

**Home-Education Admissions
in Alberta Post-secondary Institutions:
A Summary of Current Policy, 2004**

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(Léo Gaumont has been advancing the cause of home-education with post-secondary institutions for many years. In the spring of 2004, he personally visited dozens of admission officers representing every post-secondary institution in the Province of Alberta as well as more than a dozen in the four Atlantic Provinces. His findings indicate that the successful completion of provincial programming may be the most common measure of student assessment used by post-secondary institutions, but it is not the only one. The overall response was very positive towards home-educated students)

Report Delimitations

The project embarked upon in 2004 is the culmination of eight years of research and advocacy with post-secondary institutions towards the goal of facilitating the admission of non-accredited home-educated students. Although the intent was to collect data empirically, and to report on the results with the greatest possible objectivity, it remains impossible to fully quantify such divergent data as that gathered from the variety of institutions included in this study. Every effort was made to include all possibilities for admissions in the questionnaire that was used as a guide when interviewing people at larger institutions. Since the questionnaire functioned largely as an instrument for the general evaluation of admission policy and of the best approach to admission for non-accredited students, it is unreasonable to presume scientific precision in its findings. The survey did, however, provide much useful information as a general assessment of overall attitude towards home-educated graduates. A few assumptions were made throughout the project, the primary one being the assumption that post-secondary institutions were willing to make concessions to standard admission practices in order to accommodate non-accredited home-educated students. A second assumption was that institutions would be interested in what other institutions were doing to accommodate home-educated students. This was substantiated by the overwhelmingly positive response to the creation of a website to include policy and admission directives. Although the scope of the project was to include every institution offering post secondary training in the province, specialty institutions were somewhat more predictable in admission practices and so representative samples of interviews proved sufficient.

While it is anticipated to be of interest to post-secondary admission officers, this document is intended to be primarily a good news report to home-educating parents and students. The information included is accurate but the interpretation is from the perspective of a home-education specialist informing a home-educating audience.

Finally, it can be safely assumed that personally visiting and/or communicating with nearly 200 institutions within a year would give the researcher a unique and perhaps more global perspective of admissions. Although some of the statements made within this document may appear somewhat speculative, they were made within the framework of the collective wisdom garnered from dozens of admission professionals in five provinces. The reader is asked to consider these delimitations when reviewing this document.

Introduction To The New Research Project

Home-education has long been an option in Alberta. With increasing numbers of students opting to complete their formal education at home, some challenges have been presented to post-secondary institutions. Efforts to facilitate admission of home-educated students to a post-secondary level have led to many positive changes over the last eight years. Personal experience with institutional intransigence and lack of understanding provided the inspiration to influence the way institutions of higher learning viewed home-education. Work began towards the goal of encouraging post-secondary institutions to acknowledge the right of parents to educate their children at home and of the fact that post-secondary preparation need not be restricted to a single process. The initial survey, conducted in 1997, demonstrated three things regarding post-secondary institutions and their dealings with home-educated students. The first discovery was that since there were in fact very few home-educated students seeking admission, most post-secondary institutions simply had no experience and no policy in place. The second discovery was that most admissions officers believed home-based learning to be restricted to the delivery of the public curriculum and program at home, and the third discovery was that most indicated that they would be willing to make some concessions towards alternative admission requirements. Most tended to agree that the high school diploma was not necessary for admission as it had never really been as much a requirement on the post-secondary institutions' part as it has been of the public education system. The need for credit courses proved more difficult to overcome. There were however, some limited avenues available to non-accredited students at the time.

In 1999, with encouragement from Dallas Miller of the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), a national survey was conducted by sending questionnaires to a host of institutions across Canada, the results of which can be seen through the website (www.educationunlimited.ca/psarticles.html). The survey showed that post-secondary institutions were not so much against home-educated applicants as they were unsure of how to deal with them. Although numbers of home-educated applicants were still small at the time, most institutions were anticipating an increase. This survey and its published findings led to an invitation to speak at the 2002 Biannual Conference of the Association of Registrars of Universities and Colleges of Canada (ARUCC), where suggestions were made to help facilitate the enrollment of non-accredited home-educated students (the presentation can be reviewed at www.educationunlimited.ca/psarticles.html). Many post-secondary institutions then sought to address this "emerging issue" resulting in more equitable treatment for the home-educated.

New Project

Although the national stage was useful in encouraging change to admission practices generally, it became apparent that a more comprehensive effort to include every post-secondary institution could best be accomplished on a provincial level where regional educational peculiarities could be addressed. Work on the Alberta project began in the spring of 2004, with the goal of facilitating the post-secondary admission of non-accredited home-educated students. Most post-secondary institutions agreed to cooperate in the project, many with enthusiasm. Interviews were conducted with a variety of representatives, often with teams including registrars, admissions directors, recruitment officers, assessment officers, directors and department heads interested in suggestions regarding the admission of the increasing number of home-educated applicants. Smaller private institutions were interviewed primarily by phone. Although every effort was made to include most schools and colleges within the province, emphasis was placed on the inclusion of larger, well-established institutions.

Background on Home Education

A comprehension of home-based learning is critical to understanding the objectives and goals of this project. Home-based learning can take many different forms, but two main approaches can be distinguished largely on the program used. Some parents choose to continue with the regular school programming involving the provincially accredited curriculum and standards. Best described as home-schooling, this approach assures parents, students and institutions that standard processes have been followed. Students that have been educated at home in this manner arrive at the post-secondary institution with transcripts, credits and diplomas, no different from regular school attendees. Students that have been home-schooled present no challenge to admission personnel as they are simply assessed using the standard institutional admission criteria, and therefore are not within the scope of this project.

Home education, on the other hand, is best described as a learning program delivered by a parent to a student outside the structured learning environment of the school. This approach to home-based learning does not follow accredited provincial programming but it does meet provincial goals and expectations even if not in the prescribed chronological sequence. Traditional home education's one-on-one learning strategy is better able to address individual needs, capabilities, and interests, allowing the student to work at a rate and in a capacity that best fits his or her learning style and opportunities. Students exposed to this approach to education are more often self-motivated, mature, independent thinkers with clear goals and aspirations. This certainly is not true of all home-educated students, but can be safely assumed of those seeking post-secondary entrance, as most have had the time and disposition to make careful analysis of life goals. Although these students may well be ready for the rigors of post-secondary learning, they do present a challenge to admission personnel in that they arrive without the standard credits,

transcripts and diplomas, therefore requiring alternative admission strategies to the usual standard practices.

The objective of this project was to gather information about the policies and procedures employed for the admission of non-accredited students by Alberta institutes of higher learning. The intention of sharing alternate admission strategies with other post-secondary institutions in order to facilitate the enrolment of traditional home-educated students desiring post-secondary education and training was equally important.

Classification of Institutions

The Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS) website (www.alis.gov.ab.ca) lists over 200 accredited post-secondary training institutions within the province. The listing includes all manner of schools, colleges, institutes and campuses: big and small, public and private, offering every post-secondary training imaginable. Although the website is helpful, it is not representative of all institutions doing business within the Province of Alberta. Some private institutions do not seek provincial accreditation, newer ones have not yet been accredited and others have ceased to exist. In order to include all institutions, yet keep things in perspective, institutions were categorized into three groups: major institutions, minor institutions and specialty institutions.

Specialty institutions include all schools of less than one hundred full time students and make up the bulk of Alberta's institutes of higher learning. Of the more than one hundred specialty schools in the province, nearly three quarters have to do with driving and flight. Qualifications for these programs are based on age and/or health and so fall outside the scope of this project. Remaining specialty schools cover a very broad range of specialized training and are mostly small enough to be able to make concessions for non-accredited students. It is, however, with some of these newly accredited institutions that the greatest resistance to non-accredited students was met. Admissions people representing these institutions expressed a fear that using anything other than provincially prescribed programming in assessments would lead to the revocation of their provincial accreditation. This only occurred a very few times, but in every case the admissions representative was happy with the suggestion that non-accredited home-educated students apply elsewhere!

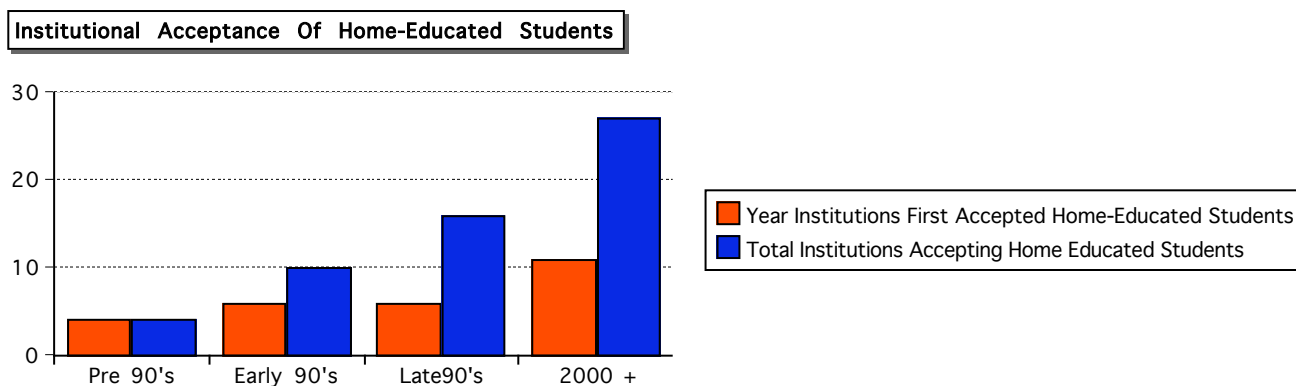
Minor institutions included well-established post-secondary institutions with student populations under one thousand. There are ten such institutions in the Province of Alberta if one includes the smaller colleges with satellite campuses. These institutions are all private and tend to be the most friendly toward non-accredited students. Their relatively small size allows the admission process to be more individualized. Most of these institutions use some form of third party testing, interviews and/or portfolio evaluations as part of their admissions process. Minor institutions play a very important role in accepting non-accredited students and offering either complete programs or transfer options to other institutions.

Major institutions included the universities, technical institutes and colleges with student populations over one thousand. There are twenty-two such institutions in the province and most are public. Although some of these institutions may seem a little less open to non-accredited students, some are very open to doing what is necessary to provide equal access. A few are just too big to appear friendly, but most have alternate admission processes available.

Questionnaire Results

Specialty schools are generally small enough and specialized enough to admit any student who shows an interest and aptitude for the program. Since the majority of these institutions are sole proprietorships, limited participation was needed to understand their admission processes. It was therefore necessary for the sake of practicality to exclude specialty schools from the questionnaire portion of the project. The questionnaire was created to be a measure of changing admission practices as well as a guide intended to help admission personnel seeking advice on admissions of non-accredited home-educated students. A total of thirty large institutions participated in the questionnaire, eight of which were private colleges. Although it was not possible to determine the percentage of students attending private institutions, the smaller number of private institutions included in the survey as well as their lower student populations were assumed to be roughly representative of student demographics.

Twenty-seven of the thirty institutions had accepted home-educated students and seven indicated that it was possible that some could have been admitted unknowingly, most likely through transfers. Four institutions had been accepting home-educated students since the 1980's, six since the early 90's, six more in the late 90's, and eleven had accepted them since the year 2000. Plotting this information graphically shows a steady increase in the acceptance of home-educated students. Admittedly, this information can just as likely indicate an increase in students applying as increased admission. Either way, it is good news.

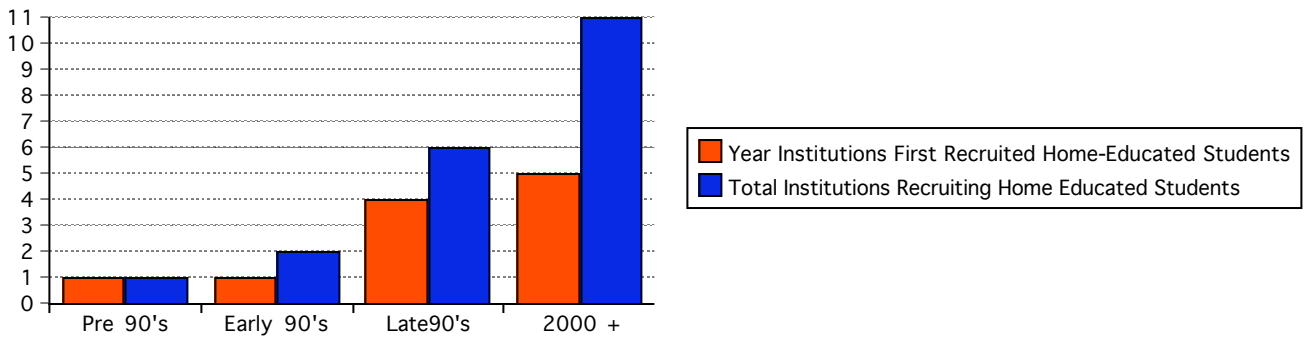


Eight institutions admitted having followed the accomplishments of the home-educated students they had accepted. All the home-educated students proved to be above average to excellent students. Results indicated that home-educated students took a little time to get used to “school” processes but soon caught on and most often worked to the top of the

class. Not one incident of improper socialization was documented; however, three institutions mentioned parental interference.

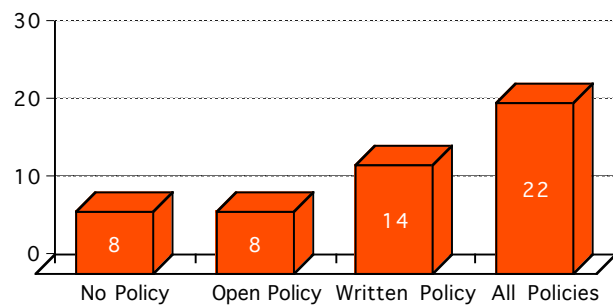
Of the eleven institutions actively involved in recruiting home-educated students, only one had been doing so since the 1980's. Most had only started recently as opportunity to do so was limited. There was, however, much interest in the annual convention of the Alberta Home Education Association (AHEA) in Red Deer. Most institutions were unaware of this event.

Recruitment of Home-Educated Students



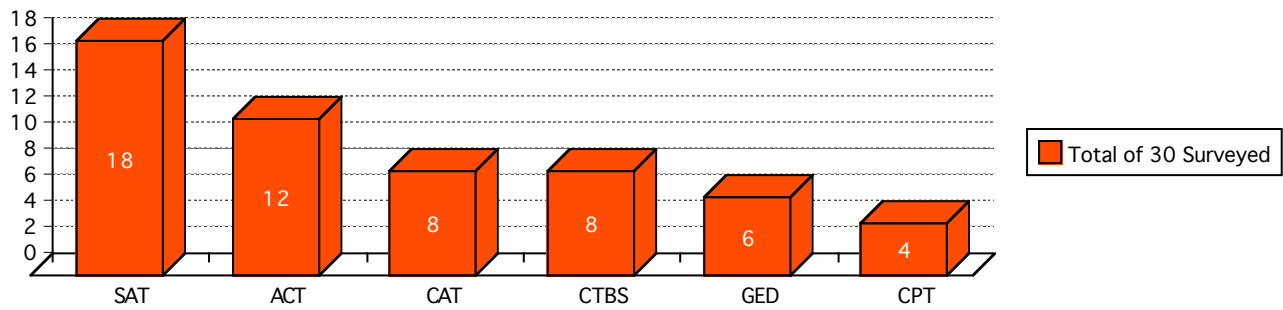
Nearly one half of the institutions surveyed have home-education admission policies. Of the sixteen institutions without a written policy in place, eight stated that not having a policy was of no consequence as they were already open to non-accredited students. The remaining eight institutions indicated that they were open to suggestions and that they intended to formulate a home-education policy in the near future. Those with a written policy had included assessment strategies in keeping with the nature of home-education.

Home-Education Policy



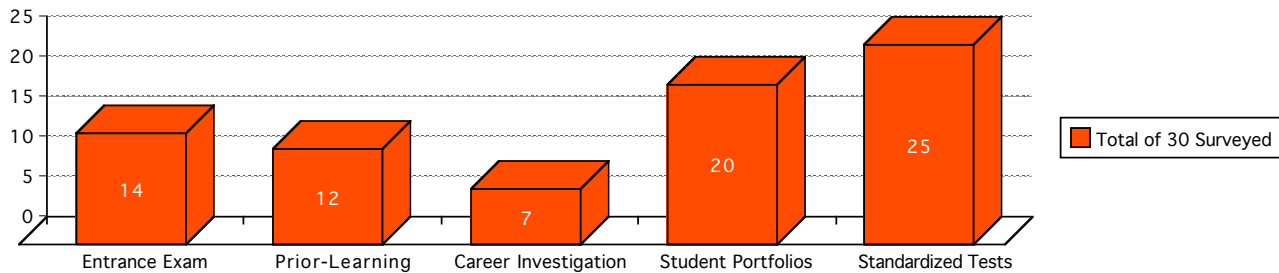
Nearly all institutions surveyed (25/30) offered assessments based on proof of proficiency through standardized tests, the most commonly acknowledged being the SAT. It should go without saying that institutes required levels of proficiency in keeping with levels of programming. While a GED, for example, may be acceptable to one institution, another would consider it to have no value at all.

