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Non-Traditional Pathways to Postsecondary Education: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Students in College Preparatory Programs

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Executive Summary

News reports warn of an upcoming labour shortage that will be accompanied by high unemployment rates due to a large pool of workers who do not have the skills to participate in the Canadian labour market. Researchers and economists have suggested focusing on training populations of individuals who have historically been underrepresented in the labour market as a way of addressing this upcoming shortage.

Through its Employment Ontario – Literacy and Basic Skills program, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities funds preparatory programs at all Ontario public colleges. These programs provide a pathway for non-traditional learners to access postsecondary education and training that would allow them to attain education, training and meaningful employment. Preparatory programs cater to prospective students interested in attending postsecondary programs, trades training or apprenticeships but who lack the admission requirements or who have been out of school for an extended period of time. Preparatory programs provide adult learners with the opportunity to improve their mathematics, communications, computer and science skills up to the level expected for college entry. The courses students take can also fulfill prerequisite requirements for entry into college programs. Other reasons students attend preparatory programs include personal development, career exploration, upgrading for employment purposes or interest in obtaining their high school equivalency.

This report examines the experiences of preparatory program students at Conestoga College. This research will help answer the questions: 1) What are the educational experiences of preparatory program participants? 2) How does participation in preparatory programs impact the lives of the learners involved? 3) What aspects or features of preparatory programs contribute to the outcomes of program participants? The results of the proposed research project are exportable given that all Ontario colleges offer similar preparatory programs.

Thirty-five participants (22 females, 13 males) participated in semi-structured interviews about their preparatory program experiences. Of those who participated, 16 were currently in preparatory programs, 15 had completed the preparatory programs and were currently attending postsecondary studies, and four were in the workforce.

When asked about their previous educational experience, participants' feelings ranged from very positive to very negative. There were two central factors that affected their performance and experience in high school: social relationships and social support. Regarding social relationships, many students reported that they placed greater importance on their friendships than on academic success. For some students, negative social experiences such as bullying also had an impact. High school experiences were also shaped by social support, with many students reporting a lack of support from individuals in their social systems. This ranged from not receiving enough attention from instructors, instructors' lack of concern regarding their well-being, and a lack of support from parents. Many students touched on the importance of social support when discussing the impact that positive attention played on their academic performance; often the support of a particular instructor would result in students excelling in that particular subject area.

When the participants began thinking about their return to school, they felt a number of concerns. One main concern was their age; this ranged from general concerns about how old they were to concerns about how long they had been away from school, and other artefacts of age, such as their memory. Participants were concerned about how old they would be compared to the other students. Students were also worried about whether they would be able to keep up with the workload and routine of being in school, considering how much time they had spent away from formal education. Our participants also had added challenges related to

the prospect of juggling school along with families and work, and whether they would be able to manage their time well enough to complete their required coursework.

The most common theme of concern about returning to school was participants' lack of confidence in their academic abilities. Often these feelings stemmed from their feelings and experiences in high school. It appeared that the longer participants were away from school, the less confident they felt about their academic abilities before starting preparatory programs.

For most participants, the main reason for attending preparatory classes was related to a desire to improve their lives, including their career outlook and income potential. Participants saw preparatory programs as a way of gaining entrance to postsecondary studies by completing the prerequisites they needed. Their experiences in the preparatory programs often helped them to further define their education and career goals as they completed more labour market research, became comfortable with the course material and became more self-aware.

Generally, participants perceived their time in preparatory programs to be a success. Most of these feelings were due to participants' perceptions of the gains that they had made while in the programs. Participants felt that they had experienced a great deal of academic and intellectual growth; working through the material resulted in participants coming to realize their own levels of intelligence and potential. They were proud of the academic gains that they had made. Additionally, participants felt that they had experienced a great deal of personal growth. Many participants commented on the skills that they learned and how they could transfer and apply these skills to other areas of their lives.

When asked to reflect on the factors that affected their success in preparatory programs, four main themes were identified. From an individual perspective, participants felt that one reason for their success was their readiness to learn. Many participants commented on how they were not in the right mindset during high school to succeed in academics. However, they were now pursuing education by their own choice in order to achieve their goals, which motivated them to succeed.

Three features of the program were cited as factors related to students' success in preparatory programs. One was the availability of training supports; the financial subsidies for items such as childcare and transportation allowed them to take part in preparatory programs when they would not otherwise have been able to for financial reasons. The program's learner-centred approach was also an important factor. Participants appreciated that the program was flexible and allowed them to learn at their own pace and use methods that were most effective for their learning style.

One very important theme that was repeatedly emphasized by participants when they discussed their success in preparatory programs was the instrumental role played by the preparatory program teachers. Participants appreciated opportunities to work and connect with teachers on an individual basis. The teachers were also sensitive to the needs of the students and would provide them with multiple methods of instruction on any given topic to ensure that participants grasped the material. Working closely with the teachers resulted in the development of close relationships that enhanced participants' motivation to succeed and also provided them with the support they needed to face personal issues in their lives. The teachers' commitment to the success of the students was very clear to students and was a source of great support.

Overall, the results of this study illustrate the importance of preparatory programs as a pathway into postsecondary studies for non-traditional students. While the students in this study came from varied backgrounds, there were many consistent themes found within their stories. Many struggled with concerns about returning to school but found that these concerns were addressed and alleviated through participation

in the preparatory programs and through the support of the teachers in the program. Participants felt that their time in the preparatory programs was a success, equipping them with self-confidence and the skills needed to be successful in postsecondary studies and beyond.

While the results of this research may not be surprising to preparatory program practitioners and staff, the fact remains that these preparatory programs are largely unknown to the general public. Given the predicted labour shortage that Canada will face, the value in providing additional funding for preparatory programs is clear. With some programs maintaining waiting lists, the market for the program is clearly present and would warrant additional financial support. Also, these programs have a proven track record of success, particularly for individuals who may have had negative educational experiences in the past. Preparatory programs could act as an important transition point for unemployed and underemployed Canadians into meaningful employment and assist Canada in building a more highly skilled and active labour force.

Introduction

New reports by economists and other experts constantly warn of an upcoming labour shortage. Rick Miner's *People Without Jobs, Jobs Without People* (2010), for example, suggests that the best way to address the labour shortage is to focus on individuals and populations who are currently underrepresented in the labour market. Historically, preparatory programs have been a pathway for non-traditional learners to access the postsecondary education and training required to attain meaningful employment. However, preparatory programs are often unknown to the general public, and little academic research has been done to describe or evaluate their impact.

More than 40 years ago, PSE was commonly referred to as higher education (HE) and placed great importance on conceptual and intellectual capacity for entry into a limited number of professions (OECD, 2008). More recently, postsecondary institutions have diversified to meet the needs of society and the economy, rather than remaining autonomous research bodies. The postsecondary system has become “demand-led (with market forces determining HE options) rather than supply-led (whereby government actions determine program offerings)” (Lennon, 2010, p. 1). In the gradual shift to a knowledge-based economy, Ontario's economic success relies on the capacity of its labour force to adapt to the challenges of a diversifying market. As such, PSE is increasingly becoming an asset for individuals to obtain long-term, meaningful employment.

The present report documents the experiences of individuals who have participated in preparatory programs. Participants discussed their pathways into preparatory programs, their experiences within them and their perceptions of outcomes after participation. With the growing workforce shortage, the emphasis on credentials and skills, and the clear relationship between educational attainment and increases in an individual's economic opportunities and professional attainment, it becomes of great importance to examine the pathways that non-traditional students take into postsecondary education.

This research examined the educational experiences of preparatory program students, how the experience impacted their lives and what aspects of the program were perceived as making an impact and being of value to them. While preparatory program staff and students have extolled the benefits of the program anecdotally, this research makes an important contribution by adding to the literature on preparatory programs.

Preparatory Programs in Ontario

After conducting an environmental scan, we concluded that all 24 publicly funded colleges offer some kind of academic upgrading and preparatory programs. Ontario public college preparatory programs are funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities under Employment Ontario and through a program called Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS). LBS-funded programs provide literacy support to individuals who are over 19 years of age (some age exceptions may apply), are an Ontario resident, are functioning below a Level 3 as defined by the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS), and are proficient in speaking and listening in the language of instruction (English or French). LBS-funded programs are hosted by a wide range of organizations including community organizations, school boards and community colleges. Each organization will have guidelines around the literacy levels learners should possess before entering into their programs. Typically, colleges in Ontario serve the higher level LBS learner who is looking for support to (re)enter the workforce or postsecondary education. All LBS-funded programs must adhere to the same service provider guidelines, thus offering a level of consistency across LBS programming at public colleges. The courses that learners take through Ontario college preparatory programs can act as prerequisites for entry into various college programs. However, preparatory programs generally differ from regular college

programs in their content and delivery methods. These programs follow a standard format by offering math, English (also referred to as communications), science and computer skills upgrading, as well as opportunities to obtain a high school equivalency (Academic and Career Entrance [ACE] or General Education Development [GED] Diploma). They also offer a degree of flexibility that is not found in regular postsecondary programs; they are available in part-time and full-time study, as well as swing shift, day and night classes and, in certain locations, weekend classes, with continuous intake throughout the school year. Some universities also offer their own unique preparatory programs, which may serve similar functions to the programs offered by Ontario's public colleges but are not funded under the same program or governed by the same mandates.

