

Non-Formal Adult Learning Programs at Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions: Trends, Issues, and Practices

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ABSTRACT

A number of recent policy reports have suggested that Canadian universities and community colleges should play a more significant role in response to the adult education and training needs of Canada's workforce. This article discusses the results of a study that examined investment trends and the characteristics of non-formal adult learner programming at Canadian post-secondary institutions. Public universities and community colleges were surveyed, and a purposive sample of key informants, representing the broad spectrum of post-secondary education in Canada, was interviewed. The results indicated that institutional investments in non-formal programs for adult learners have trended upward over the past decade. Colleges reported

RÉSUMÉ

Un certain nombre de rapports de politiques récents ont suggéré que les universités et collèges communautaires canadiens devraient jouer un rôle plus important en réponse aux besoins des travailleurs canadiens en matière d'éducation et de formation des adultes. Cet article discute des résultats d'une étude ayant examiné les tendances d'investissement et les caractéristiques de la programmation non formelle destinée aux apprenants adultes. Des sondages ont été faits auprès d'universités et de collèges communautaires publics et un échantillon choisi à dessein de participants clés, représentant le vaste éventail de programmes d'éducation post-secondaire au Canada a été interviewé. Les résultats indiquent que les investissements institutionnels

larger average annual institutional expenditures on and larger enrolments in non-formal adult learner programs. However, adult learners comprise only a small minority of the overall student population at post-secondary institutions. Financial barriers at both the institutional and individual levels were identified as key barriers to increasing access and participation. Limited operational funding at the institutional level has influenced the nature and scope of offerings and, for many institutions, has resulted in program offerings that do not necessarily target the needs of non-traditional and disadvantaged adult learner groups. The study findings have important public-policy implications for improving access and participation in non-formal adult learning, including the need for greater incentives for individuals (e.g., tax incentives) and increased support for disadvantaged learners to enhance basic-skills training.

dans les programmes non formels pour apprenants adultes ont connu une augmentation au cours des dix dernières années. Les collèges rapportent une moyenne plus élevée au niveau des dépenses institutionnelles annuelles et des inscriptions dans les programmes non formels d'éducation aux adultes. Cependant, les apprenants adultes comptent seulement pour une petite minorité sur l'ensemble de la population étudiante dans les institutions post-secondaires. Les obstacles financiers aux niveaux institutionnel et individuel ont été identifiés comme obstacles clés à l'augmentation de l'accès et de la participation. Un financement d'opération limité au niveau institutionnel a influencé la nature et l'envergure des offres, et pour un grand nombre d'institutions, cela a eu pour effet l'offre de programmes qui ne ciblent pas nécessairement les besoins des groupes d'apprenants adultes non traditionnels et défavorisés. Les résultats de l'étude ont des implications importantes pour les politiques publiques quant à l'amélioration de l'accès et de la participation dans l'éducation aux adultes de type non formel, y compris le besoin de meilleurs facteurs de motivation (par exemple des incitations fiscales) et un soutien plus accru pour les apprenants défavorisés pour améliorer la formation des compétences de base.

INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning implies that people should continue to learn throughout their lives, not just in informal ways but also through organized learning in formal and non-formal settings (Schuetze, 2005). In Canadian public discourse, participation in learning throughout one's life has been described as both a functional necessity and an economic imperative. Because of an aging population, impending retirements among the baby-boom generation, and declining numbers of youth entering the labour market, it is estimated that Canada will have a shortage of 1.2 million skilled workers by 2025 (Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2007b). Thus, upgrading the skills of the existing workforce and increasing the labour-market participation of those not currently working are critical for averting future labour and skills shortages (Goldenberg, 2006).

Rapid advances in new technologies and globalization have transformed the way we work and live, and lifelong learning is frequently cast as a means of meeting changing labour-market demands, by closing the gap between the skills of workers and the skills required by business and industry. To meet the demands of the rapidly changing, global knowledge-based economy and to maintain an international competitive advantage, we in Canada are compelled to invest in continuous training and skill-development programs that are necessary for a well-educated and adaptable workforce. The Government of Canada has highlighted the importance of continuous learning as both an individual and an economic imperative in the most recent 2009 federal budget: "To succeed in the economy of tomorrow, Canada must have the best-educated, most skilled and most flexible workforce in the world" (Canada, 2009, p. 197). Beyond the need to ensure global competitiveness, it is also suggested that the maintenance of our standard of living, quality of life, and the very survival of our society and culture is predicated on the nation's capacity to foster a "culture of learning" whereby Canadians participate in learning throughout life.

