



Post Secondary Education in Canada

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11 February 2010

Put a frog in boiling water and it jumps out immediately. Put a frog in cold water and gradually turn up the heat, and eventually it gets cooked.

In comparison to the breath taking nature of the recent economic freefall or the fearfulness of the predictions of a climate change catastrophe, questions regarding the effectiveness or sustainability our system of postsecondary education (PSE) may seem positively tame and straightforward and clearly they have taken a back seat. However, the slow but relentless transition taking place seems destined to leave us in the same place as the frog -- cooked.

In Saskatchewan, for instance, the Province has pulled funding from the First Nations University over concerns about governance at the school, including allegations of political interference from the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations. Repercussions from the provincial move have now resulted in a withdrawal of funding from the federal government due to their clear lack of mandate to pursue matters of education independently.

The federal government has also axed two prominent national education bodies, reflecting a similar attitude of strict adherence to constitutionally allocated powers and withdrawal from matters deemed provincial or local – regardless of whether or not a national interest exists. Together the moves lessen the possibility of achieving a national voice on education, just at a time when a national voice seems to be most needed.

The most recent of these was the termination of funding for the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), which since 2004 has tried to present a pan-Canadian view of Canada's patchwork of provincial education systems through national programs of data collection and analysis. Not surprisingly, in one of its final reports, the CCL suggested that Canada lacked a national standard by which to judge post-secondary education because Canadians don't understand what "quality post-secondary education" should be.

Earlier the government terminated the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (CMSF) established by the previous Liberal government. Long criticized by the provinces for its unilateral implementation, it provided grants to low-income students and researchers. It will be

replaced with a new (read non-Liberal) Conservative programme for low-income Canadians only.

Last fall many of Canada's universities and colleges were upset by a proposal from five of the country's largest universities to concentrate funding for research and graduate studies with the biggest of Canada's universities in order to make better use of public resources. Given that faculty at Canadian universities are expected to be both researchers and teachers, it was felt that such a diversion of public monies to the already large institutions would weaken the quality of education for the majority of students who attend Canada's many smaller universities and colleges. Some universities, like those in Atlantic Canada, felt that their entire region could be shut out of graduate studies if research dollars were not more evenly spent.

All of this of course is taking place on the background of a precarious economic recovery that is having important effects on both revenues and expenditures in the postsecondary sector, according to a recent report by the Educational Policy Institute¹.

The report, entitled *On the Brink*, warns that post-secondary education in Canada is about to lose significant ground in terms of universal access and affordability together with its pursuit of excellence. The report identifies four major concerns:

- "The collapse in equities affects institutions' endowments and pension liabilities thus reducing income and increasing expenditure in the short-term.
- Two or three years out, significant cuts in government operating grants to institutions can be expected as governments try to bring budgets out of deficit which, in turn, will result in a number of challenging financial years ahead for universities and colleges.
- The worsening of labour market conditions will affect student income and cause student aid budgets [and student debt] to balloon.
- The real-economy recession will create new patterns of post-secondary attendance (rising college and graduate school enrolment; falling apprenticeship registrations) which will both raise institutional costs."

Consequently PSE institutions will be faced with rising costs and shrinking budgets. They will "need help in the short-term to reduce their cost-base and diversify their revenues", according to the EPI. Without it postsecondary institutions are likely to see:

- Hiring freezes for full time staff;
- An increased use of part time and sessional staff, which already dominates baccalaureate education;
- Larger class sizes;
- Reductions in graduate scholarships;
- Cuts to library spending; and
- Deferred maintenance on buildings and equipment.

That's not all, however. The recent recession's impact will only be the opening salvo in a longer term squeeze on PSE institutions, because of the broader socio-economic shifts that will accompany the retirement of a large cadre of baby boomers – a shift that will further tighten government budgets, budgets that are in hock for at least a decade as result of spending their way out of the recession.