Conestoga College Preparatory Programs

This study examines the experiences of students at Conestoga College who have taken part in programs that can broadly be understood as preparatory programs. Participants in the present study attended one or more of three main preparatory programs offered at Conestoga: the Academic Upgrading (AU) program, "Focus for Change" and "Discover your Future." The term "preparatory programs" is used in this study to refer to any of these three programs, which non-traditional students would attend to help them transition into a college postsecondary program.

The Academic Upgrading program provides adult learners with the opportunity to improve their mathematics, communications, computer and science skills up to the level expected for college entry. The courses students take can also fulfill prerequisite credits required to gain entry into college programs. The AU program caters to prospective students interested in attending postsecondary programs, trades training or apprenticeships, but who lack the admission requirements or who have been out of school for an extended period of time and would like to refresh their skills before entering college. Other reasons students attend AU include upgrading for employment purposes or interest in obtaining their high school equivalency.

Conestoga also offers two specialized preparatory programs, "Discover Your Future" and "Focus for Change." These programs could be considered "pre" academic upgrading programs for learners who require extra support in transitioning to meaningful employment. Both of these programs provide students with self-exploration and self-assessment opportunities, as well as career and employment exploration. Students in these programs participate in informational interviews, job shadowing and labour market research to help develop realistic goals and create action plans to achieve them. While these two programs are similar in nature, "Focus for Change" is only for women and runs for a longer period of time. Upon completion of these programs, learners have often identified their educational and career goals. As a result, graduates from "Focus for Change" and "Discover Your Future" often go on to become Academic Upgrading students and work toward achieving the credentials they need to move on to postsecondary education.

Literature Review

Influx of Non-Traditional Students in PSE

Postsecondary institutions have seen a shift in student demographics over recent years. Non-traditional students are part of one of the fastest growing populations at postsecondary institutions (Fairchild, 2003).

Non-traditional students are defined as those who do not enter directly into PSE from high school¹, including students who enter through preparatory programs. In the United States, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 38 per cent of the more than eighteen million college students who enrolled in 2007 were twenty-five years of age or older (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). In 2010, the majority of college applicants in Ontario were between the ages of 25 and 34 years old. According to a report by Colleges Ontario (2012), 60 per cent of all college students in Ontario were 21 years of age or older.

Generally, non-traditional students face increased challenges compared to traditional students, including outside responsibilities, unfamiliarity with an academic environment and limited social support (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 1993; Rash et al., 2008). As a result, non-traditional students are more likely to drop out of PSE than are traditional students.

The spectrum of non-traditional pathways to PSE is varied and complex. The traditional pathway has long been one where students enter a postsecondary institution immediately after high school, graduate and obtain employment commensurate with their education (though even this traditional pathway is being challenged in today's challenging labour market; e.g., Carrick, 2012). Alternatively, students following non-traditional pathways may experience disruptions, social and economic barriers, and/or challenges to employment. Preparatory programs are an opportunity to bridge this gap by providing a pathway through to postsecondary education and, in some instances, into employment.

Much scholarship has been produced on the topic of non-traditional learners in higher education. Most notably, reports released between 1987 and 2000 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) illustrate a shift in the demographic composition of learners. At the time of the initial study in 1987, "the term adult, or mature student, was frequently used as a proxy for sections of the population who were under-represented in higher education" (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p. 311). They differed from the majority of students (or traditional learners) by specific characteristics. As the composition of students became heterogeneous "in terms of previous education, social and family background, gender, age, life-situation, motivation to study, current and future occupational profiles," these adults and mature students were conceptualized as non-traditional learners (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p. 311). A report published by York University pointed out that mature, part-time and evening students once were synonymous, but that these characteristics now fail to accurately describe non-traditional students; "diversity in terms of course load, age, as well as ethnicity, race, language and class increasingly characterizes our student body" (York University, 2009). As the number of non-traditional students accessing postsecondary education continues to increase, it becomes of great importance for postsecondary institutions to consider and respond to their varying needs.

In recent years, the state of PSE has become a priority, as evidenced by two prominent reports: the 2004 "Adult Education Review" (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2004) and the 2005 Rae report,

¹ Students who have not taken a high school class for a minimum of one academic year before entry into PSE.

“Ontario: A Leader in Learning.” Both reports emphasized accessibility for underrepresented groups as a priority. Helping all students, especially non-traditional students, successfully complete PSE involves more than just teaching them skills. Ultimately, in order to support underrepresented student groups, postsecondary education should focus on developing structured forms of support such as summer bridge programs, mentor programs, student clubs, and contact with faculty and staff advisors (Tinto, 2002) so that students are embedded and actively engaged in an environment that supports individual styles and cultures of learning.

Measuring Non-Traditional Students’ Success within PSE Settings

The report “Prepared for Success 2009-2010,” prepared by the College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading, evaluated the success of graduates from preparatory programs in Ontario in their first semester of PSE from 2003 to 2010. Examining the performance of all AU graduates in Ontario during their first semesters in postsecondary, 83 per cent achieved an overall pass rate, 9 per cent withdrew (primarily for financial reasons) and 8 per cent did not achieve the GPA required to continue in the program. In addition, of the 83 per cent of students who achieved an overall pass rate (therefore meeting eligibility), more than 70 per cent enrolled in the second semester of the same program. The report concludes, “In terms of retention and GPA, students from adult upgrading programs who move on to postsecondary programming continue to demonstrate that they are well prepared both academically and personally to succeed. Furthermore, the low rate of program changes indicates participation in adult upgrading programs may have helped them make the appropriate program selections” (College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading, 2010).

Gap in the Literature: Evaluations of Preparatory Programs

Preparatory programs are funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). As a result, they are rigorously tracked on a regular basis through stringent reporting requirements. However, not much academic research has been conducted examining the experiences of AU students. The lack of research could be due to the challenging nature of tracking non-traditional students, given their non-linear and varied pathways, and also due to college system restrictions.² Flexibility in terms of program structure and length presents a challenge in gauging progress as well.

One evaluation was conducted on the Gateway program offered at Lakehead University (Brown & Doyle, 2010). The Gateway program is designed to assist non-traditional students with their transition to university by providing individual academic advising, a University 101 course, career and personality assessments, and peer tutoring. The researchers assessed the effectiveness of the program using qualitative interviews and found that the Gateway program was effective at increasing university retention and successful program completion. The results of the Gateway program are encouraging because they suggest that preparatory programs can have a positive impact on non-traditional students by assisting them in various aspects of their lives, such as passing courses, gaining insight into themselves and assessing their future goals. While informative, this research focuses on one particular preparatory program at one particular institution, in this case a university. In the present study, we look to examine the experiences of students moving through preparatory programs that share a common structure across Ontario’s public colleges. While our research takes place at one institution, the results may be generalized to other preparatory programs and other groups of students given the standardized nature of these programs as mandated by the program funder, MTCU.

² The Ontario College Application Service (OCAS) is only able to track the participation of full-time students, therefore leaving out students who attend college part-time or through continuing education.

Research Objectives

The proposed project examines the outcomes of individuals who have participated in college preparatory programs at Conestoga College and explores the reasons for the achieved outcomes.

The goal of the present study is to fill in some gaps in the existing empirical research on preparatory programs by examining the experiences of non-traditional learners who are presently enrolled in or have previously participated in college preparatory programs as a pathway into postsecondary education. In our study, we attempt to situate participants' experiences in the preparatory program within the broader context of their lives. By taking this approach, we attempt to gain a better perspective of participants' pathways to PSE, including their experiences in high school, what led them to preparatory programs, and how participation in the preparatory program may have impacted their views of themselves and of education, and their journey through postsecondary.

This research will help answer the questions: 1) What are the educational experiences of preparatory program participants? 2) How does participation in preparatory programs impact the lives of the learners involved? 3) What aspects or features of preparatory programs contribute to the outcomes of program participants? The results of the proposed research project are exportable given that all Ontario colleges offer similar preparatory programs. Other colleges could thus benefit from the results of this work and the research conducted at Conestoga College could serve as a case study for other sites.

