

A Description of Post-Secondary Early Learning and Child Care Programs in Alberta with Strategies to Advance the Educational Preparation of Early Childhood Educators



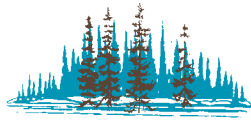
The Muttart Foundation



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Introduction

Educated and well-supported early childhood educators provide the foundation for high-quality early learning and care. Researchers and professional staff working in the field agree on the vital roles early childhood educators play in young children's early learning and care. They further recognize the importance of staff's formal educational preparation in helping them support the high-quality early learning and care experiences that benefit young children and their families.

Across Canada, however, early learning and care workforces remain modestly prepared, and service providers report challenges in recruiting sufficient numbers of staff with post-secondary qualifications. Further, qualified early childhood educators often leave the field, some after relatively short periods of practice, given the combined impacts of limited career opportunities, challenging working environments and modest rates of remuneration.

Recognizing the above, a number of provincial governments (including those in Ontario and British Columbia) have recently explored ways in which they might increase the number of qualified early childhood educators. While this work remains preliminary, it sheds some light on the challenges governments face in increasing the capacity of early learning and care workforces, including the need to match increases in educational qualifications with better working conditions and improved remuneration for early childhood educators.

In beginning to consider how to increase the number of early childhood educators with higher-level qualifications in Alberta, the current study provides an overview of the post-secondary educational programs that prepare students to work in early learning and care (with a specific focus on regulated child care programs and services). It describes the level and nature of the programs of study post-secondary

institutions offer, their models of delivery, the number of students who attend them and the number who graduate on an annual basis. It concludes with the outline of some preliminary strategies to increase the number of students who graduate with early learning and care qualifications, while also seeking to raise the level or quality of these qualifications. The strategies proposed draw on discussions with post-secondary faculty as well as the findings from comparative research literature.

To provide some background, or context, to the current study there are two introductory discussions. The first summarizes the key findings from research that examines the formal educational preparation of staff who work with children below the mandatory school age. The second outlines the educational requirements staff require to work in early learning and care settings in Alberta (with a focus on licensed or approved child care services).

The findings from the current study add to the limited information available on the educational preparation of early childhood educators in Alberta. Previous national research by the Childcare Human Resources Sector Council, from 2003 to 2013, provides foundational information on early childhood educator training, pathways to credentialing, as well as career and recruitment strategies and the workforce itself. This research requires updating, however, to reflect changes in how provinces and territories approach early learning and care and how the field has evolved and continues to develop.

The current study does not explore the related improvements required in early childhood educators' remuneration and working conditions both to attract larger numbers of qualified students into the field in the first instance and to encourage them to stay after they graduate in the second. Changes in all three areas – staff educational preparation, remuneration and working conditions – will be required to build a more qualified, well-supported, Alberta early learning and care workforce; one better able to meet the complex early learning and care needs of young children and their families.

The Educational Preparation of Early Childhood Educators – Perspectives from Research and the Field

The formal educational preparation of early childhood educators is a specialized field. Students seeking to work in early learning and care must develop a strong knowledge of early learning pedagogies supported by the appropriate skills and motivations required to work with children below the mandatory school age and their families.

The knowledge, skills and competencies early childhood educators bring to their work significantly impact service quality (OECD, 2006 and 2012). The formal (preservice) education staff complete is critical in supporting their development of this knowledge and the accompanying skills and competencies (Bueno, Darling-Hammond and Gonzales, 2010; Sylva, K., Meluish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B., 2010). Better qualified staff are more likely to create high-quality learning environments (Elliot, 2006; Sheridan, 2009) and better able to support the stable, sensitive and stimulating interactions that foster children's early learning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011).



Early Childhood Educator Educational Qualifications

The research which examines the educational preparation for early childhood educators is complex. It includes discussions of both the level and nature of formal education staff require to work in early learning and care environments with young children and their families (OECD, 2012).

Level of Formal Education

Across countries, the education for early childhood educators (including certificated teachers) varies significantly from just over a week of instruction to the completion of six years of post-secondary education (OECD, 2012). There is still a common division, including in Canada, between staff who work with younger children who have lower levels of formal education and a greater range in their qualifications, and staff who work with older pre-school children (often certificated teachers) who hold a more common set of post-secondary qualifications (Oberhuemer, 2011).

In Canada, certificated teachers in school-based programs hold a degree qualification, while staff who work with younger children hold qualifications that range from a post-secondary diploma to the completion of non-credit courses (Muttart Foundation, 2014). In the case of family child care providers there are often no formal qualifications required (Flanagan, Beach, Michal & Cormier, 2009).

The provinces and territories further differ in the proportion of staff required to hold specific levels of qualification (e.g. a two-year diploma) in particular service settings. In contrast to other OECD jurisdictions, no Canadian province or territory requires child care staff to hold a degree qualification.

Internationally, a number of countries are working to raise the educational qualifications for staff who work with young children in early education and care programs or services.

In the United States, for example, a growing number of states require prekindergarten teachers (for four-year old children) to have qualifications similar to those of public kindergarten teachers. A congressional reauthorization of Head Start required that 50 percent of lead teachers hold bachelor degrees by 2013.

In 2002, the New Zealand government required all staff in child care centres to seek three-year diploma or degree qualifications and be formally registered, as are kindergarten teachers, by 2012 (Meade & Podmore, 2010; Meade A., Robinson L., Smorti S., Stuart M., & Williamson J., 2012). Similarly, over a decade ago, Sweden raised the educational qualifications for its early childhood education and care workforce to a three- or four-year degree for core program staff and a three-year post-secondary professional diploma for staff in assistant positions.

A recent government commissioned report in the United Kingdom, calls for a minimum of 70 percent of the early years workforce to hold a diploma qualification, with team leaders holding a higher qualification (Nutbrown, 2012). The European Commission Network on Childcare has set a target for 60 percent of the early education and care workforce to hold a three-year degree credential (Oberhuemer, 2011).

The move to raise educational requirements reflects research findings which show that staff with higher levels of qualification are more likely to use approaches and practices that contribute to improved outcomes for children and their families (Barnett, 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Mitchell, Wylie & Carr, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Bueno, Darling-Hammond & Gonzales, 2010; and Pianta & Hadden, 2008). Staff with higher levels of formal education are also better able to engage with parents and to speak with stakeholders about the unique nature of early education and care and its value (Dalli & Rockel, 2012; Meade, Robinson, Smorti, Stuart & Williamson, 2012).

Specialized Qualifications

A combination of higher education with an early childhood specialization is considered the best formal preparation for staff to deliver high-quality programs (Bennett, 2009; Goffin, 2013). This finding raises questions about both the use of equivalency qualifications to address staff recruitment and retention challenges (Flanagan, Beach, Michal & Cormier, 2009) and the application of teaching approaches more commonly used with school-age children in early learning settings (referred to as 'schoolification'). Some researchers further advise that the unique nature of work with infant and toddlers, as well as with children with disabilities, requires

additional educational specialization (OECD, 2012).

Supervisors and senior staff in early education and care settings are also seen to benefit from additional formal educational preparation in management, administration and pedagogical leadership (Goffin, 2013; OECD, 2006; Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2011; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & van Laere, 2011; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). In Canada, no province or territory currently requires directors in full-day child care centres to hold a management or leadership educational credential; although a number of post-secondary institutions offer leadership and management educational opportunities for early childhood educators.

Quality and Consistency of Post-Secondary Educational Programs

Researchers in the US and beyond highlight the quality and consistency of early childhood teacher preparation programs as important considerations (Cho & Couse, 2008; Hyson, Biggar Tomlinson & Morris, 2009; Hyson, Horm & Winton, 2012; Tarrant, Greenberg, Kagan, & Kauerz, 2008). They argue that programs must be of a consistently high-quality and must reflect the specialized education and training (including practicum placements) required to work with preschool-age children (Early, Maxwell, Burchinal, Alva, Bender, Bryant, & Zell, 2007; Cho & Couse, 2008).

