

# Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System

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# **Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System**

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## Foreword

There is a lot of talk in policy circles about the importance of ‘life-long’ learning. In an economy where technologies and skill needs are constantly changing, it is important that Canadians have access to learning opportunities throughout the course of their lives. In an ageing society, it is important that everyone, including older Canadians, has a chance to fully contribute to the economy and to their communities. At a time when there are concerns about the polarization of earnings and incomes, it is essential that those with lower levels of educational attainment have the opportunity to improve their skills.

But how well do we ‘walk the talk’ in Canada? It seems not very well at all. Too many less-educated/less-skilled adults in Canada are being left behind, with little chance to improve their skills, their knowledge, and their earnings. Moreover, results of international tests of adult literacy show that 42 percent of Canadians aged 16 to 65 years have literacy skills below the level considered necessary to live and work in today’s society – a level that has not changed over the last ten years. By standing still Canadians are losing ground, as other countries forge ahead to ensure that their citizens remain productive. Canadians need to catch up.

This report, authored by Karen Myers and Patrice de Broucker, documents the availability of formal learning opportunities for adults (to complete high-school, attend college or university, or participate in skills-upgrading programs in the community or the workplace) in five Canadian provinces: Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Quebec. Myers and de Broucker conclude that our adult learning ‘systems’ are complex, difficult to navigate, and pose numerous barriers for less-educated adults who would like to improve their skills. They propose a set of principles to guide the development of more coherent and accessible adult learning programs. They also note signs of progress in several provinces.

I would like to thank Karen Myers and Patrice de Broucker for their thorough analysis of the terms of access to learning opportunities for adults in Canada, and their vision of a system in which life-long learning can be a reality for all Canadians. I would also like to thank Human Resources and Social Development Canada and the Alberta Ministry of Human Resources and Employment for their financial contributions to the project.

Sharon Manson Singer, PhD  
June 2006



## Executive Summary

The social and economic importance of encouraging adults to engage in continuous learning throughout their working lives is undisputed. Better-educated individuals earn higher wages, have greater earnings growth over their lifetimes, and experience less unemployment. Better-educated nations have higher long run economic growth and higher standards of living.

But all too often, lifelong learning simply means those who are already highly educated are getting even more education and training (the exemplar *par excellence* of the ‘rich getting richer’). New evidence suggests that adult learning and raising literacy skills have the potential to significantly improve the economic well-being of those with relatively low initial education and skills. When learning is diffused throughout the less-educated members of the workforce, national prosperity is significantly enhanced.

Canada is generally recognized as having, on average, a high level of educational attainment. However, the adult learning participation rate of the least educated Canadian adults is quite low by international standards and has scarcely improved in five years. Many observers have pinned the problem on adult learning systems that are complex, incoherent and incomplete.

This report documents the availability of formal learning opportunities for adults, and identifies the factors that influence participation of less-educated/less-skilled adults in these opportunities. In addition, it identifies gaps in our adult learning systems and recommends measures to fill these gaps. While a truly comprehensive study would examine all provinces, this report examines the situation primarily in five provinces:

Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Quebec.

### **A statistical portrait of the least educated**

A large proportion of Canada’s adult population is not equipped to participate in a knowledge-based society:

- 5.8 million Canadians aged 25 years and over do not have a high-school diploma or higher credentials;
- there is still too high a flow of young people dropping out of high-school: about 200,000 young adults have not completed high-school – this is more frequent among young men than young women and varies significantly by province;
- 9 million Canadians aged 16 to 65 years have literacy skills below the level considered as necessary to live and work in today’s society.

Less-educated individuals are likely to experience relatively poor labour market outcomes over the entire course of their career, in the form of lower wages, a higher likelihood of unemployment, and lower-status jobs. Differences in labour market outcomes based on education take effect early in a workers’ career, and persist throughout their lives. In fact, the least-educated will likely fall farther behind their more-educated counterparts over the course of their careers, as ‘learning begets learning’ – those with high initial levels of education are more likely to take advantage of future educational and training opportunities, and reap the rewards in the form of better, higher-paying jobs. The difference in labour market outcomes between the least-educated and their more educated counterparts has become larger in the past 20 years.

## **The benefits of adult learning**

Evidence is emerging that, although the less-educated are less likely to participate in formal learning, when they do participate they are no less likely than their more educated counterparts to benefit. Starting from a position of relative educational disadvantage, less-educated learners may be more likely to gain from additional well-targeted learning.

The Canadian evidence in particular suggests that there is a pool of individuals who missed out on obtaining post secondary education in their youth, but have benefited significantly from job related training or ‘second chance’ education as an adult. For these ‘high potential return’ individuals a policy designed to increase educational attainment would have a substantial payoff.

## **Earning a high-school diploma as an adult**

An examination of the possible routes to obtaining a high-school diploma in five Canadian provinces suggests the following key points:

- Adults without a high-school diploma have several options for upgrading their credentials. These include: pursuing a regular secondary school diploma or a special diploma modified to meet the specific needs of adult learners; writing the General Educational Development (GED) test; taking upgrading courses in a college setting; or writing the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES). Literacy and basic skills programs are also an option for adults whose skills are below a certain level.
- While it is well-established that returning to school later in life pays off, little is known, especially in Canada, about whether the type of credential obtained makes a difference.

- Each of the five high-school-related pathways offers different advantages and disadvantages. For potential learners, the best option depends on their current circumstances, past academic performance, and future goals.
- Few provinces are able to report accurate adult participation counts by type of program. But what seems clear is that only a very small fraction of adults without a high-school diploma engage in high-school-related learning.
- A number of complex and interrelated factors may affect participation rates: economic growth, lack of interest, lack of confidence, lack of awareness, unresponsive learning environment, cost and time – the last two being the most important self-reported barriers to participation. While lack of interest is often cited as a reason for low participation rates, it is worth noting that the latest survey data suggest that there is considerable unmet demand among the least educated. If this demand were met, participation for those without a high-school diploma would have doubled.

## **Participating in ‘second chance’ post-secondary education**

Despite considerable rhetoric around the importance of life-long learning, the average age of Canadian college and university students has remained remarkably constant over the past 40 years. Most post-secondary institutions have policies such as flexible admission and prior learning assessment and recognition to encourage the participation of older adults. Some institutions have innovative programs for adult learners without high-school diplomas or other prerequisites. But there is little evidence on the implementation and effectiveness of these policies.

One of the most significant disincentives to participation in post-secondary education for potential mature students may be Canada's financial aid system, which is designed for learners following a traditional path from secondary to post-secondary. One of the key problems is that older students, especially those with dependents, may be unwilling to give up the savings and assets that they worked hard to accumulate in order to be eligible for government loans, making them too vulnerable to economic misfortune. Moreover, in most provinces, the expected contribution required from a spouse rises rapidly even from a fairly low level of spouse's income preventing many married students with working spouses to be eligible for student loans. The proportion of older students with private bank loans and lines of credit suggests that the current system is not meeting their needs.

### **Employers' support for learning opportunities to low-skilled**

Canada has lower rates of participation in job-related training than several other advanced nations including the United States. Employer support for training is largely concentrated on their higher skilled workforce. How to encourage employers to provide more training, especially to the less-skilled employees, is a complex issue. Through case studies and evaluation research, the Conference Board of Canada has developed a business case for the provision of employer-supported training which highlights a number of benefits including increased productivity, reduced error rates, a better health and safety record, and increased customer and employee retention.

Few Canadian jurisdictions have used any of the available policy levers for encouraging employers to train their employees. While a few provinces provide training grants, Quebec is the only province with a train-or-

pay scheme. The federal government has provided substantial financial support for the development of a sectoral approach to defining and dealing with skill requirements. Although there is evidence of significant training-related activity through the sector councils, there is none in terms of their effectiveness in improving access to learning opportunities for the less-educated.

Some Canadian firms have launched initiatives to provide training to low-skilled workers with impressive results. But these firms remain in the minority. The Conference Board's research suggests that some barriers to training low-skilled workers are particularly deep-rooted. One of the most troubling aspects of Canada's economy is that the competitive human resource strategy of too many Canadian firms is based on a low-cost/low-added-value approach. This approach perpetuates a low-skill/low-wage equilibrium in which neither employees nor employers demand higher levels of skills. Firms that gain their competitive edge from low-cost, low-skilled work have little incentive to invest in labour force development.

The rise of workforce intermediaries in the United States appears to be a promising response to the problem of the low-skill/low-wage equilibrium. In some regions, workforce intermediaries have significantly improved the prospects of low-wage workers in local labour markets.

### **Adult learning scenarios**

A review of five fictive, real-life scenarios suggests that returning to school, whether to complete a high-school diploma or obtain a post-secondary credential involves a tremendous commitment of time, money and effort. Despite substantial rhetoric around the importance of lifelong learning, there are few programs and policies to support less-educated adults who wish to upgrade their

skills. Few workplaces offer skills-upgrading opportunities to less-educated adults. No province (except Alberta under certain circumstances) provides income support to adults who are already working, even if they are working in the low-wage labour market. As a result, most adult learners must rely on family and friends and/or juggle work and school and/or incur significant financial debt. These adults must rely on costly private loans. While most adults who return to school will enjoy significant economic benefits and improved labour market prospects, these benefits are not guaranteed up front. In most cases, returning to school requires great sacrifice and a profound leap of faith.

### **Gap identification and policy implications**

In recent years, most provinces have launched important initiatives that have improved their adult education systems. While these initiatives represent major investments and should be praised, this report suggests that provincial adult learning systems remain complex, fragmented, and incomplete. There are significant gaps in co-ordination, information and counselling, financial aid, employer support and government investments.

In Canada, there is a strong consensus that a publicly funded education is the cornerstone of a fair, productive, and socially cohesive society. Investments in our provincial ‘first chance’ education systems reflect this consensus. There is growing reason to believe that the social and economic benefits of publicly funded *adult* education would be equally profound. For this reason, we argue that adults should be extended a ‘right to learn’ that is similar to the ‘right to learn’ that is already established for children and youths. We put forward a vision for the adult learning system characterized by the following principles.

- No one will leave school without an appropriate minimum set of employability skills.
- All adults will have access to learning opportunities to enhance their basic skills as well as continuing opportunities to maintain, enhance or transform more advanced skills.
- All adults will have access to easy-to-follow information about learning opportunities and counselling will be readily available. Supports will be co-ordinated, and the system will be easy to navigate.
- All adults who are willing to upgrade their skills will get appropriate assistance.
- The skills development of all workers will be considered important and worthwhile investments.

Recent research has shown that increasing the skills of the least educated is an important route to increased productivity. For this reason, skills development of the least educated should be as much on the economic agenda as it is on the social agenda.

While a vision of an adult learning system that guarantees the ‘right to learn’ seems to be broadly accepted by most stakeholders, it is far from being realized in practice. How can we translate this vision of an adult learning system into a reality? We suggest the following five steps as essential elements of an effective adult learning system that works for less-educated/less-skilled adults.

#### ***1. Implement a public policy framework that acknowledges the ‘right to learn’***

In June 2004, Canada signed a recommendation of the International Labour Organization on Human Resources Development with an explicit reference to the right of adults to learn. Federal and provincial governments need to work

together to build on this momentum and move towards the development of concrete plans.

## ***2. Develop financial support programs appropriate to the needs of adult learners***

The contrast between how secondary education is offered to those under 18 compared to how it is provided to those who have not managed to obtain a high-school diploma by the age of 18 is striking. Given the foundational benefits of secondary education, it is hard to see why we would treat its provision to adults differently. At a minimum, high-school-related skills-upgrading programs should be free to all individuals regardless of age. This is currently not the case in all provinces. In addition, we argue that the special circumstances of adult learners should be recognized and appropriate support should be provided.

With respect to accessing educational institutions beyond high-school, the rules of federal and provincial financial aid systems do not work well for adult learners. Most colleges and some universities have flexible admission policies for mature students, as well as a commitment to recognizing prior learning. While these policies are steps in the right direction, for many individuals, the financial barriers to participation are simply too high. The post-secondary student aid systems should be reviewed to ensure that all adults have access to a reasonable combination of student loans and grants.

## ***3. Provide incentives for employers to support training of their less-skilled employees***

The problem of how to encourage firms to provide more training is extremely complex. Part of the problem is that Canada's economy is dominated by small to medium sized firms that simply do not have the

economies of scale to implement custom-designed employee training programs. Other problems include structural and institutional issues such as lack of information and the difficulty of calculating return on investment.

On a positive note, a number of Canadian firms are leaders in providing workplace literacy and skills-upgrading programs to less-educated workers. A handful of initiatives at both the federal level (e.g. the Sector Council Program) and the provincial level (both Nova Scotia and Alberta have workplace skills development programs and Quebec has a sectoral approach as well) bring together labour market partners to work on solutions to skills-upgrading problems.

More research needs to be done to determine which incentives and policy levers would be most effective in the Canadian context. Canada can also benefit from a careful examination of the policy levers employed in other countries.

On a more pessimistic note, some barriers to training may be much more persistent. The perpetuation of a low-skill/low-wage equilibrium in significant parts of the Canadian economy needs to be addressed through further research.

## ***4. Increase governments' investment in training for basic skills***

None of the provinces included in this study has a coherent incentive framework designed to encourage individuals, employers, community organizations, and educational institutions to engage in learning activities. Making a 'right to learn' framework a reality will require increased investments in a number of areas. Perhaps most importantly, it will require increased investments in the form of direct financial support for learners. It will also require

ensuring that existing investments are directed towards individuals who are most in need. The evaluation framework for all government investments should provide detailed information on program beneficiaries.

A 'right to learn' framework will also require further investments in new and existing innovative programs. Governments have authority over the delivery of educational services in a wide range of institutions. Many educational institutions have already adopted flexible, holistic approaches to meeting the needs of adult learners. However there is very little evidence on what works specifically for adult learners. One practice that certainly needs more research is the assessment and recognition of prior learning (PLAR), a potentially important tool for encouraging the participation of adult learners.

#### ***5. Develop a co-ordinated approach to respond to adult learners' needs***

Provincial adult learning environments tend to be extremely complex. Provincial governments need to ensure that there is an appropriate entity to co-ordinate the further development and implementation of an adult education policy framework. This entity would be responsible for ensuring the effectiveness of government-funded adult education programs and services and providing information to support management planning and decision making. The significant efforts made by some provinces (in Nova Scotia and Alberta, for example) should be closely watched.

At a minimum, governments should ensure that potential learners have the information they need to make informed decisions about their learning options: easy-to-digest information about the range of available learning options; step-by-step guides on how to access the learning opportunity that is best for them; and enough information about the costs and benefits of skills upgrading to make an informed decision in their best interest. While the Internet is an important support for information, we should acknowledge that it may not be the most appropriate one for many less-educated individuals who may have limited access or may not have the necessary technical skills to navigate. Face-to-face contacts with well-trained and equipped skills development counsellors are likely essential.

More work is required to create the kind of well-defined learner pathways that spell out the shortest and most effective routes to a wide range of economic, social and personal goals.

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# Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System

## 1. Introduction

The social and economic importance of encouraging adults to engage in continuous learning throughout their working lives is undisputed. Better-educated individuals earn higher wages, have greater earnings growth over their lifetimes, and experience less unemployment (Riddell, forthcoming). Better-educated nations have higher long run economic growth and higher standards of living (Davies, 2002). There is also a growing consensus that education system lies at the heart of a nation's social prosperity as well (Wolfe and Haveman, 2001).

But all too often, lifelong learning simply means those who are already highly educated are getting even more education and training. The most recent Canadian data indicate that individuals with a university degree are five times more likely than individuals with a high-school education or less to participate in adult learning (Myers and Myles, 2005). In fact, the standard conclusion from adult learning studies is that, far from providing an opportunity for 'second chance' education, life-long learning is the exemplar *par excellence* of the 'rich getting richer'.<sup>1</sup>

Recent Canadian evidence suggests that this should change. A study by Statistics Canada (Zhang and Palameta, 2006) shows that adult learning has the potential to significantly improve the economic well-being of those with relatively low educational attainment. A second study (Coulombe and Tremblay, 2005) shows that the benefits of upgrading the skills of the least educated members of the workforce extend to the entire nation: a one percent increase in a country's average score on the international test for adult literacy is associated with an eventual 2.5 percent relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5 percent rise in GDP per capita. (These effects are claimed to be three times as great as for investment in physical capital.) Most importantly, these authors show that raising literacy and numeracy for people at the bottom of the skills distribution is more important to economic growth than producing more highly skilled graduates.

Although Canada is generally recognized as having a high level of educational attainment, on average, there is considerable scope for improvement. According to the latest Census (2001), 5.8 million Canadians aged 25 years and over had not successfully completed high-school. Among those without a high-school diploma, the literacy skills of Canadians are very poor in comparison to other countries.<sup>2</sup> According to the International Survey of Adult Literacy, nine million, or 42 percent of Canadians aged 16 to 65 years have literacy skills below the level considered as necessary to live and work in today's society (Riddell, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> Numerous studies have shown that the more initial education an individual has, the more likely they are to participate in learning later in life (de Broucker, 1997; OECD, 1999; OECD, 2003a; Peters, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> An OECD and Statistics Canada report (2000) shows that literacy scores of Canadians without a high-school diploma are lower than similarly educated individuals in a number of countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, but higher than similarly educated individuals in the United States.

The federal and provincial governments have recognized the importance of the lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is now a guiding principle for Canadian policy initiatives ranging from national economic competitiveness to social cohesion (HRDC, 2002). Despite this recognition, participation levels for less-educated learners have scarcely improved in five years. Many observers have pinned the problem on adult learning systems that are complex, incoherent and incomplete.

This report focuses on how to strengthen our adult learning systems. It has two broad objectives. First, it aims to document the availability of formal learning opportunities and to identify the factors that influence participation of less-educated/less-skilled adults in these opportunities. Second, it aims to identify gaps in our adult learning systems and recommend measures to fill these gaps.

Canada's adult learning policy environment is extremely complex.<sup>3</sup> Because adult education is primarily a provincial responsibility, there are large differences in policy and provision across Canada. Adding to this complexity, within each jurisdiction, there is often more than one ministry involved. A recent CMEC report (Powley, 2005) noted that in no province does a single government organization have overall responsibility for adult education. In most provinces, this responsibility is split between several ministries overseeing education, labour and/or human resources development programs. While a truly comprehensive study would examine all provinces, in this report we focus primarily on five provinces: Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Québec.

The report progresses in the following way. In the next section, we draw a statistical portrait of the less-educated/less-skilled population, showing how these individuals are at great risk of being 'left behind' in a post-industrial, knowledge-based economy, and are likely to face low wages and a higher likelihood of unemployment over the course of their careers. In Section 3, we review the literature on the effectiveness of various forms of adult learning. In Section 4, we explore the various routes to obtaining a high-school diploma (or its equivalent) in five Canadian provinces. We assess the extent to which Canadian provinces provide easily accessible pathways to individuals who want to obtain this essential credential. We follow this in Section 5 with an assessment of the accessibility of post-secondary education for adults who wish to return to school later in life. Section 6 turns to the workplace and assesses the extent to which workplaces provide skills-upgrading opportunities to less-educated workers. In Section 7, we step back from the detail of the previous sections and examine how the various pieces of our adult education systems work together to meet the needs of less-educated adult learners. We accomplish this task by analyzing five real-life scenarios that represent a range of learning needs that low-skill/low-wage workers may have and then determining what opportunities are available to help these individuals meet these needs. The final section highlights gaps in the Canadian adult learning 'system,' presents key principles to guide policy development and identifies possible next steps for improving policies and practices.

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<sup>3</sup> While provincial governments have constitutional responsibility for adult education, the federal government has a long-standing involvement in various aspects of adult education such as delivering skills-upgrading programs to unemployed and at risk groups, providing student loans and bursaries to mature post-secondary learners, and conducting research and disseminating information. During the 1990s, the federal government began to formally transfer responsibility for labour market development to the provinces and territories. However, even in provinces and territories where agreements have been signed, the federal government still plays an important role. In practice, therefore, it is still accurate to say that adult education is supported by a mixture of provincial and federal funds.

## 2. A statistical portrait of the least educated

### 2.1 Introduction

In Canada, a high-school diploma is generally considered to be the minimum level of education required to gain access to a range of opportunities. Most post-secondary programs require entrants to have a high-school diploma and the labour market is relatively inhospitable to high-school dropouts. The good news is that high-school graduation rates have been increasing steadily over the past decade. The bad news is that there is still a significant number of working age adults without a high-school diploma. In this section, we provide a statistical portrait of Canadians who lack a high-school diploma or a post-secondary credential. We show that these individuals (the ‘least-educated’) are at great risk of being ‘left behind’ in a post-industrial, knowledge-based economy, and are likely to face low wages and a higher likelihood of unemployment over the course of their careers.

We first look at how large the least-educated group is, and whether the size of this group is changing over time (section 2.2). Next, we compare the labour market outcomes of the least-educated and their more-educated counterparts, showing that the least-educated fare significantly worse (section 2.3). Finally, we present evidence suggesting that, in terms of labour market outcomes, the least-educated are likely to fall farther behind their better educated co-workers over the span of their careers (section 2.4).

### 2.2 How many are there?

#### *The rise in educational attainment*

Table 2.1 shows the percentage of Canadians in their prime working years (25-64) without a high-school diploma or higher credential. The percentage of the working-age population with less than a high-school diploma has declined dramatically, almost falling by half in only twenty years.

**Table 2.1: Percentage of Canadian population aged 25-64 without a high-school diploma**

Year	% of working age population without a high-school diploma (or higher credential)
1981	45.9
1986	42.4
1991	33.7
1996	28.8
2001	24.7

Source: Authors' calculations from the 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001 census public use master file

This rise in educational attainment is driven primarily by a decline in the high-school dropout rate. Over the past decade, dropping out of high-school became increasingly less common in all parts of Canada. According to a recent report by the Canadian Council on Learning (2005), in the 1990-91 school year, the drop out rate was 17 percent. In 2004, only 10 percent of Canadians 20 to 24-years-of-age did not have a high-school diploma and were not enrolled in school.

The rise in educational attainment is also driven by a small but significant proportion of early school leavers who return to school later in life. Table 2.2 uses data from the past four Canadian censuses to track the educational achievements of birth cohorts over time. Reading across the table for any year of birth shows the percentage of individuals in that birth cohort that do not have a high-school diploma at a given age.<sup>4</sup> For example, 31.2 percent of Canadians born in 1961 did not have a high-school diploma when they were 25. Five years later, 25.8 percent of Canadians born in 1961 (who are now 30) were still without a high-school diploma. Perhaps the most striking finding of this table is that individuals continue to acquire educational credentials relatively late in their lives. For example, 1.6 percent of the population born in 1961 obtained an advanced credential between 1996 (when they were 35) and 2001 (when they were 40).

This table also reinforces just how sharply the graduation rate has increased over time. Reading down the table shows the proportion of individuals without a high-school diploma at a given age for successive birth cohorts. Table 2.2 shows that for the cohort born in 1961, at age 25, 31.2 percent of these individuals did not have a high-school diploma. If we take the cohort born in 1976, we see that the drop out rate had declined significantly with only 17.2 percent of individuals not having a high-school diploma at age 25.

**Table 2.2: Percentage of individuals in different birth cohorts without a high-school diploma (or higher credential) at various ages**

Year of birth (birth cohort)	Percentage of cohort without a high-school diploma at age:			
	25	30	35	40
1961	31.2	25.8	24.3	22.7
1966	23.3	20.4	19.1	
1971	19.5	18.0		
1976	17.2			

Source: Authors' calculations from the 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001 census public use master file

### ***Who is left behind?***

However, the news is not all good. The number of individuals of working age without a high-school diploma is still quite substantial. The 2001 figure of 24.7 percent of Canadians 25-64 without a high-school diploma (Table 2.1) equates to slightly more than 4 million individuals.<sup>5</sup> And as Table 2.3 shows, the dropout rate is higher for some groups than others. Among 20 to 22 year olds, the dropout rate is 15 percent for males compared to 9 percent for females. There is also significant variation in the dropout rate across provinces. For 20- to 22-year-olds, youths residing in Alberta, Québec and Manitoba had higher dropout rates (respectively 16, 14 and 14

<sup>4</sup> Since immigrants tend to have relatively high levels of education, the flow of immigrants could artificially increase the number of high-school graduates. Our analysis controls for this effects by excluding recent immigrants. In the 30, 35, and 40 year old categories, individuals who immigrated to Canada within the past 5, 10, or 15 years, respectively are excluded.

<sup>5</sup> Estimates for the proportion of adults without a high-school diploma differ slightly depending on whether individuals with some post-secondary education, but with no high-school diploma, are included (it is possible to participate in some post-secondary courses without a high-school diploma). Our estimate includes individuals with post-secondary experience if they did not obtain a post-secondary credential as a result of this experience. This approach reflects the importance that is typically attached to credentials in the labour market and assumes that individuals with some post-secondary gain little from this experience unless they obtain either a high-school diploma (or its equivalent) or a post-secondary credential as a result of this experience.

percent), while youths residing in New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Ontario had dropout rates lower than ten percent (Table 2.4).

**Table 2.3: Canadian high-school dropout and graduation rates by age and gender (percent) – 2001, 20-22-year-olds**

	<b>Graduates</b>	<b>Continuers</b>	<b>Dropouts</b>
<b>Both sexes</b>	86	2	12
<b>Male</b>	83	2	15
<b>Female</b>	89	2	9

Source: Adapted from Zeman, Knighton, and Bussière (2004)

**Table 2.4: High-school dropout and graduation rates by age and province – longitudinal panel in 1999 and 2001**

	<b>18-20-year-olds in December 1999</b>			<b>20-22-year-olds in December 2001</b>			<b>Total</b>
	<b>Graduates</b>	<b>Continuers</b>	<b>Dropouts</b>	<b>Graduates</b>	<b>Continuers</b>	<b>Dropouts</b>	<b>Number</b>
<b>Canada</b>	76	13	12	86	2	12	1,214,000
<b>Newfoundland/ Labrador</b>	83	8	10	89	F	11	26,000
<b>Prince Edward Island</b>	77	12	11*	86	F	13*	6,000
<b>Nova Scotia</b>	74	17	9	89	1**	10	38,000
<b>New Brunswick</b>	82	10	8	92	F	8	30,000
<b>Québec</b>	76	8	16	82	3	14	299,000
<b>Ontario</b>	75	16	9	90	1*	9	443,000
<b>Manitoba</b>	73	12	15	84	2*	14	45,100
<b>Saskatchewan</b>	82	10	7	91	1**	8	44,000
<b>Alberta</b>	74	12	14	82	2**	16	123,000
<b>British Columbia</b>	77	12	10	86	2**	12	156,000

Source: Adapted from Zeman, Knighton, and Bussière (2004)

\* indicates a coefficient of variation between 16.6 percent and 25 percent (the higher the coefficient, the larger the margin of error)

\*\* indicates a coefficient of variation greater than 25 percent and less or equal to 33.3 percent

F indicates figures that were too unreliable to be published.

