

# SAAF DISCUSSION FORUM ON NON-DEGREE CREDENTIALS

(FEB. 13, 2014; BCIT – DOWNTOWN CAMPUS, VANCOUVER, BC)

## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

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**1. *Is a lack of common understanding in policy and/or practice of these types of credentials across the post-secondary sector problematic? If so, how?***

Most responses indicated that participants did indeed see this as problematic. In particular, it was felt that this perceived lack poses problems for students (mobility), institutions (marketing of credentials and international student recruitment), and employers (lack of recognition). There are also problems regarding recognition of these credentials by other provincial jurisdictions.

It was also felt that the proliferation of these credentials in recent years can be very confusing for students. The lack of consistency between program specifics and even the related terminology feeds into this confusion. (One described it as the “wild west”.) Some may share similar titles and yet be very different. They can also vary dramatically in length, credits, and standards. Because of the absence of a meaningful structure or definitions, it isn’t clear (for example) which credentials would be appropriate to train for a specific career.

Some expressed the view that we cannot have quality assurance without some kind of standardization. While some may exist on the basis of trust, this could be tricky to address as not all institutions offering these credentials are part of the BC Transfer System. They also queried whether any discussion regarding these credentials could reasonably be focused just on public institutions – or whether it should be expanded to include the private sector. They also felt that there are financial implications at play here as credit-heavy programs can be very expensive to run. One noted that professional licensing bodies or associations may have an important part to play in influencing credentials, as is the case with health programs.

In terms of next steps, some wondered if institutions/the post-secondary system should perhaps think about how to self-regulate these issues. Guidelines and data definitions may be helpful if they are meaningful and not arbitrary. One individual underlined the importance of not looking back on the flaws in the system, but looking forward to addressing these issues. Another wondered if it might help to begin by looking at a specific credential – such as post-baccalaureates. It may also help to consider learning outcomes. While some may not see the lack of a framework as a particular problem, some felt that a collaborative approach (with institutions taking the lead) would be a more effective way forward.

**2. *Could common understanding and practices support both flexibility and quality assurance for learners, institutions, and the post-secondary system? If so, how?***

There was general agreement that this would help to support mobility and provide more clarity on the different levels of credentials. That would also help employers to understand and recognize the value of credentials (both within and beyond BC). Others recommended focusing on prior learning assessment and learning outcomes. It was felt that any system that is developed should allow for diversity across programs and institutions, and that students should be enabled to continue as lifelong learners. (Students should be the main focus.)

Some felt that supporting a balance between flexibility and quality assurance may be possible, but *how much* flexibility or innovation? It is important that institutional autonomy is preserved. It was also felt that this kind of initiative should be led by field experts/institutions and at arm's length from the government.

**3. *Are there any existing credential guidelines or models in BC or elsewhere that would be useful for us to consider?***

Two specific examples were offered - the Scotland qualifications authority and the Ontario college system guidelines for their certificates and diplomas. (Although some felt that the Ontario frameworks were much too complicated and did not really address BC issues.) It was also suggested that it may be more appropriate to examine these examples in order to learn, but not to adopt whole-scale, taking the specific challenges of the BC post-secondary context into account.

Some thought intra-institutional guidelines may be useful for sharing across the system, and others suggested that ARUCC would be an appropriate organization to check with about this, and that the PCCAT/ARUCC project regarding the development of a national transcript glossary may be instructive.

Another suggested that BCCAT should take a role on the development of guidelines, but (again) at arm's length from the government.

#### **4. *What process and content components are important in developing and implementing institutional policies on non-degree credentials?***

Although some queried whether guidelines are required as institutional systems are highly variable, most asserted that we (and ultimately students) would benefit from the development of common standards and language definitions. The aims for this kind of project should be focus on consistency – as balanced with flexibility, transparency, comprehension, comparability, equity, recognition, and transferability. It would also help to have some consistency on credits, especially regarding labs, practica, clinical work, blended learning, etc. It may help to start the discussion in a more targeted way (e.g. looking at credential types).

