



## College Quarterly

Fall 2006 - Volume 9 Number 4

---

▲ Home

◀ Contents

### Some Thoughts on the Meaning of and Values that Influence Degree Recognition in Canada

by *Michael L. Skolnik*

What has been called “degree recognition” has become the subject of considerable attention in Canadian higher education within the past decade. While concerns similar to those that are being voiced today have arisen occasionally in the past, the scale of this phenomenon today is unprecedented historically. In response to the increased demand for degrees that began in the late twentieth century, a great number of diverse types of institutions and organizations have sought the authority to award degrees; and governments in four provinces have decided that it is in the public interest to allow some of these new providers to offer degree programs in Canada, thus ending the monopoly on degree granting formerly held by the publicly funded universities. These new providers include: public colleges and institutes; private postsecondary institutions; corporate universities in both the private and public sector; virtual universities; transnational degree programs; and special mission institutions such as aboriginal colleges.

It is possible that the alleged problem of degree recognition is simply a consequence of having so many new entrants into the realm of degree-granting all at once, and that with sufficient time for adjustment the problem will sort itself out without special intervention. On the other hand, some observers of this situation have concluded that the present disarray in degree granting in Canada can be rectified only by the establishment of a national system of degree accreditation. Another consideration is that ideally the decision about what, if anything, to do about a problem should depend at least in part on knowledge of the nature and severity of the problem, and we do not, so far as I am aware, have much data at present on the seriousness of the problem of degree recognition.

Given this context of the problem of degree recognition, it was a challenge for me to decide just what would be most useful to do in this keynote address. I believe that when dealing with a problem that is not well defined, the most useful thing that a keynote speaker can do is to attempt to bring some clarity to the meaning of relevant terms; suggest some concepts or frameworks that may prove helpful in subsequent sessions, and identify some key issues and possible strategies for dealing with them. Accordingly, I will start by attempting to clarify the term degree recognition. To that end I will identify and contrast four possible meanings or uses of the term, as I believe that different contributors to the discourse on degree recognition often are using the term in different ways. Then I want to discuss two values that I think underlie major differences of opinion regarding the recognition of many degrees. I do not believe that much progress can

be made in dealing with the problem of degree recognition without dialogue about these values. Moreover, without such dialogue, the imposition of a national accreditation system is likely to exacerbate rather than solve the problem, and may do more harm than good.

I wish to thank the organizers of this symposium for inviting me to speak here. For almost the whole time that I have been a professor of Higher Education, I have puzzled over the question of why some types of learning are rewarded with a degree and others of comparable effort and complexity are not. In preparing these remarks, I have benefited enormously from the writings of two individuals in particular. One is Dave Marshall – a one person industry on the subject of today’s symposium - who has done so much to draw attention to, and provide insights regarding, the problem of degree recognition. The other is Gilles Paquet, whose occasional forays into the subject of higher education demonstrate the power and creativity of thinking outside the box. I will draw particularly upon the awesome think-piece that Gilles did for the British Columbia Campus 2020 Project. In my remarks, I will concentrate mostly but not exclusively on the problem of degree recognition for baccalaureate programs of colleges and institutes, because this constitutes the largest category of programs for which degree recognition is presently a problem.

#### **Four Meanings of Degree Recognition**

In the discourse about degree recognition, I have identified four different ways that the term has been used. To refer to:

1. Legal authority to award degrees
2. Quality and reputation of degrees
3. Accreditation of degrees
4. Acceptance of degrees as meeting requirements related to employment and/or admission to educational programs

I want to say something about each of these aspects of degree recognition and then comment briefly on their relationships to one another.

##### **1) Legal authority to award degrees**

From what we know of the origin of degrees, it would seem that the early centres of learning awarded degrees on their own responsibility to indicate that a novice had attained a level of learning sufficient to become a peer in a community of scholars and was thus allowed to instruct new learners, or depending upon the precise degree, that the individual had reached a certain step along that path. It was only later that external authorities got into the business first of recognizing degrees, then of regulating them. Historian, Nathan Schachner notes that the early centres of learning like Paris, Bologna, Salerno, and Oxford “sprang spontaneously into being without adventitious aid from Pope or Emperor”, but that later, “Pope,

Emperor, and King viewed these astonishing growths with interest, each pondering how best to turn these phenomena to his own advantage.” In referring to this shift in the source of the authority to grant degrees from inside the academy to outside, Paul Goodman remarked that “apparently the university was born free and everywhere it is in chains.”

