

## Widening Access: Making the Transition from Mass to Universal Post-Secondary Education in Canada

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It has long been recognized that innovative policies and programs can help to ameliorate unequal opportunities to accessing post-secondary education. With the demographic reality of an aging population and the secondary school population in decline, Canada must devote attention to increasing the educational attainment levels of disadvantaged and under-represented groups in order to meet growing social and economic challenges. This paper highlights some of the contemporary challenges facing post-secondary education in Canada and focuses on the need for a system that is more democratic, open, and accessible. The paper draws upon current research about the challenges faced by groups of Canadians who experience difficulty accessing higher learning opportunities. It explores a number of possibilities for increasing educational participation and attainment for those who have traditionally been excluded from the system.

### INTRODUCTION

In the early 1970s, Trow (1973) conceptualized three models of participation in systems of higher education as elite, mass, and universal. These phases of development are applicable to a consideration of the evolution of post-secondary education participation in Canada. The elite system that existed in Canada prior to World War II was largely the exclusive domain of the privileged class. Up until that point, universities that prepared a privileged few for elite professional and leadership roles in society were the dominant feature of the Canadian post-secondary system. Then, from the 1950s onward, a mass system of post-secondary participation emerged as access was increasingly made available to a larger proportion of Canadians than had traditionally been the case (Guppy, 1984; Harris, 1976). By historical standards, post-secondary participation in Canada underwent a massive expansion from about the 1960s through to the 1970s. This golden age of development was driven by demographic factors such as the baby boom, changing labour market requirements and a greater acceptance of human capital theory; that is, by the understanding that there is a connection between one's educational attainment and personal income, and that public investment in human capital contributes to economic growth (Jones, 1997).

While participation rates have continued to rise since the 1990s, the rate of growth in post-secondary enrolments appears to be levelling off. Following Trow's typology, at well over 50% of the population

taking part in tertiary education, participation in Canada is at the universal level. However, the participation levels of some groups of Canadians are well below the universal population participation level suggested by Trow (i.e., over 50%). In fact, for a number of population groups, the system appears to be mired between the mass and universal paradigms envisioned by Trow 35 years ago. As this paper illustrates, for some disadvantaged and under-represented populations, a mass system of participation has not yet materialized. Herein lies the difference between the two types of access to tertiary education defined by Anisef, Bertrand, Hortian, and James (1985) as Type I access and Type II access. Type I access, like Trow's earlier conception, quantifies the extent of access according to the overall number of individuals who participate. In contrast, Type II access measures the composition of tertiary education participants taking into account their social background and relationship with the overall population. In other words, Type II access is, by definition, more attentive to issues of equity.

For people from under-represented groups to make the necessary transition to universal access, where they, like most upper- and middle-class Canadians, are not only accommodated but obliged to participate in advanced levels of learning throughout their lives, public policy must more directly address the impediments to post-secondary participation that have existed for those who have traditionally been excluded from this level of education. This shift is especially important at present considering the changing nature of Canada's population. The demographic reality of the baby boom generation moving toward their retirement years may significantly impact the workforce while the declining high school population will likely present enrolment challenges for institutions. In addition to examining the situation of several under-represented and disadvantaged groups in some detail and proposing some directions for post-secondary policy, this paper will first briefly review the nature and status of post-secondary education participation in Canada.

## SYSTEM STRUCTURE AND PARTICIPATION

### System Structure

The Canadian constitution assigns responsibility for education, including post-secondary education, to individual provinces. However, federal responsibility for economic development, along with federal spending power, has frequently permitted the national government to involve itself in various aspects of post-secondary education policy (Fisher et al., 2006). While provincial governments are the primary sources for the funding of public post-secondary institutions, the federal government also has supported the development of post-secondary education by providing funding in areas such as research initiatives at colleges and universities, financial assistance programs for students and indirect funding to post-secondary institutions via fiscal transfer arrangements with the provinces. In the absence of a federally coordinated system, post-secondary education policy at the national level is represented by the common interests of 13 provincial and territorial systems of vastly variable diversity and size.

