



Literacy:
Learning for Life.

L'alphabétisation,
Une leçon pour la vie.



Literacy and Essential Skills

as a Poverty Reduction Strategy

NATIONAL RESEARCH REPORT

FUNDED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA'S NATIONAL ESSENTIAL SKILLS INITIATIVE

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Frontier College is a national charitable literacy organization, established in 1899 on the belief that literacy is a right. Each year, we recruit and train 2,500+ volunteer tutors who work with more than 30,000 children, youth, and adults.



Frontier College retained the services of the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) to prepare the National Research Report.

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) is a non-profit research organization, created specifically to develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate new programs. SRDC's two-part mission is to help policy-makers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged, and to raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies.

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Employment and
Social Development Canada

Emploi et
Développement social Canada

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Report Highlights

At the core of the National Research Project is the conviction that literacy instruction can provide low-skilled adults living in poverty with the knowledge, confidence, resilience, and autonomy they need to overcome the challenges they face and live productive lives.

The positive effects of literacy skills are not limited to economic well-being, however. Literacy skills are necessary to complete even the most basic tasks in a person's life. Taken a step further, literacy can empower individuals to make informed choices about their lives. These skills help individuals make better decisions about how to manage their finances, how to manage their health, how to use technology, and how to understand the institutions that govern their lives, which in turn allows them to engage more fully. Literacy is a key step on the pathway not only to employment but also to broader social inclusion and full participation in valued-dimensions of society such as social, civic, and political engagement that are critical to the inclusion and well-being of all Canadians.

The report's key recommendation is that governments need to recognize literacy as not only a policy priority but a basic human right. Moreover, funders need to expand their thinking beyond support for single projects to include more comprehensive, integrated programs.

Key Research Findings

The National Research Project' findings are the culmination of extensive consultations with policy makers, national and regional literacy associations, services providers, researchers, poverty reduction organizations, and learners involved in literacy programming and poverty reduction programs across Canada.

Key finding 1

There is a clear and well-established relationship between literacy skills and the experience of poverty.

Key finding 2

Single-access points can reduce the challenges inherent in navigating poverty reduction programs and services.

Key finding 3

Strong partnerships between local literacy and essential skills (LES) and poverty reduction service providers can improve access to needed services.

Key finding 4

Project-based funding has increased innovation, but imperilled the sustainability of service providers.

Key finding 5

Knowledge sharing among LES practitioners and awareness raising among the public and employers are necessary to improve the effectiveness of LES programs.

Key finding 6

Learner-centred approaches are most effective for low-skilled adults and require a holistic assessment of learner needs.

Key finding 7

Contextualizing program content to learners' goals is most effective in facilitating transitions to employment or education.

Key finding 8

Service delivery that combines contextualized programs with wrap-around supports are highly effective for transitioning individuals to employment.

Key finding 9

Awareness and accessibility to programs is the most significant challenge for stakeholders.

Key finding 10

Improving self-esteem, resilience, and self-confidence are key objectives and important indicators of success for literacy programs.

Key finding 11

Outcomes frameworks are often too narrow in scope and exclude the key indicators of program success that are recognized by practitioners and participants.

Strategic Recommendations

Strategic recommendations were informed by the project's key findings. They are organized into two focus areas: *policy recommendations* and *program and service delivery recommendations*.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Governments should recognize literacy as a basic human right.

Recommendation 2

Literacy should be recognized as a policy priority requiring cross-departmental and cross-jurisdictional cooperation.

Recommendation 3

Literacy should be a central pillar within any comprehensive poverty reduction strategy.

Recommendation 4

Policies and funding models should encourage collaboration rather than competition between service providers.

Recommendation 5

Funding for literacy and essential skills programming should be sustainable and predictable, while also fostering innovation.

Recommendation 6

Governments should facilitate partnerships and support knowledge translation and exchange (KTE) among providers of literacy and poverty reduction services.

Program and Service Delivery Recommendations

Recommendation 7

Raising awareness and accessibility of existing services and programs should be a key priority for improvement.

Recommendation 8

Learner-centred approaches should be used to maximize engagement in literacy programming.

Recommendation 9

Literacy programs should be contextualized to the goals of learners.

Recommendation 10

Greater integration of services should be a primary objective to improve the quality of literacy and poverty reduction services.

Recommendation 11

Outcomes frameworks used to evaluate success should be expanded to include indicators of life skills and psychological capital.

Introduction

Frontier College is proud to present the National Research Report on Literacy and Essential Skills as a Poverty Reduction Strategy. The report is the culmination of a national consultation with policy makers, national and regional literacy associations, services providers, researchers, poverty reduction organizations, and learners involved in literacy programming and poverty reduction programs across Canada.

On April 26, 2017, Frontier College hosted a National Forum on Literacy and Poverty to foster discussions around the various ways that individuals and communities can fight poverty through the power of literacy. Building on the momentum of the Forum, the National Research Project presents an opportunity to inform a poverty reduction strategy firmly rooted in literacy development that is responsive to the full spectrum of needs of lower skilled adults, including those most distant from the labour market.

With funding from Employment and Social Development Canada's (ESDC) Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), the project is part of a broader conversation on the strategies, programs, and policies that should inform a comprehensive and effective poverty reduction strategy in Canada. Indeed, the National Research Report aims to inform this discussion by providing strategic recommendations on the future of literacy programs in Canada and by highlighting innovative approaches and programs that are empowering and moving Canadians out of poverty.

Literacy and Poverty Reduction

"Literacy is the power to make informed decisions and to act on them. [...] It's really important for us to understand that literacy learners live in what is often a hostile environment that disenfranchises the poor. We too often forget that social and economic conditions are such that for our learners to find their place in the world of work is an exceptionally challenging project."

Anne Marie Williams, PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs

Literacy and essential skills (LES) are the foundational skills that enable an individual "to interpret information, make decisions, and solve problems in personal, work, and community life" (Windisch, 2015, p.20). These skills include reading comprehension, writing, numeracy skills, thinking skills, working with others, document use, oral communication, digital skills, and continuous learning. The Government of Canada's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) defines the nine essential skills as the set of skills that are "the foundation for learning all other skills" (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017a) and enable individuals to "better prepare for, get, and keep a job" (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017b).

The economic impact of low literacy is significant. In fact, there is substantial evidence supporting LES upgrading as a way to increase incomes and reduce poverty. Correlational studies using Canadian data indicate that earnings increase in tandem with literacy skills. The difference in earnings is indeed stark; median earnings of individuals with literacy skills at the two highest levels is 70 per cent higher than for individuals with the lowest literacy skills (Heisz, Notten, and Situ,

2016). A similar effect can be found when assessing labour market participation, as adults with low literacy skills are less likely to be employed and tend to stay unemployed for longer periods (Murray and Shillington, 2011). Beyond correlational studies, recent evidence clearly demonstrates that literacy upgrading can lead to not only enhanced skills but also improved job performance, increased employment, higher earnings, and longer-term job retention (Gyarmati, et. al. 2014).

The positive effects of literacy skills are not limited to economic well-being, however. Literacy skills are necessary to complete even the most basic tasks in a person's life. Taken a step further, literacy can empower individuals to make informed choices about their lives. These skills help individuals make better decisions about how to manage their finances, how to manage their health, how to use technology, and how to understand the institutions that govern their lives, which in turn allows them to engage more fully. Literacy is a key step on the pathway not only to employment but also to broader social inclusion and full participation in valued-dimensions of society such as social, civic, and political engagement that are critical to the inclusion and well-being of all Canadians.

Access to education, and implicitly, literacy, has been recognized as a human right by international covenants, of which Canada is a signatory nation. In 1976, Canada ratified the international Bill of Human Rights, which consists of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Both covenants articulate a number of rights that are inherent in the "dignity of the human person," and that protect a person's right to self-determination (United Nations, 1966a). Article 13 of the of the ICESCR explicitly protects a person's right to free education, including fundamental education, which should be "encourage or intensified as far as possible for those persons who have not received or completed the whole period of their primary education" (United Nations, 1966b).

In spite of these commitments, Canada's literacy challenge is considerable. In 2012, according to data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) measure of literacy skills, Statistics Canada estimated that 17 per cent of Canadians had literacy skills at a level 1 or lower (Heisz, Notten, and Situ, 2016). At this level of proficiency, individuals can "only locate single pieces of information in short texts in the absence of other distracting information, or demonstrate only basic vocabulary" (Heisz, Notten, and Situ, 2016). Another 32 per cent of Canadians have literacy proficiency at a level 2, defined by limited reading comprehension and the ability to conduct simple calculations with decimals and fractions (OECD, n.d.). Combined, nearly half of all Canadians (49 per cent) have literacy skills below level 3.

At the core of the National Research Project is the conviction that literacy instruction can provide low-skilled adults living in poverty with the knowledge, confidence, resilience, and autonomy they need to overcome the challenges they face and live productive lives. LES service providers are at the forefront of Canada's struggle to reduce poverty by teaching individuals the basic and fundamental tools that they need to navigate the modern world. By uncovering how literacy programs empower individuals to move out of poverty, the National Research Project intends to provide governments and stakeholders with the evidence to make future investments into literacy upgrading in Canada more effective.

National Research Project Overview

The National Research Project on Literacy as a Poverty Reduction Strategy sought to uncover how LES programs achieve these goals. Consultations with government officials, LES service providers, various stakeholders working with targeted populations, and individuals working towards poverty reduction provided key experts across the country with an opportunity to share their experiences with literacy programming and offer their vision for the future of literacy upgrading in this country. The following provides a brief summary of the project's primary objectives and approach, as well as the theoretical framework illustrating how literacy programs help individuals exit poverty.

Research objectives and approach

The primary aim of the National Research Project is to understand how investments in literacy and essential skills programming can help reduce the incidence and the experience of poverty in Canada. The study had four primary objectives:

- Document current best practices in the delivery of literacy and essential skills (LES) programming serving adults with low literacy living in poverty;
- Articulate the factors that contribute to the positive relationship between LES upgrading and poverty reduction;
- Consult with a broad range of stakeholders to identify new and innovative practices;
- Broadly disseminate research findings with a view towards informing the development of cross-sectoral poverty reduction and literacy and skills development strategies.

Frontier College retained the services of the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), a not-for-profit research firm, to conduct the project's primary research activities. Over the course of the project, from June 2018 to February 2019, SRDC worked in close partnership with Frontier College to develop a data collection strategy and research instruments in order to complete the following research activities.

A comprehensive review of existing literature and documentation at the intersection of literacy development and poverty reduction

This review included government policies, reports, and program evaluations produced by federal, provincial, and territorial governments across Canada; program documents produced by literacy and poverty reduction service providers; research reports accessed through peer reviewed journals and research organizations providing evidence on effective strategies for the delivery of literacy programs.

Findings from the literature review were used to identify existing gaps in the literature and informed SRDC's research framework and research questions.

Interviews with policy makers, literacy service providers, poverty reduction advocates, key informants working with targeted populations, and learners

SRDC conducted 30 interviews with key informants from a range of backgrounds, expertise, and experiences. An initial series of interviews was conducted in the fall of 2018 with 10 key informants. These interviews provided SRDC with an opportunity to explore key dimensions of literacy programming in Canada, to better understand the policy framework supporting literacy instruction, and to inform and refine the national survey questionnaire.

A second wave of interviews was conducted in January and February 2019. SRDC reached out to potential key informants from survey respondents who agreed to share information about their innovative programs and their experiences in literacy programming. Collectively, these interviews provided important contextual information for each of the project's research questions. A selection of quotes from these interviews are included throughout this report with the speaker's permission.

National research survey on new and innovative literacy programs for adults living in poverty

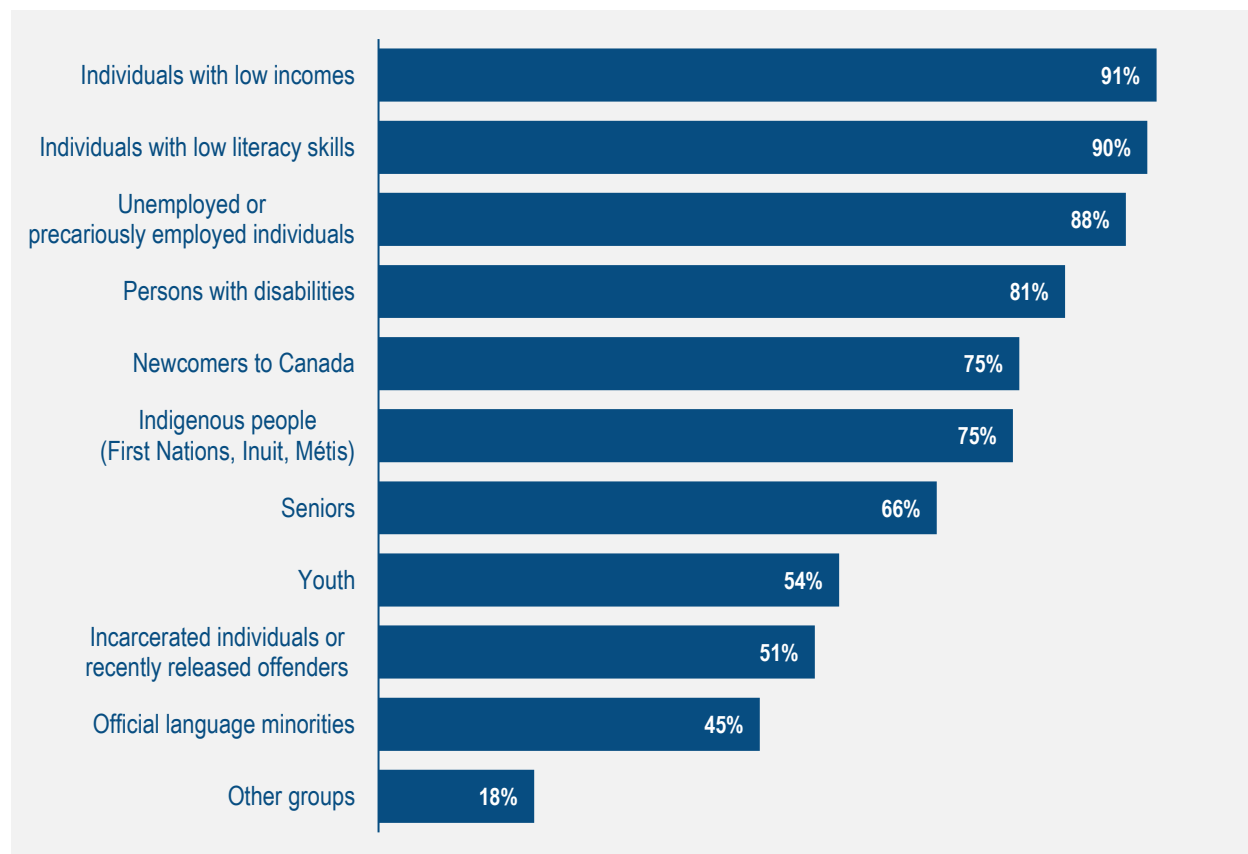
The national research survey was launched online in December 2018. In total, 408 individuals provided responses to the survey. Among them, 191 completed the survey in full, with another 217 providing partial responses. On average, participants spent roughly 25 minutes responding to the survey.

The sampling approach relied on two strategies: a targeted sampling frame of known individuals working in the field of LES upgrading and poverty reduction; and a snowball-sampling frame, where known individuals were invited to share the survey invitation with others in their professional networks.

The national research survey is not intended to be representative of the Canadian population nor the field of literacy programming in Canada. Rather, the survey intends to collect knowledge and experiences from a broad range of actors working towards poverty reduction or basic literacy and skills development across Canada and to shine a light on innovative practices and programs that have been effective in moving people from poverty towards independence.

Of particular interest was to solicit the opinions and expertise from individuals working towards developing literacy and essential skills of marginalized or multi-barriered individuals. As is shown in Figure 1 below, respondents to the national survey offer services to a wide variety of participants, primarily individuals with low incomes (91 per cent), individuals with low literacy skills (90 per cent) and individuals who are unemployed or precariously employed (88 per cent). Nearly half of respondents provide services to each of the targeted groups, ensuring that the perspectives collected through our consultations represent a wide array of experiences with various types of learners.

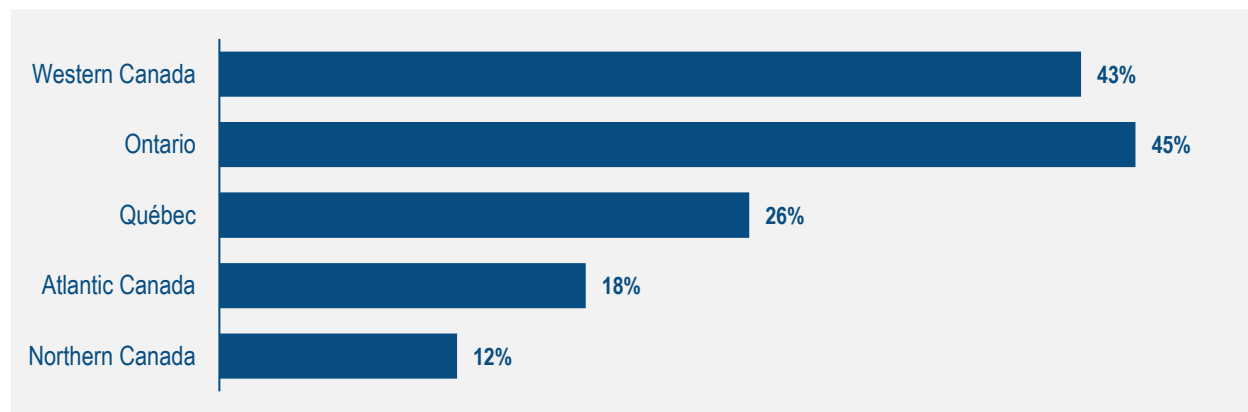
Figure 1 Proportion of respondents who serve targeted groups



To ensure that the perspectives in the survey are provided by informants from various parts of the country and in communities of varying sizes, respondents were asked to identify the provinces and territories where they provide services and the types of communities where they operate.

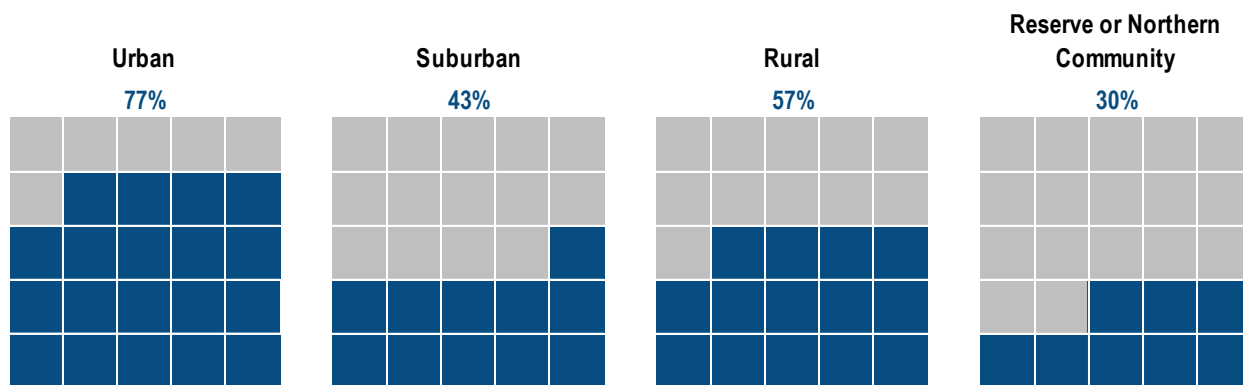
The national survey was able to obtain responses from individuals providing services in every province and territory across Canada. About one-third (35 per cent) of all respondents in the national survey provide services in Ontario, followed by Quebec (16 per cent) and Alberta (11 per cent). An additional 11 per cent of respondents work for national organizations. To enable subgroup analyses of survey data, participants were categorized into broad regional categories: Western Canada (43 per cent), Ontario (45 per cent), Québec (26 per cent), Atlantic Canada (18 per cent), and Northern Canada (12 per cent). Importantly, some organizations work in multiple regions and the categories should not be considered exclusive. As is evidenced in Figure 2 below, the sum of the percentages will exceed 100 per cent.

Figure 2 Percentage of respondents whose organization operated in various regions of Canada



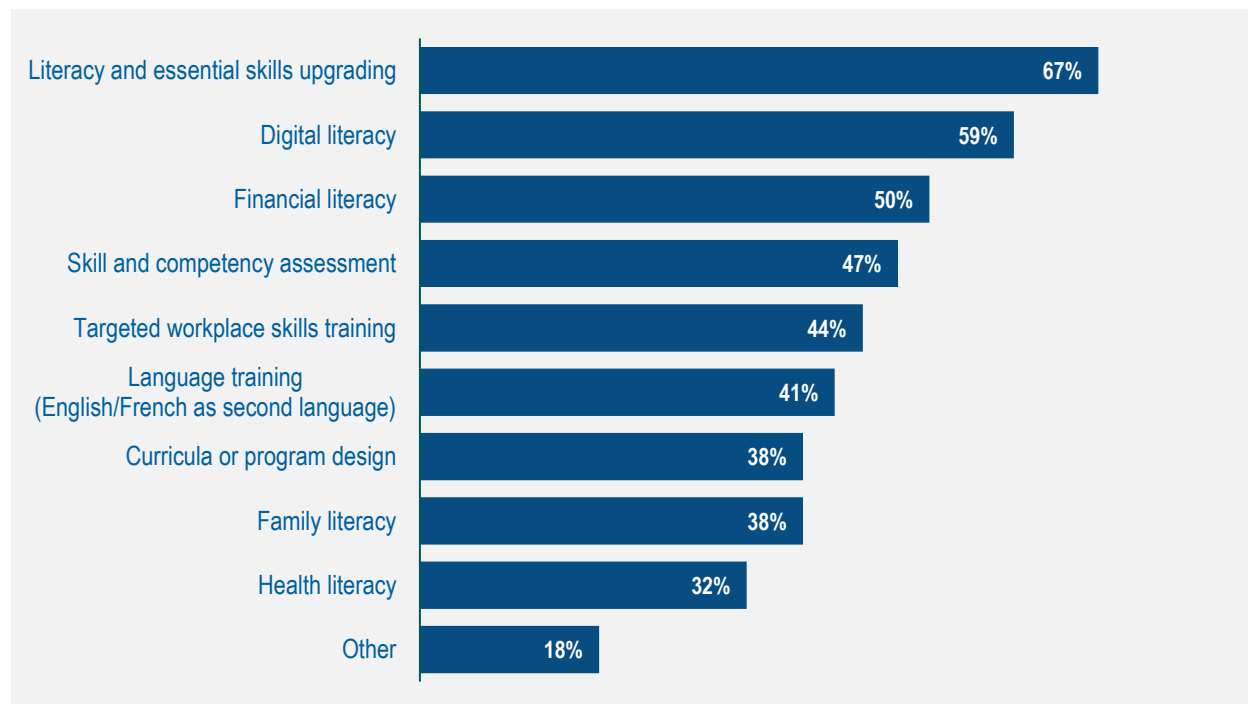
Additionally, survey respondents provide services to individuals in communities of varied sizes, as is shown in Figure 3 below. Most respondents provide services in urban communities (77 per cent), followed by rural communities (57 per cent), suburban communities (43 per cent) and on reserves or in northern communities (30 per cent).

