

ACCREDITING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PROGRAMS IN CANADA: A Recommendation

Report Submitted to

Canadian Association of Programs in Public Administration

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Introduction

This report presents a recommendation that the Canadian Association of Programs in Public Administration (CAPPA) adopt an accreditation regime for masters' level programs in public administration and public policy. The main features of our proposal are a 'mission-based' approach to assessment criteria, to better allow for diversity and differences in program capacities, a focus on masters' programs rather than schools or departments, and the creation of a CAPPA sub-committee responsible for administering the accreditation process.

The proposed recommendation is based on a review of recent reports on the state of Canadian public administration curricula and on the pros and cons as well as the practice of accreditation within and outside Canada. We provide a brief reprisal of those reports, an outline of a basic design for an accreditation regime, and an outline of an implementation process. The last would entail developing a more detailed design and, at the same time, careful costing of the design, before final approval and formal implementation. The need for simplicity, cost-effectiveness and high standards of ethics and conflict-of-interest considerations is stressed.

Background

Accreditation of Canadian university programs in public administration has been the subject of discussion over a number of years. Until recently, this discussion did not lead to any specific proposals; and the idea of accreditation itself has at best received only lukewarm support. However, two recent reports, both commissioned by CAPPA, have stimulated renewed interest in the topic. They provide valuable analysis and information on the state of public administration programs in Canada and on accreditation as practiced by other organizations within and outside Canada. Neither the reports nor their authors took a position either for or against accreditation.

The first report, by Iain Gow and Sharon Sutherland, “Comparison of Canadian Masters Programs in Public Administration, Public Management and Public Policy,”¹ examines public administration programs in Canada along several dimensions. A striking finding is the degree of commonality among programs, particularly with respect to what can be termed as a core curriculum.

The report sparked discussion at the joint CAPP/Canada School of Public Service (CSPS) symposium held in January of 2005. Five factors were cited in support of some kind of accreditation process:

- It would enhance the credibility and visibility of public administration programs both within the professional community and government circles, and within the universities themselves;
- It would help improve the quality of programs by increasing the flow and sharing of information on what constituted core courses and the content of those courses;
- accreditation would help students in gaining entry to internship programs and management trainee programs;
- Given the move towards accreditation in several fields, often involving non-Canadian professional associations, it was felt that a made in Canada solution involving CAPP, the main professional body in Canada serving the needs of public administration programs, would be preferable; and
- As CSPS seeks to review its curriculum to identify core and mandatory learning for public servants and to have its programs accredited by Canadian colleges and universities, this could facilitate an improved alignment of CSPS and university curricula.

A motion was passed at the symposium to examine the accreditation issue more closely and to identify what a proposed accreditation scheme for masters’ programs might look like.

The initiative to examine accreditation more closely is primarily CAPP’s. Nonetheless, supporting accreditation would be consistent with CSPS’s mandate to play a substantial role in fostering quality education and training in public administration and ensuring that such programs would be broadly accessible across Canada. Other governments in Canada might have similar interests. At the same time, it was agreed that specific programs, designed to meet the needs of unique communities would not be unduly disadvantaged under any given accreditation scheme. Overall, it was noted that further study of accreditation should examine the possible negative implications as well as benefits.

Three individuals present at the meeting were tasked with undertaking further research on accreditation: Peter Aucoin, Herman Bakvis and Evert Lindquist. Subsequently, under a grant and contribution agreement, CSPS kindly agreed to support the costs of a research assistant to assemble the background material. Working primarily under the guidance of

¹ <http://www.cappa.ca/resources/gow-sutherland.pdf>

Herman Bakvis and Evert Lindquist, Derek Uram, an MPA student at the University of Victoria, was asked to gather information and draft a report providing:

- A brief review and summary of the basic processes and issues in the general area of accreditation;
- A profile on a sub-set of representative organizations; and
- A précis of accreditation practices and processes of public administration and other programs in the U.S and elsewhere, as well as on other practices to promote coherence and a core curriculum.