At the system level, an ever-widening mix of university, college, and apprenticeship programs across provinces comprises the three key streams of formal post-secondary education. In comparison to

Canadian universities—which can trace their origins to the medieval European *studia generalia* of Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge—the modern non-university sector is a far more recent arrival on the post-secondary landscape. To accommodate the growing numbers and diversity of learners, community colleges developed rapidly in the post-World War II period, greatly increasing the range of choices available to learners and adding a comprehensive mix of occupationally-oriented technical and vocational training programs in a wide range of fields, including applied arts, business, health sciences and technology (Gallagher & Dennison, 1995; Jones 1997). The post-World War II democratization of Canadian post-secondary education has been achieved in large part because of the participation growth in the non-university sector (Guppy, 1984). In addition to the publicly-funded colleges, a sizable private vocational training sector has developed in most Canadian provinces, primarily since the 1980s. As with public sector colleges, private training institutions a) enrol large numbers of students in academic and vocationally-oriented programs of study; b) frequently avail themselves of federal support through labour market training and adjustment programs; and c) have been very active in providing apprenticeship and skilled trades training (Dennison & Schuetze, 2004; McBride & Kealey, 2000). While apprenticeship is a smaller part of the post-secondary education system and often suffers from an undeserved poor image as a second-best option to university or college, it is one of three essential pillars of the post-secondary education system – alongside universities and colleges.

### **System Participation**

Between 1981 and 2001, the size of the youth population (aged 15-24), which traditionally represented the main feeder group for post-secondary institutions, decreased from about 19.5% to 13.6% (Statistics Canada, 2005). As secondary school cohorts declined following these demographic trends, much of the subsequent growth and stability in post-secondary enrolments has been accomplished by increasing the overall proportion of youth who enrol in a university, college or trades program following high school. Depending on the enrolment projection model consulted, the rate of increase in overall post-secondary enrolments in Canada is either headed for a period of levelling off or on a path of precipitous decline (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2007; Berger, Motte, & Parkin, 2007; Hango & de Broucker, 2007).

Studies of youth transition indicate that about 75% of Canadian youth currently participate in some form of post-secondary education within the first two to four years of completing secondary school (Malatest & Associates, 2007; Shaienks, Eisl-Culkin, & Bussière, 2006). Evidently, post-secondary education is far more accessible today than it was just a couple of generations ago; however, access to the system is still far from universal. Participation in university-level studies remains particularly inequitable, with individuals from more affluent households participating to a far greater extent than those from lower income backgrounds (Drolet, 2005; Frenette, 2007b). If participation in the system is to grow further and make the necessary shift from mass to universal participation, policy makers must devote specific attention to increasing the educational participation and attainment levels of disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

### WHY UNIVERSAL PARTICIPATION?

While universal participation in post-secondary education is essential to the eventual realization of social equity, it is equally important for economic and utilitarian reasons. The importance of education as a domestic economic investment has been consistently articulated by governmental and non-governmental organizations alike. There is a general public policy consensus on the vast body of evidence that supports the contention that public and private investments in post-secondary education yield high returns in terms of increased labour market participation, productivity, economic development and innovation (Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity, 2008; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003).

Inaction on this policy front also has significant potential negative implications for Canadians both individually and collectively. One need only consider labour market projections that indicate that the demand for highly-skilled workers is increasing on an annual basis in Canada. Such projections suggest that somewhere on the order of two-thirds of all new job openings over the next 10 years will be in occupations that will require some form of post-secondary education (Canada, 2007). With the average age of the population rising and the share of workers retiring or approaching retirement projected to increase, an excess demand for skilled workers could occur in certain occupational areas if workers who are leaving the labour market are not replaced with new ones. Skills shortages are difficult to observe and measure, and the concept itself is relatively contentious (McMullin, Cooke, & Downie, 2004), but if they do occur, such labour shortages can have a ripple effect throughout the economy. They can inhibit productivity improvements, reduce labour market competitiveness and discourage firms from locating or investing in a local or provincial economy. They can cause workers in related areas to lose their jobs and also prevent employers from hiring new workers. A shortage of skilled tradespeople in the construction industry could result in a further inflation of housing and renovation costs. More seriously still, a shortage of health care workers could adversely impact the availability and quality and care (Buerhaus et al., 2007; Dainty, Ison, & Briscoe, 2005).

