

Degree Accreditation in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Until recently, the meaning and origin of the Canadian university degree was well understood by Canadians and around the world. Degrees were only offered by universities and the use of the label university was controlled by legislation in each of the ten provinces and three territories. Institutional membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada signified that an institution was a university-level institution. However, the increased demand in the last two decades of the 20th century for access to university-level degrees has resulted in the provincial-level approval of degrees that are offered in non-university settings. As a result of the increased proliferation of these non-university delivered degrees, the provincial-level degree accreditation processes and the university-level degree granting standards, as represented in the membership criteria for AUCC, are no longer aligned. In this paper, the author traces the changes in degree granting in Canada over the past 15 years or so. Current provincial policies and recent decisions regarding degree granting are outlined.

The author suggests a number of implications of the current degree accreditation process in Canada, including the emergence of a new kind of tiering of Canadian undergraduate degrees where different degree accreditation processes have led to different degrees with different meaning and value to the student.

In order to protect both the student consumer and the currency of the Canadian undergraduate degree, the author recommends the development of national standards to define both a university-level institution and the quality of the degree it delivers.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans un passé récent, tout le monde connaissait la provenance et la valeur des diplômes universitaires canadiens : les universités délivraient ces diplômes, l'utilisation du terme «université» était régie par la législation de chacune des dix provinces et des trois territoires, et c'est en attribuant à un établissement le statut de «Membre institutionnel» que l'Association des universités et collèges du Canada le reconnaissait officiellement en tant qu'institution universitaire. Or, depuis la fin des années 1970 environ, on a assisté à une demande croissante de diplômes universitaires, demande qui a eu pour conséquence la création de diplômes provinciaux à l'extérieur du système traditionnel des universités. La prolifération de ces nouveaux diplômes a progressivement creusé le fossé entre, d'un côté, les processus d'accréditation provinciale et, de l'autre, les exigences universitaires, telles que définies par les critères d'admission à l'AUCC. Cet article passe en revue les changements auxquels le Canada a dû faire face, dans les 15 dernières années environ, dans les domaines de création et d'accréditation de diplômes. Il examine les politiques provinciales actuelles sur l'instauration de nouveaux diplômes, ainsi que les décisions récemment prises à ce sujet.

L'auteur traite ensuite des diverses implications des processus actuels d'accréditation de diplômes au Canada et entre autres de

l'émergence d'une nouvelle série de diplômes de premier cycle – ayant chacun leur propre méthode d'accréditation –, dans laquelle les étudiants ont grand mal à se retrouver car ces diplômes n'ont ni la même signification ni la même valeur.

Afin de poursuivre la mise en place de nouveaux diplômes canadiens de premier cycle et de clarifier la situation pour la clientèle étudiante, l'auteur recommande l'élaboration d'exigences nationales définissant, à la fois, ce qu'est une institution universitaire et la qualité des diplômes qu'elle pourra délivrer.

INTRODUCTION

There was a time, perhaps as recently as a decade ago, when the issue of post-secondary institution or degree accreditation was a non-issue in Canada. All post-secondary institutions were government approved and were part of a relatively homogenous two-sector system: a college (community) system and a university system. While there was certainly wide differentiation within these two sectors, if an institution was provided with a provincial charter or legislation to be one type of institution or the other, then the institution was seen to be an “accredited” Canadian college or university. This issue has been complicated by the fact that there is no federal system of education in Canada, so each of the ten provinces and three territories established their own methods to manage and control the credentials offered by post-secondary institutions. However, the issue has been simplified in Canada by the fact that while many existing universities had private/religious origins, until recently there was virtually no history of private-for-profit universities.

Consequently, it is no surprise that the topic of degree or institutional accreditation is almost totally absent from the Canadian

post-secondary literature. This is not the case in the United States, where the relatively free market, degree granting environment has resulted in various layers of accrediting processes and agencies (Glidden, 1996). Accreditation of degree-granting institutions has a long history in the U.S. (Ewell, 1998) and institutional accreditation in the U.S. can determine the very existence, if not the future, of a degree-granting institution. Many financial factors, from eligibility of students for aid to eligibility of faculty for research support, can depend upon accreditation status. Today, institutional accreditation in the U.S. remains largely voluntary and is represented primarily by six regional accreditation bodies and various national organizations that work to continually refine the existing accreditation processes (CHEA, 2004).

