A PLEA FOR A COMPREHENSIVE AND CONSISTENT APPROACH TO ADULT EDUCATION FOR MINORITY FRANCOPHONES IN CANADA

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Table of contents

1.0 Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 3
2.0 A changing world ...................................................................................................................................... 3
3.0 Literacy among francophones outside Quebec – a rate that is considerably lower than the national average ................................................................................................................................. 4
4.0 The changing world and the implications for official language minority communities ..................................................................................................................................................................................... 4
5.0 Equality of opportunities for minority francophones to contribute to economic, social and cultural development ................................................................................................................................................................................. 4
6.0 The federal government and OLMCs: A legal obligation and an historic commitment ............................................................................................................................................................................................... 5
7.0 The learning continuum: toward francophone identity building ................................................................. 5
8.0 The role of adult learning beyond the postsecondary level .............................................................................. 7
9.0 Adult education with a view to ensuring the learner’s success ......................................................................... 8
10.0 Recommendations ...................................................................................................................................... 10
11.0 Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 10
1.0 Introduction

Today, the prosperity of countries, the success of businesses and the vibrancy of communities, as well as social progress and individual development, all require high levels of knowledge and skills. Adults face new challenges at work, but also as citizens concerned about sustainable development, as parents, as people caring for their own health or that of loved ones, or as people involved in their community.

Until recently, there was broad consensus on the importance of adult education. In the last few years, however, we have seen a policy of federal withdrawal from adult literacy. We are concerned that the government is turning its back on the hundreds of thousands of Canadians with low literacy, who represent 53% of francophones living in minority situations. On the literacy scale, such people are categorized below Level 3, which according to the 2012 Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), is the minimum level for functioning in a knowledge-based society. This puts them at risk of permanent social, cultural and economic exclusion.

The Department of Canadian Heritage launched public consultations last October as part of a process to develop a new multi-year Action Plan for Official Languages for Canada (2018–2023). In the context of these consultations, many organizations and institutions active in this area identified and fervently denounced the various challenges related to literacy and the development of French-language skills that exist for official language minority populations.

This plea consolidates the demands expressed by the key stakeholders in the field and proposes solutions that are consistent with the objectives of the Action Plan for Official Languages: 

enhance the vitality of official language minority communities, improve bilingualism in the federal public service and strengthen the country’s linguistic duality.

This document describes the global context and the accelerated need for literacy and skills development. It places this need in a Canadian context, specifically that of official language minority communities (OLMCs), and proposes solutions to support the development of people with low literacy skills for the benefit of these communities.

2.0 A changing world

The world is changing. Globalization and the development of the knowledge economy mean that having a high level of skills helps with the attainment of economic benefits. On the other hand, intensified economic globalization produces contexts of low employment and youth unemployment and leaves a growing number of people in vulnerable employment situations.

We are increasingly seeing that the acquisition of skills must go beyond objectives related to economic development, and aim for greater citizen participation. Canada is facing a new economic and demographic reality brought about by globalization and the emergence of the knowledge society. In the context of the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which seek to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all, Canada’s responsibility as a signatory requires us to report on progress based on economic, social and citizen criteria.

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1 In this survey, literacy is defined as respondents’ “ability to engage with written texts (print-based and digital) and thereby participate in society, achieve goals, and develop their knowledge and potential.” Statistics Canada, 2013. Skills in Canada: First Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), p. 8.


3.0 Literacy among francophones outside Quebec – a rate that is considerably lower than the national average

The four Canadian surveys on literacy rates (Southam, 1986; ECLEUQ, 1989; IALS, 1994; IALSS, 2003) and the OECD international survey (PIAAC, 2013) showed that literacy is considerably lower among francophones than among anglophones. Francophones in Canada have historically lagged behind in terms of literacy and education. The statistics for the minority francophone population reveal an equally alarming situation: 53% of francophone adults are below Level 3 literacy, which is the level necessary to function and contribute to our modern knowledge-based society.

4.0 The changing world and the implications for official language minority communities

Canada has experienced two economic crises in the last 10 years, causing the various levels of government to reduce public spending and change their funding programs. Francophone minority communities have not been spared, and a slowdown has been observed in their economic development. The economy of francophone communities is mainly based on primary industries (fishing, agriculture, forestry and the mining sector), which are the industries most affected by economic crises. In addition, there is a high rate of functional illiteracy among francophones in these communities. These two factors combined have led to the impoverishment of a population with little in the way of options.

