

Canadian Attitudes toward Schools: Quality, Access and Mobility

To learn about Canadians' attitudes toward their structured learning systems (e.g., formal learning institutions including schools and postsecondary institutions), SCAL 2008 posed a number of questions about elementary and secondary schools as well as colleges, CEGEPs, and universities.

Schools and post-secondary institutions perform vital functions in Canadian society, so much so that structured learning in Canada is heavily subsidized by the public. The services that schools and post-secondary institutions are expected to provide are numerous and relate not only to educational outcomes, but economic and social conditions as well.

With regard to K–12 (kindergarten to grade 12) learning, Canadians expect their school systems to go well beyond teaching the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. Schools are also expected to prepare students for the workforce, develop an informed citizenry, and prepare students for ongoing learning. We asked Canadians whether and to what degree these expectations are being met.

With regard to post-secondary education, we asked questions regarding the perceived quality, accessibility and affordability of colleges, CEGEPs and universities. Of respondents who reported having undertaken post-secondary studies, we also asked whether they had undertaken their studies at more than one institution. These questions were asked in order to understand the prevalence of post-secondary student mobility and experiences with credit transfer Canada-wide.

Overview: What we asked, what Canadians told us

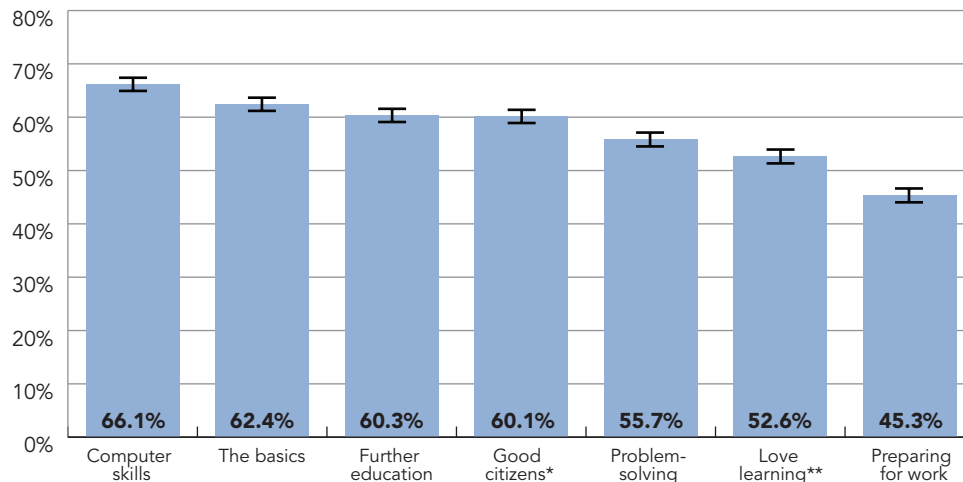
1. Are elementary and high schools meeting expectations with respect to the following?

- Teaching “the basics” like reading, writing and arithmetic
- Teaching computer skills
- Teaching problem-solving skills
- Preparing students for work
- Preparing students for further education after high school
- Teaching students to be good citizens
- Teaching students to love learning

Canadians’ attitudes toward K–12 schools are very positive. High proportions of respondents report that schools are meeting or exceeding their expectations for teaching computer skills, teaching the basics (reading, writing and arithmetic), and preparing students for further education. However, when it comes to preparing students for work, Canadians are less than satisfied: less than half (45%) feel that schools are meeting or exceeding their expectations in this regard.

Figure 12

Proportion of Canadians who say elementary and high schools are meeting or exceeding their expectations



* Teaching children to be good citizens ** Teaching children to love learning

Source: Canadian Council on Learning, Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

