



Higher Education  
Quality Council  
of Ontario

An agency of the Government of Ontario

## Returning to High School in Ontario: Adult Students, Postsecondary Plans and Program Supports

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Published by

## The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

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### Cite this publication in the following format:

Pinsent-Johnson, C., Howell, S., & King, R. (2013). *Returning to High School in Ontario: Adult Students, Postsecondary Plans and Program Supports*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.



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## Executive Summary

*Returning to High School in Ontario: Adult Students, Postsecondary Plans and Program Supports* is an exploratory study designed to examine the role of adult high school programs in supporting postsecondary access. Although high school programs for adults are considered a “non-traditional pathway” to postsecondary education (PSE), as this study demonstrates, they are an inherent part of a comprehensive education system. The study’s reach is intentionally wide in order to draw attention to the important role of adult high school programs. The following topics are addressed:

- a) the adult high school student population;
- b) their postsecondary plans and concerns;
- c) the adult high school learning environment; and
- d) postsecondary transition supports for adult students.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from close to 500 adult students in programs throughout the province.

## Main Findings and Implications

The vast majority of adults who return to high school live in poverty. In addition, there is an over-representation of women, immigrants and Aboriginal students in the respondent group. This study’s population group is not unique and shares some similarities with a student group that participated in a large survey of adult high school students over 15 years ago, suggesting a stable profile.

The most common reason that adults return to high school is to access postsecondary education. They see a postsecondary credential as a means to change their current situation, and they place a high value on education for themselves, their families and even their communities. Although nearly all have postsecondary plans, only one-quarter of the students applied to a postsecondary program.

Considering that the majority of students have low incomes, it is not surprising that financial issues are predominant when making the decision to pursue postsecondary education. However, the issue is complex. Although students did not rate financial considerations as often as other personal and employment considerations on the survey, comments following the survey questions were overwhelmingly focused on their finances. It could be that the gap between students’ current low income and finding a way to pay for PSE (while still supporting children and other family members) is so vast that it simply cannot be bridged with existing financial support programs.

Students wrote about day-to-day financial struggles. For some, it may be inconceivable to add an additional financial burden without changing their current situation, and the way to change their current situation is to obtain a postsecondary credential. The paradoxical constraint is not due to a lack of awareness. Students are very knowledgeable about various ways to finance their postsecondary education, and some shared their carefully thought out financial strategies. Further, students who applied to PSE were slightly more likely to be working and generating some income. They have accessed at least one way to bridge the gap between their current low incomes and finding a way to pay for PSE.

Adult students' postsecondary plans are pragmatic; they want to access programs that have an explicit career path. They make savvy career choices and focus on careers with a strong job-education match, helping to ensure income stability. The most popular career choices are related to health care and engineering/technology. Interview data indicate that the choice to pursue a career in health care compared to engineering is not simply based on gender preferences. Entry into engineering as an adult, in comparison with nursing and personal care-related health care, is not well suited to the circumstances of most adult learners.

One possible reason that adults make pragmatic and savvy career choices is that they cannot afford to make a mistake. Unlike many adolescents contemplating a career and education pathway, adults have a myriad of additional considerations: their age, family responsibilities, financial burdens and current work commitments. Students who applied to postsecondary programs were more likely to have a personal education plan that may have helped them navigate these complex considerations. A personal education plan may have also helped students to make connections between their career choices, related postsecondary courses and potential employment opportunities. This kind of explicit information makes a difference when turning postsecondary plans into actual applications. Although guidance services could support the development of such plans, not all high school programs can provide guidance services, and those that do must focus on the day-to-day work of getting students into and through the secondary system. Additional supports would have to be considered. In addition to guidance and career counselling, another area that could support personal education planning is curriculum content. However, past research and students' comments in this study indicate that current courses and content are not aligned with career aspirations and postsecondary access, particularly related to college programs.

The issue of foreign credential recognition also needs to be addressed. Over 70% of adults born in other countries entered high school having already completed a diploma. Further, just over half of these adults also had a postsecondary credential. Credential recognition is a complex issue and there are limits to what an adult high school program can do. Signs of disillusionment and frustration with the education system were apparent among immigrant students in the study.

Although the findings from the study support the notion that deciding to enrol in PSE involves a complex decision-making process, it may be more useful to conceptualize the pursuit of PSE differently. Looking at the findings related to postsecondary decision-making only as an internal thinking process is limiting. Students actually do an incredible amount of work to figure out whether or not they will be able to apply to and attend PSE. Seeing decision-making play out this way, in which there are a variety of circumstances that must be figured out – negotiated, arranged and re-arranged – helps to shift an understanding of the process from an exclusively internal thought process to more of a management process. In managing their pursuit of PSE, adults actively work to assemble the supports they need. At the same time they must figure out and, if possible, change what may be deterrents.

Recognizing the pursuit of PSE as a management process also helps shift attention away from an exclusive understanding of an individual's role and responsibilities in the pursuit of education to broader social and institutional roles and responsibilities. A comparison between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, and between those students who applied to PSE and those who did not, reveals how social and institutional barriers result in inequitable learning opportunities. Aboriginal students began their high school programs having already accumulated access deterrents. Once in the adult high school program, their access to a full range of adult high school learning opportunities was restricted compared to other students in the study and those who applied to PSE. Subsequently, Aboriginal students continued to

acquire access deterrents despite personal aspirations and previous steps taken to change their circumstances.

Not only do adult high school programs receive substantially less funding than adolescent high school programs, but they work primarily with students who encounter multiple barriers to education. Funding disparities need to be acknowledged and discussed. The situation with Aboriginal students is but one example of the implications of funding disparities in the adult secondary system.

## More than a “Second Chance” Program

Adult high school programs are often referred to as “second chance” programs. The term carries an assumption that students “squandered” their opportunity to obtain a high school credential the first time around. The label is inaccurate and potentially detrimental to adult students.

Nearly half of the adult students who returned to high school already had a diploma. These students did not miss out the first time around. They want to enter the postsecondary system and returned to high school primarily because of the way the postsecondary system emphasizes curricular content in order to access particular programs. These students are compelled back into the secondary system. As long as content is as important as the credential (and arguably more important in some situations), there will always be a need for programs to provide opportunities for high school graduates to obtain requisite courses. Adults who obtained a high school credential outside of Canada are particularly vulnerable in such a content-focused system. Young adults who obtained their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) the first time around and later return to high school may have been unsure about their career paths while in high school as adolescents, or they may have changed their career path in response to a changing job market or for personal and family related reasons. They too are compelled back into the system.

In addition to students who are compelled back into the secondary system, there will likely always be a need to offer an extended opportunity to some students so they can complete their diploma requirements. Students living in poverty face multiple learning challenges. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the findings related to Aboriginal students. Adult education can be an opportunity to address socioeconomic challenges and inequities. However, the secondary system is currently restricted in the potential role it can play, and as a consequence, the most vulnerable students encounter additional inequities.

The “second chance” label may also relegate high school programs to a “second class” status in the overall education system. The important and integral role of adult high school programs within a comprehensive education system has too often been overlooked. Although the programs are funded by the Ministry of Education, they are not mandated and are often seen to be extraneous to school board concerns. Further, adults return to high schools in order to access postsecondary programs, but the adult programs in which they enrol are not under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and are consequently not always considered to be an important conduit to PSE.

As an inherent part of a comprehensive adult education system that facilitates postsecondary access, particularly for students with multiple barriers, programs for adults returning to high school need to have a more prominent place in education policy development initiatives.

## Report Overview

The report is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an empirical context for the research, highlighting findings related to the following topics: the numbers of Ontario adults without a high school diploma; adult participation in education and training; issues related to access to education and training; making the decision to pursue education; economic payoffs related to a high school credential, and the personal and social value of that credential; and a description of Ontario adult high school programs. Following the research overview are the specific objectives and guiding questions used in this study. Chapter 2 provides methodological details, including a description of the mixed methods design, the research process, a description of the sample and program sites, limitations related to the sample, and details of the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 present details of the findings and correspond to each of the research questions. Chapter 3 is focused on a comprehensive description of adult learners in high school programs. Chapter 4 examines their postsecondary plans, career choices and decision-making about pursuing PSE. Chapter 5 takes a look at available program supports and access to these supports. The final chapter is devoted to the discussion and implications.

## Chapter 1: Research Context and Purpose

This study was designed to draw attention to a unique and diverse postsecondary pathway – adult high school programs – by exploring the adult learner’s decision to attend a postsecondary program and the importance of related supports. The topic of adult high school students – that is, those students 18 years of age and older who have left high school but then decide to return to a program specifically for adults – is not commonly researched and discussed in adult education and higher education literature, nor is it a stand-alone topic in education analyses. Nonetheless, information can be gleaned from a few different sources such as reports using data from national adult education and training surveys (the Adult Education and Training Survey and the Access and Support to Education and Training Survey), the Youth in Transition Survey, and smaller empirical studies and data gathering initiatives. In most instances, reported studies were conducted in Canada, often including data specific to Ontario. In other instances, particularly on the topic of adult participation in education, their decision-making and educational supports, insights can be gained from studies conducted in the US, Australia and the UK. The following topics are included in the research overview to provide a contextual understanding of adult students who return to high school:

- a) numbers of Ontario adults without a high school diploma;
- b) rates of participation in education and training;
- c) restricted access to education and training for those with lower levels of formal education;
- d) making the decision to return to a high school program and desired supports;
- e) the economic payoffs of a high school credential, and the importance of a recognized credential; and
- f) an overview of Ontario adult high school programs.

The study’s objectives and guiding research questions are presented in the final section of the chapter.

### Ontario Adults without a High School Diploma

Just under 14% of Ontario adults aged 26 to 64, or 1.7 million people, do not have a secondary credential. However, this rate is much higher among Aboriginal adults. One-third (34%) do not have a high school credential, although 44% do have a postsecondary credential (Statistics Canada, 2006). Students of Aboriginal descent commonly delay their entry into postsecondary education (PSE) and are more likely to be older, have families and be married (Educational Policy Institute, 2008). Ontario’s high school graduation rate has increased from 68% in 2003-2004 to 82% in 2010-2011 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). In addition, adolescents who leave high school before completing a diploma later return to adult high school programs or enter PSE directly. Across Canada, “second chance” programs are successful in re-engaging young adults and helping them acquire their high school diploma after they initially leave high school (Canadian Educational Statistics Council, 2010). Nationally, over half of the young adults who left high school returned at a later time to complete their high school requirements. A total of 43% of these adults then pursued PSE; 34% with a high school diploma and 9% without their diploma (ibid). In Ontario, almost 15% of the 26-28 year old cohort in the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) left high school without a diploma, but several years later (by the end of 2007), only 4.1% of the cohort were without a high school diploma or postsecondary education (ibid). This suggests that young adults are taking advantage of programs designed to help them reengage with formal education. However, participation in formal education for adults can be challenging.

## Adult Participation in Education and Training in Ontario

In 2007-2008, close to half (49%) of Ontario adults aged 18 to 64 participated in some type of education or training, including education for personal interest and their career or job (Knighton, Hujaleh, Iacampo & Werkneh, 2009). Adults participate in education and training predominantly for job-related reasons (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). Those who are university educated are five times more likely to participate in further education and training compared to those who have a high school education or less (ibid).

While we pay lip-service in Canada today to the importance of facilitating the development of human capital, we offer little help to low paid workers to access learning opportunities. (Saunders, 2005, p. 49)

Traditionally, those with lower levels of formal education are least likely to participate in further education and training. However, more recently, their rates of participation have increased along with those who have a college and university education. Comparing the Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS), 2002 results, and the Access and Support to Education and Training Survey (ASETS), 2008 results, participation rates in Ontario increased from 31% to 38%, slightly better than the national rates. Interestingly, participation rates for those with a high school education are static, while the rates for those without a high school education increased from 8% to 14% (Knighton et al., 2009). Despite these increases, the rate of participation remains low overall.

Looking specifically at participation in education (separate from training) in Ontario, regardless of current education level, the overall participation rate is 18%, the highest in Canada. Of this portion, 16% of adults participated in PSE and 2% participated in high school programs. It is not clear whether or not these adults already had secondary and postsecondary credentials. Ontario's adult participation in formal education (excluding employer sponsored training) is slightly higher than the national average.

Reasons for not pursuing education or training were different for young adults aged 18 to 24 compared to adults aged 25 to 64. Almost twice as many older adults (28%) compared to young adults (17%) reported family responsibilities, whereas more young adults (30%) than older adults (20%) reported costs as the reason for not pursuing further learning activities (Knighton et al., 2009). Financial concerns remain for older adults, and the current structure of the financial aid system does not likely meet the needs of these adults (Kerr, 2011; Myers & de Broucker, 2006). However, more than personal, family, and financial reasons deter participation in education and training.

## Unequal Access to Education and Training

Both employers and governments direct more of their training and education support dollars to those with higher levels of formal education – “a practice which may result in further intensifying inequalities in education and subsequent labour market outcomes” (Kerr, 2011, p. 32). Government-funded education and training initiatives overwhelmingly favour adults who are in the labour market or who can enter (and re-enter) the labour market quickly. This usually means that adults who have been out of work for prolonged periods and who have less than a high school education have fewer supports (Griffen Cohen, 2003). Since the mid-1990s, increases in government funding for PSE have outpaced increases for other types of education (Yuen, 2010). At the same time, funding for adult high schools in Ontario was drastically reduced. Despite some increases

after the initial cuts, current funding levels remain below the funding levels of the mid-1990s (Ontario Secondary Teachers' Federation, n.d.).

Imbalances have also coincided with the federal transfer of employment training to the provinces that began in 1995 and wrapped up in 2008 when Ontario signed the final federal-provincial labour market agreement. The transfer of responsibility (an administrative agreement that has limits on provincial autonomy and control) came with substantial cuts to training and education funding, adversely impacting women, Aboriginals, youth, immigrants and people with low incomes (Griffin Cohen, 2003). The period of federal-provincial reorganization has also coincided with broader shifts in thinking about government support, emphasizing the role of individuals in obtaining and negotiating their own support, rather than the development of comprehensive program supports targeting various groups that encounter multiple barriers (Critoph, 2003).

Using data from two international literacy surveys, Rubenson and associates (2007) confirm that there has been a deterioration of supports for those with lower education levels and lower literacy skills that coincides with the federal-provincial labour market agreements. In 1994, 23% of those not in the labour force and 29% of the unemployed participated in an education or training course. By 2002, the figures were 19% and 25%. The rate of participation for unemployed individuals and those not in the labour force is lower in Canada compared to other countries, including the US. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) examine the interaction of structural and individual barriers and conclude that "the state can foster broad structural conditions relevant to participation and construct targeted policy measures that are aimed at overcoming both structurally and individually based barriers" (p. 187).

## Making the Decision to Return to a High School Program

Making the decision to return to high school or other adult education programs can be difficult for some, particularly if past experiences were negative. One Canadian study looked at adults who decided not to participate in literacy or academic upgrading programs, concluding that a variety of factors such as past negative school experiences, finances, conflicts with work, and program/curricular formats were a barrier to participation (Long, 2002). Adults in this current study have arguably overcome resistance to schooling, if that was a barrier, because they have made the decision to enrol in a high school program. However, some resistance and trepidation may linger.

To gather additional insights, it is helpful to look at research from the US and other countries. Although the systems are different, decision-making considerations and the desired supports of adult learners who did not complete high school would arguably be similar. Making the decision to return to education, whether at the secondary or postsecondary level involves a complex process, particularly for an adult who did not complete high school. Decision-making involves a variety of personal, social, financial and institutional considerations. Gaining an understanding of decision-making can lead to the development of effective supports.

In a study focused on overcoming barriers to PSE among a groups of adults who did not complete high school, five main considerations were described: 1) life goals, 2) situational barriers, 3) motivation and self-efficacy, 4) informational and institutional barriers, and 5) the role of support people (Goto & Martin, 2009). Adults had both broad and abstract goals, such as a better life, and specific career-related goals. They faced a variety of situational barriers such as financial obstacles, work schedule conflicts and transportation costs. Child care and health issues were mentioned most frequently. While child care and their children's health meant participants would often miss classes, their own health problems eroded their self-confidence. Various barriers can be inter-related, and, similar to the health barriers, can compound the impacts of other barriers. Further education could be transformative in learners' lives, but this idea was hopeful for some and worrisome

for others. In addition, the adults “were more likely to take on unfamiliar challenges when they believed they had the ability and intelligence to achieve their goals” (p. 15). However, “[t]his was a monumental hurdle for many of the students” (ibid). Informational and institutional barriers were related to understanding and accessing the education system. Finally, “core people” in their lives provided support, encouragement and even baby-sitting. It was important to see friends pursue the same educational goals. For many of the students, people in their social environment did not support further education. The adult learners in the study sought out positive support and resisted negative messages from others.

Also influencing decisions about participating in formal education are feelings of belonging. Will an adult feel like he or she belongs and is accepted in a certain program? The notion of belonging is very complex and wrapped up with identity and entitlement – that is, feelings of whether or not one is entitled to PSE (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Adding another dimension to the issue of entitlement is a study from the UK that unveils hidden personal and social costs of working-class adult students returning to formal education. Students did not have a sense that they were entitled to PSE, experiencing personal, family and institutional ambiguity towards higher education. Further, a return to education led to a negative impact on existing relationships and was seen as a risk that may not have been anticipated (Waller, Bovill & Pitt, 2011).

A distinct group of adults who return to high school and postsecondary programs in Ontario are immigrants who may already have secondary and postsecondary credentials from other countries. While these students may experience similar barriers as students returning to education to get a credential for the first time, they also experience different ones. They often return to a high school setting because their credentials are not recognized by employers and postsecondary institutions. In addition, some return to high school programs in Ontario to gain Canadian work experience (Slade, 2008) and to improve their language skills. In a unique and valuable ten-year longitudinal study that followed over 1,000 adults who did not complete high school, the adults, including immigrants, went in and out of programs (Reder, 2011). During the periods when they were not enrolled in education programs, they engaged in self-study in order to continue working towards their high school equivalency. This sort of self-study may be unique to jurisdictions that primarily use the GED, unlike Ontario. However, it does indicate that obtaining an education credential may be a long-term process that involves starts and stops.

## Economic Payoffs and the Value of a Recognized Credential

Not having a high school diploma severely limits future opportunities and “represents a great loss to society and the individual” (Canadian Educational Statistics Council, 2010, p. 3). Jobs that do not require a high school education are disappearing. Those that remain are most often insecure, non-unionized and pay only minimum wage (Statistics Canada, March 2010). Adults without a high school education are more likely to be working for wages that keep them below low income cut-offs (Statistics Canada, March 2010), are more vulnerable to economic downturns, and experience more and longer periods of unemployment (Canadian Education Statistics Council, 2012).

There is some evidence to suggest that adults who did not obtain a secondary or postsecondary credential in their youth have benefited significantly from adult secondary education programs. An analysis of data from the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID) reveals that adults with less than a high school level of education who return to school to obtain a postsecondary credential see a “sizeable” gain in wages (Palameta & Zhang, 2006). In addition, older adults benefitted just as much or more compared to young adults. Those

with a high school level education or less reported that participation in learning was more likely to lead to a positive labour market outcome compared to those with higher levels of education (Myers & Myles, 2005).

Overall, there is a strong relationship between literacy proficiency and education attainment. There are, however, studies that examine the effects of literacy separately from education attainment, suggesting that improved literacy can have a greater effect on earnings for some than an education credential. However, this relationship is complex and variable. In a study focused on income assistance recipients, annual earnings were correlated more with literacy proficiency than education attainment (Kapsalis, 1998). But the adults with higher literacy scores were also in jobs that required the use of their literacy skills. In addition, income assistance recipients who were working were more likely to engage in literacy activities at home. Among those without a high school diploma, literacy proficiency contributed to an economic return for men but not for women (Finnie & Meng, 2007). However, both women and men with a high school diploma did see an economic return based on higher literacy proficiency. Further, only those who work in “knowledge-intensive” occupations are likely to see greater economic returns for their literacy skills. Adults in other occupations may not see the same value placed on literacy abilities (Raudenbush & Kasim, 1998). While some opportunities for higher earnings may exist for some groups in some occupations, having a credential remains highly valuable, and a necessity for women. It is not surprising then that women are more likely to return to high school than men (Raymond, 2008).

Adult learners also recognize and value the credential. When adults with a high school education or less reported a positive financial outcome after participating in an education program, the positive outcome was only related to learning that led to a recognized credential (Myers & Myles, 2005). Non-credentialed activities, such as a computer courses or quick-fix basic skills programs, did not lead to positive outcomes. The importance of obtaining a recognized credential like a high school diploma is further emphasized in a US study. Adults are far more likely to participate in education and training when the education provider is an accredited school rather than a private business or non-accredited provider. One of the ways to ensure that adults without high school have equitable and “effective access” to education and training opportunities is to develop and support programs that are personally valuable and represent long-term opportunities, rather than “job-specific non-credit courses or narrowly defined vocational training” (Kortesoja, 2009, p. 61).

## Ontario Adult High School Programs

Over the past 15 years there have been a handful of data gathering initiatives and empirical studies focused on learners attending school board adult high school programs in Ontario. A limitation of the studies is accessing provincial data that accurately describes the group of adults who return to an adult high school program.<sup>1</sup> However, past and current research efforts contribute to a growing understanding of the adult learner in Ontario high school programs, their challenges and concerns; program development challenges and initiatives; and staffing concerns and considerations.

In Ontario, 55 out of 72 school boards offer programs to adult students at over 300 different school sites (CESBA, 2007). In one two-month period in 2007, close to 60,000 students were enrolled in various courses

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Ontario Ministry of Education regularly publishes student enrolment data, referred to as Quick Facts, when describing adults who return to high school, there may be inconsistencies in the way some data are collected and reported at the board level. In addition, the data describing continuing education enrolments include adolescents and children who participate in programs (e.g., international language programs and summer school programs) offered through continuing education departments in school boards. Efforts are currently underway to ensure the consistent collection and reporting of data for adults who return to high school programs.

(ibid). An informal survey conducted in 2010 by the Ontario Association of Adult and Continuing Education School Board Administrators (CESBA) indicated that there were 10,000 graduates that year. A 1996 survey of over 4,000 adult students from 78 different programs across Ontario revealed that the respondent group was most often “economically disadvantaged” and included an over-representation of people with disabilities, visible minorities, women, Aboriginals and immigrants (Mombourquette, McEwan & McBride, 1999).

Funding for adult high school programs was “drastically reduced” over a four-year period from 1995 to 1999 (Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, n.d.). As a result, many boards eliminated or overhauled their full-time “adult day school” credit programs, with most opting to run courses on a part-time basis and without using salaried teachers. Until the reductions in funding, adult programs received the same level of funding as adolescent high school programs. Some boards that maintained the more costly “adult day school” model have had to make difficult choices in the way they organize and run their programs. One study documents some of the inequities that have occurred since the funding cuts (Slade, 2008). In order to run less popular courses (often science and math subjects), some boards have increased class sizes to 40 or 50 students in more popular courses, such as ESL credit. Also targeting immigrant students is the use of co-op placements, promoted to professionally trained immigrants as an opportunity to gain Canadian work experience. Highly skilled and professionally trained adults participate in the program, even if they do not need the high school credits. The program is seen as a way to increase enrolments and offset the costs of running other programs within the adult high school program (ibid).