Research by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council has also considered the quality and consistency of educational programs for early childhood educators as well as documenting the pathways for credentialing in Canada (Beach and Flanagan. n.d.; Flanagan, Beach, Michal and Cormier, 2009). This research identifies strategies to increase the consistency of post-secondary educational programs for early childhood educators with a focus on the accreditation of programs of study.



The Educational Requirements for Early Childhood Educators in Alberta

By comparison to other jurisdictions, the educational preparation of early childhood educators in Canada remains modest. The educational requirements for the early learning and care workforce in Alberta are no exception.

All provinces require staff in licensed centre-based child care programs to hold some level of education. The qualifications staff require to meet provincial certification requirements range from entry-level (orientation) courses through to post-secondary certificate and diploma credentials. Provinces differ in the percentage or number of staff they require to have completed a post-secondary credential in licensed child care centres. Provinces do not require regulated or approved family child care (day home) providers to hold post-secondary early childhood credentials.

A number of provinces have identified the need to increase the level of formal education staff in child care services require to work with young children and their families. To date, however, their efforts to increase these levels of education have been limited.

The Educational Preparation of Early Childhood Educators in Alberta

There are an estimated 15,500 certified early childhood educators in Alberta working in centre-based child care services, family day homes and out-of-school care programs (Ministry of Children's Services, March 2017).¹ Staff in licensed child care, out-of-school care programs and preschool programs are certified at one of three levels, based on their early learning and care educational qualification or an equivalency assessed by the Alberta Child Care Staff Certification Office (Government of Alberta, 2013).

- *Child Development Assistant*: based on the completion of the Child Care Orientation Course; completion of courses through Alberta high schools CTS program; or completion of a 45-hour (3 credit) college-level course in child development.
- *Child Development Worker*: based on the completion of a one-year Early Learning and Child Care certificate program offered by an Alberta public college, approved private college or an equivalent level of training.
- *Child Development Supervisor*: based on the completion of a two-year Early Learning and Child Care diploma program offered by an Alberta public college or university, approved private college or an equivalent level of training.

The equivalencies for Child Development Worker certification include degree programs (e.g. Bachelor of Science in Human Ecology) and diploma programs (e.g. Educational Assistant) in related fields, while those for Child Development Supervisor certification include an Alberta Permanent Teaching Certificate and other related degree and diploma programs. The Ministry of Children's Services revised the educational equivalencies for certification in April 2018 removing those qualifications used infrequently by applicants seeking certification.

Once obtained, certification does not expire and there are no renewal requirements.

The Ministry of Children's Services also regulates family day home services (also known as family child care providers). Family day home providers are not required to complete formal post-secondary education or hold specified educational qualifications.

Ministry of Children's Services workforce data provided for March 2017 show that 45 percent of the active early childhood educator workforce is certified at the Child Development Supervisor level, 40 percent at the Child Development Assistant level and 15 percent at the Child Development Worker. Based on these data, an estimated 9,300 certified early childhood educators have completed either a one-year Early Learning and Child Care certificate or two-year diploma program or an equivalent level of education. The estimated annual turnover rate within the workforce (staff who leave their current position within a given year) is 25 percent.

¹ Data were not available on staff in preschool programs

Post-Secondary Early Learning and Care Educational Programs in Alberta

Students seeking early learning and care certificate and diploma qualifications in Alberta attend post-secondary institutions across the province. The Ministry of Children's Services, which certifies early childhood educators, recognizes qualifications from 10 of Alberta's public 'community' colleges, two universities and two private career colleges. The Ministry also recognizes qualifications from two Indigenous post-secondary institutions: Maskwacis Cultural College and University Blue Quills. Both of these institutions are members of the First Nations Adult and Higher Education Consortium.

In 2016 the University of Alberta introduced an on-line Early Childhood Education Certificate program through the Faculty of Education. The program is designed for professional staff (teachers and other educators) seeking an early learning specialization. The certificate is not recognized by the Ministry of Children's Services for certifying early childhood educators to work in child care settings. Given this, the program is not discussed more fully in the current study.

The early learning and care certificate, diploma and degree programs of study offered by public institutions require government approval through the Ministry of Advanced Education. Private career colleges seeking to offer early learning and care credentials pursue an application and licensing process through the same Ministry that demonstrates labour market demand for the program of studies and evidence that the 'industry' supports the proposed curriculum.

In the absence of a professional or regulatory body for the field, the Ministry of Children's Services makes the secondary determination as to whether or not the credentials offered by public and private institutions are eligible for certification, thus enabling staff to work in the field. The Ministry makes this determination based on a review of a program's content, the hours of instruction students receive and the nature and level of staff qualifications.

There are transfer agreements between individual public post-secondary institutions for students who wish to continue their early learning and care education at a different institution. A number of public colleges also have articulation agreements with universities that enable students to enter degree-level programs with some advanced standing. Some public colleges and both public universities do not recognize, for transfer purposes, the credentials students complete through the two private career colleges that offer early learning and care programs of study.

The following descriptions of post-secondary programs at public colleges, universities and private career colleges draw on information provided by program faculty as well as from public data sources. They outline the models of program delivery, program admission criteria, and provide information, where available, on the number of students enrolled and the number who graduate in a typical year. They further highlight any key features of the programs of study and, where possible, provide comment on a program's potential capacity to accommodate an increased number of students.

Public Colleges (Comprehensive Community Institutions)

Ten of Alberta's eleven public colleges (Comprehensive Community Institutions) offer programs of study that lead to early learning and care qualifications. Each college has a mandate to serve a primary geographic area (e.g. Calgary and region, Northwestern Alberta), although most now also serve students from outside their primary geographic region through the on-line delivery of programs of study. Nine of the ten public colleges provide programs of study that lead to early learning and care credentials at both the certificate and diploma levels.

Bow Valley College

Bow Valley College is the largest provider of early learning and care programs of study in the province. The College's main campus is located in downtown Calgary with six regional campuses in surrounding communities including Airdrie and Okotoks.

The College offers certificate and diploma programs of study in a number of formats including in class, on-

line (any-time and real-time) and blended. The program typically has an intake of 120 students in the fall term (30 certificate and 90 diploma students) and 80 students in the winter term (20 certificate and 60 diploma students).

On average 400 students are enrolled in the certificate and diploma programs. College faculty report wait lists for both the certificate and diploma programs, with the diploma program more oversubscribed than the certificate program. For the 2015/16 academic year, there were 119 certificate graduates and 116 diploma graduates.

The College recently raised its student admission requirements. Applicants to early learning and care programs require credit in English 30-1, a 65 percent mark in English 30-2, the successful completion of the General Educational Development test (GED) or satisfactory results on the Bow Valley College Admissions Test. The program language requirements are a 6.0 average score on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) with a minimum of 5.5 in any band. The College also offers ongoing support for students with English as a second language. Students with previous post-secondary education can apply for prior learning assessment on a course-by-course basis. Students can also enroll in individual courses to complete a credential.



The College provides students with a flexible program of studies. It allows certificate and diploma students to move between day and evening courses and to adjust the number of courses they take per semester. The College will also consider requests for community-based program delivery. Commencing fall 2018, the College will deliver the early learning and care certificate program at the Okotoks regional campus. Program faculty advise that the use of flexible delivery models helps to reduce student attrition rates.

As part of their studies, students have access to a 'learning lab' and can complete practicum placements in a lab classroom supported through the Bow Valley College Child Care Centre. Program faculty advise that students have the option of completing all of their major practicum placements in their workplaces, but are discouraged from doing so.

Bow Valley College has formal student transfer agreements in place with a number of public college and university programs. The College is currently pursuing a formal transfer agreement with the Bachelor of Child Studies degree program at Mount Royal University.

The Early Learning and Child Care program has eight full time faculty, all of whom have either completed or are completing graduate degrees.

Program faculty advise that the Early Learning and Child Care programs are well-supported within the College, and could be expanded given either the demonstrated need for more graduates with early learning and care credentials or an increase in the number students applying to pursue early learning and care studies. They report that the challenge of finding appropriate (high-quality) practicum placements for students may present a barrier to program expansion.



Grande Prairie Regional College

Grande Prairie Regional College serves the northwestern region of the province. The main campus is located in the City of Grande Prairie with a second campus in Fairview. There are also four smaller learning centres in the West Yellowhead region.

