

PROJECT SYNOPSIS AND SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



EXPLORING LEARNER PATHWAYS

Meeting at the LBS / ESL Intersections

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Cover image:

Literacy and Basic Skills class students from the Labour Education Centre working on their writing skills - <http://www.laboureducation.org>

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PROJECT SYNOPSIS AND SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy's (MTML's) ***Exploring Learning Pathways: Meeting at the LBS/ESL Intersections*** project researched the learning pathways and needs of Anglophone-stream low-level Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) learners whose mother tongue or primary language is other than English. The project sought to contribute valuable front-line information and insights that aim to fortify a vital adult education priority identified by all three Ontario 'learning ministries'¹ (Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (TCU); Ministry of Education (EDU) and Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (MCI)), namely, strengthening the coordination of services across the education and training programs serving adult learners in the province.

The project focused primarily on second-/additional-language² learners currently in Toronto and York Region LBS programs, some of whom have previously attended English language training classes within the federally-funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program and/or attended MCI-funded English as a Second Language (ESL) non-credit classes or EDU-funded ESL credit classes.

The project's six objectives were to:

- Document assessment, referral and placement practices and challenges
- Explore the particular needs of second language learners and how they are met within LBS programs and other programs
- Document the factors that support learning and learner transitions for this group
- Develop profiles of second language learners and how these may relate to particular pathways
- Document gaps in service
- Document promising practices and possible models

All project activities addressed aimed to fulfill the following key project outcomes:

- Validating learner pathways and enhancing the knowledge of key transition points along the pathways
- Improving the coordination of services between LBS, ESL (non-credit and credit) and LINC programs in Toronto and York Region
- Building/strengthening relationships between LBS, ESL and LINC programs to ensure smoother transitions for adult learners

1 Ontario - The Learning Ministries, Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Initiative, Communiqué, vol. 2, no. 1 (May 2010), 1.

2 Many immigrants may already speak more than one language, and English may be their third or fourth language. To avoid the laborious repetition of second-/additional-language learner of English, this report will employ the phrase "second-language learner" which aligns with the use of the acronym ESL used by language training programs in Ontario. [Note: Several countries do employ the term English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)].

The various learning pathways of second-language learners with LBS needs warranted a detailed exploration that could tease out the particular needs of this learner group. To accomplish this, project researchers ventured into the front lines – a space where LBS teachers/tutors, assessors and the learners themselves helped to answer a basic, yet involved two-pronged question:

What is working and what isn't working when it comes to responding to the learning and transition needs of the LBS learner with ongoing ESL issues?

Before heading out to the front lines, the researcher reviewed literature pertaining to adult education reviews and roundtable discussions in the province and across Canada, pathways approaches, adult ESL literacy research, second language acquisition theories, demographic trends in Toronto and York Region, learner identity, acculturation processes, effective learner transitions, assessment practices across the ministries, relationship-building and collaboration theories, local immigration partnership documents, literacy rates in Canada, and non-academic outcomes. Program guidelines, education catalogues, curriculum framework documents and presentation slides/documents pertaining to changes and transformations within adult education programs across the ministries (MCI, EDU, CIC, and TCU) were also consulted. The researchers also attended local and provincial TESL conferences in order to gain a better understanding of language training initiatives that are on the horizon. This extensive review provided the foundation for the discussion paper/collaboration tool unveiled at the forum, and was used to inform all aspects of the final report.

The project relied primarily on qualitative research tools – interviews, focus groups, and online surveys – that helped to illuminate the experiences of learners who grapple with English language acquisition and literacy development, either separately or concurrently, as they move along their learning pathways. The observations, experiences, and insights of teachers, tutors and assessors were also elicited so as to build a greater understanding of this learner group as viewed by those who inhabit their learning and assessment spaces – the intake office, the assessment room, the classroom, the exit interview area and even the hallways.

In addition to drawing out data (both quantitative and qualitative) about the programs, the learners, assessment and referral practices, and transition points along the learner pathways, a great deal of effort on the part of the researchers was put into information sharing and relationship building between LBS, ESL (credit and non-credit) and LINC programs.

