

British Columbia Federation of Students
2015 ABE Backgrounder

Adult Basic Education in BC

NEW FINANCIAL BARRIERS WILL FURTHER RESTRICT ACCESS

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federation of students

THE BRITISH COLUMBIA FEDERATION OF STUDENTS

With nearly 200,000 members represented by 14 students' unions in every region of the province, the British Columbia Federation of Students is the largest democratic voice for post-secondary students in BC. The Federation and its predecessor organizations have represented students in British Columbia since 1966. The Federation represents full- and part-time students at the college, undergraduate, and graduate levels.

University of British Columbia Students' Union Okanagan
Camosun College Student Society
College of New Caledonia Students' Union
Douglas Students' Union
Emily Carr Students' Union
Kwantlen Student Association
Northern British Columbia Graduate Student Society

North Island Students' Union
Northwest Community College Students' Union
Okanagan College Students' Union
Selkirk College Students' Union
Students' Union of Vancouver Community College
Thompson Rivers University Students' Union
Vancouver Island University Students' Union

What is Adult Basic Education?

Adult basic education (ABE) is the provision of elementary and secondary level education to adults through BC's K-12 school system and most public post-secondary institutions.

ABE provides access to a variety of courses and skills training ranging from basic literacy to adult high school graduation. It also supports learners in improving their employability and life skills in addition to helping adult learners attain basic upgrading in preparation for further education. The post-secondary system is used as a delivery method for adult basic education in recognition that many adults achieve a higher rate of success and seek further education when studying in a college or university environment.

Adult basic education is an integral component of BC's education system and economic prosperity, providing a wide range of programs to students who require additional training or skills upgrading in order to participate fully in society and the economy. ABE also plays an important role in increasing adult literacy and improving high school completion and post-secondary participation rates within BC's Aboriginal population.

To be effective, adult basic education must be accessible to all who need it. Recognizing this, the BC Liberals eliminated tuition fees for ABE in 2007. In December 2014, Christy Clark's Liberal government announced they would be ending this policy, no longer requiring that adult basic education be tuition fee-free. Following years of declining investment by the provincial government, a \$15 million funding cut to adult basic education programming was also announced, further eroding these programs.¹

**\$15.9 Million
Cut**

Following years of declining investment by the provincial government, a \$15.9 million funding cut to adult basic education programming was also announced, further eroding these programs.

“High school is free, but further upgrading is not. I think it is reasonable to expect adults who've already graduated to contribute to these costs.”

– PETER FASSBENDER, MINISTER OF EDUCATION, 2014

A Short History of Access to ABE in BC

“We are helping people upgrade their education so they can take advantage of our growing economy and enjoy rewarding careers... by offering free tuition for adult basic education, whether students have graduated from high school or not. We’re also going beyond that by helping more adult learners pay for books, transportation and child care.”

–FORMER BC LIBERAL ADVANCED EDUCATION MINISTER MURRAY COELL, 2007

As far back as back as 1976, the provincial government viewed ABE as a “high priority special program”.² At the time, both federal and provincial governments were involved with vocational training and adult basic education. In 1986, responsibility for the majority of adult basic education was transferred to the newly created Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, where it remains today (now known simply as the Ministry of Advanced Education).³

In 1988, tuition fees were abolished for adult learners without a high school diploma, followed by an abolishment of tuition fees for all fundamental ABE programming in 1991.⁴ The provincial government took a further step in 1998, with the announcement that all ABE would be tuition-fee free in the post-secondary system.⁵

This policy change was short lived, as the change in government in 2002 also brought a change in policy: the provincial government once again gave public post-secondary institutions the ability to charge tuition fees for adult learners taking ABE courses if they already had a high school diploma. Fundamental level ABE programs remained tuition-fee free, however, which remains the case today.

After extensive research and consultation on the importance of ABE to the province, and the impact of tuition fees on the majority of those adult learners attempting to access the system,

the provincial government again announced a reversal in policy in 2007: all ABE courses in both the K-12 and post-secondary systems became tuition-fee free for all learners, regardless of their high school graduation status starting in 2008.

