

The School of Early Childhood Studies

Response to

Peer Review Team Report

Master of Arts in Early Childhood Studies (MAECS)

Ryerson University

January 31, 2015

Submitted by Dr. Angela Valeo
Interim Graduate Program Director

This document serves as the School of Early Childhood Studies' response to the report submitted by the Peer Review Team (PRT) comprised of a three-member panel of external reviewers. The team included Dr. Alan Pence (University of Victoria), Dr. Anna Kirova and Dr. Larry Prochner (University of Alberta).

Ryerson University Senate Policy 126 (Article IV F) outlines the requirements for the response to the PRT report as follows:

The written response may include any of the following: corrections or clarifications of items raised in the PRT report; a revised developmental plan with an explanation of how the revisions reflect the recommendations or respond to the weaknesses or deficiencies identified in the report; and/or an explanation of why recommendations of the PRT will not be acted upon.

This report was guided by the policy recommendation noted above. The PRT report was reviewed by Dr. Rachel Langford, Director of the School of Early Childhood Studies and Dr. Angela Valeo, Interim Graduate Program Director. In addition, the report was shared electronically with all RFA members within the School of Early Childhood Studies including, but not limited to those Faculty appointed to the Yeates School of Graduate Studies. These stakeholders were invited to provide feedback to this report both orally (through a facilitated discussion during a meeting) as well as in writing. Based on the feedback we submit the following response to the PRT report.

The PRT report, written in the spirit of collegiality was received by the School with a sense of pride and accomplishment. We are pleased that the report noted the program's "many strengths" including our innovative curriculum and Faculty commitment to excellence in graduate education. We also appreciate the PRT's understanding of the uniqueness of the MAECS program when they stated:

[MAECS] 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 . . . (PRT Report, p. 10)

The next section describes our response to the recommendations presented in the PRT report.

Section 1: Appropriateness of MAECS goals/learning objectives and their alignment with curriculum.

- a) We wish to clarify that the principal aim of the Masters in Early Childhood Studies is not, as the PRT report stated, to prepare graduates to work directly with children.

The program's aim and vision is to prepare highly educated individuals who can provide leadership in research, policy, advocacy, and educational practices in the early childhood field (as noted on page four of the self-study report). It is this goal which creates the foundation for all of the courses in the MAECS program.

Thus, the courses noted by the PRT as preparing students to work directly with children requires clarification: CS8930, Social Research with Children, is linked to the School's Early Learning Centre (ELC) and Gerrard Resource Centre (GRC) and is designed to provide students with experience designing and conducting research with children. CS8934, Special Topics, is linked to the ELC and is designed to provide students with experience conducting research in lab schools. Similarly, the internship course, CS8941 is intended to give students the opportunity to strengthen their understanding of early childhood policy, advocacy, and/or service delivery.

- b) The PRT expressed concerns that the program's interdisciplinary approach may not lead to development of in-depth disciplinary knowledge or in-depth knowledge of individual topics.

Faculty response to this concern varied with some comments reflecting the position that Early Childhood Studies is considered to be a field that is informed by other disciplines (James & James, 2008)¹ and that in-depth knowledge can be acquired without using any single disciplinary lens.

However, all Faculty maintain that a more extensive discussion regarding differences between Early Childhood Studies and Early Childhood Education, as well as a discussion defining the current disciplinary approaches in the MAECS program is warranted and would serve to create a stronger, and clearer conceptual and theoretical framework for the program. Accordingly,

- a curriculum mapping exercise/facilitated discussion will take place during the Fall 2015 term as five Faculty (responsible for teaching half of the graduate courses) are currently on sabbatical.

Section 2: Currency, rigour, and coherence of the program's curriculum.

¹ James, A. & James, A. (2008). *Key Concepts in Childhood Studies*. London: Sage.

- a) The School strongly agrees with the PRT recommendation to update the School's website including the program brochure and to provide updated information on scheduling of courses and program changes to the students. The following steps will be undertaken:
- The website update has been initiated and students beginning the program in Fall 2015 will have updated course information.
 - The web site will be updated twice a year by the Program Director (PD) and Program Assistant (PA)
- b) The PRT noted that the total number of courses listed per year has decreased from 21 in 2007/08 to 14 in 2013/14.

To clarify, although the program may have originally had 21 courses listed, many were, in fact, never mounted. The original funding model allowed for only 14 courses per year. Many were removed from the list last year in order to satisfy the "truth in advertising" goal that the PRT report pointed out. The new funding model inherent in Ryerson's Task Force Restructuring initiative may allow the School to offer additional courses as early as Fall 2015.

- c) The report highlighted student concerns that there was little real course selection as only a handful of courses were offered each term and recommended grouping electives into broader topics or strands.

