CHAPTER 5

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY (ECDVU)

The ECDVU is much more than a traditional training program. While ECDVU compares very favourably to other graduate programs in terms of program completion rates, costs, work interruption, and the key African issue of brain drain, the full measure of its value includes its impact on promoting ECD capacity, leadership, and networks at country and broader regional levels. Throughout this chapter and the next, we present evidence of ECDVU's success both as a training program, and at these additional levels. Readers who are interested in establishing a capacity-promoting education and training program, whether in ECD or in other fields within international development, may find the ECDVU to be a useful model. We also hope that these chapters demonstrate the promise that lies in honouring the local in international development. By promoting regional networks, mobilizing Indigenous knowledge, and stimulating local solutions, while also drawing on international expertise, we were able to deliver a meaningful training program with much broader impacts than we could have anticipated at the outset. In describing the ECDVU program and its outcomes, we hope to provide evidence that capacity-promoting initiatives are both feasible and desirable, inspiring others to take up similar approaches and to share their stories and lessons learned.

Program Mission and Goals

ECDVU's stated mission is to promote African leadership capacity as a key strategy to support child, family, and community well-being and broader social and economic development. As such, ECDVU's mission highlights the long-term importance of an integrated approach to ECD as a vital support to broader

Africa-centred goals, including those articulated in the Millennium Development Goals (and the soon to be determined Sustainable Development Goals), the Poverty Reduction Strategies, the national goals outlined in Education for All, and sectoral plans for education, health, nutrition, sanitation, and child protection. While ECDVU situates itself within these larger policy frameworks and strategies, the more specific emphasis is on how the local, regional, and country levels can address these frameworks with the active participation of ECDVU graduates. Program graduates can then, in turn, play a key role in mobilizing citizens in their own communities and countries to become involved in ECD policy and program initiatives 'on the ground.' Within this broader mission, ECDVU's goals are to build ECD capacity, promote ECD leadership, and stimulate supportive ECD networks within and across participating African countries. ECDVU also helps to address the major gap in ECD research studies in sub-Saharan Africa. The research completed during the program itself, the research that participants launch after graduation, and the research promoted through the African Scholars and Institutions (AS&I) initiative (see chapter 9) are all serving to address this gap.

Program Administration

To meet the commitment to its cross-cultural, capacity-promoting mission and goals, ECDVU encourages the active participation of both African and international ECD organizations and specialists in its programming. National ECD committees in Africa, African and international instructors, and (as needed) African and international advisory groups all play a vital role and complement the work of a small core team based at the University of Victoria. The project support team at the University of Victoria includes three main roles: a Project Director, a Financial and Program Support Administrator, and, during program deliveries, a Cohort Manager. At different times, according to need, the program has also employed course developers and technical support staff.

All three evaluations of the ECDVU have cited the role of Cohort Manager as a vital support to participants' learning. The evaluation of the first three deliveries of ECDVU in sub-Saharan Africa showed that most ECDVU students (69%) consulted the Cohort Manager on a weekly basis throughout the program, and many students (13%) sought assistance nearly every day (Vargas-Barón, with Joseph, 2011). The Cohort Manager's ongoing online support was considered by many students to be vital to their success.

As noted in chapter 4, the ECDVU also benefited from the support of an international ECD advisory committee, particularly in the early development stages. Individuals who have served on the advisory committee have brought a high level of

African and international expertise in ECD. Some committee members also served as instructors or facilitators in the earlier international ECD seminars. As the ECDVU has evolved, an increasing number of regional SSA specialists have supported and advised the program, many of whom have served as program faculty. At present, all but one of the ECDVU instructors (Pence) is African.

Country and Participant Selection

The country identification and the participant selection processes were also critical to ECDVU's success. The program organizers wanted to make a major impact within the available resources—not just to train ECD specialists, but to use the program to achieve broader positive impacts on ECD in the participating countries and across sub-Saharan Africa. Even before the ECDVU program was launched, there was a high level of interest in the program throughout Africa—indeed, the program was created in response to that interest. Thus, the challenge was not to recruit participants, but how to choose them from the many potential candidates. The program goals called for a selection process that would identify those individuals in the best position to benefit from the ECDVU's unique approach and who could have a significant impact on ECD in their home country. The knowledge and ability to identify those candidates lay within the countries themselves—not within the ECDVU administration.

