

Why aren't they calling?

Nonparticipation in Literacy and Upgrading Programs



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Why this research is so important

According to the International Adult Literacy Survey, 38 per cent of Canadians have difficulty with everyday reading and writing tasks.

To address this problem, there has been a dramatic increase during the past 20 years in the level and type of official attention paid to the issue of literacy rates among the adult population in Canada. Since 1995, Canada has had a massive, private-sector awareness campaign, called LEARN, aimed at encouraging adults to return to school to upgrade their basic education.

Despite the increased funding and messages about the importance of increasing literacy skills, only 5 to 10 per cent of eligible adults with low literacy skills ever enrol in literacy programs.

This presents the literacy field with a startling and pressing question: Why, in the face of increasing public policy initiatives and highly visible outreach campaigns, is the majority of people with low literacy skills still reluctant to participate in literacy programs?

Looking for answers

ABC CANADA has been searching for the reasons. In 2001, it published "Patterns of Participation," a study that concentrated on people who had made it to the gateway of literacy or upgrading programs, but had not continued, either because they didn't enrol, or they dropped out after a short time.

With this new research project, "Nonparticipation in Literacy and Upgrading Programs: A National Study," ABC CANADA looks at an important and little-studied group - Canadians without high school diplomas who have never contacted a literacy or upgrading program.

What's different about this study

Most of the research done on participation (or nonparticipation) in formal education programs has focused on individuals who either have dropped out of, or who are currently enrolled in, literacy programs.

Studies looking at nonparticipants who have never attempted to enrol in a literacy or upgrading program, are comparatively few in the literacy field.

Thus, many questions remain unanswered.

Qualitative and quantitative data

"Nonparticipation in Literacy and Upgrading Programs; A National Study" is an attempt to answer some of these questions.

Between October 1999 and January 2000, ABC CANADA interviewed 44 Canadians who had never completed high school. The results of these in-depth interviews comprise Stage One

of the national study, which focuses on the qualitative data. The quotes you see in this summary come from this stage of the research.

Stage Two of the national study, conducted in early 2001, is an extensive telephone survey that concentrates on quantifiable data. Researchers contacted 866 individuals across Canada who have less than high school completion and have never taken a literacy program or attempted to complete their high school diploma. Highlights of the data from Stage Two are included in this summary report.

The central aim of "Non participation in Literacy and Upgrading Programs; A National Study" is to uncover ways to:

- **increase appeal of adult basic education programs,**
- **address the barriers faced by adult learners, and**
- **improve the planning, organization and content of these programs.**

The results will have significant bearing on future policy and program design.

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NONPARTICIPATION IN LITERACY AND UPGRADING PROGRAMS

A National Study

- How many people have thought about taking upgrading since leaving school early?
- Are they aware of local programs?
- Does level of education relate to perceived need for improvement?
- Who is most likely to express an interest in improving basic skills and what are their reasons?
- How does age affect a person's attitude toward further education?
- What kinds of programs do those who have never completed high school prefer?
- How can we increase the appeal of programs for these potential learners?

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Executive Summary

Results and suggestions from the national study, "Nonparticipation in Literacy and Upgrading Programs" conducted by ABC CANADA

Little is known about those who have never tried to upgrade.

Most Canadians do not realize that more than 20 per cent of adults in this country experience serious difficulties with the basic daily skills of reading, writing and math.

During the past two decades, outreach to these individuals has increased dramatically – however, with minimal success. It is estimated that only 5 to 10 per cent of eligible adults have ever enrolled in literacy or upgrading programs, and many of those drop out.

Much research has been conducted on why the number of participants is so small and why they do not succeed, but little is known about the vast number who never even contact a program.

In 2001, ABC CANADA attempted to find out more about this group, what their attitudes are toward basic adult education programs and why they haven't sought help. The results are presented here from a major study of 866 Canadians who never finished high school and have never tried to upgrade.

Who doesn't make it through school?

