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PROGRESS THROUGH A POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION PROGRAM

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*The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the
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The essence of this paper is to provide a provincial perspective on the priority actions (interventions) that will assist learners in completing the pathways through post-secondary education. The intent is to generate a discussion, challenging readers to take into consideration how post-secondary institutions, the government and their stakeholders, can participate together, to ensure that learners have the opportunity to achieve a post-secondary education in an effective and timely manner. The paper is not intended to provide ready-made solutions related to barriers that may impede the achievement of these learners. Also, it should be clarified that references to pathways in this paper relate specifically to ways in which the learner can successfully complete a post-secondary education. Whether the pathways include transfer between programs in the same institution or from one program in one institution to another program in another institution or completing courses in two or more institutions simultaneously, the knowledge and skills that the learner has successfully obtained already should be taken into consideration.

In Canada, the constitutional responsibility for all levels of education rests with individual provinces. As such, each province, through their post-secondary institutions, with input from their stakeholders, decide which programs will be offered and what the entrance requirements and graduation standards will be to enter, and complete, these programs. Albeit that education is a provincial matter, the federal government does provide assistance for education and training programs, as well as programs for retraining and skills upgrading.

In Alberta, for example, the need for a more definitive structure for the development of the province's human resources was recognized at the beginning of the 1990s. The Alberta Government, with the assistance of stakeholder groups, took the lead in establishing the beginnings of a human resources plan in its document *Toward 2000 Together*. This document laid out several directional statements, including, "Albertans will have to determine the priority to be placed on developing the province's human resources through existing and new approaches to education, skills upgrading and training."¹ However, due to certain economic, social and political shifts in thinking in the province, these evolving ideas, although incorporated into some education and training programs, were not introduced as a complete strategy until February 1997. At that time the human resource strategy for the province was unveiled in a document entitled *People and Prosperity*. The document is the province's directional statement on human resource development from basic education to post-secondary to business and industry training programs, and even to lifelong learning. *People and Prosperity* established the following specific goals in order to enable

¹ *Toward 2000 Together*, p. 10.

Albertans to take advantage of emerging opportunities, regardless of one's station in life.

- ◇ Albertans will have improved access to information on emerging work trends, knowledge and skill requirements, learning opportunities, entrepreneurship and workplace human resource practices.
- ◇ Albertans will have access to high quality, relevant learning opportunities, and be encouraged to take part in continuous learning.
- ◇ Alberta's young people will have access to opportunities that prepare them for successful participation in work.
- ◇ Programs and workplaces will be responsive to people who face barriers to employment, ensuring that all Albertans have opportunities to develop and participate in the work force.
- ◇ Employers, employees and unions will work together to build healthy, productive, innovative workplaces.
- ◇ Albertans will be able to make use of their education and skills in the global economy.²

People and Prosperity also outlines certain actions to be undertaken in achieving these goals. Some of the actions are already underway through the collaborative efforts of several human resource development partners, as well as several government departments and agencies. Other actions were started as a result of this new provincial human resource initiative. Even though *People and Prosperity* encourages Albertans to take advantage of learning opportunities, there are still certain variables that may prevent or hinder individuals from attaining their goals.

Individuals trying to navigate effective pathways through the post-secondary system may still encounter and be influenced by individual, environmental, system and institutional variables. These variables may be described in the following manner.

Individual variables related to the characteristics of the learner and the learner's access to post-secondary education.

Environmental variables related to economic climate, resource allocation to post-secondary education, public attitudes and links within the community.

System variables, such as links among educational levels—especially K–12 and post-secondary education—costs, and information available to prospective learners.

² *People and Prosperity*, p. 6.

