House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

HUMA • NUMBER 025 • 1st SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, October 26, 2006

Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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● (0835)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the study of employability in Canada will commence. I would like to take this time to welcome all our witnesses this morning. We've been travelling across the country to talk to people about employability issues. Earlier this week we were in St. John's, Newfoundland. We proceeded to Halifax, and then yesterday to Montreal. Now we're in Toronto for two days.

We'll start with Ms. Kennedy.

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy (Executive Director, Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment): Thank you.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Bonnie Kennedy, and I am the executive director of the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment. I would like to begin my remarks with two questions for panel members.

First of all, I would like to ask you to reflect upon your current skills and abilities and try remember whether you acquired them in school or learned them as a result of work and life experience.

The second question I would like to ask you to think about is an iceberg floating in the waters near St. John's, Newfoundland. Apparently only a small part of icebergs, perhaps 10% to 25%, can be seen by the naked eye. The rest is under water. If you could picture the iceberg and consider the visible part above the water as representing formal credentialed learning and the submerged part as representing experiential or informal learning, would you want to explore a process that helps adults uncover the submerged 75% of their hidden skills and abilities?

If your answer to the first question was that you learned from experience rather than school, and if you think Canada as a nation could make use of all the experiential learning hidden inside every Canadian, then you understand the premise upon which prior learning assessment and recognition is based.

Prior learning assessment and recognition—the acronym is PLAR, and I will continue to use that acronym—is the process of identifying, documenting, and evaluating informal learning acquired through work and life experience. It challenges the notion that the only learning that really counts is that which is taught in the classroom. PLAR is a bridging and transitioning tool that enables adults to continuously build on their past learning accomplishments and to have their learning recognized in the workplace, in academic institutions, and by occupational bodies.

Many Canadians have had the privilege of completing an apprenticeship, college program, or university program, but many more have not, because of financial difficulties, personal challenges, lack of interest during teenage years, and/or family responsibilities. Those without a credential often label themselves as “stupid” because they do not have a piece of paper to prove their competence.

Imagine what would happen if a PLAR process were readily available, so that people could prove their experiential learning by getting recognition and credit for what they already know and can do, thereby reducing the time and money required for credential completion. Imagine how useful it would be to an employer to have a PLAR system that could assist in determining levels of workplace competencies.

PLAR is an innovative system for measuring experiential learning and represents a significant departure from our traditional education and training systems, which have been designed primarily for children and youth. This is why PLAR needs your support and nurturing. Adults have a lifetime of learning experience, the value of which is significant for our economic growth and social cohesion; it is the hidden iceberg of adult learning, which can be uncovered through PLAR.

What is the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment? CAPLA is a national incorporated not-for-profit membership organization dedicated to adult learning and to formal recognition of learning achievements by employers, colleges, universities, and occupational bodies. It has been operating since 1994 and undertakes PLAR research, professional development, workshops, and conferences; hosts online communities of practice; and assists practitioners, adults, and immigrants looking for ways to improve learning recognition assessment in Canada. We have over 300 members across the country and abroad.

How and when is prior learning assessment and recognition used? PLAR tools can be used by business and industry to determine what a person knows and can do when diplomas and degrees may not tell the whole story. Essential skills for the workplace can be demonstrated and measured in flexible yet rigorous ways using PLAR processes.

Sector councils use PLAR to assess competencies. Colleges and universities can use PLAR to determine if someone should receive academic credit for their experiential learning if it is considered to be equivalent to classroom learning.

Such academic credit for prior learning can dramatically affect the time and costs associated with obtaining credentials, thus making a return to formal learning more appealing. PLAR can also be used to assess workplace skills of immigrants to Canada and is an important addition to international credential assessment services available in a number of provinces in Canada.

Asking someone to demonstrate their knowledge and skills or to produce an evidence-based learning portfolio are effective ways of assessing prior learning. Learning portfolios have a variety of uses that include self-assessment, career planning, personal professional development, and preparation approved competencies for employment and job search. Wherever and whenever a standard is established, learning can be evaluated against the standard.

However, without a reliable prior learning assessment and recognition system in place, evaluation and recognition can be subjective, unreliable, and non-transferable.

Why is PLAR an important employability strategy for Canada? The recognition of prior learning is a critical component for the development of Canada's labour force and for capacity building in our communities. However, before we can utilize the existing knowledge and skills of our citizens and newcomers, we must discover what those competencies and talents are. Likewise, before working Canadians can increase their own employability, they must reflect, articulate, and document their knowledge skills and abilities, which takes time and effort.

What needs to happen? First, I think we need to ask some fundamental questions. Would Canada benefit from having a PLAR system and PLAR services to help mature Canadians and immigrants articulate and prove the depth of their learning? Is it enough to simply look at academic credentials alone as proof of learning? Can Canada afford to waste the knowledge and skills of its citizens at a time of skill shortages across the country, by not assessing and recognizing prior learning? Should adults be required to start at the beginning of a pro forma or university program each time they want to go back to formal learning?

If the answers to some of these questions are yes, the standing committee may want to consider the following suggestions: the development of a pan-Canadian adult learning assessment and recognition strategy; the establishment of national standards and guidelines for prior learning assessment, in order to ensure quality practice, transferability, and mobility; and the provision of core and targeted of funding for prior learning assessment and national leadership in this area.

Prior learning assessment services will enhance employability for the individual for the paid and unpaid labour force, and for Canada as a whole. Without it, we will be wasting our most valuable natural resources: the skills and knowledge of our citizens.

Thank you.

● (0840)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kennedy.

So that you know, we did get your brief. When it is translated, it will get to all the members.

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Who is going to speak from the next group, Mr. Santacruz or Mr. Deenen?

Mr. Victor Santacruz (Executive Director, Canadian Nursery Landscape Association): I'll start.

Thank you, and good morning. My name is Victor Santacruz. I represent the Canadian Nursery Landscape Association.

I'll tell you a bit about our association. We're a not-for-profit ornamental horticultural association. We are the association in Canada. We represent over 3,300 member companies, and we date back to 1922.

As for our industry, we are part of the ornamental sector, representing nursery and floriculture. We are the nursery side, which is also the single largest sector in horticulture, with over 9,000 ornamental products, representing a farm gate of over $2.1 billion annually. Our sector provides value-added dollars, so at the consumer level it's estimated that we represent over $12 billion of the Canadian economy.

Our industry has absolutely no government production subsidies, and we employ over 200,000 people. We're also the fastest-growing sector in agriculture, growing over 8.7% annually over the past few years.

