

Adult Learners! Save your time and money

By Wendy Terry

Adult Learners! Save your time and money by using Mature Student Admission, Transfer Credit or Prior Learning Assessment at the colleges.

Often adult learners waste a lot of time by going back to school—emphasis on ‘back’—at the level they were at when they dropped out of high school or by starting all over again in high school as newcomers to Canada. They only see the traditional school system, elementary to secondary to post-secondary and then to work. They used this system when they were young either here or in their country of origin. But there is an alternative. While teenagers still need to earn an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) in order to be admitted to college or university, adults can use Mature Student Admission.

On the other hand, if adults have an OSSD or international equivalent and also some post-secondary education from Ontario or another country, they can ask to Transfer Credit for those courses to their current program. So they do not have to repeat those courses. Furthermore, adults can ask for credit for work experience that has taught them on the job what a college course teaches, whether that experience has taken place in Canada or in another country. If a Prior Learning Assessment shows that they, in fact, know the course material, they will not be required to take the course.

Mature Student Admission, Transfer Credit and Prior Learning Assessment at Ontario colleges form an “adult education system” of sorts. There is no formal adult education system but these three processes help adults reach their educational goals in the post-secondary system in a fairly efficient manner. By putting these processes in place, there is a clear recognition that going to college as an adult is different from going as a teenager immediately after high school. Each adult is seen as an individual case rather than as one of a homogeneous group coming out of high school.

In this “adult education system” you work from your educational goal backwards to a starting point that matches your current level of skills and knowledge. Getting credit for what you have already learned

can save you time and money. By reading and comparing the continuing education and full-time calendars, you can see how these processes work.

The Adult Education System Chart opposite compares the traditional system for children and youth to the processes adults can use.

Mature Students are defined at the colleges as people who are at least 19 years of age before the course starts and do not have an OSSD. Full-time day programs require an OSSD to be admitted. But many continuing education courses—evening and weekend courses—do not require an OSSD. These courses have open admissions. You simply pay and go to class.

In continuing education, for the most part, you register course by course instead of in a program of study. When you have earned the course credits needed for a certificate or a diploma, you submit your credits and get your credential.

If an OSSD is an admission requirement and you do not have one, the colleges will assess your language skills and any other skills you need to succeed in your program. If your skills are acceptable, you just register. You can save time by going straight into the college program you want instead of going back to high school.

If your skills need upgrading, the counsellors may recommend an academic upgrading program to you. The colleges offer college preparation courses in English, mathematics, science and computers. They also offer Literacy Basic Skills, a free program offered during the day at the colleges. Upgrading programs are usually offered at night through continuing education departments, but have tuition fees.

To get secondary school credits, you could register in an adult day school at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) or the Toronto Catholic District School Board. Or you could take credit courses at the Independent Learning Centre, delivered through distance education. (There is an article on the ILC in this issue.) You may need to spend more time in ESL/LINC classes offered by both Boards of Education or community based learning centres (call 211 to find these). Board, ILC

and community-based programs are free. By upgrading in these programs you save money.

However if you need only a little upgrading, enrolling in the college upgrading program would put you into the college system. So when you are ready to move on to the next course, you are already a college student.

Mature Student Status and Open Admissions save you from going back too far and Transfer Credit and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition can put you ahead in your program. You start at a point that matches your current level of skill and knowledge, for example, at levels two or three instead of at level one.

If you have already done some post-secondary education or completed a college or university program at another institution, you could start at year one or two of a program or skip some courses by using Transfer Credit.

Transfer Credit means that each course you took at another accredited college or university that is related to the curriculum of your current program can be assessed for a course credit. A lot of course credits needed in a program can be granted by transferring learning from other post-secondary institutions. You can save time and money by not repeating courses in what you already know.

If you have a lot of work experience including life experience, on the job training or volunteer work that relate to your program, you can get course credits through a Prior Learning and Assessment Recognition (PLAR) process.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition includes many methods to document your previous experience: a challenge exam where you demonstrate your knowledge by writing a test; an interview with a subject expert to talk about your background; a portfolio of records that document your experience and knowledge such as job descriptions, licenses, awards, samples of work etc. Where you gained this knowledge doesn't matter.

There is a PLAR fee, but it is much cheaper than paying to take a course in an area you already know. It takes time, but it takes less

time than taking a course and is less frustrating than studying what you already know.

Agreements and joint programs between colleges and universities or between colleges and professional associations can lead to a university degree or accreditation from a professional association such as the Certified General Accountant program.

Going to university as an adult will be the subject of an article in the next issue of Learning Curves.

For many adults, the course by course registration and open admissions through continuing education is a more comfortable way to get started in the post-secondary system and a way to move on to a more challenging university or professional association program.

For instance, some adults take a number of college courses at night or on the weekend while working full time to get a continuing education certificate or diploma. They can then transfer into the full-time day program on a part-time basis. Many employers allow their employees to take a course or two during the day.

In the same way, continuing education course credits can be used as credits towards a professional association's accreditation program. After you earn as many credits as possible at college, then you can enrol directly in the professional association's advanced courses.

Some continuing education course credits can be used as credits in a joint college- university program. The continuing education calendar indicates which courses are equivalent to courses for these programs.

Through articulation agreements between the colleges and universities, certain designated college courses can be counted as credits in university programs. To find out about these programs, check with the university or college involved.

Only about a third of college continuing education credits are transferable to higher learning, and many programs offered at night are not offered during the day and vice versa. Nevertheless, using these

adult student processes for admission and to get advanced standing can save you a lot of time and money.

Each college offers similar but not identical programs of study. So don't assume you know what all the colleges offer by looking only at one college.

If you are interested in going to college as a mature student and getting credit for prior learning or experience, now is the time to start talking to the college. Many of the colleges have mature student information sessions on a weekly basis. The program officers who you need to talk to about advanced standing have more time in April, May and June to talk to you. If you wait until late August to enquire, they won't have much time to consider an individualized admission.

Like any complex purchase, it takes research and planning to get a package that is right for you. By customizing your learning through Mature Student Admissions, Transfer Credit and Prior Learning Assessment, adults can reach their educational goals in a more timely and cost-effective manner.

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