Method and Procedure

Research Design

A project advisory committee was convened for this study. Its purpose was to ensure consultation from important preparatory program stakeholders on all elements of the project. The committee consisted of seven members: the Dean of the School of Career and Academic Access, the Chair of Workforce Development, the Chair of Preparatory Programs, the Manager of Institutional Research and Planning, a preparatory program teacher (faculty), a preparatory program student, and the research coordinator, who acted as committee chair. All study materials were developed in consultation with the project advisory committee.

This qualitative study involved the use of semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed us to ensure that the same questions were being asked to all participants, while also allowing room for participants to elaborate on issues that were brought to the surface during the interview. Interview questions were developed based on an extensive literature review into research on preparatory programs, postsecondary education and adult education, and refined based on input from the project advisory committee. The interview assessed participants' experiences prior to entering the preparatory program, their academic goals, their preparatory program experiences and their experiences following the preparatory program. The interview was pilot tested with a past preparatory program student who was currently enrolled in a postsecondary program. Her feedback was presented to the project advisory committee. Feedback from the pilot testing session and from the project advisory committee was considered and the appropriate revisions were made to the interview guide.

The project received ethics approval from the Conestoga College Ethics Review Board (see Appendix A). A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

Recruitment

Both current and former students of Conestoga College's preparatory program were recruited to take part in this study. Participants were contacted by program instructors, either in class or by email. Since many participants remained in contact with program instructors, contacting former students did not present a major challenge. A standard recruitment letter was given to all potential participants containing the research coordinator's contact information. Interested participants contacted the research coordinator and an interview session was scheduled. Participants were offered a \$20 gift card to either Tim Horton's, Zehrs or Future Shop for their participation. Participants' names were also entered into a draw to win a 16 gigabyte BlackBerry Playbook. The original goal was to conduct 40 interviews consisting of 15 current preparatory students, 15 former preparatory students who were currently in PSE, and ten former preparatory students who have graduated from PSE and are now in the workplace. We also wanted our study sample to reflect the typical gender distribution of preparatory program students, which is 60 per cent female and 40 per cent male. Participants were to be chosen from the pool of volunteers using a stratified sampling strategy; however, because we received fewer volunteers than anticipated, we included all who volunteered to participate in the present study.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted between March 1 and August 31, 2012. Interviews were conducted either in person at one of the college's campuses or over the phone. On-campus interviews took place in a quiet room with one interviewer and the participant. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide which included predetermined questions and a set of prompts to help elicit further information from participants should they be required (see Appendix B for a copy of the interview guide). Before proceeding with the interviews, all participants were asked to provide informed consent for their participation. Interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length and were recorded on a digital voice recorder. The completed interviews were transcribed by a research assistant into Microsoft Word. All transcripts were then imported into Nvivo10 for analysis.

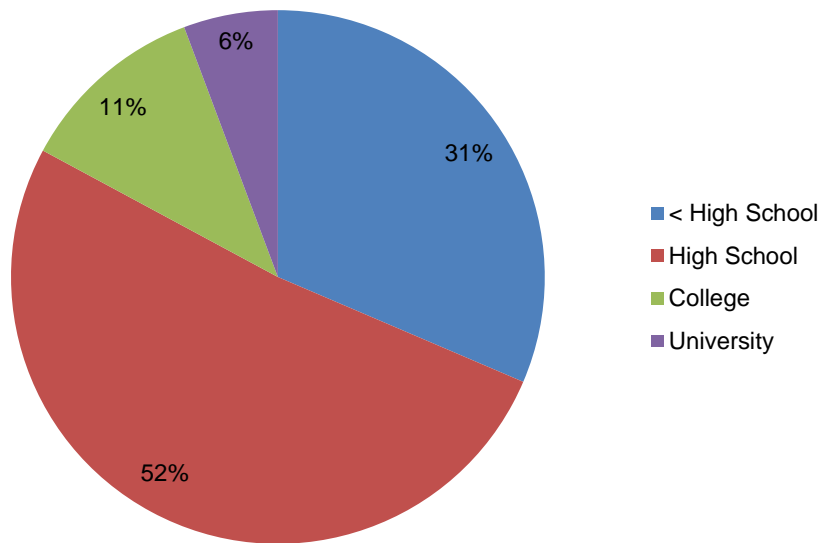
Participants

Thirty-eight individuals volunteered to take part in the study. Three participants failed to appear for their scheduled interviews and could not be rescheduled. Thus a total of 35 participants (22 females, 13 males) took part in the study. At the time of the study, the average age of participants was 36 years old, with ages ranging from 19 to 59. The average age of participants when they began the preparatory program was 34 and ranged from 18 to 58 years of age. Sixteen participants were currently in the preparatory program, 15 had graduated from the program and were currently attending postsecondary studies, and the remaining four participants were currently in the workplace. Seven of the 35 participants were born outside of Canada. To be eligible for the preparatory programs, individuals for whom English was not their first language were required to have a Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) of level 7. Of those participants born outside of Canada, five were internationally trained (referred to as internationally trained immigrants, ITIs), meaning that they had completed some form of postsecondary education outside of Canada. The remaining two participants who were born outside of Canada immigrated prior to completing high school; ITIs did not immigrate to Canada until after completing their postsecondary education. While this sample of foreign-born participants came from

varied backgrounds, their experiences tended to share many commonalities. Still, there were a number of experiences that were unique to ITIs. Where relevant, these issues will be addressed separately.

Participants in the study varied greatly in terms of the highest level of education attained before participating in a Conestoga preparatory program. Many participants did not complete high school. A higher proportion obtained their high school diploma and a few of those participants went on to college and university programs. Specifically, 11 had not completed high school, 18 participants had completed high school but did not pursue PSE, four had a college diploma and two had a university degree.³

Figure 1: Highest Level of Education Completed



³ All of the university-educated participants were ITIs, as were all but one of the college-educated participants.

Analysis

The coding framework was created based on initial readings of transcripts; this was a collaborative process involving both the research coordinator and assistant. Both the research coordinator and the research assistant began by reading through the transcripts thoroughly. On subsequent readings, each individual noted any patterns that appeared in the data, as well as any “thick descriptions” (Patton, 2002). Working in consultation, the research coordinator and the research assistant went through the patterns and thick descriptions to identify themes, which became the framework around which the data was organized. As data were analyzed and synthesized, the research coordinator and research assistant would discuss any new interpretations or themes that emerged. Upon completion of coding, the themes were summarized and presented to the project advisory committee for review and comment.

Results

Findings from the interview data are separated into three categories. The first category outlines information related to factors that led participants toward participation in preparatory programs. These include topics such as the highest level of education prior to enrolment in preparatory programs, high school experience, confidence related to academic performance, feelings about having left high school, reasons for taking preparatory classes, concerns about returning to school, and pathway determinants and challenges. The second category includes participants’ experiences within the preparatory program, which addresses barriers impacting preparatory programming, experiences with supports and services offered through preparatory programs, goals for the preparatory programs and comparisons between high school and preparatory programs. The final category outlines outcomes, including skills and related benefits gained through preparatory programs, confidence and perceived reasons for changes in confidence through the preparatory programming, feelings about and impact of education and conceptions of personal success related to preparatory programs.

Factors Preceding Preparatory Programs

Previous Educational Experience

Participants recalled a broad range of high school grades, from very poor to exceptional. Despite this broad range, most of the students in our study reported that they had average grades in high school. Some participants expressed that their grades were inconsistent; they claimed to have performed well in some subjects and poorly in others. These participants claimed that variations in performance could be attributed to factors such as personal interest in particular subjects. For many participants, there were two central factors that affected their performance and experience in high school: social relationships and social support.

Social Relationships

The social aspect of high school was frequently cited as a key determinant in overall high school experience and in some cases detracted from academic performance. Some participants reported that they tended to care more about their school friends than academic success. These participants’ comments reflect the importance of the social aspect of high school, often above all else:

“It was a social experience for me, I wasn’t there for the knowledge at all... As far as I was concerned, I was there because I had to be.” (Participant 20)

“My parents are very school-focused... But I think I always felt like I’d rather hang out with my friends than go to class and get stuff done.” (Participant 3)

Participants who reported being more focused on the social aspects of high school also reported doing poorly in school and were more likely to have dropped out of high school, particularly when their social networks included individuals who did not prioritize academics. Participants also reported leaving school early as a result of a variety of external factors, such as problems at home.

For other participants, a lack of positive social connections or having negative connections were also factors that affected their engagement in high school.