To put it briefly, a lot of things that our industry does are because green matters, and we like to use that tag line because we're also an environmental group. We do a lot of greenscaping, landscaping, and because of that we are a seasonal industry; there's no doubt about it.

Our industry does not look for government handouts. We look for solutions, with deliverables that are of benefit to the industry and to Canada, so we ask for everything that we do to be inclusive of our industry. So we appreciate the opportunity to talk here today.

As has been communicated to our association by industry and its members, employment insurance is a big issue for us. We believe employment insurance does not adequately handle the seasonality of the nursery and landscape industry. Qualified seasonal workers are often encouraged to look elsewhere, in non-seasonal industries. We desire to work with government to find win-win-win relationships for our industry, government, and our employees.

We don't put blame on the EI offices. We understand that they're working with a system, that they're doing their job, but ultimately it does not serve well our industry or our members or, again, the employees either.

It has been a common occurrence for industry to communicate to us that local EI offices are suggesting to seasonal workers that they find employment in other industries that can offer year-round employment. This short-sighted action has exacerbated the labour shortage for industry and led to more industry frustration and discontent.

We feel that EI should encourage improved training and communication with our industry to ensure that skills of these workers are elevated in order to encourage and improve synergies with other industries that directly or indirectly benefit from our economic impact. There is a more progressive policy than simply encouraging both skilled and unskilled labour to seek employment elsewhere.

We have worked with government in the past to create education and industry certification programs to better train our workforce and increase the professionalism of our industry. Over 10 years ago, we worked together with the Horticulture Human Resource Council and our industry to develop a certified horticultural technical program, which is a Canadian and American industry certification program that further develops the skills of our workforce. This program is still in existence today and it is growing annually. It is a positive example of how industry and government can work together to accomplish and further the goals of improving human resources in Canada. Our association has a proven track record of being able to work effectively with government in a constructive way to create mutual benefits.

Regarding labour shortages, again we've been trying to be proactive in raising the level of professionalism within the industry through our certification programs and have also been doing work in communicating to high schools, colleges, and universities to try to improve input into our industry. Yet we continue to face these labour shortages and a diminishing labour pool due to external forces, including EI practices.

One of the things we're dealing with right now in specific areas, such as Alberta, Ontario, and British Columbia, are certain labour shortages, specifically due to some of the construction boom that has created a demand for labour and cannot simply be met by our industry. This situation will ultimately slow us down, and that economic impact will affect others. We would like the HRSDC to create a nursery and landscape association labour market opinion in order to facilitate the industry to access foreign unskilled labour to address our short-term seasonality concerns. We recommend that this be done over a two-year process or a two-year time span in order to review the effectiveness of this.

We also feel that it would be of great assistance to us if we could work with government to help move people from areas such as Newfoundland, where they face high unemployment, to areas such as Alberta. Again, we need assistance with that. We're not looking for financial assistance, we're looking for solutions, and that is one of the things we request.

● (0845)

The bottom line is that that's my little spiel for now. I'll pass it over to Harold, and he will give some specific examples, because he is in the industry and can tell you how some of these issues have affected his company personally and those of some of his colleagues in our industry.

Mr. Harold Deenen (Co-Chair, Human Resource Committee, Canadian Nursery Landscape Association): Thank you, Dean. I'll keep it really short.

I am a contractor here in the city of Toronto, and I also serve as the human resource chair for the CNLA. I can't add a whole lot to what our executive director, Victor, has already said—and he has done a great job. I can tell you that we are a very progressive group.

I would point out that we're the only group in agriculture that collects and remits millions and millions of dollars of GST every year, so we're not looking for a handout. What we're looking for is some cooperation with HRSDC, and we're looking to try to see if we can work with the seasonality issues.

I know that both this government and the former government were looking for ways of dealing with the seasonality problems, but I think we need to be a bit more aggressive. We need to start doing a little bit more training. Rather than trying to push people into year-round occupations that don't serve any of us, we need to start working at training these people in the off-season so that they become more employable, so that they make more money, so that it's a win-win-win situation.

Thank you.

Mr. Victor Santacruz: I'd like to further add to that. We have some members in Alberta, and I bring their example because they're the ones who have been bringing the majority of concerns to us. They don't have any employees right now. Some of their garden centres, some of their landscape companies, and some of their nurseries actually aren't operating in some cases.

Some of them have gone out of their way to pay over $5,000 to bring in a foreign worker for twelve months, and sometimes eight months, just to do the job. We have a lot of people in Canada who can do this work, and obviously we want Canada first. We have areas of high unemployment, so why not bring those people to other areas? Why not facilitate it?

The problem is that they're not there. Even the national association is bringing in a foreign worker. I'm not from here and...I'm joking; I am from here. But it's almost that bad, people. I make light of it, but it's true.

We are facing real issues, and a lot of our industry members are getting very frustrated because, again, we don't ask for handouts. It has never been a tradition for our industry. We are very entrepreneurial, and our only request is that we work together with government to find solutions. There are real problems, and people are going out of business, which obviously doesn't help anyone.

We're even thinking of doing work fairs in other provinces to try to facilitate this, but alone, as a not-for-profit association, we cannot accomplish this. We're looking for some solutions and some help and, again, to work together.

That's it for us. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Santacruz and Mr. Deenen.

We're going to move to Mr. O'Leary.

Mr. John O'Leary (President, Frontier College): It's good to see you, Mr. Allison. Thank you. And thank you, members of the committee, for giving me this opportunity to present to you.

I was originally a teacher. I'm now president of Frontier College.

Frontier College is Canada's original literacy program. It was founded here in Ontario in 1899 by a group of students and teachers from Queen's University who wanted to make education available to workers in the frontier settlements of Canada at that time. They sent university students to work, live, and teach in mining camps, to rail gangs, and in logging operations right across the country.

Our heritage as an organization has always been to work with people who are in some way disadvantaged, and to help them to improve their situation and their future through access to literacy and education. Today, we recruit and train over 5,000 volunteers across the country. We work from 50 chapters at Canadian universities. If you go to our website, frontiercollege.ca, you'll be able to see where those chapters are.

I'm here today to talk to you about the links between employability and literacy. I've written a very short brief, because I think the connections are obvious to all of you and to all of us, and they're connections that you understand.

We know that a significant number of adults in Canada have serious literacy problems. Between 15% and 20% of Canadian adults aged 16 and out of school have difficulty dealing with almost any kind of print material. The impact of that problem at the workplace is very evident.

A further 22% of adults have some difficulty in coping with literacy skills in everyday life and work. We know that people with low literacy skills are twice as likely to be unemployed as those with higher skills.

