

# Taking Stock of Lifelong Learning in Canada: Progress or Complacency? 2005-2010

## NOTE ON HOW NATIONAL GOALS AFFECT INDIVIDUAL LIVES AND OUTCOMES

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It may not be valid to undertake national initiatives only for the sake of central power and authority. This is not to deny the compelling nation-building quality of a pan-Canadian learning agenda. But, in a country as radically decentralised as Canada, there must be a clear benefit to individuals, families and communities to justify a pan-Canadian approach.

For most aspects of learning and training, that is precisely the case: there is demonstrable and overwhelming benefit to having coherent, consistent national data, monitoring of performance, agenda and strategy. As we describe findings in various phases of learning, we will show how this is so.

We can outline how provinces, regions, communities and individuals are far more likely to reach their own goals if supported by the presence of overarching national strategies and goals. That is the reason for which, in almost every federal state, as well as in the EU, the trend is strongly toward integration and cohesion. Canada is the notable exception—and for this it will suffer a notable toll in learning outcomes.

As a physician, I am aware that Canadian incoherence is also a main impediment to the adequacy of our health care system. The parallels with education and learning are striking—although the situation is much worse in learning than in health care.

As in education and learning, physicians understand that a key to better health care is common national agendas and measurements. The most recent editorial from the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ Feb. 2010): “a paradigm shift is needed in Canada toward a patient-centred health system. Change will occur only if patients have access to the necessary information to make their health-care decisions.”

Just substituting “learners” for “patients” will enable us to comprehend the main barrier to progress in learning in this country.

The editorial in CMAJ goes on: “decision-makers need to agree on a common series of measurements that accurately represent quality of care .... But neither the federal government nor most health-care regions collect national measures that reflect patients’ experiences in the system, rates of medical error, hospital-acquired infections, surgical outcomes and complications”.

Again, exchange for those health issues parameters like graduation numbers from PSE by discipline, early learning outcomes, or effectiveness of workplace education and training programs, and the parallel with learning is evident.

CMAJ states with regard to health care: “waiting until we have a perfect set of measurements is not an option”; that “we cannot effect any meaningful change without some way to measure performance”; and that the U.S. has monitoring systems.

The situation is similar but more deficient in education and learning. CMAJ states: “We need to select and follow process and outcomes measures so the delivery of care improves health outcomes”.

In education and learning, CCL believes that we must establish national outcome measures so that the delivery of educational opportunity enhances learning outcomes.

**A few illustrations follow:**

### **Early Childhood Education and Learning**

It is widely recognized that quality early childhood education and learning (ECE) has critical implications for well-being and later success in school, at work, and in the community, yet we do not have any measures to provide greater understanding of quality, access, financing and policy of ECE programs.

Too often, debates about early childhood learning and development are polarized around issues of home care versus day care, or private versus public care. What is really needed is an evidence-based approach focused on helping individuals and communities address their own unique concerns. In a world where one size does not fit all, where parents and governments require choice and response to local conditions, Canada needs common benchmarks where the data are cohesive, coherent and comparable in order to assess results:

- Common, shared, national indicators of progress. At present, there is no way to know how well our children are progressing.
- Goals/benchmarks/objectives for the country, with provincial and regional determination of mode of provision of service.

### **Post-secondary Education (PSE)**

Almost all international education and training systems—and the post-secondary institutions (PSIs) that operate within them—are increasingly focused on accountability issues and the need to provide an evidence-based analysis of performance, quality, progress and outcomes. Many countries have explicit and transparent mechanisms that articulate specific nationwide goals and objectives, while recognizing the complexity of the PSE sector components and the legitimate, individual roles of the various components within those systems.

The process of setting and monitoring national goals and objectives often involves the development of measures and/or indicators, as well as regular reporting on performance and progress toward achievement of the national goals. Most jurisdictions have also put in place quality assurance bodies or agencies to regulate standards for quality and perform ongoing, independent audits.