The participant sample in this study was weighted to represent an accurate cross-section of Canadians who never made it to high school graduation. Of the 866 interviewees:

- Twenty-five per cent are under age 35; another 40 per cent are between 35 and 55.
- Almost a third have grade 8 education or less.
- More than half are employed full or part-time
- Twenty-eight per cent cite French as their first language; 62 per cent, English; 10 per cent, other.

How many have thought about upgrading?

Close to 60 per cent of those interviewed had thought about the idea of taking upgrading or completing their high school diploma. Only 20 per cent think they will actually take a program in the next five years.

Work-related reasons are most frequently cited as reasons for thinking about taking a program, especially among the young. Non work-related educational reasons for taking a program increase with age.

Expectations of enrolling in an upgrading program or finishing a high school diploma are highest for those 18-24 years of age and drop off at about age 50.

Those with the highest needs are more likely to expect to enrol in a program to upgrade or complete their high school diploma, especially those under age 30.

Regardless of need, interviewees were more likely to expect to take an upgrading program, the higher their level of schooling.

Female single parents are more than twice as likely as male parents in households with partners to think they might take an upgrading program or complete a high school diploma in the next five years.

Why haven't they followed through?

Work and family account for more than half of the reasons given by 18 to 29 year olds and those over 65.

Lack of interest is cited most by 18 to 29 year olds (14 per cent) and 50 to 64 year olds (33 per cent).

Family reasons are cited almost 33 per cent of the time by women who have considered, but not taken, an upgrading program. Another 33 per cent of these women cite both work-related and work/family reasons. In contrast, more than 60 per cent of men who have considered but not taken upgrading programs cite work-related reasons or lack of interest.

Concerns about upgrading

When asked what concerns they had about upgrading, answers were very similar among all the groups:

- The two most highly ranked concerns about taking a course are about money/conflict with paid employment, followed by distance of program offered.
- The next most highly ranked set of concerns are program related, including program length, level of difficulty, not being able to work at one's own pace, and relevance of program content.
- The highest cognitive/emotive factor is a general nervousness about taking a program.

Among the exceptions:

- Those who plan to take a program view childcare as very important and are not concerned it might be too late to learn.

- Women are somewhat more concerned than men about money problems and cite cognitive/emotive concerns more often than men.
- Female single parents cite money concerns more than any other group with children in the household. They are also most concerned about the distance of the program.

Preferred programs and locations

Those who state they might take a program in the next five years show strong interest in studying one-on-one with a tutor and small group sessions of 5-10 students. While just under a third are extremely interested in using the Internet to take an upgrading program, an almost equal number are not at all interested in the Internet option.

Among those expecting to take a program, a classroom in a local school, college or university is the preferred venue. All interviewees express a strong dislike for holding upgrading programs in public settings such as coffee shops, restaurants and pubs.

About a third of interviewees who have thought about taking a course are uncomfortable with the idea of their workplace or local church as a program location.

The challenge

The fact that there are a great many people who need help with literacy is not in doubt. The question to be answered is how best to reach and motivate them.

We know that 60 per cent of this study group have considered upgrading; 60 per cent are aware of programs in their communities, and 60 per cent indicate a need for improvement in at least one skill area.

Why then are only 2.0 per cent thinking of taking a course, and what we can do not only to increase this number but ensure they follow through and succeed"?

Suggestions for Action

To Policy Makers

Help remove financial and family barriers to upgrading by:

- **providing ways to mitigate financial problems such as the provision of income replacement programs and offsetting expenses.**
- **providing solutions to family responsibilities that include provision of childcare and eldercare and the potential for participation by families.**

To Employers and Unions

Help remove work-related barriers by:

- **supporting efforts by employees and members to improve their skills and rewarding them for success.**
- **negotiating terms and conditions of employment that make it possible and realistic for employees to engage in upgrading programs.**

To Literacy Field

Help remove cognitive/emotive barriers to upgrading and improve the appeal of programs by:

- **acknowledging the nervousness and anxiety felt by adult learners, suggesting ways to reassure them, and emphasizing success.**
- **dispelling myths and explaining exactly what classes, learning groups, or tutoring are like, who the learners and teachers are, and what kinds of materials are used.**
- **ensuring the provision of one-on-one learning and learning in small 5-10 person groups in classrooms in educational institutions.**

