



Toward a Bright Future

Recommendations for Addressing Skills Shortages
in Western Canada

Todd Hirsch, Chief Economist

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BUILDING THE NEW WEST

Toward a Bright Future: Recommendations for Addressing Skills Shortages in Western Canada is the third and final study in a series of reports prepared as part of the *Filling the Gaps Initiative* – a one-year research and public education project exploring how governments attempt to influence the skills training outcomes of western Canada’s post-secondary system and how they can improve their skills training policies. *Filling the Gaps* is a component of the Canada West Foundation’s ***Building the New West Project*** – a multi-year research and public consultation effort focused on the strategic positioning of western Canada within the global economy. Five key priorities emerged from an extensive research and consultation process and provide a framework for the ***Building the New West Project***:

- the West must create the tools to attract, retain, and build HUMAN CAPITAL;
- the West must continue ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION;
- the West must strengthen its TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE;
- the West must promote the global competitiveness of its MAJOR CITIES; and
- the West must develop new ways of facilitating REGIONAL COORDINATION.

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Filling the Gaps Initiative Recommendations

Based on feedback gathered at a series of focus groups, the following recommendations for addressing skills shortages in western Canada emerged:

1. More funding should be provided for post-secondary education to ensure appropriate program and facility capacity to meet the growing need for education and skills training.
2. The federal government's Sector Council Program should place a more regional focus on its activities, while maintaining national standards.
3. Labour Market Development Agreements need to break the link between federal funding for training and EI eligibility.
4. The quality and timeliness of shared information on labour demand should be improved.
5. Tax credits should be used to encourage companies to do more direct on-the-job training.
6. Provincial governments, industry, trade associations, and vocational education institutions should work collaboratively to change perceptions about careers in the trades.
7. The training and skills development available to Aboriginal peoples should be increased.
8. Targeted immigration through Provincial Nominee Programs should be increased.
9. The flexibility of post-secondary institutions in regard the establishment and delivery of programs should be increased.
10. The transferability of credits among post-secondary institutions should be improved.

I. Introduction

Western Canada's economy is experiencing strong growth. Spurred by increased activity in construction, health care, manufacturing, research, and education, the region continues to lead the country in terms of real GDP growth and will likely post increases of around 3% in both 2004 and 2005.

A growing economy creates both opportunities and challenges. Growth provides opportunities for companies and individuals to work and generate income and expands the tax base. Growth also brings many challenges – such as environmental risks and social equity issues – which need to be addressed and managed.

A key challenge presented by a growing economy is the pressure it places on the demand for – and supply of – labour. As certain sectors expand, there will be a growing demand for those individuals with the right skills and abilities. As the economy becomes increasingly diversified and sophisticated in its adoption of modern technology, the bar is raised for those competing for jobs. Higher levels of skills and education are being required by employers.

The Canada West Foundation's *Looking West 2004 Survey* found that issues around skilled labour are important to western Canadians. When asked to rate the importance of ensuring a skilled labour force for the coming years, nearly 71% of westerners rated this issue as a "high priority." Also, 59% indicated that improving their province's post-secondary education system was a "high priority." Clearly, training and skills development are important to western Canadians.

This is the current landscape of western Canada's labour market. As a result, there is a shortage of skilled labour in western Canada that could stymie growth and send both companies and individuals elsewhere in their search for opportunities.

It is important to qualify this shortage of skilled labour. The shortages are not present in all sectors, nor are there shortages in all parts of the West. Certain industries and areas have not enjoyed the current economic expansion with some areas (especially rural) on a long-term economic contraction trajectory. But with this qualification in mind, some economic sectors and some geographic areas are experiencing a shortage of skilled labour that is frustrating industry and holding back economic expansion.

It is also important to highlight the difference between labour and *skilled* labour. The term labour refers to the general population in the work force currently employed or looking for work. The term skilled labour refers to that subset of workers who possess a special ability that distinguishes them from others. These abilities are usually skills obtained through special training, education, apprenticeship programs, or experience.

This report is a summary of the findings from a series of focus groups conducted across western Canada in October and November of 2004. The focus groups brought together experts in the field of labour market skills development and included participants from the government, post-secondary education, and industry sectors (see Appendix B for a list of focus group participants). Focus groups were held in Calgary, Regina, Vancouver, and Winnipeg. Drawing on the focus group discussions, this report presents a series of recommendations to policy-makers and stakeholders intended to help alleviate the problem of skilled labour shortages in western Canada.

