

Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

Since the 1960s, enrolment in postsecondary education in Ontario has expanded dramatically. This was partly due to the advent of the colleges - currently with some 190 campuses blanketing the province - which greatly facilitated hitherto unavailable community based accessibility. But it was also enabled by the incorporation of several new universities, as well as exponential growth in the established institutions. This steady growth took another jump early in this century through a large influx of capital monies made available by the province to provide more space to accommodate the seemingly one-time blip of the "double cohort", a move which many felt would presumably provide adequate space for the foreseeable future as well. Yet by 2007, it became clear that Ontario, particularly in the GTA, faced more demographic growth than forecast, and constantly increasing participation rates, with the net result that a serious shortage of university places still existed. This factor was compounded by the concomitant difficulty of producing enough new faculty fast enough to replace retirees, let alone to staff additional growth. Thus there remains a considerable pressure on government and the institutions to minimize any shortfalls as regards both faculty quotas and student spaces.

In that context, it might be an auspicious time to undertake a comprehensive structural review of how postsecondary education, from college to doctoral levels, is presently delivered, so as to develop cost-effective, user-friendly, institutionally-based scenarios to surmount these emerging challenges successfully.

Moreover, this suggestion becomes even more urgent if the Government of Ontario wishes to fulfil expectations of remaining a vital player in the knowledge society of the emergent global economy, and of having in place the appropriate postsecondary infrastructure to guarantee this outcome. Certainly, it is this writer's view that it is by no means a given that the present offerings of Ontario's system, without considerable adjustment, will be adequate to prepare our next generations appropriately. To give one example, the baccalaureate degree increasingly is becoming the point of entry for the sophisticated jobs of tomorrow, yet a large percentage of Ontario's population, simply by going to college, have been and continue to be generally excluded from that avenue. At the very least, then, the complete analysis of societal needs must be matched against postsecondary outputs, with a view to seeking solutions which demonstrate nimble implementation of creative, non-traditional policy initiatives, targeted resources to maximize deliverables, and improved cooperation between and among the province, colleges and universities, so as to meet optimally the demands of the new reality.

Any readjustment will not be easy. Not only do existing institutions view this matter as not being their primary responsibility to resolve, but more important, the academic solitude between the two tracks of postsecondary education, which espouse differing mandates, values, academic standards and outputs, have become entrenched over the years. And there exists a wide divide in the common ground necessary to bring about coordinated systemic change. In this bifurcated system, flexible, innovative and integrated initiatives have been difficult to get on the agenda, let alone to activate successfully. No specific blame should be attributed to this predicament. The historic and fundamental academic dichotomy between the colleges and the universities was, in fact, created deliberately at the time the CAAT system was introduced. With laudable insight which would address the needs of the post-war industrial economy and its insatiable demand for trained workers to feed the mid-level infrastructure of contemporary enterprise, Ontario designed the CAATs to provide postsecondary (applied) experience for the "less academic" graduates of the grade 12 curriculum. Universities would continue to educate the growing professional and managerial classes, and would admit graduates only from the more academically rigorous grade 13. It is true that in recent years some academic students have chosen college as a first choice, a development which has blurred the traditional demarcation somewhat, but in general the university "fire wall" remains in place. Indeed, the recent elimination of grade 13 has actually

exacerbated the "divide" because now the vast majority of high school students, now essentially taking the same curriculum, consider themselves university bound.

A subset of this trend is that arts degree programs, not science and technology, are heavily enrolled, which in turn contribute to a rush of graduates seeking "marketable" skills by re-enrolling at a college in a fast track program designed for university graduates only; (Humber alone offers some thirty-eight of these). This movement, whereby many students who have already received four years of university education at public expense receive another year at college, also impedes the entry of others who might wish a college education, but who are denied access due to a lack of space and/or appropriate programming. This trend certainly does not help to resolve the looming issue of too many applicants for the number of seats available.