We also know there are other impacts. Those with lower literacy skills, according to the Canadian Public Health Association, are among the least healthy Canadians.

And illiteracy is a serious problem with some of the most disadvantaged people in our country. For instance, among aboriginal people, the rates of illiteracy are particularly high.

We also know that support for literacy leads to clear economic benefits. There was a study done by the University of Ottawa just last year that shows that a rise of 1% in literacy scores relative to the international average will lead to a 2.5% rise in labour productivity and a 1.5% rise in GDP per capita.

In a recent study, the Conference Board of Canada told us that employers who implement literacy in the workplace programs gain productivity, reduce errors, have a higher quality of work, gain accuracy—which is crucial in ISO certification—and a range of improvements and performance, have better health and safety for employees, and ultimately experience increased profitability.

Workers who have higher literacy rates also obviously benefit. Again according to the Conference Board, they estimate that a male and a female with higher literacy skills may be expected to earn an additional $585,000 and $683,000 respectively over a lifetime, compared to a counterpart with lower literacy skills.

In my brief, I also made reference to the connection between literacy skills and other matters that are of concern to you as parliamentarians: the connection between literacy and health, which I referred to; literacy and access to justice in our courtrooms; and literacy and democracy, in terms of being able to read and understand the print material that each of you gives to your constituents, that each of your parties prepares in your platforms. So literacy is a key feature of our democratic system.

In conclusion, what needs to be done? In a nutshell, I've been a literacy advocate and instructor for more than thirty years. We need to increase the number of Canadians who are taking literacy instruction. There is a literacy infrastructure in place across our country. Most adult literacy students are attending classes in colleges or school board programs. The second largest number are involved with voluntary community-based organizations like Frontier College. Our workplace programs at Frontier College are in place among some of the workers you are examining in this committee process. We work a lot with seasonal workers, farm workers, migrant farm workers, and domestic workers, and we've done a lot of work with hospitality and service workers in places like this hotel.

● (0850)

As an example, we're starting a new program out west with cab drivers who want to improve their literacy skills or perhaps finish high school. These are people who work 10 to 12 hours a day and six or seven days a week. They're not able to go to a more formal program, so groups like Frontier College organize informal programs to reach people who are most in need.

What I would request the committee to consider is that you support the idea of a Canada-wide literacy action plan, with the financial resources required to teach one million Canadians over the next 10 years. I was a member of a group of educators from across the country last year—the chair, Mr. Allison, and I spoke about this—and we actually prepared a 10-year action plan and presented it to the last government just before the election was called.

We urgently need a plan in this country to implement and provide the appropriate resources to teach and reach a significant number of these adults. The good news is that we know how to do it. We, being Canadian educators, know how to do it. We're simply reaching too few people.

Stephen Lewis gave a speech a little while ago about the AIDS crisis, and I think his comment is applicable to the literacy situation. He said we need fewer people doing studies and more people studying.

The literacy issue has been examined and analyzed over and over again. We need to move the conversation forward and, as I said, scale up the number of Canadians who are engaged in literacy programs at the workplace, in the community, and in our formal education system.

Thanks very much.

● (0855)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. O'Leary.

I know that when we have chatted before, I've been very impressed with the work that Frontier College has been doing. As we ask questions, I think you will probably provide some great examples of how we can move literacy ahead.

We're going to move forward now with the first round of questions.

Mr. D'Amours, seven minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

M. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I'd like to thank you for travelling here to make a presentation to us. I come from a rural area in northern New Brunswick. So I understand that it's a fairly difficult task for you to come here, with the traffic there is in Toronto. So I want to thank you for coming.

I'd like to talk with Mr. Deenen and Mr. Santacruz on the issue of seasonal jobs. We talk about seasonal employees, but in fact it's the jobs that are seasonal. I'd like your comment on the need to try to train people so they can work throughout the year. Yes, we can dream. Yes, we can hope to do that, but the reality is quite different. There isn't really any magic solution.

When you train someone so that he can work year-round, he'll probably leave the seasonal work place to go and work indoors. That means that the small businesses in the industry you represent — and perhaps there are some bigger ones — will find it hard to retain their employees. When you get into this situation, what happens the following year? You have to start over and find new employees to fill their positions. In addition, you have to train those new employees because this is a new job for them. So that becomes a problem.

I'd like to hear what you have to say on those two points. You say the employment insurance system has to be improved. In the last Parliament, with my government, I implemented the best weeks policy. That concerned the 14 best weeks of the 52 previous weeks during which people had worked. Instead of taking the last weeks, we took into account the best 14 weeks in the previous year. That was applied in the regions where the unemployment rate was high, where it was 10% or more.

First, in your view, would it be important for this initiative that was implemented in 2005 to be applied nationally in order to help industries such as yours, to allow them to keep their employees and not to penalize employees because their work ends?

Second, since the start of the new Parliament, I have introduced a private member's bill on the elimination of the two qualifying weeks in the context of the employment insurance system. Do you believe that could help you retain your present employees over the next few years?

● (0900)

[*English*]

Mr. Harold Deenen: I'm sorry, I'm not bilingual, so I will answer in English.

With respect to the seasonality issue, you raised some important points. The pilot program you have in place now—the best 14 weeks—is a good step. I think we need to move forward with that.

In answer to your question, we have been trying to connect with winter-oriented companies so that we can try to share labour. We've been working on that the last few years. We have not had a great deal of success, because there's an overlap period in which both employers require the services. So there's been only limited success. We are working on it, though.

Second, we need to accept that we live in Canada. There are seasonal businesses here, and that will never change. It's difficult for us to plant trees in the middle of the winter. Most contractors employ a number of their core people year-round, and those people are the best trained, the most educated, the ones who have worked hardest. What we need to do is broaden that base. We need to get more people who are educated, certified, and have an understanding of what they're doing, so that they are more employable in our industry. We need to get EI to push those people into training during the winter months, as opposed to putting them into year-round employment. Make them better employees. Make them more employable. Then they'll make more money. We've been working with certification pilot programs for 14 years—ever since we worked with HRSDC on that report.

Mr. Victor Santacruz: I can add to that. I think you managed to answer the question very directly. Yes, it would help, but it's a short-term solution for us.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Do you mean the two-week waiting period?

Mr. Victor Santacruz: I mean the two-week wait time, and also the 14 weeks. It's a short-term solution for us. Of course it would help, but it would help us more if, during the times they are on EI, they weren't encouraged to leave the industry. I think that's a more important point. We are seasonal. Fishing, planting trees, cutting lawns—it's not going to happen in the winter. We are in Canada and we have to expect, and embrace, a cold nature. We just can't work during that time.