For official language minority communities, vitality inevitably means an increased number of spaces where people can live in French. Common spaces must be created to facilitate physical proximity and community cohesion that go beyond economics. Over the years, francophone communities have developed associations and organizations to take charge of their development and vitality in multiple sectors, including health, justice, education and culture. These groups establish directions for development and manage activities by and for the community. The degree of a community’s development and the opportunities to fully participate in the governance of these associations and organizations are related to the skill level of the population. In minority francophone settings, the high rate of functional illiteracy deprives 53% of the population of the chance to fully participate in community development.

5.0 Equality of opportunities for minority francophones to contribute to economic, social and cultural development

An OECD study (2013) concluded that the highest levels of literacy lead to higher incomes and reduce the risk of being unemployed. Indeed, the labour market provides many opportunities to use these skills, which helps to maintain or even improve them.

However, as noted, over 53% of minority francophones are functionally illiterate, which puts them at risk of permanent social, cultural and economic exclusion. Inclusive economic development requires individual and community adaptability and resilience. Literacy and the development of multiple skills are the basic tools of solidarity and inclusion.

Furthermore, access to educational services to address this situation is limited or non-existent. Ultimately, francophones do not have the same opportunities and possibilities for social and economic development as linguistic majority Canadians. Minority francophones must appropriate literacy and skills development models in order to develop their level of social, economic and cultural skills, which are essential for the vitality of their communities.

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4 Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. Vitality Indicators for Official Language Minority Communities 3: Three Francophone Communities in Western Canada.

5 Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (2013).
6.0 The federal government and OLMCs: A legal obligation and an historic commitment

Since the adoption of the Official Languages Act (OLA) in 1969, English and French have been the official languages of the Canadian federal state. The many initiatives put forward by the Canadian government strengthen the implementation of the obligations that flow from the OLA and that culminate in the creation of consecutive five-year action plans. These plans have three main objectives: enhance the vitality of official language minority communities, improve bilingualism in the federal public service and strengthen the country’s linguistic duality. Ten federal institutions have received funding for activities and sectoral programs related to official languages. The Department of Canadian Heritage provides horizontal coordination of the official languages program, including implementation of the action plan.

In response to provincial demand, since the 1970s the government has been incrementally assigning additional responsibilities to the provinces and territories. This has taken place primarily in the area of employment, notably through the Canada Job Fund Agreements (ESDC). Some of this funding is for people who are employed, but do not have a high school diploma or recognized certification, or who have a low level of literacy and essential skills. Numerous studies on official languages show that the OLA-related clauses are applied inconsistently from one province to another. As a result, official language communities do not receive equivalent support across provinces and territories. Although progress has been made, the fact remains that programs for skills development and literacy in French in some provinces and territories are underfunded, or even unfunded. Moreover, the contribution historically provided by Employment and Social Development Canada’s (ESDC) Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) for research, resource development and dialogue in minority francophone situations has been reduced to the point of being almost non-existent. All of this means that the development of tools and resources and the availability of literacy and skills development services remain unequal from one province or territory to another.

We can and do ask ourselves: Is the money from the ESDC and OLES funds now being used almost exclusively for literacy and skills development for purposes of economic integration? Other sectors, such as family, early childhood and seniors, appear to have been completely forgotten.

7.0 The learning continuum: toward francophone identity building

In francophone Canada, school is perceived as an institution that pursues children’s educational development, as well as building a francophone identity that gives them a sense of belonging and instills a commitment to the local, national and international francophonie. According to the Association canadienne d’éducation de langue française, without identity building, the French-language school has no raison d’être. This perspective is based, among other things, on the principle that the hegemony of the English language and the surrounding majority culture creates an imbalance of power over the language and culture of the minority, which results in assimilation.

Francophone institutions in minority communities deploy a great many resources, strategies and efforts. In a learning context, the focus has been on the formal education system, i.e., all forms of training that are provided in an organized and structured context (for example, in an educational or training institution or in the workplace) and are explicitly designated as learning activities (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional on the part of the learner; it usually leads to validation and certification. In the minority francophone context, formal learning is provided by schools (kindergarten to grade 12) and postsecondary institutions (colleges and universities).

