

# Adult learning in Canada: Characteristics of learners

[The role of literacy and education](#)

[Defining what counts as adult learning](#)

[The relationship between adult learning and age](#)

[Conclusion](#)

Research has shown that in a knowledge-based economy, economic opportunities and active participation in the broader society are increasingly linked to an individual's ability to command and control his or her own life. It is in this context that makes the distribution of adult learning across the population of such importance.

Canada has had a long interest in better understanding the distribution of adult literacy and learning across population sub-groups. Canada participated in the first round of data collection in the [International Adult Literacy Survey \(IALS\)](#) in 1994. This was the first internationally comparative survey of adult skills to be undertaken. Canada was also a lead country in the international [Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey \(ALL\)](#) in 2003 (the Canadian component is called the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)). In fact, Canada was the only country to sample a very large number of people – 23,000 in all. Such a large sample was made possible by the financial support received from several federal government departments and provincial and territorial governments.

The data collected by these surveys provide a wealth of information on the characteristics of adult learners across participating countries and through time. These data have also generated a number of research studies. One of those, recently published by Statistics Canada, provides detailed information on the characteristics of adult learners in Canada. This article highlights the findings of that research.<sup>1</sup>

## **Box 1: What is ALL?**

The Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) is a large-scale co-operative effort undertaken by governments, statistical agencies, research institutions and intergovernmental agencies. It provides internationally comparable measures on adult learning in four skill domains: prose and document literacy, numeracy and problem solving. ALL was administered in 2003 in Canada, Bermuda, the Mexican State of Nuevo Leon, Italy, Norway, Switzerland and the United States. In Canada, over 23,000 individuals aged 16 and over from across the ten provinces and three territories responded to the survey.

## Defining what counts as adult learning

In accordance with the principles of lifelong learning, the ALL study recognizes three basic categories of settings where purposeful learning activity takes place:

**Formal learning:** learning that typically takes place in an education or training institution, is structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leads to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.

**Non-formal learning:** learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning opportunities may be provided in the workplace and through the activities of civil society organizations and groups. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.

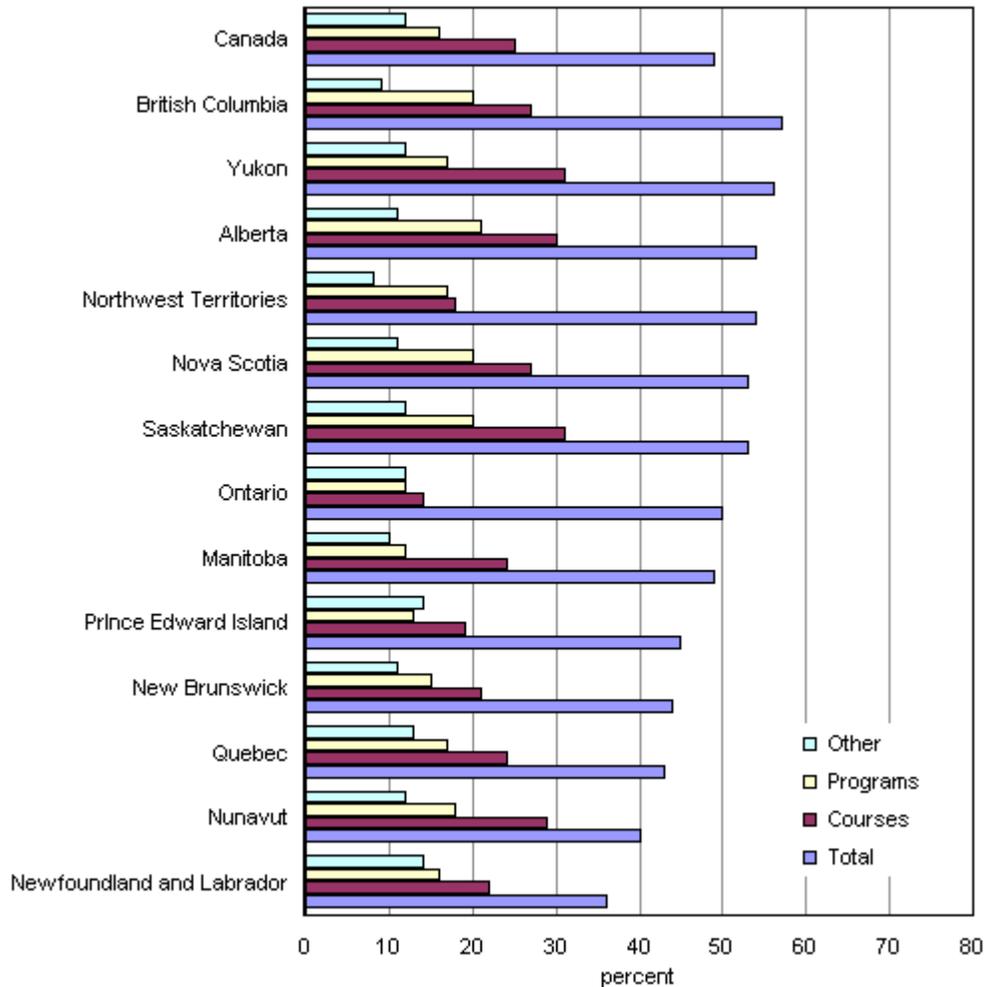
**Informal learning:** learning that results from daily life activities related to work, family, community or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but is often non-intentional (or "incidental"/random).

