

**RETHINKING THE SYSTEM OF CREDENTIALS AWARDED  
BY ONTARIO'S COLLEGES OF APPLIED ARTS &  
TECHNOLOGY**

Prepared for Colleges Ontario

by

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June 20, 2012

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This paper examines the suitability of two of the credential titles awarded by Ontario's colleges: the advanced, or three-year, diploma and the two-year diploma. The paper considers, in the light of recent developments and practices in other jurisdictions, how accurately these two credentials signal to employers and other educational institutions the learning achievements and qualifications of those who earn the credentials. It is noted that the Ontario advanced diploma appears to be the only three year postsecondary credential in North America, and possibly in the whole world, that is not a degree. By contrast, in many European countries that are signatories to the Bologna Accord, institutions comparable to Ontario colleges routinely award three-year, career-focused baccalaureate degrees. And within North America, the credential awarded in fifty states and one province for completion of a two-year program in a college is an associate degree. The paper concludes that students in Ontario colleges would be better served if the present advanced diploma were replaced with a three-year baccalaureate degree, and the two-year diploma were replaced with an associate degree. These changes in credentials would enable the colleges to more effectively fulfill their mandate of helping to develop the skilled workforce that is needed to make the Ontario economy productive and competitive, and helping residents of Ontario realize their potential.

While three-year's duration has become the norm for the baccalaureate degree in many nations over the past decade, Ontario universities have been moving in the opposite direction. Yet even though the three-year baccalaureate degree may have disappeared in some Ontario universities, and have become less prevalent in others, three-year baccalaureate degrees still retain a considerable presence in some of the universities. Examples are given in the paper of a few universities in which three-year baccalaureate degrees constitute a quite substantial proportion of baccalaureate degrees in arts and science faculties, and in one case, even in a few professional programs. The examination of the situation in the university sector suggests that there is a sufficient presence of the three-year baccalaureate degree in the university sector to make it a viable concept, while at the same time leaving considerable space for the kinds of

career-focused, three-year baccalaureate programs which the colleges are capable of offering – and arguably, *are* offering under a different credential title.

An examination of the credential standards in the Ontario Qualifications Framework indicates that the knowledge and skill requirements of the advanced diploma are the same as those of the three-year baccalaureate degree. Thus, replacing the advanced diploma with the three-year baccalaureate degree would involve only a change in credential title that would be more consistent with practices in other jurisdictions regarding the title of the credential that is awarded for completion of programs that are comparable to Ontario's advanced diplomas. Similarly, replacing the two-year diploma with an associate degree would be consistent with practices in the United States and British Columbia. If Ontario were to join British Columbia in this regard, it is likely that some other provinces would follow their example.

The paper considers in some detail how to implement these changes in credentials awarded by the colleges and suggests that the preferred route would be through amendments to the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act. It is not clear whether the replacement of advanced diplomas with three-year baccalaureate degrees could be done under that Act without amending it. If not, then in the absence of legislation, the only route for this change would be for the colleges to award three-year baccalaureate degrees by Ministerial consents under the Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act. The legal case for a credential change without legislation seems stronger for the associate degree than for the three-year baccalaureate, but still it is not clear whether the awarding of associate degrees by colleges would require either legislation or Ministerial consents under the PSECE Act.

In the recommendations section, the paper offers several recommendations regarding the quality assurance agency that should advise the Minister on the replacement of the existing credentials with the proposed new ones and on the processes for initial approval of the new credentials and for ongoing quality assurance of the programs. It is suggested that just as there is a single agency that is responsible for quality assurance for all programs in the Ontario university sector, there should also be a single quality assurance agency that is responsible for all programs in the Ontario college sector. The Ontario Colleges Quality Assurance Service would be the appropriate agency for this role. It is also suggested that the model for quality assurance of ongoing degree programs in the colleges should be changed to conform to the model followed in the

university sector. This would mean that after initial approval of a degree program in a college, ongoing quality assurance would become the responsibility of the institution, overseen through an external quality audit process.

## RETHINKING THE SYSTEM OF CREDENTIALS AWARDED BY ONTARIO'S COLLEGES OF APPLIED ARTS & TECHNOLOGY

### **INTRODUCTION**

Two factors make this a good time to rethink the system of credentials awarded by Ontario's colleges of applied arts & technology. The first is growing concern about the suitability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of a system of academic credentials that was established nearly a half century ago. There is reason to question how well some of those credentials reflect the learning achievements of those who earn them; how adequately they convey the qualifications of graduates to employers and other educational institutions; and how they fit in the global lexicon of academic credentials. In 1995, noted community college scholar John Dennison of the University of British Columbia observed that "there is not a clear appreciation of what a diploma means", and this "results in an undervaluation of the diploma from a CAAT" (Dennison, 1995, p. 13). With the increased consciousness of the importance of the degree since 1995, the problem of lack of understanding of what a diploma means likely has become more serious.

In 1972, the Commission on Postsecondary Education in Ontario enunciated the following principle:

A society which strives to provide individuals with lifetime learning options and alternatives must also give them the possibility to acquire the tangible symbols of accomplishments in these ventures.  
(Commission on Postsecondary Education, 1972, p. 49).

Making sure that each symbol of accomplishment is appropriate to the accomplishment is an important part of complying with this principle.

The college credential that has been the subject of greatest attention in this connection is the advanced diploma, a credential that requires three years of study. *The Ontario advanced diploma appears to be the only three year postsecondary credential in North America, and possibly in the whole world, that is not a degree!* Accordingly, the primary focus of this paper is on the idea of

replacing the advanced diploma that is presently awarded by Ontario colleges with a three-year baccalaureate degree.

Another credential that warrants consideration is the two-year diploma. Many in the college community are concerned that this title is not widely understood by employers, and that it does not accurately convey the level of academic and professional knowledge and skills that graduates of these programs possess. As the labour market for graduates of the colleges' two-year programs has become increasingly continent-wide if not global, there is concern that the term diploma may not be perceived as of equivalent stature with associate degree, a credential awarded in fifty states and one province, British Columbia. As a result, graduates of Ontario colleges may be at a disadvantage in competing with associate degree holders in the North American or global labour market. Accordingly, the time may have come to consider changing the two-year diploma to an associate degree. The two credential changes that are the focus of this paper are related. For example, if the term associate degree were to be adopted for two-year programs, it would be awkward, and possibly untenable, to retain the term diploma in the title of the credential awarded for completion of a three-year program.

The second factor that makes it timely to rethink the system of college credentials is the movement in many other jurisdictions toward making the three-year baccalaureate degree the normal undergraduate degree. In part, this movement reflects the desire in an increasingly mobile, global economy for a common system of academic credentials. That desire is reflected in the Bologna Accord, through which many nations have agreed to a particular configuration of degrees. These nations could have agreed on a four-year or five-year baccalaureate. Three years was the period chosen because this was more economical than a longer period, and it was believed that three years was adequate time to prepare a postsecondary student for entry into the work force or for study at the master's level.

In many countries a substantial proportion of students who are doing three-year baccalaureate degrees are enrolled in colleges that are similar to Ontario's colleges. For example, in Germany, the *fachhochschulen* account for about one-third of undergraduate enrolment (Klumpp and Teichler, 2008); in Ireland, the figure is nearly 40 per cent for the institutes of technology (derived from Higher Education Authority of Ireland, 2012); and in the Netherlands, the *hogescholen*

account for over 60 per cent of undergraduate enrolment (Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2012).

