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Education and Life - Transitions

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CONTINUING EDUCATION

Background document coordinated by Manitoba Education and Training
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The opinions expressed within are not necessarily those of Manitoba Education and Training nor of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

Executive Summary

This paper has been developed to facilitate discussion on the topic of “Continuing Education” at the Third National Forum on Education — *Education and Life - Transitions* — May 28 - 30, 1998 in St. John’s, Newfoundland. Manitoba Education and Training assumed the lead in preparing the paper; however, the contents represent a wide base of thinking from various contributors from across Canada (see Attachment #1) who have a strong interest in the topic of continuing education.

Continuing education can provide the kind of “anytime, anyplace” lifelong learning which today’s knowledge-based, rapidly changing, global society demands. It is a model which stresses flexibility, adaptability, accessibility and relevance. Continuing education not only makes important contributions to the functioning of our economy, it reinforces personal well-being, healthy lifestyles and healthy communities.

The contributors to this paper identified a wide range of issues which are relevant to any discussion on the topic of continuing education. These can be loosely grouped into four, inter-related categories:

- an emerging “for profit” emphasis in continuing education activities;
- the need for new approaches to accreditation;
- the use of learning technologies in continuing education; and
- the need for adequate learning supports to increase accessibility to, and successful completion of, continuing education programs.

The views presented are diverse, and, although common perspectives are evident in some subject areas, it is apparent that there are distinct, competing views related to these matters.

Nevertheless, there is unity of thought in related to two broad objectives which the contributors agree warrant further discussion:

- that society, in general, and our post-secondary education system, in particular, needs a stronger appreciation for the need for continuous learning and the benefits of the continuing education model of delivery;
- that there is a need to engage all sectors of society in developing strategies for addressing these important issues and there is a need for greater collaboration — between teachers and other education and training providers, governments, employers, unions, communities and learners — in implementing strategies to foster a culture of lifelong, continuous learning.

It is hoped that the Third National Forum will provide an opportunity to discuss options for implementing these objectives and the wide range of issues and perspectives related to the topic of continuing education.

Continuing Education

Paper for Discussion at the Third National Forum on Education
St. John's, Newfoundland — May 28-30, 1998

“Continuing Education” is a term which can mean different things to different people. For some, the topic is considered within a fairly broad context to include **any** kind of learning which may occur after one leaves — not necessarily completing — high school, whether that learning takes place through learning institutions, the workplace, the community, or through life experiences. Others consider “continuing education” primarily from the perspective of those activities which occur within a dedicated division or department within a secondary or post-secondary institution. Since this paper reflects an amalgam of opinions from a broad base of contributors, the reader will note that, in some cases, continuing education is referred to within the broader context, while, in others, the discussion focuses on continuing education delivered through the formal education system.

Individuals choose to become involved in continuing education activities for a variety of reasons. Some learners pursue continuing education for reasons of personal growth and enjoyment, or community development. Others take advantage of continuing education programming to improve their employment prospects. Some continuing education programming is specifically designed to address unique labour market needs, either as a direct result of employer requests or changes in the labour market. Continuing education not only makes important contributions to the functioning of our economy, it reinforces personal well-being, healthy lifestyles and healthy communities.

It can be argued that we are witnessing a transformation in our economy that demands that we pay more attention to the kind of lifelong learning that continuing education promotes. At the turn of the last century, Canada was in the midst of a shift from an agrarian-based society to an industrialized economy, and today, as we approach the new millennium, some maintain that we are witnessing yet another transformation — this time driven by technological change and the globalization of economies. Some have argued that information and knowledge are replacing raw materials and labour as the new sources of wealth in this emerging “information age,” and they go on to suggest that the quality of our **human** “resources” rather than our natural resources will dictate how well Canadians will be able to compete and prosper in the new economy

Just as the transformation from an agrarian-based society to industrial economy precipitated a shift in education from church to state, some have posited that today's economic transformations are stimulating yet another shift in the education system. Long-held beliefs that learning must occur through the traditional kindergarten-to-university progression are being challenged. Boundaries between school, higher learning, skills training, work, personal development and democratic citizenship are becoming increasingly blurred.

