

**Peer Review Report**

**Master of Arts in Early Childhood Studies**

**Yeates School of Graduate Studies**

**Ryerson University**

(Site visit November 27-28, 2014)

Submitted on December 18, 2014

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## **Introduction**

We would like to use this opportunity to commend the School of Early Childhood Studies, Ryerson University for the thorough and thoughtful Self Study completed in August 2014. The Report demonstrates the achievements of the Master of Arts in Early Childhood Studies, outlines the challenges faced by the School, and sets the stage for improvements in relation to the Ryerson University's 2014-19 Academic Plan. While the challenges are not unique to the School, as they reflect the trend common to all provinces in Canada to decrease funding for post-secondary education institutions, the Report indicates a number of creative and strategic ways taken to address these challenges. Our feedback and recommendations are made in a spirit of collegiality and are meant to suggest possible concrete steps to further address some of the challenges.

The headings (i.e. 1-8) below are drawn from the document sent by Dr. Anthony Bonato to the Review Team on October 6, 2014. Items 1 to 7 are discussed in detail, however, item 8 – the amount of funding for graduate students – was not part of the documentation sent to us prior to the site visit, or a significant topic of discussion as part of the site visit.

References to the Master of Arts in Early Childhood Studies Self-Study Report are to the version dated August 26, 2014 received by the Review Team on November 6, 2014 as part of the ECS Reviewer Materials.

### ***1. The appropriateness of the program's goals and learning objectives, and consistency of the program's curriculum with these goals and objectives***

The program's goals and objectives are outlined in Section 4 of the Self Study, Program Outcomes, and elaborated through the Curriculum Mapping Exercise (Appendix V). Early childhood studies is described as a field informed by various disciplines, represented by faculty from sociology, political science, psychology, disability studies, and child and youth care (p. 3).

Curriculum Mapping information indicates that **Knowledge** Goals are met, with most goals evident across all courses. The goal, 'interdisciplinary approaches to analysis' is identified as being met in most courses, the apparent strategy to have each course be interdisciplinary as opposed to having a range of discipline-based courses. The strength of the approach is to encourage students to view issues through diverse perspectives; the limitation is that students may not develop in-depth disciplinary knowledge or in-depth knowledge of individual topics.

Goals for *Skills* are met on balance across the range of courses. Goals 1-3 are met in almost all courses; goals 4-7 are met in some courses. Goals for Skills do not include practice work with children, although this is an aim of the program (Self Study, p. 4).

Goals related to *Habits of Mind and Attitudes* are met across the range of courses, with some courses meeting all six goals. In a few cases, it is unclear why specific goals were not met. The goal ‘consistently and critically reflect on their own and others’ prior knowledge, beliefs, and practices’ was not met in the course *Cross-Cultural Development*; the goal ‘be committed to on-going learning’ was not met in the course *Children, Technology and Play*. The most common opportunities for meeting goals in any area (Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes) are through readings, discussions, presentations, and papers.

As a general comment, the distinction between expectations specific to childhood studies and expectations common to all graduate-level education was not clear. An example is the Goal for Skills, ‘effectively synthesize, analyze and present knowledge for various purposes and audiences,’ and the match between professions, issues, and fields. Moreover, whereas the Knowledge goals are broad, the list of Skills is quite narrow.

## **2. The currency, rigour, and coherence of the program’s curriculum**

Until recently the structure of the program of studies was 4 required courses and 6 electives, or 4 required courses and 3 electives and a Major Research Paper (MRP). A program change came into effect in Fall 2014 in which 2 required courses became electives (*Families & Educational Equity* and *Curriculum Design in a Changing Society*). The change was made to ‘enable the program to offer more electives, and for the addition of two new [elective] courses’ (Self Study, p. 9): the *Internship* and *Children’s Health*. The Review Team is concerned that the change may result in different choices with the addition of 2 new electives, but it may not result in more choice for students (a lack of choice of electives was identified as a key student concern in the Self Study and by students in their meeting with the Review Team). As one student described, the selection in any given term is ‘restricted to a handful of courses.’ This concern was shared both by students and alumni of the program in their meetings with the Review Team. The total number of courses listed per year has decreased from 21 in 2007-08 to 14 in 2013-14 (Self Study, p. 41), but again, listings and actual offerings are not the same thing. The decreasing number of courses listed, as well as the limited number of courses offered and the increase in the number of electives required for graduation, will have a greater impact on students not completing an MRP.

**Recommendation:** To update information on the School’s website including the program brochure. It currently does not reflect the 2014-15 degree requirements.

