Expansion of Degree-Granting Status in the Province of Saskatchewan:
Report on Consultations and Recommendations

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Introduction and Purpose of the Review

Over the past fifteen years, there have been a number of changes to the higher education landscape in Canada. The boundaries between college and university instruction have become less rigid and the idea that a bachelor's degree can only be delivered in the context of a university is no longer true in all Canadian provinces. New providers from outside the public sector have entered the field of higher education, and increasingly, their staff have the same kinds of advanced degrees as do university instructors. The hunt for students has become more global, which implies a greater need to look at international norms in the way universities are regulated. Beyond Canada's borders, there are also profound transformations to which local institutions must respond, such as the massification of higher education in Asia, the transformation of higher education in Europe through the Bologna process, and so on.

It is always pertinent for provincial higher education systems to pay attention to national and international trends to see if one's own practices remain in line with prevailing practices. For this reason, on February 25, 2011, the Minister of Advanced Education, Employment and Immigration of the Government of Saskatchewan announced that in response to ongoing requests from post-secondary institutions within the province and developments in post-secondary education elsewhere in Canada, he would be launching a process of public engagement and consultation on the subject of expanding degree-granting status to in-province post-secondary providers other than the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina. The review was also to look at any aspects of quality assurance which might be required to support a possible expansion of degree-granting status.

This report is the result of those consultations. It concludes that an expansion which permits institutions other than the two universities to offer degrees (but not to assume the name "university") is desirable, provided that it is accompanied by a rigorous system of quality assessment at the program level. It suggests slightly different rules to govern the expansion for private providers on the one hand and public ones (i.e. SIAST) on the other. It also recommends a move towards a lighter-touch quality audit system for the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan, to be developed in conjunction with authorities from other provinces because of the difficulty of managing a Saskatchewan-only system.

Part I of the report begins with an introduction to the global context for expanded degree-granting authority, and then continues with a description of the consultation process and describes some general recurring themes from the public consultation process. Part II of the report outlines the three sets of key issues that need to be addressed in an expansion of degree-granting status, and concludes with a summary of recommendations.

Part I – Context and Consultations

I. The Broader Context – Shifting Definitions of Higher Education, and the Global Evolution of Quality Assurance

At the heart of many of the most significant changes in global higher education is the erosion of universities' monopoly on the granting of degrees and the policy changes that have accompanied this shift.

In Europe, bachelor's degrees are increasingly being delivered by non-university higher education institutions (HEIs), such as *Fachhocschule* (Germany) or *Hogescholen* (The Netherlands). Indeed, in the Netherlands, nearly two-thirds of all degrees are delivered this way. These non-university HEIs do not exactly replicate university curricula. Generally speaking, they tend to focus on a more practical and professionally-oriented type of education, with graduates expected to be able to make a transition directly to the labour market (as opposed to bachelor's graduates from universities, who are essentially being prepared to enter master's programs).

Canada has seen a similar shift. In British Columbia, community colleges began delivering four-year degrees (first via agreements with existing universities and then later in their own right) starting in the early 1990s. In Alberta, a similar experiment began in 1995-96 with the expansion of so-called "applied degrees". In both Alberta and British Columbia, some of these degree-granting colleges were later granted status as universities; however, some kept their college status, preferring to keep their more applied and labour market-oriented mandate and continued to provide programs primarily at the diploma and certificate levels alongside a very small number of degree programs. In Ontario, community colleges were permitted to begin offering "applied bachelor's degrees" following the adoption of the *Post-Secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act* in 2000. These were four-year programs with a significant professional orientation (and deliberately designed so as not to compete with degrees in existing universities). In 2009, Manitoba granted Red River College the right to offer a single degree program, in Construction Management.

In addition to non-university public HEIs being permitted to offer degrees, there has also been an enormous proliferation of degrees, globally speaking, being offered by private HEIs. Over the past few decades, for instance, most of the expansion of higher education in places like Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and the Philippines has occurred through private higher education; in Latin America also, the majority of higher education enrolments occurs in private institutions. In Canada, the spread of private education at the degree level – whether of the for-profit or non-profit variety - has been severely restricted by legislation and regulation in various provinces. However, Canada does have a substantial number of private religious institutions providing post-secondary education, ranging from largely unregulated bible colleges offering theological degrees to a few dozen students to relatively large institutions such as Trinity Western University with thousands of students across a wide range of non-theological fields.

This proliferation of degree providers – be they public colleges or private institutions – has quite naturally threatened to create an issue of trust with the public. Worldwide, universities have been the sole awarders of degrees for most of the past eight centuries. In Saskatchewan, ever since the first bachelor's degree was awarded in Saskatoon in 1912, the awarding of degrees has been exclusively pursued within institutions known as universities. The decision to allow new degree providers into a system therefore has the potential to devalue *all* degrees. Since degrees are in effect a kind of currency which is very important to the continued functioning of the labour market, any discussion about expanding degree-granting powers needs to deal with this issue of how to preserve public trust while the expansion of degree provision is occurring.

