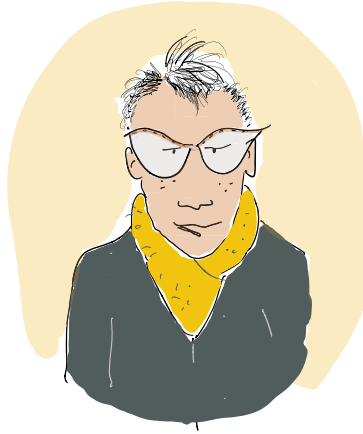


# Older Workers in Nova Scotia

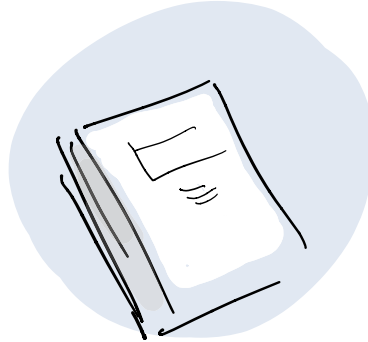


**Nova Scotia Centre on Aging**

**Mount Saint Vincent University**

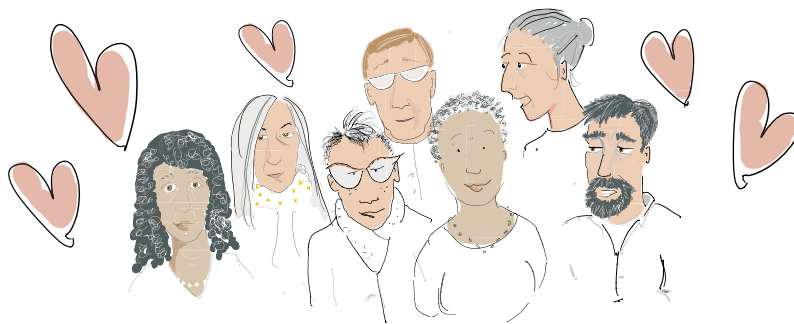
March, 2020

This summary is based on the *Older Worker Employment and Labour Force Participation - Phase 2 Final Report*, Nov. 15, 2018. The report was prepared by the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging as part of a research collaboration on older workers with the Nova Scotia Department of Seniors. To access the full report, visit: [www.novascotia.ca/shift](http://www.novascotia.ca/shift)



This research was done in collaboration with, and with financial assistance from, the Nova Scotia Department of Seniors and the Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Advanced Education.

We are grateful to the older adults and employers from across the province who participated in the focus groups and interviews. We also extend thanks to the Nova Scotia Works Centres that supported this research.



Doodles by Kelly O'Neil

*While the quotations in this infographic are from real people, the drawings do not depict actual persons. Pseudonyms are used instead of participants' names.*

# Introduction

Nova Scotia is committed to promoting the value of older workers and encouraging their labour force participation. Exploring the barriers and enablers to older worker engagement in Nova Scotia is an ongoing priority. In talking to older workers and employers, we learned more about their experiences. Here's how we went about our research:

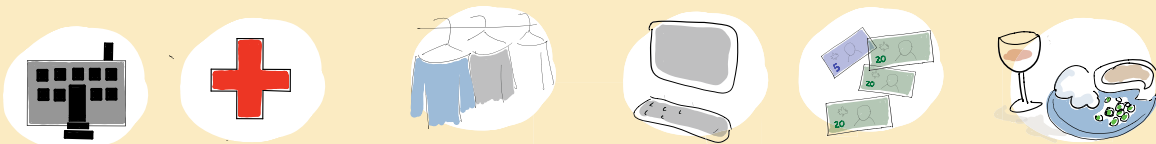
## Focus Groups and Interviews with Older Workers

In 2018, we held 9 focus groups with 57 older workers (age 55+) at 6 locations across Nova Scotia, and conducted follow-up interviews with 10 of the participants. We wanted to find out what makes workplaces feel welcoming, inclusive, and supportive for them.



## Interviews with Employers

We also spoke with 18 Nova Scotia employers from a range of sectors. We wanted to learn more about their experiences in recruiting and retaining older workers.



