

CANADIAN POLICY RESEARCH NETWORKS NATIONAL LEARNING ROUNDTABLE

Lifelong learning is essential if Canadians are to keep pace with, and capitalize on, opportunities in the knowledge economy. Recognizing this 21st century reality, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) asked the Canadian Policy Research Networks to host a National Roundtable on Learning, in Edmonton, March 19-20, 2001.

The goal of this second in a series of roundtables was to engage a broad cross-section of individuals and organizations in an open dialogue about what needs to be done to reduce barriers to learning and achieve lifelong learning for all Canadians. Participants were tasked with developing a vision for learning in Canada, guiding principles and recommendations for immediate action.

The Roundtable was set up to examine three major themes:

- Assessing learning and skills needs
- Removing barriers and accessing opportunities
- Identifying learning outcomes

Concern was expressed at the Roundtable that, despite the fact that learning is vital to the well-being of individuals, a healthy society and an innovative economy, Canada is not moving fast enough to address learning challenges. Working from the position that all Canadians will need to continually upgrade their skills throughout their lifetimes, participants set out to determine how to make this happen.

Canada's Vision for Learning

Participants identified four inter-linked priorities that are pivotal to achieving a comprehensive learning system:

- Valuing and supporting universal early childhood education, recognizing that literacy skills and the ability to learn are created in childhood.
- Investing in high quality, universal, publicly delivered primary and secondary education.
- Ensuring excellence, equitable access and program diversity within Canada's higher education system, understanding that universities must equally value and invest in humanities-based and science and technology-based disciplines to balance technical, analytical and people skills.
- Enabling all adults with ongoing opportunities to maintain and enhance literacy and skills throughout their lives, and to gain recognition for both formal and informal learning.

Improving Learning Outcomes

Roundtable participants focused on opportunities to promote lifelong learning and stressed the importance of building on an emerging public consensus about the value of education and learning.

Delegates acknowledged jurisdictional considerations. However, cooperation on a number of issues, such as the federal/provincial/territorial Early Childhood Development Agreement, provides evidence that common ground can be found.

Bodies such as the Forum for Labour Market Ministers and the Council for Ministers of Education were seen by some participants as having the capacity to unite stakeholders around a society-wide learning initiative. Likewise, Sector Councils were highlighted as an example of a cooperative, integrated approach to skills development and learning that can act as a model for the country.

Discussions focused on the need for a new policy framework that would create a new form of governance to address learning and skills development. Some participants emphasized the importance of having an authoritative body to design and oversee such a policy framework, however others noted that success would require broad-based collaboration.

Recognizing that lifelong learning must be both inclusive and diverse, delegates called on governments to take the lead – providing supports, incentives and infrastructure as well as convening stakeholders to develop integrated action plans with accountability measures. Delegates urged governments to: engage in dialogue at the highest levels; mobilize within their respective governments; and, in the case of provinces and territories, establish targets and then turn goals into results.

Possible Actions for Partners

- Identify champions of lifelong learning
- Share best practices and the benefits of learning investments
- Develop action inventories
- Help people make informed choices about learning
- Commit to targets, timetables and accountability mechanisms
- Designate 1% of GDP to early childhood education by 2005
- Develop a learner financial support system that is universal, affordable, flexible and simplified, with special supports to disadvantaged groups
- Strengthen the learning infrastructure through sustained support for public education, research, equipping instructors with leading-edge skills, and exploiting e-learning technologies
- Recognize that responsibility for these actions rests with governments, employers, educational institutions and individual Canadians who must work jointly to achieve Canada's lifelong learning goals.