

WHAT'S IT WORTH?

The Tiering of Canadian Degrees

DAVE MARSHALL

THE GROWING DEMAND FOR ACCESS TO DEGREES IN Canada is well documented.¹ Until recently, Canada has never felt the need to elaborate on the meaning and value of the Canadian "degree" credential because all baccalaureates have been delivered by university or university-type institutions. However, changes in the last 15 years may call on governments and institutions to examine this issue more carefully.

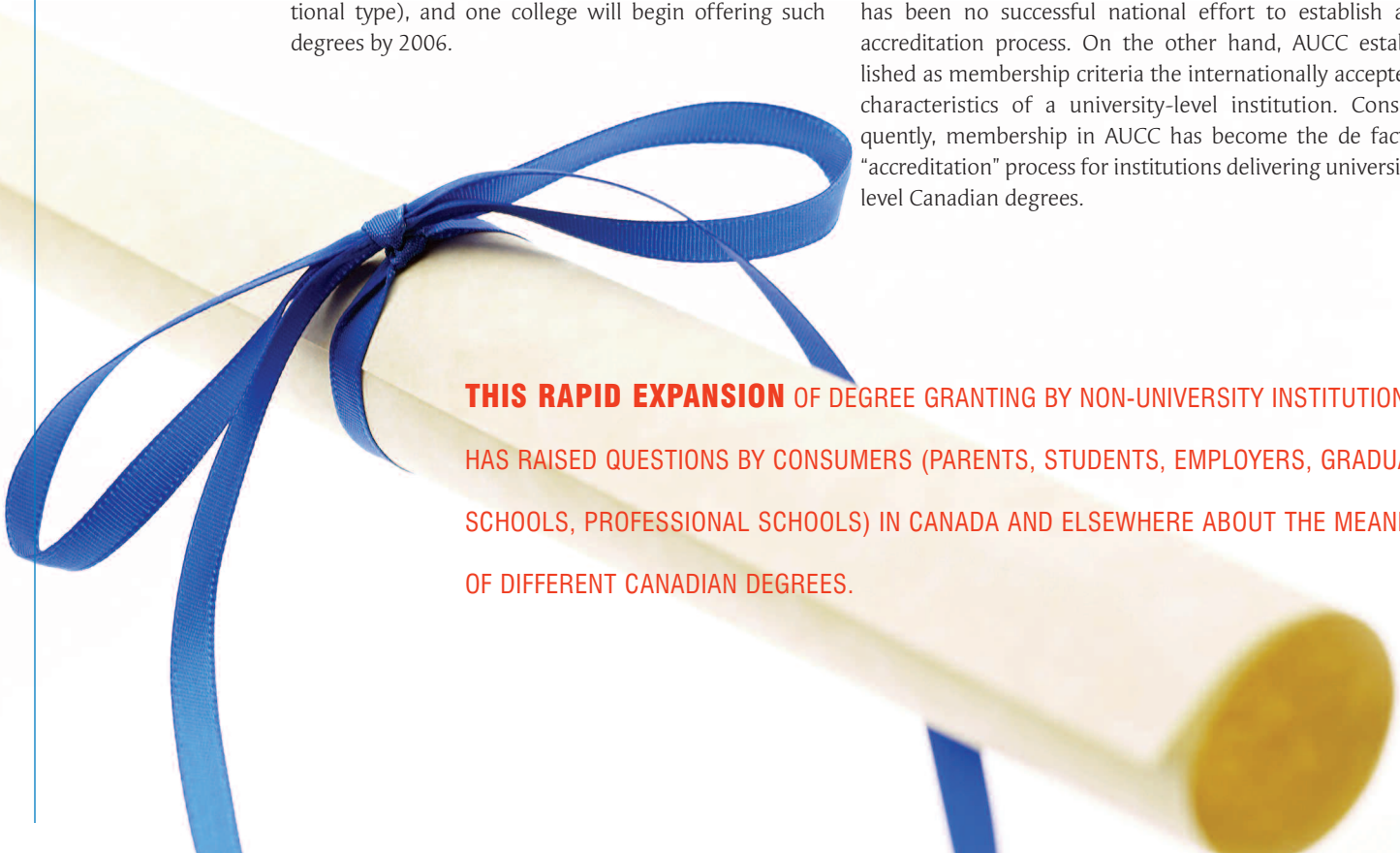
- In the mid 90s, five degree-granting /diploma-granting hybrids called "university colleges" were established in British Columbia.
- Most provinces have at least one not-for-profit (faith based) institution offering a limited range of undergraduate degrees, and the number of for-profit private universities (mostly branch campuses of U.S. institutions) is growing.
- (Community) colleges in British Columbia and Alberta have been offering university transfer programs for many years (Calgary's Mount Royal since 1931), but by the mid 90s began offering Applied Baccalaureates.
- Ontario colleges began offering Applied Degrees in 2000.
- "Polytechnics" offering (or proposing to offer) technology "baccalaureates" have appeared on the scene.
- Alberta legislation (2004) allowed colleges (community) to apply to offer full baccalaureates (including foundational type), and one college will begin offering such degrees by 2006.