Despite substantially lower funding levels<sup>2</sup>, adult high school programs do manage to provide a variety of support services, albeit at pared down or more limited levels compared to similar services for adolescent students. Depending on the board and the school, the following supports and services may be available: guidance counselling and related services, cooperative education programs, partnerships with local colleges and Dual Credit programs, support in accessing the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), partnerships with Ontario Works, community partnerships, and integrated employment programs that involve partnerships with employers (Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, 2006). However, partnerships, particularly those with colleges and other boards, can be challenging when programs are competing for the same students (Deloitte & Touche, 2010). In addition to offering adult high school credit courses, school boards also provide non-credit adult literacy and English or French-as-a-second-language programs. These programs support boards in offering a range of complementary adult education programs, facilitating a “one-stop” educational model for adults. The programs also help adult and continuing education programs offset administrative costs (ibid.).

Both the non-credit adult literacy and language programs and the “continuing education credit” courses rely on contract teachers and instructors who are paid by the hour.<sup>3</sup> The precarious nature of the vast majority of school board teachers and instructors was identified as an area of concern in the *Adult Education Review* report produced as part of a joint initiative between MTCU and EDU. “The low pay and the uncertain

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<sup>2</sup> It is challenging to compare current per student funding amounts allocated to adults with adolescent allocated funding. Upon first glance, it appears that adults are funded at just over half the rate of adolescent students. However, complex funding guidelines allocate additional funding for adolescent students, resulting in an even greater funding discrepancy between adults and adolescents, even though both must meet the same curriculum expectations to earn an OSSD. In 2012-2013 the base per student amount for adolescents is \$5,747.53 plus additional amounts for special needs, high needs, language, Aboriginal, rural and remote, etc. In comparison, the total amount for adult day school students is \$3,221.00 and the total for adult continuing education students is \$3,344.00 (Ministry of Education, September, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Teachers hired to teach “continuing education credit” courses must have their Ontario Teaching Certificate (OTC), whereas instructors in non-credit literacy and language programs do not necessarily need this qualification.

employment future mean that educators leave, and administrators find it hard to recruit new educators to what is viewed as a 'second-class' teaching environment" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 33).

In addition to the studies and data gathering initiatives mentioned above, CESBA has organized and overseen a series of action research projects, now in its third year of activity, that provides insights into the learner profile, student perceptions about program participation and program delivery formats (CESBA, 2011). The concerns and interests of the current study are aligned with the CESBA action research projects.

Returning to high school and pursuing postsecondary education as an adult is fraught with challenges, access barriers, some frustrations and disillusionment (particularly among immigrant students), sacrifices and complex decision-making considerations. However, the rewards are tangible and governments can develop policies that alleviate the challenges and frustrations and equalize access.

## Research Objectives and Questions

Although there have been sporadic, targeted and local data gathering and research initiatives focused on school board-run adult high school programs over the past 15 years, a comprehensive examination of adult learners who return to high school has not been attempted. There is a need to learn more about the students for several reasons: they have not been distinguished as a unique group of adult learners in adult learning and training studies; they are rarely the focus of attention in the fields of adult education and higher education studies; while most return to high school with postsecondary plans, the specific pathway to PSE has not been previously described. In addition, as the study reveals, most students in the respondent group are predominantly low-income, and there is an over-representation of women, immigrants and Aboriginals. As a whole, the adult learners who return to high school have encountered and continue to face multiple barriers in their pursuit of education. A better understanding of the group can provide policymakers with the information needed to devise mechanisms that facilitate access to education and remove barriers.

The main objective of the study is to better understand and describe adult learners and their concerns, and to identify the role of adult high school programs in supporting learners as they attend the high school program and prepare for PSE. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Who are the adults in high school programs and what are their concerns as learners?
2. What are learners' plans for PSE and what factors influence their decisions?
3. How does the adult high school program support decisions about entering PSE?

The research questions have been formulated to find ways to enhance the continued development of supports for adult learners while they are in high school programs and when making a transition into the postsecondary system.

## Chapter 2: Research Methods

This chapter provides details of the study's methodology, including its mixed methods design that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data from a survey and from interviews. The survey administration and interview processes are described. An overview of participants and program sites (their location and course format) is provided, followed by limitations related to the sample. Details related to the analysis of the three data collection sources – survey responses, written comments responding to open-ended questions and interview transcripts – are provided, along with an explanation of how each data source was used to develop the findings.

### Process

A mixed methods approach involving three different data sources was used. Descriptive quantitative data were gathered from an extensive survey. Within the survey were a series of open-ended questions. Following the survey administration, individual and small group interviews were conducted with a small portion of participants. The approach allowed us to fully explore the research questions using triangulation (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007), which permits comparisons between data sources that can provide both supporting and contradictory information. The experiences, perspectives and decision-making of the adult learners are the focus in all data collection activities.

The survey was administered to 491 students currently enrolled in high school programs in 12 different school boards across the province. Following survey administration, follow-up interviews were conducted with a total of 23 volunteer participants. During May and the first part of June in 2012, two researchers administered the survey in 17 of the 19 sites (in some school boards the survey was delivered at more than one site). Interviews were conducted after the surveys were completed in 13 sites. The survey was sent to two northern locations where on-site staff administered the survey with guidance from one of the researchers.

Various sites were contacted to request access. We had a limited period of time at the end of the academic year for data collection activities. This meant that we chose sites that had students actively attending. It also meant that we were not able to access some delivery formats, such as night classes and distance learning. After permission to access the site was obtained, usually from a principal, on-site staff, usually guidance counsellors and teachers, arranged access to classes and groups of students. All staff involved were given a brief explanation of the study (see Appendix A) and a copy of the survey for review. In some sites, specific classes were targeted. In other sites, students were recruited from a variety of learning groups or classes. Participation in the survey was voluntary. We targeted classes where students were completing compulsory credits or prerequisites. Students in these classes were more likely to be completing their high school program and thinking about their next education endeavours. We also considered subject areas and included students taking math and science, English and social science courses. Students at the two northern locations did not attend classes daily but did have regular contact with program staff to pick up and drop off assignments, complete tests and exams, and receive instructional support. The surveys were left with the main contact at these sites for two to three weeks and students were asked to complete the survey as they came into the site throughout that period. Before administering the survey and conducting interviews, informed consent was obtained from both survey and interview participants (see survey consent in Appendix B and interview consent in Appendix C). The informed consent documents were discussed with participants. Adult students were able to ask questions and clarify information before signing. Anonymity and confidentiality measures were taken to safeguard the completed surveys and interview data. No names appeared on the

survey, nor did the program name or even the school board name appear on the surveys. The surveys were collected separately from the informed consent documents. Pseudonyms were assigned to interview participants during data analysis and the name of their program and school board was not used.

The survey administration process was informal. Researchers introduced the purpose of the study and described the survey. Teachers and other program staff had access to the survey before the researchers visited. This allowed them to talk to students about the process. Teachers could remain in the classes or with student groups to provide support to the researchers and help respond to any student concerns. When introducing the survey we emphasized the difference between the purpose of the study and a teacher or program evaluation. The decision to have teachers remain and provide assistance helped to assure both students and staff that the survey was not an evaluation. The researchers encouraged and responded to questions (although they were infrequent) throughout the administration process to ensure understanding and a high rate of response to all questions. The surveys took students 20 to 40 minutes to complete.

After the surveys were completed, the researchers asked if any students would be interested in participating in a follow-up interview. They were given the option to participate with a peer, if they were more comfortable doing so, or on their own. To acknowledge the extra time spent on the study, often during the students' scheduled break time or immediately after classes, interview participants were given a gift card. Interviews were conducted in an office or unused classroom and were audio-recorded. They lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The intent of the interviews was to address the same topics that appeared on the survey but in a conversational and informal manner in order to gain greater insights and allow the students' perspective to be expressed.

The selection of participants for both the survey and interviews was both purposive and a matter of convenience. We targeted particular classes based on activity levels and subjects. However, all participation was voluntary. In addition, in a couple of sites, interview participants were recruited by the site staff (a principal or teacher) before the researchers arrived. These participants may have been recruited based on their ability to speak positively about their experiences in the adult high school program. However, in other instances, when interview participants were recruited immediately after survey administration, students may have been motivated to volunteer to express dissatisfaction with their program experiences. These reasons and motivations to participate were considered when the interview data was analysed.

## Participants and Program Sites

Additional details describing the participant group are located in the following chapter. In general, over half (62%) of the survey respondents were female, most respondents were between the ages of 21 and 34, just over half were born in Canada, and one-tenth of those born in Canada identified as Aboriginal. In comparison, the profile of the 23 students who participated in the interviews was only aligned with the survey group with regard to age. Otherwise, gender was split between males and females (12 males and 11 females participated). In addition, proportionally more interview participants were born in Canada (70%) and indicated that English is their first language (70%).

Out of 19 sites where the survey was administered, (details in Table 1) seven are located in large cities, six are located in small to mid-size cities, and six are located in towns.

**Table 1: Site Locations**

	Number of Sites	Number of Surveys	Number of Interview Participants
<b>Large cities</b> Toronto and Ottawa	7	202	7
<b>Small to mid-size cities</b> Barrie, Hamilton, London, Oshawa and Thunder Bay	6	175	7
<b>Towns with rural and remote catchments</b> Bradford, Carleton Place, Trenton, Belleville, Cornwall, Dryden, Woodstock	6	113	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>491</b>	<b>23</b>

Another aim of sampling was to represent a diversity of delivery formats. Three different delivery formats were in use across the 19 sites: 1) programs that are funded as “adult day school” credits, running full-time during the day; 2) programs that are funded as “continuing education” credits, running on-site during the day or evening; and 3) programs that are funded as “continuing education” credits, using a home study or distance learning format. The majority of survey and interview participants were enrolled in “adult day school” credit programs. The sample does not reflect the distribution of learners and program delivery formats (details in Table 2) documented in a recent provincial snapshot survey. The vast majority (78%) of adult students were enrolled in courses run as “continuing education credits,” and only 22% of students were in “adult day school credit” programs (CESBA, 2007). However, this study is not focused on comparing delivery formats.

**Table 2: Site Delivery Formats**

	Number of Sites	Number of Surveys	Number of Interview Participants
<b>Adult day school credit</b>	12	376	20
<b>Continuing education credit on-site delivery</b>	5	70	3
<b>Continuing education credit home study/distance learning</b>	2	45	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>491</b>	<b>23</b>

One of the primary considerations guiding data collection activities was reaching enough students. The way to ensure a high number of respondents in a short period of time at the end of the academic year was to access “adult day school” credit programs. Another primary consideration was to ensure geographical diversity of program locations, and that was accomplished. Further, we wanted to ensure student diversity amongst

survey respondents. This objective was also accomplished and will be described in further detail in the findings.

## Measures

The key measure in the study was the survey. Open-ended responses in the survey and the interview questions connected directly to specific survey topics. The survey was comprised of five sections: 1) current high school program; 2) plans for PSE and career; 3) influences on postsecondary education decision-making (i.e., financial, employment and career, family, academic and learning, and personal factors); 4) program supports and preparation for PSE; and 5) student (demographic) information.

The first section focused on the adult's current high school participation, containing mostly single-response questions about the format, and intensity of study, reasons for participating, reasons for not completing high school (if in fact it was not completed) and education background.

The next section, plans for PSE and career, asked questions about when and how students planned to participate in PSE, if they indicated that is their plan.

The third section, examining decision-making factors, was the largest and most detailed. Five decision-making topics (i.e., finances, family, employment and career, personal and academic) addressing PSE participation and barriers and 38 factors were identified based on a literature review. Students were asked to rate the influence of each factor on their PSE decision-making. Four indications of the degree of influence (no influence, small influence, moderate influence and large influence) were used. For example, a student who decided to attend PSE could indicate that cost had only a small influence on the decision, whereas a student who decided not to enter PSE or is unsure could indicate that cost had a large influence on the decision. In addition, respondents could indicate that a factor is not applicable.

The fourth section focused on identifying the supports that were deemed to be most helpful to adult learners pursuing PSE. Thirteen items addressing information about PSE and careers, in addition to curricular supports, could be rated as not important, somewhat important, moderately important and very important. In addition, students were asked to indicate whether or not a particular support (e.g., information about college and university registration, courses and costs) is available in the current high school program. Items in this section were also derived from a literature review.

The final section focused on demographic information related to gender, age, first language, Aboriginal identification, country of birth, marital status, family responsibilities, employment and income.

A total of six open-ended questions were included in the survey: one after each of the five decision-making topics, and one following the program supports section. The open-ended questions were designed to encourage students to write about additional decision-making factors or program supports that were not included in the survey.

An unstructured format was used for the interviews. An interview guide was created (see Appendix D). The intent of the format was to further explore each of the five main topics covered by the survey, but in a more conversational manner. Researchers asked the students one or two opening questions related to each survey topic and then referred to a series of prompts, if needed. For example, the opening questions addressing supports were the following: What sorts of supports have been helpful to you? How do teachers and guidance counsellors help you in the program? Students were also asked if there was anything in the survey that did

not connect to their experiences as an adult learner in order to draw attention to issues that we may not have thought about and included in the survey.

Survey topics and specific items were informed by a literature review, adult education experience and survey development expertise. An initial version of the survey was further refined and modified based on a pretest process with a group of learners and feedback from adult high school education experts. Nine versions of the survey were developed and refined before a final version was used.

## Analyses

### Survey Data

For the purposes of this report, first-level data analysis includes the presentation of descriptive statistics (frequencies) for survey items throughout the text. Percentages for each survey item were calculated based on the number of respondents who provided a valid response to the item, as most survey items had some missing responses. All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. A value of .5 was rounded to the nearest even number. All results were presented in numerical report summaries with frequency counts sorted from high to low for rating questions and multiple-response questions. Decision-making factors and supports that had the “largest influence” or were deemed “most important” were reported, and supports were also ranked based on availability.

In a later stage of analysis, after the qualitative and quantitative data sets had been merged (details below), we returned to the survey data to further examine differences between the four groups and the overall sample. Cross-tabulations of the four groups are based on 1) gender; 2) PSE application status (applied/did not apply); 3) country of birth; and 4) Aboriginal identification. To determine whether or not there were significant differences within a particular comparison group (i.e., between males/females, applied/not applied, born in Canada/not born in Canada, and Aboriginals/non-Aboriginals), we looked for significant differences based on a “worst-case scenario” (calculated as a result of 50%) margin of error at the 95% confidence level. In a handful of instances, differences slightly below the minimal (0.5-1.5% below) are reported for findings of particular interest. When reporting these percentages, the terms “slight difference” or “slightly more/less likely” are used in each instance.

**Table 3: Cross-Tabulation Confidence Intervals**

	<b>Worst-Case Scenario Margin of Error 95% Confidence Level</b>	<b>Minimal Difference Required Between Groups</b>
Gender		
Males	+/-7.3%	13%
Females	+/-5.7%	
PSE application status		
Applied to postsecondary	+/-8.5%	14.5%
Did not apply	+/-6.0%	
Country of birth		

	<b>Worst-Case Scenario Margin of Error 95% Confidence Level</b>	<b>Minimal Difference Required Between Groups</b>
Born in Canada	+/-6.2%	12.9%
Not born in Canada	+/-6.7%	
Aboriginal identification		
Aboriginal (and born in Canada)	+/-13.5%	18.5%
Non-Aboriginal	+/-5.0%	

## Open-Ended Survey Questions

There were five open-ended survey questions, in addition to a handful of questions that asked students to indicate “other” responses. The “other” responses that provided additional details and examples were integrated directly into the findings. Close to 400 written comments responding to the open-ended questions were sorted into the five decision-making topics and program support topic. Some responses were eliminated if they were duplications or were not related to the research purpose. Although students could write comments after each of these sections, their comments did not always align with the survey topic. This likely indicated that students had a more pressing issue or greater concern on their minds, or it could have indicated that concerns were interrelated and challenging to align with a specific category. For example, under personal factors, the category with the most responses that did not fit, responses were resorted into the employment/career category, financial category and family category. The factor category that generated nearly half (40%) of all responses was financial factors (40%). Additional details are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Number of Open-Ended Responses**

	<b>Number of Sorted Open-Ended Factor Responses</b>	<b>Proportion of Total Responses</b>
Financial factors	152	40%
Employment/career factors	89	23%
Family factors	72	19%
Academic/learning factors	36	9%
Personal	30	8%
Total	379	99%

## Interview Data

All audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed. Over 120 pages of transcribed text were produced. After initial reading and note-taking, the transcription data were categorized into organizational topics using a colour coding system. The table below lists topics one to six. Each topic is directly connected to the survey and interview questions (Maxwell, 2005). However, a portion of the data could not be categorized into the

organizational topics. Although the interviews were guided by specific topics, they were open-ended and conversational. Students shared a great deal of descriptive information about their current day-to-day experiences in the program. We developed an additional substantive category for these data (category seven). The remaining data were re-read to determine if they fit into the seven categories. Data that did not fit were examined to determine if they contributed to the overall objectives of the study and could be used to respond to the research questions. If they did, they were set aside for later analysis. These data were more integrated and complex and could not be readily categorized. In the next phase of analysis, additional sub-categories were created for some of the categories. The categorized data were then re-read and notes were made to develop descriptive phrases that could be used to develop themes at a later stage.

**Table 5: Categories and Sub-Categories Developed for Interview Data Analysis**

Categories	Sub-Categories
Employment/career factors	
Financial factors	
Family factors	
Academic/learning factors	
Reasons for returning to high school and PSE/career plans	Credentials not recognized Prerequisites Personal goal Career decision made
Mechanisms that help and hinder high school completion and transition to PSE	Dual Credit, co-op, OYAP Courses/curriculum Access to information about PSE Disconnections
Being an adult learner in high school	Role of teachers Social structure and scheduling Transition and fitting in Peer support and challenges Curriculum support and challenges Past experiences

## Merging the Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Once all data sources had been analysed and represented individually (as categories and numerical summary reports), we merged the data sets in a second phase of analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). As part of a triangulation design, we looked for the ways that the data sets were confirmatory and different. We then devised a matrix to describe how each of the data sets would be used to respond to the research questions. Also indicated in the matrix is the extent to which particular data sets were integrated and the role of a particular data set (i.e., qualitative data were fit into quantitative to provide greater insight, or qualitative data were primarily used, or quantitative data were primarily used). An initial write-up was produced based on the matrix. Once we had a thorough understanding of the overall findings, cross-tabulations were performed.

**Table 6: Data Matrix for Merging Quantitative and Qualitative Data**

Research Questions	Data Sets	Use of Data Sets in Findings
<p>Who are the adults in high school programs and what are their concerns as learners?</p>	<p>Survey data from section 1) Current high school program and section 5) Student information Interview data from category 7) Being an adult learner in high school</p>	<p><i>Chapter 3: Adult Learners in Ontario High School Programs</i> Survey data used to build the learner profile. Survey data integrated with interview data and responses to “other” questions to describe reasons for leaving and returning. Interview data used to describe the development of a positive high school experience</p>
<p>What are learners’ plans for PSE and what factors influence their decisions?</p>	<p>Survey data from section 2) Plans for postsecondary education and career Interview data from category 5) Reasons for returning to high school and PSE/career plans AND Survey data from section 3) Influences on postsecondary education decision-making (i.e., financial, employment and career, family, academic and learning, and personal factors) Open-ended data addressing decision-making factors Interview data from categories one to four (i.e., financial, employment and career, family, academic and learning, and personal factors)</p>	<p><i>Chapter 4: Plans for Postsecondary Education and Career</i> Survey data used to highlight learners’ PSE plans and career choices. Survey data used as primary source to organize description of decision-making factors. Then, responses to open-ended questions and interview data are used to add greater insights.</p>
<p>How does the adult high school program support decisions about entering PSE?</p>	<p>Survey data from section 4) Program supports Interview data from category 6) Mechanisms that help and hinder high school completion and transition to PSE</p>	<p><i>Chapter 5: Program Supports and Transition to Postsecondary</i> Survey data used to highlight supports deemed to be very important and access to those supports. Then, responses to open-ended questions and interview data were categorized, and four topics were developed.</p>

## Chapter 3: Adult Learners in Ontario High School Programs

This chapter has two main sections. The first one uses demographic information from the survey to provide an overview of the adult student profile. Also from the survey are the most common reasons for returning to high school, the most common reasons for leaving high school the first time around (if it was not completed), and the length of time it took to return to high school. Following the demographic overview is a section that draws upon qualitative data (formal interviews) to highlight some of the experiences of students returning to high school. This section provides insight into the interplay of conditions, dispositions and supports that contribute to a positive program environment. Key factors include personal growth and insights, interactions with peers and teachers, program planning decisions, curricular connections and supports, and provincial policy mechanisms.

### Adult Learner Profile

#### Who Participated in the Study?

The table below provides an overview of the respondent group with regard to their gender, age, country of birth, Aboriginal identification and first language. Subsequent learner profile information looks at education credentials, income, family support and family responsibilities. A detailed summary of all demographic information, including counts and proportions, is provided in Appendix E.

**Table 7: Respondent Group Profile**

<b>Gender</b>	62% female 38% male
<b>Age</b>	16% between 18 and 20 30% between 21 and 24 30% between 25 and 34 13% between 35 and 44 11% over 45
<b>Country of birth/Aboriginal identification</b>	54% born in Canada 11% of those born in Canada are Aboriginal 46% born in other countries
<b>First language</b>	61% English 4% French 35% other first languages

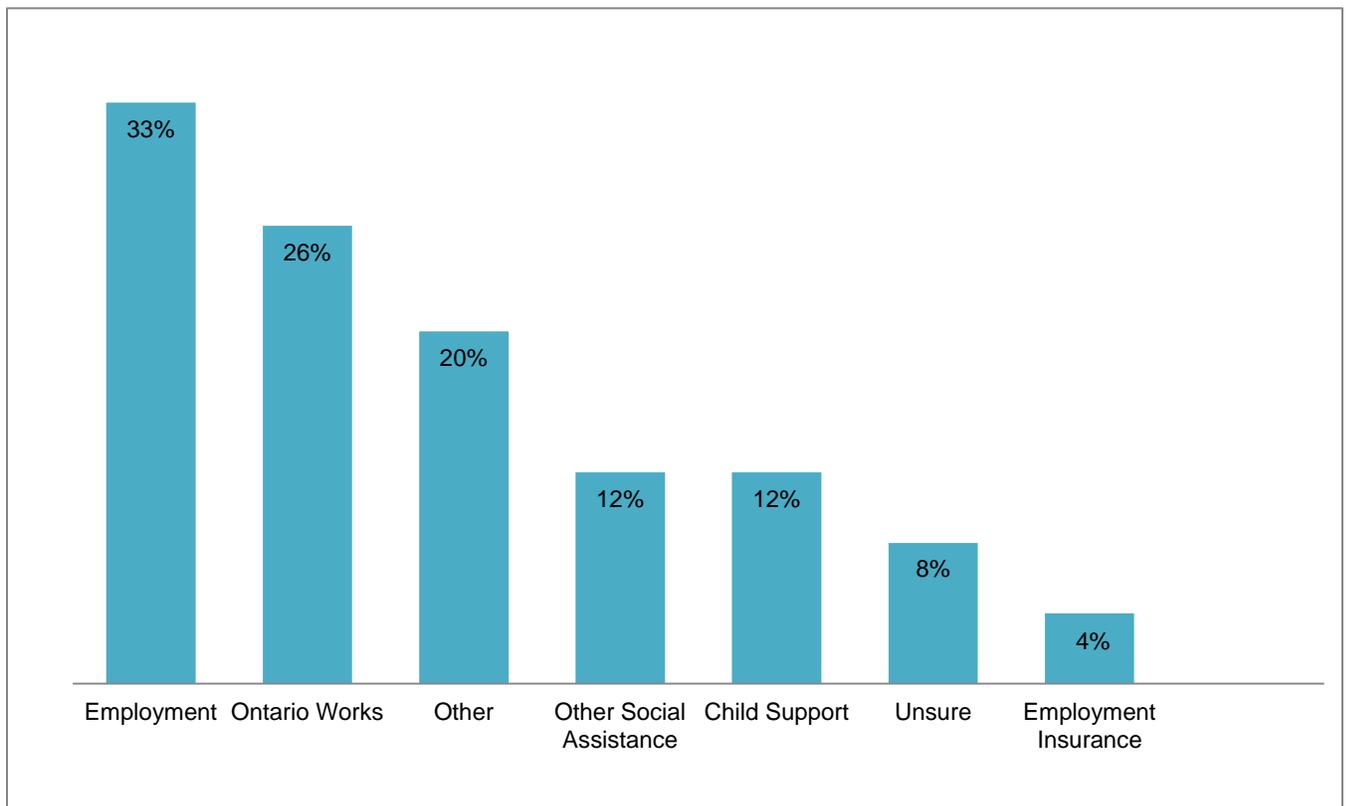
Nearly half (48%) of all respondents already had their high school diplomas when completing the survey. Students responded to a question asking if they “already have” a diploma. We are interpreting this to mean that the students entered their current high school program having previously completed a high school program. Of those who said they already have a diploma, slightly more than half (56%) received it from another country, and just under half (44%) received their diplomas from Ontario and/or another province or

territory. In addition, 14% of students not born in Canada had a diploma from Ontario. A total of 70% of students not born in Canada already had their diplomas when returning to high school. In comparison, only 29% of adults born in Canada had a diploma.

