Acknowledgments

Camosun College is located in the traditional territories of the Lkwungen (Esquimalt and Songhees), Malahat, Pacheedaht, Scia’new, T’Sou-ke and WSÁNEĆ (Pauquachin, Tsartlip, Tsawout, Tseycum) peoples. We acknowledge their welcome and hold our traditional hosts in high esteem.

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**Notes on the report design:**

This report is presented in a two-page spread format. Each two-page spread can be conceptualized separately or as part of the whole report. Participant voices are included throughout the report and are bolded and italicized. Dark coloured shaded boxes reference both scholarly quotes and composite biographies. Light coloured shaded boxes highlight research questions, design and themes.
Introduction

Camosun College is a publicly funded BC community college that supports adult learners upgrading their literacy and numeracy skills through upgrading courses offered by the School of Access. Camosun offers upgrading courses on two campuses, and at nine additional community sites in the Greater Victoria area. In addition to upgrading, the School of Access provides ESL classes, employment exploration programs and entry level employment training; from 2013-2016 Camosun’s Institutional Research and Planning Department reports that 28% of Camosun students travelled through the School of Access at some point in their educational journey.

Upgrading courses build or refresh math and English skills for learners to meet admission requirements and promote their success in other college programs. Adult learners at the Fundamental and Intermediate Adult Basic Education (ABE) levels often upgrade for a year or more in order to obtain prerequisites for entry into post-secondary programming. As well, such learners often will enter, exit and re-enter upgrading programs before completing (Comings, 2009; Kerr, 2011). Part time studies necessitated by employment and family responsibilities can lengthen the time required for adult learners to complete their upgrading. ABE students with learning disabilities or learning challenges also typically need more time to achieve their educational goals. (Patterson, 2014).

Camosun researchers chose to undertake longitudinal research, interviewing BC Fundamental and Intermediate ABE level upgrading students for a period of five years, in order to evaluate ABE student outcomes over time. A significant length of time was necessary to develop an understanding and analysis of adult upgrading pathways, which are by nature complex and long-term processes. The researchers chose to focus on adult education students because longitudinal studies of such students are lacking in Canada (Myers & Broucker, 2006). As a result, post-secondary education policy and practice is often based on short-term studies (Nesbit, 2013; Slowey & Schuetze, 2012).

Research participants follow many different pathways and come to Camosun with a wide variety of needs and goals. Examples of typical Fundamental and Intermediate ABE learners include:

- Adult learners who need to improve their reading, writing or numeracy skills before entering Trades programs, the Health Care Assistant program, or the Medical Lab Assistant program;
- Students taking math upgrading courses while enrolled in post-secondary programs;
- Adults upgrading to improve their employability skills;
- Adults with learning disabilities;
- Non-readers who have functioned well in life using various compensating methods and are now wanting to learn to read, perhaps inspired by their children or grandchildren.
Introduction

St.Clair (2016) states that one of the fundamental research questions in Adult Literacy Education (ALE) remains unclear: “What motivates people to upgrade their skills and how can this be made easier for them?” The voices of Camosun students can contribute to answering this important research question.

Camosun researchers designed a longitudinal study to explore the question:

What are the effects of returning to education on the lives of adults with literacy and/or numeracy levels at or below the Grade 10 level?

Over five annual interviews, adult upgrading students reflected on and discussed their complex pathways through education, employment, and other areas distinguished by participants.

The researchers worked to develop a detailed understanding of the goals and motivations of upgrading students, to understand the steps that brought them to the college to enrol in upgrading courses, and to learn about their experiences during and after enrolment. This report summarizes early findings, using data from Interviews 1-3. Future research will include results from all five annual interviews.

Throughout this report, the researchers will seek to present data in the words of participants as much as possible. To ensure confidentiality, names, program areas of study, and other personal details were changed or removed. To give a sense of the complex pathways followed by interviewed learners, the researchers created ‘composite biographies’ which combine real characteristics and experiences from different participants into coherent portraits. A single composite biography does not represent any one person, but none-the-less accurately represents a typical learner’s story.

