

The future child care workforce: perspectives of Early Childhood Education students



**Child Care
Human Resources
Sector Council**

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What views do early childhood education (ECE) students have about child care, their training programs, and their work prospects after graduation? To find out, the labour market update (LMU) research team conducted:

- a survey in May and June 2003 of 527 students close to graduation in 10 post-secondary ECE programs;¹
- focus groups in spring to late fall 2003 with students from five colleges; and

- key informant interviews in summer and fall 2003 with several ECE college faculty.

The ECE programs and focus groups were chosen to reflect geographic diversity and different delivery (see table below). Length of program varied from a one-year certificate program at Red Deer College to a three-year program at the two Colleges d'enseignement general et professionnel (CEGEPs).

Colleges Participating in the LMU Student Survey

College	Number of Students in Survey	Number of Students by Type of Program		
		Regular Daytime Program	Continuing Education	Distance Education
College of the North Atlantic, NL (CNA)	78	26		52
CEGEP Sainte-Foy, QC (CSF)	11	11		
CEGEP Jonquière, QC (CJ)	47	25	22	
Université du Québec à Montréal, QC (UQM)	31		31	
George Brown, ON (GBC)	143	143		
Red River College, MB (RRC)	60	60		
Grant MacEwan College, AB (GMC)	42	42		
Red Deer College, AB (RDC)	28			28
University College of the Fraser Valley, BC (UCFV)	35	35		
Vancouver Community College, BC (VCC)	52		52	

Who are the students?

ECE students have a wide variety of backgrounds. For example, 9% of students at CEGEP Sainte-Foy had a prior post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree, compared to 74% at Université du Québec

à Montréal. Almost 70% of students in the continuing education program at Vancouver Community College were born outside of Canada, compared to 9% at the University College of the Fraser Valley, just 75 kilometres away.

¹ Approximately 135 post-secondary education institutions deliver ECE certificate, diploma, degree and related programs through publicly funded community colleges, CEGEPs, universities, and private institutions.

Student Characteristics, by College										
	College									
	CNA	CSF	CJ	UQM	GBC	RRC	GMc	RDC	UCFV	VCC
% female	100	100	100	100	95.1	90.0	100	96.4	97.1	100
% under age 25	39.7	81.8	59.6	21.4	58.5	63.3	65.9	29.6	62.9	19.6
% immigrants	1.3	9.1	0.0	53.6	43.8	6.8	12.8	7.1	8.6	69.6
% with prior post-secondary credential *	61.5	9.1	40.4	74.2	40.8	33.3	14.3	17.9	57.1	56.9
% with prior ECE or related courses	59.7	0.0	29.8	25.8	20.3	43.3	19.0	39.3	48.6	50.0
% prior volunteer experience, child care centre	30.0	0.0	21.7	34.5	32.1	45.0	36.6	21.4	32.4	40.8
% prior paid experience in a child care centre	44.9	20.0	23.9	77.8	22.3	77.6	29.3	39.3	34.3	31.4
% ECE was first choice of program	93.4	100	87.2	90.0	87.4	78.3	90.5	92.6	80.0	84.6

* Certificate, diploma, or degree in any discipline

Views on training

Most students and faculty participating in the study felt training should be longer than it was in their particular province (across provinces ECE programs vary in length from one to three years), and that all staff should have a postsecondary credential. However, most agreed higher training requirements are difficult to justify when training has little impact on wages.

Accessibility

The cost of post-secondary education and distance from programs were cited as barriers to access. While students in many fields of study face these same issues, a recent report on recruitment and retention in child care found that the high cost of post-secondary ECE programs coupled with low future wage potential deters people from entering and remaining in the sector. The same report noted a lack of ECE programs in more remote regions of the country.²