Of those who have at least a high school diploma, one-third have a college or trades certification or diploma, one-tenth (11%) have an undergraduate degree and a small portion (6%) have a graduate degree. Respondents also identified additional credentials including International Baccalaureate, real estate and mortgage broker certifications, and a management accountant certification. Two respondents were currently enrolled in a university.

Two-thirds (68%) of respondents have monthly incomes of less than \$1,500 per month. Most of this group have an income of \$1,000 or less. Further details regarding income sources are provided in Figure 1.

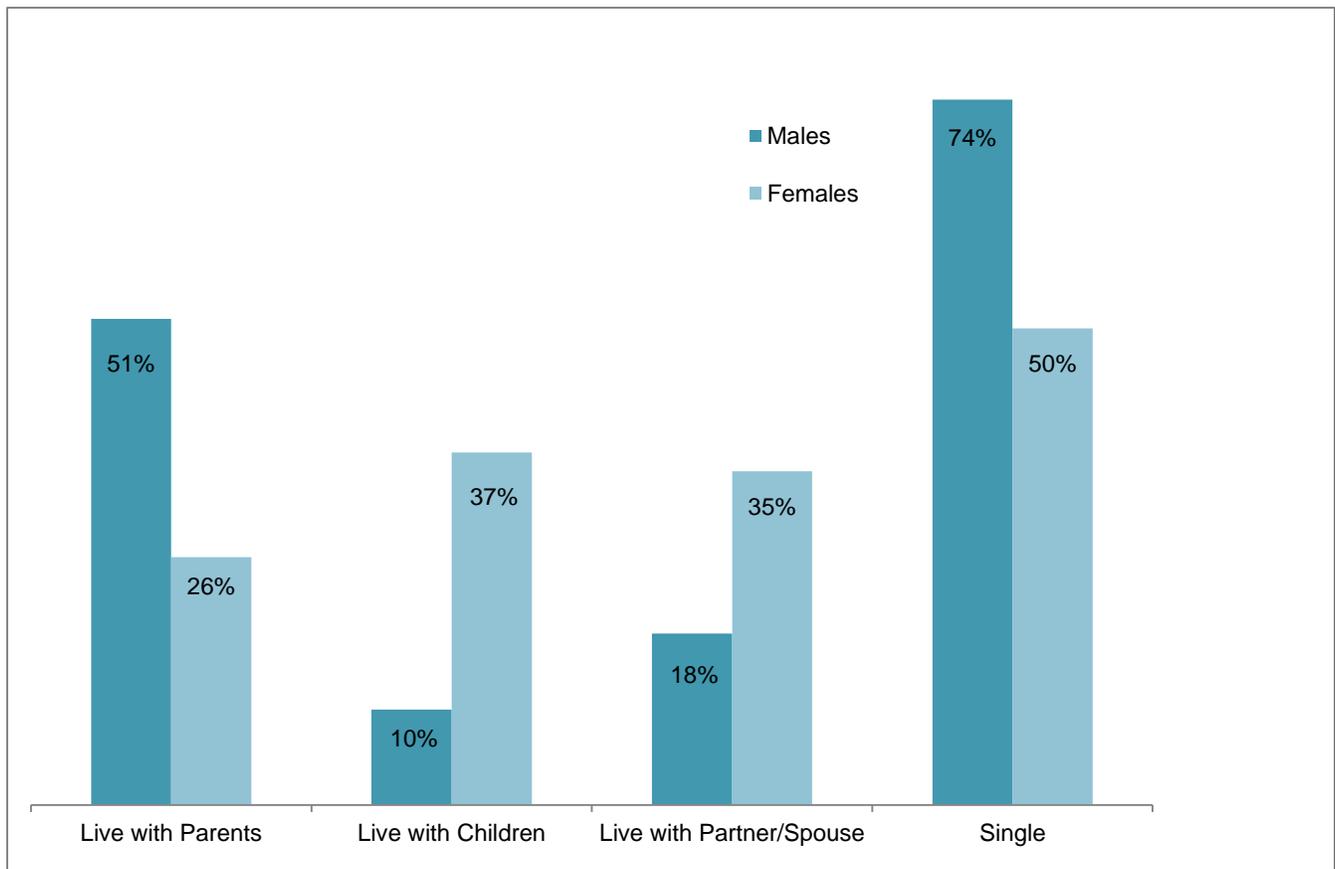
**Figure 1: Income Sources**



Over one-quarter (26%) of respondents work 20 hours per week or more, and 10% work less than 20 hours per week. In addition, 37% are not working but would like to be and are currently looking for work. Just over one-quarter (26%) are not working and not looking for work. Just under one-half of Aboriginal students (45%) receive Ontario Works (OW) compared to less than one-quarter (23%) of non-Aboriginal students. Students not born in Canada are less likely to receive OW (17%) compared to those born in Canada (33%).

Nearly all respondents live with others, including parents, spouses, partners, children and extended family, and only one-tenth (11%) live alone. There are several differences between males and females with regard to family that are presented in Figure 2. In addition, there are differences between students born in Canada and students who were not born in Canada. Students not born in Canada are more likely to be married or in a common law relationship than are those born in Canada (43% compared to 19%). Furthermore, half (50%) of students not born in Canada provide care for family members other than children, compared to less than one-quarter (22%) of those born in Canada.

**Figure 2: Family Care Responsibilities and Support**



**A Stable Adult Learner Profile**

An extensive survey (4,000 students from 78 different programs) conducted in 1996-1997 revealed a similar learner profile. Results showed that 64% of respondents were female (compared to 62% in the current survey) and 37% were male (compared to 38% in the current survey) (Mombourquette, McEwan & McBride, 1999). Further, 40% identified themselves as “ESL,” indicating that they had emigrated and spoke a first language other than English, compared to 46% in the current survey who stated that they were born in other countries, and 35% who stated that their first language was neither English nor French. The two respondent

groups also shared income characteristics: 15 years ago, 41% indicated that their main income was from government assistance and 10% received employment insurance. In comparison, 38% of the current group indicated that they received income from social assistance, but only 4% received employment insurance. The decrease in the proportion that receives EI benefits could indicate that high school programs are seeing adults with less attachment to the labour market and who may be experiencing more complex and entrenched barriers.

## Why Have Adult Learners Returned to High School?

When respondents were asked to indicate the reasons they had returned to high school, most chose more than one reason, indicating that their decision to return was complex. The following reasons were chosen most often:

- Get a diploma for PSE (38%)
- Get a specific prerequisite (36%)
- Simply want the diploma (28%)
- Diploma is for a job (15%)
- Personal accomplishment (15%)
- Improve English language skills (15%)

When we examined differences amongst specific groups, getting a specific prerequisite was the number one reason identified by over half (54%) of those who had applied to PSE as compared to 32% of those who did not apply. Only 4% of Aboriginal students returned to high school for a specific prerequisite as compared to 41% of non-Aboriginal students. Furthermore, half of the students (51%) not born in Canada stated that they returned to high school to obtain a specific prerequisite as compared to 23% of those born in Canada.

The interview data added a great deal of insight as students provided details about their circumstances and the reasons they returned to high school. The data also indicate that decision-making is complex. Although the data are organized according to the most commonly chosen reasons indicated on the survey, students also discuss additional reasons and life circumstances that compelled them to make the final decision to enrol in a high school program.

### Diploma for Postsecondary Education and Career

A number of interview participants explained that they returned to high school in order to pursue PSE, which in turn is connected to recent or solidified career directions. For example, John, 21, who also has a learning disability, explained that initially he was reluctant to be involved in educational activities but eventually he developed interest in cognitive psychology and neuroscience, perhaps as a result of his own acquired knowledge about his learning disability. “I kind of got interested in psychology and stuff like that. But I figured that the only way I can pursue anything like that was if I actually get my diploma.” Chantal, 27, explained that she did not know what she wanted to do while in high school as a teenager. Now, nearly a decade later, she wants to enter a practical nursing course. Her indecision about a career direction may have been exacerbated by personal challenges she faced as an adolescent high school student.

I am here because I need to get my grade 12, and I need to get the credits that I need to go to college. I didn't do it in high school because I didn't have any idea what I really wanted to do, and it seemed kind of pointless then. I suffered with depression and social anxiety too so it was difficult to be in the school environment.

Although a career decision may have precipitated the decision to return to high school for some, others may have entered an adult high school program without an apparent career path but rather as a means of diminishing their reliance on social services. For example, Simon, 19, explained:

I plan to get my diploma, and then by the time my diploma is done be self-sustaining so I'm not on Ontario Works anymore. I now have a job, and I'll have a diploma so now it's just saving money for postsecondary.

Sameer, 32, and originally from Nepal, is an interesting comparative case study. His decision to enter a high school program resulted from disappointment and disillusionment rather than clarification and personal aspiration. "When I came here," he explained, "I already had my Master's degree from back home." His initial plan was to enrol in a university to pursue a PhD in nursing. He focused on nursing because he said a friend who immigrated to Australia with the same educational credentials had entered a PhD program there. However, he found out that he had to be a Registered Nurse (RN) in order to qualify for a PhD program in Ontario. His current goal is to register in a practical nursing program and then a RN program. In order to enter the practical nursing program he returned to high school to complete required math and science courses. He also decided to complete all of the requirements for his OSSD at the same time and found himself in a Grade 12 English course. "So I have already finished my Master's in English Literature and still I am in Grade 12 English course. This is not very good. This *is not* very good."

### **Simply Want the Diploma**

Simply wanting a high school diploma can be tied up with emotions about personal abilities and a strong desire to overcome past challenges. In addition, both male and female interview participants talked about the importance of getting a diploma in order to be a role model for their children. Cindy, 31, described her experiences that led her back to a high school program.

I have four kids so I am finishing because you can't practice what you don't do. You know, I can't say to them, 'You have to finish high school,' when they don't see a diploma.

Similarly, Jennifer, 29, was motivated to complete her high school education to be a role model and be able to encourage her own children. Like Cindy, she left high school as a teenager when she became pregnant with her first child.

It really wasn't about going back to school for me. It was for my kids. I did leave when I had my first son. At 16 I left school. My middle son, he's not a school kid. He doesn't really enjoy it and he has a hard time focusing. I always told my kids that college or university is their choice but they have to finish their Grade 12. I just felt like I couldn't do that to them if I didn't do it myself. It's more for them.

### **Diploma is for a Job**

Two male interview participants talked about the need to get their diplomas in order to find work. Both lived in small towns and were currently receiving income assistance. Matthew, 25, said, "I was finding that it was nearly impossible to find a job without my high school diploma so I came back to finish." He thought that once he had his diploma in hand he would be able to find a job in his community without difficulty. Simon also spoke about the challenges of finding work and said that job prospects in his community were "really slim right

now, very slim.” His participation in the high school program led to a part-time job. After completing a co-op placement organized by the adult high school, he was asked to apply for a position.

### **Personal Accomplishment**

For some interview participants, completing the diploma was a personal decision that was discussed primarily in relation to their own goals and motivations. While a return to high school may have been a personal goal, the actual decision to enrol was often facilitated by other circumstances.

Natalie, between the ages of 25 and 34, already had a postsecondary certificate and was accepted to a second postsecondary diploma program. However, she had not completed her high school diploma and said in a matter of fact way, “I just want to finish this so I have it on my resume.” She said that not having the diploma did not interfere with her postsecondary education or work, but she conveyed a sense that it was something left undone that she now wanted to complete.

After leaving high school without his diploma, Dave, 29, said he had always planned to return. “It’s always been a personal goal of mine to go back.” After working in what he described as “dead-end jobs” for ten years, he decided to become a Personal Support Worker. When he found out that he needed his diploma, he decided that it was time to return to a high school program. Jason, the youngest interview participant at 18, was out of school for only a year before he decided to return. Although he had originally figured out a career path while in high school, he said that he did not have the marks to pursue PSE.

At 50, Bruce had gone through major life transformations and experiences before entering an adult high school program. He described that he wanted to use the time in the program to figure out what he would do next in his working life.

I had a business that went belly-up. I went to drugs, did drugs, came off the drugs. Being a single dad, things were getting pretty haywire. I thought, ‘You know what? I never even finished grade eight, when I was fourteen.’ I thought, ‘You know what? Perhaps it’s a good idea to find out.’ Maybe there is something that I really would like to do.

Two female participants, Debby, 45, and Jennifer explained that they always wanted to complete their high school but waited to enrol until their youngest child was in school full time.

### **Improve their English**

One interview participant, Jirair, between the ages of 25 and 34, proudly described how he was gaining English language abilities while in the high school program. After attending an ESL program, he decided to work towards his diploma and continue taking ESL classes that would generate high school credits. He explained his decision. “I said, ‘I am going to jump to high school, to adult high school.’ In two years, I just finished it! I started like a baby and now I am going to graduate.”

## **Why Did Learners Leave High School Originally?**

When asked to indicate reasons why they did not complete high school as adolescents (if in fact they had not), the majority of respondents chose more than one reason. The five most frequently chosen reasons are the following:

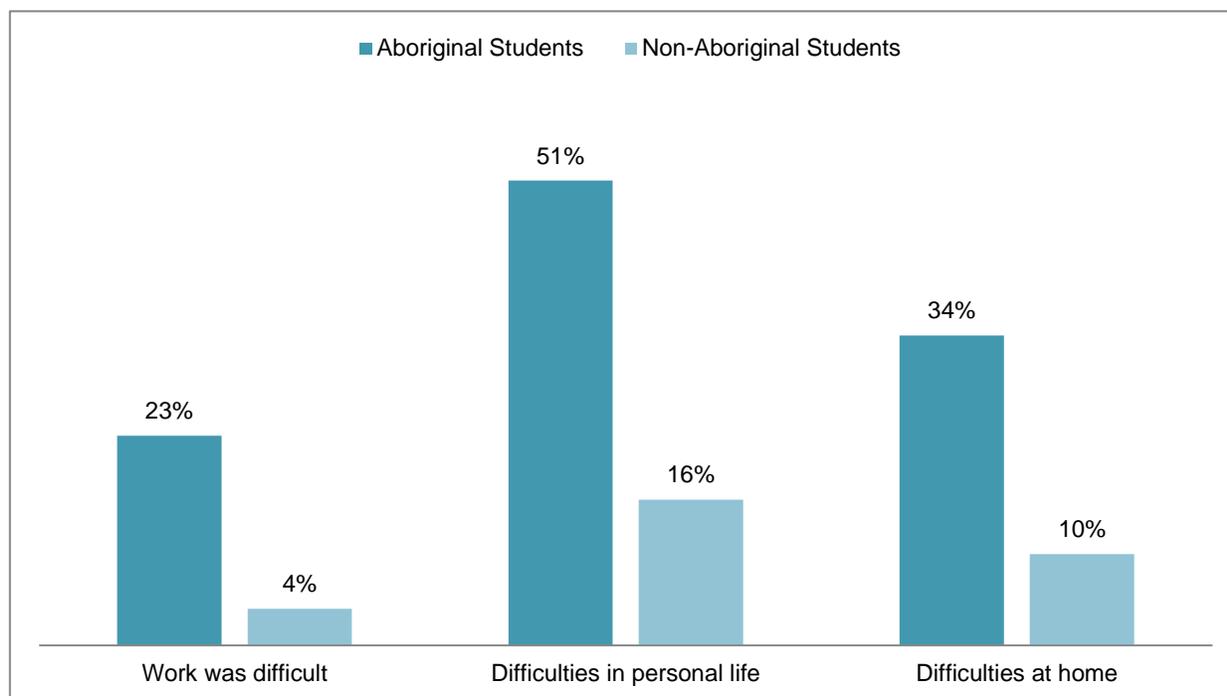
- Difficulties in personal life (20%)
- Not interested in school (18%)
- Wanted or needed to work (13%)
- Difficulties at home (12%)
- Moved to Canada from another country (12%)

This question also generated a number of compelling statements providing greater personal details about leaving high school during adolescence. Students wrote the following:

- Was told by my family that I wouldn't finish
- Being bullied, my mental health and coming out
- Drugs
- Didn't get along with teachers and large class numbers
- Death of a close family member
- Just didn't care at the time
- Married when I was in Grade 10
- Stopped going to school because of war
- School said why you even trying? Why you here?

Males (27%) were more likely than females (13%) to indicate that they left high school because they were not interested at the time. In addition, Aboriginal students indicated that they experienced more difficulties compared to non-Aboriginal students, as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Comparing Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal Students' Reasons for Leaving School**



## How Long Did it Take to Return to High School?

The largest proportion (40%) of respondents has been out of school for the shortest period of time – four years or less. One-third (33%) of respondents were out of school more than ten years, and just over one-quarter (27%) were out of school between five and ten years. Females (38%) were more likely than males (25%) to have said they had been out of school ten years or more. In addition, students not born in Canada (41%) were more likely to state they had been out of school more than ten years than were those born in Canada (26%).

For most students who completed the survey (57%), this was their first time back in a high school program. One-quarter (24%) had tried the program once before, while only a small portion (8%) had attempted a high school program three or more times. However, Aboriginal students (38%) were less likely to indicate this was their first time in a program than were non-Aboriginal students (58%). Over two-thirds (71%) of those not born in Canada stated that this was their first time back in a high school program, compared to 44% of those who were born in Canada.

Before entering a high school program, over half (58%) of respondents had participated in other education programs. These included the following:

- English-as-a-second-language programs (29%)

- Literacy programs (19%)
- College upgrading programs (9%)
- GED programs (2%)

Females were more likely than males to have participated in some form of adult education and training before entering high school. Half (52%) of the males had not participated in any form of adult education, but just over one-third (37%) of females had not participated. Not surprisingly, over half of the students (55%) not born in Canada had participated in ESL courses.

The majority (70%) of adult students also studied on their own when not enrolled in any form of education or training. They used the following self-study formats:

- Studied materials from courses (30%)
- Read about certain subjects such as history or science (27%)
- Used online sites to improve reading and writing skills (24%)
- Used online sites to improve math skills (11%)

Used materials that were borrowed or purchased (e.g., GED manual) (12%).

## What Course Delivery Formats do Students Access?

Nearly all respondents (97%) were taking their courses in classes during the day, and only a handful (5%) was using some form of distance education (online or correspondence). Although the overall proportion using a distance education format is low, two sites with mostly Aboriginal students use the format. The very high proportion of day school students is an acknowledged limitation of the survey administration process. The vast majority (79%) of students were taking one or two courses and the remainder were taking three or more courses. Under half (40%) of students planned to complete their studies after their current course and one-fifth (17%) had four or more courses to complete. A small portion (9%) said they were not sure how many courses they had to complete. Well over half (62%) planned to complete the high school program within one to six months and one quarter (26%) said that they would complete their diploma in seven months to one year.

## Making the Return to High School a Positive Experience

During the interviews, students compared their current experiences in an adult high school program with high school experiences they recalled as adolescents. For the most part, students spoke positively about their experiences in their various adult high school programs. Their positive experiences may be related to the type of program in which they were enrolled. Most interview participants were enrolled in programs that are funded using the “adult day school” model. This means that they attended the program full-time and were in classes led by salaried teachers who usually have permanent full- and part-time positions. Their programs may have also included a range of support services, such as guidance, which may have contributed to a positive experience. Although the experiences of the interview participants may not necessarily reflect the experiences of all the study participants, the data provide an informative description of the elements of program design that support adult learners. A positive experience is an interplay of students’ own personal growth and insights, interactions with peers and teachers, program planning decisions, curricular connections and supports, and provincial policy mechanisms.

## PLAR Helps Students Start the Program and Stay Motivated

A provincial policy mechanism, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) for mature students, helps students start the program and stay motivated. For students who did not have a diploma or whose diploma was not consistently recognized by employers or other educational institutions, the PLAR process<sup>4</sup> was used to help students turn their work and life experience into credits. Debby enthusiastically described how she completed all of her diploma requirements in one year through the PLAR process. “I came here with nothing. I came here with a Grade 8 education in September, and I will finish with more. I did the PLAR and a little extra.” Cindy suggested that the PLAR process be widely promoted in order to attract a greater number of students.

The only thing I can even think about for making it [the program] better is making it easier to get more courses, like the PLAR program. You get six credits in one course in six weeks. If they had more of that, I think more people would be graduating. People that need twenty credits are not going to come and do one at a time.

A survey question also provides some additional information related to PLAR use. Students who already have a high school diploma or have returned to gain specific prerequisites would not likely need to access PLAR or Mature Student Evaluation (MSE) processes. Accordingly, less than half (40%) of the respondents had earned credits using either process. The remainder stated that they had not earned credits using these processes (34%) or that they were unfamiliar with the processes (14%). However, the majority (62%) of Aboriginal students had earned credits using PLAR, compared to over one-third (37%) of non-Aboriginal students. In comparison, the same proportion of students not born in Canada (40%) earned credits with PLAR or MSE as those born in Canada (41%). However, one-quarter of those not born in Canada said that they were not familiar with ways to earn credits, compared to only 6% of those born in Canada. Students not born in Canada may not be accessing PLAR or be informed about PLAR if they already have a diploma from another country and only need specific prerequisites.

## Program Scheduling Accommodates Busy and Complex Lives

One of the noted differences between interview participants' experience in an adult high school compared to their previous experience in high school was the program's acknowledgement that the students had busy and often complex lives. This acknowledgement materialized in program scheduling decisions, flexibility and understanding related to attendance, deadlines, decreased but still some attendance monitoring, and greater personal autonomy and responsibility.