“Social anxiety... not fitting in. It’s easy to be objective now and look back on it, because it’s almost like I was a different person. I can say, y’know what? The reason he didn’t do well in school is because he didn’t have a lot of friends and he wasn’t well-liked, or he was in a group of people that were taunted or teased or whatever, and didn’t like going to school so didn’t perform well.” (Participant 32)

Specifically, some participants’ high school experiences were shaped by bullying. One participant described how being bullied affected academic performance:

“My high school experience was actually not very good; bullied a lot, teased, stuff that would affect you personally and your high school grades.” (Participant 11)

Notably, although participants reported generally doing well in high school, they tended to recall negative affective experiences. A factor that likely contributed to participants’ negative experiences was the social aspect of school: participants either caring more about their school friends than academic success or not having a strong positive connection to their peers.

For many participants, social aspects of high school, whether positive or negative, became greater priorities than academics. The high focus on social relationships during high school years may have impacted participants’ ability to prioritize schoolwork.

Social Support

When asked about their high school experiences and the challenges they faced, many participants reported a perceived lack of support from individuals in their social systems. Social support can be defined as the knowledge or understanding that one is cared for, valued by others and part of a larger network (e.g., Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Seeman, 1996). This awareness of the lack of concern from others was perceived by participants as having a great impact on their academic outcomes.

At school, the lack of support was described as not getting enough individually-focused attention in the classroom from instructors, and what appeared to be a general lack of concern for the student and his/her wellbeing.

“I didn’t find the teachers very helpful... I was struggling with... family problems, home problems, and school problems... I moved... when I was a teenager. Nobody seemed concerned that I was doing

very poorly in school, nobody spoke to me about what was happening, when I quit nobody called up.” (Participant 33)

“I just kind of was being pushed through... running through the motions and no one really dealt with me the way they should have, a little bit of extra help.” (Participant 19)

Some participants took particular notice of the difference in their achievements when they received support from teachers. For example, one participant explained how one teacher’s extra assistance contributed to higher grades in one class compared to others:

“I was going for 50’s. I had some 60’s. My highest mark was an 86 in grade eleven English because I had a great teacher who actually understood me and would explain things to me in more detail if I needed it.” (Participant 19)

Several students echoed this sentiment, believing that teachers were instrumental to their success or failure in high school. Many participants who felt that they received adequate attention and support from their teachers also reported doing well. Conversely, those who felt that they had received very little attention and support reported doing poorly. Many students acknowledged that they did not perform to their potential in high school.

For some participants, this lack of support was also felt in the home, where parents had little concern for their academic achievement.

“One of the biggest challenges at that point, we didn’t have a lot of encouragement from home. I had two parents who never completed high school, and so there wasn’t a lot of focus or attention on education like you see in other families who are really focused on getting work done and an education... that wasn’t always modeled or encouraged at home.” (Participant 8)

Many believed that if they had received more individual attention and support, either from teachers or from family members, they might have been more successful in high school.

Other Factors Impacting Previous Educational Experience

Other less common factors that were identified by some participants as being challenges to their success in education prior to their participation in preparatory programs included language barriers, teenage parenthood, alcohol or substance abuse, mental health issues, learning disabilities, family issues, problems with confidence and lack of maturity.

The Pathway to Preparatory Programs

Feelings about Having Left High School

At the time, most participants were glad to have left high school. Many were excited by the prospect of entering the workforce and earning income. However, many expressed regrets related to the decision not to continue with education over time. Some felt as though their careers had stagnated. They recognized that further education was needed if they were to progress. One participant explained this sentiment:

“Straight out of high school, I felt great. You know, if you get right into the workforce, you start making some money and you think everything’s awesome, and then you start realizing that you’re working in a factory, you’re making twenty, twenty-five thousand dollars a year, and that gets very monotonous. You’re doing the same thing all the time. At first it was kind of a plateau, and then... I really started struggling. I wasn’t happy.” (Participant 6)

Concerns about Returning to School

Almost all of the participants identified concerns or fears about returning to school prior to their start in preparatory programs. Much of the concern centered on the issue of their age; from general concerns about their age overall to specific concerns about how long they had been away from school and other artefacts of age, such as their memory. Some students expressed concerns about their age compared to the age of other students. This particular participant’s reflections on age were echoed repeatedly:

“I guess because I had been out of school for so long... I was concerned about my age. I thought I was too old. I thought I’d be in a classroom full of nineteen year olds... and I was almost thirty. I was worried about feeling awkward.” (Participant 21)

Because many of the participants had been away from school for an extended period of time, they expressed concern over whether they would be able to keep up with the workload and the routine of being in school. Participants noted that the reservations they held ranged from concerns about their ability to succeed in specific subjects to the level of difficulty of the programming in general. For example, one participant worried:

“Will I be ready to do the math, the English, be able to upgrade and not have people looking at me like I’m stupid or something?” (Participant 22)

Juggling responsibilities, particularly family and work, was a recurring concern among participants. Concerns included worries about time management and being able to balance the workload to worries about being able to complete the objectives of the preparatory programs within the requisite timeframe.

Other concerns included issues related to finances and the social aspects of school. With regard to finance, some participants were worried about funding their studies, supporting their families or paying for childcare in order to attend preparatory programs. Students were also worried about meeting new people, fitting in and making new friends.

We asked participants specifically about how confident they felt about their academic abilities prior to attending preparatory programs. It was clear from the participants’ responses that a lack of confidence in their academic abilities was a large concern when returning to school. Much like participants’ reflections about their grades in high school, for some, academic-related confidence was high in some subjects but low in others.

For some participants, lack of confidence in academic abilities stemmed from their feelings and experiences in high school. Alternatively, some expressed high confidence in academic abilities but low motivation when it came to applying their abilities back in high school.

While participants expressed a range of levels of confidence in their academic abilities when they left high school, most expressed low or moderate levels of confidence prior to attending preparatory programs. In other words, participants reported a significant decrease in confidence in their academic abilities between the time they were in high school and the point at which they began their preparatory program studies. There seemed to be a relationship between greater time away from school and reduction in confidence in academic

ability. One interesting pattern to note was that individuals with lower confidence reported spending more time away from the formal academic environment following high school. When one participant was asked about academic-related confidence levels prior to starting a preparatory program, the response emphasized the connection between confidence and time away from an academic environment:

“Not very! It’d been a long time since... I’d done any schooling.” (Participant 15)

It is important to note that not all participants had actively reflected on their levels of academic confidence because they had not been in situations that had highlighted this for them. For example, some said that they did not think about how confident they were in academics at the time because their work and home lives did not rely on it:

“Didn’t need a great deal of academic skills as a [trade]. I needed to know how to read a blueprint. I did have to do some math... It’s not something that I spent a lot of time dwelling on!” (Participant 34)

Another pattern that was identified was the relationship between confidence in academic abilities and learning disabilities. Those individuals who reported having learning disabilities, whether diagnosed or undiagnosed, tended to report lower levels of confidence in their academic abilities.

The Unique Experience of ITIs before Entering Preparatory Programs

As mentioned above, ITIs have all achieved some type of PSE credential in their home country, which distinguishes them from their peers in preparatory programs. The achievement of a PSE credential suggests that the ITIs may have found their previous educational experiences to be more positive and successful compared to their Canadian-born preparatory program peers. This is seen through the differences in their experiences prior to entering preparatory programs.

Unlike most of the other participants, the ITIs tended to report highly positive high school experiences. They tended to enjoy high school, had positive social experiences and performed well academically. When asked about confidence in their academic ability, the ITIs tended to be quite confident.

For ITIs, their pathway into preparatory programs seemed to be guided by two factors that were unique to them. One factor that seemed to lead ITIs toward preparatory programs was their concerns regarding their English language functioning. Many ITIs took part in preparatory programs in order to continue developing and refining their English language skills. Before entering into preparatory programs, ITIs noted that they were concerned about whether they would be able to communicate and be understood by others and how their level of English would translate into the academic environment. For example, one participant stated:

“I learned this language on my very own, so I was a little bit worried how I would do in academic environment.” (Participant 29)

These students were concerned that their language limitations would result in them being judged negatively in the classroom.

The second unique reason that led ITIs to enter preparatory programs was in order to obtain the necessary prerequisites to gain professional accreditation for careers they had been working in prior to arriving in Canada. For instance, one participant said:

“PSW [personal support worker] is a hard job, you lift a lot and you walk a lot and it’s just for myself because I was a nurse in my country so where I come from so I would like to be the same over here and it also is a challenge for me.” (Participant 25)

Like some of their Canadian-born peers, some ITIs were in preparatory programs in order to gain the needed academic prerequisites to gain entry to PSE. These ITIs were choosing to pursue education in careers and fields in which they had not previously worked.

