

# Let's Rebuild the Foundation: Reinstating Canada's Adult Literacy Knowledge Infrastructure Requires Federal Leadership

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## IN BRIEF

Literacy practitioners used to have access to a once robust national adult literacy knowledge infrastructure: activities that generated research on adult literacy practices and learners, ensured that the knowledge was widely shared and that it was housed and preserved for future use. The federal government played a crucial role in creating and maintaining that knowledge infrastructure, but over time its role has been significantly reduced. This paper argues that, to provide literacy practitioners with the tools to do their work effectively, the federal government should play a leading role in reinstating that knowledge infrastructure, and makes several recommendations for how to achieve this.

## EN BREF

Les enseignants en alphabétisation avaient autrefois accès à une solide infrastructure nationale de connaissances sur l'alphabétisation des adultes : des activités qui généraient des recherches sur les pratiques d'alphabétisation des adultes et les apprenants garantissaient que les connaissances étaient largement partagées et qu'elles étaient rassemblées et préservées pour une utilisation future. Le gouvernement fédéral a joué un rôle crucial dans la création et le maintien de cette infrastructure de connaissances, mais son rôle s'est considérablement réduit au fil du temps. Cette étude soutient que, pour fournir aux enseignants en alphabétisation les outils nécessaires à un travail efficace, le gouvernement fédéral devrait jouer un rôle de premier plan dans le rétablissement de cette infrastructure de connaissances, et elle formule plusieurs recommandations sur la manière d'y parvenir.

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## HIGHLIGHTS

Canada's adult education programs help people improve their literacy skills, which are the basis for success today. In the past, literacy practitioners benefited from a robust national adult literacy knowledge infrastructure — activities that generated new knowledge on adult literacy practices and learners; ensured the knowledge was widely shared and used by practitioners, researchers and policymakers across Canada; and housed and preserved that knowledge.

The federal government played a crucial role in creating and maintaining that knowledge infrastructure as part of a broader strategy to support and foster adult literacy education. Over time, however, literacy policy and the jurisdictional landscape have evolved. The federal government's priorities have shifted away from maintaining and supporting the literacy knowledge infrastructure. As a result, practitioners have been left struggling to find up-to-date resources when developing curricula, improving their teaching approaches and applying for government funding.

This paper argues that a comprehensive, national adult literacy knowledge infrastructure must be reinstated to support literacy practitioners, learners and policymakers. This can be done only under the federal government's leadership because provinces and territories currently responsible for adult education delivery do not have adequate resources and opportunities to create and maintain it efficiently. A national infrastructure would promote collaborations and break down jurisdictional silos.

The paper recommends taking the following steps to make this happen:

1. Put adult literacy research back on the federal agenda. Employment and Social Development Canada should develop a national adult literacy research strategy in consultation with adult literacy practitioners and academic experts. Findings from literacy research will inform practitioners and policymakers in their efforts to support adult learners in improving their literacy.
2. Expand opportunities to share lessons learned and best practices nationally. The federal government should support nationwide formal networks, conferences, workshops and other means of sharing adult literacy knowledge across jurisdictions. Knowledge sharing creates overall cost efficiencies, provides ongoing professional development opportunities for literacy practitioners and supports jurisdictions with fewer resources.
3. Build a national repository of adult literacy projects and results.
  - The federal government should also create and maintain a national repository of adult literacy publications, project reports, curricula and videos, building on Copian (formerly the National Adult Literacy Database).
  - The federal government should maintain and expand a funded project database made available to all adult education providers. This database should provide a detailed description of each project and its findings and share the materials it created. It would inform organizations submitting proposals and public servants assessing applications to avoid duplication and encourage connections to earlier projects.

- Employment and Social Development Canada should embrace a web archiving policy to preserve its publications and websites.

These recommendations will provide adult literacy practitioners and policymakers with the tools to do their work effectively, thus benefiting adult learners and society. Without a national knowledge infrastructure, adult literacy risks remaining marginalized, and Canadians who lack literacy skills will be left further behind.

## FAITS SAILLANTS

Les programmes de formation des adultes du Canada aident les gens à améliorer leurs compétences en alphabétisation, qui sont la base de la réussite aujourd'hui. Dans le passé, les enseignants en alphabétisation ont bénéficié d'une solide infrastructure nationale de connaissances sur l'alphabétisation des adultes : des activités qui ont généré de nouvelles connaissances sur les pratiques d'alphabétisation des adultes et sur les apprenants, qui ont permis de s'assurer que les connaissances étaient largement partagées et utilisées par les enseignants, les chercheurs et les décideurs politiques à travers le Canada, et qui ont permis de rassembler et de préserver ces connaissances.

Le gouvernement fédéral a joué un rôle crucial dans la création et le maintien de cette infrastructure de connaissances dans le cadre d'une stratégie plus large de soutien et de promotion de l'alphabétisation des adultes. Cependant, la politique d'alphabétisation et le paysage juridique ont évolué au fil du temps. Les priorités du gouvernement fédéral se sont détournées du maintien et du soutien de l'infrastructure des connaissances en matière d'alphabétisation. En conséquence, les enseignants ont dû se battre pour trouver des ressources à jour lorsqu'ils élaboraient des programmes, amélioraient leurs méthodes d'enseignement et demandaient des financements publics.

Cette étude soutient qu'une infrastructure nationale complète de connaissances sur l'alphabétisation des adultes doit être rétablie pour soutenir les enseignants, les apprenants et les décideurs. Cela ne peut se faire que sous la direction du gouvernement fédéral, car les provinces et les territoires actuellement responsables de l'éducation des adultes ne disposent pas des ressources et des possibilités adéquates pour créer et maintenir cette infrastructure de manière efficace. Une infrastructure nationale permettrait de promouvoir les collaborations et d'éliminer les cloisonnements juridiques.

Cette étude recommande de suivre les étapes suivantes :

1. Remettre la recherche sur l'alphabétisation des adultes à l'ordre du jour du gouvernement fédéral. Emploi et Développement social Canada devrait élaborer une stratégie nationale de recherche sur l'alphabétisation des adultes en consultation avec les enseignants en alphabétisation des adultes et les experts universitaires. Les résultats de la recherche sur l'alphabétisation éclaireront les enseignants et les décideurs dans leurs efforts pour aider les apprenants adultes à améliorer leur niveau d'alphabétisation.
2. Accroître les possibilités de partager les enseignements tirés et les meilleures pratiques au niveau national. Le gouvernement fédéral devrait soutenir les réseaux formels nationaux, les conférences, les ateliers et les autres moyens de partager les connaissances sur l'alphabétisation des adultes entre les gouvernements et autorités. Le partage des connaissances permet de réaliser des économies, d'offrir des possibilités de développement professionnel continu aux enseignants en alphabétisation et de soutenir les gouvernements et autorités disposant de moins de ressources.