In order to award a degree today in Canada, a postsecondary institution must have explicit authorization that derives from a statute of a provincial legislature, although the relevant statute might give discretionary power to grant such authorization to a member or official of the government. The legal authorization to award degrees is a form of degree recognition, in this case by the state, and is the most important form of degree recognition, since other forms are irrelevant without it. If some of you in this audience are from organizations that are seeking but have not yet obtained the legal authority to award degrees, this may be the only meaning of degree recognition that matters to you right now.

The legislation under which postsecondary institutions award degrees varies somewhat among provinces. In general – but with some exceptions - the provincially funded universities award degrees under fairly broad statutory authority; while colleges and institutes depend upon the discretionary authority that is granted to a Minister by some statute. Statutory authority is more secure – as intellectual fashion, and governments, change - and for that reason degrees that are awarded under statutory authority may be viewed by some as carrying a higher status than those awarded under Ministerial approval.

## **2) Quality and reputation of degrees**

Quality and reputation are two related but distinct attributes of degrees. Reputation is a general term that refers to the way that degrees are perceived by the public or particular segments of the public. Degrees may be perceived by the public as prestigious, credible, dubious, or meaningless. Quality, which has often been described as an elusive concept in higher education, refers to an essential characteristic of degree programs that may be approximated by measures of various observable properties and/or through subjective evaluation processes. The reputation of a degree program may or may not be consistent with judgments of its quality arrived at through such measures and processes. The public reputation of a degree program and the public perception of its quality both are forms of degree recognition that may have a lot to do with how well it can attract students and external support.

The reputation of the degrees awarded by colleges and institutes relative to that of university degrees is likely affected adversely by the newness of college and institute degrees and the association of these institutions in the public mind with other types of educational programs. Similarly, the tendency to associate quality with

institutional selectivity would adversely affect the perception of the quality of college and institute degree programs. However, since there are no quality ranking schemes that compare the degree programs of the two sectors, there is no formal representation of the relative quality of these two sets of degree programs.

### **3) Accreditation of degrees**

Accreditation is a formal statement by an external body that a program meets certain standards. Accreditation may involve other considerations besides quality, such as accessibility and efficiency, and normally it does not provide quality ratings or rankings. Accreditation is a very explicit form of degree recognition in which the name of the body giving the recognition, the period of the recognition, and conditions of recognition are formally stated.

All baccalaureate programs of colleges and institutes are required to go through an accreditation process at a provincial level. This is generally not the case for the programs of publicly funded universities, though in some provinces, some but not necessarily all, new baccalaureate programs are required to undergo an external review. However, once these programs get initial approval, they do not require renewals of their approval periodically like the college and institute baccalaureates do.

### **4) Acceptance of degrees as meeting requirements related to employment and/or admission to educational programs**

There are many situations in which a degree is required for employment, or for a license to practice in particular occupations. In some employment settings a degree is necessary to qualify for a higher salary or for promotion. In these cases, a question arises as to whether a degree obtained from one of the newer providers of degree programs will be recognized for the purpose of meeting the relevant requirements. For example, until recently a bachelor's degree from a university was required to be licensed as a teacher in Ontario. This requirement was changed recently so that a baccalaureate from a college may also meet the requirement. Many occupations for which colleges and institutes provide programs have implemented, or are considering implementing, degree requirements. The extent to which employment-related degree recognition barriers may exist for baccalaureate graduates of colleges and institutes is not known, but it may be quite significant.