This bifurcation of postsecondary avenues, (important to note virtually unique in North America), resulted in part from the strong university resistance to the establishment of the college system. The universities wished to protect, and have successfully done so to this day, their monopoly vis-à-vis the granting of degrees and the funding levels which go with that right. Hence, even after governmental legislation providing for colleges to offer degrees, a process which included a comprehensive vetting by the Quality Assessment Board, the universities continued to argue that "applied degrees" were not "real" degrees and thus would not be eligible for potential admission to graduate schools (fortunately there have been some modest breakthroughs in this regard). In addition, they have always been able to successfully stifle most formal, flexible, articulated routes to advanced university standing for transfers from colleges, (again, unique in North America). In short, Ontario has been deprived of the flexibility and cost benefits enjoyed by the fully-articulated programming of postsecondary systems in the United States, Quebec, British Columbia and Alberta. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that students overwhelmingly seek university places to maximize their personal mobility, lifetime earning potential, etc., as opposed to being forced to make binding (and often limiting) career choices by choosing college in the first instance. (Since 2003 of the 86,000 increase in full-time, postsecondary enrolment, some 80,000 have attended university). And who can blame them for making this choice? This imbalance clearly contributes to the emerging skills gap, and could well hurt the economy of tomorrow. But, and just as seriously, the steady flow of arts graduates who wish to improve their employment chances by attending colleges (which are becoming known, somewhat ironically as the "finishing schools" for university graduates), might not be the best course of action in terms of optimum public policy.

With the foregoing as background, this paper will comment, primarily from a college practitioner's viewpoint, on issues relating to (a) quality, (b) inter-institutional relations and (c) overall system capacity in a context of enhancing accessibility and demand in ways that are affordable to both students and government.

Quality

Turning first to quality, one can state that the track record of the colleges in comprehensively serving their communities and constituencies, and in providing well-educated/ trained graduates who have contributed to the successful productivity of the Ontario economy since 1970, has generally been very good. But it could be better. In that respect, several factors have either acted as a drag on the system and/or delude practitioners/ boards/ government into believing that quality is of such a high level that no radical upgrading need be undertaken. In general terms, the issue of chronic under funding is well known by everyone associated with the system. What is less often discussed is that this factor greatly limits the colleges' ability to carry out rapid, targeted curriculum review and/or program change. Unlike the universities, which do not feel the pressure of preparing graduates specifically for the job market, the *raison d'être* of the colleges is precisely that. Yet addressing emerging job trends and adjusting enrolments/programs and staffing accordingly are difficult actions to carry out in an under funded environment. And when a college's very survival as a viable organization is at stake, admitting students into the college to gain the tuition and government grants takes precedence over optimising job placement for graduates by altering program and faculty allocations.

Another over-riding issue is the hubris which results from the college system being called, often by provincial politicians, as the "best in the world". (Based on what benchmarked, empirical basis of data?) Moreover, artificially inflated Key Performance Indicator (KPI) scores, and healthy job placement results over the last few years, have created a false sense of security regarding prospects in the unknown but clearly different and more competitive world of tomorrow. While having some basic value as regards "satisfaction", (not particularly relevant for those unclear about where the Canadian economy is heading), they serve several deleterious purposes which are not helpful as institutions struggle to cope with their myriad and largely insoluble problems. In fact, a cynic might suggest that they primarily exist to satisfy the politicians' desire to demonstrate accountability to the electors in the spending of public monies.

Analysed in terms of substance, however, it is a stretch to conclude that the quality of programmatic output has been enhanced by the introduction of KPIs. Consider the following. Generally, the scores are too high (allowing every college to brag that they are best in something), and lack any reliable, quantifiable data which could allow any serious analysis of quality criteria or institution to institution comparisons. Worse, some of the indicators, (e.g., student satisfaction), can be manipulated. Also, students/graduates/employers respond to questionnaires voluntarily and no distinction is made as regards matching job placement, full time or part time, to field of graduation. Nor have KPIs weighed retention, graduation or survey response rates in the data analysis. Finally, it is not surprising that small institutions, with definable geographical catch basins, far fewer students, and direct linkages to a small number of major employers, outperform the larger colleges with highly diverse student bodies and more complex programming.

In short, despite the fact that any direct feedback from stakeholders can provide an important source of input to overall measurements of quality, the validity of presently utilized methodologies (and also, presumably, quality of assessment per se) remains largely in the eye of the beholder. Governmental and/or institutional pronouncements regarding quality, absent truly empirically based documentation, may be helpful for branding and public relations efforts, but because they are not benchmarked against anything as a common denominator, will always be considered suspect by those engaged in any serious measurement and assessment of quality. Only an objective system of accreditation and/or external review carried out program by program, using globally recognized benchmarks and peer review can provide a credible and effective format for quality control and enhancement. Only then can recommendations for necessary change be made, as they are doing in the United States and here in Canada in such fields as nursing, design and engineering technology.