II. The Filling the Gaps Initiative – An Overview

In 2001, the Canada West Foundation conducted extensive consultations with western Canadians regarding the strategic position of western Canada within the global economy. One of the five key priorities for the West that emerged from these consultations was the need to "create the tools to attract, retain and build human capital." To help address this issue, the Canada West Foundation launched the *Filling the Gaps Initiative*. This initiative focused on the issue of skilled labour shortages in western Canada and the role of government and industry in addressing them. The initiative produced three reports:

1) *Willing and Able: The Problem of Skills Shortages in Western Canada.* This report outlines the results of research conducted during February and March of 2004. Seventy-six industry associations representing all four western provinces and a broad cross-section of industries completed a questionnaire asking about labour market conditions in their specific sector. Three main questions were asked:

- Is there currently a shortage of skilled labour in your industry?
- Do you expect a shortage within the next five years in your industry?
- Are there currently post-secondary education programs in place in western Canada to provide the skilled labour you require?

Of the 76 industry associations that responded to the survey, 62 indicated that there is evidence of some to severe shortages of skilled labour. When asked to forecast labour demand over the next five years, 73 of the 76 associations indicated that they expect some to severe shortages.

On the question of the availability of post-secondary education programs in western Canada, 66 of the 76 respondents indicated that there are programs available. However, 41 of these indicated that the number of students graduating from these programs is inadequate to meet future industry demand.

These findings indicate that skills shortages are acute in many parts of the West, and in certain sectors (particularly health care and the skilled trades); the shortages pose a serious threat to continued economic growth in the region.

2) *Tools of the Trade: An Inventory of Education and Skills Development Programs in Western Canada.* This report presents an inventory of all provincial and federal government programs that, in some way, affect the supply of skilled labour. The programs range from those helping high school students select career options, to apprenticeship programs for Aboriginal peoples, to retraining workers for transitioning into a different occupation. The report identifies over 300 programs and categorizes them by their target client market. While assessing the efficacy of the programs was beyond the scope of the report, the broad overview of the programs and their emphasis revealed patterns, themes and gaps in how governments influence the qualities of the labour force.

For example, BC's provincial government tends to focus its efforts somewhat more on specific sector trades and skills, while Alberta tends to take a more general approach by attempting to create a favourable business environment and allow labour markets to find their equilibrium. Manitoba tends to focus on health care, Aboriginal skills training, and alleviating skills shortages in rural areas. Saskatchewan's focus is on creating an integrated system to meet industry needs in urban, rural and northern areas of the province.

3) Toward a Bright Future: Recommendations for Addressing Skills Shortages in Western Canada. This third and final report presents recommendations that flow from a series of focus groups organized in the fall of 2004. These focus groups brought together professionals from government, post-secondary education, and industry to tackle several questions: what is currently working well, what is not working well, and what needs to be done to improve skills development in western Canada?

The report also contains the results of a short survey of 27 large, private sector companies headquartered in western Canada. The questions focused on general trends in how companies recruit, train, and retain labour.

While it is a very small sample, the 27 company responses are good snapshots of current training and recruiting trends. The results suggest that while large companies in the West are doing many innovative things with regards to recruiting and skills training, some serious gaps remain (see Appendix A for full details).

III. The Three Legs of Skills Training and Development

Aside from the workers themselves, the three major stakeholders involved in labour training and skills development are governments, post-secondary education institutions, and industry.

Government

Government plays a large role in training and skills development. At the provincial level, a wide range of departments are involved, particularly departments responsible for K-12 education, post-secondary education, human resource development, economic development, and rural development. Not only do provincial governments provide much of the funding for post-secondary education, they also play a direct role through career counseling, apprenticeship programs, and training for those with special requirements.