Our industry has been proactive on this. We've been tossing around a few ideas—hour pooling, banking hours. All of them, though, have been on an ad hoc basis. I think these things need to be explored more. They are short-term solutions. They would definitely help us, but in the long term, we need to be progressive and look at solutions that will benefit everyone, including the EI system. We don't want to be draining it. We're entrepreneurs, and we want to find ways that will benefit everyone, including our employees and our companies. We have the core people who stay. But how do we keep everyone else, especially the unskilled labour? It's easier for them to leave for another industry if they're encouraged to do so. That's the question we have to answer: how we keep the lower level? What you said is true: continuous training really makes a difference.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Not everybody across the country understands the reality. As you said, Mr. Deenen, we cannot plant trees during the winter. We cannot fish in downtown Toronto. That's the reality. But not everybody understands. Still, everybody wants fish and everybody wants to buy 2x4s to build houses. Some have a problem understanding that we need these industries to make sure everybody is able to have a better quality of life.

● (0905)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. D'Amours.

Madame Bonsant.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): I represent a very rural riding, which includes a municipality of 112 inhabitants, who live an hour and a quarter from the largest town, which has 6,700 inhabitants.

One thing shocks me a great deal. Every time I go into big cities, I get the feeling you always want to empty the countryside in order to fill up the cities. It's true that there are people between 45 and 55 years of age who lose their jobs and who have spent their lives in their rural community. Do you sincerely believe they want to leave everything and leave rural Quebec to go to Alberta for one year, two years or three years? No.

Messrs. Deenen and Santacruz, I'm going to ask you a question. In Quebec, we have a training school called CRIFA. It's a school specialized in agriculture, nursery work, landscaping and so on. I want to know whether that exists outside Quebec. That's a somewhat odd question, but I want to know whether you have similar schools. If so, do you recruit at those schools?

Furthermore, if there are schools, are they far from the city? Are they in rural areas? Are young people ready to move?

Apart from that, in Quebec, in the employment insurance field, we have a system that's called Emploi-Québec. Employment insurance claimants go to this centre, where positions are always posted. Emploi-Québec pays for training for those who want to change careers.

I want you to tell me especially about your nursery system. One of my friends has one. Physically, it's very tough, and I admire her, because I wouldn't do that. I don't think someone 62 years of age can start planting very heavy trees. You have to be very solid physically and very strong to be able to work in that field. It's very tough.

I don't know whether I've asked too many questions. I await your answers.

[*English*]

Mr. Victor Santacruz: Starting off with the agricultural and nursery colleges, we have a few. Olds College, in Alberta, is just outside Calgary. We have Guelph University for agriculture and nursery programs, and the rest are colleges within Toronto. But most of them tend to be rural or semi-rural, not towns of 6,000 or 7,000 people, and again not a metropolis like the Greater Toronto Area.

It's tough getting people to study agriculture and horticulture. It's not perceived by youth to be a glamorous career, or a career. A lot of people want to be doctors or lawyers, and they aren't necessarily looking at the trades. The trades have become a dirty word. It's unfortunate, because the trades are a very respectable business and are very profitable for most people who stick with it.

Hopefully that answers the question.

With regard to jobs in Quebec, you made a good point. It is tough work, and a lot of people don't like doing it. A lot of Canadians don't like doing it. I think the agriculture sector has also seen that. It's why the foreign worker program has worked well for them. Again, I think it's a short-term solution.

You were right when you said people who are 62 years of age won't go to work in a nursery, but we'd welcome them to come and work at a garden centre. I think someone who's 62 years old or even older would provide the customer service that we need. If they would only look at our industry as a possibility, we'd love to have them.

Mr. Harold Deenen: Further on the colleges, we are working within our association with what we call the TDAs or the training delivery agencies.

There's Humber College. As an example, the North Campus teaches landscape technology, and there are about six or seven jobs that are waiting for every single graduate. There's Fanshawe College, and Olds, as you mentioned. There's Kwantlen College in British Columbia. They're available. The employment is there. There is a huge demand for these people. I believe it's 6:1 or something, six jobs for every one person that comes out, and we need a lot more people.

It's funny that you mentioned older people. I just hired a 65-year-old gentleman who had some nursery experience. He used to work for Sheridan Nurseries, and he loves working outside. He tried working inside when he retired, the whole bit, but he now works for me and just loves it. He's on a maintenance crew, which is tough work all day long, but he loves it. He isn't as productive as some of the younger ones, but neither am I.

● (0910)

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Santacruz, as I said earlier, in my riding, there's an agriculture and nursery school. That school has been in existence for 15 years. Last year, it was expanded because increasing numbers of young people are studying in the agricultural and nursery field, as you say. There may not be a lot of people who have farms in Toronto or Calgary, but in my neck of the woods, in the Eastern Townships, that's increasingly developing: farms are increasingly being transferred to girls, more than boys. Back home, we don't exactly have that problem. That's not the problem; the problem is literacy. These are people isolated in rural areas and they need to learn to read and write.

Mr. O'Leary, I wouldn't want you to get involved in politics, but what damage will the cuts that the Conservative government has made in literacy programs do in your area? You know that has been considerably cut. I want to know what the impact of this cut in literacy programs that enabled people to enter or re-enter the labour market will be in your field.

[*English*]

Mr. John O'Leary: I regret that the government made that decision. I've met with Mr. Allison and some of his colleagues; in terms of literacy policy, I know the government is aware of the importance of literacy. As I said, I'm very eager to work with them to move ahead and to look at a major, significant initiative in our country, and I know my colleagues are too.

The infrastructure in place right now is modest. It is not reaching as many people as it needs to. As I said, I regret that the cuts were made, but I do agree that we need to reorganize the literacy infrastructure in this country, because we're not getting the results we need.

I'm eager to work with the government and with the members of Parliament. I was in British Columbia yesterday, talking to the Minister of Education there. The provinces obviously play a major role, and I think it's important that we look ahead at designing something new—something more effective than, and with more capacity than, the existing infrastructure.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madame Bonsant and Mr. O'Leary.

Mr. Martin is next, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you very much.

I have a few questions. One is for Bonnie. On the prior learning and assessment, I agree with you. I think it's a really valuable and necessary service that we need to provide.

You mentioned the need for core and targeted funding. What kind of funding are you getting now, and from where, and how much are you talking about in terms of core and targeted funding?

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: Our organization doesn't have any core funding. Our organization is basically reliant upon membership fees and project funding, and we all know the downside of project funding—once the project's over, where's the sustainability? Even if the results are outstanding, where is the sustainability?

