

Three-Year Degrees

Drivers, Policies, and Practices

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BCCAT
British Columbia Council
on Admissions & Transfer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Three-year baccalaureate degrees are easily as common worldwide as four-year models, yet their use in Canada and the United States has historically been limited to regional pockets or short-term opportunities. Despite multiple attempts and various approaches taken to mainstream shorter degrees as a cost-effective alternative to the convention of four-year bachelor's programs, the status quo has persisted.



Against a backdrop of fiscal leanness, interest in expanding the three-year option as a possible money-saver for both post-secondary learners and institutions is surging once again in English North America[1], in turn prompting a re-examination of the default four-year standard and the economic, political, and cultural conditions that have sustained the entrenchment of an additional year of study. *If outcomes for three-year degrees are at least equal to those of longer degrees, and shorter degrees incur lower costs for students and institutions, then why does three-year baccalaureate programming exist in these jurisdictions as an alternative design instead of the establishment option?*

> Against a backdrop of fiscal leanness, interest in expanding the three-year option as a possible money-saver for both post-secondary learners and institutions is surging once again in English North America.

This report provides a brief comparative overview of bachelor's degree design norms in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, as well as an examination of different methods for creating "time-shortened degrees" and how these can be strategically deployed to mitigate longstanding systemic barriers to shortening baccalaureate programs.

Recommendations in this report focus on reorienting post-secondary institutional and policy structures towards the following strategic priorities, which create the appropriate preconditions for shortening degrees:

- *Focus on learning outcomes in determining learner achievement.*
- *Identify appropriate sectoral zones of opportunity (based on institutional readiness) for piloting time-shortened degrees.*
- *Avoid duplication or competition—actual or perceived—with existing programming.*
- *Develop a "zone of mutual trust" built on harmonized recognition of educational qualifications.*

[1] Mexico and countries in Central America, as well as South American countries, use the Spanish and Portuguese *licenciatura* model, which is roughly equivalent to a bachelor's degree and takes between four and six years depending on the program and national standards. For the purposes of this report, North American degree models will be restricted to those in Canada and the United States as these jurisdictions are more directly comparable with the English/British three-year standard adopted widely within the contemporary Anglosphere.

INTRODUCTION

The three-year degree, an English invention, remains the standard baccalaureate structure in the United Kingdom[2] (British Council, n.d.). With most former British colonies having imported the three-year model, and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) accepting a three-year duration as the minimum for its "first-cycle" (baccalaureate) credential as a result of the **Bologna Process**, the "degree in three" is now easily as common worldwide as the four-year model recognized as the norm in most of North America.

This report presents a comparative analysis of bachelor's degree design norms in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, with special attention to contexts and assumptions that have prevented the three-year baccalaureate option from mainstreaming in North American post-secondary systems.

What is less commonly known, however, is that three-year degrees have also made punctuated appearances in the Canadian and American post-secondary landscapes for about as long as these nations have had formal institutions of higher learning. Time-shortened degrees, or TSDs (as the three-year structure is sometimes referred to in the United States) have been the topic of a "cyclical trend of conversation" (Viator, 2023, p. 20) and promoted as a resource-saving antidote to presumed learner and structural "overinvestment" in status quo baccalaureate programming in these jurisdictions. However, while three-year degrees have enjoyed moments of enthusiastic support, their use has historically been experimental and very brief: thus, outside the province of Quebec, four-year baccalaureate degrees have remained the established educational standard in Canada and the United States.

Current economic challenges have prompted renewed interest in accelerated bachelor's degrees as a potential new norm in post-secondary credentialing across English North America, but sustaining these alternatives over the longer term requires strategic reconsideration of the conditions that have historically relegated shorter degrees to the margins of Canadian and US baccalaureate programming. This report presents a comparative analysis of bachelor's degree design norms in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, with special attention to contexts and assumptions that have prevented the three-year baccalaureate option from mainstreaming in North American post-secondary systems.

FOUR WAYS TO GET TO "THREE"

A default three-year baccalaureate model is contingent on coordination between the secondary and post-secondary sectors, such that learners who pursue a degree can be expected to have met the preparatory requirements. In jurisdictions where this conditioning does not reliably exist as a baseline expectation in high school, a "warm-up" period is normally built into the degree itself as "general education" credit, which necessarily makes the post-secondary program of work longer. Thus, where the latter scenario is typical, the work of refitting a four-year bachelor's into a three-year timeframe comes down to determining what general education is, *what pedagogical value it adds, and where it should be delivered.*

[2] Scotland, where a typical bachelor's degree takes four years to complete, is a notable exception to the UK three-year standard for reasons explained below.

Broadly, there are four methods for time-shortening a degree , typically from four years to three, with each design carrying specific curricular and policy implications:

- *Reduction through compression*, in which a student completes unmodified degree requirements through three years of uninterrupted, year-round attendance: as no curricular changes are required by this design, it is typically the "starter" three-year model of choice for providers new to time-shortened degrees.