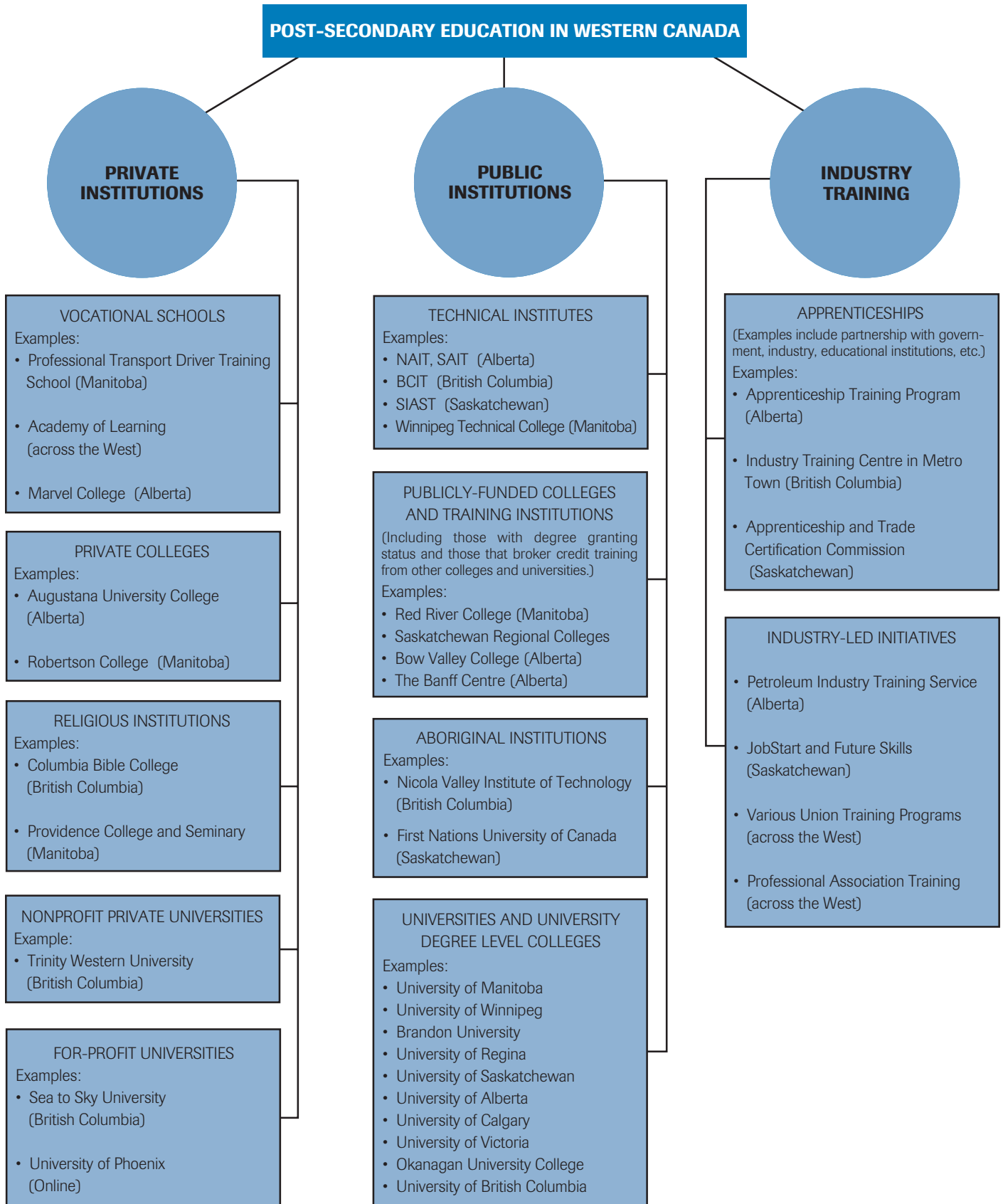
Because the provinces have primary responsibility for training and education under the Constitution, they tend to play a larger role than other orders of government. Nonetheless, the federal government – primarily through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) – also contributes to and influences the pool of skilled labour.

A key role of government is to help ensure a high quality of training and skilled labour in the economy. Skills not only benefit the individual worker, but provide a huge benefit to the entire economy as well. Skilled workers are more productive, generate higher incomes, and rely less on government services such as health care and income support. Also, recent research shows that investment in human capital is three times more important to economic growth over the long-run than is investment in physical capital (Coulombe et. al. 2004).

Post-Secondary Education Institutions (P2Es)

When the term post-secondary education is used, it often refers only to the university system, but it involves much more than universities. It encompasses a vast range of technical colleges, vocational centres, continuing education schools, private training programs, apprenticeship programs, religious and private schools, community colleges, and industry-led and sponsored training centres.

Figure 1



Within western Canada, hundreds of such "P2Es" offer a wide range of training possibilities (Figure 1). The majority of these institutions are outside of the traditional university system, and may play a larger role in addressing the future shortages of skilled workers than will the universities.

Taken as a group, P2Es deliver the training demanded by consumers (i.e., students) and required by industry. It is the programs that they offer and degrees/certificates that they grant which will have the most substantial influence on the availability of skilled labour. While governments are largely responsible for funding the (public) institutions, it is the institutions themselves that design the programs and set limits for student enrollment.

Industry

While the government has an interest from an economic and social point of view – and P2Es have an interest from an education and training point of view – no group is as reliant on skilled workers as is industry. Without the appropriately trained staff, businesses may have difficulty expanding production, experience escalating payroll costs, need to recruit from other regions/countries, or be forced to move their operations elsewhere.