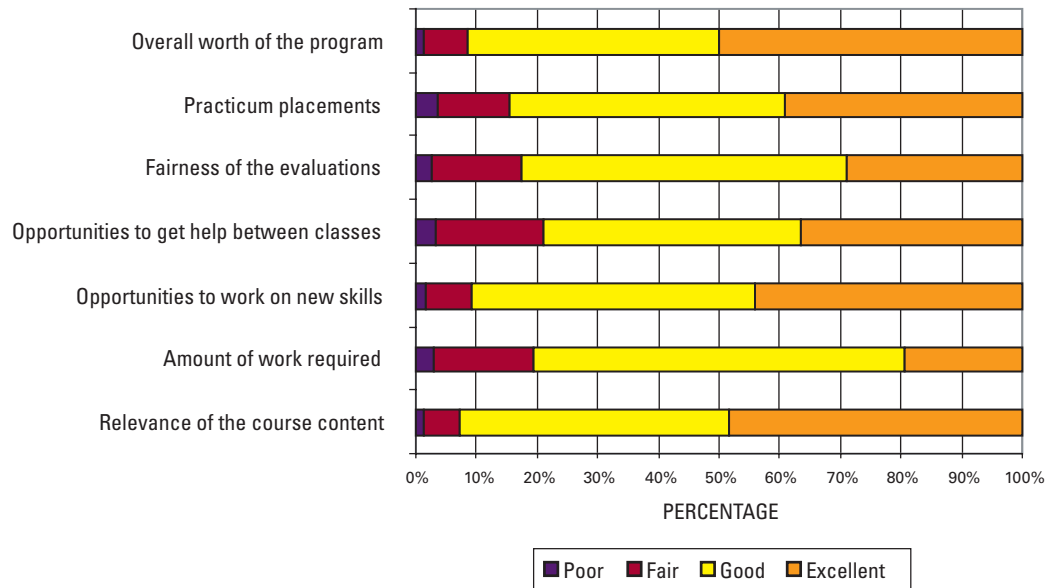
Evaluation of programs

Most students in the focus groups felt very positive about the education they were receiving. Those with prior child care work experience said they were more confident as a result of training, able to let the children express their ideas and set the direction of play, had a greater appreciation for the value of play and worked more effectively with parents.

Students surveyed also rated their programs highly—at least 75% rated all components “good” or “excellent”.

2 Miller, C. & Ferguson, E.E. (2003). *Attracting and keeping qualified staff in Canadian child care*. Halifax, NS: Child Care Connection-NS

Student Ratings of Program Elements



Most likely to rate the overall worth of their program as “excellent”³ were students who:

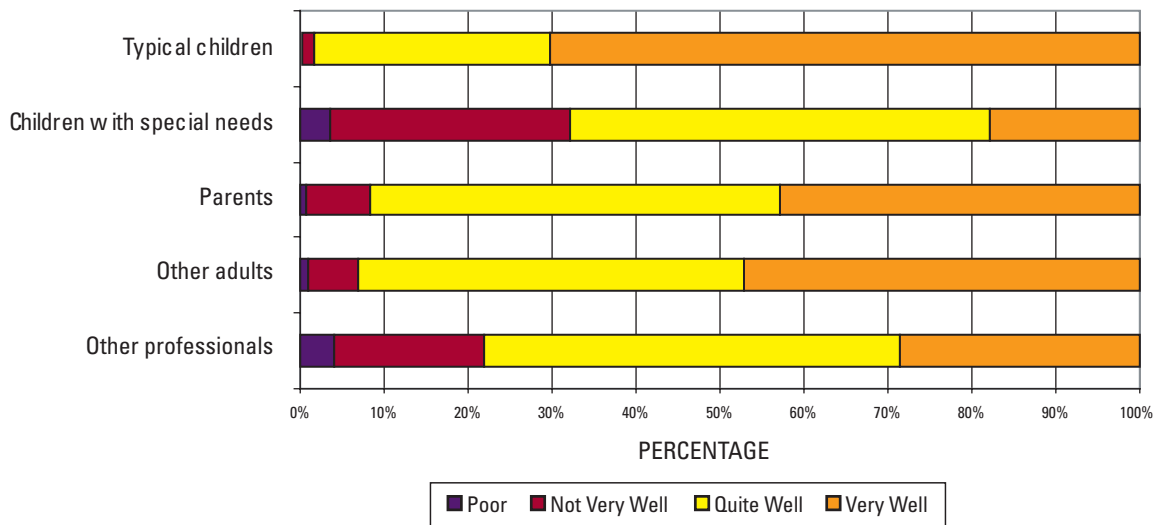
- Had enrolled in an ECE program as preparation for being a parent.
- Planned on enrolling in another ECE program after graduation.
- Had prior ECE credit courses.
- Immigrated to Canada before 1990.
- Had enrolled in an ECE program as a first step to an education degree.

