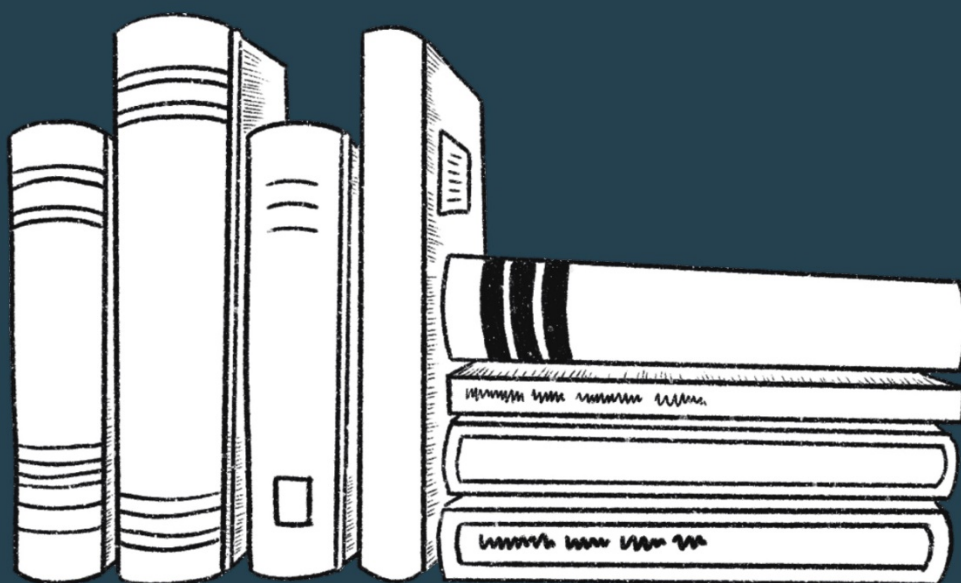


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Remote Opportunities for Adult Learners: Analyzing Ontario College Application Data During COVID-19

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Introduction

In 2019, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) called for a lifelong learning system that would help Ontarians “adapt and thrive” in the face of economic forces like globalization and digitization — to receive additional training and support when navigating displacement from “job loss, disruptions to the workplace, the desire to advance in an existing job or to change careers altogether” ([Pichette et. al., 2019](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic has since underscored the urgency of this call by further disrupting the ways in which we work and learn (OECD, 2021).

Before the pandemic, barriers like busy work schedules prevented adults around the world from accessing formal learning opportunities (OECD, 2021). Even in times of unemployment, adults have traditionally avoided pursuing further education (St. Amour, 2020) despite evidence that doing so would yield significant economic benefits (Pichette et. al. 2019). In 2020, Ontario experienced the highest annual unemployment rate since 1993 (a jump of 9.6%) and an overall reduction in working hours as COVID-19 safety measures mandated that businesses close their doors (Financial Accountability Office of Ontario, 2021). Many of those who maintained their employment shifted to working from home, finding efficiencies in the form of increased productivity and reduced commute time (Mehdi & Morissette, 2021; Morissette et. al., 2021). According to several reports, these disruptions have created new opportunities for Ontarian adults to pursue postsecondary programs online (Postelnyak, 2020; Pavia, 2021; Moore, 2021; Maxwell, 2022).

In March 2020, Ontario colleges and universities shifted from largely in-person to online learning delivery, triggering what some have called “a mass experiment in online education” (Schrumm, 2020). This shift introduced and amplified challenges for many students, forcing educators to think creatively about how to make course content accessible and engaging in a virtual world. Nevertheless, international research suggests these efforts, and the virtual environment itself, may also be opening doors to postsecondary education for some traditionally marginalized learners, including adults (OECD, 2020; Stanistreet, 2021; Markov et. al, 2021).