## 2.3 Labour market outcomes for the least educated

There are many different ways to measure labour market outcomes. Regardless of the measure, the least-educated fare poorly in the Canadian labour market, in comparison with their more educated counterparts.

### *Unemployment rates*

Individuals with low levels of education are significantly more likely than their more educated counterparts to be unemployed. Table 2.5 shows how the unemployment rate in Canada has varied by level of education, over the past 20 years. The unemployment rate for the least-educated has been consistently higher than for all other educational groups.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 2.5: Canadian unemployment rate by education level, 25-64-year-olds**

Highest educational credential	Unemployment rate (%)				
	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001
None	5.2	11.2	13.0	13.7	9.7
High-school graduation	3.5	8.1	8.7	8.4	5.9
Trades certificate	4.1	8.9	9.3	9.3	6.6
College certificate	3.0	6.4	6.8	6.9	5.0
Univ,< bachelor	3.2	5.1	5.7	6.1	4.8
Univ,bachelors	2.9	5.4	5.2	4.8	4.2
Univ,> bachelors	2.3	3.8	4.5	3.6	3.9
Univ,medical degree	1.3	2.1	1.9	3.2	2.2
Univ,masters degree	2.7	4.7	5.2	4.4	4.5
Univ,doctorate	1.7	3.2	3.1	3.7	3.8
All groups	4.1	8.6	9.0	8.7	6.2

Source: Authors' calculations from the 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001 census public use master file

### *Wages*

Not only are individuals with low levels of education more likely to be unemployed, when they are working, they are considerably more likely to be employed in low-wage jobs. In a recent report on low-wage work, Saunders (2005) found that 26.3 percent of full time workers without a high-school diploma made less than \$10 per hour, compared to 6.5 percent of university graduates (Table 2.6). Figure 2.1 represents this relationship graphically; showing the striking contrast between the proportions of less-educated and more educated individuals who are employed in low-wage jobs.

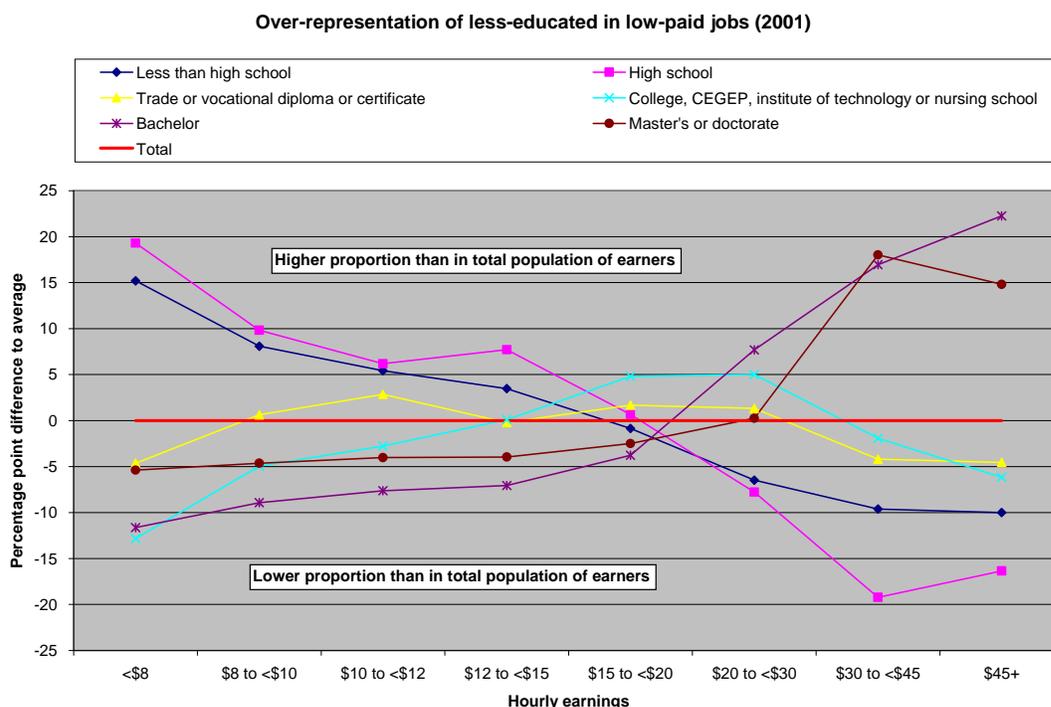
<sup>6</sup> Allen (2004) shows that this result applies equally to men and women.

**Table 2.6: Percent of full-time workers that work in low-wage jobs, by education level**

Education level	% of full-time workers in low-wage jobs <sup>7</sup>
Less than high-school	26.3
High-school graduate	20.7
Trades/college certificate	13.5
University degree	6.5

Source: Adapted from Saunders, 2005.

**Figure 2.1: The over-representation of less-educated individuals in low-paid jobs (2001)**



Source: Workplace and Employee Survey (2001)

Table 2.7 shows the median weekly wage earned by full-time, employed workers with differing levels of educational achievement over the past 20 years, as a fraction of the median weekly wage earned by all full-time, employed workers. The top panel presents data for all workers from ages 25-64, while the bottom panel looks at workers relatively new to the labour force (those aged 25-29). Three findings are relevant here.

- **Workers with less than high-school education have the lowest median wage of any group.** This holds true for all five years examined, and confirms the results of several previous studies (Riddell 2004, Allen 2004).

<sup>7</sup> 'Low-wage jobs' are defined here as those with a wage less than \$10/hr. Full-time work at \$10/hr would give an individual an annual income approximately equal to the before tax low income cut-off (LICO) for a single, unattached person in a large urban area (Saunders, 2005).

- **The wage gap has increased over the past 20 years.** In 1981, the median worker aged 25-64 with less than high-school education earned 87 percent of the median wage for all educational groups. By 2001, the same worker was earning only 81 percent of the median wage for all groups. A similar trend is seen among workers aged 25-29.
- **Each additional educational credential leads to increased wages.** This is clearly shown in Panel A where each additional credential increases the median wage.

**Table 2.7: Median weekly wage earned by education level, as a fraction of median weekly wage earned by all full-time employed workers**

**a) 25-64-year-olds**

Highest educational credential	Fraction of median weekly wage earned				
	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001
None	0.87	0.85	0.83	0.82	0.81
High-school graduation	0.93	0.95	0.92	0.93	0.91
Trades certificate	1.10	1.08	1.03	1.03	1.00
College certificate	1.04	1.08	1.03	1.04	1.03
Univ,< bachelor	1.19	1.20	1.17	1.14	1.11
Univ,bachelors	1.30	1.34	1.33	1.31	1.29
Univ,> bachelors	1.39	1.50	1.48	1.52	1.43
Univ,masters degree	1.60	1.73	1.65	1.67	1.57
Univ,doctorate	1.87	2.00	2.01	1.92	1.83
All groups	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

**b) 25-29-year-olds**

Highest educational credential	Fraction of median weekly wage earned				
	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001
None	0.89	0.88	0.85	0.81	0.80
High-school graduation	0.95	0.95	0.93	0.92	0.88
Trades certificate	1.07	1.02	1.00	0.97	0.98
College certificate	1.03	1.04	1.04	1.01	0.99
Univ,< bachelor	1.08	1.04	1.00	1.02	1.00
Univ,bachelors	1.17	1.20	1.20	1.15	1.17
Univ,> bachelors	1.18	1.24	1.28	1.25	1.27
Univ,masters degree	1.27	1.25	1.32	1.28	1.28
All groups	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

Source: Authors' calculations from the 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001 census public use master file<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Workers aged 25-29 with doctorate degrees are excluded from Table 6, Panel B. This is because there are too few of them in this age group. Moreover, because these workers have likely graduated at a much older age than their relatively less educated counterparts, they may have less work experience. Given that the wages of more educated workers grow at a much quicker rate than the wages of less-educated workers, this early wage data does not provide a meaningful comparison.

## 2.4 Changes over time

Recent longitudinal evidence suggests that less-educated workers are not only more likely to be employed in low-wage jobs, but they are also more likely to stay in these jobs. Janz (2004) used the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics to investigate the income mobility of full-time, low-wage workers between 1996 and 2001. Her results are shown below in Table 2.8: 80 percent of university graduates who were employed in low-wage work in 1996 had ‘moved up’ to higher-wage work by 2001, while less than half of low-wage workers with high-school education or less had done the same.

**Table 2.8: Income mobility by level of education**

Education level	% of low-wage workers <sup>9</sup> in 1996 who ‘moved up’ <sup>10</sup> in income by 2001
High-school or less	46
Some post-secondary education (no degree)	56
University degree	80

Source: adapted from Janz, 2004

### *The link between education and skills*

There is also a strong relationship between educational attainment and skill level. Data from the recent International Adult and Life Skills Survey indicate that individuals with low levels of initial education tend to have low literacy skills as adults. The survey measured three types of literacy: prose, document, and numeracy. These measures correspond to information processing skills needed to perform everyday tasks at home, at work, and in the community. Literacy is measured on a scale from 0 to 500 and then grouped into five levels of competence with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. Individuals with only level 1 or level 2 literacy skills have marginal or limited capabilities. As Figure 2.2 shows, 80 percent of the population aged 16 and over who have not completed high-school achieved literacy levels of only either 1 or 2. While only 52 percent of high-school graduates achieve at least Level 3, this ratio increases to 64 percent and 78 percent for college and university graduates, respectively.

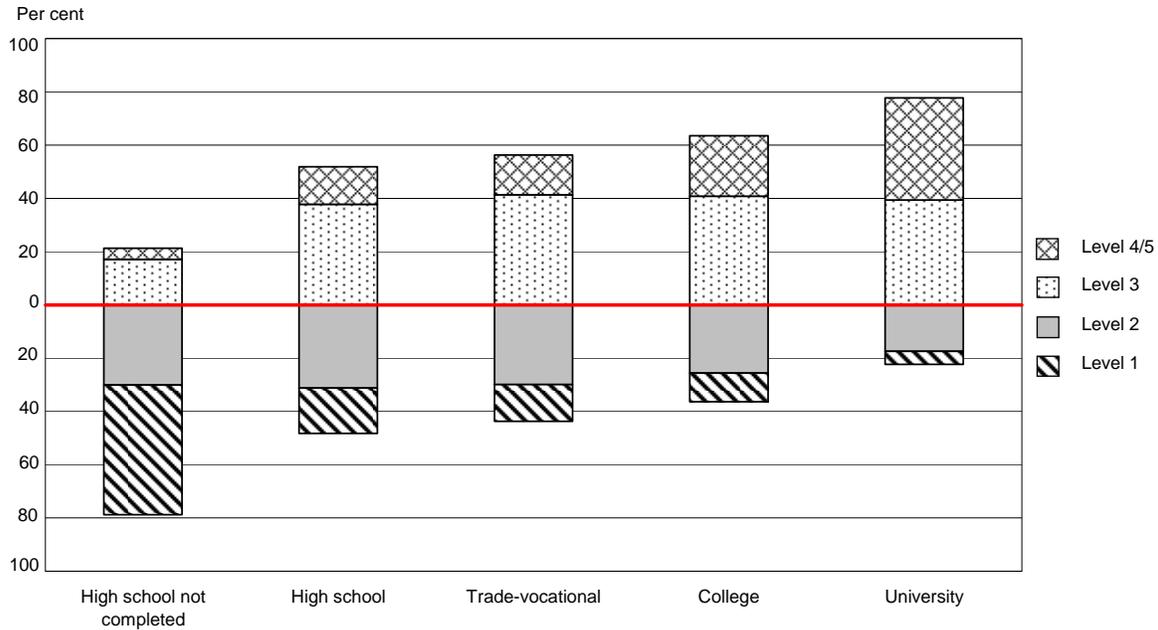
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<sup>9</sup> ‘Low-wage workers’ are here defined as having an hourly income that would place them below the Low-Income Cut-Off Threshold (2001). In 1996, this cut-off equated to an hourly wage of \$10.95.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Moving up’ was defined in this study as having an hourly income more than 10 percent in excess of the 2001 LICO. This equated to an hourly wage of \$13.26 or greater, in 2001 dollars.

**Figure 2.2:**

**Distribution of proficiency levels (Document scale), by educational attainment, Canada, population aged 16 and over, 2003**



Source: International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, 2003.

### **Skills upgrading**

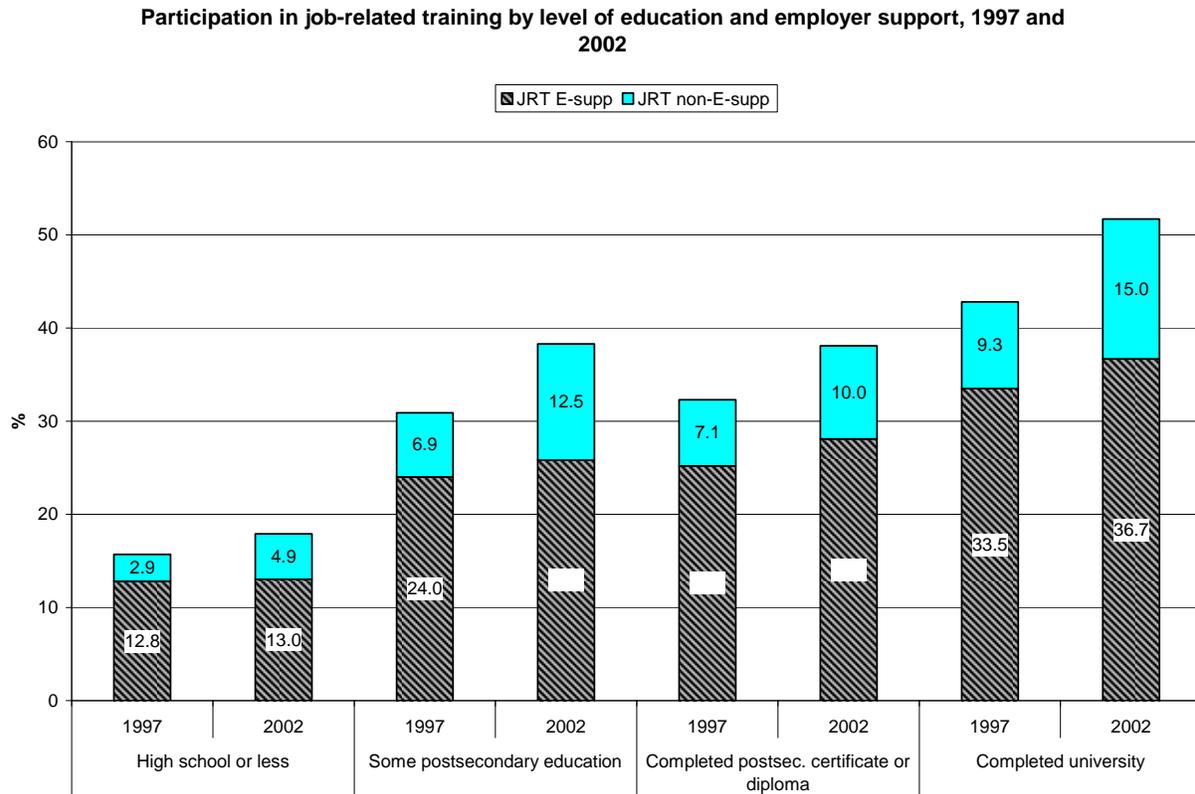
Even though workers with less than a high-school education are likely to have the greatest need to upgrade their skills, they are the least likely to participate in adult education.<sup>11</sup> The most recent Canadian data indicate that individuals with a university degree are five times more likely than individuals with a high-school education or less to participate in formal job-related adult learning (Myers and Myles, 2005). Peters (2004) uses both the 1998 and 2003 versions of the Adult Education and Training Survey to further investigate this training gap. She shows that adults with low levels of initial education are significantly less likely than their more educated counterparts to benefit from employer-supported training (Figure 2.3). She also shows that there was little change in the level of employer support between 1997 and 2002.

The 2003 AETS also aimed to gain a picture of participation in training over the longer term by asking questions about previous participation in past 5 years and the likelihood of future participation in the next three years. Peters (2004) defined *long-term non-trainees* as non-participants in job-related training in 2002, who also a) had no job-related training between January 1997 to December 2001; and b) stated that they were “not likely at all” to take training in the coming three years. *Long-term trainees* are defined as participants in 2002, who also a) took job-related training over the January 1997 to December 2001 period; and b) stated that they were “very likely” to take training in the coming three years. Peters found that the majority (56

<sup>11</sup> Numerous studies have shown that the more education an individual has the more likely they are to participate in learning later in life (de Broucker, 1997; OECD, 1999; OECD, 2003a; Peters, 2004).

percent) of long-term non-trainees had only a high-school diploma or less. In contrast, the vast majority (about 80 percent) of long-term trainees have completed some level of post-secondary education.

**Figure 2.3**



Source: Statistics Canada, *2003 Adult Education and Training Survey*.

## 2.5 Conclusions

This section has shown that less-educated individuals are likely to experience relatively poor labour market outcomes over the entire course of their career, in the form of lower wages, a higher likelihood of unemployment, and lower-status jobs. Differences in labour market outcomes based on education take effect early in a worker's career, and persist throughout their careers. In fact, the least-educated will likely fall farther behind their more-educated counterparts over the course of their careers, as 'learning begets learning' – those with high initial levels of education are more likely to take advantage of future educational and training opportunities, and reap the rewards in the form of better, higher-paying jobs. The difference in labour market outcomes between the least-educated and their more educated counterparts has become larger in the past 20 years.

### **3. The efficacy of adult learning**

#### **3.1 Introduction: Understanding the participation gap**

While many researchers have recently argued that education and training is a key part of the solution to the problem of persistent labour market disadvantage (Fortin, 2005; Jackson, 2005; OECD, 1999; OECD, 2003a; OECD, 2003b), not everyone agrees. Other well known researchers have argued that such strategies are unlikely to be effective or efficient (Esping-Andersen, 2001; Esping-Andersen, 2004; Lefebvre and Merrigan, 2003). For example, economists Pierre Lefebvre and Philip Merrigan (2003) argue that the available evidence clearly suggests that adults past a certain age and below a certain skill level obtain poor returns to skill investment. They conclude that “training is likely to represent both an inefficient investment policy for low-skilled workers and an inefficient transfer policy” (p.50). Before we examine how to improve access to education it is important to look at what we know and do not know about the efficacy of skills upgrading as a strategy to help less-educated individuals improve their labour market prospects.

The key question is: *would the educationally disadvantaged actually improve their labour market situation were they to pursue more education and training?* The answer to this question hinges on why the least educated are also the least likely to upgrade their skills. Do participation differences reflect the fact that less-educated individuals are more likely to face barriers to participation (such as cost, lack of employer support, and family responsibilities)? If so, we would expect that interventions designed to remove these barriers would lead to improved prospects for the least educated. Or on the other hand, do differences in participation reflect real or expected differences in the ‘returns’ to investments in education and training? In other words, are the least educated less likely to participate because they are also less likely to gain? Under this scenario, the least educated would be better served by policy interventions that would have a more predictable effect on their income, such as income subsidies or a higher minimum wage. In this section we provide an overview of the recent literature that addresses these questions.

#### **3.2 Debates about the efficacy of adult learning**

A major reference point for the sceptics of the ‘skills upgrading’ strategy is the work of economist, James Heckman and his colleagues (see Heckman, 2003). Two basic claims arise from this work. The first is that early childhood investment is more efficient than investments later in life. Learning is a dynamic process and is most effective when it begins at a young age and continues through adulthood. In other words, ‘learning begets learning’. Skills and abilities acquired as a young child positively affect learning and achievement that occurs later in life. Thus strong complementarities emerge across the three main components of human capital – early ability; formal education; and job-related skills and knowledge (Blundell, Dearden, Meghir, and Sianesi, 1999). The cumulative nature of skills formation means that an individual’s current stock of human capital provides both strong incentives and more opportunities for further investments in human capital. There is a large body of evidence that supports these claims (Carneiro and Heckman, 2003; Cawley, Heckman, and Lochner, 2000; Heckman and Vytalacil, 2001; Murnane, Willett, and Levy, 1995). There is no question that early childhood investment is always the first best strategy to ensure a productive and democratic society.

The second claim is that most ‘second chance’ adult remedial training programs fail to deliver any positive results (see Heckman, LaLonde, and Smith, 1999). It is this claim that commentators usually refer to when they assert that ‘second chance’ training is inevitably an inefficient investment. Heckman and colleagues based their conclusions on the findings of several rigorous evaluations of government sponsored training programs. While these evaluations cast doubt on the efficacy of government sponsored training programs, there are several reasons why we should be cautious about generalizing these findings to all adult skills upgrading programs.

First, as even Heckman (2000) acknowledges, the latest research shows that there is substantial heterogeneity in the impacts of government sponsored training programs across demographic and skill groups. For some groups these types of programs appear to generate significant benefits both to the participants and to society. For example, Heckman, LaLonde and Smith (1999) conclude that for economically disadvantaged adult women residing in the US, a case can be made that these programs have consistently been a productive social investment, whose returns are larger than those from formal schooling. Moreover, research has shown that the ‘quality’ of the intervention matters a lot. Programs with strong links to the local labour market are considerably more effective than programs without these links (Poppe, Strawn, and Martison, 2003).

Second, Heckman’s work has focused on one type of skills upgrading: government sponsored programs. There are good reasons to believe that these types of programs differ significantly from other forms of training, such as employer sponsored training and formal education (Ahlstrand et al., 2003). Government programs tend to be narrowly targeted towards welfare recipients and the long-term unemployed. In contrast, other types of programs such as college diploma programs attract motivated learners with a wide range of labour market experience. Another difference is that government sponsored training programs are often based on curriculum that is not connected to existing certificate or degree programs. Thus ‘graduates’ of these programs are typically left without an easily recognized credential that they can use as a signal to potential employers. This puts the ‘graduates’ of these programs at a serious disadvantage, especially if the program disappears once the pilot or demonstration is complete (Poppe, Strawn, and Martison, 2003).

Third, in recent years, new institutional arrangements for skills development have emerged at the local level that involve employers, educators, community organizations and learners in unique partnerships (Bernhardt, Dresser, and Hatton 2003). While few of these initiatives have been systematically investigated, preliminary evidence suggests that these innovative partnerships have the potential to positively impact the labour market outcomes of the least educated (Poppe, Strawn, and Martison, 2003).

There is a large literature on investment returns to employer sponsored training (see Lynch, 1997 for an excellent review of this literature), but these studies rarely report their findings by initial education groups. Thus, we have a sense of ‘average’ returns to employer sponsored training but we do not know if the returns for less-educated workers are higher or lower than this average.

There is also a large literature on returns to post-secondary education, but these studies tend to focus on returns for individuals who are completing their initial education rather than on returns for individuals who return to school later in life. In fact much of the research on post-secondary

education assumes an age-graded life course with a fixed sequence of educational completion and an orderly transition from post-secondary education to the workplace (Elman and O’Rand, 2004). As a result, most studies focus on the determinants of skills and knowledge in adolescence and we know little about the types of learning that work best for learning that takes place later in the lifecycle.

Only a handful of studies have focused on returns to job-related formal learning for less-educated learners. Light (1995) uses the American National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to investigate whether adults who return to school later in life have lower returns than those who complete their schooling in one uninterrupted phase. Using a sample of young men between the ages of 16 and 32 from 1979 to 1989, Light finds that by the end of a six-year period there is no difference between the wages of those who delay their schooling and those who obtain the same amount of education continuously. Jacobson, LaLonde and Sullivan (2003) estimate the impact of community college on the earnings of displaced workers (35 years or older) living in Washington State. They found that one year of community college increased earnings by about 8 percent for males and 10 percent for females. Using the British National Child Development Study, Jenkins and colleagues (2002) analyzed the outcomes of individuals who returned to school between the ages of 33 and 42. They found that men who left school with only low-level qualifications earn substantially more if they undertake a degree via lifelong learning. They did not find a similar effect for women. However, significant positive employment effects were found for both men and women. In particular, the acquisition of vocational qualifications later on in life was associated with a higher probability of having moved into the labour market by 2000 for men and women who were out of the labour market in 1991 and with a higher likelihood of remaining in work for women employed in 1991. These findings are especially significant because they are able to control for the measurement problem that statisticians call ‘selection bias’.<sup>12</sup>

### **3.3 Recent Canadian studies**

In Canada, there are numerous studies on returns to education but only two studies have attempted to distinguish the impacts of initial education from the impacts of education obtained later in life. A recent Statistics Canada study (Zhang and Palameta, 2006) uses a sample drawn from the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID: 1993-1998 and 1996-2001) to analyze the earnings gains of individuals who obtained higher educational credentials later in life. The results show that most men and some women who obtained a post-secondary certificate later in life enjoyed sizable wage and earnings gains. Most significantly for our purposes, male learners with an initial education of high-school or less actually received higher returns than their more

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<sup>12</sup> The term “selection bias” is used to refer to the problem that individuals who undertake lifelong learning are not a random subset of the population. Learners may differ from non learners on measured characteristics such as age and gender. Researchers address the problem of measured differences by including these differences in their statistical models. But learners may also differ from non-learners on other characteristics such as motivation and skill that are not usually measured in standard data sets. This is a problem because individuals who take training may be more motivated and/or more skilled than individuals who do not take training. Therefore, they may be likely to have successful labour market outcomes regardless of whether or not they took training. Moreover, encouraging less motivated or less-skilled individuals to take training may not have the desired effects if they do not have the necessary cognitive abilities to take advantage of the training opportunity. To address this problem, statisticians have devised a number of complex techniques that aim to separate out the effects of training from the effects of unobservable individual characteristics. A discussion of these techniques is outside of the scope of this paper. However, it is important to be aware of whether researchers control for selection bias or not. For a detailed discussion of these issues see Blundell, Dearden and Sianesi (2005) or Card (1999).

educated counterparts (10 percent versus 6 percent for wages, and 9 percent versus 6 percent for earnings). Female learners with high-school or less also enjoyed higher wage gains than their more-educated counterparts (10 percent versus 1 percent). However, for both less-educated and more-educated women learners, wage gains did not translate into gains in annual earnings. The authors speculate that one reason for this finding is that women may have used the increase in wages to cut back on the number of hours that they worked at several different jobs and focus on one better-paying or more satisfying job. The study asks whether these gains come from switching to a better job or staying in the same job but getting paid more money. Interestingly the data show that for less-educated men, only ‘job stayers’ and not ‘job switchers’ report significant wage gains. For less-educated women, both ‘job stayers’ and ‘job switchers’ report significant wage gains but these gains are only significant for the ‘job switchers’.

