

The Learning Province

Building on Our Strengths

Halifax
March 8-9, 2010

“Jobs and learning – the two go hand in hand. A skilled and educated workforce is a critical driver for fueling economic investment in Nova Scotia. Business investment follows talent, making the province’s well-trained, skilled, and educated populace one of the province’s greatest assets and making access to education and training vital to Nova Scotia’s prosperity.”

— Nova Scotia Government
Business Plan
2009-2010

“My government will provide the careful stewardship that is needed to meet every challenge. We will lead in the areas of innovation, in lifelong learning, in social prosperity, and in sustainable health.”

Speech from the Throne
September 17, 2009

“What does a Learning Province look like? People in a learning province value, promote and support learning it all its forms. They have access to on ramps for learning throughout their lives and they understand the importance of learning to their lives and the province’s well being and prosperity.”

Jobs and Learning presentation
March 9, 2010

The problem isn’t that we don’t know what the problems are. We do.

And the problem isn't that there are no solutions. There are. Many of the necessary wheels have already been invented; more than a few of those have been well and truly test driven.

The real problem for Nova Scotia – let's call it a challenge, but it is also, and perhaps more importantly, an opportunity – is to figure out how to apply the most appropriate solutions to our specific challenges in ways that will be both comprehensive and forward looking. It isn't enough to solve one specific problem here and another there. We need to respond to each of those individual challenges in the context of a larger goal.

The goal, which the Government already articulated in its initial Speech from the Throne, is to make Nova Scotia a Learning Province.

Figuring out what that really means and how we can begin to move in that direction was the purpose of "The Learning Province: Building on Our Strengths," a two-day gathering of more than 40 senior government officials from 13 different provincial departments and agencies,¹ which was held at the Westin Hotel in Halifax on March 8th and 9th, 2010.

Funded by the Canadian Council on Learning, organized by the Department of Labour and Workforce Development and the Office of Policy and Priorities, and facilitated by Halifax's PLA Centre, the event was designed to give those who help design policy and those who implement programs a brief but meaningful opportunity to explore what they and their colleagues are already doing, to discover what others elsewhere have been trying to do, and at least – but far from least – begin the process of figuring where Nova Scotia might go from here on the road to making itself a leader and exemplar as a Learning Province.

The session began with an opening night keynote address from Paul Cappon, the President and CEO of the Canadian Council on Learning, who focused not only on the very real challenges Nova Scotia faces but also on what he called the "vision" that could underpin the development of a lifelong and life-wide Learning Province. He also enunciated the "three important principles" he said we will need to keep in mind if we are to achieve that vision. These were:

¹ Community Services, Economic & Rural Development, Education, Education, Employment Nova Scotia, Environment, Expenditure Management, Expenditure Management, Finance, Health, Labour & Workforce Development, Nova Scotia Business Inc., and Office of Immigration.

- Set long-term “realistic but visionary” goals with “challenging yet reasonable” short-term objectives.
- Create a “learning architecture” – a framework – to ensure that public policy is integrated and coherent across departments and agencies and that nothing is “considered in isolation” from learning.
- “Keep an intensive window on the learning world outside Nova Scotia. See what others have done, where they’ve succeeded, where they’ve failed, where the conditions are optimal.”

The next day kicked off with a presentation on one important example of what others are doing. Since “nations that learn from other nations grow, and those that don’t... don’t; and what is true of nations is true of provinces,” Clifford Adelman, Senior Associate at the Institute for Higher Education in Washington, D.C., focused on the lessons we can learn from the European Union’s Bologna Process.

This Process is a “work-in-progress,” an ongoing exercise intended to provide “broad access to high-quality higher education [and] facilitate mobility of students [and] graduates” within the more than two dozen countries of the E.U. in order to prepare them for “careers and for life as active citizens in democratic societies, and support their personal development.” We will come back to that.

