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Is there a Best Fit? Assessing Alternative Entrance Pathways into an Undergraduate Degree for Non-Traditional Students at York University

Andrea Medovarski, Leslie Sanders,
Brenda Spotton Visano,
York University



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1 Yonge Street, Suite 2402
Toronto, ON Canada, M5E 1E5

Phone: (416) 212-3893
Fax: (416) 212-3899
Web: www.heqco.ca
E-mail: info@heqco.ca

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Executive Summary

This pilot study examines alternative entrance pathways into York University undergraduate degree programs for students who apply from outside the formal education system. These alternative pathways are designed to facilitate university access for students from under-represented populations (for example, low-income, first-generation, Aboriginal, racialized minorities, differently abled, newcomers to Canada, sole-support caregivers, students with incomplete high school education, or some combination of the preceding).

The bridges into a York University undergraduate degree examined in this project are:

1. Direct admission into an academic degree under the ‘mature student’ admissions category
2. Pre-university courses offered through the School of Continuing Studies, serving as a basis of admission into an academic degree under the ‘mature student’ admissions category
3. Women’s Bridging Program – non-credit courses located in the community and serving as a basis of admission into an academic degree under the ‘mature student’ admissions category
4. Transition Year Program – a combination of credit and non-credit courses serving as a full-time ‘qualifying year’ for an academic degree

These alternative entrance pathways differ by intensity of intervention, range of interventions incorporated directly into a program, tuition and delivery costs. We know from the literature that under-represented students particularly face a range of academic, cultural and financial barriers. We know that these students differ in their needs, personal characteristics and identities as university learners. Our primary research question is, which entrance pathway is best suited to a student’s situation in light of the barriers she may face?

We employed a mixed methods approach to examine this question. A literature review identified the potential barriers experienced by these non-traditional students. Focus groups with students entering through the four different pathways allowed us to explore students’ own perceptions of their pathway experience. Quantitative examination of the financial need (as measured by financial support received), prior experience with post-secondary education (PSE), and subsequent academic performance (as measured by cumulative GPA in the first eight months of their degree studies) of a sample of 1,502 students in five different cohorts across the four alternative pathways offered additional comparative information on the effectiveness of students’ self-selected entrance pathways.

Findings

Full and equal access to entry, access to appropriate learning conditions and access to the results of a university education for non-traditional students require supports that account for the complex nature and variety of barriers these students face. Different needs for flexibility in program delivery, a range of

affiliation preferences, and differing strengths in a belief that they 'belong' at university all serve to complicate the academic, cultural and financial barriers faced by non-traditional students. These differences underscore the ineffectiveness of any 'one size fits all' entrance pathway. Rather, full and equal access to a university education will best be achieved by offering a multiplicity of program options that vary in degrees of intervention, addressing learner identities and affiliation preferences in addition to varying degrees of financial and academic supports. By identifying the 'best fit' student for high, moderate and low intervention alternative entrance pathways, our findings suggest a cost effective means of supporting full access to a university education for historically under-represented students.

Recommendations

In light of our findings we offer the following tentative recommendations for any university seeking to meet the challenge of access to a university education for non-traditional students:

To ensure best practices for alternative pathways and programs:

- Ensure the presence of course options and offerings at low cost to both men and women facing high financial barriers.
- Ensure the best access to existing supports (academic advising, student financial services, the writing centre, counselling and disabilities services, and the like) by including evening and/or weekend operating hours.
- Ensure that a full array of options exists to contribute effectively to university access priorities by establishing a range of low-, moderate- and high-intervention programs, with academic and supplemental supports appropriate to each.

To best match students to alternative pathways:

- Ensure '360-degree' pathway access to university degree programs by establishing a coherent pan-university access vision and supporting strategies into which alternative pathways for non-traditional students would be integrated and coordinated. Such coordination could be an effective way of harnessing complementary benefits, including economies of scale (size) and scope (reach) of both academic and supplemental supports.
- Explore the use of a questionnaire available to prospective applicants offering a self-assessment decision-making guide for selecting the best-fit program.

Introduction

This pilot study examines existing entrance pathways into York University undergraduate degree programs for students who apply from outside the formal education system. These pathways are designed to facilitate university access for students from under-represented populations (for example, low-income, first-generation, Aboriginal, racialized minorities, differently abled, newcomers to Canada, sole-support caregivers, students with incomplete high school education, or some combination of the preceding).¹ We are interested in how well these alternative pathways support the twin goals of academic achievement and sense of belonging at the university. By examining one set of existing practices we hope to improve our understanding of what might constitute best practices for any university and possibly any other postsecondary education (PSE) institution seeking to improve access for under-represented populations.

York University has a long history of offering accessible postsecondary education to many of these underrepresented groups. In the early 1960s Atkinson College (later Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professional Studies) opened its doors to students who had not previously had an opportunity to pursue university studies. In 2009, Atkinson Faculty was amalgamated with the Faculty of Arts into the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, and the mandate to provide accessible and flexible university education widened. The pathways examined in this study are in line with York University's mission to increase accessibility by accommodating and supporting non-traditional students.²

The bridges into a York University undergraduate degree examined in this project include the following programs:

1. Direct admission into an academic degree under the 'mature student' admissions category
2. Pre-university courses offered through the School of Continuing Studies, serving as a basis of admission into an academic degree under the 'mature student' admissions category.
3. Women's Bridging Program – courses located in the community and serving as a basis of admission into an academic degree under the 'mature student' admissions category
4. Transition Year Program – a combination of credit and non-credit courses serving as a full-time 'qualifying year' for an academic degree

¹ This is not an exhaustive list but points to some of the populations examined in research on 'non-traditional' students. See for example Abramovitch (2003), Archer et al. (2002), Bragg (2006), Brine and Waller (2004), Finnie and Wismer (2011), Warmington (2003), and Wiggers and Arnold (2011).

² For York University's mission statement, visit http://www.yorku.ca/web/about_yorku/mission/

Literature Review

This study is grounded in the framework of social exclusion and integration (e.g., Bhalla & Lapeyre, 1997). It assumes that a structural approach to overcoming significant educational barriers is needed and that these barriers are most effectively overcome by adopting some manner of an integrative learning approach (e.g., Huber & Hutchings, 2004).

Scope of the Problem

Twenty-five percent of students starting grade 9 at an Ontario secondary school in 2003-2004 had entered the workplace *without* completing their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) by the fall of 2008 (Finnie et al., 2011b). At exit, approximately 19% “were well short of credits necessary for graduation” (p. iv), with grade 9 marks a “strong predictor of OSSD completion” (p. vi). Lack of academic success was cited as one of the main reasons why the workplace option was pursued prior to completing the OSSD. This conclusion is complemented by Archer et al. (2002), who note that early leavers from high school tend to come from lower income families.

Evidence from Statistics Canada’s Youth in Transition Survey suggests that, for Ontario youth, many early leavers will later attempt re-entry into the formal education system, (Lennon et al., 2011). The barriers to successful academic performance remain significant for these students, however, and the negative relationship between participation in PSE and lower income socioeconomic status is noticeably persistent. Wiggers and Arnold (2011) show that Ontario students most in need of student assistance programs are not using them. Goldrick-Rab (2006) examines pathways *through* American higher education (rather than pathways *to* higher education) and posits that students from lower socioeconomic class groups, as well as Black and Hispanic students, are more likely to follow pathways through PSE that involve stop-outs or transfers to other institutions.

Warmington’s study of “educationally disaffected” students in the British midlands (2003, p. 96) is driven by a provocative and relevant question: “[I]f school has been a significant aspect of students’ marginalization in the past, why do they want to go back or even attempt PSE? The world of mature students [is] self-evidently pitted with financial insecurities, family responsibilities, potentially fraught educational relationships and the conflicting demands of coupling study with paid employment.... Under such loaded circumstances, why [do] students commit themselves to 4-5 years of study?” (p. 96). Further, as for working class students in the UK, the economic and material risks associated with PSE “manifest themselves across the whole process of engagement with [higher education], from application through participation and on to the employment prospects of graduates” (Brine & Waller, 2004, p. 107).

Barriers to PSE Opportunities

Castle et al. (2006, p. 366) citing Cross (1981), identify the following grouping of barriers to successful academic performance in their study of access programs:

'Situational barriers' arise because of the individual's life situation, and include issues such as learners' work commitments, domestic responsibilities, as well as problems of child care, finance and transport.

'Institutional barriers' include physical location, entry requirements, time-tabling problems, as well as practices and procedures which hinder participation.

'Dispositional barriers' are attributed to factors such as self-esteem, past experiences, values, attitudes and beliefs about learning.

Academic, financial, cultural and other barriers can be mapped into these barrier categories to expand the list even further.

Situational Barriers:

- Barrier #1. Financial incapacity – The cost of the program exceeds the student's ability to obtain the financial resources necessary to pay for their education.
- Barrier #2. Lack of program flexibility – Learners' non-academic obligations prevent access to programs with limited delivery modes and rigid curriculum structures.
- Barrier #3. Inadequate qualifications – Educational qualifications and pre-requisites (high school diploma and/or grades) prevent a student's admission into PSE programs.

Institutional Barriers:

- Barrier #4. Lack of academic upgrading supports – Lack of available academic skills upgrading for students who have not acquired the educational skills or abilities required to succeed in a PSE program.
- Barrier #5. Lack of information availability/awareness – The absence of available, pertinent information about PSE programs and supports, especially those targeting non-traditional populations and other minorities.

Barrier #6. Lack of supplemental supports – An absence of resources and supports (such as counselling and mentoring during studies) needed to assist students in navigating the PSE system and guiding them toward academic success.

(Lack of program flexibility (Barrier #2) could also be categorized as an institutional barrier as course/program scheduling may prevent some students from participating in some programs.)

Dispositional Barriers:

Barrier #7. Exclusion – predisposition to negative beliefs about school and/or learning, cultural insignificance, low self-esteem, and the like.

