

Knowledge of and Interest in Apprenticeships Among Hamilton's Literacy and Basic Skills Learners

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Contents

- Executive Summary 2
- Introduction 3
 - Purpose..... 3
 - Background..... 4
 - Research question 4
- Methods 5
 - Overview 5
 - Poll and focus groups with adult learners..... 5
 - Survey with adult literacy practitioners 7
 - Interviews with adult literacy practitioners 7
- Findings: Adult Learner Perspectives 8
 - Current level of interest in apprenticeships 8
 - Current level of knowledge of apprenticeships..... 9
- Findings: Learning Practitioner Perspectives 17
 - Practitioners’ own knowledge of apprenticeships 17
 - Practitioners’ perspective of adult learners’ level of interest in and knowledge of apprenticeships 18
 - Supporting adult learners along apprenticeship pathway 21
- Limitations 25
 - Generalizability of the findings 25
 - Challenges facilitating focus groups 26
- Conclusion 27
- Appendix 1: Adult Learner Poll and Focus Group Guide 28
- Appendix 2: Practitioner Survey Guide..... 33
- Appendix 3: Practitioner Interview Guide 36

Executive Summary

On behalf of the Adult Basic Education Association (ABEA), a team of McMaster University Research Shop researchers conducted a study that investigated Hamilton's adult literacy learners' level of interest in, and knowledge of, apprenticeship programs in Ontario. To do so, they carried out focus groups with 24 learners across the city's adult literacy service providers, conducted an online survey of 15 literacy practitioners, and conducted in-depth interviews with 5 of the practitioners who participated in the survey.

Findings from this research suggest that although many learners have considered an apprenticeship as a potential goal, few had taken any steps towards applying for one. The study found connections between a low level of interest in apprenticeships among learners and a number of barriers, including:

- the pervasive stigma attached to the trades,
- lack of knowledge about apprenticeships programs including the steps and requirements to apply for one,
- a perceived lack of support for those interested in apprenticeships as a potential goal.

Although most adult learners appear to have a general idea about apprenticeship programs (e.g., that you're paid to learn a new trade on the job), these findings underscore a lack of awareness as a major barrier to learners pursuing apprenticeships. This insight is supported by the fact that the learners demonstrated, and were perceived by practitioners to have, a low level of understanding around the:

- Jobs and sectors offering apprenticeships,
- Educational and skill requirements for apprenticeships,
- Roles and responsibilities of apprentices and employers,
- Benefits of apprenticeships to employers,
- Supports available to those pursuing apprenticeships.

Learners suggested that knowing important details about apprenticeship programs, such as how long they are, how they differ from a full-time job, their earning potential, and their entry requirements, is prerequisite to considering them as a goal.

Literacy practitioners seem well-positioned to help adult learners overcome these knowledge barriers, as several stated that they've helped learners by researching programs for them and/or directing them to online resources. However, practitioners highlighted how they are fundamentally limited in their capacity to help adult learners

because of their own lack of knowledge of apprenticeships and a lack of time and resources. To overcome these limits, practitioners suggested a number of ways to enhance their support and complement any assistance they're able to provide, including:

- Establishing peer mentoring programs,
- Creating information packages that practitioners can hand out to learners,
- Hosting regular workshops and information sessions on apprenticeships at literacy upgrading locations,
- Holding an educational campaign around the benefits and desirability of apprenticeships,
- Making an adult learning apprenticeship coach available to assist learners interested in apprenticeships.

All findings from this research should be interpreted with care. It is important to note that we were unable to arrange focus groups with learners from the CNIB Deaf-blind Literacy Program for Adults or the Hamilton Regional Indian Centre, and there may be reason to believe the viewpoints and experience of these two populations might differ from the others. The research team also experienced challenges facilitating focus groups with adult learners, including language barriers, misunderstanding of the questions, and difficulties balancing input from vocal vs. quieter participants.

Overall, this study provides evidence that adult learners have a low level of knowledge of apprenticeship and that this, along with a variety of other barriers to participation, impacts their interest in apprenticeship programs. Although literacy practitioners are invested in supporting their learners who are interested in apprenticeships, knowledge and resource gaps limit their capacity to support learners along the apprenticeship pathway. While more research may be needed into the service gaps for adult learners pursuing apprenticeships, this report serves as a baseline for ABEA and the Literacy Community Planning Committee to better assist interested learners transition into an apprenticeship.

Introduction

Purpose

The primary purpose of this project was to better understand adult learners' knowledge of and interest in apprenticeships. The information contained in this report will inform the Adult Basic Education Association (ABEA) and the Literacy Community Planning

committee (LCP) on how to better assist interested learners transition into apprenticeships. Given the current labour market pressures around apprenticeship and the trades, this work is very timely and needed.

Background

ABEA is a non-profit organization that acts as the learning network for adult education and upgrading in Hamilton. The organization is the central adult education referring agency to service providers throughout the city. The seven agencies that provide these services are:

- Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board - Community and Continuing Education,
- Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board - St. Charles Adult & Continuing Education Centres,
- Mohawk College - Academic Upgrading,
- Hamilton Literacy Council,
- Canadian National Institute for the Blind - Deaf-blind Literacy Program for Adults,
- Hamilton Regional Indian Centre - Native Learning Centre,
- Collège Boréal.

ABEA and the LCP has been interested in finding out more about learners' interest in apprenticeship as a potential option. However, they did not have adequate data on how aware adult learners are of apprenticeship programs and whether they might be contemplating pursuing an apprenticeship in the future. This is because there is only one transitional goal path identified per learner. Therefore, if a learner was on the "credit" pathway but also apprenticeship, only credit would be statistically documented.

Research question

The McMaster Research Shop, in collaboration with ABEA, conducted a research project to answer the following question:

"To what extent are adult learners in Hamilton Literacy and Basic Skills programs aware of, and interested in, apprenticeship, regardless of current goal pathway?"

Methods

Overview

A team of researchers from the McMaster Research Shop started the project in October 2018 and completed it in March 2019. The team met periodically to help form the research question and methods, discuss findings, reassess timeline plans, and write this report. The Executive Director of the ABEA helped to design the data collection instruments and reviewed the research methods to ensure that data would be collected using ethical and transparent processes that met with the association’s standards.

The project collected data from both adult learners and adult literacy practitioners (who instruct them) using the methods described below.

Poll and focus groups with adult learners

The McMaster research team conducted a series of focus groups with adult learners representing five of the literacy providers, including:

- Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board - Community and Continuing Education,
- Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board - St. Charles Adult & Continuing Education Centres,
- Mohawk College - Academic Upgrading,
- Hamilton Literacy Council,
- Collège Boréal.

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind - Deaf-blind Literacy Program for Adults and Hamilton Regional Indian Centre - Native Learning Centre did not participate.

The Executive Director of the ABEA recruited participants through their network. The original goal was to have 5 to 10 learners participate in each focus group, for a total of 25 to 50 participants. In actuality, 23 learners participated in total (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of focus group participants by literacy provider.

| Literacy Provider | Number of participants |
|---|------------------------|
| Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board - Community and Continuing Education | 6 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board - St. Charles Adult & Continuing Education Centres | 8 |
| Mohawk College - Academic Upgrading | 4 |
| Hamilton Literacy Council | 2 |
| Collège Boréal | 3 |
| Total | 23 |

At the beginning of each focus group, the facilitator went through an informed consent process with learners and obtained consent by having each learner sign their name on a sheet. At least two research team members attended each focus group; one took notes, and the other facilitated the poll and group discussions. A French language translator assisted with the Collège Boréal group, as those learners spoke little to no English.

Two sets of questions were created for the focus group. The first set of questions was a poll consisting of Yes/No and Likert scale questions (1-5). The poll contained 10 questions in total. Research team members asked the questions out loud and learners circled their answers in sequence on a simple form. The purpose of the poll was to gauge learners' current level of knowledge and interest in apprenticeships before their answers could be influenced by the group discussion portion of the focus group, which may have skewed their responses. The research team recorded results from the poll on an Excel spreadsheet and later analyzed the data for trends.

The second part of the focus group was a roundtable discussion where research team members asked open-ended questions. There were 10 questions in total. The aim of this part of the focus group was to gather additional data to deepen an understanding of learners' perceptions and misconceptions, biases, and confusions they might have about apprenticeships. The research team recorded and transcribed each discussion, then later analyzed the data using a thematic analysis process.

It was extremely important that the research team administered questions in plain language to ensure everyone understood what was being asked. As the ABEA Executive Director is a trained Clear Writing professional, she reviewed all the questions beforehand for clarity and appropriate phrasing.

A copy of the focus group guide used by the research team can be found in Appendix 1.

Survey with adult literacy practitioners

To gather insights from adult literacy practitioners, the research team developed an online survey, which was distributed by ABEA using their survey software (Survey Monkey). A total of 15 literacy practitioners participated.