Graduation from high school no longer guarantees employment, and a college or university degree no longer ensures a stable, lifelong career. Today's graduates face accelerating obsolescence of career and job knowledge, and many can expect to experience numerous job changes throughout

their working lives. Others face the threat of downsizing, the downgrading of skills, and a lack of appropriate employment.

It has also be suggested that increased globalization — facilitated by the accelerating pace of technological change — requires that we, as global citizens, develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes for active participation in a global society. Within the vanishing boundaries of our emerging global society, issues such as freedom and dissent, environmental awareness, multiculturalism, human rights, social responsibility and democratic citizenship become central to an individual's lifelong learning experience.

Changes in our economy and in our society continue to challenge our educational systems to adapt to and anticipate the demands of a changing world, and, at the same time, provide new opportunities and tools for addressing these emerging demands. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that continuing education is increasingly viewed as a model for providing the kind of “anytime, anyplace” lifelong learning which today's economy and society requires. Continuing education, by its very nature, provides learning opportunities that are in demand — either by individuals, communities, or the labour market — in the location and format needed.

Continuing education has traditionally had a strong focus on adult learning needs and strategies and generally pays much more attention to issues such as flexible admissions procedures; prior learning assessment and recognition; hands on, applied teaching by “real world” instructors; and flexible delivery methodology (e.g., distance education and other technology-based learning, off-campus, workplace-based and community-based programming, independent study, modularized curricula, short courses, part-time and evening/weekend programming, etc.). These characteristics provide ways of reaching under-served learners, making lifelong learning more accessible as well as relevant and flexible.

The continuing education model benefits post-secondary institutions by providing them with the opportunity to maximize flexibility in programming by employing a mix of traditional on-site, classroom delivery methods with alternate delivery methods. Pressures on overburdened facilities can be alleviated and delivery methods can be tailored to suit course content and the availability (both in terms of time and physical location) of instructors and learners.

The continuing education model also benefits those learners who have competing demands on their time by minimizing the amount of disruption in their work and family lives. It also provides many first time adult learners — not only with valuable exposure to a post-secondary environment — but also with the opportunity to “test drive” a program or career by first taking a continuing education course prior to committing to full-time study. This saves the individual and the education system time and money, should the individual find that the program is a wrong fit.

With the obvious benefits to society-at-large, post-secondary institutions, and the learners themselves, it is increasingly evident that continuing education should play an integral role in the learning system. However, some governments have, in the recent past, withdrawn funding for

secondary and post-secondary education and training, thereby reducing their responsibility for providing this public good.

Furthermore, continuing education is treated in some learning institutions as peripheral to their primary functions. In some institutions, continuing education is fragmented and lacks the kind of organizational structures that would encourage mutual learning across settings and institutions. In other cases, reductions in government funding have caused some institutions to withdraw resources from continuing education activities, critically impacting the research and development capacity within continuing education divisions. In many institutions — often as a direct result of changes to government funding regimes — continuing education has become subject to much more stringent financing rules than “regular” institutional programs, and, in some instances, it must meet full-cost recovery or “cost plus” requirements.

The move towards an emerging “for profit” and/or entrepreneurial focus for continuing education activities brings us to the first of the issues which many of the contributors to this paper identified as central to any discussion on the topic of continuing education.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. “For Profit” Focus in Continuing Education

There are two distinct schools of thought regarding the practice of treating continuing education functions as “profit centres.” The perspective in favour of this action argues that for-profit, market-driven programming must — in order to survive — be responsive to market demands and is often customized to meet the specific demands of the employer or industry which contracts for the course. As such, programming of this nature is more flexible, relevant and customer-driven, than “regular” programming.

It can also be argued that running a continuing education department as a profit centre provides the necessary entrepreneurial environment within which an entrepreneurial spirit can be nurtured and flourish — an important factor, given that self-employment and entrepreneurship have come to represent a growing segment of the economy.

Another position in favour of running continuing education programs as profit centres focuses on the practice of piloting innovative course offerings which, once tested, can be adopted by the institution as a whole much more cost-effectively than if the pilot had not been offered on a “cost-recovery” or “for-profit” basis. In fact, some have posited that continuing education activities have compensated, in part, for some of the declining program development which has occurred in some of our post-secondary institutions as a result of declining revenues.