Number of Institutions Using Standardized Tests



Fourteen institutions had proprietary entrance exams allowing all applicants, accredited and non-accredited alike, opportunity to prove proficiency. Twelve institutions offered some form of prior-learning assessment. This fairly new method of assessment takes all the education as well as the experience of an individual into account and places him/her accordingly. This process works very well with home-educated students as it allows individuals capable of second and third level programming to enter at an advanced standing. Some institutions offering prescribed programs required a career investigation report used in the hope of eliminating potentially qualified but misplaced applicants.

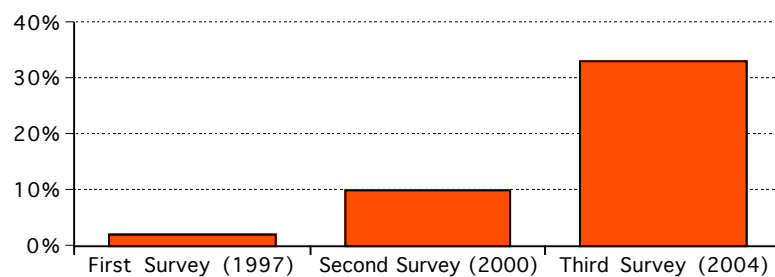
Use Of Alternative Assessment Tools



A high school diploma was not required by any of the institutions surveyed and provincial programming was demanded only by the few institutions that have yet to encounter any substantial numbers of non-accredited students.

After having developed and advocated the home-education student portfolio over the course of many years, it was most gratifying and encouraging to see the number of institutions either employing it or interested in its applications. Created primarily as the evidentiary replacement of the high school transcript, the student portfolio is the only method of properly documenting a home-based learning program that has occurred outside of prescribed provincial accreditation. Two-thirds of the institutions surveyed had reviewed or were familiar with the student portfolio and nearly all were interested in attending a workshop to better understand its contents and applicability. Even though it is more often used as a qualifier than the determiner of admittance, six institutions of the thirty questioned had admitted students based on the strength of the home-educated student's portfolio alone. Some of the larger institutions expressed some concern about

Percentage of Institutions Accepting Student Portfolios



the time constraints of portfolio evaluations, but others were as keenly interested in student portfolios as smaller institutions. Specialty institutions, being mostly smaller and program specific, also found the student portfolio to be of interest as a potential assessment tool because it allowed the evaluator

to review not just grades, but the character, interests and experiences of its owner. A registrar from one of the largest institutions in the province who had been studying the value of portfolio assessments was perhaps voicing the sentiments of the majority when he stated that “if it were possible, every student would be assessed on the strength of their portfolio”. A well-constructed student portfolio can be a very useful assessment tool. It is a shame that time constraints or uncertainty on the part of admissions personnel should prevent any institution from employing it.

In summary, most institutions involved with the questionnaire were aware of the increasing possibility of non-accredited applicants and most were interested in non-restrictive approaches to assessments. Other than to say that each institution has something in place to accommodate non-accredited students, there is no singular approach to alternate admissions.

Transfer Possibilities

Alberta’s transfer program was discovered to be one of the most highly regarded in the country. Alberta’s Council on Admissions and Transfers (ACAT) has a very workable system in place for the movement of students, courses and programs among institutions. Transfer credits, credit challenges and transfer programs provide students with many possibilities for entrance into the post-secondary arena.

Most institutions incorporated some form of distance learning that once again worked in favor of the home-educated, but none has been as all-encompassing and open as Alberta’s own Athabasca University. Nearly every post-secondary institution interviewed, including the dozen in the four Atlantic provinces, indicated that students successful in Athabasca University had access and credit to their institution. Athabasca University is, in many respects, the home-educator’s “answer to prayer,” since its open admission policies allow home-educated students to access full university programs at practically any age without need for provincial diplomas or programming.

eCampus Alberta is another example of educational innovation. It consists of a consortium of fifteen colleges that has been established to facilitate learner access through the Internet. Most of the courses taken are, like those of Athabasca University, self-paced to accommodate today's students. Courses and some full programs are instantly recognized in all the participating institutions and abroad.

