

Monograph series

LESSONS FROM DOWN UNDER:

QUALITY ASSURANCE, ACCREDITATION AND
THE LEGITIMIZATION OF THE APPLIED DEGREE

presented by

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author puts forward the case that the emergence of the applied baccalaureate is one manifestation of the radically changing landscape for higher education in a global context. Although “parity of esteem” issues will continue to haunt advocates of applied degrees for some time, a concerted effort is called for in putting in place processes and strategies for building credibility. These hybrids will become permanent fixtures in applied post-secondary institutions that have historically focused on certificate, diploma and trades level qualifications. The introduction of the applied degree will undoubtedly challenge these organizations to find new ways of holding true to their vocational mandates as they strive to move with the times. Much of the impetus for the development of applied degrees is coming from employer demand spurred on by accelerating advances in technology which, in turn, calls on higher level skills and expertise from graduates.

For non-university degrees to be taken seriously, the author argues for the development of stringent accreditation and quality assurance processes that will, over time, affirm and legitimize the applied degree and raise standards for baccalaureate curriculum design and development across the board for universities, polytechnics, community colleges and institutes of technology. Special reference is made to New Zealand which has a longer history of offering applied degrees than the other jurisdictions referred to in the article.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Ted Dunlop is currently a member of the Executive Group at Waikato Institute of Technology in Hamilton, New Zealand, where he serves as Dean, Faculty of Health, Arts and Social Sciences. Over a long career in community college education, Dr. Dunlop has had the unique opportunity to work across five jurisdictions - four in Canada (Quebec, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia) and most recently, Aotearoa New Zealand , where he has resided for six years.

Starting in the mid 1980s, Dr. Dunlop became involved in degree completion schemes in an Ontario College of Applied Arts and Technology. In 1993, he moved to British Columbia where he helped develop a unique degree program in a newly designated “university college” in partnership with an established university. From 1998 on, Dr. Dunlop has worked with a New Zealand polytechnic/institute of technology in developing applied degrees at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

At present, Dr. Dunlop has a particular interest in accreditation processes as they apply to degree development and staircasing curriculum models that allow migration from certificate through diploma to degree level study.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LESSONS FROM DOWN UNDER:

QUALITY ASSURANCE, ACCREDITATION AND THE LEGITIMIZATION
OF THE APPLIED DEGREE 1

REFERENCES 23

“Oh! When degree is shak’d, which is the ladder to all high designs.”

Ulysses speaking in William Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, Act 1, Scene 3

In very simple terms, an applied degree at the undergraduate level may be defined as a baccalaureate qualification, with a strong vocational orientation, offered by a community college, technical institute, polytechnic or private training establishment, or PTEs as they are generally referred to in New Zealand. These degrees are usually distinguished from those offered by universities which are described in some circles as academic or foundational degrees. In many respects, it can be argued that these are artificial distinctions that don’t mean much - especially if one accepts that all degrees at all levels should meet the same andragogical standards. However, that is a debate that can be saved for another day.

These hybrid qualifications are relatively new to the community college scene in North America and the TAFE (technical and further education institutes) scene in Australia as well. However, in the New Zealand context, applied degrees have been offered by polytechnics in their own right since the early 1990s following the establishment of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority in 1990. A rough count indicates that there are approximately 150 of these degrees being offered in non-university post-secondary institutions: polytechnics, colleges of education, wananga (Indigenous institutions) and PTEs (private training establishments). In all instances, the accreditation and quality monitoring of these degrees has fallen under the aegis of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). With its small population of four million people and a unitary system of government not plagued by multiple

jurisdictional layers of government, New Zealand has been seen historically as a laboratory for innovation in health, education and social services in particular.