Uram was also asked to address specific issues such as:

- The relationship between professional associations and accrediting bodies;
- The role of U.S. and international bodies in accreditation of Canadian associations;
- The degree to which accreditation is based on the self ascribed mission of professional programs versus externally determined standards;
- The degree to which unique features or programs, serving the needs of particular constituencies, are encouraged or discouraged by the accreditation process;

Uram's report, "A Study of Accreditation in Professional Educational Programs,"² was submitted March 28, 2005 and posted to the CAPPa website in early April. It examines the basic processes and issues in accreditation, including types of accreditation, standards and criteria, principles and ethics, and relationship with the profession. The analysis is based on a number of representative organizations, within the public administration sector and the management sector more broadly. They include the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) (U.S.), Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International, and the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA). Details on these organizations can be found in the Appendix to the report.

The Uram report is well-worth reading and contains several key findings. First, despite some commonalities across all accrediting organizations, there is also considerable variety in the mechanisms that are used in the 'rostering' of programs and institutions. There are also some important distinctions to be made:

- between 'mission-based' or 'bottom-up' criteria, where the unit or program under assessment plays an important role in defining the criteria against which it will be assessed versus more traditional externally defined and imposed criteria;
- to whom and what is being accredited. For some accrediting bodies the focus of accreditation is the School or Faculty (such as Schools or Faculties of Business in the case of the AACSB). For others it is the degree program (such as the MLS in the case of the ALA);

² <http://www.cappa.ca/news/CAPPa-accreditation-study.pdf>

- accreditation of professions involving the certification or licensing of practitioners (nurses, psychologists) and those organizations that do not.

In the case of organizations involved in practitioner licensing, there tends to be more emphasis on externally defined technical standards. Public administration would clearly fall in the non-licensing category.

Secondly, accreditation requires a considerable amount of time, energy and resources on the part of those doing the accrediting and those getting accredited. The Canadian public administration community will need to weigh the costs of any accreditation regime very carefully, particularly since our academic community is relatively small.

The Uram report does not take a position on whether accreditation is appropriate either in the Canadian context or for CAPP. It does, however, review the arguments for and against accreditation. It also outlines the options and choices available should CAPP decide to implement an accreditation system. The arguments and options are summarized in the sections below.

Arguments for and Against

A fuller and more detailed discussion of the arguments in favour can be found in the Uram report. However, the most frequently cited reasons can be briefly noted here:

- Establishment of general professional standards;
- Quality assurance in educational programs and their delivery;
- Assurance that minimal standards are always met through ongoing assessment;
- Promotion of peer review both within the profession and within academia;
- Opportunity and incentive for professional reflection, self-improvement, and innovation within the professional schools;
- Promotion of self-assessment and professional self-governance;
- Assurance that standards are maintained as relevant and as current as possible;
- Uniformity of professional standards with a given jurisdiction;
- Comparison of professional standards across all possible jurisdictions;
- Provision of a connection between professional employers and new graduates;
- Promotion of the profession itself through standards of practice; and
- Better professional service to society through all of the above.

To this we would add some practical reasons linked to improving the standing of public administration schools and programs within their universities. Generally, programs eligible for accreditation can cite the need for acquiring or retaining accreditation to support claims for more resources. An accreditation process should also help with external agencies, one of the more relevant ones being CSPS. As noted at the January CAPP-CSPS symposium, a nation wide accreditation scheme in public administration would facilitate an improved alignment of CSPS and university curricula, and perhaps for those of other governments.

Similarly, a more detailed exposition of the arguments against accreditation can be found in the Uram report, but the ones cited most frequently are:

- Inflexibility in assessing professional programs, especially with regard to local, regional, or ideological characteristics of professional schools;
- Too much stress on maintaining a uniform and rigid curriculum, which results in the inability of professional schools to adequately respond to changes over time, thus hindering innovation;
- Excess red tape in the accreditation process;
- Over-reliance of the accreditation process on rules and regulations rather than on actual output or outcome of professional education;
- Excess emphasis on common quantitative measures at the expense of qualitative measures; and
- Costliness (due to the human and financial resources necessary to support an adequate accreditation process) might be seen as excessive given the small size of the public administration community in Canada and resources that might be better spend in other areas.

