CANADA - INCLUSIVE DISTANCE EDUCATION:
Experiences of Four Canadian Women

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ABSTRACT

Women's participation in higher education in Canada has changed over the past two decades and no longer is the gender gap in university attainment in favour of men. Today young women are graduating from university in higher numbers than are men. Even those women who, for one reason or other, are unable to attend traditional universities are also choosing to participate in higher education. Women not only make up the majority of university graduates they also make up the majority of distance education users. Online and distance education enables many adult women, particularly those who assume multiple roles as mothers, professionals, caregivers and academics, to continue their formal learning. In this paper, framed within the context of feminism, we share with you the stories of four ambitious and successful professional Canadian women studying at a leading Canadian online university.

A review of the literature is also conducted, largely from a US and Canadian view. Canada proves to be a country that values the complexity of the multiple roles that women assume daily and inclusively supports women's choice to pursue post-secondary education or graduate work. We examine the organization of tertiary education in Canada, consider the vast geography of one of the most richly diverse countries in the world, and factors that govern both a woman's decision to seek higher education and; assist in learner satisfaction and retention rates for women in tertiary education. Four experiences of graduate women confirm that Canada's inclusive approach creates satisfied life-long learners.

Keywords: Women and higher education, online and distance education, Canada.

INTRODUCTION

Distance Education (DE) is a delivery and receiving means of education chosen by more and more Canadian women. It is chosen for a variety of factors (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2011, p. 342). Where otherwise marginalized women may not be able to access or regularly attend education, DE provides desired learner interaction, builds a sense of community, fosters 'out of the box thinking' and often removes otherwise existing barriers to learning. Hara & Kling (1999) cite Johnstone and Krauth (1996) in positing that learner satisfaction and achievement "is not significantly different" whether in a DE or traditional classroom learning (p. 4), but the Canadian women in our case studies would argue that without distance education, their education and self-betterment may not or would not be possible.

In a country as large and as diverse as Canada, distance education is capable of providing borderless, asynchronous, and flexible education opportunities. Distance education is capable of bringing classes, courses, diplomas and degrees to demographics that might not otherwise be served. We study Canada's role in inclusiveness in distance education

with four productive Canadian women whose experiences as graduate distance education learners illustrate the power of inclusivity in education.

This study is framed within a Postmodernist-Feminist context as identified by Baily, Leo-Rhynie and Morris (1996) where assumptions are not made about "coherent realit[ies] to which women's experience can be added, rather they assume there are multiple realities and experiences" such as "race, class, culture, and sexual orientation" (p. 14).

Additionally, "these experiences and their influence on the generation of knowledge [i]s fluid, contingent, diverse, and historically and culturally specific" (p. 14). The four women studied come from varied Canadian cultural, racial, socio-economic backgrounds and experiences. In each case, their histories, online learning experiences (positive and negative) and perceptions of male to female representation or ratios in the DE classroom are explored as well as the gender gap in tertiary education.

TERTIARY EDUCATION IN CANADA

Canada is located in the northern part of the continent of North America. It has ten provinces, three territories and is the second largest country in the world encompassing almost 10 million square kilometres. There are slightly more than 35 and a half million people living in Canada today, two thirds of which live within 100 kilometres of the southern border of Canada that is shared with the United States (Statistics Canada, 2015; Councils of Ministers of Education Canada, 2015).
Canada is a very diverse country. Population growth in Canada is due in large part to its immigration policies.

In 2011 Canada's foreign born population was estimated at 20.6% of the total population, the highest proportion among all G8 countries with the largest group coming from Asia (including the Middle East) the Caribbean and Central and South America, Africa and Oceania and other regions (National Household Survey, 2011).
Education in Canada is not a federal responsibility and as such the delivery, organization and assessment of education at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary level is the responsibility of the departments and ministries of education at the provincial or territorial level. Public primary and secondary education in Canada is government funded and tuition free (Councils of Ministers of Education Canada, 2015).

Canada has recognized publicly as well as privately funded post secondary institutions. A recognized postsecondary institution is a private or publicly funded institution that has received full authority to grant degrees, diplomas, and other credentials through a private or public act of the respected provincial or territorial legislature, or through a government mandated quality assurance mechanism (Councils of Ministers of Education Canada, 2015).

