Building Pathways

Laddered Credentials in Public Post-Secondary in British Columbia

Prepared for BCCAT by Tiffany MacLennan and Jiwoo Jeon,
Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA)

September 2026

BCCAT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Laddered credentials are an increasingly important feature of British Columbia's post-secondary landscape. They allow students to begin with smaller credentials, such as certificates, and progress into diplomas or degrees without repeating coursework or losing credit. In principle, laddering creates clearer pathways, reduces duplication, and supports mobility across institutions.

This report examines how documented laddering pathways currently operate across BC's public post-secondary system. Through a structured environmental scan and interviews with institutional leaders and policy experts, the study maps existing pathways, identifies dominant models, and explores the motivations and challenges shaping laddered credential design.

The scan identified 133 documented laddered pathways across the province. Most follow a Certificate → Bachelor's Degree progression, particularly in fields such as education, social work, and health. In these areas, laddering often responds to workforce needs, allowing students to enter employment quickly and return for additional qualifications as professional requirements evolve. Structured science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) transfer pathways also demonstrate strong coordination and curricular alignment.

Institutions overwhelmingly described laddering as an access tool rather than a revenue strategy. It is most often developed to widen participation, support upward mobility, and formalize progression routes that students are already attempting to navigate. However, laddering is also resource-intensive. Pathways typically emerge at the program level and are maintained through decentralized processes, which can limit system-wide visibility and consistency.

A recurring theme throughout the research is that laddering works best when it is clear, transparent, and supported by strong transfer infrastructure. When pathways are well-documented and rely on block transfer arrangements, they provide predictability for learners. When communication breaks down or agreements are difficult to find, students may struggle to navigate progression routes.

Equity considerations are central. Laddered credentials with embedded exit points — certificates and diplomas that stand alone while articulating upward — reduce risk for students who may need to pause their studies. This flexibility is particularly important for first-generation, adult, rural, and Indigenous learners, and for students beginning in community-based institutions before transitioning to universities.

Overall, laddering in British Columbia public post-secondary system is neither absent nor fully coordinated. Strong models exist, particularly in regulated or workforce-driven fields. At the same time, the broader system remains decentralized, with limited data on student uptake and progression.

As the province continues to focus on workforce development, access, and lifelong learning, laddered credentials represent both an established practice and a potential area for further coordination. The central question moving forward is not whether laddering exists--it clearly does--but how intentionally it will be supported as part of BC's public post-secondary architecture.

INTRODUCTION

Laddered credentials have become an increasingly visible feature of British Columbia's post-secondary landscape. Colleges, universities, and Indigenous institutions all participate in forms of credential sequencing that allow learners to progress from smaller credentials into larger ones without unnecessary duplication of coursework.

At the same time, laddering is not uniformly defined or consistently documented. It operates across institutional boundaries, governance structures, and regulatory frameworks, often emerging through program-level initiative rather than coordinated system design. While British Columbia has long maintained a strong credit transfer infrastructure, less is known about how intentionally sequenced credential pathways function below the baccalaureate level and how they are experienced across different institutional contexts.

BCCAT commissioned Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) to provide a structured environmental scan of laddered credential activity across BC's public post-secondary system. The purpose is not to catalogue every articulation agreement, but rather to identify patterns, dominant models, structural features, and system-level dynamics that shape laddered pathways in practice.

The British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) commissioned Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) to provide a structured environmental scan of laddered credential activity across BC's public post-secondary system. The purpose is not to catalogue every articulation agreement, but rather to identify patterns, dominant models, structural features, and system-level dynamics that shape laddered pathways in practice. By combining quantitative mapping with qualitative institutional perspectives, the report aims to clarify where laddering is most developed, how it functions, and where gaps or opportunities may exist.

Why Laddering Matters Now

Laddering intersects with several current priorities in British Columbia's public post-secondary system.

Workforce alignment: Many sectors, particularly education, social work, health, and STEM, increasingly require degree-level qualifications while continuing to rely on certificate- and diploma-level entry points. Laddered pathways allow learners to enter the workforce quickly and return for additional credentials as professional requirements evolve.

Access and mobility: Not all learners begin their studies in bachelor-level programs. Structured progression routes can reduce duplication, shorten time to completion, and create clearer mobility between institutions, particularly from regional colleges into universities.

Equity and risk mitigation: Embedded exit points ensure that learners who pause or redirect their studies leave with recognized credentials rather than partial, non-transferable coursework. For first-generation, adult, rural, and Indigenous learners, this staged credentialing can reduce financial and academic risk.

Lifelong learning: As reskilling and upskilling become more common, modular credential design enables individuals to build qualifications incrementally across different life stages. Laddering offers one mechanism for integrating shorter credentials into longer-term academic pathways.

Taken together, these dynamics position laddering as more than a technical transfer mechanism. It functions as part of the broader architecture of access, workforce responsiveness, and learner mobility within the province.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. What laddered credential pathways currently exist across BC's public post-secondary system?
2. In which fields and institutional contexts is laddering most prevalent?
3. How do institutions conceptualize and implement laddered pathways?
4. What structural features support or constrain laddering expansion?
5. Where are the major gaps in data, coordination, or system visibility?

By addressing these questions, the report seeks to provide a grounded understanding of how laddering operates today and what considerations may shape its evolution.

Reader's Note

In this document, arrows (→) are used to denote learner pathways.
For example: Certificate → Diploma → Bachelor's Degree means a certificate laddering to a diploma laddering to a bachelor's degree.

METHODOLOGY

Environmental Scan Approach

This study employed a structured environmental scan to identify and analyze laddered credential activity across British Columbia's public post-secondary system. The purpose of the scan was to map formal, credential-to-credential progression routes below the baccalaureate level and to identify broad system patterns, rather than to produce an exhaustive inventory of all transfer agreements.

The scan began with a systematic review of the BC Transfer Guide's Block Transfer database to identify documented sub-degree laddered pathways. This system-level review was supplemented by targeted institutional website searches for each public college and university in the province, as well as reviews of post-secondary related organizations and government bodies such as the First Nation Education Steering Committee and the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills. Searches focused on program pages, pathway maps, articulation agreements, transfer summaries, and related frameworks that explicitly described structured credential progression.

All identified pathways were captured in a standardized dataset which recorded the initial institution, the transfer institution, the original credential, the receiving credential, the field of study, the delivery mode (e.g. online vs. in-person), and the laddered pathway type (if publicly available) and screened to ensure consistency with defined inclusion criteria. Where necessary, program descriptions were reviewed to confirm that the pathway reflected intentional credential sequencing rather than general transferability.

Data Parameters and Boundaries

To maintain a consistent and meaningful view of sub-baccalaureate laddering activity, the scan applied clear inclusion and exclusion boundaries.

Included:

- Certificate → Diploma pathways
- Certificate → Bachelor's Degree pathways
- Microcredential → Certificate or Diploma pathways (only where explicitly recognized as for-credit and formally structured)

Excluded:

- Associate Degree → Bachelor's Degree pathways (considered part of established transfer frameworks rather than laddered design)
- Diploma → Bachelor's Degree pathways (treated as traditional credit transfer rather than laddering for the purposes of this study)
- Informal, case-by-case credit transfer
- Non-credit microcredentials that do not directly articulate into a for-credit credential

These parameters ensure that the scan captures pathways designed as intentional, vertically sequenced credentials, rather than broader or less formal credit mobility arrangements.

Key Informant Interview (KII) Approach

To complement the environmental scan, the project included a series of semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs). The purpose of these interviews was to understand how laddering is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced across different institutional contexts, and to identify motivations, barriers, and system-level considerations that are not visible through public documentation alone.

Institutional Representation

Interview participants were drawn from a cross-section of BC's post-secondary landscape, including public colleges, public polytechnics & institutes, public universities, and Indigenous education organizations. Particular attention was paid to including institutions with active laddered pathways, as well as those with distinct mandates (e.g., open learning or access-focused institutions).

Indigenous perspectives were incorporated through engagement with representatives connected to First Nations–governed post-secondary institutions and provincial Indigenous education organizations.

Stakeholder Types

Participants held a range of roles, including Deans and Associate Deans, Directors of Admissions and Recruitment, Directors of PLAR and Strategic Partnerships, Enrollment and Registrar leadership, policy advisors, and representatives from Indigenous education bodies. This range allowed the study to capture perspectives spanning academic program design, student mobility, institutional strategy, and system-level policy considerations.

Limitations

The environmental scan relies on publicly available information and may not capture informal or unpublished articulation arrangements. Delivery mode and pathway mechanisms were not consistently documented across institutions, limiting certain comparative analyses.

Similarly, while interviews provide valuable institutional insight, they reflect the perspectives of specific individuals and may not represent all internal views within an institution. The sample size, while intentionally diverse, is not exhaustive of all institutions in the province.

Together, however, the environmental scan and KII data provide a triangulated view of laddering activity in BC, combining structural mapping with institutional context and interpretation.