It is also argued by some that a notable strength of the continuing education model is its emphasis on partnerships — whether they be with employers, unions, professional groups, voluntary associations, advisory groups, other faculties or institutions. As some point out, partnerships

encourage direct private sector and/or community investment in lifelong learning and promote the sharing of costs related to capital equipment and facilities. Partnerships can also facilitate work placement opportunities and mentorships and further the relevance of the learning experience through direct workplace and/or community involvement. It is argued that partnerships build bridges between the learning environment and the workplace, other institutions and the community.

However, there are many on the other side of the debate who contend that a cost-recovery requirement in continuing education creates its own set of problematic issues. There are also those who argue that leveraging funding from the private sector in this manner allows governments to reduce their responsibilities for providing this public good. Continuous education fills a central need in the development of a national labour force capable of competing in a world economy. It also contributes to personal and community health and well-being. Societies and their governments benefit from lowered unemployment rates, higher productivity levels, reduced health, social services and justice costs and increased social stability. It is argued that the resulting economic prosperity and social well-being, in themselves, reinforce the position for an ongoing financial commitment from governments in support of this public good.

It is also suggested that, should continuing education become solely reliant on profit-seeking activities, the risk of having programming content become overly focussed on competitive economic issues is enhanced. Furthermore, although partnerships have obvious merits, an over-reliance on private sector partnerships to fund and/or deliver this public good may place at risk the negotiated balance between learners and those partners related to future employment and may even compromise the academic integrity of programming. Some observers have commented that an over-reliance on private funding may result in a narrow spectrum of program offerings geared to specific employment needs which may not always materialize. It is argued that a broad range of choice of study — both skill-related and humanistic — should be available through continuing education and that this mix of programming should be adequately funded through “core” institutional budget allocations.

Increasingly, we are understanding that many of today's social problems are not simply reflective of economic factors which, if “fixed,” will be a sufficient solution. We are beginning to understand that treating symptoms in isolation often does not produce the results we seek and that approaches which consider the individual as a whole are often more successful. Increasingly we are understanding that our (individual and societal) health and well-being are inextricably linked to factors such as our sense of empowerment in our lives, our environment, and our sense of community, in addition to the economic determinants such as employment, income levels, and educational achievement. It is proposed that we run the risk of missing the opportunity to address societal issues in a holistic manner by focussing too narrowly on specific economic needs.

It is important, therefore, to consider the needs of our **communities** and not just those of the private sector and global markets. Many communities are very aware of the needs of their members with respect to continuing education and may be well placed to identify and meet these needs. Furthermore, many marginalized learners are not comfortable with learning within a

formal institutional setting, and community-based, non-traditional learning settings can provide a non-threatening alternative. Strategies for identifying, utilizing, and providing access to community resources could maximize the strengths existing at the grassroots level, promote community values, and increase access to lifelong learning, especially for those who may benefit from non-formal learning environments.

It is also argued that, while globalization and technological advances may provide opportunities for wealth creation and improved economic prosperity for many, these transformations are also contributing to economic disparities and other social inequities between peoples (e.g., equity of access to the technology itself), a rapidly deteriorating state of the environment, and increased consumerism at the expense of other social values. As such, many believe that there is a need to ensure that a balanced array of program offerings is necessary to ensure that the learning experience is fully informed.

Furthermore, it is argued that a cost-recovery requirement for continuing education creates a multiple price system — enabling a course to be sold “for profit” in one instance and available at a publicly subsidized price in another. The requirement may also have the unintended impact of making specialized, more expensive courses (e.g., those which require supports to address the special needs of learners with disabilities or those which require culturally-specific curricula) cost-prohibitive in the marketplace and, therefore, **less** accessible to traditionally under-served learners. Cost-recovery requirements may also inhibit the development of innovative, state-of-the-art programs should they prove to be cost-prohibitive. Furthermore, in some cases, the delivery of courses cannot be guaranteed because a “critical mass” of revenue is required before delivery can be confirmed.

2. Accreditation

Another one of the primary issues related to lifelong, continuing education is the need to measure and recognize knowledge and skill development acquired in a wide variety of learning and experiential environments.