Beyond the above, other factors that directly impact institutional quality and responses to many questions need to be clarified. To present a few: what is the standardized definition of quality? Without any precise statement, it can mean different things depending on who is defining it and for whom. For example, elitism, generally taken to suggest high academic achievement and subsequent career success, is not the same as categorical excellence in everything being delivered, and is certainly not any useful criterion for the colleges who are often dealing with academically under-prepared students. In the latter context, quality can better be defined as the institution/program increasing learning optimally. Other questions follow. Do high end academic students need fewer support systems than those not academically/or financially advantaged? Does finding paid work in an area of expertise related to academic studies matter? Should institutions be measured against precise objectives stated a priori in their strategic business plan? What is institutional accountability? And what value is placed on the differentiation of the institutions?

From another vantage point, how important faculty are in influencing the quality equation remains moot, particularly when faculty are being hired in large numbers due to retirements, and, in some cases, enrolment growth. The generally accepted response is that they are crucial. Yet attracting outstanding college teachers has long been difficult due to a non-competitive reward

system in many fields and the fact that teaching in the twenty-first century is vastly more challenging and complicated than even one generation ago. Today, beyond the expected knowledge of curriculum currency, faculty are expected to be adept at utilising sophisticated educational technology, to understand and be personally comfortable with interactions in widespread cultural, religious and social diversity, and to adapt to the differing learning patterns for students of all ages and academic backgrounds (e.g., is English a first language, or is it even spoken at home?) In short, to proact in shifting the focus from working in a teaching institution to one which is a learning organization where for every student in every course two fundamental questions must be answered; (a) What has been learned, and (b) how do we know? If we are to be serious about quality enhancement, the institutions, helped by government incentives, must provide ongoing assistance for professional development for all teachers, as well as signing bonuses or the like to attract outstanding hires in areas of acute importance to the future socio-economic needs of Ontario. Simply put, attention to the importance of the faculty role in matters of quality cannot be underestimated, and that the KPIs address this most peripherally.

Finally, in colleges particularly, there has long existed a serious leadership vacuum, but the KPIs are silent on this issue also. It has become most difficult to attract competent, experienced people into senior academic administrative roles. Increasingly senior (academic) positions are being filled by people external to education who often have little experience in, or an understanding of fundamental educational issues such as learning theory. Educational institutions are different from the private sector in that they are not bottom line oriented, nor can they have "a good year" by maximizing returns to the shareholders. In service leadership must become a priority and flexible, and tailor made graduate level programming must be expanded to address this issue if we are to continue to improve the quality performance of the colleges over the long term.

Inter-Institutional Relations

Colleges in Ontario have been allowed to develop programs and curricula unique to themselves which, in many ways, have encouraged innovative and unique programming on a broad scale. This trend is clearly unlike that of Quebec where programs and curricula for a CEGEP are governed by a strictly centralized and standardized format controlled by the Ministry. The corollary is that transfer of credit there is easy to effect and curriculum credit articulation with all universities has long been coordinated. Conversely, the wide-ranging autonomy given by the Ontario government to the institutions has meant that coordinated and flexible student mobility and transfer of credits have been difficult to monitor and facilitate. Indeed, except in such generic programs as general business, some colleges, (Humber for one), having fought to achieve a modicum of academic status, have been reluctant to facilitate transfer if it means weakening requirements of its own curriculum, and grading. Yet transfer students naturally resent having to make up courses, or having courses, already completed, refused by an institution that is part of the same system. This factor has produced considerable annoyance in politicians and students who do not care for self-proclaimed institutional declarations of superiority regarding curriculum/quality over other institutions, particularly when they appear simply as impediments to individuals wishing to pursue a seamless pathway to achieve their chosen goals in postsecondary education.

If this has been the case between colleges, it has had an even greater impact on the transition of college students to universities. While it is not unfair to suggest that the universities fundamentally do not respect the academic standards of the colleges and do not need to count on transfer students to fulfill their own enrolment quotas (unlike the United States, and especially Quebec, where a student cannot go from secondary school to university without two years of CEGEP) they make a telling point in observing that if the colleges cannot bring about effective transfer arrangements amongst themselves, why should the universities work to accommodate colleges? Besides, the case can be made quite legitimately that the universities are overcrowded and under-funded too and, thus, unable to accommodate many transfer students in any case.