- *Reduction through advanced standing/prior learning assessment and recognition* (PLAR), which assumes that credit can and should be awarded "for knowledge and skills gained prior to or outside of college either through formal schooling or self-education and experience" (Magill, 1972, p. 3); for instance, prior learning can be "translated" into post-secondary credit through advanced placement (AP) challenge testing or, in the US, the **College Level Examination Program** (CLEP).

- *Reduction through cooperation between high schools and post-secondary institutions*, either through dual enrolment/concurrent admission (students being allowed to enrol in post-secondary studies while completing high school) or dual credit arrangements that enable students to complete courses for credit that can be applied toward both high school graduation and the first year of post-secondary work.

- *Reduction through revised degree requirements*, namely the elimination of credits: the reduction of a year of study could be achieved by removing 30 credits from an existing 120-credit baccalaureate program or by developing 90-credit bachelor's degrees[4]. (Magill, 1972)

For reduction schemes based on compression, advanced standing/prior learning recognition, and dual enrolment, the full complement of credits (i.e., the same number as a four-year degree, typically 120 in the US and Canada) remains in place, with advanced standing/PLAR and dual enrolment offering completion and recognition alternatives outside of the degree program itself. Such arrangements are simpler from an operational standpoint, but they have limited use as a lever for accessibility, since they effectively move the time served by the student rather than remove it.

However, *reduction through the revision of degree requirements*—namely, the excision of a full year's worth of credits from the baccalaureate program of work—has proven considerably more challenging to operationalize in the United States and Canada. First, educational qualifications in these countries are decentralized and managed at the state or provincial level, respectively: in the US, besides the expected layer of institutional and accreditation policy differences, there are also state and/or regional accreditation laws[5] that codify hour and/or credit minima for bachelor's degrees and that would require amendment before a truncated degree could be developed in these jurisdictions (AACRAO, 2020).

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[3] Some US policymakers in the early 1970s promoted the idea of adding a year to associate degrees to create a three-year baccalaureate (Van Gelder, 1972), but this plan seems to have gone nowhere.

[4] In the US, baccalaureate degrees requiring fewer than 120 credits have also been referred to as reduced credit degrees, or RCDs (Lee et al, 2026).

[5] At the time of this report, Connecticut, Washington State, Massachusetts, and North Dakota are noteworthy "holdouts," with state legislation that continues to mandate 120-credit bachelor's degrees. However, whereas Connecticut actively rejects policy changes to allow reduced-credit baccalaureates (Alonso, 2026), WA, MA, and ND were among the growing number of states willing to pilot 90-credit three-year degrees, typically under an "applied" or "career-focused" designation to differentiate these degrees from traditional four-year bachelor's (Lee et al, 2026).

More important, though, is that the debate over the optimal length of a bachelor's degree in the American and Canadian post-secondary contexts reflects a de facto referendum on the determination of general education material in degree-level programming, meaningful measurement in credentialing, and the existential mission of higher education. Unlike the UK and the many countries that have "grown up" with the English three-year model, the US baccalaureate and, by neighbourly symmetry, its Canadian counterpart are reflective of a historical trajectory that has taken these nations from "colonial dependency to technological modernity" (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1971, p. 5), with modernization in English-speaking postcolonial North America characterized by an intentional, "Anglophobic" avoidance of imitation: their hybrid systems exhibit an incoherence between secondary and post-secondary education despite a shared acceptance of measured time as their chief organizing principle (Thelin, 2011; Silva, White & Toch, 2015). The designation of classroom/contact hours as the proxy metric for knowledge and skills acquisition and the attendant expectation that these hours represent "essential" baccalaureate content are hallmarks within these contexts would become largely responsible for the preclusion of three-year degree designs.

A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE: THREE-YEAR DEGREES ACROSS THE GLOBE

School Brittania: The Establishment and Propagation of English (UK) Three-Year Degrees

The origin of three-year degrees in the United Kingdom, specifically England, reflects a fundamental change in the accepted purpose of higher education in that jurisdiction and, by natural extension, its optimizing structure. The establishment of the UK public post-secondary sector in the mid-1800s coincided with the British Industrial Revolution, when there emerged an urgent need for accessible scientific and technological education. The two English universities that existed at that time, Oxford and Cambridge, were designed to provide classical education to the governing elite, as they had since medieval times, not to prepare learners to join and innovate the workforce (Anderson, n.d.; Cockburn, King & McDonnell, 1969). Filling the growing gap in human capital would require the development of university colleges across the country to deliver job-ready education; the establishment of this new category of post-secondary institutions (later known as the "redbrick" civic universities) and their then-novel mission of producing skilled labour would direct policies to systematize **matriculation** (Cockburn, King & McDonnell, 1969). Such policies would in turn prime the system for three-year degrees by setting the habit of streaming post-secondary-bound learners through pre-university preparatory studies (two years of A-levels, or Advanced Level courses qualifying for matriculation) to then bridge directly into specialized baccalaureate programs of work (Davie, 1961).

