

## Stakeholder Summary

### Report calls on Ontario PSE institutions to introduce programs for displaced workers, adult learners

As Ontario's economy continues to undergo rapid change, the province's colleges and universities will need to introduce new short-term, flexible training programs that cater to the needs of displaced workers and other adult learners, recommends a new report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

The report, *Lifelong Learning in Ontario: Improved Options for Mid-career, Underserved Learners*, argues that adult learners represent a new and underserved market for postsecondary institutions, and their numbers are growing.

There is a large ecosystem of programs — offered by governments, colleges, universities and private career colleges — designed to address the retraining needs of displaced workers and those seeking new job opportunities. Government spending on labour market programs and services totals close to \$1.3 billion a year, the majority of which comes from the federal government.

In its most recent budget, the Ontario government announced plans to support the development of short-duration credential programs that focus on skills that employers are seeking and that help people find stable work more efficiently. It promised to launch a micro-credentials pilot to promote the development of new, responsive training programs.

The report recommends that the pilot be used to test programs that are short, flexible and that lead to recognized credentials that are portable among institutions and recognized by employers. It also suggests that postsecondary institutions introduce competency-based education (CBE) programs, which are particularly well-suited to meet the needs of adult learners with family and work responsibilities.

CBE programs award credentials based on skill mastery rather than time spent in a classroom. This allows students with prior learning and work experience to progress quickly. The programs are usually offered online and allow students to learn at their own pace, providing a flexible and cost-effective alternative to traditional programs. The US has seen an explosion of CBE programs offered by public and private institutions. Many have seen their enrolments rise while some traditional US colleges are struggling with declining enrolment.

At the same time, the Ontario government should facilitate the development of CBE and other programs by easing funding regulations and other regulatory constraints on public postsecondary institutions, or it should invite existing institutions that offer CBE programs to expand in Ontario. The report also recommends that the government create more flexibility in the eligibility criteria for existing workforce development programs to ensure that all vulnerable mid-career workers have access to lifelong learning opportunities.

All Ontarians — students, workers, educators and policy-makers — should embrace a new educational model where lifelong learning is the norm, the report concludes. “Ontario dedicates substantial public dollars to postsecondary education, employment services and workforce development,” it states. “As displacement becomes a regular feature of our modern economy, the government should leverage these investments to create a more flexible and responsive system of lifelong learning in Ontario.”

*Lifelong Learning in Ontario: Improved Options for Mid-career, Underserved Learners* was written by Jackie Pichette, Rosanna Tamburri, Jess McKeown, Kaitlyn A. W. Blair and Emily MacKay.