Once admitted, students indicate that they would appreciate more and more timely information on course scheduling to facilitate their planning. While the School website includes a range of information, it should be reviewed to ensure it is current and reflects program changes. The MA Childhood Studies brochure, for example, lists 4 required courses instead of 2 required courses, as listed in the calendar. The course list in Appendix III has a list of 23 courses offered in 2014 that does not reflect the schedule on the website. Additional information on communication will be detailed in item six of this report.

Meetings with students, current and past, and with faculty, led the Review Team to question the overall strategy of having a large number of ‘electives’—indeed, the term ‘elective’ needs to be questioned as students feel the limited number of courses on offer in any given term does not constitute ‘electives’ as there is limited or no choice. One faculty member flagged that there could be a concern regarding ‘truth in advertising’ in this regard. There is another challenge of programmatic nature that a decrease of the number of required courses may lead to—lack of common core content that all students will be required to master as part of the Master’s in Early Childhood Studies program. Building on common knowledge, acquired in the required courses not only reduces repetition in each of the elective courses, but also allows for expansion on and deepening of students’ understanding and ability to apply knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts. We respectfully encourage the School to review their decision to reduce the number of required courses in light of these comments.

**Recommendation:** To ‘collapse’ some of the multitude of ‘electives’ into broader topics – for example a somewhat broad Language and Literacy course could incorporate 2-3 ‘electives’ and result in a more integrated program of studies. It would also address student and faculty concerns that the large number of electives suggests more choice than the program has been able to provide. Regardless whether or not the School accepts this recommendation, it should not persist in ‘false advertising’, but let students know very precisely and in a timely fashion what courses will be offered and when. Indeed, the program of studies for the coming year should be available before students make application to the program.

The content of the program’s curriculum revolves around childhood studies as the hub, but individual courses do not necessarily relate one to the other. (We note this may reflect the disjointedness of the field.) To put it another way, a conceptual and theoretical framework for childhood studies is suggested by the range of courses but not explicitly defined. This could cause students to not understand the focus or purpose of the program. Nevertheless, the diversity of the courses provides a space for students to talk about childhood using various perspectives. The curriculum includes many examples of the way the School has adopted a critical and innovative approach to the childhood studies area. Examples include the *Children’s Rights* course, *Queering Education*, and *Re-*

*conceptualizing ECE*. The program's curriculum is also strong related to its specific focus on diversity and inclusion. Only one elective course has a pre-requisite (*Childhood Bilingualism*) ensuring that all other elective courses are open to students with a variety of first degrees.

The review of the submitted course outlines indicates that the Academic Plan's Strategy no. 3, 'Continue the ongoing evolution of Ryerson's high quality curriculum,' is addressed. The course content, readings and assignments speak to the faculty members' goals to provide a solid theoretical foundation for students' understanding of the major theories in Early Childhood Studies. The readings for all courses are relevant, mostly contemporary, and diverse in terms of theoretical perspectives. Most course outlines also include long, comprehensive lists of additional readings that students can use to build further their knowledge on the topic or to begin to develop their own bibliography on the topic they choose for the Major Research Project. However, there is no clear written statement in course outlines concerning the instructor expectation for the additional readings.

We agree that the approach for Curriculum Currency involving the mapping exercise is needed and fruitful. This may also involve staff grouping around a common interest or focus such as literacy, disability, or immigrant and refugee studies, etc. Instructors should add their own strengths and interests to required courses to a greater degree. Currently, required courses have the same syllabus from year to year regardless of the instructor.

### ***3. The appropriateness of the mode of delivery and the methods used for the evaluation of student progress***

The delivery is mainly in a standard seminar and discussion model. Examples of innovative delivery are the involvement of the Early Learning Centre (ELC) for a laboratory and hands-on experience with research, along with a full-day kindergarten and after-school program in a nearby public school, a new site in 2014. The program has also initiated an internship course involving students in child and family community services.

It appears that many of the types of assignments in the individual courses are very similar to one another (i.e. critical literature review, annotated bibliography). Although the Self-Study report (p. 13) states that 'the variety of learning tasks they [the faculty] assign to students helps to ensure that each of them has an opportunity to learn and to demonstrate what s/he has learned in different ways', there is little evidence of choice for students when it comes to assignments/demonstration of knowledge. The assignments in all courses should be reviewed to ensure that there is a variety of ways in which student knowledge is represented, especially for students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as Aboriginal students who come from different epistemological traditions, world views, and 'habits of mind.' The western linear, logical format of

development and representation of knowledge may place these students in a disadvantaged position.