On December 4, 2014, the Ministries of Education and Advanced Education made an unexpected announcement that the provincial government would be cutting \$6.9 million in funding to ABE programming at post-secondary institutions, and an additional \$9 million from the K-12 system. In order to compensate for this cut, post-secondary institutions would be allowed to charge up to \$1600 per term for all ABE courses offered on their campuses.” Tuition remains free for students working toward their high school diploma in the K-12 sector, or those taking basic, introductory courses not at a post-secondary campus. Beginning May 1, 2015, the provincial government will no longer be providing funding to school districts for tuition-free upgrading courses for adults who already hold a high school diploma.⁶

As with other increases to tuition fees across the province, the introduction of tuition fees for ABE has always followed a period of underfunding or funding model changes. These policies provide an excuse for the provincial government to allow institutions to charge fees, and overwhelmingly punish adult learners who are already in the system or those planning to enroll in upgrading courses.

Who are Adult Basic Education Students?

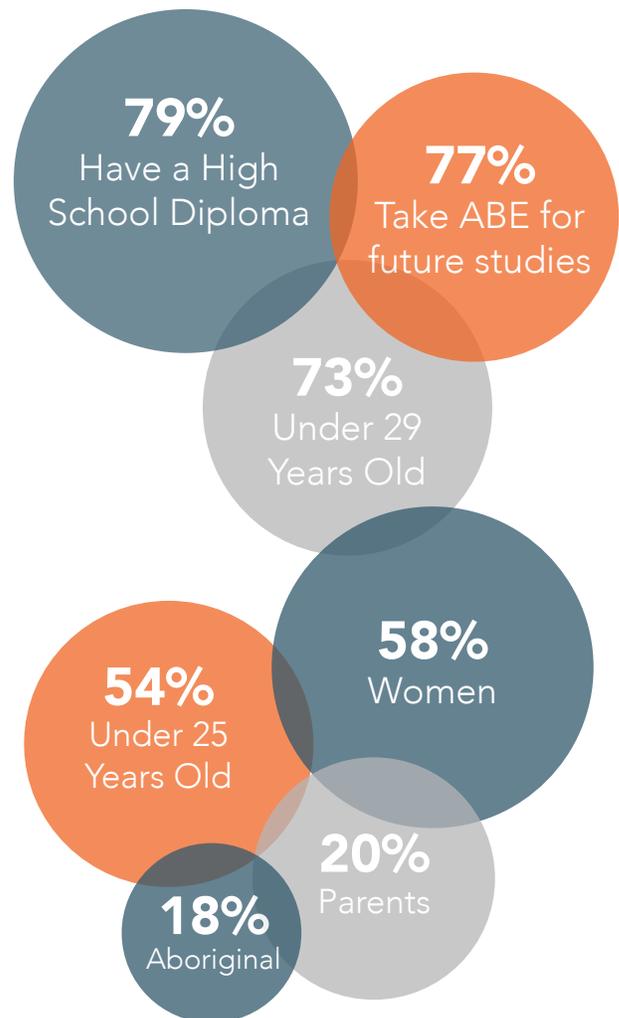
The vast majority of adult basic education students are low-income earners, enrolling in programs in order to qualify for entry into trades or college and university programs.

Adult basic education students fall into three basic categories: those seeking to upgrade their high school courses to qualify for employment opportunities or entry into post-secondary education, those seeking to complete their high school studies, and those with developmental disabilities enrolled in adult special education programs. Other ABE students include those wishing to simply improve their basic literacy or numeracy, or those taking English as a second language courses.

The majority of adult basic education students (79 percent) have already completed high school, and return to primary or secondary-level education in order to qualify for employment or post-secondary education (83 percent).⁷ In many cases, these adults take basic education courses because their high school courses are no longer relevant, due to the length of time since they attended high school. This is often the case in math and science courses. In other cases, adults must change their employment and take secondary level courses required in their new position.

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ABE Students by Demographic



Six-year high school completion rates for Aboriginal youth stand at 59.4 percent, compared to 83.6 percent for non-Aboriginal students. As a result, the proportion of Aboriginal students in adult basic education is higher (at 18 percent) than in the traditional K-12 system (at 10 percent).