Participant Voices

I would like to have a career. I would like to be in a job that I enjoy, that I can get up in the morning and be proud of.

I want to do my adult upgrading and then continue on with post-secondary education just to open up the doors of you know, better jobs, better paying jobs, more stability for the future.

I’ve been out of school for like over 12 years and for me to be here it’s a big, big step.
Research Objectives and Design

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was the first-ever comparative survey of adults designed to profile and explore the literacy (which included numeracy) distributions among participating countries. It was a collaborative effort involving several international organizations, intergovernmental agencies, and national governments. In 2000, a final report was released (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] & Statistics Canada [STAT CAN], 2000), which stated, “by 1998, the survey had covered 10.3 percent of the world population and 51.6 percent of the world GDP” (p.87).

IALS defined literacy/numeracy in the following way: *Literacy is using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential (OECD, 2000).*

This definition is further explained by Kirsch (2001): “Literacy enables the fulfillment of individual aspirations—both defined ones such as graduation or obtaining a job, and those less defined and less immediate, which extend and enrich one’s personal life. The phrase ‘to function in society’ is meant to acknowledge that literacy provides individuals with a means of contributing to, as well as benefiting from, society. Literacy skills are generally recognized as important for nations to maintain or improve their standard of living and to compete in an increasingly global marketplace. Yet, they are equally as important for individual participation in technologically advancing societies with their formal institutions, complex legal systems, and large government programs” (p. 15).

Adults who lack literacy and/or numeracy skills operate at a disadvantage, since low literacy represents a major barrier to independence. Low literacy can also exclude many Canadians from labour market participation. According to the IALS survey, good literacy skills have a positive effect on earnings in Canada.

This research uses participant interviews as the primary data collection method: the researchers believed that qualitative research could give a sense of the experiences and outcomes for this population of adult learners and noted the paucity of such research in the literature (“Canadian Council,” 2007). Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest and Namey (2005), state: “The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the ‘human’ side of an issue” (p. 1).
Research Objectives and Design

Research Objectives and Design:

1. Interview groups of Camosun students annually for a period of five years; participants will have initially entered the college with literacy or numeracy levels at or below the Grade 10 level.
2. Track three intake groups, a data collection period of 7 years.
3. Provide the postsecondary community and policymakers with longitudinal data on the experience of adults entering Camosun College who have literacy or numeracy levels at or below the Grade 10 level.

Research Question: What are the effects of returning to education on the lives of adults with literacy and/or numeracy levels at or below the Grade 10 level?

In order to evaluate ABE student outcomes over time, the researchers constructed a 5-year, cohort longitudinal panel study, focusing on longitudinal interview data augmented by quantitative survey data. A semi-structured, in-depth interview approach included reflective and retrospective elements. The common experience of the cohort was enrolment in upgrading at Camosun College with an entry level at either the BC ABE Fundamental or Intermediate level - approximately at or below Grade 10.

During the 2010-11, 2011-12 and 2012-13 academic years, a total of 47 students volunteered as longitudinal research participants. In addition, 218 upgrading students volunteered to complete online surveys. Survey data provided a demographic ‘snapshot’ of the upgrading cohort in each of the three interview cohort intake years and also permitted quantitative comparison of the demographic characteristics of interview participants to those of the larger upgrading population.

The same researcher interviewed each participant annually. Interviews were analyzed following the six-stage thematic analysis (TA) method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researchers approached this methodology in an inductive way: listening to recorded interviews and reading interview transcriptions independently, multiple times; discussing observations; developing codes; coding independently; comparing and discussing findings. Coding matrices were developed collaboratively and data was independently themed using these grids. Inter-rater reliability checks consistently demonstrated concordance.
Complex Pathways

As participants’ interviews were coded and themed, their stories provided a complex and varied description of their educational pathways. These pathways are unlike the traditional high school to post-secondary linear path that many educational processes and funding models are based on. The following quotes illustrate how participants describe their pathways:

Kerr (2011) states that “The typical definitions of attrition and retention are not as useful for adult learners as a result of their varied academic pathways” (p. 27). Grayson & Grayson (2003) also report that adult students may stop out for a term or two because of obligations in other areas of their lives.