THE STRUCTURE OF LADDERING IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Defining Laddering[1]

Distinguishing Laddering from Stacking

Although the terms stacking and laddering are often used interchangeably, they can refer to different forms of learning progression. For the purpose of thls project, the distinction between stacking and laddering based on, Presant's (2022) work, is as follows:

- Stacking involves combining smaller, often non-credit or short-credit learning units, such as microcredentials or badges, to build a broader skill set. Stacking is typically horizontal, allowing learners to accumulate competencies across related areas. Recognition is cumulative, and the goal is breadth of skills or professional upskilling.
- Laddering, by contrast, involves linking for-credit credentials so that completion of one provides advanced standing, block transfer, or direct entry into the next level of study. Laddering is vertical in nature, enabling progression from certificates to diplomas to degrees. Its purpose is to support efficient academic mobility and reduce duplication of learning.

In simple terms: Stacking builds breadth; laddering builds upward mobility.

Distinguishing Laddering from PLAR

Laddering is also distinct from Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). PLAR evaluates learning that occurs outside formal education, such as workplace experience or informal training, and awards individualized credit based on demonstrated competencies. PLAR typically occurs at program entry and is assessed case-by-case.

Laddering, by contrast, recognizes completed, credit-bearing credentials that are formally articulated into higher-level programs. Credit transfer is pre-approved, structured, and not dependent on individualized assessment.

Where PLAR is about recognizing what a learner already knows, laddering is about designing the staircase for what comes next.

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[1] Definitions and distinctions related to stacking, laddering, and PLAR in this section draw on frameworks and explanations from BCcampus and affiliated authors, including:

- *Educational Pathways* in the BC Microcredential Open Textbook (BCIT section): https://opentextbc.ca/bcmicrocredential/chapter/educational-pathways/#bcit
- Presant, D. (2022). *Stacking Micro-credentials: Scenes from a MOOC:* https://donpresant.ca/uncategorized/stacking-micro-credentials-scenes-from-a-mooc/
- *Educational Pathways* (TRU PLAR section) in the BC Microcredential Open Textbook: https://opentextbc.ca/bcmicrocredential/chapter/educational-pathways/#tru-plar

How BC Institutions Interpret "Laddering"

Across interviews, participants consistently described laddering not primarily as a technical transfer mechanism, but as an intentional design philosophy. While definitions varied slightly by role and institutional context, laddering was most often framed as the structured creation of pathways that allow students to move from smaller credentials into larger ones without unnecessary repetition or loss of credit. The language used to describe this process was very consistent: "seamless," "barrier-free," "not starting from scratch," and "removing duplication" were among the most frequently repeated phrases.

For some participants, particularly those overseeing admissions, recruitment, or academic portfolios, laddering was understood in operational terms: formalized certificate-to-diploma or diploma-to-degree routes, often embedded directly within program architecture. At institutions such as BCIT and TRU, laddering was described as something "wholly embedded" into program design, with credentials intentionally structured to build upward. In these contexts, laddering was associated with predictability and curricular coherence.

However, a strong and consistent theme across interviews was the conceptual overlap between laddering and PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition). Several participants, particularly those working in PLAR, microcredentials, and strategic partnerships, described laddering and PLAR as philosophically intertwined. While acknowledging that they are technically distinct mechanisms, participants often spoke about them jointly or interchangeably. Both were framed as tools for reducing barriers, increasing flexibility, and recognizing prior achievement, whether that learning occurred within formal credentials or through work, lived experience, or microcredentials.

From this perspective, laddering was less about the formal articulation between two credentials and more about a broader commitment to accessibility and mobility. Participants emphasized that students, particularly adult students, and those engaged in upskilling or reskilling, should not be required to "retake what they already know." Laddering, like PLAR, was seen as a means of honoring prior learning and creating multiple entry and exit points. In this framing, laddering becomes part of a wider institutional access mandate, rather than solely a transfer policy instrument.

Notably, even where interviewees did not differentiate sharply between laddering and other forms of credit mobility, the aspirational language of what laddering should be remained consistent: effective laddering is seamless, transparent, and barrier-free. The distinction between laddering, stacking, and PLAR may be technically important at the system level, but at the institutional level, these concepts frequently converge around a shared goal of removing friction from learner progression.

System Architecture of Laddering

Distinguishing Features of the BC Laddering Landscape

Three features distinguish BC's laddered credential environment:

1. **High volume of Certificate → Bachelor's Degree pathways:** The certificate-to-degree pathway is unusually pronounced compared to many "traditional" pathways where certificates typically ladder into diplomas rather than directly into degrees. This feature reflects established transfer agreements and demand for degree-qualified professionals in Education, Social Work, and Health.

2. **Heavy use of block transfer arrangements:** Block transfer pathways significantly reduce the need for course-by-course assessment and increase predictability for learners.

3. **Decentralized approach to pathway publication:** While many institutions publish clear pathway maps or transfer summaries, others provide limited or fragmented information, making system-wide mapping more challenging.

First Nations and Indigenous Institutes in British Columbia

British Columbia is home to a diverse network of private, First Nations governed post-secondary institutions and Indigenous-controlled education organizations, including members of the Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association (IAHLA). These institutions operate under distinct governance structures and mandates, often rooted directly in First Nations communities and accountable to Band leadership. Their role in the laddering conversation is therefore both structurally important and contextually unique.

Interview insights highlight that laddering is viewed positively within Indigenous education contexts, particularly as protection against "dead-end" post-secondary experiences. A central concern is that students may invest time and funding into programs that do not yield transferable, recognized credentials if they are unable to complete a full degree. In this context, laddering is valued not only for upward mobility, but for its multiple, meaningful exit points.

Participants emphasized the importance of credential structures that allow students to build progressively (for example: earning a certificate, then a diploma, and potentially a degree) with each stage standing on its own as a recognized and transferable achievement. This design is especially significant for Indigenous learners, many of whom are first-generation students, balancing family, community, and employment responsibilities. The ability to pause or exit the system with a credential in hand, rather than leaving "empty-handed," was described as essential.

Often institutional and student funding is allocated on short, sometimes annual cycles, as a result both learners and First Nations and Indigenous institutions operate within constrained timelines. Laddered models with embedded exit points reduce risk by ensuring that even if a student cannot complete the full pathway, their learning results in a formal, portable credential. In this sense, laddering functions not only as a mobility tool, but as a mechanism of credential security for protecting students' investment of time, funding, and effort.

At the same time, First Nations institutions often lack the capacity or mandate to offer full degrees independently. As a result, partnerships with public institutions become central. These partnerships can enable community-based delivery models, such as Indigenous language fluency or teacher education programs designed with embedded exit points and pathways into degree-level study (including professional development programs). In some cases, public institutions deliver degree components within communities, reducing the need for students to leave their home territories to complete advanced study. This model reflects a broader question raised in interviews: how can programs be brought to communities, rather than requiring students to relocate in order to access laddered progression?

However, challenges remain. Interviewees raised concerns about transparency in partnerships, unclear articulation agreements, and inconsistent communication around what credits are transferable and how pathways actually function. There are also broader structural barriers, including limited funding, uneven understanding of the post-secondary system, and K-12 preparation gaps that affect readiness for bachelor-level entry. Importantly, these challenges are not specific to laddering alone, but laddered design can either mitigate or exacerbate them depending on how clearly pathways are structured and communicated.

Overall, laddering is seen as a potentially powerful mechanism for supporting Indigenous learner mobility, particularly for first-generation students who may begin at community-based institutes before transitioning to universities. When pathways are clear, transferable, and community-responsive, they can expand access to fields with urgent need, such as Indigenous language revitalization and teacher education. When poorly designed or insufficiently transparent, they risk reinforcing the very inequities they aim to address.

QUANTITATIVE OVERVIEW OF LADDERED PATHWAYS

The environmental scan identified 133 documented laddered pathways across British Columbia's post-secondary system when conducted in fall of 2025. While the dataset contains incomplete fields for some entries, the broad patterns are clear and align closely with qualitative observations. The following section summarizes the distribution of pathways by credential flow, field of study, institutional role, delivery mode, and pathway structure.

Distribution of Laddered Pathways

The vast majority of documented pathways involve direct progression from a certificate into a bachelor's degree, representing roughly 84% of all cases. A smaller share (≈14%) follows the more traditional Certificate → Diploma route, typically in applied or technical fields. Only two pathways fall outside these categories: one Certificate → Certificate and one Certificate → Associate Degree, indicating that non-degree laddering is relatively uncommon in the current landscape.

Distribution of Laddered Pathways by Field of Study

Laddered pathways in British Columbia cluster strongly in a small number of academic and professional fields. While laddering exists across nearly all sectors of the post-secondary system, the scan reveals that some fields, notably Education, Social Work, and Health, have built structured, multi-institutional pathways, whereas others have lighter or more fragmented activity. The following subsections outline the main fields where ladders were identified and describe the specific program types that drive laddering within each field.