A Socio-Economic Equalizer?

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Women also make up a slightly higher proportion of adult basic education students than in traditional K-12 (58 percent versus 49 percent)⁹ and 20 percent of adult basic education students support a family while pursuing post-secondary education. Overall, the number of students studying while working full-time has increased since 2012 (from 22 to 29 percent), with over half (55 percent) being employed while taking classes.¹⁰

Education and employment outcomes for former ABE students are high, with 70 percent of students continuing their studies after ABE (48 percent in certificate/diploma programs, 43 percent pursuing degrees) and 88 percent of former ABE students no longer studying actively participating in the labour force.¹¹ Accessible adult basic education is not, therefore, simply important to meeting BC's objectives of a knowledge-based economy and being the most literate jurisdiction in North America. Adult basic education also has a strong social justice component, addressing social inequality and increasing economic stability for marginalized groups.

Former ABE Students

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The Barriers

Tuition Fees

Public education from K-12 is free in Canada, as for several generations governments everywhere have understood it as the foundation for a strong economy and society.

As noted, in 2002, the BC government began allowing post-secondary institutions to charge tuition fees for basic education courses to adults who have a certificate of high school graduation – the overwhelming majority of those participating in adult basic education courses. Under pressure from students, this decision was wisely reversed in 2007, with the government committing to providing tuition free education for adult learners. The 2007 decision to eliminate tuition fees for ABE was an outcome of the BC government’s Campus 2020 Report,¹² and followed months of research and consultation. The Report determined that the provision of cost-free upgrading programs is key to providing a strong economic future for British Columbia and greater access to the labour market for a diversity of citizens.

In December 2014, Christy Clark’s BC Liberal government announced a reversal on their previous policy, removing the tuition fee-free mandate. Tuition fees are a significant barrier to accessing adult basic education, creating financial difficulty for those seeking to upgrade their high school courses in order to qualify for employment or entry into post-secondary education. As seen from past experience, tuition fees charged for ABE in the mid-2000s represented a small source of revenue for institutions. Yet, when this cost was downloaded onto individual students as opposed to being paid for by the provincial government, it amounted to a significant impact on individual learners.

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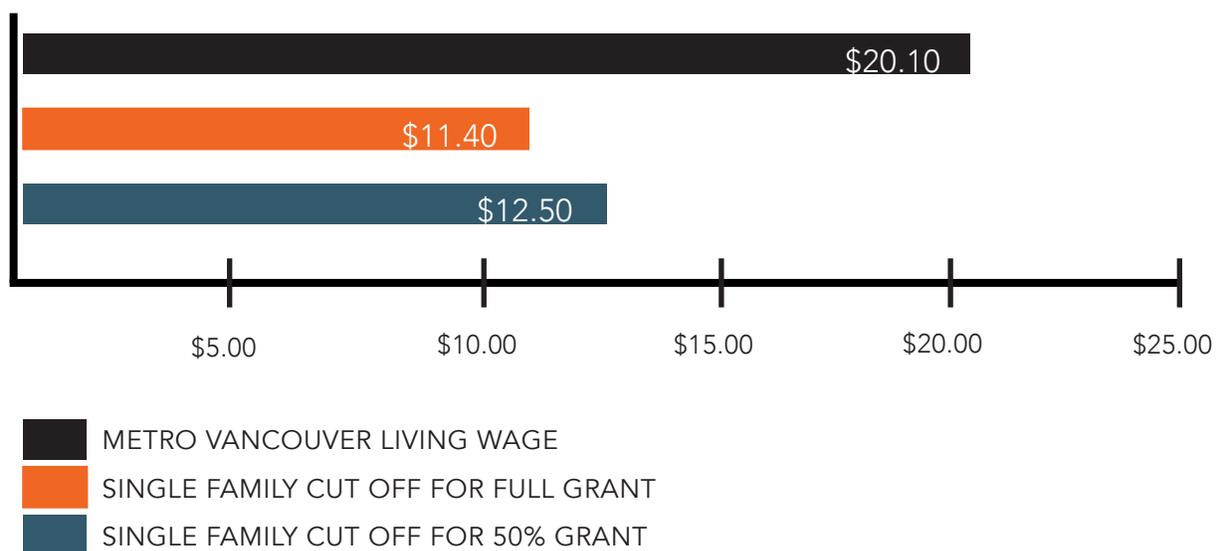
Adult Upgrading Grant

