



Professional Accounting Education in Canada: Problems and Prospects

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In recent years the accounting profession in Canada has moved rapidly towards a position of greater complexity and maturity. In recent years, a number of accounting educators have complained the education for students who want to become professional accountants has not kept pace. My thoughts on the problems relating to the provision of high-quality professional accounting education and some possible solutions are set out below.

Some weeks ago, I visited a doctor at the McMaster Faculty of Health Sciences for a check up. When he asked me why I seemed so down-in-the-dumps, I began to complain about the frustrations we were faced with in trying to offer a sound program of professional accounting education at McMaster. Encouraged by his interest as a member of another profession, I spent some time discussing the nature of our problems. Set out below are the points discussed as I recall them.

Accounting's Place in the University

The first question my doctor asked me was, "Does accounting education belong at a university?" The fact that my doctor asked this question did not surprise me although it did not occur to me to ask him to justify medicine's right to be on campus. The question is raised by many academics outside Business Faculties. I explained that professional accounting education is not simply concerned with training students to apply technical rules, no matter how complex, in an unquestioning manner. Rather, accountants face a myriad of unsolved problems which require research to identify improved solutions for measuring and communicating information to permit improved decision making. Accounting belongs on campus because of the need for research and sholarship--the same criterion that should govern the presence of any area of study at a university.

Compatibility of Business and Professional Accounting Education

My doctor stopped me and asked, "Why, if accounting does belong at a university, is it not represented on campus by a separate Faculty?" I explained that, unlike most professions, professional accounting education, to the extent it exists at universities, occurs in Faculties of Business instead of in a separate autonomous unit. Faculties of Business are, and should be, concerned with programs to educate managers by requiring a mix of courses from various functional and integrative areas including accounting. Curriculum is determined by all business faculty members who prescribe programs that best suit the needs of students who aspire to management positions. While management students are often permitted some limited specialization in a functional area, the focus of such programs is on education for managers.

Professional accountants, while they require a solid foundation of management courses, also require a considerable amount of specialized accounting and related area education (much as engineers require a solid foundation of science courses plus specialized engineering courses). Accounting faculty who understand the needs of a professional program, rather than a composite of the members of business faculties, should plan and set policy (curriculum admissions, etc.). Frankly, many non-accounting faculty members seem somewhat disinterested when the particular needs of professional accountants are discussed in business faculties.

My doctor suggested that the obvious solution would seem to be the separation of accounting into an autonomous unit outside Faculties of Business. I explained that a separate unit, such as a School of Professional Accountancy

within a Faculty of Business, might be an even better solution, given the very close relationships that should exist between accounting members and other members of Business Faculties. I added that a more identifiable, autonomous unit also might help in attracting good faculty.

An Acute Shortage of Qualified Accounting Faculty Members

My doctor said that he didn't realize that there was a shortage of qualified accounting faculty. I replied that this is the critical factor that hampers progress towards quality professional accounting education in Canada. If we could solve this problem it is likely that we could move effectively to solve our other problems but even if adequate numbers of students can be encouraged to enter Ph.D. programs, it will take three to five years for graduates to enter the market.

I said that the Ph.D. requirement is also a major reason why practising CA's who might be interested in teaching are reluctant to join accounting departments. Besides the Ph.D., other factors that discourage CA's are lack of recognition of professional contributions, research support inequities and low academic salaries compared to those that exist elsewhere in the profession.

We agreed that members of professional faculties or departments often have additional responsibilities that are not required of other members of the academic community. My doctor pointed out that his Faculty had established criteria for promotion and tenure that specifically provided for the recognition of professional contributions.

I explained that practising accountants considering academic careers recognize that the level of research support available for accounting is not

commensurate with most other areas in the university including medicine.

Indeed, accounting faculty members seldom have the advantage of:

- Ph.D. students whose research is often published by the supervising faculty member and the Ph.D. student,
- post-doctoral research assistants, and
- access to granting agencies such as the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Council or National Research Council.¹

If universities do not adjust for these differences, accountants are seen to be at a disadvantage when decisions are made about promotion and tenure.

