



Pre-Budget Submission: Centre of Excellence for Vocational Training

Summary

Canada has always relied on the skills of its tradespeople. Construction trades build, maintain and repair the country's vast infrastructure. Manufacturing tradespeople build ships, make steel, generate power. Automotive service technicians and heavy-duty equipment mechanics keep Canadians moving. Service trades cook, style and landscape. All of these occupations – and 300 more – require the hands-on skills developed in Canada's apprenticeship systems.

As a post-secondary pathway, apprenticeship has long taken a backseat to Canada's investments in university and college education. In fact, the federal government invests five times more per university student than it does per apprentice. Employer surveys in virtually every sector point to the skilled trades as among the most difficult job openings to fill, pointing to a growing and consistent challenge when it comes to finding workers with the specialized skills developed during apprenticeship training. Given the fundamental role the skilled trades play in Canada's economy today and in a future that includes green construction and sustainable energy, there is an urgent need to rebalance post-secondary training priorities to reflect the skills mix necessary to Canada's prosperity.

The Canadian Apprenticeship Forum – Forum canadien sur l'apprentissage (CAF-FCA) is a national non-profit organization built on the collaboration of employers, unions, educators, jurisdictional apprenticeship authorities and equity-seeking groups, such as those representing women and Indigenous peoples. We conduct apprenticeship-focused research, connect stakeholders, highlight best practices and promote apprenticeship as a valued post-secondary pathway. Our pre-budget submission proposes increased emphasis on practical research, shared innovation and the provision of support for skilled trades employers, who have primary responsibility for training the next generation of tradespeople. In short, this submission suggests renewed value be assigned to Canada's hands-on occupations by expanding the organization's capacity to act as a national coordinating body for apprenticeship research and practice.

Though the federal government has invested in a patchwork of initiatives for apprentices and their employers, supporting data is minimal, policies are often disconnected and impact is difficult to quantify. CAF-FCA is well-positioned to:

- Conduct research, undertake evaluation and support pilot programs that ensure apprenticeship policies, programs and systems are based on solid evidence and superior labour market information



- Identify and disseminate Canadian and international best practices for vocational education and training, expanding opportunities to share and adapt innovative programs across Canada
- Support skilled trades employers of all sizes to overcome barriers to the creation of apprenticeship positions, and ensure they have the tools to support apprentices to full competency and certification

CAF-FCA proposes an initial investment of \$25-million over five years to create a Centre of Excellence focused on vocational education and training. Future funding would depend on emerging requirements and a fresh understanding of the federal role in apprenticeship training.

Background

Apprenticeship is a post-secondary pathway largely carried out in the workplace. In Canada, apprenticeship focuses primarily on skilled trades occupations, teaching people the skills needed to perform hands-on tasks to industry standards. The training typically combines alternating periods of on-the-job (80 to 85%) and technical training (15 to 20%). Technical training occurs within the broad college sector, at union training centres or, in some cases, online. Most apprenticeship programs are four years long and lead to trade certification. Once an apprentice has completed the required hours and technical training for their trade, they write a Certificate of Qualification exam and, with a passing grade of at least 70%, become certified journeypersons.

Apprenticeship is regulated by the provinces and territories, creating 13 unique systems geared to the labour market needs and conditions in each region of Canada. Advantages to apprenticeship include the ability to earn a wage while learning and the development of practical, hands-on skills. Apprentices benefit from the guidance of a journeyperson mentor (certified tradesperson).

Apprenticeship is much more complex and nuanced than other post-secondary options. It is less linear, subject to gaps in employment, delays returning to technical training and regional variation. Apprentices are employees, subject to market forces from which many full-time students are insulated. Apprentices in Canada also tend to be older upon registration than their post-secondary counterparts, speaking to a demographic more likely to have financial and family obligations. The factors that contribute to positive outcomes are integrated and interdependent. More than ever, it is critical that apprenticeship training keeps up with rapid technological change and contributes to engaging workers, increasing learning capacity and overcoming barriers to achieving trade certification.

Canada's existing research bodies have little interest in apprenticeship training. Data collection is erratic and incomplete, leading to an imperfect understanding of barriers to entry, completion



rates, workplace training quality and career progression. The lack of coordinated efforts to test and evaluate apprenticeship training practices across the country slows the widespread implementation of innovative practices and puts apprenticeship-focused labour market information beyond the reach of stakeholders. Canada is well behind its international counterparts when it comes to understanding its own workplace-based training programs.

International Examples

Though many countries delegate responsibility for vocational education to jurisdictional governments, Canada is one of few lacking a national coordinating body. Our international counterparts generally consider research, evaluation and shared insights into effective practices to be federal responsibilities, enabling jurisdictions to adapt programs and initiatives to regional realities and industry requirements. Other countries provide a blueprint for achieving a balanced role at the national level.

Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (Germany)

The Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) is a centre of excellence for vocational research and for the progressive development of vocational education and training in Germany. Technological, economic and social change presents companies with the constant challenge of maintaining a highly-qualified skilled workforce. BIBB works to identify future challenges, stimulate innovation in national and international vocational systems, and develop new, practice-oriented solutions for vocational education and training.