Formal and non-formal learning are referred to as organized forms of learning and encompass what is referred to as adult education and training. This is in contrast to informal learning which is seen as a non-organized form of learning.

Overall, in 2003, 49% of the Canadian population aged 16 to 65 participated in courses, programs and other forms of adult education and training ([Chart 1](#)).

**Chart 1**

**Percentage of population aged 16 to 65 participating in courses, programs and other forms of adult education and training during the year preceding the interview, Canada, provinces and territories, 2003**



**Source:** Rubenson, Kjell, Richard Desjardins and Ee-Seul Yoon. 2007. [Adult Learning in Canada: A Comparative Perspective. Results from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-552-MIE - Number 17. Table A1.7.

## The role of literacy and education

There is a strong relationship between literacy levels and participation in adult learning – those with the highest levels of literacy participate in adult learning at much higher rates than those at the lowest levels of literacy. Thus, those most in need of learning to enhance their skills in order to be able to compete in the labour market are least likely to participate in education and training opportunities.

Educational attainment is by far the best predictor of participation in adult education – the more education a person has, the more likely he or she is to participate in adult education or training. This relationship holds across all provinces and territories. The relationship is strongest in Newfoundland and Labrador, where university graduates were 10 times more likely to participate in organized forms of adult learning than those with less than high school. Large gaps in the participation rate between those at the highest and lowest levels of education were also evident in New Brunswick, Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Nunavut.

The relationship with level of education holds even after differences in literacy levels are taken into account-Canadians with university degrees are on average three times more likely to participate in adult education and training compared to those with less than high school.

Family background also plays a key role. The study's authors observe that the relationship between an individual's level of learning and their readiness to participate in formal learning later in life "... reflects a stratification process that starts early in life and progresses through schooling and working life."

For example, there is a strong link between an individual's level of literacy skills as measured in IALS and the 'literacy culture' of the family in which an individual grows up. While the roots are established during childhood, readiness for learning is further fostered in the educational system. The same social and cultural forces that are behind the relationship between early literacy and family background also link the distribution of educational attainment and of reading and writing habits across different socioeconomic groups. Thus, through socialisation within the family and later in school, a positive disposition towards adult education becomes a part of many people's lives, but not of others.

Research has shown that what individuals hope to achieve in their lives, particularly in their educational goals, is often mediated by their parents' values, expectations and levels of education. The ALL data also reveal that parents' levels of education have a strong influence on respondents' participation in adult education and training. Referring to the 'compounding intergenerational effects of education on adult learning, the authors report that individuals whose mother's or father's educational attainment is higher than their own are more likely to participate in adult than those whose parents have the same level of education as the respondents. On the other hand, respondents whose parents' education is lower than theirs are less likely to participate than those whose parents have the same level of education as the respondents.

## The relationship between adult learning and age

The relationship between participation in adult learning and age is a complicated one. Economists argue that the decision to participate in adult education and training is an investment decision, made with the goal of increasing earnings. According to this argument, individuals would therefore be better off if they were to make those investments earlier rather than later in life since they would then have more time to benefit from their investment.

Other experts, this time in the field of adult learning, argue that learning as adults is not motivated solely by the prospect of improved career prospects and earnings, but that some adults engage in adult learning for personal interest. In this case, age would be less important as a factor affecting participation in adult learning.