Table 5.1 on the following page shows the countries involved in the six ECDVU deliveries. For two of the deliveries (the MENA-2 delivery in Yemen and the SSA-4 delivery in Nigeria), specific countries or donors approached the ECDVU director to mount their own ECDVU program. However, for the other four deliveries (SSA-1, SSA-2, SSA-3 and MENA-1), the ECDVU engaged in a country selection process prior to the student selection process. Like the student selection process, the country selection process was designed to maximize ECDVU's chances of fulfilling its capacity-promoting mission, with a greater focus on lower income or lower capacity countries—for example, South Africa, with a substantially higher ECD capacity than all other African countries, has not participated in the ECDVU. Additional criteria for the choice of countries included: participation in earlier ECD seminars, social and political stability, government, donor, and international organizational support for ECD, and the potential for broad inter-sectoral, multi-organizational interaction to support in-country ECD development.

Following the selection of countries, national ECD committees were formed to manage the selection of participants. The national committees typically included high-level representatives of governmental agencies, donors, NGOs,

NGO networks, universities, professional associations, and independent ECD specialists. As national ECD leaders, they could identify key national ECD objectives and the cross-sectoral processes necessary to achieve them. Then, they would identify and review potential national candidates for ECDVU, using additional criteria. The committees sought respected mid- to high-level ECD professionals who were employed full-time, had at least eight years of service and at least 10 years of active work ahead. Candidates also needed to show leadership potential and a dedication to improving ECD in their countries. Finally, candidates were asked for evidence of employer support—the hope was that employers would provide the candidates with computer access and support, funds for travel to regional seminars, and as much other assistance as possible.

Table 5.1 ECDVU deliveries, 2001-2011.

ECDVU Delivery	Countries	Number of Participants
SSA-1 (2001-2004)	Eritrea, Ghana, The Gambia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia *(This was the only 3-year, Master's degree program.)*	30
SSA-2 (2006-2007)	Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda	24
SSA-3 (2009-2010)	Cameroon, The Gambia, Liberia, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia	28
SSA-4 (2010-2011)	Nigeria	30
MENA-1 (2003)	Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Yemen	13
MENA-2 (2005-2006)	Yemen	15

Programs and Structure

The ECDVU has offered two main programs: a three-year Master's degree in Child and Youth Care and a one-year graduate diploma in International Child and Youth Care for Development, both issued by the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Victoria. Students in these programs had already achieved Bachelor's degrees that were recognized by the University of Victoria. Students without a recognized undergraduate degree completed essentially the same coursework as other ECDVU participants. Upon successful completion, they received a Bachelor's degree in Child and Youth Care (three-year program) or a Professional Specialization Certificate in International Child and Youth Care for Development (one-year program)[6] from the Faculty of Human and Social Development at the University of Victoria. The three-year program was offered only once in sub-Saharan Africa from 2001 to 2004. The one-year program was delivered five times, twice in the Middle East/North Africa, and three times in sub-Saharan Africa.

Both the one- and three-year programs incorporated online and face-to-face seminar components. For each of the web-based courses in the program, approximately 40% of the learning activities took place during a semiannual two-week face-to-face seminar. The remaining learning activities were delivered online, while learners maintained their ECD employment in-country. When they were at home, participants were expected to communicate regularly with the international cohort and to interact with an ECD 'community of learners' in their own countries. Most major assignments for the program were designed to complement the participants' ECD employment responsibilities, and were thus negotiated individually between each student and the course instructor.

