

Poor Cousin No More: Lessons for Adult Education in Canada from the Past and New Zealand

Jude Walker

IN BRIEF

Adult education provides skills development opportunities to help Canadians find better jobs and improve well-being. Yet it remains a “poor cousin” of compulsory and higher education, disconnected from social policy and the education system at large, with its learners and teachers stigmatized. This paper looks at Canada’s past efforts to address these issues by creating a national adult education strategy. It then offers insights from Aotearoa New Zealand, which went a long way to making adult education mainstream by integrating it into the country’s education system, professionalizing its teachers and standardizing assessments. Granted, New Zealand’s reform cannot, and should not, be replicated in the context of a vast federated nation such as Canada. Nevertheless, it offers important lessons to Canada’s federal, provincial and territorial governments in devising a well-functioning and coherent adult education strategy to create a better future for everyone.

EN BREF

L'éducation des adultes offre aux Canadiens l'occasion de développer leurs compétences pour trouver de meilleurs emplois et améliorer leur bien-être. Elle n'en demeure pas moins le « parent pauvre » de l'enseignement obligatoire et supérieur, en plus d'être détachée des politiques sociales et du système éducatif dans leur ensemble, et de voir ses apprenants et ses professeurs stigmatisés. Cette étude retrace les efforts déployés par le Canada pour s'attaquer au problème dans le cadre d'une stratégie nationale d'éducation des adultes. Elle examine ensuite les moyens mis en œuvre par la Aotearoa Nouvelle-Zélande pour intégrer l'éducation des adultes au système éducatif du pays, professionnaliser ses enseignants et standardiser son processus d'évaluation. Certes, il n'est ni possible ni souhaitable de reproduire une telle réforme dans une grande fédération comme le Canada. Mais elle offre d'importantes leçons aux gouvernements fédéral, provinciaux et territoriaux qui voudraient créer une stratégie cohérente et efficace visant à offrir un meilleur avenir pour tous les citoyens.

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THE FORGOTTEN CORNER OF EDUCATION

The case for investing in skills development and education for adults in Canada has been made repeatedly, comprehensively and convincingly both by researchers and policy-makers.¹ Major forces in society – such as the aging population, globalization, the climate crisis and continuing automation – are widely accepted to be placing unprecedented skill demands on the population.² The pandemic has intensified the challenge, exposing vulnerabilities in the economy. Whether someone needs to complete high school or requires retraining or professional and personal development, adult education is a matter of concern for Canadians for both economic and social reasons. Indeed, while the term “adult education” is often understood to connote remedial education for a small subset of adults, the fact is that rapid technological and labour market shifts have profound educational and learning implications for most of us.³

In many ways, Canada is already a leader in adult education, having exercised global influence in policy, practice and research for over a century.⁴ Of note is Canada’s key role in developing the OECD’s International Large Scale Assessments in the 1990s and 2000s, specifically the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) surveys, which form the basis for both the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the more recent Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).⁵ While Canada consistently ranks above the United States in all these assessments, many adults still struggle with literacy, numeracy and technology skills. Canada sits at the OECD average in the latest PIAAC survey data from 2012 with almost 50 percent of participants scoring at the three lowest of five literacy proficiency levels, compared to, for example, around 30 percent in Japan.⁶ Furthermore, proportions scoring at levels 4 and 5 tend to be higher among Canadian-born, non-Indigenous respondents, and vary widely across provinces.⁷

A plethora of providers – among them, institutes of technology, colleges, labour unions, non-profits and literacy organizations – offer important adult education

¹ See, for example, Canada, Department of Finance, *Budget 2021: A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience*, 2021, <https://www.budget.gc.ca/2021/report-rapport/toc-tdm-en.html>; W. Kops, “Older Adult Education: Towards Age-Friendly Canadian Universities,” *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* 32, no. 1 (2020): 59-73; and K. Meyers, S. Harding and K. Pasolli, *Skills Training That Works: Lessons from Demand-Driven Approaches*, IRPP Study 84 (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2021), <https://irpp.org/research-studies/skills-training-that-works-lessons-from-demand-driven-approaches/>.

² W. Cascio, “Training Trends: Macro, Micro, and Policy Issues,” *Human Resource Management Review* 29, no. 2 (2019): 284-297.

³ The term “adult education” is not without contention and can be used to refer to a plethora of different things. In this paper, I use the term to refer mainly to work-related/work-directed education for adults (such as vocational training or workplace education), as well as adult literacy and remedial education (such as high school completion; also known as “adult basic education”). The use of the term in this paper does not refer to learning for personal or social purposes (e.g., taking a yoga, cooking or personal development course) or to university education (for which the term “higher education” is generally used).

⁴ See J. Draper and L. English, “Adult Education in Canada,” *Canadian Encyclopedia*, Feb. 18, 2013.

⁵ For further information, see M. Elfert and J. Walker, “The Rise and Fall of Adult Literacy: Policy Lessons from Canada,” *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* 11, no. 1, (2020): 101-25.

⁶ OECD, *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*, (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2013). <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264204256-en.pdf?expires=1661953314&id=id&acc-name=guest&checksum=1CBD0B06C8AE7C03B640849F3CF02B9E>

⁷ Conference Board of Canada, *Adults With High-Level Literacy Skills*, <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/provincial/education/adlt-highlit.aspx>.

programming across the different provinces and territories. There are many reskilling initiatives to support the redeployment of workers to other sectors.⁸ However, adult education has tended to sit at the margins as the poor cousin to both secondary and post-secondary education.

Adult education in Canada is fragmented. There are no standardized measures of assessment for its provision and outcomes. In other words, we have no real sense of what is going on in the country as a whole. The lack of a coordinated certification process greatly complicates interprovincial transferability of credentials. Sharing of best practices is also inadequate, and often completely absent. The different aspects of adult education are often disconnected from key conversations on education, and even from ministries of education. Adult education is not always institutionalized; and receives insufficient attention and funding. It thus remains poorly understood – stigmatized by its perceived connection to basic literacy and needed only for very few and for the marginalized.

This image is sharply at odds with current thinking, which views literacy as touching on myriad areas of our lives, highly contextual and existing on a continuum – that is, not as a binary concept where one is either literate or illiterate. Indeed, while children's education is seen as a no-brainer, adult education in Canada continues to be associated with *basic* education, illiteracy and people who “screwed up at school.” Even the status of adult education teachers is much lower than that of regular schoolteachers given the widely held belief that they are less qualified, and there are no regulatory mechanisms in place to assure quality standards.⁹

Solutions to some of these issues may lie at the national level as a way of bringing coordination, collaboration and coherence to an otherwise diverse and decentralized education landscape. Others may require adult education to be fully integrated into existing provincial and territorial education systems in order to institutionalize the field and bring it into the mainstream.

This paper draws on my recent solo and coauthored research to look at adult education both in the Canadian context and beyond it. It starts off by taking us back to Canada's early efforts to build a national strategy and infrastructure in adult literacy and skills. The country came a long way toward constructing an adult education and skills system in the last part of the twentieth century and the early 2000s, yet the foundations were not strong enough to withstand the subsequent dismantling.

The paper also examines a country that has managed to set up an overarching education system which fully encompasses adult education and skills: Aotearoa New Zealand.¹⁰ Prior to reforms that started in the 1970s, adult education in New

⁸ Canada, *Budget 2021*; B. Caranci and F. Fong, “Don't Let History Repeat: Canada's Energy Sector Transition and the Potential Impact on Workers,” TD Canada, April 6, 2021.

⁹ S. Smythe, “Ten Years of Adult Literacy Policy and Practice in Canada: Literacy Policy Tensions and Workarounds,” *Language and Literacy* 17, no. 2 (2015): 4-21.

¹⁰ It is now customary in New Zealand, and particularly in government, to refer to the country by its Māori name Aotearoa (meaning, “land of the long white cloud”), in a continuing commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi upon which the country was founded (<https://waitangitribunal.govt.nz/treaty-of-waitangi/>).