These findings raise many questions. What types of learners are most likely to experience wage gains? What difference does the type of learning make? Does the type of workplace a learner works in make a difference? Unfortunately the SLID survey does not collect detailed information on the types of learning that individuals participate in. Moreover, the sample of individual with high-school or less education who engage in adult learning is quite small. Therefore it is difficult to conduct analyses that include a large number of contextual variables.

A recent paper by Myers and Myles (2005) aims to address some of the questions raised by the Statistics Canada paper by analyzing data from two large-scale cross sectional Canadian surveys on adult education. The first data source, the National Survey on the Changing Nature of Work and Life-long Learning (WALL) was conducted in early 2004 with a large representative national sample of the adult Canadian population. The second source, the Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS) conducted by Statistics Canada, is Canada’s most comprehensive source of data on formal adult education and training. Because these surveys are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, Myers and Myles (2005) were not able to assess the longer-term outcomes of adult learning experiences. However, they were able to provide a rich body of data on the consequences that adult learners attribute to their experiences. Most importantly, they were also able to identify a number of other structural factors that influence the relationship between initial education level and learning experiences later in life.

Echoing the results of Zhang and Palameta (2006), they found that respondents with an initial education of high-school or less were actually *more likely* than their more educated counterparts to report that a learning episode helped them achieve a positive labour market outcome. (Their analysis was based on the responses to three questions in which respondents were asked whether the education or training received was very helpful, fairly helpful or not helpful for (a) increasing their income; (b) gaining a promotion; and (c) changing jobs.) This relationship held even after accounting for differences in the type and quantity of the training received as well as the respondent’s job and workplace characteristics. In fact, once these differences were accounted for, less-educated learners were even more likely to report that training was helpful.

In addition, Myers and Myles (2005) found that not all training is created equal. The type and quantity of training mattered a lot. Their data allowed them to distinguish among five types of non-credit training: computer training, job entry and job upgrading, literacy and second language

training, health and safety, and a large omnibus ‘other’ category.<sup>13</sup> They found that the likelihood of reporting that learning was helpful was significantly higher for those taking credit-based learning and for those with longer learning spells. Learners who reported more than 2 days of training were 1.7 times more likely (than those who reported less than 2 days of training) to report a wage gain. Workers who reported taking 12 or more weeks of training were 3 times more likely to report that training was helpful in achieving a wage gain.

Myers and Myles (2005) also considered the impact of job and workplace characteristics such as firm size and sector, occupation and workplace autonomy. While the size of the firm that a worker was employed in did not make a difference, most other job and workplace characteristics had a significant impact. Workers who report high levels of job autonomy (a proxy for high job skills) and high levels of workplace innovation (job change) were more likely to report that learning was helpful in achieving a positive labour market outcome. Similarly workers in the private sector were significantly more likely to report that a learning episode was helpful.

### **3.4 Conclusions: Assessing the evidence**

Although there is only a small body of evidence, the studies that do exist suggest that although less educated are less likely to participate, when they do participate they are no less likely than their more educated counterparts to benefit from their learning. This conclusion is somewhat surprising given that the human capital theory predicts that results would be biased towards the most educated. One possible explanation for these results is that less-educated learners start from a position of relative educational disadvantage. Thus they may be more likely to gain from additional episodes of learning. In other words, the more educated may experience a declining marginal product for their training in which higher-order events have small effects.

The Canadian evidence in particular suggests that there is a pool of individuals who missed out on successfully completing secondary school or obtaining post-secondary education in their youth, but have benefited significantly from job-related training or ‘second chance’ education as adults. This finding indicates that there may be a non-trivial proportion of individuals with high potential returns to education who did not graduate from high-school or did not pursue post-secondary education perhaps because of low family income, credit constraints or family socialization that does not emphasize the importance of education. As Riddell and Sweetman (2000) argue, for these ‘high potential return’ individuals, a policy designed to increase educational attainment would have a substantial payoff – both in terms of increased employability and in terms of equity.

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<sup>13</sup> Within job-related formal learning a distinction can be made as to whether the learning has the potential to lead to a credential such as a degree, diploma, certificate, or license. In this paper, we refer to this type of learning as ‘credit’ learning. This type of learning is also sometimes referred to as ‘program’ related learning. Learning that does *not* lead to a formal credential is referred to as ‘non-credit’ learning. This type of learning is also sometimes referred to as ‘course’ related learning.

## 4. Earning a high-school diploma as an adult

A high-school diploma is increasingly seen as the minimum level of education required to participate in the labour market. To what extent do Canadian provinces provide easily accessible pathways to individuals who want to obtain this essential credential? This section explores the differing routes to obtaining a high-school diploma (or its equivalent) in five Canadian provinces: British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Québec and Nova Scotia. Section 4.1 provides a detailed overview of the various options available in each province. Section 4.2 presents the best available data on how many adults actually participate in each of these options. Section 4.3 provides a summary of key findings.

### 4.1 Options

#### *An overview of available options*

Adults without a high-school diploma have a number of different options for upgrading their credentials (Table 4.1). Most provinces allow adults to pursue either a regular secondary diploma or a special diploma that has been modified to meet the specific needs of adult learners. Learners who do not want to take high-school credit courses have three options: write the General Educational Development (GED) test in order to obtain a high-school equivalency certificate; take upgrading courses in a college setting to prepare themselves for a specific post-secondary program; or, write the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES), to demonstrate that they have specific workplace skills. Finally, adults, whose skills are below a certain level, have the option of participating in a literacy and basic skills program.

**Table 4.1: Options for learners without a high-school diploma**

Option	Description
<b>Secondary diploma</b>	The same credential awarded to students in the regular school system.
<b>Adult secondary diploma</b>	A modified credential designed for adults. The emphasis is on demonstrated achievement in core educational subjects such as language skills and math.
<b>GED</b>	A test-based, internationally recognized credential accepted by most employers and some post-secondary institutions as the equivalent of a high-school diploma.
<b>Academic upgrading</b>	Most colleges offer upgrading programs that prepare adult learners without a high-school diploma to pursue post-secondary education
<b>TOWES</b>	A test-based credential that demonstrates an individual is prepared for specific tasks and/or occupations in the labour market.
<b>Literacy and basic skills</b>	Programs to help adults bring their literacy skills up to a level that is roughly equivalent to grade 10.

### **Option 1: Regular secondary school diploma**

In most of the provinces studied, adults have the option to complete a regular secondary diploma. (In Nova Scotia, adults who are over the age of 19 and out of school for more than one year must pursue a special adult diploma instead). While the requirements for a secondary diploma are similar across all provinces, there are important provincial differences in terms of service providers, costs, and special provisions made for mature learners.

- **Service delivery** - In Alberta, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia, adult learners may pursue a secondary diploma either through secondary or post-secondary institutions. In Ontario, adult learners may only pursue a high-school diploma through the secondary system or through the Independent Learning Centre (see Box 4.1). In Québec, adult learners may pursue a secondary school diploma or a diploma of vocational studies (vocational branch of secondary school) through an adult education centre.<sup>14</sup>
- **Costs** - There are significant differences in the costs and financial supports available to learners across provinces. In British Columbia, Ontario and Québec, pursuing a high-school diploma is free for students of any age. In British Columbia, adult learners may also be eligible for funding to help cover textbooks, transportation and other costs. In Alberta, students over 19 must pay tuition fees. However, if individuals are deemed ‘eligible’ by the Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education, the government covers 100 percent of their tuition and books costs. The Alberta government estimates that approximately three-quarters of full-time upgrading students are currently receiving government funding. In addition, some adult learners, who are not funded directly by the government, receive funding from Aboriginal and Metis Nations.
- **Special provisions** – Most provinces make some provision for adults. In Alberta, an adult learner may enrol in a high-school credit course without the necessary prerequisite(s). If the individual passes this course, they are also given credit for the prerequisite(s). In British Columbia, Ontario and Québec, adult learners may achieve credits through Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).

#### **Box 4.1: Ontario’s Independent Learning Centre: An innovative delivery model**

Unique across Canada, the Independent Learning Centre (ILC) is an innovative distance education agency that delivers high-school credit courses and GED testing to over 23,000 Ontarians annually. Students can choose from over 70 Ontario Ministry of Education high-school credit courses. Each course costs \$40 and students can enrol at any time. All course work is marked by Ontario certified teachers.

While the upside of distance education is flexibility – learners study where-ever and when-ever they want – the downside may be isolation. As its motto, ‘independent but not alone’, suggests, the ILC works hard to counter this problem. The ILC provides free homework help by certified teachers through an online chat system, e-mail, or phone. In addition, guidance counsellors are available to help students with course selections and answer questions. The ILC is currently doing research to determine ways to increase their already high completion rates.

<sup>14</sup> The Québec legislation defines two “régimes pédagogiques” (basic regulations), one for the youth and one for the adults. Everyone is in the “youth sector” until the end of compulsory education (age 16 presently). Beyond compulsory education one may choose to move to the “adult sector” for obtaining educational services.

Does earning a regular high-school diploma later in life pay off? Unfortunately, there is no direct Canadian evidence on this subject. While the Canadian study (Zhang and Palameta, 2006) that examined the labour market outcomes of adults who obtained a credential later in life found generally favourable wage outcomes for individuals who obtained a credential, results were not reported by type of credential obtained.<sup>15</sup>

### **Option 2: Adult secondary diploma**

All five provinces offer some type of modified secondary diploma for adults (See Table 4.2).

**Table 4.2: Adult high-school equivalency certificates – eligibility, requirements, and costs**

	<b>Ontario</b>	<b>Alberta</b>	<b>BC</b>	<b>Québec</b>	<b>NS</b>
<b>Name</b>	High-school Equivalency Certificate	High-school Equivalency Diploma	Adult Graduation Diploma	Certificate of Equivalence of Secondary Studies	High-school Graduation Diploma for Adults
<b>Eligibility</b>	18 or older, out of school at least 1 year	18 or older, out of school at least 10 mths	19 or older, OR 18 and out of school 1 year	16 or older	19 or older, out of school at least 1 year
<b>Requirements (GED or credits)</b>	Pass the GED with a score of 450 or higher	Pass the GED OR obtain 100 credits <sup>16</sup>	20 credits (5 courses)	Pass the GED	12 courses
<b>Cost</b>	\$80 for test	\$400/course. Grants may be cover living and school-related costs	Free. Grants may be available for books and other costs	Free (possible limited admission fees)	Free

These diplomas are generally recognized as ‘equivalent’ to a regular high-school diploma but they are not the same thing. In British Columbia and Nova Scotia, adults can pursue this modified diploma in either the secondary or post-secondary system. In Ontario and Québec, adult learners are not required to take specific credit courses to obtain this equivalency diploma. Instead they simply have to pass what is known as the General Educational Development (GED) test. (See the next section for more information on the GED). In Québec, obtaining this equivalency diploma automatically grants an individual the 36 credits covering the optional content of a regular diploma.<sup>17</sup> This is done explicitly to encourage individuals to use the equivalency diploma as a stepping stone to a regular diploma. In Alberta learners can choose either to complete a formal curriculum of modified credits or to write the GED test. Special adult diplomas are a relatively new phenomenon in Canada. To the best of our knowledge there are no studies that track the outcomes of individuals who have obtained these types of diplomas.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communications with the researchers confirmed that there were not enough individuals in the sample who completed a high-school diploma *and* had ‘before’ and ‘after’ wage earnings to make specific claims about the wage gains associated with obtaining a high-school diploma.

<sup>16</sup> Most courses are equivalent to five credits. Some credits may be awarded for maturity, travel, or reading.

<sup>17</sup> In Québec, one needs to pass 54 units to obtain a Secondary School Diploma. Eighteen of these units are compulsory units and 36 are optional content. The GED tests do not cover the compulsory content.

### **Option 3: The GED**

The General Educational Development (GED) credential is an international testing program for adults without a high-school diploma. It is administered by the American Council on Education. The test is accepted by most employers and some post-secondary institutions as the equivalent of a high-school diploma. GED tests are available in all Canadian provinces and territories, in all of the United States, and in several other countries. In 2002, more than 1 million adults worldwide completed the GED Tests (GED Testing Service, 2005). Test content is similar in all locations, but the test used in Canada has been modified slightly to fit Canadian standards. The French version of the GED, recognized by the American Council on Education (ACE) and used across North America, was developed by the Québec Ministry of Education.

To write the test, an individual must either be 18- or 19-years-of-age or over (depending on the province) – 16 or over in Québec – and out of secondary school for at least one full year.<sup>18</sup> Test costs vary by province but are typically between \$80 to \$100. Many private companies and continuing education institutes offer courses to help students prepare for the test. The cost of these courses varies depending on the course length and the service provider. Individuals who are eligible for Employment Insurance may be eligible for funding to cover the costs of course preparation through the Skills Development Employment Benefit (SDEB). Depending on the province, individuals on social assistance may also be eligible for funding. Some employers also have an educational reimbursement policy that covers all or part of the GED preparation courses.

The test takes about 7 hours to complete (usually spread over two days). The test is composed of five tests in the areas of reading, social studies, science, writing and mathematics. Individuals who fail one or more of the tests may apply to rewrite these tests. Depending on their test score, there may be a mandatory three-month waiting period before they can write the test again.

Introduced in 1996, the GED is also relatively new to Canada. We did not find any Canadian evidence on the labour market outcomes of GED recipients. In contrast, in the United States, economic benefits of the GED have been studied extensively. While it is unclear how well the US results would generalize to the Canadian labour market, in the absence of Canadian data, the US results are worth reviewing.

In the early 1990s Cameron and Heckman (1993) published a much cited paper showing that GED holders are not the equivalents of regular high-school graduates in terms of standard labour market outcomes such as annual earnings, wages, and employment. With this fact firmly established, subsequent research set out to compare GED holders to un-credentialed dropouts. The key finding of this literature is that benefits of obtaining a GED depend on the recipient's initial skill level (usually measured by the highest grade of high-school the individual has obtained). Individuals, who left school with low skill levels and obtained a GED later in life, have earnings increases after five years that are 10-19 percent higher than similarly skilled dropouts without a GED.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, there are no statistical differences in the labour market

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<sup>18</sup> In Québec, prior to implementing the GED, there was another equivalence test, the "Test d'équivalence de niveau de scolarité" (TENS) leading to the "Attestation d'équivalence de niveau de scolarité" (AENS). The coverage and degree of difficulty of the GED are greater than in the TENS. For that reason, the Ministry is still carrying both at the same time so as not to discourage adults from upgrading their academic skills. But it is thought that the GED will make the TENS obsolete with time.

<sup>19</sup> These estimates are for white males. The same study found no statistically significant effect for GED holders who are not white (Tyler, Murnane, and Willett 2000). The researchers speculate that this finding may be explained by the relatively large number

outcomes of higher skilled GED holders (e.g, those with some grade 12 credits) and highly skilled uncredentialed dropouts (Murnane, Willett, and Tyler, 2000; Tyler, Murnane, and Willett, 2000).

Tyler (2005) suggests two possible explanations for this finding. First, because low-skilled dropouts tend to have limited work experience, having a credential is particularly important. Given two individuals with weak job applications, employers may choose the individual with a GED because they assume this individual will be more productive. Because higher skilled dropouts tend to have better work histories, a credential may not be as important. A second explanation comes from human capital theory. Higher skilled dropouts may receive little benefit from obtaining the GED because these individuals can pass the GED with little extra preparation. As a result, GED process adds little to their stock of human capital. However, lower skilled individuals may require substantial preparation to pass the GED exams. For these individuals, obtaining the GED may produce substantial human capital benefits.

More optimistically, US research consistently shows that GED holders have as high a return on post-secondary education as regular high-school graduates. Using a nationally representative sample of working age individuals, Bauman and Ryan (2001) find that 30 percent of the GED holders have some post-secondary education and 8 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher.

#### ***Option 4: Academic upgrading programs***

Most provinces offer some form of academic upgrading for individuals without a high-school diploma who want to pursue post-secondary studies. These programs are usually delivered by colleges (only a few universities have upgrading programs and these programs are usually quite small). Program design varies across the provinces, but in general the course content is similar to core high-school credit courses such as English and math, but is focused specifically on preparing students for post-secondary programs. In addition, some colleges offer upgrading courses that are specially designed to prepare students for specific post-secondary programs (e.g., biology for nursing).

**Alberta:** Most colleges offer some type of academic upgrading program. Students may apply for funding by completing a learning plan and identifying learning objectives. Students whose objectives meet provincial approval are eligible for government funding.

**British Columbia:** Adult Basic Education courses are offered at nineteen post-secondary institutions, under a variety of names (e.g., ABE, college foundation, college preparation, access, and upgrading). Tuition is usually free, although some colleges charge a small registration fee. Students may apply for additional financial support.

**Nova Scotia:** Most colleges offer academic upgrading programs. In addition, the High-school Graduation Diploma for Adults is well integrated with the post-secondary system and is designed specifically to help students make the transition to post-secondary education. One of the most impressive features of Nova Scotia's system is that dual crediting is possible between the Nova Scotia School of Adult Learning (NSSAL) and some community college programs. What this

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of black males who obtain a GED while in prison. If these individuals are still in prison when earnings are measured, their observed earnings will underestimate their true potential earnings.

means is that learners who are enrolled at community colleges may be able to work towards two programs at the same time (e.g., they could be enrolled in a business administration program at the same time as they are working towards their adult high-school diploma).

**Ontario:** Adults without a high-school diploma, who are interested in pursuing post-secondary education, may obtain the Academic and Career Entrance (ACE) certificate. The ACE certificate is currently offered by all Ontario colleges. The certificate usually takes 4 to 8 months to complete.<sup>20</sup> There is no tuition fee and some financial support may be available to cover childcare and travel costs. Post-secondary institutions generally recognize this certificate as equivalent to a regular diploma.

**Québec:** While there is no official academic upgrading program in Québec, most colleges offer some type of upgrading program.

While all the provinces in this study have academic upgrading programs, Ontario is the only province that has a province-wide program, Academic Career Excellence (ACE). Not surprisingly, Ontario is the only province that reported systematically evaluating its upgrading programs. An independent evaluation (Bainbridge & Associates, 2001) tracked the post-secondary outcomes of individuals who participated in ACE and then moved on to further education in the college system. The study tracks 1,058 individuals who graduated from an ACE program in 1995 and enrolled in a post-secondary program in one of ten participating Ontario college. Students were tracked from enrolment in their first semester of a post-secondary program to graduation, withdrawal, or failure.

The results showed that the vast majority of ACE students who enrolled in a post-secondary program achieved positive academic outcomes. By the end of the study, 60 percent of the ACE students had graduated or were still enrolled in post-secondary programs. The failure rate was 17 percent and an additional 23 percent of the ACE students withdrew from their program. While the majority of withdrawing students indicated that they were doing so for financial reasons, about 30 percent of withdrawing students went on to enrol in a second program. The participants are most vulnerable to withdrawing in the first semester of their program. About 63 percent of all withdrawals occur in this semester. The study also found that the grade point averages were comparable to non-ACE college students.

Given the strong correlations between first semester performance and subsequent performance, more recent studies only tracked the first semester outcomes of ACE students who enrol in post-secondary programs. The results continue to suggest that the ACE program is successful in preparing students for college. For example, for the academic year, 2004/2005, 82 percent of ACE students successfully completed their first semester of post-secondary education (8 percent withdrew, and 10 percent did not achieve the required GPA to continue) (College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading, 2005).

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<sup>20</sup> For an example of a college ACE offering, see <http://www.senecac.on.ca/fulltime/ACADEMIC.html>.

### ***Option 5: Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES)***

The Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) is an assessment tool that offers individuals the chance to demonstrate their skills to potential employers. TOWES assesses three skills: reading, document use and numeracy. Test questions use authentic workplace materials and tasks so that the assessment reflects how these skills are used in the workplace. The test takes about two hours and costs \$55. TOWES is now available in every province and territory in Canada. Since it was introduced, more than 25,000 individuals have written the test.

Although relatively new, support for TOWES is gaining momentum and is starting to pervade Canada's institutional fabric. For example, as part of the Essential Skills Research Project, HRSDC assessed the typical skill complexity level required for every occupation listed under the Canadian National Occupational Classifications (NOC) system. This allows employers to use a job applicant's TOWES scores as one component in assessing the applicant's suitability for a given job. To help students improve their test scores, Bow Valley College in Alberta has developed training material that can be delivered by service providers or through independent study.

Although TOWES is a relatively new program, the test has been validated through extensive field-testing across Canada. In addition, a number of the employers who have delivered TOWES related training have conducted their own evaluations. Most of the evaluations to date have focused on benefits to employers in terms of increased safety and increased productivity. One of these evaluations is of particular interest because it suggests that under certain circumstances, learners who prepare for and write the TOWES may have better educational outcomes than learners who do not. In a recent study (TOWES, 2004) at Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT), TOWES-related training was administered to two out of five groups of apprentices in their first year of the Construction Trade Apprenticeship program in 2002/2003. Each group was enrolled in their program for 8 weeks and was tested by NAIT upon completion of the course. In addition to the NAIT exams, students were required to take provincial first year examinations after completing the course. The two groups that received essential skills training had significantly higher course pass rates than the three groups that did not (100 percent and 96 percent versus 76 percent, 71 percent, and 61 percent, respectively). The two groups that received training also had higher marks on provincial exams (81 percent and 81 percent versus 76 percent, 73 percent and 71 percent, respectively). The results obtained by the program at NAIT provide a convincing example of the link between essential skills assessment and training to succeed in education programs. Ideally, future research would track the educational and labour market outcomes of a random sample of TOWES test takers across Canada.

### ***Advantages and disadvantages of each option***

Each of the five options has different advantages and disadvantages. There is no one best option. The best option for potential learners will depend on their current circumstances, past academic performance, and future goals. What constitutes an advantage for one individual in one set of circumstances may be a disadvantage for another individual in another set of circumstances. Table 4.3 provides an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of each option.

**Table 4.3: Advantages and disadvantages of various high-school-related learning opportunities for learners without a high-school diploma**

<b>Option</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>	<b>Bottom line</b>
<b>Secondary diploma</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universally recognized as part of 'first chance' system</li> <li>• Provides comprehensive preparation for participation in civic society and for post-secondary entry</li> <li>• Labour market outcomes are well established</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be time consuming</li> <li>• The comprehensive focus may result in the learner taking courses that are not directly relevant for future goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A good option for individuals with only a few credits to obtain</li> </ul>
<b>Adult secondary diploma</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible</li> <li>• Usually takes less time to complete than regular diploma</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As part of the 'second chance' system, may be perceived as 'second best' (no research exists on outcomes)</li> <li>• Additional courses may be required for entry to some post-secondary programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A good option for individuals who need to obtain many credits</li> </ul>
<b>GED</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires no 'seat time' or enrolment in any institution or formal course of study</li> <li>• Recognized by most employers as equivalent to a high-school diploma</li> <li>• Research shows that obtaining a GED is especially beneficially for low-skilled individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be perceived as part of 'second chance' system</li> <li>• Additional courses may be required for entry to many post-secondary programs</li> <li>• Research shows that the GED is not equivalent to a high-school diploma in terms of earnings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A good option for individuals who need a credential to obtain or maintain a job</li> <li>• May also work for entry to some post-secondary programs</li> </ul>
<b>Academic upgrading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible programs allow learners to take just the courses they need.</li> <li>• Evidence for Ontario's program suggests that graduates are well prepared for post-secondary.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners obtain a certificate but not a high-school diploma</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A good option for learners who know they want to pursue post-secondary education</li> </ul>
<b>TOWES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Test results provide potential employers with a clear picture of an individual's workplace skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not prepare learners to pursue post-secondary education</li> <li>• Recognition is currently limited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A good option for individuals who want to demonstrate specific skills</li> </ul>

## 4.2 Participation

### *How many learners are there?*

As the previous section shows, each province provides several different options for individuals who want to pursue high-school-related upgrading. How many adults actually pursue each of these different options? Answering this question is more difficult than it may seem. Few provinces are able to report accurate adult participation counts for all program types. Thus, while every effort was made to obtain accurate figures, the numbers presented below must be taken as rough estimates. Consequently our analysis focuses on the overall estimate of the proportion of adults who are engaged in adult learning rather than on any specific program by program comparisons.

Table 4.4 shows the number of learners in each province for each of the five high-school-related learning options. The most striking finding of this Table is that only a very small fraction of adults without a high-school diploma are engaged in high-school-related learning. British Columbia has the highest proportion of engaged learners, and Nova Scotia and Alberta have the lowest.

**Table 4.4: Estimate of the number of adult learners in high-school-related programs**

Option	Alberta	BC	NS	Ontario	Québec
<b>Regular and adult diplomas, and academic upgrading</b>	6,500 <sup>1</sup>	18,811 (secondary system) 25,000 (post-secondary) <sup>2</sup>	2,076 <sup>3</sup>	28,620 (adult day schools) <sup>4</sup>  20,000 (Independent Learning Centre) 1,500 (academic upgrading) <sup>5</sup>	70,328 <sup>13</sup>
<b>Literacy and basic skills</b>	4,000 <sup>6</sup>	<i>Not available</i>	2,336 <sup>7</sup>	42,008 <sup>8</sup>	(included above)
<b>GED<sup>9</sup></b>	1,946	1,493	1,427	3,751	<i>Not available</i> <sup>14</sup>
<b>TOWES<sup>10</sup></b>	2,615	541	212	1,673	810
<b>Total Learners</b>	15,061	45,846	6,051	97,552	71,138
<b>Population of adults between 20 and 54 without diplomas<sup>11</sup></b>	359,459	394,422	110,806	1,103,395	979,965 <sup>15</sup>
<b>Total Learners as a % of target population<sup>12</sup></b>	4.2	11.6	5.5	8.8	7.3

<sup>1</sup> Source: Alberta Ministry of Human Resources and Education. Figures are for 2005 and only include learners who were funded by AHRE. Ministry officials estimate that this figure represents about 75 percent of the total number of learners.

<sup>2</sup> Sources: British Columbia Ministry of Education and British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education. Data are for 2004-05.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Nova Scotia Ministry of Education. Data are for 2004-05.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Ontario Ministry of Education (2003). Data are for 2001-02.

<sup>5</sup> Source: College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading (2005). Data are for 2004-05.

<sup>6</sup> Sources: AHRE. Again, this figure only includes learners who were funded by AHRE.

<sup>7</sup> Source: Nova Scotia Ministry of Education. Data are for 2004-05.