Closer to home, participants listened to presentations from a number of senior officials – Ian Thompson, Deputy Minister of Economic and Rural Development; Marjorie Davison, Acting Executive Director of Policy and Planning, Labour and Workforce Development; Brenda Murray, Director of Policy, Planning and Research, Department of Community Services; and Cathy MacDonald, Corporate Strategist, Economic and Rural Development – on what various departments and agencies are currently doing to help make Nova Scotia a Learning Province as a key part of the Government’s ongoing core priorities planning exercise, as well as discussing the many and various challenges they face moving forward.

To provide outside perspectives and “ground our discussions in the practical world,” organizers also invited a number of knowledgeable outsiders to listen – and respond – to the presentations.²

² Guy Fortier is the Executive Director of Compétences Montreal, an organization of 12 Montreal colleges whose goal is to facilitate recognition of prior learning and competencies. Sandi Howell, Manitoba’s Co-ordinator of Essential Skills and Recognition of Prior Learning, is “recognized across Canada for tackling barriers with energy and innovation.” Mary Beth Lakin, the Associate Director of the Center for

Participants, of course, also spent time talking formally and informally with each other. What was interesting – to an outside observer at least – was the seeming readiness among participants to move beyond talking. “We’ve been having these conversations for at least 10 years,” summed up one senior official. “So I’d like to challenge people today to move beyond what we should be doing – because I think we’ve got a good sense of what we should be doing – to *how* we’re going to get there.”

Before we come back to that key question of how we move forward, however, it is probably worth revisiting one more time – if only to provide context – the very real challenges we face and some of the options available to help meet those challenges.

In a videotaped welcome to participants, Rick Williams, Nova Scotia’s Deputy Minister of Policy and Priorities, put the matter starkly. After six months of looking into our major policy issues, he said the Government had identified what he described as “two fundamental priorities,” both of which, he added, were essentially “learning challenges.”

Given a declining population, we must:

- increase our labour force participation rate;
- improve the skill levels of our employed labour forces.”

The statistics – and the futures of the real men and women who live their everyday lives in the shadow of those statistics – make those learning challenges urgent.

The simple reality is that our work force is becoming “older, smaller, and more urban.” Thanks to the relentless demographics of a declining birth rate and an aging population as well out-migration and lack of immigration, projections are that our provincial labour force – which now stands at about 500,000 – will shrink by 18,500 people within the next five years and by a full 100,000 by 2034.

While we are not alone in having to face these demographic dilemmas, Nova Scotia’s situation is particularly urgent. Our labour force participation rate – 64 per cent – is currently the second lowest in

Canada. By 2015, according to one analysis,³ we will have reached “zero-point,” the point at which “the availability of labour hits zero.”

And there’s more to our dilemma than simply not having sufficient numbers of people to fill jobs. The larger problem is that, while 75 per cent of future jobs will require skills and training beyond secondary school level, fully 240,000 Nova Scotians between the ages of 16 and 64 “lack the literacy and essential skills to work in a knowledge-based economy.” That’s about one-half of our current workforce. One hundred thousand of them, in fact, don’t currently have a high school diploma.

Most of them work in minimum or low-wage jobs. From an economic point of view, that “opportunity lost” represents a significant cost to the provincial treasury. The Department of Economic and Rural Development, for example, made the case in its presentation that simply turning a \$35,000-a-year income earner into a \$45,000-a-year person will generate 37 per cent more revenue for the provincial budget.

Many of those without the necessary skills, of course, often end up on social assistance. Twenty-seven-thousand Nova Scotians currently receive income assistance. That includes 7,300 families and 12,000 children, the majority of them headed by single parents. Given that “early problems,” as one presenter noted, “lead to poor outcomes,” we are in danger of perpetuating those families’ cycle of poverty and hopelessness.

Nowhere is that more apparent than in our traditionally disadvantaged communities. Twenty-four per cent of African Nova Scotians have not completed high school and 23 per cent of those in the 25-54 age cohort – prime working age – are not in the workforce. Similarly, in Nova Scotia’s Aboriginal communities, 23 per cent have not completed high school and fully one-fifth of the prime working age cohort is not in the labour force. Moreover, both these groups have larger than average numbers of young people – in the range of 40 per cent – who are under the age of 25.