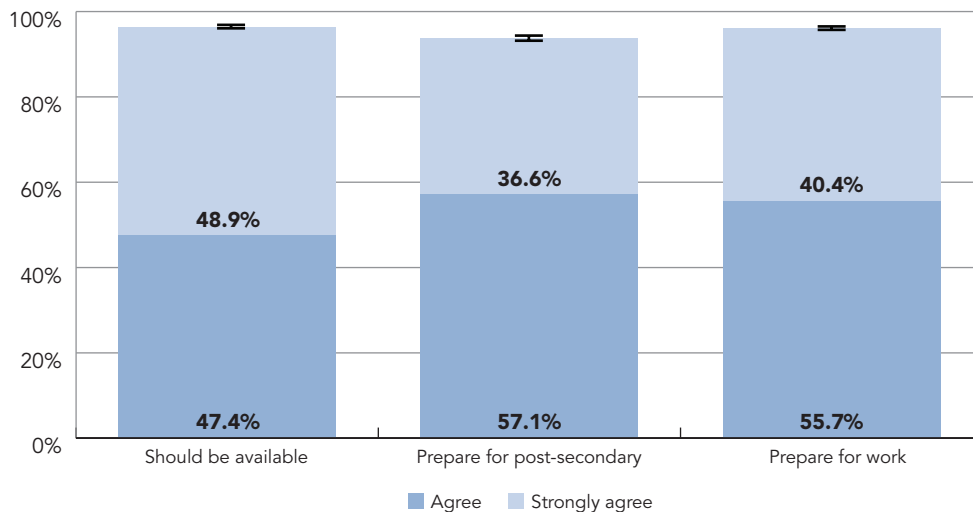
2. How important are high-school programs that include work experience?

- Should they be available to all secondary-school students in Canada?
- Do they help prepare high-school students for post-secondary education?
- Do they help prepare high-school students for work?
- How many schools offer these programs?
- Do parents encourage their children to participate in these programs?

Canadians express very strong support for high-school programs that allow students to gain work experience and job-related skills through activities such as co-ops, apprenticeships, work placements, and trade or vocational programs. Over 90% of Canadians agree or strongly agree that such programs should be available to all high-school students and that they contribute to preparing students for post-secondary education and work.

Figure 13

Proportion of Canadians who agree or strongly agree that high-school programs that include work experience should be available to all students and help prepare students for post-secondary education and work



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

Although Canadians are nearly unanimous in their support for work-experience programs, parents do not necessarily want their own children to participate in such programs. Only 59% of parents of high-school-aged childrenⁱⁱ indicate that such programs are available in their children's schools. Of these respondents, 70% indicate that they have encouraged their children to participate in programs with a work-experience component. Of parents who say that their children's schools do not offer programs with work experience, only 36% indicate that they would encourage their children to participate if such programs were available.

ⁱⁱ "High-school-aged" was defined as ages 15–24, thus including parents of children who are currently—or were recently—in the upper grades of high school.

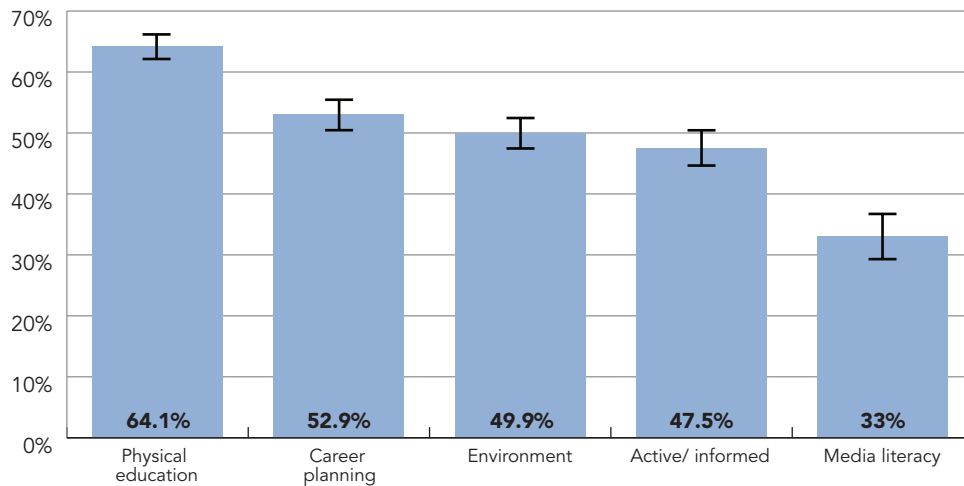
3. Which subjects should be included in the compulsory curriculum?

- Physical education
- Career planning
- Learning about the environment
- Preparing to become active and informed citizens
- Training on interpreting information presented by the media

Respondents were asked how important it is to include certain subjects (beyond the usual core curriculum) in the compulsory curriculum. Of the subjects we enquired about, physical education received the strongest support, with nearly two-thirds of Canadians indicating it essential to include in the compulsory curriculum. Training in media literacy appears to be much less important to Canadians: only one-third consider it essential to include in the compulsory curriculum.