There have been some calls to make the three-year baccalaureate degree more prominent among North America postsecondary credentials. Some have suggested that this reform could enable postsecondary systems to respond more efficiently and flexibly to both the demands of an increasingly diverse student population and the needs of the economy (Clark *et al.*, 2009). In the United States, proponents of the three-year baccalaureate degree have included a leading scholar of higher education (Keller, 2008) and a U.S. senator and former Secretary of Education (Alexander, 2009). In this dialogue, the advocates of the three-year degree seem to assume that it would be awarded by a university. However, as colleges in Ontario and a number of other provinces and American states award four-year baccalaureate degrees (Floyd, Skolnik & Walker, 2005), there is no reason why they could not also award three-year degrees.

### ***THREE-YEAR BACCALAUREATE DEGREES IN ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES***

While the three-year baccalaureate degree was once the predominant form of the baccalaureate degree in Ontario, its presence is thought to have diminished significantly over the past few decades. A major contributing factor has likely been the reorganization of the secondary school curriculum, including particularly the elimination of the former Grade 13. A report prepared by Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) for the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) earlier this year states that “three-year programs were largely eliminated in the run-up to the double cohort” (Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2012, p. 10), and the Report notes further that “[T]here are few three-year bachelor’s degrees currently available in Ontario” (p. 9). Another factor alleged to have contributed to the decline of the three-year baccalaureate degree is the increasing tendency of graduate and some professional schools to require a four-year baccalaureate degree for admission.

As a cautionary note, however, it should be pointed out that assertions about the demise of the three-year baccalaureate degree in the Ontario university sector might be exaggerated. For example, the HESA Report claims that three-year baccalaureate degree programs are offered at only eight universities in Ontario (p. 9). Yet in searching the webs sites of Ontario universities, I found three-year baccalaureate programs at thirteen universities, and in few other cases it was impossible to be sure that there were no three-year programs.

Moreover, even if the *number* of three-year programs has decreased substantially, there might still be considerable *enrolment* in some of the existing three-year programs. The HESA Report does not provide data on enrolment or number of degrees awarded in these programs, and it does not appear that there are provincial figures for enrolment in or graduations from three-year baccalaureate programs in Ontario universities.

In a search of university web sites, it was possible to find data for three-year baccalaureate programs in four universities – Carleton University, Lakehead University, the University of Western Ontario, and York University. These data were accessible in sections of the web sites that are intended to provide public accountability (and these university web sites are exemplars in that regard). Three of the web sites contain numbers of degrees awarded broken down between three-year and four-year degrees; and the other one contains a breakdown of enrolment between three-year and four-year baccalaureate programs.

The information on these web sites indicates a substantial presence of three-year baccalaureate programs in faculties of arts and sciences. At Carleton University, 43.8% of bachelor's of arts degrees awarded in 2011 were three-year degrees (Carleton University, 2012, derived from Table GR-1). Bachelor's of arts degrees accounted for 89% of the three-year baccalaureate degrees awarded, the others being bachelor of computer science, bachelor of science, and bachelor of mathematics. In total, three-year baccalaureates accounted for 29.5% of all bachelor's degrees awarded by the university.

At Lakehead University, 52.2% of the baccalaureate degrees awarded in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities in 2011 were three-year degrees, and in the Faculty of Science and Environmental Studies the figure was 50.3% (Lakehead University, 2012, derived from Table on Degrees Awarded, in the Lakehead University Institutional Statistics Book). The three-year degrees were primarily in core arts and sciences disciplines, with the largest number being in Geography.

Of the bachelor's of arts degrees awarded in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies at York University in 2011, 41.3% were Ordinary Degrees, awarded for three years of study (90 credits) (York University, 2012, derived from Table on Degrees Granted, in the York University Fact Book). In the Faculty of Science, 35.5% of the bachelor's of science degrees were three-year degrees. Unlike Carleton and Lakehead, at York a substantial proportion of three-year



bachelor's degrees were awarded also in some professional fields. For example, excluding nursing, about a third of the bachelor's degrees in the Faculty of Health were three-year degrees. Like the business schools in other Ontario universities, the Schulich School of Business at York does not offer three-year baccalaureate degrees. However, York's Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies has recently begun to offer three-year baccalaureate degrees in both administrative studies and human resources management. Three-year degrees accounted for 37.4% of Bachelor of Administrative Studies degrees, and 57.9% of Bachelor of Human Resources Management degrees awarded in 2011.

The University of Western Ontario does not appear to provide data on graduations on its web site, but in its Databook it gives data on enrolment by year of program for both three-year and four-year baccalaureate programs (University of Western Ontario, 2012). The enrolment figures for first year students do not differentiate between three-year and four-year programs, suggesting that first year courses are common to three-year and four-year programs. Of students in their second year in the Faculty of Social Sciences, 24.9% were in three-year programs, while the corresponding figure for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities was 22.6%, and in the Faculty of Science, it was 15.6%. Insofar as it is possible to tell from the web site, the enrolment in three-year baccalaureate programs seemed to be in more liberal or general fields of study rather than in professional programs.

While one should be cautious about drawing inferences from data for only four universities, this sample provides fairly strong reason to suspect that three-year baccalaureate degrees have not come close to disappearing in Ontario universities, and they may in fact, have a substantial presence. The fact that in three of the four universities for which data are available, the three-year baccalaureate degrees are mainly in the liberal arts and more general areas of study, suggests that there could be a niche for three-year, career oriented baccalaureate programs in the colleges. The fact that one university has recently developed three-year baccalaureate programs in administrative studies and human resources management could indicate that there is a demand for career oriented baccalaureate programs of this length in Ontario. Given the capability of the colleges to offer three-year occupationally focused baccalaureate programs in a large number of areas in which few if any universities offer programs, the colleges would be in a good position to respond to this demand.

## **REPLACEMENT OF ADVANCED DIPLOMAS WITH THREE-YEAR BACCALAUREATE DEGREES**

Because Ontario is the only jurisdiction that awards a three-year diploma, employers in national, North American, and global labour markets are likely to have a difficult time judging the value of this credential. Even within Ontario, it is questionable whether the labour market has sufficient information to provide an appropriate reward for completion of a three-year diploma in comparison to a two-year diploma. This could be a problem not only for graduates of Ontario colleges who move to another province or to another country for employment, but also for those who work for Ontario employers that do more of their business in other provinces and other countries than in Ontario.

In addition, it has been suggested that graduates of three-year diploma programs do not receive proportionately more transfer credit when applying to a university than graduates of a two-year diploma program. For example, in the Ontario College-University Degree Completion Accord that was negotiated between the two sectors in 1999, the minimum requirement for a graduate of a three-year diploma program in a college who wanted to complete a three-year baccalaureate degree in a university would be five full-year university courses (Ontario College-University Degree Completion Accord, 1999). The comparable number of courses for a graduate of a two-year diploma program would be seven university courses. Thus, the graduate of the three-year diploma would take 4.2 years to obtain a three-year baccalaureate degree; while the graduate of a two-year diploma program would need only 3.4 years.

From the universities' perspective, the reason for awarding limited additional transfer credit for graduates of three-year diploma programs might be that most of the third year diploma courses are highly specialized courses focused on a specific occupation. As these courses would probably have no counterparts in the university curriculum, universities would be reluctant to award credit for them (Clark *et al.*, 2009). While there is insufficient information to draw conclusions on this matter, it is possible that in terms of improving opportunities both for the labour market and for further study, the value produced by a third year of diploma study may not be commensurate with the costs – to the individual or to society - of the additional year of schooling.

