



**Towards an enhanced knowledge base
of Canadian university engagement in
and key issues related to
foreign credential recognition in Canada**

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A brief submitted to the House of Commons
Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration Canada
by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC)

1. Background information about the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) is a non-governmental and not-for-profit group representing 92 Canadian public and private not-for-profit universities and university-degree level colleges. Our membership ranges from small, undergraduate liberal arts institutions to large, urban multi-campus universities offering a broad selection of undergraduate, graduate and professional programs.

Since 1911, AUCC has provided strong and effective representation for its members, in Canada and abroad. AUCC's mandate is to facilitate the development of public policy on higher education and to encourage cooperation among universities and governments, industry, communities, and institutions in other countries. AUCC's advocacy ensures that higher education is recognized as vital to Canada's prosperity and quality of life as a knowledge-based society and economy.

Each member university of AUCC is represented by its executive head and the association's business is conducted by a board of directors, made up of 12 university presidents and the president of AUCC.

2. Canadian university engagement in foreign credential recognition

For many years now, the AUCC has been actively engaged with key federal departments on several issues related to Canada's knowledge economy and skilled work force. For example, we are engaged in a policy dialogue with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) to discuss ways to enhance institutional capacity to provide quality 21st century education while also promoting increased access to broader groups of Canadians to Canada's post secondary education system. In addition, we work closely with officials at Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) given the particular priority placed by our member institutions on the effective facilitation of international students' entry and stay in Canada for academic studies. We are an active member of the Advisory Committee on International Students and Immigration (ACISI) and work closely on issues such as study permit processing and policies related to off-campus work for international students as well as other measures to put Canada on a level-playing field with respect to the recruitment of the best and brightest international students to Canadian campuses. In early 2002, we appeared before the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration Canada to discuss international student issues.

Given this long-standing engagement in a range of policy issues of interest to key departments and the SCCIC committee, AUCC and its members are well-placed to be a partner in a current policy dialogue related to improving foreign credential recognition for new immigrants in Canada. Members of AUCC's Standing Advisory Committee on International Relations (SACIR) – which is composed of 11 executive heads of member institutions – recently engaged in a policy discussion on the issue of foreign credential recognition for new immigrants to Canada and possible roles and implications for Canadian universities in order to suggest next steps for AUCC engagement in this area.

The challenges faced by immigrants in terms of recognition of foreign credentials are well documented. A recent paper by George Tillman for the Canadian Alliance of Education and Training Organizations (CAETO) states that the Canadian system is characterized by a multiplicity of players, approaches and procedures and that the key challenges to an informed, accurate and fair assessment of credentials include: lack of information about available programs and services; lack of employer contacts and Canadian work experience; lack of understanding of the culture of Canadian workplaces; and impracticable requirements for licensing and accreditation. In addition, as illustrated in Ivan Fellegi, Chief Statistician at Statistics Canada, January 2004 presentation on Canada's immigrants, the challenges immigrants are experiencing take many forms; e.g. deterioration of language and literacy skills, discrimination, poor economic conditions, etc.

AUCC and the Canadian universities agree that the issue of foreign credential recognition in the Canadian context is an important and complex one and that many stakeholders have a role to play. There is a clear recognition that the barriers faced by skilled immigrants and new Canadians are ultimately detrimental to Canada's competitiveness in the knowledge economy and that each member of the Canadian society deserves the opportunity to reach his or her full potential. Three key issue areas emerged.

First, they recognize that as education providers, universities have a particular role to play in
a) facilitating recognition of foreign credentials for academic study at Canadian universities and
b) facilitating academic recognition for entry into professional practice.

Second, several Canadian universities are already actively engaged in foreign credential recognition initiatives. For example, several AUCC members are involved in national initiatives in the health sector (e.g. those with medical schools); provincial pilots such as the new bridge training initiatives in Ontario (e.g., University of Toronto's pharmacy department, Ryerson University's social work and nutrition departments, Waterloo University's optometry department) and local community "leadership councils" organized by the Maytree Foundation.