<sup>8</sup> Source: Wynne (2005). Data are for 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Source: GED Testing Service (2005). Data are for 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Source: Bow Valley College. Data are for 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Source: Census 2001, authors' calculations. The population totals include individuals between the ages of 20 and 54 without a high-school diploma and without further training or degrees

<sup>12</sup> Total learners (percent) is calculated by first dividing the total number of learners divided by the total population of adults without a diploma, then multiplying that number by 100.

<sup>13</sup> Source: Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation (2005). *État de la formation de base des adultes au Québec*, Québec. Population 25-64 years old registered in adult education programs in 2001.

<sup>14</sup> The GED has been implemented in 2005 in Québec. Based on the numbers for the *TENS*, it is estimated that about 6,000 adults will register for the GED annually, on average.

<sup>15</sup> Source: Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation (2005). *État de la formation de base des adultes au Québec*, Québec. Population 25-64 years without a secondary school diploma in 2001.

### ***Why are there so few adult learners?***

As Table 4.4 suggests, only a small fraction of adults without a high-school diploma are engaged in high-school-related upgrading. Why are there so few adult learners? Our research suggests that the problem is not simply a lack of learning spaces. The provinces of Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario all reported that, on average, learning institutions have more spaces available than they have learners to fill these spaces. Nova Scotia is the only province that reported that demand outstripped supply. In Québec, although there is no general shortage of spaces for adult learning, some vocational programs in higher demand run waiting lists. Also, for literacy upgrading, courses may only open with a required minimum of participants, which may affect accessibility.

The research literature, combined with interviews with key stakeholders, suggests that there are a number of complex and interrelated factors that may affect participation rates. These factors include:

- **Economic growth:** Strong economies lead may lead people to employment who might otherwise seek to upgrade their skills.
- **Lack of awareness:** Some individuals may simply not be aware of their options.
- **Lack of interest:** For some individuals, learning is not a priority. Many adults who left high-school early see little value in returning to school. Others may be satisfied with their situation, from a family and financial point of view.
- **Not worth it:** Individuals may feel that that the costs of learning may outweigh the benefits.
- **Lack of confidence:** Individuals may feel reluctant to participate because they are unsure of whether or not they would succeed.

- **Costs and time:** Finally, individuals may not be able to return to school because they feel that they do not have the means to support themselves or their families while studying.

### ***Assessing the relative importance of these barriers***

While there is considerable debate about the relative importance of these factors, very little formal research has been conducted. What follows is a brief discussion of the role that each of these factors may play.

**Economic growth:** The role of economic growth is particularly complex and has not been assessed in a systematic way. From an anecdotal standpoint, many program administrators in Alberta believe that Alberta's strong economy has made skills upgrading a less attractive option. Similarly, many administrators in Nova Scotia believe that the province-wide economic restructuring that has taken place in the last several years has been a significant driver of increased participation. Prior to the recent implementation of the GED, Québec had a long experience with the "Test d'équivalence de niveau de scolarité" (TENS). On average, the number of tests passed annually would run between 4,000 and 4,500. It would jump to 12,000 in a high unemployment year. It can be difficult to disentangle economic effects from the effects of program changes that may have occurred during the same time period. For example, at the same time that British Columbia's unemployment rate was declining, the government introduced tuition fees for adult basic education programs.<sup>21</sup> It is possible that both factors drove participation downwards (Ministry of Advanced Education, 2005).

**Lack of interest:** Lack of interest is often cited as a potential reason for lack of participation. While existing data show some support for this hypothesis, data also show that among individuals without a high-school education, there is significant unmet demand for training. The 2003 Adult Education and Training Survey conducted by Statistics Canada measured demand for training by asking respondents whether there was training they wanted to take but did not take. As Table 4.5 shows, on average 20 percent of individuals reported that they would have liked to pursue additional training. This figure, drops to 9 percent when we considered only respondents without a high-school diploma. While this figure is relatively low, (especially compared to 28 percent for respondents with a university degree), it is worth noting that if this unmet demand had been met, the participation rate for those without a high-school diploma would have almost doubled.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, among those who already took some training, the level of unmet demand was significantly higher (22 percent). This suggests that while many individuals with a less than high-school diploma may not be interested in pursuing further education, a non-trivial proportion is interested. In other words, while lack of interest is an important part of the puzzle, it is by no means the whole story.

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<sup>21</sup> The BC government has since returned to providing adult basic education programs with free tuition.

<sup>22</sup> Of course, this finding should be treated with caution since it is unclear how closely *reported* demand would reflect *actual* behaviour. For example, respondents may say that they would have liked to take a course because they believed that was the socially desirable response.

**Table 4.5: Whether respondents wanted to take job-related formal learning but did not, by initial educational attainment and participation in adult learning during the reference year (2002)**

	< High-school	High school	Some post-secondary	University or more	All groups
<b>All respondents</b>	8.6	15.6	24.5	27.5	19.8
<b>Respondents who did not participate</b>	7.8	13.0	19.7	21.2	15.1
<b>Respondents who did participate</b>	22.6	29.3	35.1	35.5	34.0
<b>Actual participation rate</b>	11.7	22.9	39.6	53.3	36.3

Source: Authors' calculations using Statistics Canada Adult Education and Training Survey (2003)

**Lack of awareness:** It is possible that at least for some individuals this lack of interest may be due to lack of awareness or lack of information about how to access learning opportunities. In a study based on a nationally representative survey of 866 individuals with less than a high-school education, Long et al. (2002) found that 60 percent of respondents were aware of upgrading programs in their communities. This study, however, did not ask these respondents whether they knew how to access these opportunities. It is possible that an individual may have a basic level of awareness that upgrading programs exists but is unsure of how to learn more about these programs. For example, a recent review of Ontario's adult education system (Wynne, 2005) found that potential learners often had difficulty navigating through an array of available program options. Moreover, the study found that while service providers are usually knowledgeable about the services provided by their own organizations, they often do not know about programs and services offered by other providers. Therefore, a given service provider may not be able to connect individuals to other potentially more appropriate opportunities (Wynne, 2005). Indeed, a recent OECD report (2003b) on adult education found that in every country studied, providing adults with information about learning opportunities was a significant problem.

As part of our research for this paper, provincial officials were asked to outline the various ways in which individuals can find out about potential learning opportunities in their province. All of the provinces studied have created various mechanisms for providing information including websites, online tools, telephone hotlines, in person services and information packages. While the sheer variety of information sources suggests that provinces have taken considerable steps to reach out to adult learners, most available information sources fall short in terms of reaching educationally disadvantaged adult learners. For example, while all the available provincial websites provide useful information, most of the content is 'text-heavy' and not presented in a plain language or 'step-by-step' manner. Moreover, the content of most of these websites is not targeted specifically to adults, which may make it difficult for adult learners to find the information they need. The targeted, plain language style of the website for Nova Scotia School of Adult Learning is a notable exception to this trend. (See Box 4.3 for more information on the school.) Alberta and Ontario have telephone hotlines but these hotlines are geared more towards helping individuals to access job search or employment preparedness programs than they are towards helping individuals determine the skills upgrading program that is right for them. Hotline representatives are not trained to provide counselling but instead refer callers to in-person services. In Québec, the website of the "Direction de la formation générale des adultes"

does not present all the available options but rather provides orientation towards local services available to deliver in-person counselling and appropriate referral, on the one hand, and access to two hot-lines run by experienced personnel under the purview of the Literacy Foundation (*InfoAlpha* and *InfoApprendre*). In most provinces, the bulk of in-person services are geared either to EI eligible individuals, social assistance recipients, or youths.

#### **Box 4.2: The Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning**

In 2001, the Nova Scotia Department of Education launched a major new adult learning initiative aimed at creating a more co-ordinated system for adults seeking to upgrade their literacy and numeracy skills and/or complete their high-school education. The Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning is the administrative body within the adult education system that is responsible for the programs and services that support the system. The School works in partnership with existing program delivery organizations and ensures that there is a continuum of educational programs that meet the needs of adults for improved accessibility, transferable learning and quality program delivery. As part of the initiative the Department developed a new Nova Scotia High-school Diploma for Adults.

None of the five provinces are currently running any significant advertising campaigns to encourage less-educated adults to return to school. On a positive note, Ontario plans to implement a 'one-stop' access system in the spring of 2006 (See Box 4.3 for more information on this program).

#### **Box 4.3: Ontario's New One-Stop System**

Ontario's One-Stop System will serve a range of clients, from those with low skills to those who are highly skilled but are facing adjustment. Services will include labour market information, job matching, employment counselling, and information on skills development options. Services will also address the needs of those with barriers to employment, including at-risk youth, new immigrants, Aboriginal Peoples, older workers, and the long-term unemployed. Ontario's One-Stop System will also support the demand side of the labour market equation, helping employers to identify and meet their current and emerging skills needs and increase productivity through skills enhancement.

The system will be accessible through a variety of channels (internet, telephone, in-person, government offices, community agencies). The goal is to ensure that in Ontario's One-Stop System there will be "no wrong door". All community partners will be aware of services and there will be strong links to Employment Insurance (Part I) and Ontario Works and the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS).

Source: Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement, November 2005

As background to the OECD report mentioned above, the OECD prepared a detailed Country Note for each of the countries included in its review. One of the most interesting findings of the Canadian Country Note (OECD, 2002b) was that despite the variety of ways in which information has been made available, Canadian providers almost unanimously said students find them predominantly through word of mouth, particularly the recommendations of friends. As the report concluded:

This is, of course, a relatively inefficient, incomplete, and inequitable way of gaining information: The information available is likely to be incomplete (since a friend has usually attended a specific institution rather than learning about the variety of them), the recommendations may be coloured positively or negatively by personal and idiosyncratic experience, and individuals who are not part of extensive social networks are unlikely to be able to get information at all.

Moreover, as we show in the next section, information about the effectiveness of programs is rarely available.

**Cost, time and family responsibilities:** Another potential explanation for why so few individuals participate is that individuals may believe that the benefits do not justify the costs. Classical economic theory argues that individuals will not ‘invest’ time and resources in an activity unless they believe that they will receive a return on their investment. Again results from the Canada’s Adult Education and Training Survey (2003) are helpful here. Respondents who indicated that there was training that they *wanted to take but did not*, were asked to indicate their reasons for not taking training. Panel A of Figure 4.1 shows the results for this question for respondents without a high-school diploma. Among these respondents the five most commonly cited reasons for not taking training were: Cost, family responsibility, busy at work, conflict with work, and training was offered at an inconvenient time (respondents were allowed to check as many reasons as would apply). The survey also asked participants to identify the single most important reason for not participating in training. As Panel B shows, cost was most commonly identified as the most important barrier to participation followed by family responsibilities and busy at work.

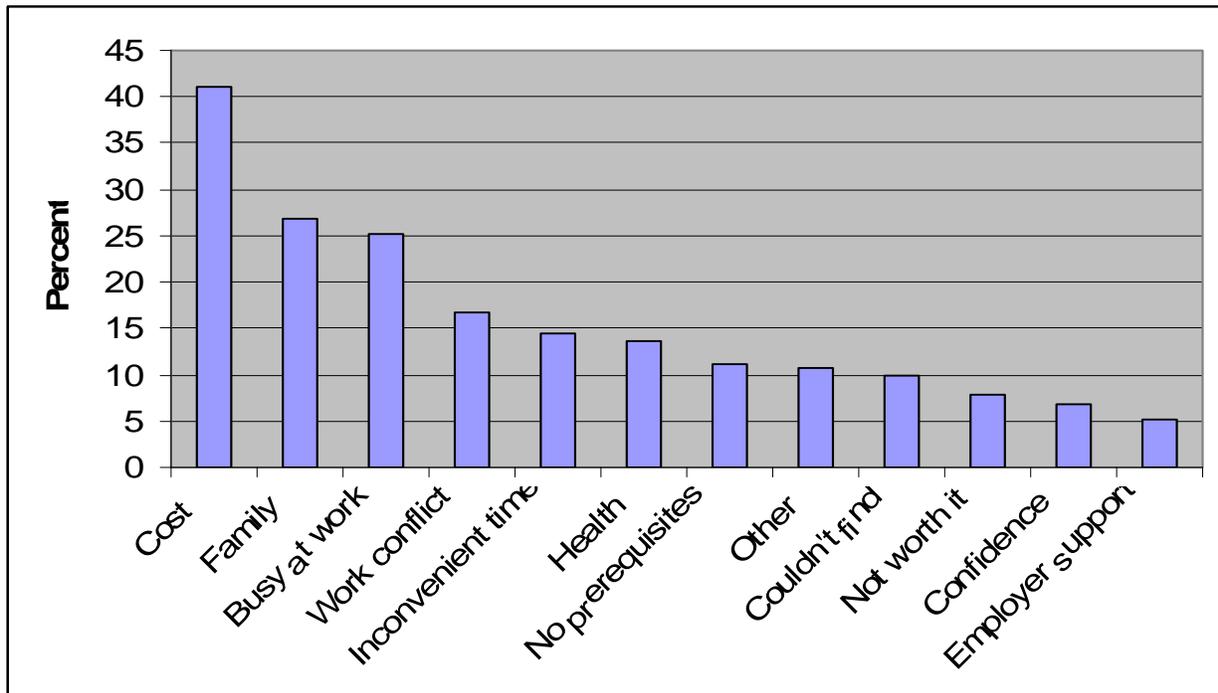
**Not worth it, lack of confidence:** Interestingly, as Figure 4.1 shows, only a small proportion of individuals without a high-school education reported ‘not worth it’ as a reason for not taking training (less than 10 percent) and less than 5 percent reported it as the most important reason. Similarly, although women are almost twice as likely as men to report lack of confidence as a barrier, the figure for both groups is less than 10 percent. Given that most early high-school leavers have negative experiences with the formal education system, this finding is somewhat surprising. Certainly ethnographic evidence (e.g., Luttrell, 1997) suggests that for many adult learners returning to school involves confronting a number of fears. Results presented in Figure 4.1 show that lack of confidence is, however, relatively unimportant compared to other factors.

### ***A closer look at costs***

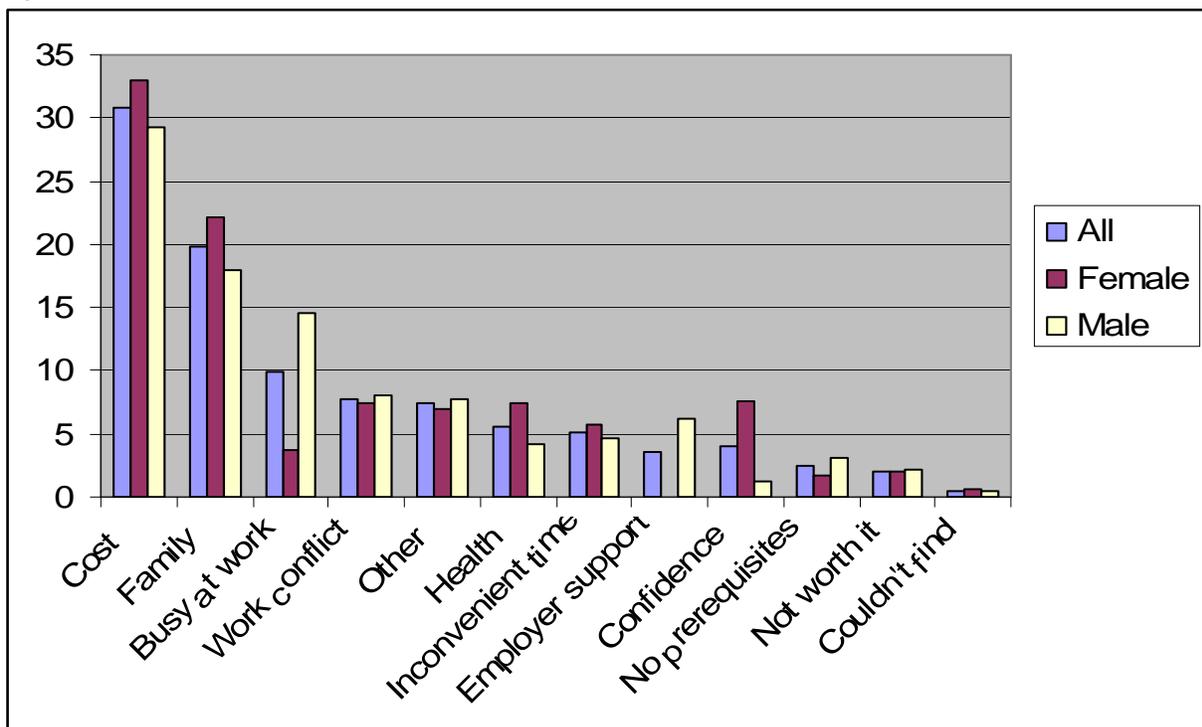
The empirical evidence suggests that time and costs are the most significant barriers to learning (Figure 4.1). In most provinces, tuition (for adult high-school courses) is free and in some provinces, learners are eligible for subsidies for transportation and childcare. However, in all provinces, learners still need to cover their living expenses. No province offers student loans for high-school-related learning. While most provinces allow social assistance recipients to participate in high-school-related upgrading programs, social assistance recipients represent only a small proportion of adults without a high-school diploma. Therefore most learners must combine work and study or rely on family members for support. Given that juggling work and family responsibilities is often difficult in the best of circumstances, it is not surprising that time is the second most common reason for not participating in adult learning.

**Figure 4.1: Barriers to training among individuals who wanted to take training but did not**

Panel A: Reasons for not taking training among individuals with less than high-school education (respondents could identify more than one reason)



Panel B: The most important reason for not taking training among individuals with less than high-school education



Source: Authors' calculations using Statistics Canada Adult Education and Training Survey (2003)

### 4.3 Conclusions

This Section examined the possible routes to obtaining a high-school diploma in five Canadian provinces. Here is a summary of the key points that were raised.

- Adults without a high-school diploma have several options for upgrading their credentials. The options include pursuing a regular secondary school diploma or a special diploma that has been modified to meet the specific needs of adult learners. Adults who do not want to take high-school credit courses, may write the General Education Development (GED), take upgrading courses in a college setting, or write the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES). Adults, whose skills are below a certain level, may participate in literacy and basic skills programs.
- While it is well-established that returning to school later in life pays off, less is known about whether the type of credential obtained makes a difference. Unfortunately, there is very little Canada data on these questions.
- Each of the five high-school-related pathways offers different advantages and disadvantages. There is no one best option. The best option for potential learners will depend on their current circumstances, past academic performance, and future goals.
- Answering the question of how many adult learners pursue each option is more difficult than it seems. Few provinces are able to report accurate adult participation counts by all program types. Although we are not able to present precise figures, by all accounts, it is clear that only a very small fraction of adults without a high-school diploma are engaged in high-school-related learning.
- Research literature combined with interviews with key stakeholders suggests that there are a number of complex and interrelated factors that may affect participation rates. These factors include: economic growth, lack of interest, lack of confidence, lack of awareness, unresponsive learning environment, cost and time. While there is considerable debate about the relative importance of these factors, very little formal research has been conducted. Data from the Adult Education and Training Survey suggest that time and costs are the most important barriers to participation.
- Lack of interest is also an important barrier to increasing participation. Only 9 percent of respondents with less than high-school reported that there was training that they wanted to take but did not, compared to 28 percent of respondents with a university degree. Nevertheless, the participation rate in job related learning among those with high-school or less would have almost doubled had their demand for courses been met.

## 5. Participating in ‘second chance’ post-secondary education

### 5.1 Introduction

In the past decade, there has been considerable debate about access to post-secondary education. This debate has focused primarily on the extent to which individuals from low-income families are able to access post-secondary education. In this section, we argue that we should also be asking whether further education is accessible to individuals who return to school later in life. In Section 5.2, we use the Adult Education and Training survey to investigate how many adults return to post-secondary education and to analyze how participation differs across key characteristics such as age, gender, and geography.<sup>23</sup> Section 5.3 addresses barriers to participation and examines what post-secondary institutions are currently doing to encourage participation. Section 5.4 takes a closer look at federal and provincial financial aid programs which are aimed at addressing the cost of post-secondary education, one of the most significant barriers to participation. Section 5.5 provides a summary of key findings.

### 5.2 Who participates in ‘second chance’ post-secondary education?

#### *How many individuals participate?*

In this section we use mainly the Adult Education and Training Survey (2003) to determine how many individuals and what types of individuals return to a post-secondary program later in life. Table 5.1 indicates the proportion of adults aged 25-54 who participated in a post-secondary program in 2002.<sup>24</sup> There is only slight variation in participation rates across provinces. British Columbia has the highest rate at 8.5 percent and Nova Scotia has the lowest rate at 5.0 percent.

**Table 5.1: Participation in post-secondary education by province (25-54-year-olds, 2002)**

	Alberta	BC	NS	Ontario	Québec	Total
Learners	83,290	124,285	16,591	341,881	168,302	816,015
Adults without a university degree <sup>25</sup>	1,146,772	1,458,946	330,545	4,100,153	2,687,659	10,970,026
Learners as a % of the target population	7.3	8.5	5.0	8.3	6.3	7.4

Source: Authors' calculations using The Adult Education and Training Survey (2003)

<sup>23</sup> Statistics Canada's Enhanced Student Information System (ESIS) is potentially the most detailed source of information about post-secondary students; however, this dataset is still under development and several of the most important variables for this analysis are not yet well reported.

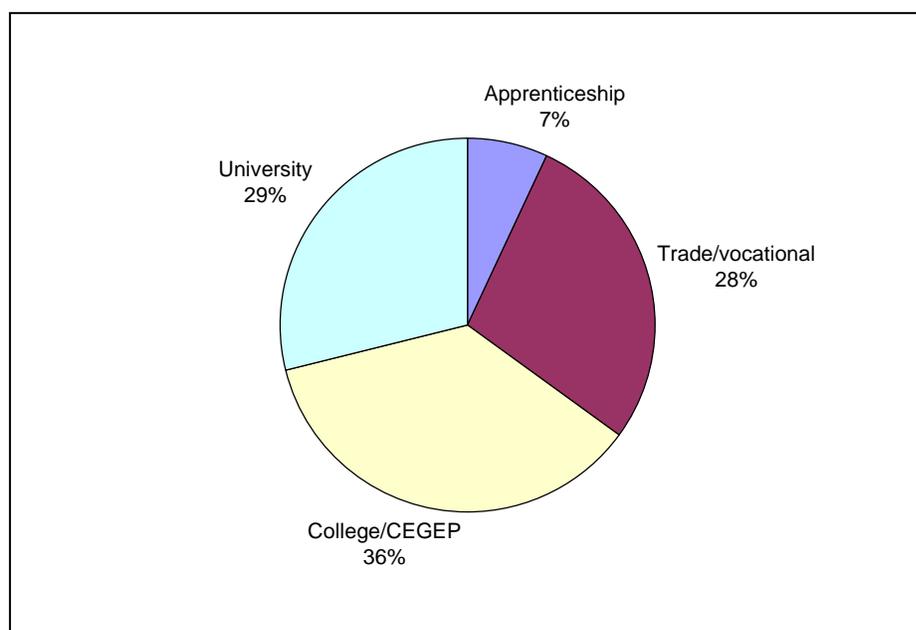
<sup>24</sup> In the 2003 version of the Statistics Canada Adult Education and Training Survey, only individuals 25-years-of-age and older are surveyed. While somewhat arbitrary, the cut-off point of 25-years-of-age is used as a marker to distinguish individuals who are pursuing post-secondary as part of their initial education from individuals who are pursuing 'second-chance' post-secondary.

<sup>25</sup> We have excluded individuals who already have a university degree at the time of the survey. Ideally, we would also have excluded individuals with a college diploma, but the data do not allow us to distinguish between individuals with 'some post-secondary' and those who have obtained a college diploma. Therefore, our analysis may slightly over-estimate the proportion of learners who belong to our target population of interest (individuals without a post-secondary credential).

### **What type of post-secondary programs are older learners taking?**

As Figure 5.1 illustrates, in 2002, adult learners over the age of 25 were more likely to pursue a college diploma (36 percent) than either a university degree (29 percent) or a trades or vocational certificate (28 percent).<sup>26</sup> Only 7 percent of adult learners were pursuing a registered apprenticeship.

**Figure 5.1 – Participation in post-secondary in 2002 by type of institution (25-54 year olds)**



**Source: Authors' calculations using the Adult Education and Training Survey (2003)**

The *2005 Canadian College Student Survey* (Prairie Research Associates, 2005), allows us to take a closer look at the types of college programs in which adults are enrolled. The survey provides a demographic profile of students of all ages who are enrolled in college programs across Canada. Table 5.2 shows the distribution by age of the participation in different college programs. Overall, adults over 25 represent almost 27 percent of the college population. Among students enrolled in a career or technical program (regular diploma programs), 30 percent of students are over the age of 25. About 12 percent fall into the 25-29 age category, 11 percent are 30-39, and 7 percent are over 40. Similarly adults over the age of 25 make up an even higher proportion of the access/upgrading students (46 percent). As we suspected (but were unable to confirm when we were using the Adult Education and Training Survey), a non-trivial proportion of these college students over the age of 25 are enrolled in post diploma programs (36 percent). This means that these adults already had a post-secondary degree or diploma before they entered their current program and therefore, these adults are not likely to fall into our target population.

<sup>26</sup> “The distinction between “college” and “trades-vocational” is based primarily on program requirements. Specifically, “college” programs generally require a secondary school diploma and are primarily of a general or professional nature (such as business, commerce or health sciences). In contrast, “Trade-vocational” programs do not usually require secondary school completion and these programs are primarily career-oriented (e.g., machining, plumbing, hairdressing, etc.). This category also includes students in other types of programs, such as pre-employment, pre-apprenticeship, language training, special contract training, job readiness training, academic upgrading and preparatory training.

**Table 5.2: Enrolment in college by age and program type**

Age	Overall (n=9,101 <sup>27</sup> )	Access/ upgrading (n=876)	Career /Technical (n=4,695)	University Prep (n=2,178)	Post-diploma (n=425)	Degree (n=884)
<b>19 and under</b>	34%	18%	30%	56%	17%	24%
<b>20-24</b>	39%	36%	41%	32%	46%	44%
<b>25-29</b>	11%	14%	12%	6%	17%	16%
<b>30-39</b>	10%	18%	11%	4%	14%	9%
<b>40+</b>	6%	14%	7%	2%	6%	7%
<b>Average</b>	24 years	27 years	24 years	21 years	25 years	25 years

Source: Prairie research Associates (2005)

### **Who participates?**

Not surprisingly, for both men and women, participation decreases with age. As Table 5.3 shows, individuals between the ages of 25 and 34 are the most likely to participate, and this difference holds across provinces (not shown). Table 5.3 also shows that women are slightly more likely than men to participate in ‘second chance’ post-secondary (8.9 percent versus 6.9 percent). While the gender participation gap among all adults is 1.1 percentage point, this gap increases to 2.6 percentage points when we consider only 25-34 year olds.

