

# Canada-Alberta International Conference on “Competing for Skills: Vocational Education and Training in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”

**In cooperation with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Learning for  
Jobs Project**

**August 31, 2009  
Calgary, Alberta, Canada**

## **THEMATIC SUMMARY**

The Conference was co-hosted in Calgary, Alberta, Canada by the Government of Alberta and the Government of Canada. The purpose of the conference was to:

- Promote/share knowledge on Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs around the world
- Showcase best practices in VET and
- Generate thought on the future of VET programming.

The conference was strongly supported by its speakers and panelists who provided context and thoughtful insights for the day’s discussions. Special speakers included the Honourable Dave Hancock, Minister of Education, Government of Alberta, Mr. Aart de Gues, Deputy Secretary General of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Mr. Tjerk (Jack) Dusseldorp, President of World Skills International and the Honourable Diane Finley, Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

All speakers spoke to the importance of VET and raised some thought-provoking questions which provided the impetus for the day’s discussions:

- Why is VET often viewed as the “poor” cousin in the education hierarchy? Is there a better way to position VET in light of academic training (e.g., do we include it in the definition of “higher education”)?
- The labour market and economy is evolving and what is current now may not be what emerges post-recession. How do we better structure the systems to be responsive and flexible enough to meet the needs of a constantly changing labour market?
- How do we encourage and sustain innovation and relevance in secondary or post-secondary classrooms or the workplace?

## SUMMARY OF EMERGING THEMES

Through the thoughts and discussions of the speakers, panelists and participants regarding VET and its role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, some key themes emerged:

### **Innovation:**

- Labour market relevance – success depends on the ability and extent to which VET can deliver the knowledge, skills, and competencies that the labour market needs to prosper and grow in a competitive market.
- Numeracy and literacy as a foundation to VET training – these skills are crucial to success and flexibility in the labour market.
- Enticing learners at a young age to consider VET by allowing secondary students to begin taking courses that work toward vocational and technical qualifications.
- Seamless transitions between education and workplace systems that prepare learners for the labour market early.
- Lifelong learning component – systems which are most flexible and mobile allow greater opportunities to re-skill and up-skill to meet the labour market's changing needs. This type of learning requires systems to have multiple entry points for access.
- Partnerships are key.

### **Lessons shared/learned:**

- Broader definition of VET is needed to ensure broad-based training and mobility across labour market sectors.
- Inclusion of soft skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem-solving) as well as functional training is required in VET programs.
- Need to expand VET model to other occupational training areas (e.g., beyond technical training for health, etc).
- Lifelong learning is a key component in meeting labour market adjustments and therefore a more flexible system with multiple entry points is needed.
- Improved governance and assessment of skills and maintaining high standards in assessment of VET.
- Stronger and better partnerships are needed. This should include government to government, across government departments, government to industry and across industry sectors.
- Ensure that VET's relevance to learners and the labour market is maintained through updated instruction (e.g., teachers have recent labour market experience), updated infrastructure and strong linkages to the business community and labour market demands.

### **Economic Crisis and VET:**

- Stay the course – important to maintain focus on long-term, larger policy directions given the longer-term challenges (e.g., aging population, globalization). However, it is also important to balance this with short-term solutions to the crisis.
- Importance of robust data systems – look for opportunities to better balance labour market supply and demand data (e.g., what kind of jobs will likely arise out of the recession?).
- Keep pace with an evolving economy – importance of re-skilling to meet labour market transitions; need for a balance of soft and functional skills; what about the rise of a “green” economy and new jobs to support it; need for lifelong learning (up-skilling/re-skilling).

- Partnerships – not just engagement but functional partnerships and at all levels and combinations (e.g., industry to industry; government to government; industry to government).

## HIGHLIGHTS OF PANEL PRESENTATIONS AND SPEAKERS

### **Panel 1: Recent Innovations in VET:**

Panel 1 discussions focused on recent innovations in VET and included the following representatives:

- The Honourable Anne Tolley, Minister of Education, New Zealand
- Dr. Tom Karmel, Managing Director, National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER), Australia
- Mr. Michel Aribaud, Vocational Education and Training, European Commission
- Ms. Cathy Faber, Director, Innovative Learning Services, Calgary Board of Education, Alberta, Canada
- Mr. Greg Michaud, Dean, Centre for Learner Academic Services, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), Alberta Canada.