The matter of costs should be taken very seriously. If CAPPa does begin designing an accreditation system, it should be subjected to a very careful analysis of operating costs as well as the costs borne by the programs to be accredited.

The arguments concerning red-tape and inflexibility carry less weight, in our view, for two reasons. Organizations using a mission oriented approach for accreditation appear to allow candidate units or programs considerable scope for setting their own standards and goals against which they are to be assessed. Secondly, Gow and Sutherland cite a U.S study that found after the introduction of NASPAA accreditation diversity in public administration programs persisted and to some degree increased. In the Canadian context, where diversity is valued, this is an important and reassuring point.

In our view the goals of preserving diversity and promoting the unique or specialized features of programs constitute arguments for adopting a 'made in Canada' accreditation system. The absence of such a scheme, a strong possibility exists that one or more Canadian programs in public administration will seek to have its programs validated through accreditation, which by default would be a non-Canadian body, most likely NASPAA. We feel that a Canadian designed and operated accreditation system is more likely to respect historical, geographical and linguistic differences. This is one of the stronger reasons for moving towards accreditation under the auspices of CAPPa.

Choices and Options

The Uram report briefly outlined the options available with respect to the structure and basic design of an accreditation system. The summary is reproduced here:

- Initial choice: whether or not CAPPa should be involved in establishing an accreditation regime;

- If affirmative, whether to become part of the NASPAA scheme or create an indigenous Canadian scheme;
- If former, i.e. joining NASPAA, choices would revolve around whether CAPPAA would become affiliate and to what degree NASPAA criteria would be adapted to Canadian context;
- If latter, i.e. an indigenous Canadian scheme, then a series of further decisions will need to be made in relation to the following:
 - Whether the accreditation process is to be administered directly by CAPPAA (or a committee or sub-committee of CAPPAA) or whether a new separate body designed solely to handle the accreditation process should be created;
 - Whether accreditation of programs is to be based primarily on mission and self-evaluation or on externally imposed criteria;
 - Number and types of categories for evaluation;
 - Criteria and standards to be used and different weights to be attached to them;
 - Duration of the accreditation cycle;
 - Processes for striking evaluation committees and their composition;
 - The design of protocols, processes and procedures, including those related to ethics and conflict of interest and appeal procedures; and, finally,
 - Fees.

There are no doubt further details relating to the above options and decisions that would need to be addressed, as well as other framework issues, such as the relationship between the accreditation body or committee and the CAPPAA executive. Equally important, any decisions made at this juncture will also need to address the sequencing and implementation of the various elements of any proposed accreditation scheme. These issues, as well as recommendations on a basic design, are outlined in the sections below.

Recommendations

Decisions and options are best visualized as involving a number of stages and sequences: determining whether or not to proceed with the adoption of an accreditation regime; if yes, identifying what form and subject to what conditions or limitations; refining respect to the detailed design; costing of the implementation and operation of the regime; assuring that costs (and revenues) will support a sustainable regime; and creating a detailed protocol for implementing said regime. Essentially, what need be kept in mind are the separate stages of design, costing and implementation.

Overall, in embarking upon what is likely to be one of the most significant initiatives undertaken by CAPPAA so far, we would urge that the following basic principles govern all stages of the design and implementation process. The accreditation scheme should:

- Be credible *and* economically viable;

- Recognize differences in content, orientation and pedagogy among different programs and respect distinguishing historical, linguistic and geographical features;
- Adhere to the highest ethical standards, particularly in relation to conflict of interest and maintenance of arms length relationships;
- Reflect and incorporate the views of stakeholders, such as practitioners and students.