**Recommendation:** To add alternative methods of assessment as well as alternative methods of delivery including digital teaching and learning, which is consistent with Ryerson's Academic Plan and would increase student access to individual courses and the Master's program.

The Major Research Paper (MRP) option is taken by 42 per cent of students. Students indicate the advisor of their choice by checking website descriptions of faculty interests. Some students expressed concerns about the MRP, described in both the Self Study and shared with the Review Team in meetings with current students and alumni. Concerns included the limited time-period to identify a research question and create a proposal in term one, time and other challenges with ethics approval, difficulty securing a supervisor, and inconsistent conceptions of style and expectation. The Review Team is also concerned that the MRP is not an optimal vehicle for creating a foundation for future doctoral studies. Creation of a Thesis structure (committee structure, supervisors with course load recognition, formal defense procedures, etc.) for students who wish to pursue such an option, would provide a stronger experience base for a future doctoral proposal.

**Recommendation:** To convert the MRP to a master's thesis. The MRP is not providing the program with a strong and suitable base from which to develop a PhD program and should be discontinued in favour of a two-stream Thesis/non-Thesis structure. This would stream a smaller number of students who are oriented toward research, to the thesis, and the larger group of students to the course-based masters, which could stabilize enrolment numbers in elective courses.

**Recommendation:** To streamline ethics approval by arranging agreements between the School and school districts, hospitals, childcare providers, etc.

In addition, except for CS 8928: *Transformative literacy*, CS 8929: *Dual language learning* and CS 8930: *Social Research with Children*, and the new internship course, there is little evidence that other courses offer experiential learning opportunities, although an aim of the program is to prepare individuals "to work directly with children" (Self Study, p. 4). There are no differentiated assignments for students who come from fields not related to Early Childhood Education and Care. Strategy 05: 'Evolve and expand experiential learning opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students' clearly points to the need for the courses to include such opportunities. Further, the twofold aim of the program to prepare personnel to work with children and to undertake research, etc. (p. 4), does not match with the experience of most graduates to date as indicated in the Self Study, who go on to work as college instructors (p. 14). In light of this, the School may consider including coursework in teaching adult learners in the

context of child services, as well as to encourage students to participate in Ryerson's Future Smart Initiative. The Review Team notes, however, that in its meetings with current students and alumni, college teaching was rarely identified as a career goal or current job.

Based on the Self-Study Report, the ELC and the Gerrard Resource Centre (GRC) offer possibilities for all students to benefit from experiential learning. Currently, only CS 8934: Special Topics: Research in ECE Lab Schools seems to allow for the use of the ELC. However, the newly developed internship course will provide opportunities for students who want practical experience and networking opportunities. The Review Team sees this as a step in the direction consistent with Strategy 05 of the Ryerson University Academic Plan.

There is ample evidence that Priorities 01 & 02 of the Ryerson University's 2014-19 Academic Plan, Strategy 12: 'provide greater opportunities for student involvement with research' are addressed. The research output of the students in the program is very good. However, it is not clear from the report if these publications are based on the students' Major Research Projects and how many of the publications and presentations are in collaboration with the faculty members that supervised their work.

Given the diverse nature of fields the students come from, and the diverse job opportunities that are available to them, the research output/dissemination of students might be through non-traditional channels, which the current 'reporting' system of student output may have not captured.

#### ***4. Appropriateness and the program's admission requirement to the program's goals and learning objectives***

The admission process and criteria for student selection demonstrate that the committee holds high standards and only the best candidates are offered a place in the program. The number of applicants and strength of applicants is a concern for many graduate programs, and that appears to be the current situation for the ECS as well. Graduate Coordinator Dr. Angela Valeo indicated that the program lacks larger numbers of strong applicants to increase admissions. Fluctuations in graduate application numbers are common for many programs, but the program may wish to follow up on the relatively low response rate to the Self-Study questionnaire sent to alumni in order to 'plumb deeper' into key questions.

While the program appears to be in alignment with Priority # 1, 2 & 3 of Ryerson University's 2014-19 Academic Plan (Strategy 14: Attract top graduate students), there is no evidence that there is a strategy to 'develop access and program initiatives to support under-represented groups, including Aboriginal students, first-generation students, students with disabilities and internationally educated professional' (Strategy 07). It is not clear from the documentation provided what the composition of the student body currently is or has been since the beginning of the program in 2006. It would be helpful to

have information on the way the program is promoted across the many different groups of potential students. We suggest that the Faculty systematically collect, analyse, and take actions to address Strategy 07 of Ryerson University's 2014-19 Academic Plan.