On the other hand, Canada has suffered under constitutional constraints that have discouraged the development of national standards and processes of quality assurance since the confederation was established in 1867. As a result, there are varying patterns of development across the 13 Canadian jurisdictions when it comes to the emergence of applied degrees. In recent years, there has been an explosion of activity in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario in particular supported by legislative and regulatory structures designed to ensure the integrity and credibility of these new qualifications. Ontario now has its Post-secondary Education Quality Assessment Board; Alberta its Campus Alberta Quality Council and British Columbia its Degree Quality Assessment Board. Interestingly, these new accreditation bodies intend to apply one set of standards for approval of all degree programs in public and private post-secondary institutions - universities, colleges and institutes.

This is quite different from the New Zealand experience where the national accreditation body continued to directly oversee accreditation of polytechnic degrees until July 2003 unlike the universities which, since establishment of NZQA, have managed their own accreditation processes through their Committee on University Academic Programs of the New Zealand Vice Chancellors' Committee. Some states in Australia are taking a more prescriptive approach to the development of applied degrees in TAFEs. In

the State of Victoria, for example, such degrees can only be developed in highly specialized niche areas with no state funding to support them and demonstrating clear linkages to the relevant industry sector (Department of Education & Training, Victoria State Government, 2002, p. 10). Universities, on the other hand, have been left with considerable autonomy to design and offer their own degree programs and do not appear to face such restrictions in degree development. It will be interesting to see how long this double standard prevails over the course of time. In New Zealand, it lasted just over a decade.

One of the first issues that proponents of applied degrees must confront relates to “parity of esteem” with baccalaureate degrees offered by universities. There are significant hurdles to be confronted here in terms of selling the merits of such qualifications to individuals, parents, employers and society in general. At the same time, many university personnel are quite dismissive of vocational schools being empowered to offer degrees. It may not be that much of an issue in British Columbia and Alberta, with their long history of university transfer schemes, but it is a big deal in Ontario where the two sectors have operated to a large degree in splendid isolation from each other since the colleges of applied arts and technology were first established in the middle to late 1960s. In fact, the enabling legislation establishing the Ontario college and institute system state makes it abundantly clear that the colleges and institutes were not to be stepping stones into universities.

In the Ontario context, colleges and institutes were expected to offer certificate, diploma and trades qualifications that prepared graduates for direct

employment. At the same time, the universities were expected to continue catering to the allegedly brighter and more academically inclined students being groomed for entry to the professional classes. From the 1960s through to the early 1980s, this simplistic point of difference seemed to work - especially when the bulk of students was less diverse and composed primarily of high school leavers. In hindsight, it could be argued, again in the Ontario context, that this division gave colleges and institutes time to develop their own identities and unique cultures as career-based, employment-driven organizations. However, from the mid-1980s on, this earlier *raison d'être* began to rapidly crumble with the acceleration of the Information Age and the dramatic shift in student demographics away from the high school leaver cohort to a much more diverse and polyglot mix of students. It should not come as a surprise to us that we are now living in one of those watershed periods when higher education is compelled to redefine itself as it has always done at intervals down through the ages. The emergence of the applied degree is just one manifestation of that phenomenon.

Another indicator that the boundaries between universities and colleges/institutes were becoming blurred is reflected in the number of university graduates in the 1980s who began beating at the doors of colleges and institutes looking to “top up” their undergraduate degrees with a compressed college or institute qualification as a means of making themselves more job ready. Interestingly, it was the student, now transformed into the “consumer”, who led the charge here. At the same time, as graduates of the fledgling community colleges began to find their place in the world, there was less willingness on their part to accept the “terminal” status of their college

qualifications. This is a phenomenon that will likely repeat itself in the years ahead as the holders of applied degrees, in turn, refuse to accept the terminal status of their applied degrees and clamour for entry to graduate school.

It is worth taking some time here to examine the impact that these trends have had on colleges/institutes and universities in recent years. On the college/institute side, it has been evident for some time that many of the vocational trades and vocational disciplines have become increasingly sophisticated, requiring higher order thinking and skills acquisition- especially as mastery of advancing and ever-changing technology has become more acute. Recently, John Webster of Unitec (Institute of Technology) (2004) in Auckland used the example of advances in medical imaging to make the point that "...roles once thought of as adequately filled by technicians, highly skilled within their narrow band of expertise but with clearly defined and limited roles, now require practitioners who can think beyond their initial skill sets and adapt to change." (p. 15A). It was this same phenomenon that drove the old professions of law, medicine, commerce, engineering and architecture into the reluctant arms of the universities in an earlier era. Of course, the downside of this trend to "academize" vocational education has seen the charge of "creeping elitism" flung at the colleges/institutes and often times from within their own ranks.

The fear that the introduction of the applied degree will undermine the existing culture of colleges and institutes is not an unfounded one. The concern that these degrees will drive a wedge between faculty groups, in particular, is deserving of careful attention. The issue is one that warrants an open and honest debate. How we make room for applied degrees without taking on the

trappings of a traditional university remains to be seen. This poses a real challenge especially when we look around and see institutions in some jurisdictions struggling to keep their balance by precariously straddling both sides of the fence. Not to say that it can't be done, but it will take a colossal effort by all parties to resolve the tensions that invariably will emerge.

Throughout this tumultuous period of change, the universities have not remained unscathed as they increasingly face the wrath of traditionalists in their own ranks who deplore what they see as "creeping vocationalism" invading the hallowed halls of academe. The debate engaging our university colleagues is not an unhealthy one as they try to accommodate new designer degrees that are clearly in the vocational domain in areas like real estate management, hospitality and tourism studies, fashion design, retail merchandising and a host of others. At the same time, universities over the past 20 years have set out to capture an increasing portion of the adult learner market by offering a plethora of certificate and diploma qualifications that, in very many cases, resemble the traditional offerings of colleges and institutes.

A case could be made here that what we are witnessing is the convergence of the two different sectors. The emergence of university colleges in British Columbia in the early 1990s followed by the creation of universities of technology in Australasia (including the Auckland University of Technology) may be early manifestations of this trend. The Government of British Columbia has recently announced the transformation of the University College of the Cariboo into what it describes as a special purpose university. At the same time, the appetite of private sector organizations to grab a bigger slice of the

pie might prompt the public colleges and universities to open new channels for dialogue premised on cooperation and partnership. This might be wishful thinking on the part of this author but it is worth giving some thought to.

Where to from here? To begin, it might help to look at jurisdictions like New Zealand and learn some lessons from the Kiwi experience. Why re-invent the wheel? As mentioned at the outset of this article, “parity of esteem” issues will continue to test the credibility and standing of these new types of baccalaureate degrees, both in the eyes of the general public and employers, in particular. However, there are a host of other issues that must be addressed:

- relationships with universities that are not driven by mistrust, condescension and defensiveness;
- examination of the quality assurance roles of accreditation boards and commissions;
- curriculum design requirements that will force clearer definition of learning progression (which is especially important for students following a pathway from certificate through diploma to degree level study);
- opportunities for advancement of graduates over time for further study beyond the baccalaureate;
- implications for the professional development of faculty earmarked to teach on degrees;

- employer support for qualifications that are markedly different from the classical profile of a university degree; and,
- the place of general education within the curricula of applied degrees as a means of ensuring that a graduate from a specialized, applied program, is well-rounded enough to appreciate the social, ethical and civic mindedness seen as the hallmark of a good education for all categories of undergraduate degrees.

The best way to build the credibility of applied degrees is through robust accreditation and quality assurance provisions. Although there may be some resentment in college and institute circles that the bar is being raised in terms of what is required of them to develop degrees, this is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, over the long term, stringent accreditation and quality assurance processes can help develop the credibility of applied degrees. This has certainly been the case in New Zealand where the New Zealand Qualifications Authority only recently devolved these processes to an arm of the national association of polytechnics and institutes of technology recently re-branded as Institutes of Technology & Polytechnics, New Zealand (ITPNZ). Although not greeted with much fanfare, this transfer is a significant milestone in recognizing the legitimacy of applied degrees offered outside of universities. Interestingly, all post-graduate qualifications must still pass through NZQA, unlike the universities which, as mentioned earlier, have their own body to regulate development of degree qualifications at all levels. The advice to our Canadian counterparts who are new to the game is to grin and bear it as a necessary phase in the evolution of these new qualifications.