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<sup>4</sup> Currently in Ontario, students can access two credit-granting processes as adults: 1) the Mature Student Evaluation (MSE); and 2) Prior Learning and Assessment Recognition for credit (PLAR for credit). Although there are differences between the two processes, both help adult students earn high school credits based on their life and employment experiences, additional education and training. A maximum of 26 out of 30 credits can be earned.

John touched on a few of these differences.

This place is perfect because it offers the flexibility of choice. You know, you're an adult you can make your own decisions. But it also kind of leads you. They say, 'Well, you have a choice, but maybe you should make this choice.' But in high school, they twist your arm. They say, 'You have to do it this way.' If you don't learn this way, that's a problem.

Nadeen, 24 and a single mother, appreciated how her teachers provided class time to do work rather than assign homework. She said that they also seem to understand that she has a busy life outside of school. "They really try to work with your schedule. They really, really try to help you accomplish all the things you need." Even when she had to miss classes, most often a result of her child's health, she said that her teachers always understood and did not question her. Similarly, Simon explained that he appreciated not having to make up excuses if he was away, like he was accustomed to doing previously in high school. "If I didn't show up, I'd be worried and I'd be stressed, and then thinking, 'Okay what can I say so I don't have to...so I can get out of this?' Here, it's okay, you didn't show up, that's fine. You have this and this due."

Cindy, a mother of three, appreciated the realistic deadlines. She said that her teacher is "really understanding to how my life schedule is. I wouldn't come to school a couple days out of the week because, you know, somebody has gotta' get sick, right." Jennifer, also the mother of three, added that no one questioned her if she had to leave in the middle of a class. "I do have three kids and if their school calls I need to be gone, you know what I mean. If something happens, my family still comes first. That's what awesome about here."

There is an assumption that adult students are responsible for their own lives and decisions, explained Jennifer. "It's also the environment itself. You're responsible for yourself in an adult school." Simon, interviewed at the same time, added, "They make it very known that if you don't come and you don't show up, you're only screwing yourself." Jennifer and Simon discussed the balance struck between acknowledging adult lives and providing encouragement and direction.

Jennifer: They concentrate on you getting your education and you're here for a purpose, but at the same time, they get that life happens.

Simon: It gets in the way.

Simon: Regular schools don't get that.

Jennifer: They don't. They just think school is school, and you need to do it.

Simon: Get your work done. They don't care how your day was.

In addition to overall scheduling, students also spoke more specifically about course scheduling. A couple of students mentioned that they liked taking one course at a time so that they could focus their efforts. This was particularly important if they had additional responsibilities outside of school such as child care and work. Jason explained, "By being able to take one course at a time I was able to focus and really get it down. After that, with the marks I was getting, I was like, 'Hey, I should go to the top.' So I tried to get into engineering and I've just got accepted." One student thought that four classes a day would deter people. Two students taking one course at a time said that the day was broken up with a break every hour, which helped them get through a four-hour day.

For some, making the transition into an adult high school program that has a more flexible schedule can be an adjustment. One participant, Dylan, 22, described situations in which other students took advantage of the flexibility.

The teachers are more lenient because they understand that there are adult responsibilities that people have. But I think it's almost lenient to a fault. There are people that need that extra time when they have responsibilities outside school, and they can't be here every day. But there are also people who have the same mentality they probably took to regular high school.

With that mentality, he explained, they take advantage of less attendance monitoring and skip classes regularly.

## Past Negative Experiences Linger but Can be Overcome

Interview participants described their own experiences and those of others who returned to high school burdened with negative memories. They also described how they overcame those memories through supportive and positive interactions with teachers and peers.

John described his personal challenges when he decided to return to school.

My first year was kind of rocky because, you know, I wasn't getting out of bed – I was pretty depressed to be honest with you. I was kind of like, 'You're just giving me the same shit every day.'

John felt that his experience was representative of other adult high school students. He explained that the school system did not work for them when they were teenagers. When they re-entered as adults, the negative feelings remained. "They come here and they are bitter; they are negative," he said. However, given time, the situation can change. He explained that once he "acclimatized" with the help of his teachers, he did very well. "I just soared. It was really awesome."

Keegan, aged 19, was also negative when he first returned to high school. But his outlook gradually changed because of the influence of his friends who were "focused and motivated." At first, he was not attending classes, but gradually started to participate.

And then what happened was I started going inside, I started going to chemistry, biology and everything. I started seeing people that actually cared about learning. That really helped encourage me to keep going and everything. Then I started meeting friends, like these guys here, and they are very motivated. They really want to pursue their goals and that's what has helped me to keep going.

Cindy said that her past and current high school experiences are "like two different worlds." She was relieved to see that cliques and bullies had disappeared. "It's very chill here," she added.

Everybody just walks in and everybody talks to each other. That's why I was like, 'It's not too bad, adult high school.' Nobody cares what you wear, nobody cares what you look like, and everybody is here for one thing: to get your diploma and get out.

Even more, Cindy appreciated the lack of labelling and categorizing students based on their academic abilities in the adult program, which she interpreted as more equitable and accepting. She explained, “There's no smart kids. There's no stupid kids. Everybody is the same. So that's where it differs a lot. Everybody pretty much gets along.”

Jason added:

I noticed a huge shift in the way that the learning was taken in terms of attitude wise. Kids in high school are sitting there in their desks all slouched down and thinking, ‘I don't want to be here. When is it over?’ And then I come to [this program] and everyone is quiet and attentive and really listening, hanging onto every word that the teachers say.

Brian, 20, acknowledged that maturity contributed to his new commitment to education, but he also thought that the dedication of other students contributed to the overall supportive environment. It also helped, according to Jess, between the ages of 25 and 34, that her program was small and that all the students knew each other. Mina, between the ages of 18 and 20, who attended the same program, explained that she was able to feel comfortable and do well in the adult program because of its small size. “High school, it's just not me,” she said. “Seeing a lot of crowds of people, and seeing a lot of people there, it kind of scares me. It just scares me. That's why I came here.”

## Getting Involved and Belonging

Although most adult programs are not able to offer the same number of extracurricular activities as a high school, many do provide opportunities for students to become involved. Some interview participants were involved in student councils, newsletter groups and school communication, and social activities. Simon said that when he had previously been in high school, he was never involved in school activities. He has since become involved in his adult high school program because he “found it was really easy to get involved.” Jennifer, who attends the same program as Simon, said that her involvement with the student council helped her to gain a sense of pride.

We're the ones that are doing it. We're taking care of the school so we're proud to come here. We know what's going on. We know we help set it up, and we can help other students. It's a pride thing.

She also carefully explained that student involvement in the adult program was very different from high school.

When it comes to things like school activities and student council and things like that, when you're in a regular high school, for me anyways, it's almost crammed down your throat with the whole school spirit and all the teams and everything else. That's great for some people, but other people aren't like that. They don't thrive on things like that. Here, it's completely up to you, what you want to do. People tend to come out of their shells a little bit more, and be like, ‘Heh, I have an idea.’ So they feel more comfortable bringing those ideas forward and that kind of gets the ball rolling on being involved.

## Gaining Personal Insights and “Growing Up”

In addition to the positive influence and support of teachers and peers, interview participants also discussed their own personal changes and growth that helped them return to high school and do well in the program. A couple of the interview participants described how they had to “grow up” and become more focused, particularly after having children. Nadeen explained, “Ever since I came to the [program] I am more focused on school, and I care. The experience I had of having a kid made me more responsible. When I was in high school I wasn’t really serious.” Brian, also a single parent, observed that “most people here have kids too so they had to grow up.” Chantal, with two children, noted a difference between students like herself with children and younger students who live at home with their parents.

There is no homework and then they complain that they don't have time. I mean, I have two kids at home, I have a job, I have a husband, if I have time and you just have to go home to your parent's house because you're twenty years old? Then you have time... I expected people to be more dedicated to what they were actually doing.

In addition, students have made decisions about their career directions and are more serious. Dylan explained:

I'm here taking mostly maths and sciences and people like, most of the people are becoming nurses or engineers. The teachers respect that we have a goal. They won't lecture the students. They recognize they are here on their own time, and they are here to learn. The first time through school, you feel like you're being forced to go. You'd rather be anywhere else. But if you come here, you're only wasting your own time.

In some of his classes, Dylan described how he was working alongside people who already had their diplomas, often from other countries. They had the technical skills but wanted to learn the language that accompanied those skills, he explained. Their abilities, he said, often humbled him. This experience, combined with his own work experiences, has changed him.

When I was in high school the first time, you imagine you know everything. Then I went to work for the first time and find out I'm not as smart as I think I am. I had an opportunity to learn from people with their ticket, like journeymen. So I got all this world experience with these jobs I've had. I come back to high school, and then it happens again. It's very humbling.

Cindy recognized that in the past, she never finished what she started. “I usually half everything. I get half-way and then I'm like, ‘I don't want to do it!’” However, her experience in the adult high school program has made her determined to complete her diploma. “But this time, I'm like, ‘No, I'm determined.’ That's what's good about adult [high school]. If you want your eight credits you can do it in three months, it just depends how much you want it.” Similarly, Nadeen said that unlike her experience in high school, she was now more attentive and working harder. She was never confident about her math abilities, but has now gained confidence.

## Dealing with Curriculum Frustrations

Unlike their other experiences in the program, students discussed very few changes between past experiences and current experiences related to the high school curriculum. Further, it was the only topic that generated some negative comments, confusion and frustration.

When Dave first decided to return to a high school program, he thought that the curriculum would be more self-directed and independent compared to his previous high school program. He was surprised to find out it was not. “I didn't think it would actually be like a classroom environment the way it is. It's exactly the way I remember it in high school, but everyone is older.” Although Dave said that he did not mind the similarities, other students expressed some frustration.

Some students spoke about difficulties with “textbook learning,” but others commented on a positive aspect of this format: it allowed people to move through the work at their own pace. Further, students who were working on later units and assignments often helped those working on earlier units.

Students also spoke about the challenges that they encountered when attempting to take courses online or through correspondence. Two students, both of whom had young children when they attempted to take a correspondence course, said that they gave up because it was too difficult to focus and stay motivated. Jennifer explained her situation: “I tried where I used to live to do correspondence. Between the kids and the husband I couldn't do it. I just didn't have the motivation to sit down and focus, and do it.” Another challenge encountered by students when working on their own was the time out of school. Rick, 40, described his frustrations with an online course.

When I started here I tried to do an online course. Then I realized, being away from school for 22 years, I needed one-to-one interaction with a teacher. I need that so I had to drop it. So I find it was crap. After 22 years away from school, how is it that I'm going to learn something?

Many students, especially older ones, preferred the day school format because it enabled them to consult with teachers concerning any difficulties they encountered in the correspondence course. However, for some students, correspondence may be the only option. One student explained that she reluctantly had to take correspondence courses because she needed specific prerequisites that were not offered in her home community. Another said that she chose to commute to a larger centre outside of her home community rather than take correspondence courses.

If I have a question, I like to be able to ask somebody, I don't like to guess or Google it or whatever. I want to talk to someone who actually knows the answer so I know that I am getting the right answer. Correspondence is not a good idea for me.

Both Cindy and Simon, in a program with full-time salaried teachers, appreciated how subjects like math were made more meaningful or relevant to their lives. Simon explained:

Being at an adult school applies a lot of reality into what you learn, like even the math. We were doing taxes and smart shopping, unit value and all that fun stuff. When I go grocery shopping at Price Chopper I'm sitting there figuring out the unit value per can, saving money. It's pretty beneficial.

Cindy shared a similar experience in her program.

If we had more personal math [in high school] then half of the kids wouldn't drop out. 'Cause you know, we deal with money every day. People don't think that but we do. If we deal with math that way, maybe I would have stuck around.

However, she has also had to pursue more traditional math courses, which she found challenging. "Now I am learning algebra and all that stuff and my head just spins. I'm like really, am I going to use this?"

Natalie, who already had a postsecondary certificate, including a college English course, thought that the courses were easier as an adult. She said she used to get "horrible grades" and was now receiving "95s and 100s." At first she thought that the English material was simply easier, but then talked about the additional support she was receiving.

## The Important Role of Adult Education Teachers

The importance of teachers has been mentioned throughout the previous sections. Interview participants discussed how teachers work with the complex demands of students' lives, are flexible, help reluctant and resistant students make a transition into the program, recognize and support the goals of students, make curricular accommodations, and make content more relevant and meaningful. In addition, interview participants commented on fundamental pedagogical aspects of teaching, discussing how teachers are understanding and patient, able to approach instruction using creative and explicit teaching methods, and are passionate about their work.

Brian appreciated the patience of teachers.

I like how the teachers are. They are really nice, understanding. They will sit there and help you. You know? No matter how long it takes. One day it took me half an hour to understand a question, and like, they didn't get frustrated and say, 'Go figure it out.'

Debby felt comfortable with her teachers and appreciated how available they were if she needed additional help.

The teachers are great. They always offer help when you need it. 'Come after school, come before school, if you don't understand something.' They are very good that way. So I never really found it challenging in that aspect. If I had a challenge, I would just go to a teacher.

In addition to patience, availability and understanding, Brian, in a program staffed by full-time teachers, also described how teachers attempted to find creative ways to help students understand content.

I find the teachers here are extremely supportive, and they can explain things in more than one way. Like, when I was in regular high school, it was like, the way it was. You ask a question and they would just read it again. I was like, 'I'm not illiterate. I just don't understand the way that you're telling me to do it.' And they wouldn't explain it so I just wouldn't do the work. Eventually, I just stopped showing up.

Cindy described how a math teacher would use images to explain concepts to her.

If you say and explain I don't understand. But if you show me pictures I understand. So he used to draw me things. That's how he explained, and I did really well in his math class.

She also wondered if perhaps the age difference between her current teachers in the adult program and the teachers she used to have made a difference. The younger teachers “come from a different generation of learning.” She thought that they may have been more creative and able to “put a twist” on the curriculum. “If high school was like this,” she explained, comparing her current program, “maybe most of us wouldn't have dropped out.”

Nadeen thought that the difference between teachers in her previous high school and the adult high school was an ability to provide more explicit instruction. “I think they kind of give you more chances. I don't know if they teach better but they break it down better. You understand quickly.” She described another aspect of teaching work that was very different from her high school experience. “The way that you're an adult, your opinion matters. It gets you motivated for learning and saying what you think. In high school [...] you don't really get to say everything you want to say.”

## Summary

Women and immigrant students are over-represented in the group of Ontario adult high school students who participated in the study. Few of the demographics have changed since a previous provincial survey was conducted over 15 years ago. Further, similar to 15 years ago, students in adult high school programs are predominantly low-income, with nearly half receiving some form of government assistance. Two-thirds of respondents have monthly incomes of less than \$1,500 per month, and most of this group have an income of less than \$1,000. Family responsibilities include children and other adults. Those not born in Canada are more likely than those born in Canada to care for other family members (not just children), and females are more likely to live with children than are males.

Almost half of the students already had a diploma before returning to an adult high school program. A majority of those born in other countries already had a diploma. However, only one-tenth of Aboriginal students already had their diploma. Similar proportions of adults return to high school for a diploma in order to enter PSE as those who return for a specific prerequisite. Obtaining a specific prerequisite was the number one reason identified by over half of those who had applied to PSE. Only 4% of Aboriginal students returned to high school for a specific prerequisite. Furthermore, half the students not born in Canada stated that they returned to high school for a specific prerequisite.

The decision to leave high school as an adolescent (if in fact the student did not complete) is complex and was likely precipitated by more than one reason. The most commonly chosen reason for leaving, selected by only one-fifth of students, was personal difficulties. However, more than half of Aboriginal students indicated that they left high school due to difficulties in their personal lives, and over one-third said that they left because of difficulties at home, compared to only one-tenth of non-Aboriginal students. Further, nearly one-quarter of Aboriginal students indicated that they left because they found the work difficult, compared to only 4% of non-Aboriginal students.

The decision to return, similar to the decision to leave, is precipitated by more than one reason. The majority have not attempted to return before, indicating an alignment with decision-making factors and a positive and supportive program experience. However, Aboriginal students were more likely to have attempted to return one or more times.

Students who participated in the interviews provided a tremendous amount of insight into the interplay of conditions, dispositions and supports that contribute to a positive adult learning environment.

- A provincial policy mechanism, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) for mature students, helped students start the program and stay motivated.
- Flexible and responsive program planning and scheduling decisions acknowledged and accommodated the busy and complex lives of adult students.
- Supportive and positive interactions with teachers and peers helped students overcome past negative school experiences.
- Extracurricular program opportunities helped students develop a sense of belonging.
- Personal changes and new insights about themselves helped learners return to high school and do well in the program.
- Curriculum frustrations, including the challenge of taking courses online or through correspondence, were apparent; some frustrations could be addressed using innovative instruction and course formats, but content-related frustrations remain.
- Teachers attuned to the unique needs and circumstances of adults were integral to a positive program experience.

The important role of teachers was mentioned throughout the interviews. Teachers work with the complex demands of students' lives, are flexible, help reluctant and resistant students make a transition into the program, recognize and support the goals of students, make curricular accommodations, and make content more relevant and meaningful. In addition, interview participants commented on fundamental aspects of pedagogy, discussing how teachers are understanding and patient, able to approach instruction using creative and explicit teaching methods, and are passionate about their work.

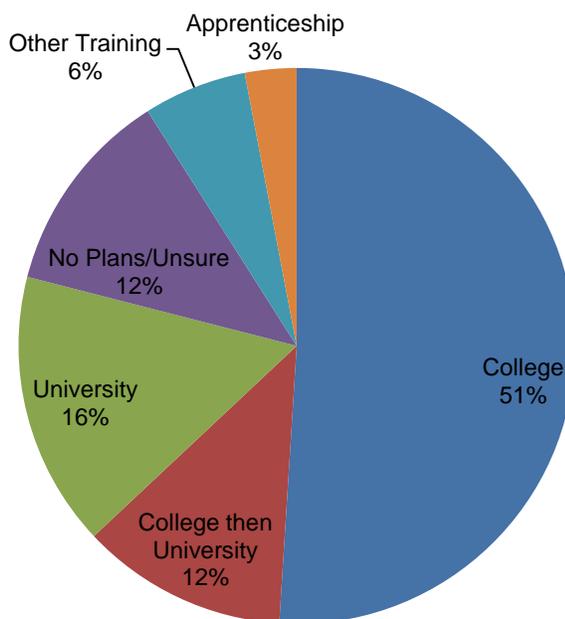
## Chapter 4: Postsecondary Plans, Career Choices and Decision-Making

This chapter integrates all three data sources. In the first section, survey data are used to describe the postsecondary plans and career choices of students. In addition, further analysis of the data is used to examine the differences between males and females, students born in Canada and not born in Canada, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Those who did apply to PSE are also compared with those who did not. In the next section, survey data are used to describe the factors that have the largest influence on PSE decision-making. Each of the top factors is then examined in more detail using both the written responses to open-ended questions and interview data. Interview data contribute further insights into the complex interplay of decision-making factors. A difference in the way students looked at finances is revealed when comparing the survey data and open-ended responses.

### Postsecondary Plans and Career Choices

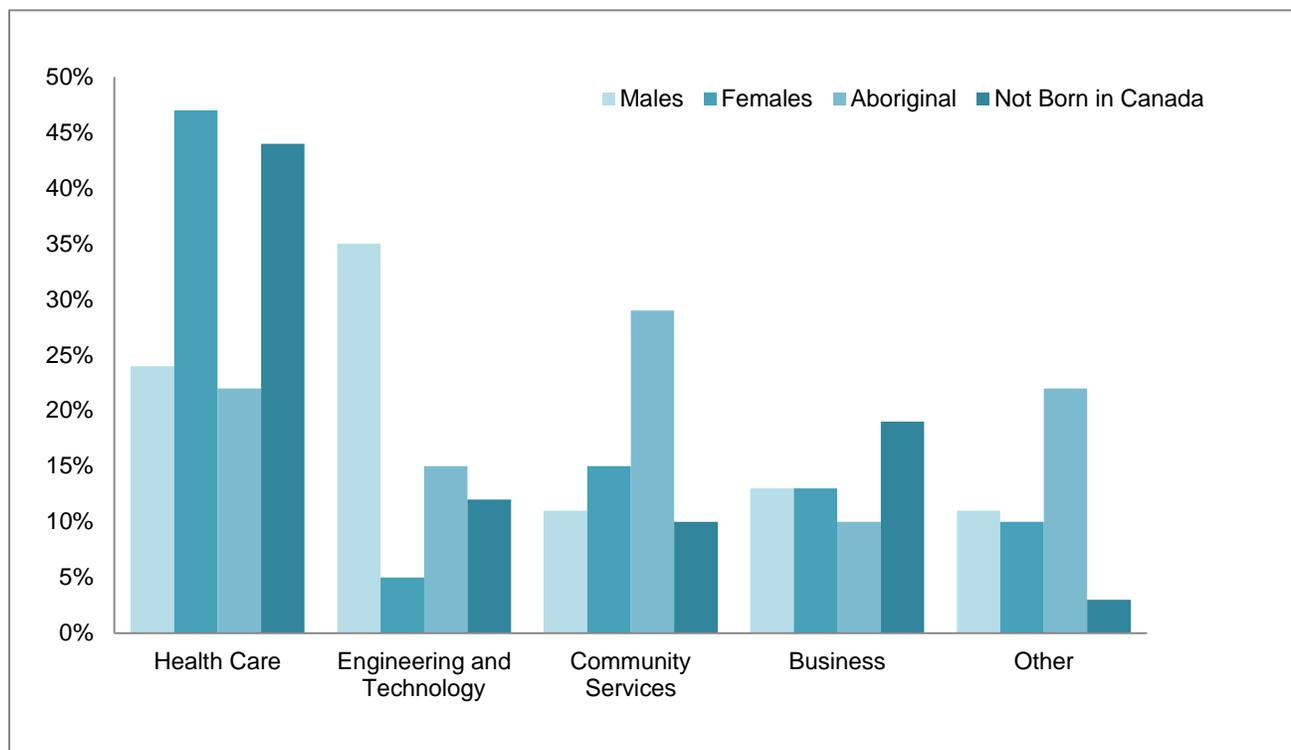
The vast majority of respondents (88%) stated that they have PSE plans. Only one-tenth (12%) stated that they either did not know or did not have any plans. Details about their plans are presented in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Postsecondary Plans of Students**



Of those who specified their career plans, the largest portion (38%) wanted to enter a health care-related field. The next most popular choice was engineering and technology (16%), followed by community and social service work (14%). The vast majority (83%) of respondents were aware of the type of preparation required for their chosen career paths. A comparison of career choices among females, males, Aboriginal students and students not born in Canada is presented in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Career Choices**



Just over half of respondents (55%) stated that they plan to attend PSE within six months of completing their current high school studies, and one-third plan to attend within one year. A strong majority (77%) of all respondents plan to take classes full time during the day. Over half (63%) said that it was important or very important to stay in their home communities for postsecondary studies. Just under one-quarter (23%) said it was not possible to take their training in their home communities, and just over one-quarter (28%) plan to leave their communities. Nearly half (45%) of the female students stated that it was very important to stay in their home community for postsecondary, compared to one-quarter (25%) of the males. Aboriginal students (43%) were more likely than non-Aboriginal students (24%) to plan on leaving their communities to pursue PSE. Students not born in Canada are more likely (47%) than those not born in Canada (29%) to indicate that it is very important to stay in their home communities for PSE.