Schuetze (2005) has suggested that any system of lifelong learning requires not only a certain degree of consistency in policies, procedures, and standards but also an efficient mechanism of coordination. Some have argued that lifelong learning has become a guiding principle for Canadian policy initiatives, ranging from national economic competitiveness to social cohesion (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). Recent comprehensive reviews of post-secondary education carried out in several provinces have largely promoted lifelong learning and emphasized the need to improve access to training and educational opportunities for adults (Alberta, 2006; British Columbia, 2007; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005; Ontario, 2005). The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), representing the

collective voices of ministers of education across the provinces and territories, has proposed a number of strategies for the successful implementation of lifelong learning and adult education programs (Powley, Kennedy, & Childs, 2005). More recently, CMEC (2008) declared that "Canada must develop an accessible, diversified, and integrated system of adult learning and skills development that delivers training when Canadians need it" (p. 1).

Despite such overtures, none of the Canadian provinces has tasked a single government organization with the overall responsibility for adult education (Powley et al., 2005). Rather, in most provinces, this responsibility is split between several departments that oversee a patchwork of education, labour, and/or human-resource development programs (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). Indeed, most of the provinces do not even employ an official definition of the adult learner and none is regarded as having a coherent framework to encourage individuals, employers, and educational institutions to engage in learning activities (Myers & de Broucker, 2006; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2001). For its part, the federal government, over the last two decades, has introduced a variety of initiatives and programs to support lifelong learning and promote a "training culture" in Canada. This labyrinthine network of programs, which originates from several agencies, with program delivery varying in funding and scope from one jurisdiction to another, is intended to assist employers with human-resource needs and to support the unemployed in acquiring skills and employment (Goldenberg, 2006; Myers & de Broucker, 2006). It is no small wonder, then, that adult learning in Canada has been described as complex, fragmented, and incomplete.

STUDY CONTEXT

Access and Participation

With strong attainment and participation rates, Canada is considered by many to have one of the most accessible post-secondary education sectors in the world. However, despite the considerable rhetoric about the need for a "learning society" and the importance of lifelong learning, in reality, progress in this area has been decidedly mixed. Over the last decade, adult participation rates in education and training activities have stagnated, and those with the most to gain are the least likely to get further education and training (CCL, 2007b). The highest participation rates in adult education and training are found among the employed (vs. the unemployed), the highly educated (vs. the less educated), and the highly skilled (vs. the lower skilled) (Rubenson, Desjardins, & Yoon, 2007). Meanwhile, those individuals with lower levels of formal education stand to benefit the most from training opportunities, particularly in the area of basic literacy competencies. Many

Aboriginal peoples, low-income learners, people with disabilities, and individuals who leave school early face multiple barriers to participating in education and training as adults. However, certain forms of non-occupational adult education required to meet the needs of these groups, such as basic literacy programs in particular, are not widely accessible or available.

Among those who are employed, about two-thirds do not take part in any work-related learning activities; a key barrier to their participation is the inadequate resources allocated to training by businesses and governments (CCL, 2007b). The results of the 2003 Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS) indicated that participants and non-participants had similar reasons for not taking part in adult education and training. Among non-participants, cost was the most-reported reason (45%), followed by being too busy at work (35%), family responsibilities (27%), and conflicting training and work schedules (27%) (Peters, 2004). For many Canadians, particularly lower-skilled and older adults, affordability is a growing barrier and a person's decision to pursue adult education and training may be affected if the cost proves unmanageable (CCL, 2008, p. 25).

A significant proportion of non-formal adult education and training in Canada is work related. Employers are both major providers of training and major sources of funding support for adult learner participation. From 1993 to 2002, more than 80% of adult education and training activities in Canada were undertaken for job- and career-related purposes (Rubenson, 2007, p. 60). According to the 2003 AETS, participation in job-related training in Canada increased from 29% in 1997 to 35% in 2002 (CCL, 2007c); roughly 4.8 million workers (aged 25 to 64), or one-third of all Canadian workers, participated in formal job-related training in 2002 (CCL, 2007b, p. 6; Peters, 2004, p. 8). More strikingly, the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) results indicated that almost 50% of the population aged 16 to 65 participated in some form of educational activity—a significant increase from 35% in 1994 (Statistics Canada, 2005).

Substantial regional variations in rates of participation in adult education and training exist across Canada (Rubenson et al., 2007). According to data from the 2003 IALSS, British Columbians had the highest participation among the provinces, at 57%, whereas participation was much lower in Newfoundland and Labrador, where only 36% of adults took part in education and training. A comparison of the results of the 1994 and the 2003 IALSS reveals that, while substantial regional differences remained, there were a few notable changes in participation rates. For example, participation across the Atlantic provinces as a whole grew by 60% over that time period (Rubenson et al., 2007, p. 22).