As indicated earlier in our assessment of the arguments for and against, we are of the view that CAPPa should seriously consider adopting an accreditation regime, subject to assurances that CAPPa has the administrative and financial capacity to do so. We also feel that such a scheme should be a ‘made in Canada’ both in its design and application. However, we should draw on the experience and the expertise of NASPAA as appropriate and to borrow those features that appear to work well.

We recommend that accreditation be restricted to masters’ level programs because of cost considerations. As well, we recommend that the subject of accreditation be programs, not academic units, because masters’ programs are in many instances delivered by units other than schools of public administration at Canadian universities,

We recommend that the criteria for assessment be based primarily on the basis of the self-defined mission or goals of the program in question. This would respect the diversity among programs in core curricula, admissions standards, and pedagogical approaches.

Administration and application of the accreditation process should not be carried out by the CAPPa itself but through an arms length arrangement, either by a sub-committee or perhaps an organization completely separate from CAPPa.³ Having two separate organizations strikes us as ponderous, given the limited number of public administration programs in Canada. Moreover, there is something to be said for CAPPa retaining ultimately responsibility and accountability for the accreditation process, even if the process is delegated to an arms length committee. In brief, we favour an arrangement where the accreditation process would be conducted under the aegis of CAPPa by an arms-length sub-committee.

The above recommendations bear on what we think are the basic elements necessary for an accreditation system. There are further elements, of course, concerning the review cycle, the selection and staffing of assessment panels and the like. However, we feel the more detailed architecture should be left to a further committee or working group, which leads us to the issue of implementation.

³ An example of the latter is the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA), an independent organization responsible for handling accreditation of schools of public administration throughout Europe, which is completely separate from the European Group of Public Administration. NASPAA, on the other hand, has its own Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA), essentially a NASPAA sub-committee that is ultimately accountable to the main organization. Similarly, the American Library Association has a standing Committee on Accreditation (COA), which performs accrediting tasks.

Implementation

Should CAPPa decide, in principle, to proceed with accreditation we recommend that CAPPa adopt a model similar to that used by NASPAA and the ALA. They rely on an arms length committee or sub-committee responsible for managing the accreditation process. This CAPPa sub-committee would operate on the basis noted above: accrediting programs rather than units and using a mission-based criteria approach. This committee would oversee the general administration of the accreditation process, including the nomination of accreditation panels.

To get to the stage of a functioning accreditation committee, we recommend that an implementation committee first be struck. This committee would have two tasks:

- Develop a detailed proposal to be implemented, including the procedures for choosing panel members, the protocols to be used in assessing a programs and choosing appropriate criteria, the length of the review cycle and other matters part and parcel of a fully developed accreditation process; and
- As part of working up a detailed proposal, that this committee also do an analysis of the costs and the means of financing those costs.

In short, the implementation committee would develop a detailed proposal based on the above basic guidelines, as well as an analysis of the financial costs and implications. The proposal would be presented at a CAPPa meeting for review and approval.

Conclusion

It is conceivable that other means can be deployed for attaining the goals of enhancing the visibility of public administration and public policy programs, providing assurance to stakeholders of the quality of programs, identifying core elements of curricula and promoting self-improvement. However, in our view, accreditation is the best means for achieving these objectives and doing so in systematic and visible manner. The issue of preserving unique features and the needs of particular stakeholders can be effectively addressed through a ‘mission-based’ criteria approach.

The question of cost and CAPPa’s overall capacity to manage a credible accreditation process is a serious one. It would need to be examined carefully during the detailed design process. However, there are likely some creative ways to address these issues. For example, there is an increasing pool of recently retired senior public administration scholars and practitioners that could be tapped for staffing accreditation panels and perhaps the accreditation committee itself. Resources and support from the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, CSPS and public service commissions may help on the cost side. This support may well be available, we feel, because ultimately accreditation will benefit not only public administration programs and students, but the profession as a whole, including the public sector organizations employing the graduates of our programs.