It is generally accepted that equally effective learning can take place in different ways and in different settings. Yet, the predominant paradigm in our society continues to be that the “best” education is obtained through full-time, classroom-based enrollment and that a university education confers a higher status on the learner than the knowledge and skills obtained through other forms of learning. Some argue that other forms of learning are relegated to a “second class” status when, in reality, they may be comparable to, or perhaps more effective than, some programming offered through the traditional, publicly supported educational system.

Again, there are fairly disparate views on how best to address the issue of assessing and recognizing the lifelong learning of individuals.

One school of thought argues that the objective measurement of institutional results and objective assessments of knowledge and skills obtained should be developed on a national basis. It is suggested that these measures could evaluate — not only the level of skills and knowledge individuals learners achieve — but also the consistency of the qualifications obtained across the country. It is suggested that national indicators related to curriculum, course design assessment, instruction, the use of technology, among other factors, would facilitate program portability and inter-provincial cooperation in course development and delivery. It is further argued that labour relations related to continuing education could benefit from established procedures which set teaching/learning conditions such as class size, working hours, remuneration, etc.

Proponents of this position suggest that, ideally, the process should include the accreditation of skills and knowledge obtained not only through the formal post-secondary education system but also through life experience, employer-specific training, and non-traditional learning experience. They propose that the process provide an assessment — not only of how well the learner has mastered specific employment-specific skills — but also a set of core skills (e.g., communication, critical analysis, systemic thinking, etc.). They further suggest that the process should be flexible enough to permit part-time learners to continue to work while developing the skills and obtaining the formal qualifications they need for existing jobs.

It is also viewed as important that the system promote the laddering of credentials to ensure that those who wish to pursue higher education goals will receive credit for prior learning. As some have suggested, prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR)— which is already being utilized by many continuing education departments and is the topic of another discussion paper for the Forum and, therefore, beyond the scope of this paper — would help inform the accreditation process related to continuing education.

It is suggested that, as a first step, pan-Canadian standards to measure the level of a learner's knowledge and/or skill proficiency should be developed for high-school graduates. Some movement in this direction has already occurred through the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) with the recently developed “common learning outcomes” for elementary-secondary Science, serving as the baseline for provinces to incorporate into their respective curriculums. It is believed by some that, if comparability of curriculum content could be achieved across provinces in **all** core subject areas, learners would enjoy greater inter-provincial mobility and equity of opportunity. Some also suggest that employers and post-secondary institutions would be better assured of the competency skills students have acquired during their high school years.

It is acknowledged that, although the process for introducing common, pan-Canadian measures for recognizing knowledge and skills at the high school level is a daunting task, the prospect becomes even more complicated with respect to the post-secondary education system. Differences in curriculum, course design, assessment, instructors, the use of technology and other instructional methods are often jealously defended by the myriad of post-secondary education and training providers. Even though some progress has been achieved through a protocol agreement among provinces recognizing the transferability of undergraduate credits among Canadian

universities, a great deal of work remains. The situation becomes even more challenging when non-formal and/or experiential learning (e.g., skills and knowledge acquired through the workplace, the community or through life experience) is considered. The challenge of accrediting learning acquired through continuing education programming tailor-made for specific (perhaps proprietary) employment is a case in point.

Despite the many challenges related to assessing the value of similar or equal knowledge and skills obtained over a broad range of learning processes, proponents of standardized measurements have suggested that independent accrediting bodies — working within a national framework outlining specific outcome measurements — could assess, recognize and grant credentials, irrespective of how or where the learning occurred. Japan provides an international example of an extensive system of certification of this type. It is reported that the Ministry of Labour in Japan conducts tests for over 300 skills at various levels. The certification is solely based on competencies acquired; no account is taken of how the skills were learned. Certification is not restricted to broad occupation categories but is also given for smaller, discrete competencies and skills, both generic and job-specific. The resulting certificates can then be combined in different ways to qualify for more substantial certificates.

Nevertheless, opponents to the development of pan-Canadian standards maintain that any move to standardize the system might defeat the very process of innovation and flexibility that is currently one of the strengths of the continuing education model. It is argued that increased control and centralization of learning at the national level runs counter to the position advocated by those who wish to enable locally and regionally developed programs to meet diverse and locally expressed needs and to the long-standing tradition of Canadians enjoying local input into education issues.