Canada supports its female and disabled learners by asking them to clearly, but voluntarily, identifies them.

In Canada, women are not overtly penalized for wishing to return to school and there are loans and grants (Provincial and Federal) to assist with such endeavours. Single mothers, new immigrant mothers, Indigenous, disabled or otherwise potentially marginalized women are provided additional financial and (sometimes free) education supports, along with tax breaks, to make tertiary education accessible and affordable should they feel motivated to continue learning. The more marginalized a woman is, the more supports her (and her family) may be able to access - if they know about them.

Community colleges in Canada are government regulated post secondary institutions that are primarily focused on career training and trades training. Colleges in Canada often go by different names including institute, institute of technology, technical college, regional college, cégep (in Quebec) and university college. Although not always, the entrance requirement to a college is not as high as it is to a university. Colleges offer one, two and sometimes three year programs that lead to a certificate or diploma. Colleges can also offer apprenticeships and sometimes in partnership with a university are able to grant degrees and diplomas (Councils of Ministers of Education Canada, 2015). There are over 130 colleges in Canada. Colleges and Institutes Canada (Colleges and Institutes Canada, 2015) is a national voluntary membership organization that represents colleges, institutes, polytechnics, cégeps and universities with a college mandate (Colleges and Institutes Canada, 2015).

Universities in Canada are government regulated post secondary academic institutions that are primarily focused on theoretical learning. Universities have undergraduate/bachelor's degrees and many also have graduate/master's and doctoral degree programs.

The Association of Universities and Colleges Canada (2015) is a national level non-profit organization that coordinates university policies, guidance and directions. Currently there are 97 public and private not for profit Canadian Universities and university degree-level colleges registered with this association (Association of Universities and Colleges Canada, 2015).

Public post secondary education in Canada is also government funded however students also pay tuition (Councils of Ministers of Education Canada, 2015). In the academic year 2007/2008 annual tuition costs for Canadian students at universities averaged around $4,524 and at colleges and institutes it was $2,400.

In Quebec the residents do not pay tuition at the college level. Education is also funded through government transfer payments to individual students through loans, grants and education tax credits (Statistics Canada, 2015).

ONLINE AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN CANADA

There are many definitions of distance education and few will argue the main goal of distance education is to make higher education more accessible and flexible for adult learners (Moisey & Hughes, 2008; (Parker, 2008; Simonson, et al., 2011). Moore and Kearsley (2005) define distance education as: "Distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching, requiring special course design and instruction techniques, communication through various technologies and special organizational and administrative arrangements" (p.2).

Today most public universities in Canada offer a variety of distance education courses and many universities focus entirely on adult online distance education. There are however, six universities in Canada that focus on distance education and online learning:

Royal Roads University, Thompson Rivers University, Athabasca University, Memorial University, TÉLUQ, and Centre collégial de formation à distance (Bates, 2012).
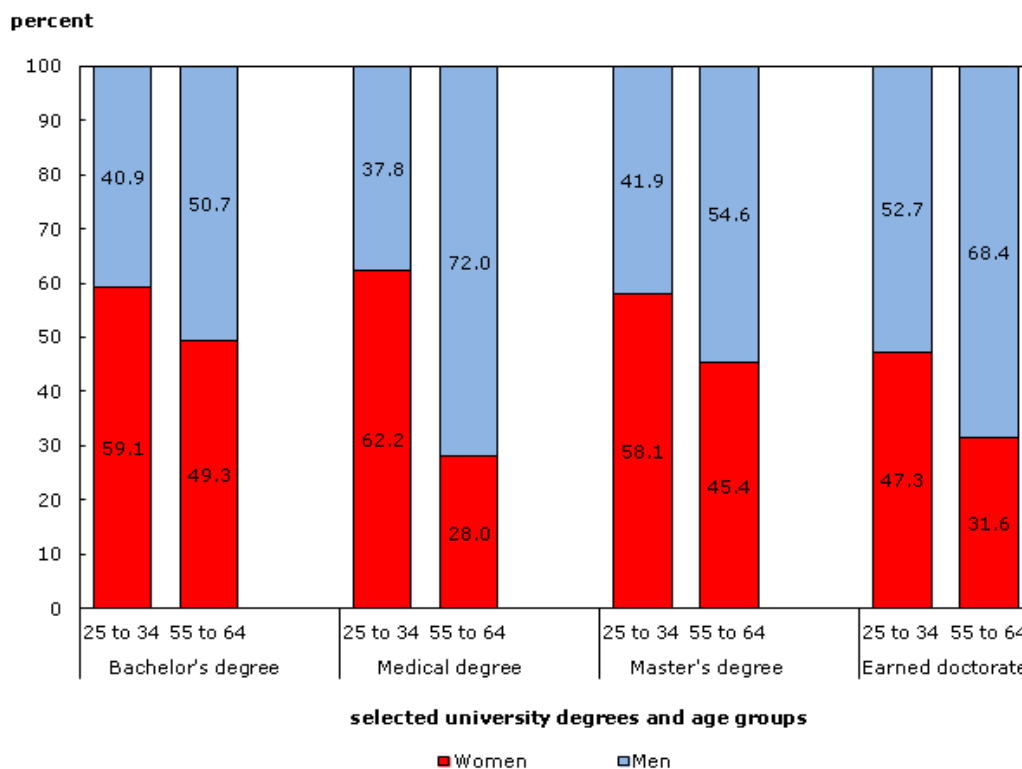
GENDER GAP IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

Twenty years ago the gender gap in tertiary education attainment in Canada leaned in favour of men (Statistics Canada, National Household Survey, 2011).

National Household Survey shows that 25.9% of all Canadians held a university degree and 21.3% held a college diploma. Of the university degree holders aged 25 to 64, women accounted for 53.7%; and of the university degree holders aged 25 to 34, women accounted for just fewer than 60%.

Today in Canada the gender gap in tertiary education attainment leans in favour of women (Statistics Canada, National Household Survey, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the "level of education attainment by sex and age group" with respect to selected university degrees as concluded through statistical analysis. The numbers speak clearly: in 2011, other than women aged 55-64 pursuing doctorates or a medical degree, Canadian women participate almost equally to the numbers of men in erudition pursuits and successes.
Such statistics are encouraging and at one Canadian university, Athabasca University, women in 2012, made up 60% of the student body and most often succeed in completing their distance education courses (Simonson, 2012, p. 72).

Figure 1
Proportion of selected university degrees as the highest
level of educational attainment by sex and age group,
Canada, 2011

Source: Statistics Canada, National Household Survey, 2011.

Canada is not alone. According to data published by The Conference Board of Canada in 2013, 2010 statistics comparing Canada to 15 other countries showed Canada as well as Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Ireland, Australia, Belgium, U.S. and France, all had gender gap imbalances in tertiary education attainment leaning in favour of women in the 25 - 64 age cohort (Gender Gap in Tertiary Education, 2013).

In Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Netherlands, U.K., and Japan however, the gender gap in this same age cohort leaned in favour of men (Gender Gap in Tertiary Education, 2013).

In the younger age group of 25 to 34 year olds however, almost all 15 countries surveyed displayed a gender gap in tertiary education attainment leans in favour of women (Gender Gap in Tertiary Education, 2013).

If Jenkin's (1995) perspective that distance education amplifies any existing imbalances "in participation between sexes [that] occurs in certain disciplines in conventional education" (p. 21), this may suggest that in younger age groups, more and more women are seeking and attaining postsecondary education in general - which is bolstering.

However, in some parts of the globe, further encouragement, supports and access to distance education may be required so as to shrink still existing extensive gender gaps in tertiary education.

Especially when we consider, that "For decades, researchers, theoreticians, and practitioners have attempted unsuccessfully to ensure women's full and active participation in all areas of tertiary education (Stalker, 2001, p. 288).

WOMEN AND ONLINE AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN CANADA

Women tend to make up the majority of online distance education students in North America (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001; Kramarae, 2003; Muller, 2008).

