

# **The Sudden Shift to Remote Delivery in LBS**

A survey report addressing the challenges and priorities in Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills program during the spring of 2020



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# Introduction

During the spring of 2020, all educational sectors, including Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS), made the shift to remote learning. The shift was managed primarily at a local level. Comprehensive training, widely accessible instructional design expertise, tech support and additional funding to purchase data and computers for learners was not available. Each program made its own decisions.

How did programs adapt? What were their priorities? What were their challenges? This report, based on a short survey delivered during the last two weeks of June 2020, provides some answers, identifies challenges and raises concerns about the uneven impacts on learners and sectors and uneven access to resources that could be mobilized to manage the shift. The findings provide a basis for discussion and planning at both the local and provincial levels.

A total of 368 surveys were completed from June 11 to 28 (332 English and 36 French). This is a convenience sample and can't be used to make generalizations about the experiences and perspectives of all LBS staff and volunteers. However, the response rate for both the English and French surveys was strong and supports the identification of consistent concerns, choices and priorities. Nearly all English (94 per cent) and French (97 per cent) respondents indicated they were involved with remote delivery during the spring of 2020 (respondents could say they weren't delivering services remotely and still participate in the survey.)

The main findings are organized into 10 topics, which are presented on separate pages. Each topic includes a brief comment to provide some context and interpretation. A conclusion pulls together overarching issues that will help guide next steps for AlphaPlus.

## Fast Facts From the Survey Results

- 368 participants in LBS programs completed the survey in English and French.
- Respondents estimated that only 45 per cent of learners likely had household internet access and 27 per cent had limited connectivity using cell phones..
- Only 13 per cent of respondents said programs purchased additional data and/or devices for learners and staff.
- 67 per cent of respondents were able to focus on instruction; 33 per cent prioritized communication and supporting learners.
- On average, each respondent used three modes of communication and four modes of instruction to make remote learning work.
- 53 per cent of respondents participated in training and professional development.
- 66 per cent of respondents stated the top priority going forward was adapted accountability and reporting processes.
- 53 per cent of respondents said other priorities were (1) ensuring internet access for learners, (2) professional development and training using ed tech tools and (3) online assessments of literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

# Related Inquiries

Several LBS support organizations initiated surveys of their members in the spring of 2020. Each of the smaller surveys, shared with us or published online, consistently identified the following challenges (listed in no particular order).

1. Learner access to technology (both devices and data) and their readiness to use technology without in-person support. This was often compounded by challenges with print.
2. Instructor access to learning materials and activities at lower levels that work in different remote scenarios. Some also experienced challenges with reliable internet and the right devices.
3. Ministry requirements related to registration and assessment designed for in-person sessions, compounded by a lack of communication from decision-makers.

What follows is a listing of the surveys we reviewed along with a highlight that adds additional or unique insights.

**Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML)**, the largest regional network, received 23 responses from program co-ordinators or managers. Although most respondents had not previously provided online learning, nearly all made the shift in the spring. Authors concluded that “both instructors and learners are facing challenges that prevent them from making the most of online learning.”

**Coalition Ontarienne de Formation des Adultes (COFA)** received responses from 15 co-ordinators. Nearly half the respondents stated they identified best practices for remote learning focused on individualizing teaching and learning.

**Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) and Laubach Literacy Ontario (LLO)** released a report summarizing 31 survey responses. They provided some insights into the supports that could address the three main challenges.

1. Purchase additional computers with data to lend to learners.
2. Develop shared resource collections for adults at lower levels that could be used online and offline.
3. Develop and/or open access to online assessment tools, including the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF) Milestones.

**Deaf Literacy Initiative (DLI)** findings emphasized the complexity and time involved when working with multiple languages (i.e. American Sign Language, English and additional languages) and communication systems, often with multi-level classes.

**The Ontario Association of Adult and Continuing Education School Board Administrators (CESBA)** had 35 out of 52 school board managers respond to their survey. In addition to the challenges identified, they stated that a key priority for managers and instructors was staying in touch with learners using different modes of communication.

Our survey, with 368 respondents, strengthens and extends the findings from smaller surveys. Examined together, they contain compelling and consistent findings that could be used to inform policy discussions along with planning and professional development initiatives.

