

# Lifelong learning: Who goes back to school?

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With the declining number of jobs in primary industries, and new technologies in manufacturing and service industries, today's workers need to learn many new skills during their working lives. Indeed, many labour market analysts and educators declare that today's workers face a lifetime of learning.

The concept of lifelong learning was outlined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the early 1970s as a strategy for new educational services. These services would provide opportunities for adults to go back to school at any stage of their lives. <sup>(1)</sup> It was expected that new educational services would help men and women in the labour force keep abreast of technological and labour market changes.

More recently, lifelong learning became a partial explanation for the dramatic increase in part-time university enrolment in the 1970s and 1980s. Competition for high-paying jobs, high unemployment, women's increased presence in the labour force, employers' greater willingness to sponsor workers' education, and the increased supply of part-time courses were all thought to be leading adults back to school. <sup>(2)</sup>

This article examines the labour force characteristics of adults aged 30 to 64 who were taking credit courses in October of 1980 and 1990. <sup>(3)</sup> The Labour Force Survey (LFS), a monthly household survey conducted by Statistics Canada, divides the working-age population into three mutually exclusive groups - the employed, the unemployed, and persons not in the labour force - and collects data on the educational activities of all three groups. October data were selected for this study because that month represents the peak enrolment period.

## More adults returning to study each year

One indicator of lifelong learning is the growing number of adults returning to study each year. An estimated 461,000 adults, or 4% of the population aged 30 to 64, returned to take credit courses at the

primary, secondary, trade and vocational, college and university levels in October 1990, compared with 227,000 persons this age, or 2% of the adult population in October 1980. (4) Three-quarters of these adults took credit courses on a part-time basis in both years.

The majority of adult students were between the ages of 30 and 39, although this proportion declined from 70% to 62% over the decade due to marked increases in the number of adult students aged 40 to 49. (5) More importantly, the rate of participation in credit courses by age showed that a greater proportion of adults from each age group had been returning to school each year. Although the highest rate of participation was among adults aged 30 to 34 years, adults aged 40 to 49 experienced the largest growth in numbers over the decade.



### Table 1 **Students aged 30 to 64 by registration and labour force status**

*Source: Labour Force Survey*

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Women made up the majority of adult students taking credit courses. Their share of the student population climbed from 58% to 64%, as the number of women taking credit courses rose 124% over the decade, compared with a rise of only 74% for men. In 1990, 5% of all women aged 30 to 64 participated in credit courses, compared with only 3% of men this age. In each age group, more women participated in credit courses than men, although participation rates for both sexes declined with age.



### Chart **Rates of participation in credit courses.**

*Source: Labour Force Survey*

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## **Adult students are already well educated**

Adults returning to school have higher-than-average education levels. Throughout the 1980s, the highest rate of participation in credit courses was among adults who had some postsecondary education, followed by those with university degrees. Adults with high school or less had the lowest participation rates in credit courses.

Of course, age and level of education are closely related. Younger adults, who are more likely to be credit

course participants, also tend to have a higher education than older adults. As well, the boom in education during the 1980s resulted in three times as many adults with trade and vocational certificates and college diplomas (2.8 million in October 1990 up from 1 million in October 1980), and twice as many adults with university degrees (2 million up from 1 million over the same period).

These changes in the education levels of the adult population had a large impact on their overall rate of participation in credit courses. About one-half of the growth during the 1980s in the adult participation rate was due to the general rise in education of the adult population. In other words, if education levels had remained the same in 1990 as they were in 1980, the overall rate of adult participation in credit courses would have been much lower than the actual 1990 rate.

Most adults returning to school took credit courses at college or university, while a small number took credit courses to obtain primary and secondary school diplomas (18,000 in 1980 and 55,000 in 1990).

Data on field of study by age of student are not available for college students, but such data are available for adult university students. [\(6\)](#) During the 1980s, the majority of university students aged 30 to 64 were part-time students in undergraduate programs. Most part-time undergraduate students this age took courses in social sciences, education, and humanities, although the largest increases in enrolment over the decade were in mathematics and the physical sciences, and health-related studies.



