

INSTRUCTOR QUALIFICATIONS BEST PRACTICES:

A Guide to Understanding and Overcoming Instructor Qualifications Challenges To Transfer Agreements in Alberta

Historical Context

Within Alberta's Transfer System instructor qualifications, for course credit transfer to degree programs, has been and continues to be an issue of considerable interest and debate. A discussion took place at the October 28, 2009 ACAT Council meeting regarding the possible establishment of a policy to address instructor qualifications.

At that time it was determined that ACAT did not have a policy role; however, it was agreed that Council should work toward a Principles and Best Practice document regarding Instructor Qualifications. As a first step it was decided that feedback from member institutions would be gathered before Council developed any such document related to instructor qualifications.

A request for feedback was circulated to institutions November 16, 2009. Twenty-one institutions provided their feedback on a number of questions and provided examples of situations where the issue of instructor qualifications created a barrier to the establishment of transfer agreements.

The questions asked were:

1. What are your institutions current practices/policies where instructor qualifications are concerned? (i.e., As a sending institution, what are your instruction policies/practices for course delivery? As a receiver, what are your general policies/practices related to your instruction expectations?)
2. Outline problems/challenges you have experienced related to instructor qualifications when negotiating an agreement? (i.e., Situations where instructor qualifications have presented a barrier to the establishment of a transfer agreement). Please feel free to provide examples of scenarios which have caused concern.
3. What recommendations can you provide for the future?

After reviewing the results of the survey, ACAT Council struck a sub-committee to develop ACAT a Principles and Best Practices document regarding Instructor Qualifications. Members were intentionally drawn from all of the different sectors of the current Alberta Post-Secondary system in order to provide representative perspective and input to the discussions and final document.
(*ACAT Council Complete February 11, 2010 Agenda Package, pp. 22-43*)

The current sub-committee carefully considered both the audience and purpose of this document. It was envisioned that the audience is individuals engaged in some or all aspects of the transfer process both as senders and receivers, and the sub-committee considered what would be useful to this range of people across a complex system.

We would like to acknowledge the efforts of past committee members as well as the many stakeholders across the sectors/system who have all contributed to the final version of this document.

Section 1: Purpose

The purpose of this document is to inform and assist those involved in Alberta's transfer system, with the aim of overcoming challenges to transfer related to instructor qualifications. In this way it is meant to assist all ACAT members to more effectively "work cooperatively for the benefit of learners to ensure smooth transitions and effective transferability of courses and programs within the post-secondary system" (*ACAT Transfer Guide*, p.1).

Toward this end, this document both describes how differences between institutions regarding instructor qualifications can serve as challenges to agreement as well as articulates a series of best practices recommendations to overcome these challenges.

This document is consistent with and in support of the following ACAT's principles:

- Student access to higher education and the opportunity for student mobility among institutions of higher education in Alberta shall be optimized.
- Negotiation of opportunities for student mobility shall be based on the recognition that while learning experiences may differ in a variety of ways, their substance may be virtually equivalent in terms of outcomes and rigor.
- Individual institutions have the primary responsibility for instructional programs, even though responsibility for higher education is shared among various constituents. The responsibility of institutions includes program design and delivery, determination of academic prerequisites and student admission criteria, and certification of the academic achievement of students.
- Post-secondary institutions are committed to developing and maintaining clearly stated policies and procedures for consideration of transfer credit and to applying them in a consistent manner.

(*ACAT Principles, Policies and Procedures*, http://www.acat.gov.ab.ca/acat_information/PPP.pdf)

This document also recognizes and endorses the Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC) "Standards on Academic Staff" as articulated in section 4.3.4 of its *Handbook*. (http://caqc.gov.ab.ca/pdfs/Handbook_June_2011.pdf).

Section 2: How Difficulties Arise

Within the Campus Alberta system, expectations regarding instructor qualifications in undergraduate degree programs are generally well understood, as specified by the Campus Alberta Quality Council: desirable, "an acceptable doctoral degree in the discipline in which the staff member is assigned to teach or in a cognate discipline"; minimum, "an acceptable Master's degree or equivalent in the discipline in which the staff member is assigned to teach." The Alberta transfer system covers a broader range of courses and programs, however, not just degree programs. Difficulties in transfer related to instructor qualifications usually arise regarding transfer into a different type of program or institution—for example, from a diploma program to a baccalaureate program or between sectors (*Alberta Post-Secondary Six Sector Model*, <http://www.advancededucation.gov.ab.ca/media/185450/sixsectormodel.pdf>)

The expansion of the transfer system means that many more institutions and people are involved in negotiating transfer agreements than once was the case, and the agreements themselves are more complex. Sending institutions are proposing courses to a variety of institutions with which they are not familiar; conversely, universities and colleges are dealing with proposals from a much broader range of institutions and programs with which they are not familiar.