3. Créer un répertoire national des projets d'alphabétisation des adultes et de leurs résultats.
  - Le gouvernement fédéral devrait également créer et gérer un répertoire national de publications, de rapports de projets, de programmes d'études et de vidéos sur l'alphabétisation des adultes, en s'appuyant sur Copian (anciennement la Base de données en alphabétisation des adultes).
  - Le gouvernement fédéral devrait maintenir et développer une base de données des projets financés, mise à la disposition de tous les prestataires d'éducation des adultes. Cette base de données devrait fournir une description détaillée de chaque projet et de ses résultats, et partager le matériel créé. Elle informerait les organisations qui soumettent des propositions et les fonctionnaires qui évaluent les demandes afin d'éviter les doublons et d'encourager les liens avec des projets antérieurs.
  - Emploi et Développement social Canada devrait adopter une politique d'archivage Internet afin de préserver ses publications et ses sites Web.

Ces recommandations fourniront aux enseignants en alphabétisation des adultes et aux décideurs politiques les outils nécessaires pour effectuer leur travail de manière efficace, au bénéfice des apprenants adultes et de la société. Sans une infrastructure nationale de la connaissance, l'alphabétisation des adultes risque de rester marginalisée, et les Canadiens qui n'ont pas de compétences en lecture et en écriture seront encore plus laissés pour compte.



## INTRODUCTION

Strong literacy skills are the basis for success today — essential for finding and keeping a good job, effectively communicating with financial and government institutions, taking care of one’s health and well-being, participating in civil society and advancing one’s education. Literacy is not merely the ability to read and write; it is the ability to “engage with written texts (print-based and digital) and thereby participate in society, achieve goals, and develop . . . knowledge and potential” (Statistics Canada, 2013, p. 8).

In Canada, adults seeking to upgrade their literacy skills can enrol in programs offered by various adult education providers, from colleges and school boards to community organizations. These programs vary widely across provinces and territories, which have jurisdiction over the delivery of adult education. Literacy practitioners work in diverse, constantly evolving delivery environments, often disconnected from each other and necessary resources, with limited opportunities for professional development.<sup>1</sup> To be effective at what they do, literacy practitioners would greatly benefit from having access to the vast body of knowledge on learners and their needs, the best teaching practices, and up-to-date and innovative curricula and other teaching materials generated by their colleagues and academic researchers across Canada. Knowing what works and where the gaps are would enable policymakers to design effective policies and efficiently allocate government funds to help adult learners improve their literacy.

Generation, mobilization and retention of that knowledge serve as the three building blocks of what I call the adult literacy knowledge infrastructure — research to understand learners’ needs and design effective pedagogical approaches; activities to stimulate an exchange of ideas and best practices by organizing regular national-level literacy conferences and workshops; and databases and web archives to preserve and circulate research findings.

As the foundation of the adult literacy system that caters to various stakeholders nationwide, a robust knowledge infrastructure necessitates concerted efforts to coordinate its efficient development, supported by adequate financial and human resources. Without national oversight, only larger provinces may have sufficient resources to invest in knowledge generation, mobilization and retention. These efforts would naturally prioritize local researchers and address exclusively local needs, rendering the resulting regional knowledge infrastructures inadequate for practitioners and policymakers in the rest of Canada. This would further exacerbate inequalities, disadvantaging smaller provinces and territories that cannot afford to fund research. Moreover, these regional knowledge infrastructures will have gaps by omitting knowledge generated in other parts of the country. Furthermore, there’s a risk of effort duplication if provinces independently tackle the same problems, resulting in inefficiency. This is why national oversight and

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<sup>1</sup> The term “practitioner” in this paper refers to anyone who teaches or facilitates literacy skills in any setting, including community-based organizations, workplaces, school boards or colleges. Practitioners include volunteers and paid staff. In addition to teaching literacy skills, many practitioners engage in action research. This is an all-encompassing definition of practitioners, and their more specific needs may vary depending on their function and place of work.

co-ordination are essential, even if adult education delivery occurs at the provincial and territorial levels.<sup>2</sup>

Adult education can benefit from models used by other sectors where responsibilities are shared between the federal and provincial or territorial governments. For example, health care in Canada is also delivered by provinces and territories. Yet two national bodies — the Canadian Institute for Health Information and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research — collect health data and provide funding for health-related research that benefits academics, health practitioners and policymakers in their efforts to improve the health care system across the country.

In the past, the federal government acknowledged the importance of a national knowledge infrastructure for a well-functioning adult literacy system. It provided initiative and support to develop and maintain its essential elements. Over time, however, federal involvement — and, very notably, funding — began to wind down. This left provincial and territorial literacy practitioners duplicating efforts and reinventing the wheel when developing course curricula, cut off from networking that used to provide informal skills development opportunities, and working in silos without a full picture of what is happening in their field across the country. While remnants of that previously rich knowledge infrastructure still exist, the information is outdated and disconnected and suffers from significant gaps. Although some provinces have the resources to continue to fund some research activities, the newly generated knowledge is out of reach for many practitioners in other jurisdictions. As a result, adult learners, who are already disadvantaged, have uneven access to state-of-the-art learning opportunities. At the same time, literacy practitioners struggle to combine teaching with searching for support and information that was once at their fingertips.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I describe Canada's once robust range of knowledge generation, mobilization and retention activities until 2015 and examine the consequences of no longer having a national knowledge infrastructure for adult literacy and learning. Understanding the historical context is not about reminiscing about the past. It is crucial for navigating the present challenges and shaping future directions. History serves as a guide, offering insights into what has worked well and what has faltered in the past. Without this knowledge, societies risk repeating mistakes and missing opportunities for progress. Moreover, the continuity of societal and institutional knowledge ensures stability and resilience in the face of change. Institutions built on a solid understanding of their history are better equipped to adapt to evolving circumstances while preserving core values and principles. Thus, investing in preserving and disseminating historical knowledge is not merely an academic pursuit but a fundamental aspect of building and sustaining vibrant and resilient societies.