Moreover, in addition to these economic and labour market concerns, there are many important societal benefits associated with having a highly educated citizenry. Children of more highly educated parents perform better in school and are more successful in their transition to the labour market. There is also a positive correlation between education and public health. For example, those with higher levels of education tend to smoke less, have better diets, and have healthier lifestyles. There is also a demonstrated positive correlation between education and civic participation, such as voting, charitable giving and volunteerism (Junor & Usher, 2004).

Re-orienting the post-secondary education system to accommodate new types of learners will not be an easy task, especially since academic systems, especially at the university level, are steeped in tradition and are highly resistant to change. As Kerr (2001) noted in his seminal work *The Uses of the University*, the university itself is one of the oldest institutions in the world and has continued relatively

unchanged over the centuries. There is no disputing that the university's constancy and reliability, its resistance to change, have served our society extremely well. However, extending access to post-secondary education for those who have traditionally been excluded will necessarily entail change at the institutional level in tandem with changes in governmental policy. If we are to become a true *learning society*, wherein a larger segment of our population has access to and is continually engaged in learning throughout their lives, educators, institutions, and public policy makers need to collaborate to increase participation levels amongst diverse and emerging group of learners.

The increasing costs of post-secondary education are, of course, a barrier to participation for some individuals, but the issue of access is actually multifaceted. Research is revealing that, aside from affordability issues, there are many other barriers that deter participation. Individuals in rural and northern areas are often deterred from accessing further education because the distance to an institution is a barrier (Frenette, 2002, 2003). Program attendance requirements that do not allow individuals to study part-time or at their own pace but require a full-time commitment are a powerful deterrent for those who have family or work responsibilities. Inflexible admission requirements combined with insufficient prerequisite academic preparation often deter potential students (Myers & de Broucker, 2006; Saunders, 2007). These access issues are further complicated by issues such as poverty, inadequate housing, racism and discrimination, substance abuse, cultural or social apathy, and language barriers. So, while an often intense debate continues to be waged about the appropriate level of tuition fees, the research shows that strategies for universal participation must go beyond the issue of sticker price and conceptualize access more comprehensively.

If policy makers are to dismantle the barriers that deter disadvantaged groups, they must first understand what these barriers are. The best way to gain insight into these is to reflect on what the existing research literature has discovered, identify the gaps, and fill these in through further inquiry. In the next section, I will review the relevant barriers to participation for a number of these groups including "first generation" students, rural populations, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities and older learners.

### **First Generation Students**

Researchers have known for some time that student choices about post-secondary education are strongly correlated with parental educational attainment and that one of the strongest predictors of whether a high school student will go on to enrol in post-secondary studies is if his or her parents pursued these as well (Andres & Krahn, 1999; Barr-Telford, Cartwright, Prasil, & Shimmons, 2003; Choy, 1999, 2001; Hango & de Broucker, 2007; Knighton, 2002; Lowe & Krahn, 2000). As Deschenes (2007) has noted, there is a "strong correlation between the educational attainment of parents and children, which may contribute to the transmission of socio-economic status and inequality across generations" (p. 271).



A growing body of research has compared the educational outcomes of first generation students with legacy generation students (Andres & Krahn, 1999; Choy, 2001; Grayson, 1997; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Ishitani, 2003; Knighton, 2002; Krahn, 2004; Lowe & Krahn, 2000; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson & Tenerzini, 2003; Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004). The former group comprises students who are of the first generation in their families to attend college or university, while the legacy or second generation group consists of students who have one or more parents who have completed a post-secondary program. In her study of the relationship between participation in post-secondary education and family background, Drolet (2005) concluded that “when taking account of both parental education and parental income, university participation rates are more strongly associated with parents’ level of education than with their income” (p. 4). A recent study conducted by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation found that just 48% of first generation students went on to post-secondary education, compared to 68% of children of parents with some level of post-secondary experience and 82% in the case of students whose parents both completed a university degree (Berger et al., 2007). First generation students are also more likely than their legacy generation contemporaries to be from low income households (Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007). In comparison to youths from higher income families, first generation, low income youth tend to have lower levels of academic achievement in secondary school, lower overall post-secondary aspirations and, when they do enrol, these students are less likely to successfully complete a post-secondary program (Berger et al., 2007; Ishitani, 2006; Lambert, Zeman, Allen, & Bussiere, 2004).