Barrier #8. Learner disabilities – different learning requirements that impede acquisition or demonstration of learning that aligns with PSE instructional practices and learning evaluation.

Learner Identities

Holding a strong identity as a university learner – seeing oneself as belonging in university – is a critical component of a student’s academic success. Brine and Waller (2004) observe that embarking on postsecondary studies can be a time of confusion and contradiction for some non-traditional students as they attempt to transition into university. Being away from formal studies for some time and having previous negative experiences with education may intersect with students’ understandings of themselves as racialized minorities, as working-class or poor, as women, or as some combination of these identities. All of these factors may or may not allow room for those in under-represented populations to think of themselves as university students or perceive themselves as belonging in PSE. Kassworm, Sandman and Sissel (2000) point out that for non-traditional students, “learning through Higher Education is not just a mental journey; it is also a very treacherous journey engaging the heart and the identity of the adult” (p. 458). As a result, some of them must “continually (re)construct their fragile learner identities” (Brine & Waller, p. 103).

Archer and Leathwood (2002) observe that some students from under-represented populations may also have tacit/common-sense beliefs about “what is appropriate for people like me” and do not perceive themselves as worthy of accessing PSE (p. 176). These dispositional barriers and self-imposed perceptions of lack are compounded by institutional cultures that position students from non-traditional backgrounds “as ‘other,’ and such cultures may discourage a conception of oneself as a potential university student” (p. 191). These factors suggest that institutional and dispositional barriers may overlap and work to compound each other in weakening students’ prospective identities as university learners. Some students from under-represented populations may need to develop alternate personal discourses and may require supports to help them cultivate and strengthen new identities as university learners.

Affiliation Preferences

Students who need to develop or strengthen their identities as university learners often suffer from a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed in PSE. These students may overcome dispositional barriers and develop their learner identities more effectively if they have a peer group supporting them or are able to form bonds with classmates who have shared experiences. “Affiliation needs include the desire for learners to be connected and supportive of one another’s learning and the importance of forming relationships that encourage learning,” (Castle et al., 2006, p. 367). They report that some students from under-represented populations have particularly high affiliation needs and that affiliation needs are particularly strong for women: “male students are generally more motivated by employment prospects than women, and men find the support of tutors and peers less significant than women” (p. 367).

Gender Differences

Previous research has shown that some of the risks facing non-traditional students are specifically gendered (Brine & Waller, 2004) and that women attempting re-entry into formal education sometimes face particular situational and dispositional barriers at a much higher rate than men. Finnie et al. (2011a) observe that “although women generally have significantly higher PSE (especially university) attendance rates than males, women in under-represented groups are generally more disadvantaged than males” (p. 1).

Women’s identities as university learners may be particularly vulnerable to erosion by dominant discourses. Archer, Ross and Hutchings (2002) point out that “even within institutions with high proportions of ‘non-traditional’ students’ the culture of the academy predominantly reflects a discourse of the student as young, white, male and middle-class” (p. 197).

In previous studies, “women students were more likely to report feeling alienated by the academic culture within the university” (Archer & Leathwood, 2002, p. 190). Black women in particular were most likely to recount “feeling ‘lost’ and ‘left behind’ by the academic language and procedures, to the extent that they talked about only ‘looking in’ rather than fully ‘belonging’ to the institution” (Archer & Leathwood, 2002, p. 190). This suggests that there are both racialized and “gendered complexities” at play for women in their attempts to develop or strengthen their learner identities (Brine & Waller, 2004, p. 97).

Research Questions

When addressing PSE accessibility, Finnie et al. (2011a, p. 50) state that there is “no ‘one size fits all’ solution to be found.” We know from the literature that non-traditional students particularly face a range of situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. While some students will require greater supports in order to overcome these barriers to access PSE and throughout their PSE journey, not all students do.

Alternative entrance pathways examined in this study differ in the intensity and range of their intervention, tuition and delivery costs. Our goal is to better understand the wide range of non-traditional students' academic, socioeconomic and social needs, the ways their identities as university learners are affected by the barriers they face, and how these relate to the alternative pathways they choose to enter York.

Our primary research question is: Which entrance pathway is best suited to a student's situation in light of the barriers she may face?

Before examining a sample of students' academic preparation and performance, financial need, perceptions of and experiences with these four alternative entrance pathways, we first summarize the distinctive features of each entrance pathway.

Alternative Entrance Pathways into York University

Our focus is on York University's four alternative entrance pathways into university, which have been developed to overcome barriers and reduce exclusion from university: Direct admission under the 'mature student' admissions category, the Pre-university Program, the Women's Bridging Program, and the Transition Year Program. These pathway programs are designed to accommodate non-traditional students who, for a variety of reasons, may lack the academic credentials required to gain admission otherwise.³ The different pathways are intended to allow students to gain access to York University's undergraduate programs. By completing the requirements of these pathways students who may not have completed high school have the opportunity to obtain a university degree (for a consolidated view of the characteristics of each program see the chart in Appendix 4).

There are a number of factors that affect the extent to which university degree studies are accessible to non-traditional students. The most important factors range from the application criteria, through the affordability of the program, to the structure and delivery of the academic curriculum together with remedial supports. In presenting information about the four alternative pathways examined in this study we consider the following characteristics (see Table 1):

³ York has a wide range of programs that are referred to as 'transition' or 'bridging' programs. Some are targeted broadly at all incoming first-year students. For example, York's Red Zone is a transition program that welcomes new students (and their parents) to York. Some, such as the *YUBridge* Program offered by York's English Language Institute, are language bridging programs designed for ESL learners. These often target students who have otherwise met the academic qualifications for admission into an academic degree. Others are credential recognition bridging programs for foreign-trained or internationally educated professionals. These include York's Internationally Educated Nurses (IEN) program and the Internationally Educated Professionals (IEP) Bridging program. Such programs fall outside the scope of the current study.

Table 1: Components of Alternative Entrance Pathways into York University

Components of alternative entrance pathways into York University	
1.	York University's stated eligibility criteria
2.	Admission requirements – criteria students must meet to gain admission
3.	Intake – the frequency of courses and number of students admitted into one session
4.	Enrolment status – whether they are recognized as a York University student with access to the full range of student services or not
5.	Program structure/Design of support – how the courses are structured and how supports are delivered to students
6.	Curriculum requirements – structure and delivery of curriculum
7.	Support services – academic and non-academic supports available to students in a particular pathway
8.	Fees – financial costs associated with enrolment
9.	Student funding – potential scholarships or bursaries specific to a particular pathway
10.	OSAP eligibility – whether or not students in a pathway program are eligible to apply for the Ontario Student Assistance Program
11.	Outcomes – what the student gains upon successful completion of the pathway program

Direct Admission under the 'Mature Student' Admissions Category

For the purposes of admission to York, mature student status is awarded to an individual who is 21 years of age or older,⁴ who has been out of high school for at least two years and who has not completed a full year of PSE at an accredited university or college. Students applying as a mature student are not required to have

⁴ As of March 2015, York altered its mature student criteria. An applicant can now be considered a mature student if she is 20 years or older. The other criteria for admission eligibility as a mature student remain the same.

a high school diploma. Applicants are admitted into a degree program based on their ability to demonstrate their potential to complete university-level study.⁵ Individuals entering as a mature student apply for immediate entry into an academic degree, have full York University student status, and can access the services and supports provided by the Atkinson Centre for Mature and Part-time Students (ACMAPS), which include orientation, student advising and transitional supports.

Pre-university Program in the School of Continuing Studies

The Pre-university (pre-U) Program is a part of the School of Continuing Studies. As with the Women's Bridging program (below), pre-U courses are available to individuals over the age of 21 who have been out of high school for at least two years. Students who complete a single course with a grade of 'B' or above earn an admission credential in support of their application as a mature student to a York University undergraduate degree program offered by the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, Faculty of Environmental Studies or Glendon College.

There are three different courses available to students in this program: pre-U humanities, pre-U social sciences and a math credential substitute. The humanities and social sciences courses run for three hours a week for 13 weeks and are held on campus for 15-35 students. The courses are patterned on first-year humanities or social science courses but also incorporate writing and academic skills instruction into their curriculum. As of 2013, students who successfully complete either the pre-U humanities or pre-U social sciences course with a grade of B or higher receive three credits post-admission toward their degree. The 'Math for Admission Waiver' course serves to fulfill the math pre-requisite for select programs in the absence of a high school math credential. This math course by itself, however, does not serve as a basis for admission into an academic degree, whereas the humanities and social sciences courses do so.

Students in the pre-university program, as well as the Women's Bridging Program (summarized below), do not have York University student status and so do not enjoy the benefits of full access to York University services and ancillary supports. Pre-U students have access to the Centre for Academic Writing.

Women's Bridging Program

The Women's Bridging Program is part of York University's Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies. The course is designed primarily for women. Students complete a single course to earn an admission credential into select York University undergraduate programs. Students who complete the course with a grade of B or above earn an admission credential in support of their application as a mature student to a York University undergraduate degree program offered by the Faculty of Liberal Arts and

⁵ In addition to the general requirement that applicants demonstrate potential to complete university-level studies, specific programs may have additional admission pre-requisites.

Professional Studies, the Faculty of Health, the Faculty of Environmental Studies or Glendon College. As with the pre-U humanities and social science courses, students who successfully complete the Women's Bridging course with a grade of B or higher now receive three credits post-admission toward their degree.

The course focuses on developing and enhancing critical thinking, reading, writing and speaking skills. It runs three hours a week for 13 weeks and is held off campus for 15-25 students. The course is patterned after a first-year university women's studies course and challenges students with formal writing assignments, oral presentations and critical discussions. All reading materials are written by Canadian authors, mostly women. The Women's Bridging Program coordinator works closely with the York University Admissions Office to bridge successful students into their desired program of interest.

Transition Year Program

The TYP is a special access program that has been in operation since September 2010. It is a program for youth (19+) and adults who, due to various barriers, have not had an opportunity to finish high school and who do not have the formal educational credentials to qualify for university admission. Most students have completed at least some grade 11 and have been away from high school for two years or more. The program offers an intensive, two-term full-time course of study leading to entrance to a selected York University degree program and students have full York University student status from the outset.