It’s like there’s this comic like where it’s your idea of success - ‘What Life has in Store for You’ and it’s like the path is all curvy and goes through a lake and gets rained on and then has to swing across a cliff.

Still like determined I mean even if it takes me the rest of my life I’m determined to finish what I’ve started and that’s a big one because – because yeah like I’m amazed at the – the hurdles that get you know tossed in front for – for mature students.

The researchers became interested in complex pathways as an overarching idea, which linked key themes in the data. Participants frequently reported factors that supported their success, despite the ‘hurdles and curves’ described in interviews.

The researchers used the images of waves and tides to illustrate the non-linear, sometimes unpredictable nature of adult learners’ pathways through upgrading courses: there is a steady, slow but powerful movement forward, though tidewaters sometimes appear to be receding and advancing simultaneously. Occasionally, powerful rogue waves can appear causing unexpected results or changes in direction.

The researchers explored the data to summarize and describe how students were successful on these non-linear, varied pathways. The most frequently reported factors for success on complex educational pathways were grouped into three themes:

| 1. | Motivations |
| 2. | Resources |
| 3. | Resilience & Empowerment |
How can post-secondary, community and government work together to overcome barriers for adult learners?

Challenges that Influence Success

Cohort Survey data responses confirmed what interview participants described as challenges that affected their ability to study. More than 40% of the online survey cohorts indicated financial stress was a challenge. Interview participants also revealed how they cobbled together their incomes, working multiple part-time, minimum wage jobs with varying, sometimes exhausting schedules. In addition, learning disabilities and physical and mental health concerns presented challenges to the larger cohorts as those conditions did with the interviewees. Except for providing supports and accommodations for learning disabilities, post-secondary institutions have little authority to address other reported challenges that impact students’ ability to study.

![Graph showing challenges faced by Cohort 1, Cohort 2, and Cohort 3]

Composite Biography* – Participant ‘A’

Participant A has degenerative osteo-arthritis condition and lives with chronic pain. She is 40 years old and has worked in the service industry for over 20 years. She needed to retrain as it was getting harder and harder to work on her feet all day. Participant A assessed her skills at Camosun, and met the math requirements but needed to work on her English. She attempted to go to school right away, while working, but just couldn’t sustain that.

It took over 3 years for Participant A to complete her English upgrading, due to health issues. She had a lot of stops and starts, but finally found a less physically demanding job, which reduced her chronic pain, and enabled her to go to school at night after work. Participant A discovered she was good at writing and debating, and especially enjoyed social and political issues. She is now in her 3rd year of a Criminal Justice program, completing an internship.

*To give a sense of the complex pathways followed by interviewed learners, the researchers created ‘composite biographies’ which combine real characteristics and experiences from different participants into coherent portraits. A single composite biography does not represent any one person, but provides a useful representation of participants’ experiences, while ensuring confidentiality.
Resilience and Empowerment

The theme of Resilience and Empowerment highlights how early successes, maintaining persistence, and managing resources were key parts of learners’ complex educational pathways.

Early Successes

Examples of early successes included discernible accomplishments such as completing a course or being accepted into a program. Less tangible but equally important early successes were personal and individual: participants learned something they had previously considered unattainable, such as fractions; felt welcomed into a community of learners; recognized themselves in the context of their peers’ ambitions; noted feelings of safety in expression. Participants repeatedly reported that early successes while upgrading reinforced and encouraged them to continue with further training and education. Supportive instructors and staff, and a welcoming environment helped to perpetuate and solidify early successes.

I think it’s confidence more than anything, I think coming back to school and doing all the upgrading it’s allowed me to know that I can do it.