It deserves noting that the provincial government funds a specific grant for adult learners attempting to access and participate in adult basic education. The Adult Upgrading Grant (AUG) – formerly known as the Adult Basic Education Student Assistance Program (ABESAP) – provides a nominal amount of money to very low-income earners in order to offset the costs of pursuing education.

In order to counteract the cost of tuition fees, the BC government announced increased funding to the Adult Upgrading Grant to assist with the costs of tuition fees, books, supplies, childcare, and transportation. The income threshold cut-off in order to qualify for a grant has also been changed slightly, with adult learners earning up to 10 percent more than the income threshold cut-off being eligible to apply for a grant to cover only half of their tuition fees.¹³

Unfortunately, the income threshold for even being eligible to apply for a grant is so low that many adult learners will not qualify (for example, a student working full-time making \$11.40 per hour is the cut-off for a single family size to receive the full grant, or \$12.50 per hour to be eligible to receive a grant to cover a maximum of 50 percent of tuition fees).¹⁴ This is far below the estimated living wage for Metro Vancouver of \$20.10.¹⁵ Further, it is up to institutions to distribute the grants, and concerns have been expressed that the expenses the grants are meant to cover (including transportation and childcare) will not be funded due to lack of adequate funding of the grant program.

INCOME THRESHOLD CUTOFF



Funding Cuts

Over the last decade, operating budgets for BC's colleges and universities have been more or less frozen, making it difficult for institutions to maintain free ABE offerings to meet demand. In response, some institutions have limited adult basic education enrolment (e.g. Thompson Rivers University) or re-classified several high school credits as university transfer courses in order to charge tuition fees (e.g. Camosun College). The result of provincial and federal funding cuts is a wide variance in the quality of and access to adult basic education throughout the province.

Funding cuts have also essentially guaranteed that institutions will opt for the highest amount of tuition fees allowable in order to make up for the shortfall in government funding. The provincial government maintains that tuition-fee free adult basic education is no longer sustainable due to an increase in delivery costs, and that charging tuition fees will ensure the post-secondary programs remain "sustainable".¹⁶ However, the funding shortfall is a direct result of irresponsible government policy. To ensure an effective system, adequate and targeted funding must be made available to institutions to offer high-quality adult basic education.

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Restrictive Income Assistance Policy

In 2002, the BC government changed social assistance rules to disallow those on income assistance (with the exception of those with disabilities) from attending post-secondary education. This includes adult basic education.

The change was made as part of the government's plan to reduce income assistance recipients by focusing on having them secure immediate employment. This strategy neglects the importance of meaningful training and skills development to the acquisition of sustained and adequate employment.

In light of the trend towards a knowledge-based economy in BC, there is a strong economic argument to be made for encouraging individuals on income assistance to enrol in adult basic education, post-secondary education, and skills training. The government's current income assistance policy does the exact opposite.