With respect to educational aspirations, previous research has shown that the type of post-secondary education chosen by students is also strongly correlated with the education levels of their parents: the higher the level of parental educational attainment, the higher their children’s educational plans extend. Students with more highly educated parents are more likely than their peers to pursue post-secondary studies, and when they do go on to participate in post-secondary studies, the children of the more highly educated are more likely to attend university rather than other types of post-secondary education such as community colleges or private training institutes (Butlin, 1999; Christofides, Cirello, & Hoy, 2001; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Knighton, 2002; Looker & Lowe, 2001; McDonough, 1997; Statistics Canada, 2001b).

A great deal of research effort is currently focused on uncovering the reasons behind first generation and legacy generation students’ post-secondary choices. This research is significant in no small part because a post-secondary education system that differentiates between students based on social class, as reflected in parental educational attainment and income levels, has far more in common with the elite system of generations past than the universally accessible system to which we aspire.

### **Rural Students**

Studies of youth transition from high school have shown that urban Canadian youth are more likely to attend university than rural Canadian youth (Andres & Looker, 2001; Butlin, 1999; Finnie, Lascelles, & Sweetman, 2005; Frenette, 2007b; Hango & de Broucker, 2007; Shaienks & Gluszynski, 2007). Studies

have similarly demonstrated that rural students have lower educational and occupational aspirations than those of urban students (Bajema, Miller, & Williams, 2002; Boak & Boak, 1989; Conrad, 1997; Haller & Virkler, 1993; Jeffery, Lehr, Hache, & Campbell, 1992). These differences have frequently been attributed to the socio-economic conditions in rural communities, including lower family incomes and lower parental educational attainment levels (Boak & Boak, 1989; Conrad, 1997; Dupuy, Mayer, & Morissette, 2000; Haller & Virker, 1993; McCracken, Barcinas, & Wims, 1991). As Bollman (1999) and Dupuy et al. (2000) have pointed out, the lower numbers of individuals with advanced education credentials in rural regions can partially be attributed to a lower demand for workers with the skills attained through post-secondary education.

While they do not significantly differ in their performance on standardized tests (Frenette, 2007a), Canadian youth who do not live within commuting distance of a college or university are far less likely to participate in post-secondary education compared to students who do (Frenette 2002; Looker & Lowe, 2001). One possible reason for this is that rural students necessarily incur additional living expenses associated with living away from home. Students who move away from home to complete a 4-year degree often incur costs estimated at \$20,000 or more than those who can continue to live with their parents while studying (Barr-Telford et al., 2004; Finnie, 2002). Unsurprisingly, these heightened post-secondary costs increase the prospect of higher debt accumulation for rural students (Kirby & Conlon, 2005).

Research has shown that while the majority of rural parents expect their children to attend post-secondary education, their expectations are different than those of urban parents (Davies, 2005). One of the key differences is that rural parents are more likely to expect that their offspring will attend a non-university institution. Distance and cost are likely factors shaping this expectation, since rural students are more likely to be proximate to a local community college or other non-university institution than a university (Frenette, 2002). Aside from the distance and cost barriers, there are, however, other factors that reduce the probability of post-secondary attendance for individuals from rural areas. Like first generation students, rural students often have less exposure to attitudes and knowledge that make them comfortable with post-secondary education. This is in part because there are relatively smaller numbers of higher status role models in rural areas compared to that of urban communities (Apostal & Bilden, 1991; Boak & Boak, 1989; Cahill, 1992; Jeffery et al., 1992).

### **Aboriginal Peoples**

While still far lower than that of the overall Canadian population, the educational attainment levels of the Aboriginal population in Canada is higher today than a generation ago. In fact, those Aboriginal students who successfully graduate from high school are just as likely to complete post-secondary education as high school graduates in the overall Canadian population (Mendelson, 2006). When it comes to participation in non-university post-secondary education, recent statistics indicate that the Aboriginal population is approaching parity with the general population: 25% of the Aboriginal population has completed non-university post-secondary education compared to 28% in the overall

Canadian population. Recent research has also indicated that the educational aspirations of Aboriginal youth are very similar those of other Canadian youth (Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005; Malatest & Associates, 2007). While these statistics are cause for some optimism, much work remains to be done if we are to achieve a greater degree of equity in educational attainment and access for Aboriginal people.