In addition to on-the-job training offered by industry, there are many examples of specific industries or businesses working directly with P2Es to provide specialized training programs. Often industry will help finance the creation of a program at an established technical college as a cost-effective and reliable method of producing the exact type of skilled worker they require.

Other programs initiated by the business community include apprenticeship programs, or the development of an independent training facility funded and operated entirely by industry. A good example of this is the Petroleum Industry Training Service (PITS) operated in Calgary and Nisku, Alberta as a joint effort of the oil and gas exploration and development companies in the province.

IV. Challenges

Governments, P2Es, and industry all have a vested interest in ensuring a skilled labour force. But to maximize the positive effect on the economy, it is not enough to just train people; the skills must be those in demand by employers.

Training programs must reflect the skills and abilities that businesses require. Getting this right is not as simple as it sounds. Certain industries may require certain skills at the moment, but there is always a time lag in training students.

Other challenges faced by the three vested interests – and reasons why some skills shortages are causing real problems – include:

Demographics: An aging population in the region has seen the average age in several key industries increase. This will pose a serious problem within 5-10 years when older employees start retiring.

Cultural biases: Potential careers in what are perceived to be the industries of the future (e.g., information technology) have become the preferred career paths of many young people. This has diverted students away from the traditional trades such as carpentry, welding, and plumbing – many of which have a social perception (mostly incorrect) as being low skill and low paying.

Many trades, resource occupations, and other traditional jobs employ high-technology applications very extensively.

Cyclical patterns: Labour shortages can also be due to cyclical patterns, both within the year (winter and summer being high demand peaks) as well as throughout the span of several years. For example, drilling activity can ebb and flow with fluctuating energy prices.

Structural issues: Often the demand for skilled labour lies only in certain regions (such as in remote rural areas) or certain segments of an industry (such as in hospital pharmacies but not in commercial pharmacies in general).

Governments, P2Es and industry have a variety of approaches to tackling the problems of skilled labour shortages. As *Tools of the Trade* illustrates, over 300 provincial and federal government programs exist that, in some way, affect skills training and development. While the efforts of all three players are well-intended, they are not always executed cooperatively. In many cases, there is a coordination problem in which certain programs are duplicated, unnecessary, or ineffective.

V. Recommendations

As part of the *Filling the Gaps Initiative*, the Canada West Foundation held focus groups in Calgary, Regina, Vancouver, and Winnipeg in October and November 2004. These focus groups brought together experts from government, industry and P2Es for a half-day session to identify some of the problems with skill shortages, and ways that coordination among the three sectors could be improved. (See Appendix B for a list of focus group participants.)

The following recommendations are based on the discussions that took place at the focus groups. The recommendations are aimed at increasing coordination among governments, P2Es, and industry; maximizing scarce resources for skills training; and helping to alleviate the problems of skilled labour shortages.

1. More funding should be provided for post-secondary education to ensure appropriate program and facility capacity to meet the growing need for education and skills training.

To properly address the skills shortages, the post-secondary system needs greater, more stable, and more predictable funding. This pertains to operating, program and capital funding provided to the institutions. According to focus group participants, insufficient and unpredictable funding is at the root of systemic problems encountered by post-secondary education institutions. In many cases, student demand for programs simply outstrips the available number of placements in the schools and students are turned away.

The call for increased funding for P2Es should not be restricted to governments. Industry could be playing a larger role as well. There are several examples of partnerships between industry (either sectors or specific companies) and P2Es where the former fund an entire program of specialized training. If industry needs specialized labour – and particularly if that industry stands to gain financially by the increased availability of skilled labour – it should be expected to increase its level of funding.

2. The federal government's Sector Council Program should place a more regional focus on its activities, while maintaining national standards.

The Government of Canada, through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), funds and organizes Sector Councils. Sector Councils are organizations within a defined area of economic activity that are guided by a partnership of representatives from business, labour, education, other professional groups, and government. They work to identify and address current and anticipated human resources challenges, and to implement long-term, human resources planning and development strategies for their respective sectors. They also play a role in establishing national standards within certain occupations.

At the moment, most of the Sector Councils are located in Ottawa. Focus group participants argued that the Sector Councils based in Ottawa do not have the same effect as the ones based in the regions.

