

# ONLINE DELIVERY IN ADULT EDUCATION DURING COVID-19 (FINAL REPORT)

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cesba 

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## About the Authors



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Note: The views expressed in this report are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of CESBA or the province of Ontario.

## Introduction

CESBA (full name: The Ontario Association of Adult and Continuing Education School Board Administrators) is a provincial non-profit professional association that represents, advocates for and supports adult, alternative and continuing education (A&CE) program staff working in nearly 60 of Ontario's school boards with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to assist learners in achieving their education and employment goals. During 2020-2022, CESBA commissioned Drs. Lorraine Godden and Sandy Youmans to investigate how A&CE staff have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For educators, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a test for which there was no prior experience or preconfigured ideas that could outline appropriate responses. A&CE leaders, educators, and staff were required to rapidly formulate responses with specific contexts in mind, as the pandemic has run its course (Reimers et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic created a challenging context for delivery of programming for adult learners in Ontario. As Ontario schools transitioned "instantly" to online delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers in adult education delivering credit courses were required to make a significant shift to their teaching that will have impacted many adult learners across the province. However, this unique situation provides an opportunity to investigate challenges faced, and responses made to this substantially different adult learning environment.

## Purpose

The purpose of this project was to investigate how adult and continuing education (A&CE) staff had responded to the need to adjust the delivery of their courses to an online environment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This investigation provides foundational work for future development of appropriate and evidence-based contingency plans for (a) any such future on-site school disruptions, and (b) ensuring A&CE teachers that are responsible for working with adult learners enrolled in credit programs are adequately supported to effectively and successfully teach and support their learners through such disruptions.

The following research questions guided the study:

- What were the biggest challenges faced by teachers as they delivered content in isolation?
- What facilitated delivery of content?
- Did these challenges differ by subject matter (e.g., English, math etc.) by program (e.g., Personal Support Worker, welding etc.), or by region?
- What new skills did teachers develop?
- Can we improve our understanding of the efficacy of in-person content delivery vs online content delivery based on these events?
- How can teachers be better prepared for a similar event in the future? What tools or skills were useful? What tools or skills need to be further developed?
- What major challenges were encountered returning to the classroom?
- What was the impact on work-related placements (e.g., co-op)? How did teachers mitigate this? What resources did they find helpful?

- Where did teachers find opportunities for innovative teaching and learning practices?
- What challenges were faced by administrators as they supported A&CE staff?

## Method

Drs. Godden and Youmans collected data from 18 participating district school boards within Ontario for this study (eight from eastern Ontario, three from western Ontario, two from central Ontario, one from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and four from northern Ontario) and one Indigenous postsecondary institution. Appropriate ethics clearance was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants were aged over 18. Data were collected during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years from A&CE adult learners, teachers, instructors, guidance counsellors, and administrators via online surveys. Three separate online surveys were developed and distributed for the purpose of the CESBA A&CE study: one for adult learners; one for teachers, instructors, and guidance counsellors; and one for administrators. All three surveys included closed-ended questions and open-response questions about A&CE supports and how A&CE for credit programs responded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the appropriate cleaning of data, quantitative data analysis was conducted on closed-ended responses using Microsoft Excel, a spreadsheet software program that allows for organization, formatting, and various calculations to be performed on numerical data. Open-ended responses were coded using thematic qualitative analysis. In addition, interviews were held with administrators. Interview data was also coded using thematic analysis.

## **Findings**

In the following section of this report, results for each of the three participant groups are presented, beginning with adult learners, followed by teachers, and concluding with administrators. Each section commences with a short description of the participant population for that section.

### **A&CE Learners**

There were 148 responses to the A&CE adult learner survey that responded to the questions regarding online learning during the pandemic. Adult learner responses were spread across fourteen district school boards. One hundred of the participants self-identified as female and 45 self-identified as male, three preferred not to disclose their biological sex. The youngest participant was 18 and the eldest 71, with the average age being 29. Through this study, we asked a number of questions related to adult learners participating in A&CE during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also included a number of open-ended questions. The findings were analysed into themes of participation, benefits of remote learning, challenges of remote learning, and skills developed during the remote learning period of COVID-19.

### **Participation**

When asked about the normal type of learning that they undertake in A&CE, 62% of learners revealed online learning as their regular mode of delivery. A full breakdown of the different types of learning can be seen in chart 1.