Since the pandemic, the Ontario University Application Centre (OUAC) noted an increase in indirect-entry students: those who apply to university from somewhere other than high school, such as the workplace (Pavia, 2021). Colleges may be attracting a similar increase in adult applicants, which would be noteworthy after several years of declining domestic enrolments, often attributed to an aging demographic (Statistics Canada, 2021; Usher, 2021). To better understand the pandemic’s impact on prospective college students, in November 2021, HEQCO partnered with OCAS, a not-for-profit organization delivering shared technology and centralized application services for Ontario’s public colleges. Together, OCAS and HEQCO modified OCAS’s 2021 Applicant Experience and Intention Survey to examine the impacts of COVID-19 on learning preferences and college application plans. Specifically, we used these results to determine whether and how impacts varied by demographic characteristics like age and employment status. The results of our analysis, which we describe in the following sections, reveal that remote work and school have indeed created entry points for adult learners. This data brief also explores areas for future research and provides ideas to improve data collection.

Methodology

Each spring, OCAS conducts an Applicant Experience and Intention Survey to understand the needs and motivations of college applicants. All consenting¹ Canadians who apply to upcoming fall college programs are invited to take the survey, in either French or English, online via Survey Monkey. While keeping responses confidential, OCAS links the survey data to application files containing basic demographic information (OCAS, 2021).

OCAS administered the 2021 survey in June of that year and included new questions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. OCAS invited 90,000 applicants to participate and received 13,000 responses (OCAS, 2021).² At the time the survey was being administered, Ontario colleges were anticipating that campuses would re-open in the fall of 2021, although many planned to continue offering at least some programs online.³

OCAS made relevant depersonalized and aggregated data from its 2021 Applicant Experience and Intention Survey available to HEQCO, and specifically data pertaining to pandemic-related questions. At HEQCO's request, OCAS linked these survey responses to demographic data from application files. The linked demographic variables included gender, age, race, Indigenous identity, whether a student is first generation (i.e., the first in their family to attend postsecondary) and geographical catchment area.

HEQCO conducted descriptive statistics using STATA 17 (n=12,549) and coded a random subsample of the qualitative responses (n=522) in NVivo.⁴ We drew the subsample with attention to the demographic characteristics of the broader sample to ensure representativeness. Recognizing that the applicant survey is voluntary and may not be representative of all Ontario college applicants, OCAS also provided a snapshot of actual college application data for context. We summarize the results of these analyses below.

OCAS Applications

Like other Canadian provinces, Ontario has seen a general downward trend in domestic college enrolments since 2013-14 (Statistics Canada, 2021); this is reflected in OCAS application data. Adult learners, however, may now be helping to slow or reverse this course. As Figure 1 illustrates, OCAS has seen applications from mature learners grow incrementally since the 2014 application cycle.⁵ OCAS data also shows a significant 6% increase in applicants aged 25 and older between 2019 and 2020-21, with growth in each age category above 25 — a clear acceleration of a trend that began before the pandemic.

¹ OCAS contacts only those applicants who provided permission to contact them, in compliance with Canada's anti-spam legislation (CASL).

² The survey ran approximately six weeks later than usual as a result of pandemic-related disruptions, and perhaps consequently, had a lower response rate than is typical. OCAS usually receives between 18,000 and 20,000 responses.