## Table 2 Rates of participation in credit courses by sex and selected characteristics

*Source: Labour Force Survey*

On the other hand, full-time university students aged 30 to 64 were equally divided between undergraduate and graduate courses. While most full-time students were concentrated in social sciences, education, humanities, and health-related studies, the greatest increases in enrolment were in mathematics and the physical sciences, agriculture and biological sciences, and engineering. Recent studies of university enrolment have noted increases in the number of older students in full-time studies. [\(7\)](#)

## Most adult students are employed

The majority of 30 to 64 years-olds who returned to take credit courses were employed, and most were employed full-time. The number of employed 30 to 64 year-olds who returned to take credit courses climbed from 158,000 in 1980 to 314,000 in 1990. The number of employed women returning to study rose much faster (144%) than the number of employed men (54%). Consequently, the rate of participation for employed men rose only slightly (from 2% to 3%), while the rate for employed women increased two

percentage points (from 3% to 5%). Although the reasons for returning to school vary, depending upon each student's personal and family situation, job-related concerns are most often cited by part-time students. (8)

About one-third of adults taking credit courses were not currently employed, that is, they were unemployed or not in the labour force. Their numbers rose faster than those of employed persons, increasing from 69,000 to 147,000 during the 1980s. More than two-thirds were women, and the vast majority were from outside the labour force.

Compared to the striking difference in participation rates of employed men and women, men and women who were not currently employed had similar rates of participation in credit courses. A full 5% of men and women not currently employed participated in credit courses in 1990, up from about 2% in 1980. However, men who were not currently employed increased their participation in credit courses at a much faster rate than women over the decade (an increase of 179% for men compared with 95% for women). As well, almost all of these men took courses full-time, while only one-half of the women did.

## **Adult students work in white-collar occupations**

Since the majority of adult students are employed, where do they work? Are they concentrated in the same industries and occupations as employed adults who are not students?

One-quarter of men students, and one-half of women students were employed in community service-based industries such as education, health and welfare, amusement and recreational industries, and religious organizations. These concentrations were not representative of the distribution of employed men and women throughout all industries. Only 10% of employed men, and 30% of employed women worked in community service-based industries.

Moreover, men and women students were concentrated in just a few occupations. Most women students were employed in managerial and administrative, teaching, medicine, and clerical occupations. Women in teaching occupations made up one-fifth of all employed women students. (9) Similarly, most men students were employed in managerial and administrative, teaching, and natural science occupations.

It is therefore apparent that most students, both men and women, were employed in white collar occupations. Undoubtedly, the higher education levels of adult students had an influence on their concentration in white-collar occupations, as these occupations tend to have higher educational prerequisites.



## Table 3 Rates of participation in credit courses of employed adults by selected occupations

Source: Labour Force Survey

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However, more research is required into the effects of education on the occupation and earnings of adult students, the size of firms where adult students work, the importance of continuous upgrading in jobs that adult students perform, and the availability of employer-sponsored education or on-the-job training.

## Conclusion

Lifelong learning was a trend of the 1980s as more adults returned to take credit courses, mainly at colleges and universities. The majority of these students were employed and they may have been taking credit courses to advance in their jobs, improve their salaries, upgrade skills and knowledge that technological advancements made obsolete, or meet the educational requirements of new jobs. On the other hand, those students who were not currently employed may have taken credit courses to upgrade their abilities before entering or re-entering the labour market.

The trend in lifelong learning was more apparent among women than men. It may be that occupations in which women are concentrated may require more frequent upgrading of skills, or may reward employees for obtaining educational credentials. On the other hand, women may need higher educational credentials to keep or advance in their jobs, improve their salaries, or obtain new positions.

Lifelong learning was also more apparent among younger adults, and adults with higher educations. It seems likely that the trend towards lifelong learning will continue through the 1990s as the younger adult population becomes more highly educated, and as success in the labour market becomes increasingly dependent upon knowledge skills.

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## Credit courses

Credit courses are courses or programs of instruction that count towards a certificate, diploma or degree. Today, a broad scope of credit courses leading to high school diplomas, trade and vocational certificates, college diplomas, university undergraduate and graduate degrees, and professional certificates of training are available to adults.