Figure 14

Proportion of Canadians who believe it is essential to include various subjects in the compulsory curriculum



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

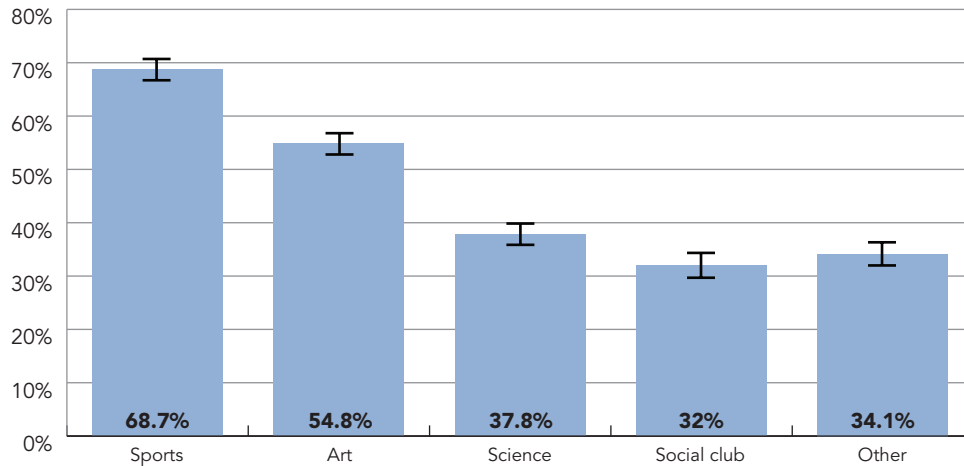
4. What kinds of extracurricular activities do Canadian children (aged 6–24) participate in?

- Art (including drama, music and dance)
- Sports
- Science (including multimedia and computer usage)
- Social groups (including Scouts, Girl Guides, 4-H club, youth group)

The vast majority (88.5%) of parents with children aged 6–24 report that their children participated in at least one type of extracurricular activity during the past year.ⁱⁱⁱ Participation in sports is higher than any other type of extracurricular activity.

Figure 15

Proportion of parents who report their children aged 6–24 participated in extracurricular activities within the last year



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

ⁱⁱⁱ Throughout this report, any timeframe references (e.g. “with the last year”) refer to the time period prior to respondents taking the survey.

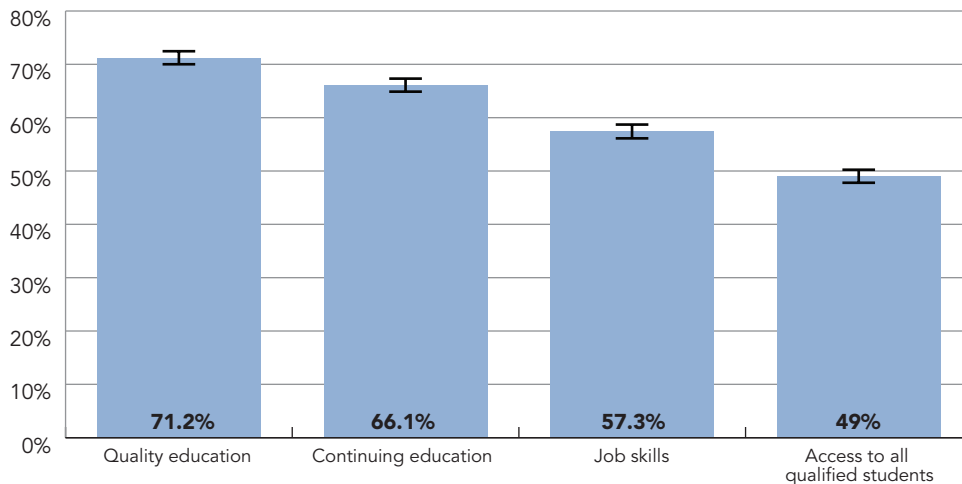
5. How well are Canada's post-secondary institutions doing with respect to the following?

- Providing quality education
- Teaching students the skills they need to get jobs
- Ensuring that all qualified students are able to attend
- Making continuing education available

Canadians are generally satisfied with the quality of education provided by post-secondary institutions: 71% believe that post-secondary institutions do a good or excellent job of providing quality education. However, many are concerned that post-secondary institutions are not ensuring that all qualified students are able to attend: only 49% feel that post-secondary institutions are doing a good or excellent job in this regard.

