

Structure of education and training in Canada

In Canada, education is the responsibility of the ten provinces and three territories. While educational structures and institutions across the country are similar in many ways, they have been developed by each jurisdiction to respond to the particular circumstances, geographical situation, and historical and cultural heritage of the population they serve. This appendix describes the various structures and organization of education and training in Canada today.

Pre-elementary programs

Pre-elementary programs—pre-Grade 1 education offered by public, private, and federal schools, as well as schools for the visually and hearing impaired—are available to children, typically 4 or 5 years of age, in all jurisdictions.

Most jurisdictions offer one year of public pre-elementary programs, with Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta offering additional years (see Figure 1). In most jurisdictions, pre-elementary programs in the year before Grade 1 are offered to children who turn 5 years of age by a certain date in the school year as specified in jurisdictional legislation. In most jurisdictions, attendance in these programs is optional, although in Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick it is mandatory. The intensity of these programs varies by jurisdiction, some offering full-day programs, some offering half-day programs, and some offering both.

In Quebec, one additional year of pre-elementary programming is publicly available to some 4-year-olds with disabilities or from low-income families. In Ontario, the provision of an additional year of pre-elementary (for 4-year-olds) is dependent on the choice of the local school board to do so, with funding coming from the Ministry of Education. In Ontario almost all school boards provide this program for their students. In Manitoba, one additional year of pre-elementary programming is offered at the discretion of each school division with two school divisions currently providing this program, which is not funded by the Department of Education. Two additional years of pre-elementary programming are funded in schools in Saskatchewan communities where a significant portion of pre-school children are not ready to participate fully in the learning opportunities offered to kindergarten and Grade 1 students. These programs are not mandatory and not universal. Alberta also offers two additional fully funded years of pre-elementary programming, targeted to students with disabilities or to those who are considered talented/gifted.

Appendix 1

In addition to publicly provided programs, private schools in all jurisdictions also offer one or more years of pre-elementary programming. However, it is important to note that private day-care programs or early childhood education programs are not offered as part of the formal education system and are not included in the data presented in this report on pre-elementary programs.

Elementary and secondary education

Public education is provided free to all Canadian citizens and permanent residents until the end of secondary school—normally at age 18. The ages for compulsory schooling vary from one jurisdiction to another; generally, schooling is required from age 6 or 7 as of a certain date as specified in jurisdictional legislation (age 5 in New Brunswick and British Columbia) to age 16. In New Brunswick, since July 1, 1999, schooling is compulsory to the age of 18 or until graduation, with all students who were in the system as of that date affected by the new regulation. In early 2003, Alberta endorsed a bill increasing the mandatory age of schooling from 16 to 17 years of age, with the change expected to become law later in the year.

In most jurisdictions, elementary-secondary education consists of 13 years of study (from kindergarten to Grade 12). The only exceptions are Quebec and Ontario. Quebec's system has 12 years—kindergarten, 6 years of elementary school, and 5 years of secondary school. Ontario has an additional year of kindergarten (see above), and high school ends in Grade 13 (Ontario Academic Credit). Following a major change in policy, 2002–2003 will be the last year for Grade 13 in Ontario. One immediate consequence of this change will be the “double cohort” of students entering the postsecondary system in 2003–2004 (comprising the last graduating class from the old system with the extra year and the first graduating class from the new system).

The elementary-secondary continuum is broken up into different grade combinations in different jurisdictions so that the point of transition between elementary and secondary school varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction (see Figure 1).

The organization of grades in schools varies by jurisdiction and can also vary at the local level within a jurisdiction. Elementary schools cover the first six to eight years of compulsory schooling. Afterwards, children may proceed to a middle school or junior high/intermediate school that usually covers Grade 6 or 7 to Grade 8 or 9, or they may go directly to a secondary education program. In many northern and rural communities, one school building may house all grades (kindergarten to Grade 11/12).

A great variety of programs—vocational (job training) as well as academic—is offered at the secondary level. Some jurisdictions offer dual credit courses that simultaneously give students both high school and postsecondary credits.

Secondary school diplomas are granted to students who pass the compulsory and optional courses of their programs.

Public funding at the pre-elementary and elementary-secondary levels comes either directly from the provincial/territorial government (e.g., New Brunswick, Ontario) or through a mix of provincial transfers and local taxes collected either by the local government or by school boards with taxing powers (e.g., Saskatchewan, Quebec). Private school funding comes primarily from fees and endowments, except in Quebec, which also provides funds for private schools (which have discretion over admission criteria). The federal government pays for the tuition fees of Aboriginal children and for children of employees who live on Federal Crown lands (National Defence, Agriculture and Transport).

Postsecondary education

Once secondary school has been successfully completed, students may apply to a college career program or to a university. Traditionally, enrolment in trade-vocational programs, such as apprenticeship or other programs geared towards preparation for employment in an occupation or trade, did not require graduation from secondary school. However, requirements are evolving so that more and more programs, especially in trades dealing with advanced technology or having implications for public safety, are now requiring high school graduation.

Apprenticeship training involves a contract between an apprentice and an employer, registered with the jurisdiction, in which the employer provides the apprentice with training and experience for a trade. Programs vary in length from two to five years, depending on the trade. Registered apprenticeship combines on-the-job experience with four- to eight-week periods of in-class training each year of the program. In most jurisdictions the in-class portion is usually taken at a postsecondary institution during the apprenticeship training. However, in Quebec, the in-class training is taken prior to beginning an apprenticeship program.

