (G)
- Business organizations should develop a business case for training (especially, but not only, essential skills training) that outlines the ROI and the benefits that contribute to it (e.g. being a learning organization helps with attraction/recruitment, retention, engagement, innovation) and then develop communication strategies to tailor the message about the business case for training to different audiences. (B)
- Business associations could identify champions among their membership. (B)

## **2. Essential Skills**

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- The literacy and essential skills levels required on the job continue to increase.
- Low literacy levels create an increased risk of workplace injury.
- We are seeing high school graduates who lack basic skills in literacy and numeracy.
- Workers may be too intimidated or too proud to seek training in literacy or essential skills. There is a stigma associated with having a low level of literacy skills.

### Proposed actions

- Business leaders should stress with educators the need for graduates to have better essential skills. (B)
- All sectors should work to develop a collaborative approach to promoting literacy and essential skills. “Learning cities” is seen as a good example of such an initiative.<sup>6</sup> (Ed)
- Government could take leadership in bringing different stakeholders together to promote essential skills. (Ed)

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<sup>6</sup> See Canadian Council on Learning (2007) for a discussion of the Learning Cities initiative.

- Business must actively address employees' fear of stigma of participating in literacy training. (B)

### **3. Equity/Fairness across Demographic/Socio-economic Groups**

#### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- Employers need to support/address programs that help people work in a culturally diverse workplace. This is especially important where there are new immigrants and/or Aboriginal people in the workplace.
- Some employers have a bias against investing in learning opportunities for older workers.
- For many Aboriginal people, poverty and social exclusion are barriers to learning.
- Some Aboriginal people need the opportunity to improve both workplace skills and life skills.
- Ageism, sexism, racism all remain challenges.
- Learning needs to be viewed as developing people's potential rather than correcting deficiencies.

#### Proposed actions

- Aboriginal colleges should develop job search skills and life skills for their students. (Ed)
- Diversity awareness training should be provided in the workplace. (L)
- Business must actively address employees' fear of stigma of participating in literacy training. (B)
- Training programs should be designed to focus on the learner. Educators should champion such an approach. This means not only developing appropriate curriculum, but also providing learners with the supports they need (e.g. child care, transportation, flexible scheduling of courses) to be able to participate in learning programs, and building capacity in communities to deliver learning programs. (Ed)

### **4. Measurement, Information and Data Gathering**

#### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- The Adult Education and Training Survey data are getting old. The latest data are from 2002, and some participants believe that more training is occurring than is suggested by these data. We need more up to date information about participation in workplace training.

- Emerging workplace trends and skill needs should be identified and should be used to inform the development of training programs and supports.
- We need more information on best practices in training.
- It is important that training (e.g. on workplace safety) is carried out in a way that allows some of the skills acquired to be recognized and transferable in other workplace settings.
- We need to assess workers' skills, but if that can lead to punitive action, workers will naturally try to avoid such assessments.
- We need a better understanding of the role of informal learning in the workplace.

**Proposed action**

- The Alberta government could undertake research and data gathering on the effectiveness of workplace training programs to inform the development of timely and relevant training. Government could fund evaluations of training initiatives in partnership with industry and think tanks. (G)

## **5. The Pan-Canadian and International Context**

**Issues, challenges, opportunities**

- In light of the continuing pressures of international competition, Canadian employers cannot stand still – they have to invest in skill development to remain competitive.

**Proposed action**

- There should be federal funding for organizations that bring stakeholders together from across Canada to share knowledge about training policies and practices. (G)

## **6. Capacity Issues**

**Issues, challenges, opportunities**

- Owners of small business often lack training in the management of human resources.
- Employers, especially SMEs, do not have the capacity/resources to identify training needs.
- The capacity to invest in training differs considerably from sector to sector.
- For many workers (e.g. single parents, multiple-job holders), it is difficult to find the time for learning.

- Some young men leave high school without a diploma to take up a job, but if they are subsequently laid off, they lack the skills needed by other employers.
- Many NGOs have precarious funding which constrains their capacity to deliver training or supports to workers.
- Post-secondary institutions do not have the capacity to deliver a large increase in training services.

#### **Proposed actions**

- The Alberta government could convene a forum with employers and unions to discuss the right mix of supports to facilitate more investment in training. (G,L)
- The provincial government could partner with external organizations with expertise in convening policy forums. (G)
- Business associations should share best practices with their members. (B)

## **7. Funding**

#### **Issues, challenges, opportunities**

- New funding models are needed to support training.
- Employment Insurance (EI) funds could be used to support training by employers.
- In some cases (e.g. United Food and Commercial Workers), unions have negotiated for training funds.