Globally, the way these issues of trust have been dealt with is through a set of processes which are collectively referred to as Quality Assurance, or QA. There are, broadly three types of QA processes in higher education: Accreditation, Audit and Assessment.

Accreditation. Accreditation is a system in which an external body sets minimum standards for a particular program, institution or set of processes, and certifies whether or not various applicants meet these standards. Canada does not have a national accreditation system for higher education institutions. The closest Canada comes to this is the application for membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, which has a significant resemblance to an accreditation program and is occasionally referred to as such by its own members even though – technically – it is not an accreditation process. Nor do any provinces have a system of accreditation. Accreditation does, however, exist for programs in a number of (mainly professional) fields of study: Law, Medicine, Dentistry, Architecture, Engineering, Nursing, Social Work, etc. The accreditation bodies are always non-governmental (i.e. professional) in nature; they are usually national in scope but occasionally are continental (i.e. mainly American) in nature.

Quality Audit. Under a quality audit system, the external auditor does not directly measure or assess the quality of an institution or unit of an institution. Rather, the role of the auditor is to assess the extent to which each institution's *internal* process of quality assurance and improvement is adequate and the extent to which the institution follows its own processes. Systems of quality audits for public institutions are becoming significantly more common in Canada, as they provide a "lighter-touch" regulatory alternative to the quality assessment systems which exist across the country primarily for private and college-based providers. In Quebec, quality audit procedures are conducted by the provincial universities' association, the Conférence des Recteurs et Principaux du Québec (CREPUQ). Similarly, the system of quality audits now coming into place in Ontario is being run by the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA), an entity which is part of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU). It will examine its first two institutions this year and will continue in sequence through the province's universities through until 2018. Elsewhere, the self-regulatory systems is eschewed for a more external approach: the three Maritime provinces have a similar system run by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Committee (MPHEC), while in British Columbia the

process used by the Degree Quality Assessment Board to evaluate an application for "Exempt Status" under the province's Degree Quality Act is also essentially a Quality Audit procedure.

Quality Assessment. Quality assessment systems are intended to make direct assessments of institutional or (more commonly) program-level quality. In Canada, all seven provinces which operate QA systems have something which works in this manner. In Alberta, British Columbia and the three Maritime provinces, the process is run for all institutions by an external agency. In Quebec, where degrees can only be given out by public universities, this process is run in a self-regulatory manner by CREPUQ. In Ontario, the Post-Secondary Education Quality Assessment Board, (PEQAB), an external agency, manages the process for degrees given out by private providers and public colleges while the universities themselves collectively manage their own process through the OUCQA. Indeed, the COU's process for regulating graduate degrees in the province, introduced in the late 1960s, is Canada's oldest system of higher education QA, dating back to the late 1960s.

The various external Canadian quality assessment agencies have some significant organizational similarities. The agency or board is governed by a small group of lay board members. They are supported by a small secretariat headed by an Executive Director. Institutions make applications for individual new programs, and though assessment is done at the program level, part of the assessment is inevitably about the institution in which the program is to be delivered. These new programs are assessed by a small team made up partly of QA agency staff and partly of subject/field experts recruited externally. This team recommends a course of action to the Board, which in turn makes a recommendation to accept or reject the program proposal (who generally speaking retains final authority over all matters).

It is important to note here that external QA bodies are meant to complement, rather than replace the substantial internal quality assurance processes that universities already have in terms of cyclical unit reviews and the everyday ordinary functioning of Academic Councils or Senates. At the end of the day, those robust internal quality and self-governance procedures are substantively what differentiates universities from other degree-granting institutions.

To conclude briefly: the higher education landscape around the world is no longer dominated by large, public universities. Other institutions, both private and public, have shown their ability to contribute to the size, labour-market orientation and degrees of student choice with the post-secondary sector. However, the proliferation of providers leads to concerns about public trust in the system as these new institutions do not have the same record of performance as do the older and more established universities. This is why, globally, such expansions of the higher education system are nearly always accompanied by the creation of various forms of external QA, so that the public can be assured that the new providers' degrees meet the appropriate standards of excellence. The two issues of expansion and QA are thus inextricably entwined.

II.   How the Review proceeded

The Review of the Expansion of Degree-Granting Status in Saskatchewan proceeded in four phases.

The first was the release of a discussion paper in early April 2011. This paper, which is included in this document as Appendix A, gave some information and background to the issues of degree expansion and quality assurance.   It also provided a six-question framework within which interested parties could frame their submissions:

1. *What constitutes a minimum standard for a bachelor's degree? What do you think of the CMEC definition of a bachelor's degree? How, in principle, could we know whether a degree is of sufficient standard to be considered a bachelor's degree? What factors need to be considered? Are there specific institutional features or characteristics that degree-providers <u>must</u> have, and if so, what are they? Or is it only program-related features which must be judged?*

2. *Should expansion of degrees include all types of degrees or only those of an "applied" nature that do not overlap with university programs? Should new degrees be subject to a test of "public interest" based on labour market demand or some other factor? Or should the awarding of degree-granting status simply be based on an evaluation of program content and instructional quality?*

