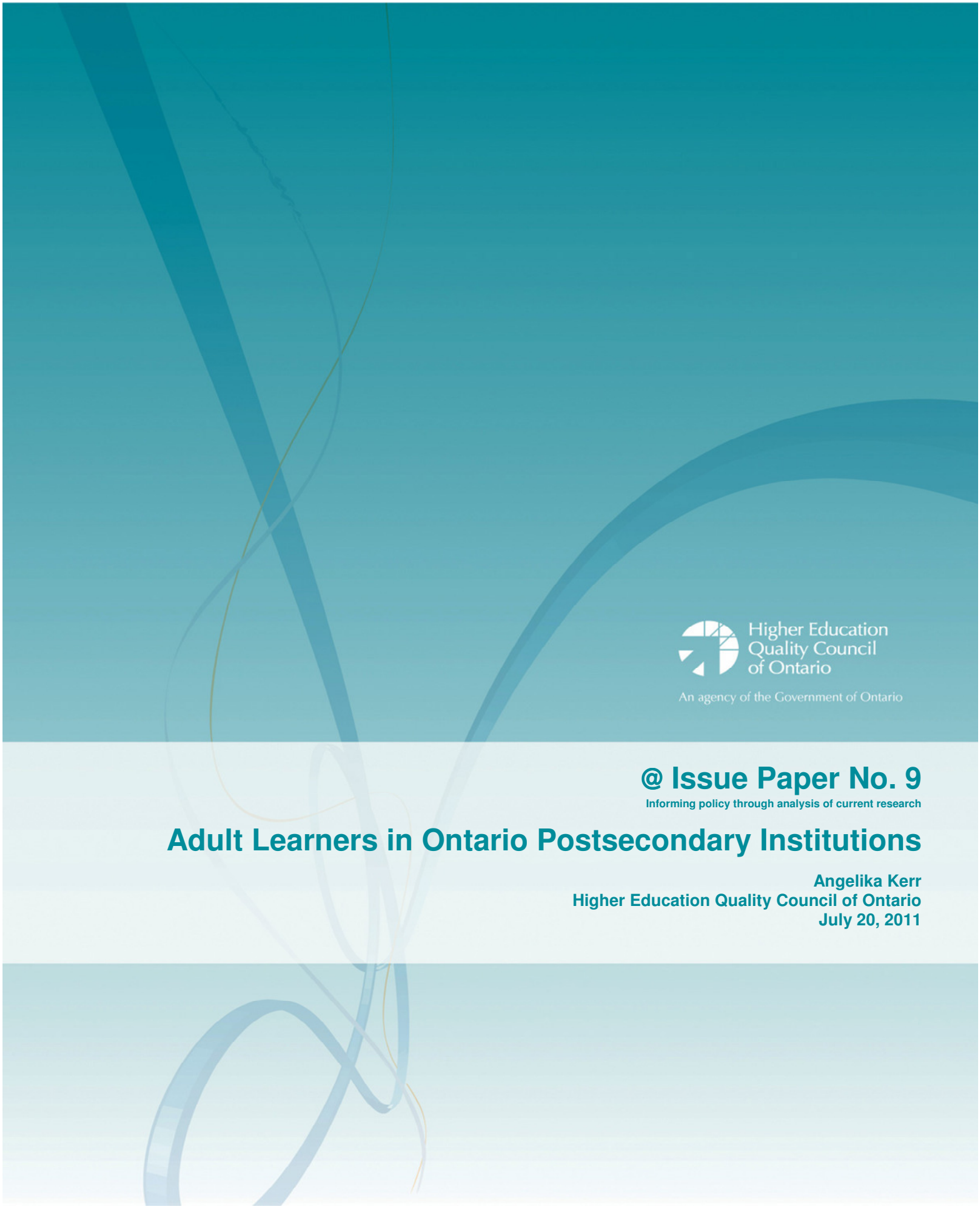

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Informing policy through analysis of current research

Adult Learners in Ontario Postsecondary Institutions

Angelika Kerr
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario
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1 Yonge Street Suite 2402
Toronto, ON Canada
M5E 1E5
Phone: (416) 212-3893
Fax: (416) 212-3899
Web: www.heqco.ca
E-mail: info@heqco.ca

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Introduction

An important goal of Ontario's postsecondary education system is to provide the appropriate level of educational attainment to meet the current and future human capital needs of the province (HEQCO, 2009: 19). This purpose reflects the recognition that education and training contribute to the human capital of individuals and make them more productive workers and better informed citizens. Attainment of further education not only provides for individual returns such as higher earnings and lower levels of unemployment , improved health and longevity, and greater satisfaction with life, but it is also strongly linked to social returns such as safer communities, healthy citizens, greater civic participation, stronger social cohesion and improved equity and social justice (Riddell, 2006). In order for the province to maintain and enhance its economic standing in the changing global economy, and to provide its citizens with the social benefits that higher education affords, it must ensure that the human capital needs of its society are met.

In pursuit of this objective, the Ontario government, most recently through its "Open Ontario Plan," aims to raise the postsecondary attainment rate of those aged 25 to 64 to 70 per cent and to provide a place for every qualified Ontarian who desires to pursue a college or university education (Government of Ontario, 2010). The future "stock" of human capital required to achieve this attainment rate will need to come from three sources: Ontarians entering the labour force for the first time who may already have postsecondary credentials or may be in the process of acquiring them; new inter-provincial and international migrants; and finally, through additions to postsecondary credentials by those who have already entered the labour force (HEQCO, 2009: 25). It is this latter population of individuals, often referred to as adult learners, with which this @Issue paper is concerned.

If it is acknowledged that adult learners must be one of the sources of the stock of human capital required for Ontario to achieve an attainment rate of 70 per cent, then an understanding of adult learners, the issues that they face and how those issues can best be addressed is vital. Government targets aside, it is becoming increasingly recognized that in the current knowledge-based economy, with its advancements in technology and rapidly changing skill requirements, learning must take place throughout the lifetime of an individual. The traditional concentration of education in earlier stages of life will no longer necessarily support individuals throughout their working lives. Initial education plays a large part in developing the potential of an individual, but it is becoming increasingly important for adults to pursue the development of new skills and competencies and the upgrading of existing ones.

This @Issue Paper will attempt to explore the status of adult learners in Ontario's postsecondary education system through:

- an examination of the demand for adult education in Ontario;
- an overview of how colleges and universities are meeting the demand for adult education;
- an evaluation of factors affecting adult learners in postsecondary accessibility and success; and

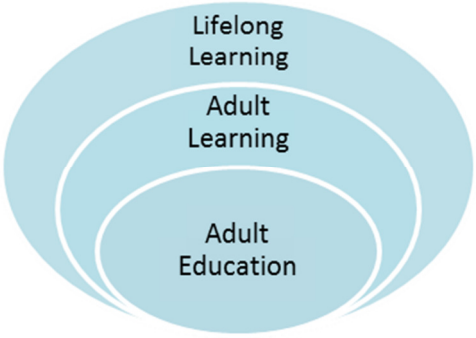
- potential policy implications to promote and improve the participation of adult learners in postsecondary education.

Examples of programs and services from Ontario institutions will be used to illustrate the state of the field in adult education, but the paper is not intended to provide a comprehensive inventory of offerings.

Definitions of lifelong learning, adult learning, adult education and their connections

The continuum of lifelong learning encompasses learning which takes place during all stages of the lifetime of an individual, that is: early childhood learning and development, the learning which takes place in elementary, secondary and postsecondary school systems, as well as adult learning and skill development later in life. Adult education is recognized as a subset of adult learning as it is only one process by which learning in this stage of life occurs (CMEC, 2005: 46) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Relationship between Adult Education, Adult Learning and Lifelong Learning



CMEC, 2005

Although terminology varies across the literature, “adult learning” is commonly defined as the process or the result of the attainment of knowledge and expertise by adults through practice, instruction, or experience. It may be intentional or non-intentional, and may occur for professional or personal reasons and in a variety of settings. “Adult education” refers to intentional learning opportunities which are organized and structured and which allow for the attainment of the skills and knowledge needed to participate fully in the economic and social life of the learner’s community. The definition usually restricts the population of learners to those who are no longer in their initial cycle of education (UNESCO, 1996; OECD, 2003; CMEC, 2005; CMEC, 2009; Wynne, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2007; UNESCO, 2009).

Lifelong learning, including that undertaken by adults, is categorized into three settings:

- Formal learning is intentional and structured, typically takes place in an education or training institution, and leads to certification.

- Non-formal learning is structured and intentional, but does not typically occur in an education or training institution or lead to certification. It is the learning most often offered in the workplace or through societal organizations and groups.
- Informal learning results from daily life activities related to work, family, community or leisure. It is not structured and is most often non-intentional or incidental, and typically does not lead to certification (Statistics Canada, 2007:11).

Both formal and non-formal learning are organized and intentional forms of learning, and as such, encompass adult education. This @ Issue Paper will specifically focus on formal learning undertaken by adults that is facilitated by postsecondary institutions.

How are adult learners identified?

The population of adult learners is generally restricted to individuals who are no longer in their first cycle of education. That is, they have left their initial round of education and are seeking, for various reasons, to return after a period of absence. However, separating adult learners from first-time students attending secondary school or postsecondary institutions is difficult as a result of the increasingly diverse educational pathways that students follow. In much of the Canadian literature, students aged 15 or over engaged in part-time studies, students aged 20 or over who are studying full-time in elementary or secondary programs and students aged 25 or over who are studying full-time in postsecondary programs are considered to be adult learners (Statistics Canada, 2007), but the strict classification of adult learners by age group is inconsistent.

As a result of such a broad definition, the population of adult learners is a heterogeneous group with varying needs and motivations for seeking further education (Wynne, 2005: 15). They could be seeking to complete requirements for a secondary school diploma in order to pursue subsequent postsecondary education or to obtain employment; they could be native Ontarians or newcomers attempting to improve literacy or numeracy skills required for success in the workplace or for full participation in the community; they could be experienced workers or unemployed individuals, with or without credentials, who wish to upgrade their skills or learn new skills and participate in retraining opportunities in response to changes in the economy and industry; or they could be individuals who wish to pursue educational opportunities for personal interest.

Adult Education Policy Landscape in Ontario

In the 2005 review of postsecondary education in Ontario, it was recommended that "participation in learning beyond the school-leaving age should be a significant public policy objective for Ontario" and that "adult learning should be promoted actively" (Rae, 2005: 11). Until 2005, Ontario had no formal definition of adult education or other terms that could be used to guide program development and delivery. In an effort to guide policy and program development relating to adult education in Ontario, an Adult

Education Review was launched in May 2004 at the request of the Minister of Education and the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities (Wynne, 2005). The review culminated in a total of fifteen recommendations to support the implementation of an adult education policy framework. Furthermore, in response to the review, an Adult Education Policy Unit was created in 2006 within the Ministry of Education to improve the development and delivery of programs and services for adult learners across the province. In 2008, the Ministers' Committee on Adult Education was formed to ensure coordination and policy alignment across the three ministries responsible for adult education: the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities; and the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (CMEC, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010: 25). In order to promote and provide information about services directed at adult learners, MTCU now hosts and is further developing a web page for adult learners on its site, targeted at adult learners seeking to upgrade skills and/or obtain a secondary school diploma or equivalent, students for whom English or French is a second language, and workers trained outside of Canada wishing to enter the labour force in Ontario1.

