

# State of Learning in Canada: Toward a Learning Future

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### LEARNING HAS LIMITLESS DIMENSIONS

Learning lies at the very core of human potential. It fosters our ability to think, create and solve problems. It enables us to envision and embrace the kind of lives we want for ourselves and our children. Beginning in early childhood and continuing throughout the adult years, learning is fundamental to our experience of being human and shapes virtually every aspect of our lives.

Learning occurs in all sites of human endeavour—in the home, at the workplace and in the community. It encompasses a complementary mix of formal and informal learning, which develops skills and abilities essential for success in the knowledge economy.

As this report emphasizes, we can no longer afford to view the purpose of education and learning primarily as the preparation of young people for the labour market. Nor can we compartmentalize learning in each stage of life without recognizing critical intersections that connect the ages and stages. Learning is not a commodity with a fixed end-point, but rather a continuous, individualized process. Learning trajectories across the life course are as complex, unpredictable and nonlinear as individuals' lives. Success or failure at any given stage can have repercussions over the long term.

### LIFELONG LEARNING: MAXIMIZING POTENTIAL, ENHANCING OPPORTUNITIES

Lifelong learning is associated with a wide range of economic and non-economic benefits. It has the potential to maximize the talents and skills of individuals, and contribute to higher productivity, improved health, longer lives and a greater likelihood of community and civic engagement. Learning begets learning, which in turn enhances opportunities to achieve personal aspirations and societal goals.

The skills and knowledge that Canadians bring to their families, their workplaces and their communities play an important role in determining our economic success and our overall quality of life. Healthy, productive and engaged citizens living in socially stable communities represent a competitive advantage in dynamic economies and societies. Similarly, internationally mobile, skilled workers are attracted to communities that are safe, culturally vibrant, and that accommodate diversity.

### STATE OF LEARNING 2008: BROADENING OUR UNDERSTANDING

The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) recognizes the need to build a learning society in which individuals can develop their potential and contribute more fully to their communities. *State of Learning in Canada: Toward a Learning Future* provides an overview of how well Canadians are equipped as learners to meet the demands of the future.

Research clearly demonstrates that learning and training are more critical than ever. Shifting workforce demographics, rapid advancements in technology and increased global competitive pressures are transforming not only our society, but our understanding of the nature and purpose of learning. In an increasingly globalized world, advances in the production of new knowledge occur at an unprecedented rate.

While most Canadians receive a solid foundation of formal education, many lack sufficient competencies to succeed in an increasingly complex and uncertain future. Employers seek employees with a more sophisticated array of capabilities, beyond the basic job requirements. These skills include: decision-making, teamwork, problem solving, entrepreneurship, leadership, information and communication technology (ICT) skills, the ability to communicate effectively and a desire to learn.

There are signs that systemic and emerging weaknesses threaten our continued success.

Though Canada leads Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with the highest proportion of adults aged 25 to 64 (60%) with university or college or trades attainment, one-quarter of Canadian adults have only a high-school education or less. Nine million adults (42%) between the ages of 16 and 65 lack the literacy skills considered essential in today's economy and society, and recent projections suggest that over the next decade, the situation will not improve, particularly in light of an aging population.

With the prospect of workforce and skills shortages caused by the pending retirement of the Baby Boom generation, combined with continuing low fertility levels and fewer youth entering the labour market, learning across the life course is now more critical than ever.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although our formal education is of enviable quality, Canadians could benefit from a wider range of learning opportunities in order to sustain economic well-being and achieve greater social equity. Too many Canadians are at risk of not fulfilling their potential, creating the conditions for a cumulative learning deficit and diminished quality of life in the years to come.

## ACHIEVING OUR GOALS: THE NEED FOR A LONGER-TERM PERSPECTIVE

Learning has the potential to achieve greater social equity and to bring us closer together as a country. Unless all segments of society have an equal opportunity to partake in lifelong learning, Canada's capacity to mature and prosper will be hampered. The commitment we make to create a learning society will also, in large part, determine our capacity to lead on the world stage. A country of informed and engaged global citizens is more willing and able to confront critical issues of our time, such as global poverty, environmental issues and conflict.

Other countries, including the United Kingdom, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Japan and Australia, have recognized and seized upon the importance of lifelong learning and are devising ambitious strategies to help their citizens become lifelong learners. Canada does not have a lifelong learning system in place, nor a plan to transform the rhetoric of lifelong learning into a coherent vision and a plan for action.

Canadian hopes for the future depend on the strength of its learning sector and a range of complementary learning opportunities that meet the needs of Canadians, regardless of educational attainment, age, socio-economic status or level of skills. Given our high educational attainment rate, Canada can respond to emerging challenges from a position of strength. We have a skilled, talented and well-educated citizenry. Our economic and labour-market performance is strong. But with the challenges of the future, we need a coordinated effort to recognize and seize as many learning opportunities as possible—a road map to the future we envision for our children and generations to come.