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6 Association canadienne d’éducation de langue française, Construction identitaire : le modèle.
**Non-formal** and **informal** learning is increasingly being recognized as a way to impede assimilation, recover dropouts and facilitate the integration of newcomers. Non-formal learning is integrated into planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning activities (in terms of objectives, time or resources), but that have a significant learning component. Non-formal learning is intentional on the part of the learner. Some courses, particularly short ones, may or may not lead to certification. Literacy and skills development activities most often fall into this category. Participation on a sports team, or in a theatre club or cultural activities may also be considered non-formal learning.

Finally, informal training is beginning to be considered important for completing the learning continuum in a minority francophone context. Informal learning takes place through daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is neither organized nor structured (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Informal learning is usually unintentional on the part of the learner. An example would be the knowledge transfer that takes place in the digital world between young people who play video games or colleagues who teach each other about new software.

Figure 1 below illustrates the learning continuum in a minority francophone situation, whose main objective is developing individuals who identify as participants in and contributors to the vitality of the francophone space at the local, national and international level.

**Continuum of Learning and Continuing Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>Non-formal</th>
<th>Informal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 to 5 years of age</td>
<td>Early childhood</td>
<td>Daycares</td>
<td>Sports, social and cultural activities, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 years of age</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Continuing education and vocational training</td>
<td>Family literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 to 21 years of age</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Family literacy</td>
<td>Essential skills and multiple literacies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postsecondary (college, university)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continuous learning is a vector of community, social and economic development for minority...
francophone communities. It is a tool for broadening the francophone space and reducing linguistic insecurity. It is central to the development of each individual’s francophone identity, enabling them to contribute to the social, cultural, linguistic and economic development of their community. We therefore believe it is essential to recognize the contribution of each of these learning contexts that contribute to the vitality of communities, and to ensure adequate funding of the non-formal learning context.

8.0 The role of adult learning beyond the postsecondary level

The essential contribution of adult learning to community well-being is indisputable, and raises questions as to the strategies that should be implemented in a minority francophone context. What learning is required in the 21st century? What is the purpose of learning in the current context of economic and social transformation? What steps must be taken to ensure the development of spaces and learning opportunities? How should learning be organized?

The success of the learner is at the very heart of our activities. Francophone adults engage in training activities for a variety of reasons: to achieve economic integration, to improve their language skills, to acquire vocational training, to earn a high school diploma or equivalency, to earn a college diploma or university degree, to acquire skills to support their children’s development, etc. The training system is characterized by different training services to address learning objectives. However, in a learning continuum, adult learners should not face constraints caused by the lack of access to any of the services they require. It is the responsibility of the different agencies to provide bridges and gateways that enable the learner to succeed.

Figure 2 below depicts a comprehensive and integrated model that enables the learner to enter the system through different points of entry and access different training services.
development workshops), Vocational training, Language training, Multiple literacies, High school equivalency (e.g., GED), Adult literacy

Centre: Learner success, Contribution to social development, Contribution to community development, Contribution to economic development

The following example illustrates what the process could look like. An immigrant goes to an immigrant service office. His first concern is to find a job and a home. The integration service helps the immigrant to find housing and refers him to an employment integration service. When the individual’s skills are being assessed by this service, it becomes clear that he has some difficulty reading and writing, and lacks computer skills. He is therefore referred to the literacy service. As part of this training, he also learns how to use a computer, perform research, and use the Web. Having acquired reading, writing and digital skills, the individual is referred to the training service to study for a high school diploma, followed by college.

Obviously, the path is not quite so linear. The person may stop at any stage to enrol in other types of training, to work or to focus on the needs of his family. It is therefore important that training services be flexible enough to allow for these changes in orientation and that they be able to steer the learner to the right service in the francophone community.

In this context, the training service may meet multiple needs by guiding the person along his learning path or to the appropriate services in the community. This requires knowledge of other community services and close collaboration with community partners to meet the learner’s needs as they evolve.

Given that the learner’s success is everyone’s ultimate goal, it is important to emphasize and recognize the expertise of the various services in the community.

9.0 Adult education with a view to ensuring the learner’s success

Adult education helps adults of all ages to realize their full potential by developing a skill set that meets multiple needs. In the case of adults with low literacy skills, these needs may be complex due to the many barriers to learning (institutional, personal, financial, etc.) that they often face.