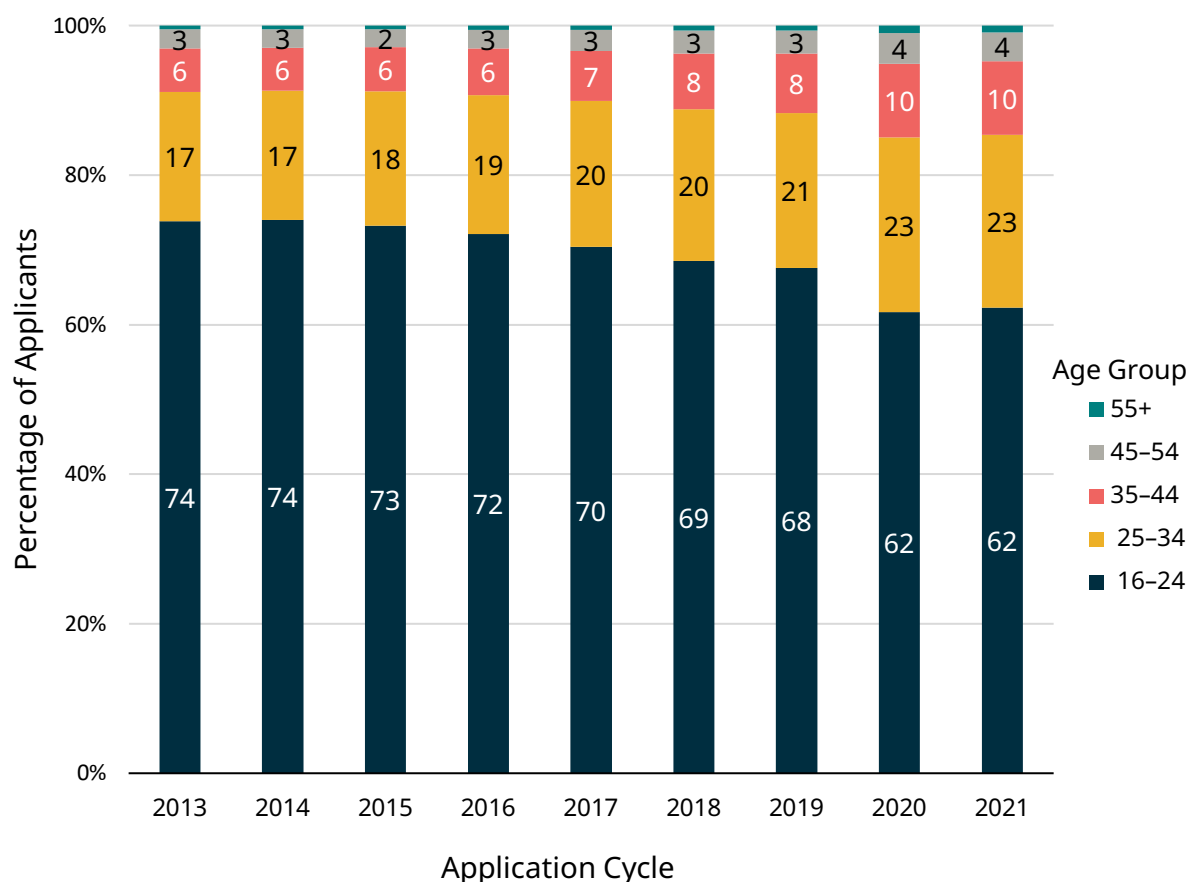
³ For example, on June 10, 2021, Mohawk College announced plans for "a significant increase to on-campus learning this Fall with a mix of virtual, remote and in-person learning planned for most programs" (Mohawk College, 2022).

⁴ Two researchers identified key concepts within each response and sorted them into coding categories.

⁵ College applications for domestic students are received in, and referred to by, an application cycle. The cycle is named for the earliest term (fall) a student may actually start taking courses in the program. For example, a student who applies for the 2021 application cycle could enrol in courses in the fall term 2021, winter term 2022, or spring term 2022. However, they may submit their application as early as October 2020 and as late as June 2022.

Figure 1

Percentage of Applicants by Application Cycle⁶



Source: OCAS

Note: This figure shows the percentage of Ontario college applicants by age group across application cycles, from 2013 to 2021.

Findings from Survey Data Analysis

The largest group responding to the OCAS 2021 Applicant Experience and Intention Survey (about 30%) categorized themselves as “Grade 12 high school students.” The majority of these respondents fell between the ages of 16 and 24. However, consistent with the application trends reported above, the overall pool of respondents in 2021 skewed older than usual; 41% of respondents reported their age as 25 years or older, compared with only 24% in 2018.

When asked whether the pandemic affected the timing of their decision to apply to college, 10% of all respondents indicated they applied sooner than expected. Asked to explain why, applicants had the option of selecting from the predefined responses below. These were geared towards the typical high school-aged respondent from previous iterations of the survey:

⁶ The percentage of applicants aged 55+ was 1% or lower each year. It was 0.5% in 2013, grew by 0.1% in 2016 and 2018 and reached 1% in 2020.

- I graduated from high school sooner than anticipated.
- I had originally planned to take a gap year in 2021-22 for work or travel.
- I had higher high school grades than anticipated and no longer needed a “victory lap” to raise my grades and improve my chances for admission to my preferred program.
- Other.