The role of Sector Councils should be expanded with a mandate to focus more attention on regional or community-based projects within the national framework – the Construction Sector Council's regional Labour Market Information Committees (LMIs) in various jurisdictions are a good example. One possible way to achieve the greater regional focus would be to maintain two parallel sets of councils: one at the federal level to address national standards, and one at the local/provincial level to work with industry and regional P2Es. If managed properly, the system would not cost any more, and better use could be made of the unique strengths of both the national and local/provincial councils.

3. Labour Market Development Agreements need to break the link between federal funding for training and EI eligibility.

Labour Market Development Agreements (LMDAs) are a set of agreements between the Government of Canada and the provincial governments. Under the agreements, HRSDC and provincial departments responsible for human resource development and training, design and manage labour market development programs and services. These services can include training, support for training, and providing living costs for individuals while taking training. The programs and services are funded by the Government of Canada and delivered by provincial departments or HRSDC (models vary among provinces).

The problem with the LMDAs is that federal funds for individuals are linked to the Employment Insurance program (EI). One must be EI eligible to receive LMDA funding for training. The program focuses entirely on training for the unemployed, but not for the under-employed or those at risk of becoming unemployed because their skills are outdated. Those underemployed or "at risk" are not eligible for the program, and therefore have few means by which to improve their skill sets.

The LMDA program needs to recognize those individuals who are underemployed and at risk as well as the unemployed. One place to start is to "de-link" LMDA funding eligibility from EI eligibility. Other methods by which to measure individual need for skills training must also be found.

4. The quality and timeliness of shared information on labour demand should be improved.

At present, most of the provincial labour departments rely almost entirely on data from Statistics Canada's monthly *Labour Force Survey*. While this survey is the most comprehensive of its kind in the country and is extremely valuable in terms of measuring

labour supply, it does not (nor is it designed to) give any indication of where and what type of labour is in demand.

Information on labour demand is critical if potential employees are expected to find work and if P2Es are expected to generate the skills that are in demand. This is a gap that could be filled by a joint effort among the provinces and industry. Questions that need to be asked include: What jobs are currently in demand? What skills are required? What skills are expected to be in short supply in the future?

An electronic database could be developed by the provincial governments and participating companies and industry associations could be responsible for inputting the data on a monthly basis. This would not simply be a database of job openings to be accessed by job seekers (there are plenty of these already). Rather, it would be an analytical tool to be used by governments, P2Es, and industry to judge where the skill shortages are most acute. The main idea is to make better use of shared labour demand data among all stakeholders.

5. Tax credits should be used to encourage companies to do more direct on-the-job training.

Many companies already provide on-the job training to develop their own specialized skilled labour. Nonetheless, much more could be done by employers in this regard. It is not, after all, a lack of labour that is the problem, but a lack of *skilled* labour. Companies would likely have no problem attracting available workers to their payrolls in return for the appropriate training.

Training new employees, retraining existing ones, or establishing co-op programs can be costly and may result in lower productivity in the early stages. Companies are often willing to do this because of the expected pay-off of higher productivity in the future. The up-front costs of training, however, are often perceived to outweigh the benefits.

To make on-the-job training more financially appealing in the short-term, the provincial and federal governments should consider a system of tax credits to encourage more companies to engage in skills training, retraining, and co-op programs. A review of existing training incentives should be done to determine a model that will maximize effectiveness.

6. Provincial governments, industry, trade associations, and vocational education institutions should work collaboratively to change perceptions about careers in the trades.

Since skills shortages in the trade occupations are among the most acute in western Canada – and are expected to worsen – it is worth considering a specific recommendation to address this sector.

There are many factors contributing to the skills shortages in the trades including a cultural bias that has dissuaded young adults from pursuing careers in the trades. The perceptions are that trade occupations are low skill, low paying, dangerous, and “second tier” in terms of social prestige.

These perceptions should be changed. A good example of an effort to change these perceptions is a recent federal government initiative to promote jobs in the trades. A series of TV and movie advertisements, coupled with a web resource developed by the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum (www.careersintrades.ca), is helping to change the image of trade careers. Much more

could be done through a collaborative effort on the part of the provinces, industry, vocational education institutions, and trade associations.

7. The training and skills development available to Aboriginal peoples should be increased.

Western Canada has a large and rapidly growing population of Aboriginal peoples – both on and off reserve. This group represents a significant pool of young, capable workers that could potentially help alleviate skills shortages. Most of the provinces in western Canada have some support and training for Aboriginal peoples, but much more could be done.

Much also needs to be done in terms of training and educating businesses wanting to tap into this segment of the labour force. Providing the necessary skills and training for Aboriginal workers is one element, but integrating Aboriginal workers into the business environment may require special cultural and social awareness on the part of the employer.