The sense of accomplishment you know where you know before it had been such a fail – failed thing for me to do math, for me to get an ‘A’ was huge, it was like, okay well maybe, maybe you can do this, maybe you can finish school.

Resilience and Empowerment – Maintaining Persistence

Interviewees in the study showed persistence as a dominant characteristic. Indeed, completing upgrading classes as an adult is indicative of persistence. For adult upgrading students, Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) define persistence as “adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to programs as soon as the demands of their lives allow” (p. 3).

Indigenous elders\(^1\) referenced in Unit 3 of the TELTIN TTE WILNEW course, Camosun College (n.d.), suggested that to effectively encourage and support Indigenous learners:

- Offer kindness, patience and flexibility
- Help the learner to connect with others who can support them
- Offer time for learners to become comfortable in the new environment
- Understand survivor issues and how they contribute to lack of confidence in a formal learning situation
- Offer learners a variety of choices for how best to learn
- Help students feel comfortable and psychologically safe

\(^1\)Mansell Griffin, Nisga'a Nation; Jana Kotaska, Cowichan Nation; Leanna Rhodes, Sto:lo Nation; Carl and Fran Sam, Lil'wat Nation; Jack Smith, Hul'qumi'num Nation
Resilience and Empowerment

By the second interview, 87% of participants reported successfully completing one or more upgrading courses. Some of these participants would continue to upgrade after Interview 2; this completion snapshot includes participants who had finished their upgrading and those still registered in upgrading courses. These are unusually high completion rates for literacy and numeracy upgrading courses in Canada (Pross and Barry 2004; Long, 2001; Malicky & Norman 1994).

One of the reasons for lower reported completion rates may be the influence of stop outs on educational pathways. For many adult learners following complex educational pathways, completion data analyzed on a term-by-term basis seems to indicate ABE course non-completions. When completion data is analyzed over longer periods, these same pathways record student success.

As Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) point out, “From the point of view of an accountability system, student persistence ends when an adult drops out of a program. When an adult returns to a program after a lapse in attendance, the program may view that student as a dropout who has returned. The adult may view him- or herself as a persistent learner who couldn’t attend for a while” (p. 4).

By the end of Interview 3, many participants were able to describe how their own persistence had increased their success and confidence over time. In participants’ own words:

I would definitely say that coming here [Camosun] and taking the classes that I took and having the experience that I had was a really important piece to the whole development of how I learn and how I interact with people, how I work.

I really noticed the connections I’m also making . . . it really allows kind of that networking to happen and really it even kind of made me think well wouldn’t it be really neat to work at the university so it kind of makes me think about a lot of different things.

I think that things have been going well and I’m still surprised at the amount of stuff I’ve been able to accomplish…. I couldn’t have … envisioned even like two and half even three years ago I couldn’t have even never imagined being as busy as I am now…. Or having completed what I’ve completed now.
Motivations

All participants described their motivations for upgrading in their initial interview. Participants reported between one and three main motivations. Motivations reported during the first interview were named and analyzed for frequency of occurrence.

Motivations for Upgrading

There were five major motivations reported by participants as shown in the pictogram below. Career was most commonly reported (58%) while 49% of participants were motivated by a desire to improve their education. In many cases, these two motivations were connected; participants reported educational goals that would lead to achievement of career goals. The ‘Economic’ and ‘Career’ motivations differ, in that many participants clearly articulated the desire to improve their economic situation as a reason for upgrading, but without a defined career plan. These participants were frustrated with low-paying, part-time jobs without benefits and with no future; they wanted to create financial stability in their lives. The researchers designated another category – Crossroads – to encompass a variety of motivations that referenced a major life change or choice. Examples of Crossroads motivators are divorce, health issues, addiction recovery, loss of job, release from prison, and mandated job retraining.

So I worked for many years with many different senior homes until I lost my position . . . . My husband told me why don’t you go back to school and keep studying; improving your English and writing because you speak better than writing and reading.