3. *Who should be given the responsibility to determine whether or not a degree is of sufficient standard? Should it be held within the Ministry or should it be an independent body? What kinds of procedures should it follow? How could outside experts best be involved? Once a positive determination of quality has been made, what consequences follow?*

4. *Should the right to award a degree have any funding implications? Does the right to offer a degree automatically confer a right to public funding for that degree? If it does not, how should the right to public funding be determined?*

5. *In expanding degree-granting power, should there be different standards for public institutions and private institutions? If a new degree-granting authority is set up, should it also have the responsibility to oversee new degrees proposed by the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan or are existing arrangements for quality assurance at these institutions sufficient?*

6. *What kinds of rules should apply to out-of-province educational institutions? Is a "Saskatchewan degree" any degree delivered in the province, and if so, how would "delivery" be defined in an age of electronic course-ware? Does the location of the institution's head office or governing board (or that of its parent organization, in the case of a subsidiary) make a difference, and if so, what extra distinctions need to be made?*

The second phase was the hosting of a "learning event" in Saskatoon on April 21, 2011. Invitations to this event were sent to the executive head of every post-secondary institution in the province, as well as heads of professional associations, faculty associations, and student associations. The event brought together experts on the subject of degree-expansion and quality assurance from a variety of jurisdictions that had taken differing approaches to the issues presented in the discussion paper released three weeks earlier. The idea was to introduce participants to the complex ideas behind expanded degree-granting and quality assurance without suggesting that there was a single "best way" or model that needed to be followed. The main presenters were:

- Dan Smith, Council on Post-Secondary Education, Manitoba
- Marilyn Patton, Campus Alberta Quality Council, Alberta
- Chris Rasmussen, Midwest Higher Education Compact, United States
- Ray Meldrum, Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand.
- Virginia Hatchette, Post-Secondary Education Quality Board (PEQAB), Ontario

Over 60 people participated in the learning event, not including ministry staff or presenters.

The third phase was the submission of responses to the discussion document. Seventeen organizations or individuals from across the province provided written comments and interventions.

The fourth phase of the consultation was a series of one-on-one discussions and interviews between the author and those stakeholders who had chosen to submit a response to the discussion paper. These discussions had three purposes. The first was to clarify issues arising from individual submissions; the second was to ask questions that might not have been addressed in the submissions and the third was to probe possible areas of overlap and commonality between positions in order to discover through dialogue possible areas of agreement.

III.   Broad Common Themes Emerging From Consultations

A number of common themes emerged from the learning event, the seventeen responses to the discussion document and the various discussions that followed. Some of the very broad themes are discussed briefly in this section, while some other, more specific positions and critiques are included in the next section which looks at key policy issues arising from the consultation.

It was clear at the start of the consultation that very few stakeholders had much of a sense of how QA worked elsewhere. This led to a great deal of confusion regarding what the term expansion of degree-granting powers might mean (some took it to mean the creation of new universities). Other stakeholders, seeing an unfamiliar process which might be seen as a threat to institutional autonomy, asked questions such as "what's behind this?", or "why now?" Though the announcement of the consultation cited the 2007 CMEC statement on quality assurance, few people saw this as a credible immediate spur to action. This emphasizes, perhaps, the difficulty of making routine policy reviews in a world where policy and politics are seen in very transactional terms. Not every policy comes under review or is introduced because of a pressing external issue or imminent announcement. Sometimes, sound policy management requires a government to review some non-imminent yet foundational issues. This was in fact one of those times, but not everyone initially accepted it as such, perhaps because the both style of policy-making being adopted in this instance and the topic itself were unfamiliar to many stakeholders.

Another important theme – and perhaps the most common reaction to the initiative as a whole – was the strength of the opposition to the creation of new universities in the province. Though this idea was never in fact on the policy agenda, a large number of submissions implicitly equated the expansion of degree-granting with the creation of new universities (which, in turn, was equated with academic self-governance and the ability to independently authorize new degrees). This concept generated a considerable amount of opposition. However, a more limited type of degree-granting approval system – along the lines of the program-by-program quality assessment and degree-approval systems seen in British Columbia and Alberta – was generally viewed much more favourably. There was also widespread agreement that degree standards such as the ones CMEC had put forward in its 2007 Statement on Quality Assurance were an appropriate basis for a degree-assessment system in Saskatchewan.

Much of the reason for the opposition to new universities stemmed from the fact that the province's two universities clearly benefit from a great deal of public trust. A substantial proportion of responses to the consultation were variations on the theme that additional scrutiny of two excellent universities was unnecessary – certainly, if any new QA system were to be developed, intervenors tended to be of the opinion that it would need to proceed with a relatively light touch where the universities were concerned.

A number of intervenors also highlighted the fact that one of the possible consequences of a widening of degree-granting powers in Saskatchewan might be an unnecessary duplication of programs. Even accepting the possibility that some of these arguments were those of monopolists trying to exclude competition, there is a substantial force to this point. Saskatchewan is a relatively small province with a widely dispersed population and as such has substantial challenges in providing certain types of high-cost, low-volume programming. In these fields, which tend to be professionally-focused, there is certainly a case to be made against duplication and in favour of well-funded single providers.

