

Associate Degree Review

Introduction

The BC Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) has provided advice to the Ministry responsible for advanced education on the requirements for associate degrees since their introduction in 1992. Periodically, BCCAT has convened provincial committees to review the associate degree in response to issues raised by system stakeholders regarding the use of the credential. Since the last review in 2000, the post-secondary environment in BC has changed substantially, and the system has seen an initial rise and then drop in number of associate degree credentials issued, an increase in associate degree subject area concentrations, and more varied purposes informing associate degree pathways used by students and institutions.

To consider implications of these changes for the associate degree, BCCAT is facilitating a provincial review under the guidance of the Associate Degree Review Steering Committee.¹ We are seeking feedback concerning the current function of the associate degree as well as future possibilities for it as a flexible yet academically rigorous access / transfer and / or stand-alone credential that is valued by students, the public, and employers. This feedback will inform the Committee’s reflections on the guiding principles for the associate degree and any recommendations concerning modifications in approach it may make to the Ministry and for follow up by appropriate task groups.²

An associate degree in British Columbia (BC) is a two-year undergraduate academic credential awarded by a college, institute, or university upon completion of a 60 credit course of study with an Arts or Science focus. It is equivalent to the first two years of a four-year baccalaureate degree and has prescribed general outcomes, curriculum, and program requirements.³ The current guiding principles for the associate degree include “breadth of course offerings, balanced with a sufficient depth in specific disciplines to provide a solid foundation for further study” as well as three criteria: 1) academically sound and publicly credible credential in the eyes of the general public and potential employers; 2) common requirements which could be readily understood by students, advisors and faculty; and, 3) general requirements that would not disadvantage students who chose to transfer.⁴

Background

All public institutions offer associate degrees as per the conditions of their enabling legislation⁵—requiring internal academic governance approval and public posting on the Post-Secondary Institutions Proposal System prior to implementation. The *Degree Authorization Act*⁶ enables private institutions to gain the authority to offer associate degrees through the Degree Quality Assessment Board review process.⁷ Any private institution

¹ See Appendix A

² See Appendix B

³ See bctransferguide.ca/associate/requirements/

⁴ See bccat.bc.ca/pubs/advisor00-06.pdf

⁵ See bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/00_96468_01;

bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/00_96052_01

⁶ See bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/00_02024_01

⁷ See aved.gov.bc.ca/degree-authorization/documents/degree-program-criteria.pdf

receiving ministerial consent to offer an associate degree in BC is also eligible to seek membership in the BC Transfer System for the purpose of articulating curriculum in the program operating under ministerial consent.

The number of students graduating with an associate degree from a public institution in BC rose significantly from 1992 until 2004 and then declined significantly through 2008. Douglas College, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Capilano University, Camosun College, and Langara College all had substantial declines in the number of graduates from 2004 to 2008. Overall, the granting of associate degrees by public institutions declined from a high of 1,844 in 2004 to a low of 865 in 2008. In 2010, 937 associate degrees were granted by public institutions. The four private institutions offering associate degrees indicate an increasing number of graduates and acknowledge the credential as an important transfer pathway and exit option for their students.

During the past decade, public institutions have developed 50+ associate degree concentrations, moving from general studies to subject area or discipline-based studies within the Arts and Science frameworks. Institutions offer concentrations in subject areas such as Aboriginal Studies and Global Stewardship and in disciplines such as Psychology and Geography. The reasons for creating these concentrations include more focussed baccalaureate degree pathways in academic areas, student demand for career / professional program options balancing academic rigour and practical application, and marketing to specific student interests. Currently, areas such as Business, Fine Arts, Computer Science, and Tourism are not eligible to become distinct associate degrees, although there are baccalaureate degree programs in these areas across BC universities.

In BC, the associate degree constitutes a transferrable block of credits to public universities.⁸ Currently all courses in any institution's associate degree must be formally articulated with one or more of four universities: the University of BC, Simon Fraser University, the University of Victoria, and the University of Northern BC although the associate degree will transfer as a block to all public universities.