To question the value of an additional year of study for a diploma credential is not to question the value or quality of the programs involved. Many of the three-year diploma programs in Ontario colleges have world class reputations in their

areas of study, and well-known companies eagerly recruit their graduates. The issue that is raised here is not one of program reputation or quality. *Indeed, it is because of the high quality and strong reputations of these programs that it is so important to ensure that the credential awarded for the programs is commensurate with their quality and reputation.*

The idea of replacing the three year diploma with a three-year baccalaureate degree is not new. As Dennison, noted in 1972, the Commission on Postsecondary Education in Ontario recommended that colleges that wish to award bachelor's degrees to students who complete three-year programs should be permitted to do so (Commission on Postsecondary Education in Ontario, 1972, cited in Dennison, 1995). The need to make this change has just become more urgent in the forty years since Commission on Postsecondary Education in Ontario made the recommendation.

There are three very good reasons to consider changing the title of the credential that is awarded for the completion of these three-year programs from diploma to baccalaureate degree. First is the value to individuals and to society of enabling more people to complete a career-focused academic program that would prepare them for making productive contributions as workers and citizens in a competitive, knowledge-based, global society. In the absence of a change in the title of the credential awarded for completion of the programs, these programs may disappear as students may become increasingly reluctant to invest three years in a program that does result in the attainment of a credential that is internationally recognized.

The second reason is to facilitate the first by utilizing the considerable expertise, capacity and experience that the colleges have developed in providing occupationally-focused programs of three years duration. Those who design and deliver three-year diploma programs in Ontario colleges have demonstrated the capability to provide postsecondary programs of three years duration, economically, at a level of complexity and sophistication that in other jurisdictions would be classified as degree programs. Thus, it would be a waste of talent and potential not to reap the benefits of the investment that the province has made not just in the development of these programs, but more so in the development of the human resources and organizational infrastructures necessary to deliver such programs.

The third argument in support of replacing the three-year diploma with a three-year baccalaureate degree is that the knowledge and skill requirements for these

two credentials are virtually the same. This can be seen by comparing the descriptions for these two credentials in the Ontario Qualifications Framework (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2012b). Qualifications frameworks document, describe, and compare different levels and types of educational attainment and credentials. They describe the nature and purpose of different academic credentials and the knowledge, skills, and traits expected of those who have attained each credential. The Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF) contains detailed descriptions for both the advanced diploma and the baccalaureate degree.

The wording of the OQF descriptions for the advanced diploma and the baccalaureate degree are not exactly the same. For some of the items described, the statements for the advanced diploma are more detailed, while for others the statements for the baccalaureate degree are more detailed. For example, consider the statements under the heading of “Overall Program Design and Outcome Emphasis”:

***Advanced Diploma***

*Programs provide the knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable graduates to work within a broad range of technical and/or management functions in a broad range of occupational areas. Graduates understand both the required conceptual frameworks as well as applications related to the specific occupational area.*

***Baccalaureate Degree***

*Programs provide some broad knowledge and conceptual sophistication, including specialized knowledge in at least one discipline or field.*

The description of the advanced diploma contains a reference to some of the specific contexts in which graduates might apply their knowledge and skills, and it refers also to attitudes. Otherwise, it is difficult to discern a significant difference between the two credentials.

In the section on “Depth and Breadth of Knowledge”, the description of the baccalaureate degree is somewhat more explicit than the description of the advanced diploma, for example, in referring to *an ability to gather, review, evaluate and interpret information relevant to one or more of the major fields in*

*a discipline*. While not stated explicitly in the OQF, however, these skills *are* described in the general education and essential employability skills requirements for the advanced diploma (Ontario College Quality Assurance Service, 2012; Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2003b).

Another example of a very specific requirement in the description of the baccalaureate degree that is not in the OQF description of the advanced diploma is *the ability to make critical use of scholarly reviews and primary sources*. However, this requirement would be covered by the advanced diploma requirement for students to “use information critically in the decision-making and application processes” (Ontario College Quality Assurance Service, 2012, p. 6). Moreover, in the college sector, program standards that provide more detailed descriptions of knowledge and skill requirements have been developed for the diploma programs. For example, one of the requirements stated in the program standards for the advanced diploma in biotechnology is: “conduct comprehensive literature searches and critically evaluate scientific information” (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2012, p. 14a). This would seem to be the equivalent of the corresponding requirement for a three-year baccalaureate program.

Besides describing the expected learning outcomes, the Ontario Qualifications Framework includes also statements about the admission requirements that are normally expected for the various programs. The OQF indicates that the admission requirements for baccalaureate programs include six university or university/college courses in secondary school. In contrast, the Minister’s Binding Policy Directive on Admissions (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2003a) states that university courses cannot be required for eligibility for admission to college programs, except for collaborative college-university programs and applied baccalaureate programs. In addition, the Minister’s Binding Policy Directive states that the practice of weighting between the numbers of university, university/college, and college courses that applicants have taken is not appropriate when making admissions decisions.

There is thus an apparent conflict between the OQF and the Minister’s Binding Policy Directive in regard to admissions requirements. However, the OQF is merely a description of similarities and differences among programs, while the Minister’s Binding Policy Directive is policy. The more serious conflict is the one between the Minister’s Binding Policy Directive and the admission requirements

that likely would be imposed by the PEQAB for baccalaureate programs should the setting of standards for three-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges be placed under the jurisdiction of the PEQAB. One of the PEQAB benchmarks for admissions to four-year college baccalaureate programs is for six university and/or college/university courses (Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, 2010b). The same requirement appears in the handbook for public organizations other than colleges without any differentiation between three-year and four-year baccalaureate programs (Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, 2010a). Given that the same benchmark is used for three-year baccalaureate programs of other public organizations, it seems likely that this benchmark would be extended to three-year baccalaureate programs in colleges.

If the change from advanced diplomas to three-year baccalaureate programs could be implemented in a way that does not trigger the PSECE Act, then there could be more flexibility in regard to admission requirements to the three-year baccalaureate programs. Without detailed knowledge of the secondary school records of students in advanced diploma programs, it is not possible to estimate the proportion of students in advanced diploma programs who would be rendered ineligible for admission to three-year baccalaureate programs if the Minister's Binding Policy Directive on Admissions is superseded by the PEQAB requirements. If for example, a substantial number of students in advanced diploma programs have taken fewer than six U and/or U/C courses in secondary school, then the change from advanced diploma to three-year baccalaureate would have a devastating impact on accessibility.

A question that arises in conjunction with the idea of replacing advanced diplomas with three-year baccalaureate degrees is whether this should be viewed as a system-wide change, or whether some colleges should be allowed to opt out of the change and retain the advanced diploma, or retain that credential for some of their programs. Institutions or programs that do not make the change might be at a competitive disadvantage in recruiting students. Even if they can weather such a potential disadvantage, there is a question of fairness to students who would not have the opportunity to earn the baccalaureate title for a program of study that is equivalent to that for which other students are rewarded with that title for their exit credential.

## ***SITUATING THE THREE-YEAR BACCALAUREATE DEGREE***

When a new postsecondary credential is introduced, questions arise concerning its relationship with other credentials. The three-year baccalaureate degree is not a new credential per se, but if it were to be newly offered by the colleges, questions would arise regarding its relationship both to other college-awarded credentials and to credentials awarded by universities. Of interest would be the pathways *from* this credential to other degrees, and the pathways *to* this credential from diploma programs.

Probably the direct pathways from a three-year baccalaureate degree in a college to master's programs and university-based professional programs that normally require a baccalaureate degree for admission would be somewhat limited. Given that Ontario universities have yet to adopt policies that make graduates of four-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges unequivocally eligible for master's and professional programs, they are not likely to be very receptive to graduates of three-year programs – though experience suggests that some universities in other jurisdictions probably would be receptive.

When the Government of Alberta gave colleges in that province the authority to award applied degrees that involve three years of classroom study<sup>1</sup>, it made clear that students who enter these programs should not expect to be admitted to master's and professional programs in the universities (Skolnik, 2005). However, administrators in some colleges have indicated that graduates of these programs have been admitted to master's programs in universities in some provinces (including Ontario), and a survey conducted by the Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology confirmed that some graduates have gone on to graduate study though it didn't name the universities or provinces where the graduates went (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2011). Thus, while pathways to university graduate and professional schools is not something that graduates of three-year baccalaureate programs should count on, it is not entirely out of the question.

It is likely that the vast majority of graduates of three-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges would not be seeking admission to master's programs, at least not very soon after completing their baccalaureate degree. In the Alberta survey, slightly less than one per cent of graduates of applied degree programs

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<sup>1</sup> The applied degree programs in Alberta also include one year of "directed field experience". I avoid referring to them as three-year programs, because that denigrates the value of experiential learning that is designed to be an integral element of the complete program.

in the colleges applied to university graduate schools within four years of graduation. Indeed, only about seven per cent of graduates of *four-year* baccalaureate programs in the universities enrolled in graduate schools within four years<sup>2</sup>.

It seems reasonable to assume that most of the graduates of three-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges who aspire to graduate studies in an Ontario university would need to complete a four-year baccalaureate in order to have a good chance for admission. Their choice would be between trying to convert their three-year baccalaureate degree into a four-year baccalaureate degree in a college or in a university. Just as universities that offer both three-year and four-year baccalaureate degrees have well established procedures for graduates of three-year programs to convert their three-year baccalaureate degree into a four-year baccalaureate degree, colleges would need to develop such procedures as well. The advantages of staying at the college to earn a four-year baccalaureate would include familiarity, proximity, and probably better credit transfer arrangements. In the university sector, a graduate of a three-year baccalaureate

So far as credit is concerned, my understanding is that a graduate of a three-year baccalaureate program in a university is usually able to obtain a four-year degree in the same program in one year, but would probably have to spend longer to obtain a four-year baccalaureate degree in a different university. Thus, a graduate of a three-year baccalaureate program in a college would probably have to spend more than a year, and possibly significantly longer, to obtain a four-year baccalaureate degree at a university.

While a college might be more receptive to a graduate of one of its three-year baccalaureate programs seeking a four-year baccalaureate degree, graduates of some three-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges might have difficulty finding a related four-year baccalaureate program in their institution. Data from OCAS show that there are 583 advanced diploma programs in the colleges and another 46 three-year programs which are not classified as advanced diploma programs but be might the equivalent. Thus the total number of advanced diploma programs might be as high as 629. If all these programs became three-year baccalaureate programs, there may not be a four-year baccalaureate

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<sup>2</sup> Since Grant MacEwan College, Mount Royal College, Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, and SAIT Polytechnic would not yet have had any graduates of their four-year baccalaureate programs four years prior to the 2011 survey, the graduates of four-year baccalaureate programs in the survey must all have been from the universities.



program with close affinity for all of them among the 71 four-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges. However, program affinity could be as great or likely a greater problem in moving to a university to earn a four-year degree than in remaining at one's college for that purpose. On the other hand, obtaining a four-year baccalaureate degree at a university might do more to improve a graduate's chances of being accepted into the master's program of her choice than obtaining a four-year baccalaureate degree at a college. Graduates of three-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges who want to prepare themselves for graduate studies would have to weigh the advantages of the two different routes for converting their three-year degree into a four-year degree.

The fact that the pathway from a three-year baccalaureate degree in a college to a four-year baccalaureate degree in a university would likely be more difficult and costly than the pathway to a four-year baccalaureate degree in a college is not relevant to the decision about whether to replace the advanced diplomas with three-year baccalaureate degrees. The reason is that the pathway from a three-year baccalaureate degree in a college to a baccalaureate degree in either a university or a college, and from there to postgraduate study, is not likely to be worse, and would almost certainly be somewhat better, than the pathway from an advanced diploma to a four-year baccalaureate degree and/or to graduate studies.

One other speculative observation might be offered concerning the implications of replacing the advanced diploma with the three-year baccalaureate degree. It is unlikely that many graduates of three-year baccalaureate programs who do not seek to enrol in graduate schools or professional schools that require a four-year degree would bother trying to obtain a four-year baccalaureate degree. On the other hand, because of the importance that is attached to having a baccalaureate degree of any kind, it could be expected that many graduates of three-year diploma programs would seek to obtain a baccalaureate degree even if they do not intend to seek a master's degree. Thus, it is likely that the proportion of three-year baccalaureate degree graduates who seek a four-year baccalaureate degree would be less than the proportion of advanced diploma graduates who seek a baccalaureate degree. Therefore, even if the replacement of advanced diplomas with three-year baccalaureates is not accompanied by improvements in pathways for graduates of three-year college programs, it would likely be accompanied by a reduction in the demand for such pathways. Of course, that would not be a justification for not doing all that is possible to

improve the pathways to further study for graduates of three-year programs in the colleges.

As for pathways to the three-year baccalaureate in a college, the principal source of interest would be from students in two-year diploma programs. Students in two-year diploma programs who wish to attain a baccalaureate degree would, in theory, be able to choose among three and four-year baccalaureate programs in both colleges and universities. Colleges would have to decide whether to create pathways from their two-year diploma programs to their three-year baccalaureate programs, or concentrate on improving articulation arrangements with four-year baccalaureate programs in colleges and universities. In this connection, it is pertinent that the province has made a substantial investment in improving transfer opportunities between colleges and universities, including particularly for 2 + 2 arrangements, i.e., enabling graduates of a two year diploma program in a college to complete a four-year baccalaureate degree in a university in four years – or four years plus a few bridging courses . Given that the momentum behind the province’s transfer initiative has been so long in the making, and that obtaining very good 2 + 2 arrangements is deemed to be of such value to students, it would probably not be prudent for colleges to try to steer graduates of their two-year diploma programs into their three-year baccalaureate programs, except perhaps in cases of exceptional program affinity. Nevertheless, given the realities of funding, it may be tempting for colleges to try to retain more of their two-year diploma graduates rather than sending them to other institutions.

### ***ASSOCIATE DEGREES***

Changing the name of the two-year diploma that Ontario colleges award to associate degree has been suggested from time to time, including in the paper that Dennison presented a workshop sponsored by ACAATO in 1995 (Dennison, 1995). The term associate degree is more widely used in North America than diploma. The associate degree nomenclature is used in fifty states and one province, British Columbia. Adopting a common title for completion of two-year college programs might enhance recognition of the credential and mobility of graduates in North America. The change of title would reflect what is believed to be the increased attractiveness among the public and prospective students, since the colleges were founded, of the word *degree* in the title of an academic credential.

