

# Creating a Lifelong Learning Society

by Claire M. Morris

People with better knowledge and skills experience greater success. Organizations with more knowledge become market leaders. Countries whose citizens have higher levels of literacy and learning are more productive and have a better quality of life. It is no wonder that investing in knowledge and skills is central to our future.

From my experience – both as the Clerk of the Executive Council with the Government of New Brunswick and as Deputy Minister, Human Resources Development Canada – I know that the desire to support the development of Canada’s valuable human resources cuts across all boundaries. I have seen the value of collaboration first-hand, and the concrete gains that can be achieved when different perspectives are brought together.

The 1999 Speech from the Throne committed the Government of Canada to “forge partnerships with other governments, public- and private-sector organizations, and Canadian men and women to establish a national action plan on skills and learning for the 21st century.” To build such a national action plan — one that is both collaborative and effective — I believe we need to anchor it to a national vision for lifelong learning.

## The Context for Lifelong Learning

Success in school, the workplace and everyday life now depends on knowing how to access and use information. Knowledge workers have been second only to management workers as the fastest growing occupation since the early 1970s. Exponential growth in information communications and technologies (ICTs) and their applications are currently challenging the notion of literacy in its traditional sense. As well as possessing reading, writing, “arithmetic” and oral communication skills, Canadians increasingly need to be technologically savvy and multi-lingual to participate in a global and hi-tech world.

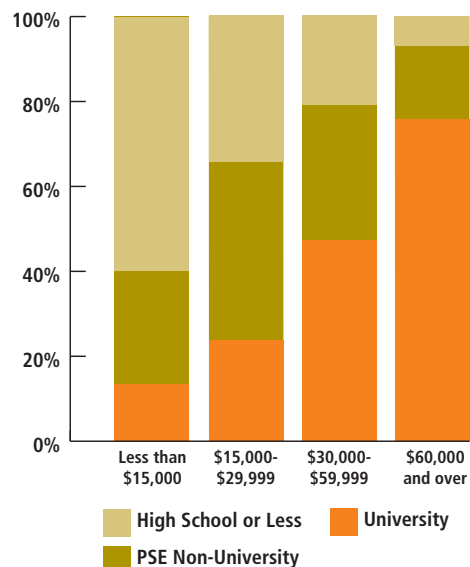
In addition, continuously upgrading the skills of all Canadians is crucial to improving labour market outcomes. Policies that support lifelong learning actively contribute to the foundation of a knowledge-based economy.

Benefits of lifelong learning extend beyond the workplace. For example, literacy and other skills help all citizens, from early childhood to senior years, achieve a better quality of life, better health, and increased social participation. It is our knowledge and skills — the foundation of sound decision making as citizens — that ensure a vibrant civil society.

Finally, lifelong learning is needed to ensure all individuals have the opportunity to participate in society to the fullest extent. Those who do not build good learning foundations or miss continuous learning opportunities risk exclusion. Without an increased emphasis on lifelong learning, the earnings gap between levels of educational attainment may continue to widen. (See Chart 1.)

CHART 1

DISTRIBUTION OF INCOME BY EDUCATION LEVEL



Adult Education and Training Survey, 1994.

## Toward a National Action Plan

Research shows that the majority of working Canadians see education and training as important; however, participation in lifelong learning activities remains low. The most highly educated Canadians tend to get the most training and those with the least education are least likely to receive learning opportunities as adults. These latter individuals may not even recognize their needs; overcoming this awareness gap is a major challenge.

While responsibility for education is clearly provincial, some key issues require the collaboration of all jurisdictions — for example, support for inter-provincial mobility in Canada, a country where people move easily from province to province, between learning institutions and between school and work.

## Taking a “lifecycle” approach

Learning needs to take place during all stages of life since later stages depend on the earlier ones. Families, schools, communities, and enterprises are all important generators of Canada’s human and social capital.

### THE EARLY YEARS

Many young children in Canada do not arrive at school ready and able to learn. Yet, current research is concluding that early child development may be more important for the quality of the next generation than the period children and youth spend in basic and post-secondary education. Later differences in learning outcomes are related to the experiences of early childhood. Some countries are now placing even greater emphasis on cultivating learning potential in the very early years.

### THE SCHOOL YEARS

Canadian elementary school children have good reading and arithmetic skills, compared to England, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States. However, recent studies are demonstrating that girls are performing better in school than boys. In addition, a net 15 percent of our youth do not graduate from high school, and Aboriginal youth and youth with disabilities have much higher non-completion rates. Yet high school completion and development of adequate foundation skills are clearly important prerequisites for further education.

