Professional accreditation¹

by V.J. Nordin²

Abstract

The primary value of accreditation is in the process itself and not in the decision whether a faculty of forestry's program is accredited. To be valuable, the accreditation process should encourage and assist Canadian university faculties of forestry to assess and improve their educational programs. All other results of accreditation are secondary to this objective.

Accreditation is a voluntary, non-governmental procedure, that must continue in this tradition if its values are to be protected and enhanced. Effective implementation will require a clear recognition and appreciation of what accreditation is all about. A national accreditation process, properly implemented, is an element essential to the pursuit of excellence in the forestry profession in Canada. No other similar cooperative initiative in recent history has such potential to advance forestry practice and education in Canada.

Résumé

La valeur primordiale d'une équivalence réside dans le processus-même et non dans la décision à savoir si un programme de foresterie d'une faculté est équivalent ou non. Pour être valable, le processus d'équivalence devrait encourager et aider les facultés de foresterie des universités canadiennes à évaluer et à améliorer leurs programmes de formation. Tous les autres résultats découlant de l'équivalence deviennent secondaires sous cet angle.

L'équivalence est une procédure volontaire, non-gouvernementale qui doit se poursuivre dans cette tradition advenant que ses valeurs soient protégées et étendues. L'implantation effective nécessitera une reconnaissance établie et une évaluation de ce que signifie l'équivalence.

Un processus national d'équivalence, adéquatement implanté, est un élément essentiel de la poursuite de l'excellence en foresterie professionnelle au Canada. Aucune autre initiative coopérative au cours des dernières années n'a eu autant de potentiel pour faire progresser la pratique et la formation en foresterie au Canada.

Introduction

The Association of University Forestry Schools of Canada (AUFSC), the Canadian Federation of Professional Foresters Associations (CFPFA), and the Canadian Institute of Forestry/Institut Forestier du Canada (CIF/IFC) have long recognized the need for a national accreditation process that would help forestry education to keep pace with the evolving roles of the profession and, at the same time, improve the image of forestry as a mature, innovative and versatile profession.

In March, 1987, these agencies commissioned the author to develop a national system of accreditation for the Canadian university schools of forestry which culminated in a comprehensive report on the topic in March, 1988 (7). This report details a national process of accreditation of university baccalaureate programs in forestry and recommends a policy and manual of procedures to implement the process.

In 1990, under the aegis of the CFPFA, national accreditation was begun with the first review being undertaken at the University of Toronto (2). This is a landmark initiation of a process that will contribute immeasurably to the advancement of the Canadian forestry profession, provided that the accreditation process is fully understood and efficiently put into practice.

This presentation, therefore, will focus on the importance of understanding the principles and purposes of accreditation, and of effectively implementing this national process.

Background

Until this year, Canada has not had a national system for the accreditation of university baccalaureate programs in

forestry similar to other professions such as Canadian engineering which formalized accreditation for university engineering programs in 1965 through the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (4). In the United States, accreditation procedures for university forestry programs have been in practice since 1935 under the aegis of the Society of American Foresters (8).

Some of the provincial forestry associations have had individually-developed accreditation activities that applied mainly to the universities within their respective provincial jurisdiction. Forestry graduates, therefore, have not had the professional acceptance nationally enjoyed by professional engineers since 1965.

In 1984, The Association of University Forestry Schools of Canada prepared a project proposal for the development of a national accreditation scheme for baccalaureate forestry programs at Canadian university forestry schools (6). In March, 1987 the project proposal was initiated; it was completed in March, 1988 (7); and implementation begun in 1990 (2).

The year 1990 is important in Canadian forestry annals, therefore, because finally there is a national system of accreditation of the educational qualifications of graduates of university forestry programs in Canada; there are criteria to ensure that forestry programs graduate students capable of meeting educational standards for provincial registration with reciprocal acceptance throughout Canada; there are national procedures to foster high standards of forestry education from coast to coast; and there is a comprehensive mechanism to maximize the mobility of forestry students, teachers, and graduates to study, train, and work in the Canadian forestry sector.

National Accreditation Defined

National accreditation for university baccalaureate programs in forestry is a voluntary initiative by the seven

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Canadian university forestry schools to ensure minimum educational standards that will meet the academic requirements for registration of the five provincial professional forestry associations.