Proportionally, fewer fulltime workers will be paying taxes and more retired people will be claiming higher health care and pension benefits, a combination that is very likely to constrain governments from re-investing in post-secondary education. Education may well become a second tier priority. In fact, the EPI suggests that we are now entering an “era of permanently declining per-student revenues”.

Postsecondary education has become what Rittel and Webber referred to as a ‘wicked problem’ⁱⁱ, as there is no clear understanding of the nature of the PSE problem, how its contributing factors all fit together, or even the end state that PSE should deliver to us. Nor is there a clear understanding of the means by which PSE can deliver what we might want. Both the problem and its potential solution are constantly evolving and consequently both means and ends must be learned simultaneously.

This is ultimately and ironically the challenge of Canada’s post secondary institutions – how to shift them and the network that they collectively comprise into a learning system.

How does one do that? How do you entice or compel organizations which by nature are competitive in their pursuit of public and private resources? How do you align their individual organizational interests with those of students, communities and Canadian society as a whole? How do you encourage their cooperation to achieve a greater collective benefit while discouraging the self-interested, rational action and the social traps that that type of behaviour may produce?

The recent Ontario report, *Academic Transformation*ⁱⁱⁱ by Clark et al., is clear in its assessment that the combined PSE focus on accessibility, national productivity, limited resources and quality education is fundamentally “not sustainable”. Paquet, in his treatment of the Ontario situation as a governance failure^{iv}, suggests that to accommodate the diversity of expectations regarding post secondary education, governments must let go of their adherence to a formulaic delivery model – ie. all universities are the same, all colleges are the same – in favour of a more variegated and localized system that is capable of making best use of local advantages of resources, talent, needs, and knowledge. What both say must ultimately give way, is the concept of autonomy for PSE institutions in favour of “government action to ensure appropriate capacity, structures and processes”.

While the governments of BC and Alberta seem to be making small steps towards fostering the requisite variety in PSE, Ontario and the other provinces remain securely in the thrall of that bureaucratic mindset that mistakenly presumes universal access and equality of inputs are the same as the equity of outcomes – the latter being so much harder to regulate. Yet even granting the progress in BC and Alberta, is the solution of PSE reform simply a matter of finding the ‘right’ leadership to see the wisdom of additional intervention in PSE, and the willingness to impose a redesign of the system on recalcitrant institutions? In my mind, that puts a lot of faith in government to do the right thing, something the vast majority of Canadians seem to be lacking these days^v.

As it is, there is no national public strategy around publicly funded education and, as the CCL has reported, no clear definition of what quality education is or how it should serve the public interest. The voices and interests of students, citizens and communities remain peripheral to the focus of policy formation which itself remains dominated by budgetary concerns, ideology and the educational flavour of the month. Where stakeholders are involved, they have been encouraged to act as advocates rather than as contributors to a shared solution, the better for governments to be seen negotiating tradeoffs in a zero sum game rather than in promoting stakeholder learning, local ownership and synergistic outcomes.

I would suggest that confidence among PSE leaders that governments can make the right choices in this regard is not high, to say the least. Political agendas are purely political and dominated by political positioning. They are not about solving problems, educational or otherwise. Political elites no longer speak out for public interest in education but for the narrow interests that elect them. The public sector, obsessed as it is with top-down consultation and the manipulation of public opinion, demonstrates little capacity to authentically engage people and institutions across diverse and often competing interests. Even when governments are seen to act, it is generally for the short term. And unless you are one of the handful of Canadians who believe in government infallibility, the general perception is that governments are incapable of continuous learning or even to recognize honest mistakes, making the possibility of incremental progress on PSE almost unrealizable.