## Comparing Students who Applied with the Overall Group

Although the vast majority of students have PSE plans, just over one-quarter (27%) of the total number of respondents actually applied to enter a postsecondary program. Possible reasons for this gap will be discussed in the final chapter. The group who applied shared many demographic characteristics with the overall group, such as gender and age. Income level was also similar, as was the rate of students who receive some form of government assistance. However, there was a slight difference in the proportion of Aboriginal students who applied (19%) compared to non-Aboriginal students (36%). In addition, Aboriginal students were less likely to be aware of PSE requirements (65%) than were non-Aboriginal students (85%).

With regard to education credentials, students who already had their OSSD (35%) were more likely to apply than were those who did not (14%). However, having a diploma from another country did not have an impact. The exact same proportions of those who applied had a diploma from another country (28%) as those who did not (28%). There was, however, a difference if the diploma was from Ontario or another province.

Overall, those who applied may have had more specific and solidified PSE plans. Over half (54%) of those who applied returned to high school to get a specific prerequisite, compared to one-third (32%) of those who did not apply. Of those who did apply, only 25% had more general goals (i.e., completing Grade 10 for a course or job, simply getting a high school diploma, or getting a high school diploma for a job), compared to nearly half (45%) of those who did not apply. Not surprisingly, a strong majority (67%) of those who applied will complete their studies after their current course. In addition, 85% of those who applied plan to enrol in a postsecondary program within one to six months.

Finally, there was a slight difference between those who applied (46%) and had a job compared to those who did not apply and did not have a job (32%).

## Decision-Making Factors

Students were asked to rate the extent of influence (large, moderate, small, no influence and not applicable) that 38 different factors had on their decision to attend a postsecondary program or not. We focused analysis on the factors that were rated as having a large influence in order to identify more compelling influences. In the table below, we present 15 items as the top factors in order to include at least one factor from each of the survey's five factor categories. In addition, though, nine of the 15 factors were chosen by at least half the students, and these are emphasized. The prevalence of employment and personal factors is striking, as these comprise all of the nine factors chosen by at least half of the students. Even more interesting is the absence of financial factors in this group.

**Table 8: Top Decision-Making Factors**

Top Factors	Large Influence
<b>1. Employment/career – Need or want a better paying job</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>2. Personal – Want to continue learning</b>	<b>67%</b>
<b>3. Employment/career – Want to pursue a particular career</b>	<b>67%</b>

Top Factors	Large Influence
4. Personal – Want to pursue personal interests	62%
5. Employment/career – Need postsecondary certificate/diploma/ degree for job	62%
6. Personal – Always wanted or planned to go to college or university	62%
7. Personal – Want to be a role model for my family or children	59%
8. Employment/career – Need or want a higher-level job with more status/responsibility	56%
9. Personal – Feeling like postsecondary is something I should do	51%
10. Academic/learning – My current grades	48%
11. Financial – Worry about personal finances	48%
12. Financial – Want to avoid debt/loans	46%
13. Personal – Balancing school and family/work	44%
14. Family – Positive family support and encouragement	44%
15. Employment/career – Need to work now to support self/family	44%

## Differences

### Students who Applied to PSE

There were a couple of differences between the overall group and the sub-group of students who applied to PSE. A strong majority (71%) of students who applied indicated that their desire for a higher-level job with more status and responsibility had a large influence, compared to just over half (52%) who did not apply. And a larger proportion of students who did apply (78%) stated that they always wanted or planned to attend PSE compared to those who did not apply (62%).

### Gender

There were a handful of gender differences with regard to the influence of various decision-making factors. Females were more likely than males to indicate that the following factors had a large influence on their decision to attend PSE:

- Flexibility of postsecondary program (e.g., part-time status, ability to take on-line courses) (36% of females compared to 22% of males)
- They always wanted or planned to attend PSE (70% of females compared to 49% of males)
- The desire to continue to learn (74% of females compared to 57% of males)
- Being able to stay in home community (39% of females compared to 23% of males)
- Desire to be a role model for family or children (64% of females compared to 49% of males)

## Country of Birth

The group that showed the most differences (10 of the 38 factors) was students not born in Canada. Students born in other countries were more likely to indicate that the following factors had a large influence on their decision to attend PSE compared to students born in Canada:

- Need to work to support myself/my family (55% born in other countries compared to 34% born in Canada); also, students born in other countries (8%) are far less likely than those born in Canada (23%) to indicate that this factor is not applicable to them
- Need PSE for a job (73% born in other countries compared to 54% born in Canada)
- Need or want a better paying job (77% born in other countries compared to 64% born in Canada)
- Need to care for others (28% born in other countries compared to 10% born in Canada)
- Previous school experience (42% born in other countries compared to 22% born in Canada)
- Close proximity of postsecondary institution (38% born in other countries compared to 24% born in Canada)
- Always wanted or planned to go to college or university (75% born in other countries compared to 50% born in Canada)
- Need to keep up with peers (29% born in other countries compared to 16% born in Canada)

In addition, students not born in Canada were less likely to indicate that the following two factors had no influence compared to students born in Canada:

- Fitting in as a postsecondary student (19% born in other countries compared to 40% born in Canada)
- Age (20% born in other countries compared to 36% born in Canada)

In other words, students not born in Canada are more concerned about fitting in and their age than are students born in Canada.

The open-ended questions that followed each of the five decision-making topics (i.e., financial, employment/career, family, academic/learning and personal) provide detail and insight that could be readily organized according to the top 15 influencing factors. However, somewhat surprisingly, there was incongruence between the number of open-ended responses related to financial and personal factors and their prevalence in the list of top 15 factors from the survey. Although financial factors (i.e., the ability to finance a postsecondary education) were not as prevalent in the list, they generated the most open-ended responses, almost twice as many as any other category. Conversely, personal factors that were very prevalent in the list generated the lowest number of responses. The fact that the number of open-ended responses did not have a numerical alignment with the factor list does not necessarily indicate that the open-ended responses are contradictory or not aligned with the survey data. It could simply mean that respondents had a lot more to say about financial issues and felt very compelled to write about them. In comparison, they may have felt that the survey covered personal factors adequately, so they did not have as much to add in these areas. The personal factors categories also contained more items than the other categories. The next section provides an overview of the open-ended responses that have been sorted to correspond to each of the top 15 factors. In addition, some interview data have also been integrated.

# Insights into Meanings and Experiences Associated with Decision-Making

## 1. Need or Want a Better Paying Job

The most commonly chosen decision-making factor was from the employment-career category. Students wrote about their employment experiences and struggles and commented on a desire to be self-supporting. However, they also expressed doubts and personal concerns that PSE education would in fact lead to a better job. The most commonly chosen factor has similarities with the final factor that appears in the top 15 (i.e., need to work now to support myself/my family) underscoring the importance of decent, stable employment.

A better-paying job could lead to financial security. One student wrote, “I want to make good money in a steady career in the future so I can have a financially stable life.” Another stated, “I decided to take postsecondary education, because it seems the best way to support yourself in the long run.” Comments were both blunt (e.g., “just the need to earn more money to survive”) and wistful (e.g., “better job will make my dreams come true”).

Students wrote about the employment experiences and struggles that compelled them to make a change. One stated, “I used to work and was getting paid minimum wage; that’s not a life for me.” Another also referred to minimum wage and wrote: “Wanting better paying job to have better life than minimum wage job and barely survive on it.”

Students also commented on losing decent jobs. One simply stated, “Laid off from job after 13 years.” Another wrote, “I was laid off from my salary position.” One student indicated that it would be up to her to find a better paying job since her “husband could not get good job according to his level of education.”

Although respondents hope that PSE will lead to a better job, they also expressed doubts and personal concerns. One stated, “College almost isn’t worth it anymore; too many people have degrees.” Another asked, “Is there going to be a job for me when I graduate from chosen field?” Being more specific, a student also wondered “if the certificate or diploma from college [would be] recognized by future employers.” A couple of respondents worried that they would be too old to take advantage of a postsecondary education. One wrote the following: “Not sure how much time I have left in my life to make a difference by taking a course I might not finish. Or if I’d have enough years left after completing a course to make any big upgrades in my financial/material needs.” Another bluntly stated, “It is my age. I’m 50 years old, and sometimes I think that by the time I will finish my postsecondary, I will be close to being retired.”

## 2. Want to Continue Learning

Students expressed many different reasons for their desire to continue learning, the second most commonly chosen factor. Continued learning was desired for general knowledge and personal interests. It was also seen as a form of self-improvement and was connected to a personal sense of well-being. Students also wrote about a desire to learn in order to support others.

Respondents wrote about self-improvement through learning. One wrote, “In general, I want to better myself and my education.” Students also expressed their thoughts as motivational messages. One said, “Do not quit, drive to strive.” Another stated, “I have a dream...” A couple of respondents were more specific. One

connected learning to postsecondary interests: “The desire to attain more knowledge on subjects important to me in postsecondary education.” Another was very explicit and simply stated, “I need the knowledge in computer training.”

The desire to continue learning was connected to a personal sense of well-being by some. One student stated that learning was a refuge from “an alcoholic partner.” Another wrote, “I have a personal desire to continue achieving accomplishments. Goals and deadlines are vital to my mental health.” And one stated, “A degree is important to my mental well-being. I feel I’m useless without one.” One student viewed continued learning as a way to create meaning and purpose in her life: “I’m getting old, and I have raised children, and now I have nothing.”

Students also wrote about a desire to learn for others. One said, “I want to build my education more to help my community.” Another expressed the desire thoughtfully and with more detail:

I have a strong drive to feel a sense of contribution to society. I also think it is highly important to be informed and/or educated in topics that apply to what is going on in the world around us. Finally, I will be given a feeling of satisfaction by being educated "enough" to help the public in the health care field.

### **3. Want to Pursue a Particular Career**

The choice to pursue a particular career could be precipitated by various personal experiences and circumstances, including life-changing experiences, newfound interests, practicality and personal abilities, personal connections and access to job opportunities. Some students were compelled to make a career change often for reasons beyond their control.

Students wrote about personal experiences that were life-changing, which led to career choices. One student wrote, “I came from a country that the first day I opened my eyes, is in war. I always wanted to work for United Nations.” Another stated, “After my accident, seeing how well the hospital took care of me, influenced me in wanting to pursue that career.” Two of the interview participants said that they wanted to pursue careers related to social work because of their experiences with the Children’s Aid Society. “When I was younger,” explained Nadeen, “I was involved with them. I started liking the program and I thought I could help other kids that need help.” Mina explained that she currently lives in a group home and has been in care since she was a young teenager.

Respondents also wrote about newfound interests and passions that led to their career choice. One student was motivated to pursue PSE because of a “particular interest/new-found interest in Health Studies & Medicine.” Passions were also directed at finding ways to make changes. Bruce explained, “I want to make a difference. I would like to have an influence on changing the way we script these policies that are coming out left, right and centre.” In addition to newfound career interests, respondents also wrote about long-time interests. One wrote, “This is a career that I have wanted for a very long time but life/family has not made it possible until recently.”

Respondents also expressed a practicality to their decision-making. One wrote that “many jobs in trades now are looking specifically toward hiring women.” Another stated that her decisions were based on “being able to get a job in my hometown.” Jirair explained that he was very flexible and just wanted to find a stable job that would support his family. He initially inquired about a firefighting course but got discouraged when he found out that he would need to return to the adult high school program for another year to get college prerequisites in Science and Math. He then thought a job in the post office would be a better choice because they require

only a Grade 12. He was reluctant to complain but quickly added, “But sometimes even I want to say something.” He then said:

I wanted to really improve my life. This is the thing. I have to improve it. If I couldn't get some job, I'll do other job. I am not going to give up. It's like a fight or war – all the life. We have to study, graduate, get career or job, better job.

Practicalities also related to knowing what one was good at. Dave said:

I seem to be good with people. I like people and people seem to like me. For the most part, everybody gets along with me. I just thought that I would be good at something like that. I am pretty caring I guess. It seems like a good choice.

A couple of students also discussed their decision to enter health care. Health care positions, and more specifically those in personal and nursing care fields, have a tremendous appeal. There are various entry points at different academic levels and bridging programs facilitate movement from one position and credential to another. More importantly, this sort of multiple entry and ladder system allows adults to move in and out of education in order to work, prepare for future re-entry, and attend to family responsibilities. When Nadeen explained her decision to enter nursing, she talked about it at the same time as she discussed child care responsibilities. She said that she plans to enter a practical nursing program at the college, work for two years, and then enter a university program. “I thought that in two years I can have a job and support my kid, and all the things I need. At the same time, I can go part-time and upgrade my education.” Some students were compelled to make a career change; sometimes it was done for reasons that they controlled, but more often for reasons beyond their control. Christina explained, “I realized I did not want to work serving for the rest of my working days, and wanted a real career. So I quit and came back to school.” Another student who already has a postsecondary education wrote, “I had a college diploma for advertising, but found it was not for me. I decided to go to school for Dental, and I needed certain courses to get in.”

Personal connections and access to better jobs could also precipitate a career choice. Debby initially chose to pursue a course in Dental Hygiene because she has friends who are dentists and offered to hire her, but she is reconsidering her choice.

I had an appointment with guidance. I still want to do something in health, but I just can't put my hand on it. I'm going to do all that next year while I'm in school and really think about it because I was kind of coming here with nothing, and getting my high school diploma where I'm guaranteed a job. I was just kind of taking the lazy route. If I do this, I'm going to get a job for sure. Now I'm not lazy. I want to work for what I do. I don't want something just handed to me.

More respondents wrote about making career changes for reasons beyond their control. A couple wrote about personal health challenges. One respondent could no longer do “manual labour” due to a “physical and medical condition.” Two respondents already had a postsecondary education but had to change careers due to health reasons. One said, “I was tired of being a Personal Support Worker, hard on my back.” Another wrote, “Worked as a Geological Technician but I have lost the ability for physical movement and require a job with less movement.”

#### **4. Want to Pursue Personal Interests**

Personal interests were related to employment, personal accomplishments and personal passions. One student wrote, “I want to work in a field that interests me so that I become creative.” In addition, Nadeen

explained the importance of ensuring she was able to pursue her personal interests in education and employment.

I like to learn when I'm interested in something. I can really give it 100 per cent. That's why I chose social work because it's something that I can really relate to. I can see myself doing it and commit to it.

The pursuit of personal interests was also disconnected from employment. One student wrote, "I'm writing a book and feel university offers courses that would benefit this." Another student retired after a long career and wrote, "I did have a successful career in banking. My high school diploma is something I've always wanted to acquire. Interest courses are what I'm going to pursue at this time." One respondent focused on the social aspect of a postsecondary education and wrote that he was interested in "meeting a lot of girls and forming a social circle of bros. who like to go out and adventure!"

### **5. Need Postsecondary Credential for a Job**

The fourth influential factor appears to be simplistic, but open-ended responses add further insights. Respondents wrote about the need to obtain a postsecondary credential because their current credentials were not recognized.

One student explained, "With my situation – diploma in Accounting & Business Application, Computer Application and upgrades – it is better for me to go into [another] training program." That is the main reason I am upgrading myself in same field." Rick, who had recently emigrated from Trinidad and Tobago, was attempting to figure out the best way to find work as a medical technologist, a career he had for 15 years.

I knew when I left Trinidad that I would not be able to fall in that category here. I knew I would have to adapt myself to a new environment, a new way of life here. I'm trying to get something within that same field, that's where my mind set is. I have a science background so I can't go do something in business. At my tender age of 40 [laughter], I have... it's like reinventing the wheel.

Not only were credentials not recognized by employers, but educational institutions also failed to recognize credentials. One student wrote, "I hope to pursue this Master's program because it is a life goal of mine. I have already completed a double major at a university and feel very adjusted to the environment."

### **6. Always Wanted or Planned to go to College or University**

Another personal factor was a general sense that students' decision-making really was not a decision at all; they always intended to pursue PSE. One student wrote, "I cannot picture my life without my university degree; it has been a goal since childhood." Another simply said, "I always wanted to attend college after finishing high school." Another was matter of fact about the decision: "Without education (undergraduate/graduate) in Canada we cannot achieve anything."

### **7. Want to be a Role Model**

Being a role model was extended to include grandchildren, friends and communities in respondents' written comments. One student wrote that her decision will "let my children know that if Mom can go back to school at 46 and get a job so can they at a young age." Another student wrote, "I want to do better than the last generation in my family to be a good role model for my children." I want to influence my kids and women my age." One student wrote about being a role model to her community in general: "Being a positive role model

to youth and my community to be healthy & active. Giving me a sense of greater purpose while living the lifestyle I live.”

### **8. Need or Want a Higher-Level Job with More Status and Responsibility**

Just over half of respondents indicated that the need to have work with more status and responsibility (and not just financial security) was a large influence on their decision.

One student wrote, “I have two very good jobs that pay very well. It's just the lack of satisfaction from these two jobs that makes me want to further my education.” A couple of students wanted to avoid specific kinds of work. One did not want to “work as a ‘lifer’ at a factory” and another did not want “to work in retail the rest of my life.” Christina, an interview participant, explained that she did not want to continue working in restaurants as a server, especially if she had children in the future. “I kind of want something more steady,” she said. “So I decided I would come back to [this program] and upgrade all those marks that I had just barely passed and apply to [college].”

Another interview participant said that his desire to have a job with more status and responsibility was related to a “lack of satisfaction at the end of the day with the jobs I have now.” Dave explained further:

The past ten years I have been doing dead end jobs: working in factories. I also did flooring for a couple of years with a friend, subcontracting for five years, and it was beating on my body. I couldn't take it anymore. I just wanted to further my education and better myself, do something that I could be proud of.

Another student wanted “the job/career environment and people that a higher level of education brings.” And another wrote that a higher-level job was all about “more prestige, authority, respect, overall status as an educated citizen.” Dylan, who had a similar perspective, explained further:

I was in a shop and I could do everything my boss could do but I'd never actually been to school. I just registered with the province. So I could do everything my boss could do. There were some crusty old guys that were working there, and I didn't want to be a 60 year old guy swinging a hammer. I figured I could do something more challenging, and I would enjoy it more.

### **9. Feeling Like Postsecondary is Something I Should Do**

Just over half of respondents indicated that they felt obligated to pursue PSE for various personal and family reasons. One wrote, “Both my parents are professionals, and so is my only sister. Also I'm very ambitious – second best just won't do.” A couple of respondents mentioned the careers of family members in a matter-of-fact way, as if their decision was simply an expectation. One simply wrote, “Father is Professor of Surgery – Pediatric Child Surgeon.” Another said, “My two sisters went to university. One is a successful kinesiologist, the other a neuroscientist.” One summed up the experience and said bluntly, “Family pressure to go to postsecondary.” Another wrote, “University means everything because of the pressure.” One respondent was motivated by others in a more positive way: “Seeing others around me doing well makes me want to be successful.”

## 10. Current Grades

Slightly less than half of respondents indicated that their current grades (the only academic/learning factor in the top 15) were a large influence on their decision-making. Interestingly, several open-ended responses in this category stated that academic/learning was not a big concern, and then pointed to other more pressing issues such as cost, child care and travel. In addition, only a couple of comments were directly focused on grades, while others addressed academic readiness, including the application process.

Of the comments that were focused on grades, the grades received in the adult high school program (current grades) were not a concern but, conversely, a factor that has helped make the decision to pursue PSE. One student wrote, "Right now I'm really doing good on all my courses because of the help of our teacher." Another attributed good grades to personal effort and wrote, "I am academically successful with good grades when I try, so I know that I am capable." Another student is much more descriptive about the role of grades over time and explained the following:

Having the second chance to upgrade my marks gave me confidence in my abilities and demonstrated the power of consistent hard work. Proving to myself that I really could do it allowed me the freedom to go for the career path I really wanted.

One respondent wrote that grades had never been an issue: "Nothing should hold me back as I have always done fine (good grades) in school."

There were also several comments about general academic and personal readiness for PSE. Academic concerns were related to prerequisites and preparation for specific programs, overall academic readiness (e.g., "I have the feeling that I need to take more academic courses to be prepared to take postsecondary") and language preparation (e.g., "I feel that I don't have good English skills for college"). One student was also worried about missing too much school when younger and wrote, "I hope my lack of attendance in my teenage years don't affect me." One worried about a learning disability: "I have a Math disability, and I often fear I will fail at that topic." One interesting comment focused on exams before PSE, expressing concern about college entrance tests and the Grade 10 literacy test required to obtain an OSSD. Interview participants added additional insights about their worries concerning language abilities and learning disabilities. John explained that he has learned to accommodate and work with his learning disability; however, he continues to worry about his math abilities. Mina explained that when she came to Canada at the age of 12, she did not speak English and she had never been to school. She worries about her reading and writing abilities and recognizes that they may not be as strong as her peers.

Students were also concerned about postsecondary curricular expectations and the general environment. One was concerned about "the increase in the workload" and "the complexity of the materials covered." Another stated, "The big classes make me nervous and the fast pace." And one was worried about "not being prepared or smart enough for all the college work." Mina was worried about getting overwhelmed in a college setting. "I think I'm not going to do really well with college. I don't deal well with a lot of people. I'm embarrassed to ask a question." Another expressed confusion about how to start the application process: "Bad credit, no support, unsure where to start (applications)." An interview participant was worried about taking several courses at a time after being able to focus on one at a time while in the adult high school program. Another interview participant, Bruce, had concerns about academic readiness. He decided to participate in the adult high school program until he felt he was ready for postsecondary. He explained:

People are telling me that I shouldn't even be here. I should just jump in as a mature student and just go to university. But I don't feel that way. [...] I would like to go there

and show respect to the institution and be able to write according to their expectations. They're just getting floored with all these people who could barely make a proper grammatical sentence.

Similarly, a student who had already completed a college business administration program returned to high school to see if she would be able to handle the requirements of a university level biology course. If she did well, she explained, she would apply to a university program.

## 11. Worry about Personal Finances

Although the two financial factors that appear in the list of 15 factors were chosen by less than half of respondents, worries about personal finances generated the most comments of all 15 factors in the list. Students were worried about poor credit histories and their current debts. However, financial concerns were most often discussed in relation to other family and financial responsibilities. Some comments indicate that students are overwhelmed by their financial situation and low incomes and see no way to make a change. There are, though, comments from students who do have access to various supports such as family, government programs and personal savings to finance their postsecondary education. A handful of comments expressed overall determination to pursue PSE no matter what the financial risk.

Students expressed their worries and concerns about bad credit and current debt load, including money already owed to OSAP. One student wrote, "Yes, my credit is very bad that's the reason I have been rejected from OSAP and I don't think without their help I would be able to pay for my college." A couple of students wrote that they already owed money to OSAP. One student seemed overwhelmed by the series of events that left her in debt: "I have no money, and I already had a loan. I got married and he got me to quit, now I left him. I have one child left at home, and I have no money. He left me in debt, bad credit." An interview participant, Natalie also said she had "really bad credit." However, she was determined to help her own children avoid her situation and said, "I've already opened up RESPs for them so they won't have to go through what I have to go through."