During this transformative period in UK higher education, the British empire was also extending its geopolitical reach. Thus, while Scotland (which remains to this day a separate educational jurisdiction from England) built and maintained a four-year degree baccalaureate model[6] that would make it an outlier within the UK system[7], Britain's three-year norm would be adopted by (or imposed upon) the majority of its colonies, and with it curricular architecture that featured streamed secondary studies followed by a compact, specialized baccalaureate, a setup that has endured long after

[6] Higher education in Scotland evolved differently than the rest of the UK: with free public universities arriving earlier, their comparative accessibility, the role of external oversight in academic governance, a qualifications framework different from the UK's, and the adoption of "pragmatic" curricula inspired by the German post-secondary model, the norms within the Scottish post-secondary sector differ in many ways from those of other British jurisdictions (Anderson, n.d.; Freeman, n.d.; Thelin, 2011; Freeman & Wylie, 2018; SCQF, 2026).

[7] Much of what characterizes the Scottish educational system was designed to be purposefully "un-English": most Scottish educators "strenuously resisted" the English pedagogical norms as elitist and "not congenial to the native genius…which hitherto had enabled the Scots, for all the poverty of their Universities, to equal and even to outshine their Southern neighbours in the educational sphere" (Davie, 1961, p. 30). A similar identification through negation motivated the adoption of the Scottish pedagogy and academic governance in Canada and the US (Bumsted, 1982; Thelin, 2011).

these nations gained their independence. In fact, within the contemporary Anglosphere, the United States, and Canada remain the most conspicuous exceptions to this three-year format, their longer degrees instead favouring the Scottish approach to admissions, curricular design, and academic governance, which were viewed in these colonies as more pragmatic and democratic[8] (Davie, 1961; Thelin, 2011).

Nevertheless, toward the end of the twentieth century, the UK's three-year baccalaureate was regarded within much of Europe as an exemplar of pedagogical efficiency. At the time, there was little coherence among European countries' post-secondary programming, which greatly limited learner and worker mobility despite many instances of geographic, cultural, and linguistic proximity. In 1987, Britain was among the EU nations that founded Erasmus(+)[9], an ongoing initiative that promotes cooperation among European youth through education and sports programming, and, in 1999, was one of the original signatories to the Bologna Accord, which established the **European Higher Education Area** (EHEA), a collective of European member nations working together to improve recognition of educational qualifications. While Erasmus(+) and the Bologna Accord are separate initiatives, they reflect a similar collective momentum toward a continental harmonization strategy that would unite the European nation-states through soft diplomacy[10] and position them competitively against a shared educational and economic rival, the United States. Furthermore, the differences in the duration of "first-level" credentials (bachelor's degrees)—which could be as short as three years in the UK but was five years long in many parts of Europe, despite meeting very similar learning objectives—highlighted opportunities for "addition through subtraction,"

> first, because governments were indeed looking for ways to reduce student time-to-completion; second, the creation of a new credential seemed like an opportunity to get universities to focus on a new type of student, who wanted less theory and more practice; and third, for those who were dubious about the first two reasons, there was an overriding desire not to get left behind in the creation of a single, pan-European Higher Education Area with harmonized degree-lengths. (Usher, 2014)

Normalizing shorter degrees on the basis of *learning outcomes* per a shared educational qualifications recognition framework, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), seemed to meet all these objectives, moving graduates into the workforce earlier while also cutting government spending per student by as much as half, since post-secondary education was (and remains) state-sponsored in most of Europe[11].

The UK, however, has since had to rethink the competitive advantage of its shorter degrees within the Bologna framework following Brexit. Departing the EU *"zone of mutual trust"* (Adelman, 2008) removed UK post-secondary learners

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[8] Interestingly, the United States and Canada were also the first two British colonies to break away from the Empire.

[9] The Erasmus program was relaunched as Erasmus+ in 2014: its current focus areas are "inclusion, the green and digital transitions, and promoting young people's participation in democratic life" (European Commission, 2025, June 26). Post-Brexit, the UK left Erasmus+ in 2021 but rejoined the program in 2026 (European Commission, 2026, May 5).

[10] The 1990s were marked by the end of the Cold War and a decade of conflicts in the Balkans; the Bologna Process focused on shared educational and labour market goals, specifically, but its conception was situated in a broader multinational effort to reunify a politically fractured continent (Gänzle, Meister & King, 2008; European Commission, 2025, May 4).