The survey attempted to gauge practitioners' level of knowledge of apprenticeships, as well as their perceptions of their adult learners' level of interest in and knowledge of apprenticeships. The survey contained a mix of open- and closed-ended questions. Some questions used a Likert scale of 1 to 5. Closed-ended questions had room for comments. There were nine questions in total.

Survey Monkey summarized the data from the closed-ended questions in charts and graphs and listed the replies to the open-ended questions and other comments provided by practitioners. The research team used Survey Monkey outputs as the basis for a descriptive analysis of the collected data.

A copy of the survey may be found in Appendix 2.

Interviews with adult literacy practitioners

At the end of the online survey, practitioners were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Eight practitioners agreed. The research team made an attempt to contact each of them to arrange an interview. The team was able to confirm five interviews.

The research team conducted interviews over the phone. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

The research team designed interview questions to generate more in-depth explanations related to some of the results from the survey, as well as information gathered from the focus groups. For example, one question asked was, "According to survey results, practitioners believe that less than 25% of adult learners are interested in apprenticeships. Are you surprised by this? Why or why not?"

As with the focus group, ABEA's Executive Director reviewed the practitioner survey and interview questions for Clear Writing style. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed for major themes. A copy of the interview guide may be found in Appendix 3.

Findings: Adult Learner Perspectives

This section discusses the findings of the focus groups, including the polling activity and open-ended discussions. It summarizes adult learners' current level of interest and knowledge of apprenticeships in subsections below.

Current level of interest in apprenticeships

In the focus group polling activity, 14 out of 22¹ participants responded “Yes” to the question, “Have you ever considered apprenticeship as a goal?” However, only 6 out of 22 participants stated that they have ever taken steps to learn more about or pursue an apprenticeship.

The remainder of this subsection is dedicated to outlining the positive and negative associations with apprenticeships, gleaned from focus group discussions, that may be shaping adult learners' interest in apprenticeship programs.

Positive associations with apprenticeships

For the few individuals in the focus groups with an expressed interest in apprenticeships, the main reason for their interest was the perception that you're able to gain hands-on training to prepare you for the job environment. As one individual stated, “I have been thinking of it because I want to do more than I am doing right now. Not just to *do* something, I want to *learn* something else.”

Two individuals from the focus groups, who were newcomers to Canada, were interested in apprenticeships because of their vocational experience in their home country. For example, one individual had previously studied to become a mechanic and believed his experience could transfer into an Ontario mechanic apprenticeship program.

One individual was inspired by his high school experience in shop and construction classes and wanted to “do more work like that in the real world.”

¹ Note that one participant arrived late to their focus group session and was unable to participate in the polling activity, which is why there are 22 responses rather than 23.

Negative associations with apprenticeships

Participants in both the Hamilton Literacy Council and Mohawk College focus groups stated a low interest in pursuing an apprenticeship program because they perceived these programs as being exploitative. Two participants specifically framed the experience as an opportunity for employers to exploit cheap labour. As one individual noted, “You bust your butt and they get all the money for it.”

Several other participants perceived a power imbalance between the employer and the apprentice. They were concerned that an apprentice could be taken advantage of since the employer is responsible for supervising the apprentice’s performance as well as determining their success in the program. One participant, who had previously completed an apprenticeship, noted that his work environment lacked sufficient safety regulations and that he felt uncomfortable raising his concerns with his employer. Another participant noted, “You just feel like you can’t really talk to anyone because the person that you are supposed to be shadowing, you are literally their shadow and like you can’t say anything, you just have to do what they say.”

Participants in the Mohawk College and Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) focus groups mentioned that apprenticeships are not often promoted as a viable career pathway. As one participant noted, “whenever you talk to a guidance counselor [about trades], they say ‘good for you,’ but they don’t say to anyone else, ‘hey you should consider the trades.’ There are a few people that don’t do too well in class, but they don’t encourage it to anyone.”

Another participant noted, “There is kind of a stigma attached to this kind of stuff. My dad always looked down on this stuff. He looked down on me. The way he looked at the trades, and the way a lot of people look at the trades, they have a bad image. They think only people new to the country do that. Back then I looked at the trades like working at McDonald’s; I don’t want to do that. There’s a stigma on trades.”

Two participants in the Hamilton Literacy Council added another explanation for a low level of interest in apprenticeships. They were concerned that people relying on government assistance might lose part of their income if they start getting paid under an apprenticeship program.

Current level of knowledge of apprenticeships

The following subsection synthesizes results from the focus group polling activity and the focus group discussions. It highlights the general level of knowledge about

apprenticeships among the adult literacy learner community, as well as more specific knowledge around the jobs and sectors offering apprenticeships, education and skill requirements, roles and responsibilities of apprentices and employers, the benefit of apprenticeship programs to employers, and available supports for apprenticeships. This section concludes with the most relevant perceived knowledge gaps about apprenticeships in the adult literacy learner community.

General knowledge of apprenticeships

Most focus group participants had a general idea that apprenticeships are programs that allow you to learn a new trade on the job. Most were able to differentiate apprenticeships from classroom education through its emphasis on hands-on, “real world” experience.

Despite having general knowledge about apprenticeships, from the polling activity, only 5 out of 22 participants stated that they would know how to apply for an apprenticeship if they were interested in becoming one. Similarly, only 4 out of 22 participants stated that they’re aware of the steps needed to complete an apprenticeship. Only 3 out of 22 participants had ever heard of the term “journey person” being an outcome of apprenticeship programs.

Jobs and sectors offering apprenticeships

As seen in Figure 1, when asked how aware participants are of the different job sectors or trades that offer apprenticeships, the majority (8 out of 22 participants) indicated that they were not aware and have never heard anything about the different sectors.

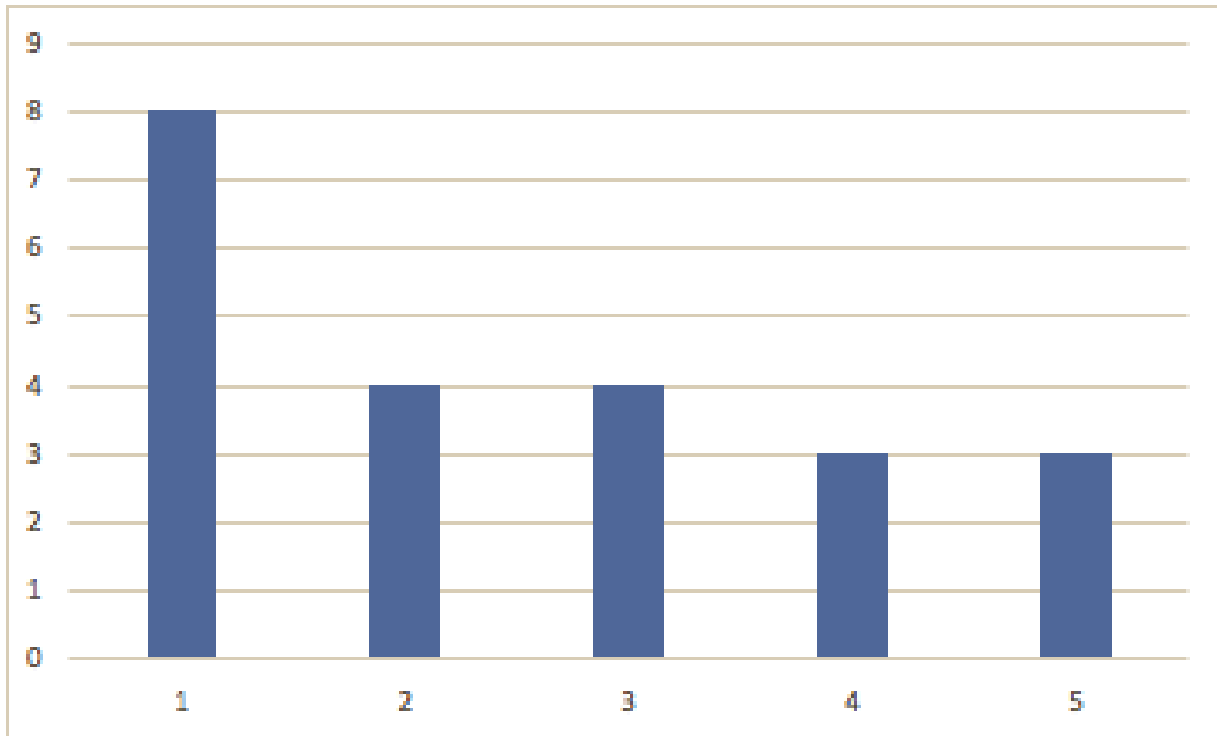


Figure 1. Responses to question, “How aware are you of the different job sectors or skilled trades offering apprenticeships?” (1 = not aware, never heard anything about it; 3 = somewhat aware, would have difficulty explaining it; and 5 = very aware, could explain it if asked.)