This school of thought denies that standardization would increase interprovincial mobility and equity while reducing perceived gaps in competency skills. It is noted that standardized measures and processes do not, in themselves, guarantee a quality learning experience and that “objectivity” in the matter of assessment and standards development is subjective, at best. Some have cautioned that care should be exercised in applying PLAR to assess some experiential or technology-based learning, since PLAR can place undue emphasis on narrow skill acquisition indicators and may not consider fully the important and equally valid (if less quantifiable) outcomes which result through the process of learning with others.

Opponents to a national accrediting process in Canada further argue that the development of national standards would ignore the constitutional jurisdiction afforded to provinces and territories over education and ignores the reality that the federal government has transferred greater responsibilities for employment development and training to some provinces. Others raise concerns regarding the composition and funding of a national accrediting body and initiate questions as to whether this kind of body would — or should — have representation from those who have an interest in continuing education (e.g., employers, unions, learners, governments) or be comprised solely of education experts. Some have pointed out that accountability issues become even more critical under these circumstances, especially if the accrediting body has no basis in legislation.

3. Use of Technologies

Few would argue that learning technologies must, first and foremost, support the needs of learners and the general integrity of the learning process. However, there are very divergent views regarding the relative merits or risks related to the use of technologies in enhancing the learning experience.

Those who support the increased use of learning technologies see in them the potential to expand education and training opportunities to learners in various settings such as the workplace, the home, and in community settings. They see how technology-assisted learning can benefit the formal system of education, enabling institutions to improve their ability to extend their reach — both in terms of distance, volume, and quality of interaction — into the global market. By overcoming the time and place constraints of traditional teaching, it is suggested that learning technologies can improve access to educational opportunities for many more lifelong learners, in the local community and farther afield. Technology has also extended access to various student support systems, ranging from learning resources (e.g., libraries) and course information to registration systems.

Furthermore — while it has been claimed that learning technologies have created a context of strong competition between education providers, placing some institutions at risk — it can also be argued that innovative institutions can use technology to differentiate themselves from their competitors, enabling them to develop specific niches which they can then market worldwide.

Proponents of learning technologies note how their use can enable the development of strategic alliances among institutions who are seeking to share the fixed costs of program development and to extend the reach of their respective expertise. They argue that the creation of partnerships among institutions and between the post-secondary system and the private sector and communities may be as dramatic a transformation as those resulting from the educational technologies themselves.

Yet, there is another school of thought which suggests that, despite the contributions learning technologies may make to the success of continuing education, they should not be viewed as a panacea. They caution that care should be exercised to ensure that technology is perceived as a “means” not as an “end” unto itself and that learning technologies **support** program development — not direct it. They suggest, therefore, that it may be prudent to ask **not** how existing programs can be adapted to fit the new technologies but how these technologies can contribute to the quality of instruction and enrich the learning experience. To this end, it has been suggested that evaluations be conducted — with appropriate involvement of instructional staff and others with pedagogical expertise — to ensure that new technology-based materials, products and learning strategies contribute to the quality of the educational experience and the outcome which the learner is seeking. For example, as some would argue, it continues to be necessary to ensure that, in as much as possible, the learning which takes place through distance delivery and/or learning

technologies leads to employment — especially for those learners in more remote regions of Canada who may now have increased access to learning but not necessarily to employment.

It is also argued that care be taken **not** to overlook traditional delivery approaches (e.g., face-to-face interaction). It is noted that goals such as democratic participation and citizenship are not easily achieved through the use of learning technologies and that some subject areas (e.g., those which require “hands-on” skills development) are not appropriate for learning through technology-based delivery. Furthermore, some individuals benefit from learning experiences which may be more collaborative and conversational in nature than the new technologies currently provide. It is, therefore, argued that a careful balance between traditional and new techniques be sought.

Nevertheless, there is a need to ensure that, when new technologies **can** enhance the learning experience, appropriate presentation methods are developed for the medium — keeping in mind the needs of individuals involved in a non-traditional learning environment. The need to design and develop appropriate presentation materials requires additional skill development at the faculty level if the new technologies are to be utilized to their full potential and benefit. It has been suggested that schools, governments, and post-secondary institutions could collaborate on ways for assessing and addressing the skill requirements of instructional staff (e.g., generic technical skills; specialized instructional design skills; skills in mentoring, coaching/counselling at a distance) and to acquaint staff with the resources currently available to assist faculty in using learning technologies.