[11] Pre-Bologna, the average duration of a European baccalaureate was about five years, and this comparatively slow pacing has been directly attributed to government subsidization; low- or no-tuition programs meant that students were not motivated to finish quicker (Viator, 2023).

and institutions from the domestic ("home-fee") space that membership afforded; the imposition of international tuition rates on continental European learners has thus discouraged many from studying in the UK. Whereas the relative brevity of UK degrees could once help to offset the higher fees, EU competitors now offer the same three undergraduate years for much less money (sometimes free of cost) and can deliver programs in English to compete directly with British institutions (Swain, 2014). In an attempt to regain a clear speed advantage over European comparators, a number of UK public universities have in the past decade or so further shortened their baccalaureate programs to *two years* through compression (Taylor, 2025): the efficacy of this practice is still under review, especially given their seeming noncompliance with Bologna Process expectations (Memorandum submitted by the Institute of Physics, 2006; Swain, 2014). Similarly, some Scottish universities have in the last decade or so begun to compress four-year degree programs into three years, in addition to expanding advanced placement recognition (Havergal, 2015), to compete in a marketplace that is increasingly dominated by shorter, faster paths to degree completion.

Going with the Flow: The Occasional Time-Shortened Baccalaureate in Canada (Except Quebec)

Within Canada and the United States, the exception that proves the rule in the case of three-year bachelor's degrees is Quebec: with French as its official administrative language, it alone has demonstrated sustained use of shorter baccalaureates. The shortened degree structure in Quebec's case was the product of longstanding divisions within the province's educational system, specifically around the language of instruction (English versus French), institutional administration (Catholic versus secular), and campus locations (Montreal area versus the rest of Quebec), all of which perpetuated inequities in learner access and outcomes (Usher, 2025a). In answering the provincial government's call to modernize its post-secondary system in the 1960s toward reconciling these differences, Quebec established its *collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel* (CEGEPs) to replace its *collèges classiques*, which had facilitated guaranteed pathways into universities (Usher, 2025b). All Quebec high school students have a mandatory year at a CEGEP, and those planning to attend university then have the option of completing an additional preparatory year to attain the requisite *diplôme d'études collégiale* (CMEC, 2001; Cowin, 2007). Quebec's post-secondary model is thus unique within North America for having built-in streams that make it possible to position general first-year education as *preparation* for post-secondary entry, similar to the UK model's path from secondary to post-secondary.

The remainder of Canada, on the other hand, developed its post-secondary systems in a very different direction from Quebec's and, not coincidentally, has seen only pocketed implementation of three-year degrees. In Canada, inconsistent adoption of the three-year degree stemmed in part from the country's hybridized educational heritage, which was influenced by both the English three-year models and Scottish four-year models of bachelor's degrees (HESA, 2012); the latter's educational ethos of the "democratic intellect"—of access to higher education based on talent, not family status or wealth—and a curricular tradition that favoured a generalist, "well-rounded" approach (Davie, 1961) shaped the character of British North American universities, where many professors were Scottish expatriates (Bumsted, 1982, p. 12).

Allegiances to curricular tradition, however, would become secondary to the practical problem of demand for higher education exceeding the physical space required to deliver four years of university study to every learner. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, some parts of English-speaking Canada (notably Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta)

had school boards running **senior matriculation** courses, usually as Grade 13, which covered post-secondary (first-year) curricula but were delivered in local high schools; the cooperative provision of this pre-university preparatory content thus facilitated the delivery of a three-year baccalaureate that the (very) few regional universities lacked the capacity to offer unassisted. The use of Grade 13 programming proved scalable as well and expanded in the 1930s and 1940s to again address a shortage of space for first-year students after the Great Depression sidelined the development of institutions' campus infrastructure; and, it was again mobilized postwar to keep pace with a tripling of the college-going population in a two-decade span (Usher, 2018a; University of British Columbia, 1936).

Once the campuses had been built out, and the post-secondary sector continued to grow, the *"senior matrick" annexes began to disappear, and with them the three-year degrees*. There were a couple of notable holdovers among the provinces: British Columbia, which followed a more comprehensive model of higher education than other provinces, maintained senior matriculation in some districts as a precursor to the "university colleges" of the 1970s to 1990s (Cowin, 2007); and Ontario, due in part to a more pronounced historical partition between the college and university sectors[12], kept its Grade 13 (later called the Ontario Academic Credit, or OAC) option available to university-bound learners until 2003.

While three-year "general degrees[13]" are still offered in Manitoba and Ontario universities, Canadian three-year baccalaureates became increasingly hard to find after the 1970s, crowded out of the post-secondary market by colleges' offerings (e.g., diploma and associate degrees); falling out of favour with university students, who require a four-year "honours" degree to advance to graduate-level study and view the "prestige" of a longer degree as an advantage in job-hunting; and misaligned with a systemic progression toward mirroring the US post-secondary sector to expand credit recognition opportunities[14]. A two-decade drought of youth employment opportunities that spanned the entirety of the 1980s and 1990s further accelerated the disappearance of shorter bachelor's degrees because at that time "spending another year in school couldn't be worse than tempting fate on the job market" (Usher, 2026). Only in recent years has there been a revival of time-shortened degrees in Canada, with the Ontario government encouraging the public college sector to develop new "applied" three-year credentials (Colleges Ontario, 2022; Ontario Government, 2022); this new generation of shorter degrees would be "distinct from university degrees" and are intended to provide "career-focused" education that will fast-track skilled workers into high-demand labour markets in the province: automotive technology, construction, automation/cybersecurity, and healthcare (Ontario Government, 2022).