In the focus group discussions, when asked how many trades offer apprenticeship programs in Ontario, none of the participants were able to provide an accurate estimate. Estimates ranged from five to thousands. When we revealed that over 150 trades offer apprenticeship programs in Ontario, and participants were asked to account for some of those trades, the most common responses were as follows:

- Mechanic/ auto mechanic (n=5),
- Construction worker (n=4),
- Plumber (n=3),
- Carpenter (n=3),
- Electrician (n=2),
- Welder (n=2).

Additional responses included horticulturist, hair designer, stonemason, and janitor. A few participants correlated apprenticeship programs with low-skilled service jobs like a Walmart Greeter and McDonald’s employee.

Educational and skill requirements

From the polling activity, focus group participants had an overall low level of awareness of the educational and skill requirements needed to become an apprentice, as seen in Figures 2 and 3.

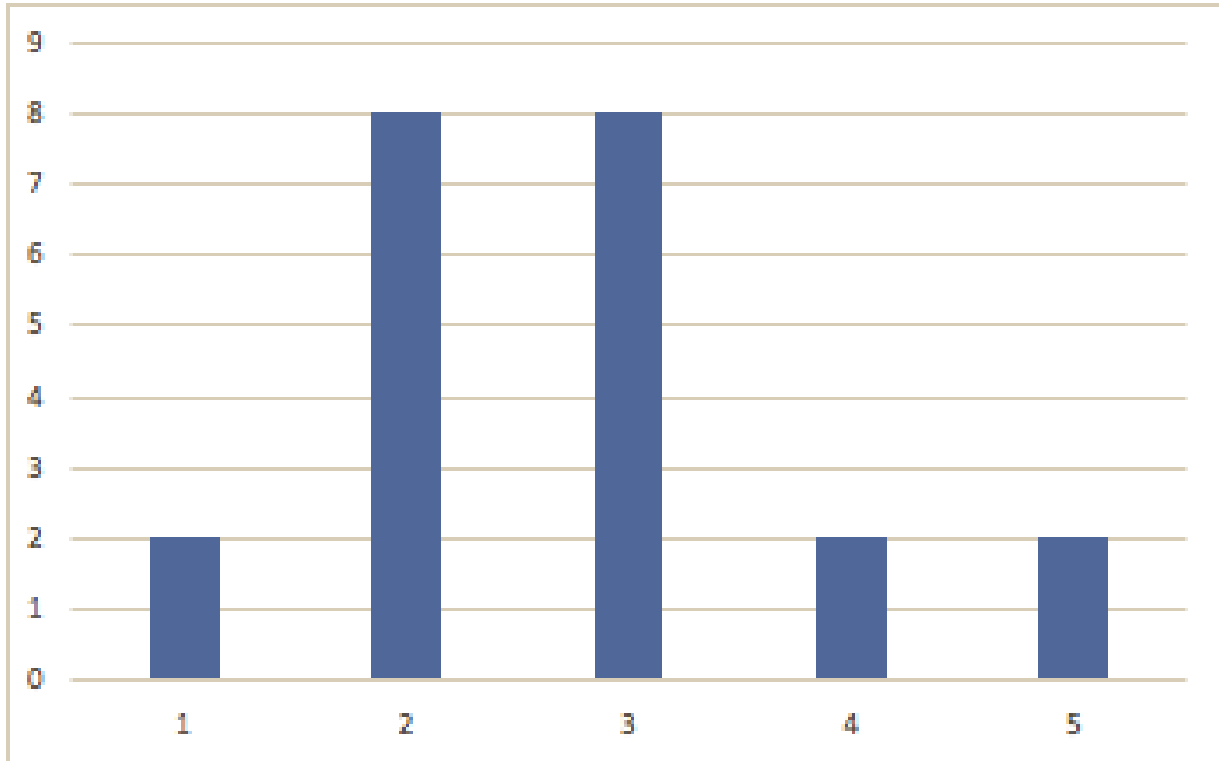


Figure 2. Responses to question, “How aware are you of the skills needed to become an apprentice?” (1 = not aware, never heard anything about it; 3 = somewhat aware, would have difficulty explaining it; and 5 = very aware, could explain it if asked).

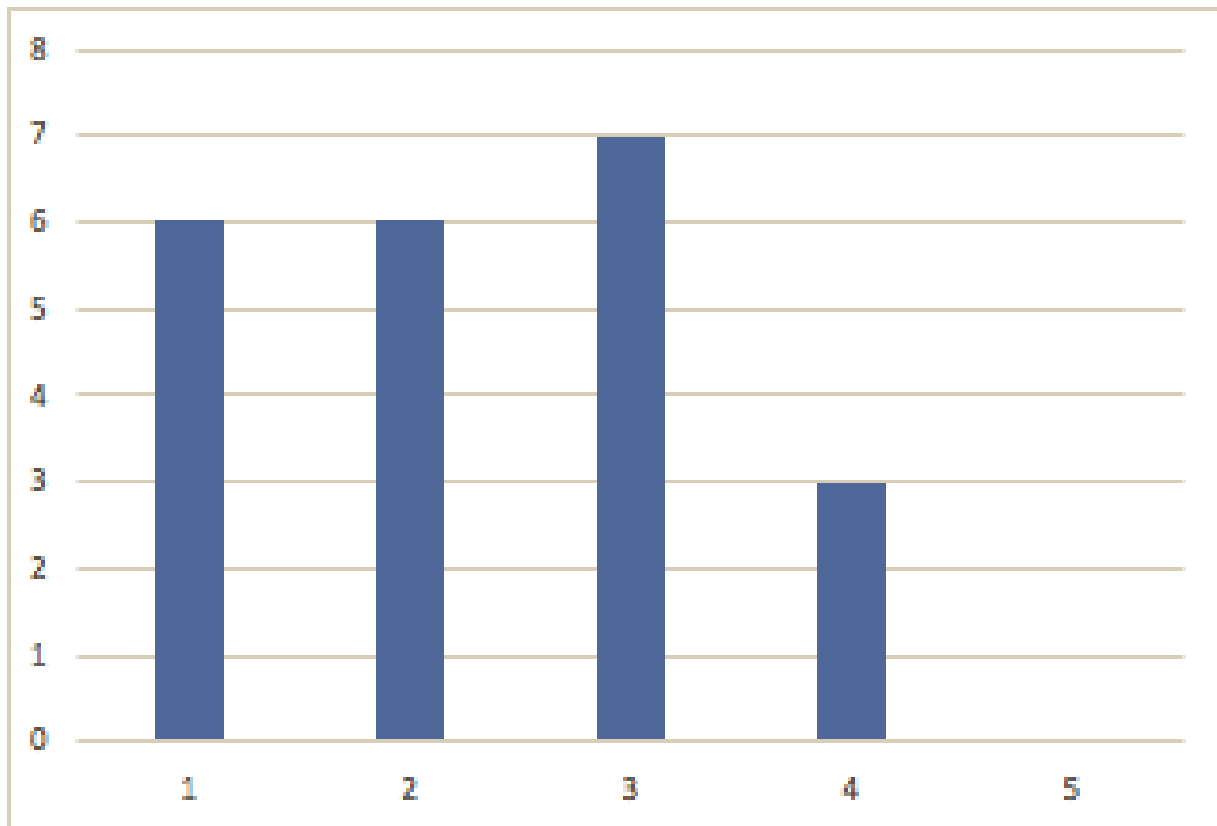


Figure 3. Responses to question, “How aware are you of the educational requirements needed to apply for an apprenticeship?” (1 = not aware, never heard anything about it; 3 = somewhat aware, would have difficulty explaining it; and 5 = very aware, could explain it if asked).

During the focus group discussions, participants were unable to universally agree on what level of education was needed for an apprenticeship. Most proposed you likely need a high school education, but others held the opinion that you would require some form of college or university education. In terms of specific course requirements, participants suggested a range of classes from math, science, and chemistry to English, history, and geography.

Participants differentiated between “hard” and “soft” skills likely required for apprenticeships. Among the hard skills, participants discussed the need for reading, writing, and basic mathematics skills. Participants brought up the following soft skills:

- Problem-solving,
- Willingness to learn,
- Interpersonal/ social skills,
- Teamwork skills,

- Strong work ethic (e.g., being on time, working hard).

The overall consensus from the focus group discussions was that apprenticeships require some form of basic education and skill requirements. However, specific apprenticeships will have specific requirements. As one participant noted, “You are not going to learn how to work with computers if you know nothing about computers. You are not going to be a cook if you don’t know something about cooking.”