Figure 16

Proportion of Canadians who believe post-secondary institutions are doing a good or excellent job



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

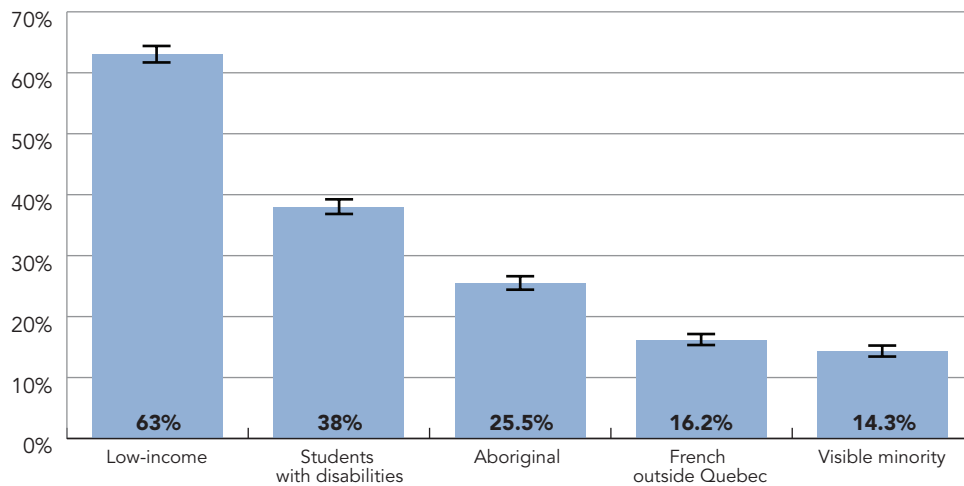
6. Do all qualified students have the same opportunity to get a post-secondary education, including the following demographic groups?

- Students from visible minority groups
- French-speaking students outside of Quebec
- Aboriginal students
- Students with disabilities
- Students from low-income families

Canadians are concerned that students from some demographic groups do not have the same post-secondary opportunities as other students. In particular, nearly two-thirds (63%) of Canadians feel that students from low-income families have somewhat less or much less of an opportunity to get a post-secondary education.

Figure 17

Proportion of Canadians who believe that some students have less opportunity to get a post-secondary education



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

7. How affordable is post-secondary education in Canada?

- Are loans and financial aid available?
- Do students have to borrow too much money to pay for their post-secondary education?

About two-thirds (68%) of Canadians believe that student loans and financial aid are available, but 82% also believe that students have to borrow too much money to pay for their post-secondary education. Most Canadians (93%) agree or strongly agree that cost should not prevent qualified and motivated students from getting a post-secondary education.

8. How mobile are post-secondary students?

- How many take courses from more than one post-secondary institution?
- How many have to repeat coursework when moving to different institutions?

Post-secondary students in Canada are quite mobile: 41% of those who had at least some post-secondary education indicate that they have taken courses at more than one institution. Of these, 25% have had to repeat coursework or learning as a result of moving from one institution to another.

Attitudes toward learning in elementary and secondary schools, among different groups of Canadians

Impressions of education in Canada vary across demographic groups. In particular, Canadians with children at home have different opinions about elementary and secondary schools than do Canadians without children at home. Additionally, immigrants often have different opinions than Canadian-born respondents.

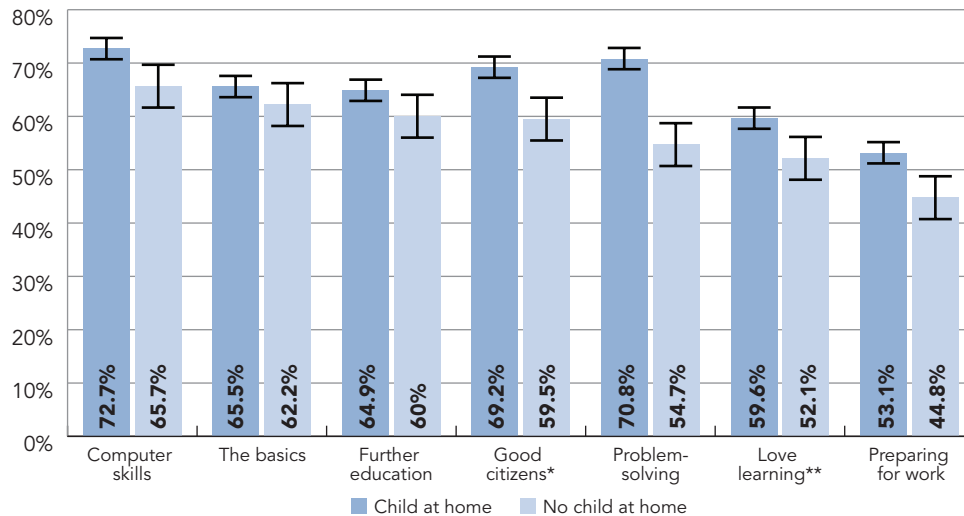
1. Canadians with children at home vs. Canadians without children at home