Recent research carried out for the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation indicates that about 72% of Aboriginal youth either did not graduate high school, did not access post-secondary education after high school, or dropped out of post-secondary education after enrolling (Berger et al., 2007). When it comes to university-level education, Aboriginal people are about four times less likely than the general population to obtain a university degree (Mendelson, 2006). This inequity is closely linked to the fact that Aboriginal students are much less likely to complete high school. Data from the 2001 census shows that the Aboriginal population fared much worse than the total population in terms of high school graduation. While just 16% of Canadians aged 20 to 24 reported having less than high school education in 2001, 43% of Aboriginal people in this age group had left school prior to graduation. This increased to 58% when only on-reserve aboriginal youth were considered. In Manitoba, over 70% of the on-reserve population aged 20 through 24 had not completed high school in 2001, compared to 61% of those in this same age group in Saskatchewan and Alberta reserves (Mendelson, 2006).

Considering that post-secondary education outcomes for Aboriginal students who complete high school are comparable to that of the general population, if there are to be more Aboriginal post-secondary graduates, we must start by providing Aboriginal communities with the resources that are required to grow the numbers of Aboriginal high school graduates. Efforts in this regard should fully integrate the advice of Aboriginal organizations, educators, and scholars who have long advocated improved access to early childhood education and K-12 curricula that demonstrate an understanding of the history, values, and issues affecting Aboriginal people. Beyond the issues of high school completion and financial considerations, Mendelson (2006) points out that Aboriginal students must overcome a number of social barriers to access post-secondary education, including alienation and cultural insensitivity, mistrust of education, family and societal expectations, familial responsibilities, and discrimination.

Better results for Aboriginal Canadians in the post-secondary education system will not only lead to better social and economic conditions for Aboriginal peoples, but will also contribute to the quality of life of all Canadians. Presently, the average income of an Aboriginal person in Canada is substantially lower than that of the general population, at about 64% of the income of the average Canadian. Moreover, Aboriginal people are about twice as likely to experience unemployment compared to the population as a whole (Mendelson, 2006). Increases in educational attainment levels in Aboriginal communities could help to reduce these income and employment disparities and, given what is known about the intergenerational effects of educational attainment, could help increase the likelihood that future generations of Aboriginal peoples will achieve better education outcomes. This is also important



considering that the Aboriginal population is far younger than the overall Canadian population.

According to the 2006 Census, the median age for the Aboriginal population was 27 years, compared to an all-time high of 40 years for the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2008). Taking into account the projected decline in the overall Canadian population aged 18 to 24, it is evident that, in the next decades, Aboriginal people will make up a growing share of the young adult population and aboriginal workers will necessarily form a much larger part of the Canadian labour force. As a number of analyses have suggested, the continued exclusion of Aboriginal people from the benefits of a post-secondary education has lurking economic consequences for the country as a whole (Mendelson, 2006; Sharpe, Arsenault, & Lapointe, 2007). In addition to the projected economic and labour force impacts, eliminating the post-secondary education participation gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples is increasingly recognized in strategies for maintaining current overall post-secondary enrolment levels in the face of in the decline of traditional youth cohorts that have attended college and university (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2007; Berger et al., 2007; Hango & de Broucker, 2007).

### **People with Disabilities**

Canadians with disabilities comprise another group that has been disadvantaged in the post-secondary education system. Like several other under-represented groups in post-secondary education, they have received attention in recent policy discussions about widening access to advanced-level studies (Alberta, 2006; Kirby, 2007; New Brunswick, 2007; Ontario, 2005; Saskatchewan, 2007). While human rights legislation provides a legal framework for equal opportunity in education, there is also growing recognition that individuals with disabilities have a valuable role to play in the labour market. At present, their potential to contribute to the economy is significantly underutilized.

In 2001, only about 45% of the two million working-aged Canadians with some type of disability were in the labour force, compared to close to 80% of the remaining population. While it is difficult to make precise estimates, many of those with disabilities who are not currently in the labour force would like to have an opportunity to participate. In the 2001 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, only 41% of the 965,000 Canadians with disabilities surveyed indicated that their condition completely precluded working. The remaining 571,000 individuals comprise an untapped pool of workers (Williams, 2006). When not excluded from the job market, Canadians with disabilities are more likely to earn less and experience more unemployment than those without disabilities. In fact, the unemployment rate for adults with disabilities in the labour force is about five times higher than the unemployment rate for people without disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2001a).