# Profile of Respondents

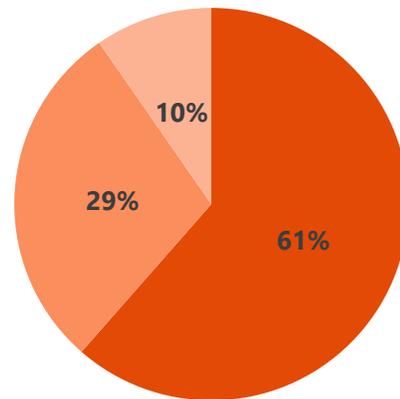
## Roles

The majority (61 per cent or n = 223) of respondents were educators and worked directly with adult learners.

English respondents also identified additional roles not named in the survey, such as student advisor (6 people) and administrators (17 people).

French respondents followed a similar pattern (i.e. 53 per cent were educators, 39 per cent were program co-ordinators, and 8 per cent were support organization co-ordinators).

- Educator
- Program co-ordinator
- Support organization co-ordinator



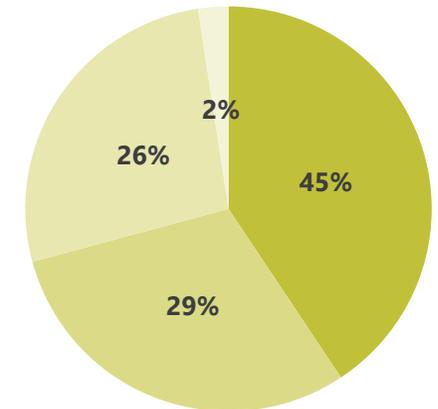
## Sectors

Nearly half (45 per cent or n = 164) of all respondents worked in community-based programs.

Colleges represented 29 per cent (n = 103) of respondents. School boards were a quarter (26 per cent or n = 94) of respondents.

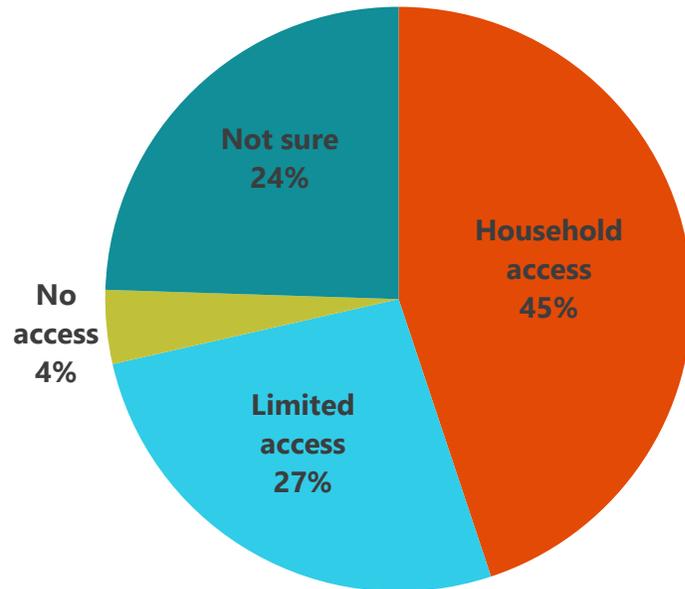
Three-quarters (76 per cent) of French respondents worked in community programs. This likely reflects how the francophone program is delivered by 24 community-based programs, two colleges (one with numerous sites) and two school boards. Also, 27 respondents who completed the English survey stated they worked with francophone learners.

- Community-based
- College
- School board
- Not sure



A very high number of participants combined with the high percentage of front-line educators and distribution across the three sectors means the findings carry some weight. Data describing staff and volunteers working in LBS were not collected, restricting the ability to adequately describe the population and make more definitive statements about the sample. A mechanism to collect staff and volunteer data would be informative and beneficial to the field.

# Learners' Internet Access



We asked respondents to tell us about learners' access to the internet. Although they were responding on behalf of learners and one-quarter (24 per cent) weren't sure, we do have some indication of learners' connectivity.

Nearly half (45 per cent) of respondents indicated that the majority or nearly all of their learners had household internet access. A household connection is a key indication of readiness to participate online in remote delivery. We didn't ask whether learners had access to a computer at home and were able to use it without in-person assistance, additional readiness indicators.

One-quarter (27 per cent) of respondents stated that all or the majority of their learners had limited access — that is, they relied on cell phones and limited data plans.