Preparatory Program Experience

Goals for the Preparatory Program

Overall, participants cited that their motivation to attend preparatory classes was connected to a desire for improvement in their lives, including improving their career outlook and income potential. For the majority of these participants, this entailed using preparatory studies as a stepping stone to postsecondary education by attaining the prerequisite course(s) or required grade cut off(s) to enter the postsecondary program of their choice. One participant explained:

“I wanted to do something with my life. I knew education was the key, and I wanted to get my feet wet before I just jumped right back into something that I haven’t experienced for a long time. And I knew my attitude was there, and I knew what I wanted to do, so I heard about these prep programs and I was all for it. It sounded like a really good stepping stone towards something bigger that I wanted to achieve.” (Participant 20)

While most participants were taking part in preparatory programs in order to prepare themselves for entry into postsecondary, several participants had goals that were unique. Specifically, a few of the ITIs took part in the program to help them further develop their English language skills. Some participants started out simply wanting to obtain their high school equivalency or to obtain skills that would benefit them in the workplace.

Others lacked direction before entering the program and hoped that it would help them discover their life path:

“The biggest thing for me was trying to figure out what I wanted to do... It’s so hard to figure out where you want to take your path in life so... the biggest thing for me was actually finding out what I want to do.” (Participant 6)

The majority of the participants knew what they wanted to gain from the program before they started and several participants held to those goals throughout the program. However, many participants reported experiencing a change in their goals, particularly those who had no defined goals or who had come to realize that their original goals were not matching their potential. When asked about initial goals for preparatory program involvement, this participant responded:

“I believe [my goal] was going to be postsecondary... A couple times I’d changed what I wanted to do, and then I thought, no I could do bigger and better and by the end of [the program] I had made my decision that I was going to compete for the [college program].” (Participant 9)

For others, the preparatory program helped them refine their pre-existing goals, in some cases highlighting options that they never knew existed or choosing from among several possible alternatives. In some cases, participants gained a greater understanding of their chosen professions, which prompted them to adjust their

goals. For example, after researching their chosen professions through the preparatory program, some participants gained knowledge about aspects of the job of which they had not been previously aware. In other cases, participants gained a greater understanding of themselves, which helped guide them to alternative career choices, which was the case with this participant:

“At first I was thinking about going into [college program], I didn’t really know why I wanted to get into it, I knew I liked working with my hands, and I know [people in this occupation] make pretty good money too... Then once I got into the [preparatory] program, that’s when I started to really learn more about myself and that’s when my goals changed. I still have the [college program] as something I wanted to do, and that’s always going to be a backup just in case.” (Participant 6)

From this sample, the majority of participants currently enrolled in preparatory programs (14 out of 16) planned to apply for postsecondary programs upon completion of their preparatory studies. Four of those participants had already been accepted into a college program and one more had applied and was waiting for a decision from various colleges. Three out of the 16 participants currently in the preparatory program planned to enter the workforce following program completion. The most common reason for not wanting to pursue PSE was a lack of finances.

Perceived Barriers to Success in Preparatory Programs

Once enrolled in preparatory programs, participants expressed that they encountered some of the challenges they had anticipated, while some concerns were alleviated. Some of these challenges were specifically related to academics. Some experienced subject-specific setbacks, such as struggles with math or challenges with communications. Participants mainly attributed these struggles to their own personal academic strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to issues with certain subject matter, participants also experienced more general barriers to their success while in the program. A few participants mentioned difficulty concentrating on their schoolwork in the preparatory environment due to distractions from other classmates. A few participants commented on challenges they experienced getting familiar with appropriate citation and referencing styles for research. Many of the barriers participants actually faced echoed their fears about returning to the academic environment prior to starting the program.

The most commonly cited difficulties faced during the preparatory program included family-related issues, juggling responsibilities and financial concerns. Many participants experienced difficulties that they attributed to being out of the formal education system for so long and struggled with the adjustments required to get back into the formal learning frame of mind and the classroom routine. One participant described the transition into the preparatory program as:

“...Tough. It was an adjustment. I don’t deal with change always very well so when you’re used to doing things one way, trying to figure out how to do them another way doesn’t always come easily.” (Participant 8)

Some participants mentioned keeping organized, meeting deadlines and staying focused as additional challenges they faced while in the program. Other common issues that participants tended to experience were related to confidence. Several participants expressed concerns with self-doubt (e.g., their ability to succeed) and issues with speaking out in class or approaching instructors with questions. This was highlighted by one participant who said:

“I think my biggest problem was the communication factor; the self-esteem and communication, because I had been home for so long and I had been in my little area for so long. So it was harder getting out, it wasn’t the getting up every morning, it wasn’t getting there, it was just where do I fit in kind of thing.” (Participant 9)

Additional Perceived Barriers for ITIs

A challenge that was specific to participants who were internationally trained centered on language barriers. In addition to some of the issues highlighted above, these students also struggled with understanding often complicated concepts presented in a second language. One ITI participant talked about her particular challenges with language:

“[The] only personal [difficulty], I would say that there was, was when I have to [learn] something and there were big words that I [couldn’t] understand. That was a difficulty for me in the program.” (Participant 1)

These participants were also self-conscious about their ability to communicate in English. The participant went on to say:

“Sometimes when a lot of people’s talking like in groups, I wasn’t sure to give my opinion on things because I wasn’t sure how to express myself and for me sometimes it’s hard when it’s a big group of people until I get to know them I can feel more confident. I feel that they will laugh or [look] at me funny because the way that I talk is a little bit different.” (Participant 1)

Growth of Learners

When asked, participants believed that their participation in the program was a success. Most felt this way because they believed they had attained, or would attain, their goals. Specifically, many participants discussed important skills that they had learned through the program (e.g., academic, time management, organizational skills, etc.) that would allow for success beyond the program, whether in PSE or the workforce. Participants also said that they had learned a great deal about themselves (e.g., their abilities, strengths and weaknesses). Additionally, they claimed that the program provided them with the much-needed motivation to move forward in their lives.

Academic and Intellectual Growth

Prior to taking part, many participants had the belief that they could not succeed in higher education, but the preparatory program allowed them to believe in themselves and their abilities. Many participants noted that their participation in the programs allowed them to realize their own levels of intelligence and recognize their own potential. Specifically, participants gained confidence in their ability to learn and succeed at academic endeavours:

“I can’t say that I’m 100 per cent confident but I can say that I’m like 85 per cent confident. I feel more – I don’t feel nervous as I was before and I feel like I can write now, better than I did before. So the course was really helpful.” (Participant 1)

“It’s really made me realize like kind of that I can do anything.” (Participant 3)

Overall, participants expressed satisfaction regarding the current state of their education paths and generally positive impacts of participation in the preparatory programs. Participants expressed feeling proud, pleased with current successes and happy that they have been exposed to new options and opportunities along their education path so far. Participants reflected on “crooked” educational paths but were ultimately pleased with their ability to change their paths or be flexible to unexpected changes while still pursuing education.

Participants gained skills. For example, one internationally trained immigrant cited vocabulary expansion, which had an impact on her everyday life. Another participant highlighted his feelings about the impact of education for him:

“At one point I would have, I didn’t even wanna discuss it, I was so disgusted with myself for what I didn’t do... now I love telling people, especially after I first received my GED. I told everybody about it, I actually would be boastful about it compared to a time when somebody would talk about high school or college and I’d leave the room because I felt uncomfortable... Now I like talking about it, I like getting it out there and it’s a great feeling, for sure.” (Participant 19)

Several participants also expressed that the positive impact of their preparatory program experience extended beyond themselves, since they felt that by participating in preparatory programs, they were acting as positive role models for their children or grandchildren.

Personal Growth

In addition to the academic and intellectual growth participants reported, they also reported growth in skills that transfer to their lives beyond preparatory programs, and personal growth as well.