# OLDER WORKERS' STORIES

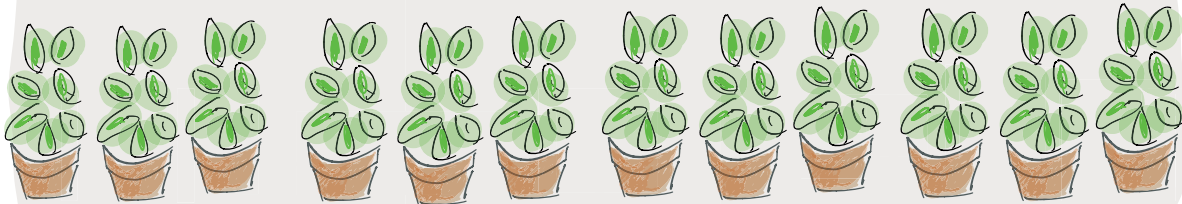
**“You’re going to have to deal with the fact that ageism is a big part of this.”**

**Annie** sees herself as capable and job-ready but has struggled to find lasting employment. She was picking up some subtle cues from employers in job interviews. “You would get these, you know, micro emotions, you come in and you see, just for a second, that crestfallen look. And then the interview would go fine, but you never heard from them again.... When it repeats often enough, you recognize that it is a pattern.”



Unstable employment has taken a huge toll on Annie. “It’s a constant juggling act,” she says. “Last winter I didn’t have enough work in to get EI (Employment Insurance) and it was a terrible panic— an absolute, gut wrenching, lie-awake-at-night panic.” Annie doesn’t see her experience as unique. “You read a lot about millennials having trouble... not being able to get jobs, and resenting boomers because the boomers won’t quit their jobs and retire....But you don’t hear nearly as much about the reverse—that it can be really desperate to be an older person trying to survive.”

“It’s really depressing... I can go back to school, I can get new clothes, I can do all kinds of things, but I can’t change my age.”





# The Older Workers We Talked To

## Gender, Age, Identity

12% identified as being a visible minority or aboriginal

57 people  
90% aged 55-64  
60% female

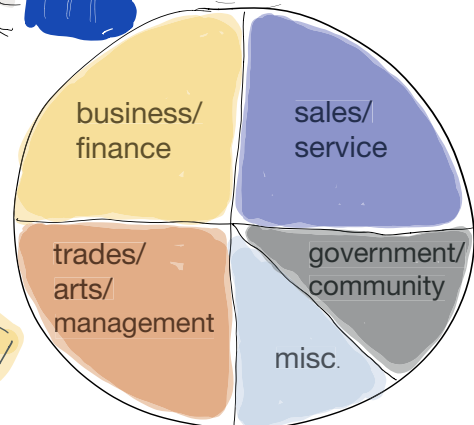
More than half were unemployed

40% had a disability

## Education

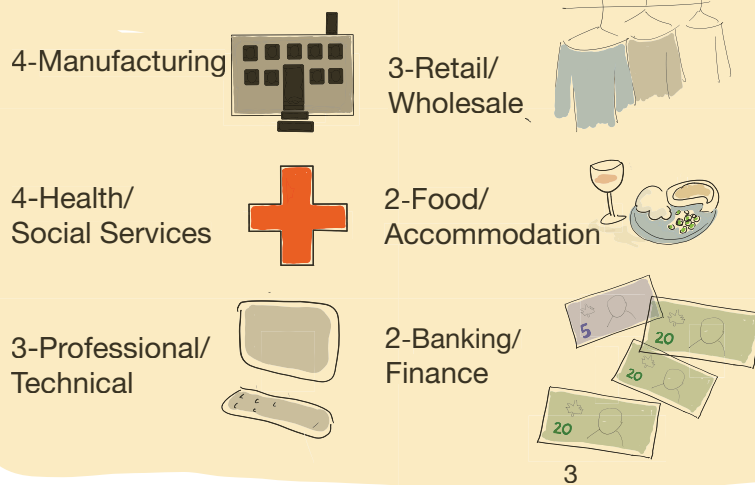
%	
37	high school
28	university degree
12	college diploma
12	didn't complete high school
9	some college/university
2	not reported

## Workers' Employment Type



# The Employers We Talked To

## Number Per Sector



## Number of Employers

## Proportion of staff who were older workers

7	less than 25%
6	25-50%
4	more than 50%

(one employer did not report)

# OLDER WORKERS' STORIES



**“I felt useful, I felt better at the end of the day, working, than I did sitting around.”**

**Beverly** has had a challenging financial road since she was “pushed out” of a professional job several years ago – “more or less forced to take a pay out” as part of a restructuring process in which she feels older workers were targeted. “There were times I was really in a bit of a desperate situation,” says Beverly, who sometimes had to rely on friends for support, and at one point, had to apply for income assistance.