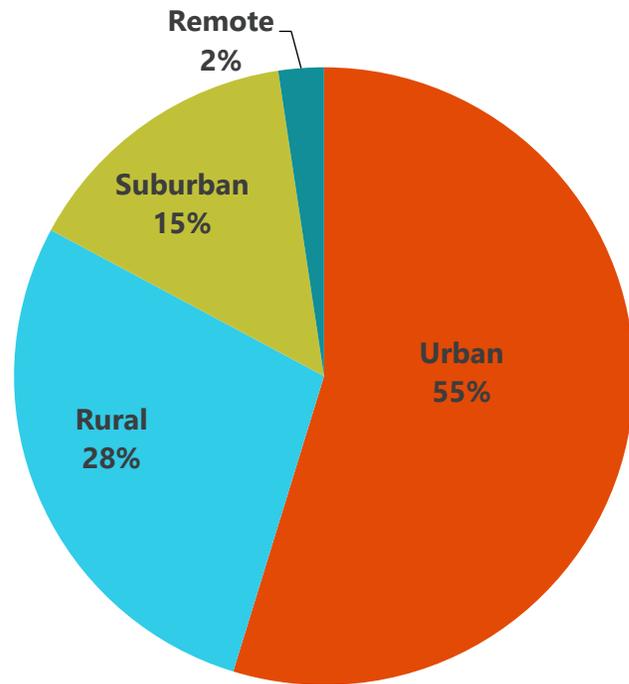
Only 4 per cent of learners may have had no access.

## Differences

There are distinct differences between the sectors related to a household connection. Respondents from school boards said 71 per cent of learners had a home connection. Half (49 per cent) of college learners likely had a home connection. However, only 31 per cent of learners in community programs likely had home connections. Those who completed the survey in French indicated that 59 per cent of their learners had a household connection.

In 2012, 61 per cent of Ontarians with low incomes had household internet access.<sup>1</sup> LBS learners likely have substantially lower rates of household internet access at 45 per cent. In addition, 27 per cent likely had limited data and relied on their cell phones. Many adult learners were not able to address the first level of a digital divide — connectivity — that would allow them to begin to participate in online learning. Limited digital access is restricting the potential of LBS and is a missed opportunity to support literacy development.<sup>2</sup> It also severely limits the abilities of learners to access fundamental supports, services and the benefits that technology provides.<sup>3</sup>

# Where Learners Live and Internet Access



## Where learners live

Over half (55 per cent) of all respondents stated they worked with learners who lived in urban areas, and over one-quarter (28 per cent) worked with learners who lived in rural areas.

However, French respondents indicated half of the learners (50 per cent) lived in rural areas and 39 per cent lived in urban centres.

This is likely because the vast majority of French respondents work in community-based programs. Overall, community-based respondents were more than twice as likely to work with adult learners in rural areas compared with those in college and school board programs.

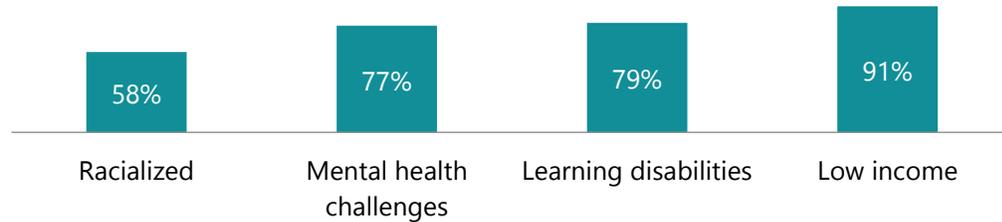
## Did they have a household connection?

Learners in suburban areas (54 per cent) were slightly more likely to have household connections compared with urban (43 per cent) and rural (41 per cent) learners. In comparison, respondents who completed the French survey estimated that 71 per cent per cent of their learners in rural areas had household connections.

Respondents also indicated that slightly more rural learners (30 per cent) compared with urban learners (25 per cent) relied on limited access. Only 18 per cent of suburban learners relied on limited access.

Although we have some indication of learner internet access, our question was indirect. We could learn more by asking learners directly about their technology access, uses and opportunities. A representative sample is possible, since we have adequate data about the population of learners. Literacy development happens primarily online for all of us. As we search for information, access government services and supports and pursue personal interests, we expand our online literacy repertoires, learn new skills and are better able to meet new demands. Supporting LBS learners means ensuring a strong connection between learning in programs, household access and day-to-day demands and pursuits.