Difficulties regarding instructor qualifications can arise at any stage of the transfer agreement process, from initial development of courses intended for transfer, through negotiation of transfer agreements, to maintenance and revision of existing transfer agreements. Challenges are unavoidable in negotiations between institutions that differ in mandate, size, location, student population, and programs.

Difficulties in negotiating and maintaining transfer agreements typically arise when the sending and receiving institutions or programs are of different types. Expected instructor qualifications may differ between the programs—in fact these variations may be imposed upon the programs by their varying accrediting bodies. While instructor qualifications required in each program should be suitable for achieving quality instruction and the intended learning outcomes in that program, they may not, at least not automatically, be seen to meet the learning objectives of a program of a different sort. Receiving institutions may be inclined to reject transfer credit for courses not meeting their normal instructor qualification requirements. The sending institution, on the other hand, may feel that its courses are meeting the learning outcomes of the receiving institution's program in other ways. The receiving institution may remain unconvinced, however.

Universities, for example, have standard expectations—articulated by the CAQC—regarding the credentials of instructors in their degree programs. The expectations regarding instructor qualifications in non-degree programs at colleges and technical institutions are typically quite different. Such an institution may nevertheless propose some of its courses for transfer credit into a university degree program. The university may reject the request because the sending institution's instructor(s) do not meet the university's normal expectations. It may be difficult for the sending institution to meet those expectations. Moreover, the college may be frustrated and feel that this rejection is unreasonable given its belief that the rationale for the universities' instructor qualifications requirement is being fulfilled in other ways. For example, such factors as carefully managed content, course delivery, and assessment of instruction may compensate for lack of the normal instructor qualifications in some courses. Therefore, when these courses are rejected for transfer credit by a university, on the basis of inadequate instructor qualifications, the sending institution may feel that the other factors they use to ensure quality instruction and learning outcomes have not been taken adequately into account. The university, on the other hand, may be skeptical that the learning outcomes which are important to their degree programs are actually sufficiently ensured in these other ways.

Program accreditation processes, in fact, can both help and hinder student transfer. These processes help ensure quality instruction and that the learning objectives of the program are being met. Receiving institutions may reasonably take that accreditation into account when granting transfer credit. On the other hand, if its program's objectives are significantly different than those of the sending program, the accreditation of the sending program may not be adequate to assure the receiver that the objectives of its program are being met. Furthermore, the accrediting body of the receiving program may even prohibit the receiving program from granting transfer credit for instruction delivered by the instructors in the sending program; they may lack the credentials required by the

receiving institution's accreditor.

Information about the accrediting requirements of different professional organizations may be found on their respective websites.

To help our institutions overcome difficulties such as these, ACAT offers the following Best Practices recommendations for your consideration.

Section 3: Best Practices

Best Practice One: Participating institutions and individuals share a commitment to the following common values and assumptions:

- Commitment to a student-first approach
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Mutual respect
- Equality and fairness
- A commitment to quality and the highest standards of academic programming
- Appreciation of cultural and organizational differences
- Institutional autonomy; right of refusal
- Trust
- Open and supportive communications
- Engagement of all stakeholders/levels within the transfer process
- Management and sharing of information
- Expectation and exercise of due diligence

Feedback in the form of responses to a November 2009 Instructor Qualifications questionnaire as well as responses to previous drafts of this document made it clear that commitment to these key values and assumptions underpin successful transfer agreements across institutions and sectors.

Best Practice Two: Institutions recognize expectations regarding instructor expertise differ among the institutions.

Post-secondary education institutions in Alberta are now divided into six sectors with many non-university institutions awarding degrees as well as diplomas and certificates. Because programs in different sectors often have differing instructor qualification standards, these differences can prove challenging to the establishment of transfer agreements across sectors. Institutions which succeed in establishing such cross-sectoral agreements recognize these differences.

Institutions granting credit for work at sending institutions from different sectors recognize the ways in which the qualifications of instructors are being established in the sending institutions. Sending institutions, on the other hand, recognize what the normal instructor qualification standards are in the proposed receiving institutions.

Best Practice Three: Sending institutions attempt, when practicable, to meet the normal instructor qualification expectations of receiving institutions.

Receiving institutions often have instructor qualification standards imposed upon them by their accreditors. Degree programs in Alberta, for instance, must adhere, in the normal case, to the guidelines outlined by the Campus Alberta Quality Council. Successful sending institutions not only familiarize themselves, therefore, with the instructor qualification standards of the intended receiving program, they attempt to meet them when at all possible.