With respect to the composition of an external QA council, there were no detailed suggestions, though there was unanimity that this body needed to work at arms-length from government. There were a substantial number of comments, however, with respect to the kinds of minimum criteria that would be used to determine whether an institution would be permitted to grant degrees. Intervenors were adamant on two points in particular: that degrees worthy of the name cannot be given in an environment which lacks academic freedom, and they cannot be given in an environment lacking in scholarly engagement and research.

Finally, some suggested that it was difficult to have a discussion about the expansion of degree-granting authority in the absence of a broader provincial PSE policy which defined what kinds of education the province expected its different institutions to provide. Though it lies outside the scope of this report, this is a valuable point that the Government of Saskatchewan may wish to reflect upon as it considers how to develop policy for a small but increasingly complex system.

Part II
Key Issues and Recommendations

IV. Key Issues in the Expansion of Degree-Granting Status

Over the course of the consultation, three distinct sets of issues emerged regarding the expansion of degree-granting authority and quality assurance. Broadly, these three issues line up with three different sets of potential providers of degree-level education: one for private providers, one for colleges (primarily SIAST), and one for the two existing universities.

Key Issue #1 – *Whether or not to permit private post-secondary providers to offer provincially-recognized degree programs.*

All over the world, there has been an increasing tendency for private providers to offer niche programs in areas of higher education not adequately covered by the public sector. Sometimes, this reflects the limited financial capacity of government to provide public higher education across a full range of academic subjects; nearly always, it reflects the increasing number of scholars with terminal degrees, willing and eager to provide higher instruction in a subject, but who are nevertheless not employed in public universities.

In Saskatchewan, there are a number of private higher education institutions ("private" in this sense meaning either being privately owned, being denominational in nature and/or whose governance structure reports to an entity other than the Government of Saskatchewan). Some (though not all) of those offering programs of three years or more in length are affiliated to one of the two main universities and offer programs at the degree level through an academic agreement with these universities. The bulk of the remainder offer short-course vocational training leading to a certificate.

At the present time, there are only a very small handful of institutions who seem likely to have both the desire and the potential capacity to offer degrees on their own. There is therefore some temptation to suggest specific measures that will offer solutions tailored to these institutions. However, Saskatchewan's post-secondary system is already beset with a large number of such tailored, one-off solutions, with the result that its higher education system is vastly more complicated that any system of its size need be. There is also the possibility that other institutions – either Saskatchewan-based or out-of-province providers attempting to set up a campus in Saskatchewan and offer degrees within the province – will eventually wish to take advantage of similar provisions. As a result, it seems wise to propose a solution which will be generally applicable across all institutions of this type.

The issue here, it should be stressed, is not whether or not to grant these institutions the title of "university". Though it is of course possible that the Province of Saskatchewan might at some point wish to designate a third or even fourth institution as a university, that designation has a fairly specific meaning which encompasses significant breadth of programming, academic self-governance and the presence of robust internal quality assurance procedures. There are at the moment no other institutions in the province which would come close to meeting that definition. Rather, the issue is whether or not the Government of Saskatchewan is going to

allow private non-university providers to issue degrees, subject to some kind of quality assurance mechanism which would be similar in nature to the ones which have already been created in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and the Maritime provinces. Such processes allow degrees to be approved on a case-by-case basis; institutions which are approved may then advertise that they are a degree provider, but this does not imply a granting of university status.

Most of the arguments in favour of such an arrangement boil down to two issues. The first issue is parity of treatment based on program outcomes.   If a non-university provider can demonstrate to a committee of peers that it is capable of designing a curriculum with a depth and breadth appropriate to the bachelor's level, staffing it with adequately trained scholars and delivering it in a setting with sufficient resources, why should such a program not be able to use the designation of a "bachelor's degree?" Second, there is an argument about choice which holds that it is beneficial to students to have a choice of alternate providers offering degrees with specific orientations that are unavailable in the province's two universities.

These ideas of equity for providers and choice for students are simple and powerful concepts. However, the consultation also revealed some substantial opposition within the province to these ideas. The essence of the opposition came in two quite separate arguments - one that challenges the idea of lifting the two universities' present monopoly and one that raises specific objections to the idea of allowing faith-based institutions to offer degrees.

The essential argument behind the first point is that a small province needs to concentrate its resources, and that allowing new providers to enter the market dilutes them (or, at least, by shifting student numbers). As a result, a proliferation of providers is to be opposed not because of any concerns about the standard of educational quality they may or may not be able to provide, but rather because their existence will inevitably cause a diminution of resources for existing degree providers. And this, say critics, must be resisted on grounds of preserving the quality of public institutions. The criticism implicit in the second argument is somewhat more profound as it goes to the heart of what a university is and does. A number of intervenors made the point that a bachelor's level degree needs to be delivered in an environment in which academic freedom is guaranteed, and many felt that this was not possible in an institution which demands that faculty sign a statement of faith as a condition of employment.

Neither of these lines of argument is trivial. Nevertheless, in both cases there are very good potential counter-arguments, and/or policy responses, which make them less compelling as reasons to maintain the status quo.