The following are some of the factors that motivate adults to undertake training:

- Job search
- Need for professional development or upgrading
- College diploma or university degree
- Facilitate return to full-time studies
- Language development
- Personal development
- Support for child’s development
- Volunteering
- Participation in community and civic life

Adults seeking training can be from a variety of backgrounds:

- Francophones, francophiles and people in mixed marriages
- Newcomers
- Refugees
- Migrants from other provinces or territories
- Youth
- Women/Men
- Seniors
• Disabled people
• Families (including from military bases)
• Dropouts
• Francophone Indigenous and Metis people
• Prisoners
• Homeless people

It is essential to recognize that the institutions or organizations providing adult education, and the professionals working in the field, have distinct expertise that cannot be improvised by others. For this reason, it is important to recognize and support the institutions that have this expertise. Several organizations and institutions in the Canadian francophonie have been working for more than 30 years to train adults who have low literacy skills or need to develop new skills in response to emerging needs in a changing world. Over the years, these organizations have developed unique expertise. The table below shows the key players that have been working in literacy and skills development for many years, using the resources available to them.

Atlantic

Newfoundland and Labrador
Fédération des francophones de Terre-Neuve et du Labrador (FFTNL)
Gaël Corbineau, Executive Director

Prince Edward Island
Collège de l’Île
Donald DesRoches, President of the Collège de l’Île

Nova Scotia
Equipe d’alphabétisation
Shirley Vigneault, Executive Director

New Brunswick
Conseil pour le développement de l’alphabétisme et des compétences des adultes du Nouveau-Brunswick (CĐACNB)
Anne-Lise Blin, Executive Director

Ontario
Coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes
Michel Robillard, Executive Director

West and North

Manitoba
(Pluri-elles (Manitoba) Inc.)
Mona Audet, Executive Director

Saskatchewan
Service fransaskois de formation aux adultes (SEFFA)
Rita Denis, SEFFA Coordinator
Francis Kasongo, Executive Director of Collège Mathieu

British Columbia
Collège Éducacentre
Yvon Laberge, Executive Director

Yukon
Association franco-yukonnaise (AFY)
Isabelle Salesse, Executive Director

Northwest Territories
Fédération franco-ténoise (FFT)
Jean de Dieu Tuyishime, Executive Director
Some of these organizations specialize in the field of literacy and skills development in a minority francophone context, while others also offer some of the training services depicted in Figure 2 (*The learner at the heart of learning*).

**Point of entry to the training system**

If literacy and skills development training is available for adults, there are a number of community partners that can steer them to these services. The following are some examples:

- Institutional services
- Formal educational institutions: colleges, universities
- Community organizations
- Job search services
- Employers
- Religious institutions
- Health and social services
- Canadian Parents for French
- Professional orders
- Libraries
- Social networks
- Cultural associations

### 10.0 Recommendations

We are proposing that the federal government institutions concerned, notably the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), Canadian Heritage, the Department of Justice and the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance, incorporate the following recommendations into the Action Plan on Official Languages:

1. That federal institutions recognize the importance of the overall development of minority francophone learners with a view to supporting that development.
2. That federal institutions recognize the importance of developing literacy and skills as an essential vector for the vitality of official language minority communities.
3. That the federal government recognize the urgency of increasing the funding available under the renewed Action Plan on Official Languages.
4. That the government ensure that all negotiations for federal-provincial/territorial agreements related to literacy and skills development include a clause that clearly sets out the responsibility to provide financial support for organizations and institutions providing these services in French in each province and territory.
5. That adult training in a non-formal context be included in bilateral education agreements and that institutions and organizations currently providing non-formal training be able to access that funding.
6. That the Consortium francophone d’apprentissage continu (CFAC, currently being established) receive financial support for its efforts to develop and provide literacy and skills development services.

### 11.0 Conclusion

Clearly, the organizations and institutions that work in the field of adult francophone education, specifically in the area of literacy and essential skills, occupy a unique and structuring place in francophone minority communities in Canada. With stable and ongoing financial support from the federal government, the expertise they have developed over the years will allow them to work
together to offer a range of services to minority francophone learners. This support will also enable them to develop innovative solutions to better structure their interventions and strengthen their capacity and their impact on the sustainability of services in each participating province and territory. Strengthening such institutions will help bridge existing gaps in the continuum of learning and enable the institutions to play a key role in the vitality of official language minority communities.

The success of this support will be measured by an enhanced capacity on the part of francophone minority communities to meet the needs of the fifty percent of their population that is composed of functional illiterates with limited participation in economic, social, cultural and civic activities. Well-educated citizens are essential to the vitality of francophone minority communities and to Canada’s development in a changing world.