It is a process by which a forestry school evaluates its educational programs and seeks an independent judgement to confirm that it substantially achieves its objectives and is generally equal in quality to the other six schools of forestry.

The primary value of accreditation is in the process itself and not in the decision whether a Faculty of Forestry's programs are accredited, although the decision is an essential element. To be valuable, the accreditation process should encourage and assist Canadian university faculties of forestry to assess and improve their educational offerings.

All other results of accreditation, including the actual decision, are secondary to this objective.

The University Forestry Schools and Professional Forestry Associations

The goals of the forestry schools and the professional associations are closely related but not identical.

The goals of the university in professional forestry education are to provide the graduate with technical and social skills for professional work, with the theoretical foundations upon which the life-long process of learning can proceed, and to develop the graduate's ability to use appropriate knowledge and data to convert, utilize and manage forest resources optimally through effective analysis, interpretation and decision-making.

The goals can be considered achieved if forestry graduates have:

- obtained a firm foundation in the sciences basic to forestry;
- begun to acquire a working knowledge of current technology and an appreciation for new, developing technology;
- had opportunities to exercise ingenuity and inventiveness in integrative processes to solve problems;
- begun to develop the ability to speak and write effectively, handle computers, and work with other people;
- begun to understand the diverse nature and history of human societies as well as their literary, philosophical, and artistic traditions;
- acquired the skills and motivation for continued self-education; and
- begun to understand and appreciate the economic, managerial, political, social, and environmental issues surrounding forestry development.

The goals of the provincial professional forestry associations are to assure and promote high standards of forestry practice, to encourage wider understanding of forestry problems and to improve forestry practice, and to assure the general public of the proficiency and integrity of registered professional foresters in the practice of their profession.

The national accreditation of undergraduate forestry programs links the goals of the schools and the associations, while affording the associations the opportunity to evaluate the need for adapting education programs to the evolving role of the profession.

University forestry schools, for their part, provide the profession with state-of-the-art technology as well as

continuing education to assist the professional to keep up with rapidly changing technology (3).

In the national accreditation process, the universities and professional associations must develop a healthy tension relationship in developing their respective goals. A weak registration procedure can allow the curriculum to wander without regular evaluation for professional relevance. However, a rigid accreditation process can result in a stagnating curriculum and loss of the innovative spirit that should characterize universities.

The professional forestry associations should influence the quality of university educational programs in the profession. At the same time, the university forestry schools must have the freedom to develop in innovative directions not necessarily in vogue for registration (3). In fact, forestry schools should be so far out front in its programs that the path frequently is not clear.

Until now, a healthy, balanced relationship has not existed on a national scale; previous accreditation exercises have often been weak or non-existent; the principles and objectives of accreditation have not been fully grasped; and none have been up to national accreditation standards of other professions such as Canadian engineering. The national accreditation process that is now just starting must develop so as to allow the profession to influence the university forestry schools without compromising respective goals.

Principles of Accreditation

The essential elements, purposes, and benefits of national accreditation are to foster excellence by utilizing criteria and guidelines for assessing educational effectiveness and quality, and to encourage improvement of programs through self-study and planning (9). These topics are enlarged upon in the following paragraphs.

The Essential Elements of National Accreditation

- A clear statement of the forestry school's goal and a description of its educational programs;
- conduct of self-study on the achievement of these objectives and goals;
- an on-site evaluation by a selected group of peers to provide outside consultation and assessment that is coordinated to the school's own planning process; and
- decisions on accreditation by an independent accrediting agency, the Canadian Forestry Accreditation Board, consisting of representatives of each of the provincial professional foresters associations and the CIF/IFC.

The Purposes of National Accreditation

The main purpose of national accreditation is to identify to the member associations of the CFPFA those forestry programs that meet the criteria for accreditation that will reflect the present and future requirements of the profession from provincial, national, and international perspectives. These criteria are formulated to provide graduates with an education satisfying the academic requirements for registration. Accreditation also emphasizes the quality of the students, academic staff, support staff and educational facilities.

National accreditation is intended to:

- Identify those forestry programs that develop an individual's ability to use appropriate knowledge and

information to convert, utilize and manage forest resources optimally through effective analysis, interpretation, and decision-making. These abilities are essential to the integrative process of synthesis that characterizes the practice of forestry.