8. Targeted immigration through Provincial Nominee Programs should be increased.

The Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs) are intergovernmental agreements between the provinces and the federal government that allow and encourage the provinces to play a more active role in selecting and recruiting immigrants to their region. The PNPs target immigrants who will be economically beneficial for the province or who will fill labour market needs that are not being met by the existing labour pool. (For more details on PNPs and their application in western Canada, see Huynh 2004.)

Manitoba has been particularly successful in its use of the PNP to attract thousands of workers, but it must be recognized that Manitoba's immigration needs are distinct from those of other western provinces. Manitoba's success does not necessarily mean that other provinces have failed based on lower PNP numbers.

Nonetheless, PNPs have great potential for addressing labour market shortages, and all provinces should examine and consider the possibilities of how increased targeted immigration could help meet labour market demand.

At the same time, there needs to be an increase in funding for immigrant settlement programs such as English as a Second Language (ESL) and for programs recognizing existing skills within the immigrant community.

9. The flexibility of post-secondary institutions in regard to the establishment and delivery of programs should be increased.

Because of the time-sensitive nature in which certain industries require skilled workers, there is often a very short window of opportunity for a post-secondary education institution to establish training programs. Rigidities within the system, within institutions, and within the legislation that governs changes to publicly-funded programs often prevent the rapid changes that are needed to keep up with the dynamics of the labour market.

Flexibility and speed should be encouraged. This could require changes to some of the current legislation that prevents publicly-funded institutions (particularly universities) from implementing rapid changes. Increasing flexibility within the post-secondary education system will help to ensure that students receive their training as quickly as possible.

10. The transferability of credits among post-secondary institutions should be improved.

There has been some progress regarding the transferability of course credits from one post-secondary institution to another, but much more work needs to be done in this area. The reasons preventing greater transferability have to do with limited resources at schools, competition for students among schools, and rigidities built into admissions offices.


Making it easier for students to transfer course work and credits among schools will create more program and career options. This flexibility would also accelerate the rate at which skilled workers enter the labour force.

While the actual policy changes required for this recommendation must come from within the post-secondary sector, government and industry could both play strong roles in advocating these changes. For example, governments could require the publicly-funded schools to provide evidence proving that transfers among schools has become easier. Where industry teams up with a vocational school for a specific program, it could require that the school simplify transfers among other vocational schools with similar programs.

VI. Conclusion

The problems posed by a lack of appropriate skills may be hampering economic growth and expansion in some sectors and some parts of western Canada.

Addressing this problem is complex, and cannot be carried out by any single government, post-secondary education institution, or industry in isolation. It will require a coordinated effort of all three sectors.

The recommendations in this report are not all new or unique. Indeed, many of them are already being implemented to some degree in a variety of jurisdictions. The point of making these recommendations is both to present new solutions as well as to re-enforce and highlight existing solutions that – if expanded upon and carried through – can help alleviate the skills shortages problem in western Canada. 

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Appendix A

Labour Training and Recruitment Practices: A Survey of Large Employers in Western Canada

Large companies – usually defined as those with more than 500 employees – are the source of employment for thousands of western Canadians. Because of their high profile, they are also among the first places that come to mind when recent graduates begin to look for work. But not all large companies behave in the same way, particularly when it comes to hiring, training, and retaining workers.

As part of the *Filling the Gaps Initiative* on skilled labour shortages in the western provinces, the Canada West Foundation conducted a survey of large companies with head offices based in the West. The purpose of the survey was to generate a snapshot of trends and common practices in the area of recruitment and training policies.

The survey posed seven questions to the human resource departments of 27 large companies based in the West (Table 1).

Table 1

Distribution of Companies by Province	
British Columbia	5
Alberta	9
Saskatchewan	5
Manitoba.....	8
Distribution of Companies by Sector	
Agriculture	2
Mining	2
Forestry	1
Energy Resources	4
Manufacturing	4
Construction	1
Transportation, Storage, Communications	2
Utilities	4
Trade	3
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	1
Business and Personal Services	2
Public Administration	1

It is important to stress that this survey is illustrative in nature and is not meant to represent a statistically accurate profile of western Canada’s corporate sector. Nonetheless, the company responses yield interesting information about patterns, themes and trends in training and recruiting. This appendix summarizes the responses received from the 27 companies.

Question #1: Does your company actively recruit students at the high school or college/university level (e.g., participate in career fairs, recruit directly through on-campus job centres)?