Recently, some potential for moving this file forward has been apparent. The colleges have begun to get their transfer act together, with more coordinated curriculum and minimum standards. Universities in areas of declining population/enrolment have understandably become more eager to facilitate flexible transfer arrangements. And, an infusion of \$3m. given to the CUCC by the MTCU to facilitate joint programming, increased cooperation between colleges and universities, has certainly piqued interest; it remains to be seen how successfully these funded pilot projects can be both sustained and replicated at other institutions.

While these developments can promote new and viable pathways which can help to circumvent entrenched attitudes, the institutions have been involved in differentiated ways, which also contribute to a blurring of traditional lines, and a possibly new structure for the future. For example, some colleges have moved upscale academically, while others cater to access and the under prepared; some universities stress graduate programs and research, with others primarily remaining undergraduate institutions. In 2007, it can be argued that there are not two but four types of institutions functioning in public postsecondary education in Ontario, as follows:

1. Community and regionally based colleges, which by dint of scarce human and financial resources, are limited in their selection of programs, particularly at the three-year and baccalaureate levels.
2. Comprehensive, full service colleges, which attract students from well beyond their prescribed geographical boundaries by offering a wide array of (unique) programs; these colleges, located generally in urban areas offer broad programming at all levels from apprenticeship upwards and a larger percentage of three-year, post diploma offerings, and, in a very few cases, baccalaureate programming; some have already changed designation from colleges to institutes of technology and advanced learning (ITAL) with a mandate to offer up to fifteen per cent of programming in baccalaureate studies.
3. Similar to the classification system devised by Maclean's, several of the universities are primary undergraduate (teaching) institutions with modest graduate studies and research capabilities.
4. The rest of the universities (about ten) tend to have larger enrolments and varying and broad offerings at the graduate level, and considerable research capacity, although some, such as the University of Toronto, clearly possess more of the latter than do others.

Moreover, although the government still classifies all postsecondary institutions as either part of the college or university systems, governmental responses to chronic problems (e.g., operating deficits, special allowances for small, rural, the North, capital allocations, etc.), suggest that this new paradigm has de facto gained traction. HEQCO then, for its part, might wish to consider going one step further and recommend the establishment of one coordinated/integrated system of postsecondary education for Ontario. This is not a novel idea as it simply follows models successfully operating in such major jurisdictions as California, New York, Florida and Texas, and, to a lesser extent, Alberta and British Columbia. Such a system can still recognize differences of mandate, programming, funding etc., but has the potential to bring critical direction and coordination to such important matters as transfer of credit, program accreditation and system-wide planning, particularly as regards such cost intensive issues as campus expansion, utilization of existing space, etc. Those who wish to maintain the separate integrity of (essentially two-year) colleges and (four-year) universities need look no further than the State of New York, to observe that the colleges do, in fact, act as one unit on matters of unique concern, as do the universities, but in the final analysis there is no artificial and dichotomous divide between two systems as has been the case in Ontario.

Such a structural move would help break down the rigid barriers, not to say confusion or frustration, which presently are faced by Ontario's students who all institutions, assisted by considerable public monies, purport to serve. One obvious example is the issue of coordinating

admissions data which, in addition to the fact that the students presently must pay separately for the privilege of applying to both colleges and universities, universities refuse to share with OCAS, the college application system. Another is the reluctance of universities to recognize the degrees offered at some colleges, even though each degree has been vetted by PEQAB using university examiners, overcome rigorous criteria on the way to approval, and undergone extensive follow-up evaluations.

In one coordinated system, retrogressive tactics by those not charged with, or accountable for, the development and effective implementation of public policy, can be monitored and even curtailed. It is true that for some issues, like degree granting, curriculum, faculty credentials, etc., the colleges must do their part in regulating themselves to conform to acceptable degree standards. But it also follows that recalcitrant universities should not be allowed to block realistic progress towards improving the total postsecondary system for the common good. Conversely, for those who think that such a transition is not necessary, what guarantees can they provide that the status quo can provide the requisite output of graduates at a cost that the tax payer can indefinitely support? To refute the argument that such a smooth transition is not do-able, one need only point to the introduction of the CEGEP system in Quebec, whereby the universities lost their first two years and in one political action became upper division institutions. While there was short term disruption, most educators and observers now deem the move to have been an unqualified success. What is proposed for Ontario constitutes far less upheaval because the institutions are already in place, and none would have to alter its fundamental mandate or programmatic offerings.