Financial worries were most often discussed in the context of other responsibilities, such as paying for child care and taking care of other family members, health costs, paying for their children's education and basic living needs. This section alone had 25 comments. Most of the comments were focused on child care issues and finding affordable daycare. One student wrote, "I have two children that I have to find care for during postsecondary school." Some identified themselves as single mothers (e.g., "I am a single mother, expenses are high") and others as single fathers (e.g., "being single dad and no being able to afford daycare for my son"). Others worried about finding ways to address specific daycare needs (e.g., "after school program and evening care to accommodate work and school) and others simply mentioned their children (e.g., "I have a child and one on the way" and "I have 6 children and not much money"). One also said that she had no other support: "I'm a single mother, and I have no any family members in Canada, so I worry a little about taking care of my son while I'm in school unless he got daycare after his school."

In addition to child care responsibilities, respondents also wrote about other family responsibilities. One wrote, "I have two kids and wife plus I have some loans already so when I want to study postsecondary education future it will be big financial problem from my education goal." Another wrote, "I cannot afford to be broke because I am the backbone (provider) of my family and I have to take care of their financial needs."

Respondents also mentioned multiple worries: "I do have a car loan to pay off, and supporting my families back in India, therefore I cannot take any loan or continue my further study." Health worries are linked to financial concerns: "I was in a car accident. Income replacement doesn't pay much and makes it stressful."

Students are also worried about paying for their children's education: "I'm not sure if I can pay for my own college when they are ready for college themselves."

A couple of respondents did not mention family as part of their financial worries, but had other concerns. One wrote, "I own a car and have many other bills. It [PSE] would be good in the long run, but I need a constant flow of money." Another stated, "I have many investments that I need to be cautious with while in school, i.e., house, car, dog, etc." One wrote that he or she was experiencing a "post retirement financial drain." Another wrote about having to contribute to family income overall: "I am currently living at home and am required to help with rent. If I am in school full time, I will need to work in order to pay rent at home." In addition, one student had a smaller and more specific financial worry: she simply wanted to be able to afford an Internet connection to help her with her studies.

Some comments indicate that students felt that they had no alternatives or are overwhelmed by their finances, and would not be able to find a way to finance their education. One commented on a personal situation that was also tied up with immigration issues:

I have been living in Canada for more than seven years. I applied for permanent residency but I have not got it yet. Immigration tells [me] to wait. I cannot get loans because of my status. I admitted to four different programs in two universities, but I cannot attend because tuition's \$21,000 per year. I work 48 hours a week, but I am not able to save for university that amount.

One student bluntly stated, "I have no money! So that's that!" A couple of respondents expressed frustration over a lack of employment, which could help them finance their PSE. One said, "It may take me a while before I am able to find a job, and therefore I will not be able to afford tuition costs." Another wrote, "I am also looking for job. I hadn't any job from almost two years. So that's why these things can affect my decision." One of the interview participants, Fareeda, 28, explained that both she and her husband are unemployed and underemployed:

So it's very hard. I'm not working, so I don't have any income. My husband he worked when he first came here, and now he's working in [company name] but they don't have hours so it's a problem. Government gives under a thousand dollar benefit, which is not enough for a family.

Although over 40% of students receive some form of income support, only a handful made direct comments about being on assistance. In addition to the above comment, another student wrote that she went on welfare in order to be able to return to high school and eventually attend PSE.

There needs to be several different ways to get financial help. If you didn't do it the unemployment way you're on your own. Or you can get \$600.00 a month from welfare. I am starving! I left a half-decent paying job to better myself, and become a vet assistant. I have no money, I have never cried so much in my life!

An interview participant, Chantal was on EI when she decided to return to school. However, EI regulations prevented her from attending full-time.

When I started going back to school I was taking night courses. I had to continue taking night courses for a little while because on EI they won't let you go to day school. If you are going to school full-time, you can't work full-time. Then I went back to work part-time and started doing day school then.

In comparison, additional comments indicated that other students are also able to draw on a range of supports, such as family, government programs and personal savings in order to finance their PSE. A few students commented on their lack of worry about financing PSE. One said, “No problem because I budget my time with my studies and my part-time jobs. I’m a self-supporting student.” Another stated, “No real reason that would stop me from taking postsecondary, my current course is already paid for from savings.” In addition, one indicated that he/she was able to access scholarships. An interview participant had an entrance scholarship. Another interview participant was determined to finance all of his university studies using bursaries. Another interview participant, John, described a variety of government and family supports that he planned to put together to finance his university studies.

I’ve actually already applied for OSAP, it’s a small loan. Thankfully my parents are able to help me out. Past that? I’ve applied for disability because I have a permanent LD. Between my disability services cheque and whatever is left of child support, financial considerations aside, it’s not too much of a problem.

Other students also indicated that family was able to provide direct support (e.g., “my family is willing to help me out with tuition and I have a college fund from my grandfather”), and indirect support (e.g., “living with my parents has helped”). In an interview, Simon said that his tuition would be covered, but his main worry was day-to-day living because he depended on income assistance:

I’m on Ontario Works and it’s really not that fun. Other than that, my RESPs should be quite substantial so I’m not too worried about tuition costs. Cost of living is really my main concern.

Cindy explained that she is in an “odd situation” because her husband’s family had a “better upbringing” and are financially secure. She added that her mother-in-law would be willing to pay her tuition.

Dave also explained that he has the support of his girlfriend to help with living expenses.

I have two children as well. I have a lot of family support so I don’t really see that being an issue. Mainly it is going to be the financial aspect of it: coming up with the money and paying bills and whatnot. My girlfriend/spouse we’ve been together for eight years, she has a pretty good job. She’s making good money and is covering that end of it.

He has also thought about what he would do if he needed additional money. Rather than apply for a government loan, he plans to ask a family member.

Students mentioned a variety of government programs at both the federal and provincial level. A couple of students mentioned Second Career and one wrote, “I am being financed by a program called 2nd Career. They are paying tuition and books plus a meager living allowance.” Also at the provincial level were comments about receiving financial support from OW, both as a general form of support and to help with tuition. At the federal level, two students mentioned support through Aboriginal Affairs and local band councils. One mentioned receiving support through Veterans Affairs. An interview participant, Jennifer knew she would not qualify for OSAP based on her husband’s income. In addition, though, she did not want to burden her family’s finances by paying tuition. With the help of a teacher in her program she was able to enter the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship program, which was seen as an ideal solution for her.

I don't really qualify for OSAP. As hard as the cost of living is right now, I have the mortgage and kids and everything. Technically on paper my husband makes too much for me to qualify for OSAP, which unfortunately is ridiculous. OYAP is the perfect opportunity for me because I don't incur any extra debt and I'm still bringing in an extra income, and getting educated. That was just perfect for me.

One of the interview participants suggested there was a need for more information about options for financing PSE beyond OSAP.

Students also indicated that they would not attend PSE without loans, or that their plans would be delayed while they worked and saved for school. Conversely, an interview participant, aware of the cost of his program, was currently working and saving for tuition: "I don't think I would have to take out a loan, it's pretty cheap, only like a couple of grand. I'm saving up for it right now by the time I am able to go I'll have enough money."

A handful of comments expressed overall determination to pursue PSE no matter what the financial risk. One wrote, "Financial factors didn't influence my decision to attend university, I wanted to go and I'd find a way to do it, no matter what the cost." Another stated, "I intend to further my education by any means, with or without OSAP, bursary/scholarship assist." In comparison, a couple of students were more resigned to the financial reality: "There is no other way to take postsecondary. Almost everyone has to pay." Another wrote, "It is very difficult nowadays to have a sound financial future without some form of postsecondary education, or training."

## 12. Want to Avoid Debt and Loans

The second financial factor, wanting to avoid debt and loans, also generated a number of open-ended responses. Students expressed an overall concern about debt and interest. Many also reasoned that, without a decent job, they foresaw no way to pay back the debts. Nor would a postsecondary education guarantee a good job. Conversely, students also thought that the debt would be worth incurring. With their postsecondary credential, they would eventually get a good job and could pay back loans.

Some students expressed an overall concern about debt. One stated, "Want to avoid debts/loans which come with interests." To avoid interest payment, one student would turn to family if needed. Another simply wrote that he/she "did not like being in debt." One worried about the time it could take to pay off student loans. One was counting on a scholarship in order to avoid debts, and would not pursue PSE without it. Fareeda was concerned about loans due to the tax implications. She described a recent experience in which her husband had a loan for school. The amount of the loan was included in the family's income, which put them in a higher tax bracket. "So this is the same with me," she explained, "If take loan the government is going to put me high income. If I won't take, then how I can pay? So it's a big problem. I am kind of – you can say flustered. So what I will do in the future?"

A lack of employment and well-paying employment was also stated as a reason to avoid debt. One student wrote, "I want to avoid debt/loans for postsecondary education. When I will get job, at that time, I think about it." Similarly, another wrote, "If I can have a job that can let me go to school and working at the same time, I will go to postsecondary education." One student expressed worry about overall financial anxiety related to PSE:

The financial factors of paying for college on top of rent costs and personal needs (including food). The cost for basic living increases as job opportunity decreases. Plus, residence on campus is still costly. It's a huge influence.

Another stated, “Not making enough money right now to work and go to school. Don’t wanna’ take loans and get behind on it.” And another said, “Not having your own money to pay off your school fee makes me feel worried of being under debt for a long time in my life.” In addition, students are worried about the availability of jobs when they do graduate. One wrote that the problem was “the lack of jobs available after postsecondary education, making it hard to pay any loans back and avoid debt.” Paradoxically, the student also recognized that he/she will likely have to “pay for more education in order to find work.” Conversely, some comments indicate that respondents are willing to take a financial risk because they will eventually have the ability to pay back loans. One wrote, “A large amount of personal research says university graduates earn on average 1 million more the college graduate in their lifetime, making debt acceptable.” Matthew, an interview participant, is aware of future job prospects in his chosen field and said:

If I do decide to go to school, I’ll probably get a job and save up for it and then go to school. If not I’ll just take loans and pay them off afterwards. It’s not a market with little job availability. All the major companies are usually hiring people to work on major projects.

Another wrote optimistically, “Well I’d like to minimize my debt... but it’s only money. I mean after I get a good job I’ll have to make some sacrifices, but that’s life, right?” Despite not having any additional financial support, an interview participant, aware of the cost of her program, said, “I was thinking to take a loan and go from there. My program is only two years. It wouldn’t be that much.” One stated, “I almost didn’t plan on going because of the debt I’ll be in after OSAP, but I decided it’s worth it.”

### **13. Balancing School, Family and Work**

Students had many concerns about balancing school with work and family. They expressed their worries about finding the time to care for family and to work in order to support them. Some also worried about the time spent away from children. Indeed, a couple of interview participants explained that they waited until all of their children were in school full time before they returned to a high school program. Students also faced the challenge of managing personal health problems and even caring for family with health problems.

Students wrote about the need to work while going to school and expressed worries about finding the time to do both. One wrote, “In order to afford postsecondary education I will need to find work. I find it rather difficult to work, especially full-time, while attending school full-time.” Another was concerned about “needing to work and juggle school.” For another, he/she was obligated to work in order to contribute to his/her family income: “To me a member of the family has to do certain thing: working while studying.”

Concerns about the time away from children were expressed by several students. One wrote, “I may have trouble in balancing my time spent on heavy study load and the time taking care of my child.” Another wondered, “Will I have time with my child?” One respondent simply stated, “I have a son and I don’t want to miss anything he does.” Cindy explained that she was not ready to pursue PSE because she has three young children:

If I was to do postsecondary, I would probably wait until they were in full-time kindergarten because right now it’s difficult because they just want me and they are still in diapers. You know how it is: diapers, bottles and it’s not like it’s one kid in diapers and bottles there’s two in diapers and bottles.

Another commented, “It has not been possible previously due to demands of my husband’s job and raising special needs children.” Debby, a mother of six children, including one with a terminal illness, explained her decision to postpone her education:

I chose to raise them. Now that they are all in school, I want to start my life. I just want to work and get an education... I’m keeping a boy alive, what I do at home every day. I have to do physiotherapy and connect him to Ventolin and medications.

Students also mentioned that they now had the opportunity to pursue education because family demands had recently changed. Jennifer, who had tried to return to an adult high school program in the past, explained that this time worked for her because her three children were in school full time. “I get up in the morning with them. We all leave for school at the same time. I’m home by the time they get home. It’s just perfect.” Even when child care for young children is arranged, there are days when a parent has to miss school. Nadeen worried about having to miss school in order to care for her baby when he is ill. “There are so many days that daycare cannot have him because he’s sick. There’s rules that if the baby’s sick it takes a few days and stuff like that. I try to come as much as possible.”

A number of comments addressed challenges with personal health and the health of family members. One student faced both personal and family health issues and wrote:

Up until this point, I was not able to go back to school. I had quite a few health problems so getting my health back had to come first. Also, I am usually under a tremendous amount of stress because not only do I have to take care of myself, I also have to take care of my mom and brother. I am hoping by the time I get my high school diploma and I am ready to go on to college/university, my family will understand that I need to focus on my education and getting and keeping good grades.

Students also referred to their own health challenges. One wrote, “Dealing with illness cause me to postpone higher education, and could cause a further delay.” Another stated, “I become stressed easily and I am afraid of becoming over-stressed.” Another explained that she was currently on disability but would eventually like to be working: “Right now I’m on a disability and I’m not sure how long it may last. My goal is to get better educated and find a great job that fits my character.”

Students also wrote about caring for family. One explained:

I currently take care of my mom as well as my brother. I am hoping that my older sister will step up and help me care for my mom and brother IF and when I decide to go to college/university.

Another student said that she had to care for three family members: “My mother and two siblings have health issues.” And one compassionately wrote, “My mother has many medical problems, I want to be able to help her.”

A couple of comments were also directed at the general challenge of balancing a busy life. For example, one wrote about concerns with “living arrangements, activities & hobbies, compromises.” Another was worried about “being able to have enough money to live and eat and still have a life while attending postsecondary school.”

#### 14. Positive Family Support and Encouragement

Positive family support and encouragement is the factor from the family category in the top 15. Students commented on the general support that they receive from family. They also talked about having access to and needing explicit support and knowledge that helped them to navigate institutional requirements and practices. Some students mentioned the absence of family support and their determination to realize their PSE plans on their own.

Students commented on the support they receive from their children (e.g., “All my kids support and encourage me by going back to school at this age”), from parents (e.g., “My dad told me he would help me accomplish my goals”), from spouses (e.g., “I require assistance from my husband due to handicap issues”), and from family in general (e.g., “I have a very supportive family; they have been very good on giving me advice about going to school”). One stated that family support was not the issue: “I have support! I need financial support.”

In addition to receiving general encouragement, students also mentioned the importance of specific guidance and advice. John explained the important role of his mother who taught him how to access a variety of supports.

I was taught from a young age – my mom is a single mother so she always taught me. ‘This is what you need to do; this is what you need to do; this is what you need to do.’ She had to really enforce it because it was a one parent situation. So that gave me a helping hand later in life.

Natalie explained the role of a close friend who recently completed the same course that she intends to pursue. “My girlfriend does that same job. She’s going to give me her books and everything. She went to the same course at the same college.” Conversely, one interview participant described how she received little advice from her parents, who were also first-generation immigrants. She explained that she had to learn the “cultural knowledge of the system” on her own. There is an assumption by immigrant parents, she explained, that the schools will provide the kind of support, guidance and information that will help with decision-making. In her family, it was not seen to be the parents’ role.

In comparison, there were several comments about not having family support. One wrote, “I do not have family support, my family does not talk to me, and they live in N.B. so I’m alone in ON.” Another stated, “They don’t think I can get into university, so no support from family, when high school took this long.”

Others commented on being the first or one of a few in their families and communities to attend PSE. One wrote, “The fact not a lot of First Nation students to go college is a large factor for me.” Another stated, “I’ll be the first to graduate and attend a college course to have a career goal.” Another expressed concerns by simply writing the following: “My families are not educated enough.”

One indicated that the lack of support was motivating and wrote, “I need to prove it to my parents that I can complete university.” Interview participants also commented. Jess, who plans to enter a veterinary technician program, explained, “I was motivated to an extent because no one’s really done anything with their life.” She also clarified the role of family support in her life: “It’s not that I don’t have support, it’s just that I don’t rely on them for support.”

## 15. Need to Work Now to Support Self and Family

The final factor is similar to the most commonly chosen factor (i.e., need or want a better paying job). Comments focus on supporting family and emphasize the importance of obtaining stable employment that can in fact support a family.

Respondents mentioned the need to support their children. One wrote, “You need good paying jobs if you're a single parent to support your family.” Another simply stated, “I am a single dad who wants a better life for my son.” Family could also include partners and spouses (e.g., “just want my wife and I to be comfortable”), in addition to parents (e.g., “to get a good job and sponsor my mother”). Students also commented on an inter-generational need for a better job that could lead to a more secure future. One student wrote, “My mom wants me have a better life, and I want to give my son a good life.” Another stated, “I am a single parent with two small children. I want my children to know education is very important so they don't have to struggle like me, and have a much better future.” Students also commented on a desire to be self-supporting. One wrote, “Our family don't have any specific income, which is a big factor of influence on my decision.” Another stated, “I just want to get a great education and a good job to support my family. Do not want to live on assistance forever.” Whether receiving income assistance or working for low-wages, a student's comment expressed fatigue and frustration: “I am tired of being below poverty level.”

## Additional Comments about Leaving One's Community to Pursue PSE

A handful of comments scattered throughout the categories addressed the issue of moving in order to attend a particular postsecondary institution. Students expressed worries about the expense of moving in order to attend PSE and, conversely, the need to move to attend an institution with lower tuition rates.

One student explained a decision to pursue PSE in Quebec: “Lower tuition rates in Quebec have influenced me to not only move, but to learn a new language as well.” Other written comments focused on the importance of staying in their home communities in order to take care of family and to maintain support networks with family and friends.

## Integration of Decision-Making Factors

An important aspect of decision-making that is not conveyed using the survey data is the complex and interrelated nature of the process. However, interview data help to illustrate the complexities involved in decision-making. The particular circumstances and decisions of four students greatly enhance understandings of the decision-making process.

Chantal's description of her decision-making touches on each of the five factors used to organize the survey data collection. She first describes personal interests, abilities and experiences that helped her make a career choice. She then describes how her decision to pursue a particular PSE program (Registered Practical Nursing) was influenced by its availability in her home community. She mentions that she was also interested in a Registered Nursing program, a position that would lead to higher pay and more career stability and opportunities, but the program is not available where she lives. In addition, she must also consider the extra time it would take to complete the program, the additional academic demands and the additional financial burden. Not only will tuition costs be greater, but the time spent in school means she is not able to work and

earn money. Weighing heavily on her decision-making is the precarious health of her husband. She must also consider the extra costs related to daycare.

I was involved in St. John Ambulance when I was a teenager. I like that sort of thing. I handle pressure well and emergencies and stuff like that. ...The RPN program is nice. I can do it here in Woodstock. I had thought about doing RN but I have kids and it would require me to travel to another city to do it, and it also requires a lot more school. My husband has a back injury, and we don't know how long he will be able to work for. I would probably have to do another year or two of high school and two more years of postsecondary on top of what I am going to have to do now. So, it's kind of more. I can get it done sooner and get into the work force sooner, and still make a decent amount of money. If he can't work, or at least can't work as much, it's not going to matter. We're just hoping that his health holds out until I am done so that we don't have to face the extra financial thing. Right now he pays most of the bills because I only work part-time because of school. So if he can't work anymore then that's going to be a huge issue. But, other than that there's child care. Child care is always an issue. There are financial issues because I am going to have to get loans and things like that, which isn't favorable. But in the end it will be worth it.

Similarly, Jirair describes an interplay of family responsibilities and worries, financial concerns and employment considerations. He is motivated and wants to attend college but does not see how it will be possible if he needs to work full time. He reluctantly concedes that he will need access to an opportunity or program that will allow him to work (and continue to have an income to support his family) and attend a postsecondary program at the same time if he is to realize his desire to pursue PSE.

I am working full time, but I want to keep going to school to improve my English skills and find a better job and finish my diploma. I am planning on college but I have some responsibilities because I have to pay for rent. I take care of my parents, my brothers even. So this is what it's like. It's hard for me to go to college. Maybe part-time college? I don't know. It's gonna' take a long time to finish the college.

I have responsibilities. I know I am single, but I have to take care of both my parents, and rent, and Metropasses. That's why I can't work part time. Twenty hours – I wish I can do that. But I have to work a minimum, maybe 36 hours, 37, or more. I prefer more of course because I can cover everything. This is what it's like. It's bothering me sometimes; I can't go to college. Sometimes I think like that. But I don't think negatively. I have to pay these things... I don't know... I need help. Like maybe something to help me so that I can work and take education. I know it's hard.

Although the next two descriptions are not as detailed, they do indicate how decision-making involves multiple factors. Furthermore, they also illustrate how access to various supports influenced decision-making.

Dylan, a single male, describes how he was able to move back into his parents' home in order to return to high school and focus on obtaining good grades to not only enter an engineering program, but to also obtain a scholarship. His situation also illustrates how a combination of sacrifices and supports were needed to enter engineering. Supporting his decision were his personal circumstances: he was single and did not have family or child care responsibilities. He also had the support of his parents. In addition, he had a well-paid job in the trades. Although he quit his full-time job, he was able to quickly pick up related part-time work that paid decently and accommodated his school schedule. His decision to enter university meant that he had to make

some sacrifices, including leaving the security of a full-time position and relinquishing a sense of independence when he moved back in with his parents. But of course, his parents were also there to provide support.

Jennifer, a married mother of three, describes a very different situation. Similar to the first two students, she must also consider family responsibilities and finances. Initially, she returned to high school without a postsecondary plan. However, she was able to access an apprenticeship opportunity with the assistance of one of her teachers. This opportunity was key in influencing her decision to pursue a postsecondary program. One of her concerns about PSE was the burden that tuition costs would place on her family. However, the apprenticeship opportunity removed that concern.

I talked to [my teacher] about the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship program. My entire life, I've always want to be a chef. And that's one of the things that they offer. Obviously the appeal to me is that it's a non-repayable grant that will pay for my tuition and everything. There's an opportunity for the apprenticeship to be paid so I would technically be adding that second income, but getting my education at the same time.

## Summary

Nearly all adult high school students have plans for PSE, but only one-quarter of respondents actually applied. While this group is not demographically unique, they did have some unique characteristics. They were more likely than those who did not apply to already have an Ontario high school diploma. Overall, they had more specific and solidified PSE plans. And they were slightly more likely to have a job. In comparison, Aboriginal students were less likely to be aware of PSE requirements than were non-Aboriginal students, and they were slightly less likely to apply.

The majority of students want to attend a college program, while just over one-tenth want to enter university and only a fraction want to pursue an apprenticeship program. The most common career choice is health care, followed by engineering and technology.

Students rated the extent of influence (large, moderate, small, no influence and not applicable) that 38 different factors had on their decision to attend a postsecondary program or not. The top 15 items are presented in order to include at least one factor from each of the survey's five factor categories. The first nine items were chosen by at least half of the students as having a large influence on their decision-making. The prevalence of employment and personal factors is striking, comprising all of the nine factors chosen by at least half the students. Even more interesting is the absence of financial factors in this group. Although financial factors (i.e., the ability to finance PSE) were not as prevalent in the list, the topic generated almost twice as many responses to the open-ended questions compared to any other category. Respondents had a lot to say about financial issues and felt very compelled to write about them.

### 1. Employment/career – Need or want a better paying job

The most commonly chosen decision-making factor was from the employment-career category. Students wrote about their employment experiences and struggles, and commented on a desire to be self-supporting. Some also expressed doubts and personal concerns about the ability of a postsecondary education to lead to a better job.