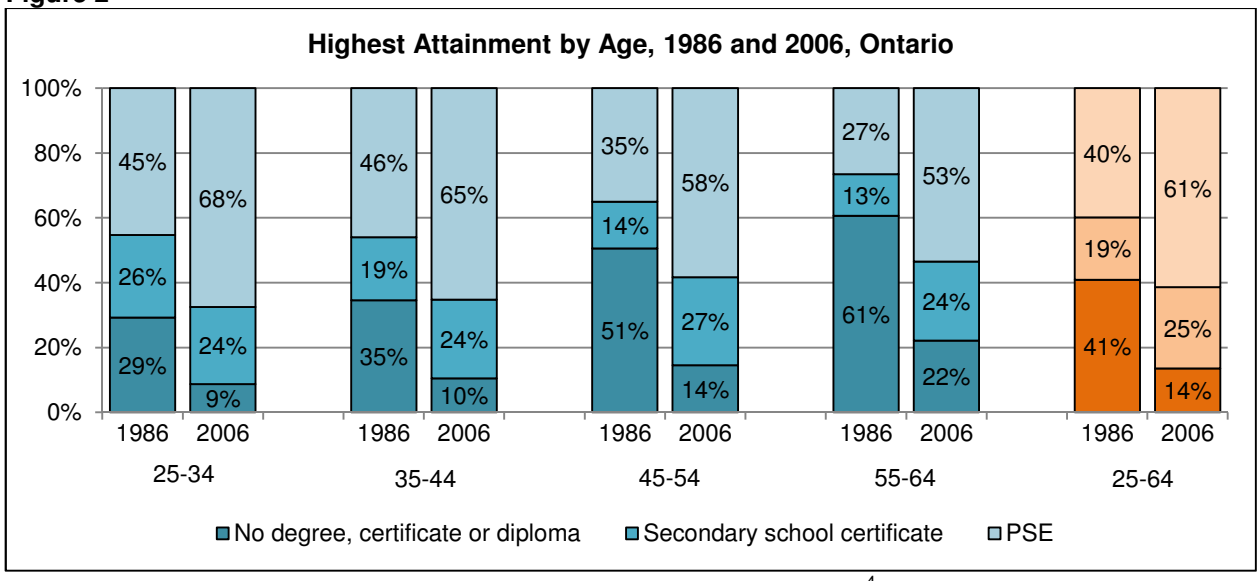
Additionally, the implementation of the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Development Agreement provided an opportunity to improve the coherence of the adult education and training system, as one of the broad objectives of the agreement is to enhance the quality of the skills of Ontario's workforce (CMEC, 2008; Government of Canada, 2008). This agreement and a number of additional initiatives, such as the establishment of local training boards[2] and the Second Career Program[3], were launched to better align a policy framework for adult education with labour market conditions.

The demand for adult education in Ontario

According to the 2006 Census (Figure 2), a secondary school certificate or equivalent is the highest educational attainment of approximately one quarter of Ontarians aged 25 to 64. About 14 per cent of Ontarians aged 25 to 64, almost 900,000 individuals, have less than a secondary school education level, with higher concentration in the older age groups. Furthermore, for certain segments of the population, the need for adult education is even greater. In the Aboriginal population, the education level of 24 per cent of those aged 25 to 64 is less than a secondary school diploma (Statistics Canada census, 2006). Figure 2 illustrates the change in highest attainment by age over the past two decades (Statistics Canada census, 1986; 2006). Although greater proportions of all age groups have achieved a postsecondary level education over that time period, the current proportion of individuals aged 25 and older with a secondary school certificate or less provides an indication of where the potential demand for adult education in Ontario might be found.

[1] http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/adultlearning/
[2] http://www.workforceplanningontario.ca/english
[3] http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/secondcareer/

Figure 2



Source: Statistics Canada, Census 1986 and 2006[4]

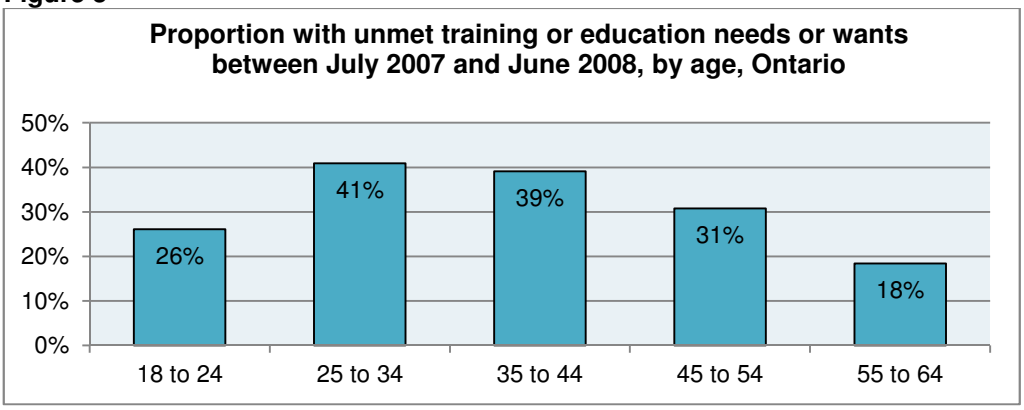
According to the 2008 Access and Support to Education and Training Survey (ASETS)[5], approximately 32 per cent of Ontarians aged 18 to 64 reported unmet training or education needs or wants[6] between July 2007 and June 2008, the highest proportion (41 per cent) being found for the 25 to 34 age group (Figure 3). Considering previous educational attainment, Ontarians with the highest levels of education were more likely to report having unmet training or education needs or wants than those with lower levels (Statistics Canada 2008 ASETS, custom tabulation). These findings may be a reflection of higher interest in further study by those with higher levels of education, or they may reflect a lack of awareness of the opportunities and benefits of, and greater access barriers to further education by those who are the least educated.

[4] POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION includes: Apprenticeship, College certificate/diploma, University certificate/diploma below bachelor level, Bachelor's degree, University certificate/diploma above bachelor level, Degree in medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine or optometry, Master's degree, and Earned doctorate.

[5] ASETS addresses issues relating to antecedents and determinants to access to PSE, including the role of student financing and participation in adult education and training (http://www.statcan.gc.ca/concepts/index-eng.htm).

[6] This proportion is determined from the response to the ASETS question: "From July 2007 to June 2008, was there any (other) education or training that you wanted to take but did not?" and "From July 2007 to June 2008, was there any (other) education or training that you needed to take but did not?"

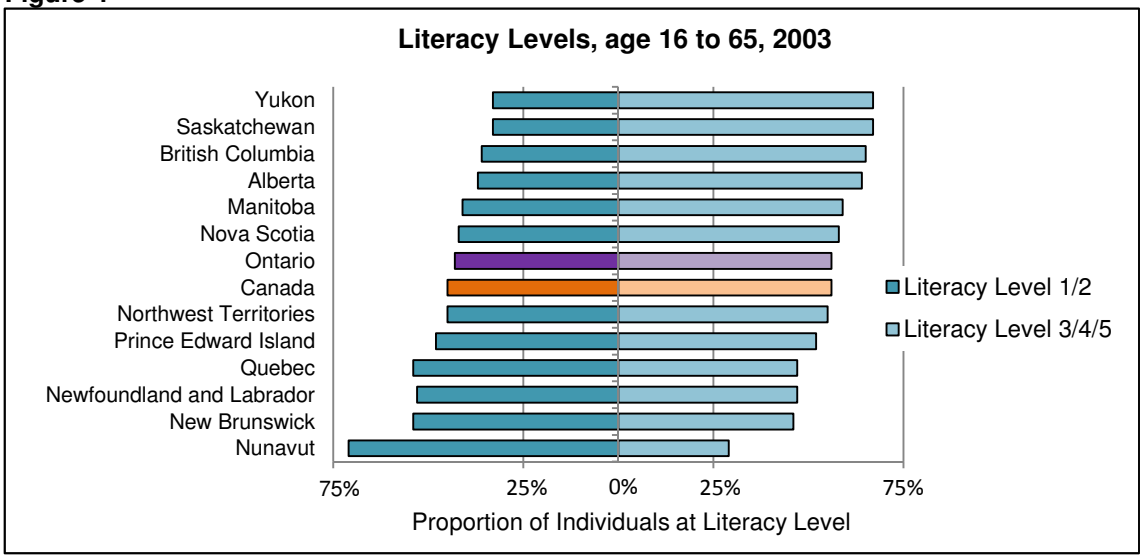
Figure 3



Source: Statistics Canada ASETS, 2008, custom tabulation

Another perspective of the potential need for adult education is provided by examining literacy proficiency in the province. Approximately 43 per cent of Ontarians aged 16 to 65 possess literacy proficiency at Levels 1 and 2 on the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) document literacy scale[7] (Statistics Canada, 2007) (Figure 4). Level 3 is considered to be a suitable minimum level for coping with the increasing demands of the emerging knowledge society and information economy (OECD & Statistics Canada, 1995). There is clearly room for improvement in adult literacy levels for Ontario and in the rest of Canada, as the literacy scores of many individuals fall short of this minimum standard.

Figure 4



Source: ALLS, 2003 from Statistics Canada, 2007

[7] The document literacy scale is one part of a framework used to develop tasks that measure prose and document literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in the IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) and ALLS surveys (OECD and Statistics Canada, 1995; Statistics Canada, 2007).

How Many and Where?

Understanding the patterns of educational enrolment for adult learners will provide support for policy makers and institutions in planning for appropriate programs and services directed at such students. Enrolment trends provide an indication of how universities and colleges are meeting the demand for adult education, and where any gaps may exist.

According to the 2008 ASETS, approximately half (49 per cent) of Ontarians aged 18 to 64 participated in some type of education or training during the reference period. Almost twice as many participated in training activities such as courses, workshops and guided job training compared to education programs, reflecting the type of learning activities at varying life stages. Greater proportions of Ontarians aged 18 to 24 participated in education programs, whereas older individuals were more likely to take part in training activities, which require less of a time commitment and are more likely to be job-related (Statistics Canada 2008 ASETS, custom tabulation).

