LIFELONG LEARNING AND EDUCATION POLICY IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT: Lifelong Learning (LLL) has become a pliable term in educational discourse running the risk of meaning both everything and nothing, making it necessary to look at how the notion of LLL has been taken up in different contexts, especially within the context of policy development. Because of the inconsistent ways LLL has been peppered throughout national legislation in North America, the aim of the presentation is to characterize LLL policy development in Canada and the United States using broad brush strokes, and to provide an overview of the evolution of the concept and its contemporary applications. An overview of LLL policy development in Canada and the US is provided. While there have been promising policy developments in recent years in both countries, LLL has been narrowly conceived and only tenuously supported.

Keywords: adult education policy, workforce education policy, North America, United States, Canada

Lifelong Learning (LLL) entails "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective" (European Commission, 2001, p. 9). LLL policies in Canada and the US tend to highlight learning that takes place post compulsory schooling or post-college or university. Many policies focus on working-age adults and on skills development for the workforce, rather than on promoting a more encompassing understanding of lifewide adult education.

The emphasis on employment and integration into the economy has remained the dominant justification for policy development and educational programming. LLL has been used more frequently in Canadian government policy documents than in the US. Canadian reports framed under "lifelong learning" can be found from the 1990s forward. In the US, policy specifically regarding, or framed as, LLL remains underdeveloped. In both countries, LLL related policies pertain almost entirely to adults of working age—generally up to 65 years old, which continues to be considered the age of retirement in both countries.

Both Canada and the US have participated and played important roles in conceptualizing how adult skills and competencies are to be measured for international benchmarking and comparison. Another common trend in policy discourse includes the shared concern about the heavy emphasis in LLL policies on human capital development. Evidence suggests that Canada and the US, even though considered highly developed, have yet to cultivate the policy and system capabilities necessary to meet their national LLL needs. The intent for this paper is to offer an overview of the application of LLL in Canada and the United States.

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Lifelong Learning in Canada

Canada is a leader in lifelong learning. It has the highest percentage of people with a post-secondary education in the Organisation for Economic Coordination and Development (OECD, 2021). Recent data show that participation in adult learning and education is above the OECD average, though highly correlated with prior formal education attainment (OECD, 2019). Canada has also had global influence in LLL policy. It played a key role in the development of the OECD International Large-Scale Assessments (IALS) (see Elfert & Walker, 2020), starting with IALS in the mid-1990s which went on to influence the subsequent adult skills assessment surveys, Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). Yet Canada has no holistic lifelong education system or joined-up policy to support lifelong learning. There are no standardized measures of assessment or clear blueprint for what is going on around the country in terms of adult education provision and outcomes, and there is a lack of sharing of best practices.

As a federated nation with no central department or ministry of education, each province and territory set its own agenda and has its own ministries of education, often one of which is concerned with compulsory schooling and the other with everything to do with the education of adults. There are formal systems provincially/territorially: adult basic education is provided through school boards and through post-secondary institutions; regulatory bodies require and facilitate professional development and continuing education; and, each province or territory offers an array of skills training for employment or trades training through many different organizations and institutions with many initiatives directed to certain groups. In addition, a network of community centers, neighborhood houses, and migrant service centers offer an assortment of educational programming which may be vocational, social, or personal.

While administration and management of education tends to be municipal or provincial/territorial, there are federal institutions that support LLL across the country. The most important is arguably Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) which administers grants and supports adult education programming. It developed Canada's Essential Skills framework and the recently launched Skills for Success office and skills typology. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada supports language education for adults across the country in the two official languages. Other ministries also fund and administer various forms of adult education nationally. For example: Indigenous Service Canada hosts the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program; Veteran Affairs offers vocational rehabilitation and other programming; and Correctional Service Canada has a host of programming through that focus on employment and employability skills.

The only government-issued report on "lifelong learning in Canada focuses on results from a 2008 survey on access and support to education and training for people aged 18-64 years old (Knighton et al, 2009) reflecting a focus on learning for employment. LLL is associated almost entirely with adult education, whether that be returning to complete one's high school diploma, undertaking a university degree later in life, or participating

in a range of non-formal education for personal, social, or professional reasons. The argument of workers possessing insufficient skills for the workplace has continued to drive government policy from when the IALS results were first released to now, which has seen an added urgency related to the 'wicked' problems (Peters, 2017) of accelerating automation, global climate change, decolonization, multiculturalism, pandemic-related challenges, among others.

