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THE BEST-LAID PLANS: EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS OF ADULT LEARNERS IN TORONTO

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the post-secondary plans and attainment of adult learners in Toronto, Ontario. We first describe the population of adult learners in Canada's largest city, describing how they are largely made up of immigrants who use the continuing education adult day programs at the Toronto District School Board to upgrade their skills. We hypothesize that the adult day schools are a stepping stone for entering post-secondary programs in Ontario and find that the vast majority of students surveyed indicated that they wished to pursue college or university. However, an administrative data set demonstrates that only a fraction of these students successfully confirmed an offer of college or university admission at a later date. We discuss this disconnect between the plans and later-life attainment of adult learners, noting how this particular population is much different demographically than traditional high-school students.

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous examinons les plans et les réalisations des personnes apprenantes d'âge adulte à Toronto (Ontario) en matière de formation postsecondaire. Nous décrivons d'abord la population des personnes apprenantes adultes dans la plus grande ville du Canada et précisons que celle ci est majoritairement composée de personnes immigrantes qui cherchent à mettre à jour leurs compétences à l'aide des programmes de formation continue et de jour pour adultes offerts par le conseil scolaire du district de Toronto. Nous postulons que ces cours de jour pour adultes servent de levier pour accéder aux programmes postsecondaires ontariens et observons que la grande majorité de personnes apprenantes interrogées affirment vouloir poursuivre une formation collégiale ou universitaire. Cependant, les données

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administratives analysées démontrent que seulement une fraction de ces personnes confirment leur éventuelle admission à un collège ou université. Nous nous penchons sur l'écart entre les plans et les réalisations des personnes apprenantes adultes plus tard dans la vie et soulignons en quoi cette population diffère considérablement de la population étudiante traditionnelle des écoles secondaires.

Introduction

Available Canadian literature on the topic of adults and their transition to post-secondary education (PSE) is relatively sparse, and nearly nonexistent when describing adult learners at the secondary level (Kerr, 2011; Pinsent-Johnson, 2012). Though at one time considered a marginal aspect of education studies, the unique pathways of adult learners have become a research topic of interest in recent years. Our research addresses this gap in the literature by investigating PSE outcomes for Canadian-born and immigrant adults who seek to upgrade their credentials through continuing education at the secondary level or at adult day schools through the Toronto District School Board (TDSB).

Our research focuses on non-traditional adult learners who seek to upgrade their credentials via Ontario's continuing education system. The Ministry of Education in Ontario provides funding to school boards for continuing education credit programs and services for adult learners who are pursuing an Ontario Secondary School Certificate or an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. Fifty-six school boards in Ontario deliver secondary-school programming to support adult learning. Because many adults require language and literacy training before entering a secondary program, most school boards offer adult literacy and English or French second-language programs (Pinsent-Johnson, 2012). Adult learners, particularly immigrants, represent a sizeable number of students who participate in continuing education programs at the secondary level and in adult day schools in the TDSB.

Background

Within the province of Ontario, the population of adult learners is heterogeneous and has varying needs and motivations for seeking further education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). Thus, adult learners may seek to complete requirements for a secondary-school diploma to pursue subsequent PSE or to obtain employment. Alternatively, they may be native-born Ontarians or immigrant newcomers who recognize that improved literacy or numeracy skills increase their chances for success in the workplace or for full participation in the community. Or they could be experienced workers or unemployed individuals, with or without formal credentials, who wish to upgrade their skills or learn new skills and participate in retraining opportunities in response to changes in the economy and industry. Finally, adult learners may consist of individuals who wish to pursue educational opportunities for personal interest (Kerr, 2011).

A better understanding of the diverse set of adults who participate in secondary programs is needed if we are to comprehend PSE access by non-traditional adult learners and evaluate the effectiveness of policies developed to address access challenges. In this context, the Government of Ontario introduced the Open Ontario Plan in 2009, making PSE attainment a provincial priority; this plan aims to raise PSE attainment to 70% for those aged 25 to 64 (Kerr, 2011). To accomplish this goal, the province needs to increase participation and attainment rates of all under-represented groups of students—including adult students enrolled in continuing education programs at the secondary-school level—who may not be enrolling in PSE at equal rates (Mullins, 2010).