Incentive For Change

Although the surveys, presentations and projects of the last eight years may have had the effect of encouraging change in admission practices, it would be presumptuous to state that the author directed all these changes or that increases in home-educated applicants alone carried this impact. The truth is the world is changing, and changing student demographics have forced all but the most archaic institutions to adjust or be abandoned in favor of institutions willing to accommodate the post-modern, Internet-savvy student. Indeed, nothing has had a greater impact on this move to a customer-based approach to admissions from the product-based policies of the past than the explosive growth in the use of the Internet. In addition to the impact of the Internet, more students are opting to work for a few years before entertaining post-secondary studies and many are enrolled while retaining part-time or full-time employment. The “shrinking” world has made it easier for students to seek higher education in different provinces and countries. These “non-status quo” students force a need for alternative admission criteria, which has caused the re-evaluation of admission practices in general. The modern approach to admission seems to be increasingly based on the student's potential for success rather than the student having achieved acceptable levels on provincially mandated curriculum. This new approach can take many forms, but adequate achievement on third-party standardized tests seems to be the most accepted alternative to provincial diploma exams and accreditation. Some institutions have implemented entrance exams that all students write as part of the application process. It is assumed that since these tests are required of all student applicants, they are designed to measure skills rather than the ability to repeat information as is the case with curriculum-specific testing. Skills-based testing has always had the advantage of measuring a student's abilities regardless of the educational pathway taken.

Larger institutions are making changes, albeit more slowly than the smaller ones. Some are still mired in the assumption that all is well with the old way of doing things, but monetary incentives precipitated by student loss will ultimately motivate institutions interested in survival to do what it takes to remain solvent. Indeed, a number of smaller specialized institutions have vanished since this project commenced, a few have amalgamated to streamline efficiency, and no less than three major institutions in the Province of Alberta have been absorbed by larger, more fiscally sound ones.

With the nearly universal articulation agreements with Athabasca University, eCampus Alberta, and provincial transfer possibilities, not to mention the host of institutions now open to non-accredited students, home-educated students can take comfort in knowing that if there is a program they would like to study, there is a way to access it, even if it is not through the front doors of the institution offering it. With many institutions offering some form of academic upgrading or preparatory programs, students lacking skills can be equipped. It is, however, assumed that home-educated students need not go through this process to be admitted.

Atlantic Experience

In June 2004, while on a speaking tour of the four Atlantic Provinces, the opportunity arose to visit post-secondary institutions. Twelve institutes were visited while apprenticing provincial leaders in home-education advocacy. The information gathered was very enlightening in view of the Alberta project. Institutions were all very anxious to discuss home-education policy, most being familiar with the 1999 National Survey and 2002 ARUCC presentation. Nearly every institution was very open to non-accredited home-education students, most simply stating that if such students applied they would be treated favorably. One institution in particular took the possibility of being among the first to incorporate home-education applicants into the entrance scholarship program very seriously. Several admission officers indicated that they wanted to keep their students from going elsewhere. This sentiment is best understood when the size and location of the four Atlantic Provinces is taken into account. The close proximity not only to each other but also to the myriad of American institutions has Atlantic ones doing everything possible to accommodate all students. Most institutes would readily admit students on the strength of SAT marks as well as on entrance exams, challenge exams, prior-learning assessments, and the strength of student portfolios, even considering letters from parents to be more legitimate than letters from teachers whose comments could only include school-related activities. The general openness and genuine interest in doing what was needed to make admissions as simple as possible was encouraging. When comparing these results to those of Alberta, it became clear that Alberta's size, location and absence of meaningful inter-provincial competition has kept it from moving as quickly in the direction of more open admissions. However, many of Alberta's post-secondary institutions have also recognized that modern technological developments and other societal changes have forced them to re-examine current admissions policies.

Proposals for the future

Post-secondary institutions contacted during this study were informed of the intention to create a website of provincial post-secondary institutions. The website is projected to be a “one-stop shopping center” for home-educated students interested in pursuing higher education. Details regarding this website are yet to be determined at the time of writing. However, it is anticipated to include the best approach to admission for non-accredited students along with any written home-education policy in addition to pertinent contact information and links for each institution.

Home-education leaders and researchers in other provinces have been encouraged and mentored to do their own research regarding the post-secondary admission of non-accredited home-education students within the individual provinces. It is hoped that the information gathered from these studies can be posted to individual provincial websites and eventually linked to create a provincially controlled, national website of post-secondary institutions.

