



Training Programs Need a Hard Look

In its 2013 Budget, the Harper government unveiled the Canada Job Grant to an unsuspecting nation. Until then, skills and employment training had been one of the few social policies in which Ottawa could brag of success.

In 2008, the Harper government implemented funding agreements leaving it up to the provinces and territories to design and deliver training programs within broad national guidelines. The provinces and territories worked hard to maximize opportunities for new immigrants, social assistance recipients and others who find it difficult to escape marginal employment. Evaluations showed good results.

Then, without warning or consultation with anyone – not provinces, not employers, not agencies providing training programs, not labour organizations, probably not even with the government’s own department responsible for training – Ottawa suddenly reversed course 180 degrees, announcing that it was diverting funding to a new scheme called the ‘Canada Job Grant.’

The federal government said the Canada Job Grant would pay up to \$15,000 per trainee for employer-sponsored courses, with the cost split three ways among Ottawa, the provinces and employers. But no one knew more than that: no details were forthcoming.

While we will never know for sure, circumstantial evidence suggests that the program was cooked up on the back of an envelope. Only one vital component was ready to go: taxpayer-financed advertising in time for the hockey play-offs.

For the next year, nothing happened other than advertising. The federal Minister refused to meet with the provinces and territories. No one could answer questions about how the Canada Job Grant would work.

Then Jason Kenney was brought in to save the day. He announced a number of key concessions, including exempting Québec entirely from the program. He met with his provincial and territorial counterparts and non-governmental agencies. He allowed less stringent conditions for employers. One by

one, the provinces and territories gave in, signing bilateral agreements to deliver the new program.

In the almost two years since then, there have been many announcements of various training agreements with individual companies, but no data. Despite glowing stories posted on government web sites, the anecdotal evidence from agencies on the ground is not so positive. It appears that unemployed workers have been almost entirely left out. As predicted, companies are training only their own employees. Few small businesses are using the Canada Job Grant.

Most of the companies getting money from the program seem to be medium or large firms that already had training programs and were able easily to take advantage of the new government funding, offsetting what they would have paid anyway. Agencies previously funded to provide training to the unemployed and marginally employed – including employment training, but also basic skills such as English or French as a second language, literacy and numeracy – find their budgets under increasing pressure as provinces and territories cut back due to reduced federal funding.

Perhaps these anecdotes are the exception and the Canada Job Grant is working well. Or perhaps our training programs are a mess, with gobs of money being wasted and people who really need skills being excluded. It would be good to know.

The new Liberal government has promised to add a substantial amount of funding for training programs led by the provinces

and territories. Before doing so, they need to take a hard look at what is being accomplished with existing funds.

The first step is an objective evaluation including solid data and a rigorous financial analysis. The second step is to make the evaluation public so that it can be the basis for engagement with the provinces and territories, employers and labour organizations, and agencies delivering training programs.

If there is one area of consensus in Canadian public policy, it is on the need for excellent skills and training programs. These programs are becoming more important every day as the demands of the labour market shift rapidly. The biggest single barrier to new immigrants making their way in Canada, and contributing to the economy, is language skills. It is time to stop squandering money on training programs as advertising vehicles and start using evidence and experience to build the best programs possible.

Michael Mendelson

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Caledon Institute of Social Policy

1354 Wellington Street West, 3rd Floor
Ottawa, ON K1Y 3C3
CANADA

Tel.: (613) 729-3340

E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org

Website: www.caledoninst.org

Twitter: @CaledonINST