Rubenson (2007) identified a number of factors that influence participation in adult education and training. Age is generally the best predictor;

younger adults tend to participate more frequently than older adults (Statistics Canada, 2001; Thompson & Foth, 2003). Men are more likely than women to receive employer support, while women are more likely than men to self-finance their adult-learning activities (CCL, 2008; Rubenson, 2007). Literacy proficiency and educational attainment are also key determinants. The higher an adult's acquired level of education, the more likely that adult is to participate in further education or training (Livingstone & Stowe, 2007; Rubenson, 2007). Highly skilled workers participate in more adult education and training than low-skilled workers (Goldenberg, 2006; Myers & de Broucker, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2001), and workplace training is more prevalent among workers in larger firms (CCL, 2007b, 2008). As well, union members are more likely than non-union workers to receive job training (Boudard & Rubenson, 2003; CCL, 2007b). Indeed, AETS data collected in 1993 and 1997 showed that unionized workers not only participated more in general and more in specific job-related adult education and training activities but were also more likely to benefit from employer sponsorship of their training (CCL, 2007b, p. 11).

Role of Post-Secondary Institutions

Federal and provincial governments invested a record \$36 billion in post-secondary education in 2006–2007. Yet, despite this significant expenditure, there are no concrete pan-Canadian goals or objectives for adult education and training beyond the lifelong-learning rhetoric (CCL, 2007b), and there has been a minimal increase in the average age of college and university students over the past 40 years (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). Increasingly, colleges and universities are being called upon to rethink their traditional missions in order to better respond to the need for lifelong learning—by improving linkages with the labour market, by providing better access for non-traditional students, and by establishing special programs geared toward older learners (CCL, 2007b; Goldenberg, 2006; Thompson & Foth, 2003).

The continuing education units (CEUs) or extension services that are established on most Canadian university campuses focus on continuing education, in fields such as business and education, as well as on campus-based, non-credit courses. The environment for these CEUs has been described as one of declining financial resources and increased threats of co-option (Einsiedel, 1998; Petersen, 2001). Over the years, the role of continuing education on post-secondary campuses has been largely transformed from a community outreach and service model to an entrepreneurial model, influenced by commercialization and competition (Einsiedel, 1998; McLean, 2008; Petersen, 2001; Selman, 2005). This entrepreneurial model has been characterized in various ways: as largely based on revenue generation or cost recov-

ery; as vocationally oriented; and as emphasizing credentialism and other means to enhance value or capture markets (McLean, 2008; Selman, 2005).

As noted earlier, despite calls for universities and colleges to better respond to the growing requirement for ongoing learning (CCL, 2007a; Goldenberg, 2006), post-secondary institutions have reported significant challenges in increasing their capacity, due to infrastructure limitations and limited financial capacities, to offer programming across large geographic areas. Public-funding policy has important implications for providers such as CEUs and their ability to be more responsive to the needs of a broader segment of adult learners.

At present, little is known about the particular levels of investment and resource allocation made by Canadian universities and community colleges in non-formal programming and services for adult learners.¹ In terms of institutional enrolment, Statistics Canada's annual Continuing Education Survey, which collected information about enrolment in university continuing education, was discontinued in the late 1990s, in part, due to unsatisfactory reporting by institutions. Moreover, existing databases such as the AETS and National Graduates Survey (NGS) are unsuitable for assessing non-formal adult learner enrolment at the institutional level. These gaps in data hinder the ability of decision-makers to form policies and strategies in an area that has grown in importance in recent years.

In an effort to fill in some of these gaps, this article reports on the results of a 2008 study conducted by the authors to identify trends in non-formal adult learner programming at universities and colleges. A modified version of a definition of "non-formal adult education programs" that was proposed by the Canadian Council on Learning Adult Learning Knowledge Centre (PRAXIS Research and Consulting, 2007), was used:

Learning that takes place in a more-or-less structured program with pre-defined content and learning objectives, including college and university continuing education programs, extension programs, and non-credit distance education programs. Non-formal, organized adult education programs include courses/workshops/seminars that provide certificates/recognition of completion. Examples may include adult basic education (ABE)/adult upgrading; English/French as a second language (ESL/FSL); literacy programs; continuing education; business and contract training; and information technology (IT) training.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The methodology was comprised of an online survey of universities and community colleges in Canada and interviews with a purposive sample of respondents from national organizations that represented the post-secondary education (PSE) sector in Canada. The study had four objectives:

1. to review trends in Canadian post-secondary institutional investments in non-formal programs and services for adult learners
2. to assess participation levels in non-formal adult education programs at post-secondary institutions
3. to examine barriers to accessing institutions' non-formal programs
4. to review best practices that have led to improvements in adult learner participation in non-formal programs.

Institutional Survey

The lack of access to data on college and university finances and enrolments is perhaps the single largest challenge to conducting research on non-formal adult learners in post-secondary institutions. Although the issue of quality assurance and accountability has become ubiquitous in PSE public-policy debates, little has been done to produce a national database of comprehensive and comparable institutional data that might facilitate accurate monitoring, evaluation, and public reporting on issues such as how expenditures and resources are allotted within colleges and universities. The same can be said for data on PSE enrolment and participation, as little information is available at the national level about who participates in PSE in Canada (CCL, 2007a).