With respect to the risk of funding dilution, the argument has significant force only if it is assumed that any new degree is accompanied by public funding. Yet, on this point, sentiment among intervenors was unanimous: there is no reason why being permitted to offer a bachelor's degree should necessarily entail the receipt of public funding. These are two fundamentally different decisions. Indeed, Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta and New Brunswick have all permitted degrees to be delivered by private providers, but none of them

have established direct government funding for such programs as a result. Because of the unanimity of views on this subject, **it is recommended that any decision to recognize a degree program at a private institution should not entail any automatic consequences with respect to obtaining public funding**.

Some might argue that there are still *indirect* effects based on a shifting pattern of enrolments, but this seems unlikely. At Briercrest, for instance, roughly half the student-body comes from out of province. Even if local enrolments rose by 20% as a result of being able to offer a provincially-recognized degree, this would only constitute about 70 students, which is too trivial an outcome to affect funding in a way that anyone would notice.

It is relevant at this point to ask what the potential future market for privately-delivered bachelor's level programming in the province of Saskatchewan might be. Though it is impossible to answer this question with absolute certainty, some observations can be made about private higher education in general which go some way to deducing the future market. The first is that it tends to focus on degrees which are relatively inexpensive to deliver (science-based programs are relatively rare, for instance). The second is that they tend to offer programs in areas which are not already directly covered by local public education; rather, they tend to offer "specialized" or "niche" programming. But this tends to only be practical when there is a large enough local population to support sustained demand for such a program. Given the relatively dispersed nature of Saskatchewan's population, it seems unlikely that the market can support many of these types of offerings. Simply put, there are unlikely to be large numbers of applicants for such new degrees and the effect on Saskatchewan's local student population should be small.

The issue with respect to academic freedom is a more difficult public policy dilemma. Certainly, there are an enormous number of Canadian precedents to allow faith-based institutions – even ones which require signed statements of faith – to deliver degrees. Indeed, if one looks at the membership of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (which despite not being a formal accrediting body is, in the absence of national standards, nevertheless a reasonably good guide to which institutions are widely considered to be "universities"), there are five such institutions across the country: one in British Columbia, two in Alberta, one in Manitoba and one in Ontario.   Since they have achieved AUCC membership, they must have been able to convince a group of their peers (i.e. other university Presidents) that they met the association's standards of *"respect(ing) the academic rights and freedoms of others (as per AUCC's 1988 statement on Academic Freedom)"*.

It is standard practice among Canadian external quality assurance agencies to conduct a full organizational review at the time an institution first applies for a degree.   It would be quite normal for a Saskatchewan QA Board to set institutional conditions with respect to the observance of academic freedom (the decision would be its own, but it is a reasonable expectation to assume that it would do so given the general feeling on the matter within the province). Such an arrangement, however, need not create insuperable barriers to allowing faith-based institutions from being able to provide degree-level education. Other provinces

and the AUCC have already found ways for the two to co-exist, and it should certainly be possible in Saskatchewan as well. An eventual provincial QA authority, should it be created, would be well advised to look at how these authorities have managed to balance these concepts.

To conclude, it seems as though the concerns of those opposed to expanding degree-granting power to private institutions – primarily, funding and academic freedom - can be accommodated within a framework that provides non-university providers with equity in the right of provision and provides students with expanded choice. As a result, **it is recommended that the Government of Saskatchewan prepare legislation permitting an expansion of degree-granting powers beyond the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan. It is further recommended that the University of Saskatchewan Act and the University of Regina Act be amended to remove their current monopoly on the awarding of degrees.**

This of course leads to the question of what kind of authority might best be able to adjudicate requests for degree programs. Other Canadian provinces presently seem to be converging on a single model, i.e., a quality assessment board with a lay membership serviced by a small secretariat which commissions expert assistance as needed from subject-matter experts. Each new degree program from private institutions is reviewed and recommended for approval (or not) to the Minister separately by this QA Board (the Minister retains the right to reject a proposal if he or she so chooses). On the occasion of the first review of a program from an institution, an institutional review as well as a program review is carried out, meaning that standards of quality both at the program and institutional level are needed.

This basic structure has been adopted in all Canadian provinces with little variation. There is little reason to re-invent the wheel, so this model – with a few modifications to reflect Saskatchewan's smaller size, would seem to be perfectly satisfactory. Board membership, for instance could be smaller: five members would likely be adequate. Secretariat support could be provided directly by staff within the Ministry of Advanced Education, Employment and Immigration. And ideally it would not take up very much in terms of human resources - perhaps just an executive director and some administrative assistance. Of course, additional expert assistance could be called upon when necessary to provide adjudication on the program proposals. In the first year or two, more work might be required, but over the long run, if as expected only a handful of new applications are received each year, then this kind of arrangement should be sufficient.

It is recommended that in order to provide quality assurance for new degree programs in private institutions, a Higher Education Quality Assurance Board for the province of Saskatchewan be created. Based loosely on models in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia, the organization would consist of a small, lay board serviced by a small secretariat which commissions subject-matter experts to assist with the evaluation of individual programs.

