

LIFELONG LEARNING AS A KEY DRIVER OF INNOVATION IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ONTARIO

On March 9, 2012, the Honourable Glen Murray, Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities spoke to the Canadian Club of Toronto and shared his vision for post-secondary education in Ontario. At Contact North | Contact Nord, we viewed the Minister's speech as launching a dialogue about the future of post-secondary education in Ontario, including the need for changes to further improve the quality of the learning experience for students and support Ontario's future growth and prosperity.

The key to change within the post-secondary system is innovation – something that has been a major focus for Contact North | Contact Nord during its twenty five year history. Since the beginning of the publicly available Internet in 1994-1995, Contact North | Contact Nord has supported building capacity for online learning in partnership with Ontario's public colleges, universities, school boards, literacy and basic skills and other training providers and offers support for students and prospective students in all parts of the province.

But the next stage of innovation requires us to give true meaning to the idea of the continuous learner – “lifelong learning” needs to be more than a slogan; it needs to be the focus of a people strategy for competitive advantage.

Students who graduated in computer science in 1995 have unlearned most of what they learned at university or college. They have had to do so to keep up with developments in technology. Equally, students who graduated in medicine, biology, biochemistry, environmental studies, engineering, forestry and many other disciplines have to invest in their continuing education to stay current. For Ontario's industries to remain competitive, this is an essential task.

The phrase “continuous learning” is meaningful for an innovation driven economy. To compete globally, both in terms of attracting and retaining highly qualified people and in terms of sustaining vibrant firms and industry clusters, lifelong learning has to be a key characteristic of the community. Companies, not-for-profit organizations, government and others need to ensure that their staff has the skills they need to function effectively and productively, both now and for the future.

Currently, most educational expenditures are directed to formal learning (K-12) and access to post-secondary education (certificates, diplomas, degrees). This is understandable -there is a need for a constant flow of talent into firms, organizations and communities. But there is also a need to invest in the lifelong learning agenda in support of innovation, competitiveness and emerging opportunities.

Securing significant growth in the number qualified persons into the market will not, in itself, sustain the value of initial educational investments in their learning over time. Continuous learning is a characteristic of effective innovation communities.

Let's imagine Ontario established the following goal for a lifelong learning strategy for the province - every Ontarian is enrolled in some form of education or training every year of their adult life. Here are some potential outcomes of this strategy:

1. There could be a significant growth in demand for educational support and services – filling continuing education and lifelong learning opportunities available in the province.
2. There could be a substantial growth in demand for informal and formal education in within the workplace delivered by public educational institutions or by other public organizations.
3. There could be new opportunities for public:private partnerships for education, training and learning.
4. Skills could be enhanced through an innovation learning skills passport for every employee in every company and organization, based on current and future competences needed to become more successful and more innovative.
5. Online education networks, both for formal learning and for the support of informal learning clusters and networks (communities of interest and communities of practice), could provide major opportunities for the development of tacit understanding of innovation and become a key part of building an innovation culture.
6. A provincial work-based learning credit agency could begin to convert work-based learning into credits that count towards a certificate, diploma or degree.
7. Specific areas which provide a focus for innovation – clusters – could develop specialized learning supports for all engaged in that cluster.

Some time ago, the United Kingdom experimented with a cash payment for every adult to support a continuing education activity, providing payments valued up to \$320 per person against a receipt for their registered learning activity. Ontario would do well to consider adding to the tax relief for learning provided in the Canadian tax system to a maximum annual amount.

Investments in online and distance education permit “anywhere, anytime” learning for all Ontarians. Increasing the range of courses and programs offered through online learning and distance learning networks form part of the innovation advantage Ontario needs to strengthen and expand. Ontario has a good start in this area with 18,000 online courses and 1,000 online programs currently available from public colleges and universities and should continue to support Ontario learners wherever they chose to acquire their learning.

To help secure learning opportunities for all anywhere in the province, a key investment is required in broadband technologies, whether fiber or wireless. No person or community should be disadvantaged because they cannot connect to a broadband network – this is a particular problem for Ontario’s small, rural and remote areas, especially First Nations communities.

In thinking through the importance of lifelong learning in the context of the Minister’s speech, the following suggestions might be considered essential in the development of an effective strategy for lifelong learning:

- a. Expand access to continuing education in the public sector through innovative uses of technology and imaginative programming.
- b. Expand private sector’s role in continuing education through tax credits for life-long learning (with an annual maximum).
- c. Create fiscal and other incentives to ensure that every adult in the Ontario workplace is enrolled in some kind of learning activity in each year of their working life. The fact that they are engaged in some learning is more important than what the learning is.
- d. Create the opportunity for work-based learning to be recognized for college and university credit through the development of learning passports and the provincial credit transfer system.
- e. Create incentives for industry associations to partner with public colleges and universities to offer lifelong learning programs which are co-funded by industry and government – a formal matched funding system.
- f. Focus on lifelong learning, not just for credit courses, and start with e-apprenticeship and offer everything a person needs to stay productive and competitive in skills throughout his/her working life.

These thoughts were inspired by the Minister’s speech on March 9th. They are offered as a starting point for a wide-ranging dialogue within the post-secondary education sector on the competitive importance of lifelong learning.

We look forward to participating and contributing to this dialogue.