# Diverse Learners and Learning Challenges

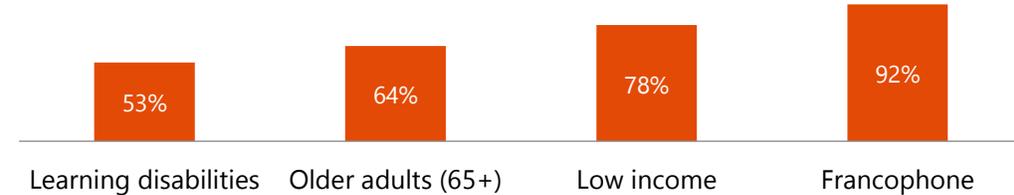


## English respondents

On average, each English respondent indicated they worked with at least five learner groups, including those not originally listed in the survey, such as newcomers, refugees, youth, LGBTQ2 and justice-involved learners.

Most English respondents worked with learners who had learning disabilities (79 per cent) and mental health challenges (77 per cent). Over half (58 per cent) indicated they also worked with racialized learners.

In addition, at least half of the English respondents stated they worked with adult learners who had physical and developmental disabilities (55 per cent), who were over the age of 65 (55 per cent) and Indigenous Peoples (50 per cent).



## French respondents

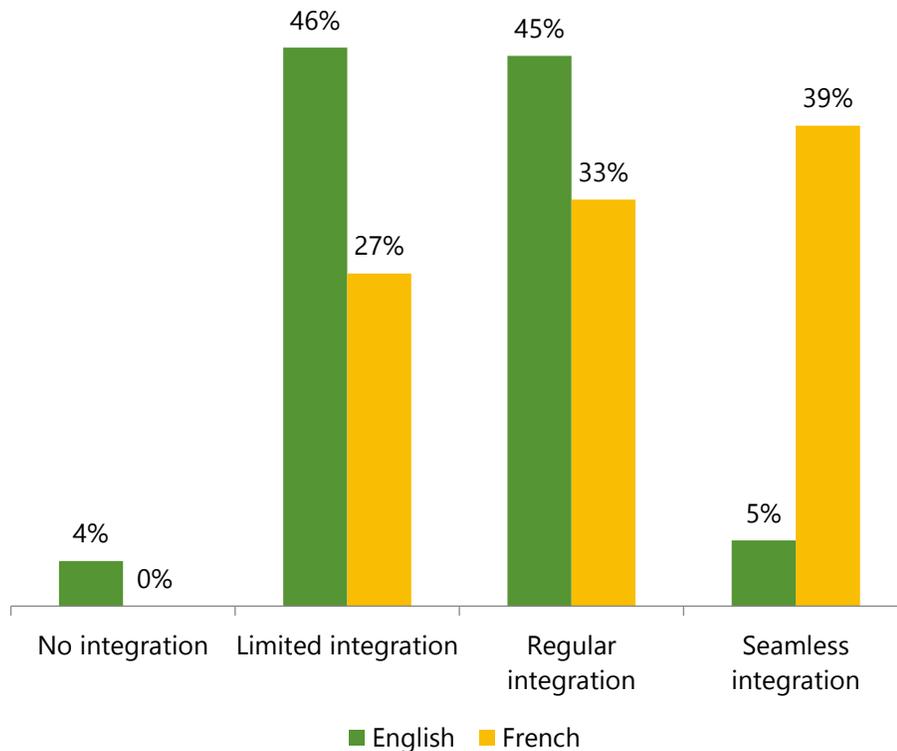
French respondents indicated they worked with four groups on average. French respondents worked predominantly with francophone learners, in addition to those who had low incomes.

Similar to the English respondents, they also worked with learners who had learning disabilities (53 per cent). A majority (64 per cent) worked with adult learners over the age of 65.