Zealand, as in Canada, functioned outside the mainstream education system, and learners were widely seen as people outside the mainstream of society. Yet, unlike Canada, New Zealand now has a centralized, coordinated, standardized and professionalized adult education system. By bringing all adult education under the same agency that governs universities, New Zealand imposed uniform standards of accountability and professionalization. These have helped bring adult educators into the professional fold of education, enhancing the legitimacy of the entire field of adult education.

In looking across the Pacific, the point is not to prescribe another country's model for Canada, nor to argue for mass nationalization or centralization. Indeed, Canada is known internationally for its highly successful provincial and territorial K-12 education system, suggesting that an entirely centralized model of adult education is likely unnecessary and impractical. Rather, the purpose is to offer some insights from New Zealand's experience that may be useful in learning what has gone wrong in Canada, and in reviving promising early initiatives that fell by the wayside.

ADULT EDUCATION IN CANADA

The current state of affairs

Education in Canada falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction; in fact, Canada is the only OECD country without a national ministry or department of education.¹¹ This means that adult education also falls under provincial and territorial authority, with governance structures varying widely across the country. For example, in British Columbia, some components of what is considered adult education fall under the Ministry of Education and others under the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training. Ontario has a Ministry of Education (which includes high school completion for adults); a Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development; and a Ministry of Colleges and Universities. By contrast, Quebec has a single Ministry of Education and Higher Education (*Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur*).

A few federal ministries fund and support specific adult education initiatives (as defined in footnote 3). The most important is Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), which administers grants and supports adult education programming across the country. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada supports language education for adults in the two official languages. Other ministries also support various forms of adult education. For example Indigenous Services Canada houses the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program; Veterans Affairs offers vocational rehabilitation and other programming; and Correctional Service Canada has a host of programs that focus on employment and employability skills

¹¹ OECD, *Ontario, Canada: Reform to Support High Achievement in a Diverse Context*, 2010, <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/46580959.pdf>.

for currently and previously incarcerated individuals. Also important to note is the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), composed of provincial and territorial ministers of education, which seeks to provide pan-Canadian leadership on education, including the areas of adult literacy, post-secondary education and Indigenous education. A dedicated unit within CMEC gathers and provides pan-Canadian education indicators.

While a decentralized approach to education is meant to serve the needs of a diverse population and a geographically vast country more effectively, adult education in Canada is fragmented, which raises a number of challenges. Funding and priorities for adult education differ across the country and are often not secure. In adult literacy, for example, provinces and territories “are under no obligation to designate specific funds in support of core literacy programs. As a result, literacy services in Canada vary considerably in resources and accessibility from one region of the country to another.”¹²

Further, there is no pan-Canadian quality assurance body overseeing educational programs for adults, though some provincial initiatives focus on quality assurance of institutions. One is British Columbia’s quality assurance process audit launched in 2016 to assess public post-secondary institutions. While this paper does not specifically recommend the creation of a centralized body, the lack of common language and sharing poses a number of problems, including cross-country recognition of training programs, identifying and funding adult learning needs, and supporting interprovincial learning on adult education programming. Recognition of educators’ credentials is also not well understood or supported across jurisdictions.

Adult education in Canada is burdened by significant stigma. In an interview that Maren Elfert conducted for our paper on adult literacy, one researcher and advocate lamented the cancellation of a successful pilot literacy program for single mothers despite its positive impacts: “And so it worked...and worked better...and we had impacts on the mother, impacts on where they lived, impacts on the kids at school... All sorts of things we couldn’t monetize, but even just the tax revenue paid for it. No jurisdiction in Canada has implemented anything like this.”¹³ This expert felt that government buy-in to the program was lacking because of the stigma that still surrounded poor and poorly educated single-mother learners.

Adult educators face stigma as well. Quoted in a paper by Simon Fraser University researcher Suzanne Smythe, an adult educator candidly remarked that, “[N]o one ever grew up saying, ‘I want to be an ABE/Literacy instructor’; it doesn’t appear in most job classification systems. It is irregular, part-time, and in many places simply doesn’t pay.”¹⁴ Adult literacy educators are not considered professionals in the same way as K-12 teachers are, whether or not they hold recognized credentials. In fact, adult ed-

¹² S. Smythe, “Ten Years of Adult Literacy Policy.”

¹³ For further information on the stigma of adult education, see H. Beder, “The Stigma of Illiteracy,” *Adult Basic Education* 1, no. 2 (1991): 67-78; P. Easton, V. A. Entwistle and B. Williams. “How the Stigma of Low Literacy Can Impair Patient-Professional Spoken Interactions and Affect Health: Insights from a Qualitative Investigation,” *BMC Health Services Research* 13, no. 319 (2013).

¹⁴ Smythe, “Ten Years of Adult Literacy Policy,” 7.

ucators tend to be paid less for doing the same work even when they hold the same credentials as schoolteachers.¹⁵

While it's true that federalism implies some degree of decentralization and autonomy for provincial and territorial authorities, it does not have to result in a fragmented education system where credentials are not recognized across provincial borders and there is no mechanism for sharing best practices. On the contrary, the very complexity of actors involved in education policy calls for mechanisms that ensure coordination between provinces and territories, and between the various elements of adult education. Germany is an example of a federal nation that has a robust adult education system with centralized programming and funding, but different approaches in its 16 partly sovereign states (*Länder*). Importantly, too, both Federal and *Länder* ministries track information and collect data, and documentation is readily accessible and shared across the country.

Box 1. Pan-Canadian global competencies

1. Critical thinking and problem solving
2. Innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship
3. Learning to learn/self-aware and self-directed
4. Collaboration
5. Communication
6. Global citizenship and sustainability

Source: Council of Ministers of Education, 2018, <https://www.globalcompetencies.cmec.ca/global-competencies>

A number of proposals and initiatives have recently sought to address the concerns surrounding Canada's adult education model, or lack thereof. For instance, Tony Bonen and Matthias Oschinski have called for national mapping of training opportunities.¹⁶ To support Canada's energy sector transition, a 2021 TD Economics report recommends the creation of a national retraining framework based on a tax-

onomy of skills and standardized programming.¹⁷ In 2018, ESDC's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills funded a program known as Futureworx to "explore the need for and how best to develop a pan-Canadian soft skills framework."¹⁸ In the same year, CMEC endorsed six pan-Canadian global competencies to be fostered by all 13 provinces and territories.¹⁹

Perhaps most significant was the formation in 2018 of the national Future Skills initiative. First proposed by the federal government's Advisory Council on Economic Growth, the initiative comprises a Future Skills Council, a diverse group that advises the government on "national and regional skills development and training priorities," plus a Future Skills Centre, which supports adult education research and programming.²⁰ As of mid-2021, the Future Skills Centre had funded over 120 projects

¹⁵ See, e.g., the case of BC as noted in J. Walker and S. Smythe, "The (Un)deserving Adult: Examining British Columbia's Adult Basic Education Policy," *Studies in the Education of Adults* 52, no. 2 (2020): 195-214.

¹⁶ T. Bonen and M. Oschinski, *Mapping Canada's Training Ecosystem: Much Needed and Long Overdue*, IRPP Insight 34 (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2021).

¹⁷ Caranci and Fong, "Don't Let History Repeat."

¹⁸ Futureworx, *Building a Pan Canadian Soft Skills Framework* (Truro: Futureworks, 2018) <https://futureworx.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Soft-Skills-Framework-Report.pdf>.

¹⁹ CMEC, "Global Competencies," Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2018, <https://www.global-competencies.cmec.ca/global-competencies>.

²⁰ Advisory Council on Economic Growth, 2017, <https://www.budget.gc.ca/aceg-ccce/home-accueil-en.html>.