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[12] Ontario's modern college system was created 1966-1967 through legislation that clearly separated the new "applied" institutions from the universities (Ontario Department of Education, 196

[13] As opposed to four-year "honours" or "major" degrees in these jurisdictions.

[14] US educational funders, most notably the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations, invested considerable energy and money into making the Canadian post-secondary landscape more closely resemble the American one (Usher, 2018, September 21).

Time Is Money: The Business and Politics of Educational Investment in the United States

Similar to the Canadian timeline, the mobilization of the three-year degree in the United States starts with a practical problem. The oldest university in the US, Harvard, was the first to offer three-year degrees, not by choice but as an emergency measure to reverse the grave financial losses and reputational damage incurred by its inaugural Head of School[15]. Just two years later, in 1642, the university's financial crisis had been averted, and confidence in the university was restored; Harvard nonetheless *codified a four-year degree as the standard* in its bylaws, mainly as a way for the new, embattled university to command respect among older international institutions (Van Gelder, 1972), but also to collect additional revenue. Given Harvard's influence, this single decision point has been identified as a possible reason for the four-year standard in both the US and Canada (Usher, 2014).

Yet, despite the eventual acceptance of the four-year baccalaureate as the ideal, the three-year persisted as an option reserved for the "better-prepared" learner. For example, at Harvard itself, immediate pushback on the codification of the four-year degree led to students from "quality" preparatory academies bypassing first-year studies, content they were assumed to have learned already. Not to be outdone by Harvard, Johns Hopkins, the University of Chicago, and Yale were all offering three-year compressed degrees designed for "well-prepared and professionally motivated students" by the 1890s (Van Gelder, 1972); however, these pathways served a vanishingly small number of "elite" students and, while learners remained technically able to squeeze four years of undergraduate study into three by taking a full-time courseload over the summers, US institutions paused promotion of three-year options by the early 1900s as there was a conspicuous lack of interest in faster completion: students[16] wanted the full four-year post-secondary experience to pursue on-campus fun, and institutions and faculty were convinced a shortened degree would devalue their "brand" (Van Gelder, 1972; Thelin, 2011).

Reputational risk was a growing concern for the system's funders as well: between a groundswell of government gifts (particularly the endowments enabled by the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890) and Gilded Age largesse, the post-secondary sector experienced unprecedented, unchecked growth that produced a sprawling collective of largely unregulated post-secondary institutions. An energetic "search for order" soon followed, with a focus on the "three Rs" of ratings, rankings, and reputations to establish and maintain quality control (Thelin, 2011, pp. 145-147). A key metric was introduced to differentiate post-secondary programming from that of high schools and quantify entry and completion requirements: the **Carnegie Unit**, whose development and implementation was led (again) by Harvard and was based strictly on the measure of time—literal "seat time"—became a proxy indicator of academic achievement[17] (Silva, White & Toch, 2015).

The "objective" measurement of classroom instruction hours rapidly gained recognition and acceptance among American post-secondary institutions. Initial implementation was motivated by institutional grant eligibility—accessing the Carnegie pension grant was contingent on adopting the Unit as a performance metric—but its proliferation was fuelled

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[15] Besides embezzling the university into financial peril, Nathaniel Eaton also sadistically abused many of the earliest students at Harvard. His chaotic leadership term lasted less than two years but remains a legend at the institution to this day. It is also a Harvard tradition not to recognize Eaton as the first president and instead start the count with his successor, Henry Dunster (Fahs, 2014).

[16] In 1900, only 4% of Americans studied past the eighth grade, and 1% enrolled in post-secondary (Silva, White & Toch, 2015; IES, 2018). Those who did attend were exclusively privileged young White men.

[17] The Carnegie Unit began as a rubric for determining institutional eligibility for the Carnegie pension grant and expanded into a wider accountability tool for standardizing post-secondary operations (Silva, White & Toch, 2015).

by its apparent "suitability as a broader mechanism to improve the administrative efficiency of schools and colleges in the spirit of the 'scientific management' movement of the day" (Silva, White & Toch, 2015, p. 8). Clear and comprehensive, the Carnegie Unit became the organizing concept for the entire US post-secondary system,

> a common currency enabling countless academic transactions among students, faculty, and administrators at myriad public, nonprofit, private, and for-profit institutions, as well as between education policy makers at every level of government…Everything from faculty workloads and compensation to athletic eligibility, academic calendars, course sequences, degree programs, daily school schedules, instructional strategies, institutional accountability, and accreditation, as well as eligibility for billions of dollars of federal financial aid, would come to rely on the Carnegie Unit. (Silva, White & Toch, 2015, p. 9)

The establishment of the Carnegie Unit, like the four-year degree standard, was intended to bestow structure and legitimacy to an "immature" system (Thelin, 2011). To some extent, it created critical efficiencies that enabled higher education to meet the challenges presented by the sector's explosive growth and modernization post-WWII[18]. Nevertheless, over time, the Carnegie Unit, became the proverbial hammer that treated everything as a nail, its operational indifference effectively fracturing the sector into the incoherent kingdoms of four-year universities and two-year community colleges and ultimately making it harder to home a three-year degree in either, a problem that continues to frustrate the normalization of a shorter degree.