In most other parts of the world, various types of “quality councils” work within the framework of legislatively approved degree-granting institutions to assure that standards of degree granting quality are examined and assessed. (Brabazon, 2002). This is the case in Canada, where history and a constitution has resulted in a system of accreditation by legislation. If an institution was approved by the respective provincial government, it was deemed to be accredited. Since only recognized public universities were traditionally provided the legislation to offer degrees, the quality of the Canadian degree was seen as consistent (and of generally high quality) from coast to coast. Only recently have broader concerns for quality assessment been evident. (Leighton-Brown, 2004).

But as the system of degree accreditation (or non-accreditation) was historically shaped by the unique Canadian context, more recent changes in degree accreditation needs have been affected by changes in this same context. The essential elements of this context as it relates to degree accreditation include: (1) provincial-federal relationships; (2) current degree accreditation processes; (3) some of the forces for degree granting change that have developed over

the past decade; and (4) the evolution of national associations and the development of national standards of practice.

This article examines these four issues and suggests trends and issues in degree accreditation in Canada.

Provincial-Federal Relations

The Canadian Constitution provides the ten provinces and three territories with control over their educational systems, from pre-school through the highest graduate levels.

All provinces and territories have resisted any attempt by the federal government to be more involved in educational decisions, despite the fact that transfer payments to the provinces from federally collected taxes are intended, at least partially, to support post-secondary education. However, over the years, some educational areas that did not exist in times of confederation have crept into federal responsibility. Manpower training, research, some aspects of student aid and innovation strategies are a few of the many ways that the provinces have been willing to let the federal government have some involvement in post-secondary education. But, otherwise, all matters related to the operations of post-secondary institutions in Canada remain the responsibility of the provinces. Consequently, common national elements in post-secondary education would have only derived from accepted or common standards of practice in post-secondary education rather than a conscious intent on the part of the provinces to respond to an issue such as degree accreditation in a homogenous fashion.

But there are differences between the provinces. Over the decade, each province has developed unique procedures with regard to the approval of new institutions and credentials. There are inter-provincial differences regarding the recognition of non-public institutions or credentials, the right of different institutions to grant different credentials, and the relationship between the various types

of post-secondary institutions. Historically, these differences have been mostly on the margin. That is, while there are identifiable provincial differences and approaches to these issues, the differences historically have not been significant enough to disrupt the tacitly accepted framework of Canadian degree-granting post-secondary education.

However, while inter-provincial differences have been evolving over the past thirty or so years, provincial-level changes in response to unprecedented demands for degree-level credentials are now threatening to disrupt the traditional inter-provincial harmony. This, in turn, suggests a need for the first time in Canada of a strong national presence in defining a Canadian “standard of practice” in various areas of post-secondary education. This would include issues such as the accreditation of degree-granting institutions and the accreditation of degrees.

Post-Secondary Accreditation in Canada: Pre 1990

To fully understand the current trends in degree accreditation in Canada, it is important to distinguish between two levels of “markets” in Canadian post-secondary education.

At one level, the diploma or certificate market is relatively uncontrolled. The diploma is the traditional credential of the Canadian college (community), and as such, all public colleges are subject to government approval and accountability processes. But, by-in-large, there is no common national or even provincial standard regarding the substances or outcome of the diploma credential. This is further complicated by the fact that both traditional universities and a myriad of private institutions offer diplomas of various hues. In Ontario alone, for example, there are over 150 private “diploma” granting institutions competing with the 25 public colleges for the diploma-bound student, and there are over 1,000 such private institutions across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003). While these

private, vocational colleges are supposedly ministry approved and inspected, assessing either the institution or the credential has been spotty and problematic. The recent controversy over the now defunct Ottawa Business College (located in Toronto) as a possible partner in immigration scams is witness to challenges faced by the “accreditation” of private colleges (*The Calgary Herald*, 2004). Furthermore, the average default rate for Ontario private colleges of students on their Ontario provincial loans hovers around the 25 percent mark (with some as high as 90 percent in the past) suggesting a serious “caveat emptor” environment (Government of Ontario, 2004). The difficulty that the public Canadian colleges have faced in establishing the uniqueness of their diplomas is an important factor in the current discussion on degree accreditation.