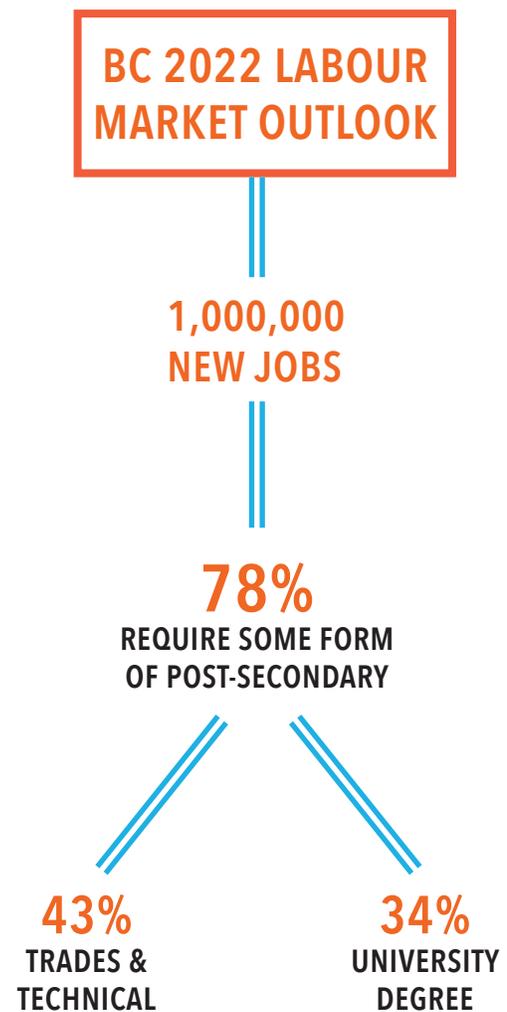
The Consequences

Skills Shortage

BC is facing a major skills shortage as “baby boomers” retire and levels of new labour market participants are declining. According to the BC 2022 Labour Market Outlook, in less than one decade, it is estimated that almost one million new jobs will be available in BC,¹⁷ and 78 percent of these new jobs will require some form of post-secondary education or training (43 percent will require a trades or technical training, and 34 percent will require a university degree).¹⁸ At the same time, it is estimated that approximately 530,000 young people will enter the job market over the next ten years,¹⁹ leaving many already in the workforce left to fill the new jobs being created. Without access to the proper training and education, the gap between the number of people entering the labour force and those retiring will continue to increase.

Government policies of allowing tuition fees to be charged for adult basic education and restricting access for income assistance recipients directly contribute to this shortage. Reducing access to high school completion or upgrading for the purpose of re-training threatens the supply of new participants in BC’s skilled economy and workforce.

Education and training is key to economic growth in the province. Improving adult education levels, and thereby increasing the size of BC’s skilled workforce is an integral component to supporting economic development in all regions.



Low Completion Rates

Completion rates for adult basic education have been identified as an area of concern by the government, despite overall high completion rates for adult basic education students. Counter-intuitively, some college administrators have stated that charging tuition fees provides an incentive to complete, arguing that many students will not take their classes seriously, otherwise. In fact, many students do not complete because of the financial burden of taking courses.

A truly effective solution to low completion rates is to eliminate the barriers to accessing adult basic education, including tuition fees, and develop positive incentives that encourage completion and the pursuit of post-secondary education.

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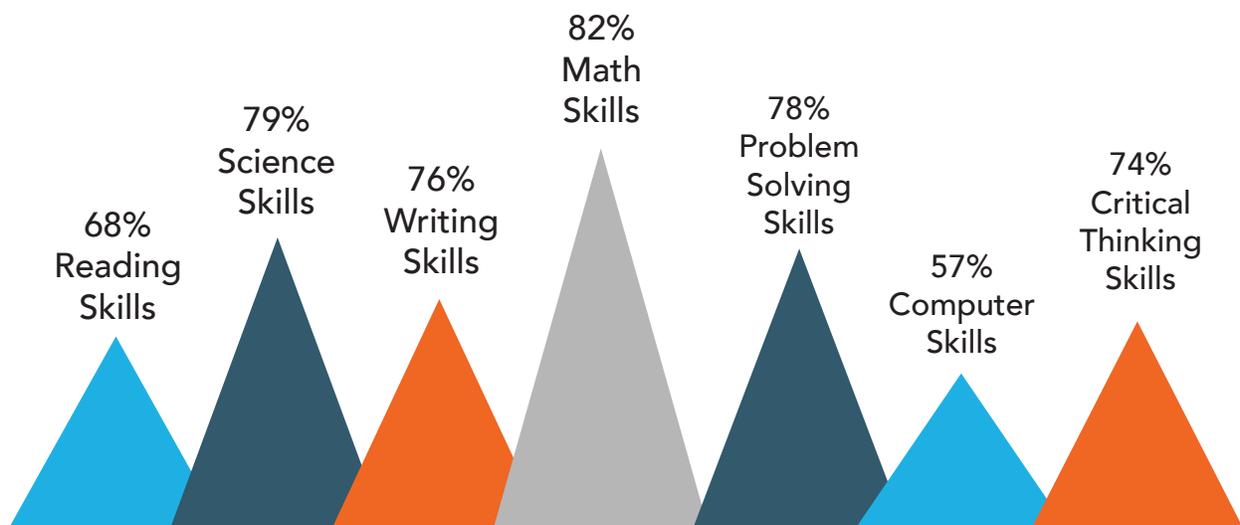
High Illiteracy