The Statistics

INTERVIEWEE DEMOGRAPHICS

| CATEGORY | % OF CALLERS |
|----------------------------------|--------------|
| Gender | |
| Male | 48 |
| Female | 52 |
| Age | |
| 18-24 | 9 |
| 25-34 | 16 |
| 35-44 | 20 |
| 45-54 | 20 |
| 55-64 | 23 |
| 65-69 | 12 |
| Level of formal education | |
| Grades 0-8 | 29 |
| Grades 9-10 | 36 |
| Grades 11-12 (no diploma) | 35 |
| Community size | |
| Less than 15,000 | 40 |
| 15,000-99,000 | 26 |
| 100,000-499,000 | 13 |
| 500,000+ | 10 |
| Didn't know/didn't answer | 11 |
| Employment status | |
| Full-time employment | 44 |
| Part-time employment | 9 |
| Social assistance/disability/EI | 17 |
| Other income (mainly pension) | 30 |
| Annual household income | |
| Less than \$20,000 | 30 |
| \$20,000-29,999 | 23 |
| \$30,000-39,999 | 18 |
| \$40,000+ | 29 |

Language of greatest fluency

| | |
|---------|----|
| English | 62 |
| French | 28 |
| Other | 10 |

Who leaves school early?

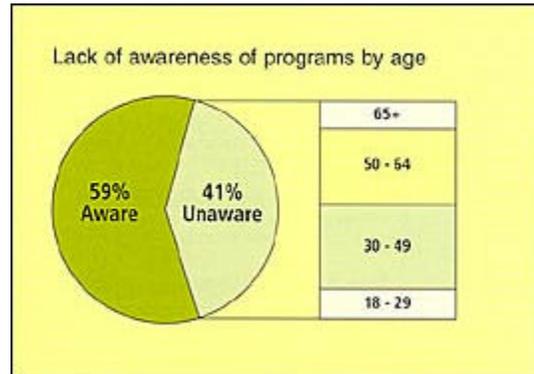
The sample group in this study was chosen to reflect the size of each province's adult population without a high school diploma.

- Of 866 Canadians interviewed, 60 per cent come from Ontario and Quebec, with 30 per cent from the West and 10 per cent from Atlantic Canada.
- The median age of our interviewees is 46, (half are younger than 46; half are older).
- Women slightly outnumber men in the sample. However, among those 50 or older, almost 60 per cent are women. In the 65 plus category, women represent more than 60 per cent of interviewees.
- Educational attainment is strongly related to age. Over half of interviewees under 25 have reached Grade 11 or 12, compared with just over a quarter of those 65 or older.
- The proportion of respondents with only elementary school education increases sharply with age. More than 40 per cent of interviewees age 55 or older have not attended secondary school.
- More than 40 per cent of those interviewed live in centres with a population under 15,000; only 10 per cent live in cities with populations over 500,000.
- Most live with partners, with or without children. One in five live in single person households. Almost 75 per cent of women 50 or older are on their own.

How aware are they of programs?

The majority of interviewees are aware of programs in their communities where people can improve their reading, writing and math skills. There is not a great difference in awareness by age, sex, and education, although younger interviewees (18-29), women, and more educated (grades 11 and partial 12) interviewees tend to be more aware of programs than others.

Age, however, does play a role in awareness of the General Education Diploma. More than 75 per cent of interviewees under 30 are aware of the program, compared with about 30 per cent of those 65 or older.