Source: Canada, "Skills for Success," <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/jobs/training/initiatives/skills-success.html>.

in partnership with over 5,000 organizations, companies, and institutes.²¹ Further, the 2020 Throne Speech announced "the largest investment in Canadian history in training for workers" and the 2021 budget earmarked more than \$300 million over the next three years for programming delivered by a centralized Office of Skills for Success within ESDC.^{22,23,24} This new agency provides information on skills needed for work and life, and offers skills assessment and training opportunities across the country. It recently launched a new Skills for Success typology, which replaced the Essential Skills Framework used by its predecessor, the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills.²⁵ Thanks to an ample budget running to millions of

dollars, the office also issued a call for proposals in early 2022 for organizations to undertake major research projects and develop new tools and programs.

These appear to be exciting times for Canadian adult education. However, we should not forget that this is not the first time the country has attempted to build or promote national skills development and adult education initiatives, or to share best practices across the country.

"We almost made it"

There was a time when adult education and essential skills seemed to be a national priority in Canada. The push started around the 1970s and momentum built over three decades, but then unravelled in the mid-2000s. It is worth looking back at these initiatives so we may learn from what went wrong.

²¹ See the Future Skills Centre website: <https://fsc-ccf.ca/>.

²² Canada, Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022, "About the Office of Skills for Success," <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/literacy-essential-skills.html>.

²³ Canada, Privy Council Office, "A Stronger and More Resilient Canada, Speech from the Throne," September 23, 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/campaigns/speech-throne/2020/stronger-resilient-canada.html>.

²⁴ For comparison, as adult education policy veteran Brigid Hayes points out, OLES was operating on a budget of about \$23 million per year in 2019-2020 for its Adult Learning Literacy and Essential Skills Program. See B. Hayes, "OLES Hits 100% Spending in 2019-2020," *As I Was Saying...* [personal blog], January 5, 2021, <https://brigidhayes.wordpress.com/2021/01/05/oles-hits-100-spending-in-2019-2020/>.

²⁵ The Essential Skills Framework was launched by ESDC's predecessor, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) in the 1990s and included nine skills that were deemed necessary for life and, particularly, the workplace: numeracy, working with others, continuous learning, reading text, writing, thinking, document use and digital skills. These skills grew out of IALS and were an organizing framework to support training and education across Canada. They informed the development of Essential Skills profiles linked to over 300 jobs and helped determine the five skills levels identified within the National Occupational Classification system (<https://noc.esdc.gc.ca/>).

Developing and building infrastructure

Canada's initial interest in supporting adult education and workforce skills has been traced back to the 1960s, particularly in the realm of adult literacy,²⁶ with major developments occurring in the 1970s and 1980s. By the early 1990s, Canada had six national literacy organizations (see Table 1), which provided support to learners of all ages and various educational levels, and succeeded in bringing issues of adult literacy – and adult skills more broadly – to the authorities' attention.²⁷

Among these six groups, the Movement for Canadian Literacy, in partnership with the Canadian Alliance for Literacy, played one of the most central roles in promoting a literacy agenda. By forming a coalition of 10 literacy organizations across the country, the Movement rose in influence, solidified through its Open Letter to the Prime Minister, *A Challenge for Action on Literacy*, which was widely disseminated through various national and local media throughout 1987 and 1988.²⁸

The first national literacy survey was commissioned by the Southam newspaper chain in 1986 to examine Canadians' ability to complete everyday literacy tasks. The project, which was the prototype for the OECD's widely acclaimed International Adult Literacy Survey, required respondents to complete reading tasks taken from daily newspapers, as well as other reading, writing and numeracy exercises. The latter included determining a medicine dosage by reading a bottle of cough syrup; circling the expiry date on a driver's licence; and figuring out change when ordering food from a restaurant. The content of the survey was determined by a 25-member panel of representative Canadians who decided which tasks adults should be able to complete in order to function in society. The panel defined adequate literacy as correctly completing 64 percent of 38 tasks. Around 38 percent of participants failed to meet this threshold.²⁹

The Southam survey's widely publicized results were hugely influential in prompting then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to include the creation and funding of a National Literacy Secretariat in his re-election platform in 1988. Statistics Canada followed up the next year by launching its Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities survey, which produced similar results to Southam. Skills were assessed on a 500-point scale, with respondents scoring below 150 for literacy and 200 for numeracy classified as demonstrating marked difficulty.³⁰

²⁶ It is of interest to note, too, that CMEC was formed in 1967 in an effort to facilitate national sharing in education more generally.

²⁷ L. Shohet, "Adult Learning and Literacy in Canada: A Review of Adult Learning and Literacy," *Annual Review 2* (Montreal: National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2001).

²⁸ See R. Darville, *Adult Literacy Work in Canada* (Vancouver: Canadian Association for Adult Education 1992): <http://en.copian.ca/library/research/work/adultlit.pdf>; e.g., full-page ads appearing in the *Globe and Mail* (October 17, 1987) and in *Macleans Magazine* twice: 1987, Vol 100, Issue 45, p. 3; 1988, Vol 101, Issue 9, p.27.

²⁹ For further information, see P. Calamai, *Broken Words: Why Five Million Canadians are Illiterate, The Southam Literacy Report* (Toronto: Southam Newspaper Group, 1987) <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED291871.pdf>.

³⁰ R. Finnie and R. Meng, "The Importance of Functional Literacy: Reading and Math Skills and Labour Market Outcomes of High School Drop-Outs," Statistics Canada Research Paper, 2006, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2006275-eng.pdf?st=7-SX0MtD>. This was the first survey to use Item Response Theory (which is also the methodological model for the subsequent OECD tests).

Table 1. Canada’s six national literacy organizations

Date Formed	Literacy organization	Description
1899	Frontier College	Formerly <i>Reading Camp Association</i> ; providing adult education across Canada
1977	Movement for Canadian Literacy	Developed coalition of 10 literacy organizations throughout the country which later collectively became the Canadian Alliance for Literacy
1981	Laubach ¹	Community-based literacy tutoring program
1989	National Adult Literacy Database	The Canadian Adult Literacy Information Network
1989	ABC Literacy Canada	Non-profit advocacy and research organization
1991	Fédération canadienne pour l’alphabétisation en français (since 2011: Le Réseau pour le développement de l’alphabétisme et des compétences)	Advocacy and national organization for French-language literacy

¹ Laubach is an international organization founded in the US. The Canadian branch was considered one of the six major literacy organizations in the country. For more information, see: <http://schugurenky.faculty.asu.edu/moments/1955laubach.html>

These results, coupled with further lobbying by media personalities and literacy organizations, led to adult literacy skills receiving even more attention. The OECD’s first international survey, released in 1995, was like fuel poured on a smouldering fire.³¹ In Canada, it gave an especially big boost to the National Literacy Secretariat. As one former staff member told us, the OECD project provided important momentum and helped propel all of the secretariat’s activities at the time.

Shortly after the OECD survey results were released, Human Resources Development Canada (an ESDC predecessor) developed its Essential Skills framework, identifying nine skills considered vital for employability and job success.³² From this, the comprehensive National Occupational Classification database was developed, containing between 200 and 350 profiles related to skill demands deemed necessary for specific occupations. The National Occupational Classification has been influential in many other contexts, including the Essential Skills for Aboriginal Futures program.³³

³¹ IALS was designed with expertise from Statistics Canada, the OECD and the US Educational Testing Service.

³² The HRSDC went through many iterations, starting as Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), and is now called Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC).

³³ D. Gyamarti, J. Lane, and S. Murray, “Competency Frameworks and Canada’s Essential Skills,” *Skills Next*, (November 2020), <https://ppforum.ca/publications/skills-next-competency-frameworks-and-canadas-essential-skills/>.

By the late 1990s, prospects were brightening for the creation of a national adult education and skills system. This continued into the first decade of the millennium with the creation in 2002 of the Canadian Council on Learning – an independent, federally funded, not-for-profit organization with a mandate to “work with Canadians, provinces, sector councils, labour 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.”³⁴ The council sought to map and facilitate lifelong learning across the country, and had some success in doing so over its eight-year lifespan.