At Athabasca University, for example, women comprise 67% of the undergraduate student population and 70.5% of the graduate student population (Open Magazine, Spring/Summer 2015) with almost all (96.8%) students residing in Canada (Open Magazine, spring summer 2015).

Of the undergraduate level students, 47.% are under the age of 25, 32.9% are aged 25 to 34 and 13.6% are aged 35 to 44 with 5.0% aged 45 to 54. Of the graduate level students, only 2.7% are less than 25, 37.7% aged 25 to 34, 33.6% aged 35 to 44, 21.2% aged 45 to 54 and just less than 5% over 55 (Open Magazine, 2015).

FOUR WOMEN STUDYING AT ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

Below are the personal stories of four ambitious and successful professional Canadian women studying at a leading Canadian online university? Two of the women are enrolled in a Master's degree program and two in a Doctorate degree program. They share with us why they chose online study and what they like and do not like about it.

Participant 1:

Jennifer is 50, unmarried, and lives with her teenager. Jennifer, for various reasons was not able to begin university studies until later in life when her child reached grade school. Right now Jennifer is nearing the end of her Master's degree and she has completed all of her courses online.

As an undergraduate student, Jennifer took part in a blended learning situation where some of her undergraduate courses were taken online and some face-to-face at a local university. Jennifer chose online study initially so she did not have to pay for a sitter and spend time travelling to school.

Once Jennifer's child was old enough to be left alone she continued with online study because of the flexibility and convenience of this mode of learning. In addition to being a parent, Jennifer also works full time. As a result, time is a premium, as she devotes many of her evenings and weekends to her studies.

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Online Learning Experience

Overall Jennifer's online study experience is very positive. She likes online study because of the flexibility; she can study from home and does not have to travel to a class on a specific day and time.

Jennifer finds her classes with the highest levels of interaction are the most engaging and it is in these classes she feels most connected with the instructor and other classmates.

When asked what she doesn't like about online classes Jennifer responds with "absent or unresponsive instructors". When asked what would improve her online learning experience, Jennifer responds with" I would like to see more of the latest synchronous and asynchronous communication tools used".

Gender Composition of Classes

Jennifer thinks men and women learn differently in an online course because she has noticed the women in her classes share personal information in their discussion posts whereas the men do not. She also thinks there are more women than men in her class.

Participant 2:

Guylaine is 62, married and all of her children are grown. Guylaine began post secondary studies a year after completing high school. Guylaine completed her Master's degree online and is currently enrolled in a Doctorate program of study at Athabasca University.

Guylaine chose to study online rather than at a traditional university because the mode allowed her to continue working and looking after her family without relocating. Guylaine is a professional as well as an academic.

Online Learning Experience

Guylaine is very pleased with her online learning experience. She has travelled a lot throughout her current program and regardless of her global position has been able to attend the synchronous sessions with an Internet connection.

Guylaine likes that with online courses she is able to think about her responses before commenting. Guylaine's most positive online learning experience was when she interned in a master's level online course as part of her doctoral program.

When asked what she dislikes about online classes Guylaine responds with inattentive tutors/instructors who fail to respond to classes or students in a timely way. When asked what would improve her online experience, Guylaine suggests the inclusion of both synchronous and asynchronous activities and to have online courses designed and lead by online teaching specialists

Gender Composition of Classes

Guylaine does not think men and women have similar experiences in an online class and her perception is there are more women than men in her online classes, something she can tell from the interactions online.

Participant 3:

Karen is 39, married, and has two small children under five. Karen proceeded to post secondary studies immediately after high school. She has two Master's degrees, which she earned through the online mode of education and she is currently working towards a Doctorate in Education.

Karen likes online classes more than traditional classes because it gives her control over her study schedule that allows her to manage her studies around work and family

obligations. Additionally, Karen is often required to relocate due to her work and with this mode of learning it does not matter where she lives. Karen spends most evenings after her children go to bed studying as well as some vacation time and weekends. Karen is a professional as well as an academic.