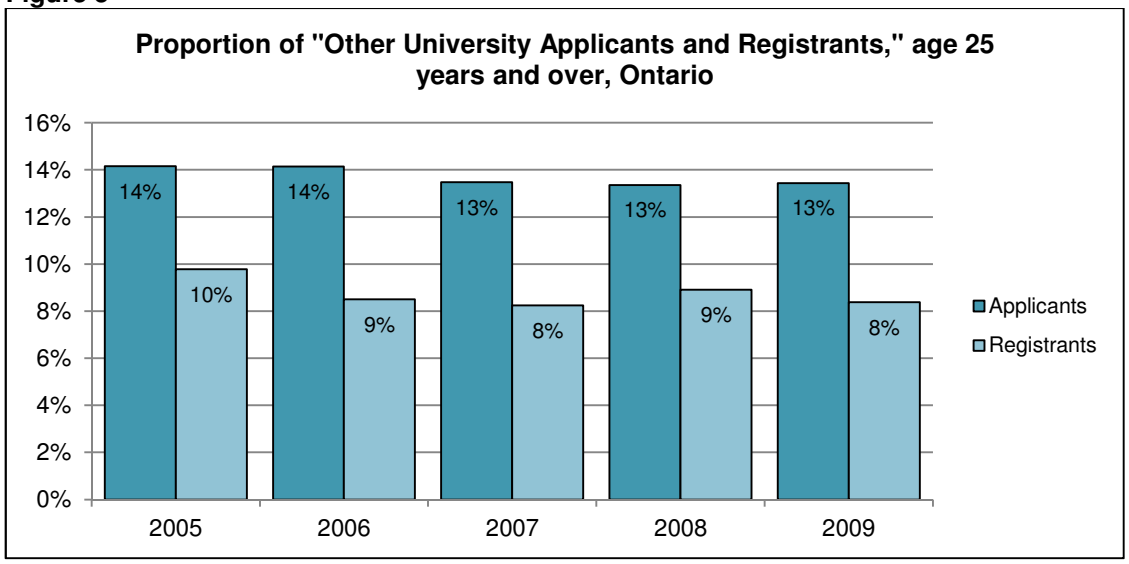
Focusing on the participation of adults in postsecondary education programs only, approximately 9.7 per cent of ASETS respondents aged 25 to 64 participated in a college education program, and 10.1 per cent of respondents aged 25 to 64 participated in a university education program (Statistics Canada ASETS, 2008, custom tabulation), but this information does not indicate in which types of postsecondary education programs the learners took part.

Regular Postsecondary Education Programming

Ontario postsecondary education applicant and registrant data disaggregated by age provide a general estimate of the number of students aged 25 and over seeking to pursue regular postsecondary education programming. University applicants who do not apply directly from an Ontario secondary school, termed “Other Applicants,” represented about 35 per cent of all university applicants through the Ontario Universities’ Application Center (OUAC) in 2008. “Other applicants” over the age of 25 are least likely to be in their first cycle of education and comprised approximately 13 per cent of other applicants and 8 per cent of other registrants in 2009[8] (COU, 2007-2010) (Figure 5). These figures may be somewhat underestimated provincial measures as they include only those applying through OUAC.

[8] In 2008, less than 1 per cent of direct from secondary school university applicants and less than 0.5 per cent of direct from secondary school university registrants were 25 years of age and over (COU, 2010).

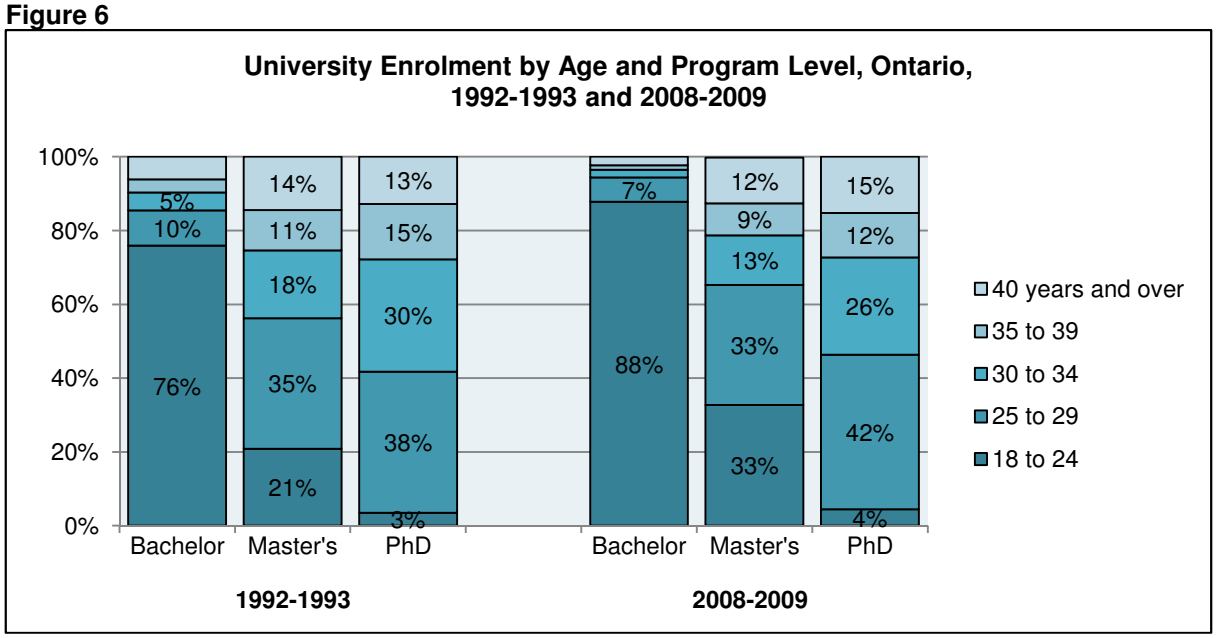
Figure 5



Source: OUAC data as cited in COU, 2007-2010

Statistics Canada university enrolment data indicate that in 2008-2009, students aged 25 and older comprised approximately 12 per cent of university enrolments at the Bachelor Degree level, 69 per cent enrolled at the Master's Degree level and 95 per cent at the PhD level (Figure 6). Comparison of these more recent enrolments with those in 1992-1993 indicates that the number of university students aged 25 and older has actually decreased at the Bachelor Degree level, but increased slightly at the Master's Degree and PhD level.

Figure 6

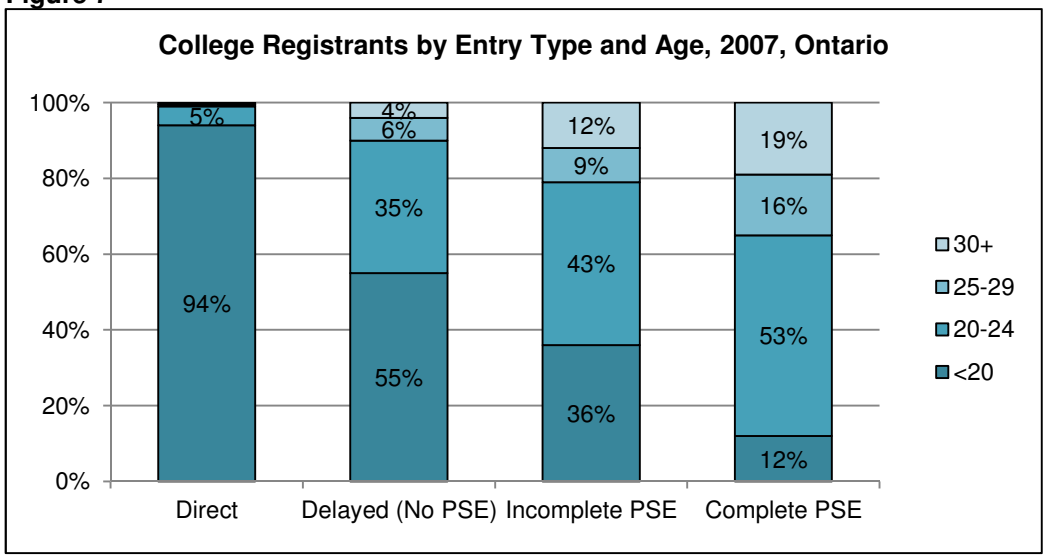


Source: Statistics Canada PSIS data, custom tabulation

College applicants not applying directly from secondary school made up approximately 61 per cent of all applications to college (CO, 2010). Just over one-third of non-direct college applicants are aged 25 and older, a proportion which has remained relatively constant over the past decade. A small proportion (5.7 per cent in 2006-2007) of college applicants who apply directly from secondary school are aged 25 and over, likely due to the fact that applicants coming directly from adult day schools are included in this population (CO, 2008a).

Non-direct college registrant data can be further segmented by previous postsecondary education experience. As would be expected, age differs substantially by segment. Registrants with complete postsecondary education tended to be older (over one-third were aged 25 or older), while delayed entrants with no previous postsecondary education were younger (CO, 2008b) (Figure 7). Furthermore, higher proportions of non-direct college registrants with a previous postsecondary education credential were born outside of Canada, considered themselves to be visible minorities, or had dependent children. All groups other than delayed entry students with no previous postsecondary education were more likely to be female. Of all segments, delayed entrants with no previous postsecondary education were slightly more likely to self-identify as Aboriginal individuals. Students with a complete postsecondary education credential and delayed entry students with no previous postsecondary education were far more likely to report their first language as being neither French nor English (CO, 2008b).

Figure 7

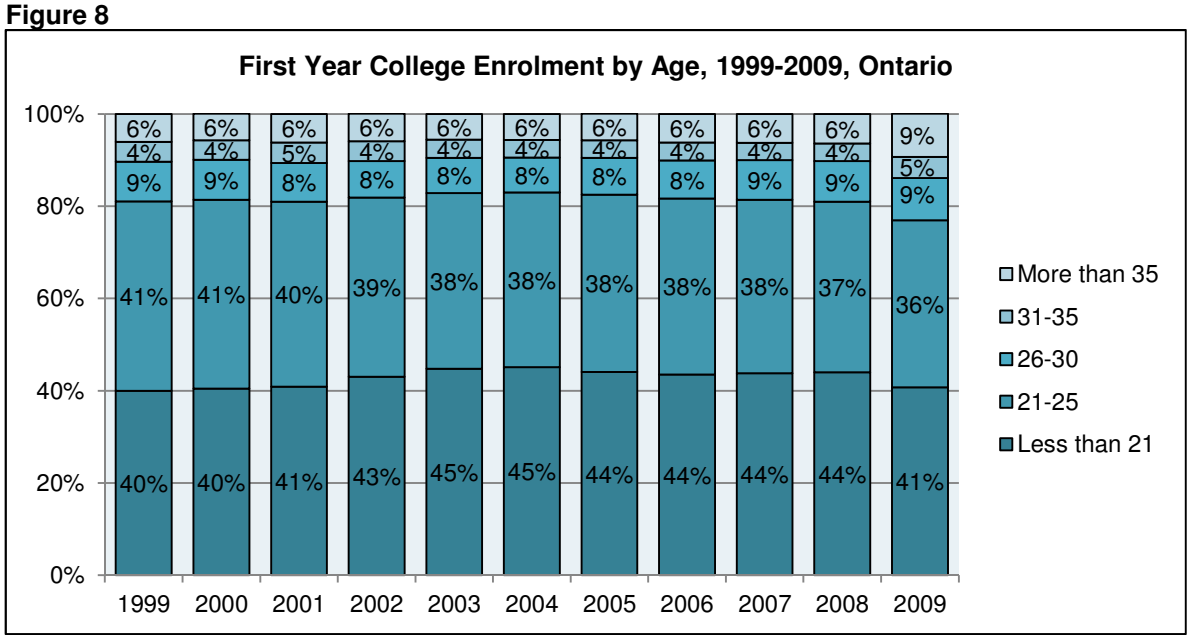


Source: 2007 CAS/OCAS data (age in March 2007) as cited in CO, 2008b

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) College Student Satisfaction Survey can also provide an estimate of college student enrollment by age. Examining the age distribution of first-year college students in Figure 8, indicates that

23 per cent were aged 26 and older[9] in 2009, a slight increase over previous years due mainly to a higher proportion of students over 35 years of age. This increase may be due to the effect of the recent economic situation, which may have necessitated a change in career and further training for many employed individuals. In terms of absolute enrolment, the number of students aged 26 and older has increased from approximately 15,000 to 28,000 between 1999 and 2009. These figures include only those students in regular college programming.