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Australia)

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is a professional and independent body responsible for collecting, managing, analyzing, evaluating and communicating research and statistics about vocational education nationally. NCVER contributes to improving Australia's training system by ensuring that policy and practice are based on sound evidence and labour market information. Its mission is to be Australia's leading provider of high-quality, independent information on vocational education and training to governments, the education sector, industry and the community.

National Apprenticeship Service (United Kingdom)

The National Apprenticeship Service supports, funds and coordinates the delivery of apprenticeships throughout England. They are responsible for increasing the number of apprenticeship opportunities and providing a dedicated, responsive service for both employers and learners. This includes simplifying the process of recruiting an apprentice using an online system where employers can advertise their apprenticeship job vacancies and potential apprentices can apply.



Proposal for a Canadian Approach

While Canada spends billions of dollars each year on post-secondary education and its associated research bodies, federal spending on apprenticeship has failed to keep pace given the equally important economic contribution of skilled tradespeople. A Centre of Excellence focused on vocational training would deliver the following critical activities:

Research, Evaluation and Experimentation

Quite simply, Canada lacks a well-resourced centre of expertise to develop insights into apprenticeship training. Research grappling with the quality of workplace training or delivering demand-driven information to students, parents and educators is developed inconsistently. While apprenticeship occurs in workplaces largely focused on productivity and profit, there are limited opportunities to illustrate how a training culture supports those objectives.

There is also decidedly little effort made to evaluate existing programs and supports. For example, stakeholders have no insight into the degree to which employment tax credits encourage new employers to hire apprentices despite emphasis on this type of government investment. Though data collected every decade or so through the National Apprenticeship Survey attempts to understand completion based on the characteristics of apprentices, there is no effort to track the attributes of companies who successfully guide their apprentices to certification. The survey provides little insight into apprentice pathways and none regarding employer participation. This makes it virtually impossible to make informed policy interventions.

Further, the federal government is well-positioned to support innovative demonstration projects and pilot programs, sharing results to enable other apprenticeship stakeholders, including the provinces and territories, to adapt promising practices to regional realities. Leadership is required when it comes to researching, testing and evaluating new ideas.

National and International Best Practices

Canada's apprenticeship stakeholders suffer from isolation in two distinct ways. First, due primarily to the disconnect between 13 unique apprenticeship systems, the implementation more broadly of what works in one part of the country is limited. Not only are there few opportunities to showcase practices (CAF-FCA hosts a national conference every two years), there is no enabling body to support national adoption. While there are "off-the-shelf" models for connecting employers and prospective apprentices, sharing the burden of training apprentices and excelling at workplace mentorship, Canadians are not benefitting from them.



Second, we aren't participating to the degree we should on the international stage despite grappling with similar challenges. In July 2015, the U.S. Department of Labor signed a joint declaration with the Swiss government to exchange information on best practices in vocational education and training. The European Union has funded a study on employer engagement, drawing examples from Germany and Canada to help guide pilot programs in Bulgaria, Poland and the United Kingdom. Countries such as Australia, Switzerland, the U.K. and Germany have undertaken to assess program design, as well as youth and parent perceptions, employer engagement and completion rates. They have also evaluated funding models and supports with a view to understanding their relative impact.

The federal government should support stronger linkages and collaboration both within Canada and with its international counterparts. Not only do we have practices worthy of replication elsewhere in this country, but are well-positioned to benefit from participation on the world stage. Understanding how other countries are dealing with similar challenges will help apprenticeship stakeholders in Canada refine our systems, while providing perspectives on innovative approaches underway in this country.

Addressing Employer Barriers

Canada's small business reality creates challenges around training capacity, the ability to provide full scope of trade and the continuity of apprenticeship positions, yet more than three-quarters of today's apprentices are trained by small businesses. Collaborative models that enable small employers to share apprentice training responsibilities stand to engage additional employers in training while reducing or eliminating capacity barriers. Larger companies, with the human resources capacity to hire, train and administer apprenticeship programs, are also better positioned to poach apprentices from smaller businesses. These companies should be encouraged to show leadership for creating the next generation of skilled tradespeople.

Businesses large and small need information and practical, timely resources focused on innovative approaches that work. This effort needs to be well-informed and coordinated, based on solid evidence and examples that employers can access and embrace. A cohesive approach will maximize impact and ensure the apprenticeship community is actively engaged.

The federal government is in a position to fund the provision of employer-focused tools, as well as targeted tips, strategies and resources. There is scope to provide services around workplace mentorship, training plans and tracking mechanisms, increasing the quality of workplace learning and supporting provincial/territorial initiatives associated with work-integrated learning.



Conclusion

A federal investment in apprenticeship training should support renewed capacity and commitment to the important role that skilled tradespeople play in Canada's economy. A Centre of Excellence focused on vocational training begins to rebalance the federal commitment to post-secondary education, while supporting the national adoption of innovative practices. Testing new ideas and evaluating what is working has potential to influence national and regional policy decisions, while ensuring Canada's contributions to the world stage are well-informed.

Addressing the challenges faced by business recognizes their key role as trainers and mentors in a system that relies on them to develop the skills Canada needs to keep working. A new Centre of Excellence will ensure investments in apprenticeship and workplace training are cohesive and impactful, drawing on the insights of experts, assessing evidence and helping inform decisions.