Roles and responsibilities of apprentices and employers

From the focus group discussions, many participants understood that the main role of the apprentice is to show up on time, work hard on the job, and follow the rules of the workplace. Several participants also mentioned that the apprentice is required to, in some way, take charge of their learning, such as by asking questions, maintaining a willingness to learn, and doing independent research outside of the workplace.

Participants in all the focus groups said that the employer had a responsibility to be knowledgeable of their trade, be able to teach the apprentice the right way to do things, provide adequate supervision, and maintain a safe workplace environment. Two participants mentioned that the employer must show respect to the apprentice, and vice-versa. One participant mentioned that the employer is responsible for paying the apprentice on time.

Benefits to employers

Participants in all of the focus groups stated that apprenticeship programs are beneficial to employers because it allows them to train entry-level employees on how to do a job correctly, as well as teach them their particular method. As one learner noted, “Blacksmiths can make several different things, but one blacksmith is different from another blacksmith. Where one blacksmith would fold the metal up to 6 times, another blacksmith might fold the same metal 600 times.”

Three participants mentioned that apprenticeships are beneficial to employers because they’re able to teach apprentices how to do a job safely. Participants in three of the focus groups also said that apprenticeship programs are a source of labour for employers in the trades and that there’s currently a shortage of workers.

Apprenticeship supports

As seen in Figure 4, from the polling activity, when asked how aware participants are of the supports available for apprenticeships, including grants, loans, and other services, the vast majority (17 out of 22 participants) indicated that they were not aware and have never heard anything about supports.

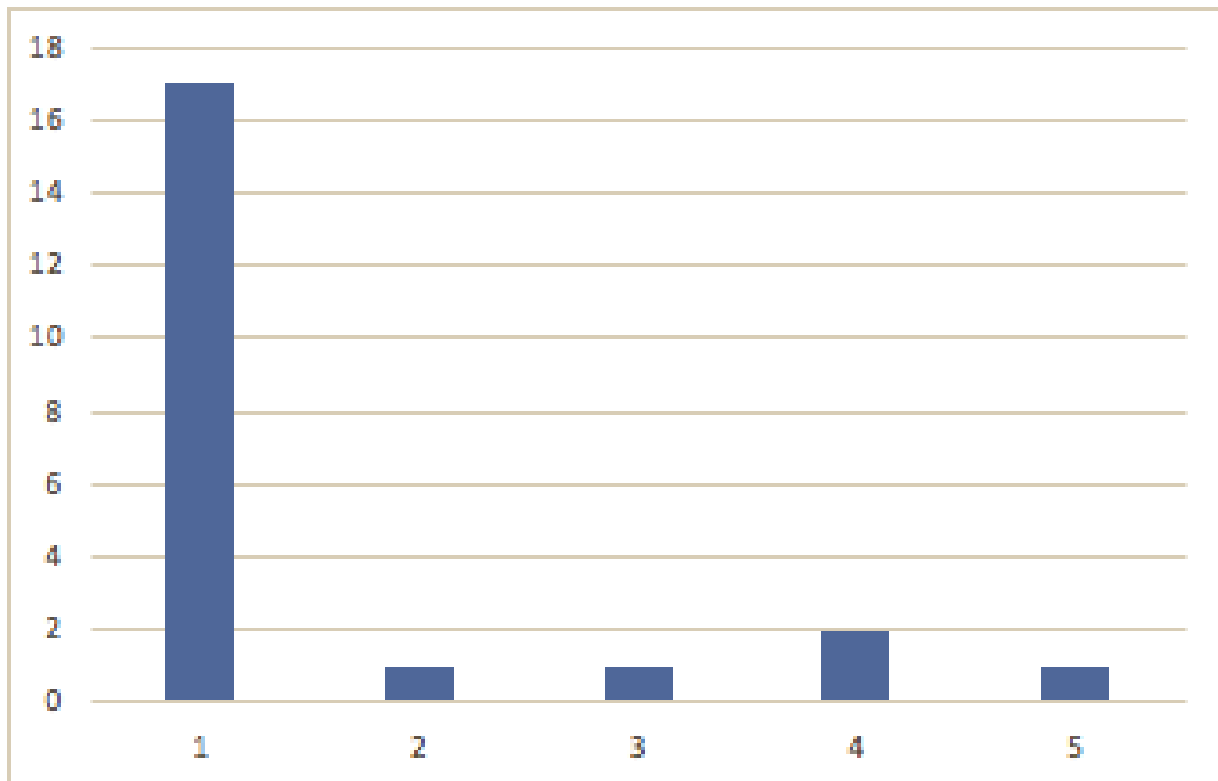


Figure 4. Responses to question, “How aware are you of any supports available for apprenticeships (e.g., grants, loans, services)?” (1 = not aware, never heard anything about it; 3 = somewhat aware, would have difficulty explaining it; and 5 = very aware, could explain it if asked).

In the focus group discussions, many of the participants were confused about the word “support” and conflated it with on-the-job support rather than pre-program support. However, as part of the discussion in the HWCDSB and Mohawk College focus groups, participants suggested several information supports that could facilitate greater knowledge of apprenticeships. These included:

- Supports designed as visual aids, i.e. “some type of plan that you can see your journey,”
- Guidance counselling in literacy upgrading institutions, especially around goal setting and pathways to apprenticeships,

- Having literature and resources written in multiple languages to assist newcomers with English language barriers,
- The use of billboards posted around facilities containing literature and website links with more information about programs,
- Holding workshops on particular trades, like a “job fair” but for apprenticeship programs,
- Advertising supports for people with families, e.g. flexibility in the hours you have to work each week.

Perceived knowledge gaps

In the focus group discussions participants articulated a variety of knowledge gaps when asked, “What would you need to know before considering an apprenticeship?” We’ve presented a summary of these gaps in Table 2, organized from most to least common.

Table 2. Summary of adult learners’ perceived knowledge gaps.

| Weight ² | Knowledge gap | Key questions |
|---------------------|--|---|
| 8 | Characteristics and structure of apprenticeship programs | What exactly are they? How do they differ from a normal full-time job? What trades are offered? What’s the structure of apprenticeship programs, and how long do they take to complete? |
| 6 | Earning potential | How much money will you make at the beginning of the apprenticeship, as you progress, and when you’re hired into the field? |
| 5 | Entry requirements and prerequisites | What level of schooling is required, including grades? What hard and soft skills are in the highest demand? |
| 4 | Working in the field | Would you enjoy the apprenticeship workplace? What does the day-to-day look like? What’s the workplace culture like? How many hours a week are you required to work? |
| 2 | Steps to apply | How do you apply to an apprenticeship? Where do you start? |

² Weight refers to the number of participants making this kind of comment.

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| 2 | Unionization and workplace protections | Is the job unionized? Will you be secure as an employee? |
|---|--|--|

Additional knowledge gaps include whether or not government assistance will be compromised, job prospects after the program (are you guaranteed to find a job?), whether Canadian immigrants are allowed into programs, and (geographic) apprenticeship locations (e.g., will you need to relocate?).

Findings: Learning Practitioner Perspectives

This section discusses the findings of the practitioner survey and the in-depth interviews that were conducted afterwards. It summarizes the practitioners' own level of knowledge of apprenticeship programs and their experience supporting adult learners along this particular pathway. It also describes adult learners' interest in and knowledge of apprenticeships from the practitioners' perspective. It touches on the limitations practitioners face in assisting learners along the apprenticeship pathway and outlines the kind of supports they need to be able to better assist learners in achieving their goals.

Practitioners' own knowledge of apprenticeships

The first question in the Practitioner Survey asked about the extent of the practitioners' awareness of apprenticeships, specifically regarding the following topics:

- Apprenticeship sectors,
- Pathways to apprenticeship,
- Training expectations,
- Employer roles,
- Testing and becoming a journeyman,
- Red Seal Trades.

As seen in Figure 5, most participants demonstrated a low level of awareness of these topics on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with weighted averages showing less than three for all categories except the first one (which showed 3.07).