Figure 8



Source: MTCU College Student Satisfaction Survey, HEQCO calculations

Both the MTCU College Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS) and the Graduate Student Survey (GSS) indicate that adult college students are more likely to be female, to have attended a metropolitan Toronto college, to have been enrolled in a health-related or business program and to have been enrolled at the graduate certificate program level (MTCU SSS and GSS, HEQCO tabulations).

Similar findings are derived from the Ontario sample of the 2000 cohort of the National Graduates Survey (NGS). For both colleges and university, relative to traditionally aged graduates, adult graduates were to have been enrolled part time, to have been married and to have had children. Adult college graduates were more likely to have been enrolled in Health/Parks/Recreation/Fitness or Mathematics/Computer/ Information-Science programs. Preferred programs for adult graduates from university included Social/Behavioural-Sciences/Law, and Business/Management/Public-Administration. Interestingly adult graduates from university who had a previous

[9] The age categories in the MTCU College Student Satisfaction Survey are as follows: Less than 21, 21-25, 26-30, 31-35, and more than 35 years of age.

postsecondary education credential were more likely to have graduated from a Health-related program (NGS, HEQCO tabulations).

Continuing Education

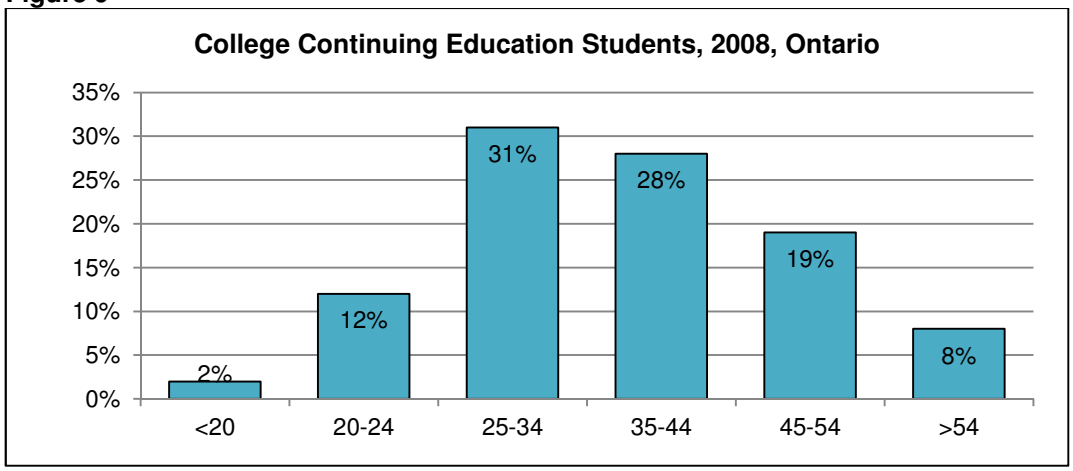
Universities offer part-time Continuing Education (CE) courses and certificates targeted at adult students through their Schools/Departments of Continuing Studies, other centres and faculties. Offerings vary according to the institution, but generally, CE courses do not carry credit towards a degree program. For example, the University of Toronto (U of T) School of Continuing Studies offers hundreds of courses and approximately 37 certificate programs within four program areas: Business and Professional Studies, Arts and Science, English as a Second Language, and Languages and Translation[10]. Various professional faculties and centres at U of T offer continuing professional development in the form of certificates, workshops, lectures and conferences.

Ryerson University is an institution that offers both non-credit and degree credit continuing education courses through the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education. In 2009-2010, 8,493[11] students were enrolled in the Chang School, of which 6,093 (72 per cent) were enrolled in degree credit courses and 2,400 (28 per cent) in non-credit courses[12]. Approximately 66 percent of the enrolment in degree credit CE courses offered through the Chang School in 2008-2009 was made up of students aged 25 and older, 99 per cent were domestic students, 53 per cent were female, and 16 per cent reported that their mother tongue was not English or French[13].

Continuing Education at Ontario colleges includes programs offering certificates, diplomas, workforce development, or learning for personal enjoyment. CE students generally participate on a part-time basis and do not apply through the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS). In 2006-2007, there were approximately 290,000 CE students in Ontario's colleges[14] (CO, 2009). Characteristics and trends regarding CE students in Ontario's colleges are obtained from the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT) Continuing Education Survey, the most recent of which was conducted in 2008, and which reported that 86 per cent of CE students were aged 25 and older (CO, 2010) (Figure 9).

[10] http://learn.utoronto.ca/scshome.htm
[11] This figure is a headcount enrolment, which counts the number of students registered on November 1st.
[12] http://www.ryerson.ca/upo/
[13] http://www.ryerson.ca/upo/statistics/
[14] The colleges perform a regular survey of CE departments that provides the number of annual registrations, and the colleges report CE activity that is funded by the provincial operating grant to MTCU. These data allow a conversion to numbers of students (CO, 2009).

Figure 9



Source: CCI, 2008 as cited in CO, 2010

According to the 2008 college CE survey, female CE students outnumbered male CE students at 66 per cent to 34 per cent, the proportion of students whose first language was neither English nor French increased over time to 27 per cent in 2008 and the majority of CE students were working, 69 per cent full time and 15 per cent part time. In 2008, 32 per cent of CE students reported that no parents or siblings had previously attended postsecondary education and 19 per cent were recent immigrants. With respect to previous education, 32 per cent of CE students possessed a university degree, compared to 29 percent with a secondary school education or less, 12 per cent with a college certificate and 24 per cent with a college diploma (CO, 2009, 2010).

Adult Upgrading: University

Academic upgrading or bridging programs refer to programs designed to facilitate entry into postsecondary education without the traditional entrance requirements.

Academic upgrading programs are offered at some universities in the form of academic bridging programs designed for individuals who have been away from formal education for some time and do not meet the established requirements for direct entry admission. For example, the intent of the Millie Rotman Shime Academic Bridging Program offered by Woodsworth College at U of T is to bridge the gap between a student's prior education and the requirements of first year university courses in Humanities and Social Sciences. Students who successfully complete the part-time program are admitted to the Faculty of Arts and Science at U of T, with one full credit towards their degree (Woodsworth College, 2010a). The number of students who were admitted into the program declined slightly from 929 in 2002-2003 to 843 in 2007-2008, the most recent figures available (U of T, 2009a). Similar programs are offered by Ryerson University's Chang School of Continuing Education as part of its Spanning the Gaps

Program (Academic Bridging Courses)[15], Carleton University (Bridging Program)[16], and The School of Women's Studies at York University (Bridging Courses for women)[17].

Another access-to-university program offered by U of T is the Transitional Year Program (TYP), which has been in existence since 1970. It is a full-time, one-year course of studies for adults who do not have the formal educational background to qualify for university admission. It is aimed at those who did not have an opportunity to finish secondary school because of financial problems, family difficulties or other circumstances. Students who complete the program satisfactorily are eligible for admission to the Faculty of Arts and Science at U of T18. The number of students enrolled in this program declined slightly from 66 in 2002-2003 to 54 in 2008-2009 (U of T, 2009a).

This past year, York University began to offer a similar two semester Transition-Year special access program for adults meeting its criteria. Successful completion of York's program results in a recommendation for admission to eligible programs in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies at the Glendon campus and the Faculty of Environmental Studies[19]. In addition, the Division of Continuing Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies at York offers part-time, non-credit courses designed for mature students to acquire the background they need for admission to York University.

Although the University of Waterloo does not offer upgrading options for students who do not possess the normal academic background required for admission, upgrading may be done through the Independent Learning Centre's distance education program20, and successful completion of the required pre-university courses. When mature students apply to the University of Waterloo through this avenue, their activities since originally leaving school will also be given consideration (U of Waterloo, 2010, email communication).

The University of Guelph offers an open admission, distance-only mode of study that provides access to degree-credit university courses for individuals who wish to study independently. This Open Learning program has no formal admission requirements; students with no previous postsecondary experience who complete four courses with the required minimum average, may qualify to transfer into the Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Commerce Programs at the University of Guelph21. Other institutions may also consider courses obtained through this avenue as transfer credits for admission (U of Waterloo, 2010, email communication).

[15] http://ce-online.ryerson.ca/ce_2010-2011/default.aspx?id=336
[16] http://www2.carleton.ca/cie/bridging-program/
[17] http://www.arts.yorku.ca/wmst/wsBridgingProgram.html
[18] http://www.utoronto.ca/typ/index.html
[19] http://www.futurestudents.yorku.ca/transitionyear/index.html
[20] http://www.ilc.org
[21] http://www.open.uoguelph.ca/prospective/open-learning/

Adult Upgrading: College

Colleges in Ontario provide adult upgrading in the form of literacy and basic skills (LBS) programs and academic upgrading (AU) programs, which are supported by the College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading[22] (CSC). Both programs are funded by MTCU and offered free of charge to learners.

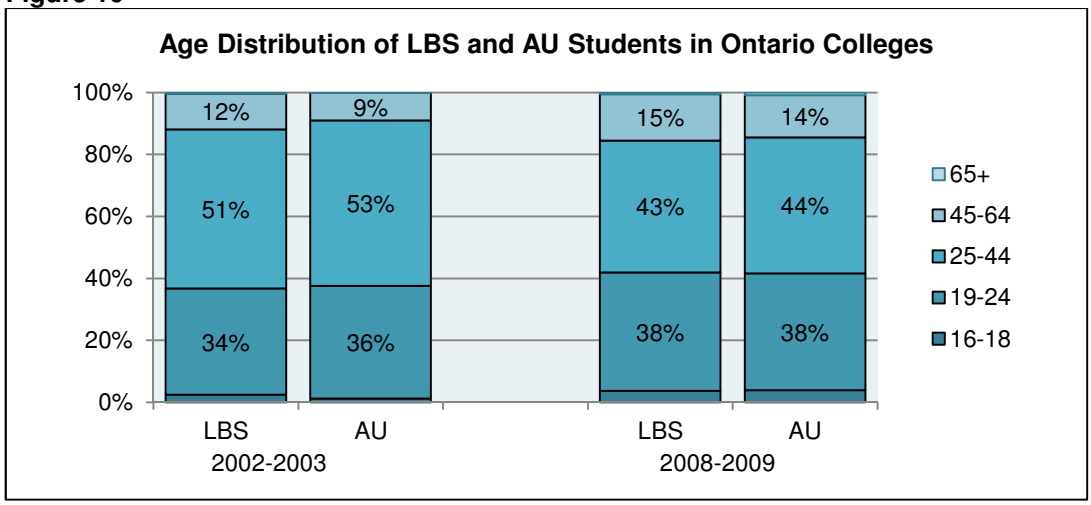
Literacy and Basic Skills is defined as that level of training that is pre-credit and roughly corresponds to Grades 1 to 9 in the traditional school system. It is divided into five levels which correspond to the levels of secondary education. The colleges represent only one of the delivery agents of LBS programming in addition to school boards and community based programs. Academic upgrading is delivered through the Academic and Career Entrance (ACE) program which was approved for delivery in July, 2004, at all 24 colleges by the Colleges Branch of MTCU. It replaced the College Entry Level programming called Basic Training for Skills Development – Level 4. It corresponds to the college stream of grades 10 to 12 in the secondary school system and is the level of programming generally accepted by colleges for admission to college-level postsecondary programs[23].

