

# Child care in Canadian universities <sup>[1]</sup>

Background research and analysis for a child care feasibility study for the University of Manitoba

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online [PDF] <sup>[2]</sup>

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

This report is part of a University of Manitoba initiative intended to enhance the university's child care support for students, faculty and staff at the university who are parents. It explores best practices and models for university child care to contribute to a feasibility study. The study will provide advice to the University about how better to meet the child care needs of its community now and in the future by creating programs and facilities and integrating early childhood education and child care services into campus developments.

In an environment in which Canadian families' access to high quality, affordable child care is limited by weak policy and insufficient public funding, there has often been an expectation that institutions such as workplaces, colleges and universities will help fill the child care gap to support their own populations. Although most Canadian universities across Canada have stepped in to help fill the child care gap, there has been little research carried out on child care at Canadian universities.

### Research components: Survey on characteristics of university child care and provincial policy profiles

The report includes two research components - a survey of university-based child care programs in U-15 universities and child care policy profiles of the seven provinces in which U-15 universities are located.

The purpose of the survey was to gather information about key characteristics of the centres in order to provide information for analyzing the university child care centres' business models. Forty-three child care centres were identified initially for the survey including 36 centres associated with U-15 universities and seven others associated with other Manitoba universities or Manitoba public institutions (one college and one hospital). The term "associated" with the university was defined as "child care that is available at or through the university or through an arrangement that the university has made".

A request to complete an online survey was made to an identified key contact person at each centre. Ultimately, 30 centres associated with universities and two in other Manitoba public institutions (32 in all) completed the questionnaire.

In addition, profiles of provincial child care policy and provision are included for the seven provinces in which the surveyed child care programs are located. The information in the profiles provides the necessary context within which to consider the information such as coverage (the proportion of children for whom a regulated space is available), specific funding possibilities including restrictions on these, access and quality characteristics relevant to university child care models. The U-15 universities are located in Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. A profile for each of these provinces was developed using a standard format to provide key policy information.

### Business models used by the surveyed university child care centres: Framework for analysis

This report considered a child care "business model" to include a number of elements (covered in the survey) that have an impact on the centre's finances, sustainability and viability as well as elements of provincial policy.

Elements drawn from the survey include:

- governance issues such as auspice/ownership, who holds the license and sits on the board;
- centre model characteristics such as centre size, age groups, inclusion of children with disabilities
- funding and other (In-kind) contributions by the university and other sources;
- staff characteristics such as training and wages;
- parent fees;
- which parents are eligible and prioritized;
- uses of the child care program(s) as a training, research or observation opportunity.

Elements drawn from provincial policy include:

- whether parent fees are set by the provincial government;
- whether, and how much, child care programs are base (program) funded;
- how fee subsidies work;
- whether capital funding is available;
- eligibility criteria that determine which kinds of child care programs are eligible to receive government funds;

### **Summary of key information pertinent to university child care business models**

Using the analysis framework, the report summarizes key information pertinent to the centre's business models.

Key governance issues include auspice: all the centres surveyed were not-for-profit: most operated as separately incorporated non-profit (legal) entities, while five were operated directly by a university. There were no for-profit child care operations. Most centres had boards of directors made up of parents and other members of the university community.

Enrolment was another key business model-related issue: many of the university child care centres provide infant and toddler spaces, which are generally scarce and in high demand but expensive to provide. It appears that the university child care centres are more likely to provide infant and toddler care than child care centres across Canada overall.

Parent fees are a key element of every child care program's business model, as they are likely to be the main source of revenue everywhere in Canada except Quebec. Outside Quebec, fees across university centres showed a considerable range, with Manitoba (the sole province included in this study outside Quebec that sets a maximum fee) lowest in all age groups. Almost all centre outside Quebec (which does not use parent fee subsidies) reported accepting children whose fees were subsidized by government. A minority of centres (including one in Manitoba) reported some that fee reductions were provided to some groups of parents (usually students).

Generally, university support (financial and in-kind) for the centres was fairly high, with most of those responding benefiting from "reduced or no rent". Most centres were in university buildings, many purpose-built or extensively renovated. There were quite a few other supports provided by the universities including cash grants. Most of the centres reported that more than 10% of their budgets came from university-related funds.

Provincial policy mattered too, however. While more than half said that more than 20% of their budget came from government funds (excluding parent fee subsidies), the highest of these responses came from Quebec, which provides significant support for child care centres, and second, from Manitoba, whose unit funding model is also relatively generous compared to the rest of Canada.

Universities were reported to make considerable research and observation use of the centres, although few are used as lab schools for ECE training, which tends to be delivered at community colleges, not universities.

### **Profile of a typical university child care centre business model**

Based on the data collected in the survey, the report describes the "typical" Canadian university child care centre as one that is a "good fit" with Manitoba's approach to child care generally. Thus, the typical centre associated with a Canadian university:

- is a separately incorporated non-profit entity;
- is one of several child care centres associated with a particular university, often located on more than one university campus;
- is governed by a board of directors made up of parents and other university members as the legal entity governing the centre;
- serves approximately 60 0-6 year olds with full-time child care;
- employs fewer than 15 FTE staff, almost all with an early childhood education credential;
- provides infant, toddler and preschool child care and includes children with special needs; is available to students, faculty and staff, and members of the community from outside the university if there are vacant spaces, with students the highest priority and families outside the university the lowest;
- is open year-round, from 7:30 AM to 5:30 PM.
- is not a lab school (as there is no ECE training program) but is often used as a research site for university-based research and to provide observation opportunities for university classes;
- charges parent fees that are, where it is permitted by provincial policy, somewhat higher than the median provincial fee, with students receiving some reduction on fees;
- provides child care for children whose fees are subsidized by government;
- pays reduced/no rent to the university, reduced or no occupancy costs, and repairs are made at reduced or no cost by the university. The university also provides communications at reduced or no cost, centre staff participate in university benefit plans and the centre receives a cash contribution from the university;
- is on the university campus in a university-owned building that was purpose-built or extensively renovated and has its own specially-designed outdoor play space immediately adjacent to the centre;
- serves the children meals prepared at the centre by the centre's cook.

### **Discussion: Issues and ideas to consider**

The report points out that although impressive support provided to university child care in light of Canada's overall weak child care policy and limited public funding, when designing a business model for university child care, the issues affecting child care generally - accessibility, affordability, quality and sustainability need to be considered.

It concludes by pointing out a number of possible innovations, partnerships and leadership opportunities that are timely and could be

valuable and exciting. The child care initiative undertaken by the University of Manitoba is clearly timely from the perspective of parents associated with the university who need child care. From the province's perspective, it is also timely, as Manitoba has recently begun a new five year child care plan, putting the provincial government in a good position to partner with the university on potential exciting developments. From the university's perspective, the child care initiative has enormous potential for exploring innovation, partnerships and leadership.

In summary, the research and review of university child care across Canada suggests that there is good potential at the University of Manitoba for the child care initiative to undertake directions that could be valuable and exciting in Manitoba and beyond.

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