

# POST-SECONDARY PATHWAYS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
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Pathways to Education and Work

Centre for the Study of Canadian and International Higher Education

*Qualifications: The Link Between Educational and Occupational Pathways and Labour Market Outcomes* is a project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The four-year project investigates the nature of pathways within postsecondary education, and between postsecondary education and the labour market. As part of this project, the *Provincial Pathways* profile series lays the groundwork for further inquiry contrasting and comparing educational and occupational pathways in Canadian provinces and territories.

## Overview: British Columbia

Postsecondary education in British Columbia is viewed as highly coordinated, integrated, and designed to balance institutional autonomy with cross-institutional collaboration (Schuetze & Day, 2001). B.C.'s extensive college system was designed with regional access in mind. While colleges initially evolved independently to meet community needs and interests, the system was progressively consolidated over several decades under increasing government oversight (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986; Gaber, 2003). BCCAT, the British Columbia Council for Articulation and Transfer, plays a leadership role in higher education system integration in Canada.

## British Columbia's Post-Secondary System

British Columbia's post-secondary system is governed through the Province's Ministry of Advanced Education.<sup>1</sup> The public system is comprised of

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<sup>1</sup> Summary drawn from BCCAT (n.d.) *BC post-secondary system*. Retrieved Dec 12, 2016 from <http://www.bccat.ca/system/psec>. Also see history and structure of the B.C. system via CICIC: <http://cicic.ca/1155/Postsecondary-education-in-British-Columbia/index.canada>, and Higher education in British Columbia (2016). Wikipedia. Retrieved January 12, 2017 from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Higher\\_education\\_in\\_British\\_Columbia#Creation\\_of\\_teaching\\_universities\\_.282008\\_-\\_present.29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Higher_education_in_British_Columbia#Creation_of_teaching_universities_.282008_-_present.29)

- 4 teaching and research universities;
- 5 special purpose, teaching universities;
- 11 community colleges offering adult education, technical programs, trades and university transfer programs; and
- 3 institutes with specialized mandates (technical education, Indigenous post-secondary education, public safety).

The public system is supplemented by private and religious institutions. Eleven private institutions in BC have degree-granting authority. Yukon College and Athabasca University (Alberta) are also integrated with the BC system. The British Columbia Council for Articulation and Transfer [BCCAT], a provincially funded agency, plays a central role in the coordination and administration of B.C.'s postsecondary system.

There is considerable flexibility in the kinds of programming offered by B.C. institutions which may house degrees, certificates, diplomas, and transfer programs under one banner. The Nicola Valley Institute of Technology, for example, offers an Indigenous-focused Bachelor of Social Work degree, while the BC Institute of Technology offers Master's level degrees in Engineering and related fields. B.C. is one of four Canadian provinces with university-colleges: teaching-focused universities that offer baccalaureate level degrees (Skolnik, 2011).

### **Quality Assurance**

Higher education quality is maintained by the B.C. government's advisory Degree Quality Assessment Board, which evaluates existing programs and approves new ones. Both public and private institutions can undergo review. Further, de facto quality assurance is rendered by membership in the BC Transfer System. All public institutions are members. Private institutions may also apply to have individual articulation arrangements made with recognized member institutions (BCCAT, 2016a). For members, online resources and databases provide tools that make it easier for institutions to assess and recognize each other's courses.

### **British Columbia Council for Articulation and Transfer**

In addition to managing the B.C. Transfer System, BCCAT, the British Columbia Council for Articulation and Transfer oversees many aspects of the Province's post-secondary system. These include maintaining an extensive, user-focused online transfer guide. [BCTransferGuide.ca](http://BCTransferGuide.ca) provides glossaries, explanations of transfer arrangements, FAQs and search functions to help students to navigate the post-secondary system. [Education Planner BC](#) provides students and potential students with career planning tools, program planning information, and links to apply at institutions across the province. BCCAT recognizes and supports 67 disciplines or occupation-focused Articulation Committees, which meet annually to discuss programming, curriculum, and transfers issues.

The Province actively gathers data on students and transfers and carries out a robust program of research under the direction of BCCAT (Cowin, 2013). In recent years, research efforts have been

facilitated by datasets that link students' K-12 and subsequent post-secondary activity via unique universal identifiers (PENs, or Provincial Education Numbers)<sup>2</sup>.

## Pathways in British Columbia

British Columbia is unique in Canada as the only provincial system specifically modelled on the American “2+2” model, wherein 2-year associate degrees from junior colleges may be block transferred to a four-year baccalaureate program at one of the Province’s universities. The system was premised on the belief that separate junior colleges contributed to a less expensive and more accessible system (Skolnik, 2010). The University of British Columbia and later-incorporated universities (University of Victoria, Simon Fraser) were concentrated in the lower mainland of the Province, so there was also a geographical imperative to forge a college system that offered both vocational and university-level education (Schuetze & Day, 2001; Skolnik, 2010).<sup>3</sup>

*The Public Schools Act* (1963) resulted in the founding of ten autonomous two-year colleges over a decade long period (BCCAT, 2016b).<sup>4</sup> This early system experienced some growing pains: seats in universities were inadequate to meet the demand coming from transfer students, and both students and institutions needed clarity on the quality and content of learning to inform transfer arrangements (BCCAT, 2016b; Dennison & Gallagher, 1986).<sup>5</sup> As a result, institutional transfer guides were developed. These provided course equivalencies and assisted students with their academic planning.