This rapid expansion of degree granting by non-university institutions has raised questions by consumers (parents, students, employers, graduate schools, professional schools) in Canada and elsewhere about the meaning of different Canadian degrees.

DEGREE MOBILITY

From the perspective of degree holders, the value of the credential is its usefulness in setting them apart from other individuals in society. The proliferation of new degrees has diluted this "sorting" effect.² Degree mobility refers to the comparative value of any credential in giving the degree holder the flexibility to pursue further study or to obtain and change jobs or careers. While it is readily apparent that different degrees have different foci and meaning, a spectrum of mobility values for different degrees is largely speculative, since there is little research-based data to suggest that different degree credentials have different values. However, there is one aspect that is both verifiable and significant to the student: the effect of membership of the credential-delivering institution in the Association of Colleges and Universities in Canada (AUCC) on eligibility for future study (graduate and professional schools).

While some provinces are developing, or have developed, various program quality assessment processes, there has been no successful national effort to establish an accreditation process. On the other hand, AUCC established as membership criteria the internationally accepted characteristics of a university-level institution. Consequently, membership in AUCC has become the de facto "accreditation" process for institutions delivering university level Canadian degrees.



THIS RAPID EXPANSION OF DEGREE GRANTING BY NON-UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONS HAS RAISED QUESTIONS BY CONSUMERS (PARENTS, STUDENTS, EMPLOYERS, GRADUATE SCHOOLS, PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS) IN CANADA AND ELSEWHERE ABOUT THE MEANING OF DIFFERENT CANADIAN DEGREES.

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Since many of the institutions offering or planning to offer new degrees are not currently members of AUCC, it remains to be seen if the degrees they grant will provide access to graduate and professional schools at universities in Canada or elsewhere. To explore this question, a letter was sent in the fall of 2003 to the presidents of 30 Canadian Anglophone universities asking for institutional graduate admission policies for degree holders from either "non-university" or "non-AUCC" institutions. Responses indicated that, in general, applicants from AUCC institutions receive preferential admission consideration in the Canadian universities surveyed. Within that general observation, admission policies for graduates from "non-AUCC" Canadian institutions could be grouped into three categories.

ALL DEGREES OFFERED BY PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS IN CANADA HAVE PASSED A PROVINCIAL LEVEL QUALITY ASSESSMENT PROCESS OF SOME SORT.

At one end, eight universities (including Queen's University in Kingston, which has a Senate-based policy regarding applicants from non-AUCC institutions) indicated that they limit access almost exclusively to Canadian AUCC-institution graduates.³ That is, only graduates from AUCC institutions are automatically eligible for admission and all others would be considered individually under some sort of "exceptionality" clause in admission policies.

At the other end, the largest number (14) of institutions consider AUCC-member graduates as automatically eligible, but consider other applicants on a case-by-case, or institution-by-institution basis. It is these institutions that are most likely to consider current graduates of Ontario's, Alberta's and British Columbia's applied degrees and the future graduates of college-delivered foundational baccalaureates. One institution stated, "In general, a student who is a graduate of an AUCC-member institution would automatically be considered for admission to a graduate program. Graduates from institutions that are not members of AUCC would be considered on an individual basis. Clearly our preference is to receive our graduate students from AUCC-member institutions."

In the middle, there are four universities that indicated that all applicants, from AUCC institutions or otherwise, are considered on the basis of both the program and institutional reputation and quality. That is, while AUCC institution graduates are normally considered eligible for further study at their institution, such eligibility was not automatic. One institution clarified their admission policy as follows:

"...all graduate admissions are done on a case-by-case basis. There is no automatic eligibility. Having said all this, as a matter of rough justice, I think it would be highly unlikely that we would consider admission of a student coming from a Canadian institution that was not accepted for membership in AUCC. This does not imply, however, that membership in AUCC would guarantee eligibility to any student from that institution – whether or not s/he held a degree or applied degree."

No institutions reported giving equal consideration to degrees from any type of institution. Four institutions had not responded (three from Alberta) at the time of publication.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A number of factors appear to be affecting the development of Canadian university admission policies for non-AUCC member graduates.