Constructing and Demolishing a LLL 'System'

The country's interest in supporting adult learning and skills for the workforce has been traced back to the 1960s (Shohet, 2001). By 1991, there were six major adult literacy organizations supporting adult education across the country which were directly supported by the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS, see Elfert & Walker, 2020). The then Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) launched its Essential Skills framework, consisting of nine Essential Skills viewed as necessary for employability and job success. From this, the federal government created the comprehensive National Occupational Classification (NOC) database, which contains between 200-350 skill profiles related to skill demands that are seen as necessary in particular occupations.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s things appeared to be looking better for the creation of a national adult education and skills system. In 1999, the country's Lifelong Learning Plan (LLP) was launched which allows adults to withdraw up to $10,000 per calendar year from their registered retirement saving plans (RRSPs) to finance full-time training or education for themselves or their spouses/common-law partners (Canada Revenue Agency, 2021). Then, in 2002, the government proposed the creation of a pan-Canadian Learning Institute which soon after became the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). The CCL was an institution that "work[ed] with Canadians, provinces, sector councils, labor organizations and learning institutions to create the skills and learning architecture that Canada needs," including "building our knowledge and reporting to Canadians about what is working and what is not" (Wikipedia, 2019). CCL mapped and facilitated lifelong learning across the country and worked toward doing so over its short existence.

It is hard to measure the impact of these initiatives since comprehensive research has not been undertaken. LLL participation likely increased, the types of learning that were happening across the country were being mapped, and employers had a standardized set of skill profiles, with the intent of identifying learning needs and to better meet demands of the labor market. However, there were no recorded improvements of Canadians' skill levels in the 2005 results of the OECD's subsequent Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (OECD, 2015). Similarly, the Lifelong Learning Plan demonstrated only limited use to a narrow group of people given its conditions. Furthermore, there was evidence of inadequate record keeping in the NLS and increasing overall demands for accountability which were not deemed satisfactory to the federal government (Elfert & Walker, 2020).

It was not surprising that with the 2006 shift in government, significant changes were implemented that initiated the dismissal of the CCL. Months after the Stephen Harper (Conservative Party) government's election, it announced it would cut $17.7 million in

funding to adult literacy, effectively removing the NLS (cited in Delacourt, 2006). The CCL was subsequently defunded and dismantled in 2010 (Jerema, 2010). Following that, the Office for Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES)—the successor to the NLS—began to make applying for grants more competitive and bureaucratically cumbersome for adult education providers, which had a devastating effect on community organizations (Smythe, 2015); much of its allotted budget went unspent year-to-year until 2017, both because of barriers to applying and many organizations were not deemed eligible or worthy under changing government priorities (Hayes, 2018). The undoing of federal support for adult basic education reached a culmination in 2014 and 2015 when all national literacy organizations were defunded (Elfert & Walker, 2020).

Since the re-election of the Liberal Party in 2015, there has been a renewed urgency for investing in adult skills and education, driven by an array of factors including: increasing automation; changing demands of the labor market caused by responses to climate change; and changing demographics through aging and immigration. The Federal government has announced a series of funding initiatives over the past few years to support workforce development, skills, and the construction of national and cross-Canadian programming. A flurry of programs was created in 2018, including: 1) *Skills Boost*, launched to "give adult learners the support they need to succeed in the workforce"; 2) *Futureworx*, funded by the Office of Literacy and Essential skills (OLES) to "explore the need for and how best to develop a pan-Canadian soft skills framework." (See Futureworkx, 2018); and arguably most fundamental 3) the national *Future Skills Program*. First proposed by the government's Advisory Council on Economic Growth, the program comprises a Future Skills Council, a diverse group that advises the government on "national and regional skills development and training priorities," and a Future Skills Centre, which supports adult education research and programming. As of mid-2021, the Future Skills Centre had funded over 120 projects partnering with over 5,000 organizations, companies, and institutes (Scott, 2021; see https://fsc-ccf.ca/).

The 2019 budget increased targets for student work placement and for supporting programs designed to "ensure skills align with labor market needs" (Government of Canada, 2019, para. 3) with the onus placed on employers. As stated in a 2019 ESDC publication entitled Supporting Lifelong Learning, increasing automation means "that upskilling will be a must for most Canadian workers, and employers can do more" (Government of Canada, 2020a). The budget announced two other programs (Government of Canada, 2019, pp.37-42): 1) the *Canadian Training Benefit* whereby eligible workers between the ages of 25 and 64 would accumulate a credit balance at a rate of $250 per year, up to a lifetime limit of $5,000, to refund up to half the costs of taking a course or enrolling in a training program; and, 2) the *Employment Insurance Training Support Benefit* which would provide workers with up to four weeks of income support through Employment Insurance (EI) system to help workers on training leave and not receiving their regular paycheck cover their living expenses, such as rent, utilities and groceries. The benefit was accompanied by the introduction of the EI Small Business Premium Rebate to offset the costs incurred by small businesses.

