



Supporting Under-Represented Groups...

FACTSHEET #2: Challenges

In 2021, the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development developed five areas of focus for the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program. One of the areas of focus is enhanced efforts to support groups who are under-represented in the labour force.

The Ministry shared these examples of under-represented groups: Indigenous persons, Newcomers to Canada, Persons with disabilities, Racialized persons, Women, and Youth. The Ministry further noted that the list of under-represented groups can vary based on the local labour market or within a specific sector.

Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) conducted province-wide research in 2022/2023. While LBS programs agreed with the above examples set by the Ministry, in this research LBS programs noted that an extremely important under-represented group is people living in poverty. Other additional groups under-represented in the labour force, as identified by adult literacy programs, are older workers, people who have been incarcerated, members of the LGBTQ+ community, homeless people, and people with mental health or addictions issues.

Community Literacy of Ontario has created three factsheets on this important subject. Our **Factsheets on Supporting Under-Represented Groups** cover the following topics:

1. Successes
2. Challenges
3. Strategies

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS FACTSHEET 2

CLO shares some of the **challenges** Literacy and Basic Skills programs have experienced while supporting groups under-represented in the labour force.



CHALLENGES TO SUPPORTING UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS

There are systemic barriers that make it more difficult for members of under-represented groups to participate in Literacy and Basic Skills and other training programs. Many are unintentional, and result from a system designed without the specific needs of these groups in mind. Adding to that challenge, some of these barriers can go unrecognized by those outside the under-represented groups in question.

LACK OF REPRESENTATION

When a learner cannot “see themselves” within a program or the curriculum it delivers, they may not develop a sense of belonging. In many cases, they may feel like an outsider when their experiences in life are not reflected.

For example, if no one referred to in the curriculum they are using looks like them, has a name that sounds like theirs, uses the same pronouns they do, or reflects their identity and experiences in any other way, it feels less relevant to their lives. A lack of representation within the organization offering service can create trust issues as well. If members of under-represented groups are unable to see themselves reflected in the staff, volunteers, Board members, marketing materials, and programming they’re offered, they may not feel there is a place for them within the organization.

LACK OF AWARENESS

There is a greater need for awareness of Literacy and Basic Skills and how it can support the achievement of individual goals within under-represented groups. LBS programs need to market to broaden their reach, both directly to prospective learners and to the organizations that serve them.

Marketing and outreach budgets are very difficult for LBS programs, since funding levels are low and they have extremely limited budgets for marketing. This results in marketing being done off the side of someone’s desk when time allows, and rarely in a strategic manner with the support of marketing and outreach professionals.

“Learning about other resources would help our organization better serve under-represented learners.”

Provincial Survey Respondent

LBS FUNDING DOESN'T REFLECT THE COMPLEXITY

It takes time to develop the level of relationship with a learner that's required to uncover each of the elements of their story that may have labelled them part of an "under-represented group," and to devise a respectful, inclusive training plan to meet their unique needs. LBS programs, with limited staff, struggle to devote the individual time required to build these trusting relationships.

Life stabilization is often a need uncovered by LBS practitioners who work hard to provide referrals and wraparound supports.

“These under-represented groups are all facing individual and systemic barriers. LBS is commonly supporting multiple barriers... it is difficult to receive only LBS funding while providing wraparound supports to these individuals.”

Focus Group Participant

Without additional funding for both the time it takes, and the additional supports learners may need, many pay for things like food out-of-pocket, work far more hours than they are paid for, or need to rely on fundraising to provide additional support for these learners.

Additional funding is needed to provide support for complex clients, including those from under-represented groups.

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Attendance and progress expectations don't always take into consideration the complicated lives that members of some under-represented groups face. From a program perspective, not being able to demonstrate learner progress reflects negatively on program statistics and Ministry outcomes, even if the expected timeline to achieve that progress is unrealistic for their learner.

From a learner perspective, because negative consequences can occur for nonparticipation (from Ontario Works, for example), people may be driven away from the programs they need the most. Some prospective learners may be putting together full-time work from several part time jobs, or they may be caring for young children or elderly parents at home. This means they may have limited hours to attend LBS programming. While offering independent online programming can be helpful for some learners with complex schedules, not everyone has the digital literacy skills and access to technology and internet that is required for success with online programming.



“There’s a lack of instructional resources for this demographic.”

- Provincial Survey Respondent

DIVERSITY IN PROGRAMMING AND LEARNING MATERIALS

General programming doesn’t necessarily meet the needs of under-represented groups. Literacy and Basic Skills practitioners need access to relevant, culturally sensitive curriculum and programming. Many LBS practitioners report looking for resources online to reflect the needs of under-represented groups.

To approach someone through the lens of what they need as a newcomer, an indigenous learner, a person with disabilities, a learner struggling with poverty issues, or a member of the LGBTQ+ community downplays the impact of the other intersecting barriers faced by the other under-represented groups they may be a part of.

Programming is created based on how someone else sees the learner versus how the learner sees themselves and their needs may be very different.

Fortunately, Community Literacy of Ontario and Laubach Literacy Ontario started the process of collecting instructional resources related to under-represented groups in 2022. You can find these resources listed on the **LBS Resource Forum**.

The LBS Resource Forum also allows users to add their own resources. As you uncover or develop resources related to under-represented groups, please add them to this forum.

Let’s collect and share resources together to better serve under-represented groups!

Further, the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development funded various provincial literacy networks to develop resources related to the Skills for Success in the areas of apprenticeship, workforce, and under-represented groups. The resources created in 2022/2023 will be available online in the near future and the resources from the 2023-2024 fiscal year are currently being researched and written. They will be piloted with LBS programs later in the year.

ACCESSIBLE AND LOW-COST LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR LBS STAFF

LBS programs have served under-represented and multi-barriered groups for many years; however, enhanced training in diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility for LBS staff are needed. Given the low budgets and small staffing complements of most LBS agencies, these opportunities need to be accessible and affordable. Fortunately, this issue is raised in Factsheet 3 – Strategies and many helpful ideas for enhanced learning opportunities on this topic are shared there.

CONCLUSION

The **Factsheets on Supporting Under-Represented Groups** were researched and written by Community Literacy of Ontario. CLO is a provincial network of community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agencies. You can learn more about our organization by visiting our **website** and by following us on social media.

To learn more, read CLO's research report on this topic. In 2022/2023, CLO conducted province-wide research and wrote a report called **"Here to Help: Supporting Adult Learners from Underrepresented Groups in LBS Programs."**

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