Two data sets are employed in this paper to respond to four research questions: (1) What are the demographic, social, and cultural characteristics of adult students enrolled in continuing education programs? (2) What is the nature of PSE plans among students in the Continuing Education Survey? (3) What proportion of students go on to confirm a PSE choice? and (4) What factors help to predict the PSE plans and confirmations of students in these data sets?

Importance of Adult Learning and Education

Adult learning, normally considered a subset of lifelong learning, refers to the process or the result of adults gaining knowledge and expertise through practice, instruction, or experience. Such learning may either be intentional or nonintentional and may occur in a variety of settings, such as at home, in educational institutions, at work, or in the community (Powley, Kennedy, & Childs, 2005). Adult education, also considered a subset of lifelong learning, refers to intentional learning opportunities that occur within structured and organized settings and allow learners to attain the skills and knowledge they need to fully participate in the economic and social life of their communities (Kerr, 2011). In 2003, nearly half of the Canadian population aged 16 to 65 participated in courses, programs, and other forms of adult education and training (Statistics Canada, 2008).

Adult learning has become not only a provincial, but also a national, if not global, priority in recent years, with developed countries sharing many concerns about training and education for adult citizens, particularly at the PSE level (Rubenson, Desjardins, & Yoon, 2007). A rapidly aging population foretells slow workforce growth, resulting in labour shortages (Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 2011). Providing opportunities for adults to build additional skills and knowledge may increase the potential of the existing workforce to meet labour needs (Myers & de Broucker, 2006; Saunders, 2007).

Our current knowledge-based economy is characterized by rapidly changing skill requirements. Livingstone (2007) drew attention to a trend in inflated credential requirements for even simple clerical and unskilled manual jobs in Canada and warned about the growing issue of overqualification. Other research has indicated that low-skill jobs are declining in number and that skills are becoming obsolete with increasing speed in this new labour market (Shek-wai Hui & Leckie, 2011). Therefore, learning must take place throughout the life course of an individual to support productivity, innovation, and employment chances and ensure global competitiveness by building human capital (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).

Education is also a marker of social mobility, reducing income disparity in an environment where the less educated are more likely to experience relatively poor labour market outcomes such as lower wages, unemployment, and lower-status jobs (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2003). Research from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (2004) showed that half of the adults who pursue continuing education escape dependence on social assistance and that 83% of adult day-school graduates go on to jobs or further education. The performance gap is widened, however, by the fact that the least educated are less likely to participate in further education. University-educated Ontarians receive five times more education and training than those who have high-school diplomas or less (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). Adults with lower levels of educational attainment stand to benefit just as much or even more from educational opportunities compared to those with higher levels of education in terms of self-reported wage and/or employment gains, particularly if a PSE certificate is obtained (Kerr, 2011).

Adult Learners and Secondary Students in Continuing Education

While some studies report no substantial gender differences in participation in adult learning in Canada (OECD, 2003), others indicate that women, specifically immigrants and visible minorities, are less likely or less able to invest in education (Chiswick & Miller, 1994; Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). A 2007 survey of adult students taking courses in the TDSB showed that, overall, nearly two-thirds of continuing education students were female, whereas women comprised half of the TDSB day-school population. Students 21 years of age or older were more likely to be female and less likely to speak English at home, possibly due to recent immigrant status (Brown, 2006).

Participation and retention rates for adult females may vary according to status and background. Through their analysis of the 2007 Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada and a review of the literature in this area, Anisef, Sweet, Adamuti-Trache, and Wayland (2012) showed that immigrant women are more likely than immigrant men to experience isolation, deficiency of local knowledge, family obligations, cultural barriers, and lower levels of education. All of these factors can act as obstacles to learning one of Canada's official languages. Those women characterized as SOLP—speaking an official language poorly—tend to be older, be visible minorities, migrate as family class or refugees, and be from regions in Asia and the Middle East. Thus, age, immigrant class, race, and country of origin may be factors in participation and success in adult education for immigrant women.

Motivations of Adult Learners and Barriers Encountered

As one might expect when considering the diversity in their backgrounds, adult learners are actively motivated to pursue education for varying reasons and toward different goals (Boshier & Collins, 1985). The decision to enroll in adult education programs is multi-faceted and informed by situational, dispositional, and institutional factors (Cross, 1981). Choosing to pursue schooling is "a cognitive, emotional, and relational decision considered within the web of family, work, social, financial class, gender, institutional support, and program delivery considerations" (Stein & Wanstreet, 2006, p. 7). Comings (2007) noted that adult learners' goals may change over time, impacting the configuration of their learning pathways. Furthermore, among other factors, previous education, skill levels, and the Human Development Index level of their country of origin (for immigrant students) can influence participation in schooling (Lum & Grabke, 2012).