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<sup>2</sup> Examining the various provincial and territorial strategies to bolster local literacy knowledge systems is beyond the scope of this paper due to its central thesis advocating for a *comprehensive national* knowledge infrastructure — a goal that cannot be efficiently and effectively realized by the provinces and territories independently.

<sup>3</sup> Canada's literacy practitioners are also involved in other activities, such as reporting, fundraising and developing marketing campaigns to attract learners. This issue deserves a special investigation but is outside the scope of this paper.

I also discuss what needs to be done — and who should do it — to reinstate Canada’s adult literacy knowledge infrastructure. My recommendations include creating an explicit and publicly available national research strategy, opportunities for information exchange, transparency about funded projects, and creating publication repositories and a web-archiving policy to preserve historical material. While historical analysis provides valuable insights, the current landscape demands new empirical evidence to substantiate future strategies. Therefore, there is a pressing need for new research on this topic to fill the void. Future studies should investigate the efficacy of proposed approaches, assess their feasibility within the Canadian context, and identify potential challenges and barriers to implementation. With the help of rigorous research, policymakers, educators and stakeholders can make informed decisions and develop evidence-based interventions to address the critical issues of adult literacy. Only through collaborative efforts and a commitment to knowledge generation can Canada effectively rebuild its adult literacy infrastructure and ensure equitable access to education for all its citizens.

My connection to adult literacy dates back to 1989 when I joined the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS), housed until 1993 in the former federal Department of the Secretary of State and then moved to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). After leaving the NLS in 2003, I continued to pursue my interest in adult literacy and essential skills while at the Canadian Labour and Business Centre and subsequently as a consultant. I monitor developments, share what I know through my blog and attempt to foster connections within the literacy field.<sup>4</sup> The issues raised in this paper come from this effort, drawing on decades of my professional experience and exchanges with practitioners, learners and other stakeholders.

## DEFINING LITERACY

Historically, literacy was defined as bimodal — a person either could or could not read. Literacy has also been seen as a measure of education. However, these definitions do not reflect the modern-day understanding of literacy. We now know that literacy skills involve a continuum of learning and that education levels, while a predictor of literacy skills, do not always align with skill levels (Boudard & Jones, 2003; Care et al., 2018). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has adopted a broad definition of literacy, acknowledging its necessity “in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society” (OECD, n.d.).

Over 30 years of evidence demonstrates the positive relationship between literacy skills and education and employment outcomes, national economic performance, social cohesion and civic participation (OECD, 2013; Statistics Canada, 1996, 2003). Strong literacy skills are the basis for further learning and are associated with a stronger sense of community. For adults, literacy training can remediate a poor or nonexistent educational background and refresh literacy skills lost from years of unuse.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.brigidhayes.wordpress.com](http://www.brigidhayes.wordpress.com)

About 13 per cent of Canadians have skills that only “enable them to undertake tasks of limited complexity, such as locating single pieces of information in short texts in the absence of other distracting information” (Statistics Canada, 2013, p. 15). Another 4 per cent do not have these skills at all.

Canadians looking to upgrade their literacy skills for personal, educational or employment purposes can enrol in adult education programs offered by schools, colleges and community organizations. Education lies within provincial and territorial jurisdiction in Canada, so literacy training programs vary widely across the country.<sup>5</sup> Aimed at marginalized groups, displaced workers and those experiencing barriers to participation in adult learning and the workforce, these programs often integrate literacy skills into their curricula as an alternative to stand-alone literacy classes. Literacy education for adults is contextualized, meaning it is tailored to address the specific needs, backgrounds and experiences of learners within their individual contexts, such as their cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds.

## WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE INFRASTRUCTURE?

Adult education delivery relies on a vast body of knowledge about learner profiles and their needs, novel and effective program designs, innovative curricula, information on government-funded projects and knowing what works. Evidence-based adult education policy is grounded in understanding who benefits, who is left behind, and how adult education programs impact learners and society. Activities to generate, mobilize and retain that knowledge constitute the adult literacy knowledge infrastructure, a foundation for an effective and well-functioning adult literacy system.

*Knowledge generation* refers to activities that involve creating new adult literacy knowledge through academic and practitioner-led fundamental and applied research, documenting insights gained, and developing materials through pilot projects, case studies and ethnographic research.

Knowledge that is not shared is not particularly helpful. *Knowledge mobilization* ensures that the results of knowledge-generation activities are shared, used and augmented. Mobilization can happen through in-person and virtual events held locally, provincially or nationally. Drawing upon the expertise of those in the field and that of the knowledge generators creates a dialogue around the critical challenges facing literacy practice.

Sharing knowledge, while helpful, is not sufficient. *Knowledge retention* refers to the methods used to house that knowledge in a way that provides public access. Libraries and databases are two such methods. The ability to consult already created knowledge is the only way to avoid duplication and build on past efforts. Online searches are helpful, but they presuppose the presence of appropriately tagged documents.

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<sup>5</sup> This paper focuses on the federal role in knowledge generation, mobilization and retention. For an excellent overview of the Canadian adult literacy field, see Walker (2022).

In the past, the federal government's efforts to create and maintain a knowledge infrastructure were part of a broader initiative to support and encourage adult literacy. This initiative began with the creation of the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) in 1987 and the International Literacy Year in 1990 and continued well into the mid-2000s.<sup>6</sup>

At the time, the NLS considered literacy in relation to its use in everyday life, and literacy training was designed to be learner-centred — that is, to consider the learner's individual goals and aspirations, which may or may not align with larger societal goals. This broad approach called for federal support for a wide range of activities and programs to improve adult literacy, as well as for various types of education providers. It complemented the direct funding of literacy training programs by the provinces and territories.

The NLS approach acknowledged the need to support the national knowledge infrastructure by developing a framework for research-support activities that set out the following objectives (NLS, 1998):

- To provide sound information to inform literacy policy and practice in Canada
- To encourage co-ordination of research projects to prevent duplication and ensure that research meets strategic needs
- To promote collaboration between researchers, practitioners and learners
- To develop an increased capacity to do high-quality literacy research in Canada, both in the academic environment and in the field
- To ensure that results of research work are widely disseminated to practitioners, program and policy developers, researchers and the broader community

To support these goals, the federal government provided grants and contribution funds for projects undertaken by not-for-profit organizations involved in creating and maintaining the infrastructure's key elements: practitioner-led and academic literacy research; the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD), later called Copian — a national repository that housed publications, project reports, curricula and videos; and specialized pan-Canadian conferences and institutes that helped knowledge exchange. The resulting knowledge infrastructure supported the efforts of literacy organizations, academics, researchers and all levels of government to develop programs and curricula, document best practices, and better understand and more effectively serve the needs of adult learners.