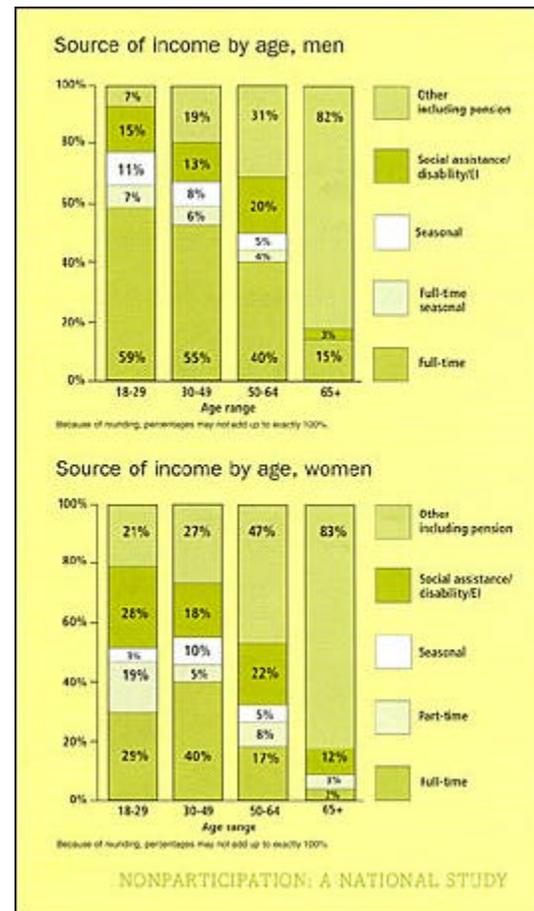
Where do they get their income?

Just over half of interviewees cite employment as their main source of income. Other income sources, mainly pensions, are cited by almost 30 per cent.

Because a substantial proportion of our interviewees is at or beyond retirement age, the overall figures understate the employment rates among those in their economically active years.

Interviewees in two-parent households with children show the highest participation rate in permanent full-time employment at 53 per cent. Single parents have the lowest permanent full-time rate, 2.7 per cent, and are the most reliant on social assistance, 37 per cent.

More than 60 per cent of men 18 to 29 and 70 per cent of those 30 to 49 have permanent full-time jobs. This is almost double the rate for women.

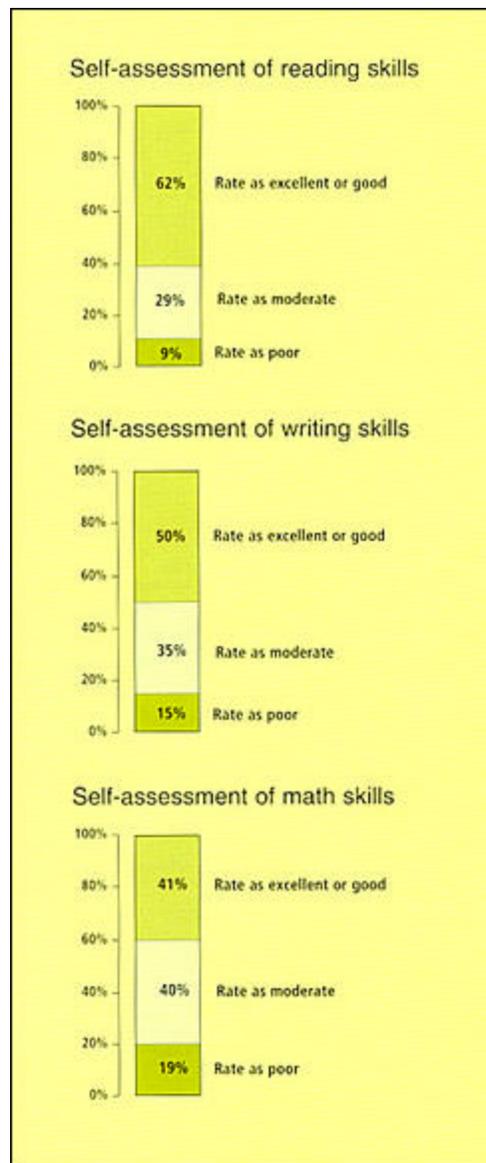


How much do they earn?

More than half of respondents in single person households have incomes under \$20,000. Among those in single person households, 33 per cent of men but only 11 per cent of women have incomes of \$30,000 or more. Over 95 per cent of single mothers have incomes below \$30,000, compared with 61 per cent of men who are single parents. In contrast, almost 50 per cent of respondents in two-parent households with children report household incomes of \$40,000 or more.

LEVELS OF NEED

Who needs upgrading?