#### A. Context

The current economic downturn (some countries referred to it as a “crisis”) has had a significant effect on the labour market, social policy and systems, and current and future training arrangements. Many jurisdictions are facing similar situations of high unemployment rates among youth and vulnerable populations, an aging population who are, or soon will be, moving into retirement, and a mismatch in the labour market need and available labour pool. Adding to these concerns is the fact that many economies are becoming less primary-industry based and much more knowledge-based, placing pressure on training to be flexible, relevant, high quality and responsive to globalization, rapid changes in technology and ever-changing labour market demands which may come in the form of new jobs requiring new skills. Mr. Aribaud (Belgium) noted in his presentation that, “VET is the sector of education that is closest to the labour market and its success depends very much on the extent to which it can deliver the knowledge, skills and competencies that the labour market needs to prosper and grow in the ever increasingly competitive globalized marketplace.” VET must meet the needs of its stakeholders on many different levels which is the challenge of the conference’s discussion.

#### B. Current Trends

Many jurisdictions discussed the fact that, regardless of the current global economic situation, in recent years there has been a move to ensure education is meeting the needs of various stakeholders and in particular, its labour market and learner population. This has led to a more learner-centric system that promotes career counseling and opportunities for learners. It has also led to reviews around quality of education from the point of view of both infrastructure and quality training. Dr. Karmel noted that Australia carefully monitors the costs (price) of training to ensure there is a balance between the cost and quality. Social inclusion in education is recognized as being instrumental in increasing productivity while reducing poverty and promoting active citizenship. This is advocated

through higher levels of education and lifelong learning. Multiple jurisdictions also recognize the importance of mobility with respect to creating a more mobile workforce both geographically and between employment sectors.

Quality and flexibility in education have become key drivers in innovation. As a knowledge-based economy demands a higher skilled workforce, institutions and policy makers are challenged to meet that demand. Partnerships between policy makers and governing bodies, industry and employers, the working population and those seeking training provide a forum to discuss the needs of all parties as well as streamline processes and bring about innovation. Several jurisdictions have implemented local and national standards with respect to literacy and numeracy, qualifications and credentials, retention of students and trainees, as well as many other relevant benchmarks and measures.

With respect to flexibility and innovation, some jurisdictions have introduced vocational training as an option for younger students who are attending secondary/high school. New Zealand described the “tertiary high school” which allows students in year 11 to attend school and work toward technical and vocational qualifications. Alberta noted that it is piloting “Career Pathways” which is intended to provide a seamless system for transitioning students preparing for high demand occupations from high school to post secondary education or apprenticeship. These two innovative projects are successful due to strong partnerships with stakeholders, the provision of flexibility around training and qualifications/credentials, and are intended to provide more seamless transitions from education to the workplace.

Lifelong learning was highlighted by every jurisdiction as playing a significant role in moving forward in the wake of global economic changes. Lifelong learning responds to an atmosphere of change in the economy and labour market demands. It also commands quality, high standards, mobility and flexibility as the workforce re-skills and up-skills throughout their careers. Lifelong learning is a catalyst to higher levels of education and continually moves a nation towards increased productivity, a knowledge-based economy and a more literate population.

### C. Moving Forward—Innovations in VET

As we move forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, stakeholders will be challenged to keep up with the rapid pace of change and ensure VET is relevant, flexible and adaptable, accessible and meets the needs of all partners/stakeholders involved, while maintaining the integrity of standards and qualifications/credentials. Policy makers and governing bodies will be challenged by competing agendas, balancing budgets and ensuring education is seen as an investment and not a liability. Maintaining and improving the quality of education will be quantified with data that is gathered through standards and benchmarks and continual evaluation. This will also provide the evidence that is needed to validate innovative and creative approaches that will attract and retain students and build a strong and highly qualified workforce for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Keynote Address by Mr. Tjerk (Jack) Dusseldorp—“Where There’s a Skill There’s a Way: Enabling Innovation and Change through 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vocational Education”**

In his keynote address, Mr. Tjerk (Jack) Dusseldorp, President of WorldSkills International, challenged participants to highlight the importance and value of VET through stakeholder partnerships, particularly with schools and universities, in an effort to link applied skills with higher levels of learning and improve the profile of VET, which is often viewed as the ‘poor cousin’ in an educational hierarchy. E-learning arrangements and the use of technology have also improved access to training and helped to profile VET as an option for all students.

Mr. Dusseldorp discussed the importance of sustainable skills development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century noting the need for flexibility in training and curriculum; adapting traditional arrangements in a rapidly changing economy and society. Innovation is key to this adaptation, but is not without its challenges to maintain quality and standards. Mr. Dusseldorp suggested that the most effective way to encourage innovation while maintaining quality and standards is to devolve the training and accountability, and trust the teaching and the training provider.