- Provide a broad basis for identifying acceptable forestry programs, provide sufficient freedom to accommodate innovative educational development, allow necessary adaptation, and permit the expression of the institution's individual qualities, ideals, rights, and obligations for initiative, experimentation, and variation.
- Reflect the need for the professional forester to be adaptive, creative, resourceful and responsive to changes in society, technology, and career demands.
- Ensure that students are made aware of the role of the professional forester in society and the impacts that forestry in all its forms makes on the environmental, economic, social, political, and cultural aspirations of society.
- Reflect the need for the professional forester to be able to communicate effectively both within the profession, with other professions, and with society at large.

The general purposes of national accreditation, therefore, are to foster excellence; to encourage improvement of forestry programs through continuous self-study and planning; to provide guidance to programs; to encourage individual forestry schools to follow and achieve innovative objectives and react with competence to and be at the frontiers of technological changes and advances; and to protect forestry schools against encroachments that might jeopardize high educational standards or academic freedom.

Benefits

The national accreditation process, if properly understood and effectively implemented, will improve the image of Canadian forestry as a mature, professional discipline. The benefits are numerous and can have an important impact on forestry practice.

For example:

- the national accreditation process will help to assure outside resource agencies and the general public that a forestry school has clear objectives, maintains conditions to achieve these objectives, provides evidence that it is accomplishing them substantially, and that it can be expected to continue to do so;
- it will simplify registration of university forestry graduates in the provincial forestry associations;
- it will facilitate mobility of professional foresters to work anywhere in Canada;
- it will enhance mobility of forestry students between the seven university schools of forestry;
- it will assist to ensure forestry programs reflect present and future needs of the profession;
- it will make professionals more aware of the need for continuing education to keep their skills current;
- it will help forestry schools to emphasize to their university administrations the need to improve certain resources and facilities;
- it will provide a means for the participation of forest practitioners in setting the requirements for preparation to enter the forestry profession; and
- it will contribute to the unity of the forestry profession by bringing together practitioners, professors, and students

in an activity directed at improving professional preparation, professional practice, and to achieve the best in professional excellence.

What Accreditation Is Not

- it is not governmental, although provincial governments may use it, in relation to professional licensing;
- it is not mandatory on the part of the forestry schools, although social and political pressures may encourage participation;
- it is not a rating system, although university forestry programs generally do get compared;
- it is not a mechanism for policing institutional behaviour;
- it does not deal with credits, although it will distinguish between worthy and unworthy prior educational experiences (9).

Discussion

The professional forestry associations, the Canadian university forestry schools, and the CIF/IFC are to be congratulated for their initiatives in getting this national accreditation process inaugurated. However, a considerable responsibility and opportunity rests with them to extract the full potential and benefits to forestry practice and education that is inherent in the national accreditation process and the participants must fully understand the system and realize an accreditation decision itself is secondary to the primary benefits of the accreditation process.

"Process" is the key word. In 1965, McLuhan stunned the communications industries by stating that the "medium is the message". In this context, the process is the key element in accreditation. The participants can change, conditions can change, but the process will remain (9).

It is not simply a matter of "parachuting" a few members of the profession to review the programs of a particular forestry school over a two or three-day period. Interaction between the profession and the forestry schools must be ongoing so that both elements may profit continuously from contacts and consultations (e.g., professional association members should participate on key committees of forestry schools and contribute to lectures and seminars).

Forestry schools must continually examine their offerings through critical self-study and planning and ensure that visiting accreditation teams are provided with comprehensive information on their programs well in advance of visits. Team members should receive careful instruction and orientation to ensure they understand their mandates.

The profession should periodically publicize the results of accreditation actions, and publish and make available generally an accreditation manual similar to those prepared by Canadian engineering (4) and the Society of American Foresters (8) which details policy and procedures.

The profession, the forestry schools, and the CIF/IFC undoubtedly will meet the challenges of national accreditation responsibly and effectively. However, considerable care and energy will be needed to do this job properly.

Unquestionably, this process provides an element vital to the pursuit of excellence in the forestry profession in Canada. No other similar cooperative initiative in recent history has such potential to generate excellence in forestry practice and education in Canada.

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