TYP delivery immerses students in an academic program with intensive student supports wrapped around their academic courses. The program is cohort-based; students attend courses and workshops as a group. Its structure requires mandatory full-day attendance of classes Monday to Thursday from September to April. TYP students enroll in undergraduate courses that, when passed, earn them 18 academic credits (the equivalent of three full-year courses). Additionally, TYP students must take 12 non-academic credits designed to enhance the academic skills necessary for the successful completion of a university degree. Students who complete the TYP with an average grade of C or higher and a pass in the non-credit bearing workshops can transfer into select undergraduate programs.

Gaps: Populations not served by Alternative Entrance Pathways

There is currently no program located at York specifically dedicated to bridging Aboriginal students into PSE. Further, while women with financial barriers have the option of attending a Women's Bridging course for \$150, the only available bridging options for men are the higher-cost TYP and pre-university courses. Males with high flexibility needs would generally be unable to attend a full-time program like TYP and men with high financial need may find the \$649 course fee of pre-university courses prohibitive. If these barriers intersect, males with both high financial needs and high flexibility needs currently have no bridging options available at York.

Finally, the bridging programs at York mainly focus on the humanities and social sciences. All three bridging pathways only facilitate admission into a select number of faculties and students are largely bridged into arts-based degree programs. No programs currently exist to bridge students into undergraduate programs in science, engineering or business.

Characteristics of Alternative Entrance Pathways

Adults seeking *re-entry* into the formal education system via first entry into university may not have the requisite academic qualifications and so need an alternative means of acquiring the academic skills. Through their differing program design and implementation, the four alternative pathways into York provide, either directly or indirectly, the academic qualifications necessary for admission in various ways.

In addition to lacking academic qualifications, other overlapping barriers compound the academic challenge that specific student populations face. Low-income, first-generation and Aboriginal students particularly can face multiple barriers, including financial limitations (barrier #1), inequity and exclusion by virtue of language or culture, and implicitly by their absence from the Eurocentric curriculum (barrier #5), in addition to a lack of adequate academic preparation (barriers #3 and #4). The four pathways into York work toward bridging various barriers and enabling access in different ways and different capacities. Table 2 maps the access pathway programs/courses onto the dimensions of access identified above.

Table 2: Mapping Alternative Pathways to Access Issues Addressed

Access Issues Addressed	Direct Admission under the 'Mature Student' Admissions Category	Pre-university Humanities and Social Sciences	Women's Bridging Program	Transition Year Program
<p>#1 – Financial capacity/Affordability</p> <p><i>How affordable is the program for low-income students?</i></p>	<p>Moderate affordability</p> <p>Students who are accepted enroll into a degree program; those who are eligible can receive OSAP</p>	<p>Low affordability</p> <p>Students ineligible for OSAP</p> <p>No bursaries available for students with financial need</p>	<p>High affordability</p> <p>Course is affordably priced at \$150</p>	<p>Moderate affordability</p> <p>Financial aid available: students who are eligible can receive OSAP</p> <p>Supports available for students dealing with OSAP blocks</p> <p>Dedicated TYP bursaries are also available</p>

Access Issues Addressed	Direct Admission under the 'Mature Student' Admissions Category	Pre-university Humanities and Social Sciences	Women's Bridging Program	Transition Year Program
<p>#2 – Flexibility</p> <p><i>Is the program flexible enough to overcome situational barriers and individual student circumstances?</i></p>	<p>Very flexible</p> <p>Students can enroll full time or part time, in day, evening or online courses</p> <p>Flexibility varies by degree program and course offerings</p>	<p>Somewhat flexible</p> <p>One fixed evening per week delivery of course designed for students who work/have time commitments during the day</p>	<p>Somewhat flexible</p> <p>One fixed evening per week delivery of course designed for students who work/have time commitments during the day At least one course offered per year during the day</p>	<p>Low flexibility</p> <p>Students are required to attend the program full-time during the day for eight months Individual one-time only accommodations are made for students' various life situations</p>
<p>#3 – Academic qualification</p> <p><i>How does program provide educational qualifications for admission?</i></p>	<p>Not provided directly</p> <p>Mature student application has flexible admission criteria. Application process considers work/life experiences as well as academic achievement</p>	<p>Successful completion of one course</p> <p>Successful completion of course provides basis of admission when applying to York as a mature student</p>	<p>Successful completion of one course</p> <p>Successful completion of course provides basis of admission when applying to York as a mature student</p>	<p>Successful completion of program</p> <p>Students transfer into an academic degree upon successful completion of program</p>
<p>#4 – Academic supports</p> <p><i>Does the program offer academic supports to foster educational achievement and prepare students for PSE?</i></p>	<p>Facilitated</p> <p>Facilitated access through ACMAPS but not delivered directly to students</p>	<p>Yes</p> <p>Academic skills upgrading incorporated into program design and delivered directly during course instruction</p>	<p>Yes</p> <p>Academic skills upgrading incorporated into program design and delivered directly during course instruction</p>	<p>Yes</p> <p>Academic skills upgrading incorporated into program design and delivered directly to all students in targeted workshops</p>
<p>#5 – Equality/Equity</p> <p><i>Does the program communicate and address the needs of under-represented populations?</i></p>	<p>No</p> <p>Not incorporated into program design</p>	<p>No</p> <p>Not incorporated into program design</p>	<p>Yes</p> <p>One of the stated goals of the program</p>	<p>Yes</p> <p>One of the stated goals of the program</p>

Access Issues Addressed	Direct Admission under the 'Mature Student' Admissions Category	Pre-university Humanities and Social Sciences	Women's Bridging Program	Transition Year Program
#6 – Supplemental support <i>Does the program offer additional supports such as counseling and/or mentoring?</i>	Facilitated Facilitated access through ACMAPS but not delivered directly to students	No Not incorporated into program design	No Not incorporated into program design	Provided directly Incorporated into program delivery for all students
#7 – Inclusion <i>Does program encourage a sense of belonging at York?</i>	Not directly Students apply directly to York and are encouraged to join the York University Mature Students' Organization (YUMSO)	Not directly Not incorporated into program design but may be potentially facilitated by the courses being offered on campus	No Not incorporated into program design and not facilitated through the course's off-campus location	Yes Fostering inclusion is one of the stated goals of the program and supported by integrated program design
#8 – Access for students with learning disabilities <i>Does the program incorporate direct supports for students with both documented and undocumented learning disabilities?</i>	Full supports available Facilitated through ACMAPS, in conjunction with York's Counselling and Disabilities Services, but not delivered directly to students	Some supports Supports facilitated through York's Counselling and Disabilities Services for students with documented learning disabilities No supports available for assessing or diagnosing students with suspected learning disability.	No supports No supports available for students with documented or undocumented learning disabilities as the program has no access to services provided by York's Counselling and Disabilities Services	Full supports available Supports directly facilitated through York's Counselling and Disabilities Services Instructors/counselors in the program look for signs of undiagnosed learning disability and work with students to facilitate assessment/diagnosis through Counselling and Disabilities Services

Taking into consideration the characteristics of these four pathways, we can group them into three design categories based on the intensity of their intervention into students' journey into university:

High-intervention Program

The Transition Year Program is an example of a high-intervention program. Academic and supplemental supports are delivered directly to all students in order to build the confidence and skills necessary for academic success. Students in TYP are considered full-time York students and have access to all supports offered at the university. Academic courses in the departments of humanities, equity studies and writing in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies are complemented by program-specific non-credit-bearing courses in learning skills and writing supports. TYP students are also serviced by the workshop supports offered by the library, the writing department and Counselling and Disabilities Services.

What differentiates TYP from other programming and other pathways for non-traditional student access is the manner in which TYP delivers the program. Its focus is on connecting all aspects of delivery. In addition to the well understood benefits of connecting the writing and learning skills supports directly to academic course content so that students can relate the skills concepts more completely and easily, the program also aims to create a broader, more enveloping sense of community that encourages and enables a sense of belonging at York University for the TYP student. Where engagement improves the student experience for all students, engagement for some non-traditional students can determine whether these students attend university at all. By relying extensively on a cohort-based model of program delivery, with students moving together as a group through most activities, with dedicated facilitators and staff sensitive to the challenges posed by the complex obstacles they face, TYP offers opportunities for creating those connections and enriching a sense of belonging for students from under-represented groups.

Moderate-intervention Programs

These include the Women's Bridging Program and the pre-university courses in the School of Continuing Studies. Academic supports are provided within a single course that meets once a week. Academic skills are woven into the curricula in both programs and are integrated into course content. However, beyond the advising sessions regarding applying to York as a mature student, no other student supports, counseling or advising supports are incorporated into these programs. Pre-U students have access to some supports available to York students such as the Centre for Academic Writing. They may choose to seek out these services but are not required to use them.

Students in these programs are not yet considered York students and the programs are not designed specifically with the aim of integrating students into the York community. In meeting on campus, the pre-U courses may help facilitate a sense of belonging to the university for some students. Women's Bridging courses are community-based and meet off-campus. Among students in both programs, there is potential for a sense of community to develop within a class over the course of the term. The Women's Bridging

course is taught from a feminist perspective and the course has a social justice mandate that pays some attention to inclusion and strengthening women's learner identities. Pre-university courses focus mainly on academic skills upgrading and have no stated outcomes of developing inclusion or strengthening learner identities.

Low-intervention Pathway

Students admitted directly under the 'mature student' admissions category enter university along a low-intervention pathway. This pathway sees students choose to enroll at York either full-time or part-time, with no supports or services delivered directly to students. Students may choose to utilize the advising, mentorship and support programs offered to all students and facilitated through York's Atkinson Centre for Mature and Part-time Students, which makes these resources available through a central hub. Individual students determine for themselves the extent to which they choose to seek out communities among other mature students and the extent to which they choose to integrate themselves into the York community.

