The Limits of Lifelong Learning in Federal Policy: Investing in the Inclusion of all Canadians?

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Abstract: Much of recent federal Canadian policy on lifelong learning promotes a dual purpose of adult education and training: A., to strengthen Canada’s knowledge economy and, B. to help counter social exclusion of ‘targeted marginalized groups.’ Although government approaches to lifelong learning have arguably shifted from the neo-liberal agenda of the 1990s, our analysis shows that inclusion is only extended to those already possessing certain levels of human and social capital. We claim that Canada’s approach to lifelong learning policy, underpinned by a concern for social investment and rooted in inclusive liberalism, paradoxically continues to exclude due to the continuation of neo-liberalism’s ‘political rationality’.

Overview
While education and training has tended to be a provincial affair in Canada, the growing focus on lifelong learning, popularized most recently by the OECD (e.g. 1989; 2003; 2005), has resulted in a release of several federal policies and initiatives, in large part emanating from the HRSDC1. In this study, we attempted to paint the landscape of lifelong learning2 federal policy in Canada, concentrating on 11 key policy documents in the areas of employment, training and literacy. Our motivation for this research stems in part from the dearth of broad-scale studies of recent documents on lifelong learning at the federal level. From our analysis, we argue that recent federal policy on lifelong learning promotes a dual purpose of adult education and training: A. to strengthen Canada’s knowledge economy and, B. to help counter social exclusion of marginalized groups—particularly three ‘target demographics’: Aboriginal peoples, recent immigrants and older workers. Inclusion and investment are two key concepts to understanding current government concerns: including, and investing in, those left behind due to shifts wrought through globalization and a changing economy. However, in further examining the nature and discourse of these policies, we found that while government approaches to lifelong learning have shifted from the neo-liberal agenda of the 1990s, inclusion is only extended to those already possessing certain levels of human and social capital. In addition, it is clear that the government is not investing in the knowledge economy for all, since the Canadian economy can be best understood as a bifurcated one (Brown, Green & Lauder, 2001): with a ‘knowledge economy’ sector on the one hand and a strong resource-extraction and service economy on the other. In seeking to explain these tensions—between exclusion and inclusion in lifelong learning, and knowledge versus resource/service economy—we argue that the Canadian government has approached lifelong learning policy from a ‘social investment’ (Saint-Martin, 2007) and ‘inclusive liberal’ (Craig & Porter, 2003) standpoint.

1 Human Resources and Social Development Canada
2 It is important to note that the Canadian government does not often utilize the term ‘lifelong learning’, unlike in OECD and other documents, but rather prefers words such as ‘essential skills’, ‘employment training’, ‘literacy’, and ‘skills training’. We use the term ‘lifelong learning’ to cover all these different conceptualizations of adult education and training.
The Low-Skills/High-Skill Divide, Inclusive Liberalism and the Social Investment State

In examining the findings of this study, we draw on Brown, Green and Lauder’s (2001) insights into high skill policy, in conjunction with broader conceptualizations of the current political economy. In their seminal work, *High Skills*, Brown, Green and Lauder (2001) attempted to describe the different pathways various developed economies had taken towards building a high skills society. While Canada was not one of the countries examined, we contend that it best fits within the Anglo-Saxon model of both the UK and US, which have both tended towards a high skills/low skills pathway to creating a skilled society. In other words, two economies co-exist side-by-side—the knowledge economy on the one hand, supported by a select group of professionals and entrepreneurs, and a large pool of routine production or service workers (Reich, 1992) remaining in the low-skilled ‘old’ economy. This low-skills/high-skills trajectory, revealed through our analysis of the federal policies, can best be understood by drawing on the theorizations of the social investment state (SIS) (Saint-Martin, 2007) and of inclusive liberalism (Craig & Porter, 2003; 2006). According to Saint-Martin (2007), the SIS is one in which economic and social policy becomes blurred and the state adopts an entrepreneurial and risk-management approach to investing in citizens through education and social programs to ensure that people are included in the economy. Instead of a welfare state, the SIS has shifted the emphasis away from social and employment security to individualized and continuous skills investment. Education and training thus become important in equipping people with the tools with which to adjust to market demands and fluctuations. Craig and Porter (2003; 2006) have used the term ‘inclusive liberalism’ to also describe the melding of economic and social policy. An inclusive liberal state would be one which focuses on the notion of ‘inclusion’, in terms of bringing in those who have been excluded from the benefits of a rapidly globalizing economy, and in terms of bringing together social and economic partners in supplying programs (in this case, education). In terms of education and training, inclusive liberalism would entail including both economic and social purposes of a lifelong learning strategy. An inclusive liberal state, like the SIS, (discursively at least) places the entrepreneurial individual at the fore, and the poor and excluded are urged to upskill to help themselves as well as their society and/or country.