### 2. Personal – Want to continue learning

Students expressed many different reasons for their desire to continue learning, the second most commonly chosen factor. Continued learning was desired for general knowledge and personal interests. It

was also seen as a form of self-improvement and was connected to a personal sense of well-being. Students also wrote about a desire to learn in order to support others.

3. Employment/career – Want to pursue a particular career

The choice to pursue a particular career could be precipitated by various personal experiences and circumstances, newfound interests, practicality and personal abilities, personal connections and access to job opportunities. Some students also discussed and wrote about their decision to enter the field of health care, due to its various entry points at different academic levels and bridging programs that facilitate movement from one position and credential to another. Students were also compelled to make a career change for reasons beyond their control.

4. Personal – Want to pursue personal interests

Personal interests were related to employment, personal accomplishments and personal passions.

5. Employment/career – Need postsecondary certificate/diploma/degree for job

The fifth influential factor appears to be simplistic, but open-ended responses add further insights. Respondents wrote about the need to obtain a postsecondary credential because their current credentials were not recognized. They expressed frustration with an inefficient system that forced them to return to high school.

6. Personal – Always wanted or planned to go to college or university

Another personal factor was a general sense that their decision-making really was not a decision at all; they always intended to pursue postsecondary.

7. Personal – Want to be a role model for my family or children

Being a role model was extended by respondents to include grandchildren, friends and communities.

8. Employment/career – Need or want a higher-level job with more status/responsibility

Just over half of respondents indicated that the need to have a job with more status and responsibility (and not just financial security) was a large influence on their decision.

9. Personal – Feeling like PSE is something I should do

Just over half of respondents indicated that they felt obligated to pursue PSE for various personal and family reasons.

10. Academic/learning – My current grades

Slightly less than half of respondents indicated that their current grades (the only academic/learning factor in the top 15) were a large influence on their decision-making. Interestingly, several open-ended responses in this category stated that academic/learning was not a big concern, and then pointed to other more pressing issues such as cost, child care and travel. In addition, only a couple of comments were directly focused on grades, while others addressed academic readiness, including the application process.

11. Financial – Worry about personal finances

Although the two financial factors that appear in the list of 15 factors were chosen by less than half of respondents, they generated the most comments of all 15 factors in the list. Students were worried about poor credit histories and their current debts. Financial concerns were most often discussed in relation to

other family and financial responsibilities. Some comments indicate that students are overwhelmed by their financial situation and low income, and see no way to make a change. There are, though, comments from students who do have access to various supports such as family, government programs, and personal savings to finance their PSE. A handful of comments expressed overall determination to pursue PSE no matter what the financial risk.

#### 12. Financial – Want to avoid debt/loans

The second financial factor, wanting to avoid debt and loans, also generated a number of open-ended responses. Students expressed an overall concern about debt and interest. Also, many reasoned that, without a decent job, they foresaw no way to pay back the debts. And a postsecondary education would not necessarily guarantee a good job. Conversely, students also thought that the debt would be worth incurring. With their postsecondary credential, they would eventually get a good job and could pay back loans.

#### 13. Personal – Balancing school and family/work

Students had many concerns about balancing school with work and family. They expressed their worries about finding the time to care for family and to work in order to support family. Some also worried about the time spent away from children. Indeed, a couple of interview participants explained that they waited until their children were in school full time before they returned to a high school program. Students also faced the challenge of managing personal health problems and even caring for family with health problems.

#### 14. Family – Positive family support and encouragement

Positive family support and encouragement is the only factor from the family category in the top 15. Students commented on the general support they received from family. They also talked about having access to and needing explicit support and knowledge that helped them to navigate institutional requirements and practices. Some students mentioned the absence of family support and their determination to realize their postsecondary plans on their own.

#### 15. Need to Work Now to Support Self and Family

The final factor is similar to the most commonly chosen factor (i.e., need or want a better paying job). Comments focus on supporting family and emphasize the importance of obtaining stable employment that can in fact support a family.

The sub-group that had the most differences included students not born in Canada. Students not born in Canada are more concerned about fitting in and about their age than are students born in Canada. The majority were also more concerned about the need to work and continue to have an income while going to school, and the need for a postsecondary education in order to get a job and a better paying job. The majority of females and students not born in Canada indicated that they always planned to attend PSE. In addition, the majority of females indicated that the desire to continue to learn was a large influence. Females were more likely to indicate that being a role model is important. There were no differences with Aboriginal students on factors rated as a large influence.

Students expressed worries about the expense of moving in order to attend PSE, and, conversely, the need to move to attend an institution with lower tuition rates.

An important aspect of decision-making that is not conveyed using the survey data is the complex and interrelated nature of the process. However, interview data help to illustrate the complexities involved.

## Chapter 5: Program Supports and Transition to PSE

Similar to the previous chapter, this chapter integrates all three data sources. In the first section, survey data are used to describe the most commonly desired program supports, and whether or not students had access to and made use of a particular support in their programs. In the next section, data from the open-ended responses and interviews have been compiled into four topics: 1) accessing information about PSE and careers; 2) accessing transition programs; 3) learning strategies and curricular content; and 4) disconnections with other educational systems.

On the survey, students were asked two types of questions about 13 different program supports that could help prepare them to access PSE. One set of questions asked whether or not the particular support was something the students had experienced in their programs. The other set of questions asked students to rate the importance of the particular support.

The table below summarizes the responses to the questions. The supports are presented in order according to the proportion of respondents who stated that the support was very important. There are a couple of choices to note in the list. Overall, ten supports were chosen as very important by over half of respondents. The top two (i.e., information about college and university registration, courses and costs and current information about career opportunities and salaries) were chosen by at least 60% of students. The bottom three (i.e., a course on career exploration, assistance with library system and information searches, and personal counselling related to other life issues) were chosen by less than 40% of students. It is of interest to note that students distinguish between the importance of current information about career opportunities and salaries and a course on career exploration, suggesting in part the need for specific and timely information.

There is an additional way to look at the rankings. The second column lists the proportion of respondents who stated that they had experienced the particular support while in their program. For example, 68% of respondents stated that information about college and university registration, courses and costs was very important, and 65% had experienced this support. The third column is a calculation of the difference between the first two columns, indicating the match between a desired support and its availability. In the example above, the difference is only 3%, suggesting a close match between a desired support and its availability. Two of the lowest ranked program supports are also the least available. They likely received low rankings simply because students have fewer experiences with them.

When the difference between importance and experience is examined, higher numbers could indicate possible unmet needs. Conversely, negative and low numbers could indicate that needs are being met overall. The five program supports with the greatest difference between the proportion of students who ranked the support as very important and the proportion that had experienced the support are the following:

1. Co-op related to my career to gain experience or to find out if this is what I want to do
2. Current information about career opportunities and salaries
3. Personal counselling related to other life issues
4. A personal education plan that matches career goals and postsecondary education choices (with help from teacher or guidance counsellor)
5. Course content focused on career (e.g., health care, business, construction, etc.)

**Table 9: Summary of Program Support Survey Questions**

	Very Important	Experienced in Program	Difference
1. Information about college and university registration, courses and costs	68%	65%	3%
2. Current information about career opportunities and salaries	60%	48%	12%
3. Learning strategies related to math and science (e.g., <i>problem-solving, analysis</i> )	57%	69%	-12%
4. Learning strategies for expressing opinions, making arguments and organizing information in written work (e.g., <i>essays, reports</i> )	56%	67%	-11%
5. A personal education plan that matches career goals and postsecondary education choices (with help from teacher or guidance counsellor)	56%	49%	7%
6. Course content focused on career (e.g., health care, business, construction, etc.)	56%	49%	7%
7. Career counselling from a school counsellor or advisor	55%	52%	3%
8. Course content that matches my personal interests and concerns	53%	55%	-2%
9. Learning strategies for handling complex reading material (e.g., <i>organizing, studying, taking notes</i> )	52%	59%	-7%
10. Co-op related to my career to gain experience or to find out if this is what I want to do	51%	38%	13%
11. A course on career exploration	39%	33%	6%
12. Personal counselling related to other life issues	38%	29%	9%
13. Assistance with library system and information searches	37%	45%	-8%

## Differences

### Students who Applied to PSE

There were no differences related to the importance of a particular support between those who applied to PSE and those who did not. There were, however, two differences related to support access. A larger proportion of students who had applied to PSE received information about college and university registration, courses and costs compared to those who did not apply (78% of those who applied compared to 60% who did not apply). Also, a larger proportion of students who applied to PSE received a personal education plan that matches career goals and PSE choices (with help from a teacher or guidance counsellor) compared to those who did not apply (62% who applied compared to 44% who did not). What is unknown is whether or not students accessed these supports as they started the application process, or if access to the supports helped precipitate their decision to apply to PSE. Either way, these supports are important.

### Gender

There were gender differences regarding the importance of two of the 13 support statements. However, there were no gender differences with regard to accessing supports. A larger proportion of females than males indicated that the following supports are very important:

- Current information about career opportunities and salaries (65% of females compared to 51% of males); and
- Information about college and university registration, courses and costs (73% of females compared to 57% of males).

### Aboriginal

Only one difference was noted between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students, and it is an issue of access rather than a desired support. Only one-third (31%) of Aboriginal students indicated that they had received career counselling from a counsellor or advisor, compared to over half (53%) of non-Aboriginal students. One possible reason for this difference in access is that the two boards that had high numbers of Aboriginal students also used a home study/distance learning format, which means that students worked primarily on their own and did not necessarily have access to additional supports.

### Country of Birth

There were several differences depending on whether or not a student was born in Canada or another country with regard to experiencing certain supports. Only one difference related to the importance of a desired support. Students born in other countries indicated that they experience the following supports more than students born in Canada:

- Career counselling (61% not born in Canada compared to 44% born in Canada)
- A course on career exploration (42% not born in Canada compared to 26% born in Canada)
- Course content focused on career (62% not born in Canada compared to 40% born in Canada)

- Co-op as career exploration or to gain experience (48% not born in Canada compared to 29% born in Canada)
- Assistance with library system and information searches (54% not born in Canada compared to 38% born in Canada)
- Personal education plan (58% not born in Canada compared to 43% born in Canada)

Students not born in Canada were more likely to indicate that course content that is focused on particular career paths is very important (63% compared to 49%). It is difficult to know why students born in other countries indicated that they experience certain supports more than students born in Canada. It may be the result of the development of courses or programs specifically for immigrant students in larger urban school boards. It is possible that students could perceive the usefulness of various activities and curricula differently, or perhaps students not born in Canada were more likely to request these supports.

Similar to the data on decision-making factors, three types of data address program supports (i.e., survey data, open-ended responses and interview data). The open-ended responses and interview data have been integrated and help provide additional insights to the survey rankings. However, unlike the data on decision-making factors, the information about program supports could not be so readily categorized using the survey questions. The interview data are more complex and interrelated. When looked at based on the survey categories, it lost much of its depth and insight. Instead, the data from the open-ended responses and interviews have been compiled into three topics: 1) accessing information about PSE and careers; 2) learning strategies and curricular content; and 3) disconnections with other educational systems.

## Accessing Information about PSE and Careers

Based on their comments and interview discussions, it appears that, in general, students have access to information about PSE course requirements, funding and registration but find it more challenging to access explicit information about career choices, courses related to those choices and employment opportunities. In general, if they know what course they would like to take, they can readily acquire the information that they need from both their adult high school program (focusing on required prerequisites and pathway to complete courses) and college or university programs. However, if they are unsure about which course they want to take, very few supports are available to help them make decisions.

Cindy explained that she was able to receive support from a local college liaison who visited her high school program each week. This was a unique and innovative partnership. However, the information was only useful, she explained, once she was able to identify the college program in which she was interested. She also received assistance from the high school program's guidance counsellor, who told her what courses she would need to take to enter the college program. Brian agreed that the visit from the college liaison was helpful, but he also knew what course he wanted to take.

Experiences with guidance services were mentioned by a few interview participants. Overall, they expressed enthusiasm for supportive staff and the helpful information they received. However, a couple of students also said they did not get the information or help that they needed. Jason said that guidance counsellors were "helpful," but then added that he still faced challenges when applying to university. It was, he said, "kind of like navigating a maze trying to apply to university. Eventually, you go through it, but it was a lot of headaches." Rick was more frustrated with his guidance experiences, but he also explained that he was looking for information about postsecondary course options and not just information about diploma requirements or general postsecondary entry.

Others said that they received no information about postsecondary courses from their adult high school program, relying instead on information that they received when in high school previously or from family and friends. One student wrote, “I never received any of this information from this school. I only chose my career path and education from support I received from my old high school and my university.” Another student explained that he was able to do his own career planning based on previous high school experiences: “It was actually a really exciting process for me because I got to apply a lot of things that I did learn in high school. Like the few things I learned in high school like career planning and making the right decisions based on my interests.”

Debby, who had been out of school for over 30 years, described her frustration trying to find explicit information about potential careers and courses. While she was able to access information about funding and registration, she encountered a variety of challenges in finding more detailed information about possible courses and careers.

I had to search. I found it only because I knew what to type in. I’m a student who hasn’t been to school for 30 years and I’m not great on the computers. It’s easy for other people to just search it out. It’s difficult for me. I don’t know what I’m looking for.

Debby then explained that it was not simply a technological challenge that she encountered, but she simply did not know how to start looking for the information. Courses and jobs have different titles, and there are new types of careers that are unfamiliar, she explained. Although she found the teachers and guidance staff at her school helpful, she acknowledged that they had limited time and information and she was not even sure what to ask them.

There could be different careers, and I could think, ‘Oh my gosh, that’s it, right there.’ I don’t know what to look for. No one’s ever talked to me—that they offer this, and this is how you do this or this. It’s just, if you want to go to college, this is how you get the money. It’s just how to get funded. But for what course?

Another student, Rick, who was not born in Canada, agreed and added, “When I was looking at this entire list [of courses and programs] and I keep repeating this, that I’m new here, but I don’t know what these things are, what they entail.”

Rick also expressed his frustrations in attempting to get information that was related to his particular circumstances. He had a postsecondary education from another country and over 15 years of experience working in his field. He had contacted the college in his community to find out what program was equivalent to his own training and experience in order to retake the program or to find a different program that matched his expertise. Despite his training and experience, he was informed that he would need to return to a high school program to take particular math and science prerequisites. He did the courses and passed an English exam, even though his first language is English. However, he was not able to start the courses because the college had not received his transcripts. Rick explained his frustrations:

They didn’t give me that information. From all the people I spoke to, nobody told me that over the phone. Plus, there wasn’t the information available on-line. Since I’m here, information is a problem here. As an immigrant, you cannot get the information.

One student wrote that it would be useful to have “input from big business about careers.” Another added that there is a need for more specific career-related information. Fareeda explained how she attempted to get such specific information for herself by talking to a college counsellor. She wanted to know more about the

kinds of jobs available, overall availability of jobs and the general work environment in a particular industry and position. Her search for specific information provides an example of the kind of explicit, detailed and personalized information that adult students may be seeking.

I had an appointment with the counsellor here, I went there. I was looking at the course International Transportation and Customs, which is in [college]. I asked him, 'Do you find any jobs? Or is this right career for me? If I take this what I will do? What will be my role in the industry?' I don't know.

The college only provides some short summary, but they didn't mention where you will work. They have to give examples. But he didn't explain. Or the college, they didn't show any examples or explanations. Because I am reading on the Internet, I don't know from two or three sentences. I don't know if it's a good career for me. Two years is very important for me. I have kids, family. Also, I have financial problems. If I will finish – that's my concern with the counsellor. If I finish a two year program, and if I don't find anything – any employment, any good job – it will be very disheartening for me. So he didn't give me a good answer. I think this type of improvement is very necessary.

One student explained how he was able to explore career options and choose a specific college course while in the high school program.

We had one course here where we actually went through and we researched what our college goals were, and then we actually went. They had speakers come in from [local colleges]. We had to go through it and figure out total cost of living and, like your books, tuition, and all that.

Findings indicate that access to career information differs from program to program. They also point to a need for information that is personalized and relevant to students' different circumstances and considerations.

## Accessing Transition Programs

Interview participants shared their experiences participating in co-op, OYAP and Dual Credit. These experiences were overwhelmingly positive and supportive, with the exception of one student's description of a co-op experience. Co-op was used in a variety of innovative ways to support various student circumstances.

John, the student with the negative co-op experience, said that he participated in what he called a "work for credit" program, in which he had to find his own employment. "It didn't work at all," he explained. "I couldn't get a job first of all, so that was the first problem. How do you have co-op without a job?" Another student, Simon, had a positive experience with co-op. His placement was arranged through the adult high school program with the dual aim of helping him find employment and earn a credit. He excitedly explained that he was offered a job at the end of the placement.

Matthew also described a positive co-op experience. In his situation, the adult high school program set up the co-op as a way for him to earn credits and stay engaged with the program. He became a math tutor for other students in the program at the same time that he was taking a 4U Math course. After completing the co-op and math course, he then participated in a Dual Credit program. The high school program that he was attending was located on the campus of the local college. He said that the Dual Credit course confirmed his

career aspirations and showed him that he was capable not only of completing but of doing well in a college course.

Another student, Nadeen, who participated in a Dual Credit course, also spoke positively about her experience. The course was related to her career goals. She said that she “loved it” because it encouraged her to express her own opinions. “There’s no right or wrong,” she explained:

It’s whatever you think and whatever you feel about a situation, you can just write it down. It made me feel that I have to finish so fast to go to college. I felt older and more that my opinion matters.

Only one student mentioned participating in the OYAP program. Jennifer described a complex array of requirements and processes that she had to work through with the assistance of one of her teachers. In addition, very few OYAP opportunities are available. One of the advantages of being in an adult high school program while participating in OYAP is that the student was not required to find paid employment. A co-op placement could be set up to fulfill the apprenticeship employment requirement.

The student then explained that, without the apprenticeship opportunity, she would not have considered a postsecondary program. Her original intention when she came to the adult high school program was to complete her diploma requirements and look for a job. She did not qualify for OSAP and was not willing to accumulate debt. “Knowing that I don’t qualify for OSAP, I would have just stopped. I would have just done my Grade 12 and be done with it.”

## Learning Strategies and Curricular Content

Students commented on a range of curricular concerns related to general learning strategies and supports, course content and specific curriculum expectations.

A handful of written comments focused on the need for general learning strategies. “We need courses that simply teach us how to learn.” Students also wrote about the need for time management strategies, after class support and tutoring, and even a “study buddy” system. Comments about course content came from both written responses and interview conversations. One student wrote, “Course on career exploration would be extremely helpful and insightful.” During an interview, Natalie commented on the content of college and workplace courses. Natalie had taken both kinds of courses. Although she appreciated some of the practical content related to a workplace course, such as developing a cover letter, resume and career portfolio, she expressed some confusion about the relevance of her college-level courses. The course she was taking did not address PSE in a direct way or in any way that she could figure out. A college-level English course focused on being a writer or journalist, she explained, but it did not look at other careers. Another student wrote about a need to see more career-oriented content in Independent Learning Centre (ILC) courses rather than content related to “radio broadcasting and drama.” Two other students commented on a need to see more courses that combined science and either health care or technology. One student wrote, “Courses should be designed in a way that it should take students in their pathway. This saves time and lessens psychological stress (vague is not good for adult students).” An interview participant, Sameer, also thought that there needed to be more career-oriented programs. The adult high school he was attending had recently introduced an integrated science program to support access to health care. He thought this was a great approach and wanted to see an additional program focused on technological and engineering fields. “If the college and the university or the adult education centre they develop the program which directly supports admission in the university or college that would be greatly appreciated.”

## Disconnections with other Education Systems

While students shared their education experiences during interviews, several described instances of disconnection and dead-ends related to language requirements, high school equivalency, prerequisites and recognition of previously obtained courses and certifications. Their frustrations and confusion are related to disconnections within the Ontario system and are additional to the frustrations shared by immigrants with credentials and expertise from other countries. Some of these issues were raised during the Adult Education Review that took place in 2004 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).

Jirair, who had recently immigrated to Canada, was worried about passing a required English assessment, even though he had received high marks in his recently completed Grade 12 English course: “We have all academic credits for starting the course. But still they are demanding about ESL – an English level above a certain level. Even though we finished and got high marks in Grade 12.”

He also described a long and complex process for acquiring English language skills. He said he began his language education in the federally sponsored program, Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program and obtained his “level 5.” However, the LINC program was different from the high school program, he explained. Although he had obtained a level 5 in the LINC program<sup>5</sup>, he was surprised to find himself at the beginning of the high school language program. He said the two language programs were different. He spent two years in the high school’s ESL program. Although he was earning credits, he explained that he only has a “literacy level” and did not earn an English credit. “Now I finished Grade 12, just to have literacy. I started like a baby because I start with ESL levels in the beginning with level A when I registered here. I just have literacy.” He recognized with some disappointment that he was not prepared for PSE, even though he currently has 30 credits. He also did not know what courses he would need to become a firefighter, his current career goal, and anticipated returning to the program for another year.

It's going to be thirty credits, and I don't know what I need. I get some information about firefighter. They need some credits like English Grade 12 and Math Grade 12 and Biology Grade 11 or 12 and Chemistry, 11 or 12. So, I don't know if I'm going to need these subjects. I have to come back again to school to take these subjects in September.

When he first registered at the high school, he recalled taking two different tests, one for English and one for Math. Based on the results of the tests he was placed in a beginning-level ESL class. However, he did do well on the Math test, adding that he “loves Math.” He said that the test indicated that he was at a Grade 11 level. However, while in high school for two years taking ESL courses, he did not take the Grade 11 Math course. Rick, who had emigrated from an English-speaking country and had previously obtained a postsecondary certification, was frustrated with being in a high school program. He had attempted to enter college directly, assuming that his previous certification and experiences would not be recognized in Canada. However, he

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<sup>5</sup> Level 5 could refer to either a class called Level 5 or a specific proficiency level using the Canadian Language Benchmarks. Based on CLB criteria, a CLB Level 5 means, for example, that a student can write a paragraph with a main idea and supporting details, and has “good control” of grammatical structures, spelling and vocabulary (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, n.d.). In comparison, “level A” in the high school is likely ESL AO. Although it is an “introductory course,” it is offered to secondary students and is focused on ensuring that a student gains the language and literacy skills needed in an academic environment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). In comparison, LINC is focused on the day-to-day use of language.

was told he needed certain high school prerequisites even though he had completed high school and a two-year training program previously. When asked if he was able to access a prior learning assessment at the college, he was confused and said, “I didn’t know about that. That was what I wanted to find out initially when I came to the country.”

Another student, who had completed a college certification course without completing her high school diploma, decided to return to high school before starting a different college course. Completing her diploma was a personal goal. She only had 11 high school credits when she started, and then earned additional credits with the PLAR process. Although she had taken a college-level English course, she explained with some frustration that she was not able to use that credit to fulfill the English diploma requirements.