Increasingly employability and employment-related training are cited as reasons for adults' pursuit of further education at all levels (Dæhlen & Ure, 2009). Of particular relevance is the OECD (2003) finding that most adult learning is short in duration and focuses on professional or career upgrading, rather than formal education; less than a fifth of adult students train to obtain a university degree or college or vocational diploma. Older adults, particularly those over 50, tend to participate less in adult education, as the returns to further training later in their careers are not perceived as worth the investment. Pursuing post-compulsory education may entail changing employers, the loss of seniority and/or benefits, a shorter remaining working life, and, more generally, smaller financial gains from their investment when compared to younger students.

The Toronto Context

The TDSB is Canada's largest school board and the fifth largest in North America, servicing over 250,000 students. The Continuing Education Department of the TDSB offers a broad range of courses to over 100,000 students aged 4 to over 65, including summer school, night school, ESL/ELL, non-credit, and general interest courses. Within this umbrella of Continuing Education is the Adult Day system. The Adult Day system allows adult students (21 or over) to take full-time secondary courses for credit. Students without an Ontario high-school diploma take courses to complete their graduation requirements. Students returning with an existing diploma, or those from other countries with education acquired in their countries of origin, may also take courses—for example, to update or upgrade already existing courses or to prepare for PSE.

In 2007–8, over 41,000 credits were earned by students, and 1,441 Ontario Secondary Student Diplomas (OSSDs) were awarded (Toronto District School Board, 2011). Enrolment in the TDSB's five adult day schools (which include three adult learning centres) in 2007–8 was approximately 14,000, with three-quarters of students aged 22 years and older. The system is set up to allow the greatest flexibility to adult schedules.

With half of Toronto's population being foreign-born, it is not surprising that immigrants represent a significant proportion of adult learners in TDSB's continuing education programs. Brown and Newton (2012) reported that within TDSB's continuing education population there were 95 different first languages other than English and 146 different countries of birth other than Canada, with nearly 80% of students being foreign-born. The top countries of origin were Sri Lanka, China, Afghanistan, and Nigeria, and the top three languages spoken were Tamil, Spanish, and Mandarin.

Ontario is also a core settlement area for newcomers to Canada, which constitutes an adult learner group of particular interest. Over 40% of new permanent residents settled in Ontario in 2010, with nearly 80% of Ontario-bound immigrants settling in Toronto (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010). PSE is a pathway pursued more often by recent adult immigrants aged 25 to 54 (14%) than by Canadian-born adults of the same age (6%) (Gilmore & Le Petit, 2008). Many immigrants' decisions to pursue training at the secondary and PSE level are influenced by difficulties in having foreign credentials recognized in the Canadian labour market (Guo, 2009). A recent study by Smith and Fernandez (2015) comparing immigrant wages to the earnings of their native peers revealed significant in-country immigrant wage gaps in the United States and Canada, with immigrants making, on average, over $200 less per month than their native peers. The study concluded that the wage gap resulted from underemployment, marginal returns on education, and discriminatory wage practices.

In response to this recurrent barrier, immigrant adults frequently decide to pursue vocational training or language courses as a means to increase their wages and thereby raise the rate of return on human capital earned abroad (Girard, 2010). Country of origin, immigrant category, age at migration, length of time in the host country, and pre-migration schooling and occupation can all inform post-migration investments in education, with greater investments seen from immigrants who come from regions that suffer from low initial skill transferability (Girard, 2010).

The review of the existing literature suggests that a large proportion of adult learners in Canada are relatively recent immigrants. Previous research has pointed to the barriers faced by newcomers to Canada and the factors that may be associated with their desire to enroll in continuing education and subsequent PSE. There is a gap, however, in information about the relationship between continuing education and PSE enrolment. We address this gap in our investigation of the four aforementioned research questions.

Methodology, Analysis, and Results

In the following section, we describe the data sets employed in our analyses and present the results, which are shown in tandem with their associated research question and are addressed through a combination of descriptive and multivariate analytic techniques, where appropriate.