**Table 5.3: Participation in post-secondary by sex and age category (25-54-year-olds, 2002)**

	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 54	Total
Male	210,950	113,666	53,330	377,946
	12.5%	5.7%	3.0%	6.9%
Female	229,341	135,244	73,484	438,069
	15.1%	6.6%	3.9%	8.0%
All	440,291	248,910	126,814	816,015
	<b>13.8%</b>	<b>6.1%</b>	<b>3.4%</b>	<b>7.4%</b>

Source: Authors’ calculations using The Adult Education and Training Survey (2003)

Interestingly, the gender participation gap varies across provinces. As Table 5.4 shows, in British Columbia, the gender gap is much larger than the provincial average (2.8 versus 1.1). In Québec, the gap is slightly smaller and in Alberta, the gap is virtually non-existent. Interestingly in Nova Scotia, the gap is reversed: men are more likely to participate than women.

<sup>27</sup> Note: the number of people (n) in each program may not sum to the overall number of people because some respondents did not indicate the program in which they were enrolled.

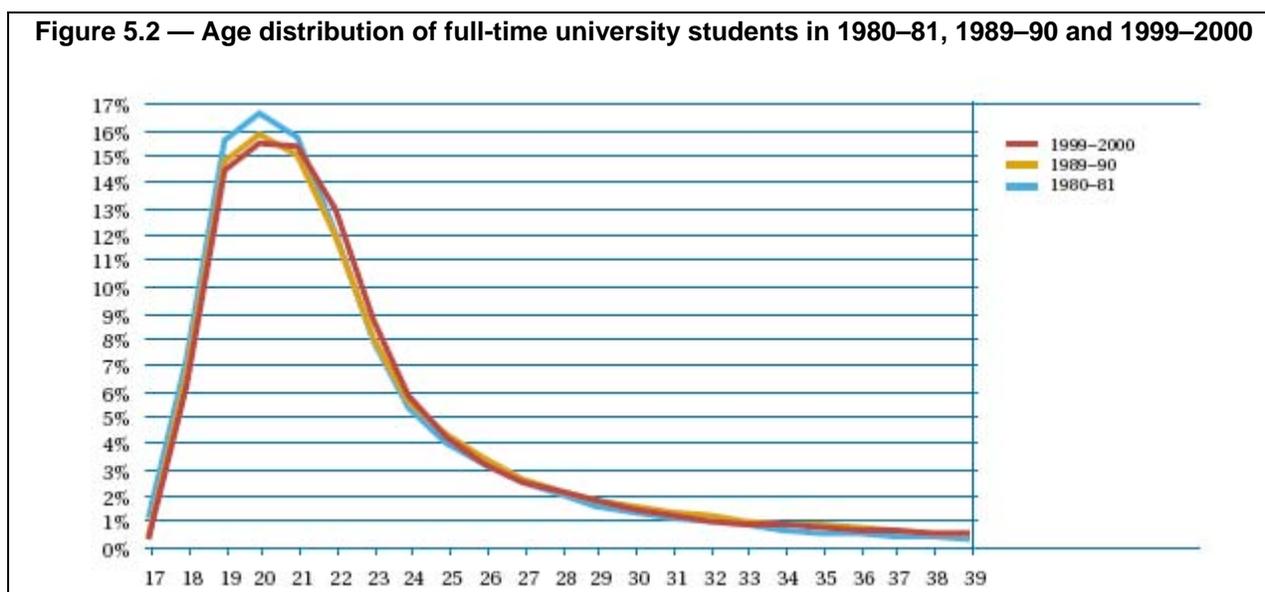
**Table 5.4: Participation gender gap (25-54-year-olds, 2002)**

	Alberta	BC	NS	Ontario	Québec	Total
Males (%)	7.3	7.1	5.4	7.7	5.9	6.9
Females (%)	7.2	9.9	4.7	8.9	6.6	8.0
Gap (%)	- 0.1	2.8	- 0.7	1.2	0.7	1.1

Source: Authors' calculations using Statistics Canada Adult Education and Training Survey (2003)

***Has the age distribution changed over time?***

The average age of Canadian university students has remained relatively constant over the past 40 years (Junor and Usher, 2004). While there are more students over the age of 30 in the university system, there has also been an influx of younger cohorts. In 1999, the average age of full-time university students was 22, compared to 21 two decades earlier (Junor and Usher, 2004). In fact over the 1990s, the average age of students declined as enrolment growth was driven by younger students. Figure 5.2 shows the age distribution of full-time university students for 1980, 1989 and 1999. The age trend for college students follows the same pattern and the average age of Canadian college students is also 22.<sup>28</sup>



Source: Junor, S., & Usher, A. (2004)

***Has the participation rate of part-time students changed over time?***

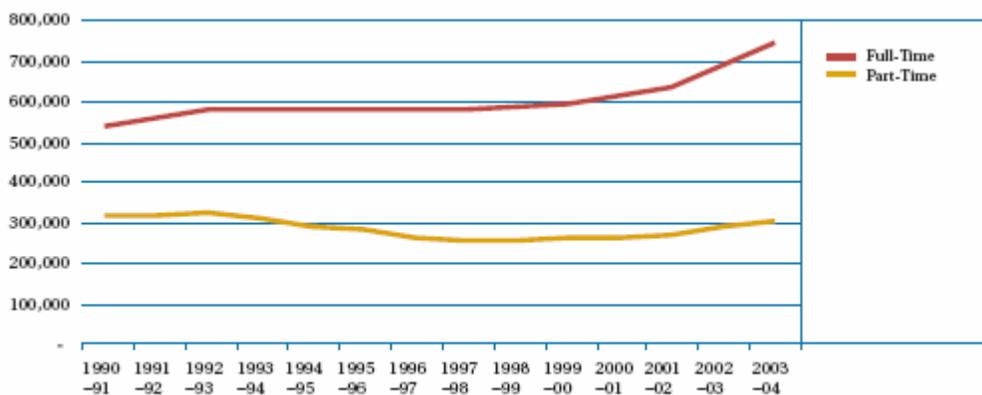
In the mid 1990s there was a sudden decline in the number of part-time students in all provinces except BC and Alberta. Figure 5.3 shows total enrolment numbers for full-time and part-time

<sup>28</sup> The average age increases to 23 if CEGEP enrolment in Québec is not included. Students in Québec typically enter the college system at an earlier age than they do in the rest of Canada (usually at 17 years old).

university students since 1990. The reason for this decline is not well understood, although many explanations have been proposed (Junor and Usher, 2004). Some observers have linked the trend to changes in gender enrolment patterns. From the 1970s, to early 1990s, women tended to upgrade their academic qualifications in order to participate in the changing labour market. Thus they were less likely to enroll in full-time studies. Also, since it takes much longer to complete a program part-time, this likely reinforced the increase. Since 1992, however, there has been a decline in female part-time enrolment. This may be due to the fact that female labour market participation and educational qualifications are now roughly equivalent to those of males and upgrading to reflect a changing labour market is no longer as much of an issue. Other observers have noted the inadequacy of financial aid programs for part-time students and the fact that a significant number of programs do not even allow for part-time study. By the late 1990s part-time enrolment began to increase again though the enrolment level has not returned to former levels.

Accurate data on college enrolment are difficult to obtain in general, and part-time rates are particularly difficult to calculate. For this reason, data on part-time college enrolment need to be viewed with extreme caution. According to Junor and Usher (2004) complete data are available from about half of the institutions in the country. Part-time college rates followed a similar pattern to part-time university rates. Although the majority of part-time students in Canadian colleges are still over the age of 30, the only age group in which the number of part-time students grew during the 1990s is the 18- to 21-year-old group. During the same period, the number of 22- to 25-year-olds enrolled in part-time college studies decreased by approximately 20 percent and the number of part-time students aged 30 or over decreased by nearly 40 percent from the 1992 peak level.

**Figure 5.3: Canadian university enrolment by registration status**



Source: Junor, S., & Usher, A. (2004)

***Do job and workplace characteristics make a difference?***

Among those who are employed, there is a strong relationship between participation in training in the previous year and the types of jobs that individuals currently hold. As Table 5.5 shows, managers and professionals are significantly more likely than blue collar or sales and services workers to have participated in a post-secondary education program in the previous year.

Similarly, individuals who work in the public sector and individuals who work in larger firms are also more likely to have participated. Interestingly, unionized workers are slightly less likely to have participated.<sup>29</sup>

**Table 5.5: Participation in post-secondary by job characteristics (25-54-year-olds, 2002)**

<b>Characteristics</b>		<b>Participation rate (%)</b>
<b>Occupation</b>	Professional, managerial	10.3
	Clerical, sales, service	7.6
	Blue collar	5.3
<b>Sector</b>	Public	9.9
	Private	8.0
	Self-employed	1.8
<b>Firm size</b>	Less than 20 employees	6.0
	21-99	9.3
	100-500	7.4
	500+	8.2
<b>Union status</b>	Union members	7.3
	Not union members	8.2

Source: Authors' calculations using Statistics Canada Adult Education and Training Survey (2003)

A more detailed analysis using multivariate logistic regression shows that age and gender remain significant factors in affecting the likelihood of participation even when we account for job and workplace characteristics.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, occupation and firm size remain also significant predictors. However, sector and union status are no longer significant. In summary, women and younger adults are significantly more likely to return to school, as are individuals who work in large firms and managerial and professional occupations.

### ***Why do adults return to school?***

The Adult Education and Training Survey asked individuals why they returned to school. Respondents were asked to indicate if a standard set of reasons applied to their situation. Table 5.6 lists the reasons and the proportion of respondents who indicated that each reason applied to them. The most common reason given for returning to school was 'to find or change jobs' (53 percent), followed by 'to do job better' (48 percent) and 'to increase income' (43 percent). Among 25- to 34-year-olds, the most common reasons were find or change jobs and to increase income. There were no significant differences between men and women (not shown).

<sup>29</sup> Of course this analysis does not tell us which came first. While it is plausible that individuals in certain types of jobs are more likely to pursue post-secondary programs it is also possible that participation in post-secondary program increases the likelihood of obtaining certain types of jobs.

<sup>30</sup> Results are not shown but are available from authors on request.

**Table 5.6: Reason for taking a post-secondary program by age group (25-54-year-olds, 2002)**

	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 54	All
<b>Increase income</b>	48.5	37.5	33.8	43.0
<b>Keep job</b>	9.5	11.7	14.4	10.9
<b>Promotion</b>	18.2	18.8	20.0	18.7
<b>Do job better</b>	43.5	52.5	55.7	48.1
<b>Own business</b>	20.9	11.4	6.8	15.8
<b>Find/change jobs</b>	62.1	41.4	42.4	52.6
<b>Other</b>	11.8	13.1	14.9	12.7

Source: Authors' calculations using the Adult Education and Training Survey (2003)

### 5.3 Barriers and incentives to participation

The relationship between obtaining a post-secondary credential and improved labour market prospects is well established. But as the previous section has illustrated, few adults actually return to school. This section examines barriers and incentives to participation.

#### **Admission policies**

The basic admission requirement for post-secondary programs in Canada is a high-school diploma or equivalent *OR* any lesser minimum admission requirement as established by the institution on a program-specific basis. Few programs have lower minimum requirements. In fact it is more common for a program to have *higher* requirements, such as specific prerequisite courses or a certain grade point average. In addition, meeting the minimum admission requirements does not guarantee entry to any program or faculty. Because the number of qualified applicants usually exceeds the number of spaces available, all post-secondary institutions reserve the right to select from among the academically best qualified applicants.

Most colleges and universities have special policies for 'mature' students. For example, according to the *Ontario Colleges* website:

Applicants to Ontario colleges who have NOT obtained an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), or equivalent, AND who will be 19-years-of-age by the program start date, may be considered for admission to the colleges as mature students. Mature student status will be considered on an individual basis and testing may be conducted for an evaluation of their academic potential. Mature applicants must also meet the specific program requirements in order to be accepted.

Official policies are similar for most colleges and universities across Canada.<sup>31</sup> Many colleges and some universities have innovative programs designed to increase access for non-traditional students. See Box 5.1 for a description of such a program at the University of Toronto.

<sup>31</sup> Quick links to admission policies for most Ontario colleges can be found at: [http://www.ontariocolleges.ca/pls/portal30/url/page/OCAS\\_adm\\_req\\_college](http://www.ontariocolleges.ca/pls/portal30/url/page/OCAS_adm_req_college).

But what do these admission policies and access programs mean in practice? Are older individuals who want to learn able to find a seat in a post-secondary institution? The large number of older students in college access and upgrading programs suggests that in practice, while mature students may not be required to complete a high-school diploma, a significant proportion of them are required to take upgrading courses. Very little systematic research has been directed at this question. More research is needed to determine how mature students fare in comparison with traditional students when applying to Canadian colleges and universities.

#### **Box 5.1 – University of Toronto’s Woodsworth College**

Woodsworth’s role in the University of Toronto is to provide the best educational experience for a diverse student body that includes a large number of part-time and non-traditional students. One of its core programs is the Millie Rotman Shime Academic Bridging Program. This program enables mature students, without a high-school diploma or without sufficient marks to qualify for direct entry, to pursue degree studies at the University of Toronto. These courses are designed for students who have been away from formal education for some time and are intended to bridge the gap between a student’s prior secondary education and the requirements of first year university courses. Students who successfully complete the Academic Bridging Program will retain a full credit towards their degree studies in the Faculty of Arts and Science at the University of Toronto. The program is operated on a first-come, first-served basis. Tuition is \$1100 per year and students are eligible for financial aid. For more details see, <http://www.wdw.utoronto.ca/>

#### ***Prior learning assessment and recognition***

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is a process that helps adults to demonstrate and obtain recognition for learning that they acquire inside and outside of formal education settings. PLAR has the potential to be an important policy tool for encouraging older adults to return to school because it enables individuals to gain academic credit for what they already know and can do. This can help ensure that learners are placed at appropriate levels within educational programs and it may reduce the time and cost of completing a program (CMEC, 2003). Although there is little systematic research on the subject, the research that does exist suggests that learners who have used PLAR report benefits in terms of time and cost savings, as well as increased self-esteem, and confidence (Aarts et al., 2003).

In Canada, most public colleges recognize prior learning in at least some of their programs (CMEC, 2003). Although PLAR policies are less common at the university level, some universities do recognize prior learning, usually through their continuing education programs (Barker and Belanger, 1999). There is often a gap, however, between formal policies and actual practices. Even at institutions most committed to PLAR, uptake by learners remains low across the country (Wihak, 2005). Again there is little formal research on why uptake is so low, but observers have suggested a number of reasons including: costs for learners and institutions; lack of awareness; faculty resistance to PLAR; concerns about quality; and lack of incentives for faculty and institutions (Wihak, 2005).

Post-secondary institutions assess prior learning through a variety of methods including demonstrations, structured interviews, portfolios and presentations of examples or products.

Many colleges, universities, and professional licensing and certification bodies use written tests to assess an applicant's prior learning.

Implementation of PLAR is uneven across provinces and institutions. British Columbia is considered a leader in PLAR. Over the past five years, PLAR in BC has evolved into a significant province-wide initiative. Twenty-five institutions are currently funded for PLA activities by the province and the BC Council on Admission and Transfer has approved a set of standards and guidelines for post-secondary institutions in BC.

More learners and institutions may be encouraged to use PLAR practices if more were known about the cost-benefits and effectiveness of different PLAR assessment methods. This is potentially an important area for development.

### ***Financial assistance***

Financial aid is another potentially important tool for encouraging the participation of older students. Older students tend to have greater financial needs than younger students. According to a recent survey on student finances (EKOS, 2003), living costs rise from \$650–\$685 among 18- to 19-year-olds, to almost \$2,000 a month among students over 25. The same survey found that age is also a predictor of the ways in which students meet their expenses. Younger students are much more likely to rely on family than older students. Only 38 percent of participants aged 26 and over reported receiving financial support from their parents, compared to 83 percent of 20 and 21 year olds (EKOS, 2003). Older students are more likely to rely on government assistance and more likely to have accumulated debt both from government and private sources.

Despite their generally high level of financial need, there is no large-scale financial aid program that is specifically tailored to the needs of adults returning to school later in life. Older adults use the same system as younger students. Because this system was designed primarily to meet the needs of students moving directly from high-school to post-secondary education, there are several components of this system that do not work particularly well for non traditional learners. The next section takes a closer look at how the financial aid works (and does not work) for adults returning to school later in life.

## **5.4 A closer look at government student assistance**

Canada's student loan system is quite complex. As Junor and Usher (2004) point out, the system has "over 40 different student assistance limits (depending on a student's province, marital status, dependants and level of study), more than 100 different loan/grant combinations within these aid limits, and hundreds of thousands of possible aid configurations once assessed need is taken into account"(p.181). However despite these differences, Junor and Usher (2004) argue that most of the country's student assistance programs follow a single paradigm. While differences exist between provinces, they are less significant than one might expect.

One of the fundamental principles of Canada's student assistance system is that assistance is granted based on an assessment of 'needs' rather than income. The needs assessment process is quite complex and involves four broad steps. What follows is a discussion of how adults are treated at each of these four steps.

## ***How Canada's full-time student loan system works***

**1. Identifying a student's category** – The first step is to determine a student's category. Students may fall into one of six categories: (1) Single Dependent – living at home; (2) Single Dependent – living *away* from home; (3) Single Independent – living at home; (4) Single Independent – living *away* from home; (5) Married; and (6) Single Parent. Individuals over the age of 25, could fall into any of categories three to six. The type of category a student falls into will affect the way costs and resources are assessed. For example, students who are deemed 'independent' will have only their own resources assessed, while dependent students will have their parents' income assessed as well. Similarly, for married students, their partners' resources must be considered as well as their own.

**2. Assessing costs** – A student's education and living costs are assessed for the entire academic year. All of the provinces adopt a similar approach, with only minor differences. Expenses include tuition, books, supplies, living allowances, transportation, and childcare. Higher living allowances are calculated if students are married or have dependents.

**3. Determining resources** – Depending on student's category, three types of resources may be taken into account: student resources, family resources and spousal resources. In general, resource calculations rules do not work in the favour of older adults. Two rules are particularly problematic. The first rule relates to how personal assets are treated. All jurisdictions, except Québec and the Northwest Territories, consider a student's assets and personal savings when they calculate resources. This means that students are basically required to deplete their savings accounts before they can receive any government assistance. In general, younger students are not unduly affected by this rule since they tend to have few assets and few responsibilities. In contrast, this rule may place considerable stress on older students who tend to have more assets and considerably more financial responsibilities. Students with dependents may be particularly reticent to deplete their entire savings, especially at a time when their annual income is likely to be lower than normal. Moreover, the practice of needs testing runs counter to the logic of most other types of loans. With most other types of loans, the more assets an individual has the more likely they will be able to secure favourable borrowing terms.

The second rule relates to how expected spousal contributions are calculated. For married students, all jurisdictions expect the learner's spouse to make a significant contribution to his/her education. In fact, in all jurisdictions except Québec, spouses are required to make a contribution starting at much lower levels of income than parents, and their contribution rate progresses more steeply. This requirement has a major effect on the eligibility status of married learners. In fact, in all provinces but Québec, a married student with no dependants whose spouse earned \$25,000 or more would have expected spousal contributions set so high that he or she would likely be ineligible for loans. In contrast, a similar student in Québec would not have any expected spousal contributions and would receive a substantial amount of assistance.<sup>32</sup> In addition, in all jurisdictions but Québec and the Northwest Territories, spousal assets are calculated as part of the student's resources. Automobiles worth over \$5,000 and RRSPs above a certain limit are considered assets.<sup>33</sup> Above these limits, the full value of student and spousal financial assets are

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<sup>32</sup> In Ontario, there is no expected minimum contribution when both spouses are students.

<sup>33</sup> Students may accumulate \$2000 in RRSPs for every year that their age exceeds 18.

added to expected contributions, requiring both individuals to liquidate most assets before the student achieves loan eligibility (Hemingway, 2003).

**4. Calculate need** – This is the simplest part of the needs assessment exercise. Assessed need is determined by subtracting the student’s total assessed resources from his or her total assessed costs. If the resulting figure is zero or less, then the student is not considered to have ‘need’ and is ineligible for student assistance. If the figure is positive, the student is eligible for assistance.

### ***Part-Time Student Loans***

Most governments do not provide assistance to part-time students. Only the Government of Canada, Ontario, and the Northwest Territories provide this type of support (Junor and Usher, 2004).<sup>34</sup> The take-up rate for the Government of Canada’s part-time loan program is extremely low. Fewer than 4,000 students hold these loans (from a pool of over half-a-million part-time students at colleges and universities) (Junor and Usher, 2004). In the much smaller world of part-time student loans, needs testing does not exist and eligibility is determined with a much simpler family-income test. The assessment formula is also more generous than the assessment formula for full-time students (Junor and Usher, 2004). For example, under the full-time student loan program, a student with an income of \$14,000 would not qualify for a student loan. By moving to part-time education, this same student would qualify for \$4,000 in part-time loans and \$1,200 in grants. However, unlike full-time loans, interest payments on part-time loans must be made by the student while in school. (Interest relief is available to students with a gross family income below a certain level.<sup>35</sup>) Furthermore, eligible part-time students can receive only a cumulative amount of \$4,000 in total loan assistance (\$5,000 in NWT).

### ***What other assistance do adult learners obtain?***

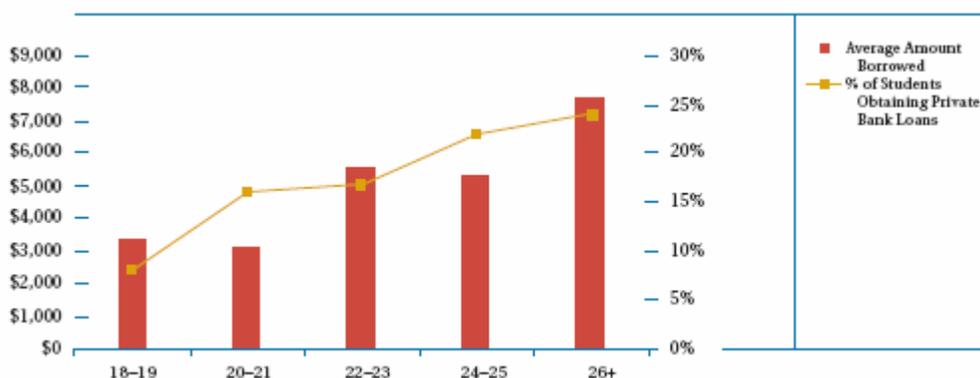
A substantial proportion of students obtain private bank loans and this figure increases significantly with age. The Student Income-Expenditure Survey found that 24 percent of students over 26 had obtained a private bank loan compared to less than 10 percent of 18- to 19-year-olds and 17 percent of 20- to 21-year-olds (see Figure 5.4). Moreover, the survey found that the average amount borrowed also increases with age.

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<sup>34</sup> Applicants to the part-time Canada Student Loan Program must be enrolled in 20-59 percent of a full course load. Students with disabilities may enrol in 20-39 percent of a full course load. To be eligible, part-time students must be enrolled in a degree, diploma, or certificate program of at least 12 weeks in length within a period of 15 consecutive weeks at a designated educational institution.

<sup>35</sup> For example, in Ontario, part-time loan interest relief for a student in a family of two with monthly interest payments below \$35 may be eligible for in-school interest relief if their gross family income per month is less than \$2,631.

**Figure 5.4: Private borrowing by age**



Source: Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation's 2001-02 Student Income-Expenditure Survey as cited in Junor and Usher (2004).

### ***Non-repayable Assistance***

In addition to loans, the Government of Canada offers Canada Study Grants (CSG) that top-up or replace student loans for high-need students. There are two components to these grants. The first component, Canada Study Grants for High-Need Part-Time, provides non-repayable grants to part-time students who can demonstrate financial need. For a single independent student, the maximum family income threshold is \$14,100. For students from a family of two the threshold is \$23,300. The grants are up to \$1,200 and count as taxable income. In 2002-03, the number of students receiving the CSG for High-need Part-time Students exceeded the number of students receiving part-time student Canada Student Loans (Junor and Usher, 2004). The second component, *Canada Study Grants for Students with Dependents*, provides students with dependents with grants of up to \$3,120 (for full-time students) or \$1,920 (for part-time students) per year (HRSDC, 2004). In 2002-03, just over 55,000 CSGs were distributed, with about 80 percent issued to students with dependents, and the rest issued to high-need part-time students.

The federal government also provides some funds to EI eligible individuals who require skills upgrading to secure employment. However because the program targets short-term training, it primarily benefit individuals taking private technical/vocational programs or skill seminars run by independent contractors. Relatively little EI funding goes to 'students' who are pursuing post-secondary diplomas or degrees (Junor and Usher, 2004). Indeed the 2004 Canadian College Survey found that while almost 10 percent of respondents indicated using the Employment Insurance funds to support their education, the majority of these respondents were enrolled in short term access and upgrading programs (Prairie Research Associates, 2005).

## **5.5 Summary and conclusions**

The debate about access to post-secondary education has largely been framed around the question of whether individuals from low-income families are able to access post-secondary education. In this section, we argued that this question needs to be expanded to include the question of access for individuals who wish to return to post-secondary school later in life. Despite considerable rhetoric around the importance of life-long learning, the average age of

Canadian college and university students has remained remarkably constant over the past 40 years (Junor and Usher, 2004). Most post-secondary institutions have policies such as flexible admission and PLAR to encourage the participation of older adults. Some institutions even have innovative programs for adult learners without high-school diplomas or prerequisites. There is little research, however, investigating how these policies are administered in practice. There is no publicly available data on the ratio of applicants to acceptances for older learners. It is difficult, therefore, to evaluate how well these policies are working. More research in this area is essential.

One of the most significant disincentives to participation may be the inadequacy of Canada's financial aid system, which is designed for learners following a traditional path from secondary to post-secondary. Older students may be unwilling to give up the savings and assets that they worked hard to accumulate in order to be eligible for government loans. Older students, especially those with dependents, may feel that depleting their assets would make them too vulnerable to economic misfortune. Moreover, in most provinces, the expected contribution required from a spouse rises rapidly even from a fairly low level of spouse's income, which makes married students with working spouses often not even eligible for student loans. While there is no research specifically examining the financial needs of older students, the proportion of older students with private bank loans and lines of credit suggests that the current system is not meeting their needs.

## **6. Is there an incentive structure for employers to provide learning opportunities for low skilled?**

### **6.1 Introduction**

Participation in job-related training is lower in Canada than in several other countries considered as important economic competitors (OECD, 2005). When employers do provide training, they are more likely to provide it to higher-skilled workers than to lower-skilled workers. Some other key facts about less-skilled adults are.