The College offers in-class and on-line programs of study leading to certificate and diploma qualifications. Students complete the certificate and diploma courses of study through full-time or part-time, in-class delivery on campus; part-time evening courses on campus and through on-line delivery.

On average, 30 to 35 students enroll in the in-class certificate program and 15 to 16 students in the diploma program. A much larger number of students enroll in on-line courses: 245 students in the certificate program and 66 in the diploma program. On-line students typically take up to three courses at a time and the majority complete their studies while working in the field.

Program faculty report some loss of students from the in-class programs, including students from northern communities. On average, around 25 students graduate each year from the in-class certificate program and 15 students from the in-class diploma program. The majority of students work in the field upon graduation. Information on the number of students who graduate from the on-line programs is not available.

The admission requirements for the certificate program of studies include an Alberta High School Diploma or equivalent, with a passing mark in grade 12 English. Students who complete the certificate program are eligible to enroll in the diploma program. The College also allows students to register in up to three courses without admission to the formal program of studies.

The Early Learning and Child Care program has three full-time and one part-time faculty. Two of the faculty hold master's degree qualifications and two hold bachelor's degree qualifications. Additional contracted staff assist with the supervision of practicums. The program has experienced some funding cut-backs in recent years which have increased faculty teaching loads and administrative responsibilities.

Program faculty report that the College administration would likely support the expansion of the program if a demonstrated community need for additional program spaces could be shown. They report that certificate and diploma program students are highly sought after by

potential employers across the region, with a number of students hired out of their practicum placements. Program faculty see the potential for expanding both in-class delivery and on-line delivery with a preference for the former. They further see merit in developing additional learning supports for students who complete their studies on-line.

Keyano College

Keyano College serves the northeastern region of the province. The college has two main campuses in Fort McMurray and Fort Chipewyan and four smaller regional learning centres.

Keyano College offers an early learning and child care certificate program, the diploma program was suspended in 2015 due to low student enrollment (the diploma program was reinstated during the conduct of the current research). The certificate program is a full-time, 8-month course of study over two semesters. The courses are primarily delivered in-class during the day. Students have some access to on-line and evening courses, with the program offering one course per semester through an alternate delivery format. The seminar course for the practicum is delivered face-to-face only. Students can complete one of their two practicum placements in their workplace.

For the 2017/2018 academic year, 24 students were enrolled in the certificate program. Program faculty anticipates that 15-16 of these students will graduate at the end of the academic year, with all of them finding work in the field. Program faculty advise that there is a shortage of qualified early childhood educators in the region.

The admission requirements for the certificate program are an Alberta High School Diploma, or its equivalent, with a minimum mark of 50 percent in English 30/30-1 or 65 percent in English 33/30-2. Mature students without a high school diploma may be eligible for admission pending an interview with program staff and completion of a College entrance test.

The Early Learning and Child Care program has two full-time faculty members and one Program Chair.

Program faculty advise that any future expansion of the certificate program, as well as the reinstatement of the diploma program, is contingent upon student demand.

Lakeland College

Lakeland College serves the central and eastern regions of Alberta as well as the province of Saskatchewan. There are two campuses: one in Vermilion and a second in Lloydminster. The College also serves students from other parts of the country through on-line delivery models.

The College offers early learning and child care certificate and diploma programs of study from its Vermilion campus and on-line. The one year, full-time, in-class certificate program has an enrollment of 23 students, with 18 students in the second-year diploma program. The number of students enrolled in on-line courses has grown significantly with 195 students in certificate or diploma programs. The College offers on-line certificate and diploma programs in French.

On-line students enroll, on average, in two courses per semester and many complete their studies while working in the field. Program faculty attribute the growth in the number of on-line students to the flexibility that this model of delivery provides. On-line students can complete practicum placements in their workplaces provided they have one year of employment experience and appropriate supervision.

The admission requirements for the certificate program are a high school diploma with a minimum of 50 percent in English 30-1 or 65 percent in English 30-2 (or 50 percent in French or 65 percent in French 30-2). Students who do not meet these requirements may be eligible for special admission or entrance testing. The College also offers an academic upgrading course for students who don't meet the admission requirements. Students can enter the diploma program either after completing the certificate program or with an equivalent qualification.

The College offers a dual credit program for high school students that enables them to take the 'Play' course offered in the certificate program in English and in French. A number of Saskatchewan students enroll in the certificate and diploma programs. College faculty report that these students attend Lakeland College because its tuition fees are lower than those at the Saskatchewan Polytechnic - the primary post-secondary institute for early education and care in the province of Saskatchewan.

Program faculty report that student attrition in the in-class programs of study is minimal. A portion of on-line students, however, often those who enter college straight from high school, leave without completing a credential.

On average, around 25 and 20 students graduate per year from the in-class certificate and diploma programs respectively. The most recent graduation numbers for the

on-line course showed an increase from previous years with a total of 68 graduates with certificate or diploma credentials (the breakdown between programs was not available).

Lakeland College has articulation agreements with a number of post-secondary institutions including MacEwan University for its Bachelor of Applied Human Services Administration and Bachelor of Child and Youth Care degrees and Mount Royal University for its Bachelor of Child Studies degree.

The program faculty includes three full-time staff with master's degree qualifications - each of whom has more than 10 years of post-secondary teaching experience. A further two staff have bachelor's degree qualifications and experience working in the field.

Program faculty advise that the College could readily accommodate higher numbers of students if additional program funding was provided through the Government of Alberta.

Lethbridge College

Lethbridge College serves the southwestern region of the province. The College's main campus is located in the City of Lethbridge with smaller satellite sites in a number of regional centres.

The College offers both early learning and care certificate and diploma programs of study. The certificate program is offered through in-class and on-line delivery. The diploma program is available through on-line delivery only. The in-class program was suspended in 2013 because of low student enrollment.

The in-class certificate program enrolls an average of 50 students per year with two intakes. The on-line certificate programs enrolls around 85 students per year with three intakes. Students can move between in-class and on-line delivery models during their studies. The on-line diploma program has three intakes per year and on average serves around 45 students in a program year. The majority of on-line diploma students complete their studies while working in the field. Certificate and diploma students are required to complete their practicum placements outside of their workplaces. The program has recently moved to limit its on-line enrollments resulting in wait-lists of students for both programs of study.

Prior to fall 2014, the program admission requirements were a high school diploma with specific course requirements of English 30-1 at 60 percent (or 30-2 at 65 percent) and

a grade 12 Social Science course at 60 per cent. As of fall 2014, the College revised its admission requirements to a high school diploma – which requires the successful completion of grade 12 English. These admission requirements mirror those in place at other public colleges.

Program faculty report that, on average, 45 students graduate annually with a certificate qualification and 10 or more students with a diploma qualification. The completion rate for the certificate program is around 70 percent and 45 percent for the diploma program. The lower completion rate for the diploma program is linked to the enrollment of out-of-province students from British Columbia. These students commonly complete the courses they require for certification in their home province and then exit the program without completing a credential.

The program has three full-time faculty positions, two of which are held by faculty with master's degree qualifications. Recruitment for the vacant third position is scheduled for spring 2018.

Program faculty advise that the potential to expand in-class courses is constrained by the availability of practicum placement sites in the Lethbridge area. Students taking on-line certificate and diploma programs generally complete their practicum placements in the communities in which they either live or work.

Medicine Hat College

Medicine Hat College serves the southeastern region of the province with campuses in Medicine Hat and Brooks.

The College provides early learning and care certificate and diploma programs of study through in-class delivery. It offers courses during the day and in the evening to meet the needs of part-time students working in the field. On average, 25 students enroll in the certificate program and 12 in the diploma program in an academic year. The diploma program includes a number of international students. Program faculty advise that some students with certificate qualifications from Lethbridge College transfer to the College to complete the in-class diploma program. Program faculty report that the graduation rates are high with the majority of students completing their programs of study.

The College has chosen not to offer the certificate and diploma programs on-line given students' preference for in-class delivery. Students can complete one practicum placement per year in their workplace, but must complete the other at an eligible community site.