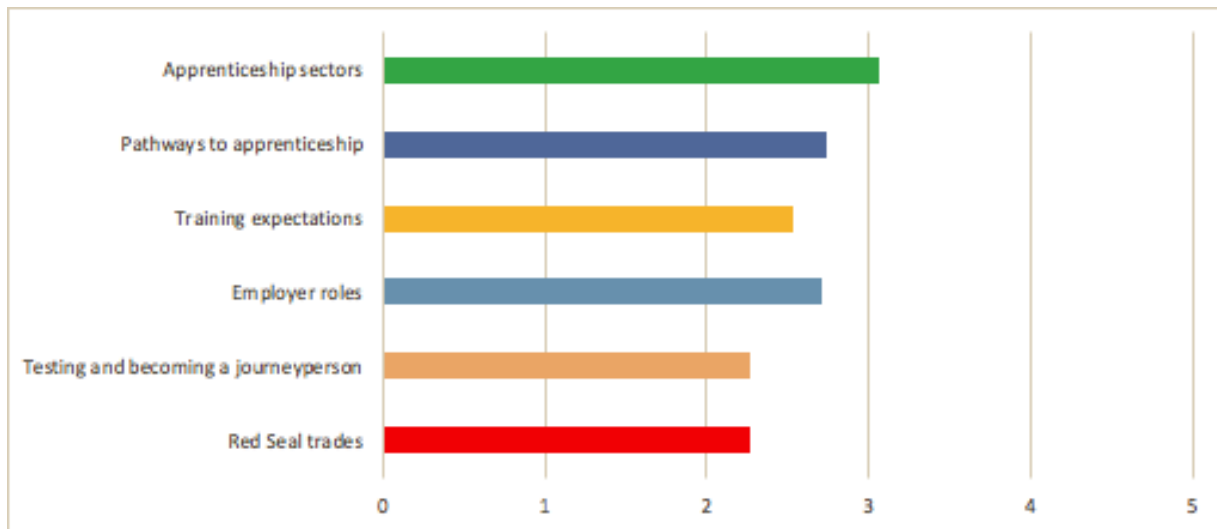


Figure 5. Learning practitioners' average level of awareness of various apprenticeship topics (1 = not aware, never heard anything about it; 3 = somewhat aware, would have difficulty explaining it; and 5 = very aware, could explain it if asked).

One practitioner commented, “I think first people [practitioners] need to see the value in it, so that when they do get information through workshops or whatever, that they actually take it in and then take it back to their students.”

Another practitioner said, “I had next to no awareness before attending the [learner] focus group in a supporting role - learned a lot!”

Practitioners' perspective of adult learners' level of interest in and knowledge of apprenticeships

Perceived level of interest in apprenticeships

According to the survey, as seen in Figure 6, practitioners believe that less than 25% of adult learners have apprenticeships as their long-term goal, with the majority believing that only 1-5% of learners are interested.

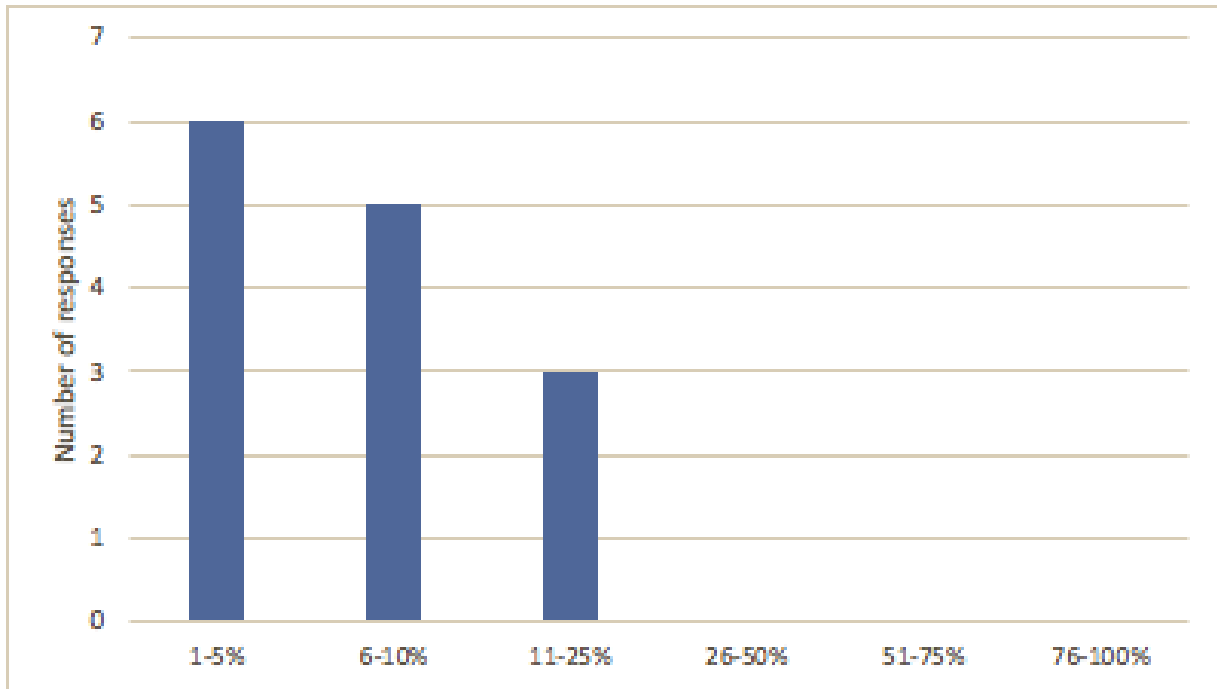


Figure 6. Percentage of learners interested in apprenticeship programs or trades, as estimated by literacy practitioners.

All of the practitioners, except one, were not surprised by the low level of interest adult learners had in apprenticeships. The practitioner who was “a bit surprised” thought that interest might be higher at the college they teach at because it “runs a program study³.”

Although practitioners perceived a low level of interest in apprenticeships among adult learners, they offered a number of potential reasons why a minority *are* interested, including:

- Awareness of job availability and potential salary,
- Contact with family members, friends, or others involved in trades,
- Awareness around apprenticeships’ hands-on approach to learning,
- Desire to “work with your hands” and “be your own boss.”

Perceived level of knowledge of apprenticeships

Data gathered from both the survey and interviews confirmed that practitioners believe adult learners possess very little specific knowledge of the apprenticeship pathway.

³ The assumption is that a program study refers to a co-op or internship program where students get real world experience in their area of study.

As seen in Figure 7, practitioners believed learners held very little knowledge of the skills, educational requirements, and steps needed to become an apprentice, as well as the supports (e.g., grants, loans, services) available for apprenticeships.

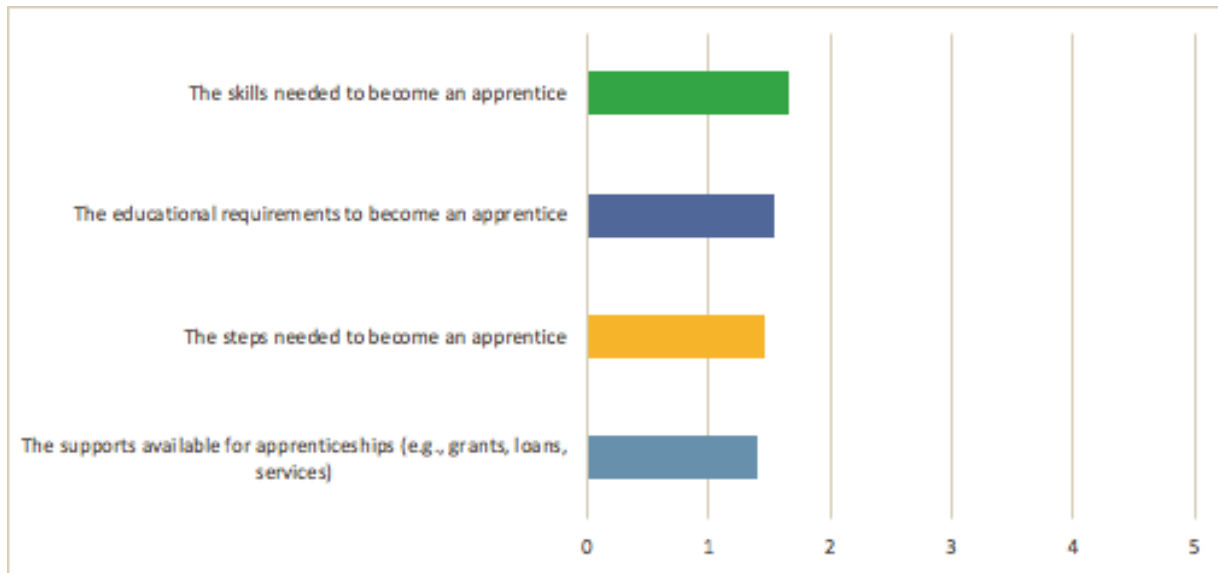


Figure 7. Adult learners’ average level of awareness of various apprenticeship topics, as perceived by practitioners (1 = not aware, never heard anything about it; 3 = somewhat aware, would have difficulty explaining it; and 5 = very aware, could explain it if asked.)

When asked why the level of knowledge among learners is perceived to be so low, four practitioners believed this is because little to no information is provided to them by practitioners. Two of these practitioners believe that because teachers and administrators lack accurate, relevant information about this pathway, they are reticent to raise the issue with their learners.