Figure 3 Percentage of respondents whose organization operates in urban, suburban, rural, and on-reserve or northern communities



The majority of the survey’s respondents work for organizations that provide literacy and essential skills services and supports directly to participants (79 per cent). When asked to identify the types of services they provide, most offer essential skills upgrading (67 per cent), digital literacy (59 per cent), or financial literacy (50 per cent). The complete breakdown of this analysis is presented in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 Proportion of respondents whose organization provides literacy and essential skills services and supports



Roughly one-fifth of survey respondents provide other services and supports to learners, such as General Educational Development (GED) preparation and academic upgrading, tutoring and one-on-one instruction services, and a focus on different types of literacies, such as art-based literacy and food literacy.

The vast majority of respondents provide these services primarily in English (83 per cent), while another 13 per cent provide services mainly in French, and 4 per cent provide services in both languages equally. Nevertheless, roughly one third of respondents (32 per cent) provide LES services in languages other than their organization’s primary language of operation¹.

Primarily English language LES Service Providers:

- 68 per cent do not offer services in languages other than English,
- 20 per cent offer additional services in French,
- 10 per cent offer additional services in Indigenous languages, and
- 10 per cent offer additional services in other languages (e.g. American Sign Language, Mandarin and Cantonese, Arabic, Spanish).

¹ The sum of the percentages exceed 100 per cent as some LES organizations offer services in multiple other languages.

Primarily French language LES Service Providers:

- 75 per cent do not provide services in languages other than French,
- 25 per cent offer additional services in English,
- 4 per cent offer additional services another language (e.g. Spanish, Arabic, Berber languages), and
- 2 per cent provide services in an Indigenous language.

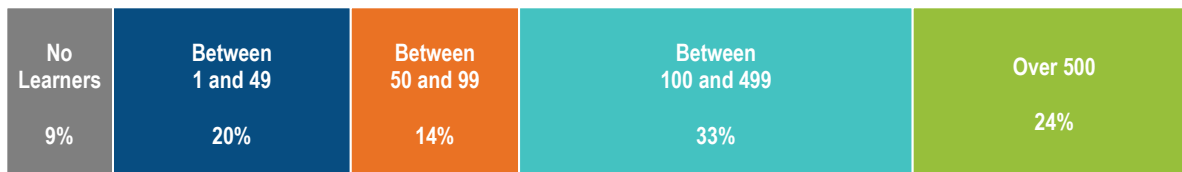
Ensuring a diversity in the size and scope of organizations was also an important concern in the sampling strategy. The majority of survey respondents (41 per cent) work for micro organizations, with zero to nine employees. Some respondents commented that their organization is primarily volunteer-based with no permanent paid staff. Just under a third of respondents (31 per cent) work for small organizations with ten to 49 employees, while roughly a quarter work for either a medium-sized organization with 50 to 249 employees (13 per cent) or a large organization with over 250 employees (15 per cent). Figure 5 presents the distribution of respondents by the size of their organization.

Figure 5 Proportion of respondents by the size of their organization



The number of learners trained in a given year by the respondent’s organization also provides some indication of the scope of their activities. Once again, there was a great diversity across respondents. Some respondents (9 per cent) work for organizations that do not provide direct LES services to learners. A fifth of respondents (20 per cent) work for organizations that train between one and 49 learners each year, 14 per cent train between 50 and 99 learners, 33 per cent train between 100 and 499, and 24 per cent train over 500 learners. The distribution of the number of learners trained each year is presented in Figure 6 below.

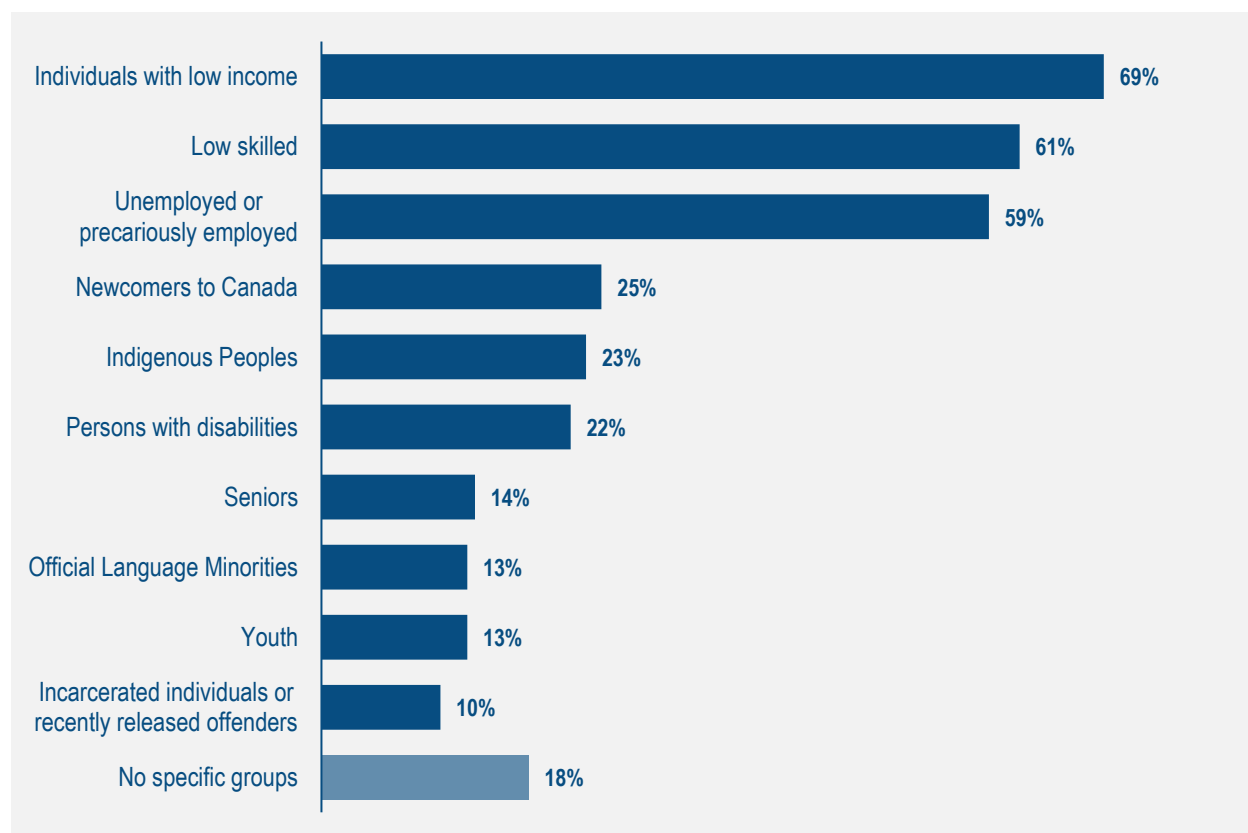
Figure 6 Proportion of respondents by the number of learners their organization trains in a given year



Respondents were asked to identify the populations they serve and the proportion of these groups relative to their entire clientele. Organizations where at least 25 per cent of their entire clientele is composed of a specific group of learners were identified as serving this population. Indeed, some categories of learners overlap and should not be considered exclusive. These categories provide important information about the types of learners that are currently being targeted by LES upgrading programs in Canada and are presently being trained by LES service providers. The results of this breakdown is presented in Figure 7 below.

A majority of organizations provide skills upgrading programs to individuals with low incomes (69 per cent), individuals with low LES skills (61 per cent), and the unemployed or precariously employed (59 per cent). Roughly a quarter of respondents provide services to new comers to Canada (25 per cent), Indigenous Peoples (23 per cent), and persons with disabilities (22 per cent). A substantial minority of respondents provide services to seniors (14 per cent), official language minorities (13 per cent), youth (13 per cent), and incarcerated individuals or recently released offenders (10 per cent). Nearly a fifth of respondents (18 per cent) provide services to a diverse clientele with no single group of learners making up more than 25 per cent of their entire clientele.

Figure 7 Proportion of respondents whose organization serves target groups of learners



Theoretical framework

Skills upgrading is hypothesized to be one of the means through which low-skilled individuals can gain the knowledge and abilities they need to move out of poverty. It is through this process that individuals can command greater control over their lives, including their finances and their health, and ultimately move towards self-sufficiency and economic independence.

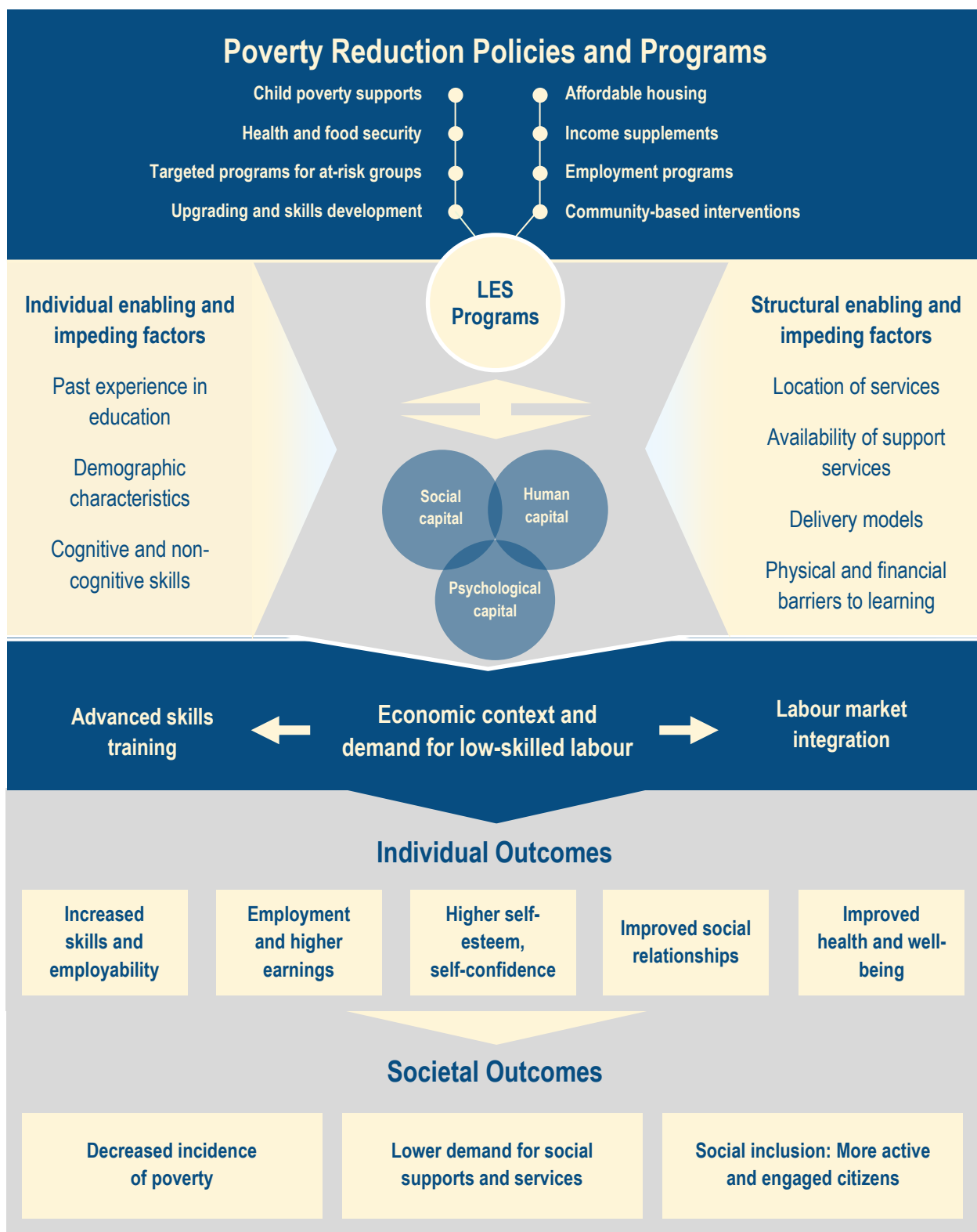
The theoretical framework model in Figure 8 illustrates how this process occurs by articulating the mechanisms and systems that often characterize LES programs and by identifying the factors that enable adults participating in LES upgrading programs to successfully increase their skills and move out of poverty.

- **Poverty reduction policies and programs:** Government policies define how their respective jurisdiction will organize and fund poverty reduction programs and how citizens can access services when needed. Poverty reduction strategies include programs and supports for families and children, housing supports, income supplements, and education and skills upgrading programs, among others.
- **Restricting factors:** Individuals living in poverty face a number of barriers to learning, both individual and structural in nature. Well-designed LES programs are those that take stock of the barriers that prevent an individual from participating and engaging in their learning.
- **Enabling factors:** Effective literacy programs for low-skilled adults require the provision of services and supports that allow learners to fully participate in skill development programs while minimizing some of the barriers they may face. Indeed, poverty reduction strategies are generally designed to facilitate the coordination and delivery of services for LES program participants, often within the same establishment.
- **Individual factors:** Individual factors are targeted by upgrading programs but can also determine their success. These factors are typically categorized as either *psychological capital*, such as trust in others, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy; *social capital*, which both qualifies and quantifies a person's existing relationships within their social networks, such as their friendships, their family, and their connections within their community; and *human capital*, which describes the level and diversity of a person's skillset, as well as their previous experience in training.
- **Program delivery models:** LES programs targeting low-skilled adults in Canada are delivered in a range of locales, including community centres, learning institutions (high schools, colleges, or universities) or LES upgrading centres. The content of these programs may be embedded within other programs, or may explicitly target the development of literacy and other foundational skills. The delivery models available to adult learners and the ways in which these informal and formal systems interact help learners achieve their learning objectives and career goals.
- **Transitions:** LES programs can help facilitate transitions as learners gain skills they need to move on to their next steps. These may include moving towards additional training, formal education, credentialing programs (e.g. obtaining a high school diploma), or the labour market.

While not all adult learners experiencing poverty may be ready and able to work, every learner who enters a LES program should have a learning plan with objectives linked to their next steps.

- ***Outcomes and evaluation:*** LES programs have the potential to transform individuals' lives across a number of dimensions, including in their level of skill, knowledge, and abilities; their self-esteem and self-confidence, their health and social relationships, their ability to manage their household responsibilities and their finances, their performance in the labour market, or their participation in postsecondary education. Well-designed evaluations can allow LES service providers to learn from their experiences, improve the quality of their programs, and provide accountability to funding agencies.

Figure 8 Theoretical framework for literacy and essential skills programs



Research Findings

Evidence collected through the national survey and key informant interviews, as well as supporting evidence from secondary sources, informed the National Research Project's findings. Using the theoretical framework as a guide, the findings articulate the various ways that key stakeholders working at the intersections of LES service delivery and poverty reduction in Canada view the state of literacy programming today and where future investments should be made in order to improve the quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of LES programs to reduce the incidence of poverty in Canada.

Poverty reduction policies and programs

Defining poverty

The simplest definition of poverty is the lack of financial resources needed to cover the costs that provide a minimum standard of living in society. Economic definitions of poverty are the simplest and most commonly used for measuring the extent of poverty, either by drawing fixed income levels under which a household is unable to cover the basic costs of living or by using a measure of consumption that identifies the costs of a basket of goods needed to maintain a minimum standard of living. In all instances, a household's income is the primary indicator used to measure the incidence of poverty.

The Government of Canada has recently introduced Canada's first Official Poverty Line to use the Market Basket Measure (MBM). This approach reflects the "combined costs of a basket of goods and services that individuals and families require to meet their basic needs and achieve a modest standard of living" (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018). The cost of such a basket will define Canada's Official Poverty Line, adjusted for 50 different regions across the country with distinct costs of living. Using this definition, roughly 12 per cent of Canadians were living in poverty in 2015 (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018).

A purely economic definition of poverty often falls short of describing the social isolation created by poverty and the psychological impact it has on individuals experiencing poverty. Poverty is much broader and more insidious in its effect than merely depriving individuals of money. It is a form of economic, social, and political exclusion that imposes limits on an individual's ability to access resources beyond money, including "political power, individual self-respect, and opportunity" for education and social mobility (Croll and Fournier, 1971, p. 2).

Defining poverty is not trivial. Definitions determine the limits of poverty, which can contribute to the exclusion of vulnerable individuals, limiting their access to needed programs and supports. How we define poverty also shapes the types of strategies needed to address the issue. If poverty is defined as an economic problem characterized by an inability to access the labour market, then the key outcome of any poverty reduction strategy will be access to work. However, if poverty is understood as a multidimensional challenge that requires a coordinated and multifaceted solution, then employment alone will always be insufficient to reduce poverty.

Moderating factors

The severity to which an individual experiences poverty depends on the interactions of a number of dimensions, including social, economic, and demographic factors. These factors can explain a number of barriers that are unique to their experience and that can limit their ability to exit poverty.

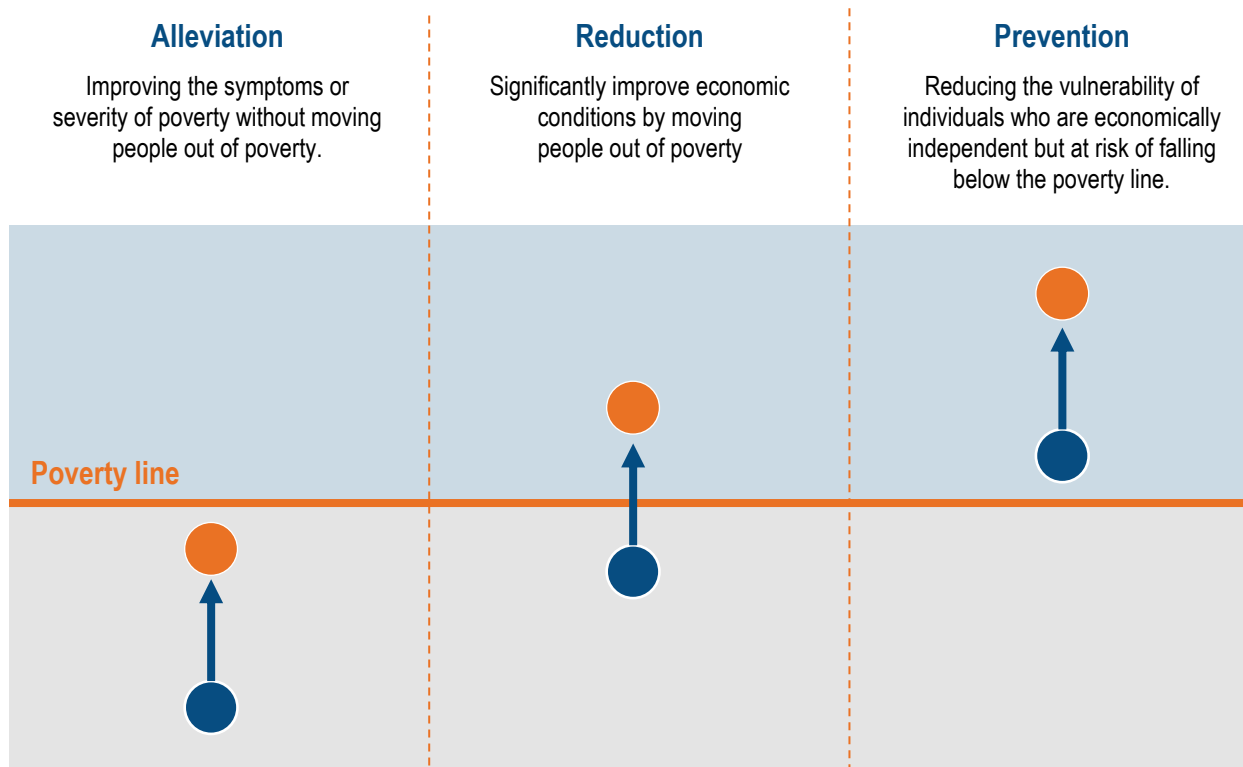
- **Gender:** Women are particularly vulnerable to poverty. The majority of single-parent families (81 per cent) are headed by women (Statistics Canada, 2014) and children in female-led single parent households are most likely to experience poverty (Government of Canada, 2016). Domestic and parental responsibilities make it more challenging for unemployed single mothers to access LES upgrading or education programs.
- **Newcomers to Canada:** Newcomers who lack language proficiency in English or French and whose qualifications are unrecognized in Canada struggle to find gainful employment and are at risk of poverty. Additionally, Canadian attitudes towards newcomers poses an additional barrier to their integration. A recent House of Commons report by the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage suggests subtle and possibly unintentional forms of systemic racism persists and contributes to the exclusion of racialized minorities from the labour market and from other dimensions of Canadian society (Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, 2018). About a fifth of recent immigrants live in low-income households, compared to 8.8 per cent of the Canadian population (Government of Canada, 2016). Improving literacy and language proficiency in Canada's official languages is an important aspect of their integration into Canadian society.
- **Indigenous peoples:** As highlighted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, one of the most damaging legacies of Canada's residential school system is its failure to educate (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The intergenerational effects of trauma caused by a system of education that abused Indigenous youth and deprived them access to education, family, support, and opportunities persist to this day. This history combined with systemic exclusion from the labour market, consistent under-investments in education, and social marginalization of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people have contributed to a higher incidence of poverty within Indigenous communities compared to non-Indigenous communities (Government of Canada, 2016).
- **Persons with disabilities:** Nearly a quarter of people living with a disability (23 per cent) have experienced or are currently experiencing poverty (Government of Canada, 2016). Persons with disabilities often face a physical environment that places limits on their ability to access LES upgrading programs and find employment.
- **Rural poor:** Limited access to work opportunities, unreliable transportation, and limited access to Internet can further isolate rural households living in poverty. In addition, as most social services tend to be located in large communities, access to poverty reduction services, including food banks and literacy programs, are more challenging. Many of the challenges faced by individuals living in rural communities are similar to the experience of Indigenous peoples living on-reserve.

- **Unattached individuals:** Single people between the ages of 45 and 64 experience higher rates of poverty compared to the general population (Government of Canada, 2016a). Single individuals within this age group living in poverty are also likely to experience other barriers, such as a disability (81 per cent) and unemployment (72 per cent).
- **Seniors:** Seniors living in poverty have become a critical policy issue as the Baby boomer generation exits the labour market. Unexpected costs, medical or otherwise, can push precarious seniors further into poverty. For those with limited digital skills and limited abilities to use documents, accessing poverty reduction services and programs online can be challenging.

Poverty reduction programs

Poverty reduction programs and policies can be categorized according to their ultimate objectives. There are indeed important distinctions in the types of approaches and the effects they intend to have on individuals living in poverty. In his background paper, *Post-basic Education and Training, Enabling Environments, and Pathways to Poverty Reduction*, prepared for the University of Edinburgh, Neil Thin provides a useful differentiation of poverty reduction programs, illustrated in Figure 9.

Figure 9 Poverty reduction strategies and objectives



Source: Thin (2004) as cited in cited by King and Palmer (2007).

All three types of poverty reduction strategies aim to reduce the effects of poverty on the individual, wherever they may be along the poverty spectrum. However, they differ in the permanency of their objectives. Poverty alleviation programs, for instance, are concerned with addressing a person’s immediate needs, whether it be hunger or shelter, without addressing the root causes of poverty. Poverty reduction programs focus on moving an individual out of poverty and into economic independence. Finally, poverty prevention programs aim to sustain poverty reduction programs over the long term, ensuring that vulnerable individuals and households have the supports they need to avoid falling into poverty.

Service providers and advocacy groups are increasingly pushing program funders, governments, businesses, and community actors to act in concert and to go further than poverty alleviation programs that target a person’s immediate needs. For example, the Tamarack Institute emphasizes the development of long-term solutions that seek to empower individuals and help them become more independent (Carlton and Born, 2016). Tamarack’s Vibrant Communities – Cities Reducing Poverty movement uses a systems-based approach to reduce poverty by encouraging cities across Canada to “build on strong economic and social infrastructure already in place” (Vasey, 2018, p. 7). By building on their existing assets, leveraging multisector collaboration, thinking across systems, and learning from their community, cities can be empowered to help address the factors that lead people into poverty.

