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Institutional Diversity in Ontario's University Sector: A Policy Debate Analysis

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Abstract

In order to meet the demands in a cost-effective manner of an emerging knowledge society that is global in scope, structural higher education policy changes have been introduced in many countries with a focus on systemic and programmatic diversity. There has been an ongoing debate about institutional diversity in Ontario higher education, especially within the university sector, for at least five decades. This paper will provide insight into issues of quality, accessibility, and funding through the lens of the current policy debate about institutional diversity by using document and policy analysis, and by drawing on a number of semi-structured interviews with senior university and system-level administrators.

Résumé

Dans le but de répondre, de manière rentable, aux exigences d'une société

Introduction

The governance of higher education takes place at multiple levels: the academic department (micro-level), the institution (meso-level) and the higher education system (macro-level). System-level governance has received considerable attention in the research literature over the last few decades, with a particular focus on analyzing the changing relationships between institutions and the state. Studies in many jurisdictions have noted the increasing role of government in reshaping and steering the higher education system, including decisions related to institutional types and missions (Austin & Jones, 2015).

Institutional diversity (the variety of types of institutions within a higher education system and their dispersion across types; see Huisman, 1998) has been a topic of inter-

the qualifications for admission to a postsecondary institution; the spectrum of occupations for which the institutions provided preparation; the balance and relationship between the applied and the theoretical in the educational process; the balance between teaching and research; and the type of academic credential (i.e., degree versus diploma or certificate) awarded. (Skolnik, 2013, pp. 3–4)

However, since the college sector was established, the extent of diversity within that sector has attracted very little attention. The first attempt to further diversify the college sector occurred in 2000 when some colleges were assigned the status of Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning (Skolnik, 2013).

Methodology

This paper used document and policy analysis, and semi-structured interviews as its main qualitative research methods. As suggested by Bowen (2009), the document analysis consisted of a systematic evaluation of the findings and recommendations of various panels, commissions, system reviews, and various studies that were synthesized to gain insight into the policy debate about institutional diversity. Policy analysis “as the disciplined application of intellect to public problems” (Pal, 2006, p. 14) was used as means of critically assessing and understanding various stakeholder contributions to the diversity debate in Ontario.

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 10 university administrators from March 1, 2013, to May 31, 2013. The selection ensured that they represented a cross-section of university types (three comprehensive, three primarily undergraduate, two medical/doctoral, and one special purpose) and sizes (six large, two medium, and one small). They also covered Ontario’s geographic regions (three from the Greater Toronto Area; three from central Ontario; and one each from eastern, southwestern, and northern Ontario) and represented over 40% of publicly assisted universities.

All university administrators were provided with a list of discussion points and were asked to comment on suggestions that would increase institutional diversity that had been made in the literature and in the university sector, generally. All interviews were conducted in person, were digitally recorded, and targeted to last no more than one hour. All interviews were transcribed within approximately one week of the date of the interview and provided to the university administrators via email to review the transcript and make additions, deletions, or corrections as they saw fit. They returned the revised transcript within one month. The written text was analyzed and synthesized to identify major themes.

Contemporary Policy Debate

The description of the contemporary policy debate about diversity will be framed by first examining the extent to which institutional diversity is a shared value between the government and various stakeholders: Colleges Ontario, COU, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario [HEQCO], organizations representing the interests of students and faculty, and university administrators. An examination of structural recommendations from the 2004 Ontario postsecondary education system review, several studies under the direction of HEQCO, the 2012 Drummond Report, and related stakeholder responses will follow.

Institutional Diversity—A Shared Value

In November 2013, the Ontario government formally adopted a policy framework that outlined its desire to pursue greater institutional diversity in its public postsecondary system (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2013). This general policy direction was supported by HEQCO (Weingarten & Deller, 2010; Weingarten, Hicks, Jonker, & Liu, 2013), COU (Council of Ontario Universities, 2010, 2011), and Colleges Ontario (Colleges Ontario, 2013). The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) supported moderate levels of diversity with the provision of a broad range of courses at all institutions but opposed the creation of any hierarchical system where some institutions would benefit from having special status. OUSA also sought to have resources allocated that would “keep all schools in Ontario competitive in the province and world market” (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2014, p. 15). The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) raised general concerns about increasing institutional diversity due to its possible intrusion into academic planning and freedom. OCUFA was also concerned about how the policy could impact geographic accessibility (a concern also raised by OUSA) (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 2013).