Budgeting for Alternative Entrance Pathways

The explicit costs of delivering alternative entrance pathways will be higher the more supports are needed to level the academic playing field for under-represented students. Endeavours toward access and equity must allow students from under-represented populations the same opportunities as other students for full participation in PSE: "This means that students who need more will receive more in order to facilitate their participation. Education equity should allow those who lag behind to catch up, which suggests that an equal formula for all will not yield equitable outcomes" (Brathwaite, 2003, p. 60).

The relative net cost to the institution of delivering different pathway options will vary in proportion to:

1. varying intensities with which dedicated teaching, administrative and complementary (e.g., counselling) supports are used
2. differences in instructor salaries across programs/pathways
3. differences in tuition revenues
4. eligibility of enrolments for government funding
5. the rate at which government funding is calculated for eligible enrolments

For students entering under the 'mature student' admissions category and for students in TYP, instructors are university instructors. Direct instructional costs will equal the university average instructional cost per student for the former and be higher, given a smaller class size (average 20), in TYP. While pre-university and Women's Bridging classes are typically smaller than the first-year average degree credit class, the pathway courses are taught by instructors who are paid a lower salary. The net effect is that the direct instructional costs per student are lower in these two programs. Fixed administrative costs are higher on a per student basis for the TYP students since dedicated administrative and counselling supports are employed at a

greater intensity as compared with students entering under the 'mature student' admissions category, pre-university and Women's Bridging courses (the latter two because supports are not offered, the former because the intensity of use is lower).

Per-credit tuition paid by students in TYP, pre-university students and mature students in a degree program is approximately the same and equal to the undergraduate student tuition rate. Tuition revenue is, therefore, approximately the same across these three pathways on a per credit basis. Student enrolments in TYP generate Ontario government grant funding at a rate equal to the rate for liberal arts enrolments. This is the same grant revenue generated by enrolments of students entering a liberal arts degree directly under the 'mature student' admissions category. Enrolments in the pre-university program are ineligible for government grants. Tuition revenue for Women's Bridging is significantly lower due to the lower tuition fee and, like pre-university enrolments, is ineligible for government grants.

Relative to the net cost of offering a first-year program to direct-entry students, the per-student cost to the university of the mature student pathway is the same, the pre-university pathway is cheaper, the TYP pathway moderately more expensive (due to a higher intensity of service usage, including smaller classes) and the Women's Bridging pathway most expensive (due to the significantly lower course fee).

Methods

The 'non-traditional' student is defined conceptually in opposition to the 'traditional' student. Where the traditional student may be defined as a student enrolled full-time (three or more courses per semester for at least two semesters per year) in an undergraduate degree in the years immediately following their high school education, the non-traditional student is anyone who enters later, attends part-time or both. The reasons for delayed entry into university are not all due, however, to educational stop-outs. Students who attend the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technologies (CAATs) immediately after high school before transferring into university, for example, would be considered non-traditional in the implementation of the coarsest definition of the term despite the fact that these students remain continually enrolled in the formal education system. In this study, with an eye to examining alternative entrance pathways as part of an access agenda, we focus on those non-traditional students who enter university from outside the formal education system, as ensured by the choice of pathway programs to which we have restricted our attention.

To examine the 'best fit' matching of students to these various pathways, we sought to compare groups of students entering York University through the alternative pathways on both their own self-assessed satisfaction with their chosen pathway as well as their subsequent academic progress. Looking at non-traditional students who entered York in the last ten years, we used a mixed methods approach that analyzed anonymized quantitative data provided by York's Office of Institutional Planning and Analysis as well as qualitative data gleaned through focus groups.

Subsequent to obtaining approval for our research ethics protocol and informed consent form, focus group invitations were sent to all students in these groups. Since no pre-U or Women's Bridging students responded to our initial invitation, we subsequently expanded our invitation to participate in the focus groups to pre-university students from September 2008 onwards (see Appendix 1: Focus Group Report). At the focus groups, participants filled out a written questionnaire (see Appendix 2) and responded orally to questions posed by one of the researchers (see Appendix 3). To promote a degree of interpretive consistency, a research assistant acted as detailed note taker in all focus groups. Follow-up review of these notes and a comparison of the researcher's and research assistant's interpretations ensured consistency in categorizing responses. We acknowledge the risk that there may have been interviewer influence in biasing discussions, as the interviewer (an instructor in the TYP) was known to some of the participants.

Sampling

Quantitative data were gathered for direct-admission students in the 'mature student' admissions category, pre-university students and Women's Bridging students who began their studies in 2004, 2008 and 2013, since these were the most robust years numerically for non-traditional student admissions within the last decade. Quantitative data for TYP students were gathered for students who entered the program every year from 2010 (the first year of the program) to 2013.

We gathered data on a total of 1,502 students across all alternative entrance pathways. These broke down as follows: 1,213 (80.8%) students admitted under the 'mature student' category, 183 (12.2%) pre-university students, 63 (4.2%) students coded as York Bridging students, the majority of whom we believe were from Women's Bridging (see limitations below), and 43 (2.9%) TYP students.

Students' average age at entry differed by no more than five years across all four categories. Pre-university students had an average age of 25.7 years. TYP students had an average age of 26.5 years. The average age of mature students was 28.8 and the students coded York Bridging (Women's Bridging) had an average age of 30.8 years. In all four pathways, the number of years between secondary school and admittance to York was unknown for most students in the group.

With the exception of Women's Bridging, all categories were divided nearly equally between genders, with slightly more men enrolled than women. Across all entry years, 49.1% of mature students were female and 45.5% of pre-university students were female. TYP had the lowest percentage of female students at 44.2%. In the category coded York Bridging, in the 2004 entry year 75% of students were female, in 2008 the total number of females was 92.6%, and in 2013 100% of students admitted in this category were female. In 2013 we believe the only students admitted in this category were those from Women's Bridging.

A total of 37 students attended seven focus groups conducted between July and August 2014. Each focus group included students from two or more pathways. Their breakdown by pathway is as follows (see Table 3):

Table 3: Focus Group Participants by Access Pathway

Access Pathway	Number of Participants	% of Total
Mature Students	14	37.8%
Pre-university	7	18.9%
Women's Bridging	5	13.5%
Transition Year Program	10	27.0%
Completed both Women's Bridging and TYP	1	2.7%
Total	37	100%

In the quantitative sample of 1,503, mature students were under-represented, while pre-U, Women's Bridging and TYP students over-represented in the focus group participants. As a group, however, their questionnaire responses were in line with previous research regarding the needs and demographics of non-traditional students. Twenty-three respondents indicated that they lived in households with an average annual income of less than \$20 000. Twenty-seven respondents indicated that neither of their parents had attended PSE. This is substantially higher than the general population at York, in which 1 in 3 students are reported to be the first in their family to attend university. Six respondents indicated the presence of one barrier to accessing PSE. All of these six students reported that barrier to be financial. Twenty-six respondents indicated the presence of two or more barriers to accessing PSE. Only four respondents indicated that they faced no barriers to accessing PSE.

Limitations

Limitations of our data collection included potential inconsistencies in coding regarding the admission categories for non-traditional students at York. Two admission categories for pre-university admissions appeared in the data. These likely correspond to the courses in humanities and social science but this is not confirmed. There was also an admissions category called 'York Bridging' but no specific category for the Women's Bridging Program. Some of our 2004 and 2008 data from this category included male students who might have entered York through other access programs offered periodically before the amalgamation of Atkinson College in 2009. These include bridging courses run through Atkinson's social science program and a Native women's bridging program that also admitted male students. Neither of these programs ran consistently and we have been unable to ascertain whether they were operating in 2004 and 2008. While they are the likely sources of male students in those admission years we were unable to confirm this.

Characteristics that influence student success, such as individual initiative and level of self-confidence, also challenged the rigour of our approach. Sampling bias exists due to the fact that response rates for focus group participation, as in other studies, tended to be low and unrepresentative of relevant populations (Wiggers & Arnold, 2011) and omitted altogether students who started but did not complete their first

course(s). This bias is compounded by the incentive offered for participants to attend focus groups. Participants' names were entered into a draw for a three-credit tuition rebate (a value of approximately \$700), which would only appeal to currently enrolled students and may not have been an incentive to participate for students who have withdrawn or completed an academic program.

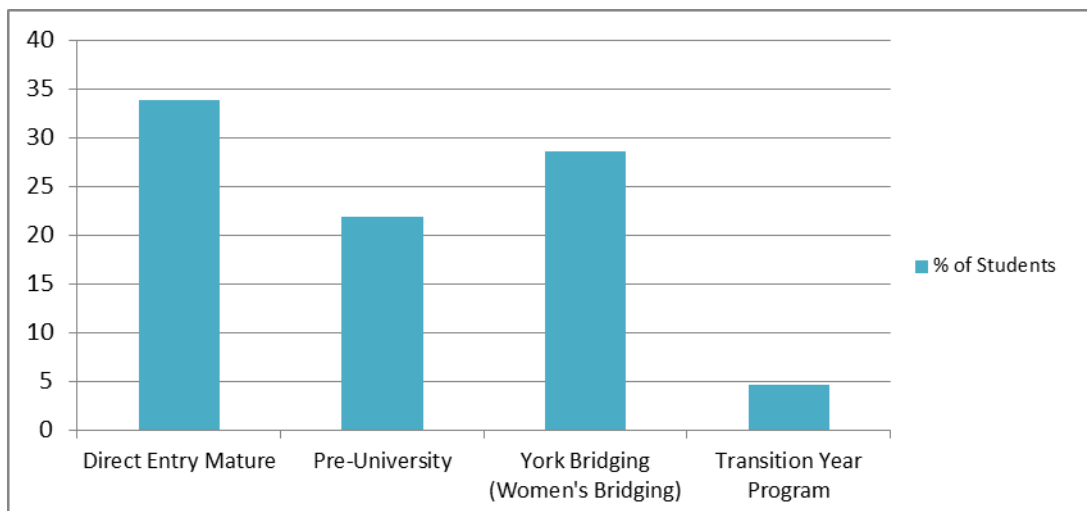
Data and Results: Quantitative

Academic Preparedness

Non-traditional students often lack the academic preparation that is necessary to succeed in PSE, and this may be manifested in a variety of ways. While some students entering through the four pathways had not completed high school and therefore faced the situational barrier of lacking the academic qualification of an OSSD, others had previous experience with PSE before arriving at York and so may have been better prepared academically.

