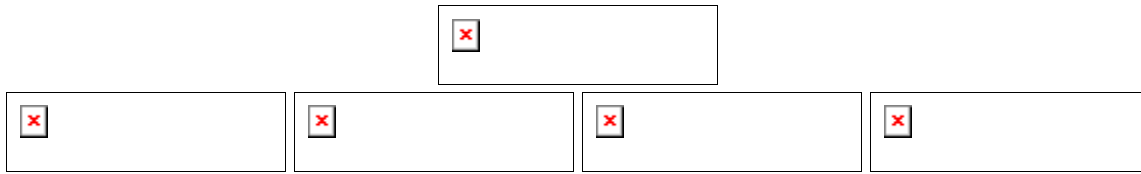


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Post-secondary Education in Canada: Thinking Ten Years into the Future

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The purpose of this essay is to outline what the writer would regard as desirable attributes of post-secondary education in Canada ten years from now. In thinking about the future of post-secondary education, three important elements are: (i) an appreciation of the present state of post-secondary education; (ii) a consideration of significant trends in or affecting post-secondary education; and (iii) an indication of the particular aspects of post-secondary education that are the principal focus of the examination. The essay begins with a few comments on the third of these elements, because that defines the parameters of the inquiry. The second section summarizes relevant features of the present state of post-secondary education in Canada. This is followed by a description of important trends in and affecting post-secondary education. The final section describes some desirable attributes of post-secondary education to aim for and suggests what the role of governments might be in the process.

Aspects of Post-secondary Education to Focus on

Post-secondary education is a vast and multi-faceted enterprise with an enormous array of constituent entities, components, and activities. Almost all studies of post-secondary education focus on a particular subset of issues or phenomena, for example, finance, governance, or learning in one sub-sector or another. In a more general commentary like this one it is appropriate to address a wide range of issues and phenomena, indeed, to attempt to make connections between different aspects of post-secondary education. Still, it is important to have a few key signposts in mind which provide a focal point for the examination.

The most pervasive and useful such focal point is the organizational structure of post-secondary education. By this phrase, I mean the distribution - by size, location, and frequency - of institutions with particular mandates and other characteristics that are providing post-secondary education. It is through the efforts of particular institutions that post-secondary education is conducted, and therefore, it is the resources that the various types of institutions are able to command, and their goals, interests, priorities,

and behaviour that largely determine the outcomes of post-secondary education. Moreover, it is primarily through its impact on these institutions that public policy is able to influence post-secondary education.

Other elements of post-secondary education upon which it is especially important to retain a focus while thinking about the future are functions and clients. The functions of post-secondary education can be conceptualized in varying levels of detail. For purposes of this discussion, the most significant distinctions among functions are first, between instruction and research, and then within instruction, the most significant categories are liberal, occupational (or career), and developmental (or remedial) education. In any discussion of the future of post-secondary education, it is important to consider the variety of clients of post-secondary education and how different structures may serve the needs of different client groups.

The Present State of Post-secondary Education in Canada

While post-secondary education in Canada is comprised of diverse institutions, one of the most pervasive distinctions among those institutions is between those whose major focus with respect to instructional activity is offering degree programs and those which are not legally authorized to offer degree programs at all or for which degree programs constitute only a small portion of activity. Until near the end of the 20th century, Canada had what is called a binary post-secondary structure consisting of two sectors which were distinguished from one another by the authority to grant degrees, a distinction which has wide ranging implications for other institutional practices such as involvement in research, hiring qualifications of faculty, and nature and level of programs. A few years into the 21st century, the binary divide has become somewhat blurred, more in some provinces than in others, as some institutions that were squarely in the non-degree sector have begun to offer degrees and have taken on some of the characteristics of degree sector institutions. Except in British Columbia, this movement has not yet proceeded far enough to significantly alter the essential binary character of post-secondary education. How far this type of change in the structure of post-secondary education will extend in the next ten years is one of the major questions for the future.

Until the recent modest extension of degree granting to institutions in what had been the non-degree sector, referred to in the preceding paragraph, the degree granting institutions in Canada had been predominantly universities, as opposed to a mix of universities and limited mission institutions of the type that exist in the United States and many other countries. The term university connotes an institution which offers study at the highest level and includes a faculty of arts and science, at least one professional school, and usually some graduate programs. By that definition, most degree granting institutions in Canada in the late 20th century were universities. Similarly, the term research university is not a precise term but implies that research is intended to be a major function of the institution and that all faculty are expected to be substantially involved in research. At least until recently, one of the characteristics of the degree granting sector of post-secondary education in Canada has been that the vast majority of institutions have been research universities or committed to achieving such a status. One implication of this is that resources for advanced study and research in Canadian post-secondary education are spread more widely – and thus, thinly - than is the case in most other countries.

One other noteworthy characteristic of the degree sector of Canadian post-secondary education is that it has consisted almost exclusively of public institutions in the sense that they were established by an act of a provincial legislature, government grants were the largest source of their operating funding, and they are subject to government regulation (though except for control of tuition fees, in practice, Canadian universities have enjoyed substantial autonomy for the past half century).

The non-degree sector (including those institutions which recently have been authorized to offer a few baccalaureate programs) is comprised of three distinct types of institutions: public community colleges that offer both the first two years of university arts and science programs and occupational programs; public technical institutes which offer occupational programs in a few or many fields; and

private vocational/technical schools and colleges which offer occupational programs in diverse areas, especially in technology and business. Some of the occupational programs in this sector are in fields in which the universities also provide programs (e.g. nursing, accounting), but most are in fields where there is no precisely corresponding university program. Particularly in those cases, articulation between the non-degree sector and the degree sector is problematic, and the amount of university credit provided for those students who want to transfer from one sector to the other varies considerably both between and within provinces. More generally, transfer of academic credit within and between sectors and provinces is riddled with problems and inconsistencies.

In addition to offering programs which require completion of secondary school, the non-degree sector is involved also in a substantial amount of developmental education which aims to give people academic skills that they didn't acquire in secondary school, and relatively short duration occupational training which doesn't require secondary school completion. By definition, these two areas of activity are not post-secondary education, even though they are commonly provided by institutions which are, by virtue of their other activities, defined as post-secondary education institutions. The extent of involvement of community colleges in developmental education and short cycle occupational training varies across Canada, and in some provinces (and nations) other public institutions than community colleges have the principal responsibility for one or both of these areas.

With respect to serving its clients, it is important to note that Canada has the highest proportion of its working age population with a post-secondary credential of any nation on earth (Statistics Canada, 2003). Though the author was unable to find recent data on post-secondary participation rates, it is likely that Canada has among the highest rates of university participation in the world. In relying predominantly upon research universities to achieve such a high university participation rate, Canada has a quite high cost structure for its university sector. In contrast, other countries have opted for either a stratified university sector in which there are many lower cost, primarily teaching, institutions or a much lower university participation rate (or both).

Significant Trends Affecting Post-secondary Education

The most pervasive trends affecting post-secondary education in recent years and likely over the next ten years are those associated with globalization. Globalization refers to a process in which nations are integrated into a highly competitive international economic system in which the perceived ability of each nation to compete economically in this system becomes the driving force in public policy not only in the economic sphere, but increasingly in the cultural and social spheres as well, including especially post-secondary education.

Globalization has had two major types of impact on post-secondary education. First, it has caused increased emphasis on the economic contribution of education relative to its other objectives. Post-secondary education has always had diverse objectives which can be broadly classified as economic and non-economic. The economic objectives include preparing people to be productive workers in professional and other occupations and research which results in new products, new technologies, and greater economic efficiency. As important as these objectives are, they stand in contrast to the cultural, moral, civic, and broader intellectual purposes of education. There has been a perennial tension between these two sets of objectives, and arguably a society is best served when there is a healthy balance between the two. Globalization threatens to upset this balance, as governments employ financial and other policy levers in ways to get universities to give the dominant emphasis to the economic objectives of their activities.

The other way in which globalization has impacted post-secondary education is through marketization, and what some refer to as commodification of education. While post-secondary education has in some countries for a long time been, at least in part, a commodity supplied and purchased on the market and subject to normal market forces, this has not been the case in Canada, except for a portion of non-degree vocational training. Rather, university education has been treated as a public good in much

the same way that health care in Canada has been, provided by government in a manner determined by public policy. As globalization has proceeded, there has been a shift in the way that post-secondary education is perceived, toward being a commodity for which the conditions of its provision and acquisition are determined by autonomous providers and consumers. While it is perhaps not necessarily so, marketization of post-secondary education has been accompanied by privatization which has meant that more of the funding of post-secondary education has come from private sources (students and donors), and more of the suppliers of post-secondary education are private.

There have been two principal means through which globalization has had the impacts described above. One is through affecting the beliefs of governments, institutions, and individuals as to what behaviour is in their best interests, i.e. the public interest, institutional interest, and individual interest. In regard to governments particularly, and to some extent, institutions, it is important to question the validity of these beliefs. Are governments correct in their apparent judgment that the best or only way to respond to the challenges of globalization is through encouraging or forcing universities to become primarily engines of economic growth and to moving substantially toward marketization and privatization of post-secondary education? This is a most difficult question to answer, and simply positing a negative answer without demonstrating the viability of an alternative strategy is perhaps to jeopardize Canada's economic well being. On the other hand, the jury is not yet in on the longer term economic and social consequences of the strategy dictated by what has become conventional thinking about the imperatives of living in a post-industrial, global knowledge society.

The other means through which globalization has impacted post-secondary education is through interaction between Canada and the rest of the world. Although restriction on the international exchange of services in post-secondary education has been a common feature of Canadian educational policy, the border has become more permeable of late, especially as a result of advances in electronic technology and in response to pressure from students for greater choice in the type of programs available to them. As former president of the University of Michigan, James Duderstadt, has pointed out, whereas in the past most colleges and universities served local populations, increasingly they themselves are operating in a global context (Duderstadt, 2002).

The concept of borders has been extended to include not just geographic borders but also conceptual borders regarding the characteristics of providers of post-secondary education. In the literature on "borderless higher education", there is a whole classification of relatively new providers of higher education who are now crossing into what was regarded as the traditional preserve of public and private not-for-profit institutions (Cunningham and others, 2000). These include: university programs provided by other educational sectors, corporate universities (including public sector institutions), private for-profit universities, media and publishing businesses, educational brokers, regional and international consortia of universities, virtual universities, and other forms of transnational post-secondary education (Middlehurst, 2002). There is a strong interaction between the geographic and other borders, because the newer types of providers are more developed in some countries than in others. For a country like Canada where the sector of alternative providers is not that well developed, except in regard to distance education, it is likely that most of the new types of providers would also be from outside the country.

Although the developments described in the preceding paragraph have received a lot of attention – the association of universities in the United Kingdom have established an Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (www.obhe.ac.uk) – there is still the question of whether they are likely to remain somewhat peripheral and whether the vast majority of post-secondary students will continue to experience the more traditional forms of education for the foreseeable future. In apparent recognition of this question, Middlehurst begins his discussion of these developments with the caution that "Overestimating change in the short term and underestimating it in the long term is a common phenomenon when revolutions are underway" (Middlehurst, p. 1). In line with this thinking, and recognizing that there are still many unanswered questions about the quality and value of some forms of borderless education, it would seem prudent in visioning the next ten years, to anticipate a modest growth in borderless post-secondary education, but not such as to transform the whole enterprise of post-secondary education.

Lastly in regard to trends affecting post-secondary education, some mention should be made of technology. Going back to programmed learning in the 1960s, if not earlier, predictions of how technology would revolutionize post-secondary education have consistently failed to turn out. Possibly, the internet will be the exception, but that too has been said of other innovations. Perhaps the most important thing to note about developments in technology in the context of the present discussion is that their impact is greatest when they interact substantially with the other trends of the kind discussed here. For example, insofar as post-secondary education plays an important role in the development, diffusion, and evaluation of advances in technology that is used in other sectors, these strongly reinforce the perceived importance of post-secondary education as nations respond to the pressures of globalization and the knowledge society. As for the applications of new technology within post-secondary education, this is a central, frequently even defining, feature for many of the new providers of post-secondary education in the world of borderless post-secondary education.

Use of educational technology has often been presented as constituting the only possible solution to a problem created by globalization and the demands of the knowledge society. That problem is that both the consequent demand for post-secondary education by individuals and families, and the perceived need for it by governments, is alleged to be outpacing the ability of people and governments to pay for it when relying on conventional approaches to the provision of post-secondary education. Of course, if the underlying analyses of the contribution of post-secondary education to personal and societal wealth creation in the knowledge society are correct, then such imbalance should be only temporary. Be that as it may, many observers believe that the gap between societies' needs for post-secondary education and their ability to pay for it is large and growing, especially, but not only, in developing countries, and that the use of technology, through distance universities, is the only hope for bridging this gap. Within the sphere of borderless post-secondary education, Canada has a few publicly supported institutions which specialize in distance education, serve the entire country, and have attained international reputations in the field of distance education. These institutions may have a particularly important role to play in maintaining access to post-secondary education in Canada in the context of the global knowledge society.

Some Desirable Attributes of Post-secondary Education in Canada Ten Years From Now

With the foregoing summary of key features of its present state and important trends as a foundation, this section of the essay humbly offers suggestions as to what some desirable attributes of post-secondary education in Canada ten years from now might be. Comments are also offered on what governments might do to foster the attainment of these attributes.

1. The public post-secondary institutions are the principal providers of post-secondary education, while the new providers have a moderately increased presence mainly filling niches not met by the public institutions

It is suggested that ten years from now, while there should be a moderate increase in the presence of the new providers described in the discussion of borderless education, the post-secondary education system in Canada will still be overwhelmingly a public one. In regard to degree activity, the publicly funded universities will be providing well in excess of 90 per cent of the activity. The principal client group served by the new providers will be working adults pursuing career related education on a part-time basis.

What governments can do to foster this attribute: ensure adequate funding of public post-secondary institutions through a combination of operating grants and appropriate levels of tuition fees combined with needs based financial assistance; recognize the value of new providers as a supplement to the public post-secondary educational system and establish mechanisms for licensing and quality

assurance for the new providers. Ensure the provision of information on the changing composition of provision of post-secondary education, including the role and impact of borderless education.

2. Post-secondary institutions concentrate on their core functions

Largely due to financial pressure as a result of inadequate basic funding, universities and colleges have devoted a lot of time, effort, and institutional resources to identifying and developing new markets and new services. Although some of the new services that institutions have developed are the educational equivalent of what one former college administrator described as running bake sales, it may be conceded that the services provided in such initiatives are generally worthwhile and appreciated by those who receive them. Still, as Abraham Flexner said, just because there's a need for an activity, it doesn't follow that the university should be the institution to provide it (Flexner, 1930). Universities and colleges have unique capabilities for performing their core functions. To divert their resources to peripheral activities because such activities bring in revenue is both penny wise and pound foolish and an abuse of their potential. And in most cases, after attending to expenses and full reimbursement of indirect costs, the contribution of so called money-making ventures to discretionary revenue isn't enough to justify the activities.

For universities, core activities are taken to mean the provision of education – for part time as well as full time students - in the arts and sciences and major professions; basic and related applied research, as well as being a repository of knowledge in those same areas. For those community colleges that have the mandate to do so, core activities include the provision of the first two years of university credit courses in arts and sciences. In addition, and for other community colleges and public technical institutes, another core function is the provision of state of the art career education in fields where the complexity and sophistication of knowledge is such as to require at least two years of study, and may require up to four years to be a competent practitioner. Further elaboration on the core functions of community colleges is provided under Attributes #3 and #4.

What governments can do to foster this attribute: ensure adequate basic funding of these core activities through a combination of operating grants and appropriate levels of tuition fees combined with needs based financial assistance. Encourage universities and colleges to concentrate on their core functions and hold them accountable for how well they perform their core, not peripheral, functions.

3. Community colleges and technical institutes provide a modest number of baccalaureate degree programs with an applied focus in areas of their particular academic strength and for which there is a strong economic demand

This attribute has two particular benefits. First, it recognizes and builds upon the considerable academic strengths that community colleges and technical institutes have developed in the career fields in which they offer non-degree programs. In many of these fields, knowledge and practice have advanced to such levels of sophistication and complexity that a baccalaureate program, that involves a suitable blending of general and specialized study, is appropriate. Because of the strong complementarity between these new applied baccalaureate programs and the existing diploma programs in the same fields, this extension into a limited number of baccalaureate programs that respond to new labour market needs would be consistent with the core functions of the community colleges and technical institutes. Similarly, the involvement of community colleges and technical institutes in applied research in areas of their specialized expertise would be appropriate.

Second, the extension of community colleges and technical institutes into this level of applied post-secondary education enables the post-secondary system to respond quickly to emerging human resource needs in the global economy without distorting the essential mission of the university, or allowing it to become too preoccupied with its economic role as opposed to what Alison Wolf refers to as the “cultural, moral and intellectual purposes of education” (Wolf, 2002, p. 154).

What governments can do to foster this attribute: establish standards and mechanisms for approval

of applied baccalaureate programs in community colleges and technical institutes, and ensure adequate quality and funding of these programs.

4. Community colleges concentrate on longer cycle occupational education and, where appropriate, arts and science courses for transfer credit, instead of diverting resources to developmental education and short cycle vocational training

For community colleges to span the gamut of educational activity from state-of-the-art career education for emerging fields on the frontier of technology to providing basic literacy, life skills, and short cycle work force training and retraining is simply asking too much of a single institution. The complementarities are weak between advanced career education on the one hand, and developmental education or basic short term occupational retraining on the other. Clients of both sets of programs would be better served by institutions which were more specialized to their needs. Where it has not already moved in this direction, the primary responsibility for developmental education and short cycle vocational training should be shifted from community colleges to provincial and/or local vocational centres and community based organizations.

What governments can do to foster this attribute: shift funding for the activities in question from community colleges to provincial and/or local vocational centres and community organizations; encourage the establishment and development of relevant community organizations; provide policies and infrastructure for overseeing the community organizations. There may be limits to the extent to which this shift is feasible in small communities and transition issues may arise where colleges are heavily involved in developmental and short cycle vocational activities. Sensitivity to these issues and transition assistance is warranted in such situations.

It should be recognized, however, that a more urgent issue than where the responsibility for developmental education for adults should be located is how to reduce the need for this activity. The substantial and apparently growing need for developmental education for adults suggests that significant improvements are needed in the capacity of elementary and secondary schools to provide all students with the literacy and numeracy skills required in a knowledge society. It is both inefficient and inhumane to shift the responsibility for this important function from the schools to the post-secondary or tertiary level. Insofar as the problem is one of funding, a reallocation of funding from the post-secondary to the earlier levels of schooling might be warranted given the importance of universal literacy, numeracy, and basic skills in a knowledge driven economy. However, the problem might not be primarily one of funding, and governments should give a high priority to encouraging research into how to improve the effectiveness of the schools.

5. Canada employs multiple strategies for providing high quality, mass post-secondary education in a cost effective manner

Typically, visions of the future of post-secondary education give scant if any attention to the cost side of the ledger. However, in the present context it would be imprudent to fail to note that one of the greatest challenges facing post-secondary education worldwide is the apparent growing disparity between perceptions of what is needed and what can be afforded. This disparity is of particular relevance in Canada for several reasons.

One is that perhaps the most critical educational need in a knowledge society – with respect to both economic advancement and social equity - is for universal secondary school attainment at a high level of quality. Given our deficiencies in achieving that standard, it could be argued that on the margin the social returns to additional investment in the schools would be higher than in post-secondary education. Second, there are other pressing societal needs besides post-secondary education. In particular, while Canada ranks first internationally in attainment of post-secondary education credentials, it ranks quite low in regard to a number of indices of health care, for example, access to diagnostic imaging facilities. Implementing the key recommendations of the Romanow Report will require large sums of public

money that might otherwise have gone to post-secondary education, but for which the needs in the health care sector are critical. And third, it has already been noted that by international standards Canada employs a very high cost model for providing university education.

What governments can do to foster this attribute: Some of the attributes indicated above will contribute to expanding access within funding constraints: a modest shift in the direction of borderless higher education and relying on community colleges and technical institutes for meeting much of the need for applied baccalaureate programs in areas which would be new to the universities but in which the other institutions already have an established base of expertise.

In addition to these strategies, it would be prudent for governments to exercise restraint on the aspirations of the universities. A nation the size of Canada cannot afford and does not need an unlimited number of full-fledged research universities. What it does need is a geographically accessible network of institutions where students can get a high quality education; some special niche institutions like liberal arts colleges and technical universities; and at most a few world class institutions that cover the full spectrum of fields of study and research. Accordingly, governments should encourage those institutions that presently have a regional or limited mission to be the best that they can be at fulfilling that mission rather than attempting to become research universities. If any new universities are created in the next decade, they should have a regional or special mission.

6. A voluntary national registry of academic credit which would guarantee credit transfer among participating institutions

Although there are some effective arrangements for transfer of academic credit in specific spheres within particular provinces, on the whole there are massive barriers to credit transfer within post-secondary education in Canada. These barriers impede geographic, career, and educational mobility, and prevent learners from making the most effective use of the wonderful resources for learning that exist in this country. In spite of numerous pleas from educational and societal leaders over the past several decades for a more seamless post-secondary system, progress in this direction has been almost glacial. Yet the trends and developments described in this essay will significantly increase the need for greatly improved opportunities for credit transfer.

Perhaps it is time to try establishing a national registry of academic credit.

What governments can do to foster this attribute: Because of the strong national interest in such an activity, the Government of Canada, in cooperation with the Council of Ministers of Education, could take the lead in establishing, and contribute to the funding of, an agency whose purpose it would be to recognize courses completed in any post-secondary education institution for transfer of credit to any other institution. Any post-secondary institution in Canada would be eligible to become a member of the registry, and a majority of the members of the governing board would be representatives of member institutions. Member institutions would commit to accepting for credit toward stipulated degrees courses that had been approved by the registry. Membership in the registry would be voluntary. Incentives to join would be: (a) recognition of an institution's courses for transfer credit by other institutions; (b) the opportunity to participate in determining policies and standards for transfer credit across the country; and (c) the possibility of obtaining financial assistance from governments for an activity that institutions are engaged in to some extent and profess to believe should be enhanced.

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