

**AURORA COLLEGE**  
**BACHELOR OF EDUCATION DEGREE**  
**PROGRAM REVIEW REPORT**

October 2021

**Review Team**

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## PREFACE

The review team would like to take the opportunity to thank Aurora College for the opportunity to be involved in the review of its Bachelor of Education degree program and to thank all participants in the stakeholder focus groups for taking time out of their busy schedules to share their perspectives on the program. The review team understands that this is a pivotal time in the history of Aurora College and that a great deal of interest is currently focused on the central role the BEd might play in both Aurora's transition to polytechnic university status and the future of public education in the Northwest Territories generally. We wish Aurora's faculty, staff and students all the best as the institution progresses through this exciting new chapter in its history.

The review team's overall assessment of the quality of Aurora's BEd degree program is that, when it was being offered regularly, the program provided students with a solid undergraduate degree in Education with a strong grounding in Indigenous perspectives. However, the attempt to prepare teachers for Kindergarten to Grade 9 with a focus primarily on English and Indigenous Studies may not have provided students with a broad enough grounding in teachable academic disciplines to become elementary generalists or secondary specialists. In turn, graduates might not have been as readily employable as was hoped because they emerged from the program without foundational knowledge in a broader range of teachable subject areas. As Aurora moves forward, it will be crucial for a revamped BEd program to strike a balance between providing increased breadth and depth in terms of its curriculum and maintaining high-quality, enriching community-based experiential learning and Indigenous cultural content.

Due to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, a site visit to Aurora College was not possible. All meetings with stakeholder groups were conducted via web- and tele-conferencing platforms during the months of April, May and June 2021, and participants also had the opportunity to send input via email to the review team if they were unable to attend a session or did not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts during a session. The review team would like to thank all participants for their candour throughout the external review process. It should be noted that because a site visit was not conducted, the review team believes that commentary on the current quality of the academic and non-academic supports available to Aurora students as well as the infrastructure (e.g., library resources, IT network, campus facilities, etc.) at Aurora's campuses is beyond the scope of this review.

The review team met with the following individuals and groups:

- First Nation Elders
- John MacDonald, Deputy Minister of Education, Culture and Employment, GNWT
- Rita Mueller, former Deputy Minister of Education, Culture and Employment, GNWT
- Glenda Vardy Dell, Vice-President, Education and Training, Aurora College
- Jeff O'Keefe, Vice-President, Student Affairs, Aurora College
- Dave Porter, Director, Thebacha Campus, Aurora College
- Yvette Arcand, Acting Director, Indigenous Teacher Education Program, University of Saskatchewan
- Valentina de Krom, Program Head, Bachelor of Education, Aurora College
- Aurora BEd faculty past and present
- Aurora BEd students and alumni.

In advance of the focus group sessions, Aurora College provided the review team with a package of files containing the BEd Self-Study Review, Aurora College's Strategic Plan and 2018 Foundational Review report, BEd program documents (e.g., program and course outlines), faculty CVs, and other related documents.

Aurora's Self-Study Review provided a broad overview of the history of the BEd program and the College's long-running partnership with University of Saskatchewan, as well as relevant data on program success indicators such as enrolment numbers, graduation and attrition rates, student and graduate demographics, etc. The Self-Study was, then, a very good introduction to the program and its successes and challenges leading up to the 2017 program suspension and provided the review team with a solid foundation; however, partway through the review process, the team found it necessary to seek clarity about the program review's mandate and purpose, mainly because the BEd program was already winding down and Aurora's relationship with USask had already ended before the review team was established. Hence, there was some confusion over the value of reviewing a program that had already been discontinued. Accordingly, a special meeting to clarify the mandate was held with Aurora's VP, Education and Training. The resulting mandate was to review the program that had been in existence and to determine whether it was meeting the needs of students and stakeholders.

As Aurora College moves towards polytechnic status, it will be crucial for the organization to adhere to its own policy and procedures for program reviews more rigorously. The review team recommends that, where necessary, the external component of future program reviews at Aurora follow an established pattern, such that key meetings with

stakeholder groups commonly consulted during such reviews (e.g., students, alumni, faculty, administrators, external partners, etc.) be organized earlier in the process--perhaps even in advance of the formation of the review team. The organization of stakeholder forums for this review was at times ad hoc in nature, although the quality of input from participants was excellent and was a testament to the important role the BEd program has played in students' lives and the education system in the NWT.

The review team's recommendations, detailed below, focus on six areas:

1. Student recruitment
2. Program entrance pathways
3. Program breadth and depth
4. Inter-institutional partnership
5. Community-based experiential learning and Indigenous cultural content
6. Faculty complement and program leadership

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Recruitment Efforts

The need to recruit and educate Indigenous teachers and Northerners was mentioned repeatedly in our meetings with stakeholders. There was a sense that there had been less recruitment in the past decade, with limited reach to smaller and remote communities. A part of the work of recruitment was the need to ensure that prospective students knew the entrance requirements for the program well in advance of applying--possibly during the early high school years.

### 2. Consideration of Program Pathways for Students without Sufficient Academic Backgrounds

We heard that many students entered the program without the background needed to be successful in University-level coursework. The number of students who were required to withdraw from the program due to academic failure is high and, in turn, impacts the sustainability of the program and the resources needed to maintain it for small groups of students.