For further clarity, this recommendation applies *only* to private institutions in the province. For recommendations regarding degrees at SIAST and degree quality assurance at the Universities of Saskatchewan and University of Regina, please see the sections Key Issue #2 and #3, respectively.

Key Issue #2 - *The creation of new programs in areas of emerging professional practice at SIAST*

One of the obvious points of contention among intervenors in the consultation was the future role of SIAST. It has obviously not escaped the notice of Saskatchewan's post-secondary community that colleges in other parts of Canada have, over the past twenty years or so, increasingly been permitted to offer degree-level programming. Neither has it escaped anyone's attention that in some provinces (notably Alberta and British Columbia, though Ryerson's ascension to university status in the early 1990s would also qualify) some of these colleges have gone on to change their status and become universities.

Based on their written submissions, a significant number of intervenors in this consultation view this process as an unwelcome one if it were applied to Saskatchewan. There are, broadly, three reasons why this is so. First, there is a belief that university-level programming requires a degree of breadth which would not be available in a community college environment. Second, there are worries that if SIAST were permitted to move into degree-level programming it would be in violation of its mission, and in consequence a) might damage universities by moving on to their "turf", and/or b) might damage SIAST itself by encouraging it to neglect its core constituency of students looking for highly employment-related training. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the former view tended to be expressed by university-based observers and the latter by college-based observers. Third, there is a feeling that if SIAST were allowed to apply for degrees in professional areas, that it could lead to duplication of programming, which in turn would tend to lead to a decline in quality as different programs competed for a fixed and fairly small pot of resources.

Each of these is a substantive reason to be concerned for the health of Saskatchewan's post-secondary system if degree-granting powers were expanded in an unrestricted way. However, there is a strong argument that there may be some areas in which it might well be the case that SIAST is better-positioned than either of the province's universities to provide instruction, regardless of the level of credential involved. To understand why this is the case, it is important to understand how new programs of study co-evolve with changes in the labour market.

The worlds of work and professional standards are constantly evolving. There are numerous occupations where specialized degrees have become a common entry requirement where previously none were required. Journalism degrees, for instance, have become a *sine qua non* for entry into a profession which 40 years ago did not really require any post-secondary education; in nursing, college-level training is still available, but university-level training is increasingly common prior to entry into the profession. Sometimes, these changes are driven

by changes in technology; as skill requirements increase, so too does the length of the education people are required to undertake. In other cases, it is purely a change in professional standards within an occupation. As a result, the range of programs that require degree-level education is constantly in flux.

For most of the twentieth century, any rise in the occupational educational requirements of the labour market has been taken care of by universities once they reach the level of a bachelor's degree. This is why, on the whole, universities have become increasingly concerned with applied knowledge over the past century or so, not just in the broad range of fields of study with which they concern themselves, but within each specific field as well. This explains the shift from disciplines such as physics and chemistry to programs like bio-chemistry, from the sciences generally to engineering and, indeed, the shift from the humanities to the social sciences (which, arguably, are just an applied form of the humanities).

Meanwhile, a mirror-image shift has been going on in non-university higher education. As required skill levels in many occupations have increased, so too have the educational requirements of the programs that feed them. In some cases, this has led to entirely new programs being fashioned, some of them at the degree level. The result is that universities and colleges have slowly converged in their orientation toward the labour market. Though in theory each remains rooted in a paradigm of "applied" and "theoretical" knowledge, in practice both have been gradually mixing the two for decades.

One result of this change is that as the labour market requirements change, it is not always clear which type of institution is best placed to offer instruction in a new area of practice. Neighboring Manitoba provides an excellent recent example with respect to project management in the construction industry. Until recently, the labour market would have expected this kind of skill to emerge naturally, either from management students with a knack for construction or from skilled tradespeople with a knack for management. However, the drive for greater efficiency in the construction industry has led the industry to be less patient with such a trial-and-error method of developing the necessary competencies; what industry would prefer instead is someone with formal training in construction management.

When this kind of demand arises, a host of questions need to be asked: how long does a construction management program need to be? Does it need to be a degree? What kinds of skills need to be taught? At what kinds of local institutions are competent teachers available to transmit these skills? Different jurisdictions may legitimately come to different conclusions about these questions: the point is that when a demand for this kind of program arises, it is not always immediately obvious whether a college or a university is the right place to house it. In some cases, the answer to this question may well be a community college, in which case awarding it to a university simply because "that's where degrees have to be" is simply inefficient.

So, there is a strong case to be made that on occasion, SIAST might be the place to put a new degree-level program. This, it should be said, is a point which most intervenors - even those

with concerns about expanding degree-granting powers to SIAST - tended to concede during discussions in the consultation period. The question is therefore not really whether or not SIAST is capable of degree-level programming; the question is how to permit it in such a way that the three concerns raised earlier – essentially, breadth, mission-creep and competition for scarce resources – are properly addressed.