Adults aged 30 to 64 who reported in the monthly Labour Force Survey (LFS) that they were taking a

credit course or engaged in research activities that could be counted towards a certificate, diploma or degree make up the adult population studied here. Since the LFS does not ask whether they have had a break in studies, one must assume that most adult students were returning to school after a period of absence.

Adults may be taking a part-time or full-time credit course, in a classroom or by correspondence, from a public or private educational institution such as a high school, trade or vocational school, community college, or university. Student nurses and doctors engaged in the practical portion of their training, and other professionals who identify themselves as students are also included.

In addition to public trade school, college and university credit courses, private trade and vocational schools offer credit courses for their own school qualifications. These may be in a variety of subjects such as business, hotel management, computer programming, and word processing. Not all credit courses at trade and vocational schools, colleges and universities are offered on a part-time basis

Adults taking employer-sponsored credit courses are included if the courses are given in an educational institution, but not if given at the employee's place of work. Persons with a mental or physical disability who are enrolled in special education programs are included. Personal interest courses, such as night courses in pottery or woodworking, are not considered to be credit courses as they do not count towards a certificate, diploma or degree.

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## Notes

### *Note 1*

See [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (OECD) (1973).

### *Note 2*

See [R. Bélanger, D. Lynd, and M. Mouelhi](#) (November 1982) and also [R. Bélanger and T. Omiecinski](#) (Summer 1987).

### *Note 3*

LFS data on credit courses represent just one facet of lifelong learning. Other related data sources are the Adult Education and Training Survey, which studies the participation of adults in full-time programs, apprenticeship programs, employer-related courses, and a broad range of short-term and part-time courses. For further information, contact Stephen Arrowsmith, Household Surveys Division, Statistics Canada at (613) 951-0566. From another perspective, The Human Resource Training and Development Survey, studying the prevalence of training programs in private sector businesses, found 2.4 million

employees had participated in formal training programs in 1987. See [E. Rechnitzer](#) (November 1990). For further related information, see [A. Sharpe](#) (Winter 1990).

#### **Note 4**

LFS figures include adults taking credit courses at primary and secondary schools and trade and vocational schools. They are therefore higher than enrolment figures published by Education, Culture and Tourism Division.

#### **Note 5**

The aging of the population had little impact on the overall rate of adult participation in credit courses. If the participation rates by age for 1990 were applied to the age distribution of the population in 1980, the overall rate of credit course participation would be only marginally lower than the actual 1990 rate.

#### **Note 6**

This information is based on special tabulations provided by Education, Culture and Tourism Division.

#### **Note 7**

See [Statistics Canada](#) (February 1991).

#### **Note 8**

See [M. Porter and G. Jasmin](#) (April 1987).

#### **Note 9**

At the start of the school year in October 1990, 13% of women teachers and 8% of men teachers aged 30 to 64 had returned to study. No doubt this is because primary and secondary school teachers' salaries are directly linked to their level of education.

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## Source

*Perspectives on Labour and Income*, Winter 1991, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E). This is the third of eight articles in the issue.



