Countries that are successful in today’s global economy are those making strategic investments in their greatest resource: a well-educated, adaptable and innovative population. In China and India, investments in post-secondary education (PSE) have been steadily rising. At the same time, the European Union and the United States are developing comprehensive education strategies. The latest report from the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) on the state of post-secondary education in Canada reveals that now is the time for Canada to devise its own PSE roadmap for current and future learners – or risk the erosion of our competitive advantage.

AN INCREASINGLY VULNERABLE POSITION

Strategies for Success, CCL’s second annual assessment of PSE in Canada, examines how well the sector is positioned to carry us forward. As with our first report in 2006, A Positive Record – An Uncertain Future, this assessment finds that Canada has one of the most highly educated populations in the world. In many fields, including research and development, we lead on the world stage and ‘punch above our weight’ in advancing knowledge. These are achievements to celebrate.

At the same time, there are indications that our position is increasingly vulnerable, particularly when considered against the deliberate measures that other leading nations are taking to enhance their PSE systems. A highly educated, skilled and creative workforce is critical to any country’s productivity, and productivity is, in turn, vital to economic growth. In Canada, our productivity lags behind that of the United States, as does our per capita GDP. It is no coincidence that these statistics go hand in hand. While we face the need to improve productivity, we are also confronted with the challenges of an aging population and increasing shortages in our labour force. Moreover, it is expected that, by 2015, two-thirds of all job openings created in Canada will require some form of post-secondary education or training. Smarter investments in training and education are our best hope for sustained economic growth.

Given current and forecasted labour and skills shortages, we need to broaden our efforts to address the needs of Canadians who have traditionally had lower rates of participation in PSE. This requires a focus on affordability and accessibility of PSE for under-represented groups including adult learners, students from rural areas and low-income backgrounds, people with disabilities, and Aboriginal people. Moreover, young men are currently under-represented in our universities. In 2004, women earned 62 percent of all undergraduate degrees. We need to look at why the gender gap has occurred and what we can do to redress the balance. With better information and careful planning, we can develop programs that expand the number of people who benefit from post-secondary education programs and, in so doing, broaden our workforce pool.

Although PSE plays a much broader role than simply preparing students for the workplace, that is nonetheless a major consideration for many learners. Stronger links between workplaces and post-secondary institutions have the twin benefits of keeping PSE relevant to the labour market and helping prepare students for the transition to the labour force. This is particularly important if we hope to have the right skill sets and the workers we need to drive innovation.
North America once produced more than one-third of all post-secondary students worldwide; now students from Canada and the United States total just one-sixth of global enrolment. We are competing with countries around the world for the bright, talented people we need. Providing better education and training, investing in targeted research and development, and striving to match workforce demand with skills will increase the opportunities that can keep our best and brightest graduates at home. Canada’s business sector keenly understands this reality.

The mobility of students and labour is also an issue in Canada. Take for instance the inter-provincial recognition of the qualifications of apprentices and trades workers. Only 13 percent of the approximately 300 trades in Canada issue certifications that are recognized nationally. For the vast majority, their certification is only good within the province where they have apprenticed, creating a major barrier to workers’ ability to move to meet demand for their skills.

Keeping our economy vibrant and sustainable also depends upon knowledge creation and transfer, which in Canada rests heavily on post-secondary institutions. Investment in research and development at post-secondary institutions has increased at twice the rate of that in the private sector, and the total number of people involved in the research sector increased by 38 percent from 1994 to 2004. However, in a comparison of gross expenditures on research and development, Canada ranks 15th among 40 Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, the same position we have held since 2001. Our universities also generate only half the license income that American institutions with similar investments produce. With better information, we could assess whether we are focusing our research and development investments in the right areas and transferring our knowledge in practical ways.