Another motivating factor was ‘Children’ with 22% of participants reporting that making a better life for their children was a major motivation for upgrading. Only a sub-set (approximately one quarter) of the interview participants were parents; this group consistently articulated acting on goals and dreams because of their children. Parents spoke about wanting to be able to put their children into sports programs or other activities that they currently could not afford. Participants often described how becoming parents provided the additional motivation they needed to move forward toward achieving their goals.

The main thing to me it comes down to my little guy right, so I’ve never had a dad – I never met my dad and I don’t want him to grow up without knowing who his dad is right. So you know like I’m here just for a better life, I want to change my life… I want him to have like a way better life than what I had . . .

I had my son and I figured I wanted to do something actually better with my life… then I decided that I was interested in welding... be able to give him... that stability and structure that I didn’t have.
Motivations

Employment and Educational Motivations at Interview 3

By Interview 3 (approximately two years after the initial interview), over 60% of participants had completed the pre-requisites for their program of choice, with nearly half of participants enrolled in their chosen program. This is particularly impressive given stop outs, waitlisted post-secondary programs, and limited start dates - some programs only have one intake date per year. Other participants (27%) reported having concretized an employment goal; such learners might have been motivated by general economic factors in their initial interview, but by Interview 3, they had defined a career goal. Research data showed how 16% of participants were already employed in their goal area after approximately two years. This extremely positive result reflects the proficiency and persistence reported by participants in navigating and overcoming difficult and complex educational pathways.

Rothes (2016) states that motivation is a key element to understand students’ engagement, satisfaction, and level of achievement in learning, but while there is a considerable amount of research on the motivation of traditional students under 25, adult or nontraditional learners’ motivation for learning is still a scarcely studied subject. She used a person-centered approach to investigate profiles of motivation in adult learners and to relate them to learning, engagement, academic self-concept, and self-efficacy. Camosun research contributes to this field of inquiry.

Transitions Reported at Interview 3 - Employment and Education

- Concretized employment goal: 27%
- Completed pre-reqs for Program of Choice: 62%
- Enrolled in Program of Choice: 46%
- Employed in Goal Area: 16%

... I wanted to take my Early Childhood Care in Infant Toddlers so that I can open up my own daycare and so that’s how I came back to school.
Educators, funders and policy makers need to create policy and practice that is a complementary, supporting part of adult learners’ lives and does not require the post-secondary experience to be the only significant focus for adult learners.

The researchers learned how participants utilized, coordinated and created very complex, interconnected webs of resources to support themselves, their families, and their learning. Some implications are:

- Post-secondary plays a role in complex educational pathways, but has limited authority to address many of the challenges adult learners face.
- Participants’ needs and resource utilization patterns motivated to explore the potential for continuing to increase the integration of college activities with government and community partners, so that all three resource areas are working together as closely as possible.
- Strengthening connections between resource providers would support learners who often discover one resource through accessing another.

**Resources – Community**

Community resources provided the most services utilized by the research participants in this study. Linkages amongst government and post-secondary and social service agencies both enabled learners to engage in returning to school and supported them once they enrolled. For many participants, making a connection with a community resource was key to accessing knowledge about other available resources. Often participants found the information and resources they needed to access post-secondary via a community-based resource.

Participants also spoke about the community of learners they encountered at the College, how being surrounded by other adults who were also in post-secondary inspired them.

*Learning is better here because even though yes I’m doing, you know, high school level courses, but I’m surrounded by a whole bunch of people who are really striving to better themselves and their lives. I mean you’ve got your third and second year college students, people who are looking university transfer, you know these are people who are really kind of – they’re setting a really good standard for education.*