The majority of the companies responding to the survey indicated that they are actively involved in some types of recruitment efforts (as opposed to relying simply on job postings). Most of this recruitment takes place at the college or university level – 24 of the 27 companies responding to the survey indicate that recruitment through college and university career centres (or other means of on-campus recruiting) is an important source of labour for them. A minority of the companies (10 of the 25) are involved at the high school level. Companies that recruit at the high school level tend to offer more positions with fewer technical or academic skills.

Participation in career fairs are popular among the large companies. Nineteen of the 27 companies said that they regularly participate in career fairs to find new recruits. Career fairs are usually organized by schools, but they may also be organized by provincial governments, industry associations, or even community groups as ways of assisting both employers and job seekers. Some of the companies surveyed also indicated that they regularly hold on-campus information sessions to give prospective applicants an idea of the type of jobs being offered and the educational requirements.

Direct on-campus recruitment – such as posting job opportunities on student billboards or targeting students in certain areas of study – is used somewhat less than the indirect career fairs or information sessions. Sixteen of the companies in the survey claim to use direct on-campus recruitment methods.

Question #2: Does your company currently participate in partnering with a post-secondary education institute for a specific training program (e.g., provide funds or expertise to a technical college for developing specific skills required by your company)?

About two-thirds of the companies in the survey currently have a joint partnering arrangement with a post-secondary school. There were several examples of companies sponsoring a program with a technical college such as the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology or Winnipeg Technical College. In these examples, the companies are able to customize the type of training and skills they require. While many of the companies mentioned that there is no guarantee of jobs for the students upon graduation, many of the graduates are in fact hired by the participating companies.

There were other examples of more indirect partnering with post-secondary education institutions where companies make donations to specific school programs. This type of indirect financial support offers less flexibility in terms of offering the company the ability to customize a program's curriculum, but it does help provide a steady stream of qualified graduates.

Question #3: Do you have any specific recruitment initiatives or training for certain demographic groups such as Aboriginal peoples, recent immigrants, etc.?

Sixteen of the companies said that they currently have programs in place to provide special training or recruitment for Aboriginal peoples or immigrants.

The companies surveyed in Manitoba appear to take this task quite seriously – 6 of the 7 companies based in Manitoba have specific policies or programs in place. On the other hand, the Alberta-based companies in the survey seem to place a lower priority on this type of training and recruitment – only 3 of the 9 Alberta companies surveyed have specific policies in place for hiring Aboriginal peoples or immigrants.

Several of the companies without specific policies in place for recruiting or training Aboriginal peoples or immigrants did not see the need for specific policies as they identified themselves as equal opportunity employers that do not discriminate against anyone.

A large retailer in the survey mentioned that it is part of an initiative that seeks to hire and train Aboriginal people for specific positions within the company, rather than to simply fill quotas of minorities. The company has partnered with an Aboriginal group to help identify appropriate candidates.

Even though the survey question did not mention gender specifically, some company respondents identified specific programs in place to attract women. Interestingly, some of these companies were from sectors of the economy (such as mining and the trades) where women are typically under-represented in the workforce. Particularly in the case of the trades, this could reflect a shortage of traditional male workers and an attempt to tap into the female component of the workforce to alleviate some of these shortages.

Question #4: What specific training, designations, educational degrees, etc. are required by potential candidates to be considered for a position with your company? (Please consider only those positions in the company that make up the majority of your payroll.)

Because of the complexity of the work forces in these companies – and the many types of positions for which they regularly hire – many companies had difficulty answering this question.

Only 12 companies indicated that they require candidates with only high school education. The companies that recruit from the high school level came primarily from the retail, resources, and manufacturing sectors. Two-thirds of the companies surveyed required potential recruits to have at least a diploma or certificate from a technical/vocational college. Finally, 21 of the 27 companies required potential recruits to have a degree from a university or similar degree-granting college. Five of the companies responding to the survey were either unable or unwilling to give information for this question.

Question #5: Do you have specific training programs for new staff?

The majority of the companies surveyed (23 of 27) offer some type of initial training for new employees. However, the amount and quality of this training varied widely across the companies.

Some companies offer training for new staff of between one to four weeks in duration. This training tends to focus on equipping staff with the customized skills required for their position (in addition to any skills or training they acquired prior to joining the company). These up-front training programs tend to be more common in positions requiring specialized knowledge of the company's computer systems, customer service techniques, or other customized skills that would not be available outside the company.

Many other companies offered job shadowing as part of the initial training program. This would involve a shorter orientation (1-2 days) followed by a week or more of on-the-job training provided by shadowing another experienced employee. This tended to be more common in some of the resource and manufacturing companies.

Almost all of the companies offered one or two days of orientation that presented the history, mission statement, values and goals of the company.