## Knowledge generation

Research activities were a key element of the federal government's original approach to adult literacy. The NLS began with a commitment to community development and building the infrastructure from the ground up (St. Clair, 2005). It used various tools to encourage research, including developing a national strategy, funding research by practitioners and academics, and leading international literacy surveys. Through project funding and direct financial support, research on adult literacy blossomed.

<sup>6</sup> The NLS was originally part of Secretary of State. Later it was relocated to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), now called Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC).

To engage academics in literacy research, the NLS established a partnership with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to launch *Valuing Literacy in Canada*, a joint initiative that offered three funding streams: strategic research grants for researchers affiliated with post-secondary institutions or literacy and non-profit organizations, grants to develop research partnerships, and doctoral and postdoctoral fellowship supplements to support junior adult literacy researchers (NLS, n.d.). Between 2001 and 2006, the initiative provided more than \$2.5 million in grants to researchers and funded 31 research projects, deemed one of the two most supported SSHRC initiatives by its stakeholders (SSHRC, 2007).

The NLS reached out to the academic community to include adult literacy on its research agenda. For example, thanks to support and encouragement from the NLS, the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education included adult literacy at its meetings and in its journal.

The NLS convened a forum to understand research needs. The Policy Conversation on Literacy Research, held in 1996, brought together a diverse group to examine what research the NLS had already funded, the current state of adult literacy research and the development of a literacy research strategy for Canada.

Following the policy conversation, the NLS funded various research initiatives to encourage and promote research. The 1999 publication *A Framework to Encourage and Support Practitioner Involvement in Adult Literacy Research Practice in Canada* (Horsman & Norton, 1999) continued the NLS's community development approach to developing and supporting research.

This work was followed in 2003 with *From Coast to Coast: A Thematic Summary of Canadian Adult Literacy Research* (Campbell, 2003). The report identified major themes to determine areas of coverage and gaps. The *Directory of Adult Literacy Research in English* (n.d.) was the source for the report.

With funding from the NLS, the *Centre de documentation sur l'éducation des adultes et la condition féminine* (CDÉACF) published *Twelve Years of French-Language Adult Literacy Research in Canada: 1994-2005* (Solar et al., 2009). The report assessed the research produced by the francophone literacy community.

In 2005, Literacy BC managed a practitioner-led project that produced *Focused on Practice: A Framework for Adult Literacy Research in Canada* (Horsman & Woodrow, 2005). The project produced an inventory that identified and described current research-in-practice activities, analyzed the conditions necessary to support research in practice and proposed comprehensive recommendations for a strategic framework for future practice and policy.

At the same time, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) — the forerunner to today's Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) — invested resources to develop, validate and test an Essential Skills Framework. The initiative identified nine skills considered "essential" that occur in all jobs. Among the skills identified were

reading text and document use, skills related to literacy. This ambitious research project began in 1993 and resulted in complexity scales for nine skills that were psychometrically valid, meaning they accurately captured what they were intended to measure. The resulting framework was the foundation for creating Essential Skills profiles for hundreds of National Occupational Classifications. These profiles, validated through extensive interviewing and quality control, provided the basis for curriculum development, assessment, skills training, career counselling and prior learning assessment. The department's sector councils incorporated the profiles into their human resource studies. The Job Bank added the Essential Skills profiles to its career planning section so that all occupations listed included information about using Essential Skills alongside technical skills.

To support data collection and advance research, Canada led the three international surveys on adult literacy administered by the OECD. The 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) were designed, resourced and promoted with a significant federal government contribution. The federal government also provided financial resources to the 2011 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). However, the promotion of the survey was left to the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC).

These initiatives greatly strengthened the literacy field and were especially welcome because of the complexities and the varying models and approaches to delivering literacy training — differences resulting from the fact that literacy training falls under provincial and territorial responsibility (see Atkinson, 2010).

### Knowledge mobilization

The NLS supported activities beyond knowledge generation (NLS, 1993). Improving coordination and information sharing was another explicit objective of the NLS to ensure that knowledge was shared and used.

One significant way was through conferences and symposiums on diverse topics sponsored directly by the NLS or through financial support provided to national and provincial/territorial literacy organizations. These in-person events provided many positive outcomes for literacy practitioners, researchers and policymakers, including expanding networks, delving deeper into research findings and developing strategies to implement research recommendations. The most lasting benefit was the development of strong networks, which lasted well beyond the life of the NLS.

Another example was the *institutes* organized by The Centre for Literacy. Generally held annually and occasionally twice a year, the institutes offered intensive opportunities to dive into subjects such as workplace literacy, digital environments, exploring international literacy survey data, social finance, health and literacy, English as a Second Language and literacy, and accountability and public trust. The institutes served as the only means at the national level to learn from each other's experiences and practices, even if informally, for literacy practitioners who, to this day, have limited opportunities for ongoing professional development. These institutes began in 1990 and continued until 2015.

Federal government financial support also enabled the publication of research journals such as *Literacies* and *Across the Curriculum*, which provided accessible, peer-reviewed research and promoted writing among literacy practitioners. In addition, the NLS supported the publication of volumes on adult literacy in Canada, contributing to the generation of knowledge by academics and practitioners. These include:

- *Basic Skills for the Workplace* (Taylor et al., 1994)
- *Reading Work: Literacies in the New Workplace* (Belfiore et al., 2004)
- *Measures of Success: Assessment and Accountability in Adult Basic Education* (Campbell, 2007)
- UNESCO's *Alpha* series, detailing current research, funded in part by the NLS

Practitioner-led research was supported by creating networks such as the Saskatchewan Applied Research Network, which trained practitioners, funded research and disseminated knowledge beginning in 2004. Its provincial government funding ended in 2017.