The admission criteria for the program include a high

school diploma with a 50 percent mark in English 30-1 or 65 percent in English 30-2. Mature students may be admitted following appropriate advising and testing, providing they meet the College language requirements. Students can also be accepted into the certificate program after successful completion of two courses, which can then be used for credit.

The program has one full-time faculty member and three part-time members. All of the faculty have master's degree qualifications and significant teaching experience.

The expansion of the certificate and diploma programs would require the recruitment of an additional full-time faculty member and an increase in the number of local practicum placement sites. Program faculty advise that both of these may prove difficult. They further report that the demand for early childhood educators in the Medicine Hat region is not anticipated to increase significantly in the short to medium-terms given the region's aging population.

Program faculty report a potential demand for part-time diploma programs of study that would enable early childhood educators with certificate qualifications to continue their studies while working in the field. They advise, however, that these potential students ideally would require some relief from their full-time working schedules, which employers may find difficult to accommodate given the absence of casual staff.

NorQuest College

NorQuest College serves Edmonton and the surrounding region. The College's main campus is located in the City of Edmonton, with three smaller regional campuses in surrounding communities. NorQuest College serves a predominantly newcomer or new immigrant student population.

The College offers early learning and child care certificate and diploma programs of study. Both are relatively new, with the diploma program introduced in the 2017/18 academic year. The program uses an in-class delivery model, with part-time and off-site options available for students, many of whom work while completing their studies. Students may complete two practicums in their workplace but must seek an alternate site for their third practicum placement.

Admission criteria for the program includes credit in English 30-1 or 30-2. Students for whom English is a second language are required to provide proof of English language proficiency prior to admission. Those students who do not meet College admission requirements, but satisfy other criteria, may be granted conditional or provisional admission to the program.





The certificate program serves 30 students in the full-time day program and 34 students in the part-time program. The newly introduced diploma program has 36 students in the first year and 14 in the second. A second cohort of diploma students will commence studies in winter 2018. The College anticipates strong demand for the second year of the diploma program.

Completion rates for students in the in-class, full-time program are high. Part-time students take longer to complete their courses of study. On average, around 30 students graduate per year from the full-time certificate program.

The program has ten full-time faculty, all of whom hold master's degrees, and three part-time faculty members. The program has recently hired new staff to support the addition of the diploma program. Program faculty advises that the College administration would support the expansion of the program to meet community and student needs.

Northern Lakes College

Northern Lakes College serves the northern and central regions of the province. The College's main campus is located in Slave Lake with smaller regional campuses across the north central region. These regional campuses serve over 50 local communities including First Nations and Metis settlements.

The College provides on-line early learning and child care certificate and diploma programs of study. On-line courses are offered synchronously and asynchronously. All on-line students have access to on-line tutorial sessions.

The admission criteria for the certificate program are credit in English 30-1, 60 percent in English 30-2 or credit in a College preparation English course. Applicants who do not meet these requirements are required to pass a placement assessment. Students who hold a certificate qualification

from an Alberta post-secondary institution are eligible for admission to the diploma program. Applications from students with credentials from other provinces are reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

For the 2017/18 academic year there were 16 full-time and 8 part-time students enrolled in the certificate program and five full-time and five part-time students in the diploma program. On average, 75 to 80 percent of the students enrolled in the certificate and diploma programs graduate with a credential. Students have the option to change their status from full-time to part-time study to manage their workloads. Program faculty report that the asynchronous on-line delivery model enables students to balance education, work and family commitments.

Students can complete their practicum placements in their workplaces if a certified Child Development Supervisor is available to supervise the placement. The College has previously permitted students to complete workplace practicum placements in which a Child Development Supervisor was not available to supervise the practicum.

The Early Learning and Child Care program employs five part-time instructors. All of the instructors hold Bachelor of Education degrees and a number have also completed master's degrees, again primarily in education.

Portage College

Portage College serves the northeastern region of the province. The main campus is located in Lac La Biche. There are two regional centres and four smaller centres including First Nations communities.

The College provides on-line early learning and child care certificate and diploma programs of study. The certificate program typically serves between 60 and 70 students per year, the diploma program serves between 30 and 35. Both programs use an open enrollment model that enables

students to enroll throughout the academic year. Students take one course per month, with lectures posted on-line. Students also have access to interactive discussion forums to support their learning. Program faculty report that 80 to 85 percent of students complete their courses of study and receive early learning and care credentials.

The admission criteria for the certificate program include completion of Grade 12 or equivalent with passing grades in English and Math courses. Students with an early learning and care certificate qualification from Portage, or another public college, are eligible for admission to the diploma program.

Students can complete their practicum placements in their workplace, if the workplace is licensed by the Ministry of Children's Services and preferably accredited. The staff member supervising the practicum placement must hold a provincial certification one level above that held by the practicum student.

The College contracts part-time faculty to deliver the certificate and diploma programs. The contract staff hold Bachelor of Education degrees and most also hold a master's degree qualification.

Red Deer College

Red Deer College serves the central Alberta region. The College's main campus is located in the City of Red Deer.

The College offers both certificate and diploma programs of study. For the 2016/2017 academic year, there were 45 full-time, 76 part-time and 99 on-line certificate students. At the diploma level, there were 14 full-time, 27 part-time and 40 on-line students. For the same academic year, there were 41 certificate graduates and 17 diploma graduates.

Historically, the early learning and care program has used different delivery models to meet student learning needs, including part-time delivery in surrounding communities and blended in-class and on-line delivery. The program has recently introduced full on-line delivery options for the certificate and diploma programs.

Typically, the program sees a reduction in student numbers from the one-year certificate to the two-year diploma qualification. Program faculty advise that a number of students in the certificate program are already working in the field. Completion of the credential is sufficient to provide them with a stronger educational foundation, the ability to be certified as a Child Development Worker, and qualifies them for increased wage enhancement. Some students with certificate credentials may return to the

diploma program as part-time students at a later date.

The admission criteria for the certificate program are a 50 percent mark in English Language Arts 30 or 65 percent in English Language Arts 30-2. Students can also enter the program through meeting benchmarks on the College Board Placement test or having previously completed three college-level courses with a minimum GPA of 2.0. Students must complete the certificate program before being admitted to the diploma program. Mature students can be accepted conditionally into the certificate program and must then successfully complete two early learning and child care courses.

Students can complete a number of their practicum placements in their workplaces pending approval from the practicum coordinator.

The program has three full-time faculty supported by part-time faculty members. Two of the full-time faculty hold master's degree qualifications with the third currently taking graduate level studies.

Universities (Baccalaureate and Applied Studies Institutions)

Two Universities (Baccalaureate and Applied Studies Institutions) offer early learning and child care programs of study: MacEwan University and Mount Royal University. Both previously operated as public colleges (Comprehensive Community Institutions) prior to receiving university status in 2009.

MacEwan University

MacEwan University campus is located in the City of Edmonton. The University primarily serves the greater Edmonton region and northern Alberta. Through its distance learning programs it also serves national and international learners.

MacEwan University offers a two-year diploma program of studies through an in-class, full-time, daytime delivery model. The program accepts 80 students into the first year of the program, with approximately 70 students continuing into the second year. The program can add students to the second year of study if space permits. On average, 60 to 70 students graduate annually with a diploma qualification. Students who leave after one year of the program are eligible for certification at the Child Development Worker level.

The Early Learning and Child Care program has submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Advanced Education for the introduction of a four-year Bachelor Degree in Early Childhood Curriculum Studies, commencing fall 2020.

The admission requirements for the diploma program are consistent with university entrance requirements. Students must have English Language Arts 30-1 or 30-2, Social Studies and three other subjects. Students must also maintain a minimum GPA average to remain in the program. Mature students may be eligible for admission if they have previously completed post-secondary course requirements.

Students complete their practicum placements in a range of early learning and care settings.

The Early Learning and Child Care program includes three full-time faculty with master's degrees and two with a doctorate. There are five part-time faculty with master's degrees, one in progress. Since MacEwan was granted university status the educational requirements for faculty have increased.

The Early Learning and Child Care program has formal transfer agreements with a number of bachelor degree programs. The most common further educational paths for students are a Bachelor of Education degree (at the University of Alberta) and the Bachelor of Child and Youth Care degree at MacEwan University.