The numbers of students participating in LBS programs was 11,704 in 2008-2009, down slightly from 12,131 in 2002-2003. LBS level 3 continues to be the level where the largest numbers of students participate in college programming. Since 2002-2003, there has been a decline in college delivery of LBS levels 1 and 2 and a corresponding increase in LBS levels 4 and 5, indicating that colleges are increasingly focused on those levels of delivery which prepare people for further education (CSC, 2009).

In AU programs, student participation was 9,032 in 2008-2009, an increase from 1,682 in 2002-2003[24]. The substantial increase in numbers of AU students is, in part, a result of increased investment by MTCU in this type of delivery. The largest proportion of participants in both LBS and AU programs was in the 25 to 44 year age range, although there have been increasing percentages for the 19 to 24 year old age group since 2002-2003 (Figure 10). Slightly more females than males participated in both LBS and AU programs (CSC, 2009). For both programs, a significant number of participants are on some form of income support (Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, Employment Insurance, Workers' Compensation). However, individuals who are employed or identify "other" (family income, pensions, or support from other organizations) as their income source have become the dominant group (CSC, 2009).

[22] The College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading is a subcommittee of Colleges Ontario and is funded by MTCU. It has formal links with all college upgrading programs in Ontario, Colleges Ontario and MTCU (http://www.collegeupgradingon.ca/about.htm).
[23] http://www.collegeupgradingon.ca/
[24] This data was compiled by the CSC from information collected from adult upgrading programs (LBS and AU) by the MTCU Information Management System (IMS). There have been some concerns on the part of colleges regarding the accuracy of the information captured and reflected by the MTCU IMS (CSC, 2009).

Figure 10



Source: CSC, 2009

Second Careers

The Second Career program was launched by the provincial government in 2008 as a financial assistance program to assist laid-off and unemployed workers in attending college in order to retrain for careers in high demand sectors. Second Career subsidizes the cost of tuition, books, living expenses and other expenses associated with training for a new career for qualified applicants. Since June 2008, almost 36,000 laid-off workers have participated in the Second Career program. According to a survey conducted by the provincial government in 2010, more than half of the students had a Grade 12 education or less when they entered the program and the average age of participants was about 40 years, with almost equal proportions of men and women attending the program. The average length of training was 9 months with average funding of $17,500. Top training occupations chosen by Second Career students included bookkeeper, heavy equipment operator, truck driver, community and social service worker, and gasfitter[25]. The largest enrolment in the Second Career program in Ontario in 2009-2010 occurred at Centennial College in Toronto and totaled 1,745 students (Centennial College, 2010).

What Factors Impact Accessibility to Adult Education and how is the Sector Addressing those Factors?

An exploration of issues affecting access to postsecondary education for adults and of processes currently employed by colleges, universities and the government to address those issues can provide an indication of how the sector is accommodating this population of learners and where any gaps in services may exist.

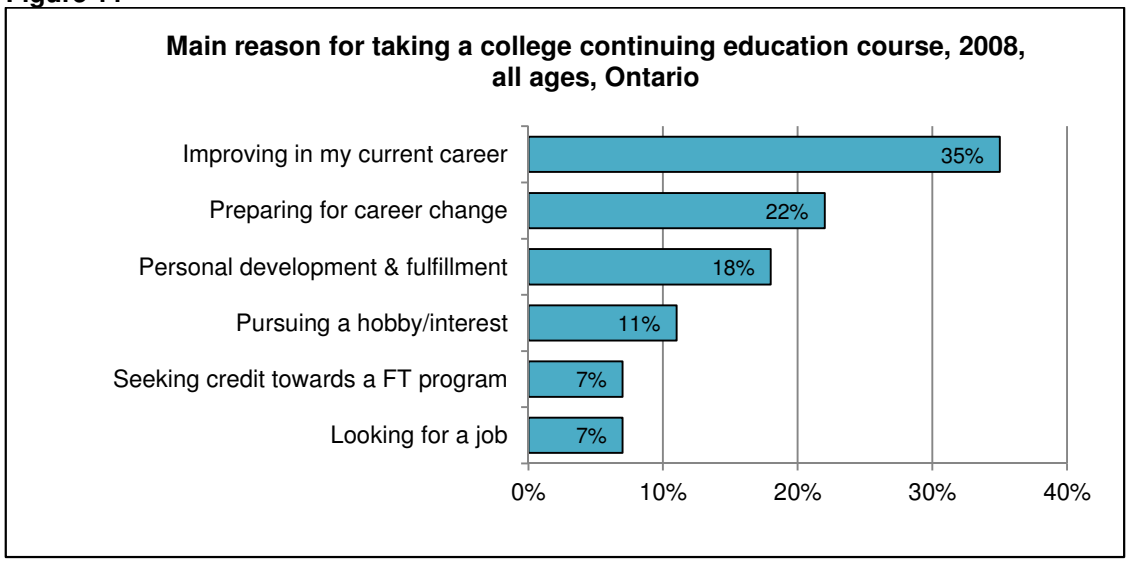
[25] http://news.ontario.ca/tcu/en/2010/09/the-second-career-program.html

Motivation

As adult learners comprise a diverse group of students, their motivations for participation in further education necessarily reflect that diversity. For adult learners attending college in Ontario, motivations tend to focus on career preparation or advancement or on study for personal interest. The MTCU College Student Satisfaction Survey indicates that adult learners aged 26 and older were equally likely to report that the main goal for enrolling in their college program was to prepare for their career or for interest. Learners aged 25 and below were more likely to report preparing for further postsecondary education as the main goal for college program enrolment (MTCU College Student Satisfaction Survey, HEQCO calculations).

Most students participating in college level CE programs reported that the main reason for taking a CE course was to provide improvement in their current career followed by preparation for a career change (Figure11) (CO, 2010).

Figure 11



Source: CCI, 2008 as cited in CO, 2010

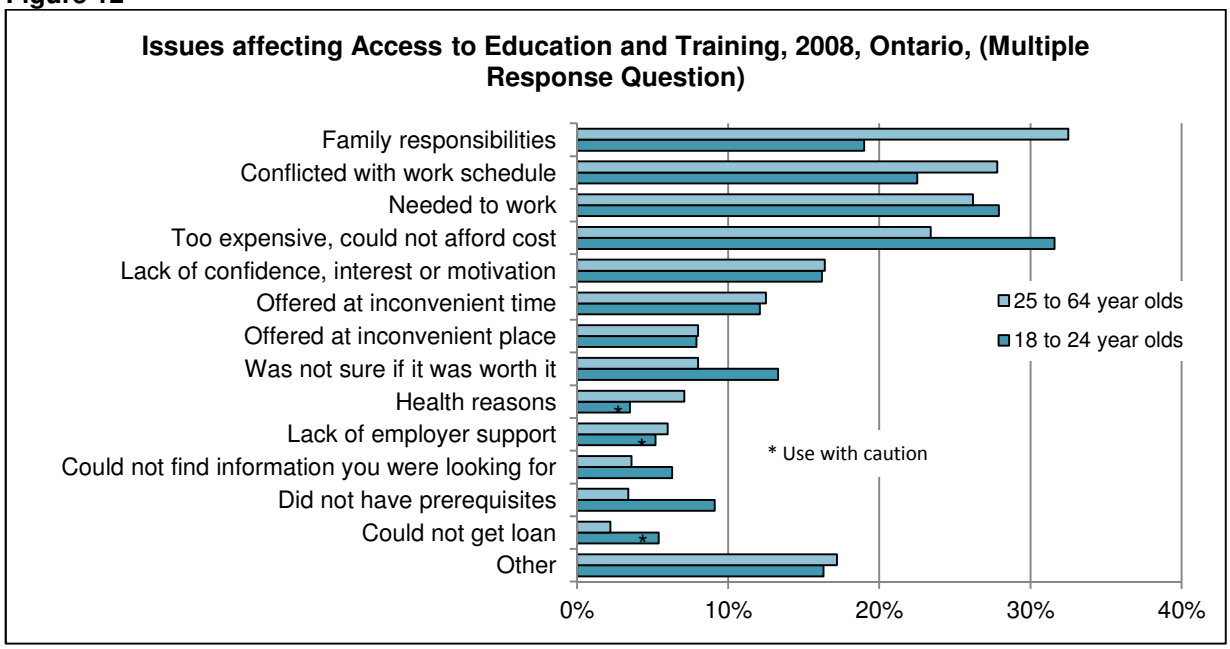
Not surprisingly, the motivations expressed by learners participating in adult upgrading programs at colleges overwhelmingly favoured further education and training, with 80 per cent of LBS students and 84 per cent of AU students in 2008-2009 reporting further education as the goal of participation (CSC, 2009).

Barriers, Challenges and the Sector Response

The barriers facing access to further education for adults are equally as diverse. According to the 2008 ASETS, approximately 35 per cent of Ontarians did not participate in education or training between 2002 and 2008, with greater proportions amongst older and less educated individuals. The top four reasons for non-participation were the same for students over 25 years of age as for younger students,

however, the relative importance of those issues varied with age (Figure 12). Almost twice as many adults (33 per cent) than youth (19 per cent) reported family responsibilities, whereas more youth (32 per cent) than adults (23 per cent) reported costs as a reason for not pursuing further learning activities (Statistics Canada 2008 ASETS, custom tabulation).

Figure 12



Source: Statistics Canada ASETS, 2008, custom tabulation

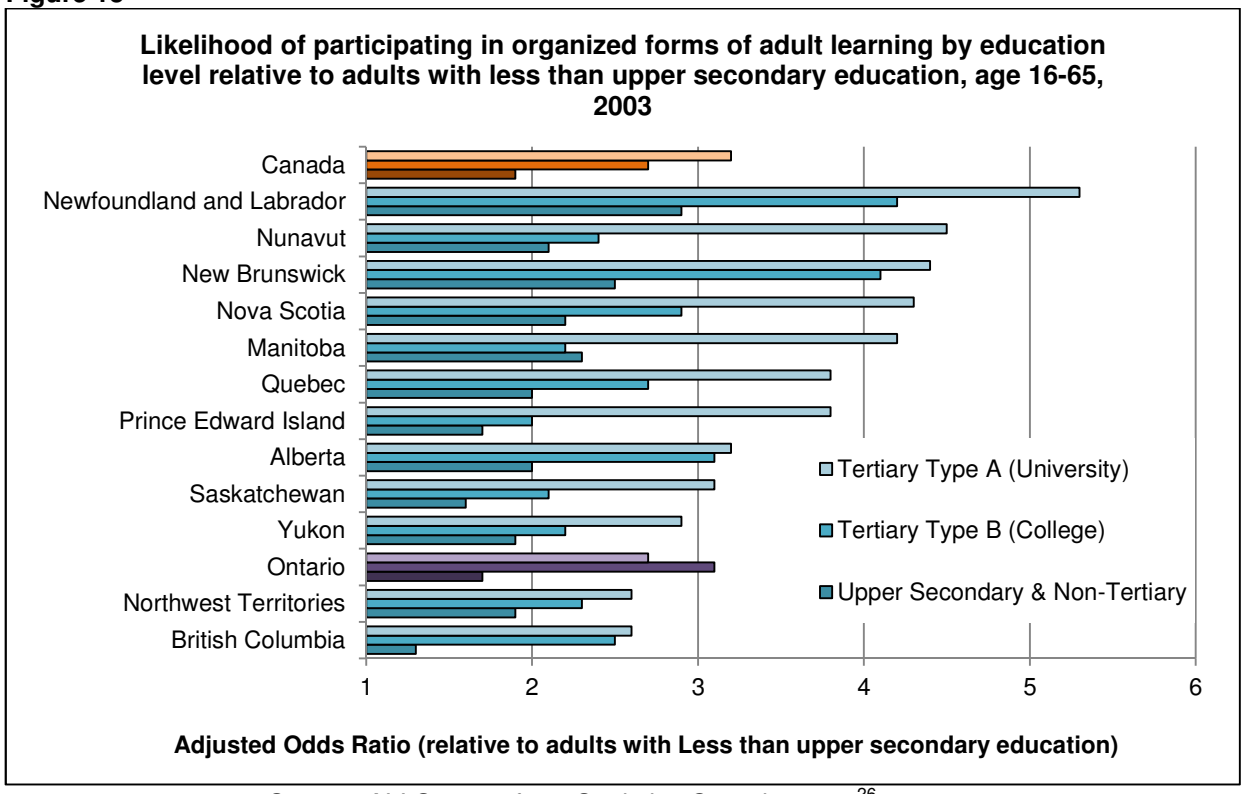
Factors affecting participation in postsecondary education, encompassing both access and persistence, can be understood across four main contexts: situational, institutional, dispositional or academic (Cross, 1981 as cited in Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009; CCL, 2007). Situational issues are those arising from a current circumstance at any given time and include financial and time restrictions, family and work commitments, the size of the employer's company (small firms facing greater challenges) or the prevailing economic situation. Examples of institutional issues include high tuition fees, entrance requirements, limited course offerings, courses offered at inconvenient times or locations and lack of recognition of previous skills, experience and credentials. Dispositional issues are attitudes and perceptions that can influence decisions about learning, such as the value placed on learning, previous learning experiences and lack of awareness about the benefits of further education. Academic factors include literacy and technological skills, and prior education level (CCL, 2007).