For the past few years, Beverly has been acquiring casual work through temp agencies, and although the work is sporadic, “the extra money coming in certainly does help.” Previously, Beverly worked at a call centre for minimum wage. “I was always exhausted after working a shift. I hated it, but I did what I had to do to survive.”

In her 60s, Beverly is now seeking work for two or three days a week. She says job openings in the field for which she trained in university are rare, and although she’s had a couple of interviews for positions in her chosen profession, she’s had no luck in landing a job. Beverly believes her age is a factor in not finding work. “(Employers) say they don’t consider your age, but they do,” she maintains. “They’re smart enough not to tell you that right out, but they’ll hint around at your age.” Working is more than about a paycheck: “I felt useful, I felt better at the end of the day, working, then I did sitting around or trying to find something for myself to do....I felt better about myself.”

# What Helped These Older Workers Find and Keep a Job?

## Employment Programs for Older Workers

A few people described taking part in a program as "transformative" in restoring confidence, providing personal support, and professional mentoring.



## Peer and Social Supports



"You're with 15 people that are feeling the same thing that you are."



Being able to connect with peers when seeking work was especially important.

"When you're not working and you don't have that social network, it's a problem."

## Generational Work Ethic

Older workers saw their dependability, reliability, and years of life and work experience as key assets for employers.

This (older workers') program was a very positive thing because it got me to where I am now. I'm in a very good place."

## OLDER WORKERS' STORIES



**“I think I would really struggle not having much on my plate... I think I’d get very old.”**

“I can’t think of a single time that I’ve been treated with ageism by an employer,” says **Jennifer**. That observation made this late 50s community worker something of a rarity among her peers in the older worker focus groups.

Jennifer was curious about other participants’ descriptions of encountering ageism in their job search process. “The one thing that struck me around the table....was that (people were) so sure that the reason for the struggle was their age. I don’t know how you could ever know that that was the case.... it could well be true, but how could you know?”

Jennifer had a bit of a revelation during the focus group. She used to make her lack of computer expertise a subject of self-deprecating humour among colleagues, but thinks she’ll handle this differently going forward. She sees the potential for joking about her lack of technical skills to generate negative stereotypes about older workers. “At the office, I’m going to really make an effort not to be seen that way.”

Retirement at 65 is not an option for Jennifer. “I need to (work past 65) for more than just financial reasons,” she says. “I think I would really struggle not having much on my plate....I think I’d get very old.” Jennifer’s wish to remain part of the workforce past age 65 is also driven by a greater purpose. “For me, it’s to try to leave this place a little better than when we started, and to do things that can impact the community.”

# Some Barriers That Keep Older Workers from Working

## Ageism

Older workers who saw themselves as highly skilled and employable linked their inability to find work to ageist hiring practices. Perceived ageist attitudes from employers left some people feeling skeptical about their employment prospects.



### Ageism compounded by racism, ableism

One older worker said that racism had been a greater barrier to employment than ageism.

A worker who uses a walker thought this influenced an employer's decision not to hire this person.



### Internalized Ageism

One man called himself a "digital dinosaur" and worried about how his age might be a factor in finding work. A female peer suggested that "How Not to Look Old" seminars could be helpful.

### Ageism can be a two-way street

Some older workers expressed negative stereotypes of younger peers—"attached to their phones"; "don't show up for work"—highlighting that ageism can work both ways.



## OLDER WORKERS' STORIES

**“It gives you a downgraded feeling. I never, ever had any trouble finding a job when I was out in the marketplace.”**

**William**, in his early 70s, was unemployed for over a year. Health issues had derailed his successful career as a self-employed sales broker. Left without income, he struggled to find his way back into self-employment, but new clients were few and far between.



William eventually switched tracks to job-seeking. He felt well qualified for advertised positions, sometimes got interviews, but couldn't land a job.