**The prevalent challenge identified by nearly all English respondents (91 per cent) and the vast majority of French respondents (78 per cent) was poverty and its ripple effects on learners' lives and opportunities.**

Based on annual data reports, the adult learner profile is diverse and changing.<sup>4</sup> In 2018-19, 40 per cent of learners received income assistance, predominantly from Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program — seven times the provincial rate. The majority (62 per cent) of LBS learners were female, a rate that has steadily increased over the past five years. The majority (67 per cent) of learners stated they identified with six groups: people with a disability, newcomers, racialized peoples, Indigenous Peoples, francophone, Deaf and Deafblind. This rate has nearly doubled since 2013-14. Intersectional challenges shaped by poverty mean LBS learners are vulnerable to the direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19. The challenges also co-ordinate learning and literacy development.

# Tech Integration Before COVID-19 Shutdowns



We asked respondents about the type of technology integration they had in place before the provincial shutdown in mid-March to get an idea of their readiness for remote delivery. There are some notable differences between the French and English respondents but not between sectors.

French respondents were seven times more likely to have had seamless integration (i.e. learners could access instructional resources at home using their own devices).

English respondents were more likely to state that their integration was regular (i.e. learners could access technology in the program on demand) or limited (i.e. access was planned and available in computer labs and/or at scheduled times).

Only a small number of English (4 per cent) and no French respondents indicated they did not integrate technology in instruction.

A higher number of French respondents indicated they incorporated e-Channel or F@D, a self-directed online learning platform, which may have facilitated the shift to remote learning. In addition, COFA provides annual professional development to educators focused on technology at both regional and provincial training events.

Regular and seamless integration would likely better prepare learners to learn independently, since both approaches accommodate individual learner decision-making and self-direction. The same approaches may have supported educators too, as they may have developed more ways to support independent instruction. It's also possible that the more prevalent use of e-Channel and F@D, combined with more regular professional development, could have supported the much higher rate of seamless integration among French respondents. There is more to be learned from these differences to support better opportunities across all sectors.

# Purchases to Support Remote Delivery

The low rate of purchases for learners in light of the very high rate of limited and no household access needs to be better understood. Did programs feel they didn't have the authority to make some budget reallocations? Were some told this wasn't possible? Or are budget allocations so tight for some that they have little or no spending flexibility? The higher number of purchases made by colleges, with larger programs and accompanying budgets, suggests that tight and inflexible budgets were one of the issues.

The higher rate of purchases made by community programs to support staff and/or volunteers also needs to be further explored. Did more staff and volunteers not have adequate data and devices at home? (Community-based programs rely on volunteers far more than other sectors.) Did the higher number of rural programs mean additional data needed to be purchased? More comprehensive approaches and solutions need to be explored to work towards equitable digital access.

## Purchases for learners

Only 13 per cent of all respondents stated that they purchased data and/or laptops for learners. There were differences across the sectors when looking at the English responses. Stating they made purchases to support learners were:

- 20 per cent of college respondents.
- 11 per cent of community respondents.
- 4 per cent of school board respondents.

Half of the 13 per cent said their program purchased additional laptops for loan or lent out their existing laptops. One-third said they paid for learners' cell phone cards and data so they could continue to participate in the program.

As time went on, learners may have acquired better data plans or devices on their own.

## Staff purchases

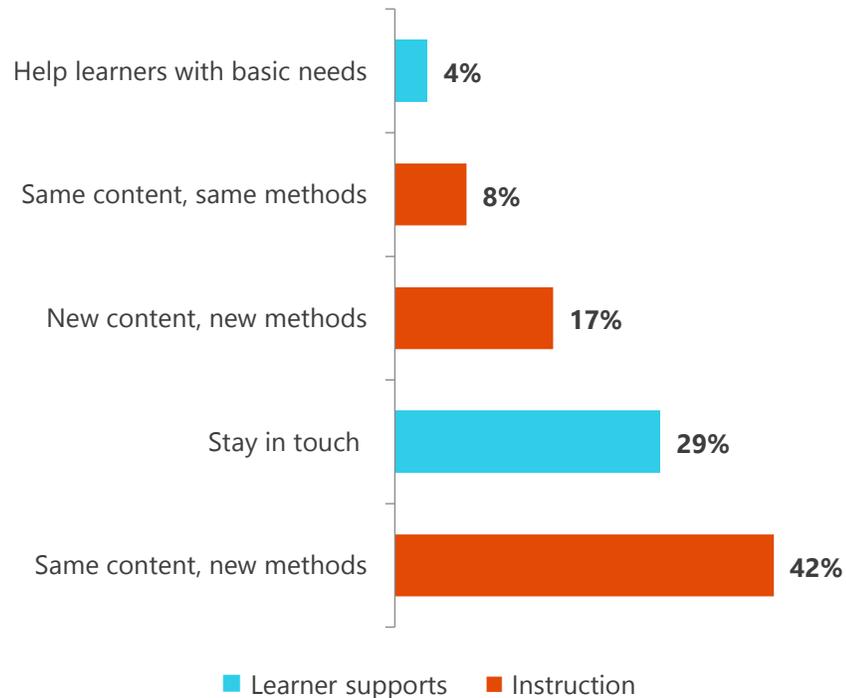
Similar to learner purchases, only 13 per cent indicated data or devices were purchased for staff and/or volunteers to use. There were differences across the sectors when looking at the English responses. Making purchases to support staff were:

- 19 per cent of community-based programs.
- 10 per cent of colleges.
- 5 per cent of school board respondents.

Most often purchased were laptops and peripheral devices such as webcams.

Most purchases were made using LBS funding — training supports and/or operational funding. Some respondents stated they were unsure if they could reallocate their funding. A few respondents stated they used other funding sources.

# Remote Delivery Priorities



During the first days and weeks of the provincial shutdown, many LBS learners were not able to access fundamental services such as food banks and mental health supports. Many were also isolated and alone. Program staff and volunteers reached out immediately.

One-third (33 per cent) of English and French respondents prioritized learner supports and communication (i.e. staying in touch and helping learners with basic needs) over instruction. English respondents in rural areas were more likely to state their priority was simply staying in touch. Respondents in community and school board programs were twice as likely as colleges to state their priority was staying in touch with learners.

Two-thirds (67 per cent) of respondents indicated they were able to prioritize instruction. College respondents were about twice as likely or more to state that they prioritized a continuation of a similar learning program using new remote tools and approaches. This suggests their curricula and technology could be quickly adapted.

Similarly, French respondents were twice as likely as English to prioritize the same content using the same methods, even though half their learners live in rural areas. This suggests their learners may have been better prepared for remote delivery.

Programs responded to dire needs, helping learners access food banks that were accessible online and income assistance counsellors who were no longer available in person. In addition, those who prioritized instruction continued to provide supports as needed. A school board educator offered more insight:

*There was no one priority. Some students I stayed in touch [with] by phone, some I was trying to offer assistance for everyday things, some were trying to continue with a similar program, some I was checking on their mental health status. Some tried and [I] tried approaches [that] worked for some. Some students needed totally new approaches. Just as programming was differentiated before COVID, so it continued to be during distance learning.*

# Professional Development and Types of Support

It is notable to see that community and school board program respondents accessed more than twice the number of training sources compared with college and French respondents.

Arguably, respondents in college and francophone programs were able to access highly focused and relevant training, while respondents in community and school board programs had to piece together training from several different sources. We also have to consider that access to training in French is limited.

Another notable difference is the role of LBS-funded support organizations compared with institution-based training. LBS support organizations like AlphaPlus, COFA, CESBA and MTML played a prominent role in providing training supports. College respondents, on the other hand, turned to college-based supports in their individual institutions. Such tightly aligned and accessible local supports may have contributed to the ability of college respondents to make the shift to remote learning. Self-directed and in-house training and meetings were mentioned across all sectors, underscoring the importance of program-based solutions and strategies.

## Participation rates

Just over half (53 per cent) of English respondents stated they participated in training and/or informal sessions to figure out a remote delivery strategy. There were no sector differences in the participation rate. One-third (34 per cent) of French respondents participated in training and/or informal sessions.

## Types of training and informal sessions

Respondents also added comments about the types of training or sessions they participated in (84 English and 11 French). These were sorted to look for patterns and trends. We noted some differences in the types and number of training sources summarized below.

| Sector                          | No. of sources | Most common types of training (in order) |                             |               |
|---------------------------------|----------------|--|-----------------------------|---------------|
|                                 |                | 1  | 2                           | 3             |
| <b>College</b><br>(n = 23)      | 5              | College teaching and learning centres    | In-house                    | Self-directed |
| <b>French</b><br>(n = 11)       | 5              | COFA                                     | Discitus                    |               |
| <b>Community</b><br>(n = 32)    | 11             | AlphaPlus                                | In-house                    | Self-directed |
| <b>School board</b><br>(n = 28) | 13             | In-house                                 | CESBA and MTML or AlphaPlus | Self-directed |

# Instruction and Communication Tools

## Instruction

When asked about their instructional preferences, respondents made close to four choices each, suggesting they had to use various modes to support learners.

