

Recognition of Degrees from Non-AUCC Member Institutions: A Review of Issues

Background

IN RECENT YEARS opportunities to complete baccalaureate and applied degrees have expanded considerably in Canada. This expansion is occurring in large part because of increasing qualifications required in many specialized professions and the concomitant demand for greater access to degree completion opportunities. New degrees have been developed in different ways for different purposes. Some of these degrees include courses consistent with those in a traditional baccalaureate degree in the Arts and Sciences. Other degrees are intended primarily to prepare students for employment in a specific occupation or field and are referred to as applied degrees. Some applied degrees may be considered terminal in nature in that their employment skills focus is not intended as preparation for graduate and professional programs. On the other hand, applied degrees in professional programs often carry a clear implication that graduates may continue with graduate level studies. For instance, colleges and university colleges in BC offer the Bachelor of Business Administration as preparation for both employment and further education. Indeed, legislation in BC uses the term “applied

baccalaureate” to describe these degrees. However, the distinctions between traditional baccalaureate degrees, terminal applied degrees, and applied baccalaureate degrees offered in various provinces are not always clear, and these degrees can be conferred by a variety of post-secondary institutions.

Most undergraduate degrees in Canada are offered by traditional universities with membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). Over time, AUCC membership has come to be viewed as a *de facto* indication of the quality of an institution and its programs, and this membership normally coincided, in the past, with the authority to offer degrees under provincial legislation. Most of the new applied and applied baccalaureate degrees are located in colleges and institutes – institutions that have not traditionally offered degree-level programming and that are not AUCC members. In BC, university colleges offer both applied and traditional baccalaureate degrees. Two of these university colleges are members of AUCC while a third is not. Universities in Canada also offer degrees that are

very similar to applied baccalaureate degrees in professional program areas such as nursing and business. Thus we have a situation in which different kinds of post-secondary institutions, some with and others without AUCC membership, are offering different kinds of degrees that have not been well defined.

Some universities have refused to accept graduates with different kinds of applied baccalaureate degrees into graduate and professional programs for a number of reasons: (a) lack of knowledge about the new degrees and their content and intent; (b) concerns about the quality and rigour of applied degree programs offered by colleges, university colleges, and institutes; and (c) questions about the appropriateness of applied degrees as preparation for further study. In the absence of any national or regional accreditation process in Canada that could be used as an assurance of quality of institutions and/or their degrees, some universities have used the AUCC membership status of the institution conferring the degree as the determining factor in whether or not that student would be considered for graduate studies. This is being done

even though AUCC is not an accrediting agency but is an organization in which institutions seek membership to benefit from its public policy, communications, research, and advocacy roles.¹ Furthermore, many of the new degree-granting institutions in Canada may have difficulty meeting criteria for AUCC membership because of the nature of their program base and the focus on teaching rather than research and scholarly activity.

This situation is of particular importance in Ontario, Alberta, and BC where the provincial governments have expanded access to baccalaureate, applied, and applied baccalaureate degrees through the non-university, post-secondary sector. Students graduating from these degree programs and wishing to continue their studies are seeking access to graduate and professional programs at universities across Canada. This paper does not focus on terminal applied degrees that may be offered in other jurisdictions in Canada. The focus of this paper is on problems arising for graduates of applied baccalaureate degrees from colleges, university colleges, and provincial institutes in BC, both public and private. Such degrees in BC are four years in duration and blend theory and practice with the

¹ It should be noted that Canadian universities normally consider applicants from American universities that are formally accredited by one of six regional accrediting associations. However, such associations only accredit the institution's organizational capacity to deliver quality degree programming and neither assess nor accredit specific degree programs.

intention of preparing students both for employment and for advanced study in relevant graduate and professional programs.

The BC Situation

THE BC GOVERNMENT has been expanding access to undergraduate degree opportunities through the non-university, post-secondary sector over the last few decades. University colleges were first created in 1989, and university colleges and provincial institutes have had authority under provincial legislation to grant undergraduate degrees independently since 1995. Colleges were given authority under the Degree Authorization Act to grant "applied baccalaureate" degrees beginning in 2003. As in Ontario and Alberta, BC established a program review mechanism, the Degree Quality Assessment Board (DQAB), which rigorously assesses new degree proposals from public and private institutions to ensure quality. Although the DQAB does function as a quality assessment mechanism for new programs, it does not function as an accrediting agency.