There is a growing consensus that these and other groups that have been traditionally marginalized in terms of economic and social participation, constitute a significant “reserve labour force” whose potential we cannot continue to waste.

³ “The Developing Workforce Problem in Nova Scotia and Canada.” Dr. J.D. McNiven, Senior Policy Research Advisor, Canmac Economics Ltd. 2009.

There is no one, single neat and easy – or quick – fix for these many and various complex problems. But there are lots of things we can do that will – over time – improve the situation.

We need to encourage immigration, for example. And we need to find ways to recognize and account for the previous education and skills those immigrants bring with them so that they can take their place as full and productive citizens of Nova Scotia. In the same way and for the same reasons, we need to push to further reduce and eliminate the barriers that make it hard for newcomers from within Canada to use their talents here.

But those can only be elements of a broader solution. They won't, by themselves, change the game.

The most important game-changer – in the short and long term – will come from finding ways to put more of our existing and potential workforce into productive, well-paying work. We must provide better transition and learning supports to prepare them, and their children, for the jobs that need to be filled in the economy of today – and tomorrow.

We are not without assets in this venture, of course.

- We have 11 first-class universities offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in everything from law to fine arts, medicine to music, business to botany, English to education.
- We have a vibrant community college system that boasts 13 campuses from Yarmouth to Sydney providing practical training in everything from aerospace to geomatics to transportation.
- We are home to the PLA Centre, an internationally recognized centre of excellence for assessing and acknowledging prior learning and for research and policy development.
- And we have undertaken some innovative pilot projects that hint at future directions we can take.

Which brings us back to the question: how do we utilize those assets in a meaningful way in order to not only solve our immediate problems but to also use those assets as leverage to transform Nova Scotia into a true Learning Province?

Committing ourselves to becoming a Learning Province requires taking a wider-angle view and **“embracing a learning culture that goes beyond formal education to encompass all forms of structured and unstructured learning – in the workplace, the community and the home.”**⁴

There are many different ways to look at lifelong learning. We can break it down by traditional academic distinctions: pre-school, P-12, community college, undergraduate, graduate, continuing, skills training, professional development, workplace education, etc. Or, as a recent British study proposes, we could divide a person’s life into meaningful age ranges – from birth to 25 years, 25–50, 50–75, and 75–plus – as a way to better allocate learning supports and investments.⁵

Too often, however, discussions about lifelong learning are, in fact, mainly about lifelong *schooling*. But learning that is *life-wide* as well as lifelong is about much more than that

It isn’t just about what happens inside a classroom or on a campus. “When we’re talking about learning,” as Paul Cappon put it in his keynote address, “we’re not talking only about formal education.” He pointed out that only the first of the four international pillars of learning identified by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development – learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, learning to be – involve formal, school-centered learning, but the other pillars “turn out to be just as important as formal education in determining the economic and social dimensions of a society.”

Becoming a Learning Province means we need to develop an overall strategy that will recognize, foster and encourage learning at every stage of life and career, and in all its formal, informal and experiential ways.⁶

Supporting lifelong learning also means creating a culture that embraces and supports it. Lifelong learning can’t – and shouldn’t – be

⁴ Canadian Council on Learning, *State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency* (Ottawa, 2007), p. 6

⁵ Schuller, T. & Weston, D., *Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), UK, 2009

⁶ For a summary of the distinctions and relationships amongst these varieties of learning, please see the Executive Summary (p. 1-3) of the major report *Achieving Our Potential: An Action Plan for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Canada* released by the PLA Centre in October 2008. Both documents are available on www.placentre.ns.ca.

divorced from other aspects of the province's social and economic policy. It needs to become an integral part of every decision we make.

All of that may sound daunting, perhaps even undoable.

So it may be helpful at this point to unpack the broad concept of lifelong learning, as participants in the session did. We need to examine the many individual pieces that make up lifelong and life-wide learning, see where the problems, bottlenecks and roadblocks occur, and then figure out how we can shape and adapt those individual pieces into an integrated, comprehensive whole that will ultimately allow us to make ourselves over into the Learning Province we seek to become.