The vast majority of all respondents (76 per cent) used email with links and instructions. Emails were also used for communication.

Community and school board programs were three times as likely as colleges to use printed materials and ready-made, third-party content (47-56 per cent compared with 16-18 per cent) .

They were also five and six times more likely than colleges to use e-Channel (21 and 26 per cent compared with 4 per cent). The majority of French respondents (64 per cent) used e-Channel or F@D.

College respondents were twice as likely (79 per cent) to use an online learning management system (LMS) compared with school boards (40 per cent) and community respondents (33 per cent).

The high number of instruction and communication tools used by respondents demonstrates their responsiveness and adaptability in a challenging situation. Also important to note are the differences between college respondents and others. College respondents were far more likely to use an LMS to co-ordinate instruction and communication, less likely to use printed materials and mail and less likely to use e-Channel. Their choices suggest that individual educators had the capacity and resources to make a shift to online learning. In comparison, community and school board programs were not able to mobilize similar online resources and relied far more on printed materials and e-Channel. French respondents relied even more on e-Channel. These differences need to be explored further to understand how various online resources, including e-Channel, along with a comprehensive LMS and accessible content enable educators and are used as a suite of options to support adult learners.

## Communication

Respondents used an average of three different communication methods. The vast majority of all individuals relied on video conferencing (81 per cent) and phone calls (80 per cent). These methods were also used for instruction.

French, community and school board respondents were three to four times more likely than colleges to use mail (i.e. notes and instructions) (24-29 per cent compared with 7 per cent).

French, community and school board respondents were at least twice as likely as colleges to text learners (67-76 per cent compared with 29 per cent) .

College respondents were twice as likely as French, community and school board respondents to rely on an LMS to communicate with learners (67 per cent compared with 27-37 per cent) .

# Preparing for Ongoing Disruption

## English respondents

We asked respondents to identify necessary supports to help them adapt to possible ongoing disruption and change.

The most pressing needs chosen by at least half of English respondents are listed in order.

- 1. Streamlined and adapted Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) processes (66 per cent).**
- 2. Professional development (PD) to use new digital tools (57 per cent).**
- 3. Online assessments of literacy and numeracy (53 per cent).**
- 4. Funding to purchase data and/or devices for learners (53 per cent).**
- 5. PD to support planning and curriculum development (53 per cent).**
- 6. Online assessments of digital skills (53 per cent).**

No role differences were noted. This suggests a shared awareness of needs among educators, program co-ordinators and support program co-ordinators. Only one sector difference was noted: college respondents were half as likely to state they needed online literacy and numeracy assessments.

## French respondents

The most pressing needs of French respondents were similar, although fewer items were identified by half of respondents.

- 1. PD to use new digital tools (50 per cent).**
- 2. Streamlined and adapted MLTSD processes (47 per cent).**
- 3. Regular communication with colleagues to share ideas (41 per cent).**

The number one priority chosen by a clear majority of English respondents and nearly half of French respondents was a need for streamlined and adapted accountability and reporting processes. Respondents who commented specified the need for online registration, online OALCF Milestone testing and sharing e-Channel registration processes.

Responsive engagement with representative organizations, decision-making and consistent communication were needed. The COVID-19 crisis reminded the field of ongoing challenges with the ministry since LBS was integrated into Employment Ontario a decade ago. Similar issues were identified in a comprehensive evaluation report four years ago.<sup>5</sup> A new approach to communication, decision-making and feedback on ministry processes is overdue.

# Conclusion

The uneven access to online resources and technology — laptops and data for learners, targeted and accessible professional training and educational technology tools — shaped respondents' experiences when making the shift to remote delivery in LBS. Exacerbating technology inequities was a lack of communication and action to address specific issues from senior ministry officials.

College respondents were more likely to help learners access laptops and data and to have institution-based access to dedicated teaching and learning support to assist with instructional design. They were also far more likely to mobilize the use of comprehensive online educational technology tools like an LMS.