Mount Royal University

Mount Royal University's primary service area includes Calgary and the surrounding region. It also serves learner populations provincially, nationally and internationally.

In 2013, Mount Royal University introduced a four-year Bachelor of Child Studies degree with majors in Early Learning and Child Care and Child and Youth Care Counsellor. Students complete foundational course work in their major area during the first two years of the degree. They come together in the final two years for advanced course work in areas such as leadership, program planning and public policy. Mount Royal University suspended delivery of its two-year early learning and care diploma program after its designation as a public university.

Students who take an early learning and child care major as part of the four-year degree are eligible for certification at the Child Development Supervisor level part-way through the degree program. Depending on the number of required courses they complete, students are eligible for certification either at the end of the second year of their studies or mid-way through their third year.

The Bachelor of Child Studies degree accepts 45 students into the Early Learning and Child Care major each fall. Following the introduction of the degree program, student retention rates were initially low. These have now increased significantly and an average of 42 to 44 students now progress into the second year of the degree program and beyond.

The admission criteria for the degree program are similar to those at the MacEwan University diploma program, reflecting the higher entrance requirements for degree granting institutions.

The Early Learning and Child Care major has five full-time faculty; four hold doctorate degrees and one holds a master's degree. There is one term-certain faculty position and several part-time faculty members. There has been some loss of faculty positions within the degree (both majors) over the last four years. The University requires Child Studies faculty to hold, at minimum, a master's degree qualification, with a doctorate preferred for tenure track positions.

First Nations Colleges

Two First Nations colleges provide early learning and care programs of study: University nuhelot'ine thaiyots'i nistameyimakanak Blue Quills and Maskwacis Cultural College. First Nations Colleges provide courses of study grounded in First Nations culture and traditions.

University nuhelot'ine thaiyots'i nistameyimakanak Blue Quills

The University nuhelot'ine thaiyots'i nistameyimakanak Blue Quills is located on designated Reserve land close to the town of St. Paul, Alberta. The University provides early learning and care programs of study at the orientation, certificate and diploma levels. Traditional Indigenous child care practices, including Cree language and culture, provide the foundation for the early learning and care programs of study allied with research on early biological brain development.

The University offers certificate and diploma programs of study full-time during the day, part-time in the evening and in community locations. Enrollment in the certificate program is typically between 10 and 15 students while up to 30 students enroll in the diploma program. The majority of students who enroll complete their programs of study, with almost all working in the early learning and care field in surrounding communities. Program faculty report a strong demand for Indigenous early childhood educators in central Alberta in child care, education and community programs.

Admission requirements for the certificate program include completion of the early learning assistant orientation program, completion of high school or equivalent, or completion of a skills appraisal test and interview requirement. Students must complete the early learning and care certificate program for admission to the diploma program.

The early learning and care program has recently undergone significant cutbacks due to funding shortages for students. There are currently two program staff, both of whom hold provincial Child Development Supervisor certification.

Maskwacis Cultural College

Maskwacis Cultural College is located on the Maskwacis Four Nations in central Alberta.

The College provides early learning and care programs of study at the orientation, certificate and diploma levels. The programs of study include a focus on early childhood

development that draws both on Cree cultural traditions and an academic knowledge base.

College faculty declined the request to provide information on its early learning and care programs of study.

Private Career Colleges

In Alberta, private institutions provide technical and career training programs in a range of fields. The Ministry of Children's Services recognizes the training programs provided through two private career colleges as eligible for early childhood educator certification: CDI College of Business Technology and Health Care and MCG Career and Employment Services (formerly McBride Career Group).

CDI College of Business, Technology and Health Care

CDI College offers early learning and care certificate and diploma programs of study through its Edmonton City Centre campus. For the 2016/17 academic year 94 students enrolled in the certificate program and 36 enrolled in the diploma program. The College enrolls students in cohorts throughout the academic year.

Students in both programs take one course at a time requiring 12 hours of class-time per week. Students are able to complete their practicum placements in their workplaces. College staff report that student completion rates are high and that the majority of students continue to work in the field upon graduation.

The College does not have formal transfer agreements with public post-secondary institutions. Some public colleges will accept students with courses or credentials from private colleges into programs of study, while others will not.

The program admission criteria include high school completion with English 30-1 or 30-2, completion of the General Educational Development test, the completion of an English course at another post-secondary institution or the completion of one year of study at a post-secondary institution in which English is the primary language of instruction.

The program instructors are part-time and, at minimum, hold a bachelor degree qualification. The College seeks to recruit instructors who hold a Child Development Supervisor certification and who have experience working in the field.

The College is considering the expansion of its programs to its Calgary campus to meet the staffing needs of child care service providers in the Calgary region.

MCG Career and Employment Services

MCG Career and Employment Services (MCG) provides employment related training and support for unemployed Albertans. MCG offers early learning and care orientation and certificate (partial and full completion) programs of study in Red Deer and Edmonton.

MCG programs are funded through The Ministry of Labour which covers the costs of students' tuition and course materials. Students are eligible to enroll in the programs if they are unemployed or underemployed and have not previously completed post-secondary education. Students must also meet a language requirement.

Through its Red Deer site, MCG offers an 18-week, full-time training program, upon the completion of which students are eligible for certification at the Child Development Assistant level. They are also deemed to have completed 380 hours of instruction toward certification at the Child Development Worker level. 12 students from central Alberta communities participate in the study program at a given time.

Students who want to complete the course work required for a Child Development Worker certification can do so through a tuition-based program, that is open to students from the Ministry of Labour funded program as well as other eligible applicants. The program is delivered in-class, during evenings and on weekends to enable students to work while they complete their studies. Ten to twelve students participate in the program at a given time and can complete practicum placements in their own workplace.

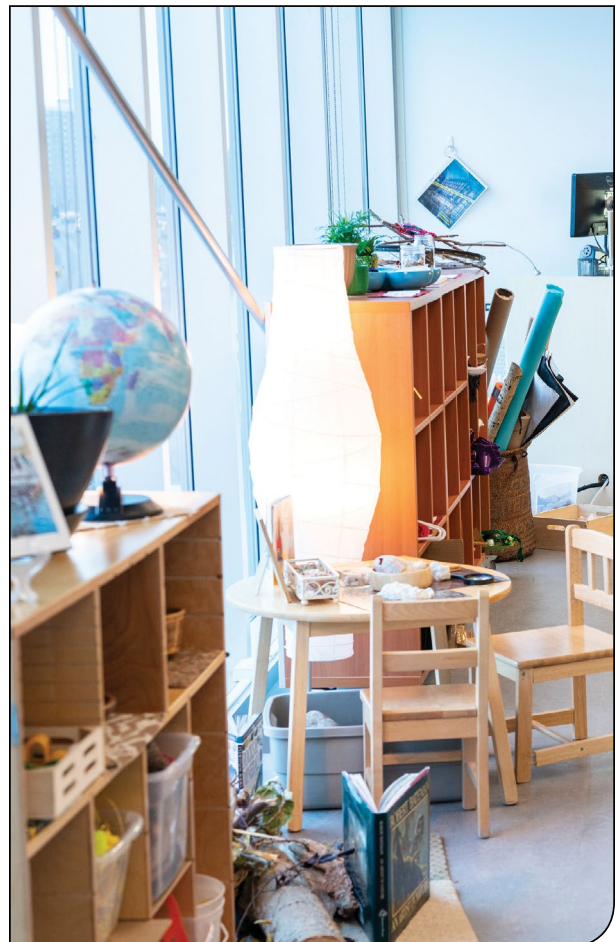
In addition to the above programs, MCG staff can also help students identify the additional post-secondary courses they need from public colleges to be eligible for Child Development Worker certification by the Alberta Government.

In 2017, MCG introduced a 24-week Child Development Worker level course in Edmonton. The full-time program is delivered in-class with 12 students enrolled in the program at a given time. Eligible students are fully-funded through Alberta Labour.

MCG staff report that almost all students are employed upon the completion of their training courses, with many hired before the completion of their studies. As one of its funding criteria for the programs it supports, the Ministry of

Labour requires that six months after graduation, 75 percent of students are employed in early learning and care.