## Knowledge retention

Documenting and preserving academic and practitioner knowledge and making it available for public use was an early priority of the NLS. The NALD, later renamed Copian, began as a list of literacy programs but became the premier Canadian repository of adult literacy research, publications, reports and documents. The NLS requested that all project recipients send final reports and publications to the NALD/Copian to ensure access. By 2015, some 4,500 digitized documents had been added to the database (Smythe, 2018), with five million users accessing it annually.<sup>7</sup>

A similar venture took place in partnership with the Ontario government. The NLS supported the development of AlphaPlus,<sup>8</sup> which combined AlphaCom (an electronic discussion forum for literacy practitioners and learners) and a Toronto Public Library adult literacy and language practitioner training project called Alpha Ontario. AlphaPlus held an extensive adult literacy collection that was later broken up when the focus shifted to online learning and training.

Often, with NLS support, literacy organizations developed their own libraries. The Centre for Literacy and the former Alpha Ontario had extensive collections, as did Literacy BC, now called Decoda Literacy Solutions. Today, only the Decoda Literacy Solutions library remains.<sup>9</sup>

While the NLS encouraged project recipients to upload their reports on the NALD, it developed its own literacy collection within the HRSDC library. Publications, final reports and other products, such as videos, were sent to the library. When the HRSDC library closed in 2012, The Centre for Literacy collaborated with the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, the successor to the NLS, to select materials that would interest people working in the field. The English-language resources were integrated into the centre's regular collection, while French-language materials were added to the collection of the CDÉACF.

<sup>7</sup> An archived version of the database can be found on the CDÉACF website, <https://cdeacf.ca/copian>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://alphaplus.ca/about>

<sup>9</sup> <https://decoda.ca/>



## NEW FOCUS ON EMPLOYABILITY

In 1993, the federal government shifted its focus from literacy in the broadest sense to literacy to improve labour market outcomes. That year, the NLS was relocated from the Secretary of State Department, focusing on citizenship, to what was then known as HRSDC (now ESDC), which was responsible for employment. At the same time, with the publication of the 1994 International Literacy Survey, attention began to move from literacy as an expression of individual needs and goals to one focused on economic and employment outcomes, “a one-dimensional discourse of literacy and numeracy as human capital” (Yasukawa & Black, 2016, p. x).

The federal scope of involvement in adult literacy began to narrow following the federal election in 2006. In the same year, the NLS was renamed the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), emphasizing a labour market mandate by including the federal government’s Essential Skills Framework and projects aimed at improving employment through these essential skills. In 2007, the OLES moved again, this time within HRSDC, from the Learning Branch to the Skills and Employment Branch, where the Essential Skills initiative already resided (HRSDC, 2010). By combining the adult literacy and Essential Skills programs, the focus more formally shifted from adult literacy for multiple purposes to literacy and essential skills for employment.

Considering literacy skills as human capital affected program development and funding priorities. For example, an emphasis was placed on standardized testing over the achievement of learner-determined goals, which was part of an international phenomenon, along with an increased reliance on international surveys to formulate program solutions (see Smythe, 2018). Literacy was seen as a linear progression, with individuals moving through levels, rather than as a learner-centred activity taking place within a variety of contexts beyond employment. Standardized assessments and a focus on outcomes have become the dominant approach used by most governments. Funding for literacy programs was based on return on investment and began to be tied to gains or losses in literacy levels as measured by the international surveys (Smythe, 2015). Priority was given to funding projects that offered direct services to Canadians.

It is also worth noting that, despite Canada’s strong involvement in the development and execution of international surveys, including millions of dollars spent, there was no official ministerial-level acknowledgment of the release of the 2012 PIAAC results. The minister of the day made no statement about PIAAC, and the results were not announced on the HRSDC website. International participants at the final institute hosted by The Centre for Literacy in 2015 expressed dismay at Canada’s abandonment of leadership, having previously looked to Canada as a model for engagement in adult literacy. Canada, once the leader in mounting and promoting international literacy surveys, was no longer a major player in this issue.

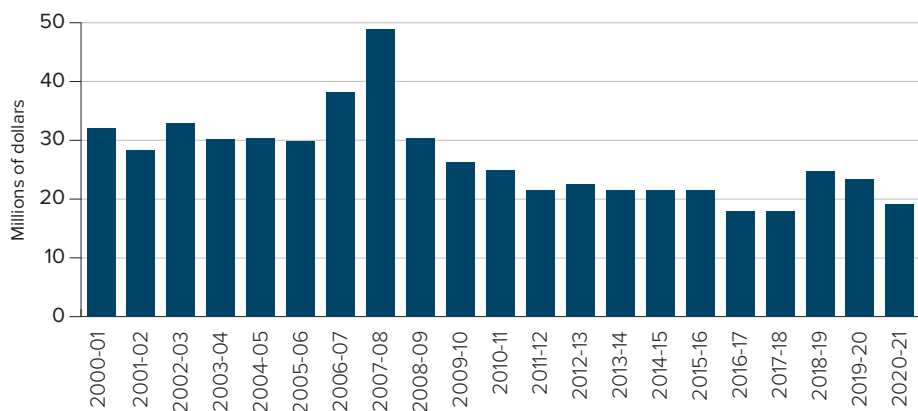
By 2014, OLES’s officially stated objective had changed from “promoting lifelong learning by reducing non-financial barriers to adult learning.” By 2015, its main objective was to achieve “systemic change by encouraging the integration of literacy and essential skills into labour market programming, services, and policies” (ESDC, 2017, p. ii).

These structural changes were accompanied by reduced federal funding for the adult Literacy and Essential Skills program (figure 1). These reductions were part of government-wide budget cuts. The total annual amount available dropped from a peak of nearly \$50 million in 2007-08 to roughly \$30 million in 2008-09 under the Conservative government. The most significant part of this reduction came from cancelling the federal/provincial/territorial funding through which the NLS supported projects that complemented direct literacy programming funded by the provinces and territories. It continued to fall, reaching its lowest level at just below \$20 million per year between 2016 and 2018 under the Liberal government. During that time, various national literacy organizations completely lost their core funding. Since then and until 2021, total funding has fluctuated between \$20 and \$25 million per year.

This gradual reduction in federal support through the OLES predominantly affected Indigenous, community-based and family literacy projects and programs; that is, projects that did not fit the new employability focus. Funding for public awareness ended completely. The OLES project funding no longer complemented provincial and territorial literacy programming, thus ending a 17-year practice of the federal government matching the amounts spent by provinces and territories.<sup>10</sup> While the cuts were part of a government-wide initiative, the relatively small savings belied a lowering of the priority placed on literacy as a federal policy issue (Hayes, 2009).