Previous Education

Interestingly, previous education level affects whether or not an adult participates in further education. In Ontario, adults with a postsecondary education level are approximately 3 times as likely to participate in adult learning relative to those with less than an upper secondary education; those with upper secondary education levels are

about 1.7 times as likely to participate (Statistics Canada, 2007)(Figure 13). It is interesting to note that Ontario is the only province where adults with a college education are more likely than those with a university education to participate in adult learning. This may in part be a reflection of the high number of colleges in Ontario relative to other provinces.

Figure 13



Source: ALLS, 2003 from Statistics Canada, 2007[26]

Data from the 2008 ASETS confirms the general findings: 64 per cent of adults aged 18 to 64 in Ontario with less than a secondary school education did not participate in job related education or training between 2002 and 2008, relative to 42 per cent of those with a secondary school diploma and 28 per cent of those with a postsecondary education degree, diploma or certificate (Statistics Canada 2008 ASETS, custom tabulation).

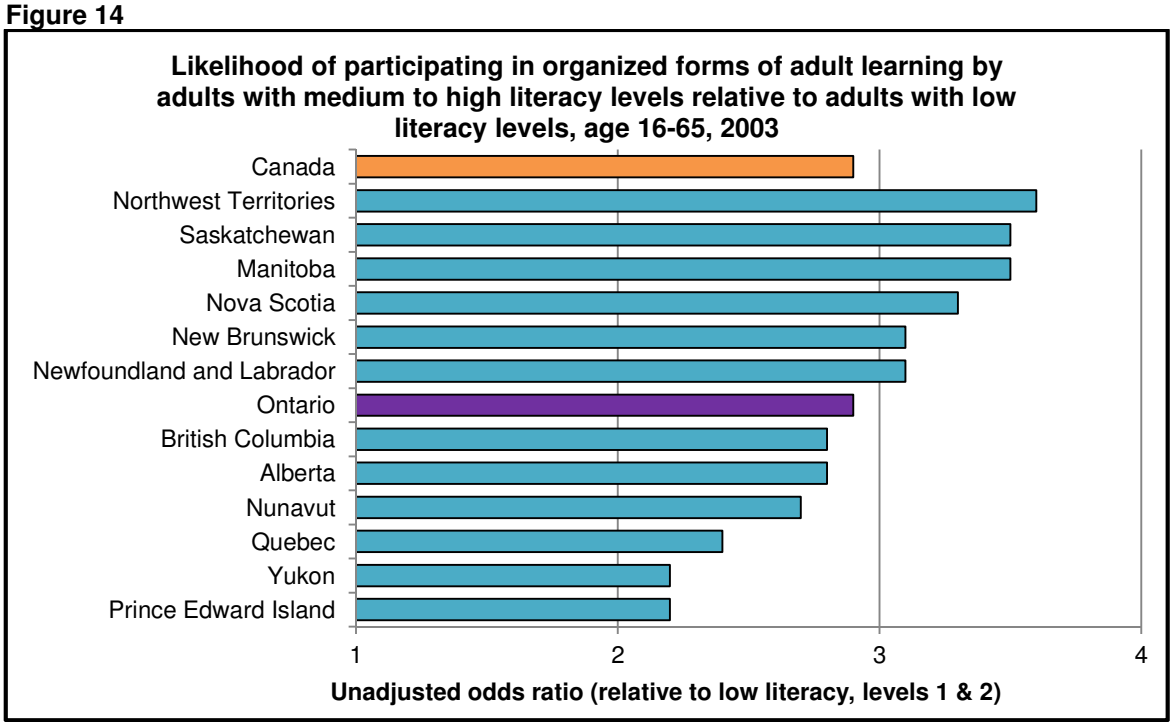
Literacy

Similar trends are seen for literacy levels of adults. In Ontario, adults with literacy at levels 3 or higher on the ALLS document literacy scale are almost three times as likely to participate in adult learning relative to those with low literacy levels (Figure 14). In addition, gender and immigrant status were also found to have an effect on

[26] Adjusted odds control for the level of document literacy.

participation in continued adult learning in Ontario, with females being slightly more likely than males, and native born Canadians slightly more likely than immigrants to participate (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Figure 14



Source: ALLS, 2003 from Statistics Canada, 2007

These findings indicate that those adults with the weakest background, as measured by literacy and education levels, are the least likely to participate in organized adult learning and to benefit from the improved opportunities that further education affords. As an unintended consequence, adult education and training, as currently promoted, may tend to intensify rather than rectify inequalities in education and in subsequent labour market outcomes (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Currently, Ontario colleges provide literacy upgrading through literacy and basic skills programs which are funded by MTCU. Additional literacy programming is offered through school boards and community organizations, which falls outside the scope of this paper. In its most recent budget, the province committed an additional $44 million over three years for literacy and basic skills programs (Government of Ontario, 2011).

Time Restrictions

For Ontario ASETS respondents aged 25 to 64, the most frequently cited barriers to participation in education and training were centered on scheduling time for education with family responsibilities and with work. The importance of offering flexible learning models and delivery mechanisms to accommodate the diverse needs of adult learners has been stressed in the literature (OECD, 2005; OECD & Statistics Canada, 2005;

Wynne, 2005). The introduction of information and communication technologies such as computers, cell phones, and the internet into the learning landscape to provide distance learning is one of the major avenues used by the sector to address such concerns. Data from ASETS indicate that almost twice as many adult Canadians aged 25 to 64 and participating in an education program used distance education compared to youth aged 18 to 24 (Statistics Canada, 2009).

Postsecondary online learning initiatives which are supported by the government of Ontario include Contact North[27] and elearnnetwork[28], which are distance education and training networks established to assist educational institutions and providers in offering distance education to residents of remote areas. OntarioLearn[29] is a consortium of 22 Ontario colleges who have partnered to develop and deliver online courses. Although enrolment varies by college and course offerings have increased, the number of students accessing courses through OntarioLearn increased from approximately 750 in 1995-1996 to just fewer than 65,000 in 2009-2010. A consortium known as the Canadian Virtual University[30], of which Nipissing University and Laurentian University are the only current Ontario members, is an association of Canadian universities specializing in online and distance education, and offers individual courses and full degree programs.

Most postsecondary education institutions in Ontario provide courses, and in some cases full programs, through either entirely online delivery or a blended learning model. In addition, a variety of administrative and support services are increasingly offered through electronic alternatives. However, the use of information and communication technologies requires that students have convenient access to such technologies and have adequate technological and organizational skills to successfully navigate the learning process through this delivery method.

To varying degrees, postsecondary education institutions provide opportunities for on campus study during non-traditional time slots to accommodate the diverse scheduling needs of students. A study conducted by York University on evening/weekend education resulted in a number of recommendations to improve and enhance the student experience, including the provision of clear information on programs and courses offered at non-traditional times, broadened course search options, adequate academic and student support services, and adequate safety and transportation services during off-hours (Edgecombe, Sanders & Visano, 2009).

A number of institutions offer accelerated or intensive teaching formats for certain programs which can reduce the time out of the workforce for employed adult learners. Such options are usually found at the graduate or professional development level, or when pursuing a second undergraduate degree. For example, in nursing, some programs are being restructured to accommodate students with previous

[27] http://www.contactnorth.ca
[28] http://www.elearnnetwork.ca
[29] http://www.ontariolearn.com
[30] http://www.cvu-uvc.ca

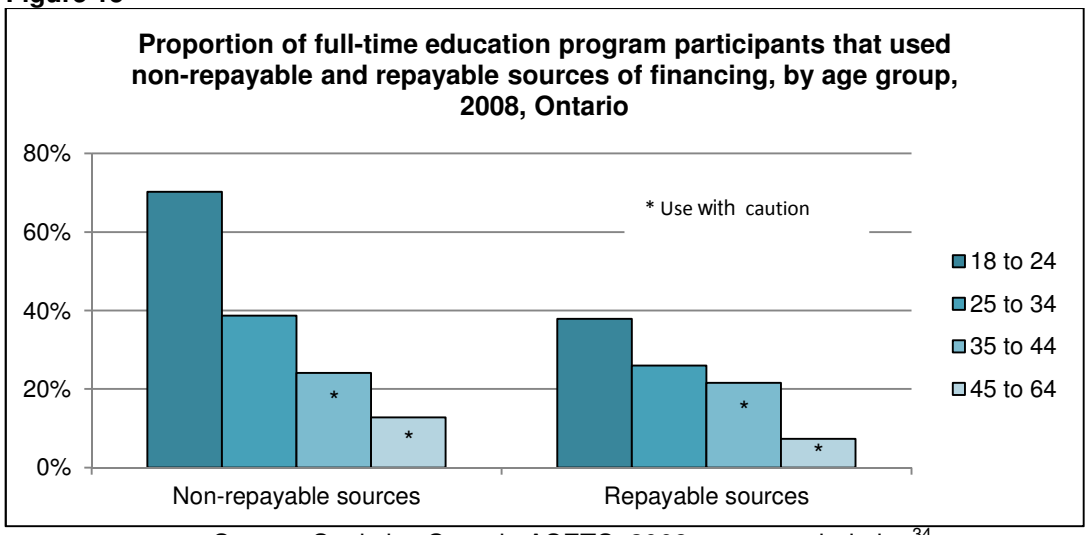
undergraduate degrees. In addition, compressed program formats are being offered by most schools of nursing, consolidating clinical practice/internships in summer months in order to graduate nurses faster[31]. Algoma University is currently considering a Block Plan format of program delivery[32] similar to that offered by Quest University in British Columbia[33]. Under this format, one course is completed at a time. Learning is intensive, with three to four hours of instruction per day for about three weeks. At the end of this time period, learners complete an exam and then move on to a new course in the next block. A similar format was pilot tested at Brock University for one course in the Department of Community Health Sciences. The introductory course was offered in the spring of 2010 for two consecutive weeks with six hours of instruction per day. An unanticipated outcome of the delivery format was the enrollment of a number of working adult students who took vacation time from their employment in order to complete the course (Faught, B., personal communication, 2010).

