

## Protecting What “University” Means

Three years ago, a private, on-line vendor of post-secondary education in information technology, Lansbridge University, opened its electronic portals to do e-business in New Brunswick.

Despite the fact that Lansbridge is a for-profit commercial enterprise offering only a narrow range of courses, it was able legally to call itself a “university” because there was absolutely nothing to prevent it from doing so.

New Brunswick is, in fact, the only province in which any entity whatsoever can call itself a university if it so chooses.

The legislatures in at least two other Canadian provinces had, at around the same time, permitted other commercial interests (calling themselves “institutes”, not universities) to describe the similar credentials they bestowed upon their graduates as “degrees” – though these were, in fact, no more than certificates of competence in a specific area of study.

Consequently, university faculty in New Brunswick, through the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations, lobbied long and hard for the introduction of legislation to regulate the criteria both for the granting of degrees and for the judicious use of the word “university”.

At the time, it was only partially successful.

On March 1, 2001 the Degree Granting Act was proclaimed in force. It provided that no enterprise could offer a program of studies leading to the granting of a “degree” without a stringent evaluation of the course content, the approval of the Minister of Education, and the sanction of either the Cabinet or the Lieutenant-Governor.

Although the FNBFA expected that the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission would be charged with the evaluation of the Lansbridge proposal, this task was funneled to the KPMG, the – again private – consulting company.

The KPMG evaluators conveyed their approval of the Lansbridge courses to the Minister, and in due course it was given the go-ahead to grant degrees.

Sadly, though, the Act was silent on the use of the word “university”. Rumour has it that Business New Brunswick – a government department – fought long and hard (and, apparently, continues to do so) to preserve the unfettered availability of the word “university” in order to encourage businesses wishing to describe themselves as such to locate in this province.

Hence, last year Yorkville University arrived on the New Brunswick scene. Originally offering an on-line master’s degree in counseling psychology – again recommended by former KPMG evaluators – Yorkville has now applied to the Minister for approval of a master’s degree in education.

It appears, though, that the ability to grant a “degree” is now coming under closer scrutiny. Agreement has been reached between the MPHEC and the Department of Education that in future the MPHEC, and not private consultants, will be evaluating any new programs offered by the private sector – just as they have always done with new or radically changed courses in the traditional universities. This means that the program or course must not only meet with the approval of the MPHEC’s evaluation team, it must then be further approved by a joint committee of the MPHEC and the Association of Atlantic Universities.

Consequently, and ironically perhaps, although they are not eligible for membership in the AAU, the courses delivered by the commercial “universities” will nevertheless be falling under the scrutiny of the established universities from now on.

It seems, then, that the battle of New Brunswick university faculty to maintain the high standards of course offerings which lead to the awarding in this province of a credential called a “degree” has been largely successful.

Now, however, the challenge remains to prevent the word “university” from being further debased through indiscriminate usage.

*Desmond Morley is the Executive Director of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.*