**The Future of Work and Learning in Canada 2015**

**Report to the National Commission on the Future of Work and Learning**

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 Submission Date: March 31th, 2012

1. **Introduction**

Today and the future’s knowledge economy demand that countries produce an increasing skilled workforce. In order for Canada to achieve and sustain a progressively skilled workforce, enhancements in all four pillars of learning: early childhood learning and development; elementary-secondary education; post-secondary education; and adult learning and skills development must be achieved (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2010).

The newly established National Commission on the Future of Work and Learning is positioned to focus on the fourth pillar of lifelong learning: adult learning and skills development. In the particular area of work and learning there is substantial evidence of Canada’s downfall as highlighted in reports including the Thematic Review of Adult Learning produced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2002 as well as various recent reports produced by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) and other telling findings found in The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) publications.

In this report, three challenges for work and learning in Canada will be discussed and recommendations based on research and successes both within Canada and globally will be provided. These recommendations are designed to be achievable within the timeframe of three years and are considered stepping stones for Canada to get on track and become future leaders in the realm of work and learning within the OECD and globally.

1. **Current Challenges**

Canada is currently performing to an adequate standard in many aspects of learning. For example: In K-12, Canadian students are still performing well as indicated in the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Brochu, Gluszynski, & Cartwright, 2011); and among the 24 OECD countries, Canada has the third-highest proportion of 20-to24-year olds who are either attending school or have completed post-secondary education (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). The aspect of learning in which Canada is particularly lagging behind is in workplace learning (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

Canadians with higher levels of education are more active and healthy (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). They participate more in adult education whereas low-skilled workers have the lowest rates of participation (Ellstrom, 2010; Rubenson, 2009; Fuller et al, 2005). Also, it has been cited that higher skilled workers more readily access and receive resources for learning and that general policies (and funding) have a limited impact on low-skilled workers and disadvantaged groups (Rubenson, 2009). In light of this situation, the focus of the current challenges to be addressed by 2015 should be on lower skilled workers and associated disadvantaged groups such as aboriginal populations and immigrants.

The three key challenges that must be addressed in order for a progression of the currently low-skilled workforce to occur are:

1. Low literacy in 42% of the population
2. Continued high school drop-out rates
3. Lack of training and career progression for many low-skilled workers

**Challenge #1: Low literacy in 42% of the population**

42% of Canadian adults perform below a Level 3 on the literacy scale, which is the internationally accepted minimum considered necessary to succeed in today’s economy and society (Canadian Council on Learning, 2011). Literacy levels have been reported to have a substantial impact on accessing adult education. The OECD has reported that in Canada only 17.2 % of those at literacy level 1 participated in adult education, compared to 60.5% of those at levels 4 and 5 (Organisation for Economic Development, 2002). Most of this variation is due to differences in employer-sponsored training, with other forms of adult education being more evenly distributed. The result of this is that those individuals who may need adult education the most in fact receive the least (Organisation for Economic Development, 2002).

**Challenge #2: Continued high school drop-out rates**

High school drop-out rates for males are still particularly troubling at 10.3% in 2009-2010, whereas females have a drop-out rate of 6.6% (Canadian Council on Learning, 2011). Another population which has an even larger proportion of drop outs is the Aboriginal population, in which 40.3% have not completed high school (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). There is also a significant discrepancy in drop outs living in small towns and rural areas compared to those living in large cities. This current situation creates an economic burden on Canada estimated at $1.3 billion due to social assistance and criminal justice costs (Canadian Council on Learning, 2011).

An underlying cause of high school drop outs is that many students are unable to conceptualize the relevance of school to working life. This is a result of the lack of apprenticeship opportunities and school-industry partnerships creating an incredible loss of much needed human capital in the trades (Canadian Council on Learning, 2011) . The CCL has reported that: “In the decade leading up to 2015, 5.5 million job openings will result from new job creation and retirements. Approximately 1.42 million university graduates will be required, while 2.02 million graduates will be needed from the college sector or apprenticeships” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). A decline in the number of high school drop outs could positively impact apprenticeship graduates that are now needed and reduce the number of young Canadians who get stuck in low-skilled employment or find themselves unemployed.

**Challenge #3: Lack of training and career progression for many low-skilled workers**

Low-skilled workers often find themselves in temporary jobs, more physically demanding jobs and jobs with less security (Sanders, Oomens, Blonk, & Hazelset, 2011). They run the risk of their skills becoming obsolete as they spend more time away from the workplace resulting in a vicious circle of temporary low skilled positions and unemployment (Sanders, Oomens, Blonk, & Hazelset, 2011). This is a situation that greatly impact’s a person’s training opportunities.

Intrinsic motivation to progress in one’s career is an important component of completing training in the work place, which can be influenced by one’s attitude and by the expectations and pressures placed on an individual to participate in training (Sanders, Oomens, Blonk, & Hazelset, 2011). The creation of career planning and exploration strategies has shown to greatly enhance one’s motivation to learn (Sanders, Oomens, Blonk, & Hazelset, 2011) .Another contributing factor in one’s disinterest in learning is the lack of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Canadian workplaces. For immigrants entering the Canadian workforce, their foreign certifications are not always recognized, which can leave them feeling discouraged and unmotivated to carry out further education opportunities such as improving English literacy skills. 61% of immigrants have low literacy skills and as such they are not able to progress in their careers and get stuck in low skill jobs (Canadian Council on Learning, 2011). As RPL efforts continue at the university and college levels, workers in low skill jobs are not seeing RPL in the workplace which is a disadvantage to further learning, as the RPL process is considered by some researchers as an empowering and motivating process, confirming the worth of the worker (Berglund & Andersson, 2012).