What I see as some solutions in terms of the big picture picks up on Mr. O'Leary's point; I think we need an adult learning strategy in Canada. We don't have one. It would deal with the issues around literacy. It would deal with the issues around seasonal workers and older workers. We really need to grapple with the reality that our education and training system is still oriented towards youth, yet we all get old so quickly, as was mentioned earlier. I think we need to develop an adult learning strategy that would embrace literacy and would embrace prior learning assessment.

Your colleague was mentioning seasonal workers. What mechanisms do we have in place to support adult learners and career planning? Within HR communities generally, I don't think there's an HR professional anywhere who wouldn't say that their business is interested in employee development, but it's very hard to articulate that across the country in terms of an adult learning strategy, because we think of career development as something that takes place in high schools. Unless you're in transition, unless you've lost your job, you can't even access career planning or job search assistance, because it's not available to you unless you're in crisis.

I would suggest that part of the funding would deal with some of those broader issues around adult learning in Canada. That would certainly be appropriate in terms of the number of immigrants we bring into this country.

● (0915)

Mr. Tony Martin: Where do you get your funding now?

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: My organization, CAPLA, does not have any core funding.

Mr. Tony Martin: But you must have some funding.

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: We have funding from projects that we undertake. In fact, I brought some materials for you to look at about some of the projects we've done for the Government of Canada.

HRSDC, for example, funds a biennial conference every other year on recognizing learning, and for the last two events, in 2003 and 2006, our organization has hosted that event. There is some speculation as to whether this HRSDC event will be financed again. I'm not sure why that is. One would think that in a skills shortage environment, recognition of prior learning would be key to managing a skills shortage in terms of mining the resources that older workers have, that seasonal workers have—all those skills and that knowledge. Without a facilitated process of getting people to reach underneath and find what their hidden skills are, they will go unnoticed.

Mr. Tony Martin: Do you have any idea of what kind of money—a ballpark figure—would be needed to develop this national strategy, with guidelines?

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: I guess there are a couple of issues. First of all, there would need to be some coordination. And if you're asking what it would cost to create a sector-like organization to manage this, I would say it would probably be somewhere in the neighbourhood of $300,000 per year over five years, similar to how sector councils are financed in Canada.

The other issue, of course, is the development of a strategy. That would presumably have to be financed in another way, in addition to having some sort of leadership to coordinate that effort.

Likewise, in terms of project funding, I've suggested in the brief that it would seem to me that provinces and territories that are moving forward in recognizing the prior learning of.... For example, in Nunavut, their indigenous communities have very definite targets on assessing the prior learning of local people so they can be put into jobs within the government. Those kinds of targeted projects, I think, require funding, as well.

It could come under a work skills strategy. It could come under adult learning and literacy. But I think those three areas would require dedicated funding, separate funding, for all three.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you. Hopefully I'll have another round with a couple of more questions, but maybe I'll stay with you, Bonnie.

The impact you see in the work you do.... Once you determine, first of all, what the prior learning and skill of the person is, as was mentioned by John, then literacy becomes an issue in many cases.

As for the impact of a drop of $17.7 million to literacy across the country, do you have any idea what that will do to your work?

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: I think the impact is perhaps twofold. One thing is the message that it sends in the community-based organizations and organizations similar to mine, which work to provide programs to adults who are underserved. There's an atmosphere created by such cuts. And I think, when it comes to recognition of learning, the cuts do affect all of us who are involved with adults, whether it's in literacy or in recognition of programs, or in recognition of learning and skills. So the drop has a dramatic effect.

Our event just took place in New Brunswick, as I mentioned to you, a couple of weeks ago. There was a lot of concern about where the Government of Canada is in terms of recognizing the skills of older workers, recognizing the skills of immigrants, aboriginal people, and seasonal workers. I don't think we can afford not to recognize the knowledge and skills of our people. That makes no sense if we're in fact dealing with a skills shortage.

From my perspective, I think of the term “multiple literacies”. When I think of somebody who can't read, perhaps they have a tremendous ability in some other area. So I think we need to celebrate the learning of Canadians in areas in which they are competent, and provide them, as I mentioned in my brief, opportunities to express that competence in some helpful workplace tool, such as a portfolio of learning where they can celebrate their learning. They can market their learning to an employer in the off-seasons, as an example, and through such a process oftentimes come to the realization themselves that, “Gee, I need some literacy training here. I'm having trouble writing this.” So this would provide an opportunity through self-reflection and self-assessment to get people motivated and engaged in lifelong learning.

I think of the population that step up to these opportunities. It's the 70% that are feeling disenfranchised, the older workers who feel that they don't have anything to offer because they're 55. We can't afford to waste those skills.

● (0920)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kennedy.

We're going to move to Mr. Albrecht.

You have seven minutes, sir.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to each of you for appearing before the committee today.

I'd like to follow up on the issue of literacy funding. I'd point out that our government is clearly interested in continuing to fund literacy programs. Mr. O'Leary commented on the need to reorganize and restructure some of that, and paraphrased the words of Mr. Lewis most appropriately when he said we need fewer people doing studies and more people studying. It's my impression that is exactly the stand that our government takes. We're not going to continue to fund study upon study; we want the program on the ground, where the funds are needed to actually be implemented to do the literacy training in place. So that's a comment.

To Mr. Deenen, I'm thankful that you do hire 65-year-olds, so that 15 years from now, when I'm not elected.... I love the outdoor work, and I'm looking forward to it. You will leave a card at the end of the...?

Mr. Harold Deenen: Absolutely, sir.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Mr. Santacruz commented on this aspect of highlighting the skilled trades, and the importance of those skilled trades, and the fact that while medical doctors, lawyers, and so on are all good professions, we need to somehow highlight the value of the skilled trades. My question is, what can we do as a federal government? You said you don't need dollars; you want solutions. What can we do as a federal government to heighten the awareness, the viability, and the productivity of those kinds of jobs?

My son graduated from University of Guelph, and now he has a landscape architecture degree. So he's working in the very field that you folks are in, and I know the value of that kind of work. I graduated in dentistry in 1973, and certainly I don't see his work as any less important than medical or dental or law, or whatever. So my question is this: how can we raise the awareness of our young people, so that they see these as important professions?

Mr. Victor Santacruz: First of all, thank you for encouraging your son to take landscape architecture. That's always great.

I don't think we have enough time to discuss how we can do all of that, but I think a lot of it is education.