### YOUNG ADULTS

There is a need to ensure broad access to a diversity of learning opportunities for our citizens beyond secondary school. Ensuring multiple pathways for qualified Canadian students to the post-secondary education of their choice is a key objective. Projected demographics and participation rate increases may put pressure on the post-secondary education system over the next ten years. Further, the increasing costs of education — rising tuition levels and student debt loads — are potentially putting low-income families at risk of exclusion from higher education.

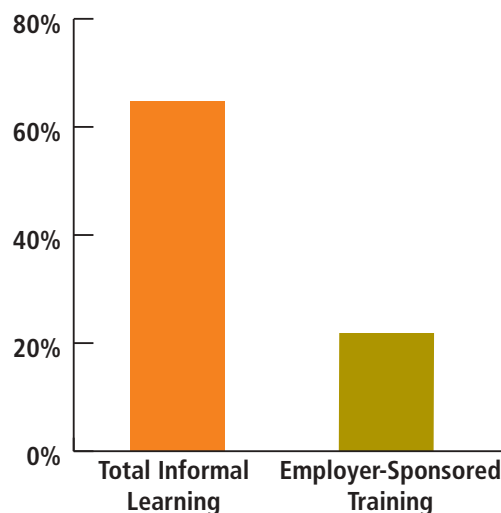
- 16 percent of our young children lag behind in verbal skills.
- 27 percent of Canadian youth do not finish high school by the typical completion age.
- 20 percent of high school graduates have not obtained foundation skills needed for entry-level jobs.
- 80 percent of current workforce participants are likely to still be working in 2010, demonstrating the importance of workplace learning opportunities.
- Only 8 percent of seniors (65 or over) participate in formal educational or training activities.

### THE WORKING YEARS

The knowledge-based economy will increasingly need workers who upgrade their skills or retrain. Canada, however, has an adult participation rate in education and training which is only average among other OECD countries at 37 percent. Given that one third of Canadian workers have indicated they would like more training, there is a need to ensure that there are increased opportunities for those who need to strengthen their skills. It is important to identify new ways to improve opportunities for adults to learn. (See Chart 2.)

CHART 2

### CANADIAN PARTICIPATION RATES IN INFORMAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING ACTIVITIES



Adult Education and Training Survey, 1994.

### THE SENIOR YEARS

As the fastest growing segment of the population (from 3.7 million in 1996 to a projected 10 million in 2014), seniors represent an important demographic group. However, most seniors (65 years or older) have low education levels and literacy skills, adversely affecting health outcomes and their participation in social and community life. It is encouraging to know the aging baby boom generation will be more highly educated than their parents, but it will be important to emphasize that continuous learning needs to take place long after retirement from the labour market.

**Those who do not build good learning foundations or miss continuous learning opportunities risk exclusion.**

Learning transferability is an important way of strengthening access to learning . . . It may be easier to transfer academic credits between European countries than to transfer credits within the Canadian educational system

### Elements of a learning strategy

I believe there are three separate but related issues now emerging that should be addressed in concert with all stakeholders: ensuring that all Canadians are aware of the importance of learning in the 21st century, that all Canadians have adequate foundation skills to take advantage of learning opportunities, and that all Canadians have the broadest possible access to continuous learning opportunities throughout their lifecourse.

Federal and provincial/territorial governments, in collaboration with the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and individuals are already involved in many innovative learning initiatives. However, steady progress will require increased collaboration and consensus building in order to translate common goals into policies and action.

### Ensuring That Canadians are Aware of the Importance of Learning

We need to help Canadians actively engage on a continuous basis in learning opportunities. Part of the solution is helping our citizens become informed consumers of learning information, and offering access to the right decision tools.

CanLearn Interactive is such an initiative to increase awareness. The CanLearn Web site ([www.canlearn.ca/www.cible-tudes.ca](http://www.canlearn.ca/www.cible-tudes.ca)), developed through collaborative efforts by governments, learning institutions, and the private and voluntary sector, provides Canadians the capacity to make their own decisions on learning. The site provides progressive, interactive

#### EN BREF

Le défi de notre société de plus en plus axée sur le savoir est de s'assurer que toutes les Canadiens et Canadiennes ont accès à des possibilités d'apprentissage. Le discours du Trône de 1999 engageait le gouvernement du Canada à « établir des partenariats avec d'autres gouvernements, les organismes publics et privés, et les Canadiens et Canadiennes pour établir un plan d'action national sur les compétences et l'apprentissage nécessaires pour réussir au 21e siècle. » Ce plan d'action, qui doit être élaboré avec la collaboration de toutes les parties intéressées, aura pour principal objectif de sensibiliser les Canadiens et les Canadiennes à l'importance de l'éducation au 21e siècle, de veiller à ce qu'ils aient des compétences de bases suffisantes pour tirer avantage des possibilités d'apprentissage qui s'offrent à eux et qu'ils aient accès à un vaste choix d'activités d'apprentissage tout au cours de leur vie.

planning tools that can be used to explore career possibilities, identify training and educational requirements, develop learning strategies and create financial plans.