Social Sciences & Humanities (SSH) (≈ 61% of all pathways)

SSH is by far the largest field represented in the scan. Activity is highly concentrated in two major subfields:

- Education-related pathways (≈ 36% of SSH):
  - Includes early childhood education (ECE), education assistant, child and youth care, adult education, and aboriginal ECE programs.
  - These pathways frequently ladder into Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Social Work programs at University of Victoria, reflecting strong professional and labour-market demand.
- Social work & human services (≈ 36% of SSH)
  - Includes social service worker, community support worker, and human services worker certificates.
  - These also commonly ladder into BSW programs at University of Victoria, University of Northern British Columbia, Thompson Rivers University, and Vancouver Island University.

Smaller clusters within SSH include:

- Legal and justice studies (≈ 8%): paralegal, aboriginal justice studies, criminal and social justice, legal administrative assistant.
- Hospitality and tourism (≈ 4%): event management, aboriginal tourism operations.
- Other SSH fields (≈ 11%): American Sign Language & deaf studies, Indigenous land stewardship, journalism, disability & behaviour support, and local government administration.

Overall, SSH demonstrates the strongest and most consistent laddering, particularly where regulated professions create clear demand for bachelor-level qualifications.

Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) (≈ 20% of all pathways)

Although fewer in number than SSH, STEM pathways tend to be academically coherent and structurally well-defined, with three notable clusters:

- Engineering & computing science (≈ 35% of STEM)
  - Includes engineering transfer certificates and computing foundations.
  - All pathways in this subfield are Certificate → Bachelor, often into second-year entry at University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, University of Victoria, or University of Northern British Columbia.
- Environmental & natural resource programs (≈ 24% of STEM)
  - Includes horticulture, forestry, and environmental technician programs.
  - Certificate → Diploma ladders are more common than degree ladders, reflecting applied and regional workforce needs.
- Health (≈ 41% of STEM)
  - Includes nursing foundations, dental assistant, health care assistant, and other technician-level certificates.
  - Typically ladder into practical nursing, health sciences diplomas, or Bachelor of Health Sciences, depending on the institution.

STEM shows fewer ladders overall but the highest structural consistency, especially in engineering transfer.

Business (≈ 7% of all pathways)

Business pathways are comparatively smaller and more institution-specific:

- Most ladders connect business administration, management, or leadership certificates → business diplomas.
- Only one microcredential-based ladder was identified (public relations → business/communications discipline).

Arts & Design (≈ 7% of all pathways)

This cluster includes fine arts, visual arts, and design programs:

- Most pathways connect Visual/Fine Arts Certificates → Bachelor of Fine Arts programs.
- A key exception is interior design, where Certificate → Diploma ladders are more common before entering degree-level study.

Institutional Flow Patterns

The data reveals a strongly asymmetric pattern of institutional mobility in British Columbia's laddered pathways. Colleges and Institutes overwhelmingly serve as sending institutions, while universities function almost exclusively as receivers, reinforcing laddering as a system-level access mechanism into degree-level study.

Flow from institutions where the first credential is from a university:

University → University: 100%

All laddered pathways originating in universities lead into other university credentials. No examples were identified of university-level certificates laddering into college programs.

University → College: 0%

No documented pathways from universities to colleges were observed.

Flow from institutions where the first credential is from a college or institute:

College → University: ≈ 88%

The vast majority of pathways starting in colleges lead into bachelor's degrees at universities. These are predominantly Certificate → Bachelor ladders, especially in education, social work, and some STEM fields.

College → College: ≈ 12%

A smaller proportion of ladders remain within the college sector. These are typically Certificate → Diploma/Associate Degree pathways, often in health, business, or applied technical fields.

This distribution illustrates that laddering in BC primarily functions to support progression from colleges-level certifications to university-level certifications, rather than lateral mobility within the college sector.

Sending Institutions

Most first credentials or the credential a student would ladder from (Credential 1) originate from BC's regional colleges and teaching-focused universities. Frequent senders include College of the Rockies, Vancouver Community College, Native Education College, Capilano University, Vancouver Island University, Langara College, North Island College, University of the Fraser Valley and Thompson Rivers University Open Learning.

These institutions primarily offer entry-level certificates aligned with workforce needs and community-based training, forming the foundation for laddered progression.

Receiving Institutions

A smaller group of universities receive the bulk of laddered pathways (Credential 2). These include University of Victoria (the most frequent receiving institution), University of Northern British Columbia, Thompson Rivers University, Athabasca University (nationally recognized BA/BSW/Professional Arts programs), Capilano University, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University.

These universities offer the degree-level programs into which most laddered certificates articulate, particularly in social work, education, and STEM fields.

Institutions That Serve as Both Senders and Receivers

Several institutions appear on both sides of laddered pathways, most notably Thompson Rivers University, Vancouver Island University, Vancouver Community College, Capilano University, British Columbia Institute of Technology.

Delivery Mode Patterns

Delivery mode information was explicitly mentioned in only 18% of identified pathways[2].

Within this subset, the majority of documented entries had in-person delivery modes. Some programs were noted to have a blended or hybrid delivery (some courses online, and some in-person). There were very few fully online deliveries. Those noted as exclusively online were concentrated only in business and adult education pathways.

Because delivery mode was inconsistently reported, these figures should not be interpreted system-wide. However, the presence of blended and online delivery in several key fields suggests an opportunity to expand flexible laddered pathways, especially for working professionals.

Pathway Mechanisms

Most laddered pathways in the dataset appear to operate through block transfer, even when the words "block transfer" are not explicitly stated on institutional websites. This is especially common in engineering, forestry, social work, and other professionally oriented fields where curricular alignment is well established. A smaller subset of pathways use embedded or direct-entry models, whereas students do not need to go through formal transfer processes but simply apply for the next program. Examples of embedded and direct-entry type transfers include Vancouver Community College certificates laddering into British Columbia IT business programs, or Vancouver Community College computing science into Simon Fraser University. While not all pathway structures are formally documented, the overall pattern suggests that block transfer is the predominant mechanism supporting laddered progression in BC, providing consistency for students and minimizing course duplication across institutions.

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[2] While in-person programming is the standard delivery mode in Canada, researchers did not assume programs were in-person if no delivery mode was listed and instead noted a missing field.

MODELS OF LADDERING IN PRACTICE

The quantitative scan provides a high-level view of where laddered pathways are located across the BC post-secondary system. The qualitative analysis complements this by identifying the underlying patterns, models, and structural features that shape how laddering actually functions for learners and institutions. Four distinct models emerge from the dataset: (1) professional ladders in education and social work; (2) structured STEM transfer pathways; (3) step-wise health ladders; and (4) institution-specific or fragmented ladders in business, arts, and niche fields.

These models illustrate both the strengths of BC's laddering landscape and opportunities for improvement in clarity, consistency, and system-wide coordination.

Model 1: Professional Ladders in Education and Social Work

Dominant pattern; highly structured; strong degree orientation.

Vignette 1[3]: "From Community Support Worker to BSW"

After finishing high school, Leanne wanted to begin working quickly but also dreamed of becoming a social worker. She enrolled in the Community Support Worker Certificate at College of the Rockies, a one-year program that gave her immediate entry into frontline roles.

When she completed the certificate, she discovered that the program ladders directly into the Bachelor of Social Work at the University of Victoria, granting her block transfer credit for much of the first year. She was able to work part-time in her home community while completing online prerequisites and then transferred to University of Victoria for her BSW.

Without having to start over, Leanne moved from entry-level work to a regulated profession through a clear, predictable, province-wide laddering route.

The most prominent model in the scan consists of certificate programs in Education and Social Work that ladder directly into bachelor's degrees, typically the Bachelor's of Education or Bachelor's of Social Work. These pathways appear across nearly all regional colleges (ex: College of the he Rockies, North Island College, Vancouver Community College , Langara College, Native Education College, University of the Fraser Valley, Vancouver Island University) and lead primarily into University of Victoria, University of Northern British Columbia, Thompson Rivers University, Vancouver Island University , and Capilano University.

[3] Vignettes are based on laddered credentials examples and may not reflect currently offered laddering pathways.

Common certificate starting points: early childhood education, education assistant, child and youth care, social services worker/community support worker, Aboriginal or Indigenous-focused certificates.

What defines this model:

- Predictable progression: Many ladders show consistent block transfer credit into the receiving degree.
- Multi-sender, few-receiver architecture: Numerous colleges send students into a small cluster of universities.
- Demand-driven: Strong labour-market and regulatory pressures (ex: ECE workforce shortage; BSW requirements) shape these ladders.
- Clear student appeal: Certificate programs provide immediate employability but also serve as on-ramps to full professional qualifications.

This model demonstrates how laddering can function as a system-level access mechanism, particularly in professions with high public demand and clear credential requirements. The model also reveals how BC's transfer infrastructure enables mobility across institutions and regions, however the model does raise questions about pathways to access degree-level study in the North and Interior BC.