Two data sets were employed in the analyses: the TDSB Continuing Education Survey and the TDSB Adult Student Administrative Data Set. The TDSB Continuing Education Survey was given to students taking Grade 12 English in March 2011. Being enrolled in Grade 12 English is an important milestone, the completion of which is required for university or college admission. The survey was anonymous and the response rate was 58% (640 of 1,101 enrolled in the course). The survey was constructed through collaboration between adult-school administrators, teachers, and the TDSB research department. Survey questions were intended to provide more information on the adult population to TDSB educators for the purpose of school planning. Respondents were asked various demographic questions, including their age, marital status, and the number of years they had lived in Canada. Information about their first language, whether or not they were enrolled in an ESL program, and the amount of time spent on adult education and foreign credentials (in terms of their highest level of education attained) was also collected. The survey gathered information on the respondents' employment status and the type of work engaged in both within and outside of Canada. Finally, the survey asked respondents about their PSE goals as well as several attitudinal questions about their experiences in the continuing education system.

The TDSB Adult Student Administrative Data Set consists of all adult students who attended any one of the five TDSB adult day schools at any time over four quadmesters between September 2008 and June 2009. Where available, information on students was provided through TDSB's student information system. Variables derived from the 2006 Canadian census were added to provide contextual information regarding the neighbourhoods in which these students lived. The data set also contains information on whether students accepted offers from Ontario PSE institutions.

What Are the Demographic, Social, and Cultural Characteristics of Adult Students Enrolled in Continuing Education Programs?

Tables 1 and 2 display descriptive statistics used in the multivariate analyses of the survey and the administrative data set, respectively. The literature review above indicated that age, sex, region of origin, immigration status, language proficiency, labour market status, and foreign credentials were all important correlates of adult learning. Our results largely confirm these findings.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, TDSB Continuing Education Survey (N = 545)

	Mean	**SD**	**Range**
Region of origin			
Canada/US	0.21		0–1
Caribbean and Latin America	0.14		0–1
Africa	0.18		0–1
Europe	0.05		0–1
Asia	0.24		0–1
South Asia	0.18		0–1
Sex (1 = female)	0.67		0–1
Marital status (1 = married or common-law)	0.36		0–1
Age (1 = less than 30)	0.64		0–1
Number of children	1.83	1.05	1–4
Children under 4 (1 = yes)	0.16		0–1
Number persons in home	3.48	1.50	1–6
Time in Canada	3.37	1.41	1–5
Citizen (1 = yes)	0.48		0–1
English first language (1 = yes)	0.35		0–1
High-school credential (1 = yes)	0.73		0–1
Foreign university credentials (1 = yes)	0.19		0–1
Unemployed (1 = yes)	0.36		0–1
Income	1.91	1.28	1–5
Property owner (1 = yes)	0.15		0–1
Plans			
College (1 = yes)	0.55		0–1
University (1 = yes)	0..25		0–1
Adult education (1 = yes)	0.14		0–1
OSSD (1 = yes)	0.15		0–1
Unsure (1 = yes)	0.08		0–1

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics, TDSB Adult Student Administrative Data Set (N = 12,858)

	Mean	**SD**	**Range**
Region of origin			
English-speaking	0.22		0–1
Caribbean and Latin America	0.15		0–1
Africa	0.16		0–1
Europe	0.05		0–1
Asia	0.16		0–1
South Asia	0.17		0–1
Middle East	0.10		0–1
Sex (1 = female)	0.65		0–1
Age (years)	29.84	9.18	21–74
Years in Canada since arrival	6.71	7.30	1–61
Arrived in Canada after age 14 (1 = yes)	0.67		0–1
Native-born (1 = yes)	0.21		0–1
Statistics Canada census variables			
Median family income	56040.2	23943.49	0–308040
Proportion of lone parents	33.68	15.99	0–100
Proportion of adults with higher education	28.29	15.70	0–92.81
Proportion of single detached houses	22.43	29.64	0–104.55
Average number of children	1.31	0.35	0.1–3.3
Unemployment rate	9.30	5.13	0–40.6
Post-secondary pathways			0–1
Confirmed university in Ontario (1 = yes)	0.02		
Confirmed college in Ontario (1 = yes)	0.17		0–1
Applied to PSE but did not confirm (1 = yes)	0.08		0–1
Did not apply to PSE (1 = yes)	0.73		0–1