Among activities and programs severely hit by the loss of federal support were those maintaining the literacy knowledge infrastructure, especially the ones developed before 2006.

**Figure 1. Adult Literacy and Essential Skills Program funding, 2000-01 to 2020-21**



Source: Calculations by the author using Main Estimates, 2000-01 to 2020-21; Public Accounts of Canada, 2001 to 2021; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Departmental Performance Report, 2005-06; 2010-11; 2011-12; 2012-13; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Report on Plans and Priorities, 2013-14.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the policy and program changes during this period, see Hayes (2013).

The reduction in the federal government’s role in adult literacy led to a severe decline in academic and practitioner-led research, information sharing and knowledge mobilization, with important consequences described below.

### **Narrower scope and scale of knowledge generation**

As the OLES became more and more focused on the Essential Skills framework, its resources became more devoted to essential skills, including knowledge generation. However, even within the new focus on employability, opportunities for knowledge generation were limited. The OLES did not produce a broad research strategy to inform project funding. Instead, it funded a few projects conducted by a handful of researchers to further develop the Essential Skills Framework, such as researching the model’s efficacy. Alternative approaches that did not use the Essential Skills model were unlikely to be funded. As a result, the scope of new knowledge available substantially narrowed, with information sharing limited to project-grant recipients.

Adult literacy research was supported at the provincial and territorial level or by non-government funding. This funding was insufficient compared to what the federal government could have provided. Without knowledge mobilization and communication, practitioners across the country had little or no knowledge about this research, not to mention access to the findings.

One study found that, outside the academic environment, research on adult literacy became rare (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2018). Some researchers described adult education as a “weak” field of research (Rubenson & Elfert, 2019), and some leading academics in the field, who were encouraged through NLS project activities, have retired. “New ideas about literacy or literacy-related research at a conceptual level were not circulating widely, and therefore could not influence innovative approaches to programming or instruction” (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2018, p. 19). In sum, the federal government no longer fostered knowledge generation about literacy by academics and practitioners.

### **Fewer opportunities to interact nationally**

In 2014, then-minister of Employment and Social Development Canada, Jason Kenney, announced that the government must ensure federal funding goes to projects that help Canadians obtain jobs rather than “administration and countless research papers” (Goar, 2014). However, there are myriad reasons adults return to learning beyond getting a job and research activities have an important impact on education delivery. The comment also discounts the importance of core funding to cover costs vital to an organization’s existence (such as rent, computers and insurance), which cannot be supported with project funds. To illustrate, federal funding for the NALD/Copian in 2013 totaled \$697,259, or nearly 76 per cent of the organization’s total revenues of just under \$924,000 that year (NALD, 2014). The province of New Brunswick gave another 6.4 per cent, and the rest came from donations and other revenues (NALD, 2014). The loss of core funding sounded the death knell for these organizations and the end of their roles in a Canadian adult literacy knowledge strategy.

Unable to find alternate sources of core funding, several other literacy organizations eventually closed their doors, including the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network and Laubach Literacy of Canada at the national level, as well as Literacy Ontario, Literacy Partners of Manitoba and Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador at the provincial level. The funding cuts also ended The Centre for Literacy and its institutes, which had become an internationally recognized forum for knowledge mobilization.

These funding cuts dramatically limited, if not completely ended, opportunities for knowledge mobilization and the ability to bring literacy practitioners, researchers and other stakeholders together at conferences and in-person sessions. The push to fund literacy training aimed at obtaining jobs ignored the real need for infrastructure support to train practitioners, develop curricula, share research and foster networking and coordination. Subsequently, funding went to projects focused on Essential Skills.

At the pan-Canadian level, interactions with others in the field became limited to meetings of groups receiving federal funding. While provincial and territorial literacy organizations shared knowledge and research among their members through regularly scheduled conferences, the federal government no longer supported the capacity to bring people together at the national level and across regions.<sup>11</sup> The last *national* conference open to anyone in the literacy community was likely the 2015 Summer Institute hosted by The Centre for Literacy.

Occasionally, a national project would form an advisory committee that offered a forum for knowledge exchange as an unexpected outcome. This was the case when Decoda Literacy Solutions brought together literacy experts and representatives of provincial and territorial literacy organizations to support its Displaced Workers and Essential Skills project beginning in 2019. The benefits of face-to-face meetings included sharing lessons learned, learning about new resources, strengthening working relationships and building solidarity (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, 2022). This lack of capacity to interact at the national level has been criticized. A 2017 report described the lack of communication among literacy practitioners as a “serious loss and disadvantage” (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2018, p. 12).

With limited in-person interaction, literacy researchers and practitioners began to rely on word of mouth or newsletters to learn about the latest research and knowledge. This contributed to missed opportunities and duplication of efforts. It also impeded the growth of knowledge within the literacy community and ultimately disadvantaged adult learners.

### **Lack of reliable information about federally funded projects**

Over the years, the federal government funded thousands of literacy projects. Proposals were assessed for innovation and avoiding duplication. Knowing what has already been

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<sup>11</sup> For example, B.C.'s Decoda Literacy Solutions held its biennial literacy conference in 2024. This event further strengthens my argument because, by Decoda's own admission, the conference had a *solely provincial focus*, bringing together “BC's provincial literacy network for interactive, dynamic and informative learning sessions.” <https://decoda.ca/training/decoda-conference/>

funded is a critical element of proposal assessment. Yet efforts by the NLS and its successor organization, OLES, to maintain their own database of funded projects accessible to the public and project proponents have been difficult. The database maintained by the NLS was accessible to members of the public, who could consult it when developing proposals. The OLES website also hosted a funded project database, but it was incomplete and contained projects only from 2007-08 to 2012-13.<sup>12</sup>

In fiscal year 2018-19, OLES produced an *Essential Skills Playbook: Showcasing Innovative Approaches at Work* (ESDC, 2019). The publication profiled 37 projects, some funded as early as 2010-11. Over the same nine-year period, according to the federal *Public Accounts*, the program funded 369 projects, making the Playbook's selections about 10 per cent of the total. The Playbook has not been updated since.