As one measure of the situational barriers faced by non-traditional students entering university, we examined their previous experience with PSE, by pathway. Mature students had the greatest previous experience with PSE and TYP students the least. Among mature students across all three years we examined, an average of 410 of 1,213 (33.8%) had some previous experience with PSE. By contrast, across the three years we examined in TYP, only 2 of 43 (4.7%) had any previous experience with PSE. Among TYP students in entry years 2011 and 2013, no students had any previous experience with PSE. Women's Bridging and pre-university students were in between the other two categories, with 28.6 and 21.9% respectively, who had previous experience with PSE (see Figure 1).

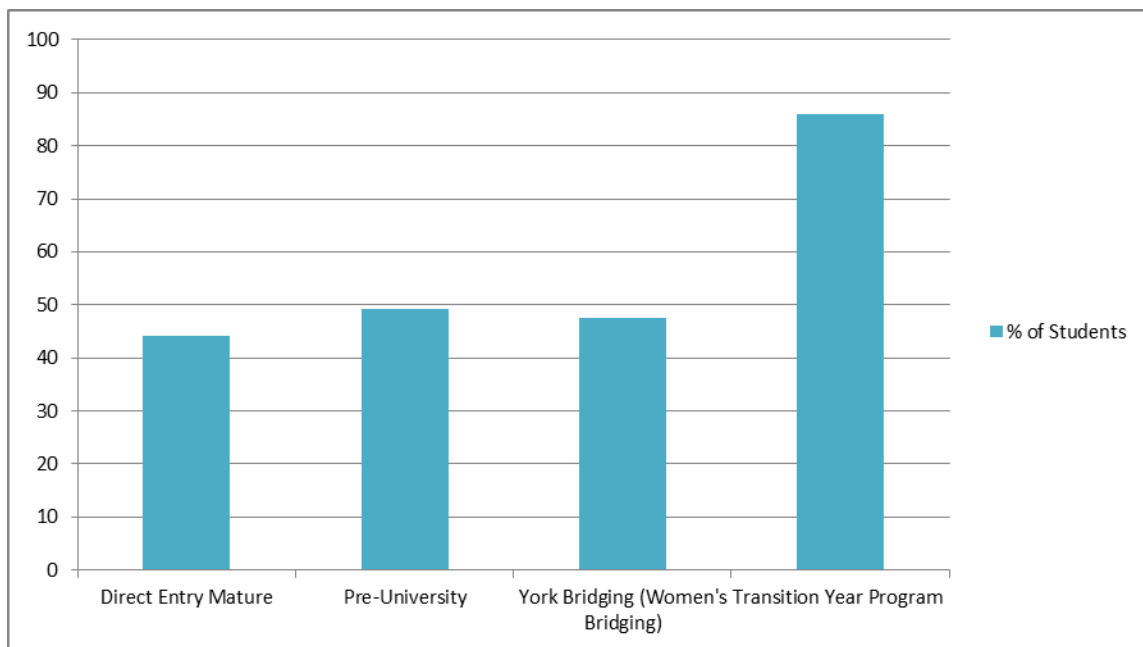
Figure 1: Previous Student Experience with PSE by Pathway



Financial Need

Across the four entry pathways, TYP students demonstrated the highest financial need, as indicated by their receipt of OSAP and student bursaries, which are given for financial need rather than merit. Among the other three entry pathways there was no significant difference among the percentages of students who received OSAP. 44.2% of mature students received OSAP at least once, as did 49.2% of pre-U students and 47.6% of Women’s Bridging students once they began their academic degrees. By contrast, 86% of TYP students received OSAP at least once during their time in the TYP program or upon transfer into their academic degree programs (see Figure 2). This is significantly higher than the provincial percentage of students who receive OSAP, which is currently reported to be 64%.⁶

Figure 2: Percentage of Students who Received OSAP at least once by Pathway

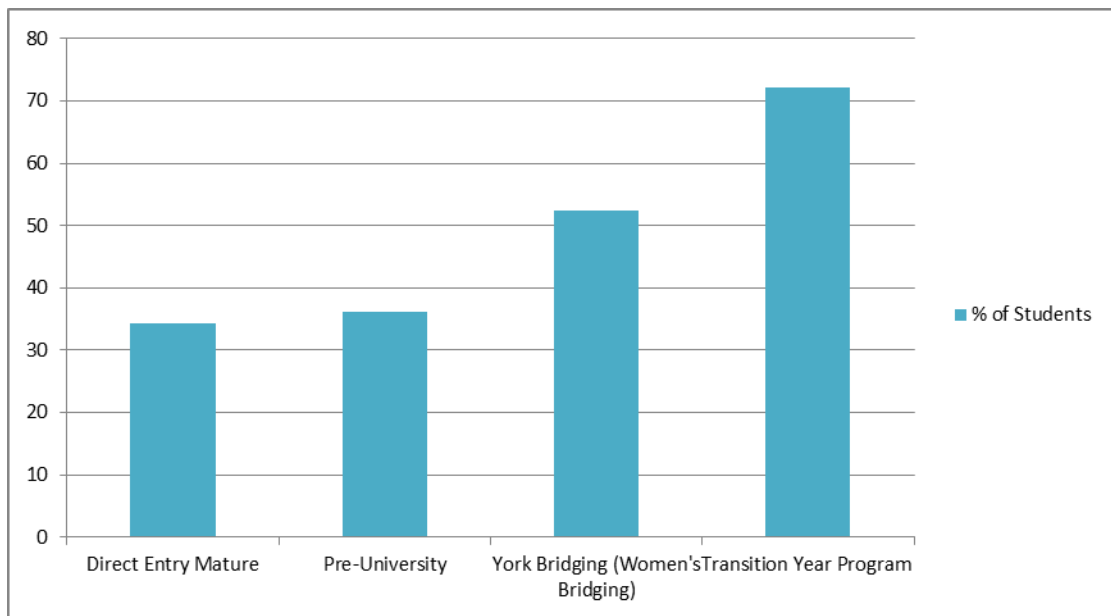


Similar patterns emerged among the percentages of students awarded bursaries. Among mature students and pre-U students, 34.4% and 36.1% respectively received at least one bursary during their academic degree studies. The number for Women’s Bridging was slightly higher at 52.4%. The percentage of TYP students who received at least one bursary during their year in the TYP program or in subsequent years was

⁶ The number of students who received OSAP in the other three pathways is below the provincial average. This might be because a significant number of students in these pathways do not complete their degrees full time. The average number of credits taken in each pathway (see below) offers further insight.

the highest at 72.1% (see Figure 3). However, among those who received bursaries, the average amount received was the lowest for TYP students, who received an average of \$1,459. By contrast, the average amounts for the other three pathways were almost or more than double. The average for pre-U students was \$2,885, for Women’s Bridging it was \$3,692 and for mature students the average amount was \$3,352 (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: Percentage of Students who Received at least one Bursary by Pathway

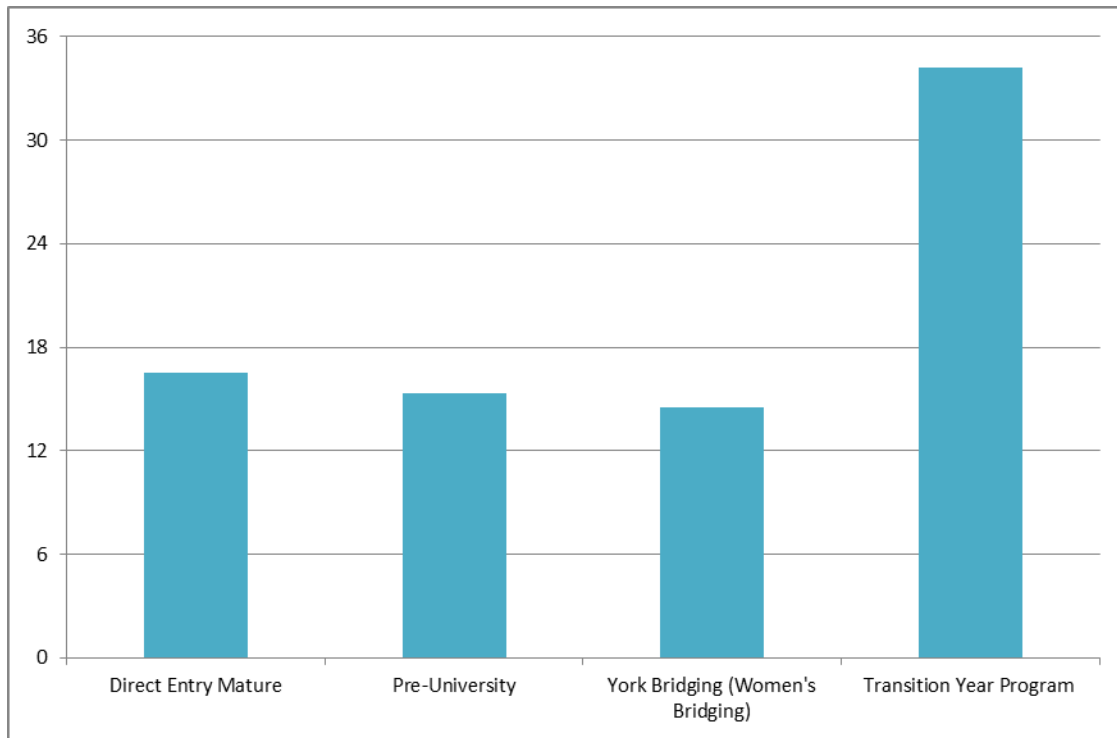


Post-pathway Academic Participation and Performance

To measure academic success of students entering via different pathways, we examined the post-pathway participation in the first 12 months of their degree. The average number of credits taken in these first 12 months was substantially higher among TYP students than in the other three groups. TYP students took an average of 34.2 credits in their first 12 months after completing the TYP program. Since a full course load at York is considered to be 30 credits, this higher number suggests that some TYP students took courses in the summer term immediately following their completion of the TYP in addition to a full course load the following fall and winter semesters.