Nowhere is the requirement for a degree more widespread than within educational institutions. Normally, a baccalaureate is required for admission to a Master's program. A baccalaureate does not of course guarantee acceptance into a Master's program, but it may enable an applicant at least to be given consideration. A major concern for many college and institute educators is whether graduates of their baccalaureate programs will be deemed eligible by university graduate schools for admission to Master's programs. The only data

on this issue that I have seen are anecdotal and show that one university has stated explicitly that it will not consider baccalaureates from colleges and institutes for admission to Master's programs, while there are reports that a few universities have admitted such graduates to Master's programs, mainly to MBAs.

### **Some Comments on the Relationships Among the Different Meanings of Degree Recognition**

What I have called the acceptance of degrees for meeting employment and/or educational requirements is seen by many people as either the heart of the problem of degree recognition, or the entire problem. I lean toward that point of view myself, and for that reason that is the meaning on which I will concentrate in the remainder of my talk. Still, I must repeat that for institutions that have been working hard but thus far unsuccessfully to obtain the authority to grant degrees, the first meaning of degree recognition is the most relevant and urgent. In other cases, the major concern may be with enhancing the reputation of the degree, or with gaining a particular form of accreditation. Because it is helpful to see the connections among these four meanings, I will give a brief example of such connections.

When we look at the first and fourth meanings of degree recognition together, we must confront the fact that while all degree granting authority comes from provincial governments, these governments cannot ensure – or, more accurately, have chosen not to ensure – that all of the institutions to which they have given degree granting authority will recognize the degree granting authority of the other institutions to which they have also given that authority. The implicit message that a postsecondary institution gives the government when it refuses to recognize the legal degree granting authority of other institutions is, “We applaud your wisdom in giving us the authority to grant degrees, but we think that some of your other decisions about whom to give this authority stink.” The explicit policy decision that some provincial governments have made, to expand educational opportunity by authorizing new providers of degree programs, is effectively nullified if the older providers of degree programs refuse to recognize the degree granting authority of the new providers. Another interesting wrinkle in this situation is that it is the institutions whose baccalaureates generally do not undergo accreditation that have tended to challenge the legitimacy of the degrees of the institutions whose programs are all accredited. And consider one other element of this bizarre situation. Usually, the accreditation teams that assess the baccalaureate programs of colleges and institutes consist mainly or wholly of expert faculty from the institutions whose leaders have publicly challenged the legitimacy or quality of the college and institute degree programs.

### **The Roots of the Problem of Degree Recognition**

Some people, particularly those in institutions that are having difficulty getting their degrees recognized, attribute the problem of

degree recognition to self-interest on the part of the existing degree providers, that is, the publicly funded universities. Self-interest likely plays a role in the maintenance of any monopoly, but in this case it is strongly reinforced by, indeed anchored in, ideas about the conditions that a degree program should meet. Without the support of these ideas, it is unlikely that self-interest by itself could forestall the extension of degree recognition in an era when the demand for degrees is so strong. Those who aspire toward degree recognition thus need to confront – or adapt to – today’s dominant ideas about the necessary conditions for awarding degrees. For those who believe that new providers of degree programs may bring something that is both different and socially valuable to the baccalaureate realm, confronting is preferable to adapting. Moreover, if the principal obstacle to recognition of new degrees is in the realm of ideas about degrees, then process solutions, like a new accreditation system, will not get to the root of the problem. A new accreditation process will be just be a vehicle through which presently dominant ideas about degrees will be imposed, leaving new providers of degree programs no choice but to adapt to those ideas.

What are these ideas about degrees that exert such a powerful influence on degree recognition? Two are especially important. One pertains to the value placed upon different types of knowledge; the other to the characteristics that an institution that awards degrees should display.

### **The Value Placed upon Different Types of Knowledge**

Judging from the frequency with which one encounters observations that reflect this distinction, there would appear to be widespread acceptance of the notion that some knowledge is more theoretical, and other knowledge more practical or applied. Yet it has proven difficult to describe the difference between theoretical and applied knowledge with precision, and for that reason, some have despaired of defining different types of education along this dimension. For example, the former Ontario Council on University Affairs said in a 1991 report that: “There is no more ambiguous term in the lexicon of higher education than polytechnic. Its meaning has remained clouded despite repeated attempts at precise definition.” Of course this report continued on as if one could make a valid distinction between a polytechnic education and academic education, somewhat belying the suggestion that such a distinction is not meaningful.