#### **Proposed actions**

- The Alberta government could seek a dialogue with the federal government (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada) regarding greater flexibility in the use of “Part II” Employment Insurance funds to support training of people who work on a part-time basis, particularly during a downturn in the economy.<sup>7</sup> (G)
- More generally, governments could explore how to increase training opportunities using EI funds. (L)
- Governments could consider mandating a co-financing approach to training costs: shared by government, employers, and workers. (L)
- Unions and employers should put a higher priority on training issues in collective bargaining. (L)

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<sup>7</sup> Part II of the *Employment Insurance Act* allows for the establishment of “Employment Benefits and Support Measures to assist individuals to prepare for, obtain and maintain employment.” See [http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/epb/sid/cia/grants/ebsm/terms\\_conditions.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/epb/sid/cia/grants/ebsm/terms_conditions.shtml) for details.

- Government should provide financial incentives to employers to invest in training, especially for SMEs. (B)

## 8. Intergenerational Issues

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- Training programs should support knowledge transfer between more and less experienced workers.
- Training programs need to recognize generational differences in learning styles.
- Some of the training that does occur is overly focused on short-term needs. We need to provide training/education to develop the skills that will be needed in the future.

### Proposed action

- Make better use of interactive and social networking technology in the design of training programs for younger workers.

## 9. Training Delivery Methodologies

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- Workers often need courses on evenings or weekends; educational institutions need to offer programs on a more flexible schedule.
- How can learning “individually” (e.g. through e-learning) best be supported?
  - Workers who are digitally literate expect e-learning options. On-line social networking might also be a vehicle for learning programs.
  - However, some workers find e-learning intimidating.
- What alternative models of training delivery are most effective?
- How can we build on what is already in place?

### Proposed actions

- Governments could consider funding programs (in addition to apprenticeship) that blend work and training, such as people working three days per week, and spending the other two in a training program. In a downturn, this could help to both minimize the need for layoffs and raise the skill levels of the workers. (G)
- All training stakeholders could jointly develop/implement community-based initiatives, such as “learning cities.” (Ed)
- See also the fourth action item under issue #3, above.

## 10. Credentials and Recognition

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- Many trades do not require formal certification, so when jobs are plentiful, people take up these occupations without the same level of training as others. People are foregoing apprenticeship in non-compulsory trades.
- Some roundtable participants felt that some apprenticeship programs have become over-specialized: the scope of practice and learning has narrowed.
- It is no longer clear what credentials mean: there has been some “credential inflation” – some credentials are easier to obtain than they used to be.
- The recognition (or lack of recognition) of foreign-earned credentials has become a big issue.

### Proposed actions

- Governments should ensure that trades curriculum reflects the need to value well-rounded trades and occupations. (L)

## Conclusion

Participants at the Edmonton Roundtable on Employer Investment in Workplace Learning all agreed that investing in workplace learning is increasingly important for the Alberta economy. Many issues and ideas for action were brought forward. Some key themes that recurred over the course of the dialogue included the following:

*The need for a more far-sighted approach to investments in learning, on the part of employers and individuals*

- Employers should consider the longer-term benefits of investment in training, including the gains in ability to attract and retain workers that accrue to learning organizations.
- Young people should at least complete high school, rather than drop out to earn money in the short term.
- All workers need to take advantage of opportunities to develop their skills.

*The importance of essential skills in the workplace*

- Government, educators, business, labour, NGOs should work to develop a collaborative approach to promoting literacy and essential skills.

*The need for greater flexibility in the design and delivery of training programs*

- Teaching methods should be sensitive to different learning styles.

- There should be more weekend, evening, and on-line courses to accommodate people who cannot take courses during weekdays.
- There should be more flexibility in funding criteria, such as allowing EI training funds to support workers who are employed part-time.

### *The opportunity for further dialogue and partnership*

- All sectors participating in the roundtable spoke of the value of further dialogue to discuss labour market needs and develop collaborative approaches to promoting workplace learning. The importance of bringing people together was emphasized in the closing comments of several participants.

Each stakeholder group represented at the roundtable – government, business, labour, and education/training institutions – indicated that there were steps they could take to address these challenges and opportunities. All recognized the importance of taking leadership to act on the ideas put forward at the roundtable.

The Edmonton Roundtable on Employer Investment in Workplace Learning was the last of a series of four dialogues being held in different parts of the country. The WLKC and CPRN will publish a synthesis report that will reflect on this series of conversations and identify common themes as well as differences in regional context and approaches to the issue.

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## Appendix 1

*Roundtable: Employer Investment in Workplace Learning  
Crowne Plaza Chateau Lacombe, Edmonton  
November 18, 2008*

### Agenda

- 8:00 Continental Breakfast and Registration
- 8:30 Welcoming Remarks and Introductions
- 8:50 Presentation on Key Research Findings
- 9:15 Table Dialogue: Employer Investment in Workplace Learning in Alberta  
– Key Issues
- 10:30 Break
- 10:45 Reports Back to Plenary on the Key Issues
- 11:15 Table Dialogue: Actions to Address the Key Issues (sector-specific tables)
- 12:15 Closing Plenary
- 1:05 Concluding Comments
- 1:15 Lunch

## Appendix 2

### List of Participants

**Elizabeth Aquin**

Senior Vice President  
Petroleum Services Association of  
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**Elisabeth Ballermann**

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**Gerry Donnelly**

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