Model 2: Structured STEM Transfer Pathways

Fewer in number, but highly standardized and academically coherent

Vignette 2: "Becoming an Engineer from the Island"

Mateo lived in Nanaimo and knew he wanted to pursue engineering but wasn't ready to relocate to Vancouver or Victoria. He enrolled in the Engineering Transfer Certificate at Vancouver Island University, where he completed first-year calculus, physics, and design in small classes with strong faculty support.

Because Vancouver Island University participates in BC's coordinated engineering transfer system, Mateo received full block transfer into second-year engineering at the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, and the University of Victoria. He ultimately chose Simon Fraser University and entered directly into the mechatronics stream without losing time or credits.

The engineering transfer ladder allowed Mateo to start locally, reduce costs, and still enter a competitive engineering program at a major research university.

STEM pathways form the second major model, characterized by clearly structured progression from technical or foundational certificates into applied diplomas or bachelor's degrees particularly in engineering, computing, forestry, and environmental fields.

Typical examples include: Engineering transfer certificates at Vancouver Island University, Camosun College, or Langara College laddering into second-year Engineering at University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, University of Victoria, University of Northern British Columbia and Thompson Rivers University's Forestry University Transfer laddering into University of British Columbia's Bachelor of Science in Forestry, Certificates in horticulture or environmental practice laddering into Kwantlen Polytechnic University or Vancouver Island University diplomas.

What defines this model:

- Heavy reliance on block transfer: STEM ladders are highly structured to preserve curricular coherence.
- Multi-institutional agreements: Engineering transfer pathways stand out for their consistency across institutions.
- Clear entry requirements: Some ladders guarantee entry (for example, to Simon Fraser University) while others are competitive (for example, University of British Columbia).
- Progression with minimal repetition: Designed to avoid duplication of math/physics/engineering core.

This model shows how laddering can be used to coordinate high-demand, resource-intensive programs across institutions. It also highlights the role of transfer in expanding access to STEM degrees for students outside major urban centres. There is an opportunity for further consistency and transparency, especially where competitive admission complicates student planning.

Model 3: Step-Wise Health Pathways

Sequential upskilling; mixed certificate → diploma and certificate → applied degree

Vignette 3: "Climbing the Health Career Ladder"

After working in retail for several years, Sophie wanted a more stable career in healthcare. She began with the Health Care Assistant Certificate at Vancouver Community College, a short program that allowed her to enter the workforce quickly in long-term care.

A year later, Sophie applied to Vancouver Community College's Practical Nursing Diploma, where her certificate gave her advanced standing and recognition of prior clinical skills. After completing the diploma and gaining more experience, she qualified for bridging into a Bachelor of Nursing program, opening the door to becoming a registered nurse.

Sophie didn't plan her full journey from the beginning but the laddered structure allowed her to progress step-by-step, each credential building on the last, without starting from scratch.

Health laddering appears in several forms, including: health care assistant → practical nursing diploma, health assistant/tech certificates → health sciences diplomas or Bachelor's degrees, dental assistant/technician pathways

What defines this model:

- Stacked professional tiers: Clear occupational progression (assistant → technician → technologist → RN/BScN).
- Institution-specific variation: Unlike STEM, the structure varies significantly by institution.
- Strong applied focus: Programs emphasize hands-on skills and meet immediate workforce needs.
- More diploma ladders than degree ladders: Health is one of the few fields where Certificate → Diploma ladders are more common than Certificate → Bachelor.

This model demonstrates the value of laddering in addressing shortages in frontline health roles and supporting lifelong upskilling. However, inconsistent documentation and variability across institutions may limit learners' ability to understand their full progression options.

Model 4: Fragmented or Institution-Specific Ladders (Business, Arts, Hospitality, Other Fields)

Lower volume; more variation; weaker system-level patterns

Vignette 4: "Moving from Business Essentials to Advanced Credentials"

Amrit wanted foundational business skills, so he completed the Business Certificate at Vancouver Community College. Initially, he assumed he would have to repeat courses if he ever wanted a higher credential.

Instead, he discovered that his certificate ladders into several British Columbia Institute of Technology's School of Business programs, including the Business Administration Diploma and post-graduate certificates like Business Analysis. With this recognition, Amrit moved directly into the Business Administration Diploma at British Columbia Institute of Technology, bypassing introductory courses and saving both time and money.

This institution-to-institution arrangement gave him a clear internal progression route even in a field where laddering is less consistently structured.

A fourth model appears in Business, arts/design, hospitality/tourism, legal studies, ASL/deaf studies, and local government administration. These pathways are less standardized and often limited to within-institution ladders (for example, certificate → diploma within the same college).

What defines this model:

- Most ladders remain inside the same institution.
- Greater diversity in credential types: Some certificates ladder into advanced diplomas, some into post-degree certificates.
- Rarely block transfer-based: These ladders rely more on embedded curriculum design or direct entry.
- Few bachelor ladders: Except in specific cases (Fine Arts, Interior Design), most pathways do not lead into a degree.

This model highlights that in many areas, laddering does exist but is less visible or less structured. The model raises question if these fields need stronger mobility supports to facilitate transfer to different institutions, or whether current, institution-specific ladders are sufficient for upskilling and labour-market alignment.

INSTITUTION PERSPECTIVES ON LADDERING

Why Institutions Develop Laddered Pathways

Across interviews, access emerged as the most consistent and genuine driver behind the development of laddered pathways. Participants framed laddering primarily as a mechanism to widen participation, reduce duplication, and create structured upward mobility for students who may not begin their post-secondary journey in a bachelor-level program. Particularly at institutions with explicit access mandates, laddering was described as aligned with institutional identity and mission, rather than as a strategic revenue initiative.

Workforce alignment also surfaced as a motivating factor, though this was more pronounced at colleges with strong labour market orientation. In these contexts, laddered credentials were seen as a way to respond to evolving occupational requirements by enabling students to begin with shorter, employment-focused credentials and return for additional qualifications as professional expectations increase. Laddering thus supports staged credentialing in sectors where degree-level qualifications are increasingly required but immediate workforce entry remains important.

Notably, enrollment growth and revenue generation were not identified as primary drivers. No interviewee described laddering as a financial strategy, and several indicated that laddering is often resource-intensive to design and maintain. Developing a formal pathway requires curriculum mapping, governance approvals, coordination across departments, and ongoing administrative oversight. In many cases, institutions must demonstrate that a pathway is "worth" building, in other words, that sufficient student demand exists to justify the investment of human and organizational capital. Where anticipated uptake is low or uncertain, laddering initiatives may be deprioritized.

Program design plays an important role in determining when laddering is pursued. New programs are often better positioned to embed laddered structures from the outset, allowing credentials to be intentionally sequenced and aligned internally. These internally designed ladders can be comparatively straightforward to implement. By contrast, creating pathways between established programs, particularly across institutions, typically requires formal articulation agreements. In many cases, these agreements are developed in response to an existing pattern of informal student mobility, serving to formalize and streamline a pathway that students are already attempting to navigate.

Overall, institutions appear to develop laddered pathways primarily when they align clearly with access mandates, program design logic, and demonstrable student demand. The absence of direct financial incentives, combined with the administrative complexity of pathway development, means that laddering is often mission-driven rather than market-driven. This dynamic helps explain both the presence of well-developed ladders in some fields and institutions, and the relative absence of them in others.

Barriers to Laddering Expansion

While laddering is broadly supported in principle, interviewees identified significant barriers to expanding or formalizing additional pathways. The most frequently cited challenge was institutional decentralization. Laddering activity is typically housed within individual faculties or programs rather than coordinated centrally. As a result, there is often no clear institutional "owner" responsible for identifying, developing, maintaining, and monitoring laddered agreements.

Transfer arrangements may be initiated by a faculty member, admissions office, or dean, but long-term oversight can become diffuse. This structural decentralization makes it difficult to scale laddering beyond isolated program-level initiatives.

Closely related to decentralization are communication challenges. Interviewees described two recurring breakdowns. First, outward communication: newly established pathways do not always appear clearly on institutional websites, application portals, or advising materials. In some cases, even academic advisors are not fully informed about new laddered routes. As a result, pathways may exist formally but remain underutilized because students are unaware of them.

Second, internal and inter-institutional communication: when one institution modifies program requirements or curriculum structures without timely coordination, existing laddered agreements can become misaligned. In such cases, students may unexpectedly lose credit or face additional requirements, undermining the "seamless" promise of laddering. The absence of standardized notification processes or shared monitoring mechanisms exacerbates this vulnerability.

Expanding laddering across institutions was described as particularly complex. Each institution operates within its own governance structures, program approval timelines, enrollment systems, and academic policies. Even within a single institution, faculties may follow different processes for curriculum updates and credential requirements, making internal laddering administratively burdensome. These variations are compounded when attempting to align entrance requirements across institutions, particularly where competitive admission thresholds differ significantly. In such cases, creating a formal ladder does not guarantee admission, which can complicate student expectations and pathway messaging.