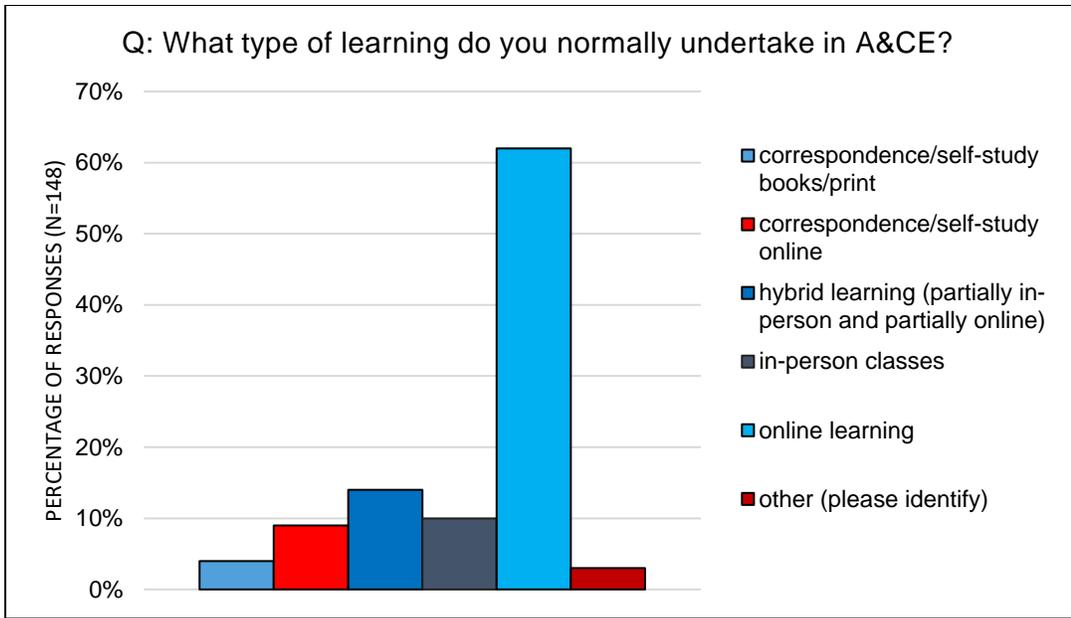


Chart 1. The type of learning normally undertaken in A&CE by study participants

As can be seen from chart 2, 91% of adult learners participated in remote learning during the pandemic, with 8% not participating.

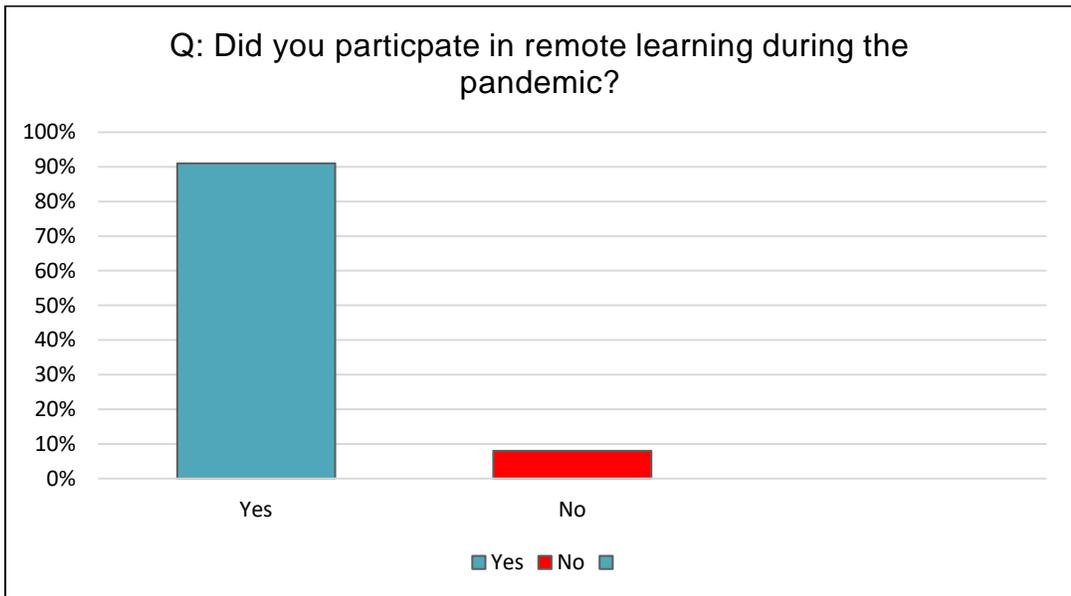


Chart 2. Number of adult learners who participated in remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (n=147)

When asked if they would like to continue to participate in learning online, 38% said yes, they would, 44% said they would like to have the option of both online and face-to-face learning, and 16% said they would like all of their learning to be face-to-face delivery. A full breakdown can be seen in chart 3.

