

A question of degrees

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Universities faced sharp criticism at a recent conference over their reluctance to recognize the growing number of baccalaureate and applied undergraduate degrees granted by community colleges.

The day-long conference, held in Toronto in early November, brought together more than 100 representatives of universities, colleges, provincial quality-assessment councils, academics and others to discuss degree recognition in Canada and the merits of creating a national degree-accreditation system.

The conference was organized by the University of Manitoba's Centre for Higher Education Research and Development and the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education in response to the proliferation of new degree programs offered by colleges and other institutions that aren't universities.

The issue has gained prominence in recent months because of anecdotal reports of graduates from some college degree programs being refused admission into graduate and bachelor of education programs offered by universities in other provinces. In some cases the students were turned down because the colleges aren't members of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, a requirement that several universities use as a basis for admission into advanced programs.

Colleges aren't eligible for AUCC membership because they don't meet the association's requirements, which state, among other things, that institutions must offer a majority of their programs at the university level, must have a bicameral governance structure, and must have a record of academic research.

Claire Morris, AUCC president, stressed that membership in the association is voluntary. She told the conference that AUCC's membership rules have been in place for many years and that only since the emergence of new degree providers have some universities started to use membership as a "trriage tool" for assessing eligibility for graduate studies.

She said colleges have "a very strong responsibility to clearly articulate" to students what their degrees will allow them to do. She urged colleges to work with individual universities and with regional university associations to explore ways of building links between college degree programs and advanced programs offered by universities. But she questioned the notion of a national accreditation system, arguing that it wouldn't necessarily solve the problem.

David Marshall, president of Mount Royal College, a degree-granting college in Calgary, agreed. He said a national accreditation system wouldn't automatically ensure the acceptance of new degrees by universities. He and other college representatives urged universities to assess college graduates on an individual basis. Colleges, he said, aren't asking universities to treat "all of our graduates in every one of our degrees . . . exactly the same. What we want is a fair understanding of how they've been treated . . . and why."

Dr. Marshall, who is a former president of Nipissing University, said the proliferation of new degree programs has led to increased confusion among students, parents and employers. Mount Royal has said it aims to convert to an undergraduate university and seek membership in AUCC. Other colleges are following suit.

Queen's University was one of the universities criticized at the conference for rejecting college graduates on the basis that they did not come from an AUCC member institution. Queen's registrar Jo-Anne Brady said the university has admitted college graduates in the past, usually on a probationary basis or after requiring them to take qualifying courses, and will continue to do so. But, she said, in Queen's experience, students who have done their undergraduate work at a university have a better chance of success. AUCC membership isn't intended to be a "gate-keeping" policy, she said. "It is the intention that our learners should be successful."

In recent years, several provinces, including British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, have given colleges degree-granting authority to expand educational opportunities and to meet the growing public demand for degrees, said Michael Skolnik, professor emeritus at the University of Toronto who holds the William G. Davis Chair in Community College Leadership. He estimated that over 40 colleges now offer degree programs.

At the same time, provinces created quality-assessment councils to review and approve proposed college degree programs, a move that was supposed to ensure the quality of the programs and facilitate student mobility across provinces and institutions.

The curriculum of an applied degree program is typically a blend of theoretical and applied knowledge, explained Dr. Skolnik. Universities have been hesitant to recognize college degrees in part because of the applied component, which universities tend to view as an “inferior type of knowledge,” he said.

But this refusal to recognize college degrees, in effect, “nullified” government policies, Dr. Skolnik argued. “Are these governments content to let universities effectively veto much of this legislation?” he asked. If not, provincial governments could require universities to recognize the degree-granting authority of colleges, he said.

Representatives from provincial quality-assessment councils also expressed their frustration over university admission policies. “Canadian universities for decades have accepted as an alternative to AUCC membership any American institution with accreditation from the U.S., yet will now not accept the equivalent bodies that are emerging in Canada,” said Doug Oworm, former chair of the Campus Alberta Quality Council and now deputy vice-chancellor and vice-president, academic and research, at University of British Columbia, Okanagan.

Others at the conference argued that a national accreditation system may be necessary, not only to solve the national debate but to attract international students. Hans Schuetze, professor emeritus of higher education at the University of British Columbia, noted that many countries have put in place national accreditation systems and that all countries in the European Union are moving towards a harmonized system of degree accreditation.-

Author: Rose Tamburri University Affairs is a magazine that is published 10 times a year by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada.

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