- In the last decade, the proportion of the population with low levels of literacy remained stable at 42 percent.
- Close to 1.5 million of 25- to 64-year-olds with less than high-school education, and 3.6 million with just a high-school diploma are employed – they form respectively 11 percent and 27 percent of total employment in this age group.
- 5.9 million 16- to 65-year-olds are employed and have low levels of literacy – 38 percent of total employment in this age group.

This means that a significant proportion of the workforce is comprised of the less-educated and/or the low-skilled. Workplace-based training matters not only to maintain and upgrade the skills and knowledge of the highly educated/skilled workforce, but also to enhance the skills and knowledge of the more educationally disadvantaged working adults.

Speaking at the 2004 Annual Meeting of The Alliance of Sector Councils, the Deputy Minister for Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Wayne Wouters, “suggested that the key objectives of the Workplace Skills Strategy are to ‘ensure the Canadian workforce is highly skilled, adaptable and resilient; build a labour market that is flexible, efficient and productive; and work with employers to ensure that workplaces are healthy, productive and innovative.’ In his view, ‘this is not just a social policy issue but darn good economics.’ (TASC, 2005) But, he said, sector councils have “been less successful in changing the skills development culture among employers” and questioned whether Canada’s CEOs have “bought into this.” He said, “As a CEO myself, I ask to what extent have we invested in our own people? What can we do together to shift this culture? Workplace training in Canada is below the OECD average.”

In this section, we will first draw attention to one of the main challenges that has to be addressed: the trap of the low-skills/low-wage economy. We will then review some of the government and partnership initiatives aiming at raising the general level of employer-supported training in the country.

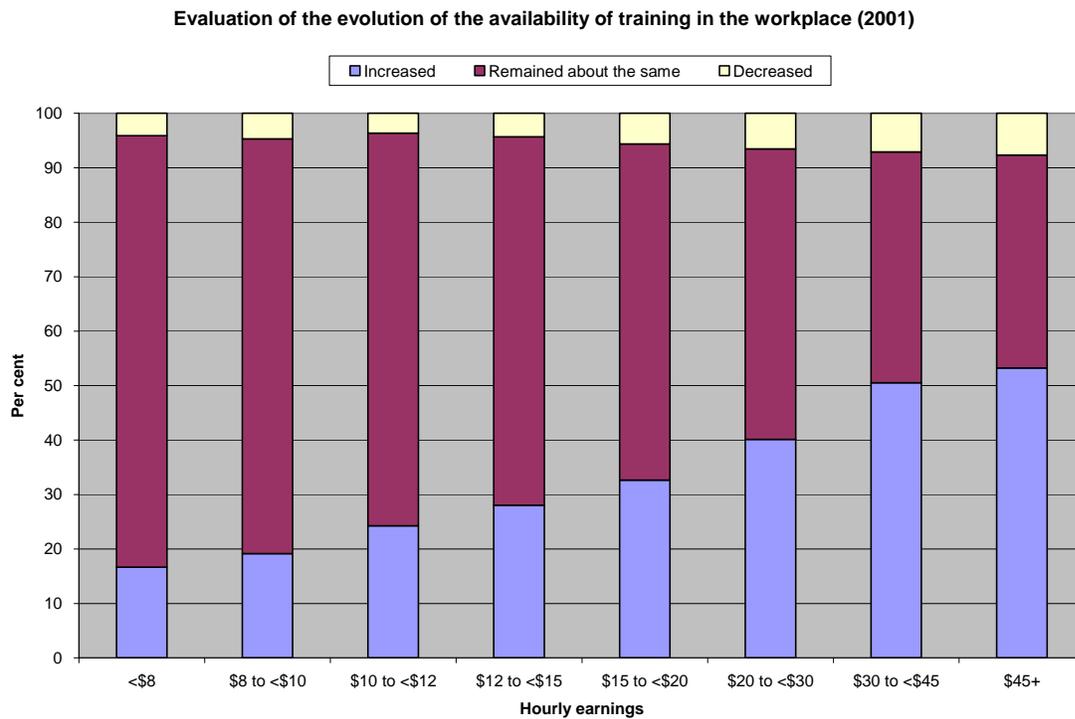
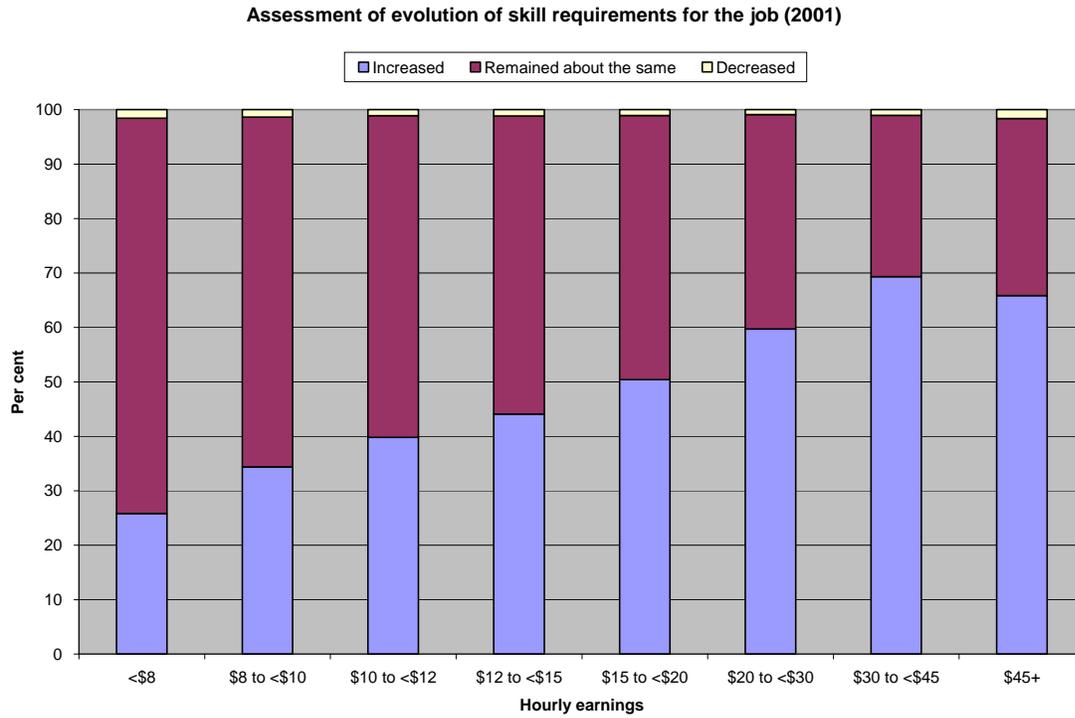
### **6.2 The risk of the low-skills equilibrium**

In their review of workplace training, the Conference Board of Canada (2005) identifies the low-skills equilibrium as one important aspect of the economic context that may considerably limit access to training opportunities for less-educated workers. As this recent report concludes:

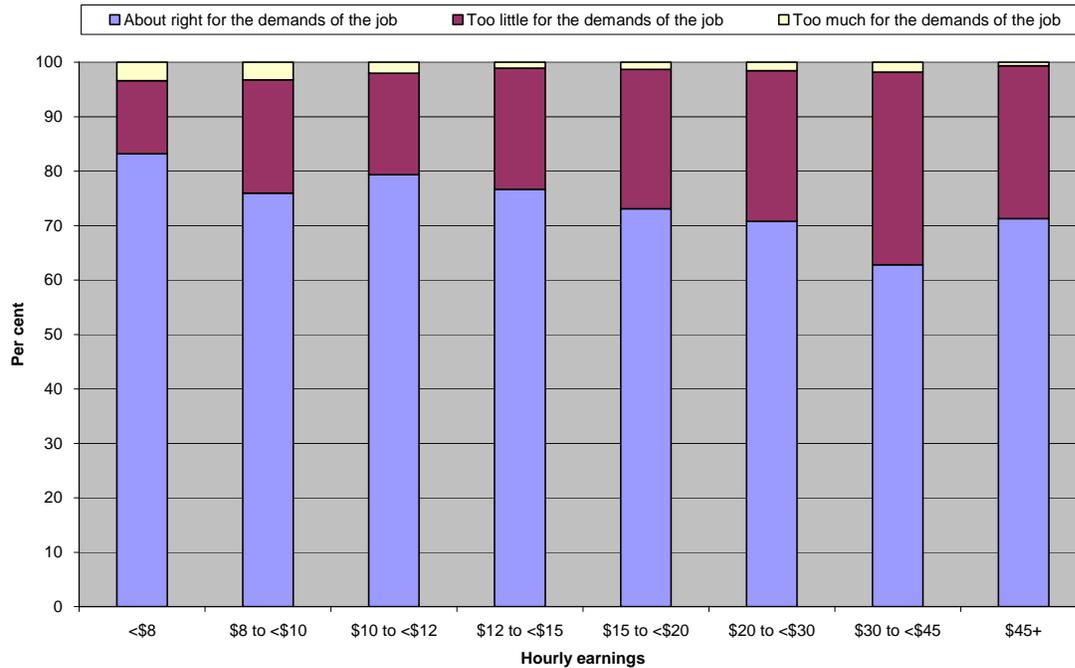
“the competitive human resource strategy of many employers is based on a low-cost/low-added-value approach – which perpetuates a low-skill/low-wage equilibrium in which neither employees nor employers demand higher levels of skills. The real impact of poor skills on business becomes evident when employees are asked to go beyond the familiar – a challenge that they are often not able to fulfill. In the end, low-skilled and under-skilled employees avoid taking on extra responsibilities or more demanding roles and as a consequence their skills status remains static, as does their productivity rates, and potential earning power.”

Figure 6.1 provides a graphic illustration of this problem. The three charts in Figure 6.1 are derived from the Canadian Workplace and Employee Survey (WES). As the first chart shows, workers with an initial education of high-school or less represent 68 percent of those who earn less than \$12 an hour and 81 percent of those who earn less than \$8 an hour. The vast majority, of these workers report that skills requirements of their jobs have not changed since they started in their current job. In contrast, more highly educated workers are much more likely to report that skills requirements have increased. Not surprisingly then, as the second and third charts show, low-skill/low-wage earners are *more* likely to report that the amount of training available to employees in the workplace has not increased since they began working for their company and they are *less* unlikely to consider this as a problem given the demands of their job. Taken together these charts suggest that low-skill/low-wage workers may get trapped in a circle of unskilled tasks in their workplace, with limited scope for skill requirements to increase, hence limited need for training and limited training opportunities offered by their employer.

**Figure 6.1: The low-skills equilibrium**



Evaluation of the amount of training taken (2001)



### 6.3 Recent government initiatives in workplace training

In The Budget Plan 2005, the Government of Canada says: “Continued improvements in the living standards of Canadians will have to rely increasingly on productivity growth. Therefore, to increase living standards, Canada must continue to invest in the drivers of productivity growth: human capital, physical capital and innovation. Building on a sound fiscal foundation, the role of the Government is to enhance and strengthen policies that encourage all Canadians to invest in these drivers of growth.” This section will review recent and current Government initiatives – mainly federal and some provincial – that are parts of the framework to encourage those who are the best positioned to invest in the drivers of productivity identified, i.e., individuals and businesses.

#### *About federal structures and programs*

Over the last two decades, the Federal Government created a number of structures and programs to promote a “training culture” in Canada and support an increasing investment in training on the part of Canadian businesses.

**CLFDB:** In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the federal government explored options for engaging the private sector in training and human resources issues. In 1991, it launched the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) and collaborated with some provinces in the establishment of a network of local labour market boards. Inspired by European models of business and labour co-management, the CLFDB was a departure from previous practices.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> According to a recent Canadian Background Report (OECD, 2002a), the CLFDB experiment was not very successful. However, according to the report, the regional boards did succeed in creating effective networks between industry and the

However, the CLFDB was disbanded in 1999. Several provinces created similar structures, and in some provinces, the concept was expanded through the creation of networks of local boards. For example, Ontario established the Ontario Training and Adjustment Board (OTAB) in 1993, and a network of local boards. The OTAB was disbanded in 1995, but the local board network continues to exist.

**Sector Councils:** Also launched in the early 1990s, Sector Councils bring together representatives from business, labour, education and other professional groups. Councils have been involved in developing voluntary occupational and skills standards, training, school-to-work transitions, LMI and career information. Building strong sector partnerships is a key aspect of the federal skills agenda. According to a government release, support for exemplary councils will double from \$60M by 2007. We examine the role of Sector Councils in more detail in section 6.4.

**Essential Skills:** This initiative of the federal government helps workers, employers, and literacy practitioners in assessing learning needs and developing tailored approaches to workplace literacy and essential skills. The goal is to enhance worker skill levels. The initiative does this by increasing awareness of Essential Skills, supporting the development of assessment tools and curriculum. However, it does not fund the cost of delivering essential skills training programs.

**Workplace Skills Strategy:** The WSS, announced by the federal government in 2004, has three main goals: to help Canadians be the best trained most highly skilled workers in the world; to build a labour market that is flexible and efficient; to respond to the needs of employers to make Canadian workplaces more productive and innovative. The government has announced three early initiatives.

- Workplace Skills Initiative – WSI will promote and test new and innovative approaches to skills development; encouraging employers to invest in the skills of their employees, and informing labour market policy about what works.
- Workplace Partners Panel – WPP is made up of business and labour champions. The WPP will help galvanize leadership in addressing workplace skills issues, providing increased investment and raising awareness around best practices.
- Trades and Apprenticeship Strategy – This strategy will help focus national attention on the challenges skilled trades are facing. Will work closely with the provinces and territories and stakeholders to address these challenges.

### ***Government incentives for employer-based training***

A recent paper by Van Walraven (2005) compares government incentives for employer-sponsored training in Canada and the United States. The key analytical question is whether the relative fiscal size of Canada's public policy incentive package can explain Canada's lower incidence of employer-sponsored training. The key finding is that differences in the size of government incentives for employer-sponsored worker training are too small to likely be a factor in Canada's lower incidence of training. In fact, the paper concludes that "the size of incentives

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education community, and the CLFDB provided leadership in the areas of labour standards and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).

for employer-sponsored training in both countries appeared too small (for the most part) to have any meaningful impact upon aggregate private costs from training and hence overall training outcomes”. (p.5)

The paper identifies five types of employer-based public fiscal incentives. Table 6.1 describes each type of incentive. In Canada, there are no federally sponsored programs and only four provincial programs. Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Ontario offer grants, and Québec has a train-or-pay scheme. Moreover, none of these programs target less-educated workers specifically. Further analysis needs to be done to determine the extent to which less-educated workers benefit from existing initiatives. Table 6.2 provides details on the existing Canadian programs.

**Table 6.1: Types of public incentives for employer-based training**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Grants</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A portion of training costs are financed through general revenues.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry Training Partnerships (Manitoba)</li> <li>Workplace Education Initiative (Nova Scotia)</li> <li>Strategic Skills Initiative (Ontario)</li> <li>US: at federal level and 31 states</li> </ul>
<b>Levy/grant schemes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A portion of training costs are funded by a levy on businesses—usually a % of payroll. Levy is used to develop a fund to which businesses can apply to obtain training subsidies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>US: federal and state programs</li> </ul>
<b>Tax deductions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A portion of training costs is reimbursed to employers through corporate tax breaks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Europe: Austria, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands</li> <li>US: in 23 states</li> </ul>
<b>Bond Financing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Payroll taxes from newly created jobs in which workers received training are used to pay for the government’s burden of private training costs.<sup>37</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Used in 4 states to support their customized training programs for ‘new hires’. Target is large businesses moving into the state or expanding.</li> </ul>
<b>Train-or-pay</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A portion of training costs are paid for from a tax that is payable by firms that fail to provide worker training at a sufficient level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1% payroll levy, Québec</li> </ul>

<sup>37</sup> According to Van Walraven (2005) the bond scheme works as follows: “Funds are generated from the sale of bonds to private investors by state governments or colleges. Proceeds are used to finance training of new or expanding businesses. Bonds are repaid from new payroll withholding tax generated by the new jobs. Instead of newly collected payroll taxes going into general government revenues, they are pledged to repay the bonds. As long as the company that is expanding hires enough new employees to generate tax revenue, it receives free training”. p.18

**Table 6.2: Existing provincial incentives programs for employer-based training**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Industry Training Partnerships (ITP) (Manitoba)</b>	ITP includes three programs that support training employee needs: <i>Sectoral Partnerships</i> , <i>Province-wide Special Courses</i> , and <i>Workplace Essential Skills</i> . ITP operates on a consortium basis – individual companies are not eligible for assistance from ITP (with the exception of single large companies which constitute ‘the industry’ in Manitoba). Large umbrella associations of similar businesses develop specific training projects and apply for funding.
<b>Strategic Skills Initiative (Ontario)</b>	This program offered grants to public/private partnerships established to develop and operate training projects that addressed skills training needed for business competitiveness.
<b>Workplace Education Initiative (Nova Scotia)</b>	The Department of Education’s <i>Workplace Education Initiative</i> , has two parts. The <i>Workplace Education Program</i> provides on-the-job training that is customized to the needs of the organization. The <i>Workplace Education Initiative</i> provides funding to different types of organizations, mostly small businesses. The <i>Workforce Skills Development Program</i> , helps workers in transition (unemployed or entering the labour force) to develop essential skills useful for acquiring a new job. This may include funding employers for the purpose of hiring and training formerly unemployed workers.
<b>The Act to Foster the Development of Manpower Training (Québec)</b>	The Act, passed in 1995, requires every employer whose total annual payroll exceeds \$1 million (\$250,000 before January 1, 2004) to participate in the development of manpower training by devoting at least 1 percent of the total payroll to eligible training expenditures. If the training investment does not meet this requirement, the difference is to be remitted to the National Training Fund. The Act has two specific objectives: (1) to improve manpower skills; (2) to generate increased investment in training through concerted action by the main players in the labour market.

(In this study, apprenticeship programs were considered a special type of employer-based training program)

## 6.4 The role of sector councils

Sectoral approaches to skills development issues have garnered momentum in many countries. In Canada, the Sector Council Program was launched in 1993 and progressively expanded as it covered larger numbers of sectors. There are currently 29 national sector councils,<sup>38</sup> forming a network that covers approximately 40 percent of Canada’s labour force. The Alliance of Sector Councils (TASC) is the umbrella organization for the network. The objectives of the sector councils are as follows:

- Define and anticipate skills requirements,
- Promote lifelong learning in the workplace,
- Facilitate mobility and labour market transitions,

<sup>38</sup> The sectoral approach has also some resonance in provinces such as in Québec (*comités sectoriels de main-d’œuvre*). The main mandates of these organizations are broadly similar to the national ones: to define needs specific to the sector, to propose measures to stabilise employment and reduce unemployment, and to develop continuing education.

- Help workers get the skills and knowledge needed to drive innovation and to sustain a competitive advantage in the changing economy, and
- Encourage the private sector to take ownership and invest in solutions that address skills challenges.<sup>39</sup>

While TASC acknowledges the importance of promoting equal access to training and employment opportunities, there is no specific reference on the organization's website to the learning needs of educationally disadvantaged workers.<sup>40</sup>

HRSDC has put together a detailed framework to evaluate the Sector Council program that includes a large number of performance indicators. Unfortunately, though, none of the indicators address the impact of sector councils from a worker's perspective. In particular, the evaluation framework does not require that Sector Councils provide information on how many workers with a given educational background have benefited from any of the training structures and programs, or the extent to which employers and councils face specific challenges to entice less-educated workers to upgrade their skills. For this reason it is difficult to gauge the impact of Sector Councils on less-educated workers.

Analysis of the data that we do have suggests that the impact of the Sector Councils on the least educated has been limited. A comparison of data from the 1997 and 2002 versions of the Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS) shows that participation in employer-supported training did not increase in a significant way in five years. According to the recent Conference Board of Canada report Learning and Development Outlook 2005, the lion's share of workplace training still targets well-educated employees. Basic skill training remains at the bottom of training priorities comprising only 2.2 percent of training investments (Parker and Cooney 2005).

## **6.5 Workplace literacy: Barriers and innovative practices**

Over the last decade, starting essentially with the release of the first results of the International Adult Literacy Survey in 1995, the Conference Board of Canada developed an extensive research agenda on the impact of literacy in the workplace. Using a variety of research methodologies from survey data analysis to case studies and surveys of employers, this research:

- assessed the literacy skill gap in the working age population,
- made the business case for enhancing basic skills in the workplace,
- looked at the factors associated with low literacy and participation in training,
- identified the barriers to training on both the employee and employer sides,
- developed strategies to overcome these barriers adapted to different types of businesses and make workplace literacy programs effective tools to enhance quality and efficiency of business operations and improve employees' comfort with basic skills.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/hip/hrp/corporate/sector/sectorcouncil.shtml#whatare> (last accessed March 25, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> [http://www.councils.org/1approach/response\\_e.cfm](http://www.councils.org/1approach/response_e.cfm) (last accessed March 26, 2006).

The Conference Board's research has demonstrated that improving the literacy and basic skills of employees is associated with higher profits and a host of other bottom-line benefits including: reduced error rates, a better health and safety record, reduced waste in production of goods and services and increased customer and employee retention. In addition, employees with better basic skills tend to learn more and faster when they take job-specific and technical training. In general, benefits of workplace literacy enhancement programs tend to spread through the organization, developing a more conscientious, resourceful, and dependable workforce as a result.

### ***Barriers for employers' engagement***

If the benefits are so significant, why are there so many workers with so limited basic skills and why aren't organizations more diligent in caring about their workforce's low skills? Through its research and survey work, the Conference Board (2001) has identified barriers for employers' engagement in basic skills training and classified them in three categories:

- Structural barriers:
  - Poaching – this is the risk that other employers would hire workers trained in another firm;
  - Lack of information – limitations in awareness of existing suppliers and programs (including government-supported ones) dedicated to employee literacy and basic skills development;
  - Government-related factors – reflect the perception of a lack of government assistance and a weakness in public investment in education and training prior to entering the workplace; tax-related factors may also play a role;
  - Labour market trends – emphasis on university education resulting in struggling apprenticeship programs; development of non-standard types of employment and fluctuations in demand for skills may impede the development of training programs.
- Institutional barriers
  - Lack of time – relates to finding the time to design and implement a literacy training program, coping with absence of workers while in training, away from production;
  - Tracking return on investment (ROI) – the outcome of training is largely intangible and requires significant resources to overcome the measurement of returns;
  - The learning environment – the standard classroom approach, most familiar to university- or college-educated employees, will often generate anxiety and resistance on the part of workers who may have less positive memories of the school experience;
  - Customized programming – the search for, and access to, programs well adapted to specific needs is potentially costly in time and resources;
  - Organizational design – weak links in the human resource development process within an organization represent an obstacle to training.
- Individual barriers
  - Attitude – lack of employee interest or motivation for training, non recognition of skill limitation are further obstacles to entice employees into explicit learning activities;
  - Access – relates to the major social policy concern of unequal access to learning opportunities by level of education or skills, including to literacy training

## ***Overcoming the barriers***

While recognizing that not all identified barriers can be addressed by employers alone, the Conference Board has proposed a series of steps that employers can take to ensure that the training they deliver is effective both in terms of skills-transfer to the workplace and in terms of improving the bottom line.

- Build and maintain employee loyalty – To confront the risk of external poaching, employers have to find their own way to keep their workplace attractive for their employees; this could include: care for employees’ opinions and concerns on job-related issues, keep satisfaction high, personal involvement in projects and their own work.
- Benchmarking – Tools for evaluation of learning activities have to be built in the program from the implementation stage; recording initial skill levels is an important step; realistic objectives can be set; then regular assessment of progress should be made and recorded – these will be essential to the rationalization of the training investment and its continuation.
- Design challenging jobs – For training to be seen as useful by employees, it has to be put to use in the workplace. Employers need to put employees’ skills to best use and show commitment to the workforce by establishing career ladders that offer opportunities and challenges.
- Allow employees access to learning – Employers should consider all opportunities to make time for training, by looking at such possibilities as rotating schedules, shift work, irregular job demands; they should also look for flexibility on the training delivery side through small group instruction, one-on-one tutoring or self-study modules; it is important that all this be in consideration of employees’ needs, interests and own schedules.
- Deliver employee-friendly workplace education – Training content and delivery should be considerate of the characteristics of the workplace, its diversity and culture, its management style and equipment used.
- Raise training staff requirements – Respect for the past experiences and learning styles of the adult learners should be clearly demonstrated by the trainers. They should also show flexibility in program design, schedule and delivery.

## ***Literacy programs at work***

The Conference Board of Canada has brought together the 12 key success factors for the delivery of effective workplace literacy programs (Figure 6.2). In addition, case study research has identified a number of specific strategies that have worked in firms of different sizes. (A large list of case studies is also available on the Conference Board’s website.<sup>41</sup>)

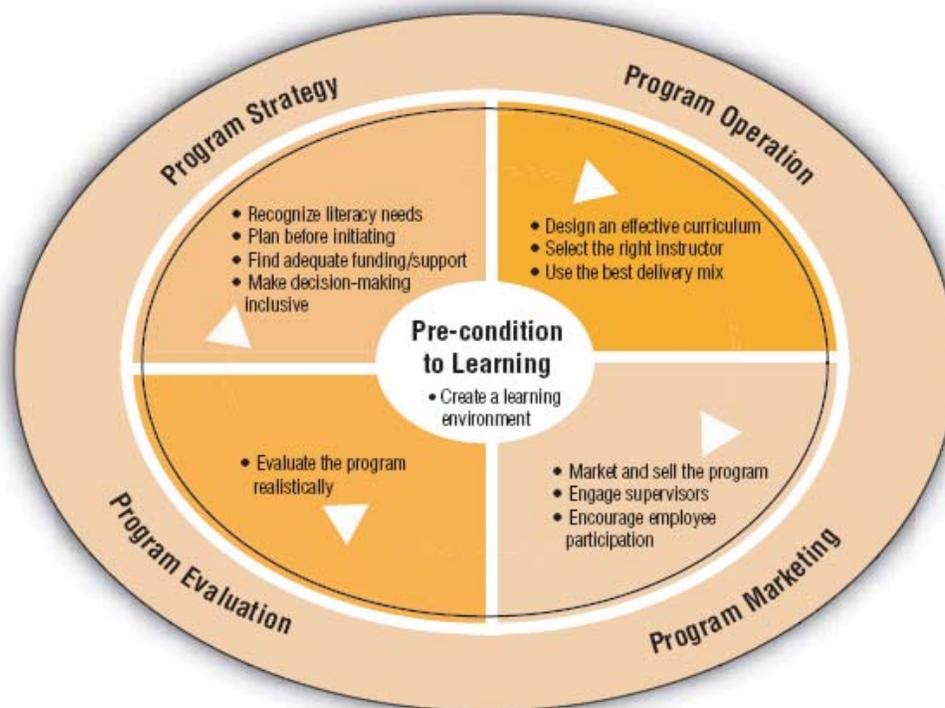
- In small businesses:
  - Senior management’s support and enthusiasm for the training program encouraged hesitant mature workers to take part.