The achievement of our potential requires that Canadians understand the challenges and rewards of building a learning society, and commit themselves to lifelong learning. We need a long-term perspective on learning that reflects the needs and aspirations of Canadians now and in the future.

## CREATING FAVOURABLE CONDITIONS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING: THREE PRIORITY ISSUES

To build a dynamic, forward-thinking country we need to foster favourable conditions for building a learning society. These include nurturing a strong foundation for learning; providing for smooth transitions between the ages and stages; and providing ongoing opportunities for individuals to learn throughout the life course.

### A Strong Foundation for Learning

To participate fully in the workforce and to contribute fully as members of their communities and of society, individuals must have a solid foundation of essential skills, such as literacy and numeracy. However, the process of learning and skills acquisition begins not with compulsory education, but in early childhood when human abilities and motivation are shaped by families and learning environments within the community.

Research has demonstrated that foundational skills—such as pre-literacy—and positive attitudes toward learning acquired early in life make later learning easier.

### Smooth Transitions and Flexibility

The critical learning intersections that connect the ages and stages are as unpredictable and nonlinear as individuals' lives. These transitions can take place through all phases of life, but particularly among young people on the threshold of adulthood.

Young adults often experience a number of daunting transitions as they leave high school and make their way toward post-secondary education (PSE) and the labour market. While some enter the labour market immediately, others go directly into a PSE program, and still others dip in and out of several options that include combinations of work, study, travel and skills development.

Factors such as family background, previous learning success and availability of resources (informational, monetary) can influence the timing and quality of young adults' decisions. Smoothing the transitions between these key life events (such as graduation from high school or university and entering the workforce) by allowing for greater flexibility could enable young people to gain the education and training they want and need, when they need it.

# State of Learning in Canada: Toward a Learning Future

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Similarly, adult learners, who often face competing demands of work and family, may oscillate between the labour market, education and training. They, too, need a flexible system responsive to their specific needs and to the impact of life events (birth of children, loss of employment and divorce) on their ability to pursue further learning.

### Ongoing Opportunities

Integrating the learning needs of individuals across the lifespan requires opportunities in all areas of life—at school, in the workplace, in the community and at home. Success will largely depend on the extent to which society actively engages and makes demands on the skills and knowledge of its citizens, promotes the use of individuals' competencies and encourages them to think, act and be engaged throughout their lives.

All too often learning and education are perceived as the domain of youth, yet ongoing opportunities are particularly important during the adult years. There is a need to offer a range of opportunities aimed at addressing the learning needs of adults at all levels of skills development.

As the OECD observed in 2002, Canada would benefit from a system that responds to the needs of individuals: enabling them to be independent and autonomous learners; helping them to understand when further education and training would be useful; and making clear what steps they could take to pursue available learning opportunities.

### SUMMARY OF THE STATE OF LEARNING 2008

This report takes a life-course approach by following, or mapping, the diverse connections and learning trajectories that can occur within and between each stage of life's learning journey.

Four chapters provide an overview of the state of learning for Canadians at key stages in the life cycle:

1. Learning in the Early Childhood Years (ages 0–5);
2. Learning in the Elementary and Secondary School Years (ages 6–18);
3. Learning in the Post-secondary Years (ages 18–27); and
4. Learning in the Adult Years (25 and older).

A fifth chapter, called "Our Changing Environment, Our Learning Future," provides conclusions about the present state of lifelong learning in Canada, examines how other countries are working to foster a culture of lifelong learning, and recommends priority areas to help us to achieve a society that realizes the benefits of learning throughout life.

### 1. Learning in the Early Childhood Years

Learning in the first five years of childhood has critical implications for well-being and later success in school, at work, and in the community—more so than learning in any other stage of life. It is a time when young learners develop attitudes about the value and purpose of learning, setting the stage for lifelong learning in all aspects of their lives. Not surprisingly, investments in early childhood learning produce the highest social and economic returns.

Despite the well-known importance of early learning, research indicates that 25% of Canadian children entering school lack the foundation needed for successful acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. Research also suggests that one child in four enters Grade 1 in Canada with learning or behavioural difficulties that could affect future success in school.

This lack of school readiness can set in motion a lifelong chain reaction, in which the children who are at greater risk of social and academic difficulties are also more likely to drop out of high school, to have more difficulty finding employment, to earn less and to be in worse health. This trajectory represents an enormous loss of human potential.