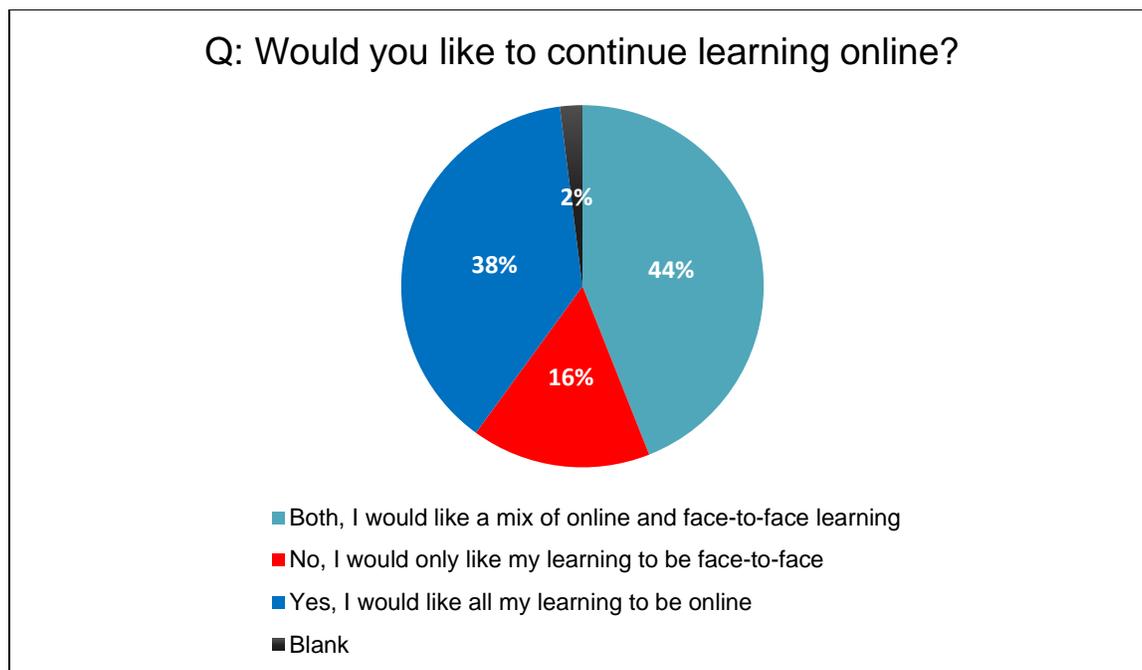


Chart 3. Number of adult learners who would like to continue learning online (n=148)

### Benefits of Remote Learning

Adult learner participants reported some benefits to learning in a remote environment through their open-ended qualitative responses. The most commonly shared benefits included:

- Flexibility, many learners liked that they could fit their learning around work and family commitments and spend needed time at home

- It was easy for some learners to use the internet for free video calls to talk frequently with teachers
- Learning remotely was cost saving, with no travel costs to adult high school
- For those learners with anxiety, not being in an adult high school relieved stress and social anxiety
- Some learners felt safer during the COVID-19 pandemic as they could stay home and still attend their classes

Through the quantitative data collected, adult learners reported a number of benefits of learning online, with the most frequent responses being the greater flexibility it offers for learners to meet other responsibilities, and that they did not have to travel to adult high school. A full breakdown of the benefits can be found in table 1, it should be noted that adult learners could select more than one option.

Table 1. Benefits of online learning to adult learners (n=148)

Benefit of Online Learning	Percentage of Occurrences
Greater flexibility to meet my other responsibilities	56%
I did not have to travel to school	47%
I like online learning	43%
I like working from home	38%
I liked learning new technology	28%

## Challenges of Remote Learning

Adult learners reported through the qualitative open-ended responses a number of challenges they faced. Some of the most frequently shared responses included:

- Courses not being updated, or having some of the content missing
- Struggling to achieve a healthy work/life balance
- Finding it difficult to stay motivated in their learning, especially due to the distractions of home
- Very challenging to stay on task with learning when home life is unhealthy
- Technological challenges with equipment and/or internet access
- A lack of support from teachers, though many felt that this was not the teachers' fault as they too were overwhelmed and stressed
- Lack of flexibility with deadlines
- Very hard to ask teachers questions from home, as there is safety in numbers when adult learners are in class together

One student shared feeling that:

*"I found working online to be very stressful at times as I have been out of school for 55 years, and it's hard enough going back but then doing it online brings so many different challenges."*

## Skills Developed by Adult Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Many adult learners spoke of the skills they had developed through moving to the online learning environment. They were asked to describe skills that they did not have previously but

felt they had developed through their remote learning during COVID-19. It should be noted that respondents could make more than one selection. A full breakdown of skills is provided in table 2., with the most frequently identified as being time management skills (n=85), followed by technology skills (n=76).

Table 2. Skills developed by adult learners during remote learning through the COVID-19 pandemic (n=148)

Type of Skill Developed	Percentage of Occurrences
Time management skills	57%
Technology skills	51%
Work-life balance skills	49%
Communication skills	43%
Organization skills	39%
Problem solving skills	38%
Other	2%

In addition to the skills outlined in table 2., adult learners shared information through the open-ended responses, where the increased technological skills were a common comment. One learner emphasized that:

*“I’ve always been able to type at a half-decent speed, but I am much better now. I think my ability to communicate by email or text has improved as well. I’m better at wording certain things, depending on who I am emailing or what it’s for. I’m able to gauge my approach and choose my wording to suit that person.”*

## **A&CE Teachers**

There were 75 participants for the A&CE teacher survey who responded to the questions regarding online teaching during the pandemic. Forty seven responses were from teachers and instructors and ten were from guidance counsellors, and 7 respondents did not identify their role. Nine teachers worked part time; the other teachers worked full time. The amount of time teachers and instructors had worked in A&CE ranged from one and a half to 33 years, with the average being 14 years. Participating guidance counsellors had between four and 20 years of experiences in their role, with the average being 12 years.

For the sake of simplicity, we will refer to teachers, instructors, and guidance counsellors as “teachers” in this section. Many of the teacher questions were open-ended. With this in mind, numbers are reported next to responses (n) to indicate how many people provided the response and findings are reported under the following themes: transitions, supports, challenges, and skills development.