The 2020 Speech from the Throne announced "the largest investment in Canadian history in training for workers" (Government of Canada, 2020b, p. 21). The latest 2021 budget announced $100 million+ investment in the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy and focuses on supporting workforce development, apprenticeships, and transitioning workers to new jobs (Government of Canada, 2021). What has most caught the attention of the research and practitioner community is the launch of a new centralized Office of Skills for Success, located within the portfolio of the HRSDC's successor, Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). Skills for Success has been allotted over $300 million over the next three years for programming. For comparison, as adult education policy veteran Brigid Hayes (2021a) points out, its predecessor, OLES, was operating on a budget of $23 million annually. Hayes (2021b) expressed concern that the Skills for Success program only had definitions and preliminary proficiency levels of skills, and that it will take years to get 'Skills for Success' to reach a level comparable to the Essential Skills project. While adult education and lifelong advocates are skeptical of these renewed policy and programming efforts, some progress has been made toward establishing a semblance of a national LLL learning system.

Lifelong Learning in the U.S.

In the US, Adult and Workforce Education (AWE) policy has been primarily been initiated at the national level, with the following areas serving as its foundation: training and education in response to economic crises and transition; preparation for military duty or reintegration after military service; assimilating newly arrived Americans by offering language and citizenship courses and employment training; opportunities to recover lost educational opportunities; and to support the socioeconomic mobility of vulnerable populations. The 1964 Adult Education Act formally initiated programming to provide literacy, basic, and secondary educational opportunities for adult learners, and became the official system of "adult education." States were provided federal block grants and mandated to create AWE services and systems locally. The term "lifelong learning" seldom occurs in US federal legislation, but when used, it refers mostly to continuing education, upskilling, jobs training, and similar forms of work-related learning.

In the late 1990s, legislators acknowledged that an expanded scope was needed for adult learning to not only improve basic literacy skills and high school equivalency, but also obtain postsecondary education, work skills certification, and other industry recognized credentials. The 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) began a major reformation of the diversified and complex AWE delivery systems, installing new federal requirements to be met to qualify for funding. WIA also reflected the shift of AWE programming from the purview of the Department of Education to the Department of Labor, and a growing emphasis on linking literacy, education, social, and employment services. WIA was framed as providing workforce investment activities, through statewide and local workforce investment systems, to improve the quality of the workforce, reduce welfare dependency, and enhance national productivity and economic competitiveness. WIOA worked to consolidate job training programs and streamline processes with the intent of helping adult learners receive needed services and support earlier. Title II of WIOA legislation also replaced requirements for a performance accountability system, and

mandated participating agencies to require eligible AWE providers to demonstrate measurable goals for participant outcomes and other specified program elements.

Architecture of the System

The US lacks an LLL-specific national coordinating body to ensure a systematic, national LLL policy agenda, but it does have a federal-level Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) within the Department of Education. The US system is a federalized system where the majority of the educational and fiscal responsibilities for education lie with states. Adding to this distribution of responsibility for education, US federal responsibility for publicly funded AWE programming is also distributed across at least seven different federal agencies. Typically, elements of AWE policy are also subsumed under other general federal legislation, with intermittent clauses worked into other mainstream national educational or workforce reform frameworks. While legislation over the past 20 years has been moving toward bringing the various federal agencies and education sectors into alignment, there has been no overarching federal plan for creating an integrated, public, lifelong education system.

Under the Career Pathways initiative, the following guidelines were provided for program design, implementation, and evaluation: (a) building cross-agency partnerships and clarifying roles, (b) identifying industry sectors and engaging employers in business and industry, (c) designing integrated education and training programs, (d) identifying and combining funding needs and sources for implementation, (e) aligning policies and programs between federal, State, and community agencies, and (f) measuring system change and performance (Alamprese & Lymardo, 2012). This framework reflects an increasing integration of initiatives at the national level in the US to coordinate AWE policy development and programming. These requirements for partnering and cost-sharing are intended to reduce redundancy of programming, and to help adult learners gain more strategic access to employment, educational, and social services. WIOA mandates have also brought standards, data and performance requirements, and programming aims into alignment, establishing an architecture for a quasi-AWE-system.