*... even people around me: seeing people that have physical disabilities or mental disabilities and they are all through this college, they are getting an education ... there are so many opportunities for people here of all kinds*
Participant B is a 28 year old single mother of 3 children. She left school in her final year of high school due to pregnancy. She worked at entry-level jobs until her partner left. She couldn’t support her family on minimum wage so was forced to go on welfare. She was diagnosed with clinical depression. While attending a community kitchen and parents’ discussion group, Participant B saw a poster about a training program for women in trades at Camosun. Participant B was excited about the chance to explore trades and upgrade her math and English skills. However, she was terrified about math and rescheduled her assessment 3 times before she could manage her anxiety. Through the college’s Disability Resource Centre, Participant B was able to access supports for anxiety and depression and information about a community mental health coach for extra support. Participant B loved the hands-on, ‘sample-the-trades’ program and successfully completed it. She then had to take 8 months off, after one of her children became seriously ill. She is now working with a career coach. She feels good about herself, and states that her children are proud and supportive of her.

*To give a sense of the complex pathways followed by interviewed learners, the researchers created ‘composite biographies’ which combine real characteristics and experiences from different participants into coherent portraits. A single composite biography does not represent any one person, but provides a useful representation of participants’ experiences, while ensuring confidentiality.*
Health

Health Related Information Reported by Participants

Just over half of the interview participants expressed improvement in their feelings of confidence and self-esteem at Interview 3. Participants also shared accounts of improving their physical health, such as stories about diet changes or increased exercise or smoking cessation. Some of these inspirational stories involved participants’ children. Interestingly, improved health determinants were frequently reported even though the researchers did not directly ask health-related questions. At the beginning of all interviews following Interview 1, participants listened to a summary of their previous interview and then were asked what was the same and what had changed compared to that previous interview. It was then that changes in participants’ health were often reported. Other participants may also have had improved health determinants but did not share those experiences because the researchers did not ask directly about health.

Participants also described how working with and changing goals over time was important to maintaining their physical and mental health while at Camosun. Sometimes participants described how they modified goals over time to accommodate disabilities or family responsibilities as they gained familiarity with post-secondary demands and better understood how to integrate school into their lives:

*Even when I am going through a struggle with my mental health which I have, I still – I’m struggling. But the fact that I can still do it you know it’s very hopefully because it shows me that I don’t have to be cured or perfect or better in order to keep going. I can do both.*

[Transitions Reported at Interview 3 - Improved Health Determinants]

- Quit smoking: 14%
- Healthier eating/exercise: 24%
- Improved housing: 27%
- Improved finances: 35%
- Improved self-esteem/self-confidence: 54%
- Resolved long-term health issue: 22%
Highlights of Findings

Highlights:

1. Educational and career success does occur over time for adult learners with lower levels of literacy and/or numeracy.

2. Success is multi-layered, incremental and often interrupted, for learners on complex educational pathways.

3. Participants describe how government, post-secondary and community organizations work together to overcome barriers for adults on complex educational pathways.

4. Early results indicate that, by Interview 3, improvements in adults’ literacy and/or numeracy positively impact their health and economic indicators.

Recommendations:

1. Develop policy and implementation guidelines that embrace stop outs as a normal part of complex educational pathways and proactively coordinate resources to facilitate the continuation of learner success.

2. Broaden the definitions for success, as well as the frame works for measuring success.

3. Support cross-Ministry policy work to serve adult learners whose needs are complex and diverse.

4. Develop scenarios and supports for complex pathways that have no single, ideal scenario.

Samantha Parsons and John Bynner (2007) conducted a longitudinal study that followed 10,000 individuals born in the UK in 1970, collecting data from birth until age 34. Their report, Illuminating Disadvantage: Profiling the experiences of adults with Entry level literacy or numeracy over the lifecourse, showed that adults who improve their numeracy and literacy skills:

- Improve their chances in the labour market, moving up the occupational status scale and resisting unemployment
- Suffer less from poor physical and mental health
- Are less likely to have children experiencing difficulty in school
- Are more likely to be active citizens

“Adult and continuing education and the development of peoples’ skills are more than just a sticking plaster [Band-Aid]. They are the vital cement to building a society in which everybody has the capacity to achieve their goals and to contribute to the well-being of society as a whole. Anything less might be seen as an abdication of responsibility and a failure of political will” (p. 11).
References


References


References