Institutional variables especially admission and assessment policies, programs, instructional services and learning resources.³

These variables will have an affect upon the individual with respect to transitions from secondary education or the workplace to post-secondary education, as well as to the selection of effective pathways on the road to success. They relate specifically to all learners, and as such, some learners may encounter difficulties in completing their post-secondary education. It is these at-risk learners that need to be identified by the institutions so that specific, directed interventions may be used to accommodate their needs and thus assist them in achieving the same education as those learners who do not encounter such difficulties. The interventions or priority actions that need to be used by post-secondary institutions should specifically ensure that the pathways taken by these learners are effective and efficient in helping them complete their post-secondary education programs. Some of the institutional interventions may include:

- ◇ providing sound academic and career advice and information
- ◇ developing effective tracking systems to identify those at risk of not completing their programs on time
- ◇ developing programs with content relevant to learner needs as they move toward the marketplace
- ◇ providing orientation and follow-up sessions for new post-secondary entrants
- ◇ providing ongoing mentoring programs for all post-secondary learners
- ◇ encouraging instructors to have a better understanding of, and greater appreciation for, the needs of their learners.

It also has to be said that post-secondary education in an institutional setting is the most common form of learning or training. However, business and industry are beginning to develop roles for themselves, not only as supporters of post-secondary education and training, but also as active participants in the delivery of programs. In the future, business and industry may perceive a need to provide similar interventions to those that may be provided through post-secondary institutions.

However, even with these institutional interventions, the public, as well as other stakeholder groups, are still asking: “What is our education system doing for our youth?” Alternatively, the question that maybe needs to be asked is: “What are the public and specific stakeholder groups doing to ensure we have a well-educated and well-trained work force?” Some sectors of our society need to recognize that learning and training are not exclusive to secondary and post-

³ *Learner Transitions and Pathways in Post-Secondary Education: Background to the Issues*, p. 11.

secondary institutions alone, but also are provided through programs offered by business and industry. It is imperative that all of the players in the marketplace, and in society as a whole, realize that this is a partnership—a partnership that not only promotes immediate training and learning but a partnership that promotes lifelong learning.

Are the present methods of planning marketplace needs adequate to make informed economic and labour market choices? It would be foolhardy to say that economic forecasters can predict the future 10 times out of 10. If these forecasters were as clairvoyant as this, the types of issues raised in this paper would not need to be, since they would not be issues. Everything would function effectively and efficiently and there would be no need for economic forecasters. The intent here, however, is to be more efficient and effective in planning so that projections, do indeed, become more accurate. These projections, then, will never be perfect, but close, in this case, does count.

Are too many learners attending post-secondary institutions without the necessary preparation or prerequisites? Are entrance requirements not stringent enough so that anyone who applies can enter a post-secondary program? On the other hand, are these requirements too rigid that promising applicants do not qualify? Is adequate career counselling available to secondary students and post-secondary learners? If so, do these groups of learners actively seek out the career counselling available to them in order to make informed lifestyle and career choices? Should society be trying to accommodate all learners and ensure that they get the post-secondary education and training they need in order to meet their personal and professional goals? Should graduation standards be reduced, increasing the flexibility in programs, offering varied delivery systems on a full- and part-time basis, and so on? These are the types of questions that jurisdictions need to wrestle with in order to meet human resource needs.

With these issues in mind, it is time to examine the government's relationship with post-secondary institutions and their delivery of appropriate education and training programs. The government has a large role to play in providing interventions that will enable learners and the institutions alike to meet their goals. From the government perspective, some possible priority actions (interventions) might be:

- ◇ Formulating public policy to enable providers to establish programs to best meet the needs of learners and the marketplace.
- ◇ Providing adequate public funding to support the development and delivery of post-secondary programs.