Governments across Canada have developed and implemented a range of policies and programs through poverty reduction strategies that provide social, health and financial supports to individuals experiencing poverty. While not all individuals and families will require all services at once, poverty reduction services aim to address the barriers that prevent individuals from moving towards economic independence whenever they may occur.

The importance of adult LES upgrading in reducing the experience of poverty and in improving the quality of life of low-skilled Canadians is clearly recognized across these policies and programs. As shown in Table 1 below, basic LES upgrading figures prominently within poverty reduction strategies across the country.

Table 1 Poverty reduction programs

Upgrading and Skills Development	Formal or informal basic literacy and essential skills upgrading, education programs, GED preparation, academic upgrading, college or university programs.
Affordable Housing and Renter Protection Initiatives	Rent supplements, affordable housing agreements, increased supply of affordable units.
Child Poverty Supports	Tax benefits, high-quality affordable daycare programs, after-school programs.
Community-based interventions	Creating seamless networks of local service providers, including recreational, health, and social well-being services to address needs.
Income Supplements	Social assistance, employment insurance, tax credits and benefits for low-income households.

Targeted programs for at-risk groups	Targeted services for at-risk groups, including Indigenous peoples, single mothers, persons with disabilities, newcomers, and others.
Health and Food Security	Supplementary health benefits, home care for seniors, drug plans, food banks and breakfast programs for children.
Employment programs	Employment services for job seekers, labour market transition programs.

Sources: Realizing Our Potential: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy (2014-2019); Taking Action on Poverty: The Saskatchewan Poverty Reduction Strategy; Together We Raise Tomorrow: Alberta's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

National poverty reduction programs and strategies

Announced in 2018, Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy provides the Government of Canada with clear strategic objectives to reduce the incidence of poverty in Canada and specific indicators to measure the government's performance in reaching those objectives.

The Strategy targets a 20 per cent reduction in poverty by 2020 and a 50 per cent reduction by 2030 (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018). It also aims to reduce chronic homelessness by 50 per cent, reduce or eliminate housing need for 530,000 households, and end all long-term drinking water advisories on public systems on reserve by March 2021 (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018). As previously mentioned, the Strategy also sets the first official poverty line in Canada's history, reflecting poverty thresholds for 50 different regions across the country, including 19 specific communities. This new Strategy aims to improve understanding of poverty by regularly updating Canada's Official Poverty Line, addressing data gaps and tracking progress through an indicator dashboard.

The Strategy also establishes an arms-length National Advisory Council on Poverty to advise the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development on poverty reduction and to publicly report on an annual basis the progress that has been made toward poverty reduction. The Council will also foster a national dialogue on poverty reduction with key stakeholder groups, Indigenous people, academics, and Canadians more broadly.

The Government of Canada expects to reach these outcomes through a suite of existing and expanded federal programs, including:

- *income supports and benefits for children families, seniors and workers;*
- *a new National Housing Strategy;*
- *public transit infrastructure;*
- *early learning and child care;*
- *labour market development transfer agreements as well as programs for Indigenous peoples;*
- *investments in home care and mental health initiatives; and*
- *supports for access to post-secondary education.*

Federal and provincial coordination will continue on current and future poverty reduction initiatives with a focus on addressing gaps in programming, preventing duplication, making sure programs work well together, and sharing data and best practices to support a solid evidence base for future actions and mutual priorities.

A key pillar of the National Poverty Reduction Strategy is the National Housing Strategy (NHS). Announced in 2017, the 10-year, \$40 billion strategy addresses a range of housing needs, from shelters and community housing, to affordable rental and homeownership. NHS targets include: cutting chronic homelessness by 50 per cent; removing 530,000 families from housing need; renovating and modernizing 300,000 homes; and building 100,000 new homes (Government of Canada, 2017).

These targets will be achieved through a number of initiatives that aim to create new housing supply, modernize existing housing, provide resources for Community Housing Providers, and fund innovation and research. In addition to these four strategic investment areas, the federal homelessness strategy will be expanded and redesigned (Government of Canada, 2017).

The NHS is delivered in partnership with the community housing sector, co-operative movement, private and non-profit sectors, and the research community through a mix of funding, grants and loans. As part of the NHS, the partnership-based National Housing Co-Investment Fund (NHCF) seeks to create up to 60,000 new affordable units and repair up to 240,000 affordable and community units over the next ten years (Government of Canada, 2017). Investments will also support the creation or repair of at least 4,000 shelter spaces for survivors of family violence, the creation of at least 7,000 new affordable units for seniors and 2,400 new affordable units for people with developmental disabilities (Government of Canada, 2017).

The NHS also includes components that will be delivered by provinces and territories, including: designated components under the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Partnership Framework and Housing Priorities Fund; the Canada Community Housing Initiative; and, the Canada Housing Benefit. Over a 12-year period, the federal investment in provincial and territorial housing programs will reach approximately \$20.5 billion (Government of Canada, 2017). Provinces and territories will be required to cost-match roughly half of this total investment. CMHC is leading and delivering the National Housing Strategy federal initiatives.

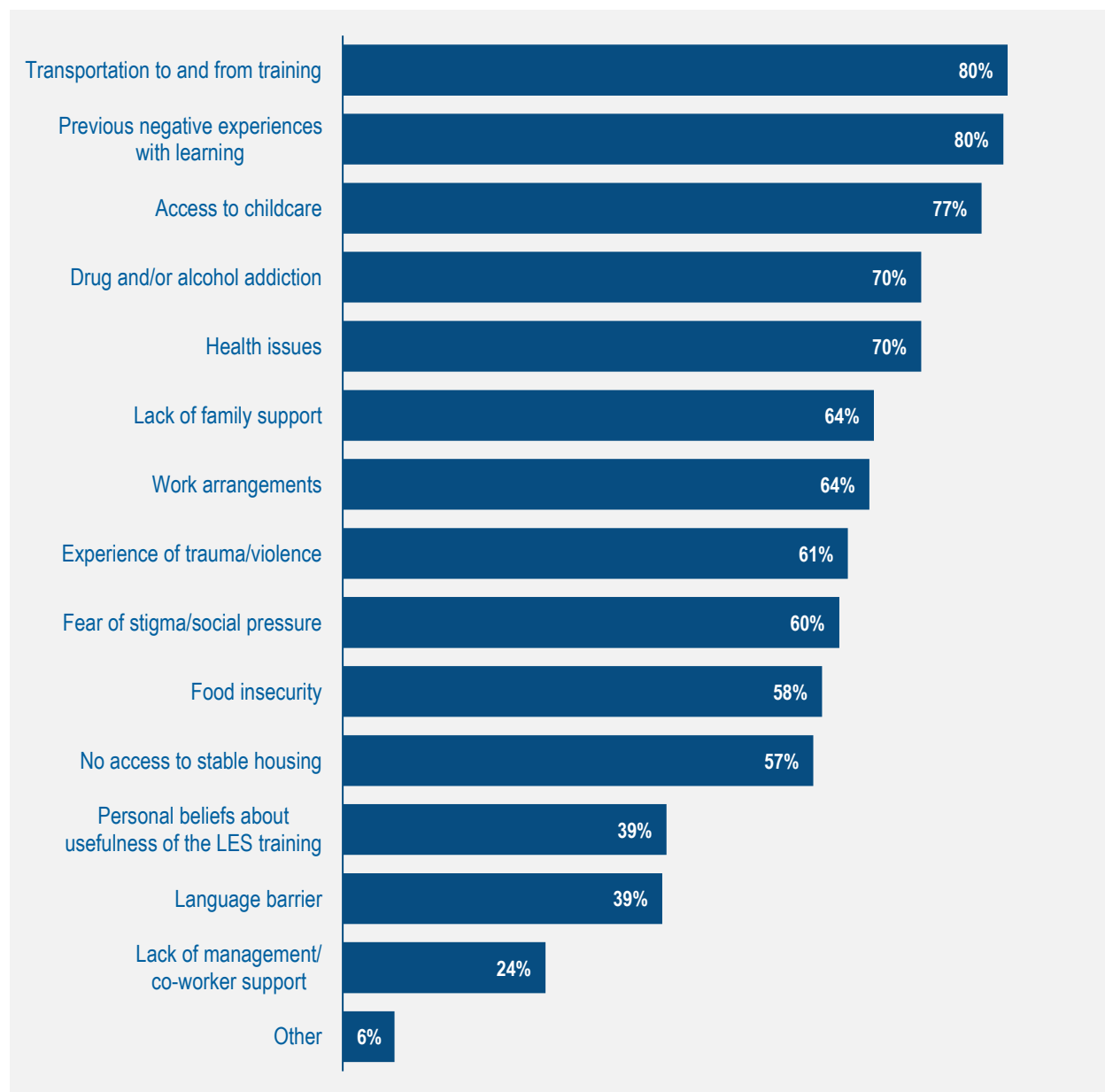
Barriers to learning

Individuals living in poverty often face a number of barriers that prevent them from accessing and completing literacy upgrading programs. As the theoretical framework illustrates, both individual and structural factors can restrict a learner from fully engaging in LES programs. Individual factors are those which are unique to the learner's experiences, while structural factors refer to the organization and allocation of supports and services.

Survey respondents were asked to identify the most common barriers that their learners face when attempting to access or complete their programs. Among the most significant barriers, two were structural in nature (access to reliable transportation to LES upgrading programs, 80 per cent; and access to childcare services, 77 per cent), while three were individual in nature (previous

experience with learning, 80 per cent; addictions to drug or alcohol, 70 per cent; and general health issues, 70 per cent). In addition to general health barriers, many respondents singled out mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, shame, and fear, as additional barriers to learning. Figure 10 below illustrates the most commonly cited barriers to learning identified by survey respondents.

Figure 10 Barriers preventing participants from accessing or completing literacy and essential skills upgrading



Key informants were asked to provide additional descriptive information regarding the barriers that their learners face. Indeed, while the survey was able to capture how common each of these barriers are and their relative significance in the field of adult literacy, the interviews offered stakeholders an opportunity to qualify these results. In effect, key informants were able to share the extent to which these barriers impede learning, but also describe how these barriers affect the lives of their learners in very tangible and discouraging ways.

The following highlights the most common barriers that were identified by key informants, including poverty itself, food insecurity, lack of reliable transportation, lack of stable housing, access to childcare services, and scarcity of supports for and marginalization of incarcerated individuals and recently released offenders.

Poverty as a barrier to learning

“When someone is struggling to pay their rent, to buy food, to pay their hydro electrical bills, when they're focused on just the basic elements of their well-being and health and living circumstances, there's not much energy left over for doing anything beyond that.”

Harriett McLachlan, Canada Without Poverty

The experience of living in poverty is the primary barrier for individuals seeking to participate in skill upgrading programs. An individual who lacks the resources they need to pay for basic necessities, whether it be food, shelter, clothing, or transportation, is unable to consider the possibility of accessing LES upgrading programs or holding down a job.

Limitations inflicted on individuals living in poverty make it difficult for them to access and succeed in LES programs. When a person lacks financial resources to cover the costs of their basic needs, whether it be clothing, shelter, food, or transportation, they may be discouraged from focusing any energy or attention towards longer-term needs. Participating in upgrading programs can be a challenging experience for individuals with limited skills and abilities. The inability to provide for themselves and for their family as a result of their poverty adds an additional layer of stress on the learner.

Indeed, when an individual's most basic needs are unmet, any program or service that fails to address them will inevitably be ineffective. As one respondent explained, *“if you're worried about where your next meal comes from, learning is not gonna happen. Regardless if you show up to the workshop or not, if you're hungry, it's not gonna happen.”* Addressing these basic needs is therefore a crucial first step to addressing skill development.

Access to food

Access to food is a challenge that many learners living in poverty face. Limited access to healthy foods, the cost to purchase nutritious foods, and the lack of necessary skills to prepare healthy meals leave many learners feeling hungry and unable to concentrate in a classroom.

Food insecurity is a problem that afflicts many Canadian households. Roughly 4 million Canadians are food insecure and struggle to access enough food to feed their families (Tarasuk, Mitchell, and

Dachner, 2014). The severity of food insecurity varies considerably across the country, with the most severe levels occurring in rural and northern communities. In both cases, food insecurity tends to be associated with high levels of local unemployment and lack of reliable transportation to larger urban centres that offer cheaper supplies of food (Buck-McFadyen, 2015).

These findings were echoed by practitioners providing LES upgrading in rural areas. One practitioner highlighted the high prices of foods and the limited variety of fresh produce that is available in her community as particularly challenging for her learners. While the availability of food may be less of a concern in urban areas, access to food is still an issue for individuals living in poverty in cities. The high cost of housing and other expenses in urban communities means that there is little money left to cover the costs of food and other basic needs.

Most practitioners stressed that food insecurity is a problem that many of their learners have to face on a daily basis. Even when learners can access healthy foods, many lack experience with food and do not have the skills to prepare healthy meals. Practitioners have identified these skills as “food literacy,” the combination of literacy and numeracy skills that a person needs to understand, follow, and complete a recipe, including measuring ingredients. Food literacy also applies to a person’s experience in a grocery store, by teaching individuals to distinguish between different foods, to read nutritional labels, and to compare prices of similar products. Food literacy also extends to a person’s understanding of how to use fruits and vegetables and other food staples in the preparation of healthy meals.

Access to reliable transportation

Access to reliable transportation is a significant barrier for individuals living in poverty, and one of the primary barriers that prevent learners from accessing and regularly attending literacy programs. Nearly all survey respondents and key informants in the National Research Project identified transportation as the primary reason why participants fail to access their programs or are unable to complete programs in full.

Access to transportation can be particularly challenging for the rural poor. Rural areas often lack public transportation, and without access to a vehicle, a person has limited options for travel. As social and community services are most often located in population centres, individuals living in rural areas without reliable access to transportation often find themselves unable to access the services they need.

While access to public transportation is often available in urban and suburban areas, the cost of travel may be prohibitive for individuals in poverty. Additionally, neighbourhoods that are more affordable for low income households may not necessarily be the same areas where needed services are offered, where upgrading programs are located, or where a possible job opportunity may be. For adults with limited literacy skills, navigating complex transportation systems can be challenging. Reading transit maps, properly identifying directions, and reading street names and transit stops, can further limit access to public transportation for adults with limited reading comprehension skills.

Lack of stable housing and precarious living situations

“Stability breeds stability. The longer you're settled, the more settled you can be. Some of the learners I see are literally falling prey to this monthly or at least several times a year. They're going through these really big transitions and it's the reset button every time. They are so surrounded by instability that they simply can't get things done.”

Randie Doornink, Almaguin Adult Learning Centre

Practitioners cited the lack of housing, but also the lack of stability in their learners' living situations as a significant barrier to learning. Learners need a stable, safe, and supportive environment in order to focus in the classroom, and that often comes through the security provided by a permanent home.

We heard from many key informants about how the instability in their learners' life situations will cause them to exit their learning programs prematurely, sometimes for months at a time, returning after the crisis has been resolved. While practitioners always maintain an open door for their learners, every exit further delays their learning plan and is an additional barrier to overcome on their path towards self-sufficiency.

Finding adequate housing can also be challenging when adults do not have the proficiency necessary to properly read or understand housing ads and rental agreements, or the necessary budgeting skills to determine what they can afford to pay on their budget. Access to housing is also affected by barriers to transportation as many low-income, low skilled adults living in urban communities rely on public transportation to travel from their homes to access needed services.

Some respondents also commented on the relationships within the home as being potentially problematic for their learners. The negative psychological effects of poverty often contribute to stress in the home and in some instances, family violence and abuse. For practitioners working directly with women, addressing this violence through partner counselling is seen as a necessary step to enable their participants to learn without fear.

Access to childcare services

“The specific needs [of these women] are about survival. I want to go back to school but I still have to work. And I have these children, so what do I do? Do I work to pay the rent or do I go back to school?”

Stephnie Payne, M. Ed., Executive Director, San Romanoway Revitalization Association

Access to affordable childcare is a challenge for parents of young children, particularly for single mothers with low literacy skills living in poverty and newcomers who lack social supports and networks to provide assistance with childcare.

Literacy practitioners commented on their experiences with single mothers who often struggle between work, training, and the care of their children. The prohibitive cost of daycare programs means that many will delay their participation in upgrading programs, choosing instead to stay home and provide care for their young children, often relying on social assistance to support

themselves and their children. Respondents working with women and young mothers expressed the need to integrate childcare programs within the delivery of their programs in order to attract and retain mothers in their programs.

Scarcity of supports for and marginalization of incarcerated and recently released offenders

The marginalization of incarcerated individuals and recently released offenders compounds any existing barriers to learning. Indeed, for recently released offenders, their main priority is reintegration into society. However, their criminal record is often the primary factor that keeps them from finding a home and stable employment. In effect, the exclusion of citizens with a criminal record from social supports and economic participation further marginalizes individuals and keeps them from seeking out the skills upgrading they need.

Low-skilled and low-income adults are overrepresented in the prison system compared to the general population (Correctional Service Canada, 2017). In response to this fact, Correctional Services Canada has defined Adult Basic Education programming as priority, available to all inmates whose lack basic skills on a “12-month continuous intake basis” (Correctional Service Canada, 2017).

Programs to support literacy and skills development are not always available in every institution across the system. A 2015 evaluation of CSC’s Education Programs and Services noted that access to library resources and computers varies by institutions, with 65 per cent of offenders who participated in the evaluations reported that accessibility to the library and its resources should be improved (Richer, McLean-McKay, Bradley, and Horne; 2015). In his 2016 report to the Minister, the Correctional Investigator noted in a case study of one of Canada’s maximum security institutions, librarian resources had been eliminated due to budget cuts, utility rooms were used as classrooms, and inmates had to wait a minimum of nine months to access education programs (Sapers, 2016).

Individual moderating factors

The effectiveness of any LES upgrading program can be explained by a number of moderating and mediating factors that are unique to a participant’s experience in training and in life. These factors simultaneously affect the success of the training while being influenced by the training. They generally include a person’s *human capital* (their skills, education, and experience), their *social capital* (the supports and resources that are accessible within their social networks), and their *psychological capital* (their attitudes, beliefs, and personality factors that influence their capacity and resilience in various situations).

Human capital and skills

Human capital describes the level and diversity of skills a person has prior to upgrading, and the extent to which an individual has invested in the development of their skills and cognitive capacities (Scheffler et. al. 2010). Growth in human capital is often one of the most highly anticipated outcomes of training, at least in the short-term, as the goal of many upgrading programs is the enhancement of knowledge and specific skills sets. Cognitive skills are those essential to

performing mental activities related to learning, including executive functions, working memory, attention, reasoning, and problem solving, among others. An often equally important aim of skills upgrading is the enhancement of non-cognitive skills including those related to teamwork, communication, and receptivity to continuous learning. ESDC's Essential Skills Framework embodies nine of these cognitive and non-cognitive skills and indeed represents one of the primary sets of outcomes of interest in many literacy-upgrading programs. However, many stakeholders also acknowledge that there are an extended set of non-cognitive skills such as those related to confidence, self-efficacy, perseverance and resilience (see psychological capital, below) that are equally, if not more important to the long-term success of literacy upgrading.

An individual's prior experience in education and skills upgrading can potentially explain their success with literacy upgrading. Negative experiences with learning can erode an individual's self-confidence and resilience. Many survey respondents identified previous negative experience with learning as one of the most common barriers preventing low-skilled adults from seeking help.

Psychological capital

"The preconception of their abilities. From the teaching perspective, that is probably our biggest barrier. And because they have that preconception of what they can and can't do, that causes them a barrier."

Key informant

Psychological capital refers to a number of dimensions that relate to an individual's attitudes and their capacity to overcome challenges in order to be more effective in their work (Luthans et. al., 2004). They include factors such as a person's self-efficacy (the ability to solve problems independently), their self-esteem, their resilience (adaptability, ability to endure hardship), their persistence (the ability to persevere in spite of challenges), and their attitudes towards learning and training. Related personality traits can also play a significant role in shaping engagement and success in literacy upgrading such as the "Big Five" personality dimensions of conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability, and openness to experience.

Positive psychological capital can influence the extent to which an individual has a positive attitude towards learning, and whether they have the necessary emotional resources to manage the challenges they face and succeed in their tasks. Indeed, overcoming an individual's low self-confidence was highlighted as one of the primary objectives of literacy programs for low-skilled adults. Low self-confidence can discourage individuals from participating in literacy programs or reduce their engagement in the program. Others may lack the resilience they need to overcome challenges over the course of their training and exit the program prematurely.

Social capital and networks of support

"If everyone in their family circle and social circle is in poverty, getting them to visualize something for themselves other than that cycle is definitely a barrier. It's difficult for them to break free of that because that's where they feel safe. That's what they've always grown up with. That's what they've always known. And to go into this other thing where the people have

different values and different lifestyles and everything else and it's hard, so hard. Sometimes, people maybe don't want to see you succeed because they don't want you to leave. That social circle sometimes can be a barrier."

Key informant

Social capital refers to the supports and resources that are accessible within one's social networks, such as their friendships, their family, and their connections within their community. In the context of LES upgrading, social networks and interpersonal relationships can provide adult learners with supports and resources they need to learn new skills or enhance their existing skills.

The size and diversity of social networks are keys to one's ability to access these supports and resources. Many of those with lower skills and in consistent poverty have small and homogeneous networks of individuals that are often in similar situations that provide limited support. Larger networks with more diverse contacts are more easily leveraged to support learners and help lift them from poverty. Evidence also suggests that LES upgrading can help expand networks for learners in terms of both strong bonds (e.g., contacts who provide personal and emotional support) as well as bridging social capital (e.g., contacts who provide access to employment opportunities) who can help in the transition to more stable employment (Gyarmati, et. al, 2014).

Strong social relations between individuals also provide a number of processes that are important to learning, such as trust and personal support (Scrivens and Smith, 2013). Respondents commented on the importance of fostering relationships with their learners and building a sense of trust with them. Indeed, for many learners, the relationship with their instructors is the first positive relationship they have had with an instructor or teacher.

Family, friends, and wider social networks have a great deal of influence on the way a person perceives their abilities and the options that are available to them, including skills upgrading and education. Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents (64 per cent) identified the lack of family support as a barrier to accessing and completing literacy upgrading.

For newcomers, strong social networks are often lacking, particularly for individuals without family members or friends in Canada. Language barriers, limited resources, and cultural differences can further deepen their sense of isolation.

Health and well-being

The health and well-being of learners, including physical and mental health, can influence a person's success in LES programs. However, literacy programs, especially those focused on building a person's health literacy (i.e. their ability to understand information related to their health and become empowered to make informed decisions that positively impact their well-being), can also help improve an individual's overall well-being.

Survey and interview participants cited health, mental health, and addictions as important barriers to learning. Health issues impact both the ability of a learner to participate in the program and the probability of the successful completion of the program.

The severity of the experience of the health issues can also be exacerbated by poverty and low literacy. Access to preventative care, regular medical check-ups and dental care is often prohibitively expensive for people in poverty. Additionally, adults with low literacy skills are often unable to navigate complex health systems and to access preventative care. Consequently, minor medical conditions and health issues can often worsen to the point of requiring emergency services.

Supports and enabling factors

The primary objective of literacy organizations and practitioners is to address the skill needs of their learners and to assist them in achieving their learning objectives. However, as discussed in the previous section, many learners living in poverty face a number of barriers that prevent them from learning. As a result, practitioners working for LES upgrading organizations will often use their limited resources to address these barriers through a variety of supports. When some barriers are too complex or their remediation too costly, organizations have developed partnerships with other specialized service providers or will refer individual learners to other providers.