Interviewees were asked to rate separately, their reading, writing and mathematics skills as excellent, good, moderate or poor. They were also asked if they ever sought help in any of these areas, from friends, family or co-workers.

While interviewees report considerable confidence in their basic skills, it should be noted that most people identified by the International Adult Literacy Survey as having literacy challenges do not identify themselves as such. Thus the self-assessments of needs shown here may be overly optimistic.

Almost identical proportions of women and men are categorized as having high needs, based on self-assessment. Younger respondents, and particularly those under 25, are less likely to be categorized as high needs than those who are older, particularly those 50 and over.

Overall almost 40 per cent of our sample is included in one or more high needs group.

The impact of years of schooling

Differences in years of formal education do not seem to have a great impact.

Interviewees who left school at or before grade 8 are somewhat more likely to be included in high-need groups for reading or writing.

But even here, those who report high needs are a minority: 16 per cent in the case of reading and 30 per cent in the case of writing.

As for mathematics, formal education seems to make relatively little difference. Overall, just over 25 per cent of study participants report high needs in math.

"I just want to get back to school... I think I would take it more seriously now. You can't do nothing without a grade 12."

—Man age 19, grade 10

FUTURE PLANS

Who is considering upgrading?

Only 25 per cent of respondents think they might take upgrading in the next 5 years, even though 58 per cent have considered doing so at some point since leaving school.

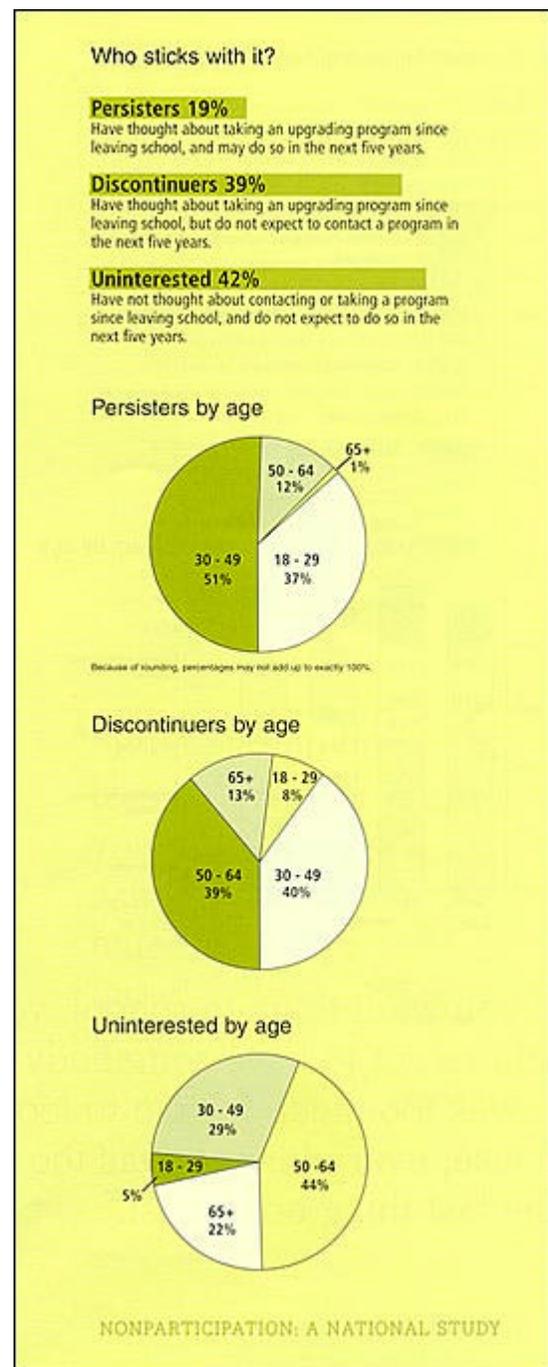
It is important to note that our sample includes people of widely different ages.

It is not meaningful to compare a 50 year old who has avoided upgrading for 30 years with a 20 year old who has done so for only a few years.

In order to distinguish different types of respondents and to make meaningful comparisons, this study has adopted the terms "Persisters," "Discontinuers," and "Uninterested."