If we think about a lot of skilled labour, in many cases we depend a lot on immigrants, although I can honestly tell you that Canada is doing quite well compared to other parts of the world, even those that we consider to be progressive, like Denmark. I was there recently and they have about three graduates in horticulture a year. I feel for them. They don't have a labour shortage, but I feel for them regarding skilled labour.

Yes, an awful lot of it is education, and I think it's for all the skilled trades, not only us, although we care about ourselves more. Ultimately, I think all skilled labour has an issue in regard to schools. A lot of it is education, public education programs that you can do, including prior learning assessment.

It's a definite issue for us. We are taking steps to work with colleges, universities, and high schools. I think a program was recently announced, where some high schools in Ontario are going to take a similar stance to those in Quebec, with CEGEPs, and they're going to specialize in horticulture or in certain trades.

But I feel education is the way to go, working with industry to really know the skill sets we and others, like Harold's company, require when they get to the workforce.

● (0925)

Mr. Harold Deenen: You asked a very good question.

Victor is being rather modest. This past week we brought people from all over Canada, about 20 people who are in the industry—growers, nursery people, and landscapers—to specifically talk about raising the awareness of the importance of green, through Project EverGreen's “Because Green Matters”, and raising the awareness of Canadians on the importance of people who are in the green industry. We spent all that money and brought all these people together to discuss how we can raise the awareness of Canadians.

It's a very good question. We can forward to you copies of the strategic plan, but ideas were coming from everywhere to try to make Canadians more aware of what we do. People don't understand what we do.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Were there two or three that came to the top, two or three ideas that you would remember?

Mr. Harold Deenen: Well, I'm not crazy about the idea of a marketing board, although that obviously came to the top, because you then have to start talking about check-offs and all of the things that you have to start governing. But I think, more than anything, it was simply raising the awareness of Canadians through any kind of media possible. It's a really expensive process, tremendously expensive.

We talked about the education system and making sure it filters down not only to the universities but all the way to the elementary kids, so they understand that, as Victor said, the trades are a proud tradition. I'm the second generation in horticulture, and I'm very proud of it. My daughter is now the third generation, and I think it's great.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Do I still have some time, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: I think the issue is much broader, as you pointed out, than simply the horticultural area. It's plumbing, electrical, and auto mechanics.

This fits in so well with Ms. Kennedy's comment about prior learning. I have relatives who could take an engine apart and put it back together, without a manual to read, and I couldn't do it with a manual. I think it's important to look at all of the trades to try to find a way to raise the value, if I can use that term, in the minds of our young people.

Mr. Victor Santacruz: I looked at trends, and right now there are a couple.

They have a program in the Paris area, where the ministry of education got together with industry, and they actually have a green day. It means the ministry pays for buses and industry provides access to retail garden centres and nurseries. The students come down and spend the day learning about horticulture, greening, and the environment. They start at a young age. They each get to take a little plant or a bulb home to learn about planting.

It's a twofold benefit: one, again, is for the environment, of course, because the work we do helps the environment; and two, it gets people interested in trades, whether those trades are horticulture or anything related to our industry.

It can be mechanical. I can tell you that many landscape companies have many mechanics working for them, because we have a lot of equipment. It can be computer engineers. Certain members have large growing operations, with automated irrigation systems. There's a long list.

But it again gives access to learning, as Harold said, at that early stage. It's an example of how we can work together to create a mutual benefit for the Canadian environment, governments, industry, and our children.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you.

That completes our first round. We will move to our second round of five minutes for questions and answers.

Mr. D'Amours, the time is yours.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. O'Leary, you said we had to ensure there were more people in Canada who were able to read and write at a high level. In my opinion, that's precisely the direction we must take. It's definitely not by reducing funds allocated to literacy that we'll be able to do so.

I'm pleased as well to hear the comments by my Conservative colleague. That will enable me to invite him to New Brunswick, to the rural Francophone regions, where literacy offices have had to close their doors. Those offices didn't do any studies, but they provided services in the communities to people who didn't know how to read or write. They didn't do any studies; they provided services. Today they're closed down because of these cuts.

Mr. O'Leary, Canada is a big country, with its provinces, territories and regions. Do you agree with me that the only way to reach an individual who lives on a range, as we say back home, is through people from the community?

That's what happens back home, in New Brunswick, and I suppose it's the same everywhere. These are volunteers who make it possible for literacy programs to exist. This is the one and only reason why they work. It's volunteers who convey the information, who talk with their neighbours and family members to convince them to go take the necessary training.

Do you also think that we can reach people by going into the regions? In a community like Ms. Bonsant's, where there are 112 inhabitants, people are hard for officials from Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal to reach.

As regards literacy, some say people aren't reaching the levels they should reach, but isn't it correct that technology is changing so quickly that everyone has trouble following the situation?

Let's take the example of the BlackBerry and cellular telephone. As far as I know, the BlackBerry wasn't around 10 years ago. We're given a manual one inch thick so we can operate it. When you find yourself with that kind of manual, you may think we should probably evaluate literacy needs every year. That doesn't necessarily mean that we've regressed; it simply means that we haven't advanced as quickly as technology required.

[*English*]

Mr. John O'Leary: Thank you very much. Like all of your questions, that's worthy of a day's discussion.

But to respond, when I talk about a national program, I'm referring to a program that uses all the tools at our disposal as educators. The first tool is the classroom. In Canada, there's a very extensive community college and school board network that can reach adults in urban and rural areas in classroom situations. That's one way to learn. But not everyone's able to learn well in the classroom.

The second area I think of where we could increase capacity is the workplace. Here in Toronto and in other cities, Frontier College, in a hotel like this, has taught the workers who do read well to help their co-workers who don't read so well. We know that goes on anyway. Workers support one another informally all the time. We need to mobilize and increase capacity through the formal school system and through workplace programs. I agree with you entirely. Frontier College actually is a community-based organization. All of our work is done using volunteers at the community level.

And again, for many adults who have not done well in school and who have had negative school experiences, the idea of walking into a classroom or a literacy class...it's not going to happen. But if they can work with a trained volunteer in their home or in a coffee shop or in a community centre, they can build up their skills and build up their confidence. I know in New Brunswick there's been tremendous, very positive results with the community access program, which I think began with former Premier McKenna.

Using classroom and school capacity, using workplaces, and using community-based programs is important. Then finally, we need strategies for people with special needs—aboriginal people, seniors, and people perhaps living in rural Canada, where there are not as many services available.