Currently there are approximately 170 registered trades in Canada, each with specific standards and training requirements as set down by each jurisdiction. In some of these 170 registered trades, apprenticeship certification is compulsory for entry into and practice of the trade, while in others, although it indicates the level of competence a holder has, apprenticeship certification is voluntary and one can practise the trade without it. Compulsory and voluntary trades vary by jurisdiction; however, there are similarities across jurisdictions in that compulsory trades commonly include those with advanced technology or that involve public safety. In 45 of the 170 registered trades, the provinces have agreed on interprovincial standards. In these 45 trades, candidates who achieve a standard agreed upon among the provinces qualify for the interprovincial Red Seal and are allowed to work anywhere in Canada without further training or examination.

In this publication, data relating to trade-vocational programs in Quebec that are administered at the elementary-secondary level are reported at that level.

Postsecondary education is available in both government-supported and private institutions, some of which award degrees. A major distinction at an institutional level across all jurisdictions is made between “degree-granting” and “non-degree-granting” institutions. Degree-granting institutions—both public and private—have authority under provincial legislation to grant degrees, and include universities, university colleges, and some community colleges.

Universities typically offer four-year undergraduate programs leading to bachelor’s degrees. Advanced degrees include master’s degrees, generally requiring two years of study after a first degree, and doctoral degrees, requiring three to five years of postgraduate study and research as well as a dissertation. Not all universities offer advanced degrees, particularly at the doctoral level. In addition to universities, university colleges are recognized degree-granting institutions that offer three- to four-year bachelor’s programs. Both universities and university colleges also offer programs leading to diplomas and certificates, but the primary emphasis is on degree programs. Additionally, a number of jurisdictions have begun to give limited degree-granting authority to community colleges. These institutions still offer diploma and certificate programs. The degree programs offered by these institutions are either two-year associate degrees or three- to four-year applied degrees in a particular area of speciality of the institution.

A university or other institution may also be affiliated or federated with another university. Federated institutions are degree-granting institutions responsible for their own administration, but under the federation agreement the granting of degrees rests with the parent institution. Affiliated institutions are ones with limited or no degree-granting authority, and in which the granting of degrees rests with the parent institution. A number of colleges have authority to offer divinity degrees, but are not in the full sense recognized degree-granting institutions.

While the majority of degree-granting institutions are public, private institutions exist in a number of provinces. For many years, there have been private institutions that offer programs in divinity. Increasingly, there are private institutions that offer degree programs in liberal arts, business, and trades.

The systems of public non-degree-granting institutions in Canada for the most part were created by provincial and territorial governments in the 1960s to provide labour market preparation programs as alternatives to the more theoretically oriented programs of universities. Depending on the province or territory, they are called colleges, regional colleges, centres, colleges of applied arts and technology, community colleges, institutes, schools, or, in Quebec, collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEPs).

Public non-degree-granting institutions offer vocationally oriented programs in a wide range of semi-professional and technical fields, leading to diplomas and certificates and, in the case of Quebec, to diplomas and attestations. Diplomas are generally granted for successful completion of two- and three-year programs (three-year programs in Quebec), while certificate programs usually take up to one year. In Quebec, attestations are awarded for the completion of shorter technical programs, and are generally viewed as the equivalent to certificates awarded in other jurisdictions.

In Quebec, students wishing to go on to university are generally required to successfully complete a two-year pre-university program offered by CEGEPs. In some circumstances, students with a technical-stream CEGEP diploma of college studies may undertake university studies.

Several college systems offer university transfer programs—typically the first two years of a university undergraduate program, usually in cooperation with a university, at which the remainder of the program would be completed.

Private non-degree-granting institutions are subject to varying degrees of government regulation and can be classified in terms of the extent of government oversight. Recognized institutions are those that have been given authority to grant academic credentials by provincial or territorial governments through charters or legislation that provide mechanisms to ensure institutional and program quality. Non-recognized, but licensed, institutions are primarily monitored by governments with a view to consumer protection rather than institutional or program quality. Finally, non-recognized, non-licensed institutions are private institutions that are not regulated by government.

Private non-degree-granting institutions may be called colleges, institutes, schools, or academies depending on the jurisdiction. Credentials issued include diplomas and certificates, with a tendency for programs to be much shorter and more intensive than programs in public institutions. In Quebec, private subsidized institutions may also offer two-year pre-university programs and three-year technical programs.

The source of funds at the postsecondary level will depend on the nature of the institution. For universities and public non-degree granting institutions, public funding comes either directly from the federal (mostly for sponsored research) or provincial/territorial (mostly in the form of operating and capital grants) governments. Private funding for those institutions is made up of tuition and other fees, donations (including bequests), investment, and non-government grants and contracts. Private non-degree-granting institutions receive very little or no public funding, except indirectly through support to students; funding for these private institutions comes mostly from tuition fees.

For a more detailed overview of postsecondary systems in Canada, see <http://www.cicic.ca/postsec/vol1.overview.en.stm>.

Figure 1
Levels within elementary-secondary schools, by jurisdiction

Newfoundland and Labrador	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
Prince Edward Island ¹	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
Nova Scotia	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
New Brunswick – English	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
New Brunswick – French	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
Quebec – General	P	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		
Quebec – Vocational											10	11	12	13	
Ontario ²	P	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Manitoba	P	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Saskatchewan	P	P	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Alberta	P	P	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
British Columbia	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
Yukon	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
Northwest Territories	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
Nunavut	P	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		

P	Pre-elementary, not universally available
P	Pre-elementary, universally available
	Elementary/Primary
	Junior high/Middle
	Senior high
	Secondary

1. Prince Edward Island introduced its pre-elementary program in 2000-2001.
 2. 2002-2003 is the last year for the Ontario Academic Course (13th year of high-school).