It has been suggested that access to technology be promoted as a **community** responsibility by encouraging banks, businesses, government offices, etc. to enter into partnerships to address the funding issues associated with implementing technology-based instruction. Some have suggested that the development of partnerships between learning institutions and the private sector could facilitate the development of products, services and the necessary skills by matching content expertise (which resides within the education system) with the new media development expertise (which exists in many private enterprises). It is noted that issues of intellectual property rights to digital materials and royalty-sharing arrangements must be addressed under these circumstances.

Nevertheless, others have cautioned that an over-reliance on private partnerships to purchase, maintain and upgrade technology can raise its own set of problems in the longer term and, as has been stated previously, care must be taken to ensure that a balance is struck between the specific needs of the funding partners and the general integrity of the program and needs of the learner.

Financial considerations must also be addressed to take full advantage of learning technologies. As some have noted, the cost of developing programs using new technologies can be significantly higher than traditional program development. Others point out that many learning technologies are relatively new and have not yet withstood the test of time or research. They are in a constant state of change, and today's state-of-the-art equipment may be grossly outdated within five to ten years. One of the major problems of applying technology-based instruction is the need to ensure that the appropriate hardware is available to enable the learner to participate. The internet and its

telecommunications infrastructure are often not available to all parts of Canada at an affordable cost. This inhibits access to this mode of delivery by those who could benefit the most from more accessible learning opportunities. Furthermore, it is argued that the lack of standardization in both hardware and software drives up costs and makes the wide-scale sharing of programs and materials more problematic. It is also necessary to ensure that program design and development recognize that some learners do not have access to the most up-to-date hardware and software.

4. Learning Supports

It is essential that adequate learning supports (e.g., financial support, library resources, career and personal counselling, tutoring, etc.) are in place to ensure learner success regardless of the mode of instruction applied through continuing education.

To maximize access to lifelong learning, it is necessary to ensure that financial barriers do not inhibit individuals from pursuing their learning goals. Some argue that existing financial aid programs are not designed to recognize that continuing education students may need financial support and that recent changes to government funding programs (e.g., the Employment Insurance program) have reduced access to benefits and training. It has been suggested that financial support programs need to be revised to enable them to be flexible enough in design to enable individuals to choose their best options for pursuing their lifelong learning goals, whether that be through traditional, publicly funded post-secondary institutions or through less traditional means.

To facilitate and encourage access to lifelong learning for those who have been traditionally under-represented in continuing education, there is a need to ensure that adequate specialized supports are available for those who require them and that appropriate adaptations to the existing learning system are made to ensure learner success. For example, the participation and success of blind, visually impaired and deaf/blind youth and adults can be encouraged by addressing issues such as poor societal perceptions related to career potential; a general lack of expertise and/or specialist skills in working with the blind; the lack of independent life skills among some learners; a general lack of education/experience with computers and technology; reduced/limited opportunities for summer/after school jobs; and a general lack of accessible materials/equipment.

Special recognition must be given to ensure that lifelong learning opportunities are accessible to Aboriginal Canadians in ways which respect their traditional ways of learning and which connect to their holistic approach to education and life. Many of Canada's Aboriginal peoples often do not separate work and family, family and community, spiritual and economic needs. Their living and learning processes are often more holistic than those of non-Aboriginal societies, and the direct involvement of Aboriginal communities in continuing education activities may provide valuable insights into lifelong learning from which the formalized educational system can learn.

There is also a need for support mechanisms to help learners make their needs known, help them overcome institutional barriers (such as some admission and registration processes) — especially

for distance learning students — and provide them with content and instructional support. It is noted that continuing education students, in particular, have limited opportunities to speak with a cohesive voice regarding their issues and that mechanisms to address this deficiency are required.