Interviewees also noted subtler cultural dynamics. In some university contexts, there remains a degree of disciplinary protectionism or a perception that certain academic programs should control preparation at advanced levels and skepticism about whether external institutions provide equivalent preparation. While not universally expressed, this sentiment can slow cross-sector laddering discussions, particularly between colleges and research-intensive universities.

Finally, time and human capital were consistently described as the most significant constraints. Developing a laddered pathway requires curriculum mapping, governance approvals, inter-institutional negotiation, and ongoing maintenance. Without dedicated coordinators, standardized processes, or automated systems to monitor changes, these tasks rely heavily on individual initiative. Given competing institutional priorities and limited return on investment, laddering expansion is often deprioritized despite broad philosophical support.

Taken together, these barriers suggest that the primary challenges to laddering expansion are less about opposition to the concept itself and more about governance structure, institutional incentives, and administrative capacity.

Equitable Access

Across interviews, laddering was frequently discussed through an equity lens, even when not explicitly framed as such. Participants emphasized that structured, transferable pathways are particularly important for students who do not follow a traditional, uninterrupted trajectory from high school into a bachelor's degree. First-generation learners, adult students, students balancing family and work responsibilities, and those beginning their studies in smaller or community-based institutions rely heavily on clear progression routes.

For these learners, laddering serves not only as a mechanism of upward mobility, but as a form of risk mitigation. Multiple embedded exit points —certificates, diplomas, and intermediate credentials— were described as critical design features. Students may need to pause their studies due to financial constraints, family/cultural obligations, or funding uncertainty. When credentials are laddered intentionally, learners can leave the system with a recognized and transferable qualification rather than forfeiting the value of partial completion. In this sense, laddering contributes to credential security: it ensures that time and funding invested result in portable recognition.

Community-based delivery models were also highlighted as important equity mechanisms. For many Indigenous learners and those in rural or remote regions, relocation to complete degree-level study presents financial, cultural, and social barriers. Interviewees pointed to partnership models in which public institutions deliver degree components within communities, or where community-based institutes serve as structured entry points into larger institutions. These arrangements allow students to begin locally and transition outward only when necessary or, in some cases, complete advanced study without leaving their communities.

However, equity gains depend on clarity and transparency. When pathway requirements are poorly communicated, when credit recognition is ambiguous, or when transfer agreements change without coordination, the burden falls disproportionately on students with less institutional familiarity. Interviewees noted that understanding the post-secondary system itself can be a barrier. Without clear articulation, advising support, and consistent communication between institutions, laddered pathways may exist formally but remain difficult to navigate in practice.

Overall, laddering appears most effective as an equity tool when it combines three features: structured progression, multiple meaningful exit points, and transparent, transferable recognition. Where these elements are present, laddering can expand access and mobility but where they are absent or inconsistently implemented, the benefits are unevenly distributed.

Advising, Transparency, and Student Navigation

While laddered pathways are often described as "seamless" in principle, interviewees identified significant gaps in advising infrastructure, transparency, and data visibility that complicate student navigation in practice.

A major limitation is the quality and availability of data on laddered student movement. Institutions generally do not have robust systems to track students transferring into or out of specific laddered pathways. In many cases, transfer activity is recorded simply as "credits accepted," without clear visibility into the originating program, the intended laddered route, or whether the student completed a formalized pathway. Where tracking does occur, it often relies on self-reporting within admissions applications. As a result, institutions lack a comprehensive understanding of how many students are actively using laddered routes, where breakdowns occur, and which pathways are functioning as intended. This weak data environment makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness or return on investment of laddering initiatives.

Advising capacity also differs markedly between internal and external laddering. Within a single institution, laddered progression is generally described as manageable. Advisors understand internal program structures, curriculum sequencing, and credential requirements, allowing them to guide students with relative confidence. By contrast, external laddering introduces substantial uncertainty. Institutions cannot control or always anticipate changes in partner pro-

grams, admission requirements, or curriculum updates. Advisors may not have up-to-date information about external pathways, and communication across institutions is not always systematic. As a result, the student experience becomes less predictable once progression crosses institutional boundaries.

Interviewees also noted that student navigation is complicated by language and system literacy. Many learners do not know the terminology associated with articulation, block transfer, or laddered credentials, making it difficult for them to ask the right questions or identify appropriate pathways. The "language of transfer" creates an additional access barrier, particularly for first-generation students or those unfamiliar with post-secondary systems. When pathways are fragmented across multiple webpages, inconsistently labeled, or embedded within faculty-level documentation, they become harder to discover and interpret.

Transparency challenges extend beyond marketing or web design. Participants described cases where articulation agreements were not clearly publicized, or where pathway requirements changed without visible updates. In such cases, students may make academic decisions based on outdated or incomplete information. The lack of standardized communication protocols across institutions compounds this risk.

Overall, while internal advising structures may function adequately, laddering across institutions exposes a broader system coordination gap. The absence of shared data, standardized communication mechanisms, and centralized pathway visibility limits the extent to which laddering can operate as a truly seamless mobility tool. These navigation challenges do not negate the value of laddered design, but they significantly influence how accessible and reliable those pathways appear from a student perspective.

ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR LADDERING EXPANSION

Interviews suggest that successful laddering depends less on individual institutional enthusiasm and more on structural alignment, both within institutions and across the system.

At the institutional level, clarity of process and ownership emerged as foundational. Laddering initiatives are more likely to function and endure when there is a defined governance pathway for developing, approving, maintaining, and reviewing agreements. This does not necessarily require a centralized "laddering office," but it does require clearly assigned responsibility whether through a registrar's office, standing articulation committee within a postsecondary institution, or designated portfolio. Where ownership is diffuse, agreements become vulnerable to inconsistency, lapse, or misalignment.

At the system level, interviewees were clear that meaningful expansion of laddering would require coordinated incentives and supports. No single institution can independently create coherent cross-sector pathways at scale. Because laddering often carries limited direct return on investment and requires substantial administrative effort, institutions prioritize it unevenly. Without shared expectations, funding supports, or provincial coordination, laddering remains dependent on localized initiative. Several participants suggested that stronger government backing, whether through mandate, funding, or formalized frameworks, would be necessary to move from isolated agreements to system coherence.

Related to this is the importance of shared infrastructure. Centralized transfer tools, articulation frameworks, standardized block transfer arrangements, and clear articulation tables significantly reduce the coordination burden. System-level tracking mechanisms including agreed-upon metrics for pathway uptake, monitoring processes for curricular change, and transparent documentation of agreements, were identified as potential enablers. Where such infrastructure exists, laddering becomes more predictable and less administratively fragile.

Finally, pathway design itself matters. Laddered systems function most effectively when credentials include embedded exit points and clearly defined progression routes. Certificates and diplomas that stand alone, yet articulate cleanly into higher credentials, provide flexibility and reduce student risk. This staged credentialing model strengthens laddering as both an access mechanism and a tool for long-term mobility.

Effective laddering appears to require three aligned elements: institutional process clarity, system-level coordination and incentive structures, and credential design that incorporates portability and multiple exit points. Where these elements converge, laddering is more likely to be sustained and navigable. Where they are absent, pathways remain uneven and vulnerable to breakdown.

GAPS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite widespread support for laddering in principle, several notable gaps remain across the BC system.

Limited System Awareness

The most striking gap identified through interviews was a lack of visibility of laddering activity, not only across institutions, but within them. When asked who in the province was doing innovative or effective laddering, interviewees were largely unable to identify specific examples beyond their own programs. While participants assumed that laddering activity was occurring elsewhere, there was little awareness of what models existed, how they were structured, or what best practices might be transferable.

This limited cross-institutional awareness suggests that laddering remains localized and program-specific rather than systemically coordinated. The absence of a shared forum, inventory, or comparative framework means that institutions are often developing pathways in isolation.

Private and Industry Partnerships

The environmental scan and interviews revealed limited visibility into laddered pathways involving private training providers or industry partnerships laddering credentials into public post-secondary institutions with the exception of Justice Institute of British Columbia which has a professional training transfer process for select, well-defined laddering[4]. Otherwise, where such arrangements may exist, they are not prominently documented or easily identifiable through public materials. Interviewees were generally unable to point to clear examples of structured, credit-bearing laddering between public institutions and private training organizations.

Given ongoing conversations about workforce alignment and alternative credential models, this represents a potentially underdeveloped area within the broader laddering landscape.

Microcredentials as Laddering Foundations

While this study included credit-bearing microcredentials where explicitly articulated, microcredentials remain largely disconnected from formal laddering structures. There is limited evidence of systematic design in which short-form credentials stack predictably into certificates or diplomas. As microcredentials expand across institutions, the absence of structured articulation risks creating parallel credential streams rather than integrated pathways. This area presents both a gap and a future opportunity.