### **Transitions**

When asked about how their school board had transitioned their programs to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, some teachers reported that where their board already had most or some of their programming online or they offered hybrid courses, the transition was more straightforward. Through qualitative data, teachers shared the following about their board’s transitions:

- Hybrid components for some courses were removed and the courses transitioned to be fully online
- In-person courses now happen synchronously

- When the building was closed and staff were working from home, all courses were moved online
- The majority of programs were already online
- Teachers adapted to receiving and issuing work to learners online
- When adult learners were given the option to work remotely, many chose that route and had daily contact with their teacher via email
- One board was able to make the transition very quickly, within days we they connected with all their adult learners

When asked to rate the usefulness of strategies to facilitate remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers reported a variety of effective strategies. Teachers were able to select all that applied, and table 3 shows the strategy with the total number of responses for each selection, and the ratings of usefulness allocated against the responses. It should be noted that some possible options were left blank. The most useful strategies included having access to synchronous communication tools for meetings and using online communication tools. The least useful strategy was building opportunities for learners to interact with each other online.

Table 3. Teachers' ratings of the usefulness of strategies used to facilitate remote teaching

Strategies and number of responses	Very useful	Useful	Neutral	Un-useful	Very un-useful
Synchronous communication tools for meetings (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams) (n=65)	20%	26%	5%	2%	0
Using online course communication tools (e.g., announcements, class emails) (n=65)	23%	22%	3%	2%	2%
Training adult learners how to use technology for remote learning (n=55)	27%	16%	13%	2%	2%
Well-being check-ins with learners (n=63)	14%	19%	16%	0	2%
Providing clear course instructions and expectations about content and assignments (n=61)	20%	21%	7%	3%	2%
Giving adult learners an orientation of their online course space and tools (n=52)	17%	21%	1%	0	2%
Making the online course space as user-friendly as possible (n=54)	20%	20%	15%	0	4%
Communicating the skills learners need to be successful online (e.g., time management, written communication) (n=65)	11%	19%	9%	4%	3%
Building in opportunities for learners to interact with each other in a remote environment (e.g., discussion boards, virtual breakout rooms) (n=50)	6%	14%	24%	2%	4%
Providing structure/accountability for learners (n=69)	10%	33%	12%	2%	0
Making yourself consistently available to answer questions and support learners (n=67)	22%	24%	3%	0	2%

Note: Teachers could select more than one response.

## Supports

Teacher respondents were asked about what supports had been put in place in their programs to support them during the COVID-19 pandemic. From their qualitative responses, the most frequently occurring effective supports were identified as:

- Access to technology, including computers and internet access at home
- Training to use technology and various online platforms and software
- Regular online meetings with colleagues and the administration team
- Being provided with sources of information to support mental health and overall wellness
- Modifications to curriculum expectations, and being advised of what flexibility they could offer to learners
- Flexibility in terms of workload and deadlines dependent upon personal circumstances
- Being able to make referrals to the Student Success program
- Mental health supports

When teacher respondents were asked what supports they would like to have put into place during remote learning, the qualitative responses revealed the frequently identified supports as:

- Access to resources to appropriately support differentiation for adult learners in the remote environment
- Additional support for undertaking effective assessment and evaluation in a remote environment
- More training on using required software and learning management systems
- Specific professional development for effective online instruction with adult learners

- Allocated time for planning and preparation, which took longer than the typical planning and preparation for face-to-face instruction
- Increased support for balancing work and home, when working from home – this was very challenging for those with family commitments at home (e.g., children also learning at home and home care responsibilities)
- Scope for regular sharing and collaboration with colleagues
- Continue existing supports and add innovative and new courses, for example micro-credentialling for some of the technological skills

The final support identified in the bulleted list was reiterated by several respondents, with one outlining that...

*“If remote learning were to go on for a long period of time, there would need to be organized communication between staff and formal PD. When we see colleagues daily, we learn from one another and pick up new technical skills that we can use in our courses. I believe working from home without focus and emphasis on interaction with other teachers and formal PD would slowly erode the skill sets of teachers.”*

Respondent teachers were also asked about the supports that had been put into place for their adult learners. The most mentioned qualitative responses included:

- Lending of technology, including devices plus Wi-Fi hotspots
- Being available to reach out to learners on a frequent basis to check-in
- Providing some learners with care packages including masks and sanitizers
- Mailing out learning materials to learners who had no internet access

- Providing learners with a nominated person they could reach out to for support and guidance
- Increasing the number of Student Success team meetings
- Providing in-person attendance for learners when schools were able to open for short periods
- Differentiated instruction and high impact pedagogical practices
- Sharing information about mental health and well-being services through a wide range of outlets including social media

Though there were a number of supports provided to adult learners, teacher respondents also identified a range of supports that they would like to see put in place to help adult learners to successfully navigate their learning in a remote environment:

- Greater access to community partners and mental health counselling for teachers to make referrals for adult learners
- Scope to provide greater flexibility with deadlines
- Technology loaning – though this was a big strategy used to support learners, there were limits on available devices and Wi-Fi hotspots so not all learners could be accommodated
- Designated IT support for adult learners – this often fell to the teacher who had limited expertise
- Additional training for adult learners to navigate online systems
- Realistic workloads for adult learners, including accommodation for additional language learners or those with family commitments

- More multilingual communication within the remote environment
- Greater flexibility between the synchronous and asynchronous time split in credit-based courses would be helpful for learners
- Capacity to provide virtual drop-in centres for academic support
- Administration should have greater flexibility to adjust diploma requirements during prolonged emergency situations – many adult learners faced challenges that significantly hampered their ability to complete academic goals