- **The new applicant environment:** One large institution confirmed that the question was a good one, but since they do not yet receive many non-AUCC member applicants, they have not developed a specific policy. However, it is recognized that universities will have to address this issue in their admission policies.
- **Provincial policies and practices:** The issue of “non-AUCC” degrees is a larger and more public concern in some provinces than others. Specifically, universities in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia are dealing with provincial approval of such degrees in their own provinces.
- **Professional requirements:** Presently, a number of professions (teaching, nursing accounting, engineering) tie accreditation to degrees from AUCC-member institutions and tie institutional/faculty accreditation to admission policies that limit admission to AUCC-member graduates.
- **Other institutional level factors:** Institutions identified a number of other factors that might affect the eligibility of graduates from non-AUCC institutions, including:
 - The increasing volume of applicants for both graduate and professional schools will lead institutions to become more selective and look for more ways to triage a larger applicant pool.
 - The degree of affinity between an undergraduate program and its graduate counterpart is an increasingly important factor. For example, since they have been designed as workplace credentials, many applied degree areas do not have a graduate program counterpart. In addition, degrees with an appropriate liberal (general) studies component may be seen as a more appropriate preparation for further study.
 - The recognition of a degree by the closest AUCC-member institution could be one factor in another university recognizing the graduates of a non-AUCC institution.
 - The institutional track record in providing university-level education could affect the eligibility of degree holders; however, these decisions are likely to be made at the department level, not the institution policy level.

CONCLUSION

In reporting the results of this study, there is no intent to comment on the quality of any Canadian degree. All degrees offered by public institutions in Canada have passed a provincial level quality assessment process of some sort. For example, Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario have developed quite rigorous standards and processes in this regard that should ensure the program quality of any approved degree. However, over the past decade or so, degrees have been approved for delivery from non-university Canadian institutions. While many of these degrees will certainly have value within their intended or unique purposes, they will have a different value with regard to accessibility to graduate and professional studies at selected Canadian universities.

While the existence of a spectrum of meaning or value for various degrees in Canada is not yet fully articulated, this study suggests several observations regarding an emerging degree divide:

EN BREF Au cours de la dernière décennie, des établissements non universitaires ont été autorisés à conférer des grades. S'il est vrai que ces grades ont une valeur certaine dans les champs d'activité visés, on peut cependant douter de leur capacité de permettre l'accès aux programmes d'études de 2^e et de 3^e cycle et de formation professionnelle des universités canadiennes. En l'absence d'un système national d'agrément, l'adhésion à l'Association des universités et collèges du Canada (AUCC) fait office de processus d'agrément pour les établissements d'enseignement universitaires. Or, plusieurs des nouveaux établissements conférant des grades universitaires ne sont pas des membres de l'AUCC. On voit donc apparaître un « fossé de la qualification » qui est nettement à l'avantage des diplômés des établissements membres de l'AUCC. Étant donné la grande variété de grades qui sont maintenant offerts, il serait temps que les établissements d'enseignement postsecondaires canadiens et les gouvernements se réunissent pour déterminer la signification et la portée des différents grades.



- There is a difference between single program assessment and institutional assessment. Specifically, while all Canadian degrees will continue to hold value for both employment and future study, baccalaureates that are both approved by a provincial degree (program) assessment process and offered by institutions assessed as “university-level” will more readily qualify graduates for further study than would baccalaureates from other institutions that have program approval alone. In Canada today, it is also apparent that membership in AUCC provides the divide between these two categories of degree-granting institutions.
- While there can be no guarantee that any baccalaureate holder will gain admittance to any graduate or professional program, for most graduates the determining factor would be their own academic performance. For graduates of non-AUCC institutions it will be both their performance and the standing of their institution.
- While program to program articulations will open many doors to graduate school for graduates of non-AUCC institutions, admission to many professional schools will remain challenging.

Given the high proportion of baccalaureate holders that pursue further studies at some point in their careers, and the increasing variety of degrees now offered by Canadian post-secondary institutions, institutions and governments should begin communicating about the meaning of different credentials from different institutions. |

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Notes

- 1 Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, *Trends in Higher Education* (Ottawa: AUCC, 2002).
- 2 David Marshall, “Access to Degrees in the Knowledge Economy: Degree Inflation and Degree Accreditation Issues,” *Policy Options* (August, 2004): 76-82.
- 3 At its January 22, 2004 meeting, the Queen’s University Senate passed the following policy statement: “To satisfy the basis of admission requirements to any degree program at Queen’s, academic credentials obtained from a Canadian institution must be from an institution that is a member of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC).” See http://www.queensu.ca/secretariat/senate/Jan2204/SCAD_CDNUiversitiesJan04.pdf for further information.