We claim that a divided economy (high skill/low skill), as well as issues of ‘inclusion’, ‘entrepreneurship’, and general ‘social investment’, as explicated within the theories of SIS (Saint-Martin, 2007) and inclusive liberalism (Craig & Porter, 2006), provide a frame in which to situate current Canadian federal policy on lifelong learning. In drawing on the political theories of SIS and IL, we seek to understand discourse, policy and practice surrounding lifelong learning within a broader frame. In doing so, we offer a holistic critique of a ‘system’ rather than demonizing particular discourse and rhetoric, which has become common practice in critical policy research in education (e.g. Nichol & Edwards, 2004). Second, our theoretical framework of bringing together theories of IL and SIS represents a relatively unique way of examining the Canadian state in regards to its approach to lifelong learning by challenging the limitations of the neo-liberal frame. While SIS and IL have been applied in general discussions of policy, to our knowledge these modes of interpretation have not been brought together in examining social policy in general, and, in particular, neither notion has been utilized as a theoretical framework in examining lifelong learning policy except for in two earlier paper written by one of the co-authors (Walker, forthcoming; Walker, 2009).

**Research Design**

The five driving questions of this study in seeking to better understand the federal government
approach to lifelong learning were: 1. What is the role of the federal government in lifelong learning policy? 2. How is the federal government articulating ‘problems’ of adult lifelong learning? 3. What are assumptions underpinning the ‘problems’? 4. What solutions are being put forward? And, 5. What are the mechanisms for achieving goals? These questions emerged inductively and through a reiterative process. In drawing from the literature on critical policy analysis (e.g. Ball, 1994; Ozga, 2000; Taylor et al. 1997; Troya, 1994), we were interested in making explicit the values and politics in the policy. Additionally, we drew in part from critical discourse analysis (CDA) as outlined by Fairclough (1992; 2003), specifically in our attention to assumptions, presuppositions, classifications, contradictions and value assumptions (see Fairclough, 2003). Eleven policy documents were chosen on the principle that they were still in use and, additionally, that we could find little or no prior literature on these specific policies.

Some Key Findings

The Knowledge Economy Versus a Basic Skills Agenda...

In examining the 11 policy documents, we found evidence of policies and discourses around both building a high skills knowledge economy and supporting a basic skills program to enable all to participate in the economy but seemingly within entry-level positions or low-skill industries. In terms of the ‘knowledge economy discourse’, the Workplace Skills Initiative\(^3\), for example, claims that it seeks to “transform workplaces” enabling people “to compete in the global economy.” The WSI intends to achieve these goals by providing funds for projects that will respond to skills-related challenges in workplaces. At the time of our analysis, the projects being funded focused on tool and model development for testing or building work-related skills. In another example, the Lifelong Learning Plan\(^4\) (LLP), which encourages employed Canadians to draw interest-free loans from their RRSPs to undertake further education, talks about the need “to keep skills current”.

In terms of policies explored, many of the policies aim at bridging improvements in “basic skills, literacy and academic upgrading”, while the Temporary Foreign Workers’ Program\(^5\) (TFWP) seeks to import and provide minimal training to workers in jobs that are generally classified as low-skill or ‘old’ economy. In another example, a federal report concerning adult literacy (2003)\(^6\) promotes literacy for its role in the prevention or mitigation of crime, homelessness and drug abuse. The programs promoted in these policies are generally short-term and focused on employment of any kind; the concepts of ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘innovation’, that are a large part of the government discourse around the knowledge economy, are notably missing. Furthermore, these ‘low-skills’ policies specifically mention target groups that generally comprise Aboriginal peoples, immigrants, and older workers. At the same time, many of the policies aimed at boosting the knowledge economy are focused on importing high skills (through high-skilled immigrants) or leaving the serious upgrading and training to the university and college system, managed provincially, and for which individuals must bear a substantial part of the cost.

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Inclusion or Exclusion?

Inclusion does appear to be a fundamental concern of these policies. Issues around social cohesion and raising the living standards of the marginalized are themes that run throughout many of the 11 documents we chose to analyse. The TFWP, for example, has the explicit aim of making workers “aware of their rights”, while the Workplace Skills Initiative (WSI) laments that low-skill workers “receive few opportunities” and should, therefore, “have greater access” to education and training. The Bold Eagle8 (n.d) program, that provides $3,000 per month for a two-month training camp for Aboriginal youth (aged 18 – 30), states that its goal is “fostering social inclusion and self confidence for Aboriginal youth”. Nonetheless, when we explore the particular requirements for eligibility to these programs, many of these policies are still not targeting those who can be seen as seriously excluded from society; perceived, perhaps, as the ‘too-hard basket’. ASEP, Aboriginal Museum Practices and Bold Eagle, all three programs aimed specifically at furthering social and economic inclusion in the Indigenous community, exclude applicants based on their attainment of a high school diploma or at least of Grade 10. This may not appear such a demanding requirement, yet since only 47% of First Nations students graduated from high school in BC in 20069—the highest percentage to date—a vast majority of the applicants to these programs, especially those in their 30s, 40s and 50s, would have been fortunate to attend high school, let alone finish Grade 10 or 12. Other documents exclude based on other factors. For example, the LLP discriminates against all those with secure employment who would be in a financial position to take a leave of absence from their job to pursue further training. Even the Targeted Initiative for Older Workers favours men, since re-training programs are offered in one-industry rural towns—i.e. targeting those who would have originally been working in resource extraction and heavy industry (mostly men). While the initiative is meant to temper the exclusion of older workers from participating in the economy by providing training and skills upgrading, because the funding is targeted to single industry towns and communities experiencing high unemployment, upskilling becomes irrelevant if there are no jobs in which to employ one’s newly acquired skills.

A Unified Goal to a Knowledge Economy(?)

In examining the landscape of federal Canadian policy on employment and training, we are struck by the vagueness of the goals invoked and the related lack of explicit accountability measures to ensure the realization of goals. Most of the policies we examined require partnerships with provincial government and/or industry and/or other organizations; that is, they include the private, public and community sectors, typical of Craig and Porter’s (2003; 2006) characterizations of a shift away from a raw neo-liberal, towards a more inclusive liberal, model. This opens possibilities to partners to take these policies in certain directions. For example, we note in Nova Scotia, according to the provincial government website, active uptake of funds made available through the Targeted Initiative for Older Workers by not-for-profits, government agencies, community colleges and so on, while in other provinces and territories none to minimal information was available on how the initiative was being operationalized. While a ‘unified Canadian strategy’ is stressed throughout the documents, there appears to be no actual overriding national strategy on lifelong learning; there is, of course, money that has been put up by the

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8 See http://www.army_forces.gc.ca/boldeagle/contents.asp
9 See http://www2.canada.com/victorietimescolonist/news/capital_van_isl/story.html?id=85ded643-ecd3-4e57-bef4-5193e6ec2408
federal government though no clear sense of consistent operationalizability of some of the policies that require partnerships. There is autonomy, in other words, without support. While inclusion of social partners is an explicit aim, investment does not appear to have been made in a substantive way.

Discussion & Conclusions: The Inclusive, Social Investment State in Lifelong Learning

The above examples illustrate, at some level, that the government is approaching lifelong learning from an inclusive liberal (Craig & Porter, 2003) and social investment (Saint-Martin, 2007) standpoint. Yet, examining the Canadian federal strategy within the high skills/low skills framework (Brown, Green & Lauder, 2001)—within which it is approaching its aim of achieving a knowledge economy—sheds light on the volatility of both ensuring a high-skilled knowledge economy and including those who have been ‘left-behind’ due to the effects of increasing global capitalism and technological innovations.

We argue that neo-liberalism is too narrow a concept through which to analyze the current Canadian political economy and lifelong learning policy in particular. Our analysis suggests that the government, indeed, is trying to find a middle ground between the “let-them-eat-cake-market-knows-best” approach of the Thatcher or Reagan governments and the Keynesian welfare social protection state, still practiced to some extent in ‘social democratic’ economies (Esping-Andersen, 2002), such as Sweden. Lifelong learning—promoted in training and employment policies—is presented as part of a Third Way (Giddens, 1999) between welfarism and neo-liberalism. In Canada, the state invests in both the knowledge and ‘old’ economies in its endeavour to help shield citizens from the vicissitudes of the market. Nonetheless, in seeking to include ‘all’, many get left behind. The social investment state is visible in federal policy on lifelong learning in, what Saint-Martin (2007) calls, a ‘trampoline’ approach to social policy instead of a ‘safety net’. Education and training are promoted to provide Canadians with the ability to ‘bounce back’ from whatever challenges the changing economy presents. Nonetheless, where the federal government approach deviates from the idea of a social investment state (SIS) is in its concern with a low-skills agenda. The author writes,

> controversy exists regarding the cost-effectiveness of ‘second-chance’ interventions to promote educational attainment among high-school dropouts, welfare recipients, and other disadvantaged workers. For instance, various studies suggest that adults past a certain age and below a certain skill level make poor investment. . . (Saint-Martin, 2007, pp. 292-3)

Adopting a rational approach to investment might discourage, then, an emphasis on basic skills education. However, in the government’s concern for inclusion, and governing from an inclusive liberal influence, as we argue, would inevitably lead to federal policy on basic skills’ education of some sort for disadvantaged and older workers, for example. Nonetheless, we find it interesting that those right at the bottom—e.g. those who haven’t finished high school, or without a basic grasp of literacy, or those who are above 65—are in fact excluded, probably as a result of the same philosophy as expressed in the above quote: that some adults represent a poor investment. Though in a low skills/high skills model (Brown, Green & Lauder, 2001), it is not just the entrepreneur or professional for whom investment is made. For these reasons, we believe that it is important to draw on all three theoretical models when examining the Canadian political economy and the federal approach to lifelong learning.

This low skills/high skills, social investment, inclusive liberal approach in-action, we
claim, has inevitably led to the continuing exclusion of the ‘very bottom’ from the benefits of increased inclusion in lifelong learning and from entering the knowledge economy. This has occurred, in part, due to the fact that the philosophical underpinnings of a ‘social investment’ and ‘inclusive liberal’ state are fundamentally based in the low-skills/high skills paradigm and in a future-oriented discourse. The lifelong learning ‘strategy’ of the federal government is, thus, embedded in what Wendy Brown (2005) calls the “political rationality of neoliberalism”. She writes,

[people’s] moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for self-care—the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions…the individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints are on this action—for example, through lack of skills [and] education… (p.42)

Indeed, while the government may promote lifelong learning and a knowledge economy for all, as a way for Canadians to ‘weather’ the storm, the responsibility essentially still lies with the individual—who must make efforts to stay employable and employed. Our final conclusions, therefore, are that until this political rationality is fundamentally challenged, and the pursuit of a high/low pathway to a skilled society abandoned in favour of a more holistic high skills agenda, inclusion in lifelong learning and the knowledge economy for all will continue to be an aspiration rather than an attainable outcome in federal Canadian policy.

References