As part of the survey, respondents were asked to identify from an extensive list of common supports the ones that they provide to learners directly, the ones that are provided by partner organizations within their network of supports, and the ones that either they or their partners are able to provide. Responses to this question provide information about two distinct but equally important features of the support system available to learners:

1. The **availability** of poverty reduction services and supports offered to learners through their LES programs. Survey results indicate that at least half of all respondents either offer directly or through referrals every listed support or service. The services that are most often made available to learners are pre-employment or job placement services (76 per cent); transportation assistance, such as bus tickets (75 per cent); personalized learning plans (74 per cent); information and guidance on educational options (73 per cent); and counselling services (70 per cent). The services that are least available to learners through direct service delivery or referral to partner organizations are legal advice (51 per cent), continuous support after the program (52 per cent), trauma-informed care (53 per cent), physical health programs (53 per cent), and addiction counselling (56 per cent). The complete results of this analysis are presented in Figure 11.
2. The **capacity** of LES service providers to offer services and the areas where they have developed strong **partnerships** to support their learners. The results show that most respondents provide supports in areas that advance their learners' progress in LES upgrading programs, including the development of personalized learning plans (54 per cent), providing information about post-upgrading educational options (41 per cent), as well as removing accessibility barriers by providing bus tickets or other transportation supports (42 per cent). Respondents are more likely to refer their participants to partner organizations when professionalized services are required, such as health and mental health services, including addictions counselling (49 per cent), mental health supports (48 per cent) and physical health supports (41 per cent), trauma-informed care (41 per cent); housing or shelter services (48 per

cent); legal advice (47 per cent), and financial supports (45 per cent). The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 12.

Figure 11 Supports and services available to LES upgrading participants

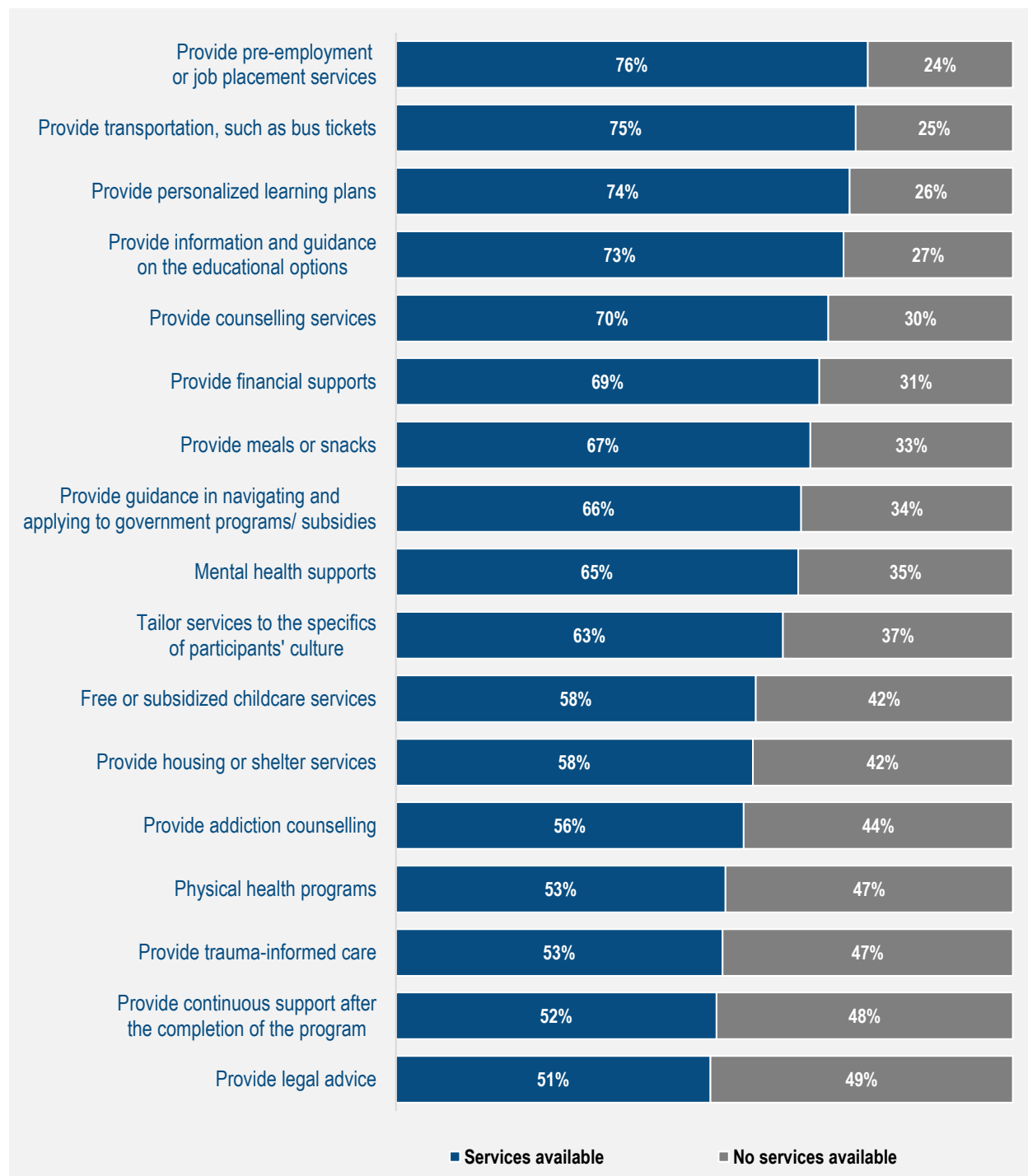
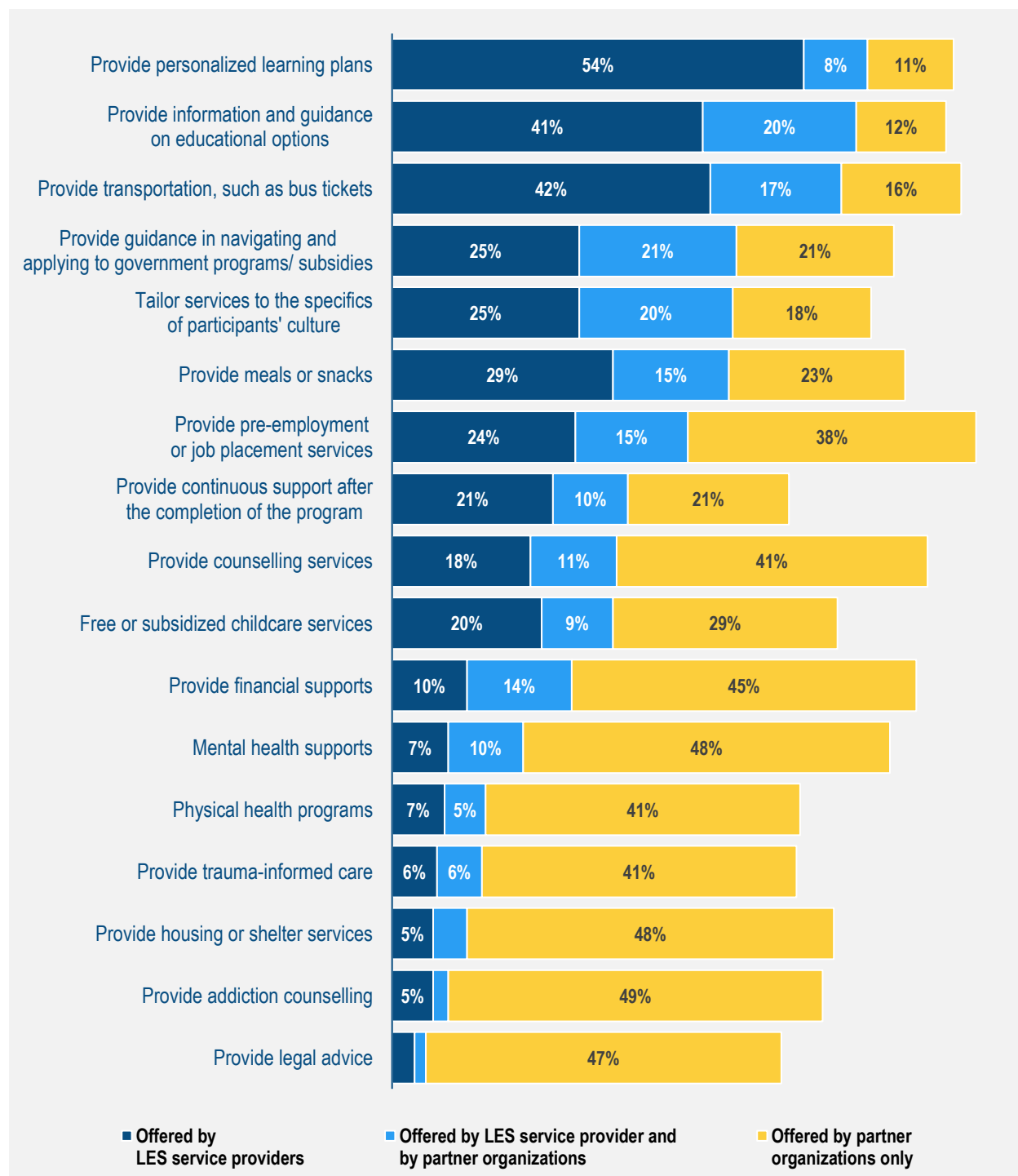


Figure 12 Services provided by LES organizations, partner organizations, or both



Note: Proportions less than 5 per cent are not shown on the figure.

Figure 12 also illustrates the supports that were deemed to be of importance to both service providers and their partners. Indeed, across a number of areas, service providers and their partners have developed the capacity to address learners' needs through targeted services and supports. Among the most significant supports where both service providers can deliver services directly or refer learners to their partners are supports that provide guidance in navigating and applying to government programs and subsidies (21 per cent), supports that provide information and guidance on educational options (20 per cent), and supports that customize services to learners' culture (20 per cent).

The analysis of survey data provides important quantitative information on the extent to which LES organizations use their limited resources to support learners in ways that can enable them to access and fully engage with learning materials. This information is crucial to appreciate the scope of services that LES service providers are able to offer in order to address their learners' needs. Interviews with key informants echoed many of these findings. However, the conversations provided a deeper understanding of the role that LES service providers play in offering supports and services, and in justifying the necessity of these activities.

Findings from key informant interviews emphasized three key supports: addressing transportation issues; addressing food insecurity; assisting learners with access to other needed supports and programs. Some LES service providers have engaged their partners in an integrated service delivery model to address barriers to learning holistically. The following section details each of these findings and provides examples of programs shared by survey respondents and key informants.

“Barriers are simply that. They don't define who you are. It's about having had the opportunity to work through the barrier. They're not forever. So many people we work with find ways around them.”

Mack Rogers, ABC Life Literacy

Transportation

As discussed in the previous section, access to reliable transportation to and from upgrading programs is a significant barrier for learners. LES service providers who participated in the study identified a number of strategies that they use to ensure that transportation does not hamper their learners' attendance. In urban areas where public transportation is available, service providers will most often cover the cost of a ticket to and from their services. For individuals receiving income supports through social assistance, transportation subsidies often cover the costs of public transportation.

Some instructors who provide one-on-one tutoring services have the flexibility to travel to their learners. This was common in rural areas where public transportation is limited, where learners do not have access to a reliable mode of transportation, and where learners have to travel a great distance to access learning centres. Instructors would also volunteer to travel if family or personal circumstances limited a person's ability to travel, due to either a physical disability or lack of access to childcare.

Online instruction is also emerging as a possible option for LES service providers operating in rural and remote areas. In francophone minority communities in northern Ontario, access to services in French is sparse. *Coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes (COFA)* has worked towards developing a distance-learning program that allow learners to access their programs from home. Like all learners in literacy programs in Ontario, participants must meet with an LES upgrading practitioner at a learning centre where their skills are assessed and a learning plan developed. During their time in a learning centre, learners can also gain the necessary digital skills they will need to complete distance-learning programs at home with their computer.

Food security

Ensuring that their learners are food secure is a concern for many LES service providers. Indeed, services providers expressed the importance of offering their learners snacks or meals, and even opportunities to take food home with them. Community organizations that offer an array of social supports and poverty reduction services, in addition to literacy upgrading programs, noted that unconditional access to food helps recruit individuals to their programs.

The quantity of food offered to learners varies considerably, often depending on the resources available to organizations and their partnerships with local organizations. Some organizations have worked with local food banks to offer food in their centres rather than their learners going to the food bank. This approach minimizes the stigma some adults feel when accessing the food bank, while also creating an incentive for them to attend and participate in learning activities.

A surprising finding from this study is the prevalence of food literacy and food preparation skills offered by community-based LES service providers. Key informants discussed the need to address food insecurity holistically. For many, the purpose of food literacy extends beyond merely addressing food insecurity. Food literacy empowers learners by teaching them the skills they need to read and follow a recipe, to understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy food, to grasp the health consequences of unhealthy eating, to manage their budget in order to access food on a limited income, and to provide individual learners with the opportunity to share their own recipes.

“We all know how popular the subject food is. People of all ages love talking about food and how they cook, their likes and dislikes with food. In our program, everyone has a voice when it comes to food and ways of preparing it.”

Pat Hegan, Miramichi Literacy Council

Below are a few examples identified through our consultations that illustrate the diversity of food literacy programs and activities that LES service providers have developed.

- Service providers working in rural Indigenous communities have incorporated literacy upgrading in a range of food-related activities, including aquaculture, composting, and mindful eating.
- The Cooking to Learn program in Miramichi, New Brunswick, is a pre-GED program targeting illiterate and extremely low-literate women in correctional centres. The five-week course relies

mostly on images and verbal guidance to teach participating women how to cook, how to follow a recipe, how to set a table, and some basic budgeting skills.

- The Almaguin Adult Learning Centre in rural Ontario developed two programs as a direct result of its learners' appeal for better access to food and food literacy. Food and Finance focuses on developing a number of employability skills tied to food preparation, including how to handle and prepare food, in addition to a number of budgeting skills due to the high cost of food in their area. The centre also developed the Meals on the Bus program that provides their learners with a free bus ride once a month to North Bay to access relatively inexpensive food.
- The *Centre d'organisation mauricien de services et d'éducation populaire* (COMSEP) in Trois-Rivières, Québec, provides training to adults on how to prepare food on a low budget, in addition to basic training that teaches learners to become assistant cooks. The centre also partners with local catering services to access meats that are prepared on site by their learners and sold at a low price to individuals living in poverty.
- Cambrian College's Adult Literacy and Academic Upgrading program created partnerships with local food kitchens. Literacy instruction is embedded within food preparation using a hands-on approach. The program has a larger goal, however. Participants are given an opportunity to see themselves in a different role: rather than as the recipients of assistance, they can now provide services to others in their community.

“We flipped that whole stigma where they are the recipients. They know what it takes to become involved, engaged community member so that they can in turn feel good about that. That has given them tremendous confidence, satisfaction; learning in a different way.”

Evelyn Diebel, Adult Literacy Program, Cambrian College - Espanola Campus

Literacy practitioners: A trusted advocate

Nearly half (49 per cent) of survey respondents provide guidance to their learners in accessing and navigating poverty reduction programs. According to research participants, adults with limited reading comprehension often find accessing poverty reduction programs and services to be a daunting, even discouraging process. Other individuals may be reticent to self-identify as being a person in need of assistance due to the negative stigma that society attaches to poverty. The structure of poverty reduction programs can also limit the extent to which LES service providers can support their learners directly.

LES service providers are increasingly seeing their role as the “trusted intermediary,” helping learners navigate the system and access the programs they need. Through their role as educators, LES instructors are able to identify unaddressed issues during their learner's initial intake assessment or over the course of their interactions. As learners build trust in their instructors, they may be more willing to confide additional needs related to their health, their mental health, or their financial situation.

“We’re beginning to understand ourselves, to see ourselves as what’s termed the trusted intermediary, so that we can help learners navigate and connect to services.”

Anne Marie Williams, PTP Adult Learning and Employment programs

Instructors also become a resource to whom learners can turn when they feel that they lack the necessary skills to complete a task or to understand the contents of a government form, for example. The trust and confidence that develops through literacy programs can enable LES service providers to assist individuals as they navigate what could otherwise be a complex network of social supports.

Integrated service delivery

The cooperation and collaboration between LES service providers and their partner organizations in the provision of social supports and services to learners indicates the scope of learners’ needs and the limited capacity of LES service providers to address those needs alone.

Integrated service delivery is an innovative approach for providing learners with contextualized programming in addition to comprehensive wrap-around supports. The approach targets multi-barriered individuals and addresses their needs holistically, rather than targeting each need individually through separate programs. The emphasis is on short-term, targeted and contextualized programs, with integrated services that “intersect in effective and meaningful ways” (RESDAC, 2014).

When developing an integrated service delivery model, partners are engaged in a collaborative process from the start of the program’s development and over the course of the program’s delivery. Partners can include LES practitioners, employment services, social service providers, healthcare providers and public health practitioners, housing supports, and other needed service providers. This approach ensures that learners have access to wrap-around supports that directly respond to their needs as part of the program, affording them an opportunity to focus on their long-term objectives and engage in LES upgrading.

While promising, the integrated service delivery model may not be appropriate for every learner or for every organization. Indeed, there are important challenges that can impede the development and implementation of integrated service delivery models. For one, establishing the necessary partnerships, developing a common set of objectives, and pooling resources, both human and financial, requires a great deal of effort. Organizations can work within their existing partnerships to build these types of integrated services, however not all organizations will have the necessary resources or networks to develop a comprehensive model.

It is imperative to note that service integration exists along a spectrum. The process need not be extensive or comprehensive, but rather responsive to the needs of learners and contextualized to their objectives. Indeed, the scale and scope of these models may be smaller depending on the context of the community and the size of the organization, but the objective remains the same: delivering targeted services in more effective ways.

“We have to be careful here. When we speak of an integrated approach, it may seem as though it is an absolute but there are in fact degrees of service integration. It depends on the context and its specificities.”

Gabrielle Lopez, Coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes

Some promising programs in Canada have applied and tested integrated service delivery approaches for specific groups of learners. The following provides a few examples that have been used for very specific groups of learners, including learners in francophone minority communities across Canada and single mothers.

RESDAC: An integrated service delivery model for francophone minority communities

The *Réseau pour le développement de l’alphabétisme et des compétences* (RESDAC) developed an integrated service delivery model to serve Francophone learners across Canada. With the support of four provincial governments, RESDAC tested this model in eight sites across Saskatchewan, Ontario, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. The following describes the development process that RESDAC applied in each community to develop contextually appropriate integrated service delivery LES programs.

- ***A learner-centered approach***

RESDAC’s integrated service delivery model places the learner at the centre from the outset. The learner’s needs are the first to be assessed, then the linguistic and cultural context of the local community, the socio-economic context, and the availability and relevance of employment sectors in the community for learners with lower literacy skills. Additionally, the number, range, extent and structure of local educational services are taken into consideration.

These assessments enable the development of strategic partnerships, bringing together service providers that might play a role at any point along the adult learner’s progress in upgrading programs, such as transportation, income or social assistance, child care, parenting support or specific training services.

- ***A collaborative approach to program development***

The partners collaborate in designing a suite of adult LES interventions and social supports focused on learners’ needs. By engaging in this process at the very start, stakeholders in the partnership can identify how they intend to provide services and support learners throughout the program. Employers are also involved in the development of the program to ensure that the range of skills meet the requirements of their occupations.

Service providers then establish a common assessment and referral approach, or a single entry point for learners, and implement joint awareness and recruitment strategies. Importantly, partners pool their human, material and financial resources; expertise; facilities; programs; and educational infrastructures for the coordinated design and delivery of joint LES upgrading interventions and wraparound supports.

Partner organizations work together to set out guidelines, establish common operational procedures, and define explicit intra-agency or shared referral processes. This process establishes trust among partners and reduces the organizations' workload.

- ***Contextualization of learning materials***

Crucially, engaging with employers from the beginning enables the development of contextualized learning materials that align foundational literacy skills to specific skills required by employers. Contextualizing learning materials to the learners' needs can also contribute towards the development of life skills, such as parenting, budgeting, or health management skills that contribute towards a person's sense of self-efficacy and resilience.

“When you start from scratch and you are trying to create an approach that is fully integrated, the employers are there from the start. They are there to define their needs, identify their work processes as well as the tasks to be executed by employees, and the program is developed accordingly. Employers are also there for the evaluation, that is to say during a work placement, for example, and are there until the program's end to assess participant skill gains and the transferability of those skills to the targeted occupation. So, there really is a synergy.”

Gabrielle Lopez, Coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes

- ***Evaluation and a culture of learning***

Finally, the RESDAC model emphasizes the need to seek feedback and reassess the effectiveness of the partnership's actions, interventions, and services in meeting the needs of learners, employers and the community. As RESDAC learned, effective implementation of this model hinges on the ability to work through any intra-agency issues related to various organizations' philosophies, visions, mandates, policies, and administrative and teaching approaches.

Homeward Bound, WoodGreen

WoodGreen's *Homeward Bound* program provides single mothers living in poverty who have a history of homelessness or inadequate housing with a four-year plan to move out of poverty and towards self-sufficiency. The model offers a holistic support system designed to address the very specific needs of their target population while providing a pathway to employment.

At its core, *Homeward Bound* is a skills development program that focuses on empowering its participants through a coordinated system of wrap-around supports. Its innovation lies in its determination to address both the participants' immediate needs and the root causes of their poverty. By combining short-term social supports with a long-term goal— career-track employment to multi-barriered single mothers—the program aims to provide an effective solution to persistent poverty. Indeed, as the next section will explore, in order for any skills upgrading program to succeed, programs must first address the factors that prevent individuals from learning.

- ***Comprehensive wrap-around supports***

Homeward Bound provides holistic wrap-around supports that specifically address the needs of single mothers, including housing in furnished apartments, goal-oriented case management, on-site

childcare, after-school programs for children and youth, credit and debt counselling, and psychotherapy and trauma counselling (WoodGreen, 2018).

- ***Contextualized learning, focused on transitions***

In the first phase of the program, the women attend a skills upgrading program that teaches life skills, computer and financial literacy skills, and academic upgrading for college entrance. The second phase of the program allows participating women to attend a two-year community college program tuition-free in one of a selection of programs, including Early Childhood Education (ECE), Computer Programming, Business (Human Resources, Operations, Finance), Office Administration/Legal, and Executive Administration. The third phase prepares participants for their transition to the labour market by teaching employability skills, industry council networking, and permanent housing support. Finally, in its last phase, women have access to a 14-week unpaid professional internship that provides them with work experience and connects them to potential future employers.

Program delivery

The structure and delivery approaches used in the context of LES upgrading programs have a considerable effect on their ability to help individuals gain the skills they need. One of the primary objectives of this research is to offer service providers with an opportunity to share their experiences in service delivery and to identify successful delivery approaches. Additionally, the project sought to document innovations in service delivery, areas where additional improvements are needed, and priority areas that can enable literacy and poverty reduction programs and services to be better integrated in order to increase their overall effectiveness.

Delivery models and approaches

Delivery setting

Across Canada, delivery of LES programs is a shared responsibility between community-based literacy organizations and formal learning institutions, such as high schools, colleges and universities. Collaboration is generally encouraged when appropriate, while skills gained and certifications acquired in basic literacy programs are often recognized across the entire education system.

Community-based literacy organizations offer a variety of literacy upgrading programs that either explicitly or implicitly teach LES to their learners. In addition to LES upgrading programs, community-based organizations will often provide academic upgrading, GED preparation courses, and employability services (e.g. assistance with resume writing, interview preparation, and connections with employment service centres).