Online Learning Experience
Karen is very happy with her online learning experience. Karen likes that she is able to build meaningful relationships with her fellow students through online synchronous and asynchronous communication technologies. She also likes that she is able to formulate her responses before posting - something not possible in a face-to-face classroom. Her most memorable online learning experience occurred during a debate on learning styles in an asynchronous group project. When asked what she doesn't like about online learning, Karen cited a time when she had disconnect with an instructor where the instructor's feedback was not clear and was not received in a timely fashion.

Gender Composition of Classes
Karen's perception is that there are more women than men in online classes, however in her current program of study she feels that the gender composition is about half and half.

Participant 4:
Vanessa is 45, married and has two teenage children. Vanessa proceeded directly to post secondary studies after graduating from high school. Vanessa is currently enrolled in a Master's program of study and this is her first online degree program. Vanessa chose online study out of necessity because of an illness that prevents her from attending a traditional face-to-face university.

Vanessa likes online learning because it allows her to study at home or at the hospital; online study provides a great deal of flexibility so that Vanessa can complete her courses.

Online Learning Experience
Vanessa is very happy with her online learning experience. Vanessa is often fearful that her illness will interfere with her learning schedule; however, this has happily proved not to be the case. Vanessa was ill for two weeks while enrolled in a course and she was pleasantly surprised with the accommodations Athabasca University granted her. Vanessa praises her university's policy on providing flexible learning programs because without the flexibility she would not be able to participate in higher education. When asked what she would like to change in her online courses Vanessa comments she would like to remove the collaborative assignments-simply so that no one else is ever let down by unpredictable illness flares that affect Vanessa's function, which then affects her collaborative partner/s. However, Vanessa has enjoyed the closeness garnered in the friendships and intellectual pursuits together through collaborative assignments so she isn't completely sold in their total removal.

Gender Composition of Classes
Vanessa's perception is that there is a large female demographic in her online courses. She notices the difference in the way men and women communicate in forum discussions; women are more likely to share experiences more fully in their posts where men's posts tend to be shorter and less contextual.

Common Participant Experiences
When asked about negative experiences in online learning courses three of the women surveyed made comments about disengaged and unresponsive instructors/facilitators. Instructors either disappeared for prolonged periods or did not provide clear and timely feedback on assignments. For one student in particular an instructor provided feedback on a first assignment a day prior to the submission of the second assignment. According

to Ustati and Hassan (2013), the success of distance education rests in "Teacher's competency in addressing the students' needs" (p. 293) and cites the research of Fox, 2003; Rosenberg, 2001; Sampson, 2003; Shearer, 2010; Starr-Glass, 2012 in supporting the argument that teachers play a central role in reducing attrition rates and affecting student retention.

ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS & THE FUTURE

Women, especially those women who assume multiple roles as mother, spouse, professional and academic, often choose online and distance education because of its flexibility. A study conducted on women distance learners by J. Furst-Bowe and W. Dittmann (2001) found that, of the women surveyed, nearly 73% of the women had at least one child at home and nearly 64% were employed full time outside the home (p. 407). Juggling the many demands of children, home, work and education can be extremely demanding so it is for this reason that many women seem to gravitate towards distance education (2001, p. 410; Mhehe, 2001, p. 106; Jenkins, 1995, p.6).

Women in North America return to school to further their education for both career related reasons and personal growth and fulfillment (Muller, 2008; Cragg et al., 2005). Indeed this mode of higher education is not without its barriers, it does provide a flexibility not available in traditional modes of higher education and this flexibility provides many women the opportunity to participate in higher education while meeting the demands of family and work obligations (Furst-Bowe and Dittmann, 2001; Kramarae, 2003; Sullivan, 2001). Learners often stay in distance education learning and complete their programs because there is a sense of achievement and learner satisfaction (Ustati & Hassan, 2013). Moisey and Hughes (2008) posit it's a DE program's "smooth administrative processes" that assist in achieving such retention and success (p. 424) while Hyo-Jeong So and A. Thomas (2008) propose that "high levels of collaborative learning" plus;

➢   course structure,
➢   emotional support, and
➢   communication medium" are "critical factors associated with student perceptions of collaborative learning, social presence, and satisfaction" (p. 318).