Although family and parental characteristics play key roles in shaping children's abilities and their attitudes toward learning, all learning environments experienced in the early years—whether in the home or in the community—can profoundly affect learning abilities over the longer term. Research shows that a stimulating and nurturing environment will result in better physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language development.

Most Canadian families depend on some type of formal or informal child-care arrangement. In 2004–2005, 51% of children under six were in non-parental child care. However, there were fewer children in non-parental care in 2004–2005 than in 2002–2003 (51% versus 54%).

The quality of child care can influence children's physical/motor, social/emotional and language/cognitive development, all of which set the stage for learning in the school years. Higher quality child care, regardless of

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

type, has been associated with children scoring higher on language and achievement tests, having better social skills, and displaying fewer behavioural problems. Yet all too often, the importance of child care as a vital precursor to formal learning is undervalued or unrecognized.

Regardless of the type of child care, parents and home form the centre of children's lives. Numerous studies suggest that family and parental characteristics are strong predictors of learning success.

The combination of strong, supportive family relationships, a high level of parental involvement and high-quality child care can compensate for adverse risks associated with low income, lack of family resources and low parental education. A cohesive, supportive, well-resourced neighbourhood can also act as a protective factor.

## The Challenge for Canada

The importance of early childhood learning and care cannot be overstated. Both are vital for fostering positive attitudes toward learning and for preparing children to become engaged members of society.

## 2. Learning in the Elementary and Secondary School Years

Situated between early childhood and adulthood, between dependence and independence, the elementary and secondary school years are a critical stage of life. Learning during early childhood sets the stage for success in the school years, which in turn affects learning in the years when young adults make the transition to PSE and the workplace. The cumulative effect will determine the extent to which these young individuals will become full-fledged, adult citizens capable of contributing to the well-being of their families, communities and society.

How young learners perform in mathematics, problem solving, reading comprehension and other competencies is a strong predictor of later performance. Students who perform well in these areas are also more likely to participate in PSE and in the knowledge economy.

As in the earliest years, the family and the home environment play an important role in successful learning. Children of parents who read, who have positive attitudes toward education, who pursue new skills and knowledge throughout life, and who are engaged in their communities are more likely to perform better in school, pursue further education and be active community members.

Children and youth who start without the foundation of a strong home environment and formal education are more likely to experience difficulty in accessing PSE or the labour market, and may be less prepared to participate and succeed in learning opportunities later in life. Students with limited skills to be effective lifelong learners risk economic and social marginalization.

Rapid technological change, global competitive pressures and new patterns of work are demanding a more sophisticated set of transferable skills, such as problem solving, communications, decision-making, teamwork, leadership, entrepreneurship and adaptability. The development of these skills requires embracing a view of learning that goes beyond the provision of formal education.

Research suggests that informal learning makes an important contribution to later success. The home environment, the workplace and community organizations (including religious and cultural institutions) are key sites for fostering new competencies and reinforcing the strong foundation acquired through formal education. Preparing children and youth for adult life requires an effective learning strategy that will target informal learning in these sites, in tandem with formal learning in school.

## The Challenge for Canada

Math, science and literacy skills are core competencies linked to later achievements, such as participation in PSE, better-paying jobs, and more stable employment.

The performance of young Canadians on international tests in reading and math has been consistently high, but other countries are making rapid advances. Although we are doing well, simply maintaining the status quo may not suffice if we are to sustain a competitive edge.

Interest in science is fostered during the elementary and secondary school years. Our performance in science during these years is above average, but the number of university science graduates is below average, a fact that could limit advances in innovation, research and economic growth. This also matters because a growing number of jobs today call for the technical competence and complex problem-solving skills provided by science courses offered during the formal years of education.

# State of Learning in Canada: Toward a Learning Future

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Of particular concern is the transition from secondary school to PSE or the labour market, a critical and often difficult stage in the lifelong learning journey. Research suggests that the transition period is lengthening and becoming more complex, given the many potential paths to choose from—school, travel and the increasing number of career options.

### 3. Learning in the Post-secondary Years

Between 18 and 27 years of age, young adults gain greater independence from family and make the first major decisions of their adult lives, including decisions about further education, participation in the labour market, and personal lifestyle choices. Those experiences and choices are built on a foundation of learning that will shape the direction of their adult lives.

Research shows that young adults participate in post-secondary learning because of a number of factors, including experience and success in compulsory education, parental economic status, knowledge of PSE, literacy skills, gender, ethnicity, employment experience and community involvement.

The transition from school to work has become longer and more complex, as PSE options, career choices and skill requirements expand. Although Canada recognizes the importance of smooth transitions, we lack an overall school-to-work strategy that identifies the range of learning options and that links PSE effectively to the workplace.