Recruitment of target populations that are vastly different from one another requires differentiated approaches to advertisement and 'marketing.' For example, recruitment of Aboriginal students may not be best accomplished via enhanced web presence, while recruitment of international students may be. In other words, a comprehensive and differentiated approach is needed if this is a priority for the Faculty and the University. In addition, the Faculty will need to take into consideration how an increase of students from the under-represented groups as well as increase in the number of international students will impact their capacity to provide adequate support to these students so that they experience success in learning.

Student GPA at graduation appears to be very high, with 78% of students being in the A- to A+ range. Although this, no doubt reflects the high quality of the students admitted to the program, it may also be interpreted as 'inflation' of grades that, in a long run does not serve the students well, especially those who pursue further graduate studies (i.e. PhD): the class average is considered when GPA is assessed for Tri-Council funding.

#### ***5. Appropriateness and effectiveness of the use of human, physical, and financial resources to support the program***

The School makes excellent use of available physical space for graduate teaching and learning, including the ELC, space for research projects, outreach to school, library, and GRC. The Graduate Student Lounge was highlighted in the report and in our meetings with students and alumni as particularly important to their student experience, serving as a space for building community, working on group projects, small group meetings, etc. We note there is no designated physical space for graduate program administration at the School, and contact with the Graduate Program Administrator who is located off-site is primarily via e-mail.

The School does have the human resources in terms of full-time faculty members, but they need to use them differently according to their strengths. For some faculty this is research and for others it is teaching. Evidence for this is the number of major research projects undertaken along with supervision of Major Research Papers. Six of 33 faculty members have supervised 42 students' MRPs since the start of the program, representing more than half of all MRPs. One faculty member has supervised more than 10 per cent of MRPs.

**Recommendation:** To assign supervisors for MRPs with consideration of the workload of faculty members, equity of distribution, as well as student interest. Future hiring should consider an appointment at the rank of associate professor with a track record of research and supervision, relieving junior colleagues from



the responsibility of leadership in this area in their pre-tenure period. (Please also note the earlier Recommendation to move towards a Thesis/Non-Thesis structure for the MA program.)

***6. The quality of the support to students and general student satisfaction with the program***

A primary concern of students is that they are not getting information in a timely fashion and that what is available is sometimes incorrect (for example, program materials provide a long list of electives, but there is typically very little, if any, choice). Students and graduates indicated that their typical means of learning about program options and opportunities is through 'informal communications' with each other. On the one hand, there are expressions of support for the instruction, but on the other the communication of information during the program and before, is unclear or incorrect in some cases.

As indicated in item 3, students stated that in a 12-month program it is extremely challenging, and sometimes not possible to form a research question, find a supervisor, write a proposal, complete research ethics, complete the study and report, and sit the oral examination.

The Self-Study states that the University permits full-time students to be employed for no more than 10 hours per week. SSHRC regulations allow 12 hours. Information regarding research stipends provided by faculty members with no tax deductible is unclear and clarity is needed (p. 25).

***7. The degree to which the scholarly, research and creative activity provides support for the program goals and learning objectives***

We have a concern that those who are carrying a scholarly load have a larger responsibility and burden for the success of the program.

It is not clear how faculty become members of the Graduate Faculty. In terms of rank, 3 faculty members within the School are full professors, with 1 associated with the program from Sociology; there are 10 associate professors within the School, and 5 from outside; and there are 2 assistant professors from within the School, and 2 from outside. As well, there is one professor emeritus from the School. For faculty members new to the program it may be helpful to have a mentorship program in place for participation in the graduate program. A review of output shows a range of quantity amongst faculty members.

**Recommendation:** To encourage faculty members to continue to build their reputation, in light of the School's desire to develop a PhD Program and in line with Strategy 21 of the Academic Plan.

The Table of Faculty Publications raised several questions. An examination of CV's shows that almost one-third of faculty members in the School of ECS are below the

average of 2.08 publications per year for all faculty members in Table 8 including all types of publications (refereed, non-refereed, and forthcoming).

In 2014, the School is hiring one full-time position. Depending on how the School chooses to structure itself as a result of the Review process, it should be possible to determine the number of faculty needed, and their responsibilities, for both the undergraduate and current MA graduate program. When the PhD program is proposed, the School will need to examine how faculty will support both doctoral and master's courses and supervision.