Persisters are those who have considered taking a program in the past and still expect to take one in the future. Discontinuers have considered upgrading, but no longer expect to join a program. Those classed as Uninterested have not considered upgrading, and do not expect to do so.

Although interviewees in the 30 to 49 age group represent the majority of Persisters in this study (51 per cent), the 18 to 29 age group has by far the highest proportion of Persisters (over 75 per cent).



What is the influence of high need?

In this study, high needs comprises the group of people who feel that they have one or more weaknesses in basic skills that needs upgrading.

Although knowing how interviewees assess their own skills does not help us to predict whether they have considered upgrading, it does help us to predict whether an interest in upgrading, once aroused, will be sustained.

Among those we have identified as high needs based on self-reports, 66 per cent are Persisters. When a specific objective like entering postsecondary education is added, the proportion of Persisters rises to more than 80 per cent.

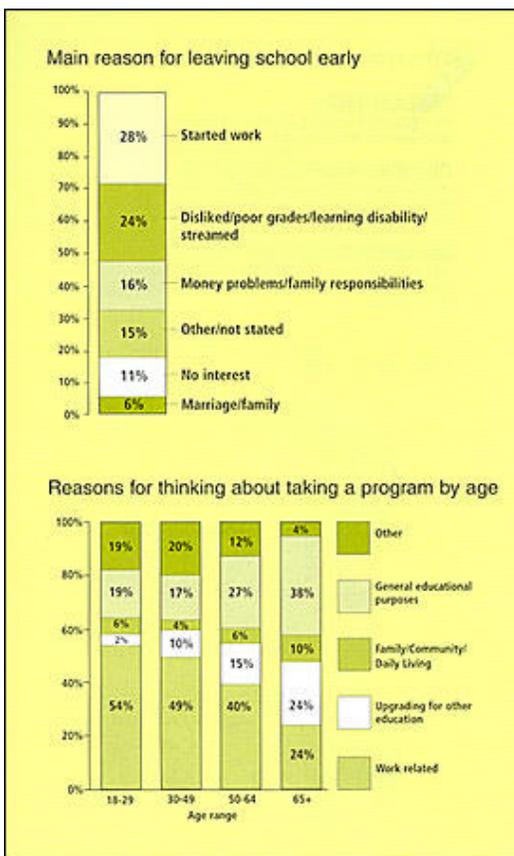
In other words, interviewees acutely aware of weaknesses in basic skills are significantly more likely to have a continuing interest in taking programs.

Likewise, expectations of taking a program seem to be higher for those facing more barriers in terms of lack of family support and risk of poverty.

This is confirmed when looking, by gender and household status, at responses of interviewees who expect to upgrade in the next five years.

So why then have they not enrolled?

MAIN BARRIERS



Reasons for not upgrading

Both interviewees who have considered upgrading and those who have not were asked the reasons why they haven't upgraded.

Among the high needs group, those who have considered upgrading and those who have not both cite socioeconomic/circumstantial challenges.

For those who are not high needs, the situation is different. Respondents who haven't considered a program are more likely to cite lack of interest than those who have thought about upgrading.

Age is also related to the reasons interviewees give for not pursuing a program. Generally, lack of interest is more often cited among older age groups, particularly those 50 to 64. This probably has something to do with the fact that they are

closer to retirement and are not thinking about upgrading for their jobs.

Factors affecting men and women

Men who have considered upgrading but have not followed through cite two main reasons. The first is work-related factors; the second, a lapse of interest. Together these reasons account for over 60 per cent of responses.

For women, work and family-related reasons are the two leading factors, representing over half of responses.

It is worth noting that women in all age groups identify family responsibilities as a factor: 35 per cent of those under 30; 29 per cent of those 30 to 49; 22 per cent of those 50 to 64; and 30 per cent of those 65 and older.

"If you want to go to school; you've got to have money, you've got to have somebody look after your kids. It was too much for me to look after the kids and the house, everything. It was too much, and school was the last thing on my list."