Tension spiked between higher education's administrative metrics and its need to innovate toward an accessible three-year degree in the 1970s, which opened with worldwide economic turmoil and attendant taxpayer frustration (Retro-Report, 2016; Danforth, 2021; ITEP, 2025). It was a turning point for the public good of post-secondary education[19], and the system's productivity faced mounting scrutiny. A key report released in 1971 by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, *Less Time, More Options: Education Beyond the High School*, argued that reducing the duration of the traditionally four-year bachelor's degree down by a quarter could be undertaken without impacting educational quality, and that doing so would reduce institutional operating costs by 10-15%, saving the public post-secondary system as a whole over five billion dollars (USD)[20] within a decade (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1971). By the time the Carnegie report was released, 54% of US universities were facing serious financial strain, and private colleges carried a collective deficit of $370 million (USD)[21]; the sector was desperate for change, and—encouraged by the Carnegie report's recommendations and clarion call to "overinvest neither the time of students nor the resources of society in higher education" (p. 24)—hundreds of institutions had by 1973 launched some version of the degree-in-three, primarily through compression, advanced placement/PLAR, or dual enrolment designs as these seemed to be able to produce the quickest results with minimal resourcing.

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[18] US post-secondary enrolments surged postwar: WWII veterans accessed post-secondary through the GI bills, and an exceptionally large cohort of early Baby Boomers reached young adulthood in the 1960s— including many young men who sought to leverage a military draft deferment during the Vietnam War by attending college. Undergraduate enrolment grew by almost 500% and graduate students' numbers grew close to 900%. Between 1965 and 1972, a new community college campus was opened every week (Menand, 2001).

[19] This was first noticeable in California, whose post-secondary system was a political lightning rod in the early 1970s as it was (and remains) the largest post-secondary system in the US; a nationwide taxpayer revolt movement that started in California and carried Ronald Reagan to victory in that state's 1966 gubernatorial election focused extensively on college and university "waste" and on the students there "partying" at taxpayers' expense. After becoming governor, Reagan publicly fired the president of Berkeley, Clark Kerr, who then became the head of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education—the organizational author of the report Less Time, More Options.

[20] Worth $43.11 billion USD in 2026.

[21] Worth $3.04 billion USD in 2026.

The three-year degrees of the 1970s, while indeed quick to bring to market, yielded disappointing results: *shortening the degree actually lowered enrolments because the students who most needed the cost savings were unable to complete within a shortened timeline*. Post-secondary students at that time were already skewing older (about 30% of the Californian college population was aged 29 or older) and many of them attended part-time to accommodate work and family responsibilities, which meant that they required a longer timeline to graduation, not a shorter one. Meanwhile, privileged learners, who were better positioned to pursue a time-shortened degree, still seemed happy to "pay to stay" for the fourth year of a degree (Stark, 1973), preferring to spend more time in school toward a longer degree that they saw as having superior quality. In addition to the lack of student interest, the majority of instructors remained vociferously unsupportive of time- shortened degrees, citing workload and program quality concerns (*New York Times*, 1978). With no support, this iteration of the three-year degree experiment failed within half a decade.

While the 1970s time-shortened degrees ended abruptly, the political impetus behind them to defend post-secondary as a public good gained considerable traction. When three-year degrees were championed in the late aughts by the educational "elder statesman" Robert Zemsky (Moody, 2023), he found a political ally in Hilary Clinton, whose presidential campaign and her New College Compact proposal, which aimed to reduce costs for new post-secondary students and reduce debt for former students, with the overarching goal being debt-free college to all who attend (Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, 2015). Some of the compressed three-year degrees piloted at this time remain in play, with the most well-known being Purdue's Degree in 3[22].

While the New College Compact proposal ended with Clinton's unsuccessful presidential run, the economic and political pressures intersecting in postpandemic recovery have made its mission of eliminating student debt all the more urgent for an increasing number of learners: total US student loan debt now sits at $1.83 trillion (USD) in the US[23], with a disproportionate amount carried by equity-deserving students: notably, women borrow more and, due to persistent gender pay gaps, take longer to repay (Canadian Women's Federation, 2019; Hanson, 2026; AAUW, n.d.), and Black women borrow and owe more than any other subgroup of students (Hanson, 2026). It is possible that time-shortened degrees can relieve some of the financial pressure for institutions, governments, and—most important—learners and their families, but the past performance of three-year degree options makes the omission of underserved students impossible to ignore. The sustainability of the three-year degree—in any jurisdiction—depends more on its alignment with the needs of diverse learners than the limits of the system, which, fittingly takes the examination of the three-year degree's future direction back to its objectives and how to innovate towards these in light of persistent systemic barriers.