The transferable skills participants reported learning and developing through their participation in the preparatory programs included goal setting, time management, interpersonal skills, study and learning skills and computer skills. Some participants said:

“I’m learning how I learn, I’m learning what kind of student I am and just how to manage time.” (Participant 10)

“It’s mostly been the [preparatory program] that I’ve really built on a lot of my skills... listening, being able to talk confidently to other people... things like that” (Participant 6)

“It’s helped me in life; I realized I’m not a very good listener, I’m not a good communicator because I don’t absorb information, so now that I have to absorb all this information, it’s helping me in life, listen to people and absorb what they’re saying” (Participant 16)

Goal setting in particular seemed to provide a tremendous benefit to participants. Creating specific and attainable goals along with the support to reach them also seemed to be linked to motivation:

“I think I would have been happy seeing the marks on paper but [the preparatory program] has really made me see the capabilities beyond just the education aspect but the personal and goals. I had never ever set goals in my life, and it wasn’t until [the preparatory program] that I actually had set goals and actually achieved them. And [if I] made the opportunity to do that once, I can do that again and again, it was still that [the preparatory program] taught me that I didn’t have before.” (Participant 19)

Self-awareness was developed through learning style assessments and personality measures. For example, one participant stated:

“You learn a lot about yourself, they do a lot of studies just who you are as a person, what your interests are, your values, skills, and they make you aware of the bigger picture as opposed to... you’re good with your hands, you should become a mechanic. There’s just so many other things you can do with that right?... and they really make you aware of that, and it’s mind-blowing how much you really do learn about yourself because it’s, before that I had no idea who I was. And now I’ve got this solid picture. And... that’s where a lot of my confidence as well has come from so, it was phenomenal.” (Participant 6)

Participants also reported how the preparatory program experience taught them how to learn, a skill that they could transfer across many different situations far into the future:

“It set me up to be a happy lifelong learner... they gave me the tools to keep on learning, to happily keep on learning... and that’s great because you can’t know everything.” (Participant 30)

Without a doubt, the largest change most commonly cited by participants was the increase that they experienced in their self-confidence. The growth in confidence touched many aspects of their lives, from their feeling about their intellectual and academic ability (as discussed above) to a general feeling of capability. One participant commented on how achieving his GED led him to feel he could accomplish much more:

“I went through... [the preparatory program] and after I went and received my GED, I just felt all these doors open for me, like if I can do this, I can do anything... I really felt I had proven something to myself and I wanted to push myself further.” (Participant 19)

It seemed that, for many participants, taking part in preparatory programs greatly increased their self-confidence. Some participants said:

“I came out a different person. I was walking a little taller and I was much more confident in my skills and abilities academically. And then after that getting into Police Foundations at Conestoga was huge. And basically it was because of [the preparatory program]. If I had sat at home, it wouldn’t have worked as well.” (Participant 9)

“I came out of [the preparatory program] with so more- so much more confidence than I did going in. I had an extremely low self-esteem going into it, and that was able to build going through [the preparatory program].” (Participant 15)

Factors Related to Success in the Preparatory Programs

When participants discussed the factors that they perceived to influence their success in the preparatory programs, and the growth they experienced, four main themes emerged. One theme was related to individual factors of each learner, specifically the participant’s readiness to learn. However, three themes were related to the design and resources of the program: the availability of training supports, the learner-centered approach of the program and the instrumental role played by the preparatory program teachers.

The Individual's Readiness to Learn

Many of the participants reflected on the change in themselves and in their feelings about education from high school to the time they entered preparatory programs. Some participants felt that, in high school, they were not in the right mindset to succeed at academics. Many were focused on other priorities, such as enjoying their social experiences, and were less oriented toward future goals. Over time, however, most participants felt that they had matured and that their priorities had changed. Comparing their current and past selves, some participants even felt that they were completely different people. One participant highlighted this by saying:

"Well I was a totally different person when I was in high school... I also do have a better worldview now or life experience than when I was sixteen, so when I was sixteen I would say for a high school experience it almost sounds like you have to do it, you have to learn things and it kind of feels out of context like you don't know why you're learning certain things when as opposed to now I knew that why I need this, or if I didn't know exactly why certain things that I'm learning." (Participant 29)

Many participants had developed clearer goals for their future than when they were in high school. Participants acknowledged that they attended high school because it was required, but were furthering their education now because it was what they desired. At the later stage in life, they were better able to identify the link between learning and their individual goals. This shift has allowed participants to better focus on their learning and has helped to provide the motivation they need to succeed. Unlike their time in high school, participants expressed that they were motivated to learn in order to succeed. Several students mentioned that this desire to succeed drove them to put more effort into their schooling than they had as a teenager. This increased motivation during the preparatory program seemed to contribute to participants' success.

Training Supports Available through the Preparatory Programs

Eligible participants are able to access training support allowances through special funding available through their preparatory programs. These training supports include subsidies for childcare and transportation. One participant expressed her initial concerns and how these were alleviated:

"How is my schooling going to affect my children? How was I going to be able to take care of my kids while in school? I have a younger child that needed daycare, so I had to look into childcare for my younger daughter. So I was afraid of that, but everything fell into place! They guided me towards getting childcare help, and actually because I was in the [program], I was taken immediately to the front of the line, and I was able to get childcare immediately for my daughter, which was absolutely fantastic. That took a great load off." (Participant 15)

Many participants noted that they would not have been able to attend preparatory programs without these financial training supports.

The Preparatory Programs' Learner-Centred Approach

Many participants attributed some of their success in preparatory programs to the flexibility of the program, which allowed them to learn at their own pace and use methods that were most effective for their individual learning styles.

One of the first components of the preparatory programs is a learning style assessment. Instructors would spend time helping students understand their individual learning style and then teach material based on that style. Participants said:

“I think that’s relative to my learning style... in high school I never did a test to see what my best learning ability was, or learning way. We did that here, so I was able to capitalize on that, use that to my advantage. Had I known that in high school it could have been different. So, sitting down with the facilitator and seeing what my best learning style was, I was able to use that to my advantage.”
(Participant 2)

“But I think the biggest moment for me was, I had one, no two teachers helping me with that unit, depending on who was there that day. And then another teacher came in one day and showed me a different way to do it. And all of a sudden I just got it! Like, I knew how to do it. So, it was nice to have different perspectives of how to do things.” (Participant 21)

In addition to being able to learn using methods that were best suited to their individual learning styles, the preparatory programs also worked to equip students with learning skills that would transfer to other contexts, thus allowing them to succeed in all future learning environments. Instructors taught specific learning techniques, such as study skills, organization, time management, goal-setting and communication skills. Two participants described some strategies learned in the program:

“In [the preparatory program], I learned something really useful and it’s as simple as writing your goals down... Break it down into the individual steps so that it’s easy to attain it. And that’s something I had never practiced before.... it’s not as overwhelming and frustrating.” (Participant 34)

“Definitely note-taking, at first I just like read everything try and absorb it and write the test, but I took like a workshop on note-taking and then it made it easier to like read everything, take notes, go back, read it over again to answer the questions, and it made it a lot easier.” (Participant 5)

Besides learning transferable skills, participants appreciated that the program was designed so that they could work at their own pace on a timeline that they designed in consultation with their teachers. This personalized pace was appreciated for a number a reasons. It allowed students to feel a sense of control over their own learning, so that they could take the time they needed to learn the material well, which helped to increase students’ comfort level:

“I can just sit and do my work, if I have a question I can go ask but I can do it at my own pace which is really good and makes things a lot easier for me.” (Participant 3)

The individual pace was also appreciated for practical reasons. It allowed busy adult learners to manage the day-to-day practical aspects of their lives while also being able to work toward their educational goals. Participants said:

“It has been really good. Like the time frames for it, if you need to you can really take as long as you need to do everything, which is good [for] a lot of people in the program, they have various things like they still work full time and come here like every day, and that’s been really flexible for me, and I don’t think I [could] have found a program that was as flexible. I don’t think I would have gone back just ‘cause my work schedule’s crazy and I can get called in whenever and if I need to like be at work instead of come here then it’s easy to do. So it’s been good, the teachers have, like I said, been great with everything. Really helpful. Anything you have any questions with and even like applying to

college not just like the academic stuff, if I have questions going in there they've been helpful with that." (Participant 3)

"A lot of flexibility. Even with your schedule, there's a lot of flexibility. I have kids so I was allowed to show up a little later, and then leave a little earlier so I could be with my kids in the afternoon." (Participant 21)

When participants encountered problems with the material they were learning, they appreciated being able to work with their teachers on an individual basis. This one-on-one attention allowed students to receive support from teachers that was tailored to their learning style and individual pace. The benefits of individual attention were explained by one participant:

"I always had problems with math and there were some things that I wasn't getting in my head. And it just took one of the teachers to sit me down for five minutes and say okay, you're not getting it like this? And he'd teach me it in a different way. [He'd] show me the same question but just break it down some way different and boom, it would just click in my head, right, like I never thought of it like that. It blew me away and the ability of just being able to sort of change a question around to kind of work with my mind and get it going, so, I almost felt like difficulties I had at the beginning, I didn't have those by the end, 'cause I had sort of learned how I can change these questions and equations to make it more easy for me to understand." (Participant 19)

Overall the learner-centered, individualized approach taken in the preparatory programs made participants feel that they were each important both as people and as learners. This was nicely expressed by one participant:

"Everybody who walks in that door is treated like an individual and gets the help that they need. And that's something that I feel like in high school I was kind of passed over, where I felt very important every day that I was there [in the preparatory program]." (Participant 19)

The Instrumental Role of Preparatory Program Teachers

Related to the learner-centered approach was the way in which teachers worked with each person individually. For instance, instructors would take the time to go through tests and assignments with students to explain any errors and how to correct them. If students were having difficulty learning material, teachers would go through the material in different ways, using different strategies to find a method that students would understand.