The instructors in the Red Deer and Edmonton programs are required to hold a bachelor degree qualification and to be eligible for certification at the Child Development Supervisor level. Staff not certified at the Child Development Supervisor level must begin working toward certification during their first year of employment.



Post-Secondary Early Learning and Care Educational Programs in Alberta: Some Common Themes and Shared Challenges

Early learning and care programs of study at public post-secondary institutions and private career colleges have evolved over time both to meet the needs of students and to respond to changes in early learning and care pedagogy and practice. They have further been shaped by developments in the delivery of post-secondary education in the province generally, including changes in public funding, the use of technology to increase student access to post-secondary programs of study, and the growing emphasis on preparing and training students in professional and applied fields to meet industry and community needs.

Taking the differences between individual programs into account, and mindful of gaps in program and student data, the following themes or trends appear common across programs as do the accompanying challenges.

Strong Demand for Post-Secondary Early Learning and Care Graduates

College and university faculty and private career college staff report both a strong demand from students for early learning and care credentials and a strong demand from child care service providers for qualified students, particularly those with certificate level qualifications. Based on 2016/17 data, an estimated 525 to 550 students graduated with an early learning and care certificate qualification (or its equivalent) from public and private post-secondary institutions and were eligible for certification as Child Development Workers. A further 340 to 360 students graduated with a diploma qualification and were eligible for certification as Child Development Supervisors.

The majority of students who complete credentials appear to work in the field after graduation; although some may subsequently leave after relatively short periods of employment. A portion of students who complete diploma credentials either pursue degree-level qualifications (in related human services fields such as education) after

graduation or seek employment in related human service fields, again such as education. The above student experiences are similar to those reported in previous national research commissioned by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (see Beach and Flanagan, n.d.).

The strong demand for early childhood educators with post-secondary credentials appears likely to continue given both the growth in licensed child care spaces in the province over the last decade and the reported high rates of turnover among certified early childhood educators (based on information provided by Ministry of Children's Services, an estimated 25 percent of certified Early Childhood Educators left their employment in 2017). The Government of Alberta, Ministry of Labour occupational demand and supply outlook for 2015-2025 identifies 'childcare and home support workers' as one of the occupations with forecasted labour shortages of more than 1,000 workers by 2025.

Taking into account the size of the early childhood educator workforce (approximately 15,500 certified staff in regulated child care, out-of-school care, and approved family day homes in March 2017), the number of students who graduate annually with certificate and diploma credentials appears relatively low (in the region of 900). Given that a number of these graduates work in the field while completing their studies and that others, mainly those completing diploma credentials, do not enter the field after graduation, the number of new graduates entering the workforce with post-secondary credentials is estimated to be in the region of 575 to 625. This number does not include staff who either enter the field with qualifications from other provinces or those certified with equivalent qualifications.

Across the province, the demand for early childhood educators with post-secondary qualifications appears particularly strong in northern and central regions, as well as in the Calgary region. There also appears a strong demand for Indigenous staff to work in early learning and care programs and services that serve Indigenous children and their families. Further research is required to confirm these findings.

The Expansion of Early Learning and Care Programs with a Focus on Flexible Program Delivery Models

There has been much change in early learning and care programs over the last decade. Most public college programs have increased the number of students they serve, while NorQuest College has added new certificate and diploma programs. A minority have seen their student numbers either stay constant or fall slightly. Mount Royal University discontinued its certificate and diploma programs after receiving university status in 2009, and has introduced a degree qualification that includes an early learning and care stream or focus. MacEwan University continues to provide courses of study leading to a diploma credential. Students can leave after one year of studies and are eligible for certification at the Child Development Worker level. Both private career colleges (CDI College and MCG Career and Employment Services) report potential future expansion of their training courses to meet the staffing needs of child care providers in Calgary and Edmonton. Considering the above changes, the following trends or themes emerge.

Overall, the number of students enrolled in post-secondary early learning and care programs of study has increased over the last five years. Based on information provided by post-secondary faculty and staff in private career colleges, an estimated 2,100 to 2,200 students studied for early learning credentials in the 2016/17 academic year (this includes students in the first two years of the four-year degree program at Mount Royal University who are eligible for certification as early childhood educators after they complete a portion of their degree studies). Much of the increase in student numbers appears linked to public colleges' greater use of flexible delivery models, including synchronous and asynchronous on-line programs of study, as well as part-time, evening and weekend in-class courses.

Seven public colleges provide on-line programs of study leading to certificate or diploma qualifications. Two of these colleges, Northern Lakes College and Portage College, exclusively provide on-line programs of study. A number of colleges offer 'hybrid' or 'blended' programs of study that combine in-class and on-line delivery formats. Based on information provided by college faculty, around half of the students studying for certificate or diploma credentials at public colleges complete some or all of their coursework (not including their practicum placements) through on-line study.

The two public universities that provide early learning and care programs of study do not offer on-line programs of study. Neither does the University of Northern British Columbia. The University of Alberta does not offer on-line programs of study.

College faculty staff advise that the use of flexible delivery models (including on-line delivery) reduces the barriers students face in completing post-secondary credentials. Specifically, flexible delivery models enable students to complete their studies while working, and, in the case of on-line delivery, without leaving their home communities. They further enable students to combine their studies with family or other commitments.

Public colleges' use of on-line delivery models enables them to serve larger numbers of students outside of their primary service regions, including students from other provinces (for example, Lethbridge College and Lakeland College serve students in British Columbia and Saskatchewan respectively). On-line delivery models also appear to help public colleges improve the financial viability of their programs of study by lowering per student delivery costs.

College faculty advise that public colleges could, with appropriate support, increase the number of students they serve. They note some cautions, however, including the need to ensure that appropriate time and resources are allocated (including high-quality practicum sites – discussed below) to support the educational preparation of larger numbers of students. Some faculty emphasize the need to maintain high program standards during any proposed expansion, with attention paid to shared expectations for student learning outcomes across post-secondary institutions. Others caution that public college administrations would need assurances that increases in program spaces were both needed and could be sustained.

Student Attrition and Workforce Entry

College faculty report a reduction in student numbers after one year of studies (or equivalent in courses). They advise that a proportion of students leave after completing a certificate credential rather than continuing for a further year of study to complete a diploma qualification. Faculty note that some of these students may return to take a diploma credential at a later date.

College faculty advise that the strong demand for certificate graduates, allied with the costs of post-secondary education (including foregone employment income) for students,

appear to be the main factors that contribute to students not continuing their studies at the diploma level.

As previously noted, college faculty report that a small proportion of diploma graduates do not enter the field after graduation. A number of these students either continue their education at the degree level or seek employment in related fields (including education). Given that most colleges do not track student employment outcomes, further research is needed to provide reliable information on the work and education trajectories of diploma students after graduation.

The Move Toward Higher and More Formal Admission Requirements

College staff report that public colleges increased and began to change their admission requirements for early learning and care programs around a decade ago, consistent with larger changes in college admission requirements. They have since remained relatively constant. The two public universities, MacEwan and Mount Royal, both raised their entrance requirements commensurate with their designation as universities in 2009.

The main changes faculty have observed include the introduction of higher language level requirements; the greater emphasis on standardized admission criteria; and the requirement that students enroll in formal programs of study. In the main, college faculty support the moves toward higher formal admission requirements and see them as consistent with the goal of raising the educational qualifications of the field. That said, they identify the following, perhaps unintended, impacts of the move toward higher and more formal admission requirements.

First, the introduction of higher language-level requirements can present barriers for potential students whose first language is not English. College faculty advise that post-secondary institutions may need to consider additional English Language Learner (ELL) classes or supports for these students, and that these classes or supports would need to be available at no cost or a modest cost to students.

Second, college faculty report that the greater emphasis on formal admission requirements can make it more difficult for mature applicants to be admitted to programs of study. College faculty advise that some mature students seeking entry through either prior learning assessments or the completion of specifically designed entry tests can find these routes challenging and cost-prohibitive.

And third, college faculty advise that the greater emphasis public colleges place on registering students in programs of study that lead to formal credentials has reduced the opportunities for students to register in individual courses and to explore early learning and care as a possible area of study. This emphasis has further made it more difficult for students with equivalency qualifications to take individual courses to upgrade their knowledge and skills.