[22] Launched in 2017 and now includes most liberal arts majors. https://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/3year/index.html

[23] While Canadian total student loan debt sits at a more modest $28 billion (CAD), the number of learners carrying a higher debt burden (≥$25,000 CAD) has increased significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2024).

TO THREE OR NOT TO THREE:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE-PROOFING A THREE-YEAR DEGREE STANDARD

Modern use of the three-year degree is intended to improve access and completion rates; meet labour market needs more quickly; and save learners, institutions, and governments money. Where time-shortened degrees have not met these challenges as a mainstream post-secondary option (or in the case of the UK, lost competitive advantage) points to misalignment between degree design, policy environment, and learner audiences.

It is crucial to emphasize that the three-year degree is not monolithic: that is, it can be adapted and executed flexibly to suit different audiences, venues, and circumstances. Strategizing to leverage this agility against the comparative inflexibility of institutional and policy structures is at the centre of the following recommendations:

- *Focus on learning outcomes in determining learner achievement:*

  Counting hours is "easy," but the ability of "seat time" to capture educational attainment has always been limiting, and evolving pedagogical approaches and educational technologies have further eroded the applicability of the Carnegie Unit as a touchstone for learner achievement. Agreed-upon learner outcomes involve multisectoral/multijurisdictional coordination but can more authentically measure learner progress and mastery in the longer term and invite ongoing collaborative revision instead of discouraging it: one such success story would be the provincial network of discipline-specific articulation committees in BC, most of which meet at least annually to discuss recognition of common outcomes (BCCAT).

- *Identify appropriate sectoral zones of opportunity for piloting time-shortened degrees:*

  Post-secondary systems vary widely, and within decentralized systems, such as those in Canada and the US, readiness for new initiatives is uneven and subject to sudden change. In the American higher education system, which is split broadly between two-year and four-year institutions, the "Goldilocks zone" is represented by mid-tier colleges, which are less likely than their bigger, more selective counterparts to be defensive about prestige and the "essentialness" of existing content but are still large enough to have resources for developing and marketing new programs (Carlson, 2026). Similarly, Ontario's strategy of diversifying the post-secondary market by creating applied/career-focused exclusively in the college sector takes advantage of a historical schism to market forthcoming three-years as something different from the university-based three-years and to tailor such programs to labour market needs. British Columbia's system, which is modelled after the California state system (Cowin, 2007), is more integrated, so three-year programs could theoretically be executed anywhere within the system; thus, *institutional readiness* to develop and deliver these would need to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

- *Avoid duplication or competition—actual or perceived—with existing programming:*

  A persistent problem with three-year degrees has been their "crisis in identity." Frequently dismissed by learners and educators alike as either cheap, "watered-down" four-year baccalaureates or overengineered competitors to two-year diplomas and associate degrees, three-year degrees have struggled to find a niche in Canadian and US post-secondary environments; such assessments have not been helped by designer ambitions to replace four-year bachelor's programs with three-year substitutes, especially where the default reduction mechanic is

the removal of credits: invariably in these cases, the curricular focus shifts from how-to-build to where-to-cut, which amounts to a misdirection of resources that can be fatal given the time sensitivity driving the development of new programs. Novel programming can benefit from a **blue ocean strategy** (Kim & Mauborgneare, 2014), whereby differentiation and lower delivery costs can help secure market share. Ontario's current development of "applied" three-year degrees, as well as efforts in some US states to create an "applied/career-focused" category of degrees, exemplify a blue-ocean approach.

- *Develop a "zone of mutual trust":*

  Harmonized recognition of educational qualifications—not just of three-year degrees but of all credentials—relies on *trust*. Decentralized systems reflect an operational preference for empirical measurements and standardized procedures, which can help start discussions about systemic agreements. In the longer term, however, standardized practices risk becoming inert and esoteric and, worse, can stifle system adaptation and coordination. With the futureproofing of higher education in mind, the sector's "traditional" features, the four-year standard and the Carnegie Unit among them, should be re-evaluated *collaboratively* against mutual threats and opportunities, particularly those touching on the issues of affordability; equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI); and technology. At a time when education is politically polarized (and at times polarizing in itself), maintaining connection and "parity of esteem[24]" (BCCAT, 2023) has become critical for the health of the post-secondary sector.

CONCLUSION

There is no question that three-year bachelor's degrees are *possible* in Canada and the United States: these have existed, for *centuries* in some places, as "boutique" post-secondary options for students with the sufficient means and motivation to complete a baccalaureate a year sooner via advanced placement or compressed studies. However, repeated cycles of undersubscription and eventual cancellation of these alternative completion pathways point to persistent incoherence between the curricular design of time-shortened degree models and learner needs. On balance, post-secondary students in these contexts are set up to need and sometimes even to want a longer timeline to degree completion to allow for co-curricular activities (research, co-op, networking opportunities); given these expectations, degrees that simply speed up the acquisition of credits, while low-risk for institutions and governments to produce and operationalize, ultimately serve no one well because learners who would benefit the most from a shorter degree—"nontraditional" students who now make up the "new majority" —are the least able to access this programming while those who are positioned to progress more quickly through their studies see no incentive to do so.