Table 1

**Students aged 30 to 64 by registration and labour force status**

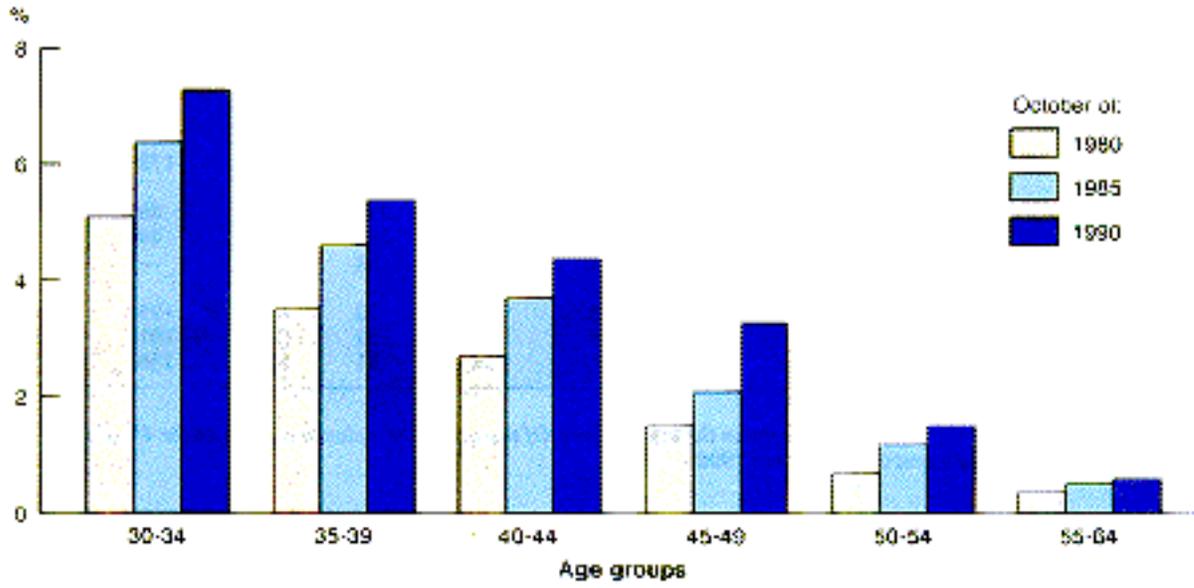
	October 1980			October 1990			Change: 1980 to 1990		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
	'000			'000			%		
<b>All students</b>	<b>227</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>461</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>124</b>
Employed	158	80	78	314	123	191	98	54	144
Other*	69	16	53	147	44	103	114	179	95
<b>Part-time students</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>339</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>117</b>
Employed	144	72	72	276	107	169	92	49	136
Other*	32	--	31	63	10	53	96	--	73
<b>Full-time students</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>149</b>
Employed	15	8	7	38	16	22	160	101	226
Other*	37	14	22	84	34	51	130	138	125

*Source: Labour Force Survey*

*\* Includes persons who are unemployed or not in the labour force. Of these, the unemployed accounted for 4% of all students in October 1980 and 6% in October 1990.*

### Rates of participation in credit courses

Credit courses have become more popular among adults of all ages.



Source: Labour Force Survey

Table 2

**Rates of participation in credit courses by sex and selected characteristics**

	October 1980			October 1990		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
	%					
<b>All adults</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>5.0</b>
<b>Age</b>						
30-34	5.1	5.0	5.2	7.3	6.1	8.6
35-39	3.5	2.8	4.1	5.4	3.9	6.9
40-44	2.7	1.9	3.4	4.4	3.0	5.8
45-49	1.5	0.9	2.2	3.3	2.0	4.5
50-54	0.7	0.5	0.9	1.6	0.7	2.4
55-64	0.4	0.3	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.7
<b>Education</b>						
High school or less	0.9	0.7	1.2	1.8	1.2	2.4
Some postsecondary	7.6	5.5	10.1	8.6	6.1	11.1
Postsecondary certificate or diploma	5.0	4.3	5.6	5.6	4.2	7.1
University degree	7.2	6.0	9.7	7.0	4.9	9.7
<b>Labour force status</b>						
Employed	2.4	2.0	3.2	3.7	2.6	5.2
Other*	2.4	2.8	2.3	4.6	4.5	4.7

*Source: Labour Force Survey*

*\* Includes persons who are unemployed or not in the labour force.*

Table 3

**Rates of participation in credit courses of employed adults by selected occupations**

	October 1980		October 1990	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
	%			
<b>All occupations*</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>5.2</b>
Managerial and administrative	3.7	6.2	2.8	6.5
Natural sciences, engineering and mathematics	4.4	--	5.1	7.8
Social sciences	3.6	--	4.8	7.4
Teaching	8.7	12.0	7.5	13.0
Medicine and health	2.9	4.6	6.6	6.5
Artistic, literary, and recreational	--	--	5.6	5.5
Clerical	2.7	3.3	2.2	5.0
Sales	1.8	1.1	2.0	2.6
Service	0.9	0.9	3.3	2.3

*Source: Labour Force Survey*

*\* Also includes religion; farming; fishing and trapping; forestry and logging; mining and quarrying; processing; machining; product fabricating, assembling and repairing; construction trades; transport equipment operating; material handling; other*

*crafts and equipment operating.*