## Challenges

Teachers were asked a number of different questions about challenges they faced during COVID-19. Teachers shared different challenges faced by their adult learners, including:

- Learners being at a disadvantage due to their lack of digital literacy skills
- Difficulty finding high quality professional resources suitable for teaching adults, despite a lot of resources to support online teaching
- Learners had a lot of distractions, which resulted in teachers re-teaching or taking much longer to ensure learners had understood all of the course material

When recalling challenges faced by themselves, teachers shared having:

- Concerns about low enrollment and job security
- Challenges balancing supporting their own children's learning with their teaching load during lock-down periods
- A lack of regular communication from board administrators that was specific to A&CE
- Anxiety as to whether adult learners were doing the work themselves, especially regarding online exams

- Sadness at not being able to regularly see their adult learners in the face-to-face setting
- Frustration at learning and getting comfortable with one learning management system only to have to learn a new one for the fall term
- A realization that teaching online had been a struggle for them both pedagogically and personally

Teachers were also asked to rate how challenging different circumstances were. A full breakdown of the challenging circumstances faced by teacher participants is provided in table 4., which shows the most frequently reported challenges as meeting the needs of different learners in a remote environment, making personal connections with adult learners, and the lack of face-to-face interaction with adult learners.

Table 4. The degree teachers found different circumstances challenging

Challenges plus total number of responses	Very challenging	Challenging	Neutral	Manageable	Very manageable
Maintaining mental health and well-being (n=37)	16%	35%	22%	16%	11%
Working from home (n=37)	11%	32%	22%	19%	16%
Achieving work/life balance (n=37)	14%	35%	8%	14%	27%
Making personal connections with adult learners (n=37)	22%	41%	8%	22%	8%
Making learning engaging (n=39)	15%	39%	21%	13%	13%
Meeting the needs of different learners (n=34)	24%	32%	21%	15%	9%
Adjusting to teaching online (n=32)	9%	40%	9%	31%	9%
Learning how to use new technology (n=37)	8%	24%	16%	30%	22%
Deciding which technology to use (n=37)	8%	11%	16%	30%	16%

Adjusting content to make it accessible online (n=36)	8%	35%	14%	22%	22%
Lack of face-to-face interaction with adult learners (n=37)	35%	32%	11%	19%	3%
Being isolated from colleagues (n=37)	8%	30%	22%	30%	11%

Teachers were also asked to identify the degree to which they found a range of circumstances difficult when returning to their classrooms. Of the 75 teachers who responded to the survey, 70 provided responses to this question. The biggest challenge was when adult learners were not returning, with 29% responses for very challenging, and 9% for challenging. This was followed by the number of responses for the significant interruption of adult learners learning as very challenging (7%), with an additional 20% of responses for challenging. A full breakdown of the responses is included in chart 4.