Another student, Dylan, who had previously completed his OSSD and entered apprenticeship training, was frustrated when he found out that he would have to complete nine courses to enter an engineering program. After speaking with the university admissions officer, he thought he would only have to take three courses, and prepared to take the courses at night while continuing to work during the day. He was shocked when he found out that he needed the nine courses. “They told me I would be here a lot longer than I ever imagined.” He ended up quitting his job and moving in with his parents in order to attend a high school program full time during the day. He completed the courses in one year. However, he said, it was not that challenging to complete the courses. “It was just a matter of paying more attention,” he explained. “In high school I thought I knew what I wanted and I kind of needed this and that, but this time around I know exactly what I want. It’s that simple.” When I interviewed Dylan, he was in a social science and humanities course. He explained that he ended up in the course because he had taken all the available Science and Math courses but needed one more course to fill up his timetable. He also said that he did not mind because it would ensure that his marks remained high. He had been accepted to a university program and had received an entry scholarship.

Cindy expressed frustration when recounting her experience with the GED. She decided to get her GED, thinking it would help her enter a postsecondary program. “It was a waste of time,” she said. “I know it sounds bad, but, well, you can’t even get into college with a GED. I found out in the real world it’s not really worth anything.” If she had known about PLAR at the time, she said, she would not have pursued the GED.

While these experiences are particular to individuals and their programs, they do raise concerns about disconnections within the Ontario system, between non-credit ESL, LINC and ESL credit programs, between high school and college course requirements, between college-level and university-level high school courses, and between equivalency programs and colleges.

## Summary

The top two desired supports rated as very important are: 1) information about college and university registration, courses and costs; and 2) current information about career opportunities and salaries. Both supports were chosen by at least 60% of students.

A larger proportion of students who had applied to postsecondary programs received information about college and university registration, courses and costs compared to those who did not apply. A larger proportion of students who applied to PSE received a personal education plan. Females were more likely to emphasize the importance of the top two supports. Only one-third of Aboriginal students indicated that they had received career counselling from a counsellor or advisor, compared to over half of non-Aboriginal students. Students born in other countries indicated that they experienced certain supports more than

students born in Canada did. This may be the result of the development of particular courses or programs in some boards that target immigrant students.

Based on students' comments and interview discussions, students generally have access to information about postsecondary course requirements, funding and registration, but find it much more challenging to access explicit information about career choices, courses related to those choices and job opportunities. While experiences with guidance services were generally positive and helpful for determining high school requirements, high school guidance does not have access to the kind of detailed and timely information about college and university courses and career outlooks that some students wanted. Students who attempted to find this sort of explicit information on their own, using college websites, calls to college staff and even direct contact with college representatives were unsuccessful and subsequently frustrated.

Interview participants shared their mostly positive experiences accessing postsecondary transition programs such as co-op, OYAP and Dual Credit. The programs solidified career choices, helped students gain confidence in their abilities, alleviated financial concerns and helped students stay engaged with the high school program. Co-op was used in a variety of innovative ways to support particular student needs and circumstances – such as career exploration, to provide paid employment, as a bridge to paid employment, and to support continued participation in the high school program.

Students commented on a range of curricular concerns related to general learning strategies and supports, course content and specific curriculum expectations. Some students wrote about the need for more support in developing general learning strategies such as time management, study skills and even courses on self-esteem. Students also discussed the disconnections between college-level courses in high school and actual postsecondary requirements and content. High school courses, they suggested, need to be more career oriented, contain more relevant content, and have more explicit connections to the postsecondary system.

When students shared their education experiences during interviews, several described instances of disconnection and dead-ends related to language requirements, high school equivalency programs, prerequisites and recognition of previously obtained courses and certifications. Their frustrations and confusion are related to disconnections within the Ontario system and are additional to the frustrations previously shared by immigrants regarding credential recognition. While these experiences are particular to individuals and their programs, they do raise concerns about potential disconnections within the Ontario system that warrant further investigation.

## Chapter 6: Discussion and Implications

This chapter highlights and extends the main findings of the study with the aim of framing some key issues for further discussion and policy development. General implications are provided following discussion topics related to the low incomes of most adult student respondents, their career choices, their struggles with credential recognition, postsecondary decision-making and education access issues. Some of the implications may confirm work that is currently underway within individual programs or more broadly, while others may provide insights for future work. Implications address the following issues:

1. The importance of long-term education solutions and poverty reduction strategies
2. Understanding that adults make pragmatic and savvy career choices
3. Recognizing that more than gender preferences are involved in making career choices
4. The importance of obtaining explicit and personalized career information
5. Credential recognition challenges
6. Effective ways to support students' efforts to manage PSE access
7. Addressing systemic inequities

In the final section of the chapter are suggestions for further research.

### Insurmountable Financial Concerns for Students with Low Incomes

Although students did not rank financial factors as having a large influence on their postsecondary decision-making, financial matters were predominant concerns, as indicated by the number of written comments addressing financial worries and considerations. Students were compelled to express their concerns. Perhaps they felt that the study was an opportunity to draw attention to their worries. That being said, why did financial factors not receive more attention from students when they were rating their decision-making responses? It could be that the gap between students' current low incomes and finding a way to pay for PSE, while still supporting children and other family members, is so vast that it simply cannot be bridged with available supports. It may be inconceivable for some students to add an additional financial burden without changing their current situation. And the way to change their current situation is to obtain a postsecondary credential. The contradictory constraint is not due to a lack of awareness. Students are very knowledgeable about various ways to finance their PSE, and some shared their carefully thought-out financial strategies. Further, although only a slight difference, students who applied to PSE were more likely to be working and generating some income.

Students generally conveyed a great deal of knowledge about financing PSE. They were aware of OSAP and had a sense of whether or not they would be eligible for financing a postsecondary program.<sup>6</sup> Findings reveal that they had thought about whether or not they even wanted to apply for a loan. They were aware of their ability to pay off debt, considering the many other financial obligations they had, and they considered the potential of finding a job that would allow them to meet day-to-day needs and make loan payments. In

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<sup>6</sup> The OSAP eligibility criteria do not always fit the circumstances of adult students, particularly if the students have assets and spousal income.

addition to discussing OSAP, students were aware of other government programs and they discussed whether or not family could offer financial assistance. During the interviews, a handful of students demonstrated their financial knowledge and an ability to piece together a financial strategy appropriate to their particular situation.

Students who applied to PSE were more likely to have income from employment. While there were no differences between those who applied and those who did not with regard to income level or whether or not a student received government assistance, there was a slight difference in whether or not a student was working. Employment income could be in addition to government assistance or it could be a student's only income. Either way, being employed in a job that supported and accommodated PSE may have influenced decision-making.

## Implication: Long-Term Education Solutions and Poverty Reduction

People with low incomes who have also experienced “long-term and deep poverty” face multiple obstacles to education (Butterwick & White, 2006, p. 5). Poverty has “profound effects on learning” (ibid). However, education designed for those who have low incomes and rely on income assistance can alleviate obstacles and, more importantly, provide a way out of poverty. Past programs in BC, for example, demonstrate how specific policy mechanisms designed for low-income adults alleviated the obstacles. Such mechanisms included the following: assistance with the many financial costs of attending school, including child care and living expenses; broad academic supports that include counselling, employer partnerships, advocacy and networking; comprehensive assessments of students' needs and capabilities; outreach to communities; and clear identification of the multiple obstacles, including institutional barriers. Despite the success of the educational support policies and mechanisms, many of them were eliminated in 2002 when long-term and comprehensive supports were replaced by short-term job search and job placement programs. Funding was linked to performance targets rather than to broad and comprehensive outcomes that include an education credential. Not only do the new programs prevent access to education, but they have also “proved to be costly, and largely ineffective for helping [income assistance] recipients with multiple barriers to employment” (ibid).

Although a different provincial system, the BC experience is worth understanding. Ontario income assistance programs, similar to those in BC, also emphasize short-term job search and job placement activities over long-term educational solutions. Not only does the emphasis on short-term employment outcomes contradict Ontario's vision for 70% PSE attainment rate for working adults, it also maintains existing education barriers and perpetuates the conditions that entrench poverty. Long-term educational solutions need to be a part of poverty reduction strategies. Such solutions require inter-ministry collaboration and the development of strategies that specifically target adults who rely on income assistance and who have low incomes.

## Career Choices

The majority of students in this study stated that they plan to attend a college program rather than university. When students did mention attending university in the interviews, they were focused on professional programs such as engineering and nursing. Adult students' postsecondary plans are pragmatic; they want to access programs that have an explicit career path. They make savvy career choices and focus on careers with a strong job-education match, helping to ensure income stability. Further, interview data indicate that the

choice to pursue a career in health care compared to engineering and technology is not simply based on gender preferences.

## Implication: Understanding the Pragmatic Career Choices that Adult Students Make

Health care, the most popular career choice, was chosen by nearly half of the females. The next most popular choice was engineering, chosen by over one-third of the males. Although the choices are aligned with gender preferences, there may be other factors influencing career choices.

During the interviews, both men and women discussed the health care field, and more specifically nursing and personal care positions, in similar ways. They described moving in and out of education and work while taking care of family and earning an income. The different access points in these career paths and the ability to advance from one position to another after gaining a credential are appealing. Adults can earn an entry-level credential at a high school, move into a college program, and then move into a university program. Bridging programs between colleges and universities also facilitate access. This sort of laddered system, with a series of sequential and advancing positions and multiple entry points, is well-suited for adult learners who need to work, care for children and support their families.

One student's description of his entry into engineering is a striking contrast and provides insights into why entry into the field may not be so appealing for adults, especially if they have family and child care responsibilities. Unlike health care, the field of engineering does not have multiple educational entry points. Although there are articulation agreements between some college and university programs, the student's apprenticeship courses and experience were not relevant. He had to return to high school to complete nine courses after already obtaining his OSSD. The prospect of completing nine high school courses even before entering a four-year degree program is daunting. Most adults would not be able to consider such a commitment. However, this student was single, had the support of his parents, and a decent part-time job. When compared to nursing and personal care-related health care positions, entry into engineering is not well-suited to the circumstances of most adult learners.

## Implication: Obtaining Explicit and Personalized Career Information

One possible reason that adults make pragmatic and savvy career choices is that they cannot afford to make a mistake. Unlike many adolescents contemplating a career and an education pathway, adults have a myriad of additional considerations: their age, family responsibilities, financial burdens and current employment. One of the interview participant's descriptions of her attempt to gather information about career choices is an example of the kind of information being sought. She wanted explicit information about the connection between a postsecondary program and job prospects. She also wanted detailed information about the companies that would potentially hire her, her role and job responsibilities. This kind of explicit information could make a difference when turning postsecondary plans into actual applications. Students who applied to postsecondary programs are more likely to have a personal education plan than were those who did not apply. We do not know if a personal plan precipitated the decision to apply. Nonetheless, the role of personalized plans containing explicit, relevant and individualized information about the connection between courses, careers and employment is arguably a necessary component of the transition from secondary to PSE.

Personal plans need personal interactions and supports. However, a previous study noted that guidance services for adolescents are inadequate and "do not support a transition into college" (King et al., 2009).

Services for adults, where they do exist in programs, would be challenged even more so. Ways to make guidance more widely available should be explored. In addition, guidance services need to be supported over the long term to ensure that they can respond to changing student populations and changes in employment and PSE.

In addition to guidance and career counselling, another area that could support career exploration, postsecondary program choices and more general college entrance and expectations is curriculum content. Here too, current courses and content are inadequate: “In general, standard secondary approaches for adolescents don’t work. Courses and content are not aligned with career and industry” (ibid). Some students in this study noted similar misalignments between their courses and career aspirations. They wanted to see course content that was career-oriented (e.g., science courses that were more targeted to the way science is studied and put to use in health care or engineering and technology, or English courses that help teach students the reading and writing practices associated with specific fields). A simple first step to take is to ensure that teachers with adult education expertise are part of provincial curriculum development and curriculum reform initiatives.

Of course there are limits to what career counselling and curriculum supports can accomplish when access to particular fields is so different, as in the comparison between personal care positions in health care and engineering. This sort of access difference needs to be further explored, particularly when discussing policy development designed to promote entry into certain careers.

## Valuing Education and Learning, Devaluing Credentials and Experience

The prevalence of personal factors in decision-making indicates that students place a high value on education and learning. They are passionate about learning and intrinsically motivated to reach their education goals. Their source of motivation may be highly personal (to support well-being, interests and aspirations), or related to family and community (to be a role model and to help others). Students value learning that is personally and socially meaningful, and value the importance of education within families and communities. Students in the study were making their education decisions as part of their broad and long-term goals and aspirations. But disillusionment and frustration can set in when such strong personal and social motivations are subsumed by a system that does not consistently recognize past education credentials and experiences. There is some indication, based on interview data and written responses, that immigrant students experience such frustrations. Most students not born in Canada already had their high school diploma before returning to the adult high school program, and just over half of these students also had a postsecondary credential. While those students who returned to high school to improve their language skills may not encounter issues related to their previous education credentials, half (51%) stated that they returned to obtain a specific prerequisite. At some point, those students would have found out that their previous education and experience had been devalued.

## Implication: Credential Recognition Challenges

Credential recognition is a complex and challenging issue. Entry into PSE is organized primarily around the demonstration of curriculum content. A diploma is important, but even more important is curriculum content. Students must demonstrate that they have completed certain subjects for particular programs. Attempting to determine curricular content in other systems, in order to demonstrate the acquisition of subject-based knowledge and skills, is challenging. Adult high school programs have attempted to address some of these

issues within the context of the secondary curriculum and prior learning recognition. However, the issue of credit and experience recognition is much broader and extends into the postsecondary system. There are limits to what an adult high school program can do. In addition to PLAR at the secondary level, helping students navigate a highly complex and frustrating credential recognition system needs to be part of a comprehensive approach to educational counselling for adult students.

## From Decision-Making to Managing Supports and Deterrents<sup>7</sup>

Although the findings from the study support the notion that deciding to enrol in PSE is a complex decision-making process, it may be more useful to conceptualize the pursuit of PSE differently.

Findings are aligned with the conclusions drawn from a recent literature review of empirical work related to decision-making and participation/non-participation in adult education.

Deciding to enroll in higher education is a complex decision-making process occurring over a period of time. The recent literature indicates that making the decision to enroll is not a linear process but rather a multifaceted process with simultaneous decision points. Nor is it a matter of making only a yes or no decision regarding enrollment based on a strong orientation to learning. (Stein & Wanstreet, 2006, p. 7)

However, looking at the findings only as a decision-making process is limited. Students actually *do* an incredible amount of work to figure out whether or not they will be able to apply to and attend PSE, and must manage a variety of changing circumstances. Depending on the student's current situation, each circumstance can either support or deter applying to PSE. For example, a student may have child care arrangements in place that accommodate and support postsecondary studies, but if those arrangements change or disappear, child care becomes a deterrent. Likewise, a student may have a job that helps pay for tuition and living expenses, but if expenses increase or the job changes, then work (either a lack of work or the need to work more) becomes a deterrent. In addition, students may have a "tipping point" circumstance that carries more weight than others. Even if they have managed to get two or three supports in place, one deterrent (i.e., a personal or family health issue, no child care, a change in course or career choice, an insurmountable financial gap, etc.) could prevent them from accessing a postsecondary program.

## Implication: Supporting Students' Efforts to Manage Access to PSE

Seeing decision-making play out this way, in which there are a variety of circumstances that must be figured out – negotiated, arranged and re-arranged – helps to shift an understanding of the process from an exclusively internal thought process to more of a management process that requires multiple supports and strategies. The interview data indicate that students turned to a variety of sources and people to get the

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<sup>7</sup> The idea to organize understandings of participation as "supports" and "deterrents" is derived in part from Scanlon (2006), who discusses adult education participation, and the people involved in it, as "supporters" and "distracters." My use of the terms extends the discussion to include not just the role of people but also the role of institutional processes and regulations.

information and help that they needed to make arrangements, and sometimes make major life changes (e.g., leave a job and move in with parents). They may engage with their peers, teachers, parents, guidance counsellors (if available) and admissions staff at postsecondary institutions. They may undertake extensive online searches or even take a career course, if available. Students have already done much of this work in order to return to high school. They have expertise. However, there are limits to what a student can do to alleviate deterrents. Furthermore, postsecondary entry will be different. There will be tuition to cover; there may be travel, a different schedule, new requirements, more bureaucracy dealing with a larger institution, and impacts on other institutional arrangements such as Ontario Works.

Recognizing the pursuit of PSE as a management process assists in the development of adult-oriented guidance supports and curriculum related to career and postsecondary access. Well-supported guidance counselling is integral to this work. Guidance services in adult high school programs have been described as the "lifeblood of an adult and continuing education program" (Deloitte & Touche LLP, 2010, p. 38). However, access to guidance services is not equitable, particularly for adult students in rural and remote areas. Strategies for more equitable and sustained access to personalized guidance services need to be developed.

## Comparing Students who Applied and Aboriginal Students

Understanding postsecondary planning as a management process also helps to reveal the difference in the way that supports can outweigh deterrents for some (i.e., those who applied) compared to others (i.e., Aboriginal students). Students who applied to PSE came to the high school programs with a variety of postsecondary access supports, and continued to acquire supports while in the program. In contrast, Aboriginal students began their high school programs having already accumulated postsecondary access deterrents, and then their access to a full range of adult high school learning opportunities was restricted compared to other students in the study. Subsequently, Aboriginal students continued to acquire access deterrents while in the adult education system.

Before entering the adult high school program, Aboriginal students had acquired more educational deterrents and fewer supports than non-Aboriginal students. They were more likely to:

- Receive social assistance (OW)
- Have left high school because of difficulties in their personal lives, at home and in school
- Have attempted returning to a high school program at least once before

Students who applied to PSE were more likely to:

- Have returned to get a specific prerequisite
- Want a job with more status and responsibility
- Have always planned to attend PSE
- Already have their OSSD

While in the program, Aboriginal students were not always able to access the same supports as non-Aboriginal students, including access to personalized planning supports. Aboriginal students were less likely than non-Aboriginal students to be aware of PSE requirements. In addition, they were less likely to indicate that they had received career counselling from a counsellor or advisor.

Compounding access to guidance services are issues related to equitable access to quality education. The two programs sites that saw mostly Aboriginal students used a distance education format. This means that students in those programs worked primarily on their own and did not have access to the same range and intensity of learning and support opportunities as those in programs that ran regular classes. In one of the programs working with Aboriginal students, there were no qualified teachers. Assignments were sent to another board for marking and “monitors” were available to provide assistance. Considering the integral role of teachers and the interplay of conditions, dispositions and supports that come together to create a positive program experience, students who work primarily on their own are restricted from accessing a full range of supportive learning experiences, including supportive interactions with students and teachers, that could alleviate past negative educational experiences. In addition, a distance education format would likely not include other important opportunities such as co-op and Dual Credit. However, Aboriginal students do access learning opportunities that are available. The majority of Aboriginal students had earned credits using PLAR. Finally, Aboriginal students were more likely to plan on leaving their communities to pursue PSE. This means that they would not necessarily have the same access to supportive networks that others can access to help manage their PSE.

## Implication: Addressing Systemic Inequities

The study’s findings related to the imbalance of access supports and deterrents for Aboriginal students indicate that educational opportunities are not equal. This finding is supported in a recent review of adult programs in school boards, some of which “grapple with access and equity issues in serving remote and First Nation communities distributed over large catchment areas” (Deloitte & Touche, p. 8).

Aboriginal students enter an adult high school program with more access deterrents than other adult students, and continue to accumulate deterrents once enrolled. Ideally, an adult high school program should be able to alleviate the inequalities, but unfortunately inequalities are exacerbated once the student is in the program. This is not the fault of the program when their ability to provide necessary support opportunities may be severely limited.

Funding is an issue. Adult high school programs across the province are already operating on an unequal playing field and are then doubly restrained compared to adolescent high school programs. Not only do they receive substantially less funding than adolescent high school programs, but they work primarily with students who encounter multiple barriers to education. Considering the challenges that students living in poverty and Aboriginal students encounter, funding disparities for adult students need to be acknowledged and discussed. The situation with Aboriginal students is but one example of the implications of the funding disparities in the adult secondary system.

## Conclusion

Adult high school programs are often referred to as “second chance” programs. The term carries an assumption that students “squandered” their opportunity to obtain a high school credential the first time around. The label is inaccurate and potentially detrimental to adult students.

Nearly half of the adult students who returned to high school already had a diploma. These students did not miss out the first time around. They want to enter the postsecondary system and are returning primarily because of the way the postsecondary system emphasizes curricular content in order to access particular

programs. These students are compelled back into the secondary system. As long as content is as important as the credential (and arguably more important in some situations), there will always be a need for programs to provide opportunities for high school graduates to obtain requisite courses. Adults who obtained a high school credential outside of Canada are particularly vulnerable in such a content-focused system. Young adults who obtained their OSSD the first time around and later return to high school may have been unsure about their career paths while in high school as adolescents, or they may have changed their career path in response to a changing job market or for personal reasons. Either way, they too are compelled back into the system.

In addition to students who are compelled back into the secondary system, there will likely always be a need to offer an extended opportunity to students to complete their diploma requirements. Students living in poverty face multiple learning challenges. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the findings related to Aboriginal students. Adult education can be an opportunity to address socioeconomic challenges and inequities. However, the secondary system is currently restricted in the potential role it can have, and as a consequence, the most vulnerable students encounter additional inequities.

The “second chance” label may also relegate high school programs to a “second class” status in the overall education system. The important and integral role of adult high school programs within a comprehensive education system has too often been overlooked. Although the programs are funded by the Ministry of Education, they are not mandated and are often seen to be extraneous to school board concerns. And although adults attend adult high school programs in order to access PSE, the programs are not part of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and are consequently not always considered an important conduit to PSE for adult students.

As an inherent part of a comprehensive adult education system that facilitates access to PSE, particularly among students with multiple barriers, programs for adults returning to high school need to have a more prominent place in education policy development initiatives.

## Further Research

Recommendations for further research complement and confirm many of the concerns and interests of the Ministry of Education’s Adult Education Policy Unit. Further research that supports the development of adult education policy development could include the following topics and general approaches:

1. Access to and analysis of student enrolment and course completion data<sup>8</sup> to help describe the learning paths and achievements of adult students who return to high school;
2. A policy impact analysis<sup>9</sup> from the perspective of people working in adult high school programs to fully understand funding disparities between adult and adolescent secondary students, subsequent program responses to current “business models” and the impacts on learners;

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<sup>8</sup> A current “capacity building” project initiated in partnership with CESBA and the Adult Education Policy Unit is focused on this topic.

<sup>9</sup> Such an analysis would extend a recent review of adult and continuing education programs completed by Deloitte & Touche LLP (2010). Their review used a “business operations perspective” that provides a comprehensive understanding of the day to day operations of programs. Within the day-to-day operations, however, are a myriad of programming decisions and challenges that must be made in response to the business models. The report hints at some of these challenges when discussing program “viability” issues and “off-setting” costs, partnership challenges and competition for students, and program equity issues. The report authors conclude that there is a need for a “cultural shift” in order to better meet ministry objectives. An understanding of the dynamics involved in such a “cultural shift” could be gained by examining the day-to-day decision-making processes that occur in response to current business models.

3. Case studies that explore education access issues from the student's perspective in order to better understand the institutional barriers they encounter in their effort to obtain a secondary and/or postsecondary credential, including decisions about which sorts of postsecondary access programs (i.e., high schools, college upgrading, distance learning, and language and literacy programs) suit their particular circumstances;
4. Case studies that explore innovative adult high school program approaches and program development initiatives that support the multiple challenges that adult high school students encounter in order to better understand the importance of locally developed solutions and share effective practices; and
5. Curricular content analysis from the perspective of adult learning and career-related content to support the development of curriculum adaptations and modifications for adult students.

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