University administrators interviewed in this study generally agreed that diversity or differentiation is a cherished value in Ontario’s university sector. As one noted, “it would be nice to have a healthy and diverse ecosystem because that is a sustainable ecosystem in the post-secondary sector; you need all types of different types of institutions.” However, diversity is also a concept that is lauded and feared due to the ongoing debate of what it actually means for institutions. Interviewees often noted that diversity, or differentiation, is a concept that is poorly understood, represents different things to different people and is often interpreted according to criteria that are not very useful. Some administrators wanted to see a definition that is agreed upon by the sector. One university administrator sought a more fluid definition. Some noted that while the sector may value diversity, it is constrained by another cherished Canadian value, that of equity. They felt the need to have policies treating everyone consistently and fairly constrains diversity. “Some would argue that Canada handicaps itself because we try so hard to treat people fairly, equitably. While this is an admirable value, if you are aspiring to be world class that does not get you there.” Another university administrator stressed, “Everything in this sector seems to be sacrificed on the altar of consistency.” Concerns were also raised by university administrators as to how diversity or differentiation could be achieved in the sector, especially with respect to possible redistribution of funding while still highlighting the need to be seen as equals.

Six university administrators expressed the importance of programmatic diversity. One administrator noted that it can be achieved by “creating a niche with depth in certain areas and some breadth in others.” Some noted that, in each community, students should have access to high-quality programs across a limited number of disciplines. The community’s needs should dictate which programs are offered. Five university administrators mentioned that they value systemic diversity as the size component is very important, especially from an economy-of-scale perspective and for creating a sense of community. Others noted that climate diversity (differences in campus environment and culture; Birnbaum, 1983) was important and can be achieved by institutions that provide a quality graduate student experience or by institutions with low student-faculty ratios. They also

thought reputational diversity (differences in institutional status or prestige; Birnbaum, 1983) has some importance. One university administrator spoke of the importance of procedural diversity (differences in the way institutions deliver their programs and services; Birnbaum, 1983).

Structural Recommendations

In June 2004, the Ontario Liberal government, under Premier Dalton McGuinty, appointed Bob Rae, former New Democratic Party premier of Ontario, to undertake a review of the public postsecondary education system and provide recommendations on how funding and design of the system could be incorporated in the 2005 provincial budget. The review focused on how to increase access to postsecondary education and improve quality and accountability. It also considered the adequacy of the system's design and structure to meet future needs. With the exception of tuition deregulation and a few other key issues (Lennon, Skolnik, & Jones, 2015), the Ontario government has since incorporated most of Rae's recommendations (2005) through its *Reaching Higher: The McGuinty Government Plan For Postsecondary Education* by completing its promised \$6.2 billion cumulative investment in higher education by 2009–2010.

With respect to institutional diversity, Rae (2005) encouraged its promotion "through the tuition framework, accountability arrangements and the design of the province's funding formula" (Rae, 2005, p. 41) in order to eliminate unwarranted duplication. He also rejected the need for central planning and instead chose "to reconcile three objectives: institutional independence and diversity, the need for greater co-ordination and clearer pathways for students, and accountability to the public" (Rae, 2005, p. 13).

The report did not provide a clear definition of diversity and therefore one can only suspect that he was referring to increased systemic and/or programmatic diversity. He did recognize that as institutions become more specialized, credit transfer arrangements among institutions need to be enhanced to create effective pathways to attain a university degree and therefore suggested more government involvement in this area. While the report failed to note what type of structural reform would best serve Ontario, it was

enthusiastically received by Ontario university and college administrators and most media commentators. That it also gained the support, albeit mixed, of the major students groups and the Canadian Association of University Teachers attests to its success in identifying the main challenges, risks and opportunities faced by the post-secondary education system. (Lowy, 2005, p. 23)

OUSA, which supported affordable access to higher education (using a cost-sharing approach) for all qualified students in an environment with stable and sufficient government funding, did not support Rae's recommendation to fully deregulate tuition fees. They believed the government should control tuition fees in order to ensure affordable access for all qualified students and to ensure that students don't pay more than their counterparts in other provinces (Voakes & Chan, 2005).

In 2009, HEQCO, an intermediary advisory agency that had been recommended by Rae, commissioned a study to identify any gaps in Ontario's higher education system

Skolnik (2009) called for increased access to baccalaureate education in Ontario through increased institutional differentiation, and they suggested the creation of a new sector composed of undergraduate teaching-focused institutions that would be differentiated from colleges and existing universities. These new institutions would have a limited research mission and would focus mainly on teaching-related scholarship. This proposal was also articulated by Clark et al. (2009).