Third, SACIR undertook a preliminary discussion on a number of challenges from the Canadian university perspective when it comes to foreign credential recognition, including:

- The need to provide potential immigrants with clear information on Canadian credential assessment procedures;
- The issue of language and cross-cultural training;
- The need for adequate capacity to create more residency placements in professional programs as well as more spaces in bridge training programs;
- Developments at the international level such as the Bologna process aiming at harmonizing the degree structure in order to facilitate mutual recognition of academic qualifications throughout the European higher education area, as well as international conventions such as the Lisbon Convention which will lead to obligations in terms of mutual recognition of academic credentials; and
- The issue of increasing number of private universities in certain countries abroad posing growing challenges for Canadian universities when it comes to the accurate assessment of the academic qualifications of prospective international students or new immigrants to Canada.

SACIR therefore recommended that AUCC examine this significant policy issue from a university perspective and clearly delineate key issues and challenges with a view to articulating where and how universities can helpfully facilitate the recognition of foreign academic qualifications. Given that the current scope of Canadian university engagement, capacity to undertake foreign credential recognition and challenges to better contribute in this area remain to be documented, an essential first step is undertake a comprehensive environmental scan with a view to informing options for further next steps. A good knowledge base of this kind is ultimately beneficial to the long-term development of relevant and efficient programs and policies that will effectively help respond to Canada's labour market needs and accelerate the integration of potential and current immigrants in the Canadian society.

3. Next steps: Building the knowledge base

AUCC recently submitted a proposal to HRSCD's Foreign Credential Program aimed at developing a fuller diagnostic of Canadian university engagement in this area and capturing the challenges and opportunities related to facilitating: a) recognition of foreign credentials for academic study at Canadian universities and b) academic recognition for professional practice. Both dimensions of this issue are worthy of further exploration and analysis, given their role in meeting the government's objectives of expedited integration of new immigrants into the Canadian workforce.

This project will assist partners, among which are many educational institutions, to build a better understanding of the Canadian universities' capacity, expertise and key issues in this area. This is an essential first step that will inform the federal government's strategy and objectives with regards to foreign credential recognition.

AUCC plans to undertake a detailed survey of member institutions on the scope of their activity in foreign credential recognition including: on-line programs and services, off-shore facilities, ESL/FSL and cross-cultural training, provincial and national pilot projects and usage of existing international academic credit transfer and recognition tools. This will be followed by an analysis of up to five case studies about Canadian universities' practice in this area in order to define key issues from the perspective of universities, as well as other key stakeholders.

Collaboration with key organizations such as the Association of Registrars of Universities and Colleges of Canada (ARUCC) to engage the network of university registrars is essential, as well as selected AUCC associate members responsible for education programs in key sectors, e.g. Canadian Association of University Schools of Nursing, Association of Canadian Medical Colleges and Canadian Association of Faculties of Dentistry. AUCC will build on existing work conducted by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC), the Canadian Virtual University, Campus Canada, the Council of Ontario Universities and the Office for Partnerships for Advanced Skills.

Following the research and analysis of the survey results and five case studies, AUCC will draft a summary report which will highlight common themes, lessons learned and current challenges.

This exercise will culminate with a winter 2006 roundtable aimed at promoting policy dialogue among key stakeholders – including selected policy-makers in government departments, professional bodies, credential assessment agencies, and university presidents and registrars –

and identify key issues with respect to foreign academic credential recognition and successful models in the Canadian university context. A roundtable report highlighting the key lessons learned and elements of the discussion would be produced and widely disseminated.

These efforts seek ultimately to respond to Canada's labour market needs through the development of an enhanced knowledge base that could inform programs to accelerate the integration of potential and current immigrants to Canada.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate the fact that Canadian universities are already actively engaged in several foreign credential initiatives at the federal, provincial and community levels and are committed to working in partnership with other stakeholders to continue to understand key issues and barriers and to work towards appropriate solutions.

AUCC is also actively engaged in policy dialogue with other stakeholders and we hope that our upcoming work to enhance the knowledge base with respect to Canadian university engagement will help inform policy developments related to improving Canada's effectiveness in this priority area.

Once our survey, case studies and national roundtable are completed, we would welcome the opportunity to brief all committee members on key results in order to share ideas and possible approaches for universities' further involvement in foreign credential recognition.