Region of birth and time in Canada. Both data sets contain demographic data.[1] The larger administrative data set (Table 2) revealed that the regions of origin of continuing education day students were, in descending order, Canada/US[2] (22%), South Asia (17%), Asia (16%), Africa (16%), the Caribbean and Latin America (15%), the Middle East (10%), and Europe (5%). Around two-thirds of continuing education students were female. Just over one-third of respondents (36%) reported being married or in a common-law union (Table 1). Age was derived from the student's year of birth; the average age of adult students was 30. Students had been in Canada for an average of nine years as of 2008 (Table 2), although there was wide variation among adult students, ranging from newly arrived to those who had been in Canada for over six decades, while 21% were born in Canada. The age at arrival in Canada was calculated by taking the difference between a student's age and their arrival to Canada; two-thirds (67%) arrived after the age of 14. Nearly half (48%) of the survey respondents were Canadian citizens (Table 1).

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[1] There are small discrepancies between the data sources with respect to the region of birth, with the survey having more individuals with Asian background compared to the Adult Student Administrative Data Set. The coding differences between the two data sets mean that those who are Middle Eastern in the Administrative Data Set are subsumed into this larger category for the survey.

Household composition. Household composition (Table 1) was conceptualized with three variables. Number of children was measured by asking the respondent about the number of children living in their home and was top-coded at "3 or more." There were just fewer than two children in the average respondent's home. A variable was also derived to assess whether the respondent lived in a home with children who were not in full-time school at the time of the survey. Around 16% of respondents had a child younger than four years of age living in their household. Household size was assessed through a survey question asking about the total number of persons in the respondent's home, which was top-coded at six persons; there were an average of about 3.5 persons in respondent households.

First language. Whether or not the respondent spoke English as his or her first language was derived from a survey question asking about the respondent's first language. Those that indicated English (3%) were coded 1 (Table 1).

Educational background. Two measures of educational credentials were considered from the survey data (Table 1). The first was whether the respondent had the equivalent of an Ontario high-school diploma. High-school credential was coded 1 if the respondent possessed a diploma; nearly three-quarters (73%) of survey respondents were in this category. Foreign university credentials were assessed through a derived variable in which the respondent was asked about various credentials he or she may have obtained in other countries. Around 20% of respondents indicated that they had a foreign university credential.

Economic background. Three measures of economic resources were considered (Table 1): whether the respondent was unemployed, his or her income, and property ownership. About one-third (36%) of the sample indicated that they were unemployed. Income was assessed from grouped categories: (1) less than $19,999; (2) $20,000–$29,999; (3) $30,000–$39,999; (4) $40,000–$59,000; and (5) $60,000 and higher. Property owners made up around 15% of the sample.

Thus, the "average student" in TDSB continuing education day programs can be characterized as a 30-year-old, foreign-born, ethnic-minority, ESL female with children, although there are considerable variations within this generalization.

What Is the Nature of PSE Plans among Students in the Continuing Education Survey?

Survey respondents were asked about their plans after completing their current course.

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[2] US-born residents are included with Canadian-born residents due to the small size of the group and the cultural and language similarities between the two countries.

They were asked if they planned to apply to university, continue with adult education, or complete their high-school diploma, or if they were unsure. Multiple answers were permitted. The most common response (Table 1, 55%) was to apply to college, with university being a distant second choice by a quarter of respondents. Around 15% intended to complete their high-school diploma, while around 14% were planning to continue in adult education. Fewer than 8% were unsure.

What Proportion of Students in the Adult Student Administrative Data Set Confirm a PSE Choice (University or College)?

For information on PSE pathways, two sources were used: Ontario university applications and Ontario college applications. We know that comparatively few adolescent (day-school) students in Toronto attend PSE institutions outside of Ontario, Canada's largest and most populous province, and that those who do are most likely to come from high-income neighbourhoods (see Brown, 2006). Given that (as we will see below) adult students in the study were more likely to live in lower-income neighbourhoods, it is highly likely that the Ontario applications capture most of the Toronto adult student pathways. Three successive years of application data were examined—the 2009, 2010, and 2011 application cycles. This provides as complete a picture as possible of the most immediate transitions from secondary education to PSE.

In Table 2, students are coded as "confirming" (i.e., the student was offered a place and the student accepted this offer) an offer of admission to an Ontario university (2%); confirming an offer of admission from an Ontario college (17%); applying to an Ontario PSE institution over the three years, but not confirming (8%); and not applying to an Ontario PSE institution in the period 2009–11 (73%).