By working closely with their teachers, participants often developed close relationships with them, which often worked to enhance participants' motivation to succeed. The importance of the student-teacher relationship was highlighted by these participants:

"Being surrounded by teachers who become your friend throughout the program, and just have so [many] confidence building skills to show you what you're capable of, it's just changed me in so many different ways that I'm still feeling now and I'm still sort of riding a hill up, where before any of these programs I felt like I was going down and down." (Participant 19)

"They are very supportive and really helpful and I think that I believe now that I can do things that I couldn't do before. I feel more confident for myself now." (Participant 1)

Resoundingly, participants found the support offered by preparatory program instructors invaluable. In particular, participants described their instructors as approachable and helpful. Many participants believed that by communicating their issues to instructors, the instructors could help them find a way to overcome those issues. One student discussed how supportive instructors could be when approached with issues:

“As long as you just communicate with the teachers, if you tell them okay I need to do this on this day, or I’m not gonna be here this day, they’re absolutely amazing, they’re so understanding, ‘cause they understand that life does happen, and sometimes your child will get sick and you’ll have to take off, or your car breaks down so you can’t come in that day. They’re absolutely so supportive, so they play a big part in dealing with these problems, I’d say.” (Participant 6)

Instructors were respectful, motivating and instilled confidence in participants. Their commitment to helping the students succeed appeared to play a great role in supporting students through the preparatory programs. For example:

“I haven’t found a single teacher here yet that you can’t walk up to and say look I’m not getting this, can you show me? All of the teachers here are really committed to making the students succeed.” (Participant 32)

“[The instructors] knew who I was, and they wanted to help me figure out what it was that I needed, and they were there to make that happen. And that was very different than high school. High school was like a funnel that everybody got poured in, and then the graduates came out the other side.” (Participant 30)

Discussion

In the past, postsecondary education was reserved for entrance into a few elite professions, with seats occupied by a privileged few. Today, it is estimated that 70 per cent of jobs require some type of postsecondary education (Miner, 2010). It could now be considered a requirement for entry into today’s labour market. Therefore, it becomes important for the future of the Canadian economy to develop multiple and varied pathways into postsecondary education for all individuals.

With this shift in labour market requirements comes a parallel shift in postsecondary education. It is increasingly apparent that there is no “typical” postsecondary student; this belief was echoed through the results of this research. Preparatory students in this study came from varying backgrounds and had previous educational experiences that spanned the spectrum from very negative, resulting in drop-out, to success and the attainment of a postsecondary credential. However, despite the different backgrounds of preparatory students, there were many commonalities in their experiences in the preparatory programs.

Consistent with previous research (Kerr, 2011), participants mainly entered preparatory programs with the goal of self-improvement, either by gaining the necessary skills and credentials to enter a postsecondary program, to find direction in their lives or to improve their employment prospects. Most students had a number of concerns about returning to school, some of which became a reality upon beginning the preparatory programs, but others which were unfounded. Students spoke of the difficulty they experienced transitioning to school after being away from formal education for quite some time.

Despite the difficulties participants experienced, they were able to persevere, aided in part by various aspects of the preparatory programs. Training support allowances assisted students with some of the financial difficulties they faced with returning to school. The two main aspects of preparatory programs that were most helpful to participants were the program's flexible, learner-centered approach and the instrumental role of the teachers. Participants spoke of how the learner-centered approach of the program was beneficial in many ways. Students were able to determine their own personal learning styles and adapted their learning to suit their style. They were also able to work at their own individual pace. This flexibility allowed participants to continue their schooling while also managing the practical issues they would face in their everyday lives. Given that students tend to leave PSE due to family and personal issues (Buchanan & Sharma, 2009), the training supports and learner-centered approach built into the preparatory programs are a real asset to facilitating the success of students and, by extension, of the program. Also, given that preparatory programs are generally a stepping stone to PSE, the program's training supports and learner-centered approach provide the non-traditional preparatory program students with the supports they need to ease back into school before they take the plunge into a traditional PSE program. It is likely that the transitional period offered through the preparatory programs plays a large role in students' eventual success in PSE.

Another theme consistently mentioned by participants was the important role that the preparatory program teachers played. According to the participants, the teachers often took on more than just the role of a typical teacher by providing participants with the social support they needed as they worked their way through the programs. Teachers were often cited as being a large motivating factor and as being instrumental to helping participants change how they saw themselves. The dedication of the teachers was apparent to the students; they truly felt that the teachers were as invested in their success as they were.

It is likely the support of the teachers, the learner-centered approach of the program and other aspects of the preparatory programs that led to many of the gains that students made. Aside from the expected gains in increased facility with various subjects, students also reported achieving many other important benefits. Students learned transferable skills such as time management, goal setting and study skills. By far the most prevalent theme that emerged was the remarkable gain in self-confidence that participants experienced. This finding is notable considering the low levels of self-confidence many participants reported feeling before they entered the preparatory programs, which is consistent with previous research (Brodie, Laing, & Anderson, 2009; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2010). For many students, taking part in the preparatory programs could be described as a turning point (McAdams & Bowman, 2001); students who previously had very low confidence in their abilities became students who were proud of their accomplishments and confident in their ability to succeed in their future endeavours. While this may not seem like a large accomplishment, research has shown that confidence actually affects every aspect of an individual's life and every decision that is made (e.g., Kantor, 2004). An individual's confidence level, the belief in his or her own ability to accomplish what he or she set out to accomplish, guides any actions that are taken. Therefore, the increase in confidence that the participants experienced as a result of their participation in the preparatory programs would have a substantial impact on the trajectory of their lives moving forward.

The impact of the preparatory programs on the lives of participants is clear; every participant who was interviewed in this study was able to discuss a way in which the preparatory program had a positive effect on their lives and would likely contribute to their future success. While these results are quite favourable, they are also not surprising. It could be argued that the preparatory programs are so successful for these non-traditional students because they meet the needs of adult learners. Malcolm Knowles (1970; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998) identified six principles of adult education. He argued that adult learners tended to be self-directed and autonomous; they approach each learning experience armed with knowledge from previous learning; they tend to have a goal in mind when they pursue a learning experience; it is important that the material they are learning is relevant and practical to their goals and outcomes; and it is important that they

are shown respect as learners. When these principles are examined, it is clear that preparatory programs fulfill many of these requirements for adult learners. Moreover, many of the reasons why the participants found the preparatory programs to be so successful, and many of the reasons why the participants succeeded (i.e., their readiness to learn, the goals they had set for themselves) relate back to Knowles' principles.

Limitations and Future Research

While this report adds to the body of academic research on preparatory programs, there are some limitations that need to be considered when interpreting this work. The participants who took part in this research did so on a voluntary basis, so there may have been a self-selection bias, with participants who had positive upgrading experiences perhaps being more likely to take part in a study about their experiences. Additionally, this sample did not include any participants who dropped out of the preparatory programs; as a result, the perspectives of this learner group were not represented in this research.

One interesting finding to note was the challenge that was faced in classifying some of the participants who took part in this study with respect to where they were along their educational and employment journey. While the goal was to interview students who were currently in preparatory programs, in PSE, and who had completed PSE and were in employment, there were a number of participants who fit into more than one or none of these categories. For example, one participant had completed preparatory studies, went on to earn a diploma and was currently employed; however, this participant was still participating in academic upgrading on days off in order to attain a lifelong goal of achieving the GED. There were also participants who were on a “break” from preparatory studies. These students were not finished with their work in the preparatory programs but had to step out for personal reasons and had full intentions of returning to complete what they had started. These findings seemed to clarify the point that postsecondary students cannot and should not be neatly classified. Instead, it would behoove PSE institutions in Canada to develop and implement unique methods of instruction and delivery to meet the changing, complex needs of Canada’s student populations.