The ***Exploring Learner Pathways: Meeting at the LBS/ESL Intersections*** culminated in a 1-Day Forum where highlights from the consultations and focus groups were presented to 56 attendees from across the programs. Among the attendees were teachers, program managers, assessors (from LBS, ESL and LINC programs), government representatives from the three Ontario education ministries (TCU, MCI, and EDU) and from the federal ministry that oversees the LINC program – Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). Those in attendance spent the afternoon strengthening their understanding of each other's programs and partaking in enriching dialogue and activities. These activities targeted the following issues:

- Participants' understanding of the term 'ESL Literacy' and the 'grey area' low-level literacy learner
- The challenge of keeping up with diversity and diverse needs in Toronto and York Region
- The components necessary for successful transitions
- Effective screening, advising and referral practices
- The learner pathways and profiles encountered in our programs
- How to best approach information sharing; and some points of commonality – 'intersection points' – between ESL and LBS programs
- Meeting at the intersection points of LBS and ESL programs in order to examine program challenges and complexities

A discussion paper/relationship building tool titled ***Embarking on a Collaborative Exploration of Adult Learner Pathways: A Tool for Building both Relationships and Understanding across Programs and Services*** was also unveiled at the forum. The tool contains information about:

- The inter-ministerial vision of service coordination
- New initiatives, transformation, and curriculum frameworks within Employment Ontario programs and Language Training
- An approach to relationship building: Intersections and Connections – Dialogues of Discovery
- A snapshot of literacy and language training programs
- Brief overview of the Canadian Language Benchmarks and the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)
- Adult learning pathways and the need for collaboration

This discussion paper/forum 'tool' document can be accessed on the project's website at <http://learnerpathways.wordpress.com>. It also includes useful website links and helpful 'discussion prompts' that can be used by service providers facilitate relationship-building opportunities with other programs and solidify understanding of other program offerings and eligibility criteria.

A FRONT-LINE FOCUS

Learner Focus Groups

A major component of the ***Exploring Learner Pathways: Meeting at the LBS/ESL Intersections*** project involved a front-line exploration of the learning pathways of adults who speak English as their second or additional language who are attending LBS Anglophone stream programs in Toronto and York Region (many of whom had previously attended LINC or ESL programs). An initial review of immigration figures and trends in both geographic areas provided a statistical illustration of the evolving and expanding demographic ‘superdiversity’ therein. The learner focus groups, however, provided a stunning snapshot of how the wealth of diversity in York Region and Toronto is also mirrored within LBS programs in York Region and Toronto – the 74 LBS learners who participated in the focus group sessions hailed from 40 different countries and spoke 40 different languages. Beyond linguistic and cultural diversity, however, the focus group discussions revealed that within today’s LBS programs there has been an evolution in the types of learners that are found there and that this evolution brings with it a set of new realities and considerations for programs and policymakers as well.

In addition to the Canadian-born literacy learners who have traditionally benefitted from literacy and upgrading programs, the research revealed that there are several profiles of learners across the LBS program sectors that are a part of a learner base of individuals who speak English as second or additional language. These second/additional language learners include:

- Displaced workers
- Settled immigrants
- Generation 1.5 learners³ – learners who arrived in Canada as children or adolescents
- Newcomers with no Canadian experience

The LBS learners who speak English as a second language and who participated in the focus group identified a number of needs – academic and other – and conveyed how they envision these needs could best be met in their adult learning journey. These needs include:

- The need to work specifically on reading and writing, math upgrading, computer instruction
- The need for a supportive environment and manageable learning pace
- The need for targeted and goal-oriented learning
- The need for strict classroom structures and protocols, combined with concrete tools that regularly measure progress
- The need to integrate into Canadian society and feel part of the mainstream (for settled immigrants/citizens, this may include the need not to feel like a newcomer in the classroom)

³ An emerging profile identified in all three LBS sectors (community-based; school board; and college sectors)

- The need to feel challenged and feel that one is moving towards something concrete that links to what is valued in the 'real world'
- The need for clear information with respect to learning options, programs, and varying level matrices - learners find navigating the program options confusing
- The need for a wide range of supports (financial, housing, childcare, transportation, and tutoring supports)

Although the above learner needs articulated by the 74 focus group participants may not be conclusive, they are indicative of the complexity of needs that second language learners bring to LBS programs (and to other adult education programs, too) – these include pedagogical needs, integration and acculturation needs, psychosocial needs linked to identity and social capital, and the need to feel that they are learning things that will allow them to contribute to their families and to Canadian society and become socioeconomically mobile within that society.

