

Addressing the Truck Driver Shortage Through a Redesign of Class 1 Driver Training (2023)

Issue

The MELT program needs to be redesigned to increase the safety of new Class 1 drivers thereby giving insurers, and the broader public, confidence in the competence of drivers exiting the program.

Background

The trucking sector performs an extremely important role in the transportation of goods in Alberta. More than 60% of all freight within the province is transported by truck, with an additional \$7 billion of Alberta's non-pipeline products transported out of the province by truck³⁸⁹ (Trucking, 2019, p.5). Despite the importance of this industry, trucking has seen a shortage of drivers for more than 20 years (Van Horne, 2004).

As a result of the Humboldt bus crash tragedy, there was additional scrutiny placed on the trucking industry as a whole. From company structure to safety planning, and driver training, every aspect of trucking organizations was considered with the intent of keeping those on the road safe. Consequently, on March 1, 2019, the Mandatory Entry-Level Training (MELT) program was instituted³⁹⁰ for Class 1 and Class 2 drivers. According to the *Commercial Truck Driver Training Course (Class 1 MELT) Course Delivery Guidelines and Curriculum* (2020) released by the Government of Alberta, "The purpose of [the MELT]

curriculum is to provide individuals seeking to obtain a Class 1 driver's license with basic driving skill procedures and to guide the instructor on how to effectively deliver the training" (p.3). In essence, the purpose of the program is to train drivers to the lowest minimum standard where they are able to pass the driver certification test.

The MELT program consists of 113 total training hours, with 40.5 hours in the classroom, 15.5 hours of in-yard instruction, and 57 hours of road training (including 39 hours of actual driving time and 18 hours of off-road maneuvers). Each of the modules have a prescribed format including an exact number of hours per subject. For example, Module 3 – Basic Driving Techniques is separated into three sections.

Section one includes:

- 1 hour, 25 minutes of classroom delivery
- 15 minutes of classroom assessment
- 1 hour 30 minutes of in-yard trainer observation
- 1 hour of in-yard application

³⁸⁹ Transportation Guide: Bridging the gap in Alberta's trucking and logistics labour market. 2019. <https://truckinghr.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Transportaion-Guide.pdf>

³⁹⁰ <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/f93f4d2d-7925-4372-9eb1-47a8afbb55a0/resource/4d77101f-4fcb-4a37-a862-2649274e5744/download/jsg-peace-officer-bulletin-04-2019.pdf>

This ultimately results in 4 hours and 10 minutes spent on proper start-up and warm-up procedures, entering and exiting the cab, starting the engine, engine warm-up, documentation, seat adjustment, proper seat belt use, mirror adjustment, and leaving the driver's seat (p.81-86). Regardless of whether or not the learner in the course has experience or knowledge in any or all of these areas, the specific amount of time is outlined and must not be deviated from.

Unlike teaching children, adults have different learning experiences that they are coming into a program with. Some may have experience in mechanics, or time spent driving on a farm or in a yard. Adult learners will pull from these experiences as a foundation from which to understand and thus, expand, their knowledge³⁹¹ (Purwati et al., 2022, p.88). Recognizing the learner's experience and adjusting the time spent on each subject to reflect that will have greater success at training more effective, safe drivers.

Since the MELT program was introduced in 2019, there have been no reviews of the effectiveness of the program – specifically as it relates to teaching for driver safety. As of the last reported measurement, there's been a 95% increase in insurance claims for commercial vehicles in Alberta from 2016-2019 as reported by the Canadian Underwriter³⁹². Regular review of the program and its effectiveness, including subsequent adjustments of the program to address the gaps found through the analyses, could contribute to the decrease in incidents and corresponding insurance claims.

Following the successful completion of the MELT program and license test, the implementation of a probationary license period with an apprenticeship program could have a number of measurable benefits. In general, apprenticeships can support organizations in meeting the demand for skilled workers, raise productivity, strengthen worker morale, and improving worker safety³⁹³ (Lerman, 2012, p.8). The combination of probationary period and apprenticeship-style program has been shown to be productive. Quebec currently utilizes such a program, whereby a student of the driver training program is in the training program for a period of 24 months with separate periods of probationary driving with oversight and restricted driving without oversight³⁹⁴ (Quebec).

With such a training program, record keeping of which drivers are participating in the program becomes very important. There has been a practice with some organizations in the trucking industry whereby some drivers will simply be included in a fleet list of a company's drivers. This creates a situation where a driver would not have their own specific driving record, so if that driver wishes to move on from their current employment, they would have no history of their driving record. While the legislation around keeping driver records is clear in Section 41 of the Commercial

³⁹¹ Purwati, D., Mardhiah, A., Nurhasanah, E., & Ramli, R. (2022). The six characteristics of andragogy and future research directions in EFL: A literature review. *Elsya: Journal of English Language Studies*. 4(1), 86-95. <http://journal.unilak.ac.id/index.php/elsya/article/view/7473/3677>

³⁹² Porado, P. 2022. Are driver shortages fueling a spike in Alberta trucking claims? *Canadian Underwriter*. <https://www.canadianunderwriter.ca/insurance/are-driver-shortages-fueling-a-spike-in-alberta-trucking-claims-1004226686/>

³⁹³ Lerman, R. I., 2012. Can the United States Expand Apprenticeship? *Lessons from Experience*. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/91788/1/pp46.pdf>

³⁹⁴ Quebec, Enriched Heavy Vehicle Driver Training Program <https://saaq.gouv.qc.ca/en/transportation-goods/enriched-heavy-vehicle-driver-training-program>

Vehicle Certificate and Insurance Regulation³⁹⁵ (2022, p.35) the understanding of the requirements of this section of legislation may not be sufficient. Accurate driver record-keeping plays an important role in ensuring the safety of our roadways.

Ultimately, truck driving plays a critically important role in our economy. From the food we eat, to the gas we put in our vehicles and warm our homes with, we are impacted on a daily basis by the role that the trucking industry plays in the supply chain. Given the shortage in drivers with Class 1 licenses, there needs to be more done to expand the number of qualified drivers to support this critically important industry.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

1. Allow some flexibility, based on the instructor's discretion, in practical driving hours spent on specific modules;
2. Consider incorporating simulated driving hours to be included as a requirement for a portion of the in-cab hours of the MELT program so new drivers can experience conditions they may not otherwise encounter (including wildlife, snow and ice, erratic drivers, etc.);
3. Review the auditing procedures to ensure that each training school that delivers MELT is instructing to a high standard, ensuring that drivers leaving the program are competent to drive safely;
4. Evaluate the driving record of new Class 1 drivers, specifically related to motor vehicle accidents, to determine the effectiveness of the MELT program with the purpose of finding opportunities to further enhance the program;
5. Incentivize companies to implement an apprenticeship or internship style program whereby new drivers are trained under experienced drivers for a certain period of time;
6. Immediately look to implement a hiring credit for organizations hiring new drivers, with the intention of helping to offset high insurance costs related to the first three years of a new driver's experience; and
7. Allow for those with existing experience from on-farm experience or driving experience in other jurisdictions, including international, for a minimum of 24 months previously to have the option of challenging the Class 1 enhanced knowledge and road tests. If an individual is unsuccessful at passing either the enhanced knowledge test or the enhanced road test on the first attempt, drivers would be required to take the MELT Program and successfully pass the enhanced knowledge and road tests in order to reobtain a Class 1 license in Alberta.

³⁹⁵ Commercial Vehicle Certificate and Insurance Regulation. 2002. https://kings-printer.alberta.ca/1266.cfm?page=2002_314.cfm&leg_type=Regs&isbncln=9780779836659