On another level, the difference is striking when the issue is the “degree” market; specifically the undergraduate baccalaureate degree. In this regard, all provinces strictly control the use of both the label “university” and the label “degree.” Until recently the two were synonymous since almost all Canadian degrees came from Canadian universities or university colleges (public). Alberta has recently extended degree-granting privileges to at least one private-for-profit institution, New Brunswick has no regulations regarding private universities, and four provinces have permitted colleges (community) to offer (applied) degrees. But in all of these cases, the degree has been limited to either a bachelor of applied or a bachelor of technology, clearly distinguishing it from the traditional and foundational university-delivered degrees.

The provincial policies related to degree “accreditation” and the result of the approval processes are presented in Table 1 – *Provincial Policies for Degree Granting*.

Table 1
Provincial Policies for Degree Granting

| Province | Approved accreditation process | Approval of degrees for non-AUCC institutions |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Newfoundland | <p><i>Memorial University Act</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes MUN as province’s only university • Term “university” not protected by legislation • Degree-granting institutions designated by the Lieutenant-Governor in Council as a degree-granting institution <p>Quality Assurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal process of self-study and review (program reviews conducted every 7 years) • Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) <p>[1 publicly-funded university]</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No university other than Memorial University operates in Newfoundland |
| Prince Edward Island | <p><i>University Act (2000)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes UPEI as province’s only university • Prohibition on use of name university • Prohibition on granting degrees other than UPEI & Maritime Christian College <p>Quality Assurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs evaluated by internal process of self-study and review • Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) reviews all new program proposals and all significant changes to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UPEI is the only university in PEI |

(con’t)

| Province | Approved accreditation process | Approval of degrees for non-AUCC institutions |
|--|--|--|
| Prince Edward Island <i>(con't)</i> | existing programs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MPHEC's monitoring function of assessment procedures • AUCC [1 publicly-funded university] | |
| Nova Scotia | <i>Degree Granting Act (1989)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established by individual statute • Designated by Governor in Council Quality Assurance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs evaluated by internal process of self-study and review • MPHEC reviews all new program proposals and all significant changes to existing programs • MPHEC's monitoring function of assessment procedures • NS Advisory Board on Colleges & Universities reviews new regional programs (with MPHEC) to recommend approval/disapproval • AUCC [10 publicly-funded degree-granting institutions] | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By legislation, must be a member of AUCC to grant degrees |
| New Brunswick | <i>Degree Granting Act (2000)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree-granting institutions established by individual statute [designated by Lieutenant-Governor in Council] Quality Assurance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs evaluated by internal process of self-study and review • MPHEC reviews all new program proposals and all significant changes to existing programs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 private universities, with religious affiliations, are granted right to grant degrees through acts of the Legislature • Atlantic Baptist University • Saint Stephen University |

(con't)

| Province | Approved accreditation process | Approval of degrees for non-AUCC institutions |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| New Brunswick <i>(con't)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MPHEC's monitoring function of assessment procedures • AUCC <p>[4 publicly-funded universities]</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bethany Bible College |
| Quebec | <p><i>An Act Respecting Educational Institutions at the University Level</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree-granting institutions vested by an Act of Parliament • Prohibition on use of name university <p>Quality Assurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutions set periodic program assessment policy – reviewed by Conférence des recteurs et principaux des universités du Québec (CREPUQ) • AUCC <p>[9 university-level institutions]</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No non-AUCC institutions can offer degrees |
| Ontario | <p>Two legal bases for degrees:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual statute of Ontario legislature • Consent of minister for programs or new universities under the <i>Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act</i> <p>Quality Assurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic peer review used to judge faculty, programs, & research • Undergraduate programs assessed (voluntary) by Undergraduate Program Review Committee • Graduate programs appraised (voluntary) by Ontario Council on Graduate Studies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 small privately-funded, faith-based institutions with restricted degree-granting authority (primarily divinity degrees) • 25 community colleges offer applied degrees <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(con't)</i></p> |