BC has a long history of cooperation between colleges and universities because of its extensive transfer system, which allows students to receive credit towards a baccalaureate degree for appropriate first- and second-year courses taken at a college, university college, or institute. Due to these long-established relationships, applied baccalaureate degree graduates

from a BC college, university college, or institute are *considered* for entrance to graduate studies and professional programs at BC universities. Whether or not the student received the degree from an AUCC institution will not determine his or her admissibility.

However, a few recent cases have emerged in which some Ontario universities will not consider for admission to graduate and professional programs graduates with applied baccalaureate degrees from non-AUCC institutions in BC. There are examples in which applied baccalaureate graduates from non-AUCC institutions have been accepted into universities; however, this often occurs after significant and time-consuming intervention from the originating institution.

A recent case is instructive. A graduate of the Bachelor of Music Degree in Jazz Studies at Capilano College in North Vancouver was informed by four Ontario universities that he could not be considered for entry to post-baccalaureate teacher education programs because his undergraduate degree was from a non-AUCC institution. Yet students from the same Jazz Studies degree, with the course work and instruction delivered by Capilano, would have been considered for graduate and professional studies in previous years because Capilano had offered the degree for more than a decade in partnership with the BC Open University (BCOU), which was a member of AUCC. Following the re-

ceipt of a letter from the President of Capilano, one of the universities stated that it would consider graduates of an institution that is not a member of AUCC on an individual basis.

Partly to address this challenge, Capilano has applied for accreditation through a regional accrediting association in the United States as no such accrediting agency exists in BC or Canada. Ironically, therefore, a Canadian institution is applying for American accreditation so that its graduates can be considered for admission to graduate studies at Canadian universities.

To summarize, colleges, university colleges, and provincial institutes, as well as private institutions, in BC can apply for Ministerial consent to grant applied baccalaureate and other degrees, following a rigorous quality review process by the DQAB. Nevertheless, some universities outside the province will not consider students for entrance to graduate and professional programs unless the degree-granting institution is an AUCC member. These universities question whether the degrees are designed to prepare students for graduate studies and are uncertain of the quality of the degrees. At the same time, there are no national or regional accrediting agencies in Canada to which institutions can apply. Students are caught in the middle of this conundrum as are post-secondary institutions across Canada that are being faced with decisions on

recognition of these new degrees in the absence of a national framework for those decisions.

The Need for a Solution

GIVEN THE ENORMOUS public investment in expanding degree-granting opportunities for students in colleges, university colleges, and institutes, it is essential that Canadian institutions work together to find a solution to ensure the recognition and portability of appropriate degrees from non-AUCC institutions for entrance to graduate and professional programs at universities in Canada.

Part of the solution to this problem may lie in colleges, university colleges, and institutes in BC, as well as government, being proactive in providing information about the nature and intent of the new applied baccalaureate degrees. What are the features of the degrees that address universities' concerns with respect to quality and rigour? How has the content of the applied baccalaureate degree prepared students for graduate or professional level programs? With answers to questions such as these, universities can use this information to make their own informed decisions about whether or not to consider graduates of these degrees, rather than relying upon AUCC membership as a deciding factor. Colleges, university colleges, and institutes should also be clear with their students at the outset about whether the applied baccalaureate degrees

are designed for access to graduate and professional level programs and, if so, at which universities. As well, any student that enrolls in an applied baccalaureate degree with the goal of pursuing further studies should check with the institution delivering the degree about his or her admissibility to other post-secondary institutions.

Another viable approach in the long run may be the development of regional and/or national accrediting agencies. However, in the short run, universities in Canada that use AUCC status as a precondition for admission should undertake a review of their admission criteria to assess the appropriateness of using AUCC membership in admissions decisions. While the highly competitive nature of admissions is fully understood and appreciated, best practice nevertheless suggests *considering* all applicants from provincially approved degree-granting institutions. Applications are normally reviewed based on (a) conventional criteria that focus on the relevance of the undergraduate experience and baccalaureate degree completed and its match with the nature and expectations of the graduate or professional program, (b) specialized selection criteria appropriate to the program of study, (c) an assessment of academic achievement and other individual merits of the candidate, and (d) a determination of the student's potential for success.

*BCCAT welcomes comments or advice
pertaining to the issues identified in this paper.
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