With respect to your point about technology, you're absolutely right, the literacy landscape is moving so quickly compared to our parents' generation or our grandparents' generation. In fact, when people are skeptical about literacy, I often say that if you're a member of the baby-boomer generation, which many of us are—probably most of us in this room—I'll bet your grandparents didn't go to high school. I'll bet in many cases your parents didn't finish high school, whether you live in Newfoundland, Montreal, or northern British Columbia

I can use my own family as an example. The O'Learys and the Sullivans came here at the turn of the century. They were literally Irish peasants. They had never been to school. My father went to school until about grade six and then he started working on the farm. He was in the army and then he worked at Massey Ferguson for 40 years. He could fix anything. My mother had a grade 10 education. But to call my father illiterate, I think, would be inaccurate. He was able to participate in his society at that time.

The literacy landscape is moving so quickly that we as educators are having a hard time keeping up to it. And you're right, but we're all constantly engaged in learning and relearning.

As a final comment, you mentioned the BlackBerry. Mr. Lazaridis, who is president of Research In Motion and who created the BlackBerry, made a speech about a year ago. He said that this country needs a mission and that it should be to become the smartest country in the world. I wrote to him. I said that's a great vision; as a teacher and educator, I love that. But, I said, let's not forget the unemployed people or the older people; the people who are cleaning the rooms, as we speak, in this hotel right now; and the working people who don't have a lot of formal education. They also need to be able to participate in this learning society, and not just in the highly skilled trades and as post-secondary students in our country.

Oddly enough, Mr. Lazaridis hasn't replied yet. I'll have to get after him.

● (0935)

The Chair: Thank you Mr. O'Leary.

Mr. John O'Leary: He's buying hockey teams.

The Chair: We're going to move on to Madame Bonsant, for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: I'm going to continue talking with Mr. O'Leary and Mr. Albrecht. I hope you're ready to move to Calgary if you want to go into nursery work, because that's where there's employment.

Mr. O'Leary, there's another reality that people aren't aware of. In my riding, bilingualism is a fact. There are certain places for literacy in French and others for literacy in English. In Lennoxville, in my riding, most of the illiterate people are Anglophones. If the Conservative government doesn't realize that some provinces like New Brunswick and Quebec are bilingual and that they have twofold needs, we'll never manage to do anything. Conservative members, you've heard the message: in Quebec, there is a reality that's called bilingualism. That's part of our culture, of who we are. Even if we don't all have the same political vision, we are Quebeckers and New Brunswickers. That was only a comment, Mr. O'Leary. It should not be forgotten that bilingualism is a fact.

Ms. Kennedy, you say there are people who have acquired knowledge and skills. I want to know the age of those people and their skills. Then I'll ask you another question, depending on the answer.

● (0940)

[*English*]

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: Thank you. I think that prior learning assessment is relevant to all ages.

Ms. France Bonsant: Okay.

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: We have seen some wonderful programs that are in place in high schools to assess the learning of young people with extraordinary skill in one area and perhaps lower skill in another. Prior learning assessment can evaluate that learning and give academic credit for it, so that the extraordinary student doesn't have to take a course in which he or she already has the learning.

That, however, is not the history of prior learning in Canada. Prior learning in Canada started because people with a lot of knowledge and skills acquired through work and life experience did not have a credential, and those without a credential are disadvantaged in the labour force because employers often consider a credential to be a proxy for knowledge and skills. That was essentially how prior learning appealed to adults. They wanted to get a credential, and having their prior learning assessment done first would reduce the time and money required to get that credential, which was viewed—and continues to be viewed—as a barrier.

The same thing applies to immigrants to Canada. Many immigrants want to have a Canadian credential because they see it as having more cachet than a credential from another country. Again, if a prior learning assessment is in place, the repetition of learning is reduced.

That applies to all of us—to those of us who have been working for 25 years and may have gotten our first credentials at the front end of our working lives, but who now want to switch careers and get into something else. We want to have credentials either in the paid or unpaid labour force to help us get into that second career, or we want to get another credential in a completely different area. Again, some part of that knowledge and those skills is transferable. To support a system that allows learning competencies to be assessed before additional training takes place makes intuitive sense, so that we don't all start back at the beginning with an 18-year-old when in fact we're 40, we're in mid-career, and we want to have our existing learning assessed for the purposes of a new credential.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: Do you believe that, in 2006, jobs have increasingly demanding requirements? For example, in health, nurses must now have bachelor's and master's degrees to advance in their careers. Do you think that, at some point, over-education has replaced knowledge and skills?

I had a problem in my riding. A gentleman had worked in upholstery for 35 years. He lost his job at the age of 56. He applied for other jobs and employers didn't want to hire him, not because of his age, but because he was over-qualified. The employer told him that, with the 35 years' experience he had in upholstery, he couldn't pay him the salary he deserved. The gentleman answered that he wasn't asking him for a big salary, but simply to be able to work at providing training. Today he's working: he's training young people on the job.

Do you think that all these requirements, for bachelor's degrees, college diplomas and master's degrees, discourage young people from going into certain fields?

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Kennedy, a quick response.

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: The nature of work has changed. There's a lot of contract work out there, short-term seasonal contract work that requires people to document and identify their own knowledge and skills, so they can parlay that into whatever job they want to have.

In that particular case, the fact that that person has a lot of formal credentialing doesn't preclude, or doesn't eliminate, the need to articulate their competencies with regard to that new job. But you're right, many people have a plethora of paper credentials, but I'm not really concerned about their problem in getting a job. I'm really concerned about the 50% to 70% who don't have credentials and are being disenfranchised in the labour force because of it. I think the 30% always seem to find their way.

● (0945)

The Chair: Thank you for that short answer, Ms. Kennedy.

We're going to move to Mr. Martin, five minutes, please.

Mr. Tony Martin: I have a couple of questions for Harold and Victor, but first to say that this summer my daughter worked in a garden centre and my son is still landscaping, both of them earning minimum wage while they're at university.

My first question is—and I'm going to put two in, and I also have one for Mr. John O'Leary when we're done, and I only have five minutes—do you take advantage of the student employment program that happens across the country in the summertime to hire people?

My second question is, you talked about trying to get the unemployed in Newfoundland to move to Ontario or Alberta or wherever. My question is, don't you think that creates a problem, in that if you start moving people around, then they're not there for you when you need them the next time? If somebody's working in fishing and the season's over, and then they move someplace else to landscape, it becomes quite expensive for them.

My experience of the area you're representing here today is that a lot of the work is labour-intensive and it doesn't pay big wages. People I know get minimum wage. The supervisor on the job where my son worked got a dollar more than minimum wage, so I don't know how long they're going to keep him.

Those are the two questions. Do you use the student employment program, and doesn't moving people around create more problems than it solves, in some ways?