#### The Challenge for Canada

The economic and social benefits of pursuing further education have been widely documented. A skilled workforce is linked to higher productivity, innovation, economic growth, as well as to stronger communities with higher civic engagement and social cohesion. Individual benefits include better wages and job satisfaction, fewer periods of unemployment and improved health and quality of life.

Skills and education are necessary for Canada's improved productivity and international competitiveness. Nearly 66% of the new job openings expected to occur over the next decade will require PSE qualifications. Only 6% will be available to those with less than a high-school education.

While PSE attainment in Canada increased to almost 66% in 2006 among those aged 25 to 34, young adults who do not pursue PSE are at risk of economic and social marginalization. They are more likely to experience low income, unemployment, poor health and less job satisfaction than young adults who acquire further education and skills.

University tuition costs have risen an average of 44% over the decade ending in 2006. Student debt load has more than doubled since 1990, representing an additional economic barrier to PSE participation.

Though apprenticeship registrations and, to a lesser degree, completions are growing, the under-representation of women in apprenticeship programs is a source of concern. Apprenticeship training provides an important and effective route to the skilled workplace and is linked to smoother school-to-work transitions, and lower levels and fewer periods of unemployment. A key ingredient in their success is the involvement of employers who are in a position to match skills to job demands.

### 4. Learning in the Adult Years

As this report demonstrates, the value and contribution of learning is evident at all stages of life—and learning in the adult years is no exception. Ongoing learning can influence income, job satisfaction, political participation, and health and well-being. It also enhances Canada's economic productivity and competitiveness.

Research on each life stage shows that learning begets further learning. Beyond the crucial economic and personal rewards are important social contributions. Adults are influential role models—as learners and as active citizens—for their children, co-workers, and their communities. Thus, adult learning contributes to social capital and social cohesion.

The sites and modes of learning in the adult years are diverse and complex. Research shows that although formal learning is vital, informal learning—in the workplace, at home and in the community—is also important and can improve technical skills, impart specific knowledge and develop the softer skills increasingly demanded by today's workplace. Yet informal learning and the significance of its contribution are largely unrecognized by governments and employers.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Similarly, recognition of adults' prior learning and experience needs to be broadened. In Canada, however, as in many other countries worldwide, formal prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) policies and supports are much more widespread at the community college level than at the university or secondary level. The implementation of PLAR and its uptake by learners appears to be concentrated in certain disciplinary areas, notably health sciences (dietetics, nursing, pharmacy, optometry), human services (early childhood education, social work), and business education.

## The Challenge for Canada

While Canada leads OECD countries with regard to PSE attainment in the working-age population, one-quarter of Canadian adults has only a high-school education or less. In addition, 9 million Canadians between the ages of 16 and 65 lack the literacy skills considered essential in today's economy and society. Recent projections published by CCL suggest that over the coming decades, the situation will not improve, particularly in light of an aging population.

Low wages, unemployment, poverty and social exclusion are the consequences for many individuals and their families. The economic and social costs are profound: lost productivity, weaker innovation and competitiveness, poorer health and well-being, and higher social expenditures.

An evolving global market and rapidly changing technologies place a premium on workforce skills, both hard (technical proficiency) and soft (such as problem solving, critical thinking, leadership, communication skills and adaptability).

Continuous learning and training over the life course are key to economic growth and social well-being. Countries that recognize this are developing and implementing innovative strategies to increase and broaden the range of learning opportunities for their citizenry.

Yet in Canada, research shows that rates of adult participation in education and training activities have stagnated. Those who most need learning opportunities are, ironically, the least likely to obtain them. And all of this is occurring against a backdrop that includes an aging workforce, pending skills shortages and an increasingly competitive and demanding workplace.

Furthermore, adult learning in this country remains underdeveloped, largely because we do not have a concerted, comprehensive strategy to address the needs and aspirations of the adult learner.

## CONCLUSION

We need to formulate a road map of the future we envision for our children and for generations to come. We need a clear vision that will keep our sights on what matters most—the development of our people.

Canada is working from a position of strength, but if we are to build on our education system and expand learning opportunities for Canadians throughout their lives, we need to assess more fully our learning requirements and find ways to address the challenges ahead.

Fostering a culture of lifelong learning requires effort and a set of long-term objectives.

In our quest to be a catalyst for lifelong learning in Canada, CCL plans to demonstrate the importance and value of lifelong learning over the next three years, through our core products, as well as through initiatives and collaboration with key organizations.

Our five knowledge centres will support CCL's work in the areas of early childhood learning, health-related learning, adult learning, Aboriginal learning and learning in the workplace.

And through publications, such as *State of Learning in Canada*, CCL will continue to monitor Canada's progress in learning and to provide Canadians with the most current information about the most effective approaches to learning.