During this time, the media was also crucial in spurring the development of what was starting to look like a Canadian adult education system. Three prominent Peters – Calamai, Gzowski and Mansbridge – made especially valuable contributions. In the mid to late 1980s, Peter Calamai was intimately involved in the Southam survey, and in reporting on and lobbying for literacy. The CBC’s much-loved Peter Gzowski became a champion of literacy, sowing the seeds in 1985 of what became the Peter Gzowski Foundation for Literacy which, as of 2021, had raised over \$15 million for volunteer-based adult and family literacy initiatives.³⁵ Calamai and Gzowski also joined forces with federal ministers David Crombie and Lucien Bouchard to help bring the National Literacy Secretariat into being in the late 1980s. Finally, Peter Mansbridge, the now-retired CBC news anchor, continues to lobby for literacy across Canada.³⁶

The media generally gave extensive coverage to the results of the OECD’s International Adult Literacy Survey, which revealed that over 40 percent of Canadians struggled with literacy and numeracy, defined as below level 3 on a scale of 1 to 5.³⁷ It continued playing a key role in bringing adult education to the attention of Canadians throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, publicizing the survey’s results, and later – though less prominently – the results of the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills survey.³⁸

Other politicians also played important roles. According to one federal official, Senator Joyce Fairbairn “triggered the strong government [response to the first OECD literacy survey]” and “was a force of nature.” Similarly, Minister of State for Human Resources Development Claudette Bradshaw set up a federal advisory committee on literacy and essential skills (the Bradshaw Committee) in 2005. According to adult education policy veteran Brigid Hayes, the committee laid out a broad vision for a national literacy strategy, backed up by a federal government commitment to increase the \$28 million in annual spending earmarked for literacy by another \$30 million over three years. However, nothing came of this promise, likely owing to the change of government in 2006.³⁹

³⁴ Text taken from “Canadian Council on Learning,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Council_on_Learning. The website and related documentation have largely been erased since the shutdown of the organization.

³⁵ Peter Gzowski Invitational, “History,” <https://www.pgicanada.ca/history/>.

³⁶ See, e.g., Z. Demarco, “Peter Mansbridge Is Out to Debunk Fake News,” *WE Stories*, <https://www.we.org/en-CA/we-stories/we-day/peter-mansbridge-debunks-fake-news-we-day-toronto>.

³⁷ Elfert and Walker, “The Rise and Fall of Adult Literacy.”

³⁸ J. Walker and K. Rubenson, “The Media Construction of an Adult Literacy Agenda in Canada,” *Globalisation, Education, and Societies* 12, no. 1 (2014): 143-63.

³⁹ B. Hayes, “Literacy: Shifting Priorities: Federal Literacy Policy Since 2006.” *Northern Public Affairs*, December 2, 2013.

A period of upheaval

Concerns about Canada's approach to adult learning emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with little recorded improvement in literacy levels – at least according to the OECD's assessments. When the federal Conservatives came to power in 2006 with a commitment to retreat from areas of provincial jurisdiction, adult education became one of the targets for cuts. Just months after taking office in February 2006, the new Conservative government led by Stephen Harper announced it would cut \$17.7 million from adult literacy funding, effectively dismantling the National Literacy Secretariat. Conservative MP John Baird explained that, in spite of the government running a budget surplus, "I think if we're spending \$20 million and we have one out of seven folks in the country that are functionally illiterate, we've got to fix the ground floor problem and not be trying to do repair work after the fact."

The erosion of support for literacy came to a head in 2014 and 2015 when the government withdrew funding for all national literacy organizations.⁴⁰ Jason Kenney, then Minister of Employment and Social Development, declared:

Our government is committed to ensuring that federal funding for literacy is no longer spent on administration and countless research papers, but instead is invested in projects that result in Canadians receiving the literacy skills they need to obtain jobs.⁴¹

Yet according to Brigid Hayes, the same government's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills repeatedly failed to allocate funds to projects dedicated to literacy programming over many years.⁴² Indeed, when the OECD surveys did not demonstrate literacy gains in the Canadian population, federal and provincial funding for literacy programs began to decline.⁴³

While governments may have been right to question why programs were not having the desired affect on literacy, the resulting upheaval in adult education programming resulted in a near-total dismantling of an already fragile system.

The Canadian Council on Learning was defunded in 2010. Elsewhere, the government's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills made grant applications more competitive and bureaucratically cumbersome in an effort to improve results, which had a devastating effect on community organizations. Much of its allotted annual budget went unspent until 2017, both because of barriers to applying (confusing, cumbersome requirements and lack of clarity and transparency in communicating requirements and deadlines) and because various groups were not deemed eligible or deserving

⁴⁰ For citations and further information on this period see Elfert and Walker, "The Rise and Fall of Adult Literacy."

⁴¹ Cited in S. Smythe, "Ten Years of Adult Literacy Policy."

⁴² B. Hayes, "Federal Government Spending on Literacy and Essential Skills," *As I Was Saying...* [personal blog], December 4, 2018. <https://brigidhayes.wordpress.com/2018/11/29/federal-government-spending-on-literacy-and-essential-skills/>.

⁴³ Cited in Smythe, "Ten Years of Adult Literacy Policy."

of funding due to the shift in approach.⁴⁴ Even now, under the current Liberal government, there exist very few open calls for proposals: the government reaches out to a handful of preselected organizations to bid on certain contracts.⁴⁵

While it may be tempting to blame the Conservative government for the upheaval, key players in the Canadian adult literacy field have noted that the situation began to unravel in the late 1990s – under a Liberal government – as tensions emerged between HRDC and the National Literacy Secretariat. The main cause appears to have been a financial scandal at the secretariat in 1999, which was uncovered by an internal government audit of 461 files to ascertain if “complete paper documentation was available on each file.”⁴⁶ The results pointed to poor record keeping, but no evidence of theft.

More generally, ideological tensions were building between the department and the secretariat over the shift to “literacy and essential skills”, and the Chrétien Liberal government’s growing focus on the link between literacy and the economy and employment in the late 1990s. Many in the secretariat were still focused on community literacy and adult education for reasons of social and individual well-being, not just economic ones.

The study I undertook with Maren Elfert confirmed that, “while the literacy strategy pursued by the National Literacy Secretariat was community-based and inspired by a view of literacy as a driver of social and personal development, (the government’s) interest in literacy focused exclusively on employment.”⁴⁷ I hearken back here to my mentor, the great Kiwi literacy advocate, scholar and practitioner John Benseman, who questioned this either/or choice. Benseman pointed out that workplace literacy programs support social, emotional and community development, while family and community literacy activities can improve prospects for employment, career mobility, and job satisfaction.

It also appeared evident from our interviews that certain literacy programming – run by community groups like “neighbourhood houses” in British Columbia or others that didn’t focus entirely on employment – was losing government support.⁴⁸ As one interviewee told us: “In about 2002...all of a sudden we’re literacy and essential skills and we’re having to partner with more of the employment side of the department. Where do you put family literacy activities, and where do you put community? That started to be a big rub in that (it) didn’t fit with the mandate.”⁴⁹

Another go at building an adult education system?

As noted earlier, Canada now appears to be making a renewed effort to build a more robust adult education and skills system. The encouraging signs include the Future

⁴⁴ Hayes, “Federal Government Spending on Literacy and Essential Skills.” Smythe, “Ten Years of Adult Literacy Policy.”

⁴⁵ B. Hayes, “Who Will Get the Call?,” *As I Was Saying...* [personal blog], August 12, 2021. <https://brigidhayes.wordpress.com/2021/08/12/who-will-get-the-call/>.

⁴⁶ B. Hayes, “From Community Development and Partnerships to Accountability: The Case of the National Literacy Secretariat” *Literacies* 10 (2009): 19-22.

⁴⁷ Cited in Elfert and Walker, “The Rise and Fall of Adult Literacy.”

⁴⁸ See Association of Neighbourhood Houses BC, <https://anhbc.org/>.

⁴⁹ Elfert and Walker, “The Rise and Fall of Adult Literacy.”