Establishing a time-shortened degree *that substantially improves post-secondary access*, especially as a mainstream credential stream, requires a reimagining of both what a baccalaureate degree represents in terms of educational outcomes, as well as the preconditions that the secondary and post-secondary sectors must jointly satisfy within a decentralized policy environment to ensure that learners transition successfully between these venues and are appropriately prepared for the rigour of baccalaureate programming entry requirements and learning objectives. In the absence of a national oversight body or qualifications framework to direct the development of a shorter baccalaureate, mobilizing sustainable solutions will depend on unlearning systemic habits, seeking opportunities to replace standardized practices with harmonized ones, and advocating for appropriate resources to build, maintain, and eventually mainstream three-year degrees.

[24] Coined by former BCCAT Co-Chair John Dennison, "parity of esteem" continues to be a central principle of the BC Transfer System (BCCAT, 2023).

KEY TERMS & CONCEPTS

Blue ocean strategy[25]	A business strategy to launch new products successfully by avoiding oversaturated markets, focusing instead on where novelty and lower-cost advantages can create consumer demand.
Bologna Process (Bologna Accord)	An educational reform process launched in 1999 (formalized through the Bologna Accord) by a collective of national governments in Europe to improve the mobility of students and graduates; it was through the Bologna Process that the **European Higher Education Area** (EHEA) was established and the three-year baccalaureate accepted by signatory countries as the standard model for a "first-level" degree.[26]
Carnegie Unit[27] ("credit hours," "student hours")	A strictly time-based measure of educational attainment representing 120 hours of instructor contact time (one daily hour of instruction, five days a week, for twenty-four weeks). In higher education, "credit hours" are derived from the Carnegie Unit and count the contact hours per week in a given semester; typically, a three-credit course is three hours per week over fifteen weeks. Fifteen credit hours is standard full-time registration for a semester, a total of thirty for an academic year "en route to a four-year bachelor's degree requiring a total of 120 credits." The structure and administration of US and Canadian post-secondary systems are based on the Carnegie Unit.
CEGEPs	*Collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel*: institutions in Quebec that bridge high schools with universities and colleges by providing the first stage of post-secondary education. CEGEPs provide general education courses that prepare students for entry into the job market, as well as an additional year of pre-university preparatory study for learners intending to pursue further post-secondary education. At the time of this report, there are 48 CEGEPs in Quebec, five of which have English as the language of instruction.[28]
College Level Examination Program (CLEP)	A set of standardized college-level challenge tests in the United States, offered across 36 subject areas, that has been administered by College Board (a US educational nonprofit) since 1967. More than 2,900 US post-secondary institutions grant credit for CLEP exams[29].

[25] Kim & Mauborgneare, 2014.

[26] European Commission, 2026.

[27] Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.: https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/what-is-the-carnegie-unit/

[28] Fédération de cégeps: https://fedecegeps.ca/

[29] CLEP, CollegeBoard.org: https://clep.collegeboard.org/

Dual enrolment (concurrent admissions)	Through cooperative delivery between a high school and post-secondary institution(s), students can enrol simultaneously in both levels of schooling. Post-secondary instructors deliver post-secondary courses at the high school, and students can receive post-secondary credit before graduating high school, on a transcript that would be recognized as a post-secondary transcript. However, students may not always receive credits toward high school graduation.[30]
Dual credit	Students enroll concurrently in high school and post-secondary, and earn both high school and post-secondary credit for the same course(s), which may be taught by post-secondary instructors, high school teachers, or a combination of both.
Erasmus(+)	Established in 1987, a European Union program that "offers mobility and cooperation opportunities in higher education, vocational education and training, adult and school education (including early childhood education and care), youth and sport staff[31]."
European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)[32]	The European Union's shared higher education qualifications framework, with credits "based on defined learning outcomes and their associated workload": a full year of post-secondary study is represented as 60 ECTS credits.
European Higher Education Area (EHEA)	A collective of 49 nation states that are parties to the European Cultural Convention and "declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education[33]."
Matriculation	Formal eligibility for commencing post-secondary studies (e.g., matriculation examinations)
Senior matriculation ("senior matrick")	A historical educational requirement in Canada that recognized "the successful completion of a secondary-school course (usually including an extra year of study) satisfying the requirements for university entrance[34]"; senior matriculation requirements varied by province and were largely abolished by the 1960s, although Ontario continued to deliver its Grade 13 until 2003.

[30] As defined in BCCAT's Dual Credit (Fitzgibbon, 2015).

[31] Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2021.

[32] European Commission, 2022.

[33] European higher Education Area [EHEA]: https://ehea.info/

[34] *Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles* (3rd Ed.): https://dchp.arts.ubc.ca/entries/senior%20matriculation

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