There are a number of ways that organizations ensure the success of their programs. Prior research has identified a number of such approaches, including providing adequate training to instructors and volunteers, keeping classroom sizes small, and working in close collaboration with other literacy organizations (Casey, Purcell, and Whitlock, 2006). Some additional best practices include

accommodating various learning styles, involving learners in the planning process, valuing their life experiences, and addressing personal barriers to learning (Okanagan College, 2009).

Community-based literacy upgrading programs provide a number of benefits to multi-barriered, low-skilled learners:

- ***Flexibility to address community needs:*** By design, community based organizations are aware of the general needs of their community and can customize training and other services to reflect the needs of their participants. For example, in communities with a high proportion of immigrants, training can incorporate culturally appropriate materials, and organizations can hire trainers who speak a common language and collaborate with local immigrant service providers to ensure adequate wrap-around supports.
- ***Embedded LES instruction:*** Not all low-skilled adults are willing or able to commit to explicit literacy upgrading or structured learning. Community organizations can serve as a bridge towards more formal training programs by embedding basic literacy skills upgrading within the delivery of other courses, such as cooking, art, or sewing classes. This type of programming allows learners to improve their LES while teaching them skills that are relevant and applicable to their lives.
- ***Positive learning environment:*** A number of adult learners with low skills have negative previous experiences with education and may be reluctant to attend literacy classes at a school or a college. Community organizations foster a positive learning environment that can provide learners with their first positive learning experience in a comfortable, friendly, and supportive atmosphere.
- ***Single-access point for other services:*** Community organizations often serve as "hubs" within the community, offering a range of services for their participants within the same access point. In this kind of setting, learners may have only enrolled in a literacy program, but can access employment services or counselling services within the same location, allowing for an efficient delivery of services.
- ***Social networks:*** Community-based programs help learners create social networks within their neighbourhood. By taking part in service embedded in their community, learners can interact with community members, create friendships, and increase their support circle and their sense of belonging.

Literacy programs offered through formal learning institutions, such as high schools, colleges, and universities, provide either non-credentialing or credentialing programs. Non-credentialing upgrading programs are flexible, learner-centred, and focused on skill acquisition. Such courses aim to improve learners' general LES, similar to those provided by the community organizations. Non-credentialing programs can provide an avenue for learners to gain some basic skills before moving onto more formalized skills upgrading offered through formal credentialing programs.

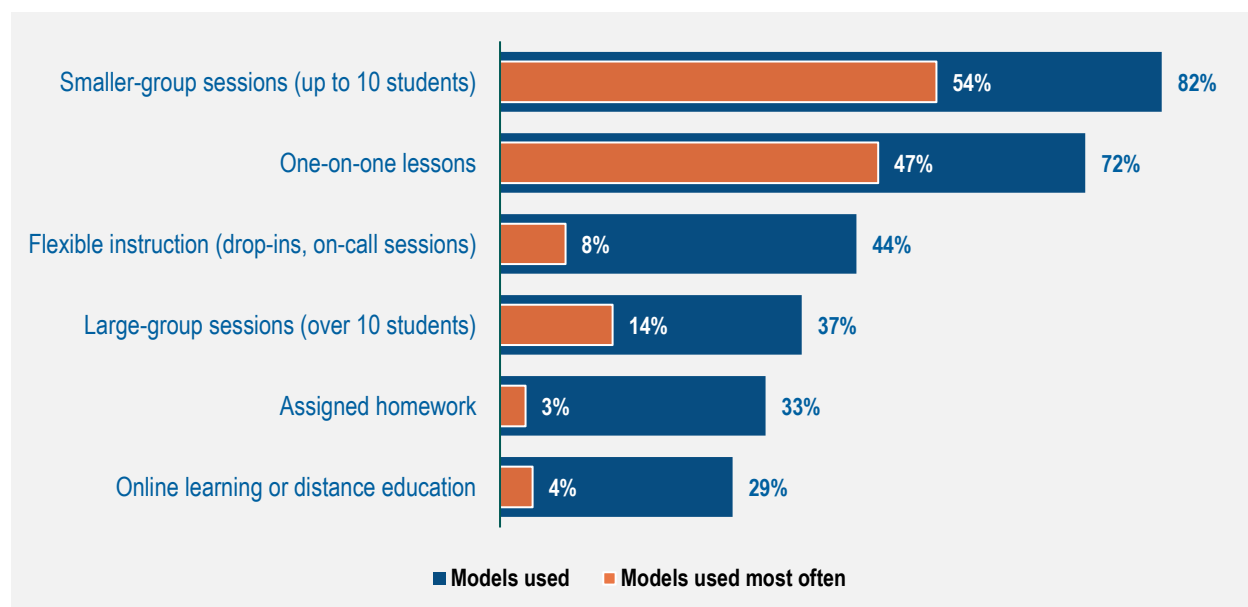
Formal learning institutions also provide adult learners an opportunity to complete courses that can lead them to their GED and acquire the prerequisites they need to enrol in postsecondary education or find employment. Indeed, colleges that provide adult literacy programs can be an ideal

setting to encourage learners to progress through the education system, moving from LES upgrading programs to postsecondary credentialing programs.

Delivery models

Survey respondents were asked to identify which delivery models they use in their programs and which ones they use most often. Overwhelmingly, respondents favour small-groups (82 per cent use this model; 54 per cent use the model most often) and one-on-one instruction (72 per cent use this model; 47 per cent use the model most often) over other delivery models. Figure 13 below presents the complete results, including the models used and those used most often by respondents.

Figure 13 Delivery approaches used and used most often by survey respondents



This finding echoes those found in key informant interviews. Key informants emphasized the importance of providing one-on-one instruction, particularly for low-skilled adult learners. This approach allows individuals to move at their own pace rather than follow a set pace dictated by a structured curriculum. Importantly, it reduces the discouraging effect of peer comparisons. Instead, learners can focus on themselves and on their abilities.

“[With one-on-one learning], it alleviates the stress and multiple distractions. The tutor can easily point out their strengths and give positive prompts continuously. They don’t receive these motivations in group lessons. They know what they can’t do. All they hear is what they can’t do! Students need to keep positive and motivated so that learning will occur. When a student feels successful... a confidence will begin to grow. Learning will then be a more pleasant experience.”

Pat Hegan, Miramichi Literacy Council

Instructors can use this progress to highlight positive strides made by the learner. Rather than focusing on what they cannot do, one-on-one instruction can help learners gain confidence by focusing greater attention on what they can do.

Online and distance learning is least often used by LES services providers (29 per cent use this model; 4 per cent use it most often). A few factors may explain why this model is not more widely utilized.

- ***Not every learner has reliable access to the Internet.*** In many rural areas of the country, broadband access is still limited and download speeds are far lower than in urban areas (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2016), making online learning less reliable. Unfortunately, individuals living in rural areas would benefit most from online and distance learning as transportation is often limited, preventing many adults to access the services and programs they need.
- ***Affordability of technology limits access:*** Access to technology and to the Internet is particularly challenging for low-income households. In the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission's (CRTC) submission to the Government of Canada's Innovation Agenda, an analysis of the affordability of technology highlights the plight of low-income households to stay connected. In the lowest income quintile, only 64.3 per cent of households had a home computer in 2014 and only 63.5 per cent had access to the Internet at home (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2016). Nevertheless, many households view access to the Internet as an essential service. Low-income households spend "a higher percentage of their income on these services than the average Canadian household," however they are more likely to forgo other expenses rather than cancel their broadband subscription (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2016).
- ***Learners in basic LES upgrading programs may lack necessary digital skills.*** Service providers have identified digital literacy as a key area of focus in many of their programs, particularly for seniors and for recently released offenders who may lack basic computer and digital skills. More generally, learners with very limited literacy skills may require more assistance and one-on-one learning approaches.

Innovations in program delivery

LES service providers are encouraged to pilot new, innovative approaches to serve their learners. As part of the National Research Project, survey respondents were asked to identify the kinds of innovations and promising new practices they have developed or integrated into the delivery of their LES upgrading programs. Activities where organizations are innovating were grouped within the following five broad areas of program delivery:

- ***Improving awareness of and access to services,***
- ***Improving processes for assessing participant needs,***
- ***Customizing programming for participant needs,***

- *Maximizing engagement in programming, and*
- *Better support for post-program outcomes.*

A majority of respondents are innovating in five specific activities. They include flexible delivery options (67 per cent), expanding outreach via new partnerships (67 per cent) and improving outreach to targeted participant groups through expanded channels (63 per cent), customization of program content to specific participant needs (64 per cent), and making programs more contextually relevant (58 per cent). The following section provides a short description of the five primary innovation areas and examples of how organizations are innovating. The survey results for activities within each category are presented in Figure 14.

Flexible program delivery

Flexible program delivery allows LES practitioners to be less prescriptive in the types of programs they can offer and instead, be more responsive to the learning needs of their participants. Every learner starts their training at a different level of proficiency across the various LES and also have different goals for what they would like to achieve. Indeed, many learners have very limited skills and may not be able to follow a structured learning program. A flexible approach to program delivery offers learners the flexibility to attend programs when their schedule allows, to learn at their own pace, and to follow a curriculum that meets their needs.

Organizations provided a number of examples of how they are including more flexibility into their services. For many organizations, flexibility requires a learner-centred approach. Some LES organizations described re-allocating staff originally dedicated to specific courses or services (e.g. grade 10 mathematics instructor, a guidance counsellor) to a flexible learning space where learners can come and go as their life responsibilities and schedules permit. Other programs have created flexible timelines for their programs, allowing students to start and finish at any time during the year, and allowing learners to complete their work on a timeline that suits their needs. Many organizations also offer one-on-one support for learners as needed.

Outreach through new partnerships and expanded channels

Outreach is essential for raising awareness about existing services and programs. Many organizations have adopted new approaches for reaching out to potential learners, including a stronger social media presence and new partnerships, though participant recruitment remains a challenge for many organizations.

Developing strong partnerships with organizations that share common objectives is often key to successful outreach activities. Many literacy organizations partner with community-based organizations and other partners to develop curricula and provide needed services, however, these partnerships can also help identify potential learners and make referrals more effective.

Figure 14 Innovations in program delivery

Improving awareness of and access to services		
A1	Expanding outreach via new partnerships	67%
A2	Improving outreach to targeted participant groups through expanded channels	63%
A3	Improving clarity and relevance of communication and messaging for targeted participants	46%
A4	Increasing accessibility of info sessions and intake procedures	40%
A5	Refining eligibility criteria	19%
Improving processes for assessing participant needs		
B1	Literacy assessments	55%
B2	Soft skills assessments	32%
B3	Making assessments more culturally sensitive	29%
B4	Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)	20%
B5	Integrating more occupational relevant assessments	18%
B6	Supporting Foreign Credential recognition	8%
Customizing programming for participant needs		
C1	Processes for customization of program content to specific participant needs	64%
C2	Making programs more contextually relevant	58%
C3	Making program content more culturally sensitive	53%
C4	Resources for active case management	31%
Maximizing engagement in programming		
D1	Through flexible delivery options	67%
D2	Through modularized programming with multiple entry and exit points	41%
D3	Through peer-learning/mentorship options	34%
D4	Through experiential program components (e.g. work placements/co-ops)	20%
D5	Provision of financial incentives	17%
Better support for post-program outcomes		
E1	Employment services (e.g. job search support, career counselling)	41%
E2	Transportation, childcare subsidies	35%
E3	Mentorship opportunities (e.g. peer support, networking)	29%
E4	Retention supports (e.g. with employment, education)	26%
E5	Wage subsidies	11%

Survey respondents provided examples of outreach strategies that mostly consist of having qualified and dedicated staff that can engage and reach out to potential learners. Some organizations have a dedicated outreach worker with the goal of supporting and establishing trust with existing participants. Indeed, while many organizations will reach out to partner organizations to encourage referrals, for organizations that provide services to cultural groups, word of mouth is an effective outreach method.

“We have two outreach workers that are on the road every day and go out into the community. We go to the ethno-cultural organizations, we go to community events, we provide orientation sessions, we have events for youth, for seniors, we do International Women’s Day celebrations where we invite somebody to come and talk to us about women’s issues. Throughout the 365 days, we promote our programs. We have a very up-to-date webpage. The best promotional thing that works for us is the old-fashioned word-of-mouth.”

Beba Svigir, Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association

Customization of program content to participant needs

Respondents from LES organizations shared a number of examples that highlight how they have innovated through customized programs. These programs are developed by taking into consideration the needs of adult learners, their skill level, and their lived experiences. Customized, learner-centred approaches allow service providers to tailor interventions to specific individuals of learner groups with common needs in ways that make learning more relevant, interesting, and engaging. According to a survey respondent, customization of program content enables practitioners to meet learners at “the point where they are confident and then build skills from there.” For many respondents, customization is about not only addressing the skills gaps that their learners face, but also the emotional, psychological, and social barriers that prevent them from learning.

An important feature in the process of customization is reflexive learning. In order to make programs truly customized to their learners’ needs, practitioners need to assess and provide space for their learners to share their experiences. Survey respondents commented that building trust and maintaining an open dialogue with their learners is key to this process. Indeed, many programs that have developed customized learning tools rely on feedback from their learners.

Research participants in both the survey and in interviews commented on the importance of culturally appropriate learning materials for learners from Indigenous and newcomer communities. Having access to culturally appropriate learning materials has been identified as a key to their success in literacy programs. Indeed, programs and learning approaches that are reflective of an individual’s culture, their norms, and their traditions, ensures that learning materials are meaningful to the individual. In turn, culturally relevant approaches to learning can help learners feel included in the classroom and build their self-confidence by giving value to their lived experiences.

“Programs servicing Indigenous populations need to be customized to include traditional and cultural activities, Indigenous learning methodology, and delivered in partnership with

Indigenous community members. There is research that shows LES taught through informal traditional activities is extremely effective in supporting skills development in Indigenous populations.”

Survey respondent

Providing contextualized learning materials to learners has been cited as a key objective of LES programs. However, for cultural communities and especially Indigenous communities, the *process* for program development, not only the program itself, must strive to be inclusive of community leaders, community values, and community experiences. Research has shown that skills upgrading programs delivered to Indigenous people in Canada are more successful when the community is involved in the development and delivery of the programs. By relying on the cultural competencies of community leaders and elders, program developers can ensure that cultural norms and traditions are reflected in the curriculum. Experienced and knowledgeable staff that are sensitive to the needs of Indigenous people is vital for the success of the literacy programming (Klinga, 2012). One key informant summarized this process along the principle: “Nothing for us without us.”

There are programs in Canada that have sought to integrate traditional Indigenous learning approaches within their programs. A primary example of integrating learning within traditional activities is the Miqqut pilot project for Inuit learners in Nunavut. The program embeds literacy skills upgrading into cultural activities, such as traditional Inuit sewing. Using an informal delivery approach, the program helps participants learn skills that are both applicable and relevant to their daily lives. Early results of the program were positive, with participants showing improved well-being, higher community engagement, and improved literacy skills, while the community benefitted by preserving and transmitting traditional cultural practices.

A key informant from the Essential Skills for Aboriginal Futures (ESAF) explained how their programs rely on Indigenous learning styles, which is summarized as *learn by doing, learn by seeing*. Learning activities focus on learning through tactile experiences, allowing learners to experience learning materials rather than passively receive it. Instructors focus on teaching LES through interactions with physical and visual objects, such as the gamification of mathematical instruction (e.g. a bingo card with fractions rather than numbers), and physical manipulation of challenging concepts (e.g. cutting paper into stairs to learn the “rise and run” of a slope).

Survey respondents mentioned customizing their programs to reflect their learners’ culture and lived experiences within the context of LES programs, including integrating traditional food preparation within food and health literacy programs, and traditional approaches for emotional and spiritual healing. One respondent commented on the addition of *Indigenous healing circles* as part of their service delivery. Facilitated by Indigenous elders, the healing circles address addiction and substance abuse in culturally appropriate and supportive ways, before learners can move forward to literacy upgrading.

Survey respondents provided examples of innovative programs that have applied customization in various ways. The extent to which LES organizations have customized their learning programs to better meet the needs of their learners illustrates how valuable this approach has been in the delivery of LES upgrading. The following is a selection of the customized programs shared by respondents:

- ***Job Fit with a Twist:*** Trent Valley Literacy Association (TVLA) in Peterborough, Ontario offers this program to people with learning disabilities. Through small group delivery, the program teaches employment readiness skills to its participants. TVLA has since added a resiliency component to empower its learners to face adversity. Additionally, the program offers food to its learners to address a common problem with food insecurity.
- ***Les mardis à niveau:*** The *Cégep de l'Outaouais* offers its adult learners transitioning back to school with a weekly workshop intended to build their learning skills, a crucial support for adults moving towards postsecondary education. Every Tuesday evening for the first ten weeks of their program, adult students are invited to attend the workshops. Facilitators embed LES skills upgrading within practical learning strategies: how to take notes in class, how to work in a group, how to manage time effectively, how to prepare for exams, how to give an oral presentation, how to use writing tools more effectively, among others. The goal of the program is to minimize the learning barriers that prevent learners from successfully transitioning towards advanced education programs. In response to learners' positive feedback, facilitators have added an additional workshop every year since its inception.
- ***Strengthening Families Affected by Incarceration:*** The Canadian Families and Corrections Network (CFCN) organizes events to offer support and information to families who have had interactions with the judicial system. These events are always held in libraries across Canada to encourage families of offenders to connect with literacy, to build a relationship with their local library, and to support released offenders' reintegration through learning. The program also aims to raise awareness and inform the public about illiteracy rates afflicting incarcerated and released offenders.
- ***Magic Carpet Ride:*** Through the Magic Carpet Ride program, the CanLearn Society provides an opportunity for adults to learn how to support their children's learning, raise their own aspirations, and build their motivation and confidence to engage in further learning for themselves. The program focuses on developing intergenerational literacy upgrading by teaching adult learners basic literacy skills so that they can be empowered to transmit those skills to their children and break the cycle of poverty and low literacy.
- ***Money Matters:*** The Money Matters program is an example of a successful partnership in curriculum development and service delivery that addresses learner needs. Funded in part by TD Bank and delivered by volunteer TD employees across Canada, ABC Life Literacy worked with the bank to develop financial literacy learning materials for adult learners, as well as customized learning materials specifically for newcomers and for Indigenous peoples. The program materials use clear and plain language to cover basic banking concepts, such as spending plans, and ways to save and borrow money.

The experience of Money Matters also highlights the important contribution that expert volunteers make in delivering specialized learning programs to adult learners. Key informants involved in the development of the program commented on the impact that having volunteer instructors with subject matter expertise deliver specialized content can have on increasing learner confidence and their intent to change their behaviour.

“The fact that they’re volunteers raises what they’re saying as important. So we’re not telling them to do it, they’re choosing to do this as something they want to do, to give back to their community. You see this really generous education dynamic, where the learners tend to be more inclined to listen to them.”

Mack Rogers, ABC Literacy

Making programs more contextually relevant

Another area where LES organizations have been innovating is in the development of programs that are contextually relevant. Contextualized programs align learning activities, materials, and concepts to a specific subject matter or occupations in line with learners’ objectives. These programs enable learners to acquire the basic skills and knowledge they need to transition successfully into a specific occupation or education program. As the examples below illustrate, many of these programs also customize their learning materials to the needs of specific learner groups.

- ***Tourism and human resources in official language minority communities (OLMCs)***: The THR in OLMCs project is a contextualized pilot project developed by the *Coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes* (COFA). Started in 2017, the project has two main objectives: provide LES upgrading to adults with limited literacy skills and to francophone newcomers in minority language communities, and ensure the employability of low skilled adults and newcomers who seek to integrate into the tourism and hospitality labour market in Ontario. The training takes place over 16 weeks, including a three-week work placement. The content of the training is contextualized: learners are taught specific skills (LES, general skills, technical skills, and communication skills) that are necessary to succeed in the sector. Both the theory and practice components of the training prepare learners for one of either three occupations in the sector: hotel receptionist, food and beverage servers, and housekeeping.
- ***CIWA’s Workplace Services Training Programs***: The Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association (CIWA) offers a number of occupational learning programs to low skilled immigrant women in Calgary. These programs provide basic literacy upgrading that prepare women for specific occupations, including childcare workers, line cooks, food service, housekeeping, and retail occupations. CIWA works with employers to customize the curriculum to meet their needs. CIWA then develops learning materials that teach women specific vocabulary necessary for that occupation. For instance, CIWA often relies on picture dictionaries to illustrate actions and common objects in that occupation. The goal is to offer women with limited to no education the basic skills and qualifications they need to qualify for specific occupations with partner employers.

Areas for improvement

While LES service providers strive to provide high quality service delivery, there are nevertheless areas where improvements can be made and service delivery enhanced. Using the same five broad categories presented in the innovation section, respondents identified key program activity areas that are, in their opinion, in most need of improvement. An additional program activity area, *tracking outcomes and best practices*, was included for this question.

Respondents were asked to consider the learning and service delivery needs of specific groups of learners, including individuals with low incomes, individual who are unemployed or precariously employed, Indigenous people, persons with disabilities, newcomers to Canada, youth, seniors, incarcerated individuals or recently released offenders, and individuals from OLMCs.

The results suggest that respondents are most concerned with the awareness and accessibility of their services. Indeed, across all learner groups, awareness and accessibility issues require the most improvements. Respondents commented on the challenge they face when trying to find participants for their programs. Often, learners do not know where to go to access services, while communities that lack extensive networks between community organizations are unable to properly refer individuals to the right organizations. Further investment in outreach to expand learners' awareness of programs and in the development of creative delivery models to improve access and engagement in programming was a widely held priority among stakeholders.

According to survey respondents, awareness of services is the most significant challenge for programs provided to seniors. This finding is consistent with the experiences shared by key informants who work directly with seniors. Indeed, the biggest challenge they face is not the availability or quality of services, but merely making existing programs known to seniors in their communities.

“How are our senior centres going to actually get in touch with people that don't go to senior centres? What about the people that live in apartments and homes that rarely leave for whatever reason? Many of my clients with social assistance had low literacy. They're afraid to fill out forms. That might be for recreation, medical, any kind of form, they're afraid because they don't understand the terminology, whether it's online or paper. And quite often, the only way that you can actually [recruit seniors] is if you have community groups that touch base with seniors.”

Key informant

Seniors living in poverty often lack the social supports, including friendships and families that would otherwise assist them in accessing available social supports. Additionally, seniors with limited literacy and digital skills may not have the knowledge or ability to navigate government portals and social programs advertised online by themselves.

Some jurisdictions have started to address issues around awareness by providing unique access points, either in physical locations, online, or by phone. For instance, community service numbers, such as 311, or the health and social services information network 211 supported by the United

Way, offer individuals, including seniors, with an easy way to learn about social services that are available to them.

Beyond increasing awareness and accessibility of services, stakeholders were most concerned with improving participant engagement *during* programs and the availability of wrap-around supports following programs, especially for individuals with low incomes, the unemployed, and the precariously employed. Survey respondents suggested a number of approaches that could improve learner engagement throughout their program, including culturally appropriate materials, experiential learning and mentorship opportunities, and greater flexibility for instructors to customize learning materials.

Respondents also emphasized the need to improve customized programs for persons with disabilities, Indigenous people and newcomers to Canada. As previously mentioned, learners from cultural communities benefit from having access to culturally relevant materials. For smaller community organizations that are seeing an increasing number of new Canadians in their programs, adapting their materials and approaches to reflect the needs of their learners can be challenging and costly. The same is true for organizations working with Indigenous learners. However, the Canadian Career Development Foundation's (CCDF) First Nations, Inuit and Métis Essential Skills Inventory Project (FIMESIP) provides LES organizations access to a project inventory and case studies of successful and innovative essential skills projects for Indigenous learners (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2019).

Few respondents identified other areas in need of improvement for seniors' programs. While few respondents spoke directly to this point, LES programs for seniors tend to have objectives that are more practical (learning to use new technologies or learning to manage health care decisions), personal (learning to read or write for the first time) or social (meeting others in their community, addressing their social isolation) compared to programs targeting other learner groups.

Figure 15 below summarizes the survey findings across all intersecting categories, by areas of program activity and learner groups. The highest proportion of respondents are colour-coded in dark blue, the mid-point in yellow, and the lowest proportion in orange. In other words, areas in blue are those where most respondents believe improvements are needed, while areas in orange are where the least respondents believe improvements are needed.

Figure 15 Key areas for improvement for targeted groups of learners

	Awareness and accessibility of services	Participant Needs Assessment	Customized programming	Participant engagement during programs	Post-program wraparound supports	Tracking outcomes and best practices
Individuals with low incomes	72%	38%	39%	54%	50%	45%
Unemployed	70%	42%	39%	49%	47%	41%
Precariously employed	61%	38%	37%	41%	42%	37%
Persons with disabilities	59%	40%	47%	39%	34%	28%
Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Inuit, Métis)	55%	34%	43%	39%	36%	32%
Newcomers to Canada	56%	40%	43%	32%	34%	32%
Youth	50%	34%	35%	44%	33%	34%
Incarcerated individuals or recently released offenders	43%	30%	34%	33%	30%	31%
Seniors	48%	28%	34%	24%	16%	22%
Official language minorities	35%	21%	21%	17%	13%	17%

Legend



Effectiveness of literacy upgrading and poverty reduction programs

The variety of services and programs that are offered to adults living in poverty can be overwhelming for those with limited literacy skills. Adults who lack basic reading comprehension and digital skills may struggle as to how and where they can access services. Often, adults in need will access the social support system looking to address an immediate need, such as a shelter or a food bank. While essential, these temporary and short-term services only help alleviate a person's experience in poverty. Without a greater integration of poverty reduction supports and services, the existing network of poverty reduction programs will be ineffective in addressing the underlying causes of a person's poverty.

With a view towards improving the effectiveness of a poverty reduction strategy with LES upgrading at its core, survey respondents were asked to identify, from a list of 27 options, key priority areas where future investments could help foster greater service integration. Among the options respondents identified as important priority areas, they were then asked to rank the five most important priority areas.

Access and use of funding

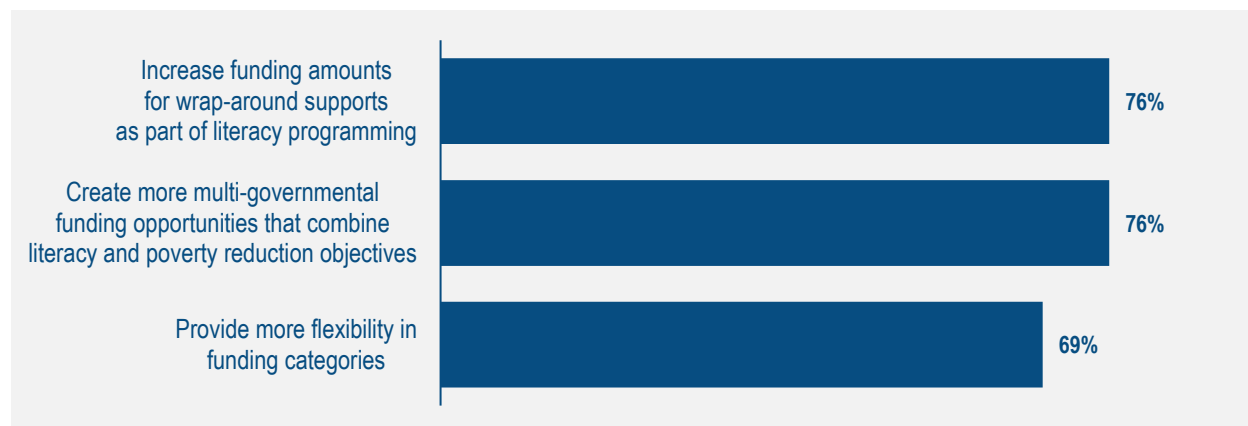
“Social assistance, the Ministry of Immigration, the Ministry of Education, etc., must invest in the enhancement of literacy skills by offering internal services or through greater collaboration with external service providers in order to provide their clientele the tools and services that are essential for their success in life and in work.”

Survey respondent

Across Canada, LES service providers receive funding from a variety of sources. Most receive support for their programs through dedicated provincial resources or from federal agencies, including project-based funding provided by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) or English as a Second Language (ESL) and *Français langue seconde* (FLS) programs funded by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Organizations also access financial and other supports from philanthropic foundations, employment centres, non-governmental organizations, and local community-based organizations (such as food banks, local emergency and homeless shelters, and clothing centres) that provide complementary services.

Survey respondents were asked to identify priority areas, how they access the funds they need, and the conditions tied to their use. Respondents overwhelmingly identified questions around access and use of funding as key priority areas. All three areas presented to survey respondents were identified as key priorities by over two-thirds of respondents. They include increasing funding for wrap-around supports (76 per cent), creating more opportunities for multi-governmental funding opportunities that combine literacy and poverty reduction objectives (76 per cent), and providing more flexibility for organizations to decide how to use their resources (69 per cent). Findings are presented in Figure 16 below.

Figure 16 Priority areas for access and use of funding



Respondents provided additional comments regarding the structure and availability of funding models for LES programs, particularly concerning project-based funding. Since 2014, OLES has adopted a project-based funding model instead of a core-funding model to encourage LES organizations to innovate and test new approaches to program delivery. By piloting new projects, organizations can help identify successful approaches to be scaled-up. However, this approach also means that organizations without core funding are unable to keep successful programs running after the project’s funding agreement ends. Many respondents also lamented that the cycle of project development and grant application for project funding reduces the amount of resources available to spend on LES instruction.

Coordination and partnerships

As previously discussed in this report, many LES organizations rely on partnerships with local service providers to offer additional services to their learners. These complementary services are often key to ensuring that learners have access to the services they need and allow service providers to streamline local service delivery.

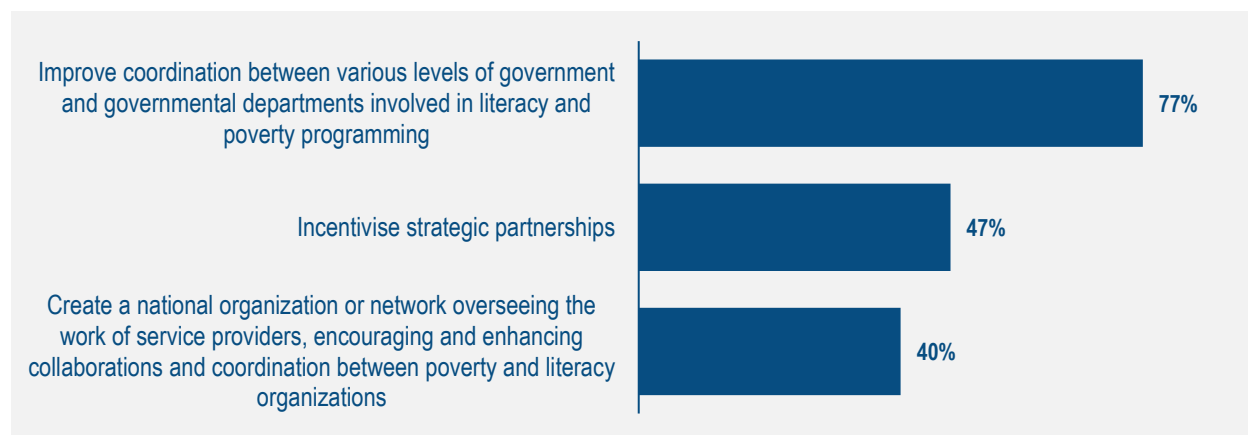
The survey presented respondents with three possible options to help improve the coordination of local service delivery while fostering greater partnerships between LES and poverty reduction organizations. The results of these findings are presented in Figure 17 below.

Respondents commented that service coordination is more valuable when it occurs at the local level rather than the national level. Less than half of survey respondents (40 per cent) felt that having a national organization oversee collaborations and service coordination between LES and poverty reduction organizations would be effective. Instead, the majority (77 per cent) cited greater intergovernmental coordination in the delivery of literacy and poverty programming as a crucial priority area.

Indeed, this finding echoes those from the previous section around access and use of funding. Respondents were clear that governments need to work more closely together—across levels and across departments—in order to better align their strategic objectives related to poverty and

literacy. In doing so, governments can make better use of existing funds, encourage the development of programs that are focused on integrated service delivery, and provide greater support to individuals living in poverty.

Figure 17 Priority areas to increase coordination and partnerships



Survey respondents identified a need to create and encourage processes and opportunities for community organizations to meet, liaise, and collaborate. However, some respondents cautioned that while local coordination and collaboration between poverty reduction programs, employment services, and literacy programs is essential, current funding structures actually encourage competition. With limited sources of funding available, organizations have to compete against potential partner organizations for the same grants. Many respondents blame the current funding structure as being responsible for creating an atmosphere that discourages collaboration.

Respondents identified an important role for the federal government in improving the coordination of services through knowledge and information sharing across jurisdictions. Indeed, many programs are being developed and tested across the country, but in the absence of a federal body to disseminate findings across jurisdictions, lessons learned remain unshared. Organizations risk duplicating their efforts in program development rather than investing finite resources into proven strategies, successful programs, and existing tools.

Integration of social, poverty, and LES services

“It should be set up that a person comes into the door at [Literacy and Basic Skills] and all the other services are filtered through there. The LBS service providers have the best understanding of not only what is available but the ability to completely assess what is required.”

Survey respondent

The structure of existing poverty reduction LES upgrading programs can be challenging for low-skilled adults. Indeed, government-funded programs tend to be delivered in silos, with

responsibility and governance over programs managed within separate departments, each with their own overarching objectives that cut across their slate of programs. The result is a heavily layered system of services and supports, with multiple access points. Individuals in need of services must therefore navigate these systems and find the appropriate access points to programs for which they qualify.

Some service providers across Canada are attempting to minimize confusion across the system in order to increase access to programs. For example, COFA is currently piloting a single-window service centre that provides francophone minorities with information, skills assessment, and referrals. The single-window approach intends to reduce the burden on learners by assessing their needs and directing them to the services they need.

« The Adult Education and Training Partnerships (PEFA) for Francophones are piloting the Prototype of the virtual centre of information, evaluation, and referral (CIEA) project that we are implementing in northern Ontario and eventually in the East and in the Centre-South-West is aiming to do just that. That is to say, a one-stop shop that will allow a francophone adult to access different types of services that can eventually respond to their needs and their personal goals, whether it be access to work, a return to school, autonomy, etc.»

Michel Robillard, Coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes

Having a strong network of partner agencies is an important tool for effective referrals. Nevertheless, respondents were clear that greater service integration—at the policy level as much as at the program delivery level—is essential to improving the quality of service delivery for LES upgrading programs and poverty reduction services. As previously noted, organizations cannot provide the entire range of services their learners need alone, nor do they have the resources available to do so.

Indeed, funding agreements between governments and LES service providers often hinder practitioners' abilities to respond to the needs of their learners. The rigidity of funding agreements limit the scope of their activities to those directly linked to skills upgrading services. As one respondent commented, the current funding structure may “promote inter-agency competition” rather than rewarding partnership development across departments. Greater policy integration and coordination across departments within federal, provincial, and territorial governments, as well as across levels of government, could help direct resources towards greater integration of services for adult learners.

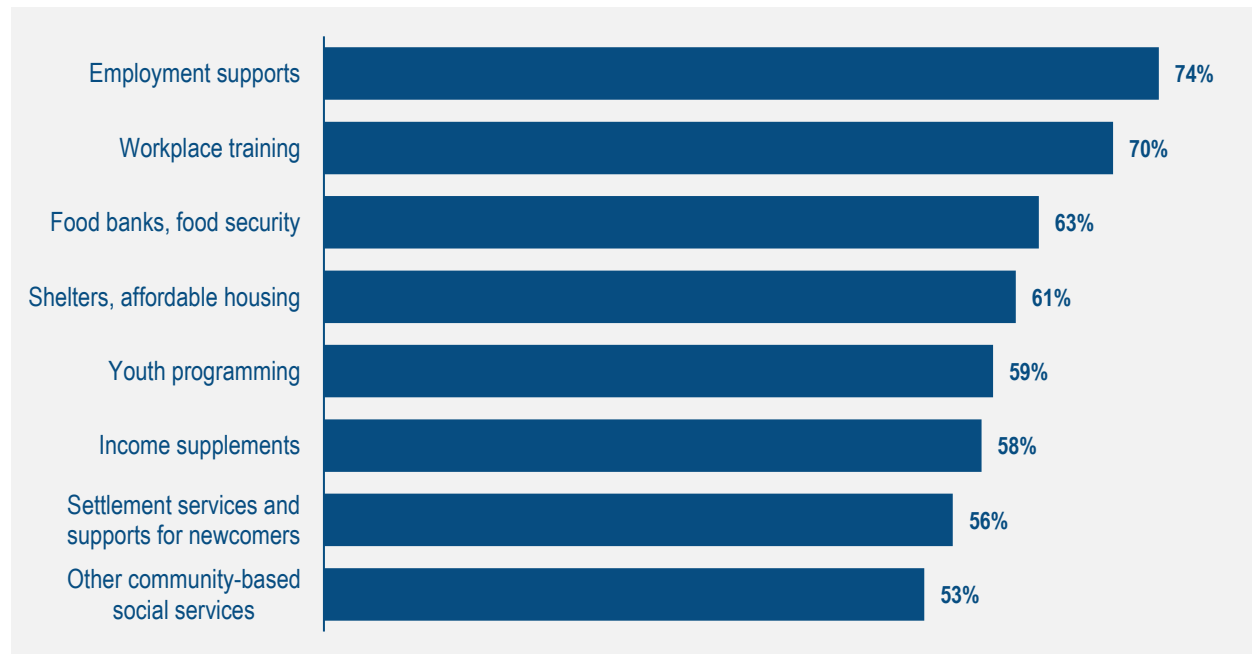
There are promising examples of integrated service delivery at the policy level in Canada. The Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) is supporting collaborative projects for adult learners through its Education's Regional Partnerships for Adult Education (RPAEs). Each of the province's RPAE were allocated funding of up to \$100,000 for 2017-2018 to invest towards new or existing programs that “improve collaboration in the adult education system and foster more seamless and learner-centred program and service delivery for adults” (Government of Ontario, 2018). The project-based funding model sought to encourage local service integration and collaboration between services for adult learners, including Literacy and Basic Skills programs, settlement agencies, and municipal Ontario Works providers.

The majority of survey respondents were supportive of integrating all suggested poverty reduction programs with LES services. Most respondents identified employment supports (74 per cent) and workplace training (70 per cent) as those that should be prioritized for an integrated approach. Indeed, many LES organizations are collaborating with employment services to help their learners with employment and employability skills, such as resume writing, mock interviews, and work readiness skills.

A majority of respondents also identified poverty reduction programs that target basic needs, including those that address food insecurity (63 per cent), housing (61 per cent), and income supplements (58 per cent), as being apt for service integration. As previously noted, practitioners are often the first to identify basic needs through an intake assessment and will often refer their learners to organizations that provide these services. However, some organizations are working with their partner organizations to integrate supports within a single location, including access to food.

Fewer respondents identified settlement services and supports for newcomers as a key priority area for service integration. However, survey respondents commented that support services geared towards the LGBTQ community, especially for refugees and trauma survivors, are lacking in many areas and could indeed be integrated within a broader LES mandate. The full breakdown of survey responses are found in Figure 18.

Figure 18 Priority areas for further integration of LES services with other poverty reduction programs and supports



Assessment and evaluation

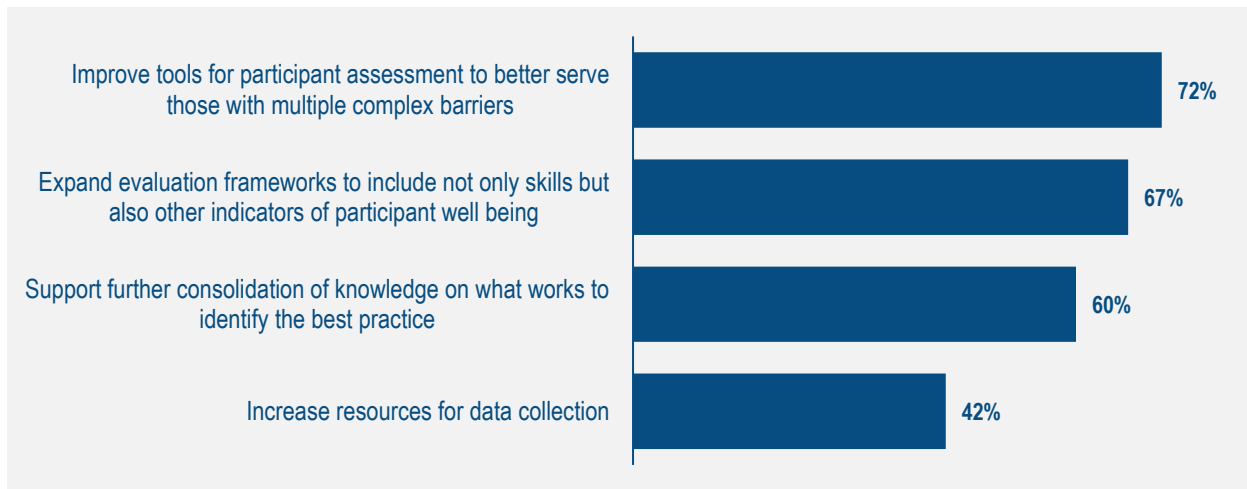
“Provide more tools for assessment training. Better align evaluations with learner goals and community needs. Less reporting and data collection for agencies providing the services.”

Survey respondent

Skills assessments and program evaluations are key tools in determining the effectiveness of LES and poverty reduction activities. Having well-designed evaluation instruments can help service providers better understand where they are having the most significant impact and where they should be investing more of their time and resources. Figure 19 illustrates that most respondents (72 per cent) believe that these tools need to be improved to better service multi-barriered individuals. Many key informants working with learners with limited LES spend a considerable amount of their time removing barriers to learning. Assessments that solely measure gains in reading, writing, and other LES often fail to capture other successes.

Indeed, many respondents were clear that skill development is only one component of their learners’ overall development, in addition to increasing their self-confidence, attitude towards learning, overall wellbeing, and community involvement. Two-thirds of survey respondents (67 per cent) identified a need to expand the evaluation framework to better reflect the work that they do in building life skills and psychological capital.

Figure 19 Priority areas for assessment and evaluation



Over 40 per cent of respondents believe that more resources should be allocated towards data collection. However, respondents also cautioned against the negative effect that evaluations could have on their learners’ self-worth and on their progress, particularly, when onerous skill testing can have a discouraging effect on learners who face a number of challenges. Assessment tools that emphasize outcomes that do not align the personal learning objectives may seem confusing to the learner.

Outreach and education

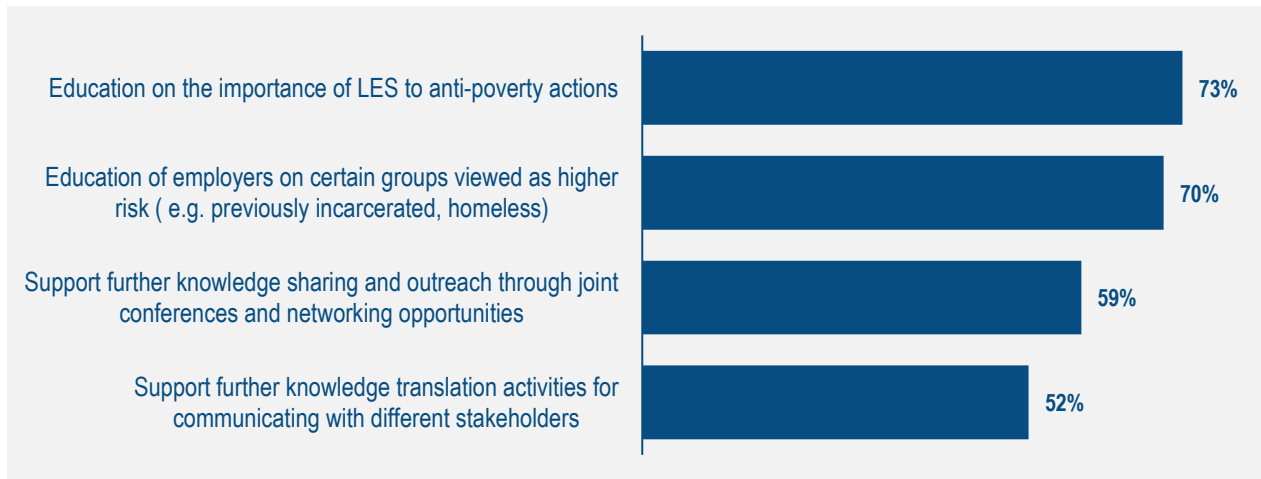
A persistent challenge for many practitioners working with individuals living in poverty is informing the public and employers on the abilities of their learners, as well as sharing information about their work with others in their field. For most survey respondents, the most important priority area is increasing education that informs the public on the importance that LES upgrading contributes towards supporting poverty reduction actions (73 per cent). Community outreach enables other support organizations to understand their roles and their contribution towards a common goal, however, survey respondents and key informants identified that the lack of awareness of what exists in their community hinders meaningful collaboration.

“If you are not in the circle of poverty and employed you may not know what programming exists in the community that supports individuals at risk.”

Survey respondent

Additionally, to ensure that poverty reduction programs are sustained in the long-term, more work needs to be done to educate employers about multi-barriered individuals who are more likely to experience poverty, including individuals with a criminal record and the homeless or precariously housed. Respondents were clear that outreach with employers is important to ensure employment opportunities for their learners, but that more work needs to be done to ensure that employers are empowered to engage with community organizations in a concerted effort to provide learners with opportunities to exit poverty.

Figure 20 Priority areas for outreach and education on literacy and poverty issues



In order to increase education and outreach about poverty, community-based LES service providers have adopted strategies that allow people with various lived experiences to talk about the causes and consequences of living in poverty. Some organizations discussed integrating the Bridges out of Poverty framework within their program development. Bridges out of Poverty encourages organizations and communities to develop strategies and programs that contribute towards policy

changes and poverty reduction. A key principle of the framework is that everyone in the community has a role to play to reduce poverty, and therefore, everyone should be involved in poverty reduction efforts. The framework emphasizes the importance of creating a dialogue between individuals living in poverty and their community's middle-class residents in order to raise awareness and find community-based solutions that provide meaningful opportunities for everyone to contribute.

The Almaguin Adult Learning Centre operating in Powassan, South River, and Burks Falls, Ontario, encouraged its instructors to attend a Bridges out of Poverty workshop. The Centre has since created roundtable discussions, *Getting Ahead in the Getting by World*, to unite members of the community and share information about what living in poverty is like. Randie Doornink, the program leader and a key informant in the project, talked about the transformative effect that outreach and information sharing about the experience and causes of poverty, and possible solutions to poverty has had on the community:

“Some of the discussions got a little heated, but the amount of information sharing and the amount of connections that happened was amazing. Some of the older ones looking at a 20 something who literally goes to sleep every night worrying about whether there's food tomorrow. It's like, ‘Wow, that's happening in my community?’ So they've actually taken that information to their cohorts and shared it around and it's those kinds of discussions that I think, in the long-run, will make the biggest difference.”

Randie Doornink, Almaguin Adult Learning Centre

Analysis by subgroups

Subgroup analyses were conducted to uncover differences across regions of the country (Western Canada, Ontario, Québec, Atlantic Canada, and Northern Canada) and across learner groups. The importance of these analyses are two-fold. First, it is imperative that the needs and priorities of respondents from predominant groups in the sample do not mask those of smaller groups. Also, to ensure that future investments towards LES programming are effective, it is important that differences in priorities and needs of organizations working in different regions and with different groups of learners are taken into account.

Analysis of survey data according to subgroups focused on key indicators that would be of interest for regions and for learner groups. Specifically, subgroup analyses attempted to identify any differences in the availability of wrap-around supports, delivery models, innovations in program delivery, and priority areas to improve the effectiveness of LES and poverty reduction programs.

Very few differences emerged between organizations working in different regions of the country, and in some cases, no differences at all. Supports prioritized by service providers to their learners were consistent across the country, with very subtle differences identified, but none that differentiated substantively from the national portrait.

Analyses by specific learner groups uncovered relative consistency and agreement across all variables assessed. Indeed, analyses suggest that across all learner groups, there are similar and consistent priorities and values regarding how future investments into LES programming should be

made. The largest differences were seen in organizations serving incarcerated or recently released offenders, those serving Indigenous Peoples, and persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, differences were subtle and priority areas did not diverge substantially compared to those of organizations servicing other learner groups.

The most significant differences were found in the types of services that LES organizations provide to support their learners. The complete results of this analysis can be found in Figure 21. Key highlights are summarized below.

- Organizations working with incarcerated or recently released offenders differed considerably in the types of services and supports they offer to their learners compared to organizations servicing other groups of learners. In particular, they are substantially more likely to provide counselling services (58.8 per cent), mental health supports (52.9 per cent), trauma-informed care (52.9 per cent), addictions counselling, and legal advice to learners (29.4 per cent). They are also less likely to offer personalized learning plans (41.2 per cent, compared to 58.6 per cent to 74.2 per cent of organizations working with other groups of learners).
- Similarly, organizations working with Indigenous Peoples were also more likely to provide counselling services (44 per cent) and mental health supports (42 per cent) compared to other organizations. These organizations are also more likely to provide physical health programs (28 per cent) than other organizations.
- Organizations working with Persons with disabilities were generally comparable to other organizations in terms of the services and supports they prioritize, however a larger proportion of these organizations in relation to others provide their learners with information and guidance on the educational options (78.7 per cent) and transportation supports to access LES programs (78.7 per cent). These organizations were also more likely to provide continuous support to their learners after the completion of the program (51.1 per cent).
- Service providers targeting all three groups of learners (incarcerated/released offenders, persons with disabilities, and Indigenous Peoples) were all more likely to provide guidance in navigating and applying to government services, with 70.6 per cent, 70.2 per cent, and 68 per cent of responding organizations, respectively, offering these services to their learners.

Figure 21 Subgroup analysis of supports available to learner groups

	Offenders	Indigenous Peoples	Persons with disabilities	Low-income	Unemployed	Low-skilled	Seniors	Youth	OLMCs	Newcomers
Provide information and guidance on the educational options	64.7%	70.0%	78.7%	69.0%	75.4%	71.9%	72.4%	60.3%	65.2%	59.6%
Provide personalized learning plans	41.2%	66.0%	70.2%	73.1%	73.8%	74.2%	58.6%	58.8%	69.6%	63.2%
Provide transportation, such as bus tickets	52.9%	58.0%	78.7%	64.1%	69.0%	65.6%	55.2%	57.4%	47.8%	59.6%
Tailor services to the specifics of participants' culture	52.9%	64.0%	59.6%	51.0%	52.4%	51.6%	34.5%	54.4%	52.2%	49.1%
Guidance in navig. and appl. to government programs/subsidies	70.6%	68.0%	70.2%	53.8%	57.1%	55.5%	44.8%	48.5%	47.8%	42.1%
Provide meals or snacks	58.8%	66.0%	61.7%	51.7%	48.4%	51.6%	51.7%	54.4%	39.1%	38.6%
Provide pre-employment or job placement services	64.7%	46.0%	42.6%	44.1%	45.2%	42.2%	37.9%	41.2%	34.8%	42.1%
Provide continuous support after the completion of the program	29.4%	36.0%	51.1%	35.9%	37.3%	35.2%	27.6%	33.8%	34.8%	33.3%
Provide counselling services	58.8%	44.0%	29.8%	33.8%	30.2%	32.0%	34.5%	30.9%	26.1%	22.8%
Provide financial supports	17.6%	30.0%	31.9%	25.5%	24.6%	25.0%	27.6%	27.9%	26.1%	19.3%
Free or subsidized childcare services	11.8%	34.0%	31.9%	30.3%	33.3%	28.1%	24.1%	16.2%	13.0%	26.3%
Mental health supports	52.9%	42.0%	19.1%	21.4%	17.5%	20.3%	13.8%	22.1%	17.4%	8.8%
Provide trauma-informed care	52.9%	26.0%	12.8%	13.8%	14.3%	14.1%	6.9%	19.1%	13.0%	8.8%
Physical health programs	17.6%	28.0%	12.8%	13.8%	12.7%	14.1%	13.8%	16.2%	17.4%	10.5%
Provide addiction counselling	35.3%	24.0%	6.4%	8.3%	8.7%	8.6%	6.9%	8.8%	4.3%	1.8%
Provide housing or shelter services	17.6%	20.0%	8.5%	9.7%	8.7%	8.6%	13.8%	10.3%	4.3%	7.0%
Provide legal advice	29.4%	10.0%	4.3%	5.5%	5.6%	5.5%	3.4%	4.4%	4.3%	5.3%

Post-upgrading transitions

Skills upgrading is most effective when learners are given the opportunity to articulate their personal learning objectives and have been given an individualized plan to achieve those objectives. A learner's objectives are often tied to his or her next steps—what they plan to do following the completion of their LES program. They can be personal and specific—the desire to read to one's grandchildren or the capacity to understand government forms—or they can be broad and long-term—completing the prerequisites for a postsecondary program or accessing the labour market for the first time.

Post-upgrading transitions to pursue education programs or to enter the labour market can often be fraught with challenges and barriers, often the same barriers that prevented a learner from accessing programs in the first place. Developing and delivering post-program supports that address these barriers is necessary to ensuring that learners can successfully transition towards their goals.

Transition to education programs

In many jurisdictions across Canada, basic LES upgrading is a foundational program within a broader education system. By embedding basic skills upgrading within a broader system of learning, participants can move through the education system seamlessly and at their own pace. To facilitate their learning, basic adult literacy programs are often delivered in stages or levels that correspond to grade levels within the formal education system. Skills gained and credits earned are then recognized throughout the system to encourage learners to access further education, whether it be obtaining their high school GED, accessing additional skills training programs, or going on to postsecondary education.

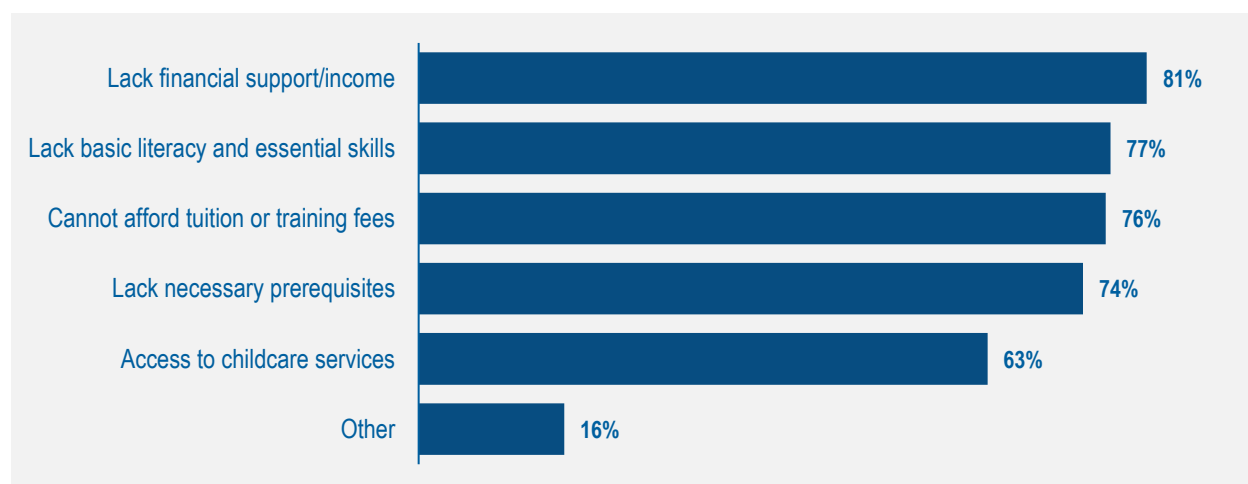
Learners face a number of challenges when attempting to move towards specialized learning programs. Survey respondents identified lack of financial support and income as the most significant barrier (81 per cent). Indeed, low-skilled adults living in poverty often lack the resources to pay for tuition or other fees, including textbooks and supplies (76 per cent). For some, choosing school over work can be a difficult choice, one that requires prioritizing long-term benefits ahead of their family's short-term needs, a choice that is often difficult to make. For parents with children, the lack of access to affordable childcare prevents them from pursuing advanced education programs (63 per cent).

Additionally, survey respondents commented on how limited LES can create barriers for some learners (77 per cent). Indeed, learners may lack the skills needed to navigate the postsecondary system, including how to apply to programs and how to apply for student assistance. Others may lack the skills to learn how to learn, including proper studying skills. Respondents also commented that some learners lack the necessary prerequisites to qualify for postsecondary programs (74 per cent).

For many adults, basic adult literacy programs provide a way to re-enter the education system following a prolonged absence and the barrier may be psychological in nature. Indeed, some adult learners may have had negative experiences in formal education systems and may even be wary of

formal education programs. Many respondents commented that the lack of self-esteem and self-confidence due to trauma or negative experiences tied to personal failure in formal education settings discourage learners from taking that next step. Many learners may also lack the resilience they need to overcome challenges that come up in their courses, cope with changes in expectations, or manage stress.

Figure 22 Barriers to advanced education



Transition to the labour market

Increasing the labour market participation of individuals living in poverty has been seen as an effective tool in reducing the incidence of poverty. However, a number of structural challenges may prevent low-skilled adults from transitioning into Canada’s labour market. The economic context in which these programs operate has a great deal of influence in moving individuals with limited skills out of poverty. The demand by employers for low-skilled labour and the quality of the jobs available to low-skilled workers (i.e. permanent, full-time jobs), will inevitably determine whether they can successfully transition out of poverty.

As the national economy shifts towards a knowledge economy, demand for high skilled labour is expected to increase. Some economists estimate that by 2031 more than three-quarters of Ontario's workers will require postsecondary degrees (Literacy Link South Central, 2014). The decreasing availability of low-skilled jobs poses a problem for adults with limited literacy skills who seek to enter the labour market following LES upgrading. Those who do find employment are more likely to be employed in precarious, temporary, or part-time jobs (Lewchuk, et. al., 2013). Indeed, encouraging low-skilled adults to enter the labour market, often by accepting low-paying jobs with few options for career growth, fails to address the underlying causes of unemployment, which are often due to a lack of skills needed to succeed in the labour market (Butterwick, 2010).

Literacy programs that take into account the needs of employers and are responsive to local demand for skills can help facilitate labour market transitions for low-skilled learners. Indeed, adult literacy and skills upgrading programs that are developed with a view towards employment can be

effective in reducing the number of people living in poverty. While not every adult with low literacy skills is ready or able to transition to the labour market, for learners who aim to enter the labour market, the best approach is to teach them the skills that can help them get and keep a job.

Surprisingly, less than half of the National Research Project's survey respondents work with employers in any way that benefits their learners. Among the service providers who engage with employers, most (24 per cent) are looking to establish a network of employers who can provide their learners with a future work placement.

Nevertheless, some LES service providers have worked with employers to customize curricula in ways that meet their needs. A primary example of this is the Essential Skills for Aboriginal Futures (ESAF) training lab, part of the federally funded Aboriginal Community and Career Employment Services Society (ACCESS). ESAF provides customized occupational training programs to urban Indigenous learners in Westminister, British Columbia. ESAF has worked with over 18 local employers that are able to employ learners. Working in partnership with the employer, ESAF identifies the key skills that learners need to succeed in an occupation with that employer.

“What we do is we partner with an employer who has capacity to hire new employees and is willing to come on-board and work with us. We don't say ‘we need you to guarantee jobs,’ but ‘can you guarantee us interviews for each participant and that suitable candidates will be considered for employment?’ The employers work very closely with us in the curriculum development and often present their corporate presentations to the class and provide us with tours of their work environment.”

Cori Thunderchild, Essential Skills for Aboriginal Futures (ESAF)

Learners are not only taught occupationally specific LES, but also information about the employer and relevant contextual information about the field. The underlying strategy is that learners are not only engaged in a learning program; they are preparing for their interview with their potential future employer.

“Right from the beginning, day one we tell the participants that ‘Today is the first day of your interview.’ Then, in the last week of the 8-week program, after all our training is completed, the employer's HR person will come in and conduct mock interviews with the participants, review their resume, and give them feedback.

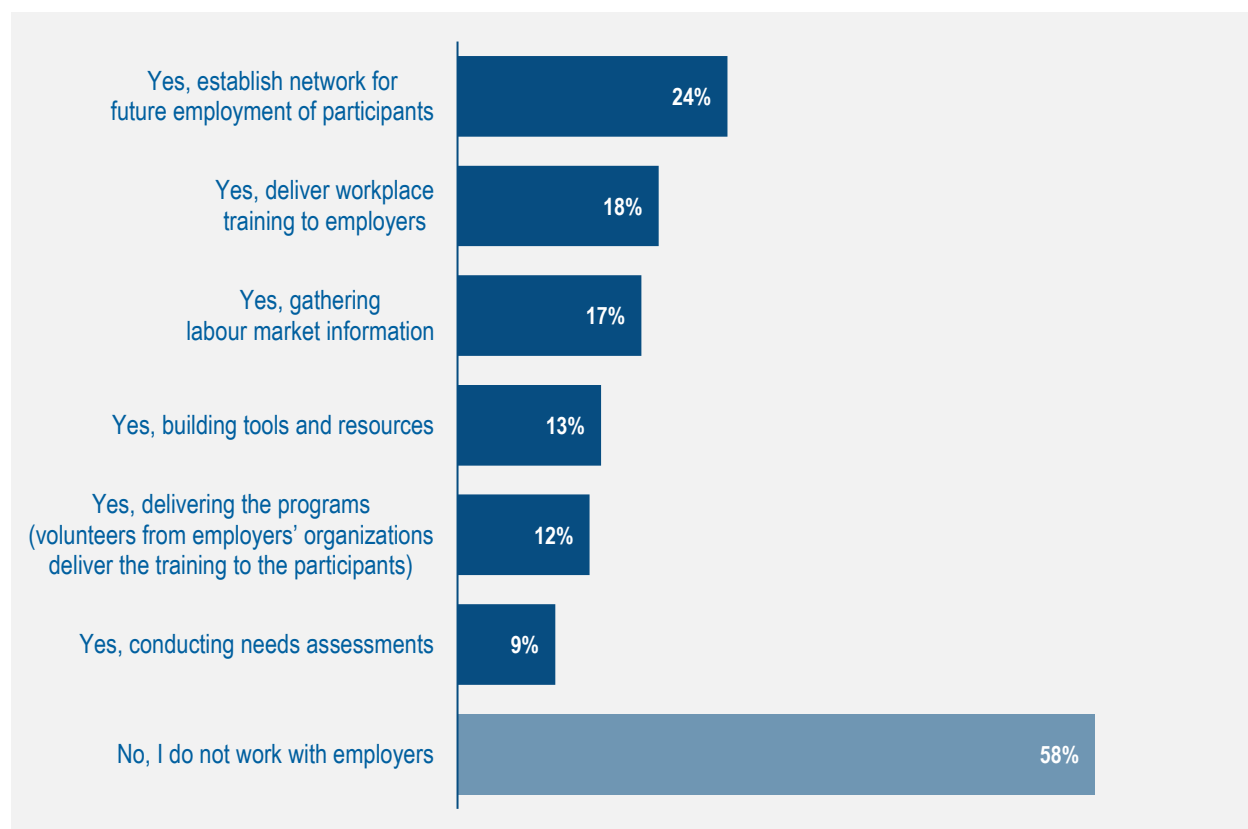
“Then the participants attend an actual scheduled panel interview. The folks that are on that interview panel do not know that these interviewees were students in ACCESS Essential Skills program. So therefore they are not biased at all in the interview process but rather amazed at how well-informed and prepared the interviewees are.”

Cori Thunderchild, Essential Skills for Aboriginal Futures (ESAF)

By teaching their learners the core LES needed for a specific job, they achieve two objectives: they increase the likelihood that their learners will succeed in the labour market, and they create a reliable and employable pool of well-trained workers for a specific partner employer. Evaluations

of ESAF outcomes are indicative of its success: 78 per cent placement rate, 90 per cent program completion rate, as well as increased self-confidence and self-awareness, and employer satisfaction (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2018).

Figure 23 Proportion of respondents who engage with employers in various ways



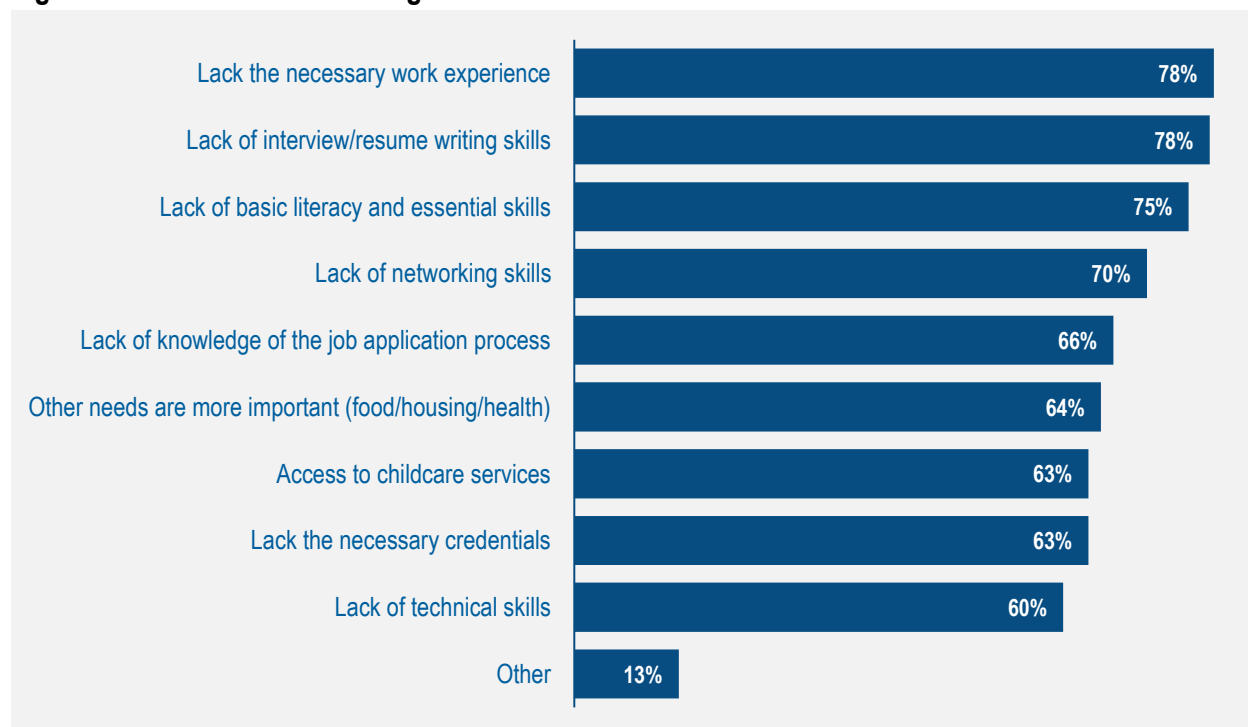
Barriers to labour market

The transition to the labour market can be challenging for individuals living in poverty. For many, the barriers that prevented them from accessing LES upgrading may also prevent them from getting and keeping work. As such, supporting learners through this transition by understanding and removing the barriers that prevent them from succeeding in the labour market should be an integral part of a poverty reduction strategy.

Respondents were asked to identify which barriers their learners most often face when attempting to transition towards employment. Respondents cited the lack of employability skills and work readiness as the primary barriers preventing transitions to employment. Indeed, most respondents see the lack of necessary work experience (78 per cent), the lack of interview or resume writing skills (78 per cent), the lack of networking skills (70 per cent), and the lack of knowledge about the job application process (66 per cent) as significant barriers for their learners' transition to the labour market.

In terms of skills needed by the labour market, three-quarters of respondents (75 per cent) identified low LES as a problem for their learners. This result points to the fact that building LES is a multi-phase process that involves progressive, evolving learning plans, as skills and self-confidence increase. Even after completing their learning plans, learners may still require skills upgrading as they target new goals and objectives. Additionally, not having the necessary technical skills was deemed to be of lesser concern compared to other barriers, but was nevertheless identified by a majority of respondents (60 per cent).

Figure 24 Barriers to accessing the labour market



Outcomes and indicators of success

“Service delivery quality depends on continuous program review and improvement, so we are also working on innovation in program impact evaluation. Over the last two years we have been involved in developing an impact framework and Key Performance Indicators, refining data collection tools and processes, and enhancing practices for reporting, accountability, and knowledge mobilization to inform and support other organizations, programs, and participants.”

Survey respondent

The National Research Project set out to identify new and innovative LES programs that have demonstrated a level of success across a number of outcomes of interest. Part of that process is determining how organizations measure the success of their programs and what outcomes they are

hoping to change over the course of their interventions. Respondents in the national survey and in key informant interviews were asked to discuss how they evaluate their programs and to identify the measures they consider the most significant indicators of success.

Nearly all respondents (84 per cent) collect outcomes data on their participants. Indeed, for organizations that receive government funding, there is an obligation to report on the progress and skill development of learners. In some jurisdictions, reporting and monitoring processes are highly regulated. However, many respondents commented that these measures do not always correspond to the objectives of their learners and to the activities of their practitioners.

“We are learning to walk a fine line between what our learners' goals and aspirations are, what measurable things are, and what the ministry's measurable things are. They are very disconnected.”

Key informant

In order to improve the quality of program evaluations, survey respondents were asked to identify what they consider to be measures of success their programs. Overwhelmingly, respondents identified improvements in psychological capital, including higher self-confidence (82 per cent) and positive attitude towards learning (76 per cent) as being the primary indicators of success. In fact, respondents in both the survey and interviews emphasized the importance of changing their learner's self-confidence, resilience, and attitudes towards learning. Indeed, for many respondents, LES upgrading is fundamentally about changing a person's psychology first. Improvements in attitudes and self-confidence contribute to a person's ability to learn.

“Government forgets about self-confidence. It forgets about some of the things that are harder to measure. But any practitioner would say that as you see confidence increase, you can see basic skills increase.”