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/education/best-practices/case-studies.htm>.

- Effective time management, supervisor buy-in and training in small groups of employees helped ease scheduling conflicts and minimize impact on production. Modular learning programs and delivery through e-learning are also used to resolve time issues.
- Partnering in course development helped with making the courses directly relevant and applicable to the workplace. Partnership with the sector council is proving an efficient and cost-effective way to access proven training resources and tools.
- In medium-sized businesses:
  - Partnership with governments at various levels and with learning organizations helped address the issue of cost.
  - A flexible training model with frequent, short training sessions helped make training accessible in a context of 24-hour-operations.
    - Training offered on-site and using material contextualized to the workplace helped ensure appropriateness and direct relevance to employees' work.
- In large business:
  - The company provided an on-site learning centre to ensure easy access to customized training in an area away from major educational institutions.
  - Training staff has been employed by the company; this helped the development of a good understanding of the real training needs of the workers and more familiarity with their background and past experiences.

**Figure 6.2 - Key Success Factors for Workplace Literacy Programs**



Source: The Conference Board of Canada, *Profiting from Literacy – Creating a Sustainable Workplace Literacy Program*, December 2005.

As the above discussion shows, context and circumstances are very important and should be given considerable consideration to ensure the success and sustainability of training programs. A recent study by Brisbois and Saunders (2005), on skills upgrading initiatives in Alberta and the Northwest Territories has also shown the role of context and circumstances in the development of training activities aimed at upgrading the low skills of the workforce. In most of the cases Brisbois and Saunders reviewed, one of the key incentives to train low-skilled employees was the importance of safety issues, particularly where the work involves the use of heavy equipment or machinery. In the Northwest Territories, another motivator was the need to meet hiring quotas for aboriginal employees, many of whom had low levels of literacy and numeracy. These employees needed higher skills to keep the mines where they often work running and for their own safety in the workplace. Legislated requirements may have played a role in employers' move to provide training, but it is clear that employers often went well beyond such requirements because of their own cost concerns.

Syncrude, a large company operating in the oil sands of northern Alberta, recognized that its business success depended largely on the skills of its workforce. In partnership with Keyano College in Fort McMurray in the late 1980s, it developed a workplace literacy program called ERIC (Effective Reading In Context). Its high effectiveness has been demonstrated and it has been made available to business, industry, unions, high-schools and communities throughout Alberta.

Another example drawn from the Brisbois/Saunders study illustrates the important role that sector councils can play. The Canadian Trucking Human Resources Council (CTHRC) conducted a pilot project with the Canadian Petroleum Products Institute (CPPI) to look at the relationship between essential skills and driver safety among drivers used by CPPI member companies. This partnership benefited both organizations – CTHRC was interested in further promoting essential skills in the trucking industry, and CPPI had a desire to see an increase in safety, and decrease in product handling incidents and personal injuries in their sector.

During the summer of 2003, 231 CPPI certified drivers in Alberta participated in the Test of Workplace Essential Skills for Professional Drivers (TOWES-PD). The pilot looked at the relationship between the safety records of these drivers and their respective TOWES test scores on three essential skills: reading text; document use, and numeracy. Findings from the analyses found that drivers with higher scores on the three essential skills were less likely to have had product handling incidents or personal injuries.

Standards were also set for CPPI drivers on the three essential skills tested based on the CTHRC custom essential skills profile for Professional Drivers. The results found that 50 percent of drivers were below the benchmark for reading text, 41 percent were below the benchmark for numeracy, and 95 percent of drivers did not meet the benchmark for document use. According to stakeholders interviewed, this last result was particularly surprising given the trucking industry is very document driven. Document use among drivers who transport hazardous materials is particularly intense for safety reasons and drivers are continuously using and completing documents (e.g., delivery forms, inventory forms). The results of the pilot have the industry re-thinking its training protocols and how it designs workplace documents. They will help to identify and respond to learning needs among CPPI and CTHRC drivers.

The TOWES-PD pilot project is important because it quantitatively measures the link between essential skills and safety. The CTHRC can use these results to further promote the importance of essential skills within the trucking sector.

### ***Workforce Intermediaries***

One of the most interesting labour market trends in the United States is the rise of ‘workforce intermediaries’. Over the past decade, a growing number of groups have come together across the country to deal with the problem of workforce development. Many of these partnerships have significantly improved the prospects of low-wage workers in local labour markets. The intermediary approach has proven successful in a wide range of institutional settings, including community colleges, federally mandated Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), state and local agencies, unions, employer organizations, community development corporations, community development financial institutions, faith-based groups, and community-based organizations (Fischer, 2005). What distinguishes workplace intermediaries from other initiatives is a focus on improving business productivity and helping low-income individuals not just find a job, but advance over time to jobs that enable them to support themselves and their families (Gilothe, 2003).

Perhaps the most significant intermediary project to date has been the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative. The Jobs Initiative involved a six-city effort to reform local labour markets and help connect low-income, low-skilled young people to good jobs. The foundation chose six diverse large to medium size cities: Denver, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Philadelphia, St. Louis and Seattle. The Initiative was designed to show the field what could be achieved given adequate, sustained support. A core principle of the Initiative was that outcomes for low income workers should be related to higher wages, labour market retention, and career advancement. Since the Jobs Initiative’s inception, across the six sites over 10,000 low-income people have been placed in jobs paying wages averaging \$4 above the federal minimum wage. While still modest, for the vast majority of participants, these wages represented a substantial increase in their weekly earnings. Moreover, as many as 14 percent of those placed into jobs had no prior work experience (Fischer, 2005).

The overall conclusion of the Jobs Initiative is the finding that strategic partnerships have the potential to alter the way in which local labour markets and workforce development systems operate. Most importantly, these changes can help promote the scale, sustainability, and structural changes that are needed to improve access to good jobs and career ladders for large numbers of low income job seekers (Gilothe, 2003). While the concept of ‘workforce intermediaries’ has not yet caught on in Canada, the US experience suggests that it is an area well worth investigating further.

## **6.6 Summary and Conclusions**

Canada has much lower rates of participation in job-related training than several other advanced nations including the United States. The problem of how to encourage firms to provide more training is extremely complex. Over the last decade, the Conference Board of Canada has done important work in this area. Through a series of case studies and other types of evaluation research, the Board has developed a business case for the provision of employer-supported

training which highlights a number of benefits including increased productivity, reduced error rates, a better health and safety record, and increased customer and employee retention.

There are many policy levers available for encouraging employers to train their employees. Few Canadian jurisdictions have used any of these levers. While a few provinces provide training grants, Québec is the only province with a train-or-pay scheme. More research needs to be done to determine which incentives would be most effective in the Canadian context.

A number of Canadian firms have launched initiatives to provide training to low-skilled workers with impressive results. But these firms remain in the minority. The Conference Board's research suggests that some barriers to training low-skilled workers are quite persistent. One of the most troubling aspects of Canada's economy is that the competitive human resource strategy of too many Canadian firms is based on a low-cost/low-added-value approach. This approach perpetuates a low-skill/low-wage equilibrium in which neither employees nor employers demand higher levels of skills. Firms that gain their competitive edge from low-cost, low-skill work have little incentive to invest in labour force development.

The rise of workforce intermediaries in the United States appears to be one of the most promising responses to the problem of the low-skill/low-wage equilibrium. Workforce intermediaries have significantly improved the prospects of low-wage workers in local labour markets. The emergence of these new 'labour market arrangements' is an important development that should be closely monitored.

## 7. Adult learning scenarios

### 7.1 Introduction

In the previous sections we have examined particular aspects of the adult education system – high-school upgrading, ‘second chance’ post-secondary programs, and workplace initiatives – in detail. In this section, we step back and look at how well provincial adult education systems meet the needs of adult learners. We accomplish this task by constructing five real-life scenarios that represent the range of learning needs that low-skill/low-wage workers may have and then determining what opportunities are available to help these individuals meet their needs, in each of our five provinces. Box 7.1 presents both the scenarios we used and the questions asked.

#### Box 7.1: Scenarios and questions

**Nicholas** (23) is currently working in a unionized hotel as a doorman. He left high-school when he was 16 and has worked in the service industry for the past 7 years. He wants to improve his labour market prospects by going back to school for hospitality management.

**Grace** (40) is employed as a clerical worker in a small, non-unionized firm. She enjoys her job, but she and her husband are struggling to make ends meet. She wants to go back to school and upgrade her credentials so that she can find work as a bookkeeper. She has a high-school diploma. At 40, she has over 15 years experience in the labour market.

**Pedro** (29) has worked for the past eight years in a large unionized manufacturing firm. Until recently, he enjoyed a decent wage and a relatively secure job. Three months ago, his plant closed and he has been unable to find comparable work. He is current receiving Employment Insurance and wants to expand his labour market options by obtaining a trade certificate as an electrician. He has a high-school diploma as well as one semester of college.

**Debbie** (25) is employed in a minimum wage job in a retail store. She is worried about her future and is thinking about going back to school. She thinks she may be interested in some type of medical technician or nursing position, if she could obtain the appropriate qualifications through college or university. She is a 25 year old single mother of a 7 year-old child. She has a high-school diploma and four years of work experience.

**Nadia** (33) has been unemployed for 4 months and is currently receiving social assistance. She was previously working as a cleaner in a large firm. She would like to go to college for office administration, but she is worried that her reading skills are too low. She left high-school when she was 16.

#### Questions

1. What sources of information are available in your Province to help these potential learners explore their options for skills upgrading (e.g., government websites, service centres, etc.)?
2. What government supported options does each of these potential learners have?
3. What are the tuition costs associated with each of these options? To what extent does the Province provide financial support to cover these costs and other living expenses?
4. What other mechanisms does the Province use to encourage adult skills upgrading?
5. How do you measure the impact of these options? What proportion of applicants is accepted? Which programs have waiting lists? How long are these lists?
6. To what extent does the Province collect data on participant outcomes for these programs? Are these data publicly available or available to researchers?

## 7.2 The scenarios

### **Nicholas**

Our first scenario involves Nicholas, who is a 23-year-old early school leaver, and who is currently working in a unionized hotel as a doorman. Nicholas is six courses short of obtaining a high-school diploma and has worked in the service industry for the past 6 years. He wants to improve his prospects by returning to school for hospitality management.

The first question we asked in relationship to Nicholas’s scenario was how he would gather information about his options for completing a high-school diploma. As we discovered in Section 4, access to easy-to-navigate, plain language information about high-school-related options is hard to come by in most of the provinces examined in this study. As Table 7.1 shows, while all provinces except Ontario have a website targeted to adult learners, these websites are typically text heavy and hard to navigate. Nicholas would probably have the easiest time figuring out how to access information in Québec. Québec has a well-publicized adult learning telephone hotline and local adult education centres that provide face-to-face counselling. Alberta also has a hotline and service centres. The downside of Alberta’s hotline is that counsellors are trained to respond to a range of labour market and training scenarios and often do not have detailed information on adult learning. It may take more than one referral to find someone with the correct information. Neither British Columbia, Ontario, or Nova Scotia has an adult learning hotline. In these provinces, the only way prospective learners can gather information is to visit specific service providers. The drawback to this approach is that most agencies often only have information about their own services. Only Nova Scotia formally trains its information agents to ensure that they provide appropriate referrals. Therefore, once they figure out whom to contact, prospective learners in Nova Scotia have a relatively good chance of getting accurate and complete information.

**Table 7.1: Sources of information about options for completing high-school**

	<b>Alberta</b>	<b>BC</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>Ontario</b>	<b>Québec</b>
<b>Website targeted to adult learners?</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Website presents options clearly?</b>	No	No	Yes	No	No
<b>Website uses plain language and is easy to navigate?</b>	No, contains some useful info, but this info is hard to navigate	No, contains some useful info, but this info is hard to navigate	No, contains some useful info, but this info is hard to navigate	No	No, website primarily provides contact information
<b>Adult learning hotline</b>	Yes	No	No	No, hotline is targeted to labour market and post-secondary	Yes
<b>Service or adult learning centre</b>	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
<b>Formal referral process</b>	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Website address</b>	<a href="http://www.advancededucation.gov.ab.ca/other/">http://www.advancededucation.gov.ab.ca/other/</a>	<a href="http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/abe/welcome.htm">http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/abe/welcome.htm</a>	<a href="http://www.ednet.ns.ca/index.php?sid=592176461&amp;t=sub_pages&amp;at=15">http://www.ednet.ns.ca/index.php?sid=592176461&amp;t=sub_pages&amp;at=15</a>	None	<a href="http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/dfga/portail.html">http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/dfga/portail.html</a>

As outlined in Chapter 4, Nicholas has four options for completing his high-school diploma: he can complete a regular secondary diploma; he can obtain a special adult diploma; he can write the GED test; or he can take an academic upgrading program at a college. Any of these options would provide a useful stepping stone towards his goal of obtaining a diploma in hospitality management. However, if Nicholas decides to pursue the GED, he would need to ensure that the GED is accepted by the post-secondary institution to which he plans to apply. (The GED is not usually accepted by post-secondary institutions in Québec). If Nicholas lives in Nova Scotia he may have the additional option of pursuing credits that count both towards his high-school diploma and towards a diploma in hospitality management.

Regardless of which option he chooses for completing his high-school diploma, the cost of obtaining a post-secondary credential is quite high. As Table 7.2 suggests, most, but not all, provinces provide free tuition for high-school, and post-secondary tuition fees vary significantly.

But tuitions fees are not the biggest financial barrier. Even in Québec where tuition fees are quite low, Nicholas still needs to figure out a way to cover his living expenses while he is in school. Most individuals find combining full time work and school quite difficult. However, unless Nicholas is able to rely on support from family and friends he would likely have no other option. Moreover, achieving Nicholas's learning goals is no small undertaking. At a minimum it would likely take Nicholas three years of full time study to complete high-school diploma and obtain a diploma in hospitality.

For the high-school portion of his upgrading, Nicholas would not be eligible for grants or loans, regardless of the province he lived in. The only exception is Alberta, where, under some circumstances, working individuals may be able to gain special permission from Alberta Human Resources and Employment to return to school. If special permission was granted, Nicholas would have his tuition costs covered and he would be given a modest living allowance. Once Nicholas entered a post-secondary program he would likely be eligible for some more support. If he chooses to study part-time he would likely receive a Canada Study Grant of \$1,200 and he would likely be eligible for federal and provincial student loans.

In an ideal world, either Nicholas's union and/or his employer would provide him with some financial assistance. Many Canadian unions do provide some form of scholarships or bursaries to their members who wish to upgrade their skills, however the amounts are likely to be modest. It is possible that Nicholas's employer has an educational policy that provides at least reimbursement for the costs of tuition and books for programs that are deemed to be job-related.

If Nicholas lives in Nova Scotia, his employer may be encouraged to provide some relevant training through the province's Workplace Education Program. However, as we suggest in Section 6, in general, most workplaces do little to encourage the educational advancement of their least educated employees.

**Table 7.2: Education costs and available supports**

	<b>Alberta</b>	<b>BC</b>	<b>Nova Scotia</b>	<b>Ontario</b>	<b>Québec</b>
<b>Cost for high-school</b>	About \$2,600 for 6 courses	No cost	No cost	No cost	No cost
<b>Cost for college<sup>42</sup></b>	\$7,800 for two year program	\$7,100 for two year program	\$5,400 for two year program	\$5,400 for two year program	Only nominal cost
<b>Support for High-school</b>	May be eligible for a grant to cover tuition, books, expenses	Limited grants may cover books and transportation	No additional support	No additional support	No additional support from Ministry of Education, but possible support from programs in other Ministries
<b>Support for College</b>	May be eligible for a grant	Eligible for student loans and part-time study grant of \$1,200	Eligible for student loans and part-time study grant of \$1,200	Eligible for student loans and part-time study grant of \$1,200	Eligible for student loans and grants

**Nadia**

Our second scenario features Nadia, a 33-year-old woman who is currently receiving social assistance. She worked previously as a cleaner in a large firm and she would like to go to college for office administration. However, she left high-school when she was 16 and she is worried that her reading skills are too low. She has Grade 10 and a few Grade 11 courses.

Because Nadia also does not have a high-school diploma she will face many of the same difficulties as Nicholas. But, because she is on social assistance, Nadia will face an additional set of opportunities and constraints. In all five provinces Nadia would likely be able to remain on social assistance while she undertook literacy and basic skills upgrading and completed her high-school diploma. While this decision is usually left to the discretion of the individual case workers, most provinces encourage social assistance recipients to upgrade their skills at least to the level of a high-school diploma. In fact in Ontario, all Ontario Works applicants without a high-school diploma or equivalent are required to complete a literacy screening questionnaire and may be mandated to participate in literacy training.

Nadia's costs will differ from Nicholas's costs in two important ways. First, because Nadia is likely starting with less human capital, it will likely take her longer to obtain a college diploma and longer to reap the labour market rewards associated with obtaining a post-secondary credential. Second, because Nadia is on social assistance she will benefit from income support while she is taking upgrading courses. However, when she is ready to enter college, if she lives in Ontario or British Columbia she will have to leave social assistance and apply for student loans. In contrast, if she lives in Alberta, Nova Scotia or Québec, she may be able to receive approval to remain on social assistance and pursue a post-secondary credential. In Alberta, Nova Scotia, and Québec individuals who are on social assistance may be eligible for grants that cover

<sup>42</sup> Costs are for the full duration of the program and include tuition and ancillary fees, but not books or other material costs. Costs were determined by examining the 2005/06 fees at one college or university from the capital city of each province under consideration.

tuition, books and supplies. It is important to note that in all three cases, the decision of whether individuals on social assistance can participate in post-secondary education is left to the discretion of social assistance caseworkers. Moreover, especially in Nova Scotia, availability of these post-secondary ‘seats’ is limited and demand outstrips supply. As long as Nadia is able to get a ‘seat’, pursuing post-secondary education would be much easier for Nadia if she lives in Alberta, Nova Scotia or Québec than it would be if she lives in either British Columbia or Ontario.

### **Grace**

Our third scenario features Grace, who is employed as a clerical worker in a small, non-unionized firm. She enjoys her job, but she and her husband are struggling to make ends meet. She wants to go back to school and upgrade her credentials so that she can find work as a bookkeeper. She has a high-school diploma and at 40, she has over 15 years experience in the labour market.

Because Grace already has a high-school diploma, she is starting from a much better position than either Nicholas or Nadia. However she still faces the extremely difficult task of figuring out how to finance a minimum of two years of post-secondary education (see Table 7.3). Because she works in a small, non-unionized firm, she is unlikely to get any support from her employer. Even in Alberta, Grace’s prospects for funding are limited. Because she is employed full time, she would not be eligible for full-time, grant-funded training offered by Alberta Human Resources and Employment, unless she was given special permission to leave her job. However if she is able to show financial need, she might qualify for part-time funding (although this would likely be difficult if her husband is working full time as well). Grace also may face difficulty accessing a student loan. In all provinces but Québec, if Grace’s husband earned \$25,000 or more, she would be ineligible for a loan. Moreover, Grace would not be eligible for a loan if the combined assets of her and her husband were over \$5,000. In other words, even a modest family income and asset base may prevent Grace from accessing a student loan. If this were the case, Grace may be forced to rely on a private loan with significantly higher interest rates. Thus from an economic standpoint, given the substantial costs involved, for Grace to return to school, she would need to be quite sure that her investment would pay off.

**Table 7.3: Costs of a 2 year diploma in business administration with a specialization in accounting**

	<b>Alberta</b>	<b>BC</b>	<b>Nova Scotia</b>	<b>Ontario</b>	<b>Québec</b>
<b>Costs of college</b>	\$7,460	\$7,200	\$5,400	\$5,400	Nominal costs
<b>Support for College</b>	Eligible for student loans and may be eligible for a grant is she is given ‘counsel to leave’	May be eligible for student loans	May be eligible for student loans	May be eligible for student loans	Eligible for student grants and loans

### **Debbie**

Our fourth scenario involves Debbie, who is employed in a minimum wage job in a retail store. Debbie is worried about her future and is thinking about going back to school. She thinks she may be interested in some type of medical technician or nursing position, if she could obtain the appropriate qualifications. She is a 25-year-old single mother of a 7-year-old child. She has a high-school diploma but she does not have grade 12 chemistry or biology.

Of all our potential learners, Debbie has the most ambitious academic goals and will face the highest costs. Because nursing requires a four year degree program rather than a shorter and more inexpensive diploma program, her tuition costs will be more than double those of the other learners (except in Québec where tuition fees are much lower). Moreover, Debbie will likely face the additional costs of obtaining the necessary prerequisites. Most science-based programs such as nursing or nuclear medicine technician require students to have a number of grade 12 science and math courses. While most provinces offer tuition-free high-school credit courses to adults without a high-school diploma, adults who already have a diploma may have to pay for additional courses. Given that Debbie works in retail, she is unlikely to receive any support from her employer. Adding to this, Debbie faces the additional barrier of needing to find childcare while she is attending classes. Because Debbie has a dependent, she would be eligible for a Canada Study Grant of \$3,210 if she studies full-time, or \$1,920 if she studies part-time. In all provinces she would likely be eligible for a student loan. In Alberta, because Debbie has a dependent child, she may be eligible for funds to cover part-time or full-time training if she can demonstrate financial needs. None of the other provinces have any specific programs to support single mothers who wish to return to school if they are already working.

**Table 7.4: Costs of a 4 year degree program in nursing**

	<b>Alberta</b>	<b>BC</b>	<b>Nova Scotia</b>	<b>Ontario</b>	<b>Québec</b>
<b>Cost of a university degree</b>	\$22,870	\$20,040	\$29,920	\$18,400	\$7,000 – may be a two- or three-year university program depending on pre-requisites obtained
<b>Support</b>	Eligible for student loans and possibly a grant	Eligible for student loans and grants			

### **Pedro**

Our last potential learner, Pedro, is 29 and has worked for the past eight years in a large unionized manufacturing firm. Until recently, he enjoyed a decent wage and a relatively secure job. Three months ago, his plant closed and he has been unable to find comparable work. He is currently receiving Employment Insurance and wants to expand his labour market options by obtaining a trade certificate as an industrial electrician. He has a high-school diploma as well as one semester of college.

Pedro is in the best position of all of our potential learners. Because he is receiving Employment Insurance he may be eligible to participate in the federal government's Skills Development Program, or his union may have negotiated a labour market adjustment program for its workers. In addition, apprenticeships have lower tuition costs than other post-secondary programs and apprentices earn a wage while they pursue their training (but usually not while they are taking the in-class portion of their training). In addition, because Pedro has already completed one semester of college, he will likely receive some advanced standing if he chooses to pursue a diploma with his apprenticeship.

**Table 7.5: Obtaining a skilled trade – electrician**

	<b>Alberta</b>	<b>British Columbia</b>	<b>Nova Scotia</b>	<b>Ontario</b>	<b>Québec</b>
<b>Length of apprenticeship program</b>	4 years	4 years	4 years	4-5 years	8,000 hours
<b>Length of in-class training</b>	36 weeks	40 weeks	34 weeks	28 weeks	1,350 hours (included above)
<b>Cost of in-class training</b>	\$2,925	\$3,400	\$2,535	\$1,500	Up to \$1,000
<b>Certification mandatory?</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

### 7.3 Summary and conclusions

As these scenarios suggest, returning to school, whether to complete a high-school diploma or obtain a post-secondary credential involves a tremendous commitment of time, money and effort. Despite substantial rhetoric around the importance of lifelong learning, there are few programs and policies to support less-educated adults who wish to upgrade their skills. Few workplaces offer skills-upgrading opportunities to less-educated adults. No province (except Alberta under certain circumstances) provides income support to adults who are already working, even if they are working in the low-wage labour market. As a result, most adult learners must rely on family and friends and/or juggle work and school and/or incur significant financial debt. As Grace's scenario illustrates, many adults are not even eligible for government loans. These adults may end up relying on costly private loans. While most adults who return to school will enjoy significant economic benefits and improved labour market prospects, these benefits are not guaranteed up front. In most cases, returning to school requires great sacrifice and a profound leap of faith. In section 8, we take a closer look at these gaps in provincial and federal adult learning policies.

## 8. Gap identification and policy implications

### 8.1 Introduction

The social and economic importance of encouraging adults to engage in continuous learning throughout their working lives is now undisputed. The latest Canadian evidence suggests that less-educated adults who obtain a formal educational credential later in life realize significant wage gains (Zhang and Palameta, 2006). Moreover, as Coulombe and Tremblay (2005) show, there is now some international evidence to suggest that raising literacy and numeracy for people at the bottom of the skills distribution is more important to economic growth than producing more highly skilled graduates. Despite this evidence, very few adults with low levels of initial education actually do participate in job-related skills upgrading. The obvious question arising from this finding is *why*. This report investigated the adult learning systems of selected Canadian provinces to determine how well they meet the needs of learners with low levels of initial education. Our key finding is that, in all of the provinces studied, less-educated individuals are not well served by the current system. In this section, we identify the major gaps in adult learning policies. Then, after setting out some overarching principles to serve as a guide, we propose several steps that should be taken to move towards adult learning systems that enable less-educated adults to realize their economic and social potential.

### 8.2 Current policy frameworks and existing gaps

In the late 1990s, observers became increasingly concerned that Canada did not have a coherent adult learning policy. For example, Doray and Rubenson (1997) concluded that Canada has no “formal framework for human resources development and adult education policies”. Similarly, Bélanger and Tuijnman (1997) characterized Canada’s adult learning system as being provided by “a bewildering array of sponsors, including colleges and universities, community colleges, libraries, labour organizations, religious organizations, commercial organizations and businesses”. Much has changed since these reports were written. In the past five years, all of the provinces studied in this report have either made or begun to make substantial changes to their adult learning policies and programs (Powley, 2005).

Alberta has recently made significant changes to its adult learning system. In 2003, Alberta Human Resources and Employment (AHRE) launched the Skills Investment Strategy which transformed the way it delivers services (AHRE, 2003). This strategy consolidated the design and delivery of 19 previous programs into four core programs that provide career information, deliver basic and occupationally focused skills training, and foster industry and community partnerships. One of the most significant aspects of the Skills Investment Strategy is that AHRE programs now include working individuals as well as the unemployed. (Figure 1 in Appendix A illustrates how skills training programs are delivered in Alberta).