Let's look first at the more traditional and formal ways of thinking about learning and then circle back to look at the role of informal or experiential learning – prior learning, life-wide learning – and see how the various pieces of the puzzle can be integrated and incorporated into a holistic vision of Nova Scotia as 'The Learning Province'.

Early Childhood Development

Let's start with "early childhood development," which the Affordability and Social Prosperity presenters rightly described as a "pillar of the Learning Province."

While Nova Scotia does have early childhood development programs, the key unmet need here is among our poorest and, therefore, most vulnerable children. As the presenters put it, we need to make "aligned and deliberate policy choices that break the cycle of poverty by focusing on children."

There are a number of barriers to achieving this. For starters, the current social safety net focuses on providing income support for the head of the household rather than social support for the family as a whole. Worse, the rules currently in place create unintended incentives for those household heads to enter the income support system but disincentives for them to exit it.

We will need to provide broader social supports for families – in particular for those from traditionally disadvantaged communities – in order to enable them to improve their circumstances and, in the process, create the opportunity for their children to break the poverty cycle for their own and future generations.

There are currently many programs in place that try to do some of this, of course, but they're not coordinated and there's no single-entry

system that “provides the opportunity to align, integrate and/or harmonize complementary programs and services.”

It’s also worth noting that not every significant learning initiative requires a significant financial investment. In his presentation, for example, Cappon highlighted the importance of what he called a “huge driver of learning and developing, and that is reading to young children.”

Getting more parents and guardians to do just that is the goal of Read-to-Me!, a modestly resourced (\$100,000) but potentially culture-shifting Nova Scotia initiative that currently provides every new mother in the province with a backpack containing two baby books, a library card in the name of the infant and literacy information for the family.

Primary-Grade 12

Within the traditional primary-to-Grade-12 public school system, there is now not only a stronger focus on literacy education in the early grades but also a broader range of practical, work and career-oriented programs for older children and youth: LifeWork portfolios for junior and senior high school students, for example, Youth Apprenticeship Initiative, Options and Opportunities, community-based learning programs and career-related and skilled trades course options for high school students are all important initiatives that need to be supported.

Apprenticeship Training

There is no question skilled tradespeople are in demand. Over the next ten years, in fact, there is expected to be a shortage of such people in Canada. Having a Certificate of Qualification in a trade means “skilled employment that pays well.”

The Department of Labour and Workforce Training currently offers apprenticeship programs to provide what its website calls the “training and experience you need to become a professional, skilled journey person in an exciting career.”

But the program only currently provides apprenticeship training in 34 of the 65 trades it has designated for apprenticeship training.

Community Colleges, Private Colleges

The Nova Scotia Community College was established in 1996 to bring together a number of independent provincial vocational schools and training institutes. It has evolved into a highly-regarded province-wide, community-based system offering practical education through Schools of Access, Applied Arts and New Media, Business, Health and Human Services and Trades and Technology.

There are also a range of private colleges, licensed by the Private Career Colleges Division of the Department of Education offering “training opportunities that respond to labour market needs and lead to employment” in such fields as massage therapy, truck driving, information technology, esthetics, multimedia, travel, tourism and business education.

Universities

For its size, Nova Scotia boasts an incredible number of very good universities, more per capita, in fact, than any other province. But, when we look a little deeper into the reality, it becomes clear that it is not as rosy as it first appears. As Paul Cappon put it succinctly and unequivocally, our university system consists of “a set of large, competing and expensive universities with insufficient differentiation and a declining youth core to attend them.”

Given the numbers of universities we have, we also need to ask ourselves why is it true that our citizens obtain fewer degrees than other Canadians? In part, of course, it is because getting a university education is considered expensive, particularly in Nova Scotia. But cost is not the only barrier to access. Too few Nova Scotians “qualify” to enter those halls of higher learning. We will come back to that issue when we talk about the role of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) later in this report.