Skills initiative, numerous proposals to map skills needs and training options, and the recent establishment of the Office of Skills for Success with its new skills framework. Yet despite the new language, new systems and new offices, the adult education field continues to lie outside the mainstream, fitting within neither post-secondary education nor compulsory education. It is also not yet clear whether these fresh initiatives do much to challenge the long-standing association of adult education with basic learning for a small and marginalized subset of the population. Making matters worse, as former National Literacy Secretariat scholar-in-residence and adult education professor Ralf St. Clair noted in 2016, “there continue to be 13 jurisdictions shaping their own approach to the field, with few shared tools or methods.”⁵⁰

While these developments give cause for renewed optimism, it is still worth examining the experience of New Zealand, which started building a cohesive adult education system in the 1990s and has continued to expand it to this day. Though not without its flaws, the New Zealand case has shown how adult education, learning and skills can be integrated into government ministries, funding and conversations.

LESSONS FROM NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand differs from Canada in many ways: it has a centralized government and is not a federation. It is much smaller both geographically (270,000 km² versus 9.98 million km²) and population-wise (5 million versus 38 million), and has a much smaller economy (ranked 52nd in the world in 2022 compared to Canada’s 10th spot).^{51,52} Even so, the two countries have many similarities:

- “Rich” countries with high standards of living.⁵³
- Generally highly educated populations, though Canadians are more likely to have completed a post-secondary diploma or degree.⁵⁴
- Settler-colonial nations grappling with the legacy of colonization and disparities in economic and social conditions between Indigenous peoples (Māori in New Zealand; First Nations, Inuit and Métis in Canada) and non-Indigenous populations.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ R. St. Clair. “Plus ça change. The Failure of PIAAC to Drive Evidence-Based Policy in Canada,” *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung* 39, no. 2, (2016): 225-239.

⁵¹ World Population Review, “Total Population by Country 2022,” <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries>.

⁵² World Population Review, “GDP Ranked by Country 2022,” <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-by-gdp>.

⁵³ In 2020, Gross National Income per capita was \$45,000 in Canada versus \$41,000 in NZ; life expectancy was the same at around 82 years; both countries are ranked low in terms of corruption. One main difference, which relates to the reforms NZ underwent in the 1980s and 1990s, is that NZ is more economically liberal, ranked higher on fiscal, economic, property rights, and monetary freedom. See Georank, “Canada vs New Zealand: Economic Indicators Comparison,” <https://georank.org/economy/canada/new-zealand>.

⁵⁴ In 2019, the OECD reported that in 25 to 34-year-olds, 63 percent of Canadians versus 44 percent of New Zealanders had completed some form of tertiary education (i.e., a diploma, certificate, degree, etc.). In 55 to 64-year-olds, the gap was similar: 50 versus 30 percent. See OECD, “Population with Tertiary Education,” <https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/population-with-tertiary-education.htm>.

⁵⁵ For further information, see J. Walker, “Comparing Adult Education Systems: Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand,” *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung* 43 (2020): 241-57, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40955-020-00158-z>.

- Market economies, which generally prize liberal individualism and, compared with more welfare-oriented societies like the Nordic countries, have weaker unions, encourage greater competition, tend in varying degrees toward means-tested benefits instead of universal provision and have higher levels of inequality.⁵⁶
- Large numbers of recent immigrants.⁵⁷
- Traditional resource economies with a growing high-tech sector.⁵⁸

As a country with only around 5 million people in the South Pacific, New Zealand has punched above its weight in global influence in social policy. It has repeatedly been seen as an incubator of social policy initiatives, recently receiving wide attention, for example, for its largely successful management of COVID-19.^{59,60} In the realm of education, it has demonstrated leadership in such areas as phonics in reading instruction, and developing and globalizing the model of outcomes-based education.^{61,62} Especially relevant here is its remarkable success in creating a robust tertiary education system (including both post-secondary and broader adult education)⁶³ stemming from a root-and-branch reform of social and economic policy in the 1980s and 1990s. The Tertiary Education Commission now oversees every aspect of adult education, from university to college to workplace to community.⁶⁴

Dismantling and rebuilding the country as we knew it

Starting in 1984, New Zealand undertook a set of radical reforms, which came to be known as “the New Zealand experiment.”⁶⁵ In brief, the country went from being a closed welfare state with preferential immigration ties to Britain to a deregulated, liberalized economy with mass privatization and the application of business practices to the public sector. Educational reforms were characterized by standardization,

⁵⁶ D. Soskice and P. Hall. *Varieties of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Quebec is somewhat of an exception given the tighter labour regulations and increased power of trade unions.

⁵⁷ See Walker, “Comparing Adult Education Systems.”

⁵⁸ For New Zealand, see Digital Nation New Zealand, *The New Zealand Tech Sector – Key Metrics, 2019 update*, <https://nztech.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2020/07/Tech-Sector-Key-Metrics-2019-Update.pdf> and Stats NZ, “Regional Gross Domestic Product: Year Ended March 2020,” 25 March, 2–21, <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/regional-gross-domestic-product-year-ended-march-2020>; for Canada, see Canada, “Digital Technologies/ICT,” https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/ict-tic.nsf/eng/h_it07229.html.

⁵⁹ C. Cheyne, M. O’Brien, and M. Belgrave, *Social Policy in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Critical Tradition [4th Edition]* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶⁰ See, e.g., E. Roy, “New Zealand Beat Covid-19 by Trusting Leaders and Following Advice – Study,” *The Guardian*, July 23, 2020. While no country could ultimately eliminate COVID-19, New Zealand still stands out: with a similar population to British Columbia and only a third of the mortality rate as of May 2022 (NZ≈1,000; BC≈3,300) See <https://github.com/CSSEGISandData/COVID-19>.

⁶¹ For further description, see Reading Horizons, “Reading Wars: Phonics vs. Whole Language Instruction,” <https://www.readinghorizons.com/reading-strategies/teaching/phonics-instruction/reading-wars-phonics-vs-whole-language-reading-instruction>.

⁶² G. Steiner-Khamsi, “The Economics of Policy Borrowing and Lending: a Study of Late Adopters,” *Oxford Review of Education* 32 no. 5 (2006): 665–678.

⁶³ The term “tertiary education” is in common use in New Zealand, Australia and a number of European countries (though not in Canada) as interchangeable with “post-secondary education.”

⁶⁴ New Zealand, Tertiary Education Commission, <https://www.tec.govt.nz/>.

⁶⁵ J. Kelsey, *The New Zealand Experiment: A World Model for Structural Adjustment* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1997).

accountability, quality assurance, professionalization and privatization.⁶⁶ While these reforms initially applied only to compulsory schooling, they started to touch adult education and skills in the late 1990s.⁶⁷

Placing adult education within the new order

Interestingly, it was New Zealand's centre-left Labour government (in power from 1984 until late 1990) that initiated these so-called "neoliberal" reforms, which transformed the country from a relatively protectionist, Britain-focused welfare state to a more open, economically liberal model. These reforms gained further traction under the subsequent centre-right National government that held office for the following decade.

The key turning point for adult education was the creation of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), set up under the *Education Amendment Act 1990* with a mandate to regulate, monitor and assess most educational matters. While first affecting only compulsory schooling, starting in the late 1990s, the new agency went on to bring under its umbrella polytechnics, institutes and other providers of adult and community education with the aim of establishing high standards of quality control and accountability. The authority is currently responsible for quality assurance covering almost all educational providers, except universities. It conducts assessments, liaises with overseas certifying bodies, oversees university entrance requirements, approves new courses and represents institutional authority.⁶⁸

Until the late 1990s, adult education was largely ignored. The National Council of Adult Education, established in 1947, was abolished, and adult and community education experienced major cuts.⁶⁹ It was only under Helen Clark's Labour government in the first decade of the millennium – owing in large part to the released results of the International Adult Literacy Survey in the late 1990s, which advocates could capitalize on – that adult literacy and skills gained traction as policy priorities.⁷⁰ New Zealand's performance in the survey was as dismal as Canada's, giving adult education policy-makers, researchers and practitioners some powerful ammunition to advance their case for an increased focus on adult literacy and skills training, including extra funding. The country's first adult literacy strategy was launched in 2001 in the early years of Helen Clark's leadership. It adopted the standards set out by the NZQA's qualifications framework.⁷¹ Following this move, the field of adult education began to

⁶⁶ Walker, "Comparing Adult Education Systems." It is interesting to note that NZ's ostensible "laissez-faire" economic experiment implied further regulation of certain sectors (i.e., increased accountability measures), centralization and standardization.