Canadians who have children at home have more direct knowledge of elementary and secondary schools than those who rely on the media or other sources of information. Some researchers have argued that Canadians without children at home—e.g., non-parents and parents whose children have left home—may be the most disenchanted with schooling systems, because they may find current educational practices unfamiliar, foreign, and ill-disciplined.¹³

The Canadian Teachers' Federation has reported that 67% of parents with children in public schools give the schools an 'A' or 'B' rating, whereas only 59% of the general public does so.¹⁴ SCAL 2008 results show a similar pattern: Canadians with at least one child at home are generally more satisfied with Canadian schools than are those who do not have children at home.

Figure 18

Proportion of Canadians with and without children at home who say elementary and secondary schools are meeting or exceeding their expectations



* Teaching children to be good citizens ** Teaching children to love learning

Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

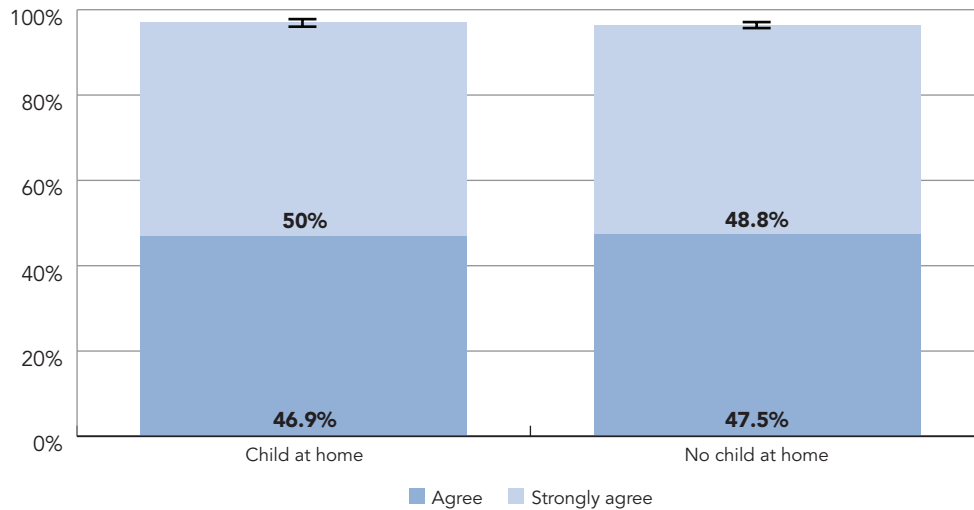
The largest opinion gap between Canadians with and without children at home is in the area of problem-solving. While 71% of Canadians with at least one child at home feel that schools are meeting or exceeding their expectations with respect to teaching problem-solving skills, this is true for only 55% of those who do not have children at home. Canadians with children at home see teaching problem-solving as a particular strength in Canadian schools, while those without children at home see it as an area of weakness.

Though Canadians with children at home are more likely than those without children at home to be satisfied with schools' role in preparing students for work, both groups express relatively high levels of dissatisfaction with schools in this domain. Researchers have also reported that students are similarly dissatisfied. For example, recent findings indicate that Alberta high-school students value career transition resources but do not perceive their high schools' career development resources to be effective.¹⁵

Other researchers have noted the critical shortage of skilled trades workers expected within the next few years, and suggest that young people be encouraged to participate in programs such as the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program.¹⁶ Canadians with and without children at home agree with this assessment: the majority of Canadians in both groups agree or strongly agree that programs with work experience should be available to all high-school students.