Finally, there is also the not unrelated reality that our universities have traditionally not played well with each other, let alone others. They’re not the only ones. We’ll need to come back to that as well.

Workplace Training

While the new knowledge-based economy has been evolving at a dizzying pace and, with it, the need for continuous training and re-training of workers, most Nova Scotia employers are stuck in the limbo

of what one background policy paper calls our “short-sighted business training culture.”

Employer contributions to essential skills training, for example, are low. And fewer than 20 per cent of employers who could train apprentices in the skilled trades actually do so. The training opportunities that do exist are often only available in large firms and tend to focus on providing additional training to workers who are already qualified. The training that does take place at smaller companies is often informal and there is no process in place to recognize what has been learned.

All of which requires what the Jobs and Learning presenters rightly described as a “cultural shift.”

If we are to become a learning province, it will be important for learning – training, research and development – to be considered in every policy and planning decision, inside and outside government.

During our discussions, for example, a representative of the Department of Economic and Rural Development referred favourably to the province’s recent success in attracting the Korean manufacturing giant, Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering Inc., to set up operations in Nova Scotia.

That’s all very well, replied the CCL’s Paul Cappon, but does the agreement include guarantees that the company will do research and development in Nova Scotia? “It’s very, very difficult to get innovation and workplace education and training because foreign capital doesn’t tend to want to invest in research and human capital in those countries where it has its financial holdings,” Cappon pointed out. “The role of government is very important to ensure there is some provision for the amount of innovation, research and development the company will do in the province and, similarly, that it will agree to a certain level of workplace education and training.”

As the Jobs and Learning presenters put it: “We need Nova Scotians to think and act differently about learning and working.” And that culture shift must include their government.

Adult Learning

Recognizing that many adults today still do not have a high school education, the Government created the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning in 2001 to coordinate offerings in literacy training and/or high school diplomas to adult learners. The program, which is coordinated

by the Department of Labour and Workforce Development, currently offers tuition-free programs at more than 150 sites across the province.

Adult learning, of course, means more than simply offering high school equivalencies. Cliff Adelman, in his presentation, suggested that Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition offers practical transition support to match the informal and experiential learning of adults with both the specific learning outcomes traditionally conferred by formal training and certification and also with occupational needs of a wide-range of fields.

These, he suggested, could include the culinary and 'hospitality' arts, horticulture, music performance, fine and graphic arts, or second and third language skills. This would enable individuals to turn the skills and learning they have acquired through their own self-directed studies and their personal and community activities and interests, into transferable, marketable assets for employment.

Cliff Adelman also offered another example that will have a familiar ring to Nova Scotians: "I'm a roustabout (a low-skill level worker on oil and gas rigs). I've been out there on oil platforms for the last 10 years and I've made pretty good money... But we've put up all the platforms we're going to put up for now... I'm 40 years old... What are you going to do with me?"

Given the dizzying speed at which economic and industry needs are changing, the notion of adult learning must also incorporate continuous workplace training and retraining so that workers will be able to build upon the skills they have acquired and to gain the skills they will need to make the transitions created by economic restructuring and dislocation, as well as by whatever jobs and technologies come along in the future.

Learning for Older Nova Scotians

Given the demographic inevitabilities we referred to earlier – aging population, declining birth rate – it's also imperative that we find new ways to harness the skills and talents of older Nova Scotians. The end of mandatory retirement has opened up new opportunities for those workers to remain engaged and productive participants in the province's work force.

The problem is that many of the skills they bring to the table don't come accompanied by formal certification. They've been acquired over time in a workplace or workplaces, and over a lifetime of life experience. We need to develop ways to assess and recognize those skills so that we as

a society can continue to utilize them. At the same time, we need to offer continuing training and education to our older citizens so they have the skills they need for an ever-changing economy.

Learning for older Nova Scotians, of course, shouldn't just be about jobs and economic productivity. If we are to be a true learning province, we must provide opportunities for citizens to learn and engage at every stage of life.

