

Who Wants to Learn?

contact: Ellen Long

Data from groups working with the LEARN campaign

Excerpt from "Executive Summary, (pages 4 and 5) of Who wants to learn? Patterns of Participation in Canadian Literacy and Upgrading Programs, the summary of Results from a National Study conducted by [ABC CANADA](#) in partnership with [Literacy BC](#). With permission.



Who is seeking literacy and upgrading education?

Patterns of Participation interviewed more than 300 people who were seeking information about literacy and upgrading education across Canada (with the exception of French Canada and the Yukon).

- More than 80 percent identify English as their language of greatest fluency. - Nearly half are employed.
- Nearly a quarter are receiving some form of social assistance.
- Close to half of potential learners live in households with annual incomes of less than \$20,000 a year.

A number of barriers to literacy

The Patterns of Participation study identified a wide array of factors that stand in the way of increasing literacy skills among Canadian adults.

Program/policy-related factors

- 43 percent of callers don't enrol because of program/policy-related problems such as not being called back by a program contact person, long waiting lists, inconvenient course times, wrong content or teaching structure, and unhelpful program contact.
- Of those who enrol but drop out, more than a quarter identify program/policy-related factors as the main reason for leaving programs. These factors include wrong program level, content or teaching structure and program cancellation.

Socioeconomic-circumstantial factors

- 30 percent of those who do not enrol cite socioeconomic-circumstantial factors as the main barrier.

- Almost half of those who do not enrol in literacy or upgrading programs cite money problems as a contributing factor for not enrolling.
- Of those with children, more than 40 percent of women and close to 20 percent of men cite childcare conflicts as a factor in their decision not to enrol.
- Women are more likely to cite socioeconomic-circumstantial factors than men, reflecting women's lower incomes and higher degree of responsibility for childcare.
- Socioeconomic-circumstantial factors are an even larger problem in dropping out of programs. 56 percent of those who drop out cite reasons such as job-related conflicts and family responsibilities, especially childcare.

Cognitive-emotive factors

- Contrary to popular understanding, cognitive-emotive reasons such as fear are least likely (15 percent) to be cited as the main factor for not enrolling. Older callers and those with lower levels of formal education are the most likely to cite cognitive-emotive reasons as contributing factors.
- A relatively low proportion of learners (6 percent) offer cognitive-emotive factors as their main reason for leaving a program, although worry or nervousness about being in a program is a contributing factor for more than a quarter of those who drop out.

Problem is systemic

In addition to the underlying problems of poverty, childcare issues and job conflicts, there are dramatic regional variations in models of funding and service delivery across Canada that make it difficult to provide quality programs and service. Of the groups and programs who participated in this study:

- More than a third have no full-time staff.
- More than two-thirds have one or less full-time staff.
- Close to 40 percent are open less than 35 hours per week.
- 57 percent close for more than four weeks per year.
- High numbers use volunteers to cover critical teaching and referral work.
- Half do not provide special training for staff or volunteers who do referrals.

What it will take to solve the problem

Given the small fraction of people with low literacy skills who actually contact programs and all the socioeconomic-circumstantial difficulties they must overcome to do so, it is nothing short of tragic when they are told that they are not able to enrol because of policy- or program-related barriers.

But what will it take to change the picture of Canadian literacy and upgrading programs from one of low enrolment, high dropout, and precarious participation?

Certainly, it is tempting to direct individual literacy organizations to revamp their approach or slash their waiting lists; but without increased program funding and significant infrastructural change, that may not be possible.

Some of the problems facing literacy education in Canada can be alleviated by immediate action and increased funding. Most solutions, however, require longer-term strategies, which include moving away from our current patchwork of assorted programs and services, toward a genuine system for adult basic education.

[This study did not include the experiences of the 90 –95 % of people with low literacy who have not participated in any literacy or upgrading. It only looked at people who had used the LEARN line which is not the only means of recruiting learners in the country. Ed.]

[The Summary ends with ten top recommendations for policy-makers and for the field. Ed.]

Ellen Long, one of the co-researchers, presented some preliminary findings from this study at the Summer Institute. Ellen can be reached at elong@interlog.com

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For more information on the LEARN campaign and on this research, visit the ABC CANADA web site: www.abc-canada.org