| Province | Approved accreditation process | Approval of degrees for non-AUCC institutions |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Ontario <i>(con't)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal cyclical academic reviews (independent peer review) of departments & programs • AUCC <p>[17 publicly-funded universities]</p> | |
| Manitoba | <p><i>Council on Postsecondary Education Act</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree-granting institutions established by individual statutes • Use of term “university” restricted by legislation <p>Quality Assurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All new program proposals reviewed by another institution offering same program; approved by Council on Postsecondary Education • Quality monitored through graduate satisfaction surveys & student in-class surveys • AUCC <p>[4 publicly-funded universities]</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 privately-funded religious post-secondary institutions grant degrees in theology and/or related fields |
| Saskatchewan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree-granting institutions established by individual statutes • Use of term “university” restricted by legislation <p>Quality Assurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No external processes for reviewing university programs apart from professional accreditation • AUCC <p>[2 publicly-funded universities]</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No non-AUCC degree-granting institutions |

| Province | Approved accreditation process | Approval of degrees for non-AUCC institutions |
|------------------|---|---|
| Alberta | <p><i>Post-Secondary Learning Act</i> (2004)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows degree granting to any approved post-secondary institution after assessment of the degree by a Quality Assessment Council • Use of term “university” restricted by legislation <p>Quality Assurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universities have internal program review procedures based on institutional policies & procedures • New degree programs assessed by Quality Assessment Council • AUCC <p>[4 publicly-funded universities; 3 privately funded university colleges with degree programs]</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 additional private, not-for-profit colleges with accredited degree programs • Potentially, 17 colleges (community) could offer any undergraduate degree [many now offer applied degrees] • One private-for-profit degree granting institute |
| British Columbia | <p>A <i>University Act</i> and a <i>Colleges Act</i> define the degree-granting authority</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>University Act</i> establishes 3 of the traditional universities; <i>University of Northern BC Act</i> establishes 4th traditional university • Individual Acts define special purpose institutions • Private degree-granting permitted <p>Quality Assurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal program review procedures • New program proposals (incl. substantively-revised programs) submitted to Ministry for approval <p>[4 traditional universities; 3 specialized degree-granting institutions; 4 university colleges, 1 private religious-based university]</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kwantlen University College • BC Institute of Technology • A few private postsecondary institutions that offer programs leading to degree in theology |

That there are even these differences between provincial approaches to degree granting is more a response to the surge in demand for the degree credential than a conscious effort at provincial differentiation. At the current time, each province has a different legislative process to establish new degree-granting institutions and approve new degrees. In Alberta, for instance, all institutions (universities and colleges) are under one post-secondary learning act. New institutions are established by Order in Council or specific institutional legislation. In Ontario, each university has its own act while the (community) colleges are individually mandated under a College Act. A Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board reviews requests from private and “out-of-province” institutions to offer degrees in Ontario. The Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act (2000) allows colleges of applied arts and technology to apply for ministerial consent to grant applied degrees. In British Columbia, there are two separate acts, one for universities and one for colleges, and this has fostered a mix of different types of degree-granting institutions. Under the College and Institute Act, the government may authorize university colleges and institutes to grant baccalaureate degrees in designated programs. The Private Postsecondary Education Act governs British Columbia’s private post-secondary education system and stipulates that private institutions must register with the Private Postsecondary Education Commission (PPSEC). PPSEC offers registered private post-secondary institutions a voluntary accreditation process designed to ensure standards of integrity and educational competence.

But, regardless of the variations in process, each province has the complete authority to establish new degree-granting institutions and approve new degrees. Until the early 90s, the process was clear: only universities offered degrees and colleges offered diplomas or certificates. By 1990, no province had created a new university in twenty or so years. New degree programs were reviewed by various

provincial “quality assessment” processes (e.g., the Ontario Council of University Affairs in Ontario, Maritime Higher Education Commission in the eastern provinces), but there was at least a tacit understanding that getting a Canadian degree was attaining a degree that was guaranteed to be understood and accepted worldwide.