One practitioner believed the level of knowledge is so low because information about apprenticeships is difficult to find, and that there are only a “lucky few” who find out from people they know who have travelled the apprenticeship path. Another practitioner said, “A few who know they are interested in trades will be better informed, but I’ve never heard students talk about apprenticeship ...”

Supporting adult learners along apprenticeship pathway

Perceived adult learner barriers to pursuing apprenticeships

Interviews with practitioners revealed a number of perceived barriers to learners pursuing apprenticeships.

Four practitioners believed learners' lack of interest in apprenticeships is due to a lack of awareness of them. One practitioner believed that the process of becoming an apprentice might be difficult for some people to comprehend and that it can be difficult to find information about the process, i.e., the steps required to become an apprentice. Another practitioner highlighted how many adult learners probably don't even know about what trades offer apprenticeships.

Even with greater awareness, one practitioner articulated that there were other obstacles to pursuing apprenticeships: "I could see challenges in setting something up. I mean if it's on the learner to find potential employers, I could see that it won't go very far, very fast."

Two practitioners believed that there is a lack of interest because there is a stigma associated with apprenticeships, where people may feel that it's better to go to university or college and that apprenticeships are for people who are "good with their hands" and not necessarily "school material." They also suggested that a lot of adult learners are marginalized and may think of apprenticeships as unattainable. Moreover, there may be a gender bias in the acceptability of apprenticeships. One participant mentioned how females are not encouraged to investigate apprenticeships because trades are traditionally viewed as male-dominated fields: "I know a few people, females that would be really great ... but it never even occurs to them, you know, it's never brought as an option."

Lastly, several practitioners mentioned that at least some learners may be deterred from investigating apprenticeships since many, if not all programs, require a high school diploma or other requirements that the learners have yet to achieve. In other words, learners may think that it is not worth pursuing until they have met the requirement(s) first.

Overcoming adult learner barriers to pursuing apprenticeships

From the survey, as seen in Figure 8, slightly more than half of the practitioners surveyed had assisted at least one learner to research and/or transition into an apprenticeship.

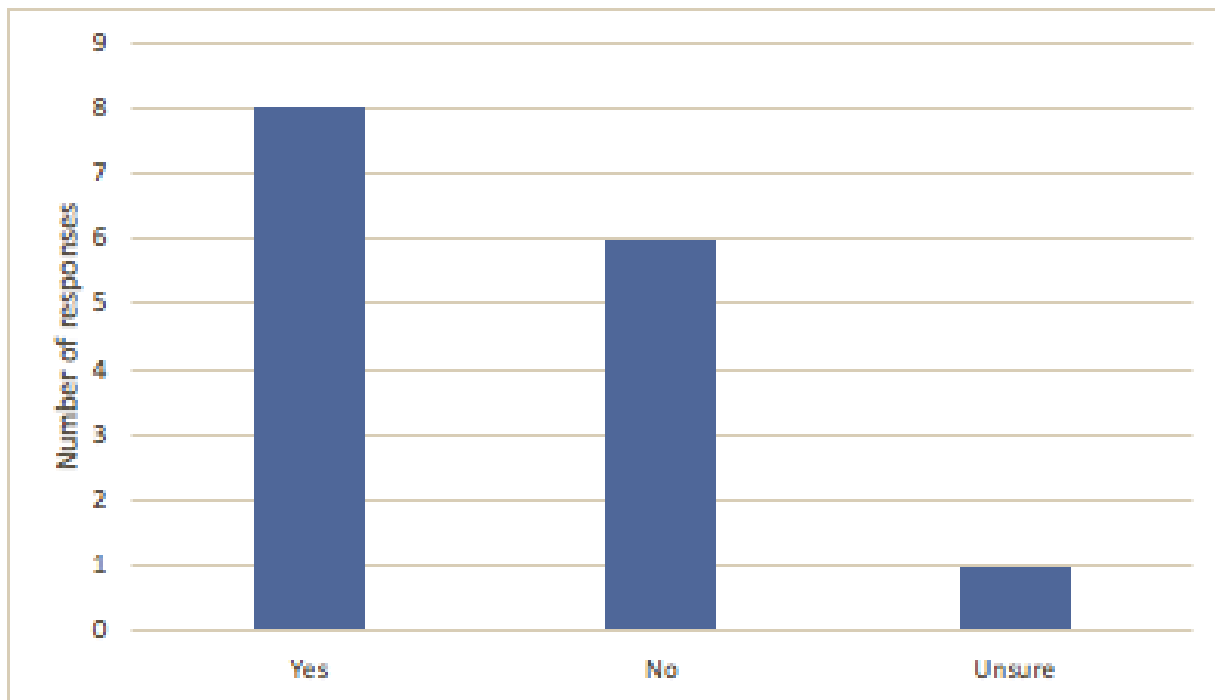


Figure 8. Number of practitioners who have helped an adult learner research and/or transition into an apprenticeship.

One practitioner thought that an effective way to support adult learners in pursuing apprenticeships was to connect them with peers who hold knowledge about apprenticeships. She felt that this kind of peer mentoring provides a unique opportunity for students to learn from each other's experiences. The practitioner suggested that students could initially be connected via email (provided they both consent). They could then drive the communication on their own with little to no further involvement from the practitioner.

Another practitioner said that connecting learners to community members or organizations that are more knowledgeable about apprenticeship (such as ABEA, YMCA employment centre, etc.) was an option:

"I can call people working in the employment sector in Ontario [government] for the students and those people are usually more

knowledgeable and I can refer. That might be another strategy I might take, depending on the student, I would refer them to an employment counsellor.”

Two practitioners stated that they assisted adult learners directly by researching and gathering information for the student. One stated, “I helped her in terms of researching where she could study, which colleges or programs she can take a pre-apprenticeship for and just digging for her in general.”

Another practitioner said, “I have done some internet research for students and then I made a couple of phone calls for her.”

Yet another person said she referred interested learners to any upcoming events that would provide insightful information, saying, “If there is anything going on within the community for certain programs then I will definitely refer them.”

A number of participants mentioned guiding the adult learners to online avenues, such as institutional or provincial government websites, where they can learn more about available apprenticeship options: “...give them the website and have them pursue it directly, rather than me do it for them directly.”

A suggestion was also made that employers need to participate in an awareness campaign along with providing some sort of structure that would allow learners and employers to provisionally agree to apprenticeships.

Limits to supporting adult learners in pursuing apprenticeships

Three participants expressed that their own personal lack of knowledge regarding apprenticeships limited their ability to support adult learners, saying:

- “I don't know much about apprenticeships and neither does much of the faculty,”
- “My own ignorance. My deep and profound ignorance,”
- “It's learning for me that I need to do.”

Two practitioners mentioned that a weak social bond between students limits their ability to assist adult learners. One practitioner noted that miscommunication or unresponsiveness between students and coordinators makes it difficult for practitioners

to support adult learners, stating, “If the coordinator⁴ doesn't get back to the student it is really disappointing.”

All of the practitioners alluded to the lack of resources available to them to provide to adult learners interested in apprenticeships.

Overcoming limits to supporting adult learners in pursuing apprenticeships

All of the practitioners mentioned (in one way or another) that they need physical materials to give to students who are interested in apprenticeships. One practitioner said, “[What would be helpful for us practitioners] is probably just clear packages of information with websites given out to them, where they can explore the requirements for apprenticeships.”

Another stated, “We need packets with more information like outlining the terminology you just used, outlining the process, some hard data.”

Yet another participant said, “I would even just like a package of information that outlines, up-to-date, all the terms and processes.”

One practitioner spoke of the need for better training or at least time to do in-depth research and gain a fundamental level of knowledge about apprenticeships: “I need time. Time to be able to do the research and do follow up calls and things like that. It would have been easier if I had already had knowledge or some resources that I could have to rely on as a starting point.”

A third practitioner thought that something more than posters and handouts is needed:

“I think they need, you know, people coming and talking to them and kind of even holding their hand a little bit, you know, just to start the process or where to start. Um, to get them interested and maybe, you know, people that are doing different jobs to come in and talk about those jobs.”

This same practitioner offered an example of a present partnership with the union:

“Right now we have a partnership with LiUNA. It's just brand new. It's an 8 week program and when they [learners] are done they get their certificate for concrete finisher. Yeah, so I think stuff like that is really great cause it's like a little introduction. And it's been quite, like quite a bit of interest,

⁴ The assumption here is that coordinator refers to someone outside of the practitioner's organization.

right! Cause you know, they hear that they don't have to pay for it and you know we help them with transportation and it's only 8 weeks, and there are quite a few jobs in it (the field). We try to say it's a union job. So I think stuff like that is really good."

Additional comments by practitioners allude to the fact that they need support from experts in the field or from people who have personal experience with the apprenticeship pathway. They provided several ideas to facilitate this kind of exchange, including:

- Peer mentoring programs for students,
- Regular workshops/information sessions on apprenticeships,
- An educational campaign around the benefits/desirability of apprenticeships,
- Availability of an apprenticeship coach who can walk students through the process.