In a paper prepared for the Campus 2020 review of postsecondary education in British Columbia, Gilles Paquet, of the University of Ottawa, distinguishes among three types of knowledge which he calls *savoirs*, *savoir-faire*, and *savoir-être*. These distinctions might, in English, be termed: knowing things or about things – theoretical knowledge; knowing how to do things – practical or applied knowledge; and knowing how to be – personal development Professor Paquet also draws a parallel with the Aristotelian distinction among: “knowledge that is universal, general, and non-contextual; knowledge

that is practical, instrumental, product-oriented know-how; and knowledge that is experience-based, prudence, practical wisdom concerning how to exercise ethical and moral judgment in particular and concrete situations." Paquet argues that the best education is one that integrates these three types of knowledge, but that in Canada we have tended to separate them into different institutions and different programs. To say that different institutions concentrate on one or another type of knowledge is to refer to a heavily predominant, not necessarily, exclusive orientation. Universities concentrate largely on the first type of knowledge, except in some professional schools where there is an uneasy coexistence with the second and third types of knowledge having a clearly subordinate role. Colleges and institutes have tended to concentrate on the second type of knowledge, except in their traditional university-transfer courses in arts and science which constitute a university colony in a college. The typical curriculum of an applied baccalaureate program has much more balance between theoretical and applied knowledge, but this does not seem to be appreciated by many universities which have a stereotypical view of colleges and institutes as specialists in applied knowledge.

Paquet argues that one of the factors that has prevented the integration of the three types of knowledge is that the first is valued so much more highly than the other two. He identifies many implications of the relative valuation of different types of knowledge, such as the ineffectiveness of much professional education. He does not comment on the implications for degree recognition, but it is easy to see what they are. Most of the new baccalaureates in Canada are applied degrees and thus represent what the universities regard as a different and inferior type of knowledge. Even though three provinces have decided that it is appropriate to recognize the attainment of a suitably high level of applied knowledge by the award of a degree, the universities do not subscribe to the idea that different types of knowledge can be of the same status. It is not that the applied degrees constitute a different type of knowledge that prevents their recognition by universities; it is that they are perceived to constitute an inferior type of knowledge.

Requirements for admission to master's programs are rarely if ever based upon empirical evidence regarding the ability of entrants to succeed in the master's program. Rather, admission requirements are purely statements of institutional values. It is most unlikely that the universities that have stated that they will not recognize college and institute baccalaureates for admission to master's programs have collected any data that would shed light on the likely performance of these bachelor's graduates in master's programs. What these institutions are saying is not that the graduates of college and institute baccalaureate programs cannot handle master's level studies; but that it is not appropriate to give them a chance.

Besides applied knowledge, another type of knowledge that doesn't fit within the dominant knowledge paradigm of the

contemporary university is indigenous knowledge. It is hard to locate indigenous knowledge precisely within Paquet's framework. It has in common with applied knowledge that it is strongly embedded in practice and much of it is tacit rather than explicit. But indigenous knowledge depends more on tradition and oral transmission than occupation related applied knowledge. Also, indigenous knowledge is associated far more with Paquet's third category of knowledge, knowledge of the self, than are the other two types of knowledge. I suspect that graduates of baccalaureate programs of postsecondary institutions that emphasize indigenous knowledge will encounter similar problems of degree recognition as will graduates of applied baccalaureate programs. It is possibly in recognition of this situation that some aboriginal postsecondary institutions have concentrated more on developing an international system for accreditation of aboriginal institutions than on seeking accreditation from conventional accreditation bodies within their own jurisdictions.