Jones and Skolnik (2009) and Clark et al. (2009) noted several issues with creating new institutions. If created, they should be unencumbered by an existing institution's history, culture, and labour agreements. Some of these institutions could be career-focused (closer to polytechnic institutes without the graduate component) while others could be career-focused and offer liberal arts programs. Placing some of these institutions in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) was also recommended, due to the future expected growth in demand for baccalaureate education in that region. However, the recommendation failed to address the impact on other universities outside of the GTA that draw a significant portion of their students from the GTA. They also suggested that a handful of colleges could have increased involvement in providing career-focused baccalaureate programs, or could have their mission redefined to substantially provide baccalaureate programs.

COU responded that

Ontario universities do not support the development of universities whose mandates are solely to teach undergraduate students. The expansion and innovative application of knowledge through research is part of the core mandate of all universities, along with equipping students with the advanced skills and capabilities that allow them to contribute to Ontario's knowledge economy. (Council of On-

within existing universities. A university administrator did note that teaching-focused institutions are a good idea as long as they have “a scholarship mandate, and research that suits and fits their areas of excellence.”

Jones and Skolnik (2009) and Clark et al (2009) also suggested the creation of an open university to enhance degree completion in Ontario because traditional universities currently do not have an open admission or the flexible credit recognition features of an open university. University administrators were generally supportive of this initiative. One university administrator noted that

the open university concept serves an important niche. An important part of the ecosystem. An open university would meet the needs of a lot of people who want to complete degrees, pursue degrees, particularly while they are still working and when they don't have access.

Another university administrator suggested that “anything that democratizes access to knowledge is a really good thing.” Another suggested that an open university should be created as a joint venture amongst existing universities. Concerns around the quality of education that could be obtained from an open access institution were raised by one university administrator: “If you are going to mix open access with specializations, you will diminish the educational experience for the people who really want to be experts or at the forefront of a field as you will have to dumb down the material.”

In July 2010, the Ontario deputy minister of Training, Colleges and Universities requested HEQCO to explore the issue of

whether a more strongly differentiated set of universities would help improve the overall performance and sustainability of the system, and help Ontario compete internationally [and] . . . how to operationalize a differentiated policy, should government be interested in pursuing this as a strategic objective.” (Weingarten & Deller, 2010, p. 6)

HEQCO's report provided a roadmap for the provincial government to increase diversity in Ontario's postsecondary education system in a period where increased enrolment (due to market demand for credentials) is threatening quality, and government resources are being constrained. It acknowledged that the current system is somewhat differentiated due to its existing binary structure. The university sector is k

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valued equally as institutions compete for outcome-dependent funding, which is within their stated mandates. They further suggested that a comprehensive agreement between government and universities laying out each institution's priorities, goals, and areas of future growth and development is the cornerstone of increased differentiation. The notion of a comprehensive agreement as suggested by Weingarten and Deller (2010) is well accepted by Ontario universities (Council of Ontario Universities, 2010). However, COU opposes the categorization of institutions that would arbitrarily limit institutional aspirations: "The approach to differentiation should enable innovation and allow universities to develop in response to their students, communities and competitors across the globe"

When it comes to the negotiation of multi-year mandate agreements and the introduction of new programs, OCUFA “rejects in principle any attempts by the Government of Ontario to interfere with academic planning and the operation of existing programs. Our current institutional and program mix has evolved organically with the needs of students and communities in mind” (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 2012, p. 6). Furthermore, when it comes to the responsibility to negotiate any new mandate agreements, OCUFA is “concerned that a blue ribbon panel would not have a significantly robust mandate to conduct such a consultation. Similarly, HEQCO has an abysmal record of sector consultation, and would be an inappropriate body for developing new mandate agreements” (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 2012, p. 6). The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) is a non-profit organization that represents the interests of university faculty in Ontario. It has been a vocal critic of the government's proposed changes to the higher education system, particularly the introduction of a new regulatory body, the Ontario Council on University Education (OCUE). OCUFA has argued that the government's approach to higher education reform is top-down and does not involve meaningful consultation with the academic community. It has also expressed concern that the proposed changes would undermine the autonomy of universities and the quality of education. The text above is a quote from OCUFA's 2012 report, “The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations' Response to the Ontario Council on University Education's Report on the Future of Higher Education in Ontario.”

As for the issue of quality in the Ontario university sector, there currently exists no formal provincial government accreditation system, yet quality issues continue to be of interest as the government seeks to keep institutions accountable. Institutions in Ontario are expected to develop measurable program outcomes consistent with Ontario's qualification framework, but quality assessment has been left in the hands of universities. HEQCO is also interested in developing broad outcome standards that could be used in

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