By contrast, the average number of credits taken in the other three pathways was lower than a full course load. Mature students took an average of 16.5 credits, pre-U students 15.3 credits and Women’s Bridging students 14.5 credits (see Figure 4). The high average number of credits taken by TYP students might confirm our findings regarding their lowest flexibility needs, or it might suggest that they typically experience a level of confidence after completing TYP that facilitates their pursuit of full-time studies.

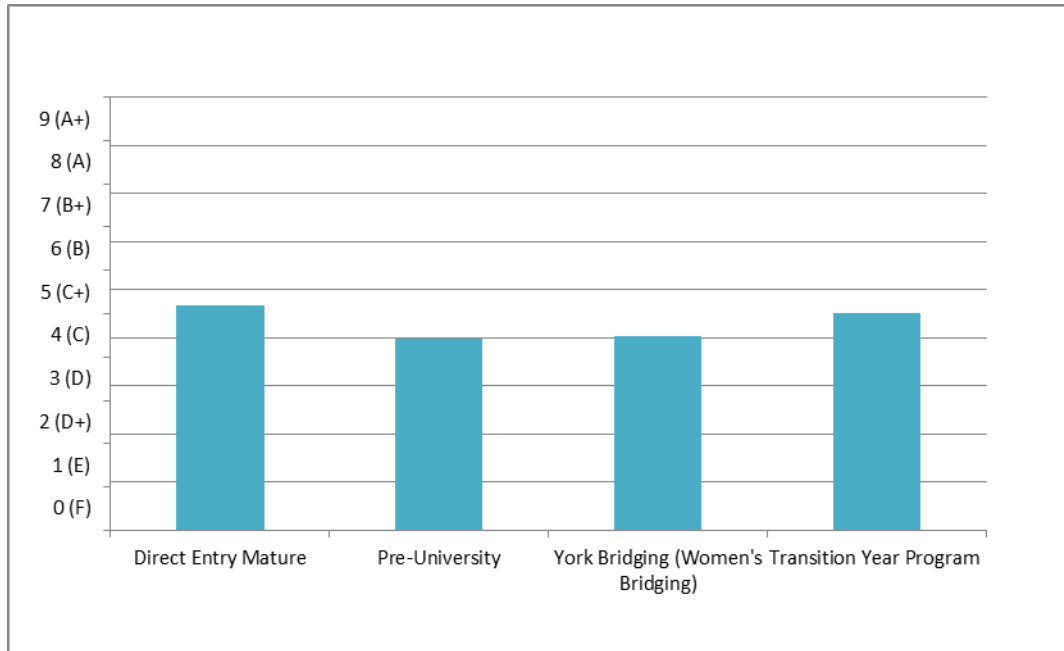
Figure 4: Average Number of Credits Taken in First 12 Months of Academic Degree by Pathway



Students' average cumulative GPAs as of April 2014 were also considered. Mature students had the highest average cumulative GPAs at 4.673.⁷ TYP students had the second-highest average cumulative GPAs at 4.508. The average cumulative GPA for York Bridging was 4.044 and for pre-university it was 3.983 (see Figure 5). When compared with the academic preparation on entry, these results suggest that TYP students effectively 'catch up' academically.

⁷ York calculates GPAs on a nine-point scale with the following grade values: 9 (A+), 8 (A), 7 (B+), 6 (B), 5 (C+), 4(C), 3(D+), 2 (D), 1 (E), F(0).

Figure 5: Average Student Cumulative GPA in the First 8 Months (as of April 2014) by Pathway



Data and Results: Qualitative

Student reflections on their experiences before entering university, in their chosen entry pathways and in their degree programs, offered further opportunities for examining the barriers they faced and the ways their alternative pathways did or did not meet their needs. Data gathered in the focus groups exhibited a strong consistency with the results stated above with respect to students' financial situations. Reports from focus group participants on their academic experience prior to arriving at York complemented the above analysis.

For some, there was an identifiable lack of academic preparation (i.e., no OSSD). This was the result of a range of factors, including academic disengagement in high school, which also resulted in dispositional barriers and feelings of exclusion for some students who felt marginalized by their previous experiences with formal education. Others faced a history of interrupted education, in some cases due to previous experiences as immigrants or refugees, or due to mental or physical illness or family trauma.

Even those students who had earned a high school diploma faced various situational barriers as a result of their measurable or perceived lack of academic qualifications. Some students had completed high school in another country and this diploma was not considered an adequate qualification for entry into a Canadian

university. Others experienced a gap of several years between their completion of high school and their first attempt at PSE, while some students' high school grades did not meet admission requirements at York. These students required the academic upgrading provided through pre-U, Women's Bridging or the TYP.

Learner Identities

Mature students participating in the focus groups tended to demonstrate the strongest learner identities. This was the only category in which at least some of the respondents indicated that they felt they belonged in PSE before beginning their studies or that they knew they would attend PSE at some point in their lives. One stated, "I felt like I belonged here." Another said, "I've never had the sense of not belonging." A third, "I always felt comfortable right from the beginning. And excited." Some reported feeling "academically confident." Many also displayed a focused, goal-oriented mindset and knew what their journey into and through PSE would look like. As one respondent stated, "When I started I had a goal. I wanted to work in management and I knew I needed a degree. I had a plan and was ready for it. I know I can do it."

By contrast, pre-university students in the focus groups most often demonstrated moderate identities as university learners. Some indicated that this pathway helped them overcome their dispositional barriers. As one student indicated:

"I was so scared to attend class. Am I smart enough? Will I be accepted? Am I focused enough? Without Pre-U I wouldn't have been able to find out. I knew very few people who had attended postsecondary so I wanted a sneak peak if you will. I needed a confidence boost and a little academic support before I was ready to allow myself to even dream about a life with postsecondary being a large part of it. I can't imagine how I would have accessed postsecondary without Pre-U. It let me work full time, while realizing just how much I wanted and needed this in my life. I'll be forever thankful." (Written anonymously on a focus group questionnaire)

Students from Women's Bridging participating in the focus groups also generally had moderate identities as university learners and most felt more confident to begin university studies after completing the program. One respondent indicated that the academic supports encouraged "competence and courage." Another observed that "I felt a lot more confident knowing I can actually write an essay" by the end of the course. A third indicated the course "gave me a head start" into starting a degree program.

TYP students demonstrated the weakest identities as university learners. Respondents consistently indicated that, before entering TYP, they felt they did not belong in PSE. Students in this group were also the most likely to report that their previous familial or peer group discourses were inimical to their identities as university learners. One respondent stated, "I experienced a stigma against taking higher education within my family and community," while another indicated that her family had a "university is a waste of time mentality." Among those who reported that no one in their peer group had attended PSE, two students stated that the prevailing belief was that attending university was "bourgeois." Before attending university

they too feared being seen “as one of ‘those people.’” These students’ experiences demonstrate that previous familial or cultural discourse may provide “little or no preparation for the secondary discourse of school; it may even be ‘anti-preparation’” (Abramovitch, 2003, citing Gee, 1996, p. 98).

Affiliation Needs

Mature students typically reported the lowest affiliation needs and most described themselves as independent learners. While peer support was valued by some, most did not join study groups. While four respondents indicated that they became involved at York through clubs and events, others stated that they did not want to or were unable to form connections with peers who were much younger than they were and did not share their experiences as parents, as people with greater work experience, and the like.

Students from Women’s Bridging generally demonstrated moderate affiliation needs. Within the course itself, respondents consistently praised the quality of instruction and the manner in which the instructor facilitated a sense of belonging and community, gave everyone a space to speak and encouraged peer interaction. One respondent remarked that the professor “got the group together,” while another stated that “she got everybody talking so we were comfortable with each other.” The course is held at various off-campus locations and most respondents indicated that they benefitted a great deal from the campus tour, which helped them orient themselves to the university. Two students specifically indicated that the day of their scheduled campus tour was a turning point with respect to their sense that they would belong at York. One student stated that she chose this pathway specifically because it was geared toward women: “I didn’t want to feel alone in this. I wanted to be connected to women. I was 30 and there were other people older than me and I felt welcome in the group. Women’s Bridging made me feel like age wasn’t a factor.”

TYP respondents reported very high affiliation needs and indicated that they benefitted from the cohort-based model of the program. One student stated that, in his estimation, TYP had “a communal, group success culture.” Generally most students felt part of or took ownership of the TYP program: “We saw each other as one team, not individual students. Therefore we worked together and supported each other to do well.” Another said that being part of a cohort “felt like 24 hour support,” while a third most valued “the relationship you build with your peers. We always want each other to win.” She stated that her classmates formed regular study groups because “we all wanted to do well and had good teamwork.”

Overlapping Needs

Among focus group participants, those in TYP often reported being the most societally marginalized and experiencing the greatest number and complexity of barriers. Most reported that the high level of intervention incorporated into the program was transformative for them. The program’s direct supports and active interventions made a big difference for their PSE journey, as many indicated that without the support of the program they might not have attended university at all. One respondent, who reported the presence of many barriers in her life, remarked, “TYP was my ticket to university and I took it... They made education

look attainable.... They made it look like university is for everyone and here's the tools." She now feels "better equipped" to succeed because of the support of TYP.