William's experiences have left him frustrated and perplexed. “I think that when (employers) look at the resume, they start adding up the years. They say... this person is not 25 years old, and he may be well experienced, but we're looking for somebody younger. I strongly feel that's the bottom line.”



# Other Barriers to Employment

## Changing Culture in the Job Market and Workplace

"I grew up knowing your worth is based on the work you do. That world has gone away."

Some older workers felt challenged by a changing work world with new social norms and different hiring and workplace practices.



## Health and Physical Challenges

Several older workers had to change or leave employment due to health or physical challenges.

"Physical work is a problem for my health. One day of hard work (takes me) three days to recover."



"My approach is to take time—quality vs. quantity."

## An Outdated Retirement-at-65-Mindset

Many workers planned to work past 65. They said the idea of age 65 as a retirement norm means employers might not hire them due to a perceived limited return on investment.

## Lack of Peer Supports

"I don't have networks.... I have become very isolated."

## Access to Information and Training

Some older workers were unclear about eligibility and availability of employment training programs and supports. Being able to afford training and up to date technology was also a challenge.

# OLDER WORKERS' STORIES

**“I have a living example of a positive work environment.”**

**David**, who is in his early 60s, lives in a rural community where he’s working multiple jobs to help cover the cost of specialized medical equipment for a health condition. David worked in retail management most of his life.

His last job came to an end in a phone call telling him his services were no longer needed. “I was gobsmacked,” he says.



Feeling “discouraged and depressed,” he signed up for an employment program targeting older workers offered through the local Nova Scotia Works Centre. He says it was “the best decision I ever made in my life.”

Through the program, David found his current full-time job, where he couldn’t be happier. He said, “I have a living example of a positive work environment. The people that I work with... are all ages... ethnic backgrounds... that creates a synergy that gets things done. I have not had one bad day since I started here.” David attributes his success to the program. “It was key,” he says, “because you realize that you are not a worthless, disposable person; things happen, it’s happened to other people as well, and you can draw strength from each other.”

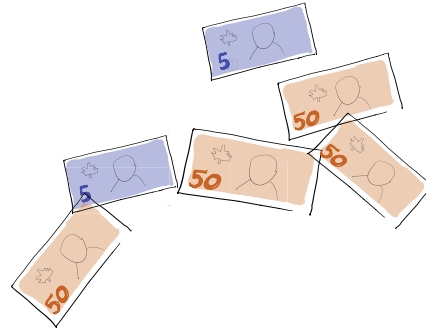


## 'Work After Work': Retirement Plans

An abrupt or complete removal from the workforce was not on most workers' radar. Many planned to gradually transition to retirement through part-time work, working multiple jobs or shifting into self-employment.



Financial pressures, like limited savings and pensions, were a factor in the decision to work past 65. But finances were not the only motivator.



## Meaning of Work for Older Workers

People spoke about the deep value and meaning they find in working.

"I'm going to keep going until I can't keep going anymore. I need a purpose. I need a mission. And retirement without some kind of objective just wouldn't work for me."



## OLDER WORKERS' STORIES

**“I have to keep telling myself every day it’s not a job performance thing – but it still feels like it.”**

“It was a big shock.... I certainly wasn’t expecting that outcome at all.” That’s how **Jane** describes the recent loss of a much-loved contract position working for a nonprofit.

Shortly after an older worker focus group session where this participant in her early 60s spoke glowingly of her employment doing front-facing work, she got word that her contract was not being renewed.

News of the organizational re-structure behind the contract termination was a blow, particularly since Jane lost a former position in a previous re-structure. “I have to keep telling myself every day it’s not a job performance thing, as I’ve been told very clearly,” she says, “but it still feels like it.”

Overall, she says she is “feeling positive that I have the skill set to do a lot,” but acknowledges, “I’m hesitant about my age.” Jane feels her technical skills need some brushing up to make her more competitive in the job market. “When you’re sitting in a room where four 25-year-olds are applying for a position,” she says, “...all those feelings are welling up.”

Maintaining her confidence through the job search process is one of Jane’s biggest challenges as an older worker. Her previous attachment to an older worker employment program has helped with this. “You come away (from the program) with a new term: LE – life experience, and I think it’s valuable,” she says. “You can’t buy it. You can’t teach it.”