Best Practice Four: Sending institutions clearly articulate when they are requesting an exception to the receiving institution's normal instructor qualifications criteria, and they provide a clear rationale for the exception.

Successful sending institutions explicitly request exceptions to the normal instructor qualifications expectations of the receiving institution and provide a convincing explanation of why the exception should be granted in this case. The sending institution may establish that the proposed instructor(s) of the course(s) in question have the expertise necessary—expertise established in some alternative manner—to deliver the outcomes required for the proposed transfer credit. Or the sending institution may establish that the outcomes necessary to justify the proposed credit are being assured in some other way.

Best Practice Five: Sending institutions communicate with receiving institutions before making their formal proposals.

Discussions ahead of the proposal arriving in the WIP screen have the effect of predetermining the type and amount of transfer credit as well as expediting the evaluative process of the receiver. Determining factors which might either facilitate or hinder the agreements are most easily determined ahead of the submission of the proposal.

Best Practice Six: Receiving institutions respond to proposals with reasonable flexibility.

As articulated by the Campus Alberta Quality Council, "The diversity of programs offered by institutions within Alberta, which range from mature research universities with large graduate programs, to technical institutes, to public and private colleges of various sizes, requires that standards on the number, qualifications and mix of academic staff be both clear and flexible. Variations of the standards and norms set out . . . may be acceptable, provided that, in the judgment of Council, such variations are academically justifiable and do not impair the quality of the program offered." (*CAQC Handbook* (2011): Preamble, Section 4.3.4, http://caqc.gov.ab.ca/pdfs/Handbook_June_2011.pdf.)

Instructor qualifications is just one of many factors contributing to transferability. When a sending institution successfully demonstrates that the proposed instructor(s) in its courses have the expertise necessary—though established in some alternative way—to secure the outcomes of which the requested transfer credit is a recognition, or those outcomes are being secured in some other way (and there is no other impediment to the agreement), the receiving institution is willing to grant this exception and enter into the agreement.

Best Practice Seven: Institutions adhere to their commitments regarding instructor qualifications.

When a transfer agreement is established the receiving institution assumes that the instructor(s) of the

course(s) or program(s) for which transfer credit is being granted do, in fact, have the credentials identified in the agreement. When a course or program is no longer taught by an instructor with those credentials, the sending institution must notify the receiving institution and renegotiate the agreement.

Successful sending institutions, therefore, implement effective protocols to ensure that commitments about instructor qualifications are communicated to personnel who appoint instructors. Implications of new hires on established agreements and accreditation criteria are considered by program administrators and personnel services.

Best Practice Eight: When receiving institutions reject a proposed transfer agreement they provide a clear explanation of why it was rejected.

When receiving institutions reject a proposed agreement on the basis of inadequate instructor qualifications, they provide the sending institution with a clear explanation of why, including why reasons proposed for exception to the normal rule were considered inadequate. This provides the sending institution with the opportunity of making revisions to their proposal to address the receivers' concerns.

Best Practice Nine: Timely review and update of fields in the courses/program and proposal transfer process database forms are conducted as necessitated by changes in events and context.

These forms must provide the opportunity for sending institutions to make an adequate case for transfer when it involves departure from the receiving institution's instructor qualification expectations. Receiving institutions need the opportunity to adequately explain when and why a proposed agreement is rejected.

Instructor qualifications and transfer agreements face a myriad of challenges and complexities including the roles of CAQC and ACAT, the Campus Alberta approach, accreditation of programs and institutions, credentials and qualifications, discipline/thesis considerations, learning outcomes, course levels, institutional size and location, PLAR, and sender and receiver roles to name a few.

The current sub-committee respectfully submits this document to the ACAT Council. Our attempt to bridge the gaps around the issue of instructor qualifications within the current state of transfer in Alberta is offered as a means to frame discussions and continue dialogue as we chart our next action steps to continue to improve and develop a transfer system that is responsive, proactive, collaborative, and positive for users and students alike.

Approved by ACAT Council,
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The original and current* members of the sub-committee were/are:

Eric Dohei* (ACAT Manager)

Catherine Eddy (Associate VP Academic, Concordia)

Karen McDaniel* (Articulation Coordinator, SAIT)

Colleen Rausch (Associate Registrar, GMU)

Vince Steinhauer (Blue Quills First Nations College)

Ann Tierney* (Vice-Provost, Students, University of Calgary)

Alice Wainwright-Stewart* (Vice-President Academic, Innovation and Research, Lakeland College)

Jonathan Strand* (Associate Vice President, Student Services, Concordia)

Robert Boudreau* (Associate Vice President, Academic, University of Lethbridge)

Seaneen O'Rourke* (Dean of Programs, Yellowhead Tribal College)

Anthony Norrad* (Associate Registrar, MacEwan University)