There is considerable variation among jurisdictions in the configurations of credentials awarded by colleges. Australia has one of the most differentiated sets of credentials. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) lists seven different credentials for occupationally-focused programs of two years or less duration (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2011). These include four levels of certificates, a diploma, an advanced diploma, *and* an associate degree. While the advanced diploma and the associate degree are very similar, they seem to differ in two ways. The duration of study for the associate degree is said to be “typically two years”, and that for the advanced diploma is described as 1.5 to 2 years. Thus, the Australian advanced diploma is not like the Ontario advanced diploma.

The Australian associate degree appears to involve the attainment of more general knowledge than the advanced diploma. The knowledge outcome for the associate degree is described as “broad theoretical and technical knowledge with some depth in the underlying principles and concepts of one or more disciplines” (p. 43); while the description for the advanced diploma is “specialized and integrated technical and theoretical knowledge with depth within one or more fields of work and learning” (p. 40). Notwithstanding these differences, under the AQF’s Pathways Policy, the floor for negotiation of transfer credit to a three-year baccalaureate degree is the same for both the advanced diploma *and* the associate degree, fifty per cent.

The most common credential awarded for completion of two-year occupationally-focused programs in Ireland is the higher certificate; in New Zealand, the national diploma; and in the United Kingdom, at least until recently, it was the higher national diploma (HND). The associate degree is not awarded on the other side of the Atlantic, but in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, there is now also the foundation degree, which was introduced in 2001. The foundation degree is a two-year credential that is at the same level in the UK Qualifications Framework as the higher national diploma, and is considered to be a UK equivalent of the North American associate degree.

Foundation degrees are vocationally oriented though, like Ontario diplomas, they include academic courses as well. It is not uncommon on the internet to find prospective students asking for guidance in choosing between the higher national diploma and the foundation degree. It is not an easy matter to determine the difference between these two credentials. Some say that the foundation degree is more geared toward to transitioning to a baccalaureate

degree than the HND; others caution that the foundation degree is more institution-specific, while there is more national uniformity of standards, and hence potential portability, for the HND. The HESA Report states that after completion of the two-year foundation degree, a three-year baccalaureate degree can be obtained in just one year of study. If that is true, the UK foundation degree provides a far more effective pathway to the baccalaureate degree than the American associate degree. A major concern about occupationally-focused associate degrees in the United States is the limited amount of credit that they provide for transfer to a baccalaureate program (Townsend, 2001; Townsend, 2002; Chase, 2011).

When first employed in the United States, the term associate degree was intended to connote a significant step on the way to the completion of a baccalaureate degree. The associate degree – formally known as the associate of arts or the associate of science - was first awarded by junior colleges whose mission was to provide the first two years of university-equivalent courses in arts and sciences, preparing students for subsequent transfer to a university where they could do the third and fourth years and obtain a baccalaureate degree. Dennison notes that this type of associate degree was formally part of a four-year baccalaureate program, and thus “associated [with the baccalaureate degree] in a literal sense” (Dennison, 1995, p. 4).

However, the connotation of the term associate degree changed dramatically when two-year colleges added vocationally-focused programs to their repertoire. For completion of a two-year vocationally oriented program in the United States, the credential awarded is normally an associate of applied science, or associate of applied arts, degree. The applied associate degrees were not intended to prepare students for transfer to university. In fact, they were frequently described as “terminal” degrees, signaling the end of a person’s formal education. This practice of regarding these degrees as terminal endured in some places at least until 2002 (Townsend, 2002). Increasingly, since the early 90s, efforts have been made to create pathways to the baccalaureate degree for graduates of applied associate degrees, but these initiatives have met with only limited success. Colleges in the United States that have sought transfer arrangements with state universities for graduates of applied associate degree programs have encountered similar problems as have colleges in Ontario with Ontario universities. However, because of the greater diversity of the university sector in the United States than in Ontario, American colleges have often been

able find some universities that would agree to reasonable credit transfer parameters for students in college career programs.

In the United States, the two-year programs that consist of university-equivalent courses for which full, or nearly full, transfer credit is awarded by universities are referred to as academic associate degree programs; while the occupationally-focused programs that have as their primary aim preparing graduates for the workforce are referred to as applied associate degree programs.

The only Canadian province in which colleges offer associate degree programs has taken an interesting tack on the use of this credential. British Columbia has both associate of arts and associate of science degrees, but it does not have associate of applied arts or associate of applied science degrees. The associate degrees are in such broad areas as Economics, Communications, Environmental Studies and Women's Studies. In areas that have a more applied focus, such as Community Social Service Work and Applied Environmental Science, there are diploma programs but not associate degree programs. Dennison notes that while British Columbia has embraced the idea of academic associate degree programs, opinion has been divided on whether it should also have applied associate degree programs (Dennison, 1995).

From this brief examination of practices in other jurisdictions, several questions can be identified regarding the adoption of associate degrees in Ontario. One is whether to award associate degrees for some programs and retain the term two-year diploma for others. One problem with this approach is that of possible differences in status between associate degree and diploma programs. Even though their opinion has not carried the day, advocates for extending the associate degree to applied programs in British Columbia have stressed this concern. This concern might carry greater weight in Ontario than in British Columbia because applied programs have always been so central to the mandate of Ontario's colleges. Also, because of decisions made when the Ontario college system was created, programs that consist of university-equivalent courses in arts and sciences were not established until recently, and are still few in number. Therefore if Ontario employed the British Columbia approach there might be relatively few associate degree programs in the colleges – perhaps too few to justify the effort involved in adopting a new credential.

As with replacing the advanced diploma with the three-year baccalaureate degree, a related question is whether the replacement of the two-year diploma

with the associate degree should be done on a system-wide basis, or whether each college should have the option of not adopting the associate degree.

Another question is whether the word applied should be inserted in the titles of some associate degree programs and not others. This approach may not be advisable for two reasons. Firstly, it is likely that the vast majority of programs would be regarded as applied associate degrees, and thus the word applied would not be of the same value in differentiating among kinds of programs in Ontario as it is in the United States. Secondly, after the colleges have taken pains to convince the government to eliminate the requirement to use the word applied in the titles of their baccalaureate degrees, it would seem retrograde to require that this word be in the titles of almost all their associate degrees.

If the term associate degree were to be used for all two-year programs in the colleges, decisions would still have to be made as to the degree titles for programs, or groups of programs. For example, should every program title include either associate of arts or associate of science? That practice may not be as appropriate today as it was when it was adopted in the United States. There are now many programs that are difficult to classify as either arts or science, such as business. Perhaps Ontario should use the classification of fields that is commonly employed in the colleges, and have associate of arts, associate of technology, associate of business, and associate of health degrees. Similar questions would arise in regard to the titles of specific baccalaureate degrees. It would be helpful to agree on some conventions regarding the titles of baccalaureate degrees and associate degrees.

Finally, a question arises as to whether the adoption of the term associate degree for a two-year program in a college presupposes that a graduate of the program would be able to obtain a four-year baccalaureate degree in two additional years of study. As noted earlier, although this was the goal when colleges in the United States began to offer two-year programs in arts and sciences, it was never adopted as a goal for two-year career programs. Moreover, often graduates of two-year programs in arts and sciences in the United States need more than two additional years to obtain a baccalaureate degree. Thus, the fact that Ontario does not have a completely seamless postsecondary system is definitely not a reason for not adopting the associate degree credential. None of the other jurisdictions in which associate degrees are awarded do either. Like them, Ontario is working to smooth out some of the

seams. If the adoption of the term associate degree for some of its credentials gives more urgency to that effort, so much the better.