Originally, the goal of this research was to examine the role that preparatory programs played in successful outcomes experienced by students. Of particular interest was the impact that preparatory programs had on the employment outcomes of participants, particularly after successfully completing PSE. Unfortunately, the sample obtained did not contain enough participants who had completed PSE and were employed for meaningful themes to be gleaned. The fact that there were only a few participants who had completed PSE and entered employment in the sample was not surprising. It is often difficult to track students after they have left school. While we were fortunate that some former students continued to keep in touch with their preparatory program instructors, we were not able to access enough students to build a sizeable sample.

Future research should examine the impact of preparatory programs on students’ employment outcomes, particularly after they succeed in PSE. Anecdotal evidence from preparatory program staff and former students seems to indicate that preparatory programs arm students with transferable skills that allow them to succeed not only in PSE but also in the workplace. This work could be further informed if the experiences of preparatory program students could be compared to the experiences of PSE students who had not taken part in preparatory programs.

The present research would be complemented by a quantitative study examining similar questions, themes and variables. Though this qualitative research gives a voice to participants’ experiences, it does not provide statistical or experimental evidence to lend further credibility and evidence to the accounts of preparatory program students.

Recommendations

Participants offered several suggestions for improving the preparatory programs. One suggestion was to offer and promote programs more broadly in order to attract more participants. When the suggestion was brought up with the project advisory committee, however, it was found that demand for the program was not an issue. In fact, the programs currently have waiting lists. The problem is with limitations in program funding and the college's capacity to accept all interested participants. Some participants were aware of these limitations and suggested that the college lobby for increased funding in order to provide more options for time (e.g., evenings, weekends), more instructors and newer physical resources (e.g., textbooks). Because of limited space, participants would often take tests in the classroom while other students were working on their own studies. Some participants commented that a separate testing room would have been useful to reduce distractions.

One concern that some students had was the extent to which the preparatory program was preparing them for PSE. Some questioned how their performance in the preparatory program would compare to their performance in a college program. The goal of preparatory programs is to prepare students for success in college. For some students there appeared to be a disconnect between the work they were doing in the preparatory program and the work they might have to do in college. However, the work participants complete in the preparatory programs is meant to be a stepping stone that transitions them into working at the postsecondary level. Many students were aware that college programs entail a greater work load and a faster pace than do preparatory programs, which caused some students who were planning on attending a postsecondary some apprehension. This feeling of apprehension seemed to be affirmed by some students who had gone on to postsecondary programs. Increasing the workload or the pace of the preparatory program may not be advisable or even possible. Currently, the preparatory programs attempt to prepare students for PSE by providing them with a preview of what to expect. Efforts include having full-time college students who had previously participated in preparatory programs give a classroom presentation to current preparatory program students about the realities of college life, and arranging for preparatory students to shadow full-time college students. Given that concerns about the transition to PSE were mentioned by a number of participants, it would be worthwhile for faculty to spend more time speaking with students about how to manage an increased workload based on their course load. Also, while there are initiatives in place, such as the student speakers mentioned above, a more concrete process may need to be developed which mindfully incorporates these initiatives and addresses common concerns for preparatory students exiting to PSE.

According to Tinto (2002), providing non-traditional students with the opportunity to obtain PSE is not enough: students also require academic preparation. Research has shown that without proper preparation, even traditional students are more likely to fail in PSE (Cabrera, La Nasa, & Burkum, 2001). This point was highlighted in the present study. A few students discussed how the preparatory program had positively contributed to their PSE experience. One participant in particular mentioned that, even though he had obtained the required credits to enter a postsecondary program, he returned to the preparatory program to help improve math skills needed for work in the postsecondary program. Within the current postsecondary system, preparatory classes are not mandatory, even if students have been out of the education system for many years. While they may meet the admission requirements to be accepted into the program, they may lack skills necessary for academic success. The result may be that many adult learners who did not attend preparatory classes will struggle in their postsecondary program, which could lead to attrition. To help address this, postsecondary institutions may want to offer preparatory courses as a form of remediation for students already accepted into a postsecondary program but who are having difficulties.

Students discussed several ways in which preparatory programs served as a valuable stepping stone into postsecondary programs. However, more could be done to help students transition successfully. For instance, postsecondary institutions may want to offer transition programs for non-traditional students to help them acclimatize to postsecondary life. One such program could involve mentorship, in which a senior student could be paired with a non-traditional student to offer guidance and support.

The results of this research combined with results from the “Prepared for Success” reports (e.g., College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading, 2010) clearly demonstrate the high likelihood of success for students who have undergone preparatory studies. However, when preparatory students apply for admissions to PSE programs at Ontario colleges, they are often compared on equal footing with recent high school graduates, despite the fact that their retention/persistence rates are higher and that they may be better prepared. One recommendation would be for preparatory program students to receive bonus marks added to their preparatory marks when they are evaluated for admission (e.g., Conestoga College preparatory students currently receive ten bonus marks for their science courses). Alternatively, a system could be developed that would allow preparatory students preference when applying for PSE programs. Initiatives such as these would recognize the preparation these students have completed (including career planning, skill development, etc.) in anticipation of entry into PSE.

We see through the research on non-traditional students that there is no longer a “typical” postsecondary student. Similarly, colleges in Ontario are also going through a transition, with many colleges now offering degree programs on their own or jointly with other institutions. As college programming changes, preparatory programs must also change to meet the entrance requirements of these new degree programs. While some universities have offered transition or preparatory type programs (e.g., York University’s “Transition Year Program”), more universities in Ontario should be developing preparatory courses so that students can transition into degree programs. Even within our sample, there were a number of participants who spoke of attaining a degree as one of their future goals. Work needs to be done to develop these pathways into degree programs for non-traditional students.

Another shift that was observed in the demographics of preparatory students was the number of internationally trained immigrants taking part in the programs. This research clearly demonstrated that this population is actively involved in preparatory programs, often for reasons that are unique to them. Additionally, these students come with concerns and barriers that are also unique. While preparatory programs are not intentionally meant to serve immigrants as a specific population, the fact is that many ITIs are accessing these programs. It would therefore be beneficial for preparatory programs to develop content that would address the unique concerns of ITIs. Recognizing that preparatory programs are not English language programs, there is still room for course content to be developed that would address issues that ITIs may face as they progress in their education and in the labour market. For instance, modules could be developed on soft skills or on culturally specific content related to education. Programs or modules such as these could augment currently available bridge training programs (e.g., Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration [MCI]-funded “Business Edge” at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto; Conestoga College’s “Pre-Health Bridge to Practical Nursing Diploma for Internationally Trained Health Professionals” funded by MCI) to provide more complex preparation and training for ITIs. The reality is that the immigrant population is a large part of Canadian society, and one that is likely to continue to grow. It is important for colleges in Ontario and for MTCU to be proactive and mindful about the way that preparatory programs are meeting the needs of this expanding student base.

Unfortunately, preparatory programs at Ontario colleges are still not well known. The fact that you can “prepare for college at college” and that you could gain admission to college without your grade 12 or diploma are not common knowledge to the general public. Many people still believe that they need to get their diploma

in order to gain entry to college and do not know that they can gain the credits they need to get into a college program at colleges. Changes to public policy and funding are required to accommodate the growing market of individuals looking for further skill development and pathways to PSE. As our waiting lists for preparatory programs at Conestoga College seem to indicate, there is clearly a need to provide pathways to PSE for individuals who have been out of school for an extended period of time or who do not have a high school credential. Given that there were approximately 4.5 million people in Canada in 2006 without a certificate, diploma or degree, and with the growing shortage of skilled labour that Canada will be facing (Miner, 2010), it is important to examine educational interventions for adults, and in particular those beyond traditional interventions that tend to focus on the high school level or at-risk youth. The popularity of programs like MTCU-funded Second Career and preparatory programs show the appetite adults have for education and for a second chance to be successful in school and beyond. Investment and policy change in favour of preparatory programs would provide this population with opportunities to develop the skills required to meet Canada's labour market needs.

Summary

The main findings from this research point to the instrumental role that preparatory programs played in changing the lives of participants. Taking part in the preparatory programs seemed to be a turning point for many participants and seemed to lead to many outcomes both academic and personal, including large gains in individuals' self-confidence. Furthermore, many participants were confident that they would succeed in achieving their goals thanks to the skills that they had gained in the preparatory programs. While the results of this research may not be surprising to preparatory program practitioners and staff, the fact remains that these preparatory programs are largely unknown to the general public. Given the predicted labour shortage that Canada will face, the value in providing additional funding for preparatory programs is clear. With some programs maintaining waiting lists, the market for the program is clearly present and would warrant additional financial support. These programs also have a proven track record of success, particularly for individuals who may have had negative educational experiences in the past. Preparatory programs could act as an important transition point for unemployed and underemployed Canadians into meaningful employment and assist Canada in building a more highly skilled and active labour force.

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