Another practitioner raised the notion that there may be underlying biases among practitioners regarding apprenticeships, which needs to be addressed:

"I mean something needs to be done with the frontline workers like us to, you know, get the message out. Make it a more positive path, or positive idea, as a path for our students. They [practitioners] might not even know that they have those biases."

Limitations

In research, it's important to identify any characteristics of the research methods that could have impacted any findings, as well as the interpretation of those findings. In this section, we first discuss issues with our study sample that may impact the generalizability of the findings, then we discuss specific challenges with the focus groups.

Generalizability of the findings

The project did not reach its goal of 5-10 participants per focus group. Therefore, consideration should be given as to whether our sample sufficiently represents the adult literacy community in Hamilton. However, it is worth noting that although we did not hit our target for each individual group, larger turnouts in some groups offset low turnouts in others, which allowed us to come very close to the overall minimum goal of 25 participants.

It is also important to note that the focus group sample does not include the viewpoints of learners from CNIB Deafblind Literacy Program for Adults or the Hamilton Regional Indian Centre, as we were not able to arrange focus groups with either organization. There is reason to believe the viewpoints and experience of these two populations might differ. For example, CNIB learners might have particular accessibility challenges with apprenticeships related to visual impairments, and Indigenous learners may face particular cultural challenges.

The small sample size for the practitioner interviews (n=5) again raises concerns about generalizability. When recruiting participants, “self-selection bias” may also have interfered with the range of opinions considered in this project. In other words, those who knew the most about apprenticeships and had lots to say about the topic may have been more likely to volunteer to be interviewed. As such, the research team may have missed hearing the views of those with a lower level of knowledge or enthusiasm, who may in fact have had valuable information to share.

Challenges facilitating focus groups

A common challenge with focus groups is that some people are more likely than others to voice their opinions. Therefore, there is always a risk that the findings from the discussion portion of the adult learners’ focus groups may not fully represent the views of all participants. Additionally, it was sometimes difficult to gauge the level of knowledge across the group, as it appeared that some learners remained silent rather than vocalized their lack of knowledge or were hesitant to share their opinions with the group. In contrast, those who knew answers to the questions or were confident about expressing their views contributed more. To offset this limitation, facilitators actively encouraged the quieter participants to contribute, and the data collected in the polling portion of the focus groups may have allowed these quieter individuals to record some of their experience.

Some learners had comprehension barriers where English was their second language. Despite repeating questions and maintaining a willingness to clarify any confusions, the research team held doubts as to whether participants with severe language barriers were able to comprehend the majority of the questions. For the Collège Boréal session, the language issue was addressed by the presence of a French language translator, but this created the possibility that participants’ perspectives were distorted through the translation process. Another barrier was that certain questions, despite being edited for Clear Writing, were confusing. For instance, for a question asking participants’ knowledge of apprenticeship supports, this was often regarded as on-the-job support rather than higher level administrative and goal-seeking support.

Two final issues to consider are, 1) although focus group facilitators stressed that the session was not an academic test, learners sometimes acted as if they were being quizzed and may have stayed silent out of shyness or shame for not knowing the answers, and 2) at least some learners may have been intimidated by the presence of researchers from a higher education institution, causing them to say less than they may have otherwise.

Conclusion

This study investigated Hamilton adult literacy learners' level of interest in and knowledge of apprenticeship programs in Ontario. To do this, a team of McMaster University Research Shop researchers conducted focus groups with adult learners across the city's service providers and conducted a survey and interviews with literacy practitioners. Findings suggest that adult learners have an overall low level of interest in and knowledge of apprenticeships in Ontario. Stigma towards apprenticeships, a lack of awareness about the programs, and a lack of support for those considering a transition were the main barriers to pursuing apprenticeships. Adult literacy practitioners can help to remove these barriers but appear under-resourced in terms of their capacity to do so. Findings from this study highlight a number of potential initiatives to support adult learners along the apprenticeship pathway, including ways to support practitioners in their ability to assist learners. Although the study had several limitations, including restricted samples and challenges conducting the focus groups, findings in this report are intended to help ABEA and the Literacy Community Planning committee better assist learners considering and actively pursuing a transition to apprenticeship.

Appendix 1: Adult Learner Poll and Focus Group Guide

SETUP:

- These focus groups require at least two facilitators, as well as any support staff to address accessibility needs (e.g., translator).

Supplies

- 2 x copy focus group guide
- Refreshments (coffee/donuts)
- Lined paper & tape
- Pens and pencils
- Laptop for note taking
- Recording device (can be phone)
- Copies of poll
- Participant consent log
- Chart paper
- Markers

Room arrangement

- If necessary, create signs using lined paper and tape to walls/doors directing people to focus group room
- Set up refreshments on a table off to the side
- Arrange seats/desks in a circle
- Place a copy of the poll on each seat/desk, as well as a pencil or pen for recording

PART 1: Introductions (10 minutes)

- Thank you for taking the time to meet with us. My name is [name], and this is [name] and [name].
- We're volunteers from McMaster University's Research Shop, which is an initiative that helps community groups with small research projects.
- We're holding a series of focus groups for the Adult Basic Education Association (ABEA), and the purpose of these focus groups is to gather information about learners' knowledge and interest in apprenticeship and the skilled trades

- Getting people trained through an apprenticeship program is important for employers because so many skilled trade workers are older and will retire in the next 10 years
- ABEA and the upgrading programs will use the information from these focus groups to help design better supports for adult learners interested in an apprenticeship.

Participant information

Before we begin, we're going to provide you with some information about the focus group to help you decide whether or not you want to participate:

- The focus group will be about 1 hour.
- The focus group is split into two parts: for the first part we'll be using a poll to ask you some questions; the second part we'll be asking some discussion questions to get more information from you as a group.
- It's up to you whether or not to participate in this focus group. You may stop participating at any time by leaving the room, letting us know, or by not answering the questions we ask.
- Your decision to participate won't impact your involvement with the program, your relationship with your instructors or any connections with McMaster
- You don't need to respond to questions that make you feel uncomfortable. Only share what you feel okay saying in the group.
- The McMaster Research Shop will keep what you say confidential. No one's names or identifying details will be released at any point of the project.

Notes/ recording

- In order to remember what you say, we will be recording this focus group and a team member will be taking notes.
- Notes and recordings will be kept in a secure location and will only be accessed by Research Shop volunteers.
- Once we've finished our report for this project, the notes and recording will be deleted.

Consent

- Does anyone have any questions?
- If you agree to participate in the focus group, please sign this consent form with your name, signature, and today's date.

- If you don't want to participate, it's okay to leave the room now, or you can just sit and observe but not participate for the remainder of the session.

Participant consent log

| Name | Signature | Date | Facilitator Initials |
|------|-----------|------|----------------------|
| | | | |
| | | | |

PART 2: Poll of Apprenticeship Knowledge (10 minutes)

- As mentioned, for the first part of this focus group, we'll be using a poll to determine your individual level of interest in and knowledge of apprenticeships.
- On your seat/desk there should be a poll sheet with a pen or pencil - if anyone is missing a poll or a working pen or pencil, let us know.
- There are a total of 10 questions. These will be Yes or No questions, or questions asking you to rate your awareness of a topic from 1 to 5.
- For the awareness questions, 1 = not aware, never heard anything about it; 3 = somewhat aware, would have difficulty explaining it; and 5 = very aware, could explain it if asked.
- We will repeat each question twice before moving onto the next question.
- If you're not sure about a question, feel free to raise your hand and we'll try to clarify.
- Does anyone have any questions or concerns before we start?

Questions

1. Have you ever considered apprenticeship as a goal? (Yes or No)
2. Have you ever taken steps to learn more about or pursue an apprenticeship? (Yes or No)
3. If you were interested in becoming an apprentice, would you know how to apply for one? (Yes or No)
4. How aware are you of the different job sectors or skilled trades that offer apprenticeships? (Awareness scale)
5. How aware are you of the skills needed to become an apprentice? (Awareness scale)
6. How aware are you of the educational requirements needed to apply for an apprenticeship? (Awareness scale)

7. Are you aware of the steps you need to take to complete an apprenticeship? (Yes / No)
 1. How aware are you (Awareness scale)
8. How aware are you of any supports available for apprenticeships (e.g., grants, loans, services)? (Awareness scale)
9. Have you ever heard the term journeyperson? (Yes or No)
10. If you answered “Yes” to Question 9, would you be able to describe the steps you need to take to become a journeyperson? (Yes or No)

PART 3: Discussion Questions (40 minutes)

(After a facilitator has collected all the response sheets, the next part of the focus group asks a range of open-ended questions to collect more detailed information about participants’ interest in and awareness of apprenticeships. I recommend that the note taker makes a “seating plan” and identifies people by number (e.g., 1 to 10), and then uses these numbers to identify the order in which people speak, making short notes of what each person says to compliment the recording.)