A Changing Degree-Granting Environment: The Forces for Change

Since the early 90s, all provinces have had to respond to the dramatic increase in demand for undergraduate degrees. This is the largest increase in demand for university places since the post-war baby boom demands in the late 60s when many of the Canadian universities today and almost all of its community colleges were established. While not quite of the same magnitude, over the past decade the combined pressures of demography and participation rate have caused the demand for undergraduate degrees to increase significantly. Current estimates are that Canada will need another 100,000 or so places in degree programs in order to meet the demand of the coming decade (AUCC, 2002). Different provinces have responded to the demand for access to university degrees from public institutions over the past decade or so in various ways:

- Give existing university funds to expand undergraduate capacity (e.g., Ontario);
- Start new universities from scratch (e.g., University of Northern British Columbia, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Royal Roads);
- Offer and expand university transfer (the offering of the first two years of university at a community college) at colleges (e.g., British Columbia, Alberta);
- Establish post-secondary hybrids (e.g., university colleges in British Columbia);
- University degrees off campus;
- Various college-to-university articulations/joint programs leading to university degrees; and

- Establish degree-granting institutions to provide “distance degrees” (Athabasca in Alberta, British Columbia’s Open Learning University, Télé-Université (Université du Québec).

But as it can be seen from the above list, to date, the common element in all of these responses has been the intention that all new degree experiences will ultimately lead to a provincially approved university credential. Consequently, while there is some fraying at the edges, the informal national compact that the Canadian degree has a value and reputation to be protected has endured. However, some cracks in this compact have been developing (Marshall (a), 2003).

Perhaps the first crack was the granting of a university charter to a number of unique institutions such as Nipissing University in North Bay (1992), Royal Roads University in British Columbia (1995), and Ryerson University in Toronto (1993). All have histories of high-quality programming, but were also chartered as very different and distinct degree-granting institutions. Nipissing was Canada’s first (subsequently revised) undergraduate only university; Ryerson was Canada’s first career or vocationally-focused university; and Royal Roads was the first publicly chartered university with a mandate to be self-funded. Since receiving their “charters,” all have established good reputations as degree-granting universities and have been accepted into the university fold. While they certainly represent differentiated missions, they function within the framework of the traditional university environment. However, their establishment did suggest a first sign of change in the degree-granting business in Canada. Ontario’s newest university, the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (2003), continues the tradition of developing new and unique degree-granting possibilities by establishing a new “university.” In 2005, the B.C. Open University and The University College of the Cariboo will join together to become the new Thompson Rivers University (UCC, 2004).

The second crack in the degree-granting compact occurred in the province of British Columbia as the government responded to both the shortage of universities, in general, and the shortage of degree places by establishing a collection of five degree-granting–diploma granting hybrids that they called “university colleges.” Every attempt was (and is still being) made to ensure that the student environment and the degrees offered are as “university like” as possible. For example, the degrees were initially offered by an established university in British Columbia, although the complete degree was delivered on the college campus. Nonetheless, the existence of degree-granting institutions that were not in the traditional university model (they are government funded and legislated under the Colleges Act), caused some discomfort in the area of degree recognition. This discomfort surfaced as these University Colleges attempted to gain membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). British Columbia is currently in the process of dismantling some aspects of the university college model. The University component of the Okanagan University College has now become an Okanagan campus of the University of British Columbia. The University College of the Cariboo has joined with the B.C. Open University to become Thompson Rivers University (UCC, 2004). Malaspina University College continues to press for full university status (MUC, 2004).

The third crack relates to private degree-granting institutions. Canada has accepted for some time the validity of the private, not-for-profit, (primarily faith-based) degree-granting institutions. Most provinces have at least one such institution chartered to offer a limited range of undergraduate degrees. However, with the exception of the AUCC membered private, not-for-profit university colleges, the credibility of the faith-based baccalaureates has always been questioned, and even more so over the past decade as more and more such institutions have been established and have received permission from the provincial government to operate as

a “university” or “university college.” Alberta has been the national leader in approving faith-based institutions and degrees, and as such, has recently attracted institutions that cannot get approval to operate a degree-granting institution in one of the other provinces (Government of Alberta, 2004). Accreditation is certainly an issue for such institutions (some are currently members of AUCC), but the relatively small impact on the Canadian degree-granting scene and their ability to articulate one-to-one transfer relationships with established public universities has resulted in a certain level of acceptance by the national post-secondary education system.

However, private-for-profit degree-granting institutions are another matter. Canada has literally no history of private-for-profit universities in general, much less private-for-profit degree granting. To date, such institutions have been very tightly controlled in Canada. For example, Alberta has given DeVry the right to grant technology degrees, and at the current time, DeVry is actively operating in Calgary as a “for profit” degree-granting institute. Two new private universities are in various stages of implementation in British Columbia. In addition, the University of Phoenix has had some success in operating in British Columbia. So while it would appear that the per student or competitive impact is relatively small, the existence of these degrees in Canada has put a large crack in the compact of the Canadian degree credibility and called into question the default system of “accreditation” at the provincial level.