More than 50% of people who answered this question selected “other.” Most of these respondents fell into older age categories (25+) and cited “unemployment” and a “increase in time and availability” as reasons for their early application. For example, one respondent shared the following statement:

I always knew I wanted to upgrade to a bridging program; however, I didn’t feel I had the time. After COVID-19 hit, it became unclear when the lockdowns would end. I felt that a good way to pass the time was by going to school and upgrading which would allow for more opportunity and a pay raise.

The survey also asked about whether the pandemic influenced other decision-making factors besides timing, including program and preferred delivery format. Across all the demographic groups we inspected, most respondents (about 80%) said their decision about which program to apply to was not affected by the pandemic. Some respondents explained that their decision was driven by longstanding interest in a specific field of study or related area of work. Of those respondents who **did** report that the pandemic affected their decision, many indicated that a flexible delivery format was an important factor in their decision-making process.

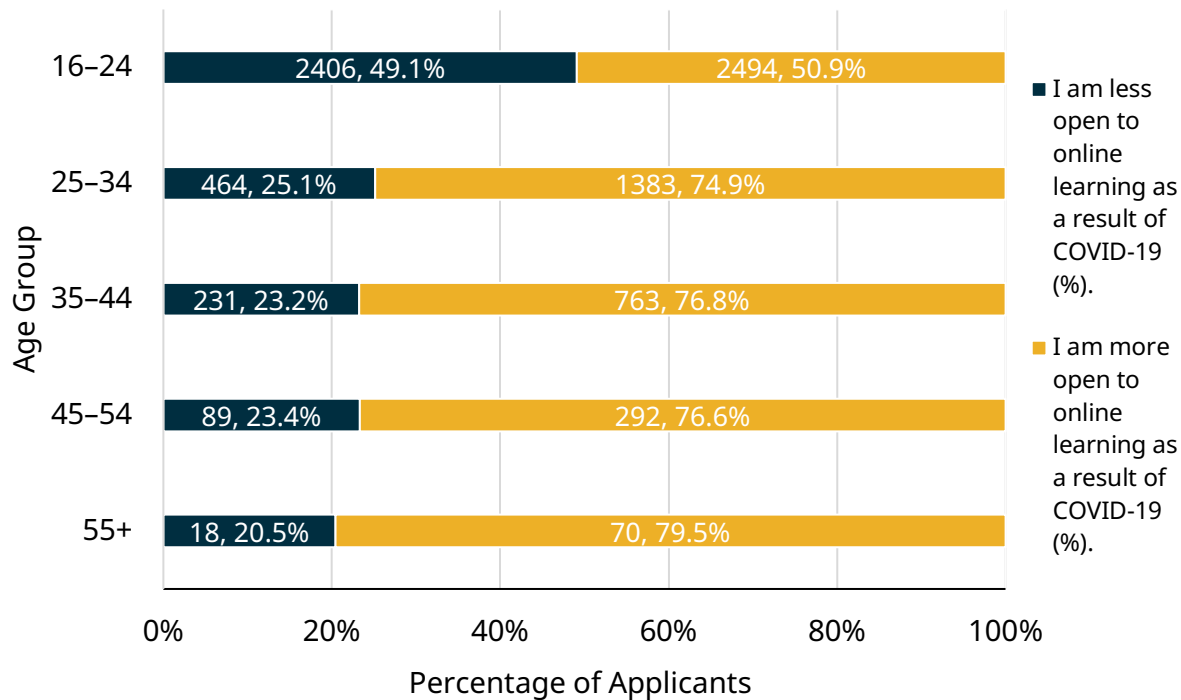
The survey asked about the pandemic’s effect on learning preferences, and specifically about openness to online learning. Roughly 70% of respondents aged 25 and older said the pandemic did affect their learning preferences. Our analysis hereafter is limited to this subgroup: to those who indicated that the pandemic did alter their attitude around learning preferences.

Figure 2 shows responses from those whose openness to online learning changed. Within this group, between 75% and 80% of mature learners (aged 25 to 55+) indicate being more receptive to learning online. About 80% of students aged 16 to 24 attributed a change in their learning preferences to the pandemic. Among these students, about half reported being more open to online learning while the other half reported being less open.⁷ Many of these students presumably experienced some online learning in high school during the pandemic. This experience likely informed students’ even split in preferences regardless of whether high school emergency remote learning was a fair representation of online learning in PSE.