#### ***8. The level of funding for graduate students***

We heard from the students their deep appreciation for the funds that some students received as admission scholarships. In meeting with both current students and alumni, the available funding was mentioned as one of the primary reasons for the students to apply to and accept offers into the program.

#### ***General areas in need of further attention***

From the list of 29 identified strategies to address the four priorities in the Ryerson University's 2014-19 Academic Plan, the Faculty has taken steps to address almost all with perhaps the exception of having a plan to "expand technology-enhanced and high quality online offerings (Strategy # 11) or to "encourage the use of new and diverse learning and teaching methods" (Strategy #10). It is not clear from the Self-Study Report if the School has taken steps to "Enhance pathways and transition support for students transferring from other post-secondary institutions, and provide appropriate transfer credit for students' prior learning" (Strategy # 09).

**In addition to the eight points identified above as included in the guidance letter of October 6, 2014, the Review Team has been asked to comment on the following:**

***i. The program's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities:***

Clearly this is a program with many strengths. It is the result of a vision to create an innovative and unique early years program that moved beyond Ryerson's long standing place as a leader in undergraduate early childhood education in Canada to break new ground through conceptualizing a graduate Early Childhood Studies program that incorporated new and diverse understandings of children's care and development. That diversity and innovation is evident in the many electives identified in program materials developed at the outset and updated since. It is also evident in the faculty who have created and taught innovative courses, reached out to develop new resources in the community, supervised MRPs, pursued research, and continued a strong tradition of undergraduate education providing coursework and supervision for what may be the largest undergraduate Bachelor's-level program in early childhood studies in Canada.

Given such a range of responsibilities it is not surprising that there are also some weaknesses in the existing program. A number of these have been flagged in the responses to the 8 questions above and they are reflected in the reiterated specific recommendations that follow below. Those weaknesses could be summarized as challenges: 1) the need for clearer, more accurate and more timely communications with students in regards to the nature of and opportunities afforded by the program; 2) given the lack of true ‘electives’ available to students each year, consideration of alternative curricular approaches to address diversity of content and diversity of students and their needs; and 3) strengthening preparations for a desired, future doctoral program through differentiating between those faculty with ‘research and research support responsibilities’ and those without such expectations. Institutions across Canada have approached these differences in roles and responsibilities in various ways.

This summary and the more specific recommendations relate to:

**ii. The program’s developmental plan:**

The Review Team feels that the ECS program, through the development of its 2014 Program Review document and through its engagement in this review process, is extremely well positioned to create a future looking 2015-2019 development plan that: incorporates the innovation found in its original plan for the Master’s program; is informed by its experiences to date (as captured through the review process); and is inspired by future-looking hopes, such as a desire to mount a doctoral program.

**iii. Recommendations for actions to improve the quality of the program, if any, distinguishing between those that the program can itself take and those that would require external action, where possible:**

The following list of Recommendations is contextualized in response to the general mandate of points identified in the contract letter of Oct. 6, 2014. They are excerpted here for the purposes of ease of consideration. For the most part the recommendations are ones that the program itself must lead with, even if the dynamics require action by other units and levels within the university.

- **Recommendation:** To update information on the School’s website including the program brochure on an on-going and timely manner to reflect current course offerings, program changes and degree requirements.
- **Recommendation:** To create a more integrated program of studies by identifying broader topics for the ‘electives’ that could accommodate diverse interests. This would address student and faculty concerns that the large number of electives suggests more choice than have thus far been provided.

- **Recommendation:** To add alternative methods of assessment as well as alternative methods of delivery including digital teaching and learning, which is consistent with Ryerson's Academic Plan and would increase student access to individual courses and the Master's program.
- **Recommendation:** To convert the MRP to a Master's thesis. The MRP is not providing the program with a strong and suitable base from which to develop a PhD program and should be discontinued in favour of a two-stream Thesis/non-Thesis structure. This would stream a smaller number of students who are oriented toward research, to the thesis, and the larger group of students to the course-based masters, which could stabilize enrolment numbers in elective courses.
- **Recommendation:** To streamline ethics approval by arranging agreements between the School and school districts, hospitals, childcare providers, etc.
- **Recommendation:** To assign supervisors for MRPs with consideration of the workload of faculty members, equity of distribution, as well as student interest. Future hiring should consider an appointment at the rank of associate professor with a track record of research and supervision, relieving junior colleagues from the responsibility of leadership in this area in their pre-tenure period.
- **Recommendation:** To encourage faculty members to continue to build their reputation, in light of the School's desire to develop a PhD Program and in line with Strategy 21 of the Academic Plan.