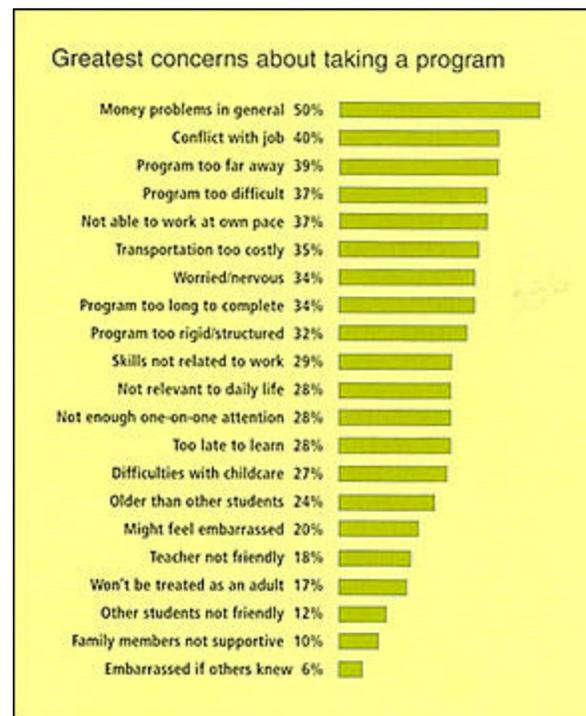
—Woman age 39, grade 10

MAJOR CONCERNS

Concerns about upgrading programs

All interviewees were asked to describe their concerns about taking a program. The two most highly ranked concerns for each group are socioeconomic: money problems in general, and concern that taking an upgrading program might conflict with paid employment.

While this study shows that concerns about taking a program are very similar among the various groups interviewed, some interesting differences do appear:



- For those who anticipate taking a program, access to childcare is an important concern with 40 per cent of respondents rating it high.
- Those under 30 are very concerned about whether taking upgrading will conflict with their jobs.
- Among those who have thought about a program but don't anticipate taking one, more than a third report major concerns that it might be too late for them to learn.
- Women are more concerned than men about feeling nervous, not getting enough attention, being older than other students, finding friendly teachers and students, and not being treated as adults.
- While all groups cite money problems as a leading concern, female single parents rate it at the top as an extreme concern. This group also has exceptionally high concerns about the program being too far away.

What program settings would they prefer?

The top two choices of interviewees who expect to take an upgrading program in the next five years are small classroom settings with 5-10 students and one-on-one tutoring. Their preferred venue is a classroom in a local school, college or university.

Discontinuers show less interest overall in the formats presented, however they do demonstrate a clear preference for small group sessions over one-on-one tutoring. They are also much less oriented to new distance education formats – either television or Internet.

Both Persisters and Discontinuers strongly indicate that they would not be comfortable using a coffee shop, restaurant or pub as the locale for a course. Workplace programs based onsite are also unpopular, though to a lesser extent.

"Some people have said to me, 'Well, how come you didn't go back to school?' I say because I hated school. I actually hated it. It wasn't a nice experience.

—Woman age 37, grade 6

S u g g e s t i o n s f o r A c t i o n

"Nonparticipation in Literacy and Upgrading Programs: A National Study" has uncovered ways of increasing appeal and improving future policy and practice relating to Canadian adult basic education.

To policy makers for action

1. Strengthen outreach to potential learners by providing solutions to the family and financial problems that concern them.
2. Provide accessible, high quality childcare for adult learners who have small children, and eldercare for those with these responsibilities. Services may be onsite where feasible or addressed by bursaries to cover the expense of care. Where necessary, as in small communities, facilitate cooperation among potential learners with similar family responsibilities.
3. Mitigate the financial problems associated with upgrading either with some form of income supplement, or by offsetting learners' expenses, such as transportation, meals, tuition and materials.

To employers and unions for action

1. Show support for any efforts by employees and members to improve their skills. Reward them for successfully completing upgrading programs with salary increases, promotions, increased responsibility and further opportunities for upgrading.
2. Negotiate terms and conditions of employment that make it possible and realistic for employees to engage in upgrading programs, such as paid time off and payment of costs associated with the program.