The fourth crack occurred in 1995 when Mount Royal College in Alberta became the first “college” in Canada to offer applied baccalaureate degrees. Other Alberta colleges, and colleges in Ontario and British Columbia have followed suit. Colleges in British Columbia and Alberta had been offering university transfer for many years (Mount Royal was the first to offer university courses in Calgary in 1931), but it was with the introduction of the “applied degree” credential that the “university monopoly” on

the baccalaureate credential in Canada was broken. Still, these credentials have not caused a significant challenge to the traditional degree-granting environment, since they were approved and continue to be recognized as unique applied workplace credentials and not intended to be in competition or a substitute for a traditional baccalaureate degree. However, there is no common understanding across the country of the program for these degrees. Alberta applied degrees and Ontario applied degrees are quite different in both program content and length of study. Nonetheless, the graduates of at least some of these degree programs are gaining increased respect in both the workplace and the professions and finding a credible and recognized place in the post-secondary spectrum.

In essence, by 2000 the degree-granting scene in Canada was starting to show the signs of differentiation usually associated with the post-secondary system in the United States. Consumers, the workplace, and graduate schools now had to distinguish between private degrees, distance degrees, faith-based degrees, applied degrees, and the more traditional, public university undergraduate degrees. By this time, all of these groups, in addition to being confused, were questioning the long accepted notion of the efficacy of provincial-level processes to approve “accredited” institutions or degrees.

It now appears that the next (and perhaps final?) crack in the degree-granting compact is in progress in at least one province in Canada (and certainly being watched by others). With an escalating demand for university-level degrees and continuing concerns for the funding of post-secondary education, provinces are now considering the “college” (traditional community colleges in Canada) as an agent to deliver the complete foundational baccalaureate degree; the BA and the BSc that represent most of the demand and most of the enrollment in existing universities (Government of Alberta, 2003). College-level degrees would solve several of the following degree-

access problems from a government's perspective.

- Governments traditionally have far more control over colleges than with universities.
- Governments can avoid “bicameral” governance and the perceived problems of faculty control over academic decisions.
- Governments can ensure faculty teaching loads that are, in some instances, twice the university setting.
- Governments can separate research from teaching and have degree-granting institutions where the faculty role does not include research.
- And most importantly, because of all of the above, an undergraduate degree (in a college) can be delivered for less cost to both the taxpayer and the student of the “same” degree in a university.

Alberta has recently passed the Post-Secondary Learning Act 2003 (Bill 43) as the first provincial legislation that allows public colleges the opportunity to extend their current ability to offer the first two years of university transfer, to offering the complete foundational degrees which, to this point, have traditionally been the domain of the provincially-chartered universities.

The bill also provided for the Campus Alberta Quality Council. The government believes that this quality assessment process can suffice as the “accrediting” agency and the quality control on degree granting in Alberta. Consequently, all degrees approved (even college-delivered degrees) will be “accredited” at the same level of acceptability as all degrees offered by any university in Canada (Government of Alberta, 2003).

It is possible that this step by the Alberta Government to allow traditional (community) colleges to offer formerly university-level foundational Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees may be the final crack in the tacit international acceptance of a Canadian degree. Despite the fiddling with degree granting at the margin (e.g., private, virtual, applied, and so on), degree granting has

remained largely the domain of the licensed or chartered university in Canada. But now, the implicit acceptance that provincial government control over the degree-granting environment has been a sufficient “accreditation” process will be under question. In essence, as long as individual provincial governments stayed mostly on the same page regarding degree granting (as they do with many other standards of practice in many professional areas), Canada has never felt the need to establish a national degree or institutional accreditation process. Consumers (parents, students, employers, graduate schools, professional schools) both here in Canada and elsewhere are now suggesting otherwise.