Data Tracking and Measurement

Perhaps the most fundamental gap is the absence of reliable data. Few institutions are able to quantify how many students are actively using laddered pathways, how many complete sequential credentials, or where breakdowns occur. Transfer activity is often recorded only as accepted credits, without identifying whether those credits correspond to formalized ladder agreements.

Without shared metrics or tracking frameworks, it is difficult to assess the scale, impact, or effectiveness of laddering across the system. The lack of data also limits institutions' ability to evaluate return on investment or refine pathway design.

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[4] Justice Institute of British Columbia. Professional Training Transfer. Available: https://www.jibc.ca/registration/professional-training-transfer

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE BC SYSTEM

The findings from this report suggest that laddering in British Columbia is neither absent nor accidental. It exists in pockets of strength, particularly where access mandates, regulatory requirements, and program design align. However, it remains uneven, decentralized, and difficult to measure. The following considerations emerge from the research as areas for system-level reflection:

From Emergent Practice to Intentional Design

Laddering in BC has largely developed organically and has been driven by program-level initiative, institutional mission, or student demand. While the organic development has produced strong models in certain fields, it has not resulted in coherent system-wide architecture.

If laddering is to function as a meaningful access and mobility strategy, greater intentionality may be required. Intentionality, in this case, could include clearer provincial expectations around pathway transparency, shared definitions of laddered credentials, and alignment between institutional access mandates and mobility infrastructure.

The question is not whether laddering should be mandated in all cases, but whether the current decentralized model is sufficient to achieve system-level equity and transparency.

Comparative Insight—System-Level Intentionality

The Philippines provides a clear example of what intentional, system-level laddering design can look like. Through a series of coordinated policy instruments, the country established a formal mandate for articulation between technical and academic sectors. Central government and quality assurance agencies share responsibility for ensuring alignment, and institutions are required to embed laddered structures within approved programs.

This stands in contrast to British Columbia's decentralized approach, where laddering is not formally mandated and remains largely institution-driven. The Philippine model illustrates that intentional design does not necessarily eliminate institutional flexibility, but it does establish a baseline expectation that laddering is a core feature of the system rather than an emergent property of it.

See Appendix A: Comparative Case from The Philippines.

Building Shared Infrastructure and Visibility

A recurring theme throughout this study is limited visibility. Institutions do not consistently know what laddered pathways exist across the province, nor can they reliably measure student uptake within their own programs.

Strategically, the system may benefit from stronger shared infrastructure, including, but not limited to, the following:

- A more comprehensive, centralized inventory of laddered agreements;
- Clearer public documentation standards for pathway publication;
- Agreed-upon metrics for tracking laddered student progression;
- Mechanisms for notifying institutions of curriculum changes affecting articulation.

Without shared infrastructure, laddering will likely remain fragmented and unevenly accessible.

Comparative Insight—Shared Infrastructure and Visibility

New Zealand's approach highlights the role of shared infrastructure in making laddering visible and actionable. The New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework provides a unified structure across all credential levels, while the New Zealand Record of Achievement functions as a centralized, lifelong transcript that captures all formal learning. Together, these tools ensure that pathways are not only theoretically available but practically navigable by learners and institutions alike.

Similarly, Mohawk College demonstrates how visibility can be operationalized at the institutional level through detailed pathway maps, public-facing transfer tools, and active advising supports such as Pathways Fairs.

In BC, where laddering exists but is often difficult to identify or track, these examples underscore the importance of infrastructure that goes beyond agreements themselves. Without shared systems for documenting, tracking, and communicating pathways, even well-designed laddering opportunities may remain underutilized.

See Appendix A: Comparative Case from New Zealand and Mohawk College.

Aligning Incentives and Resources

Laddering is widely supported philosophically but often deprioritized operationally. The development and maintenance of pathways require time, coordination, and governance effort. In other words, resources that institutions must allocate amidst competing demands.

If laddering is viewed as advancing provincial goals related to access, workforce development, or regional equity, then alignment between policy expectations and resourcing becomes critical. Strategic investment, whether financial, regulatory, or infrastructural, may be necessary to move beyond isolated agreements toward scalable coherence.

Without aligned incentives, laddering will continue to depend on local champions rather than structural design.

Comparative Insight—Incentives and Resources

Across all comparative cases, a consistent feature of effective laddering systems is the presence of portable, recognized interim credentials. In the Philippines, National Certificates (NC I–IV) provide formal recognition at multiple exit points, allowing learners to transition between work and study without losing progress. In New Zealand, micro-credentials and sub-degree qualifications are fully embedded within the national framework and recorded in the NZRoA, ensuring visibility and transferability.

At the institutional level, Queen's University's graduate laddering model similarly emphasizes credential security by allowing students to accumulate credits incrementally without redundancy, supporting re-entry into formal programs over time.

These models reinforce the importance of designing pathways that reduce risk for learners, particularly those who may not follow linear educational trajectories. Strengthening laddering through staged credentialing and clear transferability may represent one of the most direct ways to support access, persistence, and completion among diverse learner populations.

See Appendix A: Comparative Case from New Zealand and Queen's University

Strengthening Equity Through Credential Security

This study underscores the importance of embedded exit points and portable credentials, particularly for first-generation, adult, rural, and Indigenous learners. Laddering is most effective when it reduces risk and ensures that students who pause or redirect their studies do not lose recognition for completed learning.

Strategically, institutions and system actors may wish to prioritize pathway models that incorporate staged credentialing and clear transferability, especially in community-based delivery contexts. Transparent communication and advising support remain central to ensuring that these structures function as intended.

Comparative Insight—Strengthening Equity through Credential Security

Across all comparative cases, laddering is most effective when it guarantees recognizable, portable credentials at each stage of learning. In systems such as the Philippines and New Zealand, interim qualifications (such as certificates and microcredentials) are formally embedded within national frameworks and can be carried forward without loss of credit. This approach reduces risk for learners who may pause or redirect their studies and supports more flexible, non-linear pathways.

Potential Roles for BCCAT

Given its mandate and position within the BC transfer ecosystem, BCCAT is uniquely positioned to influence the coherence and visibility of laddered pathways. While laddering remains institutionally driven, BCCAT may play a strategic role in:

- Supporting shared definitions and documentation standards;
- Facilitating cross-institutional dialogue on best practices;
- Enhancing transparency within provincial transfer tools;
- Exploring improved tracking mechanisms for laddered student mobility.

The central question moving forward is whether laddering should remain a decentralized feature of program design, or whether it should evolve into a more explicitly coordinated component of BC's post-secondary architecture.

Comparative Insight—Coordinating Bodies and System Stewardship

In jurisdictions where laddering is more systematized, a coordinating body plays a central role in maintaining coherence. In the Philippines, this role is distributed across the Commission of Higher Education, the Quality Assurance Agency, and Department of Education, while in New Zealand, agencies such as the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and the Tertiary Education Commission oversee framework alignment, quality assurance, and progression tracking.

These entities do not eliminate institutional autonomy but provide shared standards, data infrastructure, and system-level visibility.

BCCAT occupies a similar position to what commissions would be responsible for in other countries within British Columbia's transfer ecosystem. The comparative cases suggest that its role could evolve further to support not only articulation agreements, but also the broader coherence, transparency, and measurement of laddered pathways across the system.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the structure, prevalence, and functioning of laddered credentials across British Columbia's post-secondary system. The findings suggest that laddering is neither peripheral or fully systematized. It is present across nearly all public institutions, particularly in fields shaped by professional regulation and workforce demand, and it plays a meaningful role in advancing institutional access mandates.

At the same time, laddering remains largely decentralized. Pathways are often developed at the program level, with varying degrees of visibility, documentation, and institutional oversight. While many examples of effective laddering exist, particularly where credentials are intentionally sequenced and supported by block transfer arrangements, the broader system lacks consistent data, shared monitoring mechanisms, and comprehensive awareness of existing models.

The research also highlights the importance of laddering as an equity mechanism. Structured progression routes with embedded exit points reduce student risk and increase mobility, particularly for first-generation, adult, rural, and Indigenous learners. When pathways are clear, transferable, and supported by transparent advising, they function as intended. When communication breaks down or agreements lack visibility, students bear the consequences.

Overall, laddering in British Columbia can best be characterized as emergent rather than fully intentional. It reflects institutional mission and local initiative more than coordinated system design. Whether the province chooses to maintain this decentralized model or move toward greater coherence will shape the future role of laddered credentials within BC's post-secondary architecture.

The opportunity ahead is not necessarily to expand laddering indiscriminately, but to strengthen the conditions under which it works well: clarity of ownership, transparent communication, embedded exit points, and shared infrastructure that supports student mobility across institutions.

In this sense, laddering represents both a reflection of the system's existing access commitments and a potential lever for advancing them further.