Framing of Policies

From inception, AWE policy has been framed in terms of helping adults become more economically independent. Policy rhetoric related to learning in adulthood remains heavily centered on socioeconomic matters such as unemployment, the need for labor to reskill and upskill, and the cultivation of human and intellectual capital to remain competitive and economically viable internationally. This framing of federal policy has translated the LLL notion into an active tool for the reform of education and to tackle market mandates and economic shifts. Even though the framing and scope of LLL-related policies in the US remain narrow, a number of interesting initiatives have recently emerged.

Policy Trends

Career Pathways (CP)**.** The 2006 CP initiative was instigated with the purpose of helping adult learners find pathways to and through postsecondary education and the workforce. CP programs and systems deliver intentionally structured curriculum and student-focused supports that enable learners to pursue occupationally, technically, and professionally oriented postsecondary education and workforce training. CP include a wide range of core program elements, including curriculum and instruction, work-based learning opportunities, industry-recognized credentials, proactive student supports, career guidance, and job placement. Career progression also includes strategies that enable adult learners to advance in postsecondary education and training beyond entry level to secure multiple—including stacked—credentials (certificates, licenses, and degrees), to enter and progress through careers that provide financial stability (Bragg et al., 2019). Based on an analysis of state and national level evaluations, Bragg's team asserts that there are significant differences in basic skills gains, college credits, and entry-level credentials earned by participants in CP programs, as well as improved program retention and credential attainment.

Integrated Education and Training. Another major trend is the integration of academic and workplace skills development in a more realistic workforce-oriented context. Integrated education and training (IET) provide simultaneous instruction in basic academic skills and occupational or industry-specific training. IET provides postsecondary academic, occupational, and technical skills that enable students to attain required competencies and credentials. The IET model requires employer engagement and partnerships between public and private education and training providers. IET programming works toward integrating literacy and academic skills, technical workplace skills, digital literacies, soft skills, and emotional and interpersonal skills that are sought by employers. The programs also offer wraparound services such as case management, financial aid assistance, academic advising, individualized training plans, and job placement services that help learners complete their studies and transition into employment.

Digital Capabilities. The 2020 global pandemic forced education providers to change how they work with learners, integrating new technologies and tools they had not previously used. What became clearer during the pandemic was that the US suffers from internet and digital infrastructure problems that magnify the growing gaps between various demographic groups in their digital skills levels and ability to integrate into the current technology-rich economy. In response, the Digital Equity Act of 2021 was drafted and, "Expresses the sense of Congress that a broadband connection and digital literacy are increasingly critical to how individuals participate in the society, economy, and civic institutions of the United States and finds that the Federal Government has an interest in and an obligation to pursue digital equity" (Section 3). The proposed legislation highlighted the need for national infrastructure capacity building, as well as the importance of establishing equity in access so all people can develop the digital capabilities required to participate in today's society and economy.

Interoperability. A 2018 federally funded initiative through the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), called *Teaching Skills That Matter* (TSTM), introduced a framework which emphasized nine skills, five topic areas, and three teaching approaches intended to cultivate essential capabilities with real-world relevance to learners' lives that can be used in multiple contexts. From a policy standpoint, what is of note here is that this framework is aligned with education frameworks implemented in other areas (e.g., secondary education and community colleges) with the aim of aligning systems and curriculum. Efforts at aligning various levels of education systems in the US could potentially extend the national public education framework past compulsory education toward a more comprehensive system approaching the idea of supporting LLL. Such policies and initiatives may gradually leverage the current systems by moving them into alignment with an increasing scope of influence beyond compulsory education.

Discussion

Both Canada and the US have embraced a variety of policy reforms in support of lifelong learning, but these have been inadequate, piece-meal, and heavily focused on education and programs to support working-age adults. Over the decades, the two countries have developed some notably similar systems, and have tested initiatives related to individual learning accounts and savings plans to support continued learning and training throughout adulthood. It also appears that both countries have elected to introduce mandates over the past two decades that have increased the demands and requirements of states/territories and local-level educational providers. Both countries have also recently introduced new programs and funding avenues to support LLL-related services, especially in response to the hardships brought on by and exacerbated since the 2020 global pandemic.

Note: Please see the following chapter for a more comprehensive overview of North American LLL policy: Roumell, E. A., Walker, J., & Salajan, F. D. (2022). Lifelong learning: policy issues in USA/Canada. In K. Evans, W. Lee, J. Markowitsch & M. Zukas (Eds.) *Third International Handbook of Lifelong Learning*. Springer Press International.

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