What Factors Help to Predict the PSE Plans and Confirmations of Students in These Data Sets?

Table 3 presents the results for the multinomial logistic regression estimations predicting PSE plans among the adult day-school survey respondents. The results are presented as odds ratios. The three outcomes in Table 3 are plans on attending university, plans on attending college, and plans to go to either college or university. The reference category in the multinomial regression was "neither university nor college."

What is immediately obvious from scanning the multivariate analysis is that there are very few statistically significant predictors in the model. Being younger than 30 was a significant predictor of having plans for all PSE options. There were no statistically significant differences in plans by region of origin. In terms of length of time in Canada, no pattern is evident; compared to the reference group (new arrivals who had been in Canada less than one year), all other groups were more likely to indicate either university or "either" plans. There is some suggestion from the decreasing odds ratios between "1–3 years" and "6–10 years" that such enthusiasm may wane over time. Those with foreign credentials were also far more likely to indicate a preference to attend university or college.

The analyses examining student attainment with the much larger Adult Student Administrative Data Set are shown in Table 4, employing binary logistic regression. University and college confirmations were combined in one category. This decision was due to the very low percentage of university confirmations (2%). The first column of Table 4 shows individual characteristics as predictors of PSE confirmation; the second column adds neighbourhood characteristics.[3]

Individual predictors of PSE include sex, age, region of origin, identity as a native English speaker, generation status, and arrival in Canada after age 14. Results revealed that females were more likely than males to go on to PSE, while age was negatively associated with PSE confirmations. In other words, the older the respondent, the less likely he or she was to

Table 3: Multinomial Logistic Regressions Predicting PSE Plans, TDSB Continuing Education Survey

Odds Ratios (Reference Category = Neither University nor College)

	University	**College**	**Either**
Sex (female = 1)	0.609	1.057	0.821
Age less than 30 (1 = yes)	3.233***	1.725*	4.710**
Region of origin (reference = Canada/US/UK)			
Caribbean and Latin America	1.781	2.152	0.926
Africa	1.247	1.931	2.317
Europe	0.776	0.672	1.727
Asia	0.760	1.344	1.181
South Asia	0.563	0.903	0.969
Middle East	0.379	0.962	1.107
First language English (1 = yes)	0.833	0.801	1.070
Length of time in Canada (reference = < 1 year)			
1–3 years	0.275*	0.596	0.172*
4–5 years	0.171*	0.440	0.058**
6–10 years	0.238*	0.339	0.091*
Over 10 years	0.261	0.561	0.073*
Married (1 = yes)	0.650	0.695	0.369
Has child under 4 (1 = yes)	1.793	1.838	1.861
Unemployed (1 = yes)	1.061	1.079	0.950
Citizen (1 = yes)	1.890	1.238	6.324*
Foreign PSE credentials (1 = yes)	2.272*	0.948	4.914**
N	534		
Pseudo R^2	0.066		

$^{*}p<0.05$, $^{**}p<0.01$, $^{***}p<0.001$

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[3] The neighbourhood variables were tested for multicollinearity. None were correlated at higher than r = 0.55.

confirm PSE. Generation status and region of origin had no impact, while arrival after age 14 was positively associated with PSE confirmation. Although previous analysis had concluded that neighbourhood did not explain the variance in PSE choice, it was included here to determine if the intercepts should be allowed to vary in the multivariate estimate.

Table 4: Logistic Regressions Predicting PSE Confirmations (N = 12,858), TDSB Adult Student Administrative Data Set

Odds Ratios (Reference Category = Neither University nor College)

	University	**College**
Sex (1 = female)	1.123*	1.115*
Age (years)	0.943***	0.942***
English native speaker	0.920	0.838
Generation status (reference = native-born)	1.000	1.000
1985 and earlier	0.831	0.908
1986–1996	0.921	1.027
Since 1997	1.170	1.275
Arrived after age 14	1.306**	1.314**
Region of origin (reference = Canada/US/UK)		
Caribbean and Latin America	0.679	0.613
Africa	1.492	1.368
Europe	0.887	0.789
Asia	1.560	1.423
South Asia	0.900	0.836
Middle East	0.851	0.766
Neighbourhood characteristics		
Adults with higher education		1.004*
Unemployment rate		0.997
Proportion of single detached homes		1.000
Proportion lone-parent families		1.002
Median family income		1.000
N	12858	12858
Pseudo R^2	0.049	0.051

$^{*}p<0.05$, $^{**}p<0.01$, $^{***}p<0.001$

Although this did not prove to be necessary, neighbourhood characteristics still may have a uniform effect across individuals and can be included as independent variables. The second column of Table 4 merges the TDSB Adult Student Administrative Data Set with neighbourhood socio-economic data from the 2006 Canadian census. Variables include median family income, proportion of lone-parent families, proportion of adults with greater than high-school education, proportion of single detached houses, average number of children, and unemployment rate.