⁷ Looking at all responses, including those who said the pandemic did not affect their openness, 40% of respondents aged 16 to 24 reported being more open to online learning as a result of COVID-19 and 39% said they were less open (the remainder said the pandemic did not affect their openness).

Figure 2

"How Has COVID-19 Affected Your Learning Preferences?" by Age Group

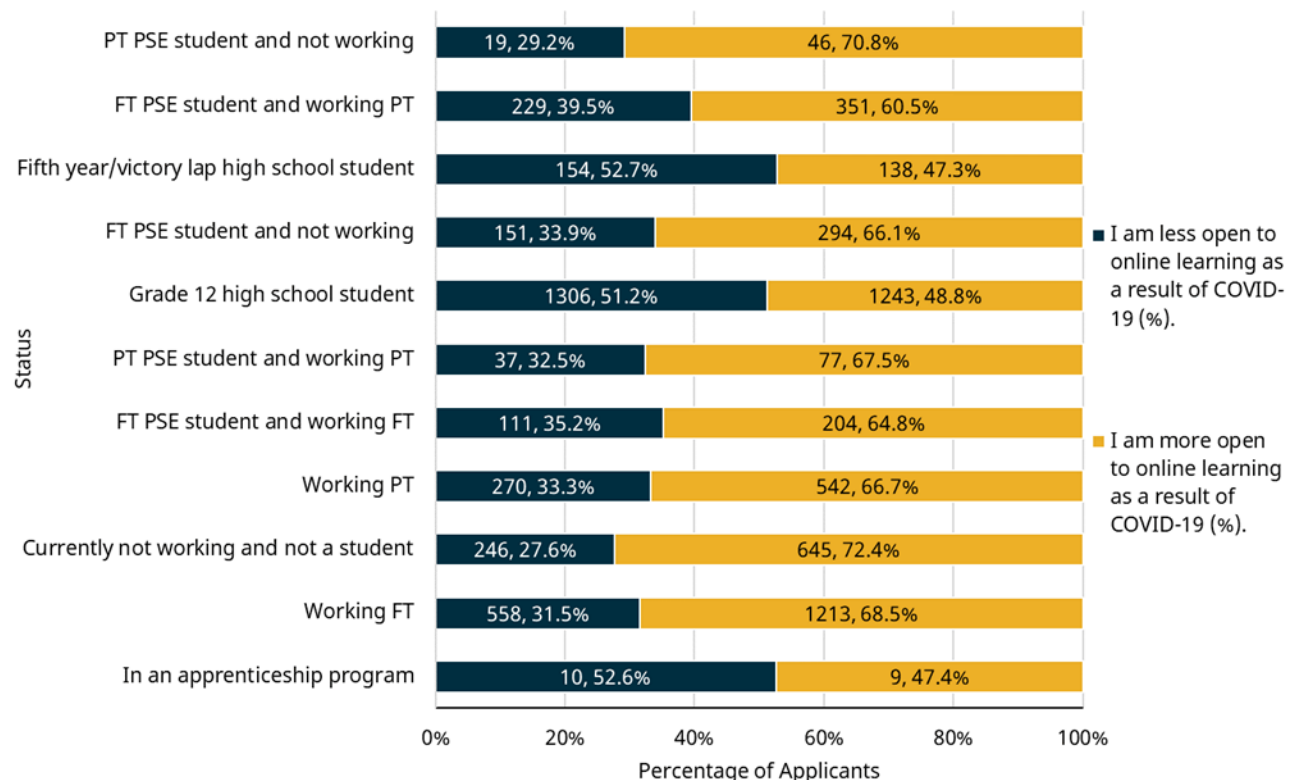


Note: This figure shows responses by age group to the question, "How has COVID-19 affected your learning preferences?"

Figure 3 shows how these preferences relate to student employment status at the time of application. Here we see that those most amenable to online learning as a result of COVID-19 were applicants who were neither students nor employed. About 65–70% of applicants who reported a positive shift in their views of online learning were also working full time. Grade 12 high school students and fifth-year ('victory lap') students are more evenly split: about half of those whose preferences changed gained a more positive view of online learning as a result of the pandemic, and the other half developed a more negative view. Students in apprenticeship programs are similarly divided. While only a small number of apprentices responded to this question (n=19), this finding might help explain the drop in apprenticeship registrations and certifications we saw in 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2021a).; That is, alongside other factors, such as disruptions to industries like hairstyling and food services, a preference for in-person learning may have dissuaded some potential applicants. Aside from age and employment status, demographic factors (i.e., gender, race, Indigenous identity and whether a student is first generation) do not seem to have affected respondents' openness to online learning.

