

Figure 1 Overview of the adult learning typology

Definition of adult learning

Adult learning is broadly defined as purposeful and directed learning undertaken by adults, either alone or in groups, to increase knowledge and skills, and/or change behaviours, values, or beliefs. This definition includes formal, non-formal, and informal learning but excludes incidental learning.

Non-intentional		Intentional	
Unstructured		Structured	
Incidental learning	Informal learning	Non-formal learning	Formal learning

Definition of adult learners

Core definition:

All learners age 25 and older

Additional components:

Include – learners age 20 to 24 who are pursuing foundational learning

Include – learners age 20 to 24 who are in “adult social roles” such as heading a family or working full-time as a primary activity

Additional considerations depending on research, policy, and program objective:

Exclude – learners over age of 65 if focus is on the working age adults

Exclude – learners pursuing advanced degrees if focus is on adults with lower skills

Exclude – learners who engage in learning primarily for non-labour market reasons

Five types of adult learning

Foundational	Higher Education	Workplace-related	Other Labour Market-related	Personal/Social
Instruction on the basic skills and learning strategies required for further learning or employment, typically below the Grade 12 level or IALS Level 3.	Education or training that is offered by a post-secondary education institution and leads to a post-secondary credential.	Learning related to the firm in which the learner is employed that is supported at least to some extent by the employer, but that is not Foundational or Higher Education.	Learning to improve labour market prospects, but is not related to the firm in which a learner is employed, and is not Foundational or Higher Education.	Learning directed to individuals in the context of their families and communities for the purpose of personal, social, cultural, civic, or spiritual growth or enrichment.