British Columbia has also introduced a number of changes to its adult education system. In 1999, the government introduced a new adult secondary diploma and launched a project to develop a more co-ordinated and learner-centred approach to adult basic education (ABE) programming. Two of the most important outputs of this project were the development of an articulation

process that allows adult learners to make a smooth transition between the secondary and post-secondary systems and the elimination of tuition fees for ABE courses.

Ontario has just begun the process of enhancing its adult education system. In contrast to British Columbia, in Ontario, there is no formal integration between the secondary and post-secondary systems. In fact there is considerable tension over whether skills-upgrading programs should be located within the secondary school or community college systems (Wynne, 2005). In 2004, the Ontario Government undertook a comprehensive review of adult education. The key conclusion of this review was that Ontarians do not have adequate access to learning opportunities that will prepare them for the labour market. In February 2006, in response to this report, the Ontario government established the Adult Education Policy Unit. While it is still early days, it is expected that this unit will have a significant impact on Ontario's adult learning environment. (Figure 2 in Appendix A shows how Ontario's adult education system is currently organized.)

In 2001, Nova Scotia launched the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning (NSSAL) (see Section 4, Box 4.2). One of the most attractive features of Nova Scotia's system is that it allows for dual crediting between NSSAL and some community college programs. Dual crediting means that learners without a high-school education may be able to work towards completing a high-school diploma and a post-secondary credential at the same time. Another important feature of Nova Scotia's system is that all NSSAL service delivery partners have received training so that they can provide learner assessments and appropriate referrals to any of Nova Scotia's adult learning programs. This is significant because prior to 2001, service providers often operated in isolation of each other, and there were few learner transitions between programs. Nova Scotia has also recently launched the Workplace Education Program designed to encourage government, business and labour to invest in education and training (see Section 6).

Québec is one of the few provinces in which adult education is covered by a legislative framework. This legislation defines two "régimes pédagogiques" (basic regulations), one for youth and one for adults. Adult education is delivered through the "commissions scolaires" (school boards) in specific institutions, called the "centres d'éducation des adultes" (adult education centres). Programs are harmonized across the two sectors, youth and adult. While Québec has already developed a relatively coherent adult learning system, it is continuing to improve its programs. In 2002, it developed an action plan to ensure that existing adult learning policies were aligned with an emerging lifelong learning paradigm. Although Québec is one of the few provinces where there are waiting lists for certain types of adult programs (mainly on the vocational side), there are still concerns that participation levels among the least educated are far from optimal.

The federal government has also launched a number of initiatives in the area of adult learning. HRSDC's Learning Initiatives Program has funded a number of projects including several projects on prior learning assessment and recognition and a large scale research project that will demonstrate the impact of comprehensive 'learner supports' as a means of increasing access and retention and addressing non-financial barriers to adult learning. One of the most important recent federal initiatives was the launch of the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) in 2004. The CCL is a national, independent, non-profit corporation with a mandate to promote and support research to improve all aspects of learning across the country. Although the CCL does not have a programming role, it will likely have an impact on learning opportunities for less-educated learners through the identification of good adult learning practices.

As this brief overview suggests, over the past five years, most provinces have launched important initiatives that have significantly improved their adult education systems. While these initiatives represent major investments and should be applauded as such, our research suggests that provincial adult learning systems remain complex, fragmented, and incomplete. As our analysis of various adult learning scenarios (Section 7) demonstrates, there are significant gaps in co-ordination, information and counselling, financial aid, and employer support. What follows is a brief summary of these gaps.

**Lack of co-ordination** – Provincial adult learning environments are extremely complex. In no province does a single government organization have overall responsibility for adult education (Powley, 2005). In most provinces this responsibility is split between several ministries. For example, in Ontario, three ministries are involved: the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities; the Ministry of Education; and the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

**Lack of information** – Easy-to-navigate, plain language information about adult learning opportunities is hard to come by. While all provinces (except Ontario) have a website targeted to adult learners, these websites are typically text heavy and hard to navigate. Essential information is often difficult to find. Only Québec and Alberta have hotlines and service centres that provide face-to-face counselling. In British Columbia, Ontario, and Nova Scotia, the only way prospective learners can gather information is to visit specific service providers. The drawback to this approach is that agencies often only have information about their own services. Only Nova Scotia formally trains agency staff to ensure that they provide appropriate referrals.

**Limited financial aid** – As the scenarios in Section 7 demonstrate, costs associated with returning to school are quite high. Even in Québec, where post-secondary tuition fees are relatively low, learners still need to figure out a way to cover their living expenses while they are in school. While single part-time students and students with dependents may be eligible for small grants, these grants do not come close to covering school-related costs. Moreover, as discussed in Section 5, the rules for accessing student aid are designed for young people and do not work well for most mature students. Married students are at a particular disadvantage. Even learners with a modest family income and asset base may be ineligible for student loans.

**Minimal employer support** – Canada has lower rates of participation in job-related training than many other advanced nations including the United States. As the Conference Board recently noted, the competitive human resource strategy of too many Canadian employers is based on a low-cost/low-added-value approach. This approach perpetuates a low-skill/low-wage equilibrium in which neither employees nor employers demand higher levels of skills. While Section 6 highlights a number of successful workplace initiatives targeted at less-educated learners, these initiatives are the exception rather than the rule.

**Insufficient government investments** – While the federal and provincial governments have increasingly recognized the importance of lifelong learning, in practice, skills upgrading is not very well supported. Although governments recently launched a number of important initiatives (e.g., the Sector Councils and the Canadian Council on Learning), there is still little support available to offset the direct costs of skills upgrading.

**Lack of research data** – There is a striking lack of reliable longitudinal data on adult learning participation and outcomes. As a result we have very little understanding of the forms and types

of learning that work best for less-educated adult learners. Data are also missing when it comes to assess the effectiveness of policy initiatives such as the Sector Council Program on the skills and knowledge of workers.

### **8.3 Principles for an adult learning system**

In Canada, there is a strong consensus that a publicly funded education is the cornerstone of a fair, productive, and socially cohesive society. Investments in our provincial ‘first chance’ education systems reflect this consensus. The results of this report suggest that the social and economic benefits of publicly funded *adult* education would be equally profound. For this reason, we argue that adults should be extended a ‘right to learn’ that is similar to the ‘right to learn’ that is already established for children and youths. We put forward a vision for the adult learning system characterized by the following principles.

- No one will leave school without an appropriate minimum set of employability skills.
- All adults will have access to learning opportunities to enhance their basic skills as well as continuing opportunities to maintain, enhance or transform more advanced skills.
- All adults will have access to easy-to-follow information about learning opportunities and counselling will be readily available. Supports will be co-ordinated, and the system will be easy to navigate.
- All adults who are willing to upgrade their skills will get appropriate assistance
- The skills development of all workers will be considered important and worthwhile investments.

### **8.4 Changing policy and practice: Possible next steps**

The business case for adult learning is clear. Adult education has been linked to a wide array of benefits including improved labour market prospects for learners, and increases in productivity and living standards. A country’s standard of living – the income it generates per person – depends on the employment rate (the percentage of the population that is working) and productivity (how much each employed person produces). Labour productivity in turn depends not only on how hard people work, but also on how ‘smart’ they work. The larger the share of the population with low education/low skills, the further away we may be from maximizing productivity. It makes economic sense for the country to actively develop ways of raising the economic contribution of these people by upgrading their skills. As a key piece of the puzzle on how to raise productivity, the issue of low education/low skills should be as much on the economic agenda, as it is on the social agenda.

While a vision of an adult learning system that guarantees the ‘right to learn’ seems to be broadly accepted by most stakeholders, it is far from being realized in practice. How can we translate this vision of adult learning system into a reality? We suggest the following five steps as essential elements of an effective adult learning system that works for less-educated/less-skilled adults.

## **1. Implement a public policy framework that acknowledges the ‘right to learn’**

Federal and provincial governments have the responsibility for designing an adult learning framework that corresponds to the goal of economic and social prosperity. Most provinces have developed or are in the process of developing adult learning policy frameworks. This is a major step in the right direction. However, in all cases, these frameworks fall short of recognizing the ‘right to learn’ for less-educated adults.<sup>43</sup> In June 2004, Canada signed a recommendation of the International Labour Organization on Human Resources Development with an explicit reference to the right of adults to learn (see Box 8.1). Federal and provincial governments need to work together to build on this momentum and move towards the development of concrete plans.

A ‘right to learn’ framework would need to include the following components:

- A right to educational leave for employees,<sup>44</sup> and defined ways of accessing appropriate support for the unemployed or social assistance recipients
- A financial support program to match various life circumstances
- An incentive framework to encourage individuals, employers and community organizations to participate in learning activities

### **Box: 8.1 - Recommendation on Education, Training and Lifelong Learning**

Members should:

- a. recognize that education and training are a right for all and, in cooperation with the social partners, work towards ensuring access for all to lifelong learning;
- b. recognize the realization of lifelong learning should be based on the explicit commitment: by governments by investing and creating the conditions to enhance education and training at all levels; by enterprises in training their employees; and by individuals in developing their competencies and careers.

*International Labour Organization, (Recommendation 195) adopted June 17, 2004.*

## **2. Develop financial support programs appropriate to the needs of adult learners**

The contrast between how secondary education is provided to those under 18 compared to how it is provided to those who have not managed to obtain this education by the age of 18 is striking. Although education is a provincial responsibility, the public education system (K-12) follows the same core principles from coast to coast:

<sup>43</sup> The notion of ‘right to learn’ has recently emerged on the policy agenda in Québec. On April 10, 2006 the *Conseil Supérieur de l’Éducation (Québec)* issued a brief to the Québec Ministry of Education. This brief recommends that the Minister for Education, Recreation and Sport and the Minister for Employment and Social Solidarity should proceed with: 1) an in-depth examination of the right to education and training for adults; 2) setting up the conditions to enforce such a right.

<sup>44</sup> Such a policy would likely need to include a job tenure threshold. The 1974 Paid Educational Leave Convention of the International Labour Organization has been ratified by 33 countries but not by Canada.

- Public education is free;
- Public education is available locally;
- Space is guaranteed for all, regardless of former achievement or income;
- Programming aims to meet the needs of the learners, who differ in ability and interest;
- Attendance is compulsory (up to age 16 or higher).

Given the well-established benefits of secondary education, it is hard to see why we would treat its provision to those over the age of 18 differently from how we treat its provision to those under the age of 18. At a minimum, high-school-related skills-upgrading programs should be free to all individuals regardless of age. This is currently not the case in all provinces. In addition, we argue that the special circumstances of adult learners should be recognized. Given that adult learners are often involved in providing care and financial support for other family members, their participation in skills upgrading is often not feasible unless they are provided with a minimal level of financial assistance to help them meet basic living expenses.

With respect to accessing educational institutions beyond high-school, our analysis has shown that the rules of federal and provincial financial aid systems do not work well for adult learners. Most colleges and some universities have flexible admission policies for mature students, as well as a commitment to recognizing prior learning. While these policies are a step in the right direction, for many individuals, the financial barriers to participation are simply too high. The post-secondary student aid systems should be reviewed to ensure all adults have access to a reasonable combination of student loans and grants. In addition, given that part-time study may be the best option for many adults, post-secondary institutions should be encouraged to ensure that the widest possible range of programs allow part-time study.

### ***3. Provide incentives for employers to support training of their less-skilled employees***

Canada has much lower rates of participation in job-related training than several other advanced nations, including the United States. The problem of how to encourage firms to provide more training is extremely complex. Part of the problem is that Canada's economy is dominated by small- to medium-sized firms that simply do not have the economies of scale to implement custom-designed employee training programs. Other problems include structural and institutional issues such as lack of information and the difficulty of calculating return on investment. Over the last decade, the Conference Board of Canada has done important work in this area. Through a series of case studies and other types of evaluation research, the Board has developed a business case for the provision of employer-supported training which highlights a number of benefits including increased productivity, reduced error rates, a better health and safety record, and increased customer and employee retention. The Conference Board has also developed a series of 'how to' toolkits for employers who want to launch skills development projects but are unsure of how to do so.

On a positive note, the Conference Board's research program showcases a number of Canadian firms that are leaders in providing workplace literacy and skills-upgrading programs to less-educated workers. In addition, there are a handful of initiatives at both the federal level (e.g., the Sector Council Program) and the provincial level (both Nova Scotia and Alberta have workplace

skills development programs and Québec has a “Commission des partenaires du marché du travail” and “Comités sectoriels de main d’œuvre”) that bring together labour market partners to work on solutions to skills-upgrading problems. While most of these initiatives are relatively new, early indications suggest that many structural and institutional barriers can be overcome and that more firms can and will benefit from increased investments in skills development. The emergence of these new ‘labour market arrangements’ is an important development that should be closely monitored to ensure that these initiatives play a significant role in upgrading the skills of the less educated.

As Section 6 suggests, there are many policy levers for encouraging employers to train their employees. Few Canadian jurisdictions have used any of these levers. While a few provinces provide training grants, Québec is the only province with a train-or-pay scheme. More research needs to be done to determine which incentives would be most effective in the Canadian context. Canada can also benefit from a careful examination of the policy levers employed in other nations. For example, in France, the “*Bilan de compétences*” legislation entitles every salaried employee to a 24 hour release from work every 5 years for an opportunity to review his/her skills with professional assistance. On that basis, training needs are assessed and training plans are created.

On a more pessimistic note, the Conference Board’s research also suggests that some barriers may be much more persistent. One of the most troubling aspects of Canada’s economy is that the competitive human resource strategy of too many Canadian firms is based on a low-cost/low-added-value approach. This approach perpetuates a low-skill/low-wage equilibrium in which neither employees nor employers demand higher levels of skills. It is unclear how firms that gain their competitive edge from low-cost, low-skill work can be encouraged to invest in labour force development. This is an important area for further research.

#### **4. Increase governments’ investment in training for basic skills**

None of the provinces included in this study has a coherent incentive framework designed to encourage individuals, employers, community organizations, and educational institutions to engage in learning activities. Making a ‘right to learn’ framework a reality will require increased investments in a number of areas. Perhaps most importantly, it will require increased investments in the form of direct financial support for learners. It will also require ensuring that existing investments are directed towards individuals who are most in need. For example, the federal government has already invested significant funds in large scale programs such as the Sector Councils Program. While this investment provides much needed support for training infrastructure and curriculum development, much of this work is not targeted specifically towards disadvantaged workers. The evaluation framework for all government investments should provide detailed information on program beneficiaries.

A ‘right to learn’ framework will also require further investments in new and existing innovative programs, as well as improvements to delivery mechanisms. Governments have authority over the delivery of educational services in a wide range of institutions. Many educational institutions have already adopted flexible, holistic approaches to meeting the needs of adult learners. However there is very little rigorous research on what works and what doesn’t work for adult learners. Before more funds are invested, governments should conduct a systematic research project to identify and disseminate best practices. One practice that certainly needs more research

is the assessment and recognition of prior learning (PLAR). PLAR is a potentially important tool for encouraging the participation of adult learners in that it may allow learners to significantly reduce the cost of obtaining a credential. While most colleges and some universities have PLAR policies, there is little data on how well these policies meet the needs of adult learners. An in-depth evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of existing PLAR programs would provide a basis for determining how this type of program could be improved.

### ***5. Develop a co-ordinated approach to respond to adult learners' needs***

As this report has documented, provincial adult learning environments tend to be extremely complex. Easy-to-understand information about adult learning opportunities is hard to come by. Provincial governments need to enhance co-ordination by ensuring that there is an appropriate entity (such as a secretariat, a steering committee, a cross-ministry working group or unit) to co-ordinate the further development and implementation of an adult education policy framework. This entity would then be responsible for ensuring the effectiveness of government-funded adult education programs and services and provide information to support management planning and decision making.

Several of the provinces included in this study have made significant efforts to enhance co-ordination. Nova Scotia's School for Adult Learning appears to integrate many of the necessary ingredients for an effective system, starting by a well-trained staff who can advise potential learners about a range of learning opportunities. While it may be too soon to recommend this approach as a best practice, the progress of this promising initiative should be carefully monitored. Similarly, Alberta has taken important steps towards a more co-ordinated system by consolidating a large number of programs and services into a 'one-stop' service centre approach. This approach should also be monitored.

At a minimum, governments should ensure that potential learners have the information they need to make informed decisions about their learning options. Less-educated individuals need access to three types of information. First, potential learners need easy-to-digest information about the range of available learning options. Second, potential learners need step-by-step information about how to access the learning opportunity that is best for them. Finally, potential learners need enough information about the costs and benefits of skills upgrading to make an informed decision about whether such a large investment is in their best interest.

While the Internet is an important source of information, it should not be the only source. Less-educated individuals may not have the necessary technical skills to navigate the Internet. Moreover, reticent individuals are likely to benefit from face-to-face contact with supportive skills development counsellors, especially if these counsellors are well-trained and equipped with appropriate learning tools. These tools may include:

- Up-to-date labour market and skills-upgrading information that reflects on local labour market demands and corresponding educational requirements. (This information should be adapted to adult circumstances.)
- An individualized Skills Portfolio that recognizes prior learning and skills development.

- Clearly articulated learner pathways that map out various learning options. These pathways should support learners in making transitions to further education, in getting or keeping a job, and in participating more fully in the life of their community

In principle, learners should be able to enter the adult education system at any point, have their prior learning assessed and recognized, participate in the appropriate learning program(s), and proceed to the next step, whether employment or further education, in the shortest time possible (Wynne, 2005). This is not the current reality in any of the provinces studied. More work is required to create the kind of well-defined learner pathways that spell out the shortest and most effective routes to a wide range of economic, social and personal goals.

While ‘co-ordination’ and ‘coherence’ are essential concepts for an adult education system, an accountability framework would help getting them into the Canadian reality. The National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) in the United States looks like an interesting framework to consider in this respect.<sup>45</sup> The NRS is an outcome-based reporting system for the State-administered, federally-funded adult education programs. It establishes a national accountability system for these programs by identifying measures for national reporting and their definitions, establishing methods for data collection, developing software standards for reporting to the US Department of Education, and developing training materials and activities on NRS requirements and procedures. It has several features that are called for in this report: public accountability of the adult education program; a measure of its ability to meet policy and program goals; a collection of outcome data that enable authorities to correlate practices and programs with successful outcomes; and an assessment of progress in meeting adult education policy goals.

The Ontario adult learning system was likened to ‘an archipelago without a good ferry system’ in the mid-90s and it was still a relevant description of the situation when the Government of Ontario launched its Adult Education Review ten years later, in 2004. In light of our review of the situation in several other provinces, and our examination of the approach of the federal government and of employers to learning opportunities for less-educated/less-skilled adults, the same metaphor can be generalized to the system(s) in Canada at large. The metaphor may have originally been borrowed from a description of the inter-island transportation system in Hawaii, said to be “the only large archipelago without a ferry service”. Now the hopes are high: this situation is set to end with a regular daily ferry service between the islands starting operation in April 2007, with a substantial intervention from the US government. Will the metaphor end in such a positive way and a similar timeframe for the adult learning system in Canada as well? We have set out some principles and suggested next steps towards building the kind of coherent, connected system of adult learning that we need.

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<sup>45</sup> Further information on the NRS can be found at [www.nrsweb.org](http://www.nrsweb.org) and in US Department of Education (2005).

# Appendix A

## An overview of selected provincial adult learning delivery systems

**Figure 1: Adult learning in Alberta**

Under the Lifelong Learning Policy Framework, two ministries are involved in adult education. Alberta Advanced Education provides funding to the Community Adult Learning Program, which in turn funds 83 Community Learning Councils to provide literacy programs in communities across Alberta. Alberta Human Resources and Employment (AHRE) delivers a variety of skills development programs.

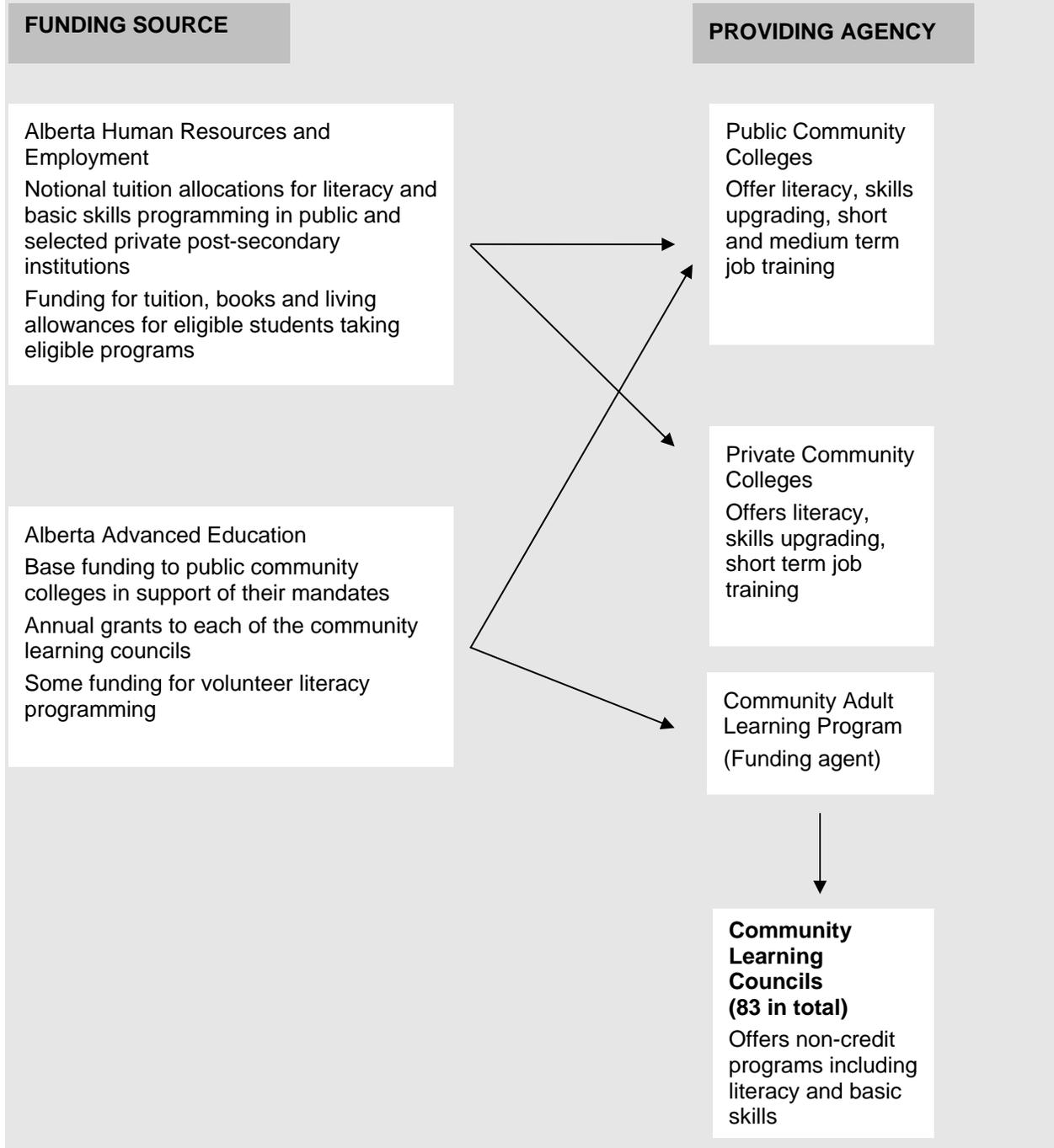
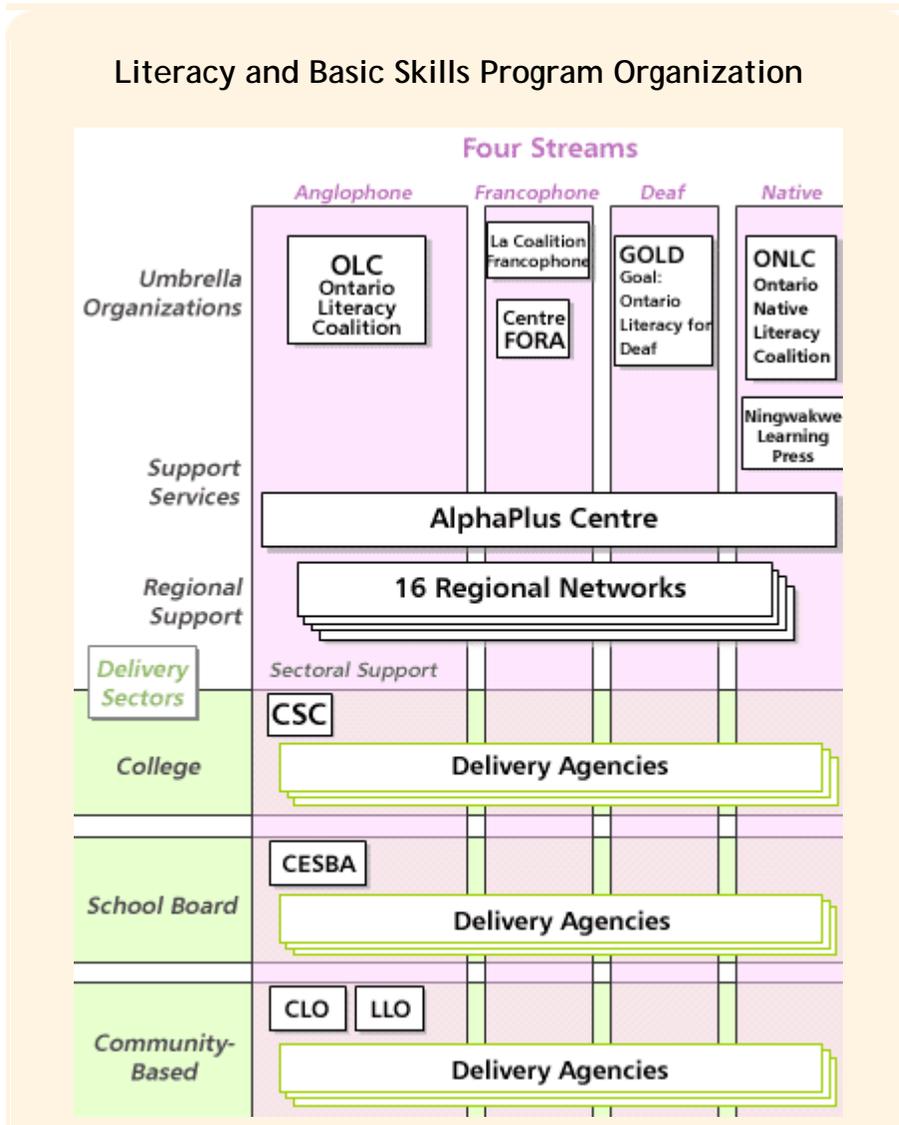


Figure 2: Adult learning in Ontario





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