Financial Issues

Although financial issues were not the leading barrier to participating in education or training activities for adults, a significant proportion of Ontarians aged 18 to 64 (24 per cent) reported it as a reason for not engaging in further learning activities. There are a variety of financial sources that students can use to pay for their education. Some, such as government student loans, bank loans and private loans from parents, family and friends, have to be paid back. Other sources are non-repayable such as money provided by parents, spouse or partner, family or other people and grants, bursaries, scholarships or other sources. As seen in Figure 13, the proportion of students who received non-repayable or repayable financial support for their studies decreased with age, although the difference between younger and older students was more pronounced for non-repayable than for repayable sources (Statistics Canada 2008 ASETS, custom tabulation). To some extent, this is an expected finding: adults over the age of 25 are more likely to be employed and may have accumulated personal funds and assets to cover further postsecondary education expenses.

[31] Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing, 2011 (http://www.casn.ca/en/114.html)
[32] http://www.algomau.ca/administration/president/messages-from-the-president/the-block-plan
[33] http://www.questu.ca/academics/the_block_plan.php

Figure 15



Source: Statistics Canada ASETS, 2008, custom tabulation[34]

Employer support is one resource potentially available to employed individuals. Such support can include providing the training, paying for the education or training (either directly or by reimbursing an employee), allowing a flexible schedule to accommodate education or training, providing paid time off, or providing transportation to or from the education or training location (Statistics Canada, 2009). Over one-third (38 per cent) of those aged 18 to 64 who were employed and who participated in education received some form of support from their employer. This proportion was 49 per cent among the employed adult population aged 25 to 64 relative to 27 per cent for those employed and aged 18 to 24 (Statistics Canada 2008 ASETS, custom tabulation). This may be related, in part, to the lower educational attainment and experience of younger individuals in the workforce. Employer support for education and training is largely concentrated on their more highly skilled workforce. This may also be tied to the nature/type of occupations/industries in which more highly skilled workers are employed; less skilled employees tend to work in positions that require more "on the job" training. In Ontario, approximately 22 per cent of employed individuals aged 18 to 64 with less than a secondary school diploma who participated in education programs received employer support, relative to 28 per cent of those with a secondary school diploma and 45 per cent of those with a postsecondary education credential (Statistics Canada 2008 ASETS, custom tabulation).

Enlisting the cooperation of employers in supporting the education and training of lower skilled employees through motivation or additional incentives, through the provision of information which clarifies and promotes the benefits of further learning, and through improved linkages between government, educational providers and employers, has been suggested as a mechanism for expanding the participation of working adults in further education (OECD, 2003; Myers & de Broucker, 2006; CCL, 2007; Rubenson,

[34] Respondents could have indicated repayable, non-repayable, a combination of, or no external sources of financing.

Desjardins & Yoon, 2007). There are a number of federal and provincial incentive programs for employers in Ontario to offset costs of training of their employees and can take the form of tax credits, wage subsidies or financial support. Examples can be found through Employment Ontario[35] and Job Connect[36], and include the Apprenticeship Training Tax Credit[37] and Ontario Labour Market Partnerships[38]. MTCU has also established the Sector Initiatives Fund[39] to help industry sectors and organizations develop training programs, standards, and materials for their workforces. The approach is to encourage the sector-wide research and planning needed to address skills gaps. In addition, with funding from Service Canada, MTCU has established local training boards[40] to direct the planning and delivery of governmental training programs to make skills training more accessible, effective, and responsive to local needs (CMEC, 2008).

As many adults pursue part-time studies at postsecondary education institutions, either through regular programming or continuing education or upgrading programs, they face additional financial barriers in that they do not qualify for funding through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), although they do qualify for the Ontario Special Bursary Program and the Canada Student Loans Program through part-time student loans and/or grants. For students who do qualify for OSAP, student loan eligibility and amounts are negatively affected by savings and assets that individuals have accumulated and by spousal income for married applicants. The higher proportion of older students with non-government sources of financing, relative to government student loans suggests that the current system may not be meeting their needs (Statistics Canada 2008 ASETS, custom tabulation). In a recent initiative to address this issue, the student "income-while-in-school" exemption and the vehicle exemption have been doubled, and the spousal income contribution was reduced by 10 per

Admission Policies

The minimum admission requirement for undergraduate level postsecondary programs in Ontario is a secondary school diploma or equivalent, with some program-specific requirements established at individual institutions. Most colleges and universities have special policies for "mature" students. For example, mature students may be considered for admission to an Ontario college if they are 19 years of age by the program start date and have not obtained a secondary school diploma or General Educational Development (GED), including ACE. Mature status is considered on an individual basis and testing may be conducted for an evaluation of the applicant's academic level[41].

[35] http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/employmentontario/eoes.html
[36] http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/apprentices/jobconnect.html
[37] http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/employers/taxcredit.html
[38] http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/employers/labourMarket.html
[39] http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/apprentices/sector.html
[40] http://www.workforceplanningontario.ca/english
[41] http://www.ontariocolleges.ca/portal/page/portal/ONTCOL/Apply/ApplicantInformation/MatureStudents

At the university level, definitions and regulations on mature student admission into regular programming vary with the individual institutions. Mature student criteria apply to those applicants who are not eligible for admission in any other admissions category. Most (but not all) universities have a minimum age requirement of 21 years upon start of the program and require that applicants have not participated in formal schooling for a minimum period of time, ranging from 1 to 5 years. Several universities stipulate that mature students initially enroll on a part-time basis and that transfer to full-time status is conditional upon success as a part-time student. Most universities also have additional criteria based on the program or faculty to which the student applies. U of T does not admit applicants based on age or work experience: an applicant to U of T who does not hold the published admission requirements may be able to qualify for humanities and social science programs through the U of T Academic Bridging program[42].

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

There are also institutional barriers related to prior learning and credential recognition (PLAR) which may affect access to further education for adult learners, in terms of the availability of and fees for such assessment services. Prior learning assessment can help an adult gain recognition and credit for prior knowledge and skills upon which they can build in the next stage of education. The groups which would benefit most from improved PLAR include immigrants with foreign credentials, individuals with prior learning gained through work and training, and students transferring between postsecondary institutions.

All of Ontario's colleges offer PLAR assessment as required by a MTCU policy implemented in 1997. The purpose of the policy "was to make colleges more accessible to a broad range of adult learners, help adults to become more productive and capable members of society, and increase the efficacy of the colleges by eliminating unnecessary training" (Morrissey & Myers, 2008). Colleges are mandated to make the PLAR process and information easily accessible to students[43]. Assessment fees are established by MTCU and the current cost is approximately $125 per course assessment.

Although there are no provincial policies governing PLAR at Ontario universities, some PLAR activities are taking place, most often in professional programs that are linked to regulated professions (Morrissey & Myers, 2008; Kennedy, 2003).

For potential learners anticipating credit for previous education or experience, the PLAR process can be challenging, costly and time consuming. In addition, the lack of an established mechanism in Ontario to facilitate the transfer and recognition of students' credits as they move from one institution to another has been a challenge facing adults with previous education and seeking credit transfer. Recently, the

[42] http://www.adm.utoronto.ca/adm-awards/html/admissions/adm_general_info/adm_faq.htm#Mature, accessed on November 15, 2010.
[43] http://www.accc.ca/ftp/es-ce/MTCUCollegeFramework.pdf

Ontario government committed to implementing a new credit transfer system, under which colleges and universities will work together to develop more opportunities to transfer credits between institutions, provide on-campus advisors and orientation programs for transfer and a centralized website for information[44].

Student Support Services

In addition to student support services for the traditional student, some institutions offer academic and social support services specifically directed at mature learners. This can take the form of specialized workshops offered to adult students by institutional student services dealing with issues specific to them. Support services can be of a more practical nature, such as on campus child care facilities where children of students, faculty and staff are given priority placement. Unfortunately, the waiting lists for many of these facilities are long[45]. Support services for students with disabilities would also affect adult students as the prevalence of most types of disabilities, particularly physical disabilities, increases with age, (Statistics Canada, 2006). The ASETS survey also indicated that health-related issues were a more frequently reported reason for not participating in further education (Statistics Canada 2008 ASETS, custom tabulation).

At a number of institutions, support is provided in the form of mature student associations or clubs who promote social networking, student support, advocacy, resources and community interaction among mature students. In several cases, a physical meeting space is provided for adult students. For example, at Queen's University, the Ban Righ Center[46] supports the continuing formal and informal education of women, particularly mature women returning to the institution, by providing not only a gathering place, but also financial advising, advocacy and social, academic, and information services. A recent report using Queen's University as a case study sought to understand the experiences of mature female students and examined ways in which this type of university support mechanism influenced the experiences of mature female students. The recommendations of the report stressed enhancement of mechanisms for outreach, communication, networking and dissemination of information aimed at adult students (Massey, Brooks & Sutherland, 2010).

[44] http://news.ontario.ca/tcu/en/2011/01/helping-students-graduate-faster.html
[45] http://www.familycare.utoronto.ca/caring_children/childcare.html
[46] http://banrighcentre.queensu.ca/

What is known about the Outcomes for Adult Learners in postsecondary education?

Understanding the postsecondary education experience of adult learners and whether or not they succeed in achieving their goals in a timely manner provides some insight into how well the sector is serving this population. Once adult learners gain access to postsecondary education, are they adequately supported to succeed?

Retention and Persistence

Several recent studies which explore the retention and non-completion rates of adult students in postsecondary education point to a lack of detailed data and research on mature student persistence (Grayson & Grayson, 2003; McGivney, 2004; MacFadgen, 2008). Approaches to measuring persistence and retention have largely worked with assumptions based on the traditional undergraduate student. These assumptions may not be valid for adult learners as their life circumstances are different from those of traditional students. When adults enrol in postsecondary education programs, they may not intend to complete their studies without interruption (Kerka, 1999). The typical definitions of attrition and retention are not as useful for adult learners as a result of their varied academic pathways. Adult students may take only one course at a time, and even then, may easily stop out for a period of time due to obligations in other areas of their lives (Grayson and Grayson, 2003). Similar implications can be drawn from the preliminary findings of a survey of college early leavers. The three most frequently cited factors that strongly influenced the early departure of adult students from their college program were personal/family issues, costs, and issues with time management. The factors most frequently cited by traditionally aged students: change in career goals, dislike for the program, and personal/family issues (GTA Institutional Research Network, forthcoming).

Many of the factors affecting access to postsecondary education for adult learners continue to impact mature students during their postsecondary education experience. Research specifically exploring mature student retention and persistence highlights a number of elements which appear to have greater significance for adults. Such adult learning factors include student expectations and understanding of the learning experience, goal orientation, relevance of studies and course content to the life and work context of the learner, availability of targeted support systems which facilitate academic and social integration, and adequate student-faculty interaction (Kerka, 1999; Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000; McGivney, 2004; Pyper & Bélanger, 2004; Kinser & Deitchman, 2007; MacFadgen, 2008; Mason, Doray & Bélanger, 2010).