Before addressing issues specific to quality assurance and accreditation processes, there are some other key factors that need to be taken into account. One is the need to place relationships with universities on a stronger footing. As the boundaries become increasingly blurred in terms of who does what, it behoves us to open and strengthen dialogue with our university colleagues - not all of whom are hostile to our efforts. As accreditation bodies become a more potent fixture on the post-secondary landscape, new prominence will need to be given to curriculum design and program development. A higher level of sophistication will be called for as clear standards are put in place that mark the progression of learning for students embarking on higher level qualifications.

For example, in the New Zealand context, the National Qualifications Framework identifies 10 levels of learning with certificates at Levels 1-4, diplomas at Levels 5, Graduate Certificates at Level 6, Bachelors and Graduate Diplomas at Level 7, Postgraduate Diplomas and Certificates and Honours Degrees at Level 8, Masters at Level 9 and Doctorates at Level 10 (NZQA, 2003, p. 3). These clearly defined levels are especially relevant for students following a path from certificate through diploma to degree-level study. At the same time, consideration of opportunities for advancement of graduates over time for further study beyond the baccalaureate cannot be pushed to the back burner. In this respect, dialogue with the universities can expedite the advancement of graduates of applied degrees over time to graduate level study. Colleges and institutes embarking on degree development will need to attend to the implications these degrees will have on the culture of their organizations, the changing expectations of faculty teaching on degrees including the role of

research in support of degree study and the garnering of employer support to give more than just lip service to these qualifications and finally as mentioned earlier, the place of general or liberal education in the curricula of applied degrees. Interestingly, in the New Zealand context, there has been no real attempt to carve off a portion of curricula to be defined as “general education”. In order to avoid the dismissive attitude that all too often is aimed at general education proponents in Canadian colleges and institutes, it might be helpful to examine different ways of ensuring that this dimension of curricula is more effectively integrated and not left exposed as a target by those who do not appreciate its relevance or see it only as a way of protecting the jobs of liberal arts faculty members.

Aside from select professional areas, Canadian colleges/institutes and universities have not had much experience with quality assurance and accreditation processes. Colleges/institutes and universities develop program proposals which are then referred to their respective ministries of education for approval. The quality of these approvals is variable. The advantage of well-established accreditation and quality assurance processes is that they bring a higher and more consistent standard to the development of new programs- hopefully, one set of standards for degrees wherever they originate. This has certainly been the experience of the author in comparing his experiences in four jurisdictions in Canada with that of New Zealand over the past six years. Until recently, as Marshall (2004) has pointed out, what we have had in the Canadian context is a “simple system of accreditation by legislation”, that is “if an institution was approved by the respective provincial government, it was deemed to be accredited” (p. 2). The labelling of these

new hybrid degrees as bachelor of applied... or bachelor of technology reflects an attempt to differentiate these credentials from the more traditional “academic” or “foundational” degrees offered by universities. To make this kind of differentiation runs the risk of creating what Marshall calls a “degree divide” which simply feeds into the public perception that the qualifications offered by colleges and institutes are inferior to those offered by universities (2004, p. 21). Interestingly, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority makes no distinction between undergraduate degrees offered by universities and those offered by non-university tertiary institutions. However, what is described as a focus qualifier like “Applied” may be added to the title of the degree in order to denote a particular focus of a program and/or qualification (NZQA Approvals, 2003, p.26). At the same time, there are anecdotal reportings of universities making such distinctions in their admission policies and practices governing enrolment in postgraduate programs. As noted further on, Canadian colleges and institutes will need to ensure that their new qualifications do not become viewed as terminal in nature. This is where careful negotiation and dialogue with universities becomes imperative.