Possible Factors Influencing the Use of the Associate Degree

Several factors have been cited as contributing to the drop in the annual number of associate degree credentials awarded, including the expansion in baccalaureate degree programs; development of more flexible academic diploma programs and pathways; increasing competition for transfer spaces at research universities (precipitating transfer with fewer than 60 credits by eligible students); and less advantageous admissions requirements for associate degree graduates entering Simon Fraser University. The following additional issues areas have also been identified as important to examine within the provincial review of the associate degree:

Access

Questions have been raised regarding whether the associate degree is accessible enough to attract aboriginal, first generation, and / or non-traditional learners to academic studies in higher education and to enable their success through a relevant and manageable program.

Autonomy and Quality Assurance

Some institutions find that the prescribed associate degree core requirements and low levels of elective credits outside Arts or Science are limiting to their development of associate degree programs that meet regional or community needs or draw on institutional strengths outside of Arts and Science disciplines.

The requirement to articulate all courses with one or more research universities may no longer be relevant given the growth of general and applied Arts and Science baccalaureate degree offerings across the public post-secondary system.

⁸ See bctransferguide.ca/associate/transfer/

Credential Confusion

Institutions offer a variety of diplomas and certificates, both academic and vocational in nature. The lack of consistency of expectations and purpose among these credentials across institutions, in particular the two-year academic diplomas and associate degrees, may be confusing to students, the public, and employers.

The associate degree may be trying to accomplish too much, due to a conflict between different purposes: (a) laddering tool; (b) guaranteed block transfer pathway; and (c) career preparation.

Flexibility and Transfer

Many institutions indicate that the associate degree is not flexible enough as a transfer vehicle for students proceeding to a baccalaureate degree program since students can fulfill general education requirements and specific lower level requirements for a major in less than 60 credits.

Over 50 associate degree concentrations are currently offered within the associate degree framework, but enrolment levels are relatively low at some institutions. This seems to indicate interest in associate degree variation, but relatively low traction with students pursuing pathways within the current frameworks.

Although all of BC's universities have indicated that they will recognize 60 credits for associate degree completion, only SFU and UNBC have maintained preferential admission for holders of the credential.

Outcomes for Careers

The generic learning outcomes of the associate degree may not meet workplace requirements of employers or act as a preparation for careers in areas not requiring a baccalaureate degree, or the associate degree may meet such requirements but employers are not widely aware of the credential.

Questions for the Associate Degree Review Consultation

In order to consider options for the future of the associate degree in BC, the Associate Degree Review Steering Committee is seeking feedback in the following areas from Transfer System stakeholders:

1. Current role of the associate degree at your institution

Identify the function(s) that best describe the role of the associate degree for students in your institution:

- a. Access pathway
- b. Career preparation
- c. Academic preparation
- d. Transfer credential
- e. Terminal credential
- f. Other Explain: _____

2. Future role of the associate degree at your institution

Are changes to the function(s) of the associate degree contemplated at your institution?

- a. Yes
- b. No

If Yes, please describe them: _____

3. Purpose of diplomas in your institution

Identify the primary purpose(s) and educational emphases of diplomas within your institution.

- a. Access pathway
- b. Career preparation
- c. Vocational preparation
- d. Academic preparation
- e. Transfer credential
- f. Terminal credential
- g. Other Explain: _____

4. Development of associate degrees outside Arts and Science

Do you think that there should be associate degrees outside of Arts and Science?

- a. Yes
- b. No

If yes, please indicate areas:

5. Flexibility of requirements and electives options for associate degrees

Do you think the general and specific education requirements of the associate degree are flexible enough?

- a. Yes
- b. No

If No, please elaborate on which requirements should be revised:

- a. Math
- b. Science
- c. English
- d. Breadth
- e. Electives
- f. Other Explain: _____

6. Articulation and Quality Assurance Expectations

Is the requirement that all courses in the associate degree be formally articulated with one or more of the four research universities still appropriate?

- a. Yes
- b. No

If no, should the requirement be expanded to include . . .

- a. Public universities offering general Arts and Science degrees
- b. All public institutions
- c. All public and private BC Transfer System institutions with legal authority to offer associate degrees
- d. Other Explain: _____

7. Articulation and Transfer Expectations

Is a 60 credit block transfer guarantee necessary for associate degrees in Arts and Science?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. If no, please explain: _____

Is a 60 credit block transfer guarantee necessary for associate degrees outside Arts and Science?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. If no, please explain: _____

8. Credibility in eyes of general public and potential employers

Are the general learning outcomes of the associate degree widely understood?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. If no, please elaborate: _____

Are the general learning outcomes of the associate degree adequately aligned with . . .