### ***IMPLEMENTING THE NEW CREDENTIALS***

In order to implement the two new college credentials that have been suggested in this paper – the three-year baccalaureate degree and the associate degree – the colleges would require an appropriate form of approval from the government. The need for approval of the credentials awarded by the colleges is stipulated in Section 12 of the Regulation 34/03 under the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, 2002, which states that:

The categories of diplomas, certificates or *other documents* awarded by a board of governors attesting to the attendance or completion of a course or program of instruction are subject to approval of the Minister (italics for emphasis).

If the new credentials suggested here were to be considered “other documents” under Regulation 34/03, then they could be implemented with approval of the Minister.

However, there is another Act of the Assembly which may have a bearing on this matter, the Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000. This Act states that no person shall grant a degree unless authorized to do so “by an Act of the Assembly or by the Minister under this Act” (Section 2). A question thus arises as to whether the restriction on the granting of degrees in the PSECE Act overrides the authority that the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act gives the Minister to approve “other documents” that the colleges may award. Since the PSECE Act contains a provision under which the Minister may give approval for a college to award a baccalaureate degree, it seems probable that the PSECE Act would override the approval powers of the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act – at least in regard to the awarding of baccalaureate degrees. The rest of this section will proceed on the assumption of the supremacy of the PSECE Act over the Colleges Act in regard to awarding baccalaureate degrees by the colleges, but the possible conflict between these two acts should be referred to those with expertise in statutory law for a definitive judgment. Also consideration should be given to the possibility that Regulation 34/03 could be modified in such a way as to confirm the authority of the Minister to approve baccalaureate and associate degrees under this regulation.

If the authority of the colleges to award the two new credentials suggested in this paper is governed by the PSECE Act, then there would be two options for implementation of the new credentials: (a) new legislation, for example an amendment to the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act; or (b) consent from the Minister under the procedures stipulated in the PSECE Act for the colleges to award the new credentials. If the colleges are not allowed to award these two credentials under the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, then unless or until the colleges are given statutory authority to award three-year baccalaureates and associate degrees under that or some other act, the only other option would be for them to obtain a Ministerial consent to award the credentials.

Under the Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000, the Minister may give consent to a college to award “a baccalaureate degree in an applied area of study”. Since the Act does not distinguish between three-year and four-year baccalaureate degrees, the Act enables the Minister to give approval to the colleges to award three-year baccalaureate degrees in addition to the four-year baccalaureate degrees for which consents have been given since 2002 under this Act.

However, PSECE Act does not explicitly authorize the Minister to give consents for Associate Degrees. Perhaps it could be argued that by giving the Minister the power to grant consents for baccalaureate degrees, the Act implicitly gives the Minister the power to grant consents for a lesser degree. In that case, the same procedures could be employed for granting consents for associate degrees as for baccalaureate degrees.

Or one might argue that since the PSECE Act does not mention the associate degree in the section that defines a degree for the purposes of the Act, the restrictions on the awarding of degrees in the Act would not apply to the associate degree. In that case, the authority that the Minister is given by the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act to approve credentials awarded by the colleges would include the associate degree, especially since the associate degree is equivalent of a two-year diploma.

In interpreting what a degree is, the Act states that:

For the purposes of this Act, a degree means one or both of the following:



1. A document of academic achievement granted or conferred by an educational institution that . . . . . would reasonably be understood as an undergraduate or graduate degree, including but not limited to, a document including the terms bachelor, bachelor's, baccalaureate, master, master's, doctor . . . . .
2. A diploma, certificate, document or other thing . . . . . that includes a reference to bachelor, bachelor's, master, master's, doctor, doctoral, or doctorate (2010, c. 12, s 2(2)).

From this wording it looks like the intent of the Act was to regulate the awarding of bachelor's and graduate degrees, not a sub-baccalaureate credential.

Turning to the matter of Ministerial consents, the Act requires that prior to granting a consent, the Minister refer an application from a college to award a baccalaureate degree to the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board for assessment and advice. The standards and procedures that the PEQAB has developed for assessing applications are extremely detailed. In order to comply with the PEQAB's requirements, applications for a Ministerial consent are typically several hundred pages in length, and the entire process from application to consent can take many months or longer. Applicants must pay the PEQAB an application fee of \$5,000 per program, and an assessment fee of between \$7,000 and \$11,000. As noted earlier, there may be as many 629 three-year diplomas to be replaced with three-year baccalaureate degrees. Assuming that the average program assessment fee is at the midpoint of the range for assessment fees, the costs to the colleges just for PEQAB application and assessment fees would be almost nine million dollars. This figure, of course, does not include the substantial costs that the colleges would incur in preparing all those program applications and overseeing them through the applications process.

There are more than twice as many two-year diploma programs as three-year programs. Data from OCAS indicate that there are 1,275 two-year diploma programs, and another 84 two-year programs that have not been flagged as diploma programs, giving a total of 1,359 programs. If it were deemed necessary for a college to obtain a Ministerial consent in order to award an associate degree, the cost and workload associated with doing so would be considerable.

Based on the same assumption as was made above for three-year programs, the application and assessment fees that would have to be paid to the PEQAB for this number of two-year programs would be about 19 million dollars, making the total for all programs about 28 million dollars.

If the advanced diplomas awarded by the colleges are to be replaced by three-year baccalaureate degrees, it would be impractical to spread the change process out over too long a period of time, and similarly with replacing two-year diplomas with associate degrees. In ten years, consents have been given for 71 four-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges. The idea of replacing approximately 629 advanced diplomas with three-year baccalaureate degrees, and 1,359 two-year diplomas with associate degrees programs within a short period of time is mind-boggling - if all those programs must be put through exactly the same process as the 71 four-year programs have gone through.

Besides being very detailed, lengthy and cumbersome, the PEQAB assessment process is also highly prescriptive. The PEQAB has stipulated many precise requirements for resources and educational processes that all programs must meet. Few, if any, of these requirements are evidence-based. That is, there is no empirical evidence that establishes the connection between these requirements and student outcomes. One such requirement that could pose a serious obstacle to replacing advanced diplomas with three-year baccalaureate degrees is the requirement that states how many of the faculty who teach in a program should have various types of graduate degrees. Moreover, in the PEQAB Handbooks, no differentiation is made with respect to this requirement between three-year and four-year baccalaureate degrees. There is an inconsistency between having very detailed learning outcome requirements on the one hand, and a great many input and process requirements on the other. This deprives students and society at large of the benefits that would result when institutions have the opportunity to satisfy the outcome requirements in other more innovative, effective, and economical ways.

As noted earlier, another area where the PEQAB has stipulated requirements that could pose problems is in regard to admissions. Having more open admissions than the Ontario university sector is an important element of the colleges' mandate, and one of the reasons why the college system was created in the first place. The need to preserve more open admissions would be a very important consideration in replacing advanced diplomas with three-year baccalaureate degrees, and in replacing two-year diplomas with associate

degrees. Otherwise, many of the types of students whom the colleges have served and who have succeeded in college programs in spite of weaknesses in their previous educational records would be disqualified from admission. This is also an area in which the PEQAB requirements make no distinction between three-year and four-year baccalaureate programs.