At the degree level, the accreditation vacuum experienced in the Canadian context has created the somewhat anomalous situation where membership in a national collective of universities, i.e., the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) becomes the de facto standard for accreditation of all degrees. As Marshall points out, membership in this exclusive club of universities has become the benchmark for acceptability of Canadian degree credentials adding further that many universities use AUCC membership as an important criterion for accepting degree graduates into their graduate

programs (2004, p. 15). At present, certification of teachers and nurses throughout Canada is contingent on AUCC membership which presents British Columbia colleges and institutes with a conundrum as they set out, under the authority of the provincial government, to develop applied, practice-based baccalaureates in nursing in their own right.

Where is all this leading us? In just a few short years, there has been a flurry of activity in the United States, Canada and Australia to develop applied degrees. At the same time, different jurisdictions have attempted to ring fence these new degrees by establishing accreditation bodies to control their development. As suggested at the outset, accreditation processes provide the best vehicle for building the quality and credibility of these new credentials. The trend should be applauded even if it sets a double standard, as seems to be the case emerging in Australia, for example, with the universities continuing to be allowed a fair amount of autonomy with degree development while the TAFEs face stringent standards to reach and restrictions are placed on their right to offer applied degrees.

In the New Zealand context, it has taken more than a decade for the central accreditation body to delegate approval of undergraduate degree programs to the quality arm of the national association of polytechnics and institutes of technology. The change happened in July, 2003 and, though receiving little fanfare at the time as noted earlier, it will stand as a significant milestone in acceptance of polytechnic degrees as a bona fide part of the tertiary education landscape. In time, it is hoped that this double standard will yield to one standard for the accreditation of all degrees - a course of action that several

Canadian provinces are following with the establishment of mandated accreditation bodies to approve all degree development.

At this juncture, the following strategies might provide a useful roadmap for putting in place a robust accreditation process for the approval of applied degrees. These strategies are drawn by the author from the New Zealand experience over the last dozen years:

- It is important that curricula being developed show a clear progression of learning for all years of the program. This is especially relevant for certificate and diploma level students hoping to ladder or staircase into the degree. Prospective students need to appreciate that degree level study is not “more of the same” and carries a different set of expectations. Faculty members accustomed to teaching at certificate and diploma levels also must understand the difference.
- The place of research or more broadly defined “scholarly activities” in enriching teaching and learning must be clearly understood, especially by faculty who are recruited to teach at the degree level.
- Negotiations need to be conducted with university counterparts to explore pathways for progression from the applied baccalaureate to postgraduate level study. Legislative and regulatory intervention might be necessary to “encourage” such collaboration.

- Employer, industry and professional support must be clearly demonstrated as part of the accreditation process. This should include rigorous market research and analysis and a clear picture of the employment profile for prospective graduates of applied degrees. Once a new degree is approved and launched, it is important to identify how ongoing industry support will be maintained and expanded.
- As part of the quality assurance processes, there should be adequate provision for ongoing audit and monitoring. In the New Zealand context, Degree Monitors fulfil this responsibility through annual visits reviewing and evaluating the program and preparing a report for the accreditation body. These Degree Monitors are individuals who have distinguished themselves in their respective fields and whose professional stature is recognized by business and industry. In most cases, they are drawn from universities and are strongly sympathetic to the cause of the applied degree.
- Paper accreditation of new applied degree proposals should be avoided. A panel composed of a good cross section of appropriate stakeholders (including university representation) should visit the sponsoring college or institute to assess first hand the case before accreditation is granted. Clearly defined protocols need to be followed for these visits.

- The relationship between the accreditation body which approves the curriculum and the arm of government that approves accompanying funding must be clearly demarcated.
- The traditional aspects of accreditation need to be attended to with respect to the effectiveness of supporting services and the level of resource allocation to support the new degree, i.e. library resources and support, student services, counselling, career counselling and advising, study skills support, disability support services, on-line teaching and learning support, etc.
- From a curriculum design perspective, a taxonomy of learning should guide the structure for the development of new degree programs. The National Qualifications Framework in New Zealand provides the framework for measuring learning expectations for the 10 levels entered on the Framework. Interestingly, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia are following suit in their efforts to explicitly articulate the learning expectations for degree level study.