Professional Associations as Accrediting Agencies

While both the university sector and the college sector in Canada have national associations, each has evolved over the years in a different manner. The Association of Community Colleges of Canada (ACCC) has recognized the extensive diversity of types of colleges in Canada and, consequently, has always had a relatively open membership policy. Today, over 150 public institutions belong to ACCC (ACCC, 2004). The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), on the other hand, has consistently maintained (and strengthened) its membership rules to ensure that each member (93 institutions) is at least a “university-like” institution (some are affiliated colleges of larger institutions). Membership is tightly controlled by by-laws that, in essence, use criteria representative of the defining characteristics of a university (AUCC, 2004). AUCC is not legislated to be an accrediting agency nor do they espouse to be. The rationale for quite tight and exclusive membership criteria, for example, is to be able to service its members, and more efficiently, lobby as a group with a more narrow community of interest.

While membership in AUCC has always been a condition for many university-level privileges (federal research grants, student

aid), and since all of those holding or seeking membership were clearly universities, this was not much of an issue. However, as more and more differentiated “degree-granting” institutions were established and as more and more of these sought the “privileges” of AUCC membership, membership in AUCC became the *de facto* accreditation process for new universities or degree-granting institutions in Canada. That is, in the absence of any other explicit national standard for degree granting, and given the proliferation of new types of degree access across the country, membership in AUCC became the dividing line between accredited degrees and non-accredited degrees and institutions.

Today, despite advances by colleges in gaining access to some federal research funds, membership in AUCC still remains the only national “accreditation” process for degree-granting institutions and is the benchmark for acceptability of Canadian degree credentials domestically and internationally. For example, graduates must hold professional degrees from AUCC institutions in order to be certified as teachers and nurses in most provinces (Alberta Teacher’s Association, 2004; Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing, 2004). A recent study of the admission policies of Canadian university graduate schools showed that almost all of the Canadian universities with a significant proportion of their enrolments in graduate or professional schools give admission preference to AUCC-member institution graduates. In addition, there are some universities that will only accept AUCC institution graduates into their graduate or professional schools (Marshall (b), 2004). Furthermore, some federal granting councils and agencies still require AUCC membership for institutional eligibility (Canada Research Chairs, 2004).

In summary, the following observations can be made about degree “accreditation” in Canada.

1. Tight government control on university status or degree-granting privileges has historically served as a *de facto* accreditation process in Canada.

2. The historical consistency between nationally accepted standards of practice related to degree-granting institutions and provincial approval of universities and degree-granting privileges has resulted in a strong reputation internationally for the Canadian delivered degree.
3. Over the past decade or so, various provincial governments have approved a range of new types of degrees and degree-granting institutions.
4. There is now a considerable range of different types of degrees from different types of institutions that have been “accredited” at the provincial level, but are not consistent with previously accepted national standards of practice for degree granting institutions (Table 1).
5. While it may only be acting “*in de facto*,” the only remaining national standard of practice for degree granting is provided by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada which defines the degree of university-like criteria in the degree-granting institution (AUCC, 2004).
6. Individuals, employers, graduate and professional schools can no longer rely solely on provincial “accreditation” to determine the status of a particular Canadian institution or degree.
7. There are now at least three steps and proxies that must be used both domestically and internationally in determining the acceptability of a Canadian degree: (1) provincial approval; (2) local “accredited” (AUCC) university approval of a degree for admission purposes; and (3) membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (Marshall (b), 2004).

Trends and Issues in Degree Accreditation in Canada

Two things are now clear regarding the degree business in Canada over the next decade. First, there will be an increased demand for undergraduate degrees, and secondly, different provinces will

continue to approve an array of new degrees and degree-granting institutions to respond to this demand. For example, it is almost assured that some Alberta colleges (community) will soon offer traditional foundational-type baccalaureate degrees. From these two observations, the following trends can be speculated.

1. Consumers, parents, students, employers, and graduate and professional schools throughout the country will have to start looking beyond the “degree” to the institution delivering the degree to determine the relative value of the credential.
2. While there may be some implicit tiering with university credentials at the current time, this tiering will be increasingly explicit as different types of institutions enter the degree business (Marshall (b), 2004).
3. Professional associations such as AUCC will become much less cavalier about the importance of the standard of practice that they establish and the implications of membership in their association. This will include increased efforts to deliver the measures of “quality” in a degree experience. There are even accrediting agency associations being established to further the use of “national standards of practice” in a wide range of professional areas (Association of Accrediting Agencies of Canada, 2004).
4. While increased differentiation of institutions within the degree-granting professional association would be both tolerated and encouraged, the boundaries of what defines an appropriate degree-granting institution will be clearly established and enforced for purposes of membership.
5. Degree-granting institutions that fall outside the “standards of practice” established by university professional associations are liable to establish their own professional group and their own standards of practice. For example, as more and more non-AUCC degree-granting institutions develop, the possibility increases for the development of an association

of degree-granting institutions of Canada or of Canadian technical institutes.