The Academic Board administering these arrangements was dissolved in 1974 and replaced with the Post-Secondary Articulation Coordinating Committee, which gave colleges a stronger voice than its predecessor with respect to transfers and programming (BCCAT, 2016b). However, this period was also marked by a loss of institutional autonomy, as the Province assumed control of budgets and removed colleges’ powers of local taxation. Gaber (2003) argues that colleges’ dissatisfaction with their loss of autonomy helped to move these

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Link, G. (2004). The BC Provincial Education Number (PEN: Considerations for assigning the PEN to post-secondary applicants. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED505012.pdf>. The BCCAT commissioned report notes that similar systems were in place in Quebec and Indiana. Cowin’s (2013) summary of BCCAT research discusses the *Student Transitions Project*, which relies on PENs (p. 13).

<sup>3</sup> A bibliography of resources pertaining to BC’s transfer system, produced by BCCAT, is available at <http://www.bccat.ca/pubs/historyresources.pdf>. Many of resources apply more broadly to Canada and other Canadian provinces.

<sup>4</sup> The sequence of the establishment of these institutions is reviewed in Wikipedia: Higher education in British Columbia (2016). Wikipedia. Retrieved January 12, 2017 from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Higher\\_education\\_in\\_British\\_Columbia#Creation\\_of\\_teaching\\_universities\\_-\\_present.29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Higher_education_in_British_Columbia#Creation_of_teaching_universities_-_present.29). Presently there are 11 autonomous public colleges operating in the province (BCCAT, 2016b).

<sup>5</sup> In 1966, students began transferring from colleges (eg. Vancouver City College and Selkirk College) to universities (BCCAT, 2016c). However, students were still concerned about the volume of available transfer opportunities in the province and as a result, a 54 hour long protest was held at Simon Fraser University in 1968 in support of greater transfer opportunities for students attending Vancouver City College (BCCAT, 2016b).

regionally independent institutions toward more collaboration. The Post-Secondary Articulation Coordinating Committee developed the first set of Principles and Guidelines for Transfer in 1976, which was in turn adopted by all college councils and university senates (BCCAT, 2016b).<sup>6</sup>

In 1989, a report entitled, *Access for All*, resulted in third and fourth year programming at select two-year institutions and the creation of additional institution types, including university-colleges (Schuetze & Day, 2001). The *Access for All* report also led to the formation of BCCAT (BCCAT, 2016b). Since its creation in 1989, BCCAT has continued in its central role, advising postsecondary institutions and partners on matters related to transfer, articulation, and mobility.

Recent BCCAT activities include efforts to bring all members of the BC Transfer System onboard as both sending and receiving institutions. This is an enhancement of the online transfer system that, along with numerous support documents and resources, is designed to make it as easy as possible for institutions to align courses for articulation.<sup>7</sup> BCCAT has also been charged with developing a universal student application process for all BC institutions. BCCAT's present mandate also includes the development of a universal online application system (BCCAT, 2016c).

## Trades

The Industry Trades Authority [ITA] is the agency that monitors and maintains the quality of BC's apprenticeship system. The ITA maintains a list of post-secondary institutions in the Province that offer trades training. These include both public and private institutions. Specialized programs are offered to attract youth, women, Indigenous persons, and transitioning immigrants, to trades. Program search functions and career information are also offered via Trades Training BC, a consortium of publicly funded colleges and technical institutes.

## Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

According to Conrad (2008) British Columbia was once a Canadian leader in PLAR, but stalled as infrastructures supporting PLAR were lost. Presently, British Columbia does not have a provincial framework for Prior Learning Recognition. Students seeking PLAR will do so through individual institutions in the Province. Thompson Rivers University hosts a *Prior Learning International Research Consortium*, [PLIRC] which curates international trends and best practices, and conducts comparative policy research in PLAR. BCPlan is a non-profit, province-wide society that brings together social partners with an interest in PLAR.

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<sup>6</sup> A timeline of key events and developments in BC's transfer system is available at <http://www.bccat.ca/system/history>

<sup>7</sup> Additional details may be found in this undated report: BCCAT (n.d.) Enabling the BC Transfer System: Final recommendations. Retrieved December 13, 2016 from <http://www.bccat.ca/pubs/enablingfinal.pdf>

## Summary

British Columbia's post-secondary system is well-regarded, and BCCAT has contributed a long, consistent program of research to understanding pathways in Canada. Particularly because the system was designed with college to university transfers in mind, the Province has a wealth of past policy experience that can be drawn on by other provinces moving toward similar arrangements in Canada.

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