The college programs for which changes are sought in the titles of their credentials are programs that have already been in existence, most of them for quite some time. They have been monitored by program advisory committees and have been scrutinized through the quality assurance processes that have been in operation in the college sector. Thus, it would be inappropriate and wasteful to treat a request to change the titles of the credentials that are awarded for completion of these programs in the same way that applications for brand new programs are treated by the PEQAB.

The agency that has the primary system-wide responsibility for quality assurance in the college sector is the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS). Two of the core quality assurance processes undertaken by the OCQAS with respect to advanced diploma programs are the Credential Validation Service which determines that the programs are validly classified as advanced diploma programs; and the Program Quality Assurance Process Audit (PQAPA) which validates the internal quality assurance procedures that a college employs in having its programs assessed. The PQAPA in the colleges sector is similar to the process employed in the university sector by the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance for the purpose of quality assurance in that sector. The Ontario College Quality Assurance Service is one of eight agencies worldwide, and just two in North America, that have been recognized by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education as meeting its Guidelines of Good Practice as a stand-alone quality assurance agency (International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, 2012).

As the advanced diploma programs of the colleges are existing programs that already have been subject to credential validation and quality assurance procedures, and are equivalent in regard to learning outcomes to three-year baccalaureate programs, it should be possible to work out a streamlined and less expensive process for the Minister to give consent to changing the name of the credential that is awarded for completion of these programs. While the PEQAB

could be asked to develop such a process, there is an alternative approach that could be employed.

Instead of using the PEQAB, the Minister could refer applications to replace the advanced diploma with a three-year baccalaureate degree to the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service. This option was made possible by new regulations under the Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act that were published in *The Ontario Gazette* in September, 2011. Under the new regulations, the Minister may refer applications for Ministerial consents to another accrediting or quality assurance body than the PEQAB. However, before doing so, the Minister must obtain advice from the PEQAB on the suitability of such a referral, and be “satisfied that the board’s advice supports a decision to refer the application to the body or authority” (Ontario, 2011). It is difficult to predict the likelihood of one quality assurance agency deferring to another such agency.

Be that as it may, given the experience and increased stature that the OCQAS has gained since the Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act came into being, consideration should be given also to turning over the responsibility for review of four-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges to this agency. The college sector quality assurance process has been operational since 2006. Quality assurance for all degree programs in the university sector is handled by a university sector agency, the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance. Although the university sector has had many years experience with some kinds of quality assurance activities, the process as it is currently structured was put in place only in 2010.

Rather than dividing the responsibility for quality assurance in the college sector between the OCQAS and the PEQAB, it would be more efficient to follow the practice of the university sector, and make a single, sector-based agency responsible for quality assurance of all programs in the college sector. The agency that is responsible for quality assurance in the university sector concentrates exclusively on quality assurance in that sector, and presumably that specialization enables it to do its job most effectively. By that same logic, it would make sense to concentrate the responsibility for quality assurance of all college sector programs in a single agency that specializes in quality assurance for that sector.

If the OCQAS were responsible for quality assurance of both diploma and degree programs, it could deal with issues pertaining to transfer between diploma and

degree programs in the colleges in a more informed and knowledgeable manner than could an agency that has responsibility for just one of these two sets of programs.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, an agency that specializes in college sector quality assurance would be better able to deal with issues that are unique to that sector than one which is primarily university-oriented. One such issue is how to ensure quality while maintaining as much flexibility as possible in regard to admission requirements. Another is how to judge the qualifications of faculty for teaching in occupationally-focused programs in a way that gives appropriate recognition to professional expertise and accomplishment in contrast to rigid requirements pertaining to educational credentials. A quality assurance agency that has responsibility for the entire college sector is more likely to develop the depth of understanding of these issues than one that has responsibility for only a portion of college sector activity and whose primary focus is the university sector.

While thus far in its life, the OCQAS has operated a process of auditing the quality assurance processes of institutions and has conducted assessments of how well programs meet the program standards for their respective credentials, it has not had responsibility for full-blown quality assessments of proposed new programs. However, given its experience and stature as a quality assurance agency, it should be able to make whatever structural changes would be necessary for it to perform the analogous function with respect to proposed new college programs as its counterpart, the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, performs with respect to proposed new programs in the university sector. Such structural changes might include widening membership on its board to include employers, persons with relevant college sector quality expertise in other jurisdictions, and persons from the university sector who have relevant expertise. The inclusion of employers would reflect the career –focused orientation of college programs. Obviously, it would still be the Ministry, not the OCQAS that would determine funding eligibility for proposed new programs.

An alternative to making each sector responsible for its own quality assurance would be to give a single agency responsibility for quality assurance for all

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<sup>3</sup> When colleges were given the opportunity to offer applied degree programs in Alberta in 1995-96, applications to offer the programs were reviewed by the Ministry of Advanced Education. In 2004, that responsibility was transferred to the Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC), a newly established body whose primary responsibilities were for university programs and a body that had no responsibility for diploma programs in the colleges. Concern about the lack of familiarity of the CAQC with the college sector may be one of the reasons why there have been no completed applications for new applied degree programs in Alberta since the responsibility for review of applications was transferred to the CAQC.

postsecondary education. From the colleges' perspective, this idea offers both an attraction and concern.

The attractive feature of a consolidated quality assurance agency that has responsibility for the programs of both universities and colleges is that there is reason to hope that the quality judgments of such a body about college degree programs would carry more weight with universities than the judgments of an agency that might be identified with the college sector by virtue of concentrating on that sector. However, the experience with reviews of four-year baccalaureate programs in Ontario thus far shows that this hope is not justified.

The PEQAB decided early on to impose the same requirements on the colleges as it imposes when it assesses programs of universities – requirements that reflect university values, conventions and tastes in educational matters. As a consequence, the colleges were deprived of flexibility in regard to such matters as admissions policies, awarding transfer credit to their own diploma students seeking to enter their own baccalaureate programs, and judging the qualifications of those in who teach in their baccalaureate programs. The hope was that by compromising their views on such educational practices, they would earn the right for graduates of their baccalaureate programs to be admitted to postgraduate programs in Ontario universities. However, by and large the colleges have not been able to reap the benefits of this possibly Faustian bargain. Even though it is often accomplished professors from Ontario universities, serving on assessment panels, who commend the quality and degree-worthiness of college baccalaureate programs, the same universities have refused to give recognition to college baccalaureate programs for purposes of admission to graduate and professional programs – though some universities may consider graduates of college baccalaureate programs on a case-by-case basis.

Since quality review by an agency that has responsibility for both college and university programs has not made a difference in regard to acceptance of college programs, it would be sensible to adopt the more efficient, responsive approach, and make quality assurance of all college programs the responsibility of an agency that concentrates on college sector quality assurance. However, if an attempt is made at establishing a new quality assurance that would have responsibility for the programs of both the colleges and the publicly funded universities of Ontario, there should be equal representation of persons with a college sector background or identification and a university background and

identification on the board of such an agency; and an equal voice for colleges and universities in determining the policies and practices of the agency.

Whatever the agency, if the same procedures are followed in granting Ministerial consents for the new credentials for the colleges that have been suggested in this paper as have been employed thus far under the Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, then the consents would be for a period of five years. Having such a short period of time between assessments could be problematic given the large number of new three-year baccalaureate and associate degree programs that would have to be reviewed. The five year term may have been appropriate for brand new programs. However, this seems like a very short time frame for programs with a proven track record. Consideration should be given to extending the length of Ministerial consents for college programs from five years to seven, a period commonly employed by quality assurance agencies in other sectors and jurisdictions, or even to ten years. Even better would be to do away with the practice of stipulating a number of years' duration for a Ministerial consent, and instead make the consent revocable if a program fails to satisfy a periodic quality assessment.