Our traditional system of Westminster democracy has proven to be inadequate for the type of complex challenge represented by reform in the PSE sector. Due to its adversarial nature, governments refuse to establish priorities or to make choices for fear of providing hard targets for the opposition. In addition, the stewardship role of public servants, long seen as the last bastion for the protection of the public's interest, is increasingly being eroded and the provision of service to citizens is rarely a priority. Said one college executive recently, "I have never heard in any discussion among public servants the idea that citizen interests should be foremost". Instead, careerism has become the predominant public sector ethos.

While many people in big governmental bureaucracies may claim to be in control, especially at election time, there is no one who is really in charge^{vi}. And if no one is in charge, who is it then that can impose systemic change on PSE in a way that can make the best use of resources to pursue the shared goals of society? It would seem that even though Clark et al. have accurately identified the key problems in the PSE sector and even the necessary reforms, their reliance on governments to provide the vital leadership seems a bit of wishful thinking.

However, the corollary of the "no one is in charge" view is that everyone is. Let me say this again to let it sink in. If nobody is in charge of the PSE sector – that is, not politicians, ministry bureaucrats, college and university presidents, faculty, business nor community groups – then they all are. Since they are all contributing in some way or other to the problem of the status quo, they can all begin to contribute to a solution. To rephrase a popular slogan from the 60s, "if you're not part of the problem, then how can you expect to be part of the solution". This means a solution, if it is to be found, can begin with any of them. They don't have to wait for someone else to fix things for them. All they have to do is start.

As simple as this sounds, starting begins with a conversation. Given that a community fundamentally takes its shape from the conversations that take place within it among its citizens and residents^{vii}, if you want to change any aspect of a community you need to change the nature of those conversations. The critical question for PSE reform, therefore, lies in the ability to foster an authentic dialogue across many communities on the role, value and nature of quality education.

In this regard PSE institutions have a distinct, initial advantage over governments, businesses and even not-for-profits because they retain significantly higher levels of social trust. They are more readily accepted as neutral brokers and as social conveners. But most importantly, it is in their very nature. Just as water wets, PSE institutions are places where ideas may be discussed, debated, challenged, and even turned on their head.

So while Clark et al may be right in assuming that post secondary institutions will not change of themselves, given the incentives of the system and the very intense competition for resources, they may very well be in a position to foster the necessary dialogue to shift conversations to a level where supportive governmental action can then become possible.

That process must of necessity be a collaborative one, one that inspires joint ownership and shared possibility. It must also be able to envision a future for PSE institutions that they, students, parents and communities would want to live into. And with that process governments would have no option but provide support for PSE reform for fear of losing their own legitimacy.

As one provincial Deputy Minister commented to me, “What holds us back as a society are the people at the margins – the poor, the uneducated or illiterate, the people with ill health. If we can develop local solutions that are more effective and cheaper at reaching those on the margins our society will benefit immensely.” But my sense is that responsibility for that challenge rests primarily with PSE institutions and their ability to catalyze the conversations that can reshape what we think is possible.

This week Canada is open to the world as host of the 2010 Winter Olympics. For the next few weeks we will be inundated with the experiences of those who have pursued excellence to its limits. It is an attitude we urgently need among all our post secondary institutions. Bronze is not good enough in today’s world. We need to go for the Gold!

ⁱ Alex Usher and Ryan Dunn, *On the Brink: How the recession of 2009 will affect post-secondary education*, Educational Policy Institute – Canada, February 2009

ⁱⁱ Rittel, Horst, and Melvin Webber; "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," pp. 155-169, *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 4, Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, Inc., Amsterdam, 1973.

ⁱⁱⁱ Clark Ian D., Moran, Greg, Skolnik, Michael L., Trick, David, “*Academic Transformation: The Forces Reshaping Higher Education in Ontario*” McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal/Kingston, 2009

^{iv} Paquet, Gilles, “Ontario Higher Education as Governance Failure”, *Optimum Online*, March 2010

^v EKOS Research, *Trust in Government*, 2008

^{vi} Cleveland, Harlan, *Nobody in Charge*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2002

^{vii} Block, Peter. *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, 2008