⁶⁷ In New Zealand, school is compulsory from the age of 5 until 16. The school system is very similar to the K-12 systems in Canada (with Year 1 equivalent to Kindergarten and Year 13 the same as Grade 12).

⁶⁸ For further information, visit the New Zealand Qualifications Authority website at <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/>.

⁶⁹ D. Amundsen, "Sixty Years of Adult Learning in Aotearoa New Zealand: Looking Back to the 1960s and Beyond the 2020s," *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 60, no. 3 (November 2020): 492-514.

⁷⁰ For further information on all of this, see J. Walker, *The Contexts of Adult Literacy Policy in New Zealand/Aotearoa* (PhD Dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2011).

⁷¹ Accompanying the adult literacy strategy, the Māori Adult Literacy Party launched a progressive Māori-specific publication which explored culturally appropriate and supportive ways to help meet the goals of the Adult Literacy Strategy as they related to Māori. See Māori Adult Literacy Working Party. *Te kawai ora: Reading the World, Reading the Word, Being the World*. (Wellington: Ministry of Māori Development, 2001).

be professionalized, with the introduction of compulsory certification for all adult education instructors.

The most important initiative in the creation of an all-encompassing adult education system was the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) established in 2002 following recommendations by the Tertiary Education Advisory Commission and passage of the *Tertiary Education Reform Bill*. Encompassing every aspect of adult education from community literacy programming to workplace learning and university education, the commission requires all providers to meet most of the same policy priorities, abide by the same accountability rules and operate on similar funding formulae.⁷² The NZQA was subsequently folded into the commission and given jurisdiction over quality in all tertiary institutions outside of universities. As I noted in an earlier paper, “both the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and the Tertiary Education Commission represent the ultimate in centralization, coordination and regulation by including everything to do with non-compulsory schooling under one banner.”⁷³

In 2012, the NZQA launched a strategy to support Māori learner success, and professional standards and credential requirements increased across all types of adult education providers. In 2013, a project was undertaken to develop a *kaupapa Māori* (Māori principles and ideas) assessment model to evaluate the link between literacy and well-being for Māori learners. This initiative examined, for example, the effects of literacy learning on learners’ relationships with their *whanau* (extended family), such as reading more and connecting more with grandchildren.⁷⁴

Meanwhile, adult education became increasingly integrated into other government agencies – especially what later became the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, a catch-all department that oversees immigration, employment, housing, urban development, innovation, Māori economic development and a host of other functions.⁷⁵ For example, with its mandate to “build a skilled workforce,” the ministry’s employment strategy connects directly to adult education and training.⁷⁶ Indeed, over the past two decades, what could be called an adult education “system” has both expanded and centralized.

⁷² The TEC is not technically a ministry and is headed by the Minister and Associate Minister of Education and thus connected to the Ministry of Education; however, my previous research (Walker, *The Contexts of Adult Literacy Policy* 2011) showed that, since the creation of the TEC, the Ministry of Education has taken much more of a backseat on anything pertaining to the education and learning of adults as TEC has essentially taken on this role. The Ministry of Education develops Tertiary Education Strategies and determines policy concerning tertiary education. For further information on the governance structure of the education of adults, see New Zealand, “Tertiary administration,” Ministry of Education, <https://www.education.govt.nz/further-education/tertiary-administration/>.

⁷³ Walker, “Comparing Adult Education Systems.”

⁷⁴ J. Hutchings, B. Yates, P. Isaacs, J. Whatman and N. Bright, *Hei Ara Ako ki te Oranga: A Model for Measuring Wellbeing Outcomes from Literacy Programmes*, Research Report, National Fund Project, 2013, <https://ako.ac.nz/assets/Knowledge-centre/NPF-10-006-Hei-Ara-Ako-ki-te-Oranga/RESEARCH-REPORT-Hei-Ara-Ako-ki-te-Oranga-A-Model-for-Measuring-Wellbeing-Outcomes-from-Literacy-Programmes.pdf>.

⁷⁵ New Zealand, Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/>.

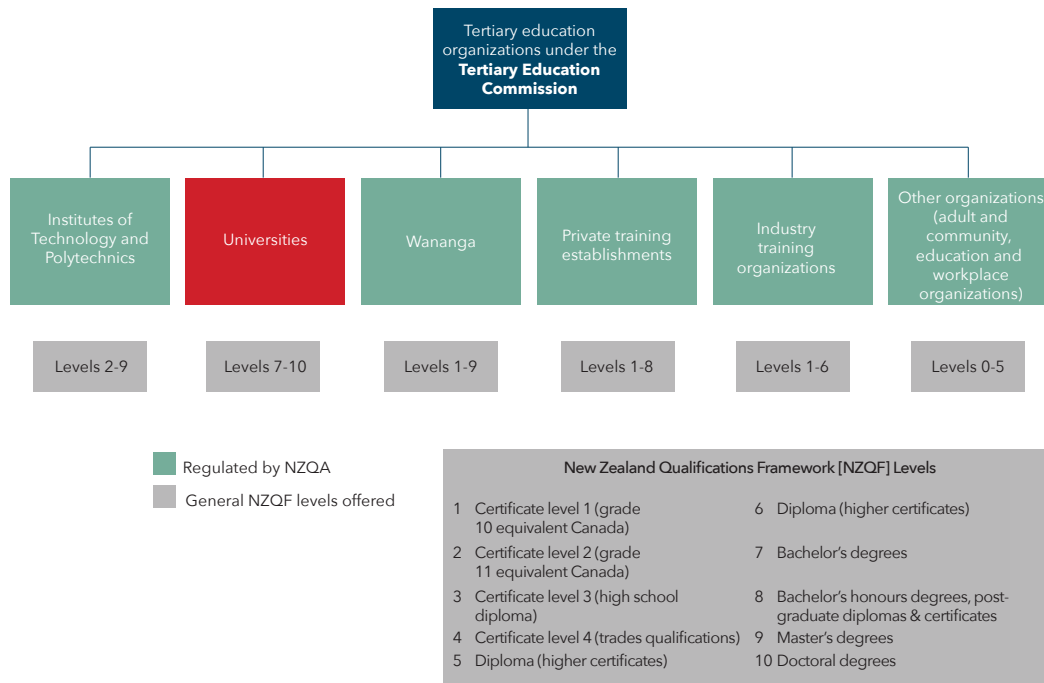
⁷⁶ New Zealand, “Employment Strategy,” Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/business-and-employment/employment-and-skills/employment-strategy/>.

From grannies in cardies to professional educators

Education in New Zealand is now highly centralized and regulated, with all post-compulsory education, from adult and community education to universities, falling under the jurisdiction of the TEC (see Figure 1).

New Zealand’s adult and community education infrastructure did not receive the same attention and support under John Key’s National government during 2008-2017 as it had from the previous Labour administration.⁷⁷ Under the current Labour Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, the government has allocated more funds for initiatives such as workplace literacy and numeracy; training and certification of adult educators; and adult and community education in schools.⁷⁸ The funding model for adult education instituted by the Key government has also changed so that providers no longer have to compete with one another in the same way, nor are they subject to the previous bureaucratic application process.⁷⁹

Figure 1. New Zealand's tertiary education system



Source: Created by the author based on New Zealand Qualifications Framework, <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/qualifications-standards/understanding-nzqf/>.

Note: Some institutions in New Zealand offer higher and lower levels than the ones mentioned here, e.g., some universities offer continuing education programs that correspond to levels 3 to 5.

⁷⁷ M. Bowl and R. Tobias, "Learning from the Past, Organizing for the Future: Adult and Community Education in Aotearoa New Zealand," *Adult Education Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2012): 272-86.