Currently, there are no national or provincial databases that provide disaggregated financial data concerning college and university expenditures on non-formal adult education programming, and comprehensive institutional data outlining enrolment in non-formal programs are similarly unavailable. Because these data were only available from the individual institutions, the authors of this study carried out a survey of such institutions in an effort to collect the desired information. The survey's target population encompassed public universities with membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) and the member institutions of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC).

The survey questionnaire was designed to collect a variety of institutional-level data regarding adult learner programs,² including aggregate financial data on investments in non-formal adult learning over the 10-year period between 1998–99 and 2007–08. Institutional respondents were asked to provide details on adult learner enrolment levels, on the types of

non-formal adult education programs offered, on barriers to accessing these programs, and on best practices for improving adult learner participation in non-formal programming.

Field testing of the survey was completed with a number of post-secondary institutions and individuals with expertise in the area of adult learning. Based on this pre-test, modifications were made to the questionnaire items. The survey was constructed using the SurveyMonkey Web-based interface and was administered to institutions in both English and French in November and December 2008. Numerical data were analyzed using standard descriptive statistical methods, while open-ended survey question responses were analyzed for emergent themes using a cross-case comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Key Informant Interviews

During the survey administration period, 10 semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of key informants to supplement the survey data. These informants, who were selected for their knowledge of adult learning programs and populations, were individuals in senior leadership positions with national and provincial organizations that represented the broad spectrum of Canadian post-secondary education (see Appendix A). The purpose of these interviews was to explore perspectives around trends in institutional investments in non-formal adult learning, notable barriers to access, best practices, and the current status of non-formal adult learning programs at universities and colleges. The interview script is presented in Appendix B. Interviewing, transcription, and analysis occurred concurrently. Interview data were analyzed using standard qualitative methods (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992); the responses of the key informants were organized around the main questions that were asked and then summarized according to the key themes that emerged.

Data-Gathering Challenges

A number of institutions either declined to participate in the survey or were unable to complete survey items because of data unavailability. Several respondents indicated that their institution did not collect or assemble data for programs completed by adult learners. In a number of instances, institutions reported that they had no mechanisms in place to account for student activity across a diversity of program offerings of varying durations. A number of institutional respondents were unable to provide the requisite data because of difficulty accessing financial or student records. In some cases, respondents did not have access to disaggregated financial data that would reflect adult learner participation in activities relevant to the survey. Other institutions indicated that although most of the financial and enrolment data

requested in the survey could be compiled, it would be too complicated, onerous, and/or time consuming to do so.

FINDINGS

Survey Sample

A total of 198 institutions (107 colleges and 91 universities) were invited to complete the survey. Of these, 66 institutions did so, for an overall response rate of 33%. Table 1 provides the distribution of completed surveys by region and institutional type.

Table 1: *Distribution of Completed Surveys by Province/Institution*

Province/Territory	Universities		Colleges/ Institutes		Overall		Response Rate
	Completed	Declined	Completed	Declined	Completed	Declined	
British Columbia	6	6	7	10	13	16	45%
Alberta	3	3	4	10	7	13	35%
Saskatchewan	1	4	2	7	3	11	27%
Manitoba	1	3	2	3	3	6	33%
Ontario	13	16	6	17	19	33	37%
Quebec	5	14	7	23	12	37	24%
Atlantic	6	10	2	5	8	15	35%
Territories	0	0	1	1	1	1	50%
Total	35	56	31	76	66	132	33%

Enrolment of Adult Learners

Overall, 40% of institutional respondents indicated that less than 5% of their student population was enrolled in non-formal adult learning programs (see Figure 1), but there were significant differences in the enrolment profiles of colleges and universities in this regard. The majority of universities (55%) enrolled fewer than 5% of students in such programs; colleges, however, reported far greater proportions of students enrolled in these programs. Whereas 32% of colleges reported that over 40% of their student population was comprised of adult learners in non-formal programs, none of the

university respondents indicated that their institution had levels of non-formal adult learner enrolment exceeding 40% of total enrolment.

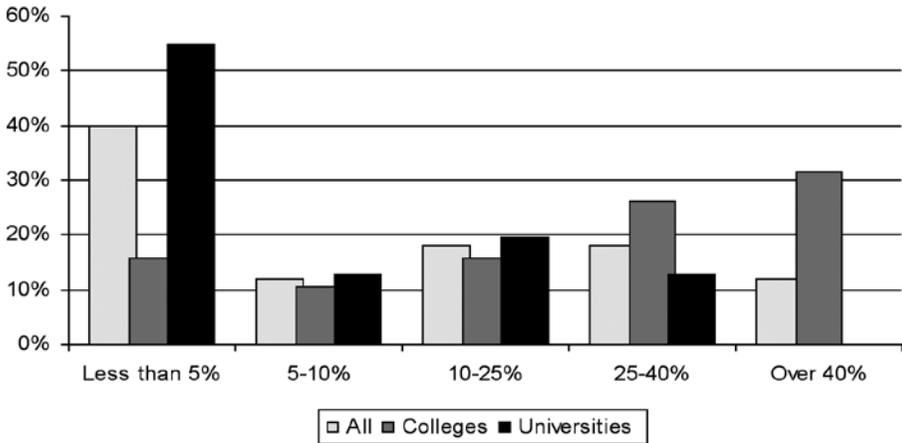


Figure 1: Student population enrolled in non-formal adult education programs (52 respondent institutions provided data for this item)

Program Expenditures

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the dollar amount that their institution allocated to non-formal adult learner programs in each academic year between 1998–99 and 2007–08. Average expenditures for the respondent colleges and universities and for the respondent post-secondary institutions combined are provided in Figure 2.

The financial expenditures reported by colleges were consistently higher than those reported by universities for each year in the 10-year period examined. On average, annual expenditures for colleges were approximately 4.5 times more than those of universities. In 2007–08, annual university expenditures (\$1.59 million) were less than half those of colleges (\$4.40 million). Over the decade in question, college expenditures increased by almost 4.5%, while university expenditures increased by almost double that amount.

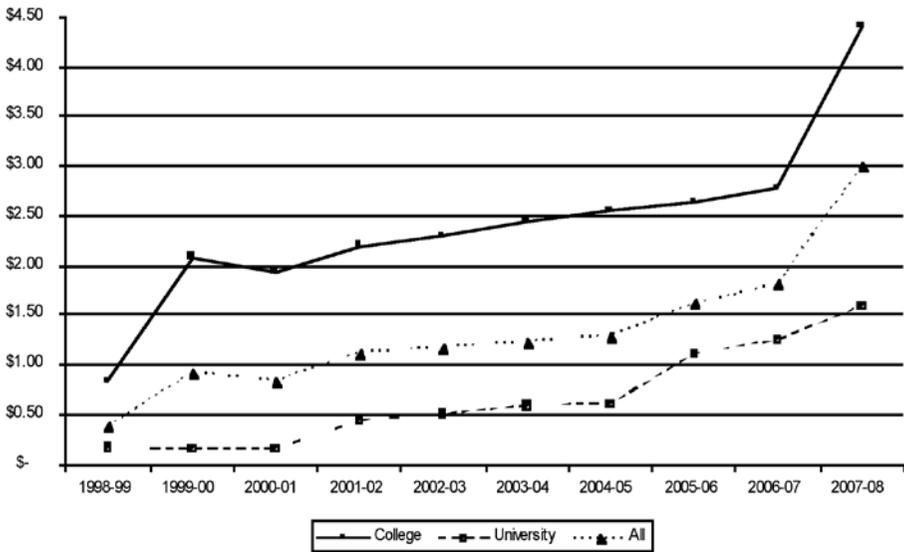


Figure 2: Average annual institutional expenditures on adult education programs (35 respondent institutions provided data for this item. All amounts in millions, adjusted for inflation to the 2008 level using the change in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for Canada.)

Sources of Program Funding

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the three major sources of institutional funding that the respondent institutions relied on to fund non-formal adult learner programs in 2007–08, that is, student fees, provincial operating grants, and contracts with private businesses. A majority of the respondent institutions (61%) reported that more than 25% of the costs associated with adult learner programs were covered by funds from student fees; colleges appeared to be less reliant on this source of funding than universities. About 44% of institutions used operating grants to cover more than 25% of the costs of adult learner programs, and 22% reported that over 25% of their funding for these programs came from contracts with business and industry. Compared to universities, colleges were more reliant on the latter two funding sources.

A number of respondents and key informants suggested that continuing education programming was perceived as a “revenue-generator” by institutional administrators and that continuing education units were sometimes expected to operate in a “cost-recovery” environment. Furthermore, continuing education programming was perceived as being viewed by institutional

administrators as “marginal” or secondary to formal credit programs, and formal credit programs were perceived to be more consistent with the traditional mission and mandate of universities in particular. One informant viewed the situation this way:

Non-credit programs don't have the clout that credit ones do... there is not a lot of value given to non-credit. It just doesn't have as much weight. So I think that is the challenge. The perception that non-formal adult learning is not essential and it is not tied to the formal economy, usually, so therefore has no worth, or little worth.

Table 2: Sources of Funding for Adult Education Programs (2007–2008)*

	College		University		All	
	Less than 25%	More than 25%	Less than 25%	More than 25%	Less than 25%	More than 25%
Tuition Fees	58.3	41.7	30.8	69.2	39.5	60.5
Prov. Operating Grants	33.3	66.7	66.7	33.3	55.6	44.4
Contracts with Business	71.4	28.6	83.3	16.7	78.0	22.0

*42 respondent institutions provided data for this item.

Programs Offered

The respondent institutions reported that they currently offered a variety of different types of non-formal adult learner programs (see Figure 3). At universities, the top two program types were Professional Development (77%) and Business and Leadership (71%). The types of non-formal adult learner programs most commonly offered by colleges were contract training (73%) and workplace training (63%).

Much of the non-formal adult learner programming at the college level was characterized by key informants as “corporate training,” developed with employers to address training requirements. Of these programs, many were short in duration and specific to the needs of the company contracting the training. Colleges were described by key informants as having particular strengths in partnering with employers to provide workplace-skills training.

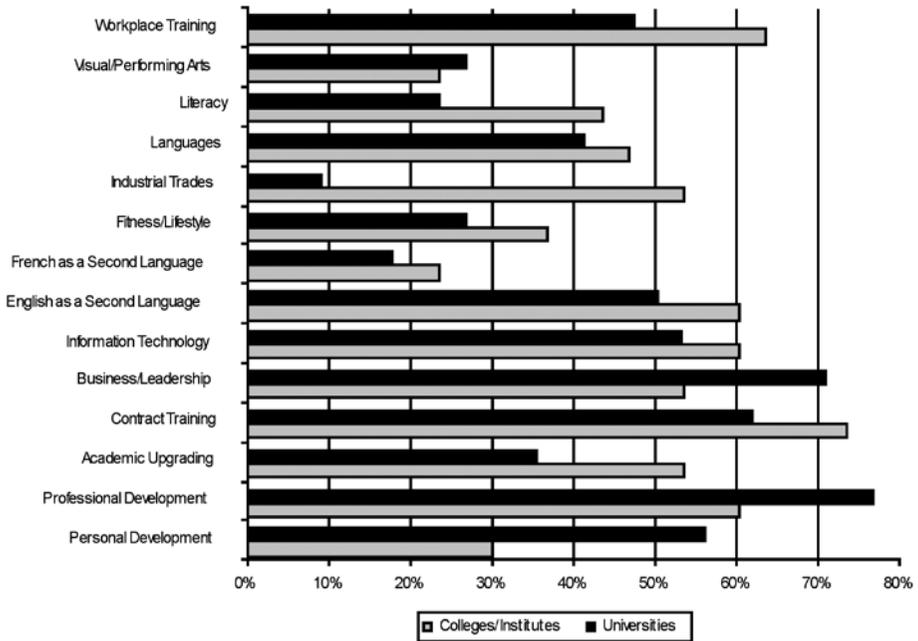


Figure 3: *Types of non-formal adult education programs offered (57 respondent institutions provided data for this item.)*

Best Practices

Institutions used a number of program models and best practices to improve access to and participation in their non-formal programs. The respondents and key informants indicated that these programs tended to be successful when they were developed to meet a recognized need of a specific and targeted audience of adults (e.g., unemployed individuals, older workers). This was often achieved by working closely with partners in the community to develop customized programs that suited the requirements of partners, such as governments, businesses, and not-for-profit organizations. The need for “community outreach,” “collaborative” models for partnerships, and “targeted” programs for community stakeholders were recurring themes in the survey and interview responses.

Another group of best practices that were frequently mentioned were those under the theme of flexibility. Institutions reported utilizing multiple modes of program delivery, such as blended-learning formats that included both face-to-face and online instruction, in order to make programs more easily accessible to adult learners. A number of institutions noted the success

of delivery formats that followed modular and shorter, compressed-delivery models. Programs were sometimes offered with varying durations to provide learners with a choice of course lengths and schedules, and some institutions offered programs at multiple sites, including off campus in communities and in workplaces, to increase learners' accessibility.

Collaborative partnerships between several institutions and/or organizations were also noted to be effective in improving program access and participation. These joint activities included the shared promotion, development, and delivery of programs. Several respondents and key informants advocated for greater collaboration and sharing of information and best practices between universities and colleges involved in the delivery of continuing education programs. As one of them noted:

There is very little connection between universities and colleges in continuing education activity. On the non-credit side, I think universities and colleges tend to see themselves as competitors, and particularly in smaller markets, I wonder is there more opportunity for collaboration between the two education providers and then add that to collaboration with industry.

Barriers to Access

Institutional respondents were asked to identify up to three barriers to accessing non-formal adult learner programs at their institutions. Cost and time were repeatedly cited as the most significant barriers. As one key informant commented:

Cost is always an issue. It is an issue with the population I deal with but I think it is also an issue for others, and being able to fit it into their lives is also a big issue if you are still working.

A number of the respondents indicated that public funding to support the operating costs of non-credit programming was either limited or non-existent. Programs were typically offered on a full cost-recovery basis, which resulted in higher fees for learners, compared to the fees charged for formal programs. Because the cost to individual learners could be high and because student financial support for these programs was limited or unavailable, some adult learners may not have had the financial ability to participate in non-formal programs. This may have been most problematic for adult learners with lower levels of educational attainment who might gain the most from learning opportunities. One key informant noted:

But money is going to be an issue for the individual worker or adult, more generally... And a less educated adult who is trying to upgrade their skills may be in a lower paid job or have lower income to start with. So it is the ones that most need the training, the less educated adult, are the ones who are going to have the least financial capacity to pay for it themselves.

Both institutional and key informants suggested that the responsibilities and “life demands” of adult learners created challenges for scheduling programs in ways that could accommodate their lifestyles and schedules. Many saw the absence of available and/or affordable childcare as a major limiting factor for adult participation in any type of educational program. A number of respondents also highlighted the need for employers to be more supportive of adult education and training. While recognizing the inherent challenges that some employers face by granting increased “time off” for education and training, these respondents believed that greater employer support was needed to facilitate increased participation.

Many institutional respondents identified space limitations and distance considerations as other barriers to accessing non-formal adult learner programs. A number of them noted that there was limited physical space available for these programs within their facilities; some indicated that formal education programs received priority for space allocation. At some colleges and universities, particularly those located in rural and remote communities, geography and distance to travel to campus sometimes limited easy access to programs.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the survey results indicated that post-secondary institutions’ investments in non-formal adult learner programming had trended upward over the past decade. The primary sources of funding for these programs were tuition fees, provincial operating grants, and contracts with the private sector. Colleges were more reliant on provincial operating grants and private-sector contracts, whereas universities were somewhat more reliant on tuition fees. Taken as a whole, post-secondary institutions were most reliant on tuition-fee revenues. This heavy reliance, in comparison with other funding sources, was consistent with the suggestion from the survey respondents, interview respondents, and others (e.g., McLean, 2008; Selman, 2005) that continuing education units in many post-secondary institutions were operated in accordance with a revenue generation, or cost-recovery, entrepreneurial model.

Compared to universities, colleges reported larger average annual institutional expenditures on non-formal adult learning programs and appeared to enrol proportionally larger numbers of adult learners. These findings appear to support the Canadian Council on Learning’s (2008) assertion that “community colleges form the primary vehicle for adult education and worker training” in Canada (p. 111). Colleges also tend to be more decentralized and geographically dispersed among smaller communities (Frenette, 2003), as well as play a greater role in academic remediation and the provision of

basic literacy and upgrading programs and be more likely to attract older adult learners seeking to complete high school-equivalency requirements.

Many of the themes that emerged from the survey findings supported Schuetze's (2005) contention that effective lifelong learning systems should not only incorporate policies and practices that accommodate adults' work and family responsibilities but also allow time off for learning, fully or partially sponsor training, provide income support during training, and offer a greater choice of learning approaches. Echoing the findings of others (CCL, 2008; Peters, 2004), our study findings indicated that costs were a significant barrier to continuing learning for individuals, especially those from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Because the cost to individual learners can be high and financial support for these programs either limited or unavailable, some adult learners will have meagre financial resources to participate in non-credit programs. In terms of increasing access and participation, the study respondents highlighted the need for greater incentives for individuals (e.g., tax incentives) and increased support for disadvantaged learners to enhance basic-skills training (e.g., basic literacy skills). The current financial aid system was viewed as a barrier to participation because of its restrictive eligibility criteria that do not recognize non-formal adult learner programming. Currently, no large-scale financial aid program is specifically tailored to address the needs of adult learners.

Many institutional respondents identified space limitations and geography as barriers to improving access to non-formal adult learner programming. Most of them also indicated that costs were a significant barrier and that public funding to support the operating costs of non-credit college and university programming was either limited or non-existent. Because such programs were often offered on a full cost-recovery basis, the fees paid by learners in those programs were higher than the fees paid by learners in other formal programs.

Our findings also indicated that the profile of non-formal adult education and training should be raised among various constituencies in both the post-secondary education and industry sectors; in addition, basic and essential-skills training that target disadvantaged adult learners surfaced as a key area for future development. Directed subsidies to increase program offerings of this nature across post-secondary institutions emerged as a key policy measure to increase access and participation, as did increased incentives to foster greater employer support and investments in non-formal adult education and training.