A Shortage of High-Quality Practicum Placement Sites

College faculty report a shortage of high-quality practicum placement sites for students in certificate and diploma programs of study. They link this shortage to the modest quality of many early learning and care services, changing service models in some communities (e.g. a shift from centre-based child care to family day homes), and the absence of licensed or regulated early learning and care services in smaller, more isolated communities. Some faculty also report challenges in finding certified Child Development Supervisors to supervise student practicum placements.

College faculty further advise that most programs of study now permit students to complete at least one of their practicum placements in their workplaces, a response to the number of students who now complete their studies while working in the field. Some faculty report concerns with this practice, however. The concerns faculty express include the pressure some employers place on students to complete workplace practicums (given the challenges employers (for-profit and non-profit) face in finding replacement or back-up staff); and the challenges students may experience in pursuing their own learning needs ahead of the needs of their employers. Further, for students who work while studying practicum placements outside of their workplaces can result in economic hardships in the form of lost employment income. Some working students may also face time and cost barriers in travelling to available practicum sites, especially if they live and work in isolated or smaller communities with limited licensed child care services.

In short, college faculty remain aware of the challenges of providing students with the high-quality practicum placements they need to further their education and practice.

Individual Transfer or Articulation Agreements Between Post-Secondary Institutions

College faculty report that students who transfer between post-secondary institutions now rely on articulation agreements between individual institutions (public colleges and universities). While a province-wide articulation agreement was previously in place, this has now lapsed.

College faculty advise that currently relatively few students transfer their courses or programs of study between public institutions, and for those that do a transfer of credit is generally accepted. Students with diploma qualifications from public colleges can also transfer some credit for courses to specific degree qualifications, based on agreements negotiated between individual institutions.

Students with early learning credentials or course work from private career colleges, however, may not be able to transfer credits for courses or credentials to public institutions. College and university faculty advise that, despite the Ministry of Children's Services recognition of credentials from private career colleges for the purposes of certification, public post-secondary institutions will generally not recognize these credentials for transfer purposes. College and university faculty report that students from private career colleges may not be aware that their education is not transferable should they wish to continue their studies at a public college or university. Related to the above, college and university faculty raise concerns about the quality of the programs of study offered through private career colleges.



Strategies to Advance the Educational Preparation of Early Childhood Educators

The importance of a well-educated early learning and care workforce is widely supported in the research literature. Early childhood educators with higher levels of formal educational preparation, and who work in well-resourced environments, are better able to support young children's learning and development than educators with lower levels of education or education in a non-related field. Beyond the level of qualifications, research findings also highlight the importance of the quality of formal educational programs.

Based on discussions with post-secondary faculty, allied with the findings from comparative research, the following strategies are proposed to advance the educational preparation of early childhood educators in Alberta. They include initiatives to increase the educational levels of the early childhood educator workforce as well as those to enhance the quality of the educational programs that prepare students to work in the field.

The strategies outlined are preliminary. They are intended to promote discussion among early learning and care stakeholders, with an initial focus on post-secondary faculty and policy makers. They will benefit from further review and consideration by a broad range of early learning and care stakeholders.

The strategies proposed do not address the remuneration and working conditions of early childhood educators which remain beyond the scope of the current study. Both will need significant improvement, however, in parallel with advances in early childhood educators' formal educational preparation, if provincial governments are to increase the number of early childhood educators with post-secondary credentials.

A New Base Qualification for Permanent Certification

College faculty report a significant 'education gap' between certified staff who complete the Child Care Orientation Course and those who complete an early learning and care certificate program of studies delivered by a public post-secondary institution. While the former involves the self-directed study of 54 hours of on-line material the latter comprises ten post-secondary courses including two practicum placements. At present, only a small number of certified early childhood educators (Child Development Assistants) who take the orientation course go on to continue their education at either the certificate or the diploma level.

Given the central role early childhood educators play in shaping the quality of early learning and care environments, it is proposed that the Ministry of Children's Services introduce a new base qualification as the requirement for permanent certification at the Child Development Assistant level. The proposed new base qualification would comprise four or five designated courses, taken through an approved public post-secondary institution and include one practicum placement. College faculty advise that the Ministry of Children's Services and post-secondary colleges previously supported a 'bridging' qualification that was similar to the proposed new base qualification.

In the short-term, staff who take the current orientation course would receive provisional certification and be required to complete the new base qualification within a specified time period to receive permanent certification. In the medium-term, three to seven years, the new base qualification would replace the orientation course as the minimum educational requirement for certification at the Child Development Assistant level. In the long-term, seven years and beyond, the Ministry of Children's Services would work with early learning and care stakeholders to move toward a certificate-level credential as the minimum educational requirement for certification as an early childhood educator (Child Development Assistant).

To reduce the barriers Child Development Assistants may face in completing the proposed new base qualification, public post-secondary institutions would deliver the required courses using flexible delivery models. These models would enable staff to complete the proposed base qualification, over an agreed period of time, while working. The provincial government would provide educational grants or bursaries to eligible Child Development Assistants

to enable them to complete the new base qualification. The provincial government would also provide funding to public post-secondary institutions to develop and deliver the proposed new base qualification.

The provincial government would further assess the need for new language training courses for Child Development Assistants who may not meet the language requirements to complete the new base qualification. Pending the demonstration of need, the provincial government would work with public post-secondary institutions to design and deliver English Language Learner (ELL) courses or programs of study that would be available at no cost to eligible Child Development Assistants. When the proposed new base qualification becomes the minimum requirement for certification, the provincial government would extend the provision of ELL courses to eligible students seeking to enter the field.

The Ministry of Children's Services may also require early childhood educators who apply for certification with an 'equivalency' qualification to complete the new base qualification, within a designated time-period, to receive permanent certification at either the Child Development Worker or Child Development Supervisor levels. Provincial educational grant or bursary funding would be available for eligible staff with equivalency qualifications to complete the base qualification.

New Financial and Workplace Supports for Students Completing Certificate and Diploma Qualifications

College faculty advise that a significant proportion of students taking certificate level qualifications complete their studies on a part-time basis while working in child care. They further note that a number leave after completing the certificate credential rather than continuing their studies at the diploma level. For a number of these students, the direct costs of post-secondary education and/or the lost-income that can result from completing further education are barriers to them pursuing a diploma credential.

To reduce the financial barriers students' face in studying for early learning and care credentials, it is proposed that the Ministry of Children's Services pursue two related strategies. First, the Ministry will increase the funding amounts available through the current Early Learning and Child Care Career Scholarship program for recent

high school graduates attending full-time post-secondary programs of studies. In addition, the Ministry will introduce a new tuition support grant for eligible students taking a full-time early learning and child care diploma at a public post-secondary institution. The grant will cover a portion of the costs of the program (tuition, books and student fees). Students who receive a grant will be required to work in the field for a minimum of one year after graduation.

Second, pending consultations with early learning and care stakeholders, the Ministry of Children's Services will design and introduce a workplace educational supports program, similar to that in place in Manitoba. The Manitoba Early Childhood Education workplace program allows non-profit centres to access a 'staff replacement grant' for eligible employees who are enrolled in an approved Early Childhood Education workplace program. As part of the program, eligible employees attend classes two days per week and work in a licensed early learning and care program for three days a week. The staff replacement grant covers the cost of a substitute employee while the student employee attends classes.

The Review and Development of Provincial Program Standards for Post-Secondary Early Learning and Care Programs of Study

College faculty advise of significant changes in post-secondary early learning and care programs over the last five to ten years. They note changes in delivery models, and some reductions in staffing complements as a result of provincial funding cuts to post-secondary institutions. These changes have taken place against the backdrop of efforts by the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and others to advance the field as a profession, provincial government support for the development and implementation of Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework, and a growing awareness among early learning and care stakeholders of the importance of services that are culturally appropriate and inclusive. College faculty advise that post-secondary institutions have differed in their capacity to respond to the above developments.

To ensure that post-secondary early learning and care programs provide students with a high-quality education that prepares them to work in the field, it is proposed that the Ministries of Children's Services and Advanced Education work with senior faculty from public post-secondary early learning and care programs and

representatives from the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, the Alberta Family Child Care Association, and the Alberta Association of Child Care Operators to review and develop program standards for post-secondary early learning and care programs of study leading to certificate and diploma credentials.