Figure 3

“How Has COVID-19 Affected Your Learning Preferences?” by Status at Time of Application



Note: This figure shows responses by status at the time of application (only those who noted an effect on their openness) to the question, "How has COVID-19 affected your learning preferences?"

Discussion

Responses to the OCAS 2021 Applicant Experience and Intention Survey suggest a confluence of pandemic-related factors is creating an opportunity for mature learners in Ontario to access college programs, accelerating a pre-pandemic trend. Indeed, the findings above align with international research and Ontario media reports which suggest many mature college applicants are capitalizing on a combination of more leisure time and the flexibility of online learning to access postsecondary (Postelnyak, 2020; Pavia, 2021; Moore, 2021; Maxwell, 2022). This seems to hold true across other demographic factors (i.e., gender, race, Indigenous identity and first-generation status).

The findings also suggest there is a growing openness to online learning in Ontario, particularly among mature students. As pandemic restrictions are lifted and opportunities for regular in-person learning return, Ontario educators should pause before returning to 'normal.' Colleges should consider how best to optimize the distribution of program and course offerings between

virtual, in-person and hybrid,⁸ understanding that their decisions will differentially affect access for groups of learners. Collecting additional nuanced data will help paint a clearer picture of learner preferences and the optimal distribution of offerings.

OCAS plans to support this effort by including more questions about learning preferences as well as demographic questions in future iterations of the survey. For example, the next version — administered in June 2022 — will allow us to delve deeper into student learning preferences by asking about learners' openness to hybrid or blended courses. A recent HEQCO report found a particular openness or even preference for online or hybrid learning among lower-income students ([Napierala et al., 2022](#)). The applicant survey can explore whether other groups of students may share this preference. The survey will also include a question about whether a learner has an accessibility need, which research suggests may also affect online learning preferences. In the summer of 2020, HEQCO surveyed and interviewed students with self-reported disabilities and found that online learning removes some barriers associated with in-person classes. Students learning online do not have to navigate inaccessible buildings or public transportation, for example ([Pichette et. al., 2020](#)). And a recent report from eCampus Ontario found that “neurodivergent, mature, and other equity-seeking students identified helpful aspects of online learning that in-person learning did not provide” (Markov et. al, 2021).

Of course, the preferences articulated in survey data constitute one of the many metrics Ontario colleges should analyze as they chart a post-pandemic path forward. Colleges should also monitor enrolments and outcomes such as retention and graduation to see how these application survey results play out. Do mature students, attracted to online learning opportunities during the pandemic, graduate? How do their graduation rates compare with other groups? If and when in-person learning resumes, how might that affect metrics like retention and graduation? The OECD notes that while the pandemic has increased online learning options for adult learners, it has also highlighted “key limitations” of online learning for this group, “including the prerequisite of adequate digital skills, computer equipment and internet connection” (2020). Institutions should track outcomes with a view to both understanding the extent of these kinds of limitations and developing strategies to address them.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced learning online, it both introduced new obstacles and opened new doors. As we contemplate a post-pandemic world, where lifelong learning will be essential, we should be mindful of the inequities that the pandemic has introduced or highlighted. We should also take note of the ways in which the pandemic has improved access to education and use those lessons to push our postsecondary system past a return to the status quo and instead towards progress. OCAS and HEQCO are committed to supporting that push toward progress with ongoing research and analysis.

⁸ The terms “hybrid” and “blended” are often confused or used interchangeably. By ‘hybrid,’ we mean that some portions of a course take place in-person and some take place online; e.g., one out of three scheduled classes takes place online, perhaps as a recorded lecture or a virtual discussion group. By contrast, ‘blended’ refers to a learning environment that integrates the use of technology and/or online instruction with face-to-face instruction; e.g., instructors may include an online video as part of an in-person lecture (Saichale, 2020).

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