Regarding salary levels, my doctor commented that some members of his faculty are paid a full-time university salary and, in addition, receive a percentage of the fees billed to their patients for medical services rendered. We agreed that some method of making the income levels of accounting academics more competitive with the income of practitioners is needed if this shortage is to be remedied. I remarked, however, that it was unlikely that universities will permit salaries of accountants to get too far above those of faculty members in other departments. My own Dean of Business is conscientiously trying to consider my complaints of inadequate salaries but it seems easier to convince him that business faculty deserve higher salaries than professors of, say, philosophy, than to successfully argue that supply and demand dictates accounting salaries that are noticeably higher than those of other business professors!

¹ Recently accountants in the United States have been allowed to submit research proposals to the National Science Foundation which is a source of considerable research funds for academics. To give some idea of the level of support provided, I have acted as a referee for two NSF proposals with budgets of approximately \$300,000 during the past year.

I indicated that other solutions to the Ph.D. shortage problem being employed at McMaster were to recruit academic MBA's with professional certification and to convert non-accounting Ph.D.'s to accounting. We offer a limited number of continuing lecturer positions to excellent MBA's who wish to emphasize teaching outside our normal tenure stream. In addition, given the shortage of professional accountants who are willing to undertake Ph.D. studies, we have been encouraging a small number of non-accounting Ph.D.'s, who exhibit an interest in and an aptitude for accounting, to take an M.B.A. in accounting and then apply for faculty positions. Our experience to date suggests that this holds promise where capable candidates can be located. Currently, we have a Ph.D. in Chemistry as a tenured Associate Professor, a Ph.D. in English teaching part-time courses and a Ph.D. in Physics with extensive computer experience in our M.B.A. program who, we hope, will be joining our staff in January of 1981. I concluded, however, that even with these arrangements, we are still unable to fill available full-time positions.

The Burden of Part-time Teaching

My doctor asked, "How do you make up for the shortages of full-time staff?" I pointed out that a large percentage of part-time teaching is done by accounting practitioners at some universities. In addition, full-time faculty members are often asked to teach an overload to enable accounting departments to offer a full range of courses. We agreed that some part-time teaching by responsible practitioners can add a useful "real-world" perspective to professional programs, but I warned him that too high a proportion of part-time and overload teaching can prove dangerous, based on my experience. Part-

time and overload teachers, while helpful in covering needed courses in the absence of a sufficient number of full-time staff, do not help with recruiting, curriculum planning and other committee work, advising students, etc. Moreover, a heavy load is placed on full-time staff when they are required to co-ordinate courses taught by part-timers.

An Inefficient Use of Scarce Resources

I complained to my doctor that the shortage of qualified faculty in accounting can be compounded by an inefficient use of these scarce resources. Undergraduate admission standards that are too low can result in large number of students enrolling in introductory accounting courses although many of them have little chance of completing B.Comm. programs.¹ Higher admission standards would permit faculty members to direct more of their efforts to good students who will complete their program and who deserve a greater share of faculty members' time.

My colleague from medicine found it difficult to understand this policy of resource allocation stating that the Health Sciences Faculty at McMaster admitted 100 students selected from approximately 2,500 applicants this year and that close to 100% of admitted students will graduate.

A Fragmented, Hit-or-miss, Professional Education Program

Probably the greatest shock to my fellow professional came when I answered his question of, "How would a bright high school student go about obtaining a good professional accounting education?" While indicating that

¹If adequate resources were available, it could be argued that these students should be permitted to enroll. It is true that a small percentage of students holding marginal grades at admission do complete their program with satisfactory grades.

circumstances can vary noticeably across Canada, I used the case of Ontario to indicate the steps to be taken by accounting students who wish to obtain a CA certificate:

- a) Select any university degree program, full-time or part-time,
- b) Take a minimum of 15 university credit courses as specified by the Institute in accounting and related areas on a full or part-time basis. The courses can be taken at different universities and specified minimum grades must be obtained to receive Institute credit for some courses. In certain cases where university courses are not available, the Institute offers correspondence courses to students.
- c) Successfully complete a four-week School of Accountancy that is offered by the Ontario Institute.
- d) Pass a uniform final examination.
- e) Complete an experience requirement of two or three years.