Learner profiles and pathways were also extracted from the focus groups and 12 'learner portraits' are showcased in this report. These portraits provide rich, intimate and nuanced summaries of learning journeys, which detail learner motivations, transitions, successes and challenges.

Other data that surfaced from learner focus groups are:

- Learners who have attended LINC or ESL courses may mistakenly consider their language learning to be complete, so they no longer think they need language training and check off the ESL learning as complete – the 'checkmark phenomenon'
- Most adult learners find their programs through word of mouth (primarily through family and friends)

LBS Teacher/Tutor Focus Groups

The 18 LBS practitioners who participated in the project's focus group sessions reported that, initially, many of the ESL background LBS learners view their literacy/upgrading classes as extensions of their ESL classes; however, in time they come to realize the differences between LBS and ESL programs. Practitioners also stressed the ESL/literacy learners benefit from the transition-oriented focus and embrace any and all information related to workplace culture and workplace vocabulary. It was also noted that learners often view LBS as an 'immersion experience' – the chance to be learning alongside native speakers of English and to part of a supportive community that includes Canadians as well as immigrants.

Teachers and tutors did draw attention to the fact that, in addition to their literacy and upgrading needs, these learners do have ongoing ESL needs that require tending to – vocabulary development; pronunciation needs; writing issues and grammar clarifications. Some LBS practitioners felt challenged by these issues and others reported quickly addressing grammar questions and then returning back to the program's LBS focus. Most teachers felt that even

though their learners did have strong spoken English, they could still benefit from more opportunities to practise speaking. Several lamented that the only time some learners may speak English is in their classroom and never outside in their daily lives.

LBS practitioners and college upgrading instructors described the LBS learner who speaks English as a second/additional language as having a different emotional profile than Canadian-born learners in the classroom. They indicated that these learners are motivated, work hard and are frustrated when they do not move ahead as quickly as they would like to. This learning group often possesses a metalinguistic awareness and many have learned how to learn. Some learners are from war-torn countries and have experienced trauma that affects their learning, but many have stronger supports in their communities than do their Canadian-born LBS classmates. Some of the more challenging learners in this group have English that is fossilized and effecting any changes in their English is a challenge.

Practitioners did voice concerns about Canadian-born program participants sometimes feeling 'ostracized' when the class had many second language learners, but also shared examples of how mixed learner groups also resulted in benefits for all learners.

All practitioners did stress that it was much harder to diagnose learning disabilities (LDs) in LBS learners who speak English as a second language because it is difficult to distinguish whether gaps exist as a result of language acquisitions or LD issues.

Assessors focus groups

The 9 LBS assessors who participated in the focus groups echoed practitioner concerns about distinguishing language issues from learning disabilities. Most stated that although they had a general understanding about language training options, they felt they did not know how to properly refer individuals to the appropriate ESL programs – particularly those individuals who are professionals or insist they have already attended LINC or ESL programs.

These LBS assessors also mentioned that even learners who have completed certain credentials or attained a number of credits (e.g. adult credits or OSSD) find that gaps persist between the credentials and their skill levels. This causes considerable frustration for learners who feel they have caught up, only to learn upon assessment that they are not ready to move on to their next step.

When adults were not an appropriate fit for their programs assessors relied on program catalogues and their own folder containing program options they had researched. Paramount to effective referrals are the relationships LBS assessors have built with other programs.

Assessment Practices and Appropriate Referrals

Complementing the assessor focus group is the data that was collected through the project's online LBS assessor survey and MTML's Literacy Access Network (LAN) telephone hotline

case studies. The majority of the 24 survey respondents indicated that, in addition to the placement assessment piece, they employed probing questions during the intake interview and their experience as assessors to holistically determine whether adults who speak English as a second/additional language are a good fit for the LBS program. They gave examples of effective screening questions that help determine whether the client would benefit from being placed in the LBS program or would do better in a language program or adult credit course.

MTML's LAN hotline also lent valuable insights as to the benefits of probing the caller for information that helps direct the individual to the appropriate program. Case studies cited by the LAN line operator further informed the project and added to the list of screening questions that assessors provided in the online survey.