Some posited that the best way to begin examining these issues is to look at (a) the value or purpose of credentials for students - e.g. standalone or laddering? (b) institutional frameworks – to inform best practices.

Some suggested that the development of these kinds of policies should be done by individuals with expertise on pathways and program planning, respecting learning outcomes. (i.e. staff involved with teaching and learning centres who understand learning outcomes.) It was also felt that this work should be done apart from the government, and should be properly grounded in academic research.

Clear institutional policies and implementation plans are important, but policy is just a start, as procedures are continually changing. Timelines and templates would be helpful, as would definitions of roles and responsibilities. (Someone commented specifically “Kudos to BCIT – we really like their flowcharts and policy.”) Communication is also key throughout the process as even the best policies may meet obstacles if educators are not kept in the loop. Templates can help the educational process for faculty.

In terms of academic governance, we should also look at sustainability and not just what concerns education councils. There should be a more robust process for “tweaking” programs; this often happens without reference to the bigger picture.

In the interest of quality assurance, both credit and non-credit programs should be subject to the same review process. Determining credit can be time-consuming. The program review can occur 3X per year; processes could be streamlined to determine transfer credit.

Support is also an important issue: sufficient resources are needed to do this kind of work, which can be difficult when budgets are tight.

**5. *Can institutional policy be implemented such that balance between curricular guidelines and capacity for innovation is maintained. If so, what are the key considerations?***

It was felt that there is a particular need for system policy (over and above institutional policy) to increase transparency for other institutions or jurisdictions, and for employers. To support recognition and appropriate assessment of learning, transparency is vital. This need not stifle innovation or flexibility. Policy should be clearly structured.

This could be a challenge where professional/licensing bodies are involved. Still, others noted, for industry-focused programs, it may be appropriate to fast-track them. (The example given was BCIT's Industry Partnership Certificate – 30-45 days). One questioned the value or purpose of this kind of program.

All credentials should be validated by going through the same process, and in terms of credits, there should be more flexibility within standards. (i.e., an established minimum with the option to add.) If institutional curricula are current and following good quality assurance processes, it wouldn't be so time-consuming and difficult to respond to change. It was felt that it can be easier to frame policy than to establish procedures.

**6. *Considering the session presentations as well as the experiences of your institution, are there some common understandings or guidelines that we could adopt or develop across the system with respect to non-degree credentials? If so, what kinds of general parameters would be important to discuss?***

The issue of clarity and transparency was raised; issues such as language/terminology, distinctions between credit and non-credit programs, and overall consistency are important for other jurisdictions to be able to understand and recognize these credentials.

Suggestions for a way forward included the following:

- Identify typical credential models. Start with an assessment of what is happening now in BC and map out these credential types and definitions.
- Look at *credit* guidelines (i.e., what constitutes a credit?) (But this issue could pose considerable challenges, so it's unclear how we might move forward on that.)
- Look at duration, baselines, contact hours – all with the same goal: to aim for some consistency across the system.
- Define general education requirements according to each credential, each with specific outcomes. (e.g. Academic = science, humanities, social science, foundations with critical thinking, communication skills, etc.)

- Set minimum standards to help institutions work towards comparability (rather than under-cutting).
- We should address language issues, and credit vs. non-credit standards.
- The aims should be that the quality of a program should justify credits. (e.g. 60 credits for undergraduate programs for red-seal trade – acknowledge they’ve done some learning, and enable students to use the training for their purposes. There may be some grandfathering/recognition work to be done.
- Communication is vital – other jurisdictions, employers, parents, and students, etc. should have the info they need to make informed choices.

***7. How do we ensure that the value of the post-baccalaureate credential is understood and appreciated by disparate stakeholders such as students, employers, licensing/professional bodies, and post-secondary institutions?***

Some commented that the value of a credential is linked to its relevance – they should be useful to students at all levels. Others felt these criteria would help to clarify the value of a credential: clear criteria on credits, duration, rigour, qualifications of faculty etc. Common understandings within the post-secondary system would also help, as well as recognition by credentialing boards. And a common framework and consistent language may help us understand the value of credentials.