While much work is still required to achieve the goal of employment equity in Canada, there is no disputing that the improved employment outcomes that post-secondary education provides are realizable for a great number of people with disabilities. The available data does in fact indicate that the labour market situation of people with disabilities is mitigated by higher levels of educational

attainment. That is, people with disabilities in the labour market are likely to have more advanced education than their counterparts who are not in the labour force (Williams, 2006).

Although efforts have been made to reduce barriers to post-secondary education for youths with disabilities, we are far from a level playing field when it comes to equality of opportunity. For example, Canadians without disabilities are far more likely to complete high school and nearly twice as likely to earn a university degree (Statistics Canada, 2004). A recent survey of individuals who were in Grade 12 in 2003 found that just 43% of respondents who described themselves as having a disability went on to post-secondary education after high school, compared to 71% of other respondents (Malatest & Associates, 2007). People with disabilities often face significant and unique barriers to accessing post-secondary education. Many students with disabilities face greater financial costs because their living expenses may be higher than other students; they may take a longer period of time to complete their studies; or they may be unable to rely on earnings from summer or part-time employment (Looker & Lowe, 2001). They may also accrue additional expenses because specialized supports provided for them in their secondary school, such as interpreters, translators and technical equipment, are not fully subsidized or not subsidized at all at the post-secondary level. Additional barriers such as limited physical access to facilities and a lack of institutional sensitivity to their unique needs also currently prevent many people with disabilities from sharing in the benefits of post-secondary education. In addition to reducing their chances of gaining and keeping employment, this lack of access ultimately limits their participation in Canadian society. This is a human rights issue and, particularly in light of the challenges awaiting us as our population continues to age, an issue of considerable economic importance for all Canadians.

### **Adult and Older Learners**

Despite considerable rhetoric about the need for a learning society and the importance of lifelong learning for Canada to remain or become a competitive knowledge-based economy, the progress in effectively supporting adult and older learners has been disconcertingly slow. Adult education participation levels in Canada appear to have remained relatively stagnant since the early 1990s and the participation rates in adult education of Canadians with relatively little schooling and those with poor literacy skills are conspicuously low by international standards (Myers & de Broucker, 2006; Rubenson, Desjardins, & Yoon, 2007). In addition, the average age of students on Canada's college and university campuses has not increased by much over the past 40 years (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). At present, approximately 5.8 million Canadians aged 25 years and over have not completed high school and there are approximately 9 million Canadians aged 16 to 65 with literacy skills that are below the level needed to participate in a knowledge-based society and economy (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). Because a large proportion of Canada's adult population is not properly equipped to live and work in today's society, there is, evidently, an increasing need to provide opportunities for adult learners to improve their skills and more fully participate in the economy and contribute to their communities. However,

adult learners, especially those with the lowest levels of education, are less likely to participate in post-secondary education because of financial difficulties, a lack of awareness about how to access learning opportunities, and a lack of flexibility and support from not just the post-secondary system, but from their employers as well (Bailey, 2007; Goldenberg, 2006; Myers & de Broucker, 2006).

Participation in job-related workplace training is lower in Canada than in the United States and a number of other developed countries with which Canada competes for investment. In recent years, there has been a decline in the proportion of Canadians who participate in job-related continuing education, and Canada has slipped down in international rankings of workers' participation in job-related training (Bailey, 2007; Goldenberg, 2006; Myers & de Broucker, 2006). Compared to employers in the United States, Canadian employers invest about 50% less of their overall payroll on training. While the benefits of investment in employee training—such as enhanced performance and productivity and increased customer and employee retention—are well documented, Canadian employers are frequently reticent to make workplace learning investments (Bailey, 2007; Bloom, Burrows, Lafleur, & Squires, 1997; Goldenberg, 2006; Myers & de Broucker, 2006).