### **Panel 2: “The New Global Economic Context: Does it merit a new VET response?”**

Panel 2 discussions focused on the new global economic context and the merits of VET in responding to it. Representatives on this panel were:

- Dr. Ursula Renold, Director General, Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (Switzerland);
- Ms Margaret McKinnon, Group Manager, Youth and Industry Skills, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Australia);
- Ms. Natalia Cuddy, National Coordinator, Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (United Kingdom);
- Mr. Seamus Hempenstall, Principal Officer, Department of Education and Science (Ireland).

#### A. Context

The current economic situation described by panel 2 was similar to the description provided by Panel 1. The global economic situation has caused jurisdictions to review and re-think their education and labour market strategies in developing current and future responses to the situation. The economic downturn is recognized as being much worse in some sectors than others and in some cases the unemployment rate has exceeded 20%. This has put pressure on training and increased demand for re-training and/or up-skilling, thereby increasing the need to re-furbish infrastructure and revamp some training.

The recent economic downturn is increasingly complex in the face of globalization, rapidly changing and increasing use of technology, and other changes such as the aging population, knowledge based economy, etc. This creates additional challenges beyond ensuring access to training opportunities that will lead to employment, challenges that raise concerns regarding the economy’s productivity and future.

## B. Response to the Economic Situation and the Need for Change

Several jurisdictions discussed the need for innovation in response to the economic situation and noted that innovation should be based on solid research data and standards/benchmarks that lead to positive outcomes. Innovation is also intended to be learner-centric, prepare learners for ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills in order to make their skills more transferrable and immediately relevant to the workplace, and engage all stakeholders in the learning process. Innovation also requires greater degrees of flexibility while working with multiple stakeholders who may have very different perspectives, while attempting to achieve a common goal.

To maintain a competitive advantage in the future, it will be increasingly important to maintain standards and quality in education and specifically VET. Nationally recognized qualifications/credentials are beneficial in a labour market context to facilitate worker mobility, while recognizing the importance of standards related to process, productivity, etc. Monitoring standards against benchmarks can assist policy and decision makers in monitoring the labour market and ensuring that programs are meeting the needs of stakeholders. For example, Switzerland noted a rigorous monitoring schedule that incorporates scientific monitoring of supply and demand in the apprenticeship market, statistical monitoring of apprenticeship contracts and cost-benefit analysis of training activity for firms with apprenticeship training, in an effort to ensure a successful VET system.

The economic downturn has caused unemployment rates to increase in various sectors and amongst many vulnerable groups, particularly those with low skill levels. This is a challenge that panelists noted would require decisions regarding targeted training in specific sectors and for specific learner cohorts (e.g., youth). Australia has set a specific target that “40% of all 25 – 34 year olds attain higher education qualification by 2025.” Up-skilling and re-training will also provide learners with the opportunity for more mobility and opportunities within the labour market. Two jurisdictions (UK and Ireland) also recognized prior learning assessment and recognition as potential tools to recognize informal learning that might be transferrable to other employment opportunities.

## C. VET’s Role

If the response to the economic situation is to ensure quality education with the ability to change and be innovative, then VET, being closest to the labour market, has a very important role to play. Panelists noted the opportunity that VET has to partner with stakeholders to ensure training is accessible, of high standard and quality, and meets the needs of both the learner (eventually the employee) and the employer. VET is a critical investment that will help countries maintain their competitive advantage as they move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **OECD Report on VET, Learning for Jobs—Presented by Ms. Kathrin Hoeckel, Directorate for Education, OECD**

Ms. Kathrin Hoeckel shared the results of the OECD’s ongoing study on VET. The study involves 16 countries and is the first study to be conducted in many years. Ms. Hoeckel indicated that VET systems vary widely across OECD countries, but noted common themes regarding the need for quality data and standards, increased access to training and the importance of partnership with stakeholders. The current

economic crisis has, in some jurisdictions, seriously challenged VET since there is such a strong link between the economy and the provision of apprenticeship placements. In sectors with very high rates of unemployment, there are fewer apprenticeship placements which significantly slows the process for certification and progress through apprenticeship. Ms. Hoeckel suggested that the response to the current economic situation is to maintain the system through various subsidies, closely monitor demand and supply and engage in innovation.

## CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The conference was highly successful and allowed participants to share best practices/learnings and discuss the critical role of VET in meeting labour market need, particularly in the face of the global economic downturn.

The conference was a key step in an ongoing international dialogue on current and future trends in VET. The discussion aided participants in exploring opportunities for VET programming to act as a driver for economic recovery, influence an emerging, post-recession economy and meet shifting labour market needs and realities.

Next steps include:

- Presentations of conference context and results to the OECD Education Policy Committee
- Update of the working paper on VET (Government of Canada, HRSDC)
- Linking of conference results to the OECD *Learning for Jobs* study
- Ongoing international dialogue on VET through the legacy webpage of the VET (<http://education.alberta.ca/department/events/vet.aspx> )