In addition to the lack of motivation by many low-skilled workers, some employers don’t see the economic or social benefit of workplace learning, especially for those in low skill work, and they also fear losing workers as they gain more skills or having to increase workers’ pay. Evidence can be seen in a 2009 Conference Board of Canada report that presented the fact that Canadian companies spent an average of $787 per employee on learning and development in 2009, representing a 40% decline over the past decade-and-a-half (Canadian Council on Learning, 2011) and as previously mentioned, most training money is utilized by employees in high-skilled positions, not leaving many funds for low-skilled employees.

1. **Addressing Current Challenges to Work and Learning by 2015**

**Addressing Challenge #1: Low literacy in 42% of the population**

Increasing literacy is an issue that must addressed through all four pillars of lifelong learning. With respect to work and learning, solutions that could be implemented within a short time frame include increasing the funding and availability of Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs both in classroom and e-learning settings as the OECD noted its thematic review (2002) that there were long wait lists for these programs. Considering that approximately 72% of Canadians that are below a Level 3 literacy level are employed, measures to engage with workplaces, especially those with smaller numbers of employees, who carry out less training, should be undertaken (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2012). Funding should be made available specifically to those workplaces that wish to engage their employees in ABE, as past funding expenditures have shown that unless specific groups and training is targeted, traditionally strong groups consume the resources (Rubenson, 2009; Fenwick, 2010).

Short interim solutions should involve raising awareness among employers (focusing on small and medium size employers) by providing evidence of how literacy improves employers’ bottom line (such as providing the results from the International Survey of Reading Skills, 2008) as well as local success stories from employers who have provided ABE training and resources of how to carry out or support training.

**Addressing Challenge #2: Continued high school drop-out rates**

Local schools creating partnerships with local industry is at the heart of reducing the number of high school drop outs. Education departments need to be encouraged, and provided incentives, to continue efforts at a local level to improve partnerships as government researches successful models in German-speaking countries and Scandinavia to provide more guidance in the future (Canadian Council on Learning, 2011). Better communication of the financial incentives provided to employers (especially those in small towns and rural areas), available in all provinces, who employ high school aged apprentices, would help jump start efforts for schools trying to secure placements for students.

With respect to aboriginal high school drop outs, there are many other factors to be addressed to help alleviate high school drop-out numbers. Efforts already recommended by reports such as those developed by the CCL should be reviewed and continued action pursued within aboriginal communities. Individual organization efforts such as the Calgary centered Aboriginal Youth Animation Project, which provides skills training for youth in animation and employability, must continue to be supported.

**Addressing Challenge #3: Lack of training and career progression for many low-skilled workers**

Increasing training opportunities and career progression for low-skilled workers requires the commitment of government, employers and employees. A key determinant of this is employer buy-in. Employer buy-in to enhancing training and career progression can, in many cases, be influenced by personal beliefs and attitudes, awareness of training benefits, access to resources and financial incentives (Myers & de Broucker, 2006).

All businesses, but in particular small to medium size businesses, need to know what opportunities are available, the benefits of these opportunities and be encouraged to utilize available resources. On a local level, partnerships must be promoted. In the US, workplace intermediaries have enabled career development for low-skilled and disadvantaged workers at the local level (Jobs for the Future, 2012). As a short term measure, the Commission should review the successful partnerships occurring at the local level (including those with Sector Councils) as well as the success of workplace intermediaries to create a national strategy to support partnerships and potentially invest in workforce intermediaries. The Workplace Skills Strategy (WSS) funding guidelines should continue to target specific groups such as low-skilled workers and newcomers to Canada (Fenwick, 2010). The guidelines for funding should be promptly reviewed and enhanced to encourage participation of small to medium size companies and create opportunities for lifelong learning within companies, not just short term projects.

As means to increase RPL in workplaces (which has been shown to increase positive attitudes towards future training), the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) should be promoted to both employers and employees. As the test is available across Canada, a national strategy to increase the test’s recognition as well as a review of the administration of TOWES and HRSDC’s partnership with Bow Valley College, is imperative to increase the utility and growth of this tool.

Resources providing successful human resources policies**,** such as the availability of personal development or career plans, merit pay schemes, frequent work-meetings, performance interviews and feedback from managers need to be widely disseminated and their utility promoted to employers as they are proven to increase training participation (Sanders, Oomens, Blonk, & Hazelset, 2011).

1. **Conclusion**

Challenges to the future of work and learning need be addressed promptly in order to ensure Canada’s prosperous future. There are many short term efforts that can help jump start a national reform on work and learning. Focusing on low-skilled workers, who are in the greatest need of support, and the confounding reasons why Canadians find themselves in these positions, will create the most economic and social benefit to the country. The challenges of low literacy, continued high school drop-out rates and lack of training and career progression of low-skilled workers can be addressed both through some of the short-term strategies outlined in this report as the country works towards national long term strategies.

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