Some queried how a credential could be delivered at “graduate level” but not be a graduate degree. They also felt this kind of credential poses challenges for transfer (and there are already issues regarding 3 & 4 level courses). Greater transparency to students for the understanding and value of education.

Some comments suggested that it may make sense to work with employers and industry to ensure value. (One participant advised “Do your homework on what is needed before going onto program development within your institution.”)

There were some concerns raised regarding the issue of what may be seen as “balancing mixed motives” if institutions develop programs on the basis of their revenue potential.

Finally, the issue of marketing and communications arose again, with suggestions that a) the value of programs be made clear on promotional material, or b) institutions collaborate (pool funds) to focus on defining the value of BC credentials to the domestic and international markets, rather than advertising their own programs.

**8. To what extent is laddering (or otherwise connecting) to further credentials within the institution a consideration in the development and curricular design of post-baccalaureate credentials? To what extent is transferability of the post-baccalaureate credential a consideration?**

Transferability and/or laddering was seen as valuable (some viewed it as *critical*), as students taking these credentials are often returning to work or shifting careers and need to make the most of their educational opportunities. (It was noted that this would also be seen as important by the Ministry.) Also, it was felt particularly important as student pathways are becoming increasingly idiosyncratic and non-traditional. We should aim to allow flexibility while still ensuring quality and ongoing value.

It can also be important to universities, although less so for colleges (due to lack of options). Some wondered whether laddering was necessary as it can get very complicated. It may be more appropriate to focus on this within institutions rather than across the system. Others queried whether the international market would see this issue as so important. Yet others asserted that laddering is particularly relevant when it comes to the issue of credential recognition by other jurisdictions.

In the case of innovative programs, it can take time to determine their relevance or success, which may present problems with regard to determining transferability. Also, programs that are developed based on a community's needs (and so are market driven) may not be as readily transferable.

It's possible that post-baccalaureate credentials may be more accessible and flexible for students, and so have marketing appeal.

**9. Considering the session presentations as well as the experiences of your institution, are there some common understandings or guidelines that we could adopt or develop across the system with respect to post-baccalaureate credentials? If so, what kinds of general parameters would be important to discuss?**

A shared agreement on appropriate outcomes, general education requirements (appropriate to respective program levels), and a common language and clear standards of quality and rigour would be a suitable focus. One recommended the development of "DQAB-like" guidelines. Other points raised included:

- The credit hours or duration is less useful as a basis for credentials/levels.
- It would be helpful to distinguish between graduate level and post-baccalaureate work.
- The link between professional bodies (for quality assurance) with professional programs was seen to be a useful component.
- The issue of "double-dipping" for concurrent programs should also be looked into.
- A review of what is happening in the BC post-secondary system would be an appropriate place to start.

*General Comments:*

- There is a pressing need to have employers at the table.
- We need to incorporate both credit and non-credit credentials in the discussion
- Do we have clarity around what our objectives are? Is our approach learner-focused?
- The notion of a glossary with very broad guidelines seems the most helpful. There may be good reasons for variation from the guidelines on a local basis.
- It may be that credentials are becoming less crucial as badges and learning outcomes become important - or does the ability of badges, learning outcomes and MOOCs to carve out a niche highlight the importance of being able to articulate the content and outcomes of our credentials?
- Do we have the opportunity to capture existing ranges in institutions in order to identify common understandings and outliers?
- Credit adjustment has implications for tuition revenue. This is also a component in the rising importance of non-credit credentials and the drive to create new credential categories like the post baccalaureate.
- So many categories. Will employers understand the differences?
- Employers are a diverse group. Some employers will be very sensitive to the content of different credentials relevant to the field - others less so.
- Policy needs to reflect the diversity of contemporary students. They have wide ranging motivations.
- Context is crucial and many different contexts are implicated.
- The discussion around credential frameworks reflects the tension between academic quality and the increasing need to rely on entrepreneurial, tuition-based revenue sources.
- Financial aid policy and contemporary student lifestyles and demographics would be a good topic for a future discussion forum.