

Education Matters: Insights on Education, Learning and Training in Canada

Adult learning and the world of work



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- ^P preliminary
- ^r revised
- X suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
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Adult learning and the world of work

The last issue of Education Matters contained an article that provided information on the characteristics of adult learners in Canada.¹ It concluded by noting that employers play a key role in providing both the need, and the opportunity, for adults to engage in learning and training in Canada. This article carries on the theme of adult education and training in Canada by providing information on employer-sponsored training and the characteristics of employees who engage in that training.

As with the previous article, the findings summarized here are based on analysis of data from the [International Adult Literacy Survey \(IALS\)](#), undertaken in 1994, and the international [Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey \(ALL\)](#), undertaken in 2003 ((the Canadian component is called the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)). The analysis is provided from an international perspective, with the situation in Canada being compared to that of four other countries – Norway, Switzerland and the United States.

Reasons for participating in adult education and training

Overall, close to or over half of adult populations in the four countries were enrolled in organized forms of adult learning during the year preceding the interview. At 47%, the participation rate in Canada was somewhat lower than in Norway (53%), the United States (55%) and Switzerland (57%).

When asked the reasons for participating in education and training courses and programs, adults in all four countries overwhelmingly cited job-related reasons. In Canada, 82% of adults reported participating in organized forms of adult education and training for job-related reasons, compared to 20% who cited participating in courses and programs for personal reasons. These percentages were similar in Norway, Switzerland and the United States.

The dominance of work-related reasons for participating remains unchanged over a person's entire working life. It is notable, for example, that close to 90% of Canadians with job tenure of more than 21 years who reported participating in an organized form of adult learning in 2002 did so for job-related reasons, a percentage that is similar to employees who had been in the job for between one and five years.

These results suggest that a large proportion of Canadians are active participants in what is now commonly referred to as the 'knowledge-based economy' and are ready to upgrade their skills in order to improve and/or maintain their prospects in the labour market. At the same time, it is becoming rare for Canadian adults to engage in organized learning activities primarily for personal reasons or study for the sake of study.

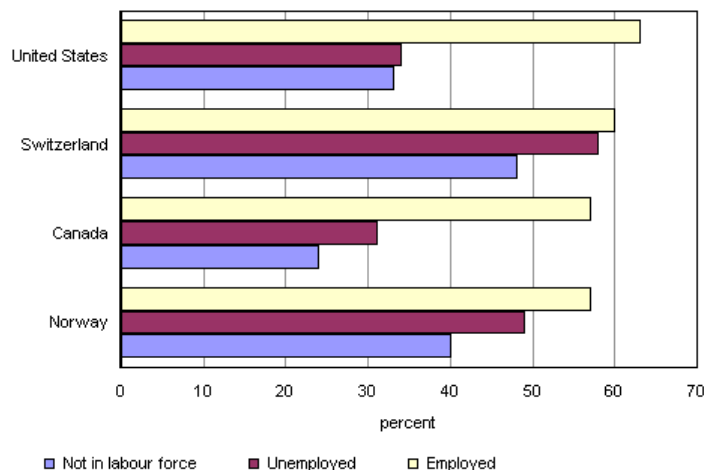
Labour force status and participation in adult education and training

In Norway, 63% of adults who participated in adult education and training in 2002 had received financial support from their employer. In Canada, the United States and Switzerland, that figure was somewhat lower, at about 50%. In the latter three countries, self financing of adult education and training was reported to about the same extent (40% to 50%) as employer-financed training, while this form of financing was less frequent in Norway, at 27%.

Given the important role played by employers in financing adult education and training, it is not surprising to find that the highest rates of participation in adult education and training are found among the employed and the lowest, among those not in the labour force.

However, there are distinct differences between the two European countries and the two North American countries in terms of the links between participation in adult education and training and labour force status. The rate of participation in adult education and training by individuals who were not in the labour force was the lowest in Canada compared to the other countries. In both Canada and the United States, unemployed adults were much less likely to participate in adult education and training than they were in Norway and Switzerland.