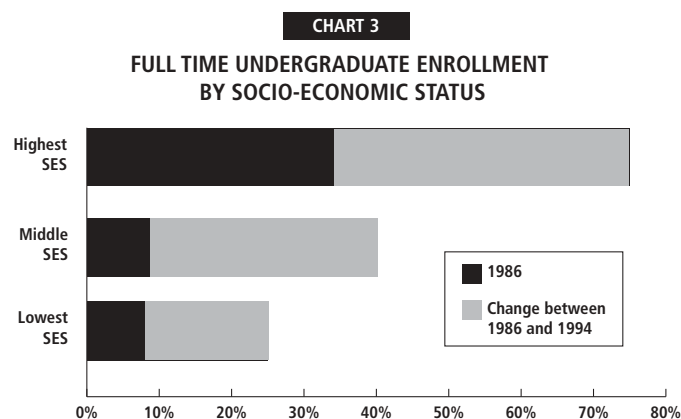
### Ensuring Adequate Foundation Skills

For the new economy, Canadians need to read, write and calculate at ever-higher levels of competence. They need the ability to use information and communications technology, teamwork skills, knowledge of other languages, and a capacity for continuous learning. Canadians need to strengthen and reinforce their existing foundation skills in order to further build upon them. As IT skills are quickly becoming recognized as a new, higher form of literacy, new measures are required to ensure that "the digital divide" is reduced.

International skills are quickly becoming another essential tool in the new global economy. Yet, we do not support international academic mobility programs to the same extent as some other developed countries. Canadians need to have more access to international learning opportunities.

### Ensuring the Broadest Possible Access to Learning Opportunities

The doors to knowledge and skills should be open to all Canadians because they are doors to opportunity. High-risk Canadians — such as low-income families, students with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, and people living in rural and remote areas — do not access learning opportunities to the same extent as other Canadians. Obstacles for citizens with special needs should be eliminated. (See Chart 3.)



Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1994, draft.

The Government of Canada has responsibility for some key initiatives that support financial access to higher learning such as Canada Student Loans Program and Canada Education Savings Grants. Personal investments in learning need to be facilitated. However, besides financing, distance, time, and sometimes motivation continue to be major roadblocks to learning and will require innovative solutions.

Learning transferability is an important way of strengthening access to learning. It would permit the assessment and recognition of learning achieved by Canadians, whether that learning occurred in the workplace, at another educational institution, or in another country. Other countries are perform-

ing better than Canada in this area. In fact, it may be easier to transfer academic credits between European countries than to transfer credits within the Canadian educational system.

Building a system to guarantee that knowledge and skills already mastered do not have to be re-learned would significantly encourage learning in this country and reduce costly duplication.

## Conclusion

Since the inception of the United Nations Development Index in 1990, Canada has consistently ranked number one in the world. Clearly, learning-oriented activities are critical to maintain our high ranking.


But the cost of education is high, and the average student debt is rising significantly. The number of youth (age 18 to 24) finishing high school over the next decade is expected to increase by 8 to 10 percent and the participation rates in post-secondary education are on the rise. Although this is good news, it will be important to ensure consistency between demand from citizens and the supply of an adequate array of learning opportunities. In addition, the Canadian private sector and the post-secondary education system need to work together more closely to ensure that the post-secondary system is adequately responsive to rapidly changing labour market requirements.

The growing knowledge-based society will require that all Canadians access continuous learning opportunities — the

number of low skilled jobs are diminishing, and the high growth sectors of the economy require a more highly skilled work force. The challenge is to ensure that all Canadians can be a part of the new knowledge-based economy and are not marginalized from learning opportunities.

Last year, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) produced an exceptional report, “Public Expectations of Post-Secondary Education”, which articulates key principles — quality, accessibility, mobility and portability, relevance and responsiveness, research and scholarship, and accountability — that provide a basis for discussion at a pan-Canadian level.

Perhaps these principles can serve as a platform for dialogue and cooperation in the lifelong learning sector generally.

Personal and professional development at all life stages is a hallmark of our rapidly changing society in this new century. Let’s start it off right, by working together to forge a national action plan that meets Canada’s lifelong learning challenges. 

**Claire Morris** is Deputy Minister, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), Chairperson, Canada Employment Insurance Commission, and Deputy Minister of Labour. She joined HRDC as Associate Deputy Minister in 1998, prior to which she served as Secretary to the Cabinet and Clerk of the Executive Council with the Government of New Brunswick, Deputy Minister of the Policy Secretariat for the provincial government, and Deputy Minister, Health and Community Services.



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