What is evident in the literature, and in our survey of four Canadian women, is that in Canada, distance education is highly effective because students are supported - if not by their families and cultures (although many are); then by their province and their nation.

Citing Rosenberg (1990) and Stalker (2001), Gouthro (2005) reports, in women, "feelings of lesser self-worth" that is directly related to what he notes is "the unequal distribution of power between men and women" because "in many relationships places women at a disadvantage" (p. 15).

It has been proven that women and men communicate differently in online learning environments. Gunn et al. (2003) mentioned that there are gender differences in styles of participation and contribution in computer mediated communication and they found that women posted and read more messages than their male counterparts on the course bulletin board. Also, a study conducted by Price (2006) has proven that women prefer higher levels of interaction and social connection with fellow students and instructors. Ustati and Hassan (2013) and Simonson (2012) concur. And yet in another study by Machado (2001) it was shown that female students, more than male students, like the social interaction that discussion boards have to offer. There is no arguing female online students are academically engaged, confident independent learners who enjoy the social interaction of online discussion boards.

There are many research studies supporting the importance of instructor presence in online studies. A study conducted by J. Furst-Bowe and W. Dittmann (2001) found that the quality of the course and the learning experience was largely dependent on the instructor. This study cited interaction with instructors as key to the learning experience (p. 406).

Another study conducted by Getzlaf et al. (2009) confirmed that " effective feedback is a crucial aspect of the 'direct instruction' component of teaching presence of online instructors" and that students need the feedback for two reasons; to make improvements in future assignments and to apply to practical situations in their daily lives (Getzlaf et al, 2009).

As Ladyshwesky (2013) concludes in his study, *Instructor Presence in Online Courses and Student Satisfaction*, "there is a relationship between instructor presence and perceived student satisfaction with their online course experience" (p. 2) and goes as far as to postulate, as do others, that rather than student demographics or course design, that course quality depends more on the teacher than how the class is delivered (p. 18; Ustati & Hassan, 2013, p. 293).

CONCLUSION

Our survey concludes with, overall, very satisfied Canadian women distance education experiences. Canada has seen an increase in the presence of women in distance education classrooms, both synchronous and asynchronous. The four Canadian women in article that were surveyed, are satisfied, overall with their distance education experiences in Canada. The survey and this article takes a postmodern feminist approach, as defined by Baily, Leo-Rynie & Morris (1996) in that, it is inclusive of "women's experience" based on "race, class, culture and sexual orientation" (p. 14).

In countries like Canada that celebrate cultural and personal diversity, such factors provide inclusiveness rather than manifesting as misogynistic maligning of women. While research continues to conclude that student outcomes show "no significant difference among student outcomes based on mode of course delivery" (Caplan, 2008, p. 246), distance education offers women the flexibility and accessibility that they may require to balance busy professional with familial and personal lives.

The Canadian university that the women surveyed attend provides many of the supports, services and flexibility that Canadian women require to succeed in tertiary education. Distance education permits education to occur where for some, it may otherwise prove impossible.

In fact, according to data from Athabasca University, in Alberta, Canada, "a greater percentage of women passed distance education courses" (Simonson, et. al., 2012, p. 72). There is an increase in women's participation in online education because there is an increase in online higher education in general (men and women) – however, the growth rate in online higher education is higher than the growth rate in traditional higher education (Barnard, Lan, To, Osland, Paton & Lai, 2009, p.1). This suggests that distance education has a vital role to play in educating Canadian women.

Distance education in Canada has a proven track record of barrier removal, learner success, low attrition rates, and gender inclusiveness. With the United Nations identifying women as "the world's largest excluded group" (Jenkins, 1995, p.6), Canada is providing such inclusiveness in its approach to educating its women and girls - recognizing them as

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valued and valuable contributing members of society, in whom education is worth investing.

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She is a freelance Writer with over 20+ years ESL (Japan & Canada), Theatre and English teaching experience. Fiona assists Canadian women apply or appeal for long term disability benefits. As well, Fiona is a proud alumnus of the University Of Manitoba And The Black Hole Theatre Company. She believes that education assists women (our global "sisters") build better tomorrows for themselves, their families and this earth.

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