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Examining Online Health Sciences Graduate Programs in Canada

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Abstract

Approximately one in 10 employed Canadians worked in health care and social services in 2016. Health professionals perceive life-long learning as an important element of professional life and value flexibility in their continuing education activities. Online learning is ideally suited to meet this need for flexible health sciences continuing education. The present study sought to identify and characterize online graduate programs in health sciences offered by Canadian universities. All Canadian (non-technical) university websites were hand searched for online graduate programs in health and related fields. Each identified program was characterized by 10 features: province, university, flexibility (i.e., fully online or blended), subject area, curriculum (e.g., coursework, thesis or project, practicum), duration and timing options (i.e., full-time, part-time), admission requirements, class size and acceptance rates, and employment outcomes. The search identified 171 Canadian university online graduate programs in health and related fields. Across Canada, the greatest numbers of programs are offered in Ontario and British Columbia. Most programs are master's and graduate certificate programs, with graduate diploma and PhD programs being less common. While the majority of programs require an undergraduate degree for admission, some programs base entry requirements on previous work experience. Most programs offer a blended learning experience, with fewer being fully online. The most common content areas include nursing, public health, occupational health, and occupational therapy. These findings highlight opportunities to advance fully online, health continuing education in novel subject areas.

Keywords: online, health professional, post-secondary education, continuing education, e-learning, Canada

Introduction

E-learning, as defined by the Canadian Council on Learning, involves the development of knowledge and skills through the use of technology (Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2009). Technology can support engagement with content through online learning activities and tools, and promote interaction among individuals in distance education (Abrami et al., 2006). Many higher education institutions are adopting e-learning as a means of providing accessible and flexible educational opportunities to meet the learning needs of students in the 21st century. Indeed, e-learning has become a critical cornerstone in higher education advancement. The number of Canadian adults between the ages of 25 to 64 holding university degrees continues to rise (Statistics Canada, 2013) and post-secondary institutions have reported steady growth in online enrolments since 2015 (Martel, 2015; Bates et al., 2017; Donovan et al., 2018). In 2016-2017, 17% of all Canadian post-secondary students were taking at least one online course for credit, and 65% of those same post-secondary institutions anticipated modest (1-10%) to fast growth (over 10%) of their online enrolments over the next year (Donovan et al., 2018). Catering to the growing student demographic of part-time, mature, and working professionals, online education offers convenient, flexible, student-centered educational opportunities (Innes, Mackay, & McCabe, 2006). For 57% of Canadian institutions, online learning was rated very important for expanding continuing and professional education programs (Donovan et al., 2018). Moreover, online education allows for universities to increase student access, be more economically competitive by attracting students from outside the traditional service area, improve educational attainment, and provide pedagogical improvements (Abrami et al., 2006; Donovan et al., 2018).

Data from multiple domains provide strong evidence that health education is an area of current and future demand, not only in Canada, but worldwide. As the Canadian population ages, there has been a rise in life expectancy accompanied by chronic conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2016). This demographic change is increasing the demand on healthcare systems, highlighting the need to expand the number of health professionals who possess the competencies and skills required to: 1) adapt to the rapidly evolving health care sectors, and ii) contribute to the complex problem-solving that is required by the health changes of today and tomorrow. E-learning has been found to be an appropriate and effective method for learning health-related content and can be used to meet this growing need for working health professionals (Moore & Hart, 2004; Shenk, Moore, & Davis, 2004; Wernet, Olliges, & Delicath, 2000).

Currently, few studies have investigated online learning opportunities in the health sciences in Canada. This may be attributed to the devolved and distributed structure of the higher education system (Contact North, 2016). Highlighting this gap in the literature presents a time-sensitive and valuable opportunity to further our understanding of online education opportunities in Canada. To our knowledge, no published studies have evaluated the current landscape of online graduate education in the health sciences offered by Canadian universities. Consequently, this research aimed to identify and characterize current online postgraduate programs in health and related fields offered by Canadian universities. The study identified existing program availability and opportunities for further development in novel areas of concentration.

Methods

Canadian university websites were manually searched between January 2017 and October 2017 for fully online or blended graduate programs in a health or health-related field. College-level institutions and polytechnic universities were excluded from this study in order to focus on university-based programs. All data were exclusively collected from the university websites; universities were not contacted for further information or clarification about their online programs.

Programs were included in the data analysis if they met the following inclusion criteria: (i) online format, (ii) graduate-level program (e.g., post-baccalaureate certificates, diplomas, master's and PhD), and (iii) in a health or health-related field. To meet the online inclusion criterion, the majority of the program had to be available in an online or blended format. A program was considered graduate-level if a post-secondary degree or equivalent credential was required for admission. A program was defined as a health or health-related program if the program's stated intent was to provide education related to health. Health, as defined in the Constitution of the World Health Organization, is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (World Health Organization, 1948).

A list of all Canadian universities was created (see Appendix) and corresponding university websites were searched by three independent researchers, including two bilingual speakers. To identify online health programs that meet set inclusion criterion, a thorough search process was undertaken using the Google search engine, university website search features, and direct access to relevant departmental web pages. This preliminary search yielded 192 programs that were entered into an Excel database. To validate the accuracy of program findings, all university websites were reviewed again by an independent researcher. A cross-comparison of research findings was conducted, along with a consolidated team analysis to review any discrepancies in inclusion. A total of 171 programs met the inclusion criteria following the final phase of data collection.

The data were analyzed iteratively using content analysis. Data were categorized in the database according to: province, university, program name, program type, subject area, learning format, program format, experiential learning, program flexibility, academic admissions, work or volunteer-related admissions criteria, class size, acceptance rates, and job outcomes. Codes were inductively created from recurring patterns in the data, as well as defined and categorized to assist in thematic analysis (Table 1).

Table 1

Codebook Used to Deductively Code Data

Category	Definition	Description of codes
Program type	Coded as certificate, diploma, master's, doctorate, or other.	Other: if program did not fit into the other four categories.
Subject area	Code based on program title or program description.	Varied
Learning format	Coded as fully online or blended format.	Fully Online: no requirements to attend campus for learning, however, an experiential learning

		opportunity such as an internship may be required. Blended: requires some component of attending classes, workshops, or retreats on campus.
Program format	Coded as thesis, course, course/thesis, or thesis/project.	Thesis: requires a thesis in addition to required coursework. Course: coursework only. Course/Thesis: an optional thesis in addition to required coursework. Thesis/Project: optional thesis or project in addition to coursework.
Experiential learning	Coded as experiential learning or none.	Experiential Learning: experiential learning opportunity, either required or optional. Experiential learning included capstone or culminating project, on-campus residencies or labs, practicum or internship, or similar experience. Thesis was not included in experiential learning. None: no experiential learning opportunity.
Program flexibility	Coded as flexible or not flexible based on scheduling options.	Flexible: programs provide options in completion time, the number of courses students are required to take concurrently, the range of durations over which program can be completed, or is offered part-time. Not Flexible: full-time or a structured format with specified end date.
Academic admission requirements	Coded as undergraduate degree or equivalent, undergraduate degree plus additional qualifications or degrees, academic experience, or other.	Undergraduate Degree or Equivalent: required an undergraduate degree, certificate, diploma, or equivalent credential. Undergraduate Degree Plus Additional Qualifications, Degrees, or Academic Experience: previous code requirements, plus an additional qualification, degree or academic experience (e.g., registered nurse, or graduate degree). Other: required academic admissions other than the previous two codes.
Other admission requirements	Code based on additional admission requirements including work, volunteer experience, or not a requirement for admission.	Work Experience: work experience in addition to academic requirements. Work or Volunteer Experience: work or volunteer experience in addition to academic requirements. Not a Requirement for Admission: did not require work or volunteer experience.
Class size	Code based on availability of information on class size.	No: information on class size not provided. Yes: information on class size provided.
Acceptance rates	Code based on availability of information on acceptance rates.	No: information on acceptance rates not provided. Yes: information on acceptance rates provided.
Job outcomes	Code based on availability of information on potential employment outcomes.	No: potential career outcomes not provided. Yes: specific career outcomes provided. Vague: vague or very general careers in health care noted.

Results

The results from the website search identified 171 online graduate programs in a health or health-related field offered across 44 Canadian universities (Table 2). The programs were offered across Canada, in British Columbia (n=35), Alberta (n=26), Saskatchewan (n=9), Manitoba (n=1), Ontario (n=50), Quebec (n=26), New Brunswick (n=6), Nova Scotia (n=10), and Newfoundland (n=8). There were greater numbers of programs available in some provinces, particularly Ontario and British Columbia, likely in accordance to a higher saturation of universities in these provinces. No programs were identified within the Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Prince Edward Island.

Table 2

Summary of Program Findings

Total programs	Program type	Common content areas	Program delivery	Program structure	Experiential learning	Admission requirements
171 programs	47 certificate	Nursing	76 fully online	132 flexible, part-time	111 experiential education (i.e., internships, practicums, residencies)	89 undergraduate or equivalent
	21 diploma	Public health	92 blended			70 undergraduate plus additional qualifications
	76 master's	Occupational health or physical therapy	3 blended or online			70 required work/volunteer experience
	4 doctoral					
	3 combined					
	20 other					

Of the 171 programs identified, there was a variety of graduate-level credentials, certifications, and degree opportunities in the health field. The results identified 47 certificate, 21 diploma, 76 master's, and four doctoral online health programs. Three combined degree programs, including a graduate diploma and master's degree, and dual-master's degrees, were also identified. Some programs (n=20) did not report the type of graduate credential, or did not classify the program as a certificate, diploma, master's, or doctoral degree (i.e., microprogram).

The most common content areas offered by the online programs included: nursing, public health, and occupational health or physical therapy. This finding was consistent across the certificate, diploma, master's, and doctoral program types, with some variance in subject area frequency and availability. Of the certificate programs, there was a higher prevalence of nursing (n=13), occupational health and safety (n=5), public health (n=4), and mental health (n=4) programs. The diploma programs included varied subject areas, with a higher proportion of nursing (n=4) and health information (n=3) program availability. Of the four PhD programs identified, three programs specialized in nursing. Finally, there was a higher frequency of nursing (n=21), public health (n=9), social work (n=7), counselling (n=5), occupational therapy (n=4), and clinical science (n=4) master's programs. Less common were programs in the following subject areas: addiction, anesthesia, clinical epidemiology, food science/safety, oncology, palliative care, nutrition, health

and social services, rehabilitation science, dementia, polysomnography, health leadership/management, health education, pediatric psychosocial care, gerontology, child psychology, eHealth, and medical radiation.

The programs identified were delivered fully online, or in a combination of distance and on-campus face-to-face learning experiences, which were referred to as blended. A total of 76 programs were fully online, with a higher proportion of certificate (n=37) and diploma (n=10) programs, compared to master's (n=14) and doctoral (n=0) degrees. The majority of programs included a blended learning format (n=92), with mandatory on-campus institutes, courses, residencies, workshops, practicums, and other in-class delivery methods. Three programs offered both blended and fully online learning opportunities, dependent on student preference. Many of the programs (n=132) included flexible program structures, with part-time and self-selected paces. According to program type, many of the certificate (n=37), diploma (n=17), master's (n=57), and doctoral (n=2) programs included flexible formats and duration.

In congruence with flexible format structure, a significant portion of the programs offered experiential learning opportunities (n=111). These included internships, practicums, residencies, clinical practice, research projects, placements, workshops, labs, and fieldwork. Most of the master's (n=67) and doctoral (n=4) programs offered an experiential education component; whereas, certificate (n=19) and diploma (n=10) programs were less likely to offer hands-on learning experiences. Some of the master's (n=28) and all of the doctoral (n=4) programs offered a thesis or dissertation option.

Most of the programs (n=89) required an undergraduate degree or equivalent for admission into the program. Equivalent qualifications included a college degree, undergraduate-level courses, certificate, or diploma. Some programs (n=70) required an undergraduate degree plus additional qualifications, degrees, or academic experience. For example, a post-secondary education degree or diploma, in addition to registration by an accredited government body (i.e., a Registered Nurse in Canada) or a graduate-level degree *were required for admission*. Many of the program admission requirements (n=70) included previous work or volunteer experience, which ranged in duration and relevance to the program-area. Finally, few program websites (n=14) offered information about acceptance rates and class sizes.

While some program websites provided information about employment opportunities and career outcomes, including a list of specific career options or opportunities for advancement in their field, this content tended to be ambiguous or largely undefined for the majority of programs. For example, one Master of Public Health webpage described career opportunities with the following statement: "Career in public health practice."

Discussion

The present study identified 171 online programs in health or a health-related field offered by Canadian universities. Certificate and master's programs are the most prevalent online health credentials, with fewer online educational opportunities at the diploma or doctoral level. The majority of programs focus on specific disciplines or professions including nursing, public health, and occupational health or therapy; fewer online

programs take an interprofessional perspective. Many programs offer an experiential learning component, particularly those at the master's and doctoral levels. Less than half of the programs identified were offered fully online, with the remaining programs requiring students to participate in a mandatory on-campus component, which was clearly indicated on the program websites. Thus, there appears to be an opportunity to develop additional, fully online graduate programs in health sciences, particularly at the master's and doctoral level, incorporating interprofessional learning and practice within the program pedagogy.

Limitations

While procedures were put in place to improve the overall quality of the collected data, there are some limitations to this study. The search strategy used to collect data could have missed programs at universities as the websites of non-health departments, such as education and psychology, were not searched. Some websites were difficult to navigate and information was often not optimally presented, or information was implied rather than explicitly stated. Lastly, since these data reflect only information available to the researchers within the 10-month period of time over which they were collected, and due to the evolving nature of online and program information, the present findings could quickly become outdated. Despite these limitations, the present findings contribute to our understanding of the current state of e-learning across Canadian universities in the field of health.

While most university websites provided program overviews, admission requirements, application process and deadlines, and course information, many program website layouts were difficult to navigate and some information was unable to be retrieved. A limited number of websites provided statistical information regarding acceptance rates and class sizes for prospective students. Highlighting such pertinent information with greater transparency is one avenue for change. In addition, employment opportunities associated with the program were often ambiguous and largely undefined. Program websites should be designed in a comprehensive, accessible manner to attract and inform prospective students. Along with standard program information, websites should offer data and supporting information pertaining to program admissions and employment after graduation.

Future Program Development and Research

As indicated by the number of applications Canadian universities receive for their graduate program(s) in the health sciences field, there is no shortage of student interest in pursuing a health-related career as indicated. This study suggests that online academic programs are readily available to a vast population of students. As this educational format continues to gain popularity, institutional websites must continue updating their websites to foster the needs of the student population. This includes providing relevant, up-to-date information that is presented to interested students in a logical, user-friendly format, allowing for efficient navigation. Today, university students and employed professionals alike, place a high value on flexibility of time and place in their continued educational endeavors. Therefore, the need to provide additional fully online programs that contain experiential learning opportunities is of great importance and

deserves an in-depth investigation of how this structure of learning can be further integrated into additional university programs throughout Canada.

Future work in this area may deepen our understanding of e-learning in Canada by extending the search beyond universities to include colleges and polytechnic universities, and extending the search beyond health science to better understand the availability of e-learning generally. Search strategies could be improved by surveying universities about the number of programs that offer e-learning. Comparing this search to similar searches in other countries with online health science programs would develop our understanding of how Canada fits into the global context of e-learning.

Conclusions

This research aimed to identify current online graduate programs in the health sciences offered by Canadian universities. As this research suggests, there is a critical and continual need for online graduate programs to be structured in a format that allows for an optimal level of accessibility and flexibility for the student population. While this type of education is increasing among Canadian institutions, findings suggest that this program configuration is particularly lacking at the master's and doctoral level. Additional fully online post graduate programs that align with personal demands of potential students such as ongoing work and family commitments are needed.

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Appendix

List of University Websites Searched

Province	University	Website link	Reasons for inclusion/exclusion
Alberta	Ambrose University	https://ambrose.edu/	No graduate health courses
Alberta	Athabasca University	http://fhd.athabascau.ca/	Yes
Alberta	Burman University	https://www.burmanu.ca/	No graduate health courses
Alberta	Concordia University of Edmonton	https://concordia.ab.ca/	Yes
Alberta	King's University	https://www.kingsu.ca	No graduate health courses
Alberta	Grant MacEwan University	https://www.macewan.ca/	Yes
Alberta	Mount Royal University	http://www.mtroyal.ca/	Yes
Alberta	St Mary's University	https://www.stmu.ca/	No graduate health courses
Alberta	University of Alberta	https://www.ualberta.ca/	Yes
Alberta	University of Calgary	http://werklund.ucalgary	Yes
Alberta	University of Lethbridge	https://www.uleth.ca/	Yes
British Columbia	Capilano University	https://www.capilanou.ca/	No graduate health courses
British Columbia	Emily Carr University of Art and Design	http://www.ecuad.ca/	No graduate health courses
British Columbia	Simon Fraser University	https://www.sfu.ca/	Yes
British Columbia	Thompson Rivers University	https://www.tru.ca/	Yes
British Columbia	Trinity Western University	https://www.twu.ca/	Yes
British Columbia	University of the Fraser Valley	https://www.ufv.ca/	Yes
British Columbia	University of British Columbia	http://www.mrsc.ubc.ca/	Yes
British Columbia	University of Northern British Columbia	https://www.unbc.ca/	No
British Columbia	Royal Roads University	http://www.royalroads.ca/	No graduate health programs
British Columbia	University of Victoria	https://www.uvic.ca/	Yes
British Columbia	Vancouver Island University	https://programs.viu.ca/	Yes
British Columbia	University Canada West	https://ucanwest.ca/	No graduate health programs
British Columbia	University of British Columbia Okanagan	http://ok.ubc.ca/welcome.html	Yes
British Columbia	Quest University	https://questu.ca/	No graduate health programs
British Columbia	Fairleigh Dickson University	http://www.fdu.edu/	No online graduate courses offered from Vancouver campus or online
Manitoba	Brandon University	https://www.brandonu.ca/	Yes
Manitoba	University of Manitoba	http://umanitoba.ca/	No online graduate health programs
Manitoba	University of Winnipeg	https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/	No graduate health programs
Manitoba	University College of the North	https://www.ucn.ca/default.ed.aspx	No graduate health programs
Manitoba	Canadian Mennonite University	http://www.cmu.ca/	No graduate health programs
Manitoba	Providence University College	http://www.prov.ca/	No graduate health programs
Manitoba	Booth University College	https://www.boothuc.ca/	No graduate health programs

Manitoba	Université de Saint-Boniface	https://ustboniface.ca/	No graduate health programs
New Brunswick	Université de Moncton	https://www.umoncton.ca/	No online graduate health programs
New Brunswick	Mount Allison University	https://www.mta.ca/Prospective/Default.aspx	No graduate health programs
New Brunswick	St Thomas University	http://w3.stu.ca/stu/	No graduate health programs
New Brunswick	University of New Brunswick	http://www.unb.ca/	Yes
New Brunswick	Crandall University	http://www.crandallu.ca/	No graduate health programs
New Brunswick	St Stephen's University	http://ssu.ca/	No graduate health programs
New Brunswick	University of Fredericton	https://www.ufred.ca/	No undergraduate admissions requirements
New Brunswick	Kingswood University	https://www.kingswood.edu/	No graduate health programs
New Brunswick	Yorkville University	http://www.yorkvilleu.ca/	Yes
Newfoundland & Labrador	Memorial University of Newfoundland	https://www.mun.ca/	Yes
Nova Scotia	Dalhousie University	https://www.dal.ca/	Yes
Nova Scotia	Saint Mary's University	https://www.smu.ca/	Yes
Nova Scotia	Acadia University	https://www2.acadiau.ca/index.php	No graduate health programs
Nova Scotia	Mount Saint Vincent University	http://www.msvu.ca/	Yes
Nova Scotia	University of King's College	https://ukings.ca/	No graduate health programs
Nova Scotia	St Francis Xavier University	https://www.stfx.ca/	Yes
Nova Scotia	Cape Breton University	https://www.cbu.ca/	No graduate health programs
Nova Scotia	Université Sainte-Anne	https://www.usainteanne.ca/	No graduate health programs
Ontario	Algoma University	https://www.algomau.ca/	No graduate health programs
Ontario	Brock University	https://brocku.ca/	Yes
Ontario	Carleton University	https://carleton.ca/	No online graduate health programs
Ontario	Lakehead University	https://www.lakeheadu.ca/	Yes
Ontario	Laurentian University	https://laurentian.ca/	Yes
Ontario	McMaster University	https://www.mcmasterce.ca	Yes
Ontario	Nipissing University	http://www.nipissingu.ca/	No graduate health programs
Ontario	Queen's University	http://www.queensu.ca/	Yes
Ontario	Saint Paul University	https://ustpaul.ca/	No graduate health programs
Ontario	Redeemer University College	https://www.redeemer.ca/	No graduate health programs
Ontario	University of Sudbury	https://www.usudbury.ca/	No graduate health programs
Ontario	Ryerson University	http://www.ryerson.ca/	Yes
Ontario	OCAD University	https://www.ocadu.ca/	No online graduate health programs
Ontario	University of Guelph	https://www.uoguelph.ca/	Yes
Ontario	University of Toronto	http://www.utoronto.ca/	Yes
Ontario	University of Ottawa	https://www.uottawa.ca/en	Yes
Ontario	University of Waterloo	https://uwaterloo.ca/	Yes
Ontario	University of Windsor	http://www.uwindsor.ca	Yes
Ontario	Western University	https://www.uwo.ca	Yes
Ontario	Wilfrid Laurier University	https://www.wlu.ca/	No online graduate health programs.
Ontario	Trent University	https://www.trentu.ca/	No online graduate health programs.
Ontario	York University	http://www.yorku.ca/	Yes
Prince Edward Island	University of Prince Edward Island	http://www.upei.ca/	No online graduate health programs

Quebec	Laval University	https://www.ulaval.ca/en.html	Yes
Quebec	McGill University	https://www.mcgill.ca	Yes
Quebec	Bishop's University	http://www.ubishops.ca/	No graduate health program
Quebec	TELUQ	https://www.teluq.ca/	Yes
Quebec	Concordia University	https://www.concordia.ca/	No graduate health program
Quebec	Université du Québec à Montréal	https://uqam.ca/	No online graduate health program
Quebec	Université du Québec à Chicoutimi	http://www.uqac.ca/	No graduate health programs
Quebec	Université de Montréal	http://www.umontreal.ca/	Cannot identify relevant programs
Quebec	Université de Sherbrooke	https://www.usherbrooke.ca	Yes
Quebec	Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières	https://www.uqtr.ca/	Yes
Quebec	Université du Québec à Outaouais	https://uqo.ca/	Cannot identify relevant programs
Quebec	Université du Québec à Rimouski	https://www.uqar.ca/	No online graduate health programs
Quebec	Université du Québec en Abitibi- Témiscamingue	http://www.uqat.ca	Yes
Saskatchewan	University of Regina	https://www.uregina.ca	Yes
Saskatchewan	University of Saskatchewan	https://nursing.usask.ca	Yes
Saskatchewan	First Nations University of Canada	http://fnuniv.ca/	No graduate health programs