Canada has not put any such mechanisms or processes in place at the pan-Canadian level, and still lacks processes for meaningful dialogue between provincial/territorial and federal governments for post-secondary planning and other issues. Consequently, key priorities of quality, access and credit mobility are addressed in a fragmented manner and current initiatives lack a national perspective.

In contrast to other developed countries, Canada has no national strategy for PSE, no acknowledged and accepted goals, no benchmarks, and no public reporting of results based on widely accepted indicators.

Canada is also unusual in having no quality assurance system, no qualifications framework and no system of accreditation. This makes it difficult for both Canadian and international students to navigate the sector to their advantage.

### **Our country has fundamental data gaps in PSE**

Canada has the greatest deficiencies in acquisition and use of data on learning after high school of any OECD country. This renders the country incapable of matching labour-market demand to supply, providing adequate information on which students can base study and career decisions, establishing accountability for resources expended and determining how much and what progress is being made.

## International overview of PSE processes and system-wide structures

	MAJOR REVIEW IN LAST 5 YEARS	SYSTEM-WIDE GOALS & OBJECTIVES	FUNDING ALIGNED WITH NATIONAL PRIORITIES	QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY(IES) IN PLACE	ONGOING MECHANISM FOR FEDERAL/ STATE PLANNING	FEDERAL MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>EU</b>	Yes	Yes	N/A	Under development		
<b>GERMANY</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Process under development	Yes	Yes
<b>U.S.</b>	Yes	Under review	Limited federal money targeted	Yes	No	Yes
<b>SWITZERLAND</b>	Yes	Yes	*	Yes	Yes	Federal Office of Education
<b>U.K.</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A
<b>N.Z.</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A
<b>CANADA</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b> The provinces and territories meet as the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada and the federal/provincial/territorial Forum of Labour Market Ministers meet regularly to share information	<b>No</b> Federal Human Resources Ministry funds labour market programs, research, literacy and other initiatives related to PSE

\* Available material is not detailed enough to make conclusions at this time.

In particular Canada:

- lacks an informational framework through which to understand, measure or clearly demonstrate the quality of its PSE sector;
- does not have the information required to assess PSE capacity in relation to labour-market needs;
- has no useful picture of the country's private providers of PSE (who they are, what they do, their capacity, their enrolment figures, what happens to their graduates);
- has very little information since 1999 about its community colleges regarding faculty, enrolment or capacity;
- can provide only a limited picture of part-time faculty at our universities.

### Need for a PSE Data Strategy

A PSE strategy would offer a pragmatic approach that would promote mobility, efficiency, effectiveness and equity across the country, while providing benefits to all levels of our society.

- for learners: improved information regarding opportunities, better choices and responsive learning
- for institutions: improved and more responsive programs
- for governments: improved access to information on a national basis and more effective planning
- for business and labour: improved ability to predict and respond to changes in Canada's workforce

### Adult Learning and Skills Development

While Canada's formal education is of a high standard, the effectiveness of the Canadian adult-learning sector has long been a concern of policy-makers. The 2002 OECD report, *Thematic Review on Adult Learning, Canada* identified specific areas of weakness—a lack of specific policies geared to the adult learner, and a paucity of data on adult-learning outcomes—and provided specific recommendations intended to improve learning opportunities for adults and the effectiveness of the adult-learning sector.

As the OECD noted, in Canada there is fragmentation in institutional arrangements which reflects a lack of coherence and co-ordination at the policy level. More specifically, there is a lack of vertical integration (i.e., how well adult training policies are connected with formal learning at the initial, secondary and tertiary levels), and a lack of horizontal integration (education and training policies need to be coordinated with broader employment, social and economic policies).

### Improving adult learning in Canada

To address these issues Canada must move toward the implementation of the recommendations of the OECD report.

In particular:

- Set national benchmarks or targets for either participation or outcomes as measured by adult literacy and other essential skills to ensure appropriate levels of participation in adult learning and improve the literacy levels of adults.
- Develop coherent and effective policies targeted to the specific learning needs of adults including a coherent national system of Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR).
- Increase research efforts on the effectiveness of adult education and strengthen labour-market information.
- Develop a pan-Canadian forum on adult education.