### **The Role of Institutional Characteristics in Degree Recognition**

If difference in type of knowledge is the most important idea that influences the recognition of degrees of the new providers of degree programs, the second most important idea is that of difference in institutional characteristics. Even if courses in the institutions that are new providers of degrees were exactly the same and taught by faculty with exactly the same academic qualifications as in the existing universities, degree recognition would be a problem because of differences in institutional characteristics. Several institutional characteristics are relevant here, including differences in the campus environment that are difficult to define precisely. One characteristic that I will not take the time to address today is that of arrangements for governance. Probably the most important characteristic is the extent and nature of faculty research. It is a core value of Canadian universities that those who teach should also be actively involved in the conduct of research, normally dividing their time roughly equally between these two functions. Although the universities maintain that intensive participation of faculty in research produces superior education for the undergraduate students of these faculty, the evidence for this assertion is weak to non-existent to contradictory. Attachment to this institutional characteristic thus has the status of a value in and of itself, like the idea that theoretical knowledge is superior to applied knowledge. But it is such a strongly held value that institutions that hold the value are disinclined to recognize degrees awarded by institutions that don't hold the value.

### **Some Possible Approaches to the Problem of Degree Recognition**

Based upon this very brief survey of the meaning of degree recognition and some of the underlying causes of the problem, I can suggest four possible strategies to address the problem.

First, recognizing that we do not have a good understating of the



magnitude and severity of the problem, we need research on this subject. The research should include comparison of the curriculum and learning outcomes of baccalaureate programs of colleges and institutes and other new providers of baccalaureates with related programs in universities. We also need studies of the aspirations and experience of graduates of the new baccalaureate programs, similar to the research that has been conducted on college to university transfer students.

Second, provincial governments should consider whether they have any responsibility when some of the institutions that they authorize to award degree - and fund - refuse to recognize the degree granting authority of other such institutions. Provincial governments in four provinces have stated that they want more diversity in the types of institutional providers of degree programs, and they have enacted legislation to that end. Are these governments content to let some universities effectively veto that legislation. If not, provincial governments could require that all institutions to which they have given the authority to grant degrees recognize the degree granting authority of any other institution to which they have also given the authority to award degrees. This would not intrude on an institution's right to select the individuals that it admits. It would just mean that an institution could not arbitrarily exclude an applicant on the basis of the type of degree authority of the institution that the applicant had attended previously.

Third, it would be helpful to have open dialogue within the higher education community broadly construed about the values that should influence degree recognition, which would include the ones that I have discussed this morning. How persuasive is the logical and empirical justification for the importance attached to those values? One of the issues that should be prominent in that dialogue is whether all providers of degree programs should be expected to embrace all of the academic values of the traditional providers; or whether it is more sensible to expect value diversity commensurate with the diversity of institutional missions, roles, traditions, circumstances, and strengths. The public policy goal of having greater diversity in the types of providers of degree programs will be completely frustrated if all providers of degree programs are expected to reflect exactly the same academic values. I should emphasize that my intention here is not to suggest that the publicly funded universities should change their values, but to question whether they should be attempting to impose their values on other types of institutions.

The most difficult and pressing issue in the practice of accreditation is how to ensure quality while at the same time allow for the kinds of institutional differences that I have just described. It is easy to imagine the homogenizing influence that a new national system of degree accreditation could have. Old approaches to accreditation will not enable new providers of degree programs to deliver high quality programs that are different in fundamental ways from those of traditional institutions. If a national system of degree

accreditation is to be established, one thing that would be important is to ensure that there is equitable representation in the governance of the accreditation system by constituencies that hold different values pertaining to the necessary conditions for degree recognition. Higher education in Canada will not be improved by the creation of a national system of accreditation in which the voices of those who represent the value of applied knowledge, or the value of indigenous knowledge, or the value of learning in a predominantly teaching oriented setting, are absent or marginalized.

---

An earlier version of this paper was presented at a national conference on degree recognition co-sponsored by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Development, University of Manitoba, and the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, in Toronto, November 10, 2006.

---

**Michael L. Skolnik** is Professor Emeritus and William G. Davis Chair in Community College Leadership at the University of Toronto. He can be reached at [mksolnik@oise.utoronto.ca](mailto:mksolnik@oise.utoronto.ca)

◀ Contents

---

• The views expressed by the authors are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The College Quarterly or of Seneca College.

Copyright © 2006 - The College Quarterly, Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology