

Training students for jobs that aren't there

National Training Act: planned obsolescence

by Karen McCarthy
for Canadian University Press

Sometimes predicting the future should be left to fortune tellers or gypsies hovering over crystal balls.

Now, the federal government has gotten into the act.

Under the new national training act passed last July, the federal government will attempt to predict job shortages to better enable it to allocate funds for training and retraining programs across the country.

"Serious shortages of skilled workers in industrial trades and in computer-related and engineering technologies have been occurring virtually across the country since the mid-1970s," Lloyd Axworthy, federal minister of employment and immigration stated last January when he was first proposing the act (Bill C-115).

Axworthy said there would be a continued shortage of some 9,000 skilled workers annually over the next five years, unless something was done about it.

A better training system was needed to accommodate these future needs, he concluded.

His solution: the new national training act.

As the minister has said the act is "designed to overcome skill shortages and accelerate economic growth." Whether a piece of legislation can actually create or stimulate a better economy is debatable.

The nucleus of the billion-dollar training act is the Canadian Occupational Projections System (COPS), a new improved computerized system. Information collected from the federal and provincial governments and both the business and labour sectors will be used to compile a list of "national occupations" expected to be in high demand.

A finalized list is expected soon, but an interim one lists draughtspeople, architectural and engineering technicians, systems analysts, computer programmers, welders, flame cutters and machinists as positions short of qualified people.

The act's hyped up advertising campaign presents it as the solution to future job shortages, as illustrated quite succinctly in an ad posted in a Montreal metro station:

Problem: there is a new need in Canada for people trained in new skills and new technologies.

Solution: the new national training act.

Not only is the act a "solution" for the above problem, but it has taken on the role of answering the unemployment problem. In a coun-

try with unemployment inching upwards, now at 12.8 per cent, with no definite signs of an economic upswing and with the federal government fending off a barrage of attacks by the position on the unacceptable level of unemployment, it would appear the national training act is the Liberal government's seven-per cent solution.

the act gives them hope, false hope

"When you have record unemployment, it (the act) gives them hope, a false hope," says Diane Flaherty, executive officer of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS). "In the short term it gives people hope for a job in the future, in reality there are no jobs waiting for them."

It is evident from the high-tech boom and micro-chip age that there is a need for skills training. But with the new national act, the government is placing all its resources, human and money, on training. It certainly receives much attention from the public and is a high profile project that says the government is using public money for public use.

It appears to be a popular policy among politicians in power these days to talk of how Canada must adapt quickly to these changes by training hordes of people, now.

When Ontario signed the act agreement with the federal government, the province's education minister had ominous words for the future direction of university education.

Bette Stephenson said universities must re-allocate their resources to the training component of post-secondary education.

Federal minister of economic development and scientific development Donald Johnston has echoed the same sentiment.

"Tomorrow's society must honour scientific and technological achievements the way society honours many other professions," he told the Conference Board of Canada in mid-January. "Our education system must emphasize the importance of mathematics and scientific disciplines."

"What the national training act does, is extract the training from the education," says Flaherty of the CFS. "It's a dangerous thing to do," she says. "A lot of people are talking about training and when people refer to education what we often hear from employment and immigration people is only in terms of training. What we are saying is that education is a lot more than just skills training."

The government's immediate concern on increasing training has drawn a response from the Canadian Association of University Teachers, which reflects their obvious intolerance of a government that can't make up its mind.

"It is after all the same federal government which, in the '60s strongly supported scientific development, in the '70s attacked university scientific research, deliberately reduced the level of funds available and through misleading rhetoric about taxi drivers with PhDs, caused many students to abandon the possibility of scientific careers and now in the '80s, is preparing for universities of high technology," said CAUT.

less money into post-secondary education

Flaherty says whether the federal government will admit it or not, there will be less money going into post-secondary education and more into skills training. She says the impact will be great and the victim will be education.

CAUT says the universities are not trade schools, but providers of education in liberal arts and professional education.

But business and industry have thrown their support behind Axworthy and his new act, evidenced at the first national conference on COPS held in Hull in mid-January.

Peter Doyle, director of industrial relations from the Canadian Manufacturers' Association, was there and is very optimistic about the act.

The training act should help individuals who are going to be trained and that will help employ-

ers and help the economy, he says. "The results should be positive."

Although it will be difficult to predict exact numbers of where the shortages will occur because of the recession and post-ponement of energy projects, Doyle says COPS will give indications to business and industry to help in human resource planning.

Despite the support for COPS as a good means of forecasting, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) remains unconvinced.

National representative of the

CLC, Katharine McGuire says if a national plan for training is to be implemented, strong cooperation between labour, the private sector and the federal government is needed. Information must be collected from the private sector on future investment plans and the kind of training currently being undertaken she says.

"Unless the private sector is involved in the forecasting, it won't be accurate," she continues.

Although Axworthy says these groups will contribute to COPS, McGuire doubts whether this information-gathering system will be sufficient. The CLC, along with the Business Council on National Issues, have proposed that a Labour Market Institute be created to collect and co-ordinate the information from the private sector.

"Without that institute, we see no way of insuring the proper flow of information," says McGuire. According to her the CLC will continue to fight for the institute's creation. But the federal government's continuing to ignore the proposal.

MP Cyril Keeper, the NDP employment critic, who voiced many concerns over the act when it was being debated in the House, agrees with the institute idea. He says it would provide a system where confidential information on investment plans could be handled with care.

Keeper adds if a country is to have a training program it needs an

The success of Canadian business depends on the skilled workers of this country. But with this technologies and changes in the Canadian economy, skills that are in demand are changing. People being trained in new skills and developing trades are too few. That's why Canada's National Training Act will help more Canadians acquire the skills of tomorrow starting today. We're encouraging employers to do more job training. Increased reimbursements for some employees and less paper burden will make it easier for industry to train more Canadians. Funding to the provinces for community and technical colleges will help them build training facilities with the most modern equipment to train Canadians in the



Employment and Immigration Canada
Lloyd Axworthy, Minister

VALUABLE

important new skills for workers who need to because of technological changes in the job — special training programs will be available if the skills are in demand in Canada. Who need special training? How to handle the 1980's?

TRAINING ACT
About Skills Training Act
OTTAWA, K1A 0A9

pro

Canada

provinces shift their funds towards the sciences also.

There are four components to the National Training Act, and when trying to figure them out it is much like reading a macroeconomic textbook.

First, there is COPS, the focal point for the rest of the programs.

Next is the industrial training program, which includes the Critical Trade Skills Program. Under this program, people are streamlined into specific jobs designated as "priorities" by the government. Government grants cover up to 75 per cent of the costs for a trainee, but jobs usually last 52 weeks, an extension of the previous system.

Third is the Institutional Training program (Skills Development Program) where emphasis is placed on skills training in colleges and universities, apprenticeship and pre-employment programs aimed at the youth.

Fourth is the Skills Growth Fund (Occupational Growth and Adjustment Fund) which does out money to post-secondary institutions, mostly community or poly-technical colleges, to build, upgrade or expand facilities to accommodate students for specific training courses. To date, 118 projects have been approved at a total cost of 42.1 million in government funds.

The catch is money goes only to institutions catering to the government's training policies. For example, Ottawa's Algonquin College has received funds for upgrading facilities in machining and controlling courses.

Indirectly, the federal government is influencing the direction post-secondary education will take. The federal government can afford (or so it seems) to give out large grants to these institutions in an economic situation where the provincial governments have tightened the screws. A possible scenario is the federal government re-routing money it would have given to post-secondary education (arts, general education) into the skills growth fund for more training.

Apart from the CLC's complaint of possible inadequate information and the federal government's probable increased involvement in the curriculum of post-secondary institutions, there are other problems stemming from the training act.

One serious flaw is the act fails to account for skills mobility or the fact that skills learned could easily become obsolete within two years.

Another problem is that Axworthy's own advisory council told him the act didn't address problems of youth unemployment. But the cabinet minister seems to have remedied that ailment by introducing a number of job-creation programs and promises of large grants for summer jobs for students.

Women stand to lose the most in this expansion of technology, according to Heather Menzies, author of *Women and the Chip*, word processors and computers are fast replacing clerical and secretarial jobs, jobs that have been traditionally termed as women's. If women wish to remain in the work force they will have to re-train their skills, says Menzies. But she also points out that these skills can become obsolete very quickly meaning these women must go back and retrain again.

Training obsolescence will no doubt lead to a society built upon de-skilling workers, where people will have to become more flexible and adaptable to the changing technologies. The choice of entering careers could become severely limited.

And whether or not it succumbs to death due to an overload of government bureaucracy and inefficiency or eventual cutbacks remains to be seen. But those contemplating entering the training courses should look very carefully before leaping and thinking of the act as that bright brass ring to grab on to. It's tarnishing very quickly.

ing — technology will dictate available jobs rather than allowing persons freedom of choice.

Already there are problems in registering for courses. According to CFS researcher Bruce Tate, an official in Axworthy's office told him that there is a nine-month waiting list for marine engineering courses.

The same official, who didn't want his named used, said many of the federally-sponsored training courses are useless.

the courses are useless... the jobs just do not exist

As more and more people enroll or try to enroll in these training courses in hopes of finding jobs, they will probably be rudely awakened to the fact that the jobs just do not exist.

Job security and fair work conditions are not offered under the employer-sponsored training aspect of the act (industrial training).

There are two sorts of abuses associated with government grants. The first is where the job training lasts only the length of time as the grant. Smaller and medium sized enterprises will hire and train a person only as long as the government grant holds out. Often the government grant is not supplemented by the firm to industry levels, as there are no mandatory laws or policies enforcing the employer to offer more money to the trainee.

McGuire and Keeper both say that a system is needed to work as a check and balance on employers who receive grants. In other words, a system that will spot check whether or not the employer is contributing his/her fair share into the training of an individual.

Keeper says what has been proposed by many business people and is also supported by the CLC according to McGuire, is a grant/fee levy system. He explains each industry would establish a fund of money by collection of a fee placed on each company. When a company wants to train someone they use that money plus the government grant. This ensures companies are paying their fair share, he says.

This type of fee/levy system was recommended by Allmand's task force and ironically, was rejected by Dodge's task force as an unfeasible solution to controlling government grants.

The act affects not only training but the society as a whole, welfare of individuals, employment prospects and education.

It is time Canada started to train its own resource people in the scientific fields; we're already far behind other countries.

But whether or not this act is the answer cannot be answered until a lot of people have gone through the system.

And whether or not it succumbs to death due to an overload of government bureaucracy and inefficiency or eventual cutbacks remains to be seen. But those contemplating entering the training courses should look very carefully before leaping and thinking of the act as that bright brass ring to grab on to. It's tarnishing very quickly.