The school agrees with this recommendation and will,

- discuss the possibility of strategically grouping electives during the Fall 2015 term. This will also include a discussion of the program's goals and conceptual framework.

Section 3: Appropriateness of the mode of delivery and the methods used for the evaluation of student progress.

- a) The PRT report recommended converting the MRP to a thesis and creating a two stream (thesis/non-thesis) option.

Though a number of our students are entering PhD programs on the strength of their MRP and their overall performance in the program, the Faculty is in favour of exploring the possibility of moving to a thesis option. However, there are a number of factors to consider before moving in this direction. Some questions to consider are: How would a thesis and non-thesis stream differ? How different is a thesis structure from our current MRP structure? What are the implications of moving to a thesis structure for Faculty work-loading and for student choice? The PRT noted that students found it difficult to organize and complete an MRP in one year thus raising questions about the viability of completing a thesis in one year. In order to explore these possibilities more thoroughly:

- The PD will compile information comparing Thesis/Non-Thesis structures in other programs at Ryerson as well as across universities (Spring/Summer 2015) in order to help inform the discussion.
 - The Faculty will discuss this recommendation during the Fall 2015 term and, if in favour, will create a time-line for its implementation.
- b) The report commented that the types of assignments in courses were too similar and did not take advantage of e-learning and digital media.

While graduate Faculty foster student engagement online through the use of Blackboard Discussion Boards and web logging (in password protected multi-user course blogs), we acknowledge the PRT report recommendation regarding exploring alternative methods of assessment and delivery. Faculty members will continue to strive to ensure appropriateness of delivery and methods used for the evaluation of student progress.

Section 4: Appropriateness of the program's admission requirement to the program's goals and learning objectives.

- a) The PRT recommended that the program develop initiatives to attract and support under-represented groups which would align with Strategy 7 of Ryerson's academic plan.

Ryerson University is committed to attracting and supporting under-represented groups. At the University level Strategy 7 is currently carried out through the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Studies.

The availability of part-time studies in the MAECS program does, we feel, provide access to students who are employed while pursuing their degree, mature students wishing to change careers, or to learners from various groups who cannot afford full-time studies. However, partial funding for part-time students should be considered.

- b) The PRT recommended that the program consider international applicants.

Under the current graduate structure, Ryerson University does not receive funding for international students and they are only admitted after domestic quotas are met. Ryerson University is exploring ways to recruit international students at the graduate level.

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

- a) The PRT reported some inequity in the number of Faculty members supervising Major Research Papers (MRP) and recommended that MRP supervision be assigned to Faculty.

The MAECS is a one year program with MRP supervision occurring during the spring/summer term (the non-teaching term for most RFA). Assigning Faculty to MRP supervision responsibilities contravenes Article 10 of the RFA Collective Agreement and will not be acted upon. MRP supervision will continue to be voluntary.

- b) The School agrees with the PRT's recommendation that the program assistant should be located in the school. The PA will be housed on-site.

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

- a) Concerns in this section of the PRT report appear to refer back to students' needs to have clear and timely information about the MRP process and availability of courses. In order to further improve access to information:
- Website and course selection criteria updating is currently under way:
 - The PD will hold a one-hour regularly scheduled meeting with the students once a month in order to keep students up to date with issues related to course offerings:
 - An on-line method for students to choose and drop courses will be created to make course selection easier.

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

- a) The PRT report recommended that Faculty members continue to build their reputation in light of the School's plan to develop a PhD Program in line with Strategy 21 of the Academic Plan.

Supports are currently in place at the Faculty- and School-levels to encourage Faculty members to continue building their research profiles. ECS Faculty have an ongoing commitment to engage MA students in their research projects through opportunities to work as research assistants and carry out their MRP research within the umbrella of larger funded projects.

Graduate program Faculty members teach in both the graduate and undergraduate programs. Through the ECS undergraduate program, many MAECS students build their capacity in scholarship and teaching by working as graduate teaching assistants.

Section 8: Level of funding for graduate students.

- a) The PRT report noted that students were very appreciative of the level of funding that they received in the program.

Students will continue to receive internal and external funding for our program.

In summary, while acknowledging the many strengths of the program, the PRT report flagged a number of areas needing improvement, and Faculty look forward to the

opportunity of creating a stronger program as a result of this feedback. In addition to the activities noted in the bulleted points throughout this document, the Faculty will undertake the creation of a developmental plan for the graduate program in Spring 2015. This activity comes at a crucial time given the University's re-structuring of the Yeates School of Graduate Studies.

We would also like to thank the Yeates School of Graduate Studies, in particular, Dr. Anthony Bonato (Associate Dean) and Shirley Lee (Program Administrator) for their guidance and support during this review.