

Expanding the Trades: Addressing Manitoba's Skilled Labour Shortage

By Dennis Owens
Senior Policy Analyst

Executive Summary

- Manitoba suffers from a significant shortage of tradesmen.
- Less than one-fourth of post-secondary students are currently enrolled in a vocational program.
- Despite a promise in 1999 to "double college enrolment," modest enrolment increases at community colleges have put Manitoba nowhere close to meeting that goal.
- All three major universities have a much larger number of students. Unfortunately, most of these drop out before completing their programs.
- Manitoba's "mainstreaming" public schools are partially responsible. Students are forced to take a general academic program even if it is not suitable for them.
- Germany provides a model for excellent streaming, in which students enter one of three different levels in lower secondary school.
- As a result, about 65% of the workforce in Germany has received vocational training.
- Many of the most popular vocational programs in Germany are the areas in which Manitoba is experiencing a labour shortage.
- Manitoba's government can redeem its promise if it makes changes to its mainstreaming policy at the K-12 level.

Introduction

Manitoba suffers from a shortage of skilled tradesmen. The housing market has been booming in Winnipeg and beyond, and the limiting factor in building more homes faster is a lack of skilled labour. Although the trades have been seen in the past as less desirable employment than white-collar work, skilled labour is increasingly seen as a vital, remunerative and favourable career path.

Manitoba's NDP government made a pledge in 1999 to double enrolment in community colleges. While the number of students in colleges has increased since then, it has nowhere near doubled. Manitobans need to take a clear look at the reasons for this shortfall, to solve the shortage of tradesmen and make Manitoba competitive.

The Manitoba Situation

Manitoba's high school graduates attend university at the same rate as the average Canadian, but the level of community college enrolment



among 18 to 24 year olds ranks last of all the provinces. In response to this problem, the NDP pledged to "double college enrolment" and said they would do this over the next four years by increasing funding, making it easier to transfer credits to the university level, and expanding co-op education programs.¹

Manitoba currently has four public community colleges: Red River College in Winnipeg, Assiniboine Community College

in Brandon, Keewatin Community College (recently renamed University College of the North) in The Pas and Thompson, and *L'École technique et professionnelle* in Winnipeg. Due to its very small size (under 200 students), enrolment at *L'École technique et professionnelle* is not included in this discussion.

Here are full-time enrolment numbers at these institutions in two academic years, five years apart:

Community Colleges²

College	1998/99	2002/03	Increase
Red River College	5,288	6,992	+ 32.2%
Assiniboine Community College	1,484	1,932	+ 30.2%
Keewatin Community College	771	731	- 5.2%
Total	7,543	9,655	+ 28.0%

While full-time community college enrolment has shown some growth, the promise to double enrolment has not been kept. These increases are even less impressive, given that public universities have been growing at a similar rate over the same five-year period; that may indicate that this growth owes more to broad trends than to specific initiatives undertaken by the government. In fact, total full-time university enrolment in Manitoba now stands at 26,214, which is almost three times larger than community-college enrolment.³

The Department of Education, Citizenship and Training has created an initiative, the College Expansion Initiative (CEI), to increase community-college enrolment through the creation of new training programs and assistance with the construction of a new campus for Red River College.⁴ While this is a step in the right direction, community college enrolment still lags substantially behind university enrolment. The roots of the shortage of skilled labour go deeper than current provincial government policy.



The Role of K-12 Education

One significant change in education in the second half of the twentieth century is the elimination of streaming. Traditionally, students were separated on the basis of academic potential and ability, and placed in classes with similar students. The majority of students followed a general curriculum, while academically gifted students pursued advanced or accelerated learning, and students requiring remedial assistance were provided with necessary supports. But streaming has been virtually eliminated and replaced by mainstreaming, in which all students are kept in the same regular classroom setting for as long as possible. Teachers are expected to modify their instruction in order to ensure that students with special needs, either for further stimulation or for remedial education, are able to participate in the classroom.⁵

What this means is that, until students reach high school and have the option of enrolling in vocational programs, all students receive a “one size fits all” education. By following this practice, public schools in

Manitoba effectively steer students toward university rather than community colleges. Since all students are forced to remain in a general academic stream until at least high school, those who would be better suited for an education that prepares them for a trade are denied this opportunity. Instead, a disproportionate number of students decide to go to university when they complete high school rather than considering a career in the trades.

As a result, universities in Manitoba have a very high dropout rate. At the University of Manitoba, approximately 50% of students enrolled in their first year of full-time studies fail to complete a degree within six years. The results for part-time students are even worse, since 66% of first-year students do not even make it to the third year of their program.⁶ This dropout rate provides strong evidence that many students who enrol in university classes would be better suited for a different form of post-secondary education. Since mainstreaming discourages enrolment in vocational programs, a look at a country with a different educational philosophy may be instructive.