A Generative Curriculum

The design of the ECDVU courses drew on the generative curriculum model developed as part of the First Nations Partnership Program (Pence, Kuehne,
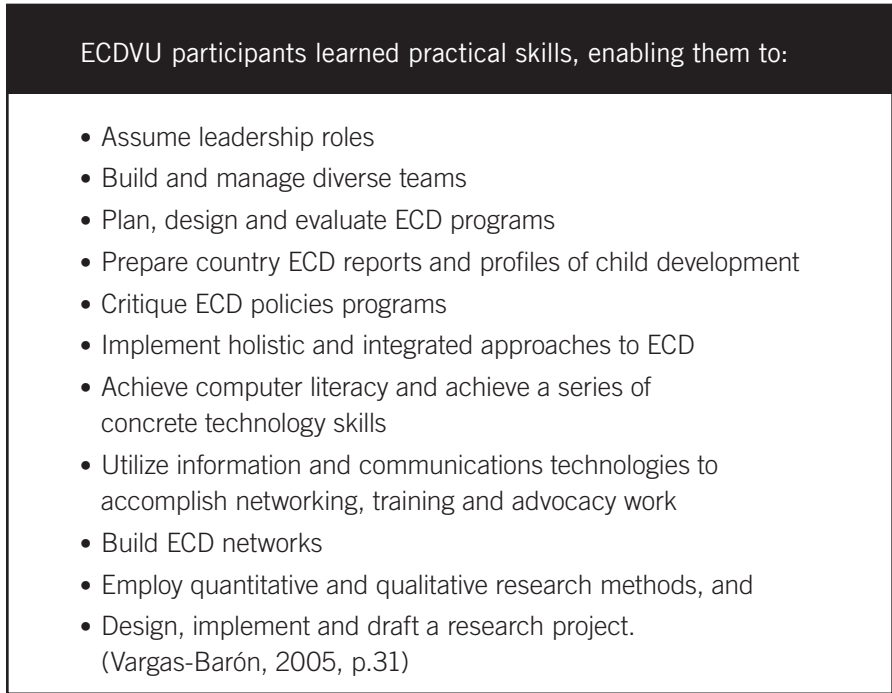
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[6] *The ECDVU was ahead of the University of Victoria itself in developing Graduate Diplomas—the very first one-year program offered (MENA-1) awarded graduates a Graduate Diploma on a pilot basis, however for SSA-2 when ECDVU sought to recognize graduates with a Graduate Diploma, the new incoming Dean of Graduate Studies indicated that such a program must first go through Senate—representing a delay for SSA-2 and 3 who received PSCs for the same work as the MENA-1 and SSA-4 programs. Such challenges, both within UVic and elsewhere, represent a level of detail typically not discussed here.*

Greenwood, & Opekokew, 1993; Pence & McCallum, 1994) and reflected the following capacity-promoting principles and characteristics:

- **A learner-focused approach** that draws on learners' experiences in their personal and professional lives;

- **An ecological approach** that places individuals, programs, and policies into an interactive and dynamic context and seeks to plan activities that impact the larger ecology;

- **A capacity-promoting approach** that strengthens participants' capacities to fulfill their professional mandates and to be accountable to their constituents and the broader ECD community in their countries;

- **A co-constructive approach** that encourages learners to use program curricular materials and their own in-country experiences and data to generate their own perspectives and applications;

- **A multicultural approach** that considers ideas, research, and goals pertaining to child care and development from many different cultural sources, including (but not limited to) African and Euro-Western sources;

- **A cohort-driven approach** that encourages collaboration, reciprocal learning among peers, and networking among learners of each participating country; and

- **A historical approach** that explores 'how we came to be here' vis-à-vis the evolution of various theories and constructions of children and their care, and more recent international development activities on child care and development.

The first external evaluation (Vargas-Barón, 2005) included a review of the ECDVU courses, methods, materials, dialogues, major projects and theses. The evaluator found them to be culturally appropriate and of exemplary quality, noting that ECDVU's generative curriculum and methods would be valuable for students in any world region. She noted in particular the flexibility of the program, which enabled participants to learn about ECD in their own cultural contexts, while reviewing the history and current status of ECD concepts, activities, and research throughout the world. Further, participants in all three evaluations (Schafer et. al, 2005; Vargas-Barón, 2005; Vargas-Barón, with Joseph, 2011) expressed nearly unanimous appreciation for the program's instructors, course content, and teaching methods. Figure 5.1 on the following page summarizes a range of skills that ECDVU participants indicated they learned through the program.