# What We Heard From Employers

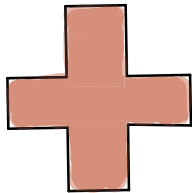
## No Perception of Ageism

The employers we spoke with didn't share the view that ageism may be a barrier, and they didn't see themselves as ageist.

Almost all the employers had older workers on staff, including people in their 60s and 70s, and even one worker in their 90s.

The employers said that age was not a factor in their hiring. They said they looked instead at job applicants' attitudes, skills, and experience.

## Older Workers Can Fill Niche Jobs

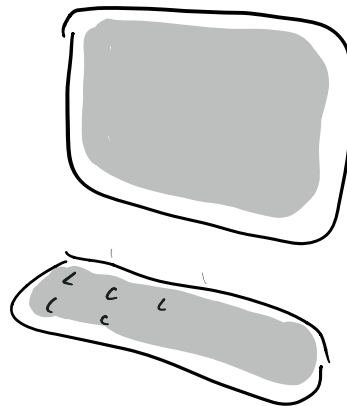


“(Older workers) have a fierceness about them. They’re comfortable with personal care. The younger workers have learned it from books... whereas the workers with experience have learned it over the years, and it's innate with them.”

Employers in the health sector identified older workers' capacity to show compassion to clients as a strong asset in caregiving work.

A tourism employer said older workers are a good fit for seasonal work that faces staff shortages when students return to school.

A trucking industry employer said older workers fill a sector gap in their willingness to take on long haul routes that may not appeal to younger workers with families.



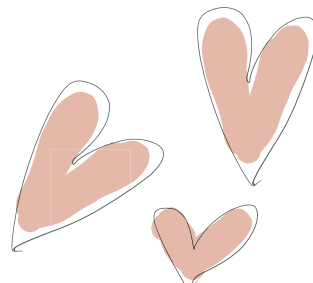
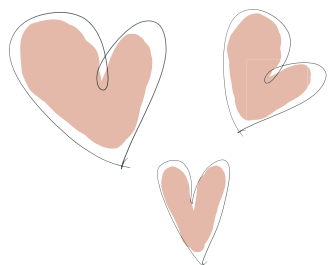
# What We Heard From Employers

## No Anticipated Labour Force Gaps

Most employers weren't concerned about skills gaps with the retirement of older workers. They said they had more applicants than available jobs.

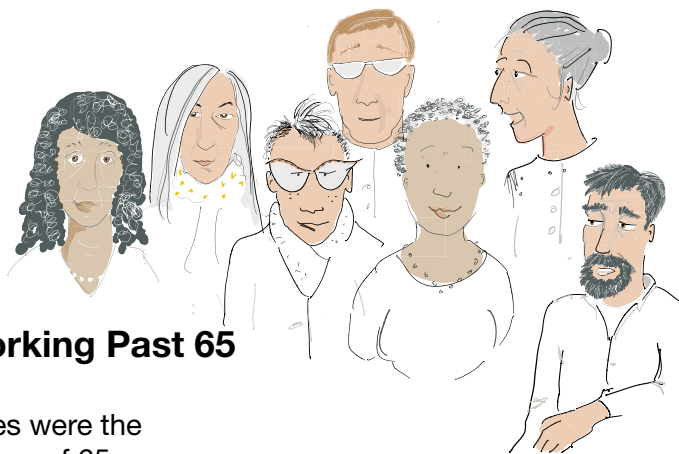
Among the few employers who had concerns, most didn't have any formal succession planning or targeted hiring practices to attract older workers.

"Some of our retirees have returned to the workforce and they have been excellent. They have extensive knowledge of the business and great values. When we welcome them back, it's a win-win."



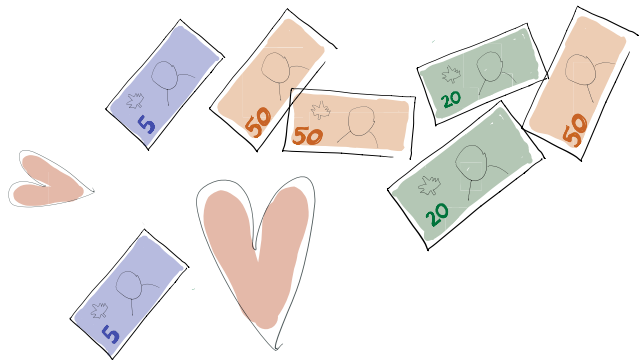
## Older Workers are Highly Regarded

Employers described their older workers as reliable, hard-working, and knowledgeable. They saw older workers' interpersonal skills and the ability to problem solve as core strengths.