Even though departments across the government were mandated to proactively disclose the grants and contributions made starting in 2006, the data posted on the Proactive Disclosure site lists only the organization name and amount of funding but, in most cases, provides no information about the objective of the funded project. As a result, an organization trying to devise an innovative project or build upon past practice would be hard-pressed to discover what has already been funded. How program officials assess a new application for its innovation or potential to avoid duplication is also unclear. If an internal database exists to help make funding decisions, it is not publicly accessible. These actions resulted in a duplication of effort, missed opportunities and loss of continuity, among other results.

### Limited access to research findings

Outcomes of funded projects and findings produced by academic research play a vital role in advancing knowledge. Without a national repository, however, knowledge retention is fragmented, access is limited and duplication of efforts is the likely outcome.

The problem of access to research findings began with the closures of several departmental libraries of the federal government, including that of HRSDC, in 2012 (Smythe, 2018). While the rationale for closure did not directly target literacy and was apparently part of overall government cuts (Price, 2011), it had a negative effect on the collection assembled by the NLS and OLES. The collection was built upon the final reports and documents created by funded projects. As a result, hundreds of documents and videos funded by the federal government became unavailable to most public servants, literacy practitioners and the public. The Decoda Literacy Solutions library in Vancouver became the most robust existing library, with a dedicated librarian and 5,000 pieces of material available for lending, but only to B.C. residents.

With the rise of the internet, knowledge retention moved away from fungible products to the ephemeral. Publications are no longer printed but posted on websites, and traditional retention methods, such as sending copies of publications to Library and Archives

<sup>12</sup> <https://oles.esdc.gc.ca/bace-oles/pr.4j.2ctse.1rch@-eng.jsp>

Canada (LAC), seem to be no longer used. For example, a quick search on the LAC site for “Essential Skills” finds no documents older than 2013. Similarly, a search for “adult literacy” in the online database of CMEC produces predominantly pre-2014 reports. Most documents listed among the 314 results of that search are international reports, and none are course curricula.<sup>13</sup>

Developing online documents and resources is a positive step that opens access to materials to a broader audience. However, without central repositories, catalogues or the services of a digital librarian, gathering information from a myriad of websites is an enormous task, especially when it comes to information stemming from activities at the local level, such as new curricula, research insights or program evaluations.

What NALD/Copian brought to the table was a one-stop repository of digitized documents. Before its closure in 2015, due to the loss of core funding, the organization undertook a massive project to digitize its collection. As a result, most documents generated through federal funding were only ever available on its website. Its database of over 4,500 literacy reports and products is still accessible through the CDÉACF website, although it has not been updated since 2015.<sup>14</sup>

Without a service such as NALD/Copian, accessing reports and research papers relies on internet searches and the hope that organizations producing them are posting them online. While some provincial literacy organizations have online resource hubs available to their members, these significant efforts cannot replace a national means of sharing and retaining knowledge.

### Lack of systematic web archiving

Along with the ubiquitous use of the internet to publish documents, the world has turned to web pages to post information and resources. However, as one study showed, only 10 per cent of the web remains live and unchanged after one year of being online (Digital Preservation Coalition, n.d.). According to a U.K. report, early online content — from the early 1990s to around 1997 — worldwide has completely disappeared due to the lack of web archiving (United Kingdom, 2011). Hence, to preserve digital information for future researchers, historians and the public, web archives regularly take snapshots of web pages throughout their lifespans to document a website’s evolution and track changes or edits. The U.K. government recognized the need to ensure that information is preserved. Its Web Archive collects snapshots of a website throughout its lifespan. It is a “living archive.”<sup>15</sup>

However, Canada’s Open Portal approach to data preservation follows guidance from LAC, which does not see web pages as historical documents and does not require their preservation (LAC, 2022). LAC sets the guidelines for web page disposal that allow federal departments to choose if and how they archive out-of-date web pages based on “operational value” (see Government of Canada, n.d.; LAC, n.d.).

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cmec.ca/297/Search-results/index.html?q=adult%20literacy> (last accessed on April 19, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> <https://cdeacf.ca/copian>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/webarchive/about-the-uk-government-web-archive/>

In 2021, the OLES underwent another transformation and became the Office of the Skills for Success (OSS) — mandated to promote a new Skills for Success framework that reorganized some of the existing Essential Skills and added two new skills. References to the original Essential Skills and the OLES itself seemed to have disappeared from the web. Searches conducted after May 2021 found no original OLES web pages, even with the Wayback Machine Internet Archive.<sup>16</sup> It is unclear whether the pages were archived and are not publicly available or if they were removed entirely without archiving.

Deleting Essential Skills from other Canadian government websites means historical information only exists on the websites of non-government organizations. It also had the effect of cancelling almost 30 years of a government-led and publicly sponsored research project. This loss affects practitioners and researchers who need but no longer have access to the Essential Skills materials. Implementation of the new framework relies on work to design, update, pilot-test and finish proficiency levels and descriptors for all nine skills (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, 2021). While, to date, definitions and components of each skill from the new network have been provided, work still needs to be done to transition appropriately and effectively from Essential Skills to Skills for Success.

The move to storing documents online and the ability to remove, modify or delete web pages further degrades knowledge retention. When the sole source of information is on a web page, deleting that page effectively deletes a historical document. Consequently, knowledge becomes challenging to generate and share, resulting in duplication and missed opportunities.

## TOWARD REBUILDING KNOWLEDGE INFRASTRUCTURE

Since 1988, the federal government has spent millions on adult literacy. That is a sizable investment of taxpayers' dollars. Yet the knowledge acquired during this time is no longer available for literacy practitioners, policymakers, researchers, adult learners and the general public.

The loss of the NALD/Copian, the HRSDC departmental library, the online projects-funded database and web pages has meant not only a loss of knowledge but also a loss of history. Without knowing the history and what has already been funded, the OSS risks funding projects that reinvent the wheel. Without access to historical documents, future researchers will be unable to tell the story of the federal government's role in adult literacy and build on its knowledge and experience to develop further and advance the adult literacy field. Without the ability to meet and exchange knowledge, literacy practitioners and researchers are working in silos. And adult literacy remains a marginal issue without the ability to generate new research by practitioners and academics.