Workforce Development and Transitions Strategies

One of the bottlenecks to developing a lifelong learning culture – and, paradoxically one of the opportunities for creating one – is the reality that much of what we think of as real learning doesn't take place inside a classroom or even in a formal setting. People learn at home, on the shop floor, on the decks of fishing boats. And the skills they learn in those settings go well beyond what we might think of as trade-specific skills. Inshore fishermen, for example, are also entrepreneurs who learn how to manage their small businesses, create and expand markets, incorporate sustainable practices in their workplaces, etc.

Finding effective and efficient ways to identify, validate and utilize these other forms of learning is especially important in Nova Scotia where vital skills and knowledge have often been passed down through the generations or learned on the job and at home.

If we are to respond to the two challenges Rick William identified in his welcoming remarks – increasing participation rates and improving skill levels – we clearly need to integrate the assessment and recognition of prior learning into our plans.

Again, we are not without positive examples of our own on which to build.

Consider the case of Continuing Care Assistants. When it became clear that Nova Scotia needed a continuing care strategy to meet the needs of an aging population and allow people to continue to live in their communities, it also became clear we would need to regularize a sometimes bewildering array of training and qualification requirements for those workers.

Many of those in the field (or wanting to be in it) had many of the actual skills needed – through some combination of “formal and informal study, including work and life experiences, training, independent study, volunteer work, travel, hobbies, and family experiences” – but lacked the necessary certification.

To help bridge that gap, the Prior Learning Assessment Centre – in collaboration with the Nova Scotia Community College, a number of Private Colleges and the Health Department – developed ways of assessing and certifying the skills continuing care staff brought to the table. This not only built their self confidence and motivation, but also indicated both the training modules they did not need to undertake as well as the specific ‘bridge’ training they needed to fill in whatever skill gaps remained.

Rather than simply throwing “training solutions” at a general upgrading “problem,” employing Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition principles and practices provided specific, targeted and cost-effective transition support in a field of crucial importance to Nova Scotia’s aging population.

In addition, the Community Care Assistant’s program now offers its graduates more employment options because they’re now certified, while providing those who use their services the reassurances they’re hiring qualified, certified individuals.

This is just one example of the transition support and labour force development possibilities prior learning assessment and recognition can create. In a culture of lifelong and life-wide learning, it not only offers learners a multiplicity of *on-ramps* to learning at all ages and stages but it also provides the vital linkages between formal and informal learning, between using learning to encourage economic growth while, at the same time, fostering community and personal development.

The combination of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition principles and practices, combined with targeted ‘bridge training’ has great potential to provide efficient and effective transition support for groups ranging from immigrant newcomers to traditionally marginalized groups and for many workers facing continuous workplace change.

The problem, of course, as Paul Cappon put it, is that “we are specialists at pilot projects that stop.” We need to “nest these initiatives within a framework that’s articulated publicly,” he argues. And, of course, we need to break down the roadblocks and other impediments that continue to make it difficult create the smooth and seamless path through a lifetime of learning.

There are, unfortunately, still too many of them.

As we have noted previously, universities – and other post-secondary institutions for that matter – all over the world have maintained moats

around their individual institutions, refusing to recognize prior learning, or qualifications awarded by others or, in many cases, even explaining what it is their own certifications actually signify in terms of what students have learned and what skills they've mastered. That, in turn, has made it more difficult for other institutions – and employers – to assess or recognize what their students have actually learned and can do.

Globalization and the resultant breaking down of international boundaries have transformed that isolationism from a quaint quirk of academia into a significant barrier to educational – and economic – development.

Nowhere was that problem more pressing or immediate than in Europe where 27 independent states came together in 1993 to form the European Union with the goal of “ensuring the free movement of people, goods, services and capital.”

Learning from the European Experience: The Bologna Process

Ensuring free movement of people across national boundaries, of course, has required what Cliff Adelman describes as “the most far reaching overhaul of higher education ever attempted.” Adelman has spent much of the past decade studying what's happened in Europe and suggesting how lessons learned there could be applied in North America. That's why “The Learning Province's” organizers invited him to make a presentation on what has come to be known as the Bologna Process⁷ and its lessons for us.