At the heart of the accreditation process is the documentation needed to support the development of a new program. The “cookbook” approach used in New Zealand provides a convenient guide for curriculum developers. Eight key criteria are used to evaluate proposals submitted by NZQA approved post-secondary institutions. As the following illustrates, each criterion carries with it the specific requirements for meeting that criterion:

- Title, aims, learning outcomes and coherence: The adequacy and appropriateness of the title, aims, stated learning outcomes and coherence of the whole course.
- Delivery and learning methods: The adequacy and appropriateness of delivery and learning methods, for all modes of delivery, given the stated learning outcomes.
- Assessment: The adequacy of the means of ensuring that assessment procedures are fair, valid, consistent and appropriate, given the stated learning outcomes.
- Acceptability of the course: The acceptability of the proposed course to the relevant academic, industrial, professional and other communities, in terms of its stated aims and learning outcomes, nomenclature, content and structure.
- Regulations: The adequacy and appropriateness of the regulations that specify requirements for admission, credit for previous study, recognition of prior learning, course length and structure, integration of practical/work-based components, assessment procedures, and normal progression within a course.
- Resources: The capacity of the organization to support sustained delivery of the course, in all delivery modes, with regard to

appropriate academic, staffing, teaching facilities, physical resources and support services.

- Evaluation and review: The adequacy and effectiveness of the provision for evaluation and review of courses: for monitoring the on-going relevance of learning outcomes, course delivery and course standards; for reviewing course regulations and content; for monitoring improvement following evaluation and review; and for determining whether the course shall continue to be offered.
- Research: The adequacy of provision of research facilities and support of staff involved in research, the levels of research activity of staff involved in the course and of ways by which the research-teaching links are made in the curriculum (NZQA, 2003, pp 7-11).

Actual approval and accreditation starts with an application and fee to cover all expenses associated with the process which is charged to the applicant. If given the green light, a site visit is arranged for a panel “representing the interest groups in the field covered by the proposal...” (ITP Quality, 2004, p.2). The proposal itself involves two steps: “an evaluation of the course itself and then an evaluation of the capacity of the Provider to offer the course and maintain the standard of graduates at a degree level.” (ITP Quality, p. 2) The sponsoring provider is allowed to nominate panel members who must then be endorsed by the appropriate academic, industry or professional organizations.

The accreditation body, in this instance ITP Quality (under delegation from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority) assigns a Quality Systems Evaluator (QSE) with overall responsibility for the process and panel chair. In addition, the panel is usually composed of two university academics (from New Zealand or overseas) nominated by the New Zealand Vice Chancellors' Committee; one senior academic from the applying institution but from a different discipline; one senior academic from a different institution offering a similar program; two representatives from external stakeholder groups and one member endorsed by an institution's Maori stakeholders as identified in the institution's charter (Form G4 ITP Quality Approval and Accreditation of Courses leading to Degrees (April, 2004), p. 47).

The proposal documentation is reviewed by panellists prior to the actual visit, responses made and a preliminary appraisal rendered before confirmation of a site visit. Any subsequent documentation required of the sponsor must be provided in advance if a decision is made to proceed with the site visit. Following an evening briefing of the panel, the visit normally occurs over a full two-day period with evaluation of the documentation against the program approval and accreditation criteria. The sponsors are on hand to respond to queries about the proposal. At the end of the visit, a written recommendation is made to the accreditation body supporting or rejecting the proposal. If the recommendation is for approval then the name of a Monitor is put forward for consideration at the same time. The panel recommendation is weighed by the accreditation body and a decision is made whether to approve the program and accredit the provider.