Focus group guidelines

Thank you very much for participating in the poll. We’re now moving onto our group discussion questions. Before we begin, we’d like to set out a few guidelines:

- First off, everyone’s views are welcome and important. This isn’t a test, and we’re not looking for any “right” answers - we’re interested in what you currently know.
- It’s important that we all protect each other’s privacy. Anything heard in the room should stay in the room.
- We want to hear everyone’s ideas, so we may step in to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak and be heard.
- Lastly, in order to finish on time, we may redirect the conversation if it’s straying off topic.
- Does anyone have anything else that we should add to these guidelines?
- Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin the second half?

Questions

1. What do you think of when you hear the word apprenticeship?
2. Is anyone currently considering an apprenticeship?
 - a. (For those who acknowledged) Where did you get your information about the program? Could you tell us what motivated you?

- b. For those not considering an apprenticeship, could you tell us some of the reasons why not?
2. Does anyone know someone who is completing or has completed an apprenticeship? What's your impression of their experience?
 3. How many trades do you think offer apprenticeships in Ontario? (Wait for responses) There are more than 150 designated trades offering apprenticeship programs in Ontario. Keeping this in mind, what kinds of job sectors or skilled trades do you think might offer an apprenticeship?
 4. Why do you think an employer would want to hire an apprentice?
 5. What skills do you believe are needed to become an apprentice?
 6. What educational background might be needed to qualify for an apprenticeship?
 7. What do you imagine the employer's role and responsibilities might be to the apprentice?*
 8. What do you think the apprentice's role and responsibilities might be to the employer?*
 9. What are some of the most important things you would want to know before considering an apprenticeship?
 10. What supports or other things can the program do to provide more information or help people on the apprenticeship pathway?

*Only ask these questions if have time

WRAP UP:

- Thank you for participating in our focus group. Your feedback will be extremely helpful for supporting adult learners looking to transition into apprenticeships.
- ABEA will follow up with you once we've completed this project to share some of the key results with you.
- If you have any questions or concerns or want to learn more about what your participation means, feel free to email rshop@mcmaster.ca, or you can stick around and we'll do our best to answer your questions.

Appendix 2: Practitioner Survey Guide

INTRODUCTION:

The Adult Basic Education Association (ABEA), in partnership with the McMaster Research Shop, is conducting a study to determine the knowledge of, and interest in, apprenticeship opportunities among adult learners in Hamilton Literacy and Basic Skills programs, regardless of their current goal pathway.

The study is collecting data by holding a series of focus groups with adult learners and conducting a survey among adult education practitioners to gather information from both perspectives. This information is needed to better inform the organization's Literacy Community Planning committee to assist learners, who are interested in, accessing supports to transition to apprenticeship.

You've been identified as an adult education practitioner with general knowledge of your students' learning goals and ambitions. Hearing from you about your own awareness of apprenticeship programs and your involvement with adult learners' regarding apprenticeship as a learning pathway is critical to this study. If you agree to participate, please complete this short survey (max 15 minutes) below.

Provision of an email and/or phone number in this survey are optional. Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of any identifying information that is obtained in connection with this study. All answers connected with the survey will be used solely for the research purpose and your name will not be associated with your responses or released at any time.

If you have any questions regarding this research or would like additional information, please feel free to contact ____ at _____.

By clicking "Next," you agree that you have read the above information about this study and that your participation is optional.

QUESTIONS:

1. What service provider organization do you represent?
 - a. Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board – Community and Continuing Education

- b. Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board – St. Charles Ault Education Centres
 - c. Mohawk College – Academic Upgrading
 - d. Hamilton Literacy Council
 - e. Canadian National Institute for the Blind – Deafblind Literacy Program for Adults
 - f. Hamilton Regional Indian Centre – Native Learning Centre
 - g. Collège Boréal
2. To what extent are you aware of the following topics regarding apprenticeships? (Likert scale 1 to 5, 1 = Not aware at all; 3 = Somewhat aware, but would have difficulty explaining it; 5 = Very aware, and can explain it if asked)
- a. Apprenticeship sectors
 - b. Pathways to apprenticeship
 - c. Training expectations
 - d. Employer roles
 - e. Testing and becoming a journeyperson
 - f. Red Seal trades
3. What proportion of your learners would you estimate have apprenticeship or trades as their longer-term goal? (Not necessarily a direct goal path from LBS)
- a. Less than a quarter
 - b. Around a quarter
 - c. Around a half
 - d. Around three quarters
 - e. More than three quarters
4. Have you ever assisted a learner to research and/or transition into an apprenticeship? (Yes/No)
5. (If answered “Yes” to Question #3) What motivated their interest and/or transition into an apprenticeship? (Open ended)
6. What additional resources have you allotted, or would you use, to assist a learner with an apprenticeship goal? (Open ended)

7. What supports or resources do you need, if any, to support learners to better understand apprenticeship as an employment pathway and transition to apprenticeship? (Open ended)

8. Are you willing to be contacted to participate in a short follow-up interview in January 2019? (Yes/No)

(If answered “Yes” to Question #7) Please enter a phone number and/or email address that you may be reached at.

Appendix 3: Practitioner Interview Guide

SETUP:

Interviews will be conducted by phone by one of the RS team members. Interviewers will take notes and record each session. Each session should take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Supplies

- Fully charged phone able set to record entire interview. Computer or notepad.

INTRODUCTION:

- Hi [insert name] and thanks so much for agreeing to participate in this interview about apprenticeship programs, as it relates to the adult learning community.
- My name is [name] and I'm a volunteer with McMaster University's Research Shop. As you may recall from the online survey you completed, we're helping the Adult Basic Education Association gather information about learners' knowledge and interest in apprenticeship programs and the skilled trades. Your input on the subject is an important aspect of our research.
- What we learn from the interviews with adult learning practitioners (like you) will be integrated with the data we've collected from the online Practitioner Survey and the 5 Adult Learner Focus Groups we have completed. The Literacy Community Planning Committee (the LCP) will use the overall results of our research to help design better supports for learners interested in apprenticeships and for the practitioners who help guide them.

Participant information

- Of course, we'll keep what you say strictly confidential. No one's names or identifying details will be released at any point.
- I will be taking notes as well as recording the session so that nothing is lost.
- We will keep notes and recording in secure locations. And you can rest assured that they will only be accessed by Research Shop volunteers. Once we've finished our report the notes and recording will be deleted.
- This interview consists of 6 questions and should take about 20 minutes.
- Do you have questions?

Consent

- I will now read a short paragraph asking for your consent to proceed. If you agree to participate, just say “YES” clearly when I am finished.

I agree to participate in this interview about apprenticeship programs. I understand that I may stop participating at any time and that my decision to participate won't impact my relationship with my employers or with ABEA. I understand that all conversations occurring will be kept completely confidential.

Thanks! We can now proceed with the questions.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. According to survey results, practitioners believe that less than 25% of adult learners are interested in apprenticeships. Are you surprised by this? Why or why not?
Prompt: Do you think it's a lack of awareness vs. a lack of interest (e.g., learners don't believe it's something they're capable of doing or that they'd want to do)?
Prompt: What do you think are some obstacles holding back learners from pursuing an apprenticeship?
2. We know from our focus groups that adult learners don't know a lot about the skills and education needed, the steps, and the supports available to transition to an apprenticeship. Why do you think their level of knowledge is so low?
3. What information tools and/or resources do you think would help learners along the apprenticeship pathway to employment?
4. Have you ever assisted a learner to research and/or transition into an apprenticeship?
(If yes) In what way?
(If yes) What strategies helped you to assist the learner(s)?
(If yes) Was there anything that hindered your ability to assist the learner?
5. To what extent are you able to help a learner along the apprenticeship path, e.g., reviewing a complete list of suitable options (Ontario Apprenticeship website), narrowing down options, ensuring they find a sponsor or are hooked up with people/organizations who can help them to find a sponsor, etc.?
6. In the online survey, most Practitioners scored less than 3 (on the scale of 1 to 5) when asked about their knowledge of apprenticeship programs, such as the sectors of apprenticeships, employer roles, pathways, etc. This means there's an overall low level

of knowledge about apprenticeships among Practitioners. What could be done to better inform practitioners about apprenticeships?

WRAP UP:

- Thank you for participating in this interview. Your feedback will be extremely helpful for supporting adult learners looking to transition into apprenticeships.
- ABEA will follow up with you once we've completed this project to share some of the key results with you.
- Do you have any questions or concerns?
- If you want to learn more about what your participation means, feel free to email rshop@mcmaster.ca.