The first of these is probably dealt with most easily. Appropriate requirements on breadth can simply be written into the standards for degrees by a new QA Board, which will then be responsible for applying such criteria in any review of new programs (whether at SIAST or at a private provider). These breadth requirements need not be overly restrictive. Certainly there are a large number of newer, professionally oriented programs at universities whose breadth is not anything like that of a liberal arts program and there is no reason to impose requirements on new providers that universities would not impose on themselves. But by collaborating with experts in various fields of study, it should not be beyond the wit of a new council to ensure that new programs have not just degree-level depth, but appropriate degree-level breadth as well.

The question of "mission creep" is an important one. It should be noted here that the administration of SIAST has made it clear that it has no interest in providing degrees in traditional areas of study such as history, psychology, etc. Rather, it is interested solely in providing degrees in areas which are professionally-oriented and which lead directly to employment. This, after all, *is* its mission, and has been since its creation. Thus, it may make sense to state up front that while SIAST should be given the right to offer degrees, this right should be confined to areas which align with its historic mission of preparing students for the world of work.

So far, so simple: a restricted right to offer professional degrees subject to a QA council vetting with respect to both depth and breadth would seem to satisfy the two conditions. But there remains the issue of duplication. Not unreasonably, intervenors in this process expressed concern that allowing SIAST to offer degrees – even in the more restricted area of professional programs – would create the scope for duplication and overlap. This, they feared, would lead to a lowering of overall quality as resources which could have been made available to make a single high-quality program were distributed over two programs.

Let us assume for the moment that this is one of those areas where it probably makes sense for the province to avoid duplication. By restricting the number of providers of any given program to one, the initial decision of where to place such a program becomes subject to significant political pressure. Thus the decision to start a new program is often seen as having less to do with where it makes most sense to such a new program, and more to do with which institution proposes it and whether or not they have the ear of the responsible public officials. Whether or not this is true, the perception is widespread, and perhaps underlines the difficulty of managing a higher education system with only two universities – what goes to one is always seen as a slight to the other.

In any case, what is clearly needed here is a mechanism which will meet four tests: a) identify possible new degree programs with professional orientations in areas of emerging need, b) allow SIAST to be given due consideration as a location for such programs as it seems best suited to provide, c) ensure that the decision regarding where to locate such new programs provides the best possible quality and value to the taxpayer and d) that all of the above is both done and seen to be done in an impartial manner. The solution, it would seem, therefore rests in the creation of some sort of competitive mechanism and which would allow impartial judging of such matters and which would include SIAST as well as the two universities.

Such a system could then work along the following lines:

1) In October of each year, the two universities and SIAST could make a short proposal to the Minister with respect to the creation of new degree programs. The proposal would necessarily include an explanation, with evidence, for how a new degree program is responding to a human resource need within the province.

2) Within 60 days, the Minister would indicate for each proposed program whether it would a) entertain more formal proposals under the assumption that a successful program would receive funding, b) entertain more formal proposals under the assumption that a successful program would not receive funding or c) not entertain any proposals at all for such a program

3) For all proposals which the Minister has indicated he/she would entertain proposals, the Minister would then ask all three institutions whether they would like to submit a proposal, either individually or jointly, to deliver such a program.

4) All institutions would then be permitted to submit a proposal to deliver said programming, indicating a detailed curricular statement, an itemization of resources and staff available to teach the courses, the expected intake and number of graduates, and the cost to government (if funding is being sought). These submissions would take place in or around the month of March.

5) Based on these submissions, the QA Board would be tasked with adjudicating a) whether the proposals would meet the necessary standard of quality to be called a degree program and b) which of the competing proposals would deliver the best value to the people of Saskatchewan. This recommendation would be delivered to the Minister in time for it to be included in any budget forecast discussions with government in October, which would in turn then give institutions time to start a program the following September (though in some cases start-up might take longer than a single year).

6) The following spring, the QA Board would review a more detailed plan drawn up by the successful institution with respect to the new program in order to add a final element of quality control before the program launch. Such a review could be formative in nature,

with the council and its subject-matter experts providing advice to improve the new programs in addition to providing a "minimum standards" approach.

This role would be a slightly novel one for a QA Board, in that it would be asked to look at value-for-money as well as standards of quality. But it would not appear to be an overly-onerous duty given that demand for new degrees from private providers is expected to be fairly light. Moreover, it meets the fourfold test of providing an identification of need, a value-for-money decision, a disinterested review and the inclusion of SIAST.

A final note on this issue: though the prospect may seem somewhat remote at the moment, there is reason to believe that at some point in the future, the province's regional colleges may wish to offer degrees as well. If and when this time comes, it would be logical that they should be included in this policy framework as well.

What follows from the above are the following recommendations:

The section of the SIAST Act which lists the types of academic awards it may offer should be amended in order to allow it to offer degrees provided they have been accepted by the Minister based on a recommendation from the QA Board.

A competitive mechanism should be set up to adjudicate requests for new professionally-focused programs from the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina and SIAST. The new QA Board should act as the adjudicator in this process, and should make its decisions based both on standards of quality and value-for-money. The process should take place along timelines which permit the decisions to be incorporated into fall budget forecast discussions.

Key Issue #3 - *Quality Assurance at the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina*

Quality assurance, at the end of the day, is a matter of trust. It exists primarily to assure people that institutions which are less well-known or well-scrutinized are capable of providing education at an acceptable level. It is a bureaucratic seal of good housekeeping.