Figure 19

Proportion of Canadians with and without children at home who agree or strongly agree that programs with work experience should be available to all high-school students



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

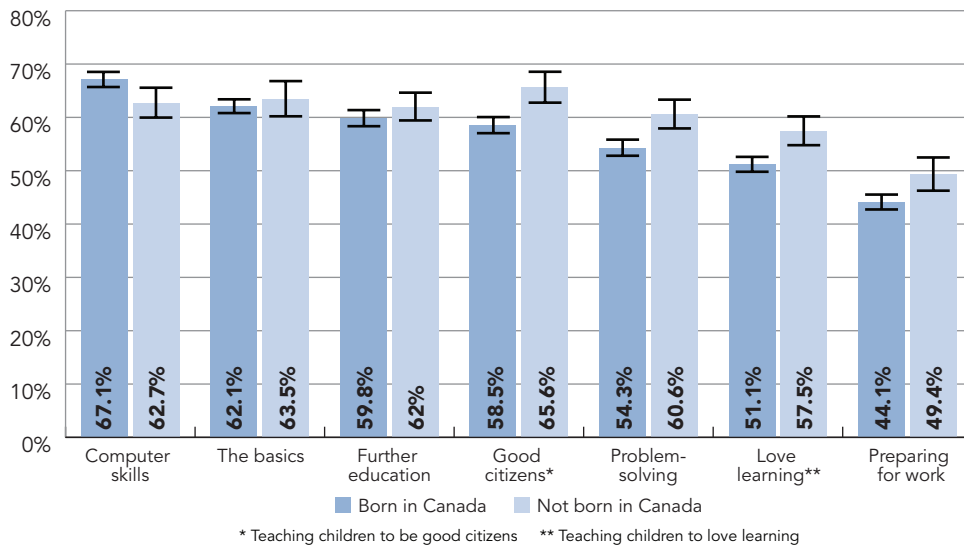
2. Respondents born in Canada vs. those born outside Canada

Some Canadian research has revealed negative perceptions of elementary and secondary schools among parents born outside of Canada. For example, several researchers have identified these parents and parents of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) high-school students as particularly unhappy with their children’s schooling programs, and have described conflicts between the educational philosophies of their home countries and Canadian schools.¹⁷ In particular, a dominant pattern among Canadian educators is to pursue a child-centred, progressive pedagogy that encourages children to be critical, communicative and to hold multiple points of view. By contrast, some immigrant students and their parents expect learning to be a task consisting of a large number of discrete skills learned through rote memorization.¹⁸

Based on these findings, we might expect those born outside of Canada to be less satisfied with Canadian schools than those born in Canada. However, SCAL 2008 results reveal that attitudes toward elementary and secondary schools are generally more favourable among those born outside of Canada. There is one notable exception to the general trend: respondents born outside of Canada are less satisfied than those born in Canada with respect to schools’ efforts to teach computer skills.

Figure 20

Proportion of respondents born in and outside of Canada, who say elementary and secondary schools are meeting or exceeding their expectations



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

The largest opinion gap between these two groups is in the area of preparing students to be good citizens. Although citizenship education often carries an extra dimension for children of those born outside of Canada (e.g., learning to integrate into Canadian society), respondents born outside of Canada are particularly satisfied with this aspect of schooling in Canada.

Mobility among post-secondary students

Canadian post-secondary education students are increasingly pursuing non-traditional pathways through college and university.¹⁹ Among these are students who delay transitioning to post-secondary education after high school, those who oscillate between part- and full-time study, those who switch programs, and those who transfer between post-secondary institutions.

While non-traditional student pathways may be on the rise, established institutional and system structures may not always accommodate these pathways. Challenges pertaining to credit transfer are a good example of this. In provinces such as British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec, long-established systems facilitate some aspects of student mobility between institutions. Additionally, there are sector-wide protocols—such as the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada’s *Pan-Canadian Protocol on the Transferability of University Credits*—under which degree-granting institutions agree to recognize one another’s first- and second-year courses where appropriate.

Some pathways for inter-institutional student mobility are more complicated than others, and many remain difficult to negotiate with administration. When students are unable to transfer credits from one institution to another, they often have to repeat courses and learning that they have already successfully completed at another institution.