I added that a variety of student-sponsored, CA firm-sponsored and private programs are run to help prepare students for the School of Accountancy and the uniform final examination. For example, over 85% of students in Ontario take one or more review courses offered by the CA Students' Association.

Pointing out that medical students have only one decision to make after completing a pre-medical university requirement, that of which medical school to attend, my doctor expressed concern as to how professional accounting students could be given good advice concerning a complete education program. He asked questions such as:

- a) "Who checks to see that courses taken at one university would fit together with those taken at other universities?" I replied that it was my understanding that it was up to the student to pick courses

that fit together to form a proper program and, presumably, students with inadequate programs will not pass the required professional examinations. He stated that it seemed unfair and inefficient to permit students to select their own, easy, program and work for many years only to fail their last examination.

b) "How does a student with excellent grades and potential know which universities offer the best accounting programs?" I indicated that he or she would probably find it difficult to identify a good program--especially with the poor quality of advice that often is provided to students. In my opinion, many high school teachers and guidance counsellors are not well informed about the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching staff and programs available at different universities. They frequently seem to direct students to universities that have, for example, strong mathematics departments--not a bad consideration other things equal, but other things are seldom equal.

CA Institutes may contribute to this lack of knowledge. In Ontario, the Institute publishes a brochure that indicates the courses available at each university that are accepted for CA credit but makes no comment as to course quality.¹ This can lead the uninitiated to believe that all such university courses have roughly equal merit. Therefore, people that advise students make recommendations based on factors such as the general

¹In Ontario, only courses that contribute to meeting the Institute's 15-course minimum requirement are listed. No advice is offered concerning other courses that should be taken in addition to the 15 specified courses if a proper professional accounting education is to be obtained.

prestige of the university,¹ reputation in subjects seen to relate to accounting such as computer science and mathematics, or simply by recommending their own university.

My doctor indicated that most professions, including medicine, are involved in some type of accreditation of educational programs in an attempt to insure that those below a certain level of quality are not accepted for professional certification. As we parted, he voiced surprise and concern that any responsible profession would offer such a fragmented, pick up something here and something there, educational program. He further questioned how professional accounting education could maintain a presence on campus that would command a fair share of university attention and resources. I had to agree that if I were to walk across our campus and ask a student at random "which way to accounting?", I would probably be directed to the cashier's wicket in the central administration building. On the other hand, if I asked the same student for directions to engineering or medicine, he or she would immediately point to one of two of the largest buildings on campus containing human and physical resources that would dwarf those of the accounting area.

I left my appointment believing that, although there was room for differences among the professions as to appropriate educational approaches, there was no reason that professional accounting education should be so divided from other professions on campus, with the accounting profession, poorly

¹Prestigious universities can, in such circumstances, take advantage of accounting students by using large numbers of relatively cheap part-time staff, thereby retaining more funds for allocation to other areas within the same department or to other university departments.

resourced and identified, and other professions, accepted and supported by a society long convinced of their rightful place on campus. While a direct comparison of accounting with professions such as medicine places accounting in an unfavourable light, in all fairness it should be noted that accounting is a young profession and it was only in the middle of this century that we started to depart from our predominately apprenticeship and correspondence course approach to professional accounting education in Canada. To gain a perspective on recent factors that have influenced developments in accounting education, it is helpful to look back to the Mackintosh Report, presented to the Councils of Provincial Institutes of Chartered Accountants in Canada in March of 1967.¹

The Mackintosh Report

Many, perhaps most, accountants will remember this report as the one that recommended implementation of the university degree requirement that was first proposed by the Martin Committee in 1959.² It is important to note that Mackintosh also made a number of additional recommendations that were intended to give a long-run direction to accounting educational planning. The most important of these was:

My recommendation is that the Institutes should adopt as their target for the future the transfer to approved universities, ultimately on a full-time basis, of all instruction required for qualification as a chartered accountant.....³ (emphasis mine)

¹W. A. Mackintosh, Report to the Councils of the Provincial Institutes of Chartered Accountants in Canada on Educational Plans, March 20, 1967.

²Report to the Education & Examinations Committee of the Provincial Institutes of Chartered Accountants from its Sub-Committee on Long Range Educational Planning, W. F. Martin, Chairman, August, 1959.