“If we in North America examine it carefully and listen,” suggests Adelman, “we will have an epiphany or two and will inevitably get some ideas of how to address core issues here.”

The Bologna process has been described as a process of integration, an effort to break down education borders in the same way that economic borders have been dissolved. This would make it possible for students to “choose from a wide and transparent range of high quality courses and benefit from smooth recognition procedures [making post-secondary education] more compatible and comparable, more

⁷ The Bologna Process is so named because ministers of education from 29 European countries signed their initial declaration of common purpose at the University of Bologna in Italy in 1999. Today, 46 countries, including some outside the EU, are signatories to the process. And other countries and regions, including Latin America, Africa and Australia have adopted or adapted aspects of the Bologna Process in their own education and training systems.

competitive and more attractive”⁸ across disciplines and across countries.

One of the ways in which that has been accomplished, Adelman explained, was to dispense with the progress-halting assumption that post-secondary education institutions could – or should – simply standardize what they offer students. Instead, the goal was to create a system of reference points to produce a “zone of mutual trust” that would permit the recognition of credentials across borders and significant international mobility for students... a kind of harmony within diversity.

In at least 27 European Union nations, the Bologna reforms are proceeding in parallel to a process known as the Lisbon Strategy.⁹ The Lisbon Strategy contains an *EU Strategy for Growth and Jobs* – led by the Ministers of Employment as well as Education – which also includes vocational education, lifelong learning and research. It intersects with the Bologna Process in such areas as national and transnational qualification frameworks.

The European Higher Education Area, as it is known, established a transnational “qualifications framework”¹⁰ designed to demonstrate “what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on the basis of a given qualification.” Each of the signatory countries was then expected to develop its own national qualifications framework, “tuning” them like musical instruments to suit their specific circumstances but still compatible within an overarching – orchestral, to extend the tuning metaphor – framework. This tuning process then extends into individual institutions and disciplines, which must develop their own templates of *learning outcomes* that are comparable across institutions and countries.

⁸ For a fuller account of European skills and learning developments reflected in the Lisbon Strategy, please see pages 158-163 in M.C. Morrissey, *Achieving Our Potential: An Action Plan for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)* in Canada (2008)

⁹ *Ibid.*, IHEP, April, 2009

¹⁰ This is referred to as the European Qualification Framework (EQF). Individual countries also have national credit and qualifications frameworks – and this system combining qualification frameworks, a common credit system and quality assurance, assures the recognition of degrees (and occupational designations) across borders.

Such a system, provided it is transparent and accountable, makes it easier for individuals to move across institutions, occupations and countries, and have their full range of learning recognized.

Because qualifications frameworks focus on outcomes – what you know rather than the title of your qualification or where you obtained it – qualifications frameworks also make it easier for individuals to gain credit for learning outside a formal institution.

That has other implications as well. If you can create a framework for a complete academic degree, for example, why not a similar process to recognize the learning outcomes obtained through completing parts of the degree, through diplomas or shorter-cycle “Associates” degrees? That would make it easier for part-time students to achieve meaningful intermediate qualifications they can immediately use in the workplace.

In a larger – and significant sense – all of this changes the focus from what is easiest for an individual institution to what is most helpful for learners and would-be learners.

One result of all this harmonization effort was the introduction in 2004 of the “Europass,” a kind of standardized electronic CV that provides learners, educators and employers “a single transparency framework” attesting to the learner’s qualifications and competences. But the Europass goes beyond simply stating what degrees or certificates the learner has attained, it also provides detailed, independently verified information on what the learner has actually learned. And, perhaps as importantly, it recognizes not only school-based learning but also provides a formal record of “any organized period of time that a person spends in another European country for the purpose of learning or training.”

Providing formal recognition for all of this, including informal learning, Adelman argues, creates the necessary “social acceptance” for moving forward.

What does all of this have to do with Nova Scotia and our goal to become a Learning Province?