Germany's Educational System

One of the most notable examples of streaming can be found in Germany. German students attend primary schools until they reach the end of fourth grade, after which they enter one of three levels of lower secondary schools.

The *Hauptschule* (grades 5-9 in most states) leads to receipt of the *Hauptschule* certificate and then to part-time enrolment in a vocational school, combined with apprenticeship training, until the age of 18. The *Realschule* (grades 5-10 in most states) leads to receipt of the *Realschule* certificate and then to part-time vocational schools, higher vocational schools or continuation of study at a Gymnasium. The Gymnasium (grades 5-13 in most states) leads to the *Abitur* and

prepares students for university study or for a dual academic and vocational credential.⁷

Each of these schools provides *Technische Berufsausbildung*, different types of education to their students. Students who are more suited to vocational work than academics are placed in a setting that encourages them to enter this field. Similarly, students who are best suited for university are placed in a program that provides a greater level of academic rigour. This system is more responsive and flexible than those with just one stream, because it provides each student with an appropriate education. Interestingly, an approximately equal number of students are enrolled in each of these three streams.⁸

About 65% of Germany's workforce has been trained through some form of vocational training.⁹ In Manitoba less than one-fourth of post-secondary students are enrolled in a vocational program.¹⁰ This difference would be even more striking if it included the many Manitoba students who take no post-secondary training whatsoever.



Unsurprisingly, Manitoba is facing a shortage of skilled tradesmen, while Germany has an abundance of skilled workers. Some of the most popular trades selected by vocational students in Germany include car mechanic, painter and decorator, electrician, commercial clerk, retail trade specialist, hairdresser and dentist's assistant.¹¹ Workers in most of these occupations are greatly in demand in Manitoba.¹² Manitoba's needs go unmet, though, because it lacks a system, like Germany's, designed to produce large numbers of workers in these vocational fields.

Conclusion

If the Manitoba government is serious about increasing community college enrolment, it must explore the reasons for the relatively low enrolment in the first place. Although enrolment has moderately increased over the last few years, it still lags far behind enrolment at the various universities. Mainstreaming elementary and secondary education has led to unrealistic expectations about who should attend university, which is borne out by Manitoba's high drop out rates for university students. Many of these students would fare better if they were directed towards learning a vocation.

In contrast, Germany has a very high participation rate in vocational education. The reasons for this can be found within its public school system. Unlike Manitoba, German students are streamed at a relatively early age into an appropriate academic or vocational program. Instead of forcing all students into the same general academic stream, students are provided with schooling that matches their interests and skill levels and prepares them for a realistic and productive career after high school. One result is that Germany has a much higher number of skilled tradesmen than Manitoba.



If the Manitoba government is serious about wanting to double college enrolment, it should consider implementing the German model. The “one size fits all” K-12 education system must be changed, so that all students can receive an education that meets their needs and goals, and the province’s shortage of skilled tradesmen addressed.

About the Author



Dennis Owens is the Frontier's Senior Policy Analyst. A descendent of homesteaders near Portage la Prairie, he graduated from the University of Winnipeg in 1970 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Political Science. Over a 20-year career in the transportation business, he rose to the position of operations manager of a Winnipeg-based firm. Since then he has researched and written about Canadian public policy issues for a variety of organizations including the Manitoba Taxpayers Association and the Prairie Centre. His specialties at the Frontier Centre include municipal issues, public education, healthcare and aboriginal policy. His frequent exposure in electronic and print media has included a regular commentary on CBC radio and articles printed in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *National Post*.

Footnotes

¹ Benjamin Levin, *Governing Education*, University of Toronto Press, 2005

² Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, *A Statistical Profile of Education and Training in Manitoba*, available at <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/strategy/statprofile.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth. *College Expansion Initiative*, available at <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aet/cei/index.html>

⁵ Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth. *Supporting Inclusive Schools: A Handbook for Student Services*, available at <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ks4/specedu/ss/index.html>

⁶ Rodney Clifton, *What Can be Done About the “Under-Funding” of Canadian Universities?*, available at http://www.fcpp.org/main/publication_detail.php?PubID=631

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, *An Overview of the German Education System*, available at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/GermanCaseStudy/chapter1a.html>

⁸ David Lutterkort, *Information on Germany*, available at <http://www.watzmann.net/scg/faq-16.html>

⁹ German Culture.com.ua, *Vocational Education and Training*, available at http://www.germanculture.com.ua/library/facts/bl_vocational_education.htm

¹⁰ Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, *A Statistical Profile of Education and Training in Manitoba*, op. cit.

¹¹ Federal Foreign Office, *Facts About Germany: The Dual System*, available at <http://www.tatsachen-ueber-deutschland.de/536.0.html>

¹² Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth, *High Demand Occupations in Manitoba*, available at http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aet/lmi/hdo/hdo_list.html