From a much less utilitarian perspective, there has also been consistent research evidence pointing to connections between learning programs for older adults and positive health benefits (Cusack, Thompson, & Rogers, 2003; Hammond, 2002; Swindell, 2002). This research has shown that continuing education positively impacts the mental, physical, and emotional health of older adults, and that seniors who continue to participate in learning activities tend to more likely to be actively engaged in their families, communities and personal relationships. These findings should serve as great encouragement for adults to engage in continuing learning. It is more important than ever that we place the education levels and post-secondary participation of older adult Canadians high on the public agenda.

There is, in short, little doubt that increased participation in post-secondary education would be a considerable benefit to the aforementioned groups, as well as Canadians in general. However, it should be recognized that many other segments of the Canadian population have educational needs that also warrant attention. The scope of this article does not allow for a detailed discussion of these, but they be identified as visible minorities, immigrant communities, homeless families and individuals, and those who live in inner-city neighbourhoods. Clearly, and importantly, these groups are not mutually exclusive as people often belong to more than one of them.

### **MOVING THE WIDENING ACCESS AGENDA FORWARD**

In making any changes to accommodate the learning needs of these groups, new initiatives need to be developed with the recognition that one-size-fits-all approaches are not well suited to meeting the educational needs of disadvantaged and under-represented persons. A specialized policy approach is necessary if institutions are to improve access for individuals facing unique circumstances and

challenges. In a number of provinces, such as Ontario, politicians and policy makers have demonstrated a willingness to experiment with demand-side mechanisms that directly target funding and supports toward assisting disadvantaged and under-represented groups. Moreover, if current post-secondary participation rates are to undergo a lasting, positive change, policy-makers must certainly abandon the short-term, pilot project-based funding model that has to date often driven efforts to remedy the problem of low post-secondary education participation. This model has often relegated specialized post-secondary system supports for the most disadvantaged in Canadian society to the outer fringes of post-secondary institutional policy, where they are vulnerable to periodic cost efficiency exercises. Specialized student support programs should instead be placed at the core of post-secondary funding with a coinciding long-term commitment to provide the resources required to build system comprehensiveness.

From the preceding discussion, there is little doubt that one of the most significant disincentives to participation in post-secondary education for disadvantaged populations is the cost involved. While it has been politically popular to provide universal subsidies to fund tuition reductions, tuition freezes and universal tax credits, these are neither efficient nor equitable ways of helping the needy. In fact, there is increasing evidence that such uniform subsidies for post-secondary education further entrench existing social inequalities rather than alleviate them (Jones, Shanahan, Padure, Lamoureaux, & Gregor, 2008; Junor & Usher, 2004). They are inequitable, in particular, because they spend more public funds to subsidize post-secondary studies for higher income groups who have much higher post-secondary participation rates compared to lower income earners. They are also inefficient because many students from higher income groups would participate in the current system in the absence of additional public subsidies. A more effective use of any new funding would be to direct it entirely toward increasing affordability for those at the lower end of the income spectrum. To clarify, the suggestion is not, here, to increase the cost of college or university for higher income learners as a means of buying or subsidizing increased access for under-represented groups. If nothing else, there may be a certain degree of elasticity in the relationship between costs and participation, but there would most certainly come a point where tuition increases would price post-secondary education beyond the reach of a great many students.

Finally, while the availability of financial resources is a significant determinant in post-secondary participation, a lack of academic preparation is evidently important as well. The system should not be designed in such a way that negative or unsuccessful experiences with formal education earlier in life act as an impediment to further education. To ensure that all Canadians have access to lifelong learning opportunities, the post-secondary system needs to take on greater a greater responsibility for academic remediation. Post-secondary institutions at all levels should also adopt clear, publicly accessible guidelines recognizing the prior learning experiences of prospective students. This cannot be achieved unless institutions have both sufficient resources and willingness to fully accommodate new types of learners.



## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Our society, and participation in the public sphere, is increasingly predicated on a high skills-high wage economic strategy. Although the extent to which educational attainment can facilitate upward social mobility is constrained by stratification at the societal level, education remains the primary mechanism by which low income and disadvantaged groups can transcend the socioeconomic position of their families. While education for citizenship has long meant something important to many educators, perhaps a reinvigorated call for education for economic competitiveness will appeal to those who possess the influence to make the changes that are necessary to make post-secondary education universally accessible to all Canadians.

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