But as we have already noted, most stakeholders seem quite pleased with the quality of programming currently on offer at the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina. Many questioned the need for any kind of oversight for fear of adding a useless layer of bureaucracy to oversee a process which most felt was already fine. Based on the responses to the consultation, there is really no gap in trust which needs to be filled when it comes to these two institutions.

That said, there was some sympathy for the idea of equal treatment for new and old degree providers; that is to say that if new degree providers (either SIAST or private) had to go through some kind of QA process, then it would be only fair for the two universities to have to submit to it as well. This argument is usually supplemented with the argument that in view of their already-extensive internal quality control programs, these institutions deserve a "lighter touch" form of external oversight. There are practical, as well as philosophical reasons for this; requiring these two institutions to go through the process for every new program would substantially increase the amount of work before the new QA Board – perhaps tripling or even quadrupling it. This might substantially alter the business case for such a council for very little obvious gain given the amount of public trust they already enjoy.

Still, the argument that some kind of process is required is fairly strong. Though the province's two universities might not need a QA seal of approval in order to operate in the local market, it is increasingly the case that they are competing in a more global market where they do not enjoy such trust. As QA becomes a more generalized phenomenon around the world, there is a risk that institutions which do not possess some kind of QA certification will be at a disadvantage.

A possible approach to this issue would be the implementation of a Quality Audit system in place for the two universities. Recall from above that under a system of Quality Audit, it is not individual programs which are examined and approved. Rather, what occurs is a general assessment of an institution's own internal quality control mechanisms: how good they are and whether they are in fact being followed. Similar processes already exist in most other Canadian provinces, including British Columbia, the Maritime Provinces (a joint process managed by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission), Quebec and, as of this year, Ontario.

Though a system of quality audits is a good idea, there is nevertheless a difficulty in making it work in a provincial system with just two universities. Complex procedures like quality audits, which are really only meant to occur every five to ten years at a given institution, benefit significantly from economies of scale. It is difficult to imagine that such a task could be

accomplished with any deftness in a small jurisdiction with only two such audits to conduct every decade. For one thing, there would be almost no qualified academics who would be able to participate in more than one such review per decade, given that nearly everyone qualified to work in such a review is associated with one or the other institution under review. This is another example of how higher education systems made up of two degree-granting institutions can be more difficult to manage than a system of twenty. So, while a Quality Audit system for the Universities of Regina and Saskatchewan might be very desirable, it is difficult to see how such a process could in practice be managed within the province.

Managing such a complex process within one's own province is not the only option. As the Maritime Provinces' Higher Education Commission has shown, what can be out of the reach of a single province can be achieved if several provinces work together. One option therefore might be to work together with other provinces that have not yet decided on a quality assurance mechanism in order to pursue the creation of a joint quality audit system.   In this respect, the province of Manitoba, which has not yet developed a system of external quality assurance, would be an ideal partner. Another option would simply be to contract out such a procedure altogether to another provincial QA authority which already performs such a process. If this were done, the British Columbia Degree Review Board, which uses a Quality Audit process in order to determine "exempt status" from the normal program quality assessment review, would be an obvious candidate.

It is therefore recommended that the Government of Saskatchewan adopt a policy with respect to ensuring that the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan be subject to periodic quality audits, along lines similar to those adopted by the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance or the process for "exempt status" used by the British Columbia Degree Quality Assessment Board. It is further recommended that the government, with the participation of the two universities, begin discussions with other provinces and QA authorities to determine the feasibility of either.

V.   Summary and Consolidated Recommendations

It is recommended that in order to provide quality assurance for new degree programs in private institutions, a Higher Education Quality Assurance Board for the province of Saskatchewan be created. Based loosely on models in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia, the organization would consist of a small, lay board serviced by a small secretariat which commissions subject-matter experts to assist with the evaluation of individual programs.

It is recommended that any decision to recognize a degree program at a private institution should not entail any automatic consequences with respect to obtaining public funding;

It is recommended that the Government of Saskatchewan prepare legislation permitting an expansion of degree-granting powers beyond the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan. **It is further recommended that the University of Saskatchewan Act and the University of Regina Act be amended to remove their current monopoly on the awarding of degrees.**

It is further recommended that the section of the SIAST Act which lists the types of academic awards it may offer should be amended in order to allow it to offer professionally-focussed degrees they have been approved by the Minister based on a recommendation from the QA Board.

A competitive mechanism should be set up to adjudicate requests for new professionally-focused programs from the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina and SIAST. The new QA Board should act as the adjudicator in this process, and should make its decisions based both on standards of quality and value-for-money. The process should take place along timelines which permit the decisions to be incorporated into fall Budget Framework discussions.

It is recommended that the Government of Saskatchewan adopt a policy with respect to ensuring that the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan be subject to periodic quality audits, along lines similar to those adopted by the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance or the process for "exempt status" used by the British Columbia Degree Quality Assessment Board. It is further recommended that the government, with the participation of the two universities, begin discussions with other provinces and QA authorities to determine the feasibility of either.