Academic Outcomes

The College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading provides some information on AU graduates who have moved on to postsecondary education (CSC, 2010). The data are limited in that they provide information on students who have registered full time in postsecondary programming in the same college at which they attended their academic upgrading. Graduates enrolling part time and graduates transferring to another college are not included in the data. For some colleges, information is provided only for those students moving on directly after their AU program, those who may have "stopped out" are not included.

For the AU graduates that were tracked, there was a 27 per cent increase between 2002-03 and 2008-09 in the number moving on to full-time postsecondary programming. Algonquin College had the largest number of AU graduates moving on, with 19 per cent of the provincial total in 2008-09, although the inability to track transferring AU graduates negatively affects the provincial share of the GTA colleges, where transfer rates tend to be higher. A larger proportion of female AU graduates moved on to postsecondary education than males (59 per cent vs. 41 per cent) in 2008-09. Enrolment in Health Sciences programs (32 per cent) was the most popular choice among AU graduates, followed by Technology programs (19 per cent) and Business (17 per cent). Furthermore, in 2008-09, 66.5 per cent of AU graduates opted to enrol in programs of 3 or more semesters in duration, indicating that many AU graduates make a long term commitment to their educational goals (CSC, 2010).

For those AU graduates tracked through their subsequent college programs, the overall first semester pass rate for students in all programs was 82 per cent, 9 per cent withdrew mainly because of financial reasons, and 9 per cent did not achieve the GPA required to continue in their postsecondary education program of choice. The average GPA varied by program category from 2.83 to 3.33. In most program categories more than 70 per cent of eligible students enrolled in the second semester of their program. In terms of retention and GPA, graduates from AU programs who move on to college programming appear to be well prepared (CSC, 2010).

Of the 843 students enrolled in U of T's Academic Bridging Program in 2007-2008, 385 students (46 per cent) successfully completed the program and were eligible to register in the faculty of Arts and Science. Of those eligible graduates, 306 students (79 per cent) actually registered in the following year (U of T, 2009a).

Of the former U of T Transitional Year Program (TYP) students who entered the Faculty of Arts and Science between 1998 and 2007, 226 of the 469 students identified completed an undergraduate degree. This is 48 per cent of a cohort that included students still in the early stages of Faculty of Arts and Science registration. In all, 284 of the students (61 per cent) completed at least 10 credits, and 338 (72 per cent) maintained a GPA above 1.7, slightly lower than the average for ordinary Faculty of Arts and Science entrants. The number of first-degree completions by former TYP students at U of T has ranged between 12 and 23 annually (U of T, 2009b).

The results of the 2010 survey conducted for Ontario's Second Careers Program indicated that 93 per cent of Second Career students completed training, 61 per cent of those graduates found new jobs and 86 per cent of graduates were satisfied or very satisfied with their program[47].

An ongoing research project exploring the success of Ontario college students in first semester college mathematics indicated that, while the bulk of the student enrolment occurred in the 18 to 20 age group, the highest levels of mathematics achievement were attained by students in the 30 to 50 age range (CMP, 2010; 2011). In addition, the study found that Second Careers Program students attained higher levels of first semester mathematics achievement relative to direct entry college students (CMP, 2010; 2011). These findings led the researchers to contend that combinations of maturity-related factors were likely to be significant determinants of success in college mathematics, although previous education of the participants was not accounted for, and would affect achievement.

Labour Market Outcomes

The question is: does it pay to go back to school? There have been numerous studies on the returns to postsecondary education in Canada (Moussaly-Sergieh & Vaillancourt, 2009; Boothby & Drewes, 2010; Boudarbat et al., 2010), but little research has attempted to separate the impacts of adult schooling from those of regular schooling. The limited number of studies that do exist have been conducted at the national level, and the authors advise caution in interpreting the results as due expressly to adult education.

Results from the Youth in Transition Survey were used to examine the early labour market outcomes of those who had returned to high school after dropping out, referred to as "second chancers". Analysis revealed that overall outcomes of second chancers were not necessarily different from those dropouts who never returned to high school. However, for second chancers who went on to postsecondary education, there was a positive impact on employment status only. These findings suggest that the postsecondary education experience of this group of learners assists in gaining a foothold in the labour market, but that the postsecondary training has not necessarily translated into higher earnings for these graduates (Hango, 2010).

Analysis of the labour market outcomes of a sample of adult learners, (individuals who had interrupted schooling for some time before returning), from Statistics Canada's Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics suggested that there are benefits in the form of higher earnings and shorter periods of unemployment for those who continue to participate in education as adults. Returning to school resulted in significant wage and earnings returns, but only if a postsecondary certificate was actually obtained (Zhang & Palameta, 2006), particularly for men (Drewes, 2010). Although older individuals and workers with lower levels of previous education participated in adult education less

[47] http://news.ontario.ca/tcu/en/2010/09/the-second-career-program.html

often than those who were younger or more-educated, those who did participate often benefited just as much or more (Zhang & Palameta, 2006). For individuals who experienced unemployment, participation in education programs and job related courses resulted in a higher likelihood of leaving unemployment relative to non-participants (Drewes, 2010). Similar findings were uncovered using the National Survey on the Changing Nature of Work and Life-Long Learning and the Adult Education and Training Survey: the least educated were the least likely to participate in further education, but when they did participate they were the most likely to benefit in terms of self-reported wage and/or employment gains (Myers & Myles, 2005).

Several national studies have investigated the effects of delaying school among postsecondary education graduates using the National Graduates Survey (NGS) (Dubois, 2007; Ferrer & Menendez, 2009). Data from the 1995 cohort of the NGS indicated that approximately 28 per cent of the class of 1995 had delayed their first postsecondary degree by one year or more (Ferrer & Menendez, 2009), 30 per cent for college graduates and 8 per cent for Bachelor's degree graduates (Dubois, 2007). In comparing the labour market status and wages of graduates who completed their first postsecondary degree right after high school, with the outcomes of individuals who were not in school before enrolling in the same program, it was generally found that graduates who delayed their education were no worse off, and in some instances, received a premium relative to graduates who did not delay, even after considering other factors such as experience or labour market connections (Dubois, 2007; Ferrer & Menendez, 2009).

A recent study used the Longitudinal Worker File, an administrative database of workers that allows displaced workers and attendance in postsecondary education to be identified. Workers were followed longitudinally from five years prior to nine years following job loss, which facilitated the analysis of the earnings consequences of training following displacement, as well as the relationship between job displacement and postsecondary training. Study results indicated that workers who attended postsecondary education shortly following job loss saw their earnings increase more than displaced workers who did not. Despite the apparent benefits of education, however, job loss was found to be associated with only a modest increase in postsecondary education attendance (Frenette, Upward and Wright, 2011).

Although the research on labour market outcomes to adult education is limited, there are some indications that returning to school does provide for generally more positive outcomes for returning adult learners. Additional research in this field would be welcome and informative as this is the type of information that would be useful and motivating for adults considering a return to education and for educational providers advising them.

Summary and Implications

Adult learners, those who have left their initial round of education and have returned after a period of absence, are a heterogeneous group with varying needs and motivations for seeking further education. Adult learners are also difficult to define and hence to identify, in part due to the non-linear pathways that all postsecondary education students are increasingly pursuing. In gathering relevant data for this paper it was evident that there is a lack of reliable longitudinal data on adult learning participation and outcomes. Many of the indicators used to assess student outcomes are based on traditionally aged students and are not entirely applicable to adult learners. Data on assessment of the effectiveness of policy initiatives directed at adult education are also difficult to find. An investment in research exploring the results of adult education participation, including labour market and social outcomes, would enable evidence-based decision-making in both policy and practice.

Almost 900,000 Ontarians aged 25 to 64 (14 per cent) have less than a secondary school education level; an additional 1.7 million Ontarians in that age group (25 per cent) have completed only a secondary school education. Approximately 3.5 million Ontarians aged 16 to 65 (43 per cent) have literacy levels insufficient to cope successfully with the increasing demands of the emerging knowledge society and information economy. The highest proportion of Ontarians with unmet education or training needs or wants is in the 25 to 54 age group. Even for well-educated and employed adults, in the current knowledge economy, with its advancements in technology and rapidly changing skill requirements, it is becoming increasingly necessary to pursue the development of new skills and competencies and to upgrade existing ones. The demand for adult education exists within these segments of the population, either at a basic level, for re-training, or in pursuit of higher education.

Ontario postsecondary institutions are accommodating adult learners either in regular postsecondary education programming or in programs specifically targeted at adult students, which include continuing education, and upgrading or bridging to postsecondary education programs. The concern arises over the unequal distribution of participation in adult education. Research findings indicate that those adults with the weakest background, as measured by literacy and education levels, and who would benefit most from the improved social and economic outcomes of further education, are the least likely to participate in adult education.

How can the sector encourage participation by adults in further education, particularly the second chance learners? The most frequently cited barriers to participation in adult education and training were centered on scheduling time for education with family responsibilities and with work. As a result, adults are more likely to participate in training activities which involve shorter term time commitments and which are relevant to their career goals or employment. Adults with prior education and/or work experience and who are seeking to further their education are those who would benefit most from prior learning assessment and credit recognition. Additionally, research on the persistence of adult learners indicates that they are more successful if they can see the relevance of the learning to the context of their life or employment and if they are

supported academically and socially. These findings suggest that educational institutions providing a variety of flexible delivery formats for learning and services, programming relevant to the life circumstances and needs of adults, and adequate targeted support services, including PLAR and transfer credit facilitation, may have greater success in recruiting and retaining this population of learners.

Although not ranked as highly, financial issues were also a concern for adult students. The higher proportion of older students with non-government sources of financing, relative to government student loans suggests that the current public financial aid system may not be meeting their needs, and some efforts have recently been implemented to begin to address this issue. Employer support, financial or otherwise, for adult education or training was also concentrated on more highly skilled and educated employees, a practice which may result in further intensifying inequalities in education and subsequent labour market outcomes. Furthering financial support or incentives for both learners and employers, encouraging employers and employer-organizations to increase investment in learning for their employees, and supporting provider collaboration with employers to customize offerings in order to meet the needs of the workplace and workers have all been suggested as mechanisms for making adult participation in further education and training more equitable.

In summary, there are a number of crucial conditions for reaching adult learners that have emerged from the research, particularly those "second chance learners," and encouraging them to participate in further education. The implications are directed at the various stakeholders involved in adult education. For government this implies the collaborative development of a policy framework for adult education that co-ordinates with labour market policy; promotion of financial support or incentives for educators, employers and learners; fostering of a culture of lifelong learning for individuals and employers; and encouragement of collaboration and coherence among providers. It is suggested that adult education providers make learning more attractive to adults by using an approach that incorporates adult learning principles and is responsive to the needs of adult learners; provides flexibility in the provision of programs, services and outreach policies; and improves the recognition of prior learning and credentials. Finally, it is suggested that employers and employer-organizations increase investment in and opportunities for participation in learning for employees.

Considering the province's target to raise the postsecondary attainment rate to 70 per cent, the understanding that adult learners must be tapped to meet this goal, and the general acknowledgement that in the current knowledge economy learning must continue throughout the entire lifetime of an individual, an increased focus on adult education by all stakeholders is clearly warranted.

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