⁷⁸ TEC, "Fund Finder," <https://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/funding-and-performance/funding/fund-finder/>.

⁷⁹ "Chris Hipkins: 'Bureaucratic' competitive tertiary funding model expelled," *NZ Herald*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/chris-hipkins-bureaucratic-competitive-tertiary-funding-model-expelled/OKCGI2SKRHTHGAMBSPDKZOH5Q/>.

The adult and community education sector has been further expanded through an emphasis on literacy, numeracy and cultural capability. The latter is designed to help instructors of foundational adult education and literacy to provide more culturally responsive and appropriate pedagogy, with special attention to Māori and Pasifika students.^{80,81} Indeed, the 2020 budget included an increase of \$16 million specifically for adult and community education.⁸² The present government also appears committed to embedding literacy in all forms of education – that is, integrating adult literacy more closely into existing vocational, language and skills curricula.⁸³

An adult and community education fund, operating out of the TEC, is focused on improving employability (as has been the emphasis in Canada), and also on promoting inclusion, raising foundational skills, and improving health and well-being.⁸⁴ Assessment of learning has also become a crucial part of the adult education system. That has included the development in recent years of an adult literacy and numeracy assessment tool, which contains thousands of questions, many of them culturally specific to New Zealand, that are used to measure progress for adult literacy and numeracy across six steps.⁸⁵ Adult literacy and numeracy providers are required to use the assessment tool for their learners as a condition of funding from the commission.⁸⁶

Recent years have seen a move toward quantitative measurement of outcomes, development of additional achievement standards, and the creation of a Māori qualifications service within the NZQA. The *mātauranga Māori* qualifications and assessment standards focus on Indigenous knowledge, known as “field Māori,” that “gives national recognition to mātauranga Māori [and] caters specifically to Māori knowledge, pedagogy, and skills, and enables the portability of Māori skills and knowledge within the national education system.”^{87,88}

Meanwhile, adult education has been further centralized. In 2020, the TEC brought the country’s 16 institutes of technology and polytechnics together under the single umbrella of the New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology, commonly known by its Māori name, *Te*

⁸⁰ The term “Pasifika” is used in New Zealand to refer to people of Pacific Island descent (whether immigrants or second, third, fourth, etc., generation). Educational and employment outcomes of Māori and Pasifika continue to lag behind the country’s average.

⁸¹ ALNACC, “ALNACC Professional Learning Courses,” Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Cultural Capability, <https://ako.ac.nz/alnacc/>.

⁸² Amundsen, “Sixty Years of Adult Learning in Aotearoa New Zealand.”

⁸³ M. Conway, D. Lopez, and H. Casey. *Embedding Literacy, Language, and Numeracy* (Leicester, UK: NIACE, 2007).

⁸⁴ TEC, “Adult and Community Education,” <https://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/funding-and-performance/funding-fund-finder/ace/>.

⁸⁵ New Zealand, *Comparing Literacy and Numeracy Scales in the Assessment Tool and Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)*, Ministry of Education, March 2019, <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/80898/comparing-literacy-and-numeracy-scales-in-the-assessment-tool-and-survey-of-adult-skills>.

⁸⁶ For further information, see TEC, *Guidelines for using the Literacy and Numeracy for Adults Assessment Tool* (Wellington: TEC, 2017), <https://www.tec.govt.nz/assets/Forms-templates-and-guides/0869eb24/Guidelines-for-using-the-Literacy-and-Numeracy-for-Adults-Assessment-Tool.pdf>.

⁸⁷ *Mātauranga Māori* translates to “Māori knowledge.”

⁸⁸ NZQA, “Mātauranga Māori Qualifications and Assessment Standards,” New Zealand Qualifications Authority, <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/maori-and-pasifika/maori-qualifications/>.

Pukenga.⁸⁹ A single chief executive now oversees all 16 campuses.⁹⁰ All instructors, whether at a polytechnic or an adult literacy organization, are considered professionals: certification is required, sometimes up to the level of a master's degree, and has become more standardized. As one adult literacy practitioner at a polytechnic told me with pride about a decade ago as credentials requirements were being implemented, adult basic education instructors have become just like university lecturers and the field can no longer be (mis)characterized as a bunch of volunteer "grannies in cardies."⁹¹

While it is difficult to assess the success and contribution of specific reforms, there are some encouraging signs. Between 2013 and 2018, the proportion of Māori and Pasifika students gaining post-secondary credentials increased by 27 percent and 34 percent, respectively (compared to an 18 percent improvement for the total population).⁹² Similarly, the OECD's three adult skills surveys have shown a slow but steady improvement from the mid to late 1990s up to the most recent decade. This has not been the case for Canada, where literacy scores decreased slightly between 1994 and 2012.⁹³

POLICY LESSONS FOR CANADA

Canada's challenge now is to capitalize on recent commitments of the federal government, the work of the Future Skills initiative, and the groundswell of support for more national sharing and accounting for training opportunities and skills. Lessons learned from Canada's past experience and New Zealand can help light the path toward a successful adult education system in Canada. I identify five key areas for action across federal, provincial and territorial governments: make adult education mainstream; beware of reliance on single measures of progress; support the professionalization of adult educators; empower Indigenous leadership in education; and build toward national coordination.

These recommended actions should, of course, be done in consultation with all stakeholders – adult education providers, learners, educators, government officials, employers, Indigenous governments and communities, and others. It is the only way of building a system that will best meet the needs of Canadian adults.

1. *Make adult education mainstream*

It is critical to better connect adult literacy and essential skills to various ministries and agencies within each province and territory. In our previous study, one former high-ranking official emphasized that it was "very important that [literacy] be institutionalized, to be connected with everything, so it

⁸⁹ It is interesting to note that a previous consolidation had happened in 2018, when 25 polytechnics and institutes were reduced to 16. See Amundsen, "Sixty Years of Adult Learning in Aotearoa New Zealand."

⁹⁰ Te Pukenga, <https://xn--tepkenga-szb.ac.nz/>.

⁹¹ Walker, *The Contexts of Adult Literacy Policy in New Zealand/Aotearoa*.

⁹² Stats New Zealand, *Education Outcomes Improving for Māori and Pacific Peoples* (Wellington: Stats NZ, 2020).

⁹³ OECD, *Skills Matter: Further Results from the Survey of Adult Skills: Country Note, New Zealand* (Paris: OECD, 2016).

doesn't fall between the cracks." Similarly, a former director of the National Literacy Secretariat was concerned that literacy "not be off on its own" or be "a renegade." In other words, adult literacy and essential skills need to be brought into the mainstream, connecting a broad range of policy goals with adult literacy programming.⁹⁴

For adult education to receive the legitimacy and funding it deserves, we should find ways to better connect government ministries, tertiary (post-secondary) education institutions, workplaces and communities so that everyone is working in tandem toward common objectives. Much of this work will need to be done at the provincial and territorial levels.

Another problem in Canada is that adult education is not thought of as tertiary or post-secondary education, a perception that keeps it outside the mainstream of the education system. One of the most important moves that New Zealand made was to group everything involving the education of adults under one banner, from adult literacy to vocational training to higher education. Community adult education became part of the broader architecture with family and community literacy activities folded into a broad tertiary education strategy.⁹⁵

New Zealand has given its adult education system greater legitimacy by connecting it with ministries involved with economic and social development. These connections have helped recognize adult education's importance as a social policy issue and brought it more attention.⁹⁶ While much remains to be done in terms of "mainstreaming" adult education and skills in the country, there is little doubt that New Zealand has gone a long way toward what government and adult education leaders in Canada have been calling for.⁹⁷

2. *Beware of reliance on single measures of progress*

The proliferation of assessment tools since the first Southam survey and the broadened definition of literacy, numeracy and competencies have helped make a more persuasive case for investing in adult training and education. In both Canada and New Zealand, the OECD's level 3 threshold is now broadly accepted as the minimum level of skills proficiency. This has led the media and numerous think tanks to the conclusion that 40 percent to 50 percent of Canadians and New Zealanders lack the skills to fully participate in our modern knowledge-based society.⁹⁸

In Canada, paradoxically, the choice of level 3 as the cut-off may have harmed the drive to bring literacy education into the mainstream. As Suzanne Smythe

⁹⁴ Elfert and Walker, "The Rise and Fall of Adult Literacy."