An interesting feature of the New Zealand scheme is the appointment of Degree Monitors to ensure that the conditions of original approval and accreditation are firmly met. In addition to the submission of an annual program evaluation report by the provider, the accreditation body appoints an independent monitor who will visit the institution to determine that all accreditation requirements are being met. In addition, for at least the first year following approval, an Independent Evaluator will accompany the monitor on his or her visit. Monitors are appointed “who are experienced in academic processes and expert in the discipline area of the degree. They will have an independent and neutral perspective on the degree and the ITP (institute of technology/polytechnic)” (NZPPC Degree Monitoring Guidelines, January 2004, p.4). Monitors are provided with an orientation to the role and ongoing support and guidance. The actual visits occur over the course of a full day and will include meetings with senior management, program managers, lecturers/teaching staff, resource managers, e. g. librarians, students, program advisory committee members and other relevant stakeholders. The report that follows is generally divided into two parts. The first part lists:

- groups and/or individuals contacted during the visit;
- information provided to update or extend the annual program evaluation report;
- comments on information provided by the ITP in its annual program evaluation report;

- developments in relation to issues identified in previous monitoring where applicable; and,
- other issues discussed or identified (NZPPC Guidelines, p.6).

The second part of the report generally focuses on the following aspects:

- Whether the degree is being implemented and managed as planned and presented at the time of approval.
- Whether modifications and enhancements made by the ITP have been broadly consistent with the intent of the program and the natural evolution of a quality program.
- The appropriateness of consideration given to any recommendations made by the Evaluation Panel.
- The level of independent, external academic input provided to inform reviews and future possible program enhancements.
- Any issues that may affect the satisfactory provision of the degree (NZPPC Guidelines, p.6).

In time, once the provider considers the program to be well-established, application can be made to the accreditation body (now ITP Quality for

undergraduate degrees under delegated authority from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority) to relax the requirement for annual visits by monitors and rely more heavily on the annual program evaluation report as the main vehicle for quality assurance.

The applied baccalaureate has been described in many circles as “an idea whose time has come” (Garmon, 2003, p. 1). It is an idea that has obviously taken root fairly quickly and is spreading rapidly as evidenced by the example of New Zealand in the early 1990s and select jurisdictions in Canada, Australia and the United States, especially in the past five years. It is part of a larger phenomenon where the needs of a technology-based society are aggressively driving changes in higher education and forcing a reassessment of traditional mandates, core values and ways of doing business. As Walker (2000) has noted, “the world of education is up for grabs” (p. 1). The floodgates have been opened and there is no turning back. The applied degree is here to stay.

Rather than waste time debating whether or not such hybrids should be allowed to exist, it would make more sense to channel energy into ensuring the efficacy of these qualifications. The best way of doing this - and again, drawing on the New Zealand experience - is to ensure that robust accreditation and quality assurance requirements are in place. Although hardly an overnight process, this will not only help establish the credibility of the applied degree as alluded to earlier, but will also go a long way in strengthening the curriculum development and design processes for university undergraduate degrees if it

is to be expected that the same high standards are to be applied. It is heartening that the Canadian jurisdictions moving quickly to endorse applied degrees are looking at applying one standard across all tertiary education sectors. However, even in cases such as that of Australia, where the bar is being raised somewhat higher for applied degrees, this attention to standards will work to the advantage of these types of qualifications. Winning favour will take time and accreditation is the best vehicle for building credibility, even if seen as inequitable and overly prescriptive in the short-term.

The emergence of accreditation bodies in select provinces will help remedy the accreditation and quality assurance vacuum that currently exists for all types of degrees whatever their origins. It will also challenge the appropriateness of a professional body, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, made up of a collection of university members, being unofficially vested over time with de facto and quasi accreditation powers. The real issue to be faced here is not whether applied post-secondary institutions will be allowed to develop a new type of applied degree but whether clear standards will be applied across the board in order to ensure that all of the options available to learners at the baccalaureate level will reach the same threshold of quality and satisfy their specific aspirations. In time, the point of origin of an undergraduate degree as a distinguishing marker should make very little difference.

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