To the literacy field for action

1. Ensure that communication with potential learners addresses their feelings and fears:
 - a) Acknowledge that many people are uncertain or nervous about upgrading and reassure them they will soon feel comfortable.
 - b) Explain that adult education teachers have sensitivity in dealing with adults who have been away from school for a long time.
 - c) Acknowledge the challenges inherent in adult learning, such as conflicting

responsibilities and fear of failing. Suggest that having met life's challenges to date, they can meet these new ones, too

2. Address program/policy-related factors that are of concern to potential learners:
 - a) Use images and concepts that dispel the myth that adult learning is similar to early schooling. Show that the classroom might be as simple as group of people sitting around a table, or a pair working together at a desk.
 - b) Explain exactly what classes, learning groups, or tutoring are like, who the learners and teachers are, and what kinds of materials are used.
 - c) Make it clear that most programs don't mix adults with children or teenagers.
 - d) Reinforce that upgrading is for adults of all ages.
 - e) Offer information about the ability of older people to take in new information.
 - f) Show that programs are for people "just like you" – people who didn't have the opportunity to go further in school, didn't get the help they needed, were bored in school, or were made to feel they weren't smart in school.

3. Emphasize success:
 - a) Suggest that people who consider adult learning are smart for wanting to invest in themselves and their futures.
 - b) Show success stories of real people who took part in adult learning.
 - c) Develop a student "speaker's bureau" to help in community outreach.
 - d) Present learning and upgrading as an important step in providing opportunities and achieving one's dreams.

4. Highlight the variety and flexibility of programs:
 - a) Participants may learn one-on-one with a tutor, in a small group, on the Internet with help from a tutor, or as part of a larger class.
 - b) Adult learners have more control over their learning environment than they did as children in school. They don't have to sit in a chair for hours on end and can leave the classroom at their own discretion.

- c) Programs aren't only for people with high needs. Adults can learn to write a resume and business letter, or learn to use a computer to send e-mail.
 - d) Adult learners don't have to pick up their schooling where they left off. Assessment of adult skills is not usually based on a grade level, and learners often work toward goals they set for themselves.
 - e) Programs are of differing lengths and most allow people to set their own pace or stop and start when they need to.
5. Keep adult education programs flexible and offer as wide a range of formats and locations as possible.

How the study was conducted

"Nonparticipation in Literacy and Upgrading Programs: A National Study" set out to interview a significant number of individuals from across Canada between the ages of 18 and 69 who had not finished their secondary education, and uncover what their attitudes, perceptions and preferences are regarding upgrading and adult education.

The central aim is to uncover ways to increase appeal and improve programming by investigating nonparticipants' awareness and perceptions of, and preferences and motivations for, joining adult basic education programs.

Two-part study

The study was performed in two stages. The first stage involved interviewing 44 individuals in 12 provinces who had not completed high school or pursued upgrading.

These interviewees were encouraged to talk about their experiences and why they had not contacted an upgrading or literacy program. The quotes used in this summary come from these interviews.

Stage Two of the study was done on a much larger scale and included 866 telephone survey participants across Canada.

The survey questionnaire was designed to provide a comprehensive profile of individuals who left school early and of their reasons for not pursuing supplementary education or skills upgrades.

The data was weighted for age, gender, education level, and province, based on Statistics Canada data of Canadians who have not completed high school.

The authors and timing of the study

The data for "Nonparticipation in Literacy and Upgrading Programs: A National Study" was collected between October 1999 and early 2001. Its authors are Ellen Long, Leanne Taylor, Doug Hart, Helen Breslauer, and Chris Slosser.

"I always wanted to go back to school, but I always had a hard time in school.... I didn't want to have a hard time again."

—Woman age 51, grade 6

"I thought of some type of program... to better myself somehow, to bring my education up to a level where I could go out into the community and sit or stand beside other people that have an education, and be at the same level with them."

—Man age 50, grade 9



ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation is a joint initiative of business, labour, education and government, supporting the development of an educated and adaptable workforce through the fostering of a lifelong learning culture.

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