The majority of respondents also indicated they would like more information on language training options in order to develop a solid understanding of them, thus informing their referral practices in order to better direct learners to the appropriate language training and/or to CLARS assessment centre.

RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING – LEARNING ABOUT EACH OTHER AS WE CONNECT

The relationship-building component of this project took place in the midst of major transformations and impending new initiatives⁴ within the various adult education programs serving adult learners with both ESL and literacy needs (e.g. CLARS, OALCF, centralized databases [EOIS-CaMS and HARTs], etc). Oddly enough, the notion of change acted as a catalyst for dialogue and discussion. Behind many of the changes lay the key principles that inform Ontario's adult education programs as outlined in the 2005 Ontario Learns report, namely accessibility for and inclusion of all adults; coordination and integration between and among programs; innovation and flexibility in meeting learner and community needs; accountability and effectiveness in the use of public resources and faster integration of new Canadians into the economy. Coming together and understanding that all adult education and training programs in the province are influenced by a guiding vision comprised of these principles made for lively and engaged dialogue.

Sharing the objectives of this project with ESL, LINC, and adult credit managers and front-line staff, while at the same time asking them about their top-of-mind issues started to lay the foundations for relationship building across the programs. Misinformation regarding each other's programs was also corrected and partial information was clarified; there seemed to be an appetite for understanding what each program could offer adults who are speakers of English as a second or additional language. The project's 1-day forum tapped in to this appetite for cross-program dialoguing and information sharing.

⁴ For a comprehensive look at these initiatives and transformations you can consult the relationship building tool annexed to this report or posted on our project website at <http://learnerpathways.wordpress.com>.

SUPPORTING SMOOTHER TRANSITIONS

Ensuring smooth transitions for learners with both ESL and literacy needs was a key discussion point in the focus group sessions, during the stakeholder interviews and in the course of the 1-day forum. There seemed to be a consensus that a holistic understanding of adult education options on the part of learners and service providers could facilitate well-timed learner transitions. The following were considered to be factors that supported/could support learner transitions:

- Ensuring regular communication/meetings take place with next-step programs (something many admitted there was too little of), especially if programs are co-located or are within a learning hub setting
- Including a formal orientation piece at the start of a new program helps clarify the program's objectives and expectations, allowing the learner to understand how these may or may not fit with his/her goals and learning expectations
- Visiting each other's programs; having representatives from next-step programs come in and speak to learners
- Explicitly making learners aware of the time and commitment demands of their next step – helping learners have a realistic sense of what comes next
- Devoting more time to bridging learners to the next step, thus effecting a 'warm handover'
- Recognizing that learning pathways are not necessarily linear for adult learners – making room within the pathways construct to allow for unforeseen interruptions along the learning journey or for changes in goals.
- Finding ways of gently easing the learner to the next step, perhaps having a mechanism in place for learners struggling with the transition, particularly if the learning experience differs greatly from the processes of academic institutions in the learner's country of origin – e.g. allowing learners to 'come back' periodically for support in a comfortable setting; having access to an academic counselling that explicitly addresses transition challenges; introducing time management workshops with respect to new academic demands.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This project's front-line exploration revealed that the learning pathways of adults who have both language and literacy needs are complex and shaped by a multitude of factors. Clear and accessible information regarding adult education and training options – for both learners and service providers – assists in the navigation of learner pathways and helps to strengthen service coordination which is so crucial to an integrated adult education system that is envisioned for Ontario.