Because we had neighbourhood information, we first employed a random intercepts model (also known as a multilevel model) to determine the extent to which different neighbourhoods impacted the variance of PSE uptake. Surprisingly, individual differences in neighbourhood explained less than 2% of the overall variance in PSE choice. In other words, the neighbourhood in which students lived made no difference in whether or not they went on to PSE. This is a rather remarkable finding; much achievement literature focuses on "neighbourhood effects," yet we found that virtually none existed (for an overview, see Galster, 2012). While continuing education students live in a variety of neighbourhoods across Toronto, all of these neighbourhoods can be characterized as lower income. Thus, relative income homogeneity may explain the lack of neighbourhood effect. We found a fairly weak but statistically significant association between the proportion of adults with higher education and PSE confirmations.

Discussion and Conclusions

For a significant number of adults in Ontario, pathways to PSE are seldom direct and often complex due to financial obligations and family commitments. Many find non-traditional pathways to PSE, including continuing education courses offered by school boards (e.g., foundation courses in English). While immigrants may enroll directly in Canadian universities and community colleges to upgrade their foreign qualifications, a significant number rely on continuing education courses to upgrade their skills before applying to PSE. Our literature review revealed that there are no studies that document the effectiveness of continuing education as a strategy for accessing PSE by adults in Canada. This study addresses this gap in the research literature by investigating PSE outcomes for Canadian-born and immigrant adults who seek to upgrade their credentials through continuing education at the secondary level or at adult day schools through the TDSB.

Adult students' experience of schooling is quite different from that of most adolescent high-school students. This is due not only to age. Most adolescent students in the position to apply to PSE have been full-time students for nearly all their lives. In contrast, while the adult students in this study were studying full time, most had been doing so for only a very short period. Fewer than half of the adult students both started and finished the 2008–9 school year. Only 38% attended both the 2007–8 and 2008–9 school years, while only 15% attended three consecutive school years (2007–8 through 2009–10). Under such circumstances, the fact that at least one-fifth of these students continued into an Ontario PSE institution is extraordinary.

Our analyses examined two sources of data from the TDSB to examine continuing education students' PSE plans and confirmations. In the multivariate analysis, neighbourhood was found not to contribute to the explained variance in confirmations (and thus not retained as a multilevel factor). In addition, neighbourhood characteristics included in the multiple regression analysis were found to have only a marginal impact. This study found that neighbourhood matters, but that the neighbourhoods from which continuing education students are disproportionately drawn are more similar to than different from *each other*. While continuing education students live in a variety of neighbourhoods across Toronto, nearly all can be characterized as lower income. In other words, comparing neighbourhoods among continuing education students is inconsequential due to their similar socioeconomic positions. Comparative analysis of the neighbourhoods of continuing education students and the general population of high-school students, however, would likely yield different results.

While research shows that the use of non-traditional pathways is frequently linked to disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances and that the chosen trajectories may increase educational stratification by reducing students' chances of completing a university degree, it is important that we consider an alternative perspective. Adoption of non-traditional trajectories may actually provide opportunities for PSE that some students would not ordinarily have if their only alternative were a "traditional" educational pathway. Be that as it may, our study shows that only a fifth of adult learners confirm a university or college offer of admission, a figure well below the attainment rate in Ontario.

Descriptive analyses revealed that over half of all survey students expected to attend college, while a quarter expected to attend university. In terms of looking to the administrative data set for actual pathways, however, only a mere 2% of students confirmed university and fewer than 20% of students confirmed college. Controlling for various factors, no differences in region of origin were found, which sharply contrasts with the PSE pathways found for traditional high-school students in Toronto, where Black and Latin American students (particularly males) are far less likely to confirm PSE compared to Whites, Asians, and South Asians (Robson, Anisef, Brown, & Parekh, 2014). The older age of these students, their immigrant status, and their similar socio-economic experiences (by neighbourhood) suggest, however, that this group of students and their experiences differ in stark ways to that of "traditional" high-school students.