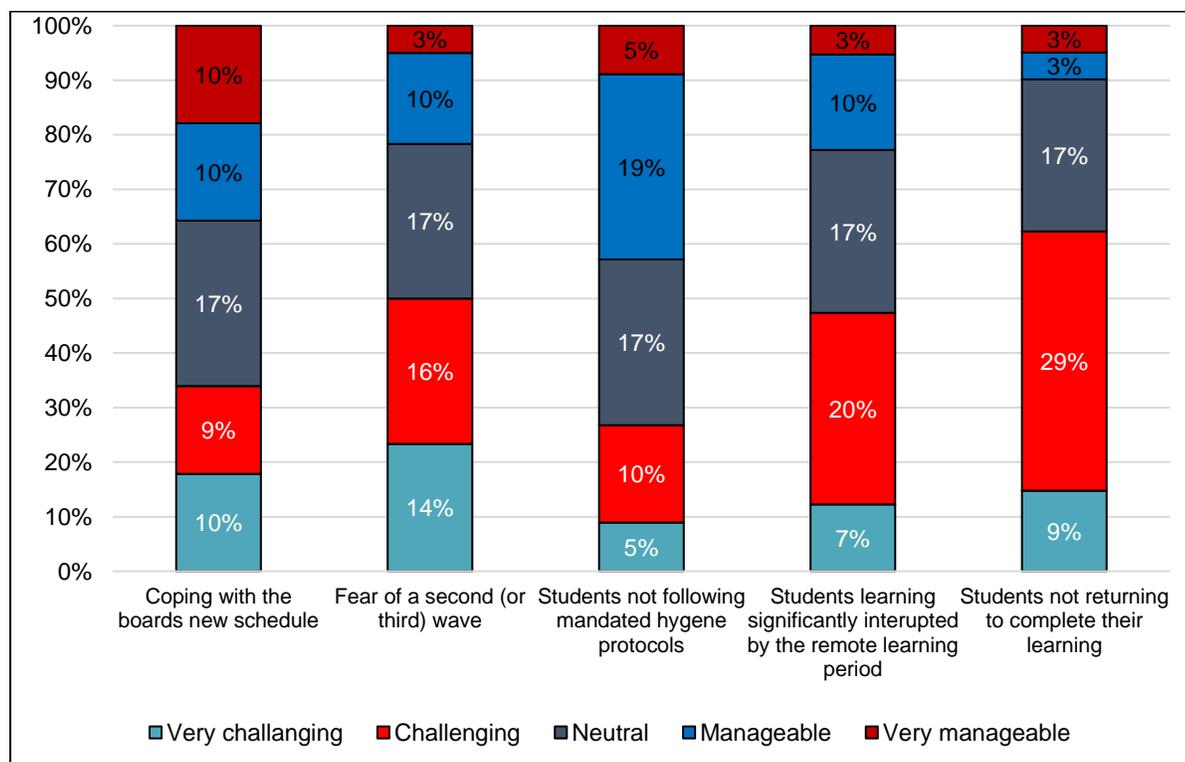


Chart 4. Circumstances teachers find challenging when returning to the classroom

## Skills

Teachers were also asked about new skills they felt they had developed during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of teaching remotely. The 43 teachers that responded to this question were asked to select all that applied from a given list (see table 3), and to only identify skills that they did not already possess. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the biggest areas of skills development can be seen in using technology. However, equally ranked was problem solving, and many teachers also reported developing creativity skills as well as skills for online teaching. A full break down of the skills developed can be found in table 5. One teacher, when asked if there was anything else to share about skills developed during the pandemic stated:

*“Teaching remotely offered new challenges to all of us. However, it was new and allowed for creativity. It also allowed more time during the day for staff and adult learners. I think engagement was the most important part of this type of learning. I spoke more to adult learners on camera than I ever did in the classroom!”*

Table 5. Skills developed through remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic

Type of Skill	Percentage of total amount of responses (n=189)
Technology (e.g., using video capturing software)	12%
Online communication (e.g., learning how to communicate well in a virtual environment)	7%
Work-life balance (e.g., finding space for work at home and family life)	10%
Online teaching (e.g., interacting with adult learners in a non-face-to-face environment)	11%
Problem solving (e.g., overcoming technical issues)	12%
Online course development (e.g., designing an online course that works well in a learning management system)	10%
Time management (e.g., moving course content online very rapidly)	8%
Creativity (e.g., new ways to teach and support adult learners in an online environment)	11%

Collaboration (e.g., supporting colleagues in a remote environment)	6%
Mental health and well-being (e.g., coping with home becoming a work environment)	8%
Leadership (e.g., taking responsibility for training colleagues)	5%

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## **A&CE Administrators**

In total, there were 15 administrator participants who responded to the A&CE administrator survey regarding online learning during the pandemic, and seven administrators who participated in interviews. Administrator participants were spread across 14 district school boards. Participants had held their roles in administration for between two and 23 years, with the average term being ten years. The minimum term of working in A&CE sector was one year, the maximum was 16 years and the average term served was nine years. Through this study, we asked a number of questions related to administrator’s roles and experiences in A&CE during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also included a number of open-ended questions. The findings were analyzed into themes of operations, transitions, supports, challenges, successes, and innovations during the remote learning period of COVID-19.

## **Operations**

The normal operations of A&CE programs within each district school board includes a variety of delivery modes including online, hybrid, in-person and through correspondence (see chart 5.). Ten of the 14 boards offered online learning prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