Most of the institutions that declined to participate in our survey suggested that they did so because the requested financial and enrolment data were not readily accessible. A key reason for this was that institutions do not compile comprehensive financial data that reflect either adult education

program revenues and expenditures or adult learner enrolments. These enrolment data were not routinely compiled since many institutions did not appear to have mechanisms in place to uniformly “count” the students enrolled in their non-formal program offerings. The delivery of programs and services for adult learners was also sometimes decentralized across the operations of post-secondary institutions, particularly in larger institutions; as such, there was sometimes no detailed, routine, and centralized accounting of adult learner activity. Finally, even if the institutions that declined to participate in our survey had the mechanisms to compile these types of data, a large number of those institutions suggested that they did not have access to the human resources required to produce them.

Sources such as the Adult Educational Training Survey and the National Graduates Survey provide some indication of Canadians’ participation in non-formal adult learner programming at post-secondary institutions; however, the picture these data provide is far from complete. The fundamental data gaps, particularly for institutional-level activity, make trends in this form of education difficult to identify and follow. As observed by the New Brunswick commission on post-secondary education, following its comprehensive review of the province’s post-secondary sector, “The lifeblood of good policy is good information. Good information, in turn, requires accurate data carefully analysed” (New Brunswick, 2007, p. 11). At present we lack the information needed to evaluate the status and performance of this key sector of education, and this continued absence of complete data prohibits an assessment of whether existing adult learner programs can meet the demands of the rapidly changing knowledge-based economy and future labour-market requirements. If this is to be remedied, the results of this study leave no doubt that post-secondary institutions must not only make the collection of clear, consistent, and accessible data on these programs a priority but also possess the resources to make this possible. The changes required are significant in scope and impact and involve the adoption of a standard mechanism that would account for and report both student enrolment activity and the associated financial information. As post-secondary education is a provincial responsibility, this may require leadership at the highest provincial ministerial levels, as well as collaboration across the individual provinces and territories. This constitutes a significant undertaking, considering the competing priorities of the former and the absence of a strong tradition among the latter.

ENDNOTES

1. Within the taxonomy of adult learning, there is an absence of consensus on the meaning of the term “non-formal learning.” As such, the customary meaning and use of the term varies. In this article, we use the term to refer to not-for-credit adult learner programs and services that are organized within post-secondary institutions.
2. There are significant regional variations in how Canadian post-secondary institutions approach, support, and account for non-formal adult learner programs and services, such as continuing education. As a result, survey questions may have been interpreted and answered in different ways by different respondents.

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APPENDIX A

Key Informant Organizations

- Association of Atlantic Universities
 - Canadian Association of University Continuing Education
 - Canadian Council on Learning
 - Canadian Policy Research Networks
 - Colleges Ontario
 - Council of Ministers of Education, Canada
 - Council of Ontario Universities
 - Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission
 - University Presidents' Council of British Columbia
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APPENDIX B

Key Informant Interview Script

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a Key Informant interview as part of a research study examining program models and best practices to improve adult learner participation in non-formal programming offered by Canadian universities and colleges. For the purposes of this interview, “Non-Formal, Organized Not-for-Credit Adult Education Programs” are defined as learning that takes place in a more-or-less structured program, with pre-defined content and learning objectives, including college and university continuing education programs, extension programs, and non-credit distance education programs. Such programs typically encompass courses, workshops, seminars, etc. Examples may include ABE, literacy upgrading, ESL, IT training, and personal and professional development.

1. What is your perception of the current state of non-formal adult learning program delivery across Canadian universities and/or community colleges?
2. What are the challenges faced by adult learners in accessing and participating in non-formal adult learner programs offered through Canadian universities and/or community colleges?
3. What program models and/or best practices have Canadian universities and/or community colleges introduced that have been successful in increasing adult learner participation in non-formal adult learning?
4. How could Canadian universities and/or community colleges play an increased role in responding to the adult learning and training needs of the Canadian workforce?
5. What are the greatest challenges facing Canadian universities and/or community colleges in increasing investments and resource allocations in non-formal adult learning programs?
6. What federal policies and programs have been supportive of Canadian universities and/or community colleges in increasing investments and resource allocations toward non-formal adult learning programming?
7. What provincial policies and programs have been supportive of Canadian universities and/or community colleges in increasing investments and resource allocations toward non-formal adult learning programming?
8. What federal government policy or program areas would be useful in supporting increased investments and resource allocations by Canadian universities and/or community colleges in non-formal adult learning?

BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Dale Kirby is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. He is a co-investigator on a five-year Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) study of student transition to post-secondary education and the workforce.

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Dr. Vernon Curran is the director of Academic Research and Development and an associate professor of Medical Education in the Faculty of Medicine at Memorial University of Newfoundland. He holds a cross-appointment with the Faculty of Education at Memorial and teaches in Adult Education, Post-Secondary Studies, and Health Professional Education programs.

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Ann Hollett is the research coordinator for the Centre for Collaborative Health Professional Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Ann is responsible for the evaluation of inter-professional health education curricula and research projects and has coordinated research in support of primary health-care providers to develop competencies for inter-professional health-care collaboration.

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