

Act Debases Academic Standards

Some folks just can't take a gentle hint, can they? On May 7 last, we wrote about the DeVry Institute of Technology, a private, for-profit learning facility which is a corporate subsidiary of a U.S.-based multi-national company.

For reasons best known to the respective governments of Alberta and Ontario, DeVry has been granted the power in those provinces to confer the exalted title of "degree" on what are, in reality, merely diplomas or certificates of competence in narrow fields of expertise.

Observing that having "a degree" used to mean that, in obtaining it, one also had benefited from concomitant exposure to four or more years of a broad university experience, the column closed with the hope that recent New Brunswick legislation - the Degree Granting Act - would be used judiciously to prevent a similar distortion of the word "degree" occurring in this province.

On May 24 a private, for-profit corporation named Lansbridge University, located in Fredericton, New Brunswick, was designated in this province under the Degree Granting Act to grant "master's degrees". These will be delivered electronically in three programs with strong commercial and information technology content.

So much for the gentle hint...

A subsidiary of Learnsoft Corporation, which is based in Ottawa, Lansbridge University was originally established in Fredericton in October, 1999 as Unexus University. Why would an Ottawa-based company offering educational services over the Internet, which is universally accessible, locate in Fredericton?

Well, at the time New Brunswick was the only province in which any person or corporation who had a mind to could claim to be a "university" without breaking the law.

Perhaps the infusion into the enterprise of \$375,000.00 in taxpayers' money from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, and of another \$225,000.00 from Human Resources Development Canada, on the pretext of the creation of 30 new jobs in Fredericton - which, by the way, do not seem to have materialized - was also an incentive.

According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, 8th Edition, a "university" is

"[A]n educational institution designed for instruction, examination, or both, of students in many branches of advanced learning, conferring degrees in various faculties, and often embodying colleges and similar institutions"..."

DeVry is offering what it calls "degrees" elsewhere in Canada but it has not - as yet, at any rate - been permitted to presume to call itself a "university". Unfortunately, the absence of appropriate legislation in New Brunswick meant that, unlike DeVry, Unexus/Lansbridge could ignore the traditionally accepted definition of a "university" and call itself one.

However, it was hoped that it would not also be given the degree-granting status which could then mislead some members of the general public to identify it with the province's publicly-funded conventional institutions.

Obviously, it is time to take off the rose-coloured spectacles.

The New Brunswick Department of Education gave its final blessing to Lansbridge's enfranchisement as a degree-granting entity on June 11, 2001 after an "independent body" reportedly had judged that its program was of "degree quality".

The "independent body" would, of course, be expected to have been the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, which evaluates all new university course offerings in the Maritime Provinces. It was not. The "independent body" in this case appears to have been the international consulting firm KPMG, based in Zurich, Switzerland which convened a "validation committee" consisting of a university president, three Business School deans, and one professor of education.

For the New Brunswick government to have permitted Unexus/Lansbridge to call itself a "university", without making any attempt to introduce measures to prevent it, is surpassed in its naiveté only by its then having accredited it to grant "degrees" by e-mail.

The result has been the debasement, in this province, of the academic and social currency of the traditional degrees which many individuals have had to sacrifice much to obtain.

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