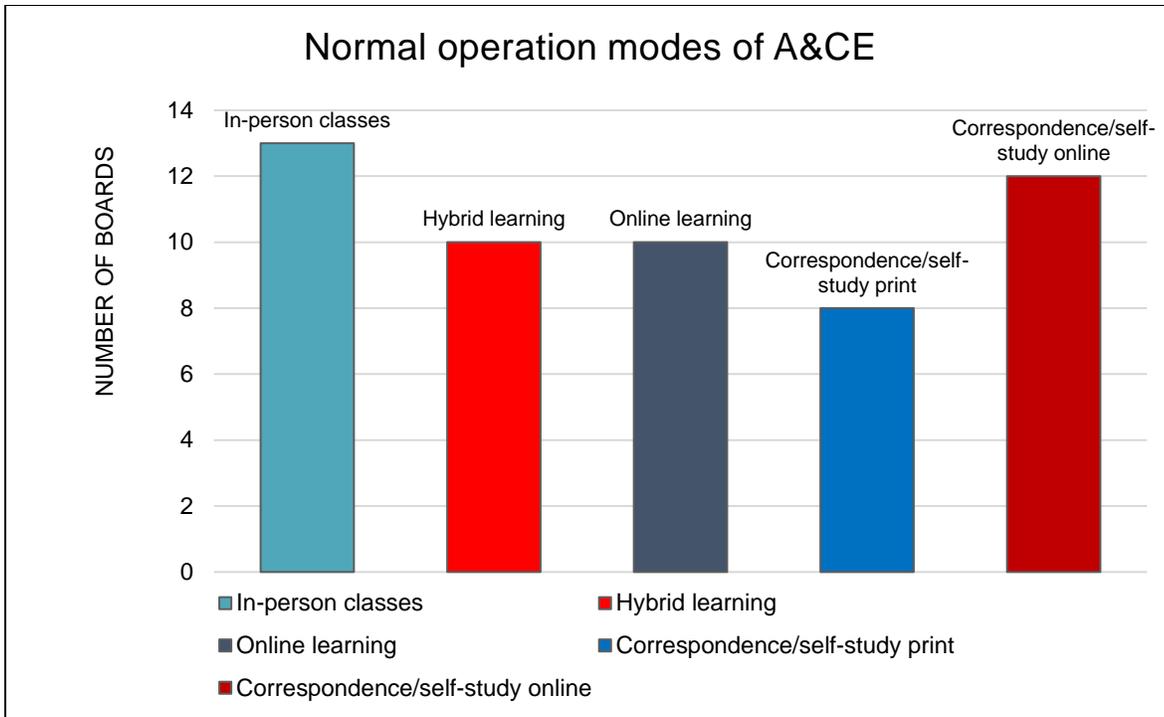


Chart 5. The normal operating modes of A&CE programs

When asked about how their enrollment in classes had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, administrators in two district school boards reported an increase, five reported no change, and seven reported a decrease in enrolment.

### Transitions

The transition to remote learning during COVID-19 was more straightforward for boards that were already operating hybrid or online modes of delivery. For all boards, the transition process saw an increase in a variety of activities implemented to support the transition, including:

- Increasing the range of courses available through web services that support the creating, distribution, and grading of courses
- Distributing course materials and being available for learners to collect and drop off assignments and completed work

- Distribute devices and Wi-Fi hotspots to adult learners on a loan basis
- Adopting a wider range of strategies to make frequent contact with learners, including contact information gathering and regular emails
- Increasing the courses available through an online classroom platform
- Ensuring staff had access to timely training to support the transition
- Aligning with other day school activities

For some boards, this transition was complex and difficult, especially those boards who do not have online or hybrid delivery modes as part of normal operations.

### **Supports**

The first category of supports that the administrators were asked to describe were those that had been put into place to support the A&CE teachers in their board. Supports included:

- Ensuring there were regular check-ins
- Regular suggestions for curriculum adaptation and updates
- Distributing technology to support home working
- Support with how to effectively communicate with learners
- Training, either through formal PD sessions and or collaborative chat rooms
- Reducing expectations
- Mental health and well-being support
- Implementing regularly scheduled work days to support staff with children and caregiving responsibilities
- Mentoring of new staff by existing staff

From the open-ended responses gathered through the administrator survey, supports provided for adult learners included:

- Increased flexibility and accommodations for completing and submitting work
- Adapted curriculum
- A reduction of tasks and examinations
- Provision of technical devices for use at home and wi-fi access through portable hot spots
- Additional welcome emails sent to learners that included pictures of their teachers
- Additional efforts to connect with learners on regular basis through email and social media
- Guidance support offered remotely

Administrators were also asked about the supports they drew upon during the COVID-19 pandemic through interview questions. Their board superintendent was definitely seen as the go to source of support for information regarding safety protocols and adhering to Ministry guidelines. In addition, four principals described feeling that their superintendent provided a great deal of emotional support, especially in the early stages of the pandemic when normal modes of operation were impossible. Interestingly, some administrators felt that as they brought their staff together to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, the camaraderie shared was also a supportive strategy for themselves, one administrator described “all being in it together.” Many of the administrators referred to participating in the Adult Education Strategy (AES) as a foundation for coming together to respond to the COVID-19 challenges. Through the AES, boards had time to work collaboratively within their own board in addition to working with others in their region. The sense of community that had grown within some boards due to the AES was a solid basis for the required collaboration to successfully implement remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Challenges

In their responses to the open-ended survey questions, administrators described a variety of challenges that they had faced through their administrative roles during the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

- No changes to the funding to acknowledge the difficulties of adult learners in meeting attendance requirements
- Impacts on learners of not being able to run some international languages and tutoring programs
- Declining enrolment
- Not having enough technology to be able to loan devices and wi-fi hotspots to all of the learners who needed them
- Ensuring learners were referred to the necessary supports was difficult with limited contact
- Overseeing authenticity of student work and task integrity
- Balancing the accreditation requirements of the Personal Support Worker (PSW) program with meeting the needs of adult learners and long-term care facilities
- Not being able to use community partner setting for the delivery of programs
- Not being able to continue with many co-op placements, especially paid co-op which is a crucial income source for some learners
- Being unable to continue with the regular food program as this brings learners into A&CE and is a crucial resource for many learners

- Ministry guidelines were not specific to A&CE so administrators were left to extrapolate K-12 guidelines, and interpret what this meant for adult learners. Subsequently a lot of very “on the fly” decisions were necessary

## **Successes**

In spite of the challenges that COVID-19 presented to administrators, every participant in this study reported on a variety of successes achieved by their staff, teachers, and learners during the pandemic of which they were proud. These included:

- Refining online enrolment and registration process to make the experience more convenient for learners
- Increased enrolment in some courses, especially the PSW program, and courses necessary for post-secondary education upgrading
- Teachers became much more comfortable with using a variety of technology hardware and software, and more adept at teaching in an online environment
- Some have used the opportunity to undertake curriculum review, development, and implementation
- The experience pushed one boards thinking around A&CE, especially in regard to course integrity and how to maintain it
- Student Success meetings have increased in frequency, and teachers and staff have used these to prioritize learner needs
- Increased flexibility of staff to teach in diverse ways

## Innovations

Administrators were keen to share through the open-ended survey questions several innovative practices they felt had developed or been implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. These were outlined as:

- Increased staff and teacher learning, especially in regard to online teaching where the level of skills development has built capacity
- Moving to online platforms has been successful, with development of online student databases and new or refined registration processes that improve the learner experience
- Though adaptation of programming happened very rapidly, many of the adaptations are sustainable beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, including:
  - Online registration
  - Online teacher support periods for struggling learners
  - Earlier intervention and support through Student Success team meetings
  - Revised bell schedule that met student needs combined with quad-mesters
- Re-thinking graduation ceremonies and ways to celebrate successes remotely
- Considering how to supervise Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) for learners in their own homes, which, if possible, will be a valuable innovation where currently unavailable

## Implications

In revisiting the research questions that guided this study, there are several important implications, which we address in three overarching areas of implications for learning, teaching, and administration.

**Implications for Learners:** For some adult learners, moving to remote and online learning worked well. It provided them with greater flexibility to care for their families, balance work and their home lives. It also allowed flexibility in timescales for completing their courses, and freedom to learn at times that suited them. However, for many adult learners, the challenges were profound. Many lost the benefits of the food that adult high schools frequently make available, the social aspect of meeting with peers and supportive teachers, and the sense of community that A&CE provides. Some boards managed to find ways to mitigate these challenges, and consideration could be given on how to ensure eligible adult learners who are in online learning environments have sustainable access to such benefits. For many, the lack of technology was a significant barrier, and they were reliant on loaned equipment as they tried to maintain their learning. All participating district school boards described not having enough equipment to meet the needs of their learners. Subsequently, some learners have had their learning interrupted, but the efforts of educators to keep connected with these learners will likely encourage many re-starts. In spite of the challenges, the learner success has remained high, clearly many adult learners are capable of academic success in an online environment.

**Implications for Teaching:** The data showed that a significant amount of skills development happened for teachers and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in regard to using technology and teaching in remote and online environments. Consideration should be given on how to further build on these skills, ensuring teachers have opportunities to further enhance their online teaching pedagogy. This would ensure that all A&CE teachers and staff remain agile and better prepared to pivot their teaching practices, even at short notice. Clearly, there were a number of challenges faced by A&CE educators as they strived to support learners, balance life outside of work, and continue to work at capacity. The check-ins

from administrators and support of colleagues were vital and speaks to the culture of care that is so important in the A&CE community. The continued culture of care will be crucial as educators return to their more normal modes of operations and seek to support learners as they return to in-person classes.

**Implications for Administrators:** The COVID-19 pandemic presented substantial challenges for administrators as they sought to interpret and implement Ministry guidelines, and support their staff, teachers, and learners. However, it also presented opportunities, and this study highlighted several innovative practices that school boards have embraced and successfully implemented. Such innovations included the rapid and successful moving of registration systems online, finding ways to celebrate learner success in remote environments, offering online dual credits, and considering ways to administer the PLAR process remotely. One of the challenges moving forward will be to strike a balance in providing programming and delivery modes for the learners who can succeed in an online environment and for those who need the structure of in-person classes. Moving forward, this has implications for ensuring staff and teachers remain current and prepared for both in-person and online teaching in the A&CE environment. The experiences gained of the increased delivery modes through COVID-19 will be valuable sources of information to support this decision-making and planning.

## Conclusion

Throughout this study, adult learners, teachers, and administrators have revealed numerous examples of challenges they faced as they strived to continue learning, teaching, and leading during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study has highlighted the difference teachers and administrators have made to many adult learners who were able to continue to access their

courses, through the care of A&CE educators in keeping them on task and completion pathways. This is consistent with many reports that outline the wide-ranging benefits to adults that can be obtained through participating in A&CE programs (e.g., Field, 2012; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Vignoles, Wolf, & Galindo-Rueda, 2003; Zhang & Palameta, 2006).

Importantly, as adult high schools and adult learning centres closed their doors, some adult learners were left without a physical safe haven, disadvantaged learners had no or limited access to equipment or connectivity to take immediate advantage of online learning, and faced additional barriers in trying to meet their educational goals. For A&CE staff, teachers, and administrators, COVID-19 meant a reduced or different kind of offer of support for learners, stress and anxiety as they quickly sought to upskill their own digital skills, and balance the needs of their families and home commitments. The findings of this report show that in the main, A&CE responded well in these trying circumstances, and in many instances increased student success.

During the AES strategy (2016-2019), district school boards came together to implement a three-year pilot across seven different regions of Ontario. This was a period of significant networking and forging of relationships, both within each district school board, across boards and regions. Notably, some boards shared in this study the ongoing value of these relationships, highlighting how they helped forge collegial approaches to managing the challenges brought on by Covid-19. Subsequently, further leveraging these relationships is considered a worthwhile practice to encourage as boards continue to strive to support adult learners and staff through these challenging times.

We close this report with a celebration of the strength and resilience of A&CE learners, teachers, and administrators in the face of COVID-19. During this time of crisis, A&CE has demonstrated how crucial it is to the socioeconomic wellbeing and social mobility of learners and their communities (James & Thériault, 2020). This study has re-iterated the vital role A&CE has in helping adult learners continue to develop skills and achieve the academic credentialing needed for sustaining employment, health, and well-being during such challenging times.

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