6. There will be political and national pressures to establish a national degree-granting accreditation body that is arms length from both professional associations and provincial politics.
7. The current shortcomings of relying on professional association standards such as AUCC should be remedied. For example, at the current time, there is no “re-accreditation” process. That is, once you are a member, you are always a member with no further assessment of degree-granting ability. In addition, national accreditation processes are, at some point, going to have to recognize the role of private university degree-granting institutions in Canada. Private-for-profit institutions are currently excluded from AUCC membership; consequently, the establishment of standards of practice regarding private institutions is left to politics at the provincial level and, consequently, is open to the kind of abuse apparent in the “Ottawa Business College” case.
8. The issue of degree accreditation and degree credibility will heat up considerably in Canada over the next decade as competition for spaces in graduate schools and professional schools increases. These schools will begin to use the institutional source of the degree as an initial triage for admittance. There are Canadian universities at the current time that will only admit students who are graduates of AUCC-membered institutions, and this is likely to increase as the degree market becomes increasingly confusing (Marshall (b), 2004).
9. The challenge to bridge provincial autonomy and education with national interest and the professional “standard of practice” will remain a serious issue. Without an attempt to reconcile provincial versus national interest, there is a real danger that in less than two decades Canada will have

gone from an internationally recognized national standard of practice in degree granting to ten (or more) different degree meanings and standards. The implications for international educational trade are significant.

10. There will likely be increased meaning attached to different accreditation processes. Accreditation serves no value for any institution or student if there are no implications of accreditation. At the current time, the only implications of adhering to a standard of practice in degree granting such as that established by AUCC are the access of the graduates to higher levels of education and, in some cases, employment. Trends in post-secondary education in Canada point to the dramatically increased demand for a limited number of post-graduate professional places suggesting that increased importance would be placed on the origin of the undergraduate degree and method of degree-granting accreditation.
11. The proliferation of different types of degrees will continue to fuel credential (degree) inflation (Marshall (c), 2004).
12. Finally, and perhaps most importantly from the consumers' and society's perspective will be the development of what might be referred to as a "degree divide." That is, with the continual development of different types of degrees with different delivery structures from different institutions and without the clear consumer data provided by recognized "standards of practice," there will be degrees that will be chosen by those who are less informed about the meaning of a particular degree credential and degrees chosen by those with access to the knowledge that will allow them to recognize the implication of a degree from a particular tier of institution. Given the strong correlation between socioeconomic levels and levels of education, this could, in some ways, represent the circumstances where there would be degrees for "the uninformed and the poor" and those for "the informed and the rich."

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It is apparent that describing degree-granting accreditation in Canada is not a simple task. Canada has historically had no national system of accreditation for degree-granting institutions or individual degrees. Those wishing to assess the credibility of a Canadian degree would have to check first the level of provincial approval to grant degrees; then the legislation and attitude in the particular province towards degree granting; and then check for membership in the professional organization that establishes the standard of practice for degree granting in Canada (AUCC). Historically, we have not needed much else in the way of accreditation in Canada. Policies and practices of Canadian provinces in approving new degree-granting institutions (new universities) and controlling the offering of degrees has been in alignment with the standard of practice accepted for university-level degree granting throughout the world. However, starting in the late sixties and continuing through the nineties, there has been a gradual erosion of the university degree granting monopoly, and consequently, a separation of the practice and policies of several provinces and nationally and internationally accepted standards of practice. The result is, in some instances, a schism between these standards of practice and provincial policies that bring into question the usefulness of the default accreditation processes that have existed in Canada for many years. As a result of this circumstance, it is likely that attempts will be made to define some Canadian standard of practice for degree granting accreditation. But in the meantime, consumers, employers, and foreign institutions seeking some measure of accreditation of a Canadian credential will have to consider both the provincial-level of approval and the national status (AUCC membership) of an institution. 🍁

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