<sup>16</sup> The Wayback Machine is a digital library of internet sites and other cultural artifacts in digital form (available at <http://web.archive.org/>). It has been archiving digital sources since 1996. As of January 2023, a quick search for the "Office of Literacy and Essential Skills" on the Wayback Machine produced 17 results out of nearly 800 billion web pages searched. All 17 referred to archived publications of the U.S.-based National Institute for Literacy.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons behind this total collapse of the adult literacy knowledge infrastructure. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering the major structural shifts at the federal level around adult literacy that occurred before it:

- First, the move toward treating literacy solely as an employment-related skill limited the range of funded projects and activities. This inevitably narrowed the scope of supported research topics down to only those promoting the skills frameworks approved by the federal government.
- Second, prioritizing tangible outcomes like moving people up the literacy scale and into jobs effectively undermined the importance of “countless research papers” as well as the administration of important organizations in the field, activities perceived as not immediately related to training delivery and not easily measurable in their return on investment.
- Third, the federal government’s funding cuts removed federal support from activities like research and conferences. This inevitably led to the winding down of research, the closures of libraries and document repositories, and the discontinuation of conferences. These activities are more effective and efficient with federal leadership due to the resources and co-ordination involved and the wide range of beneficiaries they serve nationwide. Therefore, these funding cuts effectively halted the federal government’s leadership in adult literacy, dismantling the very foundation of the field — its knowledge infrastructure.

The federal government’s priorities are not likely to change any time soon. We did see some progress in funding in 2021-22, when the budget for the OSS grew to over \$90 million, the highest the adult literacy field has ever seen. Yet the OSS’s funding decisions have remained limited to activities supporting, enhancing or embedding Skills for Success in the adult employability training landscape. These activities, including research and evaluation efforts, continue to focus exclusively on improving the OSS’s own programming, firmly positioning federal involvement in adult literacy within the rubric of employability training and employment policy. Any references to literacy skills are subsumed under the concept of Skills for Success. Regrettably, support for the knowledge infrastructure outside of what is relevant to the framework is not among the funded activities.

It is worth keeping in mind that the OSS’s own work sits upon 30 years’ worth of knowledge that was carefully collected, stored and shared by previous generations of academics, practitioners and public officials. Restoring access to that wealth of knowledge and renewed efforts to maintain and further develop it would enhance the OSS’s future objectives. Doing so requires a well-articulated national strategy led by the federal government, which is especially important given the federated nature of the education field in Canada and continued calls by education professionals and researchers to go back to co-ordination and coherence.<sup>17</sup> In a sense, activities to reinstate the knowledge infrastructure can be an essential stepping stone to tying together and supporting the literacy field nationwide.

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<sup>17</sup> For example, Walker (2022) calls for national co-ordination as one of her five recommendations.



The following actions may serve as the first necessary steps in that direction:

1. **Put adult literacy research back on the federal agenda.**
  - The federal government, such as the OSS, should develop an explicit national adult literacy research strategy in consultation with adult literacy and essential skills experts. As part of that strategy, efforts should be made to engage a wider group of academic researchers, particularly those involved in adult literacy research in the Skills for Success effort and literacy more specifically. Partnering with SSHRC and academic associations would support an effective research strategy. This literacy research strategy should focus on understanding who is benefiting, what works, what impact programs have on learners and society and how research supports learners and practitioners. This would enable policymakers to use evidence-based research to design programs aimed at helping adult learners.
2. **Reinstate and expand opportunities for adult literacy researchers and practitioners to network.**
  - The OSS should host national conferences and symposiums, attended not only by those with funded projects but also open to those interested in literacy and essential skills. These conferences would be a way to disseminate research findings. Workshops aimed at adult literacy practitioners would ensure that the latest knowledge, including best practices, innovative curricula and expertise about adult learners, makes its way to the literacy classroom.
3. **Build a national repository of adult literacy projects and results.**
  - More transparency about funded adult literacy projects is needed to avoid duplication of effort. The OSS should provide a list of funded projects on its web page, with some information about the nature of the project and its results (e.g., its findings, their implications for practitioners and products such as learning curricula it developed, if any).<sup>18</sup> Organizations submitting proposals could use the database to develop projects that build on past ones. Public servants assessing applications could use it to ensure no duplication and encourage connections to earlier projects. This would result in stronger, more robust projects built on the cumulative knowledge gained by earlier projects.
  - CMEC or the OSS could create and maintain an online national repository, a one-stop portal, for everything related to adult literacy, such as research publications, project reports, curricula and videos. Such a repository should be created in consultation with adult practitioners and researchers to ensure that it contains relevant research that could be translated into practical applications and assure quality control to leverage these materials to design new programming.
  - ESDC should embrace a web-archiving policy and create an archive of restored pages. The U.K. Government Web Archive is an example of how the government preserves content by archiving its websites and some social media accounts.

<sup>18</sup> The OSS provides a list of “Skills for Success assessment and training tools” for learners and employers (<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/jobs/training/initiatives/skills-success/tools.html?category=Individual&-type=Training>). While this is an important step in the right direction, it is not related to the database I recommend be organized and maintained.

These recommendations are low-hanging fruit and do not require enormous resources. Some may still argue that allocating every dollar available directly to program delivery is preferred. I believe that these recommendations' expenditures represent investments that will yield significant national public benefit by boosting delivery for decades to come. They would enhance the effectiveness of literacy training and eradicate inefficiencies without overhauling the existing system or establishing a new organization. Without further research, the extent to which these recommendations can generate these benefits is difficult to ascertain. However, this is precisely the premise advocated for in this paper.

Arguments that adult literacy is not federal jurisdiction do not hold water. In health care — an area of shared federal, provincial and territorial jurisdiction — the federal government supports new research and information-sharing through organizations such as the Canadian Institute for Health Information and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The importance of national knowledge creation and exchange is also recognized by the recent Horizontal Evaluation of the Labour Market Development Agreements, which, among other things, recommends that ESDC work with provinces and territories to share and discuss lessons learned, as well as boost efforts to maintain and strengthen data collection (ESDC, n.d.).

Generation, mobilization and retention of knowledge serve as the very foundation of the adult literacy field and provide education practitioners and policymakers with critical tools to do their work, further strengthening practice and policy, and benefiting adult learners and society overall. The federal government must recognize the importance of these tools in creating and nurturing a robust adult literacy knowledge infrastructure. Restoring and further fostering this wealth of knowledge requires a deliberate, transparent, articulate approach and federal leadership. Without a national knowledge foundation, adult literacy risks becoming marginalized and Canadians who lack literacy skills risk being left further behind.

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