Least likely to rate the overall worth of their program as “excellent” were students who were:

- Not accepted at their first choice of program.
- Studying through continuing education.
- Enrolled in an ECE program mainly to improve their employment choices.

³ All trends reported in this document are shown as individual characteristics. It is beyond the scope of the background document to show the relationship between and among characteristics in any comprehensive way.

Student Ratings of Preparation to Work With Various Groups



Working with different groups of children

Students surveyed were generally satisfied with their training as it related to working with various groups. More than 75% said their programs prepared them “quite well” or “very well” to work with almost all groups, especially typically developing children.

Almost one-third of students negatively rated their preparation to work with children with special needs. Focus group participants also indicated a need for more education in working with children with special needs, including how to better support children with language delays and behavioural issues, and the use of adaptive equipment. They also wanted more placements in settings inclusive of children with special needs in order to gain practical experience.

Of the 17.7% of students surveyed who indicated they were “very well” prepared to work with children with special needs, most had prior related experience or:

- Preferred to work with children with special needs.
- Had participated in prior non-credit ECE activities, such as seminars and workshops.

Plans to work in child care

Only about half of focus group participants saw themselves working in child care upon graduation –others said they would seek work in family child care, as school teachers, or in some other capacity with children. Many wanted to know about options for ECEs outside of regulated child care, such as Aboriginal Head Start, CAP-C programs, family resource centres, Child Life programs at hospitals, and working in kindergarten (either as a teaching assistant or teaching in a private school).

The main reasons cited for not wanting to work in regulated child care were perceived low quality programs and poor working conditions. Other reasons included lack of respect and low wages. Many students felt they would get more respect if the job was better paid.

Field (practicum) placements had a major impact on whether younger students and others with no previous child care work experience would consider a future in the sector. Some students had very positive placement experiences. They felt supported by the centre staff and believed they were contributing to the development of the children.

However, most expressed concerns about their experiences, including:

- Poor physical and unclean spaces, especially in infant programs.
- Operators cutting corners on staffing, supplies and food due to lack of adequate resources.
- Staff burn out and fatigue from long hours and the demands of the job.
- Inconsistent approaches and expectations between college faculty and supervising staff at the centre. For example, students were often concerned about the emphasis on “school readiness” in their field placements as opposed to the whole development of child and a play-based approach.
- Not being included in staff meetings, thereby gaining little practical experience in addressing issues effectively.
- Not having the respect of school personnel or being allowed to use common staff areas in child care centres located in schools.
- The ability to speak a second language not being valued.

Perceived availability of jobs

Many focus group students said most child care jobs available to new graduates were part-time or short-term contracts without benefits such as paid vacation or any job security. Others said jobs were only available in poorer quality centres where turnover was high. In the survey, 31% expected it would be somewhat difficult or very difficult to find an ECE-related job after graduating.

ECE and Teaching

A significant number of students surveyed planned to use their ECE program as a steppingstone to becoming teachers:

- 22% decided to enrol in ECE at least in part because it is a “good first step to an education degree”; 8% said this was the **main** reason for enrolling in ECE.
- 17% planned to be teaching in the education system in the next five years.