Chart 1
Participation in adult education and training, by labour force status, 2002



Source: See Rubenson, Kjell, Richard Desjardins and Ee-Seul Yoon. 2007. [Adult Learning in Canada: A Comparative Perspective. Results from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-552-MIE – Number 17.

The relationship between labour force status and participation in adult education and training is compared for Canada in 1994 and 2003. The results suggest that, at a time when the possession of relevant skills is widely seen as being increasingly important for securing a job, the situation for the unemployed and for those outside the labour force has deteriorated. In 1994, 23% of those not in the labour force and 29% of the unemployed participated in an education or training course or programme; by 2002, the figures were 19% and 25%, respectively.

These trends may reflect, in part, differences in the economic conditions prevailing in the mid-1990s compared to the early 2000s. In 1994, the rate of participation in the labour market was lower than in 2003 and the unemployment rate was much higher as the recession of the early 1990s continued to have an effect. As a result, many workers found themselves in need of retraining in order to adapt to changing labour market demands. The stronger economic conditions in 2003 may have reduced the need or the incentive for the unemployed and for those not in the labour force to engage in education and training activities.

Impact of job and workplace characteristics on adult learning

Despite long-standing concerns regarding an under-investment in training by small and medium-sized employers, firm size still acts as a strong determinant of participation in employer-sponsored adult education and training activities. In all four countries, workers in firms with fewer than 20 employees were least likely to participate in such training. The disadvantage is particularly noticeable in Switzerland, Canada and the United States, where workers in companies with 1,000 employees or more were four times as likely to be supported in their education by the employer compared to those working in establishments with fewer than 20 employees.

Supervisory role and occupation also had an impact, but less than the impact of firm size, and the variations in training rates across occupations was smaller than expected. In all four countries, employees in managerial, knowledge or high-skill information occupations were somewhat more likely to receive some form of employer-sponsored training than employees in other occupations.

Skills match-mismatch and participation in adult learning

Factors such as type of occupation, type of industry and the extent of supervisory role can be seen as indicators of the skill demands of a job. Thus, it is of interest to note that a more direct measure, like the extent of engagement in literacy practices at work, is a strong factor predicting the likelihood of receiving employer-sponsored training. After taking account of gender, age and educational attainment, Canadian, American and Norwegian employees with extensive engagement in literacy practices at work were about 2.5 times more likely to participate in employer-sponsored education and training than those with very little engagement in literacy practices at work.

There is a strong relationship between the (subjectively reported) literacy- and numeracy-related practices at work and a person's possession of associated skills - the higher a person scored on the numeracy and literacy skills tests, the more likely they were to engage in these practices.

In some instances, there is a mismatch between an individual's skills and the extent to which the job tasks make demands on these skills. Typically, the focus has been on skills shortages, which refers to the situation where workers are faced with job tasks that exceed their actual skill levels. However, it is also possible for employees to possess higher levels of literacy and numeracy skills than required for them to successfully complete their job tasks. This is referred to as a skills surplus. Finally, there are two groups whose skills match the tasks, namely those who are low skilled in jobs with low requirements for literacy and/or numeracy practices and those who are highly skilled in jobs with high skill requirements.

Box 1:
Definition of skills match-mismatch

Skills match and mismatch is measured by the extent to which job tasks require the use of literacy and numeracy skills, as reported by individuals, and measured literacy and numeracy skills.

Persons in jobs with skill requirements below the median were assigned to the "low skill requirements" category, while those in jobs scoring above the median were assigned to the "high skill requirements" category. Similarly, persons scoring at skill Levels 1 or 2 on the numeracy

and literacy scales were assigned to the "low-skills" category; those scoring at Levels 3 and 4/5 were assigned to the "medium to high skills" category.

These four categories were combined and labeled as follows:

- Low-skills, low skill requirements → Match;
- High-skills, high skill requirements → Match;
- Low-skills, high skill requirements → Mismatch: Skills deficit;
- High-skills, low skill requirements → Mismatch: Skills surplus.