THE DATA GAP

These realities require a nationally coordinated strategic response. However, in order to conceive of a plan that will meet Canadian needs over the long term, we must first know where the strengths and weaknesses in our PSE sector lie and how we can improve in areas critical to our future success. When CCL’s researchers were writing the 2006 and 2007 PSE reports, they discovered a paucity of information that transcends provincial boundaries. Not only does the shortage of nationally comprehensive data impede our ability to measure Canadian success, it also hinders our
ability to compare our progress to that of other nations.

For example, in the 2007 edition of the OECD’s annual *Education at a Glance* report, Canada was unable to provide figures for 60 percent of the 96 indicators related to PSE. We could not supply such basic information as the drop-out rates in our colleges and universities, participation, enrolment and graduation from our colleges, public and private investment in PSE, or a profile of the learners who participate in our system. In some cases, we collect information in a way that does not correspond to international comparisons; in other cases we do not collect the information at all.

Why is the shortage of data significant? Unless we have a solid base of information across the country, we cannot know how well the approximately $36 billion invested in PSE by federal and provincial governments each year contributes to achieving our social and economic priorities. As Don Drummond, senior vice-president and chief economist of the TD Bank pointed out with respect to *Strategies for Success*, “Improving the education-to-work relationship will be difficult if we cannot measure how our post-secondary education system is performing.”

If we are to improve productivity and increase our individual and collective prosperity, Canada needs data to track the effectiveness of our investments in PSE, plan for future needs, and evaluate our performance against our international competitors.

Better information can help learners choose the best type of post-secondary program to help them achieve their goals. It will enable post-secondary institutions to forecast and meet student and employer demand. Moreover, better information can assist employers in planning how to train and recruit the workforce they need. “Improving our knowledge base on post-secondary education is a cornerstone in the work needed to improve Canadian productivity and competitiveness,” says Perrin Beatty, president and CEO of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. “Our continued need for highly educated and well-trained workers is critical.” Finally, governments require better information to guide priorities, goals, and investments.

The PSE data strategy proposed by the CCL has the potential to address these information issues. We recognize that the shortage of comprehensive data is not the only challenge that Canada’s post-secondary education sector faces. It is, however, an issue that requires a nationally coordinated response. British Columbia and New Brunswick have recently issued reports on post-secondary education in their jurisdictions. Both B.C.’s *Campus 2020* and New Brunswick’s *Advantage New Brunswick* recommend discussions with other governments to agree on the collection of accurate and meaningful data to support national and international comparisons and standards.

**A PAN-CANADIAN STRATEGY**

Coordinating national initiatives in Canadian PSE can be challenging for many reasons, most obviously because jurisdiction over educational matters is distributed among the provinces. However, this need not impede pan-Canadian initiatives such as the PSE data strategy. There are already several promising examples of inter-governmental initiatives and inter-sectoral collaboration. For instance, the federal government works with the provinces and territories to provide student aid, and invests in research and development at universities and colleges. The federal government also transfers payments to the provinces and territories for PSE and administers tax measures to support learners and their families in meeting education costs. Some provinces have set up PSE quality assurance agencies and are comparing notes on their processes.

In fact, there already exists among provinces some degree

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**International Overview of PSE Processes and System-Wide Structures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Major Review in Last 5 Years</th>
<th>System-Wide Goals and Objectives</th>
<th>Funding Aligned with National Priorities</th>
<th>Quality-Assurance Agency(ies) in Place</th>
<th>Ongoing Mechanism for Federal/State Planning</th>
<th>Federal Ministry of Education</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Process under development</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Under Review</td>
<td>Limited federal funds targeted</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Federal human resources ministry funds labour-market programs, research, literacy and other initiatives related to PSE.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Available material not detailed enough to make conclusions at this time.*
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of harmonization in terms of a vision for the future of PSE in Canada. For example, in structuring our annual PSE reports, CCL used as a framework the following eight goals that were common to the provinces’ own PSE strategies:

- A skilled, adaptable workforce, able to meet our human resource needs
- Innovation, knowledge creation and knowledge transfer
- Active, healthy citizenry
- Quality
- Accessibility
- Participation and success of under-represented groups
- Lifelong learning
- Affordability and sustainability

As the wealth of pan-Canadian information on PSE grows, we anticipate that even more alignment will emerge among governmental and institutional priorities. The time is right to begin a national discussion around these goals, objectives and potential benchmarks through which progress can be measured.