Figure 5.1

ECDVU participants learned practical skills, enabling them to:

- Assume leadership roles
- Build and manage diverse teams
- Plan, design and evaluate ECD programs
- Prepare country ECD reports and profiles of child development
- Critique ECD policies programs
- Implement holistic and integrated approaches to ECD
- Achieve computer literacy and achieve a series of concrete technology skills
- Utilize information and communications technologies to accomplish networking, training and advocacy work
- Build ECD networks
- Employ quantitative and qualitative research methods, and
- Design, implement and draft a research project.
  (Vargas-Barón, 2005, p.31)

Research and Publications

A key goal of the ECDVU and related capacity-promoting initiatives (see chapter 9) is to fill a major gap in studies and data on ECD in sub-Saharan Africa. The literature on the ECD field in sub-Saharan Africa is very limited. Euro-Western research, which is based on approximately 5% of the world's children (Arnett, 2008; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Pence & Hix-Small, 2007), dominates the ECD literature. The ECDVU thesis and project requirements were part of a deliberate effort to generate a relevant literature to inform ECD policy and practice in Africa. Each study and publication by an ECDVU graduate made a contribution to advancing the understanding of ECD in SSA. ECDVU students were encouraged to work with colleagues or committee members to publish aspects of their work in professional journals, including at the country level. Some key topics explored through projects, theses, and publications include:

- Children's rights
- Orphan care, particularly related to HIV/AIDS
- Indigenous knowledge
- Use of local materials in ECD

- Integrated ECD
- Quality and effectiveness of pre-schools and ECD programs
- Policy development and implementation
- Parenting and parental participation
- Education/training programs
- Innovative 'local' programming.

Program Costs

The ECDVU is a cost-effective model of delivering graduate-level education in the majority world. The most recent external evaluation of ECDVU (Vargas-Barón, with Joseph, 2011) estimated the total cost of delivering the one-year ECDVU graduate diploma program at US $17,925 per participant, including travel and accommodation for the seminars. Based on 2008 figures, which correspond to the SSA-3 delivery, the comparable costs for international graduate students were US $33,000 at American universities and $25,600 at Canadian universities (Vargas-Barón, with Joseph, 2011, p. 5). Costs for the three-year, ECDVU Master's degree program were naturally somewhat higher—roughly $27,000-$30,000 per participant—but still considerably lower than the cost of a comparable Master's degree at an American or Canadian university offered around the same time (Vargas-Barón, 2005).

Completion rates also provide compelling evidence of the value of the financial investment in the ECDVU model. ECDVU's completion rates are outstanding for an online or blended education program anywhere in the world, at 90% for the three-year SSA-1 program, and an average of 96% for the one-year programs across all four SSA deliveries. If program completion rates are included in the base calculation of cost—and they should be—the ECDVU is extraordinarily cost-effective: online programs often have completion rates of less than 50%, representing a doubling of per-student completion costs. ECDVU's strikingly high completion rates illustrate the benefits of providing context-relevant education in SSA for appropriate candidates, supported by systems that promote both participant and country development.

Importantly, the ECDVU program successfully avoided the 'brain drain' that typically results when ECD expertise migrates from Africa to countries of the industrialized world. Participants remained employed in their countries throughout the program, where they were also able to remain with their families and respond to personal and community needs. After graduation, 99% of participants remained employed in their countries, building new ECD networks, partnerships

and programs, and improving and expanding training systems, developing new ECD tools and publications, and sharing their learning and resources with colleagues. When considering the costs and benefits of the ECDVU model, it is important to take these broader 'ripple effects' into account—we will explore these outcomes more fully in the next chapter.

Distance education programs are typically less expensive to mount and deliver than face-to-face programs. With ECDVU, the blended delivery was more than cost-effective: it was critical to the success of the capacity-promoting generative curriculum model at the heart of the program. If learners were located in a distant, foreign university, cut off from interacting with their home, community, and national contexts, it would have been impossible to fully implement the generative curriculum model, and learners would not have been able to produce the Africa-based literature and initiatives that are among the greatest outcomes of the program.

ECDVU: A Model of Capacity-Promotion in Post-Secondary Education

The ECDVU, like the FNPP before it, drew on the complexity and the expertise of 'the local' to create a program that goes well beyond the individual to impact broader social structures. Participants were not uprooted from their home countries, their families, or their child-focused employment to participate—indeed, that daily focus was integral to the contextually meaningful educational experience the program sought to provide. Participants' learning rippled throughout their families, their employment, their communities, and their countries. Through that daily 'immersion,' ideas moved from theory to praxis, from possibilities to realities. Being part of a cohort of similarly motivated individuals was enabling and energizing, making ongoing consultation within and across countries possible, often for the first time. Through the face-to-face seminars, the program also invited diverse leaders from academia, government, and programs into those interactions, promoting additional contacts within and across countries, and increasing the reach of the ECDVU's influence. In the next chapter, we explore these broader impacts.

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