Overall, the proportion of matches in the four countries is consistently around 60 percent. In Switzerland and the United States, the groups displaying mismatch were more or less equally divided between those with a skills shortage and those with a skills surplus. In Canada and Norway, however, about two thirds of the mismatch came from those with a skills surplus and only one third were classified as having a skills shortage. (It should be pointed out that the estimates of skills match-mismatch are based on subjective reports of the frequency with which a skill is being used and not on actual measures of the extent of use.)

From the perspective of the emergent knowledge-based economy, one might speculate that the distribution of match-mismatch may be changing over time. A comparison of skills matches in 1994 and 2002 provides some insight into this issue. The trends are similar across all four countries. First, the proportion of the workforce with low skills working in jobs with low skill requirements has decreased since 1994, while there has been an increase in the share of skilled workers in jobs with high skill requirements. Second, the share of the workforce that is experiencing a skills shortage has increased. This trend is somewhat stronger in Canada and the United States compared to Switzerland. The United States, and Canada in particular, also saw a reduction in the proportion of the workforce classified as having a skills surplus (medium-to-high-skilled workers employed in jobs with low skill requirements). These findings lend support to the claims that a general broad trend toward rising skill requirements has been occurring in the labour market.

An important question is to what extent the match or mismatch between job tasks and observed skill levels has an impact on the opportunity and the readiness to engage in adult education and training. This question was addressed by comparing participation rates and the distribution of the "match-mismatch" in document literacy skills and their use in the workplace.

As expected, employees in all four countries who had low skills and who were working in jobs with low literacy requirements reported a noticeably lower rate of participation in employer-sponsored education and training than those with a skills shortage, a skills surplus or those with high skills employed in jobs with high skill requirements. Participation in employer-sponsored training was highest among those with high skill levels in jobs with high skill requirements.

In all four countries, those with a skills shortage received employer-sponsored training to a greater extent than those with a skills surplus. This was particularly striking in Norway where 44% of participants with low skill levels employed in jobs with high skill requirements (i.e., those with a skills shortage) received employer support for adult education and training. This compares to only 29% of those with high literacy skill levels employed in jobs with low literacy requirements (i.e., those with a skills surplus). Among those with high skill levels in jobs with high literacy demands, the share receiving employer-sponsored training was 47%.

While the pattern is similar in Canada, the percentages of employees receiving employer support for training was much lower than in Norway — 28% for those with a skills shortage, 22% for those with a skills surplus and 37% for those with high skill levels in jobs with high skill requirements. In Switzerland and the United States, those with high skill levels in jobs with high skill requirements also participated in employer-supported education and training at higher rates (43% and 41%, respectively) than those with low skills in jobs with high literacy skill requirements (31% and 28%, respectively).

Conclusion

Adult participation in organized forms of learning is reasonably high in Canada, though it falls short of the levels found in Norway, Switzerland and the United States.

It is striking the extent to which participation in adult education and learning is for job-related reasons, with the great majority of adults reporting job-related reasons for enrolling in courses and programs in 2002.

Two other facts are notable as well. The first is the important role played by employers, with about half of adults who participated in adult education and training in 2002 reporting that employers had sponsored that training. But that also means that, second, about half of the adults who were enrolled in courses or programs, most often for job-related reasons, did that training on their own, without financial support from their employer. It is evident, then, that many Canadian adults recognize the need for, and are active participants in, education and learning during their working lives.

Finally, it is worth noting that employer support for training favours high-skill workers in jobs with high skill requirements. That raises the question, then, of how best to create education and training opportunities for those in need of skills upgrading.

References

1. [Adult learning in Canada: Characteristics of learners](#). Education Matters, Volume 5, no. 1, April 2008.
2. See Rubenson, Kjell, Richard Desjardins and Ee-Seul Yoon. 2007. [Adult Learning in Canada: A Comparative Perspective. Results from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-552-MIE – Number 17.