## Money the Main Driver for Working Past 65

A number of employers thought finances were the main reason their employees over the age of 65 were still working.

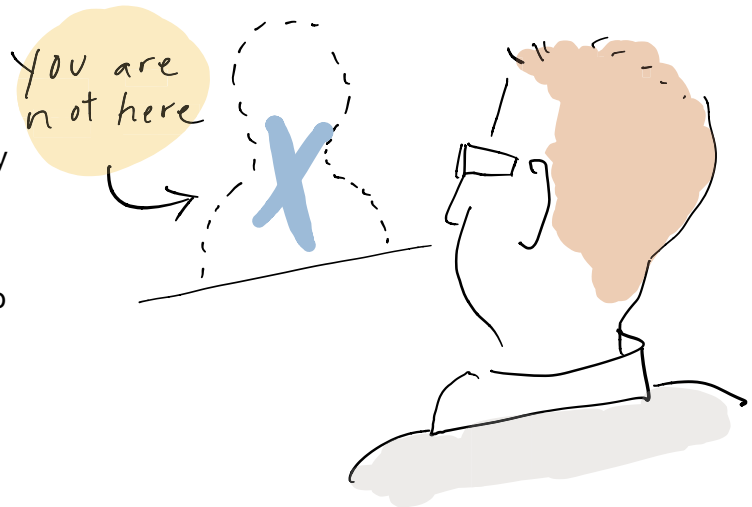


"I think its pretty obvious why they are here...I mean, why else would you get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to go to work for 12 or 13 hours a day at 70 years old?"

# What We Heard From Employers

## Skills Retraining, Physical Challenges

The employers said they accommodate older workers as they would do for employees of any age. When challenges arose, employers used strategies like peer mentoring or work re-assignment to get the job done.



## Lack of Older Workers as New Hires

It seemed that many on-staff older workers were long-term employees aging in place, rather than recently hired older adults.

When asked if they had worked with employment supports like Nova Scotia Works to explore ways of attracting older workers, most had not.

"Not many people over 65 (are) applying for the jobs.... We're open to bringing in more... they are just not arriving or applying."

## Interactions with Younger Workers



Employers described mainly harmonious relationships between older and younger workers in their workplaces. Some saw a mentoring role for older workers with younger staff.

# Now What?

## Ideas From Older Workers

### Government/ Employment Service Centres

#### Offer Customized Employment Initiatives for Older Workers

- interview support
- career exploration
- work placements
- better program promotion
- include people age 50+

#### Target Employer HR Personnel as Change Agents

- challenge stereotypes
- promote value of older workers

#### Better Access to Computer/ Software/Entrepreneurial Training

- improve visibility, affordability

#### Enhance Opportunities for Peer Support

- link older workers online, through community hubs

### Employers

#### Support Flexible Work Options

- part-time/casual work
- flex time

#### Promote Positive Intergenerational Workplace Relationships

- support initiatives that encourage dialogue between generations



For information on employment  
and career services in Nova Scotia  
visit: [www.novascotia.ca/works](http://www.novascotia.ca/works)

# Now What?

## Our Take Aways From Employers

### Government/ Employment Service Centres

#### Target Older Workers for Niche Positions

- identify jobs that would benefit from flex time, skills, experience of older workers

#### Promote Older Worker Engagement

- create a public awareness campaign to promote the value of older workers
- develop an evidence-based tool using an older worker lens for HR personnel in recruiting and hiring

#### Share Employer Best Practices

- showcase real-life examples of successful strategies for hiring and retaining older workers

For information on recruitment, planning, and retention services in Nova Scotia visit:  
[www.novascotia.ca/works](http://www.novascotia.ca/works)

### Employers

#### Leverage Older Workers' Time, Skills, Experience

- build a roster of retirees interested in staying connected
- explore opportunities for intergenerational mentoring

#### Use an Age-Friendly Lens in Recruiting and Hiring to:

- review current practices
- identify potential ageism

#### Connect with Nova Scotia Works

- for help in supporting older workers in the workplace and job market





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Mount Saint Vincent University  
2020  
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