An even better way to reform the procedures for granting Ministerial consents for whatever degree programs of the colleges that are deemed to require consents would be to adopt the quality assurance model that is employed now by the OCQAS. The ingenious part of that model is the separation of credential validation from broader aspects of quality assurance, i.e., between the CVS and the PQAPA processes.

The literature on quality assurance indicates that quality assurance is most effective when it is the responsibility of institutions themselves, and faculty embrace the idea of quality assurance and take ownership of the process (Dill, Massy, Williams & Cook, 1996; Newton, 2000). Vesting the responsibility for quality assurance with institutions prevents some of the downsides of external quality assurance, such as stifling innovation, enforcing conformity, and demoralizing faculty (Anderson, 2006; Harley & Lee, 1997; Morley, 2003; Skolnik, 1989; 2010). Coupling institutional responsibility for quality assurance with an external audit of institutional quality assurance procedures is thought to be the best way to promote both quality improvement and accountability. The move away from external reviews of program quality toward the audit approach in Ontario universities in 2010 is consistent with a worldwide trend in that direction. This is the model that Ontario colleges put in place in 2006.

While employing an audit model for quality assurance of college degree programs makes sense for reasons indicated above, because Ontario colleges are relatively new to degree granting, it might help to gain public confidence that the degree programs are bona fide degree programs if the appropriateness of awarding a degree upon completion of the programs is validated by an external agency that ensures that the student outcomes meet the requirements for the relevant degrees. Thus, the ideal way of dealing with the change of credential of existing advanced diploma programs to three-year baccalaureate degrees would be: (1) first, conduct an external credential validation to determine whether an advanced diploma program meets the outcome requirements of the three-year baccalaureate degree; and (2) then, to make ongoing quality assurance the responsibility of the institutions overseen through an external quality audit process.

Similarly to the practice in the university sector, proposed *new* three-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges – as opposed to *existing* advanced diploma programs that are having a change of credential - should be subject to a full quality review, which includes validation of the credential. After initial program approval, ongoing program quality assurance should be handled through the institutional audit process. This model should be extended to the four-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges. In a large public higher education sector like the Ontario college sector, which has well developed quality assurance procedures, there is no justification for retaining the approach to ongoing quality assurance that the Ontario university sector has abandoned. After a college baccalaureate program of any duration has received Ministerial approval, ongoing quality assurance should be handled through the institutional audit process.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. The Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act should be amended to give colleges the authority to award baccalaureate degrees – both three-year and four-year degrees - and associate degrees.



As the three-year baccalaureate degrees and the associate degrees are equivalent to the advanced diplomas and the two-year diplomas that the colleges have been awarding since their founding, the colleges have demonstrated sufficient prowess in regard to the corresponding programs that the awarding of these degrees is one of their core functions, and thus warrants being a statutory power of the colleges. Moreover, the sheer number of such programs makes it impractical to require Ministerial consents for each of these programs. As regards the four-year baccalaureate programs that the colleges presently offer under Ministerial consents, there has now been sufficient experience with colleges offering such programs as to give them statutory authority to award degrees. This would be in keeping the tradition in Ontario of postsecondary institutions gaining the authority to award degrees on their own after a period of oversight by some other institution or agency. Normally this period of oversight has been less than the ten years that the colleges have been awarding such degrees under the oversight of the Postsecondary Education Quality Assurance Board.

The only situation in which it would be unnecessary to amend the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act is if it is decided that the Minister has the authority to approve these new credentials under that Act or through new or amended regulations under the Act. However, even in that case, it would be desirable to amend the Colleges Act and/or the PESCE Act so that four-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges can be treated in the same way as three-year baccalaureate programs.

2. Until the Colleges Act is amended, the colleges should be enabled to replace all existing advanced diploma programs with three-year baccalaureate degrees, and all existing two-year diploma programs with associate degrees. Replacements of these credentials should be accomplished through an expedited process of granting Ministerial consents for the awarding of the new credentials.

This process needs to be expedited so that the change in the title of credentials can be made for all programs within a reasonable period of time, ideally no more than one year. Otherwise, it will be very confusing for students and disruptive for colleges if some programs yield baccalaureate degrees while equivalent programs yield advanced diplomas. Under the normal pace of the consent process, dealing with so many programs could take many years.

3. In the expedited process of awarding Ministerial consents, the determination of whether each program meets the standard for the new credential should be made by the Minister based upon advice from the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service, as is enabled by Regulation 34/03 under the Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act.

With its history of quality assurance for two-year and advanced diploma programs, and expertise and understanding of matters pertaining to the colleges, the OCQAS is the most appropriate agency to advise on these programs. The OCQAS has the appropriate international recognition as a quality assurance agency to perform this function.

4. Employing the processes of the Credential Validation Service, the OCQAS should determine for each advanced diploma program whether it satisfies the OQF outcome requirements of the three-year baccalaureate degree.

Since these are not new programs, there would be no need for a full quality review. The only issue is whether a program satisfies the outcome requirements of the three-year baccalaureate. The OCQAS could make that determination employing the well tested processes of the Credential Validation Service. After the credential has been validated, periodic quality assurance could be the responsibility of each college, overseen through the Program Quality Assurance Program Audit (PQAPA) process. Proposals for new three-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges would be subject to a full quality review that would include credential validation.

5. In regard to the associate degree, all programs that meet the OQF outcome requirements of the two-year diploma should be recommended for a change in their credential to the associate degree. The OCQAS should be asked to confirm that each two-year diploma program does meet those outcome requirements.
6. The Ministry should convene a committee to make recommendations on the conventions that should be employed in regard to specific titles of baccalaureate degrees that replace existing advanced diplomas, and for the specific titles of associate degrees that replace two-year diplomas.

When the framework for titles of new four-year baccalaureate degrees in the colleges was developed by the PEQAB, a top-down process was followed in which the Board determined the framework. Given the very large number of new three-year baccalaureate and associate degrees to be considered now, and the enormous range of such programs, it will be advantageous to draw upon the knowledge and experience of a range of individuals to develop the framework for titles of these programs. This committee should include representatives of different programs areas in the colleges, the Credentials Validation Service, the Ministry, the PEQAB, and perhaps relevant professional associations.

7. In keeping with the suggestion in recommendation 4, that after initial program approval, ongoing quality assurance be the responsibility of institutions, overseen through an external audit process, there is no reason to stipulate a particular number of years' duration for Ministerial consents for degree programs in the colleges. Rather, it might be stated that a consent is granted at the pleasure of the Minister and could be revoked should the Minister lose confidence in the quality of the program.
8. For consistency with the treatment of new three-year baccalaureate and associate degree programs, the procedures for Ministerial consents for four-year baccalaureate programs should be modified: after initial approval of a program, ongoing quality assurance for the program should

be an institutional responsibility, subject to external oversight through an audit process.

For the same reason that it would be the appropriate agency to have responsibility for review of and quality assurance for three-year baccalaureate programs in the colleges, the OCQAS would be the appropriate agency for performing these functions with respect to four-year baccalaureate programs as well. Similarly, the same rationale for the approach to quality assurance of ongoing programs would apply to the four-year baccalaureate programs.

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