APPENDIX A: COMPARATIVE CASES

The Philippines: Building a National Laddered Credentialing System

Box 1: Overview of the Philippines Education System[5]

The Philippines education system is structured into three major sectors: Basic Education, Technical-Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and Higher Education. Basic Education is managed by the Department of Education (DepEd) and includes Kindergarten, six years of elementary, four years of Junior High School, and two years of Senior High School. Upon completion of Senior High School, students can pursue either technical-vocational or academic tracks.

TVET is administered by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA). It offers competency-based training in various trades and occupational areas, leading to National Certificates (NC I to NC IV) and Technical-Vocational Diplomas. These programs are typically short-term and skills-focused, designed to prepare individuals for immediate employment.

Higher Education, governed by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), includes degree-granting programs such as associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and postgraduate studies. Institutions in this sector range from state universities and colleges (SUCs) to private higher education institutions (HEIs).

The Philippines has made significant strides in constructing a national framework for laddered education. Ladderization allows students to progress from TVET to higher education or vice versa, creating multiple entry and exit points and preventing duplication of learning.

Policy Timeline and Key Frameworks

The foundation for a ladderized education system was laid in 2004 through Executive Order No. 358[6], which formally directed CHED and TESDA to build equivalency pathways and articulation between TVET and higher education. This landmark order acknowledged the need for a more integrated and flexible approach to education and training, and triggered a series of reforms aimed at bridging the academic and technical sectors. Among its defining features were mechanisms for credit transfer, allowing TESDA-certified competencies to count toward degree programs, and the

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[5] Philippine Qualifications Framework (PQF). "Republic Act No. 10968: Institutionalizing the Philippine Qualifications Framework." Available at: https://pqf.gov.ph/Home/Details/16

[6] Republic of the Philippines. Executive Order No. 358 (2004): "To Institutionalize a Ladderized Interface Between Technical–Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Higher Education (HE)." Available at: https://lawphil.net/executive/execord/eo2004/eo_357_2004.html

embedding of vocational credentials into higher education curricula. It also promoted short bridging programs for academic gaps, recognition of prior learning (RPL) for informal and work-based experience, and multiple entry-exit points so students could gain employable credentials at each level and return to continue their education without repeating prior learning.

In 2006, CHED released Memorandum Order No. 37, operationalizing ladderized programs across priority disciplines such as agriculture, health, engineering, information technology, and business[7]. This memorandum empowered higher education institutions to incorporate TESDA-registered qualifications directly into their curricula, facilitating early credentialing and smoother transitions for students.

The reform momentum continued with the introduction of the Philippine Qualifications Framework (PQF) in 2012, which was institutionalized through Republic Act No. 10968 in 2017[8]. The PQF established a unified framework for all qualifications in the country, spanning NC I through doctoral degrees. It set common learning outcomes and descriptors, ensuring that academic and vocational credentials could be aligned and articulated for vertical mobility.

The most definitive legal backing came with the passage of Republic Act No. 10647, known as the Ladderized Education Act of 2014[9]. This law mandated systemic coordination between CHED, TESDA, and DepEd to promote seamless progression between education sectors. It solidified mechanisms for credit transfer, the embedding of credentials, recognition of prior learning (RPL), and the use of bridging programs to ensure continuity in learning.

To ensure program integrity and quality assurance, TESDA also implemented the Unified TVET Program Registration and Accreditation System[10], which required ladderized TVET components within HEI programs to be formally registered and evaluated.

Key Takeaways

The Philippines model demonstrates that a coordinated, policy-driven approach can create a functioning laddered system at the national level. Key enablers include a unified qualifications framework (PQF), cross-agency coordination (DepEd-CHED-TESDA), and a legal mandate for articulation. Institutions retain flexibility to design ladderized curricula, but must follow national standards and register embedded programs with TESDA.

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[7] Commission on Higher Education (CHED). "Revised Policies, Standards, and Guidelines on the Implementation of the Ladderized Education Program." Available at: https://legaldex.com/laws/revised-policies-standards-and-guidelines-on-the-implementation-of-the

[8] Republic of the Philippines. Republic Act No. 10968 (2018): "An Act Institutionalizing the Philippine Qualifications Framework (PQF)." Available at: https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2018/ra_10968_2018.html

[9] Republic of the Philippines. Republic Act No. 10647 (2014): "The Ladderized Education Act of 2014." Available at: https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2014/ra_10647_2014.html

[10] Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA). "About TESDA: Mandate, Mission, and Functions."Available at: https://www.tesda.gov.ph/About/TESDA/26

Queen's University: A Graduate-Level Laddering Model[11]

Box 2: Institutional Context at Queen's University

Queen's University, based in Kingston, Ontario, is a research-intensive public university with a strong focus on professional education. Like many post-secondary institutions in Canada, Queen's has faced recent enrollment challenges and budget constraints. These pressures have amplified the need to explore alternative credential models that are both sustainable and responsive to changing learner demographics. In this context, the university has prioritized flexible, modular approaches to graduate education that can attract a broader range of professionals seeking incremental learning.

Within its Faculty of Education, Queen's offers a structured and stackable pathway for graduate students through an online laddering model. This approach allows educators and professionals to incrementally build toward a Master of Education (M.Ed.) degree by beginning with shorter, focused programs.

Program Structure

The laddering model at Queen's begins with entry into a Graduate Certificate, progresses to a Graduate Diploma, and culminates in the Master of Education (M.Ed.) degree. These programs are designed to be accessible to working professionals and focus on practical, field-relevant skills.

- Graduate Certificate in Education: Consists of three courses and typically focuses on foundational or specialized themes. Options include fields such as Classroom Specialist or Indigenous Education. The certificate is for professionals seeking targeted expertise in a specific area without committing to a full graduate degree. Courses within this program are delivered through Queen's Continuing Teacher Education (CTE) portal and Professional Studies (PS), with fees ranging from CAD $650 to $745 per course. Despite its continuing education positioning, credits earned are fully transferable into more formal graduate pathways.
- Graduate Diploma in Education (GDE): Requires five courses. Students may ladder from a certificate into the diploma, allowing two additional courses to build deeper knowledge. Diplomas are offered in areas such as Literacy Education and Assessment and Evaluation. These are registered through Queen's central graduate registrarial system. Domestic students pay approximately CAD $1,253.70 per course, while international students pay CAD $2,918.70 per course.

[11] Queen's University Faculty of Education. "Laddered Graduate Programs: What Is Laddering?" Available at: https://educ.queensu.ca/graduate/online/ladder#:~:text=What%20is%20Laddering%3F

- Professional Master of Education (PME): Students may carry forward all completed credits from the diploma or certificate into the M.Ed. program. This program consists of 10 courses, allowing those who have completed prior credentials to complete the remaining courses. The M.Ed. is designed for those pursuing leadership roles in education, policy, or administration. Like the diploma, the M.Ed. is administered within Queen's graduate registrar system. Per-course tuition is CAD $1,253.70 for domestic students and CAD $2,918.70 for international students.

Design Principles

Queen's laddering model is guided by flexibility, accessibility, and professional relevance. It allows students to advance their qualifications while continuing to work, and removes barriers to re-entry into graduate studies. The credit transfer process is seamless and does not require redundant coursework. The model supports professional upskilling and career mobility, particularly for educators seeking advancement in school systems or specialized roles. The entire laddered structure is available online, making it ideal for in-service educators. Frequent start dates each year allow for maximum flexibility in planning and progression.

Key Takeaways

This model demonstrates how a single institution can create an internal laddered credential system that supports flexible professional development. It emphasizes how thoughtful curriculum design, credit articulation, and online accessibility can promote lifelong learning within a graduate education context. As an example of laddering at the post-undergraduate level, it also signals a broader trend. As Canadian institutions work to recover from financial challenges associated with changes in international student policies, graduate-level laddered pathways like this may become more common across the country.

Staircased Credentials in New Zealand

In New Zealand, the concept of "laddered credentials" is commonly referred to as staircasing, reflecting the structured, step-by-step accumulation of qualifications. This model is deeply embedded in the country's tertiary system, supported by two major pillars: the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF)[12] and the New Zealand Record of Achievement (NZRoA)[13].

System Structure and Foundations

The NZQCF offers a coherent national structure of ten qualification levels, ranging from basic certificates (Level 1) to doctoral degrees (Level 10). This inclusive framework also incorporates micro-credentials, which are recognized at all levels and serve as short, skills-based learning modules that can stack into larger programs. All NZQCF-listed qualifications are required to outline clear education pathways detailing what each program can lead into and how prior learning can be recognized.

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[12] New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). "About the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF)." Available at: https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/qualifications-and-standards/about-new-zealand-qualifications-credentials-framework/

[13] New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). "New Zealand Record of Achievement (NZRoA)." Available at: https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/qualifications-and-standards/access-your-results/new-zealand-record-of-achievement/

The NZRoA complements this structure by serving as a centralized digital transcript for every learner. Administered by the New Zealand government, it records all formal achievements, including unit standards, certificates, diplomas, degrees, and micro-credentials. This record follows the learner across institutions and life stages, providing a verified and portable account of educational progress. It simplifies credit recognition and enables learners to demonstrate previous learning for advanced standing or program entry.