³Mackintosh, op.cit., page 16, paragraph 15. To be complete, this paragraph goes on to say, "...except limited instruction as may be judged to be more effective when the student has had some practical experience..." but, Mackintosh indicates that it was difficult to clearly identify any such areas for purposes of making his report.

Mackintosh stated that there were many reasons for selecting this target, including the fact that it would "...direct the accounting profession along the road which other professions in their evolution, one by one, have selected..."¹ Although not naming them, he is describing Schools of professional accountancy that would provide and be responsible for well-planned and co-ordinated programs of professional accounting education, complete to the point of certification.

The report also includes other recommendations worth recalling:

- a) On the question of which universities should eventually participate that, "...it would not be necessary to enlist the co-operation of all universities. Some would not be interested and some would lack adequate staff."²
- b) On the question of accreditation, that it is necessary but, "The Institutes should not seek to prescribe a curriculum. They need insist only on minimum standards..."³
- c) On the question of paraprofessionals, "That the training of auxiliary personnel by existing and emerging institutions should be encouraged and assisted,..."⁴
- d) On the question of educational uniformity that, "...the various provincial arrangements should be brought to comparable, though not

¹W. A. Mackintosh, Report to the Councils of the Provincial Institutes of Chartered Accountants in Canada on Educational Plans, March 20, 1967, page 17, para. 19.

²Ibid, p. 17, para. 20.

³Ibid, p. 17, para. 20.

⁴Ibid, p. 12, para. 22.

necessarily exactly uniform pattern" but that "...no desire for tidy uniformity should blunt initiative and innovation."¹

and

e) On the question of the division of educational responsibilities between universities and the profession, that the Institutes long-term direct involvement should be at the post-certification, professional development level.

Overall, Mackintosh was concerned that students not be given "...a quota of knowledge...to be drawn down during an lifetime..." but rather that they learn how to learn--a process that includes heightening the imagination, sharpening awareness to relevance and improving standards of judgment.² In the long run, he foresaw a less fragmented approach to professional education based on an integrated program taken on a full-time basis at a single university that emphasized logic and the ability to reason. Moreover, universities offering such programs would be accredited by Institutes using minimum standards (quality of faculty members, library resources, etc.) rather than course-by-course evaluation that could stifle educational innovation. Practical experience requirements would be set to contribute to improved professional education instead of to generate a source of inexpensive labour, and paraprofessionals would move in to do, as the Adams Report puts it, "...the less demanding but important tasks presently included in the work performed by students."³

¹W. A. Mackintosh, Report to the Councils of the Provincial Institutes of Chartered Accountants in Canada on Educational Plans, March 20, 1967, p. 16, para. 13.

²Ibid, p. 15, para. 10.

³The Report of the Special Committee to Examine the Role of the Auditor, John W. Adams, Chairman, CICA, April, 1978, Section I, paragraph 12.

In my opinion, the long run direction provided by Mackintosh in 1967 is still relevant today. If there is general agreement on this point, the important question would seem to be, "Have we been and are we making satisfactory progress towards these targets during this transitional period?"

Professional Accounting Education in Transition

Mackintosh was well aware of the compromises that would have to be made in the short run if long-run progress was to be made. He acknowledged that a variety of established methods of instruction would have to be continued for varying periods and that other temporary methods might have to be improvised but he cautioned that:

The important consideration is that they should temporary and all designed to lead to the one goal, full-time university instruction and study.¹ (emphasis mine)

I believe that we may have lost sight of Mackintosh's goals, especially during recent years. To illustrate my concern, I would like to refer briefly to the Report of the Special Committee on Educational Planning which was submitted to the Ontario Institute in 1978.² This report states that "...the 1970 move to a university-based program... should continue to form the basis of the Institute's educational requirements,"³ but it then devotes most of its attention to short-run transitional problems. I realize that when fires are burning, it is difficult to talk long-run policy instead of moving to

¹W. A. Mackintosh, Report to the Councils of the Provincial Institutes of Chartered Accountants in Canada on Educational Plans, March 20, 1967, p. 18, para. 27.

²Report of the Special Committee On Educational Planning, W. T. Mitchell, Chairman, February, 1978.