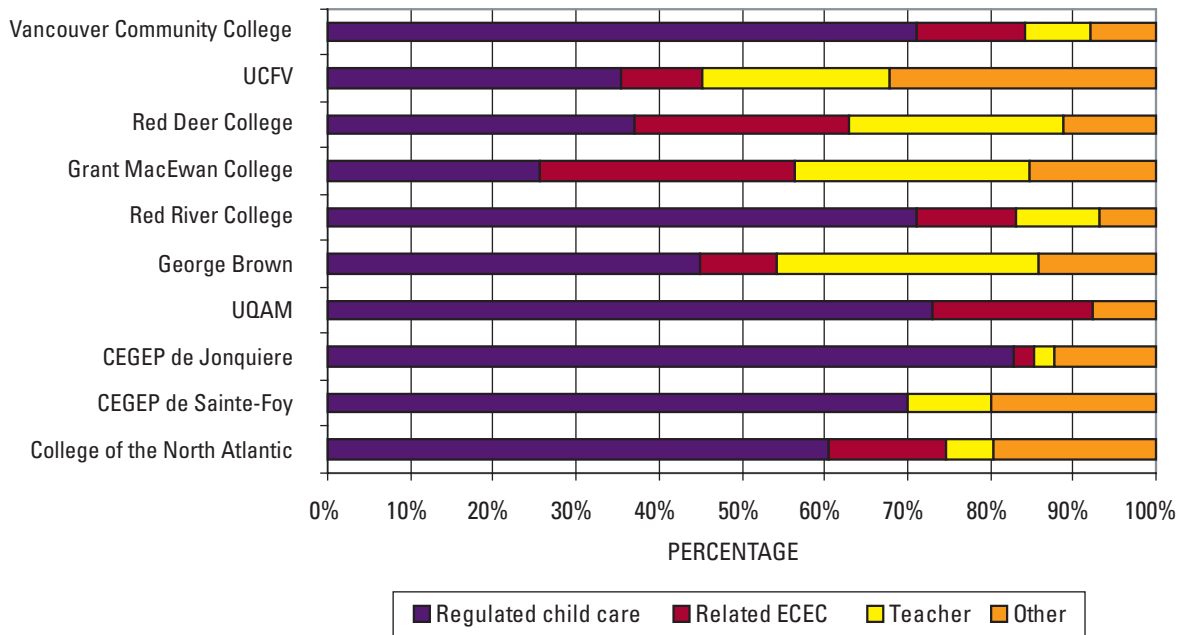
Most likely to say they hoped to teach in the education system were students who:

- Preferred to work with school-age children.
- Had volunteer experience in an after-school care program.

Plans to stay in child care

According to the National Graduate Survey, only 55% of ECE students graduating in 1995 were working as child care educators and assistants just two years later; by 2000, this had dropped to 43%. The LMU survey echoes this disturbing trend—overall only 55% of the ECE students planned to work in regulated child care in five years.

Students' Work Plans in Five years, LMU Survey



Most likely to plan on working in child care in five years were students:

- Attending a post-secondary institution in Quebec.
- In a continuing education ECE program.
- Whose employer paid for their ECE program.
- Not planning to continue their studies after graduation.
- Who spoke neither English nor French when growing up

Least likely to plan on working in regulated child care in five years were students who:

- Had decided to enrol in ECE as a first step towards a teaching degree.
- Planned to enrol in an education program.
- Had volunteer experience in an after-school care program.
- Planned to enrol in neither an ECE nor education program.
- Had not been accepted to their first choice of program.

Immigrants in ECE programs

Immigrants students were distinct from other ECE students in a number of ways: they were older, had more education, and were more likely to plan on working in a child care centre, both after graduation and five years hence – despite being less optimistic about the ease of finding child care-related work.

Given the recruitment and retention problems in child care, it might be fruitful to focus specific recruitment efforts on this population.

Immigrant vs. Non-immigrant Differences, LMU Student Survey

	Immigrant (%)	Born in Canada (%)
Age 35 or older	36.4	14.0
Attained prior university degree	37.6	4.2
Expect finding an ECE-related job after graduating will be "very easy"	8.1	36.4
Expect to earn \$16/hr or more just after graduation	41.5	18.3
Plan to work in a child care centre just after graduation	63.3	47.4
Hope to be working with children in a child care centre five years from now	37.0	23.5

Moving forward

Increasing the number of new graduates who choose to work and remain in child care is critical for the future of the workforce. The sector needs to make efforts to enhance the skills and leadership qualities of supervisors and directors to recruit new graduates and work collectively on quality improvements. Plans to follow the students surveyed as they move into the workforce and surveying additional students will provide key information on their employment choices, job satisfaction and job stability as part of the Sector Council's long-term labour market strategy.

Working for Change

The information in this backgrounder comes from the November 2004 labour market update study, *Working for Change: Canada's Child Care Workforce*. The study profiles those who work in regulated child care and points to solutions for addressing the critical labour shortage in this sector. The study was sponsored by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC).

For more information visit www.ccsc-cssge.ca or contact us at:
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