⁹⁵ Walker, *The Contexts of Adult Literacy Policy in New Zealand/Aotearoa* Amundsen, *60 Years of Adult Learning in Aotearoa New Zealand*.

⁹⁶ Walker, *The Contexts of Adult Literacy Policy in New Zealand/Aotearoa*.

⁹⁷ Elfert and Walker, "The Rise and Fall of Adult Literacy."

⁹⁸ J. Walker and K. Rubenson, "The Media Construction of an Adult Literacy Agenda in Canada," *Globalisation, Education, and Societies* 12, no. 1 (2014): 143-63.

found, funding for literacy organizations in the 1990s and 2000s was made conditional on outcomes in a way that meant little attention was paid to individuals with the very lowest literacy skills (in other words, those at levels 0 or 1 in the OECD surveys). Instead, efforts were focused on “getting people to level 3.” As the Conference Board of Canada remarked in 2013: “Moving this group [level 2] up to a solid level 3 – considered to be the minimum ‘job standard’ level that enables employees to cope with the demands of work – would be less expensive and involve fewer resources per capita than moving the group of employees with extremely rudimentary level 1 literacy skills up to level 3.”⁹⁹

Consideration should also be given to assessing “soft” outcomes; for example, not just moving up a level or landing a particular job, but changes in personal and social well-being.¹⁰⁰ Connecting adult education to social policy more broadly can help instill it in the public consciousness, and ultimately bring legitimacy and funding to the field. Forging connections with immigration, housing, labour and economic policy-makers will be important.

3. *Professionalize adult educators*

Encouraging the professionalization of adult educators in some form could help bring legitimacy to the field, and to the educators themselves. It could lead, for example, to equal pay for equal work, and advance public recognition of adult educators’ contribution to society.

The stigma of being an adult learner, and even an adult education teacher, has been at least partly overcome in New Zealand, but not so in Canada. By bringing all adult education under the single banner of the TEC, New Zealand has subjected all providers to equal standards of accountability and professionalization. This in turn has helped bring adult educators into the mainstream of tertiary education and given greater legitimacy to the entire field of adult education.

One enduring obstacle in Canada is the variation in governance and delivery systems among provinces and territories. There is no centralized assessment body like the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, nor any requirement for the provinces to support adult education.

As a general principle, we need to be mindful of what we are assessing and counting as outcomes of adult education, and what the implications may be

⁹⁹ Cited in Smythe, “Ten Years of Adult Literacy Policy.” We are reminded here of Goodhart’s Law as popularized by Strathern (1997): “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.”

¹⁰⁰ In the first decade of the 2000s, there was a collaborative initiative between BC’s Ministry of Advanced Education and literacy organizations called “From the Ground Up” that involved literacy practitioners determining and measuring literacy outcomes. The outcome of this project was to “develop and test five new and unique outcome measurement tools.” See <http://en.copian.ca/library/learning/groundup/mtagpc/intro.htm>

of not achieving these outcomes. But we also need to bear in mind that professionalization can be a double-edged sword. Yes, it brings legitimacy and funding, but at the risk of undermining autonomy and diversity.

4. *Empower Indigenous leadership in adult education*

New Zealand's increasingly close work with Māori over the past decades – including the development of a Māori qualifications framework and consideration of nontraditional outcomes – is an important step forward, and should be of particular interest in Canada, at both the provincial and federal level.¹⁰¹ Partnering with and empowering the leadership of First Nations, Métis and Inuit organizations will be crucial.

Programs developed to support the training of Indigenous Guardians in Canada are good examples of initiatives that have either been codeveloped with or led by Indigenous nations.¹⁰² Indigenous Guardians are trained experts who manage protected areas and support the development of land-use and marine-use plans. The programs also help connect youth with elders, create good-paying jobs and foster local and regional economic opportunity. There are now over 80 Guardians programs operating across the country.¹⁰³ It is also crucial to support the work of provincial organizations of Indigenous-run adult and post-secondary institutions, such as British Columbia's Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association, and include them more fully in policy-making decisions and conversations.

5. *Build toward national coordination*

There will likely always be 13 separate education systems in Canada, but it should be possible to address some issues at the federal level. This does not imply support for a one-size-fits-all approach to adult literacy and skills, but rather coordination on critical issues. Indeed, recent initiatives suggest a widespread desire for more coherent and connected policies and systems across the country.

Canada's federal system of government and geographic vastness will always be challenges to any national initiatives. However, there may be ways to make better use of existing organizations like the federal-provincial-territorial Council of Ministers of Education that could facilitate the exchange of knowledge and practices across the country, help tackle interprovincial barriers to credential recognition and generally contribute to streamlining the highly decentralized field of adult education in Canada. Some national assessment and recognition of adult education and the skills outcomes of learners and programs may be useful.

¹⁰¹The consultative process between the Crown and the First Peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand (*Tangata Whenua*) is still inadequate and tensions continue. At the same time, it does appear that progress is being made on better meeting the educational needs of both Māori and Pasifika adults – the two groups that lag behind in the country in terms of educational participation and outcomes.

¹⁰²Indigenous Guardians Toolkit, Nature United, <https://www.indigenousguardianstoolkit.ca/section/what-are-some-examples-indigenous-guardian-training-programs>

¹⁰³Indigenous Leadership Initiative, <https://www.ilinationhood.ca/guardians>.

We should also consider reinvesting in pan-Canadian clearing houses to share best practices, along the lines of the former National Adult Literacy Database; supporting work that both captures and shares effective adult education, similar to the government and foundation-funded practitioner research published in 2004 by long-time adult education instructors; and exploring possibilities for new ways of supporting and sharing provincial research on Canadian adult learning, as a reimagining of what was the Canadian Council on Learning.¹⁰⁴ A revisiting, reinvesting and revival of such initiatives may allow for the revitalization of national literacy organizations and literacy and other adult education programming across the country. The Future Skills Centre may have a key role to play in such projects.

It is important to recognize, however, that creating and changing educational systems is much harder in Canada than in New Zealand. Canada's geographic size, federal system of government and lack of a central education body make coordination and cohesion difficult. By contrast, New Zealand has the advantage of being a small, centralized island nation, enabling it to develop a national system and institute far-reaching national policies. Yet New Zealand's success in creating a cohesive adult education system goes beyond geography and institutional structure. Bringing the trifecta of standardized assessment, professionalization and centralization under one agency (the Tertiary Education Commission) has helped minimize the sidelining of adult education and training as something meant only for those at the margins, and hopefully can develop a broad-based support for adult education in all its forms.

While I share the widely held sentiment that greater cross-provincial and territorial sharing, openness and coordination are important, I also question whether Canada is willing to accept – and, indeed, whether it should accept – the level of regulation and standardization that now mark much of New Zealand's approach to social policy. Demands for accountability in the field of adult education, training and skills development have escalated, bringing with them onerous bureaucratic requirements for demonstrating that specific standards have been met.¹⁰⁵ Canadian governments should aim to balance increased standardization with empowerment of the institutions and educators best placed to innovate and adapt to local needs.

Adult education and skills training have a vital role to play in navigating the economic and social challenges Canada faces, and in improving the well-being of individual Canadians. By drawing on lessons from our past and from other countries' experiences, we can bring all government and nongovernment actors together to devise a nationally coherent system of adult education that will create a better future for us all.

¹⁰⁴E. Battell, L. Gesser, J. Rose, J. Sawyer, D. Twiss, *Hardwired for Hope* (Nanaimo: Malaspina University College, 2004), <http://en.copian.ca/library/research/hwired/hwired.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵For further information, see the recent Ministry of Education report: https://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/our-work/information-releases/Advice-Seen-by-our-Ministers/01-2020/R-94-ER-1237051-Hipkins_Redacted.pdf



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