In addition, many would argue that there is an acute need for relevant, up-to-date information on labour market needs, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally — both for learners and for those involved in the planning of program offerings. For example, it has been recognized that many Canadian graduates are finding employment in other countries which are experiencing acute labour shortages in certain occupational sectors. It is suggested that trends of this nature need to be considered in the planning of course offerings and that, in general, course development should be based on accurate labour market information to ensure that activity is not being overly focussed on certain economic sectors at the expense of others. However, as others have noted, timely and accurate labour market information is often difficult to obtain and does not, in itself, guarantee employment or that individuals will pursue learning opportunities in any given area, despite reported skill shortages in that field.

It has also been argued that transition/career and education planning workshops must be provided to students, youth and adults who plan to become involved in continuing education activities. It is suggested that counselling sessions be made available through a wide array of media and be delivered through schools, community centres, colleges and career centres. Furthermore, in order to provide learners with the ability to make informed decisions regarding their lifelong learning experience, it has been suggested by some that a comprehensive database and directory of institutions and their program offerings should be developed and maintained. To enable this database to be as comprehensive as possible, it is argued that it should include traditional and non-traditional, public and private, resident and distance delivery institutions and should be widely accessible (e.g., through the internet, at libraries, high schools, educational institutions, employment offices). Proponents suggest that the data base could also include basic information on the institution's performance, such as completion rates, employment or licensing rates, average starting salaries of graduates, student and employer satisfaction levels. They argue that this could, in part, address the increasing pressure on publicly funded post-secondary institutions to document the results they achieve with the public funds they are granted.

Nevertheless, as others have observed, databases and directories of this nature are extremely expensive to create and maintain. Those in opposition to this proposal suggest that instituting a comprehensive system related to lifelong learning may prove to be too daunting a task to be a realistic option. They argue further that such data bases are open to misinterpretation since they cannot reflect the variety of conditions under which learning institutions function (e.g., diversity of student population, local social and economic conditions, programming which is less employment-focussed, etc.). Furthermore, as some have cautioned, career counselling should not become equated solely with data bases, and it should be remembered that many learners gain greater benefits from face-to-face interactions with trained counsellors than by accessing a kiosk.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Despite the differences in perspective related to many of the issues which are seen as being critical to the topic of continuing education, there is a unity of thought in one significant area — that society, in general, and our post-secondary education system, in particular, need a stronger appreciation for the need for continuous learning and the benefits of the continuing education model of delivery. While it is recognized that the concept of lifelong learning has been embraced by many Canadians for many years, efforts must be maintained and enhanced in convincing Canadians that our mental fitness (i.e., continuous learning throughout one's lifespan) is just as important as the need for physical fitness in ensuring our overall health and well-being.

However, a culture of lifelong learning cannot be developed nor sustained solely by the post-secondary education system and/or governments. After all, not all learning occurs through publicly funded institutions. Private trainers and educators, employers and unions, communities and individual learners themselves all contribute to lifelong learning. To provide learning opportunities to as many Canadians as possible, we must engage all sectors of society and recognize the contributions each can make to our common goal. Further, we must be willing to support the efforts of our post-secondary education system (both public and private; formal and non-formal) to innovate in program design and delivery to further the principles of lifelong learning.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the most common recommendation made by the contributors to this paper was the need for more collaboration — either through formal partnerships or more casual collaborative arrangements — between teachers and other education and training providers (at all levels of the learning process), governments, employers, unions, communities and learners. One observation made during the course of this paper's development was that the learner's perspective was not included among the viewpoints provided. It was noted that, in general, continuing education could benefit from a more cohesive voice, with more formalized structures in place to provide its constituents — both within and outside of the formal education system — with an opportunity to discuss their issues collectively.

Not only is there an identified need for strong coordination to establish consensus on the issues identified in this paper, there is a need to collaborate on the development of strategies for addressing these issues and on the implementation of those strategies. It was suggested that the sharing of experiences and “best practices” and the identification of cost and resource sharing opportunities between those who have an interest in continuing education would be useful in identifying the necessary “next steps” in enhancing the kind of lifelong learning environment which is so necessary in today's — and tomorrow's — world.

The Third National Forum on Education provides an exciting opportunity to discuss the concept of continuing education among a wide range of constituents. It is hoped that this paper would provide a starting point for those discussions and would help inform the development of the kinds of collaborative arrangements so necessary for the ongoing development of a continuous, lifelong learning culture.

Contributors to the Continuing Education Discussion Paper

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