- a. Lower level baccalaureate degree requirements
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Don't know
- b. Workplace requirements of employers
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Don't know

Steering Committee Timeline

The main vehicle for gaining stakeholder feedback will be the online survey available at <http://fluidsurveys.com/s/adreview>. BCCAT staff and / or Steering Committee members will also consult with system colleagues at regularly scheduled system group meetings or by invitation wherever possible. For more information please contact, Val Yorkston, BCCAT Communications Coordinator, at vyorkston.bccat.ca or 604.412.7683.

August 2012

- Establish Steering Committee

September 2012

- Initial Steering Committee meeting to establish consultation document and process

September - December 2012

- Consultation with Transfer System and related groups, and through public online survey

November - December 2012

- Steering Committee meeting to review feedback and guide writing of report by sub-committee

January 2013

- Steering Committee meeting to review, revise, and endorse final report and recommendations

Appendix A

Associate Degree Steering Committee Membership Criteria

The Steering Committee is chaired by the BCCAT co-chairs, Dr. Roger Barnsley and Dr. Robert Fleming. John FitzGibbon, Associate Director Transfer and Technology, and other BCCAT staff will provide support and attend meetings as resource persons. In addition to the co-chairs, committee membership shall include 10-13 educators from across the BC Transfer System. Members shall be drawn from institutions involved in granting associate degrees and / or admitting students who have completed associate degrees. Of the committee members, at least two shall be Council members and two or more will be from each of the following groups: research universities, new universities, and colleges / institutes. One committee member will be from a private institution in the BC Transfer System.

Associate Degree Steering Committee Membership

BARNSELEY, Roger	Co-Chair, BC Council on Admissions and Transfer
BUDRA, Paul	Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Science (English Faculty), Simon Fraser University
CAMPBELL, Robert	Dean, Faculty of Arts & Sciences (History Faculty), Capilano University
CAVERS, Ian	Associate Dean, Curriculum and Learning, Faculty of Science (Computer Science Faculty), University of BC
DALE, Mark	Provost, (Biology Faculty), University of Northern BC
DAVIS, Eric	Vice President Academic & Provost, (History Faculty), University of the Fraser Valley
DENTON, Kathy	Vice President Academic, (Psychology Faculty), Douglas College
FLEMING, Rob	Executive Director & Co-Chair, BC Council on Admissions and Transfer
KINDLER, Anna	Associate Vice President, Academic Programs (Art History Faculty), University of BC
KRAUSE, Gerda	Division Chair, Math & Sciences , Faculty of Sciences and Technology (Biology Faculty), Langara College
NAUGLER, Diane	Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts (Sociology Faculty), Kwantlen Polytechnic University
PERROT, Allyson	Chemistry Instructor, School of University Arts and Sciences (Chemistry Faculty), Selkirk College
STRIDE, Richard	Dean of Business, School of Business (Business Faculty), Camosun College
SUTHERLAND, Kate	Associate VP Academic, Student Relations (English Faculty), Thompson Rivers University
TOONE, Trevor	Principal, (Chemistry Faculty), Columbia College

Appendix B

ASSOCIATE DEGREE STEERING COMMITTEE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Purpose

To review the curricular elements and general requirements for Associate Degrees; to investigate approaches to enhancing Associate Degrees as rigorous, flexible, and relevant credentials on their own and within academic credit transfer pathways; and to make recommendations regarding any appropriate changes relating to curriculum, general requirements, and / or approaches to the credentials.

Objectives

- To examine information on the current status of associate degrees in BC;
- To consult with Transfer System stakeholders, educators, students, and others on the design and value of associate degrees;
- To explore opportunities for associate degrees as credentials facilitating both continuation of academic study and career preparation;
- To investigate approaches for associate degrees as vehicles for block transfer to academic major and / or career baccalaureate programs;
- To consider the current curricular elements and other requirements for associate degrees as well as possible modifications to those elements as deemed appropriate or desirable; and,
- To present a report and recommendations to the Minister by January 31, 2013.