Mr. Harold Deenen: First let me address your question on the programs. In the past we've tried the student employment programs. We hire a number of university students. By the way, our minimum wage is $10 an hour for a university student, and our average foreman makes over $20 an hour. I've already given out three gold watches. We've had people for over 20 or 30 years. That's the key, but you've got to train them.

In answer to your question, it's too much trouble to try to get subsidies, more trouble than the money is worth, more administration than it's worth—a frank, candid answer.

With regard to mobility of the workers from Newfoundland, it's interesting that you say that. Our incoming president is from Newfoundland, and he always says to me, “Harold, can I send you a bunch of people to train?” Then he says, “And then send them back, because then they'll be a whole lot better for me.” He's joking, but he's serious at the same time.

The problem is that we've come to the point where we haven't got labour, period, so we're looking wherever we can. We prefer to hire a Canadian first rather than bring in offshore people. If it means hiring people for a shorter period during the summer months, then we would prefer to target areas in Canada that have a higher unemployment rate, and Newfoundland, as you mentioned, is one of the opportunities, as well as some of the other rural areas in Canada that are looking for employees.

Yes, it would be better to find permanent, long-term labour, but the reality is that they're just not there.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you.

I have a question for John.

You mentioned restructuring the way we deliver literacy programs. In many instances what we're doing now isn't quite as effective as it could be. This is an opportunity perhaps for us to do that, to revisit, relook, and maybe create something new. What will the impact of any of that be, of a reduction in funding for adult literacy of $17.7 million?

Mr. John O'Leary: As I said, if the government had asked me prior to this round of cuts for my opinion, I would say don't do that, because there is an infrastructure place and some of it is being affected, there's no question about that.

As I said earlier, I met with Mr. Allison and other members of the Conservative caucus. They're aware of the issue, and I think there's an openness there to look at this question: what infrastructure is in place, and how can we build it up so that we can teach more people? I know I'm repeating myself.

It's a question of money. More money has to be put into it. A year ago, the minister responsible for literacy was from New Brunswick, Claudette Bradshaw. We were talking to her about annual budget for literacy in the order of $500 million to $600 million per year to start. When I was talking about that number, the officials at the table blanched; they went white. I asked them what the annual budget was for the University of Toronto for one year, to reach 50,000 people, and they didn't know. I said it is $1.3 billion. That's one university for one year.

We keep repeating these figures—that 25% to 30% of adult Canadian citizens have serious literacy problems, and the amount of money that has been spent on it over the past 20 years has simply been too modest. That's why the numbers aren't moving forward.

The good news is, as I said, that if an adult does not know how to read, whether they're a hotel worker, an unemployed worker in my colleague's industry here, a senior, an aboriginal youth, or a homeless person in downtown Winnipeg, we know the programs are in place to reach those people. But there are too few of them and we need to scale it up. So my advice, and I hope I will have the opportunity to continue dialogue—and I think I will—with the government, is that we do need to increase our investment in literacy and we do need to build on the existing infrastructure and increase the capacity so that more people are able to fully realize their potential.

● (0950)

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's all the time we have.

We're going to Mr. Albrecht, for five minutes.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Thank you.

Ms. Kennedy, I just want to follow up. It's probably covered in your briefing notes that we don't have yet, but how large a group do you work with, how national is it in scope in terms of east to west, and what kind of buy-in have you received from groups such as plumbing or electrical skill types of organizations that are charged with the responsibility of training workers in those fields? Is there a buy-in to the concepts that you've articulated? It certainly seems to me to be something that would be win-win.

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: Yes, absolutely. My organization, CAPLA, has about 300 members across Canada and abroad. Those could be individual members or institutions. It varies.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: You said “and abroad”. Of those 300 members, how many would be in Canada, roughly?

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: The majority would be in Canada.

At the event that we had in New Brunswick last week, we had 11 countries attend. We have members in every province and territory, because prior learning assessment has been in Canada for well over 30 years, but in the absence of any dedicated funding or strategy that identifies the needs of adults, we are very much in the innovative stages, and it's not for lack of trying.

We haven't raised the awareness of prior earning assessment tools in the most effective ways possible. So it's really practitioners who are moving this forward.

There are some notable exceptions. The provinces of Quebec, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan have been real leaders in the area of prior learning assessment. Just recently, the Province of Alberta has had province-wide consultations on prior learning assessment and recognition. So it's becoming more in the public domain than it was before. Our concern, of course, is that there be a national strategy, national guidelines and standards for prior learning assessment. It needs to be rigorous.

The sector council movement is very interested in prior learning assessment. As you know, it is creating industry standards but needs the capacity for people who are experienced in the field to benchmark against those standards. Hence, the tools are required.

● (0955)

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Are the provinces you mentioned—Quebec, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan—that already are buying into this doing so at the provincial educational system level, the level of the ministers of education?

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: Yes, to a degree. I would say it's more labour force development, more an employability focus, such as the panel is interested in, and immigration as well. But it all has to do with the skills shortage and utilizing older workers and finding out what they know and can do in a coherent, reliable, and valid way. We're still looking at developing those tools, because this is an innovative practice and it needs the support of government.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: I'm just wondering as well what kind of buy-in there is at the community college level, if I could use that term, and among the institutions that would generally be charged with the responsibility of providing skills training.

Ms. Bonnie Kennedy: I would say the Association of Canadian Community Colleges is very much a supporter of prior learning assessment. Because of jurisdictional challenges, it's very much up to the institution as to how much funding they want to put into it.

Like any innovative strategy, this requires marketing. If we build it, will they come? Yes, if they know about it, and if we can have someone within the college system to advocate on behalf of adult learners, because people who don't have credentials don't necessarily see themselves as being college material. Adults need to have an advocate within the college system. That is available in some colleges, but not in others.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: I think the encouraging part for me is that the colleges and the ministers of education are becoming aware of it and generally are aware of it, contrary to my belief before I arrived here this morning. So thank you.

The Chair: I'll take this time to thank everyone for being here today. I appreciate these are all very relevant and important issues that your groups have touched on.

Ms. Kennedy, one of the things we hear all the time when it comes to recognizing the skills of immigrants who come to this country is that sometimes people don't qualify because they lack the degree, or the diploma, or whatever the case is, and people are calling for more recognition that they possess some skills that are important and would help us out. I appreciate where you're coming from. You have a bit of an uphill battle, because you have to deal with all kinds of organizations to try to coordinate what you're doing, but I encourage you to continue. I think it's very important, very relevant.

We thank the other two groups very much as well for being here and offering some very excellent insight. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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