A high proportion of adults in BC are illiterate. A province-wide literacy organization estimates that 40 percent of BC adults have difficulty reading a newspaper, filing out a work application form, reading a map or understanding a lease. Similarly, 49 percent of BC adults do not have the skills necessary to calculate a tip, create a budget, calculate sales tax, or understand credit card interest rates.²⁰ These difficulties include functionality in a variety of areas, such as reading, writing, computer skills, and other areas that are important for full participation in a knowledge-based economy.

Access to adult basic education impacts all of these areas. Students have reported that ABE has been helpful in development of their math skills (82 percent) and their science skills (79 percent), and over three-quarters of former students have reported that ABE was helpful or very helpful to their development of independent learning skills and problem solving skills.²¹

Financial barriers to adult basic education inhibit the improvement of adult literacy by reducing the ability of potential learners to access the system.

ABE Students Report an Increase in Skills:



Enrolment Declines

BC's post-secondary education system saw significant drops in enrolment when tuition fees were implemented in 2002. Many students who were already in the adult basic education system were forced to end their studies. A 2005 survey conducted by the Ministry of Advanced Education showed that 21 percent of those who planned on taking more courses but did not cited lack of financial resources as a reason, 25 percent cited the decision to work, and 18 percent cited personal circumstances, which included circumstances such as lack of childcare.²² Of course, all three of these choices are inextricably linked to financial resources.

Conclusion

Adult basic education is an important component of building a skilled workforce, addressing socio-economic marginalisation, and has a profound affect on the individuals who need to access it. Overwhelmingly, adult basic education students credit their courses with developing their literacy, numeracy, and computer skills, as well as self-confidence and social skills.

To accomplish these goals, ABE must be accessible to all who need it, regardless of economic status. Tuition fees will negate the assistance provided by grants to adult learners in accessing ABE. In the past, students who accessed the grant were able to use it toward addressing the costs of textbooks, transportation, and childcare, all of which continue to present significant barriers to many adult basic education students. Now, the majority of it will now go toward paying for tuition fees.

Experience has shown that charging tuition fees for adult basic education reduces enrolment, and has a significant impact on the learners who are currently enrolled or plan to be. The provincial government itself admits that many of the learners accessing ABE programs face unique challenges accessing the labour market.²³

With BC's 2015 Budget projecting a three-year \$879 million surplus,²⁴ it is clear there is no justification for cutting funding to basic education and asking students and their families to pay more. The new fees to high school and upgrading courses will only create financial barriers to adults returning to school, preventing them from meaningfully accessing the labour market.

The BC government made an important decision in 2007 to re-introduce free adult basic education, determining that free ABE was key to the province's future. This conclusion is equally true today as it was then.

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1. "Adult upgrading courses supported by grants for low-income learners", December 4, 2014, BC Government Media Release: <http://www.newsroom.gov.bc.ca/2014/12/adult-upgrading-courses-supported-by-grants-for-low-income-learners.html>.
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4. Ibid. Note that both changes in policy were as a result of recommendations provided through provincial research and consultation processes – the 1988 changes stemming from a recommendation of the 1988 Report of the Royal Commission on Education, and the 1991 change as a result of a recommendation in the Provincial Literacy Advisory Committee's 1989 Report.
5. Ibid.
6. "Adult upgrading courses supported by grants for low-income learners", December 4, 2014, BC Government Media Release: www.newsroom.gov.bc.ca/2014/12/adult-upgrading-courses-supported-by-grants-for-low-income-learners.html.
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