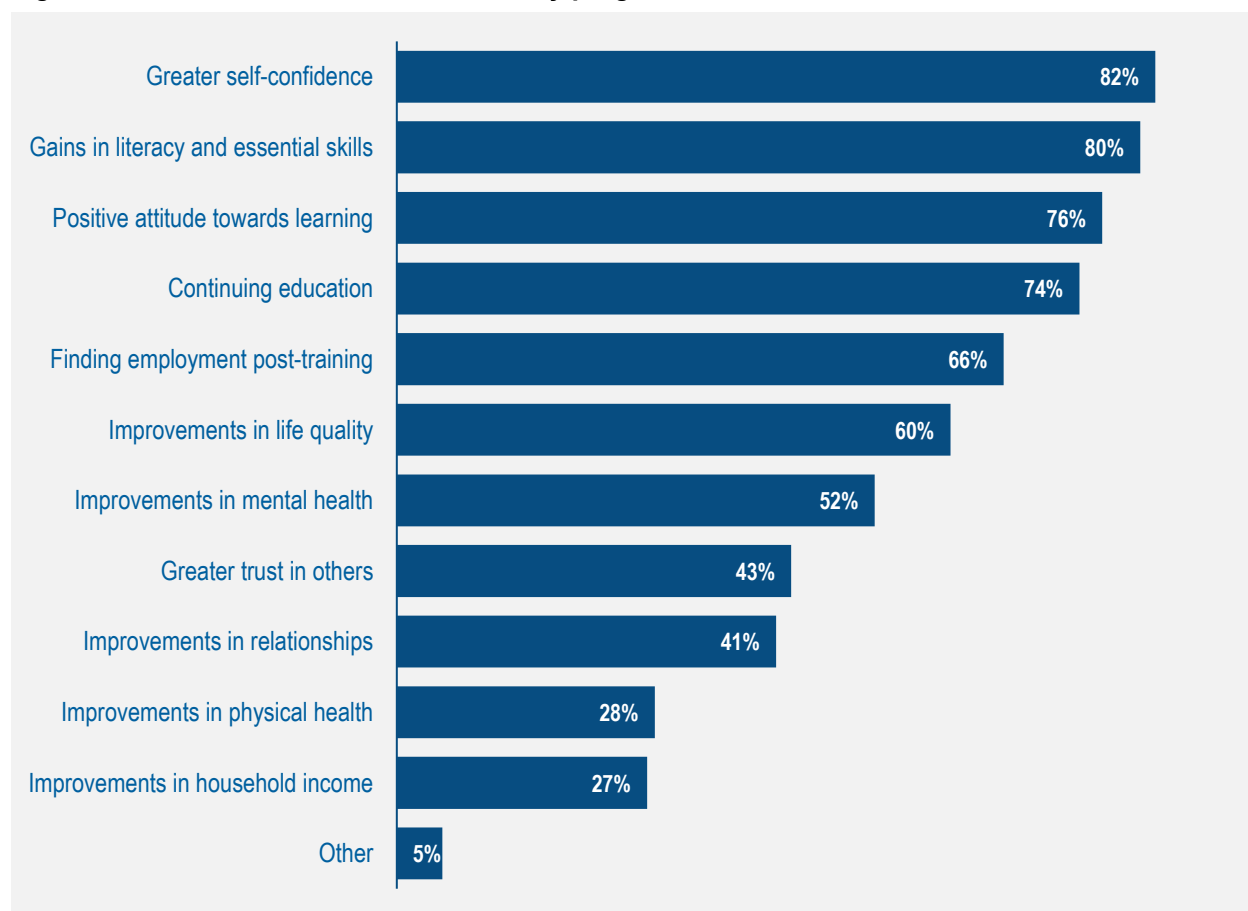
Key informant

In nearly equal measure, respondents consider improvements in human capital, assessed through skill gains, as a key indicator of success (80 per cent). Additionally, successful transitions, either through enrollment in education programs (74 per cent) or through employment (66 per cent), are important indicators of the program's success. Roughly a quarter of respondents (27 per cent) consider changes in a person's household income—a sign of greater economic integration and a potential indicator of economic independence—as an important indicator of success. This finding is indeed consistent with the priorities of many LES service providers whose learners are far-removed from the labour market. Labour market integration may be a longer-term objective for some learners, but not a direct outcome of basic LES upgrading.

LES upgrading can have a positive effect on an individual's life through multiple channels. Indeed, while LES upgrading aims to enhance an individual's skills and increase their employability, LES upgrading can also help individuals build relationships through interactions with others in their community. For some respondents, changes in a learner's social capital, including increased trust in others (43 per cent) and improved relationships (41 per cent) are important indicators of their program's success.

Finally, a majority of respondents identified changes in a person’s health and well-being, including improvements in their quality of life (60 per cent) and in their mental health (52 per cent) as indicators of success. However, relatively fewer respondents identified changes in physical health (28 per cent) as an important measure of success. Indeed, few literacy interventions include physical health and exercise as part of their programming, which may explain why few respondents view changes in physical health as an indicator of success.

Figure 25 Indicators of success for literacy programs



Respondents were asked to comment on what they consider to be the long-term effects their programs have on their past participants. Most respondents echoed the importance that improvements in self-confidence, self-esteem, and attitude towards learning have over the long term. Indeed, most respondents identified positive changes in psychological capital as being the most important long-term positive impact of their programs. This extends to their confidence to learn new things, to have greater autonomy, and to have the resilience to persevere in school and in work.

“Building relationships and knowing they can come in at any time for anything and we will help. The positive empowerment we offer is off the charts in [Literacy and Basic Skills]. We are the cheerleaders and support for the learners. We offer them something they never have experienced and [they] learn to trust and allow us into their circle.”

Survey respondent

Summary and Recommendations

The *National Research Project on Literacy as a Poverty Reduction Strategy* offers important insights into the links between literacy and essential skills upgrading for low-skilled adults and poverty reduction strategies in Canada.

Key stakeholders involved in the development and delivery of literacy and essential skills (LES) programs across Canada shared their opinions, thoughts, and experiences to help identify where future investments in LES programs would be most effective in lifting low-skilled adults out of poverty. Other stakeholders, including policy makers in government, practitioners and researchers working for non-governmental poverty reduction organizations, and community groups working in partnership with literacy organizations, contributed to a comprehensive understanding of literacy programming and its importance in poverty reduction.

Over the course of the study, practitioners were clear that their work is at the forefront of Canada's efforts to reduce the incidence of poverty. Low-skilled adults are more likely to experience poverty and are less likely to be active in the labour market. In addition, adults living in poverty often face a number of challenges in their lives that contribute to their social and civic exclusion. Findings from the National Research Project clearly show that literacy practitioners are well aware of their role in addressing not only their learners' skills, but also the barriers that limit their potential.

LES practitioners provided important insights into the kinds of programs that are available in Canada today to help support adult learners with low literacy skills living in poverty. The national survey allowed respondents to identify areas where their programs are innovating, where improvements are still needed, and how service providers can best support transitions from LES upgrading to education and employment.

Summary of findings

The National Research Project' findings are the culmination of extensive consultations with policy makers, national and regional literacy associations, services providers, researchers, poverty reduction organizations, and learners involved in literacy programming and poverty reduction programs across Canada.

Key Finding 1: There is a clear and well-established relationship between literacy skills and the experience of poverty

Literacy proficiency and the experience of poverty are intrinsically linked. Correlational studies have demonstrated the positive relationship between earnings and literacy skills. Adults with low literacy skills are also less likely to be employed and tend to stay unemployed for longer periods. Beyond correlational studies, recent evidence clearly demonstrates that literacy upgrading has large positive impacts on not only skills but also improved job performance, increased employment, higher earnings, and longer-term job retention.

Literacy can also improve the quality of a person's life and alleviate the symptoms of poverty. Literacy skills can help individuals make better decisions about how to manage their finances, how

to manage their health, how to use technology, and how to understand the institutions that govern their lives, which in turn allows them to engage more fully. Literacy is a key step on the pathway to not only employment but also to broader social inclusion and full participation in valued-dimensions of society such as social, civic, and political engagement that are critical to the inclusion and well-being of all Canadians. Addressing the skills needs of adults living in poverty is a necessary step towards lifting them out of poverty.

Key Finding 2: Single-access points can reduce the challenges inherent in navigating poverty reduction programs and services

Federal, provincial, and territorial governments offer a comprehensive menu of poverty reduction programs for low-income adults and their families. However, program silos often add a layer of complexity that can limit the kinds of services offered by LES providers. Additionally, having to navigate a system with multiple access points is an additional barrier for adults with low-literacy skills.

Literacy practitioners see themselves as trusted advocates who can help learners navigate and access the programs they need. Some LES practitioners commented that they are often the first access point for adults living in poverty.

Nevertheless, many practitioners believe that structural changes are needed. Indeed, the majority of stakeholders (77 per cent) identified greater intergovernmental coordination in the delivery of literacy and poverty programming as a crucial priority.

Key Finding 3: Strong partnerships between local literacy and essential skills (LES) and poverty reduction service providers can improve access to needed services

Individuals living in poverty often face a number of barriers, both structural and personal in nature, that prevent them from accessing and completing literacy upgrading programs. Sustainable and reciprocal partnerships between LES service providers and poverty reduction organizations at the community level are necessary to ensure that learners receive the services and supports they need.

Respondents confirmed that their learners face a number of barriers, most often linked to their experience in poverty. The most common barriers include a lack of access to reliable transportation to and from LES upgrading programs (80 per cent), previous negative experiences with learning (80 per cent), and access to affordable childcare while attending skills upgrading programs (77 per cent).

Respondents were clear that any effort to increase literacy skills must be coupled with necessary supports and services that alleviate the burden of poverty and remove barriers to learning. However, LES service providers do not always have the capacity to deliver additional supports to learners. Among the services that are provided directly to learners, LES practitioners tend to focus on areas that advance their learners' progress in skills upgrading programs, including the development of personalized learning plans (54 per cent), providing information about post-

upgrading educational options (41 per cent), as well as removing accessibility barriers by providing bus tickets or other transportation supports (42 per cent).

LES service providers rely primarily on partner organizations to provide learners with professionalized services, such as health and mental health services, including addictions counselling (49 per cent), mental health supports (48 per cent) and physical health supports (41 per cent), trauma-informed care (41 per cent); housing or shelter services (48 per cent); legal advice (47 per cent), and financial supports (45 per cent).

Having a well-coordinated support system can leverage the expertise of different service providers and help adult learners access the services they need, regardless of their primary access point.

Key Finding 4: Project-based funding has increased innovation, but imperilled the sustainability of service providers

The shift towards project-based funding has imposed significant constraints on the capacity of community organizations to do their work and on the long-term viability of their services.

Participants in the National Research Project overwhelmingly support the development of a funding strategy that is sustainable, predictable, and supported by cross-governmental sources. They emphasize the need for an expanded mandate that combines literacy and poverty reduction objectives (76 per cent), allows for the delivery of wrap-around supports (76 per cent), and provides more flexibility in the use of resources (69 per cent).

Key Finding 5: Knowledge sharing among LES practitioners and awareness raising among the public and employers are necessary to improve the effectiveness of LES programs

A persistent challenge for service providers is informing the public and employers on the abilities of their learners. One of the most important priority area for improving the effectiveness of literacy programs is informing the public on the importance that LES upgrading contributes towards supporting poverty reduction actions (73 per cent).

Survey respondents also identified information sharing about their work with others in their field as an area that requires improvement (59 per cent). Indeed, there is no formal or consistent process for practitioners to share information nationally about promising approaches, effective learning tools for specific groups of learners, and innovative programs.

Key Finding 6: Learner-centred approaches are most effective for low-skilled adults and require a holistic assessment of learner needs

Learning approaches that customize materials to the individual's needs are most effective for low-skilled adults. A deep understanding of these needs requires an intake and assessment process that is holistic in nature – and one that learners will be receptive to and see value in.

Indeed, most service providers commonly use an intake and assessment process. However, most respondents (72 per cent) believe that available assessment tools could be improved to better service multi-barriered individuals.

Key Finding 7: Contextualizing program content to learners' goals is most effective in facilitating transitions to employment or education

Contextualized programs align learning activities, materials, and concepts to a specific subject matter or occupations in line with learners' objectives. Contextualizing learning content to a specific occupation, or a specific educational program can ensure that learners have the skills they need to succeed in their next steps.

Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of respondents are already innovating with customization of program content to better align with learner needs and more than half (58 per cent) report making program content more culturally-sensitive.

Over 40 per cent respondents identified customization of LES programming as a priority area for further investment and innovation, especially for persons with disabilities (47 per cent), Indigenous Peoples (43 per cent), and newcomers to Canada (43 per cent).

Key Finding 8: Service delivery that combines contextualized programs with wrap-around supports are highly effective for transitioning individuals to employment

Integrated service delivery is an innovative and successful model for LES program delivery. By convening community partners at the onset, needed services and supports can be integrated within the delivery of the program itself.

The majority of survey respondents were supportive of integrating suggested poverty reduction programs with LES services. In particular, most respondents identified employment supports (74 per cent) and upgrading (70 per cent) as those that should be prioritized for integrated approaches.

A majority of respondents identified programs that target basic needs, including those that address food insecurity (63 per cent), housing (61 per cent), and income supplements (58 per cent), as being apt for service integration.

The approach is resource intensive and is not appropriate for every organization or learner. However, this approach has proven to be successful in moving vulnerable adults out of poverty in pilot projects that targeted specific groups of learners facing common barriers and sharing similar needs. A number of pilot projects, including the RESDAC model and WoodGreen's Homeward Bound, are testing the effectiveness of these models for specific groups of learners.

Key Finding 9: Awareness and accessibility to programs is the most significant challenge for stakeholders

Many organizations have adopted new approaches for reaching potential learners, including developing new strategic partnerships (67 per cent) and adopting targeted outreach approaches through new channels for reaching client groups (63 per cent).

However, improving awareness and accessibility of services for all targeted groups is an important challenge and was identified as the most important priority by all stakeholders, especially practitioners working with low-income learners (72 per cent), persons with disabilities (59 per cent), newcomers (56 per cent), and Indigenous Peoples (55 per cent).

Key Finding 10: Improving self-esteem, resilience, and self-confidence are key objectives and important indicators of success for literacy programs

Beyond skills, literacy upgrading is fundamentally about developing a person's psychological capital: increasing their self-esteem, improving their attitude towards learning, and building their resilience in the face of challenges.

Most respondents (80 per cent) identified negative experiences with learning as one of the most important barriers to learning. Indeed, low-skilled adults may have experienced a series of failures in the formal education system. By internalizing their failure in education, they often lack the confidence and resilience they need to overcome challenges in learning. Addressing the psychological barriers to learning is a critical step to skill development.

In fact, respondents overwhelmingly identified improvements in psychological capital, including higher self-confidence (82 per cent) and positive attitude towards learning (76 per cent) as being the primary indicators of their program's success.

Key Finding 11: Outcomes frameworks are often too narrow in scope and exclude the key indicators of program success that are recognized by practitioners and participants

Respondents were clear that program outcomes are too narrow in scope, focusing overwhelmingly on skill gains, employment, and education.

Over two-thirds of survey respondents (67 per cent) identified a need to expand existing evaluation frameworks to better reflect the work that they do in building their learners' life skills and psychological capital.

In addition to improving psychological capital, a majority of practitioners also identified changes in a learners' health and well-being as key indicators of success, including improvements in their quality of life (60 per cent) and in their mental health (52 per cent).

Recommendations

Strategic recommendations intend to advise policy makers, service providers, and other stakeholders offering literacy and essential skills programming across Canada on how policies and programs should be structured, funded, and delivered in order to increase their effectiveness in reducing poverty.

Recommendations are organized into two focus areas: policy recommendations (the role and responsibility of government, the structure and nature of program funding, and policy tools to enhance partnerships and strengthen the central role of literacy in poverty reduction strategies) and program and service delivery recommendations (best practices in the design and delivery of literacy programs).

Policy recommendations

Recommendation 1: Governments in Canada should recognize literacy as a basic human right

Every Canadian should have the right to learn the skills they need to meet the demands of their daily life. Recognizing literacy as a human right acknowledges that basic skills are necessary and fundamental to ensuring self-sufficiency, independence, and basic human dignity.

In the information age, basic literacy and essential skills are essential for any individual to survive. Adults in need must have access to quality basic education to protect against the social and economic isolation of vulnerable citizens.

International covenants, of which Canada is a signatory, have recognized literacy as an important contributor towards a person's social, civic, and economic engagement. Governments must ensure that every individual has the right to gain the skills needed to participate in and contribute to our shared institutions.

Recommendation 2: Literacy should be recognized as a policy priority requiring cross-departmental and cross-jurisdictional cooperation

Improvements in literacy proficiency affect adult learners across a number of dimensions that extend beyond skill gains and labour market participation. As a result, governments must define literacy as being more than a dimension of a broader education policy.

Given its influence on individual empowerment and wellbeing, literacy requires strategic alignment and cooperation across departments. Literacy must be understood as a key priority for government policies targeting health, employment, education, housing, income supports, and other social programs working towards poverty reduction.

Broadening the scope of literacy's policy objectives provides an opportunity for all levels of government to work in concert to develop a common set of priorities. Better coordination between jurisdictions and across levels of government is necessary to improve resource allocation towards and to enhance overall effectiveness of adult literacy programming across the country.

Recommendation 3: Literacy should be a central pillar within any comprehensive poverty reduction strategy

Literacy and poverty are closely related. Studies show that a person's income and their labour market participation correlate with their proficiency in literacy. Additionally, most people experiencing poverty have low literacy skills.

Literacy upgrading alone is insufficient to move people towards independence and self-sufficiency, however. Adults experiencing poverty often face a number of barriers that prevent them from exiting poverty. These same barriers often limit adults from participating and succeeding in literacy programs. Addressing these barriers is therefore the key to enabling individuals to learn and to move out of poverty.

The Government of Canada has recently introduced a National Poverty Reduction strategy with programs targeting literacy and clear indicators to measure changes. Governments across Canada that seek to develop similar strategies to reduce the incidence of poverty in their jurisdiction must first recognize that literacy upgrading is a critical step on the pathway out of poverty.

They must also appreciate that increasing literacy skills can help move individuals out of poverty, but only if needed supports are available, accessible, and adequate.

Recommendation 4: Policies and funding models should encourage collaboration rather than competition between service providers

Stakeholders from across the country shared their experiences developing partnerships with other service providers in their communities. Across the country, service delivery partnerships and integrated programming for literacy skills upgrading and poverty reduction naturally arise. Indeed, survey respondents identified a number of supports that are offered in partnership with local service providers.

However, policy silos and funding constraints on providers impede these efforts. Additionally, competitive project-based funding discourages collaboration between local organizations.

Governments and other program funders should continue to prioritize funding strategies that reward and encourage collaboration between organizations and integrated service delivery. Service providers have expressed an openness to increase their level of engagement with others across sectors in order to improve the overall quality and comprehensiveness of supports available to adult learners. However, more attention must be paid to the barriers that hinder the development and sustainability of such partnerships, notably the amount of time and resources dedicated towards maintaining the stability of the partnership.

Governments can encourage the development of programs that are holistic and that leverage the expertise of multiple service providers by incorporating partnership requirements in grants and contribution agreements. Program funders should also recognize that coordinating partnerships is most effective when done locally, by building on existing relationships within communities.

Recommendation 5: Funding for literacy and essential skills programming should be sustainable and predictable, while also fostering innovation

Literacy and essential skills service providers require a funding strategy that can sustain their programs, that is predictable year over year, and that can foster innovation.

Increasingly, governments are adopting a project-based funding approach that encourages innovation and tests promising new programs. The model has contributed to a dynamic culture in LES service delivery. In the last few years, new and innovative programs have emerged, demonstrating the transformative effect that well-developed and well-financed programming can have on the lives of low-skilled adults. However, the cycle of project development and grant applications significantly lowers the amount of resources available for program delivery.

A core-funding model embedded within an innovation strategy would provide the stability service providers seek while encouraging greater innovation in the field of literacy and essential skills upgrading.

Recommendation 6: Governments should facilitate partnerships and support knowledge translation and exchange (KTE) among providers of literacy and poverty reduction services

Governments can improve the quality of literacy and essential skills upgrading in Canada by encouraging greater partnerships between local organizations and by disseminating knowledge about promising programs.

Federal, provincial, and territorial governments should facilitate partnerships through flexible joint-funding models that encourage integration of service delivery and that support local networks of community organizations.

Governments should also support ongoing activities related to knowledge translation and exchange (KTE). Indeed, governments are best suited to provide support for the work of national and regional convening organizations who have the capacity to bring practitioners together to share best practices and innovations in service delivery.

In addition, the establishment of a permanent National Advisory Council on Literacy and Poverty could serve as a pan-Canadian, bottom-up process for information sharing. The Council would serve to advise all levels of government on potential policies and programs at the intersection of literacy and poverty in Canada, and could help develop common strategic objectives across provinces and territories.

Program and service delivery recommendations

Recommendation 7: Raising awareness and accessibility of existing services and programs should be a key priority for improvement

Practitioners are struggling to reach new participants. Investments into innovative strategies that improve learners' awareness of and accessibility to programs should be prioritized, including:

- Funding creative partnerships between providers servicing similar populations;
- Allocating additional resources towards outreach and communications strategies; and
- Promoting the development of innovative models to facilitate increased access and engagement in literacy programming, particularly among marginalized learners who may have more limited access to traditional models.

Recommendation 8: Learner-centred approaches should be used to maximize engagement in literacy programming

Learners are more responsive and engaged in literacy programs when the materials and approaches used are relevant and appropriate to their goals and lived experience. Learner-centered approaches are fundamentally about having a deep understanding and appreciation for a person's experiences and valuing the skills and knowledge they bring with them into the program.

Providing culturally appropriate programming will also maximize engagement of learners from Indigenous and newcomer communities.

Program funders should support practitioners' work in developing tools and resources for holistic and comprehensive needs assessment, particularly for marginalized groups. A common objective for program funders and service providers across the country should be to create programs that are learner-centric and better aligned with participant needs.

Recommendation 9: Literacy programs should be contextualized to the goals of learners

Learning activities and programming materials should be contextualized to specific subject matter or occupations that align with learners' objectives. Programs that intend to build the specific skillsets a learner needs to achieve their stated goals are more effective than skills upgrading programs that follow a generic curriculum.

This is particularly true for skills upgrading programs that embed literacy within an occupational framework and customize their content to specific jobs. These programs are effective in transitioning and retaining learners in the labour market. Similarly, aligning literacy program content to specific postsecondary program requirements can improve a learner's chances of success.

The importance of contextualization also extends beyond facilitating employment or educational transitions. Developing programs that align with an individual's broader objectives, including those

related to their health, their finances, or their community engagement, can make the content seem more relevant, purposeful, and engaging, particularly for marginalized groups.

Governments can further support the contextualization of literacy programming by funding projects and programs that aim to develop and test contextually relevant tools and resources, particularly for marginalized groups.

Recommendation 10: Greater integration of services should be a primary objective to improve the quality of literacy and poverty reduction services

Literacy organizations should strive to work with community partners in the development of integrated service delivery that provides wrap-around supports to learners while leveraging the expertise of community partners.

While not all literacy organizations have the capacity or the resources to implement integrated service delivery models, this model has been proven effective in addressing the barriers common to specific groups of learners while supporting their training.

Governments should encourage integrated service delivery models when appropriate and should target programs that are most appropriate for integrated delivery, such as access to food, housing and shelter supports, and income supplements.

Recommendation 11: Outcomes frameworks used to evaluate success should be expanded to include indicators of life skills and psychological capital

Assessing outcomes solely in terms of skills, employment or education fails to capture the broad depth of impact that literacy programs have on individuals' lives. Building up a person's self-esteem, resilience, and attitudes towards learning is often the key to their success. Indeed, many low-skilled adults have a history of failure in formal education and associate learning with these negative past experiences.

Broadening our understanding of success in the context of literacy programming requires looking at changes in a learner's health and well-being, including improvements in their quality of life and in their mental health.

Governments should work with service providers to improve and simplify the outcomes reporting process. Ultimately, outcomes evaluation should provide accountability for literacy programming by accurately and effectively measuring changes that practitioners are expecting to see in their learners. A process that minimizes the burden on instructors should be favoured.

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