- ◇ Providing infrastructure funding to enable post-secondary institutions to maintain high quality, relevant programs.
- ◇ Providing, in conjunction with secondary schools, information for learners directly related to the pathways they will pursue in post-secondary education.
- ◇ Encouraging private sector funding from business and industry to establish workplace programs at post-secondary institutions.
- ◇ Encouraging partnerships between post-secondary institutions and business/industry to develop and fund short- and long-term training programs for the workplace.
- ◇ Reducing financial barriers by providing more low-interest loans that learners would have the responsibility of repaying over a longer period of time after finding employment.
- ◇ Providing learners with the most cost-effective and efficient ways for learning.
- ◇ Developing policies that provide learners with the flexibility to move between and among programs and institutions.
- ◇ Reducing program costs by amalgamating programs into centres of program specialization.
- ◇ Reducing costs by providing more electronic or on-line access to programs rather than having to physically attend institutions.
- ◇ Providing incentives, such as tax credits and tax holidays, for business/industry so that they are able to develop and deliver training programs that would be accepted as equivalent by post-secondary institutions for credit.
- ◇ Continuing to enhance partnerships forged between government and other stakeholders to promote research that leads to productive post-secondary programs that will meet the evolving needs of all stakeholders.
- ◇ Encouraging institutions to develop assessment processes in order to promote the principle of recognizing prior learning.
- ◇ Encouraging further development and improvement of transfer credit systems between and among post-secondary institutions.

If a highly educated and trained work force is necessary to allow Canadians to compete on a global scale, then it is imperative that interventions such as the ones mentioned are seen to be valued. Governments, business, industry, the media and citizens at large seem to be united in their desire to have a highly educated, trained, efficient and effective work force. This being the case, then funding must be made available, public policy must be seen to be enabling, incentives must be made available, opportunities must be more accessible and a greater number of working partnerships must be struck. If all of these elements are put into place, interventions such as these can move each province and territory, and thus the country, forward at a 21st century pace. Relevant education and training are the desired outcomes, the interventions are the drivers and support, enabling policies and partnerships are the keys.

These government interventions may have many far-reaching implications for the types of government and institutional enabling policies that need to be developed and also for the budgeting of public funding dollars. Ultimately, the effectiveness of these interventions becomes the basis of accountability for institutions and government alike. A number of questions related to the costs, benefits and appropriateness of these interventions seem to arise. How will these interventions be measured? What measurement tools will be developed? How will the effectiveness of the results be determined? These are just three of the questions that need to be asked with respect to interventions. There are several others, such as:

- ◇ Should public and/or learner satisfaction surveys be developed?
- ◇ Should the percentage of learners entering a program versus completing a program be examined?
- ◇ Should the number of learners who have gained employment in the area for which they trained be determined as a percentage of the beginning cohort?
- ◇ How are learners who change programs or institutions, and who are not counted in the beginning cohort group, taken into consideration?
- ◇ Should learners be surveyed on their opinions related to how programs may be improved?

A myriad of measurement tools may be used to gauge the success of interventions. These tools range from a variety of surveys, particularly satisfaction surveys, to calculating the percentage of the beginning cohort that graduated or obtained work in their chosen field of study, and so on. Regardless of the measurement tools used, standards related directly to the results need to be developed and followed throughout any analysis. If satisfaction surveys are used, one must ensure that the data collected is evaluated in a meaningful way to generate useful results. If analysis of cohort groups is done, the results also must be obtained through a set of developed standards and procedures. In the final analysis, the measurement tools used and the methodology developed must be sound and trusted to ensure that accurate information is obtained so that effective decisions can be made. Ultimately, the measurement tools—surveys, mathematical analysis or anecdotal information—developed to measure the results of interventions need to demonstrate which interventions were most successful. The analysis of these interventions will afford government and post-secondary institutions the opportunity to make decisions concerning which interventions should and would continue to be supported, and what new interventions need to be developed.

As we move toward the new millennium, all jurisdictions in Canada are striving to establish policies and guidelines to help their citizens become ever more competitive in the global community. The government interventions outlined are intended to assist learners to complete post-secondary education and training programs in order for them to be able to compete successfully in the world marketplace. Business and industry can adopt/adapt a majority of these interventions as well. Society places heavy demands upon its citizenry to be productive. Governments, as a major part of that society, are expected to play a very large supportive role in the productivity of the society they serve. Governments, in the future, will still be required to shoulder a certain amount of the responsibility for the productive nature of the work force in the economy. However, in order to succeed, the brave new world we are embarking upon seems to be right for sharing and forming partnerships. This being the case, it is imperative that we no longer make scapegoats of each other, but rather, that we adopt strategies to enable all those with a vested interest to work together to achieve a sound productive Canadian society.

REFERENCES

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