Another respondent stated:

"I chose TYP because I wanted to do well, I didn't want to jump straight into University. TYP helped me start off strong. [It] gave me the tools I needed to succeed.... [It] gave me the opportunity to get immersed in the University culture. I liked that TYP was all co-ordinated, that they gave support about OSAP and navigating the university.... TYP was like a university user manual. I learned expansive knowledge about what it takes to be a university student.... The university campus was intimidating at first. But the program helped me in navigating the university and its resources. The support of the program was unbelievable. *I wouldn't be in university right now without the support that was provided.*" (emphasis added)

Several respondents indicated that TYP was the only possibility they had encountered for accessing PSE. As one stated, "I used to think University was unmanageable and virtually impossible. I thought it was too hard. Too big. Too expensive. Too 'not for me.'" The supports offered made him realize that "all of it was... manageable." He stated, "TYP chose me. I had been told no over and over. At the first sign of yes I jumped at it."

Another student stated:

"TYP has given me the opportunity to achieve my dream of attending York University and never gave up on me even when I felt I had given up on myself. The program and courses offered are amazing but the fact that they are there as not only a support for academic purposes makes a lot of difference. I learned a lot about life and hope to have a dream job one day doing for others what this program has done for me. I was in a homeless shelter when I found this program and it made me feel proud to get into school."

Some students in other pathways also faced multiple barriers and expressed a genuine need for more direct delivery of supports to facilitate their entry into PSE. While they appreciated the academic supports provided by pre-U and Women's Bridging, they needed further intervention once they completed those programs. When asked if he felt prepared to start university, one pre-U respondent stated, "Academically yes, socially no. I don't know how the university works. I'm not sure how to reach out to get supports." This student further commented:

"I could have been better supported with an introduction to all of the services that York has. From housing to mental health, these are barriers many students need to address before they can reach their true potential. These topics could be covered at an exit orientation. You get your grade and get in, woot... now what? How do I pay for this? What if I need help? Who can help me pick courses? As a student leaving Pre-U you don't have a clue."

A Women's Bridging student facing similar concerns also expressed the need for more direct support upon completion of program. She stated that she found the process of entering York "overwhelming." She elaborated, "You finish the [Women's Bridging] course and you're in this 'you can do it' mindset. But the actual doing part is so hard. There's no one to go to once you get in. You get a lot of support until you get in, then there's no more support."

Of the four groups, mature students were the most able to navigate the university on their own and reported the least use of both academic and supplemental supports. Among those who did use supports, some reported dissatisfaction with them, indicating that their own online research had yielded more answers or clearer information than they received through academic advising or student financial advising. Others reported more positive experiences. One reported supportive assistance from both ACMAPS and student advising, saying: "I enjoyed the transition into university.... I had a smooth transition."

Need for Flexibility

Focus group participants told us about a wide range of complex life situations that imposed situational barriers and impacted their ability to pursue PSE. They had to consider work schedules, some were caregivers with one or more dependents and some also cared for other adult family members. Some faced their own physical or mental health issues. Some students also required time off school to deal with issues resulting from their status as refugees or landed immigrants attempting to gain Canadian citizenship. Other students reported the need for time off to attend court dates for various reasons.

In comparison to other categories, mature students spoke more often about their range of flexibility needs. This was the one area in which we were unable to clearly classify their needs. Some students reported low flexibility needs and were pursuing their degrees full-time. Others reported moderate flexibility needs. These students were also pursuing full-time studies but expressed an interest in completing their degrees as quickly as possible and wished for greater summer, evening and online course availability so that they could take a higher course load in any given year. Other mature students reported high flexibility needs, particularly those who were completing their degrees part-time and solely through night courses. One respondent reported that reduced course availability in her program was potentially creating an institutional barrier toward completing her degree:

"One of the reasons I selected York as a mature student was the availability at the time of the Atkinson program for "mature students", offering many evening courses. As the years have passed, I have experienced diminishing course availability.... I am now at the point where I may either need to suspend completing my degree at all or transfer to another university.... This is not my preference as I really enjoy York University."

The number of students with high flexibility needs offers further insight into why "mature students" reported the lowest use of support services. Their responses indicated the presence of institutional barriers.

Students taking only night classes told us they were unable to access support services that were only open during regular daytime business hours. Some indicated that they might make greater use of these services if they were open in the evenings or on weekends to accommodate the schedules of those working full-time.

Pre-U students reported moderate to high flexibility needs as most completed the pre-U course while working full-time. One student said, “I liked that it was a condensed program. It worked in terms of my schedule.” Some of the pre-U respondents also demonstrated a “testing the waters mindset” (OKLearn.ca) and utilized the course as a way to transition gradually into becoming university students.

Students from Women’s Bridging demonstrated moderate to high flexibility needs. They generally appreciated the convenience of the course being located in their communities. One respondent indicated that the course was offered at a location across the street from her home, while another indicated that it was offered through the same organization for which she worked. Some respondents did the Women’s Bridging course while working full time and were continuing to work while pursuing their degrees. They appreciated that the course met once a week, mostly in the evenings. One student would have liked to see the course offered on Saturdays to further accommodate the rigours of a full-time work week.

Responses from Women’s Bridging students and women who entered through other pathways suggest a gender dimension is at play in their need for increased flexibility.

In all four pathways, only women participants reported being sole-support parents and only women reported needing to leave or delay beginning their postsecondary studies to care for children or elderly family members or both.

Students with Learning Disabilities

Across all four pathways, eight respondents (21.6%) indicated that they had a documented or a suspected learning disability. This suggests that considering the prevalence of learning disabilities (LD) is of particular concern in the development and delivery of PSE access programs.

Among those with confirmed LD, three were pre-university students, two were in TYP and one had completed both Women’s Bridging and TYP. Among those with suspected LD, one was a TYP student and one was a mature student. Across all pathways, a particular pattern emerged in their responses. Students with confirmed or suspected LD consistently demonstrated learner identities that were weaker and affiliation needs that were higher than others in their pathway. For example, one pre-university student with identified LD wrote a note at the end of his anonymous questionnaire in which he stated: “I *need* in class student tutors, also in living student tutors. Dyslexia. I’m still alone. I need community” (emphasis in original).

Pre-university students with LD reported a range of experiences in their pre-U classes. Some of them received support from forming peer groups, doing presentations together, or engaging in group study

sessions, while others reported being in classes in which no community developed amongst students. The experience of having their affiliation needs met dramatically increased their reported satisfaction with their pre-U experience and their ability to strengthen their identities as university learners. One respondent was in a class that did not form community. He indicated that “We didn’t connect. It was 40 students sitting in a room not talking to anyone.” By contrast, another student with reported LD was in a pre-U class in which students did connect and formed regular study groups. He indicated that he got a great deal out of these peer affiliations and that it “really helped [him] succeed” in the course. He reported becoming friends with one classmate who is still part of his social circle and peer support network at York; this friend helps him figure out how to navigate the university when he needs assistance.

The mature student with suspected LD wished she had received greater support in learning to navigate the university, stating that “As mature students we do need some hand-holding because we are coming from different backgrounds.... We need more support.” She also reported that she did not feel like she belonged in PSE when she began her degree. She stated that her first two years at York were a process of “learning to belong” as a university student.

The TYP students with documented or suspected LD were the only ones who reported that this pathway met their affiliation needs and helped them strengthen their identities as university learners. One student with documented LD was the same student who commented on the program’s “communal group success culture.” A TYP student with suspected LD also reported coming from a high-risk neighbourhood and witnessing regular violence while growing up. He reported that, with the support he received in TYP, “it was a breakthrough for me to transition myself into an intellectual culture.” All of the TYP students with confirmed or suspected LD also commented on how much they valued the direct delivery of supports and credited this aspect of the program as contributing a great deal to their success.

Discussion

Non-traditional students, as students entering York University through an alternative entrance pathway, begin their journey from very different starting points as indicated by such measures as previous experience with PSE, financial need and self-reflections on their initial identities as university learners. From the fact that the post-pathway academic performance of a sample of 1,502 students entering through these four different pathways is similar across all pathways, we might infer that the more intensive pathway supports were effective in levelling the academic playing field.

While not all non-traditional students necessarily experience fragile learner identities, one aspect of improving access, facilitating inclusion and reducing barriers means taking into consideration students’ ongoing negotiations of identity and their processes of identity transformation. Doing so comes with the recognition that some students from non-traditional populations may need increased supports that help them strengthen their identities as university learners, upon entry and into their academic careers – a point gleaned from both the literature and our focus group discussions.

Focus group discussions suggest that students with high affiliation needs may require the support of a cohort-based program that aims to combat their potential feelings of exclusion from PSE. Some students may also experience better academic results in situations where they experience a strong sense of affiliation. Peer supports are especially critical for the student who is first in their family or peer group to attend university. Those students who have not yet developed the learning skills and habits necessary to self-direct their learning may benefit from positive modeling provided by others in their peer group. Further, in situations where the student's pre-university social reference group is unfamiliar with the demands of university, the opportunity to connect with others in a similar situation offers critical social supports.

Matching Students to Alternative Pathways

In considering a 'best fit' or most appropriate match of program to student, one higher-level consideration appears to be the outright number of barriers a student faces and the degree of intervention they require to access PSE successfully. Those with the greatest number of barriers require the direct academic and supplemental supports provided by programs such as York University's TYP, while those with the fewest barriers may be more suited to the lowest intervention pathway of direct admission into an academic degree under the mature student admissions category.

Of the nine cases of students who felt that they were not well matched to the pathways they had chosen, eight of these mismatched students indicated that they faced multiple barriers and required *more* support and direct intervention than they received in their chosen program or pathway. These results suggest that there is a positive correlation between the number of barriers a student faces and the degree of intervention s/he requires in accessing PSE. Of the five mature students who would have chosen a different pathway, all indicated the presence of at least two barriers to accessing PSE. They demonstrated weaker identities as university learners and stronger affiliation needs than others in the pathways they had taken.

Those who start their PSE journey with a weak university-learner identity may benefit from the more intensive intervention of a TYP-like program, if they also have higher affiliation needs. Since identity as a university learner may be weaker for women but women also tend to have the highest flexibility needs, the challenge exists to design a more extensive Women's Bridging Program or deliver caregiving supports that will help mitigate the flexibility need for women enrolling in a TYP-like program. In the TYP experience, the lack of affordable childcare combined with the full-time demands of the program remains a significant obstacle for women seeking to transition into university.