The proposed program standards would build on the current Ministry of Children's Services guidelines for determining the eligibility of post-secondary certificate and diploma credentials for staff certification purposes. They would include an outline of the essential skills and knowledge (competencies) that a student must reliably demonstrate to graduate from a program of studies. Consistent with program standards in place in other jurisdictions, individual public and private colleges would retain responsibility for determining the specific structure of their programs of study, the delivery methods and other matters relating to curriculum to support the outcomes identified in the program standards. Further, individual colleges might also determine whether additional learning outcomes are required to meet specific regional needs or interests.

In developing the above program standards, the Ministry of Children's Services and the above partners would also develop guidelines for the periodic review of program standards to ensure that they remain appropriate and relevant to the needs of students, service providers and the children and families they serve. All post-secondary programs of study that lead to early learning and child care credentials would be required to undergo a periodic external review to ensure that they meet the provincially agreed program standards.

It is further anticipated that the development of new provincial program standards for early learning and care programs of study would provide the basis for the reintroduction of province-wide articulation agreements between post-secondary institutions.

The Evaluation of On-Line Delivery Models

College faculty report significant growth in the number of students who complete certificate and diploma programs of study either on-line or through blended on-line and in-class formats. Seven of the ten public colleges that provide certificate and diploma programs of study now use on-line delivery models. These delivery models include synchronous and asynchronous delivery, the use of different learning management systems or platforms, and

the provision of various student learning supports. College faculty advise that on-line delivery models reduce some of the barriers students face in completing formal programs of study.

The research findings suggest that preservice early learning and care education can be delivered effectively on-line, provided there is clarity on the anticipated student learning outcomes and the matching of these outcomes with appropriate technological tools, approaches and learning supports. Some preliminary research from British Columbia, however, reveals a preference among Indigenous students for face-to-face learning. These findings suggest that on-line delivery may not meet the needs of all learners (The BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2012).

As a complement to the proposed review and development of provincial program standards for early learning and care programs of study, it is proposed that the Ministries of Children's Services and Advanced Education, with the support of early learning and care stakeholders and post-secondary institutions, undertake an evaluation of current on-line and blended or hybrid early learning and care programs of study.

The evaluation would include an assessment of the impact of on-line learning approaches on student access to post-secondary programs of study, an analysis of student learning outcomes, the identification of the challenges post-secondary institutions face in delivering on-line programs of study and those students face in completing them, and the identification of possible learning tools and supports that post-secondary programs can use to support on-line student learning.

The proposed evaluation of on-line delivery approaches would include a consideration of the possible benefits of consolidating on-line early learning and care programs in one or more public colleges, or the introduction of formal partnerships between public colleges and universities to support the delivery of on-line programs of study.

The Ministries of Children's Services and Advanced Education would share the results of the evaluation with post-secondary institutions and other early learning and care stakeholders.

The Review of Practicum Placements

Faculty at public post-secondary institutions report challenges accessing high-quality practicum placements for students completing certificate and diploma credentials. They further report an increase in the number of students who complete one or more of their practicum placements in their workplaces. Faculty comments speak to the challenges post-secondary programs face in placing students in practicum placements that develop their professional knowledge, skills, dispositions and motivations.

To improve the practicum experiences of post-secondary students it is proposed that the Ministry of Children's Services strike and support a post-secondary faculty working group to explore and identify strategies to improve the quality of student practicum placements. As part of its work, the working group would seek to identify the expertise, resources and supports post-secondary programs, students and practicum sites require to support positive student learning and development experiences. The proposed working group would also take into account the particular needs of students completing workplace practicum placements and develop workplace practicum guidelines for use in post-secondary programs of study.

It is anticipated that the Ministry of Children's Services would use the findings from the post-secondary faculty working group to inform the design and implementation of new resources and supports to improve the quality of student practicum placements.

Increasing the Educational Opportunities Available for Early Childhood Educators

A number of college and university faculty see merit in increasing the educational opportunities available for early childhood educators. Specifically, some faculty support the introduction of additional degree-level qualifications while others identify the need for new post-diploma educational options. Previous research conducted by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council found support among early learning and care stakeholders, including post-secondary faculty, for increased educational requirements for child care centre directors.

Post-secondary faculty see the potential for new educational qualifications both to increase the capacity of early

childhood educators to deliver high-quality early learning and care and to encourage qualified staff to remain in the field given new or improved career opportunities. Faculty caution, however, that new educational opportunities must be matched with improved remuneration and working conditions to attract and retain qualified early childhood educators. They further advise that post-secondary institutions will likely need to see new provincial regulatory requirements for higher qualifications before they develop new programs of study.

It is proposed that the Ministry of Children's Services work with faculty from public post-secondary institutions, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, the Alberta Family Child Care Association, and the Alberta Association of Child Care Operators to develop a new certification level for early childhood educators linked to a degree-level qualification in early learning and care. Mount Royal University currently provides a Bachelor of Child Studies degree with a major in early learning and child care. MacEwan University is seeking to introduce a Bachelor of Early Childhood Curriculum Studies in fall 2020.

The proposed new certification level might be classified as an Early Childhood Director, following previous research undertaken by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council. Certified staff with a degree-level qualification would perform more specialized functions or roles in or across service settings relating either to pedagogy or organizational management and leadership. The Ministry of Children's Services would develop new wage enhancements for staff certified at the Early Childhood Director level that exceed those in place for Child Development Supervisors. Over an agreed period of time, the Ministry of Children's Services would amend the child care regulations to require one or more senior staff in licenced child care settings to hold a degree-level qualification.

To support the above staff changes, the Ministry of Children's Services would provide educational bursary support for eligible staff certified at the current Child Development Supervisor level to complete a four-year early learning and child care degree qualification. Public colleges and universities would develop formal articulation agreements to support the transition of students with certificate and diploma credentials into degree-level programs.

Summing Up

Alberta's public colleges and universities, two Indigenous post-secondary institutions and two private career colleges, offer programs of study that lead to early learning and child care credentials at the certificate, diploma and degree levels. These programs of study have evolved over time to meet both the needs of students preparing for work in the field and child care service providers delivering a range of provincially licensed and approved child care services. The Ministry of Children's Services determines whether the early learning and care credentials public and private post-secondary institutions offer are eligible for the purposes of certifying staff to work in licensed or approved early learning and care programs.

The increase in early learning and care services in the province over the last decade, including both child care services funded and supported through the Ministry of Children's Services and Early Childhood Services funded and supported through the Ministry of Education, has resulted in a growing demand for staff to work with young children and their families. At the same time, the greater understanding of the importance of the formal education of these staff in preparing them to meet the complex needs of young children and their families has raised the need for staff with higher qualifications. The result is a shortage of educated staff to work in early learning and care services – a shortage that seems likely to continue in the short- and medium- terms. A similar situation exists across Canada.

The current study provides a description of the programs of study public post-secondary institutions and private career colleges provide for students seeking early learning and care credentials. It outlines some of the trends and challenges facing post-secondary institutions as they deliver these programs of study and proposes some preliminary strategies both to increase the number of students who graduate with post-secondary credentials and to improve the quality of

their learning experiences. The various strategies proposed draw both on the comments of college faculty and the findings from the comparative research literature.

Despite the interests of provincial governments across Canada in building the capacity of their early learning and care workforces, the progress to date has been limited. There are significant challenges that remain including how best to integrate increases in staff pre-service qualifications with parallel improvements in working conditions and remuneration.

The insights and perspectives of early childhood educators and other early learning and care stakeholders are critical to advancing this work, with much that requires consideration and subsequent collective action. Ultimately, what governments and early learning and care stakeholders see and understand as the primary purposes of early learning and care inform both the policies and regulations that shape services and, by extension, the roles and responsibilities of early childhood educators. The goal of supporting children's active learning and their development in ways that build on their own culture, values and experiences demands a well-educated and supported, professional early learning and care workforce. At present, the early learning and care workforces in Alberta and other Canadian provinces fall short of this requirement.

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