A successful pan-Canadian strategy would need to include a wide range of interested parties: federal, provincial and territorial governments, post-secondary institutions, learners, businesses, researchers, labour and professional organizations, and others. We propose that the mechanism be a formal, structured forum to discuss common issues, to plan, to set goals and to measure progress through regular public reports. We believe that provinces and post-secondary institutions can and should remain autonomous and accountable to their constituents even as they strive to contribute to Canada’s collective PSE goals.

CCL has identified seven areas that could serve as a focus for benchmarks and targets for a Canadian education strategy, to help us measure the successes we hope to achieve:

- Literacy levels
- The number of math, science and technology graduates we produce at the undergraduate and graduate level
- The ratio of research and development personnel per 1,000 population
- Graduation rates
- Post-secondary education attainment rates for the population
- High-school completion rates
- The rate of adult participation in lifelong learning

Additional issues that could be addressed through pan-Canadian strategies lie in the areas of quality assurance and accreditation, student mobility and credit transfer, and prior learning assessment and recognition. Currently, our weaknesses in these areas hold us back from greater success in the knowledge economy. For example, although we know we have nearly 70 public universities and degree-granting institutions, 155 public colleges and institutes and 29 public degree-granting colleges/institutes in Canada, we don’t track the number of private-sector institutions providing post-secondary education and training. Increasingly, employers are having difficulty assessing a candidate’s credentials and suitability for a specific job. Learners also need to know that their credentials will be recognized. Establishing national organizations with mandates to
accredit and assure the quality of public and private post-secondary institutions may help to alleviate this problem. It could also assist Canadians who need their credentials recognized internationally.

Other provinces are eager to begin the kinds of discussions proposed by the British Columbia and New Brunswick reports. As Diane McGifford, Manitoba’s Minister for Advanced Education and Literacy, has indicated: “The challenges we face in this sector have many commonalities across provinces and territories. Ensuring access, affordability and quality are priorities for all jurisdictions. It is important to develop enhanced information at institutional and provincial/territorial levels that can contribute to a clearer pan-Canadian picture.”

As a model for this kind of cooperation across jurisdictions, we need only look to the European Union. The EU held a major review and has established system-wide benchmarks for PSE and skills development across all 27 member countries, aligned with individual national priorities. The United States, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany and Switzerland have also set national goals and objectives for their post-secondary sectors. Many of these countries have also increased funding for PSE, tying it to national priorities and establishing measures to promote accountability.

As we consider the possibility of a national strategy, it is important to recognize the links between PSE and the wider social and economic goals we hold as Canadians, such as the priorities we place on health, inclusiveness, a rising standard of living, tolerance, accessibility, and social engagement. A strong PSE system fosters and supports these values. We already know that educated people participate more actively in their communities; they volunteer and make charitable contributions more often than people with less education. Well-educated people perceive themselves as being in better health and report a higher level of satisfaction than their less-educated peers. Strengthening our PSE system will benefit the country in more ways than purely economic.

A pan-Canadian strategy for PSE should address all of these areas if we are to improve our competitive position relative to the other nations around the globe that are already making education a national priority. Without concerted action, Canada will continue to lag behind other nations in our capacity to assess, report and improve our performance. If we act soon – working together at all levels of government, and with all stakeholders – we will benefit not only the learners, faculty, researchers, taxpayers, and employers with direct involvement in our post-secondary sector. We will also benefit our country and society as a whole, as we nurture a healthy, engaged citizenry responsible for the innovation and creativity that provide new opportunities for growth, a vibrant, competitive economy, and an even better quality of life.

DR. PAUL CAPPON was named President and Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Council on Learning in October 2004. A prominent educator, physician and administrator, he has been a lifelong education advocate, community supporter and author of numerous publications on learning and community medicine.

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