Providing students with the support they need as they enter a University program is essential for them to be successful, and multiple pathways may be needed to help ensure success. One possibility is to have a pre-education program that emphasizes the literacy and numeracy skills they need to be successful in both the program and as teachers later

on. Such a program would likely draw on adult basic education courses Aurora College already runs on a regular basis. Another option is to ensure there are both academic and non-academic supports in place from their first year in the program. This may include academic resources such as writing coaching and numeracy tutoring, extracurricular programs or non-academic supports such as counselling, access to financial bursaries, and on-site child-care.

### 3. Bachelor of Education Program Focus, Breadth, and Depth

Recent graduates expressed concerns that Southerners were selected more frequently than Aurora students for teaching positions in the NWT. In addition, we heard that the choice of an Indigenous Studies major and English minor may not be sufficient to prepare them for the generalist focus at the elementary level or the specialist focus for a teachable subject area needed for secondary content. Rather than creating one program to serve all of K-9, we recommend that Aurora consider creating a generalist program for K-6, with Indigenization across all curricular subjects. The secondary grades require more specialized content knowledge, yet it is difficult to create a program for multiple majors given the program's enrollment numbers. One suggestion is to recruit students who have received a bachelor's degree in a relevant subject and create a 2-year program (minimum 48 Education credits) in which they can develop pedagogical and curricular knowledge. This 2-year program could potentially overlap with years 3 and 4 of the elementary program, with students in both pathways taking courses (e.g., Educational Technologies, Assessment, Creating Effective Learning Environments, Teaching Exceptional Children, Legal and Institutional Contexts) together.

### 4. Partnering with Another Institution

An Education degree, particularly one built on a wide breadth of courses, requires instructors with a broad range of expertise, which is difficult to resource and deliver through a small institution. We also heard the need for preservice teachers to hear diverse perspectives on education from different instructors. While the Northern perspective needs to remain prominent in the program, we recommend that Aurora considers hiring both Aurora instructors and other instructors from outside the institution to provide the diversity needed.

While some dissatisfaction with changes to the University of Saskatchewan program was expressed during forums, it is important for Aurora to continue to be actively involved in decision-making regarding courses for NWT students. In renewing a relationship with University of Saskatchewan or in negotiating a new partnership with a different

postsecondary institution, it will be important to ensure the program meets the needs of students from the beginning and make revisions through ongoing communication and collaboration. We believe it is crucial that in any future partnership agreement Aurora secures for itself a seat at the table, so to speak. This may include a defined role for Aurora College faculty and/or administrators on the partner institution's Education-related committees or autonomy to make program changes as needed, in consultation with the partner institution.

#### 5. Community-Based Experiences

We heard strongly from program stakeholders that a key component of the Bachelor of Education program in the past was its community-based experiences. The experiences need to be purposefully woven into a revised program in ways that students are able to maintain connections with their home communities, if desired. Experiences may include field placements with experienced and qualified mentors in the students' home community; local cultural activities and culture camps; independent studies or projects in home communities; and community leaders both leading and participating in university-based activities (e.g., lesson plan fairs).

#### 6. Program Staffing & Leadership

While it is understandable that the staffing complement around Aurora's BEd program was reduced in size after new intakes were suspended in 2017, we do not believe it is sufficient or sustainable to run the program indefinitely with a team of only contract faculty and/or adjunct faculty from a partner institution. It is crucial that a future version of the Education program be built around a solid faculty complement. A revived BEd program, especially if Aurora sees it as a key component of transition to polytechnic university status, should be built around a core group of permanent instructors hired by Aurora College, including an instructor in a program lead role. The expertise of this core group would then be augmented by the recruitment of specialist contract faculty to ensure students benefit from a diversity of perspectives in the classroom. We believe it is important that the core faculty group not only has the required level of postsecondary education but also prior public school teaching experience, ideally within the NWT, the broader Canadian North, and/or rural and remote Indigenous communities. Prior public school experience helps establish credibility with prospective students as well as key external partners in NWT's school system. The program lead should also, ideally, have prior public school teaching experience and, therefore, be able to teach core Education courses in the program and mentor students towards the teaching profession. The program lead should thus be both instructor and administrator. This position would also be the primary liaison and

relationship builder with key contacts at NWT's Dept. of Education and any partner institution Aurora opts to work with. Pursuant to that, and related to Recommendation #4 above, if Aurora opts to deliver its BEd in partnership, we recommend that any future agreement includes a role for the program lead within the partner institution's Faculty of Education when it comes to curriculum decisions.

Should Aurora, as part of its transition to polytechnic status, opt not to deliver the degree in partnership but instead launch a BEd as its first independently credentialled undergraduate degree, then recruiting a larger complement of permanent faculty becomes a requirement. External quality assurance councils (e.g., Saskatchewan Higher Education Quality Assurance Board) insist that undergraduate programs be staffed with a minimum number of full-time equivalencies (FTEs) to support the delivery of required courses year over year and also allow time and space for research work, which is an essential faculty duty when a college or university grants its own degrees. Meeting and even exceeding the minimum FTE requirements set by external quality assurance boards would also allow Aurora to maintain capacity around the Education program in the face of unanticipated extended leaves and faculty sabbaticals, should Aurora eventually develop policy and procedures around this aspect of academic culture.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The review team would like to thank Aurora College for the opportunity to be involved in discussions of the future of its Bachelor of Education program. We hope the recommendations in this report will help the College make crucial programming decisions over the next few years, particularly as it transforms into a polytechnic university. It was evident in the thoughts shared by forum participants that Aurora should be proud of the contributions its BEd program has made over many years to the education system in the NWT. We look forward to seeing that tradition continue with renewed energy.