Well, we know we have a lot of universities, a community college system, apprenticeship and workplace training programs that – while they may each independently be performing well – are currently not in sufficient harmony with one another. And we know too that there are too many Nova Scotians whose access to those institutions and programs are blocked because they lack the recognized credentials for entry.

In response to Adelman's presentation, Paul Cappon attempted to place Bologna in the context of the two key issues Rick Williams had laid out the night before. "In order to be successful here," he said, "we have to have flexibility, responsiveness and access." Bologna, he argued, offers "a set of tools" that can not only be used with formal learning but also in the recognition of informal learning as well. Finding "new pathways to student participation, not just in higher education but in the workplace," he suggested, will be "very, very important" if Nova Scotia is to become a Learning Province.

Why it matters

Nova Scotia needs to become a Learning Province because our future depends on it.

It won't be easy, and some of what needs to be done has to be done in concert with other provinces, with Ottawa, with countries beyond our borders. But that shouldn't stop us. In fact, it should make us more determined.

Everyone, of course, is well aware of the constitutional considerations that make pan-Canadian initiatives on education so difficult. But, as Margaret MacDonald, the Deputy Minister of Labour and Workforce Development, pointed out, very significant progress is being made at the federal and provincial levels – as well as internationally – on what are termed Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreements. That's, in part, because these agreements focus on the learning issue in terms of skills development and learning recognition rather than getting tangled up in the more jurisdictionally contentious realm of formal "education." These agreements, which offer a model for future negotiations, have very significant implications for cross-jurisdictional skills development and learning recognition.

If we can create the Learning Province we envision, we will not only have begun to address our urgent specific problems of low workforce participation and weak skills development but we will have also have established our credentials as a leader and exemplar of lifelong and life-wide learning in Canada and beyond, able to contribute to trade, investment and labour mobility discussions and development at both the national and international levels.

More generally, establishing a solid reputation as a Learning Province will also help us attract investment and enhance economic development. And, last but certainly not least, becoming a Learning Province will have a positive impact on how we see ourselves and our

possibilities as Nova Scotians.

Becoming a Learning Province

So, to circle back, finally, to the challenge that senior participant in The Learning Province session initially laid out – how to “move beyond what we should be doing... to *how* we’re going to get there.”

Before we do that, however, we need to articulate – one more time and clearly – why we want to become a Learning Province. “When the Canadian Council on Learning produced its first report on post-secondary education in Canada,” Paul Cappon pointed out in his final comments on the day’s proceedings, “we articulated the eight national goals that we thought Canada should have for post-secondary education. **The first goal** wasn’t universities. It **was a flexible and responsive work force**. And I think that has to be the goal for Nova Scotia because **it is about jobs and the economy – not only, of course, but primarily.**”

It is fair to say that presentations and discussions at “The Learning Province: Building On Our Strengths” represent a very important step on the long and difficult but exciting and promising road to Nova Scotia’s becoming a true Learning Province.

The presentations made it clear that the “how-to” means for developing a Learning Province are practical, well understood and well tested. We don’t need to re-invent wheels or test them in yet more pilot projects that lead nowhere.

The discussions among the participants also clearly demonstrated that Nova Scotia’s public service is ready, willing and eager to embrace the notion of the Learning Province, and to move forward with making it a reality. The conversations across departments and agencies that began at the Westin should continue – and expand to include other key players like educators and employers. The goal must be to connect all the dots in ways that will not only specifically respond to Rick Williams’ challenges to improve workforce participation and skill levels but also – and more generally and importantly – lead to the development of a comprehensive, innovative and implementable framework for lifelong learning.

What remains now, however, is for the Government itself to translate its own good intentions of the September 2009 Throne Speech – “We will lead in the area of innovation in lifelong learning...” – into the flesh-and-blood reality of policy and programs.

As the Canadian Council on Learning's Paul Cappon, put it at the end of the day: **If Nova Scotia is to truly become a Learning Province, Government must first demonstrate the "political will" to make it so.**

That is the challenge.