Box 3: An Institutional Experimentation - Te Pūkenga

Established in 2020, Te Pūkenga is New Zealand's national institute of skills and technology, merging all 16 public polytechnics and 9 industry training organizations[14]. This unified network was designed to facilitate seamless learner progression across programs, campuses, and qualification levels.

For example, a student may begin with a Level 3 Certificate in Health and Wellbeing at one campus and later advance to a Level 6 diploma or a Level 7 applied degree within the same institutional system even if it is a different campus, or part of the country. Te Pūkenga is unifying curricula across disciplines and locations, simplifying cross-campus credit transfer. Its internal learner management systems, recognition of prior learning (RPL) policies, and centralized data sharing further streamline staircased pathways.

One of the major goals of Te Pūkenga was to embed equity goals in its staircasing model[15], focusing particularly on increasing access and progression for Māori and Pasifika learners by making seamless transfer and promoting upward credentialing.

Te Pūkenga, however, was formally dissolved by the government in 2025 and will go back to being now 11 polytechnics and 9 work-based learning organizations[16] due to a costly and unsuccessful merger period.

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[14] Te Pūkenga, New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology. "About Te Pūkenga." Available at: https://www.xn--tepkenga-szb.ac.nz/about

[15] Te Pūkenga, New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology. "About Te Pūkenga." Available at: https://www.xn--tepkenga-szb.ac.nz/about

[16] Tertiary Education Commission (TEC). "New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology (NZIST): Delivering Vocational Education." Available at: https://www.tec.govt.nz/strategic-initiatives/vocational-education-system/delivering-vocational-education/new-zealand-institute-of-skills-and-technology

Outcomes and Learner Progression

National data show that approximately 30-40% of learners who complete a sub-degree qualification (Levels 1-4) progress to a higher-level program[17]. Progression rates vary by field and learner group, with recent gains among Māori students and persistent gaps for Pasifika students. These outcomes are monitored by the Tertiary Education Commission and embedded in institutional performance indicators.

Learners who staircase benefit from multiple entry and exit points, credential portability, and reduced redundancy. Many programs are designed so that a certificate can lead into a diploma, which in turn can lead to a bachelor's degree. This modular structure supports learners who need to pause their education or switch providers, enhancing retention and completion rates.

Additionally, the NZRoA plays a practical role in enabling these outcomes by providing visibility to prior credits, eliminating the need for duplicated coursework, and supporting academic advising by making progression opportunities transparent.

Mohawk College's Laddering Supports

Mohawk College, based in Hamilton, Ontario, serves over 13,000 students annually, including more than 3,000 international learners. Notably, only about 25% of its students enroll directly from high school, with the majority being adult or returning learners seeking to reskill or upskill. The college's 2022-2027 Strategic Plan underscores its commitment to "individualized pathways and laddering opportunities, from micro-credentials through to degrees," aiming to meet evolving workforce needs[18]. Laddered credentials are essential to Mohawk's vision of lifelong, accessible, and future-ready education.

Credit Transfer and Pathways Infrastructure

Mohawk College provides robust support for internal and external credit transfer, maintaining detailed internal pathways maps that chart academic progression between programs[19]. These maps outline how certificates articulate into diplomas, how diplomas transition into advanced diplomas, and how credentials can ladder into degrees. Students can access these tools at Mohawk's Pathways Website, which outlines opportunities to build credentials efficiently without repeating coursework.

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[17] Data sourced from Te Pūkenga Statement of Performance Expectations and Annual Reporting (https://www.calameo.com/read/002386530681a8833a34d). Progression rates are tracked using the Tertiary Education Commission's Educational Performance Indicator (EPI) for student progression from NZQF Levels 1-4 to higher-level qualifications.

[18] Mohawk College, 2022-2027 Strategic Plan, https://strategicplan.mohawkcollege.ca

[19] Mohawk College. "Pathways and Credit Transfer." Available at: https://www.mohawkcollege.ca/pathways-and-credit-transfer

Box 4: Example of Business - Accounting Pathways at Mohawk College[20]

If you're exploring the Business - Accounting (Ontario College Diploma) program at Mohawk College, the Pathways website provides a clear and comprehensive overview of all your transfer options - both into the program and beyond it. The platform outlines not only the possible entry points (from certificates or other related diplomas), but also all the potential receiving programs within Mohawk that you can ladder into.

Each transfer pathway is clearly labeled with the credential type (e.g., advanced diploma or graduate certificate), the area of study, and the specific campus location where the program is offered. For a Business - Accounting student, this includes progression to programs like Business Administration - Accounting (Advanced Diploma) or a range of specialized post-graduate certificates such as Analytics for Business Decision Making, Business Analysis, or Global Business Management.

This system gives learners an exceptionally clear sense of the upward credentialing opportunities available to them within the institution. By making pathways transparent and specific, Mohawk empowers students to plan ahead, understand where they can go next, and make informed decisions without having to leave the college ecosystem.

Complementing this, Mohawk hosts a dedicated Pathways Fair. The Educational Pathways Fair at Mohawk College is an annual on-campus event designed to help students plan the next step of their educational journey. The fair brings together representatives from over 30 colleges and universities in Ontario, across Canada, and abroad. Students can meet these reps face-to-face to explore further education options

The event is a one-stop forum to get answers to all their questions about admission criteria, prerequisites, application processes and deadlines, or how to transfer credits from their Mohawk program to another credential. In essence, the Pathways Fair lets students "find pathways to [their] next credential, degree completion, or study abroad opportunities," connecting them with the information and contacts needed to pursue additional qualifications. Mohawk also provides a Virtual Pathways Fair website (a "virtual exhibit hall") that showcases all participating institutions and their pathway information for students who cannot attend in person or want to research on their own time ensuring that the fair's benefits are accessible to all students, both on campus and online.

Key Takeaway

Mohawk College has created a highly structured, modular learning ecosystem that supports student mobility through laddered credentials across health, trades, technology, and business. Institutional supports like the Pathways Fair and online pathway maps empower students to plan their academic journeys efficiently.

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[20] Mohawk College. "Pathways Within Mohawk." Available at: https://www.mohawkcollege.ca/pathways/within-mohawk

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWS AND PARTICIPANTS

Interviewee Confidentiality: To support candid input, all interview participants were assured that their contributions would remain anonymous and would not be attributed to individuals or institutions in the body of this report. The following lists are therefore provided for transparency regarding the range of perspectives included, rather than for attribution of specific insights.

Participating Institutions:

- Simon Fraser University
- British Columbia Institute of Technology
- Vancouver Community College
- Thompson Rivers University
- First Nations Education Steering Committee and Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association

Participant Roles:

- Deans and Associate Deans
- Directors of Admissions and Recruitment
- Directors of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and Strategic Partnerships
- Enrollment and Registrar leadership
- Policy advisors
- Representatives from Indigenous education organizations

Interview Approach: Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, with sessions ranging from individual interviews to small group discussions of up to four participants. This approach allowed for both consistency across interviews and flexibility to explore institution-specific contexts in greater depth.

The interview guide focused on several core themes, including:

- How laddering is defined and distinguished from other forms of credit transfer or articulation;
- Institutional drivers and decision-making processes shaping laddered program development;
- Barriers to implementation and areas of persistent challenge;
- Opportunities for expansion within and across institutions;
- Data collection and institutional understanding of student progression through laddered pathways;
- Student experiences, including supports and challenges associated with laddering;
- Examples of effective models and areas requiring further research, policy development, or system-level support.

Participants were also invited to share additional reflections beyond the structured discussion areas.

Semi-Structured Question Guide

1. To start, could you tell us a little about yourself and your role, and how you and your colleagues define or conceptualize laddering (vs other forms of credit transfer or articulation)?

2. Can you describe the laddered credentials currently offered at your institution, and how (if at all) they influence program design, resource allocation, or recruitment?

3. What information does your institution collect on student progression through laddered pathways, and what does it tell you about how many students move into your institution with credits from elsewhere, or continue on from your programs into another institution?

4. What barriers to laddering have you or your colleagues encountered in practice? Which of these barriers have been successfully addressed? Which barriers remain persistent or difficult to resolve?

5. Do you see opportunities to expand laddering within your institution or across BC? What might enable or constrain this expansion?

6. What do you know about the experiences of students who ladder into your programs, or who continue from your programs into others? Are there particular supports or challenges these students face?

7. Are you aware of strong laddering models at other institutions that you believe are worth highlighting? What makes them stand out?

8. Are there areas of laddering practice that you think require more research, policy development, or system-level support?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

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info@bccat.ca

www.bccat.ca
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@bccat_org