Question #6: Do you offer ongoing training and skills upgrading programs for existing staff?

Investing time and money in their human resources is a high priority for the companies in the survey. All but one of the companies in the survey have formal policies around training and skills upgrading for their employees. The one company that did not explicitly offer such training mentioned that training takes place where there is “an identified business need.” If one considers this company to provide training as required, then it is fair to say that 100% of the companies provide at least some level of ongoing training to their employees.

The amount of training provided varies by company and by position within the company. Many respondents indicated that up to 100% of tuition is paid for employees in management positions for university courses (e.g., MBAs) relevant to their jobs.

Most of the companies provide basic ongoing training to their employees such as computer training, machinery and equipment training, first aid, and the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS).

Question #7: Does your company currently have a program or initiative to retain employees nearing retirement (or attracting back those already retired)?

If investing in existing employees is a priority for the companies surveyed, it appears that investing in older employees nearing retirement is not. Only one company indicated any policy or program in place to tap into the expertise embodied in their more senior employees. This company offers two ways for retired or semi-retired employees to contribute. One way is through a program of community volunteerism that encourages company “alumni” (as well as current staff) to get involved in a community program. The other way is to bring back recently retired alumni to assist with training or act as mentors. While only one company has a formalized program for retirees, it is clearly something that other companies are considering.

Eight of the companies are either in the process of exploring options to retain the experiences of retirees, or have informal means of tapping into the resources of retirees. For example, some companies will bring back recent retirees in contract positions to assist in peak workload periods.

Given the aging of the workforce and the impending surge of retirees over the next five to ten years, the issue of retaining the experience of retirees will doubtless grow in importance for all companies.

Appendix B

Focus Group Participants

Please note: The recommendations in this report should in no way be attributed to any individual listed below, nor do the opinions contained in the report represent in full or in part the opinions of these participants or the organizations they work for or represent.

Julie Ball, Project Co-ordinator, Calgary Chamber of Commerce (Calgary)

Valerie Barr, Research Co-ordinator, Canadian Association of Oilwell Drilling Contractors (Calgary)

Yolanda Bilger, Business Development Manager, Calgary Economic Development (Calgary)

Colleen Bradley, Manager, Career Services, Mount Royal College (Calgary)

Marilyn Braun-Pollon, Director, Provincial Affairs Saskatchewan, Canadian Federation of Independent Business (Regina)

Shannon Campbell, Sector Partnerships, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (Edmonton)

Andy Cichos, Vice President, External Relations, Bow Valley College (Calgary)

Myrna Dubé, Senior Director, Business Development, Calgary Airport Authority (Calgary)

Bob Guthrie, Chief Executive Officer, ApprenticeshipWorks Saskatchewan (Regina)

Leonard Harapiak, Director, Winnipeg Technical College (Winnipeg)

Paul Holden, Director, Manitoba Advanced Education and Training (Winnipeg)

Glen Ingham, Director, Industrial Programs, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) (Regina)

Nancy Johnston, Director Co-operative Education, Simon Fraser University (Burnaby)

Dan Kelly, Vice-President, Western Canada, Canadian Federation of Independent Business (Calgary)

Roslyn Kunin, Roslyn Kunin & Associates, Inc. (Vancouver)

Ernie Lipinski, Director, Training and Employment Programs Unit, Saskatchewan Learning (Regina)

Janice Mansfield, Manager, Skills Development, BC Ministry of Skills Development and Labour (Victoria)

Wayne McElree, Assistant Deputy Minister, Saskatchewan Learning (Regina)

Barb McMahan, Aboriginal HR Liason, Manitoba Customer Contact Association, Government of Manitoba (Winnipeg)

Valerie Mushinski, Chief Executive Officer, Cumberland Regional College (Nipawin, SK)

Ken Peacock, Senior Policy Analyst, Business Council of British Columbia (Vancouver)

D'Arcy Phillips, CEO, Manitoba Aerospace HR Coordinating Committee (Winnipeg)

Marie Rajic, Manager, Government Relations, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (Calgary)

Robert Stayner, Marketing Officer, Partnership, Training and Development, Red River College (Winnipeg)

Garth Toombs, Human Resources Consultant (Calgary)

Peggy Valentine, Director, Career Services, University of Calgary (Calgary)

Fred Wonnick, Policy and Planning, Gateway Group (Winnipeg)

Jeff Zabudsky, President, Red River College (Winnipeg)



#900, 1202 Centre Street South
Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2G 5A5
Telephone: 403.264.9535

www.cwf.ca