Home-educated students bound for post-secondary institutions have long been excluded from entrance scholarships. There are no home-education specific scholarships, while entrance scholarships that are available are generally linked to the provincially prescribed programming. The greatest offender in this discrimination is none other than the Alberta Government, which not only recognizes the option of home-based learning, but also encourages it with provincial funding. It is difficult to understand, therefore, how the provincial Rutherford Scholarships continue to be attached to provincial programming to the exclusion of students opting to complete their provincially supported program outside of the provincial prescribed curriculum. Parents exercising their right to choose what is in their children’s best educational interest have long been discriminated against in this province as proven by the decreased level of funding for all manner of education outside the public processes. The restrictive nature of the criteria for the Rutherford Scholarships is just more evidence of provincial prejudice against non-conformity. Post-secondary institutions need not follow the provincial example. Scholarships linked to a broader standard, such as SAT scores, would certainly be more inclusive of home-education students. Much work remains to be done in scholarship availability, but if the American experience is any indication, there is sure to be some improvement here as well.

Much has been written about the advantages of home education and much anecdotal information regarding the successes of home-educated students exists. However, there is little critical research in the post home-education pathways taken and the successes within them. There exists an opportunity for a graduate student who has been educated at home to investigate the post-secondary pathways being taken by home-educated students within the province and determine if there is any correlation with how well they have done.

Home-educating Albertans Can Take Comfort

The High School Diploma and/or provincial accreditation has long been used as the standard admission criteria for post-secondary entrance, but it has never been the only approach to ascertaining post-secondary readiness. Alternate admission criteria have always existed. The changing world has resulted in changing student demographics and no one is better acquainted with these changes than the modern post-secondary institution. Home-based students educated outside of provincially accredited programming can take heart in knowing that they form part of these changes and so need not fear being unduly limited in post-secondary options. No doubt, some additional knowledge of admission practices may be necessary and some additional effort may be required of the home-educated student seeking admission, but one must ask whether some minor inconveniences at this juncture of a student's educational journey are anywhere near as restrictive and discouraging as attempting to deliver a provincial program designed for the public system within a private home. Parents need to be reminded that they have the final authority for educating their children and that it may well be in their best interest and that of their children to question the motives and understanding of those who would still recommend the use of public school curriculum in the home.

Conclusion

Although there has been a great deal of improvement in both the overall acceptability of home education and efforts to accommodate home-educated students at the post-secondary level, some longstanding prejudices still remain in regards to socialization, educational efficacy and the need for standard provincial programming. Obviously, this was more the opinion of admissions staff representing institutions that remain opposed to the idea of educational alternatives, and whose policies reflected these prejudices. Very large institutions continue to be a little less tolerant of non-traditional students while a very few remain mired in traditional admission practices, but time and experience should lead to improvements here as well.

The last five years have witnessed remarkable changes in admissions practices of post-secondary institutions. There are now a number of different approaches to alternate student assessment, including institutional entrance exams, standardized testing, prior learning assessment tools, career investigation reports, probationary, unclassified and general studies programs as well as the ability to transfer most courses and programs. Most institutions surveyed indicated an interest in evaluations involving student portfolios. Student portfolios, which have made important gains in respectability, along with individual interviews, remain the prerogative of smaller institutions, which can afford the time and resources needed to more thoroughly assess student preparedness.

Special treatment is not sought or expected when advocating the admission of non-accredited home-educated students, but equal access and opportunity are desired. The onus for proof of proficiency has always been and should remain the student's. However, post-secondary institutions are encouraged to provide alternatives to standard admission practices for students who have not followed standard education pathways.

It is critically important that post-secondary institutions be visionary as their mandate is to provide training for the future. Alberta's post-secondary institutions are, for the most part, forward thinking when adopting policies and procedures. Much useful information was obtained in conducting this project, the most noteworthy discovery being the overall positive outlook the majority of post-secondary institutions displayed in trying to find mutually agreeable methods of ascertaining post-secondary readiness of non-accredited home-educated students. Indeed, the overall attitude, over the last seven years, has gone from one of indifference, to tolerance, to acceptance and genuine interest, shown by the fact that most institutions readily took part in the project and all the larger institutions were gracious enough to provide answers to the questionnaire. With parents and post-secondary institutions sharing the common goal of access and success for non-accredited home-educated students, the future does look promising for all who desire a higher education.

Acknowledgements

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Post Script

No one is able to change the world alone. Many suggestions went into this project and more would be appreciated. Please make comments and suggestions by contacting:

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More information on home-education and past studies can be reviewed by visiting www.educationunlimited.ca

This report and the future website will be linked to www.educationunlimited.ca.