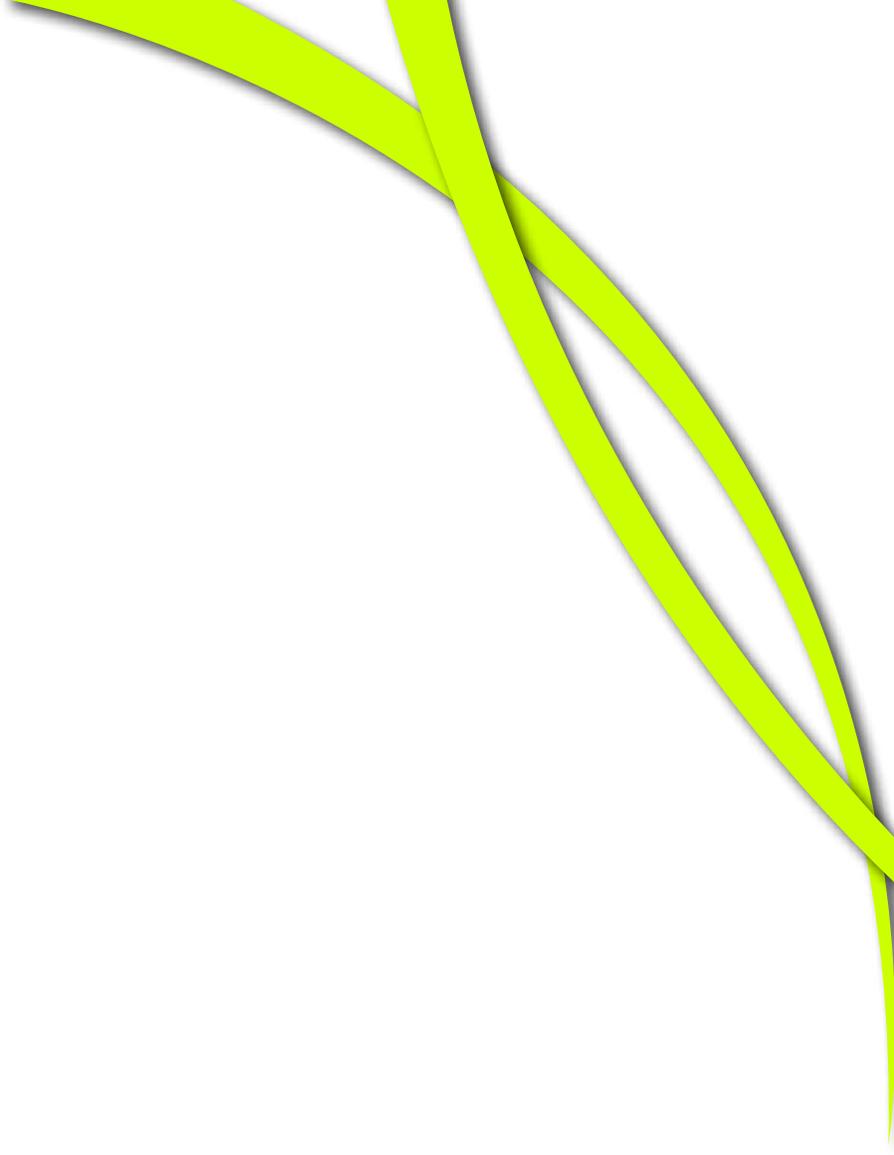
Learner pathways are rendered far more complex as the diversity of learners in Toronto and York Region who speak English as their second/additional language introduces a complex set of needs to their learning journeys – distinct pedagogical and andragogical needs that are intertwined with issues of acculturation, identity, belonging, and are also influenced by social and economic realities. The project findings underscore that the unprecedented 'superdiversity'⁵ in the region calls for greater flexibility and innovation within the adult education programs across the ministries, which all seek to provide a range of relevant educational opportunities for adults.

The relationship-building activities that were carried out throughout the course of this project revealed a cautious, yet deep-seated need for programs to come together and address the complexity and challenges that exist in the classroom and when dealing with placement and referral issues. Opportunities to come together and dialogue on the needs, learning pathways and transition points of adult learners with both language and literacy issues helped clarify misinformation, and helped build awareness and understanding across the programs. The project revealed an appetite for dialogue and for coming together to view adult education more holistically.

The following recommendations have been formulated as a result of the project's findings:

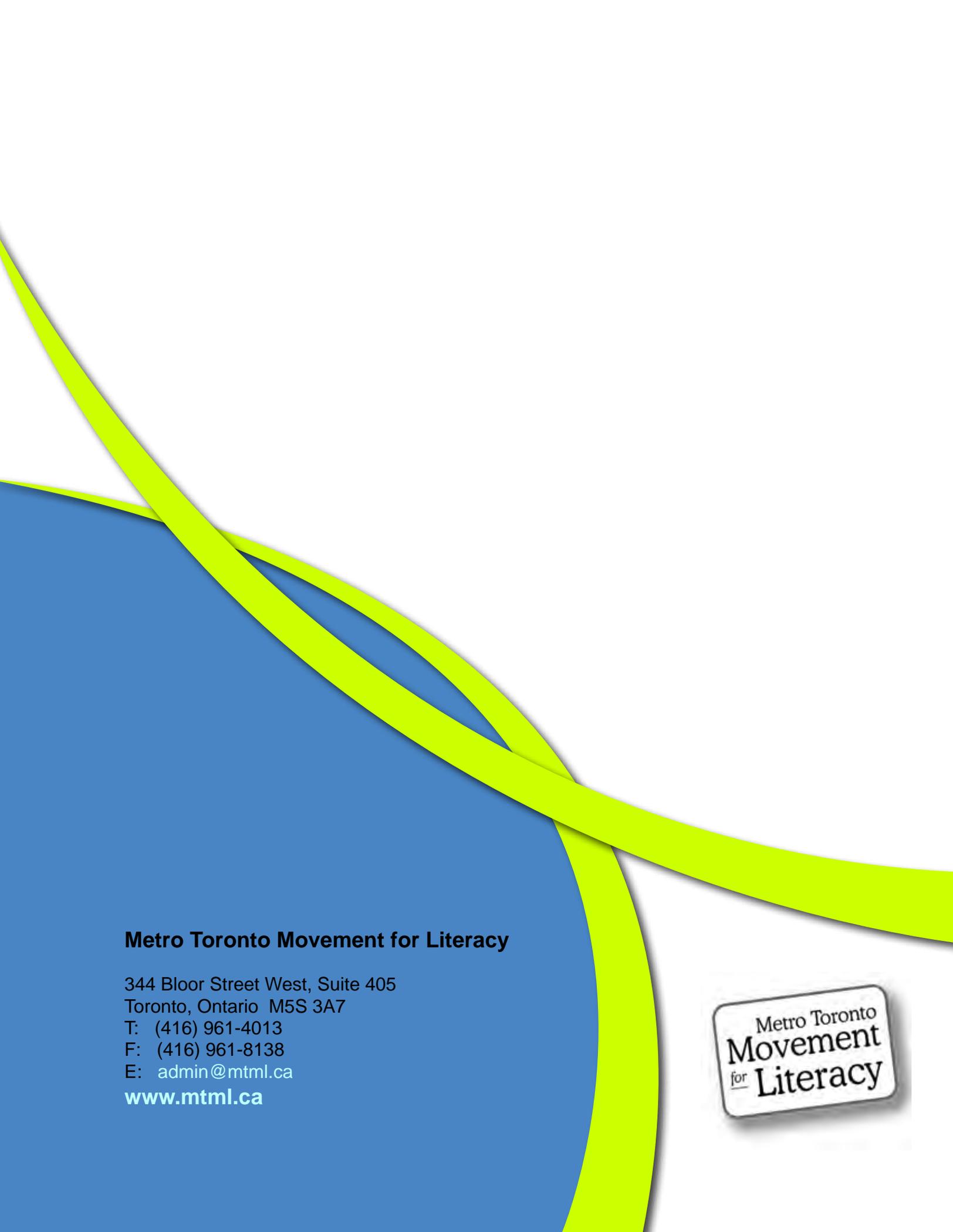
1. Improve access to information about the range of learning and training programs offered by the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities, the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, the Ministry of Education, and by Citizenship and Immigration Canada.
2. Create opportunities and resources for service delivery agencies providing adult language, literacy and learning programs to increase their knowledge and awareness of each other.
3. Develop and implement a screening and assessment approach that is flexible and responsive to the complex needs of the learners, to be used by language programs/CLARS centres and literacy programs when determining a learner's eligibility and suitability.
4. Provide a greater diversity of language training and literacy programs in order to address the distinct needs of different groups of learners.
5. Support partnerships and collaborative initiatives between language and literacy providers.

5 A term coined in James Simpson, Melanie Cooke, and Mike Baynham, *The Right Course? An Exploratory Study of Learner Placement Practices in ESOL and Literacy*, p. 11.



“Education is an indispensable strategic instrument for sustainable human development. It is a tool. But it is also the right of every person – the right to become an active and creative citizen. Lastly, learning is a joy: in it each person may discover a sense of freedom, self-realization and independence. Once experienced, the joy of learning can never be forgotten; it repeats and returns throughout a lifetime; and it is inexhaustible.”

– FEDERICO MAYOR, Director General of UNESCO
Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, Hamburg, July 1997



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