Analysis of the ALL data finds that after controlling for the effects of education, participation in training is in fact higher for those in the youngest age group (excluding full-time students). In other words, being part of the youngest age group matters more for predicting the likelihood of participating in training than the actual level of education of the young. In contrast, the level of education is a more important predictor among older age groups.

However, there is a strong interaction effect between education and age. Analysis based on the 2003 [Adult Education and Training Survey](#) (AETS) found that, regardless of their age, workers with high school or less were least likely to have taken formal job-related training in 2002, with the participation rate being about 20% for those aged 25 to 54 years. Similarly, university-educated workers in all age groups were most likely to have taken training in 2002. Workers aged 25 to 34 and 45 to 54 were most alike in this regard, with 55% of them or more engaging in formal job-related training. Even at 37%, the rate remained much higher for 55 to 64 year-olds who had a university education than it was for workers with the least education, regardless of their age.

Coming demographic changes – aging baby-boomers, rising number of retirements, small relative size of younger birth cohorts – suggest that there will be growing pressures to encourage older workers to remain in the workforce for a longer period of time. In this context, it is of interest to look more closely at the patterns of participation in adult education and learning of adults aged 55 or more.

The analysis finds that, as expected, individuals engage less in learning as they age and they become even less involved with career-related learning. Total participation in organized forms of adult learning declines rapidly from 34 percent for Canadians aged 56 to 60, to 20 percent for those aged 61 to 65, to 13 percent for those aged 66 to 70, and seven percent for those aged 71 to 75. Participating for personal interest reasons becomes significant for those who are retired or reaching their retirement. Over 80 percent of participants over 65 cited this reason for participation. Similarly, as participants get older, self-financing begins to be the pervasive form of financing. Over 80 percent of participants relied on financing from non-employer sources. These results suggest that adult learning does not come to an abrupt end as Canadians exit the labour market; rather, the intensity of their participation gradually reduces while the reason for, and subject of, learning shifts.

In general, the characteristics of older adult learners resemble the characteristics of participants in other age groups. Older adults who have higher levels of education are more likely to participate in adult learning. For example, the rate of participation in adult learning among 56 to 75 year-olds who had not completed high school was 8%, but it was 41% among those with a university degree.

Also, older adults who were active in either paid or unpaid work tended to be more active participants in adult learning. Employed older workers participated at 38 percent, while the rate of participation of those who were outside the labour force was 12 percent. Individuals in families with more than \$60,000 in annual household income were more likely to participate than those with lower incomes.

In relation to unpaid work activities, those who were more active in community organizations were more likely to participate in adult learning. Likewise, people who were more active in reading, using the internet and using computers for task-oriented purposes outside paid work engaged more frequently in all forms of adult learning. These findings suggest that adult learning is a complement, not a substitute, for civic participation or other forms of self-directed learning activities.

## Conclusion

The report's authors also looked at other characteristics of adult learners in Canada which are worth noting. One of these is gender, where in fact, they found only minor differences between men and women in terms of participation in adult education and training activities. After taking into account differences in age, labour force status, educational attainment, document literacy levels, immigrant status and occupation, there was only a slight over-representation of men in adult education and training.

Another important factor to consider is immigrant status. The report touched on this topic only briefly, but did note that recent immigrants (those who had lived in Canada for less than five years) were similar to native-born Canadians, with the rate of participation for both groups being at 52%. This rate was substantially higher than it was for established immigrants (41%).

Finally, the authors note that employer financial support plays a central role in supporting opportunities to engage in adult education and training among the adult population. However, participation in employer-sponsored training is unequal across groups of workers. In particular, workers with the least education, regardless of their age, are also least likely to participate in training. In fact, training participation patterns are more similar by education level than they are by age. In other words, the evidence suggests that formal education and the acquisition of new skills through further education and training are mutually reinforcing,

## References

1. Rubenson, Kjell, Richard Desjardins and Ee-Seul Yoon. 2007. [Adult Learning in Canada: A Comparative Perspective. Results from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-552-MIE – Number 17.
2. Peters, Valerie (2004). [Working and Training: First results of the 2003 Adult Education and Training Survey](#). Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics - Research papers. Statistics Canada Catalogue number 81-595-MIE20040015.