³Ibid, p. 1, para. 2.

put out the fires. Nevertheless, it is at least equally dangerous to immediately focus on the planting and chopping down of certain trees without keeping the purpose of the forest in view. The Committee does not seem to realize that a majority of their recommendations would apply only during a period of transition to full-time university study.¹ Most of the problems faced by students, universities, practitioners and the institute that are discussed in the report would not exist if proper full-time programs of university education were in place.

In addition to a predominantly short-run focus, the Ontario report contradicts the recommendations of the Mackintosh report on certain key issues. Most important, it rejects Mackintosh's major recommendation:

Requiring exclusively some form of full-time program has advantages, but we do not see it as a desirable approach.²

The report continues in this vein by seeming to push Ontario towards an increase in part-time, non-credit course offerings that contradict the idea of university-level education. For example, "...the present short-term experiment of having Woodsworth College of the University of Toronto offer a non-degree credit course in auditing is, we believe, a positive move..."³ As long as such steps are seen to be temporary, transitional steps, I have no strong objection to them. If they lead to putting in place a structure

¹ Recommendations concerning continuing the present system of a combination of university and Institute-sponsored education, developing a proper division of subject matter between universities and an Institute-sponsored School, duties of course content and exam sub-committees, the nature and role of a summer institute-sponsored School of Accountancy, the need for an adequate number of part-time university credit courses and the need for a better indicator of a student's success (recommendations 1 to 8).

² Report of the Special Committee On Educational Planning, W. T. Mitchell, Chairman, February, 1978, p. 25, recommendation C 7.8.

³ Ibid, p. 24, recommendation C 7.4.

that will continue over the long run, I side with Mackintosh in advocating a reconsideration of our short-term goals. Recently I have heard rumours of a variety of university proposals relating to accounting education that are apparently being studied in Ontario. Participants in this symposium from other provinces may be facing similar or other proposals. These include:

- a) The offerings of diploma-level courses by a university to be taught largely by part-time staff in an effort to reduce charges that it is not serving the needs of the accounting profession and to get students out of degree programs if they want only certain courses required by the Institute.
- b) The offering of part-time university credit courses in Toronto by a university in a distant city.
- c) The offering of credit courses to meet the Ontario Institute's 15-course requirement by areas in the university other than the one (usually the Faculty of Business) in which most of the accounting faculty members reside. For example, departments of economics can offer accounting courses to fill the demand from students who cannot gain access to existing courses or secretarial practice departments can offer most or all of the Institute's 15-course requirement where business faculties fail to do so.
- d) New co-op programs are being proposed, some of which offer winter work periods combined with part-time and summer study periods. Others propose to offer the 15-course CA requirement in combination with departments such as philosophy.

e) Joint university-community college programs are under consideration, at least one of which could involve the taking of community college accounting courses for partial credit towards a university degree.

We should applaud sincere efforts by universities to help meet temporary needs for professional accounting education. At the same time, we should point out, as clearly as possible, our long-term educational goals to enable universities to determine whether they wish to develop current or new programs to try to fill these needs. Unfortunately, during periods of financial stringency due to declining enrolments, some universities are likely to offer courses or programs, that have certain features designed primarily to attract students but which allocate insufficient resources to permit the offering of a sound program (e.g., inadequate quantity and quality of full-time faculty members, large class sizes). My hope is that all of you will join me in accepting Mackintosh's long-run goals for professional accounting education and in working together to achieve them as soon as possible. At the same time, we should continue to try to improve our present, transitional, delivery system.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered as a means of moving more quickly to the time when high-quality professional accounting education will be available in Canada:

1. If necessary, Institutes should review their long-run educational plans to decide whether they still agree with the recommendations of the Mackintosh Report. I hope they do and will take steps to insure that short-run transitional concerns and activities are in conformity with these long-run goals.