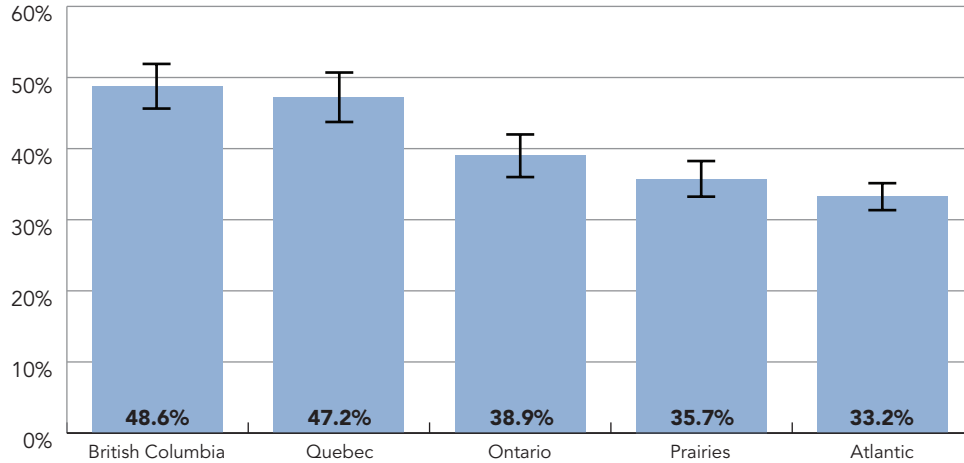
With increasing frequency, there are calls for attention and action on transferability in Canada. The Certified General Accountants of Canada is one example: in its report following its 2008 Summit on Skills and Learning, the CGAC called for Canadian policy-makers to “consider a national credit transfer system to address the issue of academic mobility and to encourage lifelong adult learning with a highly mobile population.”

Some provinces have established systems to facilitate the transfer and recognition of students’ credits as they move from one institution to another. For example, Quebec students attend CEGEP before moving on to university. In British Columbia, many colleges and other institutions offer the first two years of a baccalaureate degree, and through established articulation agreements between institutions, students can transport these college courses to count toward completion of a degree at a university.

Patterns of student mobility in different Canadian regions suggest there is greater mobility among post-secondary students in jurisdictions with established credit transfer systems. In particular, students in Quebec and British Columbia appear to be more mobile than students in other parts of the country: in BC, nearly half (49%) of those who have some post-secondary education have attended more than one post-secondary institution, whereas in the Atlantic provinces only one-third of students attend more than one institution.

Figure 21

Proportion of Canadians who have attended more than one post-secondary institution, by region

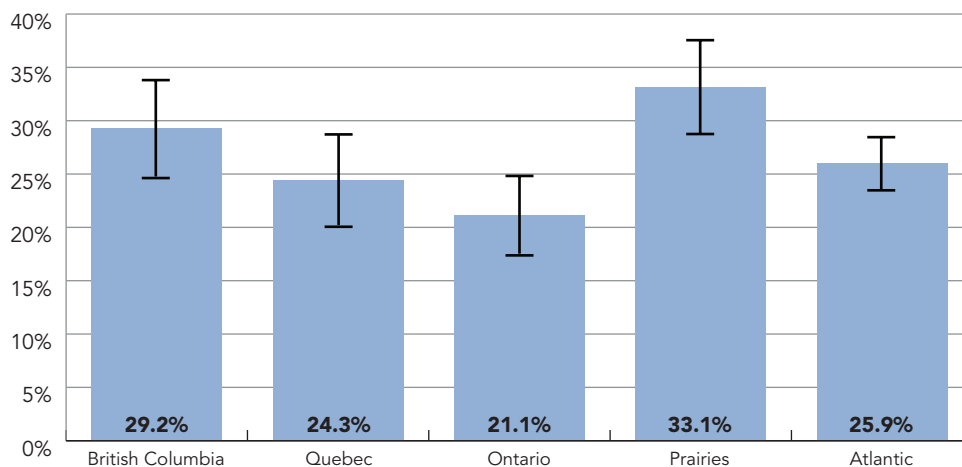


Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

Although students in jurisdictions with established credit transfer systems are more mobile, they are not necessarily more successful in transferring their credits from one institution to another. Between one-fifth and one-third of mobile students in all jurisdictions report repeating coursework or learning that they have already successfully completed.

Figure 22

Proportion of mobile post-secondary students who report repeating coursework at different institutions



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

Conclusion

The results of SCAL 2008 reveal positive attitudes among Canadians toward K–12 schools and post-secondary institutions. Canadians with children at home are generally more satisfied with K–12 schools than are those respondents who do not have children living at home. Similarly, immigrants are generally more satisfied than Canadian-born respondents.

SCAL results also reveal a few areas where Canadians may welcome improvements, specifically:

- preparing high-school students for work;
- providing opportunities for low-income students to pursue post-secondary studies; and
- accommodating mobility among post-secondary students.