Previous research has found that students from lower socio-economic groups have lower aspirations than students from more affluent backgrounds (Marjoribanks, 2003) and that aspirations vary according to ethnic group membership (Chang, Chen, Greenberger, Dooley, & Heckhausen, 2006; Uwall, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008). Educational aspirations, in turn, have been found to be positively associated with academic persistence (Bui, 2007; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) and future academic attainment (Andres, Adamuti-Trache, Yoon, Pidgeon, & Thomsen, 2007). Assuming that the vast majority of the administrative data set would also have had strong aspirations (as was found in our smaller survey sample), this leads us to ask why such a discrepancy exists. As pointed out by Khattab (2014), the gap between expectations and achievement is inextricably linked to cultural and social capital. Although we have no way of knowing whether respondents believed their desires about PSE were grounded in any kind of practical reality (e.g., financial ability), this type of disconnect between desired outcomes and achievement can be characterized by Khattab's (2014) typology of a "conformist," whose responses may be an expression of an acceptance of norms that value the pursuit of higher education, but whose low social, cultural, and economic capital make such pursuits very unlikely to materialize. Indeed, the data presented earlier in this paper demonstrate that an adult education student typically comes from very modest means. Our sample is not composed of "typical" North American teenagers, but rather of adults who were likely born outside North America, are very likely to be visible minorities, and have a fairly low socio-economic status relative to the rest of the population. These characteristics themselves suggest quite strongly that our subgroup of interest is atypical. We can only speculate about the cost/benefit analysis that such students undertake when making these choices, but it is reasonable to make such assumptions, as many continuing education students are from modest-income households, would likely be averse to further debt, and may lack the various forms of capital necessary to negotiate the PSE application process.

Indeed, it is clear that the traditional pathway process may become less "traditional" as PSE access continues to increase. An exploratory investigation of TDSB students starting community college in the 2009–10 school year found that around a quarter of these college students had the traditional direct access, while a tenth were the continuing education students profiled in this analysis. However, two-thirds were from other pathways—mostly older students, some only a few years removed from school, but many who had not attended secondary school in a decade or even decades (Brown, Newton, & Whetstone, 2014). It will be important to examine the profiles of this broad range of students in future work.

Our findings complete a preliminary step in understanding the non-traditional pathways chosen by adult learners in the TDSB. To provide the necessary supports, both at the secondary and PSE levels, that would facilitate greater access to and persistence in Ontario's higher-education system, we need to learn far more regarding the life course structures and dynamics that impact the education- and employment-related choices made by adult learners.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Our analyses are limited by the generalizability of our findings. Our data and existing Canadian research are limited to Ontario—Toronto, in particular. As Toronto is the largest city in Canada and home to the largest number of immigrants, we can surmise that the experience of immigrants in this part of the country may be atypical. Continuing education demographics in less ethno-racially diverse parts of the country may indeed result in different outcomes for adult learners in such contexts, but we have no way of knowing. Thus, we cannot say that our portrait of adult learners in Toronto is anything like what would be found elsewhere in Canada. Our findings also considered PSE participation in only three consecutive years after the student completed Grade 12 English, which is a relatively short period. Some students likely applied to PSE in subsequent years, but our analyses will have missed them.

Our findings may provide a useful foundation for future qualitative studies that can examine the discrepancy between aspirations and achievements by using in-depth interviews with a sample of migrant workers, for example. Additional analyses that would elaborate on our understanding of adult learners would also compare this population with the more general population of students in the TDSB. Our findings have indicated a disconnect between aspirations and choice. We have argued that this is likely due to a subpopulation that is entrenched in a social setting that emphasizes the social desirability of PSE, but that also experiences a lived reality of constrained social, economic, and cultural capital, which makes PSE a difficult, if not impossible, endeavour. Further studies should compare the continuing education day-school students with the general TDSB population to identify key differences and how these differences may contribute to the different PSE outcomes we observed here. In comparing this specific population with the more general population of high-school students, we could learn more about how various factors differentially impact traditional and non-traditional secondary-school students. Such potential research studies that identify and compare the timing and sequencing of education- and employment-related choices in relation to demographic, social, and cultural factors about traditional and non-traditional students would provide valuable information, particularly with regard to developing policies and practices for increasing PSE participation among adult learners, not just in Toronto, but also in wider contexts.

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