Francophone respondents may have had a stronger basis for making the shift to remote delivery, being far more likely to have seamless technology integration before the provincial shutdown. This may be due to their more prevalent use of e-Channel or F@D. The differences could provide some important insights to better understand what it takes to build and maintain a more resilient LBS system that takes into account the complex and interconnected challenges that learners face.

We need to better understand the experience from the learners' perspectives. For some, the shift was likely positive. One respondent commented, "Students really liked the flexibility and autonomy of online learning." For others, however, particularly at OALCF Level 1, along with those who have no home internet access, a computer or expertise to work without direct support, there is concern. "Where do the beginning readers, writers and digital learners fit?" asked a respondent. Additional research is needed.

## AlphaPlus and next steps

Before the COVID-19 crisis, AlphaPlus started a process to develop a comprehensive description and strategies to guide discussions on technology access, use and learning in LBS. The crisis amplified previously identified issues and underscored an urgent need to address issues related to equitable access and learning opportunities. We are continuing this initiative, with the guidance of two advisory groups, and aim to have a discussion document prepared by March 2021. Findings from this survey provide a stronger rationale for the project.

## Endnotes

1. Statistics Canada. (2012). Table 27-10-0017-01 *Internet use by location of use, age group, household income and geography*. <https://doi.org/10.25318/2710001701-eng>  
We referenced the 2012 Canadian Internet Use Survey (CIUS) from Statistics Canada since data was collected by phone. This changed in 2018, when data was collected primarily online, potentially restricting participation by those with limited or no connectivity.
2. Vanek, J., & Harris, K. (2020). *Digital literacy and technology integration in adult basic skills education: A review of the research* [Research brief]. <https://www.proliteracy.org/briefs>
3. For more information on Ontario's digital divide, refer to Pinsent-Johnson, C., & Sturm, M. (2020). *Ontario's digital divide: A spotlight on the differences in online connection, activity and benefits* [Research brief]. <https://alphaplus.ca/download/the-impact-of-ontarios-digital-divide/>
4. LBS data was compiled from several unpublished reports: Employment Ontario Information System LBS Reports 2012-16, LBS Learner Profile # 60BR 2016-17, LBS spreadsheet data for 2017-19. Reports available from AlphaPlus.
5. Similar issues were identified in a comprehensive evaluation report four years ago. Refer to Cathexis Consulting. (2016). *Executive summary: Evaluation of Ontario's LBS program*. <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/publications/lbs-exec-summary-report-2016-en.pdf>

# Appendix: More on the Survey and AlphaPlus

## Methods and analyses

The aim of the survey was to explore the sudden shift to remote learning from the perspective of staff and volunteers in Ontario's LBS system. This is a convenience sample with 368 respondents. It is not representative of all LBS staff and volunteers. A descriptive analysis was completed. We used a consistent set of terms to describe proportions and showed the percentages in parentheses.

We used Survey Monkey to administer the survey and do most analyses. We examined differences in subgroups related to sectors and participants' roles. We also looked at the French respondents as a subgroup. We applied the 10 per cent minimum needed to report a significant difference between subgroups (with a confidence level of 95 per cent).

The 36 French responses were analyzed separately. Responses were then combined in the findings when there were no significant differences. Significant differences (at least a 10 per cent difference) are noted and reported separately.

Participants were informed of the survey aim and how their data would be analyzed and used. They were ensured their participation would be anonymous. AlphaPlus did not collect any personal information in the main survey. Participants could opt to enter a draw for one of two iPads, a small incentive for participants. Their contact information for the draw was collected separately and deleted after the draw.

## Survey development and limitations

The survey was developed and administered by AlphaPlus using Survey Monkey. A variety of Ontario-based and US surveys were examined to develop the topics and some items. The English survey was translated into French after it was developed, a limitation that could impact the findings as they relate to francophone programs. A limited pilot occurred, also a limitation that could impact how some questions were interpreted.

## About AlphaPlus

AlphaPlus is Ontario's only organization focused on helping adult literacy education professionals to incorporate digital technology. We believe that through the use of digital technology in our sector, we can build capacity, create equity and access to learning, and enhance learning experiences. We work as a leader and guide, sharing knowledge and directly helping literacy educators and administrators to integrate technology in innovative ways that increase effectiveness and reach.

Contact us ([info@alphaplus.ca](mailto:info@alphaplus.ca)) or visit our website (<https://alphaplus.ca/>).