2. A detailed study into the nature of Schools of Professional Accountancy (SPA's) and their advantages and disadvantages should be conducted by the CICA or, perhaps better yet, by the Canadian Academic Accounting Association with the support of the CICA and other professional accounting organizations. As Sidney Davidson points out accounting education should not be restricted to meeting the needs of the CA (CPA) profession alone:

Students enrolled in accounting programs are in training for work in management accounting, government accounting, accounting for nonprofit organizations and for public accounting. Professional education in accounting should be oriented to prepare students for these several paths.¹

Based on a limited investigation of SPA's that I am conducting for McMaster University, a detailed study of SPA's should include:²

- a) Consideration of different types of schools including four-year programs of concentrated professional education (the engineering approach) and five-year programs combining general courses, usually in the first two years, with professional education (e.g. law and medicine).
- b) Consideration of the number of schools that would be required to meet the demand for professional accounting graduates in the long-run.

¹Sidney Davidson, "A Plea for Flexibility", Journal of Accountancy, March 1978, p. 61.

²One of the dangers connected with the SPA idea is that a university may adopt the name School of Professional Accountancy to try and attract students without allocating sufficient resources to the SPA to permit the attainment of a quality educational program. The study suggested here must focus on the role of SPA's in promoting excellence in professional accounting education.

- c) Consideration of the ability of SPA's to attract high quality faculty members including a study of means of paying salaries that are more competitive with those of practitioners. As part of this study, the salary policies of medical, law and other professional faculties should be reviewed.
- d) Consideration of the role of SPA's in meeting the demand for Ph.D.'s in accounting.
- e) Consideration of the cost savings that would occur if SPA's provide all education necessary to write the UFE. This would include the cost savings to firms of in-house training that is not firm-specific, to students of attending cram courses, summer schools, etc., and to firms of student leaves for study purposes.
- f) Consideration of the ability of SPA's to attract good students, especially if a five-year program is selected and present four-year program options are continued by other universities.
- g) Consideration of the role of basic and applied research in SPA's.
- h) Consideration of developments in other professions and in other countries concerning professional schools.
- i) Consideration of whether and in what ways practical experience could be combined with SPA studies to improve the value of both.¹
- j) Consideration of proper practitioner interaction with SPA's to bridge the gap between academy and practice. Possibilities such as faculty members working with practitioners on research projects,

¹See for example, the Adams Report, Section I, paragraph I4.

faculty internships, practitioners becoming full-time faculty members for one or two years, practitioners serving on advisory councils, etc., should be studied.

k) Consideration of an appropriate curriculum for SPA's including inter-disciplinary studies, communicative skills, professional ethics, etc. The desirability of permitting specialization in areas such as, taxation, information systems and auditing, also requires study.

l) Consideration of the way in which SPA's can be financed, especially during the current period of financial stringency. This would include a study of the likely revenues and costs of running SPA's given the various funding methods employed in the different provinces.

3. The issue of accreditation of university accounting programs should be pursued with a view to identifying both strong and weak programs for students and employers.

4. The use of accounting paraprofessionals should be studied to identify their proper role, training and relation to professionals and professional accounting students.

Conclusion

I believe that a way must be found and the necessary resources supplied to encourage the establishment of high-quality professional accounting programs at Canadian universities. If not, it is likely that the universities that offer extra courses in an effort to try to meet the specific needs of the accounting profession will be forced to cut back their offerings and concentrate

on the needs of general business management students in B. Comm. and M.B.A. programs since these programs are the first responsibility of business faculties. While SPA's may not be necessary in moving towards the establishment of high-quality professional accounting education programs at Canadian universities in theory, they may have a great deal to offer in practice. At present, professional accounting has little status on campus other than indirect recognition as one of many departments in Faculties of Business. Law, medicine, engineering, and other professions are established on campus and are easily identified as deserving their share of educational resources.

The demand for professional accountants from government, industry and public practice, together with the growing importance of our services to society, justifies the allocation of a fair share of educational resources to professional accounting education. In the United States members of the accounting profession have begun to make significant contributions to universities in support of improved professional accounting programs-- especially SPA's. During the past five years approximately 25 SPA's have been formed or approved in the United States, many with the help of monetary and non-monetary contributions from the profession.

When I visited one SPA in the United States recently, the Director of the School mentioned that their visibility on campus had improved markedly in just four years. He indicated that some excellent students now apply to both their law and accounting schools and, if accepted by both, choose accounting. Wouldn't it be nice if we could have a similar situation in Canada in the not-too-distant future?

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