The results of this pilot study suggest the following preliminary taxonomy of 'best fit' pathways in terms of students' entry-level circumstance and their own self-identified satisfaction with their chosen pathway.

Table 4: Fit of Alternative Entrance Pathways with Student Needs

Student Needs and Characteristics	Direct Admission under the Mature Student Admissions Category	Pre-university Humanities and Social Sciences	Women’s Bridging Program	Transition Year Program
Financial needs	Low to moderate	Low to moderate	Moderate to high	High
Academic preparedness	Moderate to high	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Identity as a university learner	Strong	Moderate	Weak to moderate	Weak
Affiliation needs	Low	Low to moderate	Moderate	High
Flexibility needs	Low to moderate	Moderate to high	Moderate to high	Low to moderate

Conclusion: Best Fit Pathways

By combining student academic data, skills assessments and supports, data on non-academic supports including financial support, and results from focus groups, we assessed both the objective student performance and subjective student experience in overcoming a variety of situational, institutional and dispositional barriers. Statistical comparisons of students’ PSE history at the time of entry, socioeconomic status, student experience with academic and non-academic supports offered and utilized, and post-pathway academic performance across comparison groups offered valuable evidence of the relative academic effectiveness of each pathway. Descriptive analysis offered by summary statistics indicated how academic success relates to the independent background, experience and program design factors. Our results offer some insight into the relative effectiveness of the alternative pathways conditioned on the situation of the prospective student. They also permit tentative statements about what might be best practices for enabling the success of non-traditional students.

The best-fit student for direct admission under the mature student admissions category:

- Faces low to moderate financial barriers. Students can pay their university tuition and associated costs or access student financial assistance.
- Experiences moderate to high academic preparedness. Students may require the flexibility of admission requirements to accommodate any barriers to entry but do not require the remedial supports or academic upgrading incorporated into other programs

- Possesses a strong identity as a university learner. Students see themselves as belonging in university and may have a “focused, goal-oriented mindset” (OKLearn.ca). Students can access any supports they may need in navigating the university on their own.
- Has low affiliation needs and would likely not require a cohort-based program to succeed academically.
- Has low to moderate flexibility needs. Students can choose to complete their degrees on a full-time or part-time basis.

The best-fit pre-university student:

- Faces low to moderate financial barriers. Students may be currently employed in low-paying or unsatisfactory positions and require a university education to upgrade employment skills or move into new careers.
- Experiences moderate academic preparedness. Students may have completed high school but require higher grades to enter PSE, or they may have been away from formal schooling for a number of years and benefit from academic upgrading to refresh their skills and knowledge.
- Possesses a moderate identity as a university learner. With the academic upgrading provided, students can see themselves as belonging in university by the end of the pre-U course. Students can access any supports they may need in navigating the university on their own.
- Has low to moderate affiliation needs. Students can seek out community among their fellow pre-university students if they choose and can maintain these affiliations beyond the pre-U course if they choose. Ideal pre-U students would not benefit from the cohort-based delivery of TYP.
- Has moderate to high flexibility needs and benefits from the evening delivery of the course. Some students may have a ‘testing the waters mindset’ (OKLearn.ca) and attempt the course to see if PSE, and specifically university, is for them. Such students will not benefit from a bridging program that requires full-time enrolment.

The best-fit Women’s Bridging student:

- Faces moderate to high financial barriers. Students benefit from the low cost of the program (\$150).
- Experiences moderate academic preparedness. Students may have completed their OSSD but require higher grades to enter PSE, or they may have been away from formal schooling for a number of years

and benefit from academic upgrading to refresh their skills and knowledge. They may also face a history of interrupted education as a result of caregiving or child-rearing roles.

- Possesses a weak to moderate identity as a university learner. Students' previous life situations may lead them to benefit from the program's emphasis on addressing equity and inclusion.
- Has moderate affiliation needs. Students may benefit from bonding with other women who share similar life experiences over the duration of the course.
- Has moderate to high flexibility needs, potentially as a result of caregiving roles. Students benefit from the evening delivery of the course and/or its proximity to their communities.

The best-fit TYP student:

- Faces high financial barriers that manifest themselves in various ways and may continue to impact them throughout their academic careers, including low income, social assistance or blocks to accessing OSAP. Students benefit from full-time enrolment and their status as York students so that they may finance their participation in TYP through OSAP if necessary, and from the program supports that help them navigate OSAP if they face blocks. TYP students also benefit from the bursaries offered through the program for participation and completion.
- Experiences low academic preparedness due to a lack of completion of their secondary education or a history of interrupted education. Students benefit from the extensive and targeted academic supports.
- Has a weak identity as a university learner and requires the supports designed to facilitate inclusion and belonging, as well as the supports that help students navigate the university as an institution.
- Has high affiliation needs and benefits from the cohort-based model of delivery.
- Has moderate to low flexibility needs. Students may need some accommodation for situational needs that may arise in their lives but can devote themselves to full-time academic study for the two terms (eight months) required to complete the program.

Future Research

This study has shed light on some of the complex and interrelated barriers many non-traditional students face in accessing PSE. It was an initial effort to study the effectiveness of non-traditional pathways into York

University for students seeking admission into a university undergraduate degree program. This initial pilot study revealed a number of areas that require further investigation:

1. Further study into the effectiveness of these non-traditional pathways by specifically reaching out to students who did not complete their first course(s).
2. Further study of alternative pathways at York, such as those operating in conjunction with Colleges of Applied Arts and Technologies. While a substantial number of non-traditional students enter York via this pathway, CAAT transfers were beyond the scope of the initial research.
3. Further study of similar alternative pathways at other PSE institutions in Ontario. To what extent are the preliminary results of ‘best fit’ matching suggested by this pilot study evident in non-traditional students accessing PSE via alternative entrance pathways in other PSE institutions?
4. Further study of other alternative pathways and access initiatives to complement the programs examined here. Three further areas in particular might merit further consideration:
 - Aboriginal students’ needs for culturally relevant academic and support programming.
 - Curricula and program design needed to facilitate more direct access into the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs.
 - Access to graduate programs for applicants who do not meet the minimum admission requirements but for whom prior learning and relevant experience may serve as an equivalent qualification, (see Lennox and Phillip, 2000, e.g.)
5. For non-traditional students, the issue of access to information is even more complex. Recruiting exceptional non-traditional students who come from outside of the formal education system presents a host of challenges. How to reach potential students to deliver information about the alternative pathways that might facilitate their entry into PSE? How to offer information that is accessible to potential applicants unfamiliar with the structure of the university – its admissions processes, academic programs and the like?
6. We might benefit from targeted qualitative research to gather more comprehensive data on learner identities and affiliation needs – aspects of the student experience that are not revealed through quantitative data. Two further areas in particular might merit further exploration:
 - Students with learning disabilities. Students who self-identified as LD consistently expressed some of the weakest identities as university learners, indicating their fears that they were not “good enough,” “smart enough” or prepared enough for university even after completing a

bridging program. We need to better understand LD as a concrete barrier to accessing PSE, the ways it erodes students' identities as university learners and how this might be best addressed by the various alternative pathways/programs. Additionally, we might further explore the means by which we can address the barriers facing low-income LD learners needing to access financial supports for initial diagnosis and accommodation.

- Barriers specifically related to immigrants and refugees, and how status in Canada impacts a student's journey to PSE. Some students reported a history of interrupted education or a need to delay university until they got landed immigrant status because they could not afford international student fees. Others reported financial barriers that arose from the need to send remittances to family members in their home countries. We also need to better understand the concrete barriers affecting immigrant and refugee students and how they might be better addressed by the various alternative entrance pathways.

Recommendations

In light of our findings we offer the following tentative recommendations for any university seeking to meet the challenge of access to university education for non-traditional students:

To ensure best practices for alternative pathways and programs:

- Ensure the presence of course options and offerings at low cost to both men and women facing high financial barriers.
- Ensure the best access to existing supports (academic advising, student financial services, the writing centre, counselling and disabilities services, and the like) by including evening and/or weekend operating hours.
- Ensure that a full array of options exists for effectively contributing to university access priorities by establishing a range of low-, moderate- and high-intervention programs with academic and supplemental supports appropriate to each. A comprehensive list of access programming might include:
 - High-intervention programs. For example, two-semester, full-time programs such as York's Transition Year Program
 - Moderate-high intervention programs. For example, one-semester full-time programs, or courses that meet multiple evenings per week, for students/new immigrants with a high school diploma (or equivalent) in need of moderately intensive transition supports

- Moderate-intervention programs (such as York's pre-university courses or Women's Bridging courses, for example)
- Low-intervention pathways that include direct admission into degree programs, with particular consideration offered for students' various employment and life experiences (for example, the considerations offered by York's admission category of 'mature student')
- Bridging pathways for students into a wide range of academic fields and disciplines, including math, science and professional programs such as social work, business, engineering and the like.

To best match students to alternative pathways:

- Ensure '360-degree' pathway access to university degree programs by establishing a coherent pan-university access vision and supporting strategies into which alternative pathways for non-traditional students would be integrated and coordinated. Such coordination could be an effective way of harnessing complementary benefits, including economies of scale (size) and scope (reach) of both academic and supplemental supports.
- Explore the use of a questionnaire available to prospective applicants offering a self-assessment decision-making guide for selecting the best-fit program.

Maintaining this commitment to an accessible education for the non-traditional student from under-represented populations necessitates a critical understanding of access and its implications: "Access is no longer creating a larger door or a different set of doors on the campus for access. It is moving beyond the campus culture to the multicultural and diverse world of adult contexts, knowledge requirements and learning communities. Thus, the issues of access are more than form, logics or process; it is the reconceptualization of the place and textures of learning and support structures in all areas" (Kassworm et al., 2000, p. 456). Such a commitment can help facilitate opportunity, belonging and inclusion for all students in PSE.

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