

## Environmental Scan Series.13

# Adult Education

At TRU, 46% of all learners are adult students (those aged 25 or older, according to Statistics Canada).<sup>1</sup> Participation rates in adult education is one measure of accessibility in post-secondary education. Adult education empowers non-traditional learners by allowing them to acquire new skills, adapt to a rapidly changing world, and build careers in an increasingly competitive global economy.<sup>2</sup> The average participation rate in formal and/or non-formal education among Canadian adults aged 25 to 64 years was 58% in 2016 (higher than many developed countries around the world).<sup>3,4</sup> This brief environmental scan will define adult education, outline the various types of adult education and the needs of participants, and will discuss the role of adult education in a globalized, knowledge-based economy. Access and recruitment opportunities for post-secondary institutions are also discussed.

### Defining adult education

Although there is no universally-accepted definition of “adult education”, the United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) does provide a working definition: “**Adult education denotes the entire body of the learning process, whether formal, non-formal or informal, whereby persons regarded as adult by their society, develop, enrich, and improve their knowledge and capabilities for living and working.**”<sup>2,5,6,7,8</sup> The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) has adopted the definition of adult education from UNESCO to develop and to evaluate its adult education policy and progress.<sup>9,10</sup>

### Navigating a global knowledge-based economy

To stay competitive in the global market, workers have to up-skill and re-skill throughout their careers.<sup>11</sup> This is particularly important for adults who may already be in the workforce, and are affected by demands for up-skilling and re-skilling driven by globalization and Canada’s growing knowledge-based economy.<sup>12</sup>

The globalization of technology and international cooperation has resulted in an integrated world market of commodities, workers, wealth, technology, and information.<sup>10,13</sup> Canada’s growing

## Glossary

**Formal education:** the institutionalized, chronologically graded, and hierarchically structured education system.<sup>21</sup>

**Non-formal education:** organized and systematic; occurs outside the formal education system and does not result in academic credentials. *For example: adult literacy programs, occupational skill training, and community program.*<sup>21</sup>

**Informal education:** the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes, and insights from daily experiences and exposure to various environments.<sup>21</sup>

**Career Starters:** recent graduates seeking additional professional qualifications before entering the workforce.<sup>14</sup>

**Careers Changers:** mid-career adults seeking new professional qualifications to move into new fields.<sup>14</sup>

**Career Advancers:** mid-career professionals seeking new qualifications for promotion or raise.<sup>14</sup>

**Career Crossers:** mid-career professionals seeking cross training to advance in current fields.<sup>14</sup>

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knowledge-based economy (e.g. BC's growing technology sector, as described in [Environmental Scan Series.2](#)) is driving constant development, improvement, efficiencies, and economies of scale that shorten the life span of technologies. Technological obsolescence comes more quickly now than ever before. This compels workers to up-skill and re-skill more frequently, and later in life, than previous generations.<sup>12</sup>

### Stages in Adult Learning

Adult learners include a range of current and prospective workers with varied objectives and needs.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is essential for institutions to identify different groups of adult learners, and to understand their unique objectives and needs in order to provide optimal support.

Based on their career objectives, adult learners can be classified into: career starters, career changers, career advancers, and career crossers.<sup>14</sup>

Career starters and career changers pursue adult education for a career transition.<sup>14</sup> They want a change in their career path, and are looking for employment opportunities in a new field.<sup>11</sup> While career starters are recent graduates seeking additional professional qualifications before entering the workforce, career changers are mid-career adults seeking new professional qualifications to move into new fields.<sup>14</sup>

Both recent graduates and mid-career adults have limited time and financial resources; hence, they prefer programs with features like an accelerated format and stackable credentials.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, since they intend to enter into a new field, programs with practical

experience significantly enhance the chance of employment.<sup>14</sup>

Career advancers and career crossers pursue adult education for advancement in their current fields.<sup>14</sup> Flexibility is essential to these learners because they are juggling multiple roles across the domains of family and work.<sup>14</sup> They are interested in programs with professional development opportunities, which will allow them to apply the newly developed skills in their current positions.<sup>14</sup> They will also benefit from a network of professionals who can provide support.<sup>14</sup>

### Adult Education by the Numbers

In Canada, there were 25 million adults (aged 25 or above) in 2016, which accounted for 71% of the total population.<sup>15</sup> Older age-groups will increase substantially in the Thompson Rivers 'College Region' over the next several years (see [Environmental Scan Series. 4](#)). While the 25 to 39 aged cohort is projected to grow by over 7,000 people by 2027, the greatest increase will come from those aged 40 to 54. The local 40 to 54 age group is projected to increase by one-fifth of its current population by 2027 (the end of the projection period).<sup>15</sup> This growth will account for an increase of nearly 15,000 individuals in the Thompson Rivers region.<sup>15</sup>

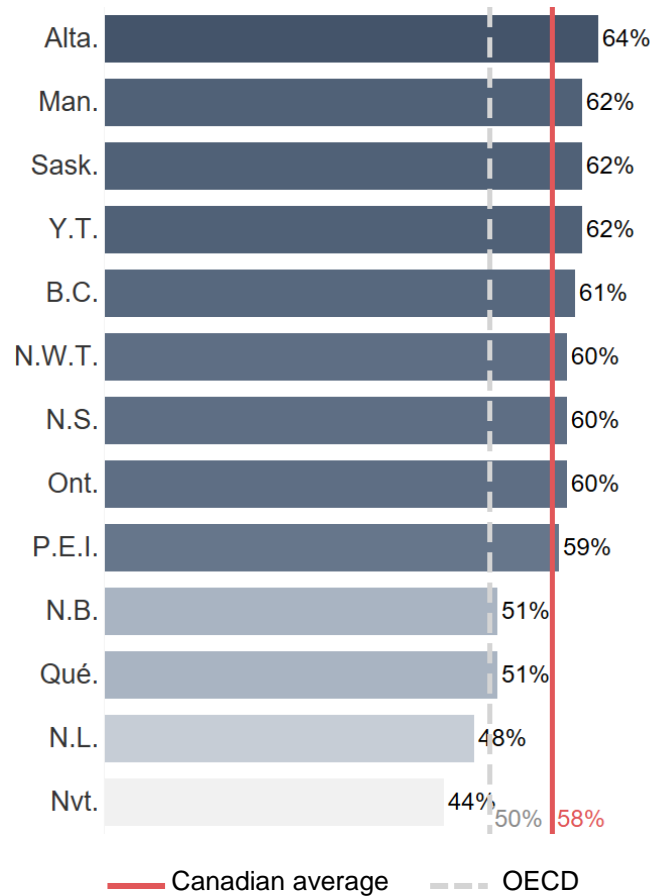
Fifty-eight percent (58%) of Canadian adults participated in formal and/or non-formal education, the majority of whom (44%) participated in non-formal education only.<sup>16</sup> This was higher than the 50% average adult participation rate in formal or non-formal education in Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations.<sup>16</sup> Those who already have post-secondary education are more likely to participate in additional non-formal education and to have

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those opportunities sponsored by their employers.<sup>4</sup>

Provincially, the average participation rate in formal and/or non-formal education ranged from 44% in Nunavut to 64% in Alberta.<sup>16</sup> British Columbia’s average participation rate was higher than the national average (Figure 1).<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 1.** Participation rate in formal and/or non-formal education of 25 to 64 year-olds, by Canadian provinces and territories.

Nearly two-thirds (61%) of British Columbia adults participated in formal and/or non-formal education, with the majority (44%) participating in non-formal education only.<sup>16</sup>

**Support for adult learners**

The most commonly cited barrier to participation in adult education was being too busy at work, ranging from 25% in Quebec to 42% in the Yukon.<sup>16</sup> In British Columbia, it was the same as the national average at 30%.<sup>16</sup>

The second most commonly cited barrier to participation in formal and/or non-formal education was cost.<sup>16</sup> It was 22% in British Columbia, which was the highest rate in the country.<sup>16</sup>

Family responsibilities were the third most commonly cited barrier to participation in adult

**Barriers to Accessing Education**

1. Time away from work
2. Cost
3. Family commitments

education.<sup>16</sup> The rate was 18% in British Columbia, which was the second-highest in the country.<sup>16</sup>

It is crucial for institutions to support adults in overcoming these barriers so that they can remain competitive in the labour market.

An example of such support is offering on-demand learning options.<sup>17</sup> Adult learners are juggling multiple roles across the domains of family, work, and school. Therefore, flexibility is essential to adult learners ([See Environmental Scan Series. 4](#)). However, flexibility is not just about continuing registration and a self-paced online delivery model. Flexibility can also mean on-demand learning in courses that are organized in stackable modules with the option to complete a module for specific topic or skill.<sup>17</sup> Learners can combine modules to build

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customized courses and earn certificates, micro-credentials, badges, etc. for their career objectives.<sup>18</sup> MicroBachelors are now offered by EdX (a top deliverer in the MOOC industry), following the introduction of MicroMasters in 2015.<sup>19</sup> Modularized learning allows students to achieve specific learning goals in a relatively short period, which is ideal for the working professional who may be short on time and money, and who many be dividing their energy among many other commitments.

Creative payment options are another example of supporting access for adult learners. To help adult learners cope with the financial stress of going back to school, some institutions have adopted a Coursera-type (the MOOC provider) payment model.<sup>20</sup> In this model, adult learners can pay for a single course, or a monthly subscription to a Specialization Certificate until they complete it.<sup>20</sup> Another example comes from the Online Learn on Demand program from the Kentucky Community & Technical College System.<sup>17</sup> Adult learners in the program can choose to pay for an entire course upfront with a discount, or they can choose to pay for a single module for only a fraction of full course cost.<sup>17</sup>

#### Recruitment Opportunities

While a major post-secondary focus for recruitment is high school graduates, attention to adult learners will bolster domestic student enrolments for post-secondary institutions. Although the count of grade 12 students in school district 73 Kamloops/Thompson will increase over the next several years, by 2027 it will still be 9% lower than it was in 2012.<sup>22</sup> Across the province, the count of grade 12 students will increase only slightly compared to

this year, and will also not recover to 2012 levels.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, this brief scan has demonstrated a growing need to provide adult education opportunities to support an aging population that works in a globalized, knowledge-based economy; one that requires successful employees to embrace life-long learning, up-skilling and retraining opportunities. In British Columbia, 36% of working-age adults had only a high school or below high school level of education.<sup>23</sup> This represents approximately 912 thousand potential post-secondary learners that could benefit from flexible, accessible learning options.

#### Summary

Adult education is the learning process, whether formal, non-formal, or informal, that helps adults to improve their knowledge and capabilities for living and working. Adult education is particularly important in a knowledge-based global economy. More adult Canadians participate in education than many other developed nations, and changes in Canada's economy and workforce will guide even more Canadians to pursue lifelong learning.

In a knowledge-based global economy, re-skilling and up-skilling are keys to remaining competitive in the labour market. The objective of adult education is to ensure workers can learn, adapt, and have good jobs throughout their working lives in an increasingly competitive global economy.

Over 900,000 working-age British Columbians do not have a post-secondary education, and work duties, family responsibilities, and cost are three major barriers that are preventing them from participating in adult education. Post-

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secondary institutions can increase access and strengthen domestic student recruitment by providing flexible options like on-demand learning, stackable modules, and alternative payment solutions.

#### *Next in the Series*

Upcoming scans will feature the Future of Work (part 3 of 3), sustainability and climate change, and Indigenization in higher education.

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## Sources

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<sup>20</sup> Coursera. (n.d.). [Payments & Subscriptions](#).

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