System capacity

Although the suggestion for one integrated system for postsecondary education is just one of an array of possible courses for future realignment, its creation certainly has the potential to facilitate a coordinated, cost-effective redressment of capacity issues which suddenly are back on the agenda. For starters, institutional planning (and growth) has for too long been an ad hoc activity. Moreover, the institutional tail has tended to wag the governmental dog, with long term enrolment decisions, all too often being taken as "one offs" rather than as part of any concentrated, well thought out enrolment management plan for the entire province. While some (in government) may disagree with that somewhat glib analysis, it is hard to refute the many examples which speak to this. Capital grants for the double cohort were often based on factors not directly related to where the students would most likely end up enrolling. As a result, while many institutions accepted governmental largesse, some neither reached their projected enrolment targets nor raised the agreed to one-third portion which represented their commitment as one of the conditions of receiving two thirds from government. Other institutions virtually opted out with Queens' decision to give lip service to double cohort growth being one prime example. More recently, institutions have activated plans to address their own (survival) needs, although they usually expected capital monies from government to follow. Examples of this trend abound, notably Nipissing (in Brantford), Lakehead (in Orillia), UOIT (in Durham), Humber (in Orangeville), McMaster (in Burlington). Again, the political origins of UOIT and the subsequent designation of several colleges as ITALs, are also examples of adhocism and institutional opportunism. Finally, the "collaborative" nursing programs, which purport to be an effective way to deliver degrees using the resources of both colleges and universities, have been influenced by the ability of the universities to dictate terms of academic and financial control which, in turn, have pushed up the cost of operation because the government was not in position to consider alternative options.

The implications of these observations suggest that the government needs to become a more active player in Ontario-wide planning, and two issues on the current agenda present opportunities to do just that. The first is the declining population/enrolment in the North, and, to a lesser extent, some of the small institutions around the periphery of the cities. The second is the looming shortfall of potentially 40,000 university places over the next two decades in the GTA. Whilst, to a degree, these two issues are mutually exclusive, creative solutions can be explored/implemented which can bridge the two to overall public benefit. For example, ways can

be found to allow small institutions to survive by subsidizing students from the GTA, who are prepared to study in the North; (this would hardly break new ground, although policy to date has tended to prop up institutions per se, not the students). Other possibilities could include the twinning of institutions, Northern institutions primarily offering generic programming and feeding upper level programs at institutions in the "South", and subsidizing students from the North to attend compressed summer sessions, delivered either at other GTA institutions, or delivered by faculty from larger institutions on Northern campuses. To date, this type of flexibility has rarely been discussed, let alone enacted, yet is it unreasonable to consider allowing visiting faculty at one institution to deliver courses at another, particularly if the objective ending is to facilitate students' ability to receive education as flexibly as possible? (There are, in fact, some viable examples of how this can work, with McMaster at Conestoga and Trent at Durham.)

The magnitude of the second issue is such that there can be no single, overarching solution. The three major universities in Toronto cannot, and will not, solve this enrolment pressure alone and all institutions in the area (and even beyond), particularly those with excess capacity, must play some part in any prescriptive actions. Admittedly, for the colleges to play any significant role in solving the shortfall in baccalaureate places, will call for adjustments to admissions, standards, curriculum, faculty credentials, etc., but that is a solution which is far more pragmatic than expecting the University of Toronto to take, say 15,000 more undergraduates, particularly when their emphasis should be more on graduate studies and research. (Compare Harvard's undergraduate and graduate student enrolment numbers for an interesting juxtaposition of this issue.) And how many more undergraduates can York and Ryerson each take and still remain quality institutions which provide a personalized and effective baccalaureate experience?

In that context, only coordinated and diffuse schemata can realistically address the issue of creating up to 40,000 new undergraduate seats, one which might include the following options:

1. GTA colleges formalize articulated transfer programs with universities in GTA and beyond, e.g., Guelph, McMaster.
2. More joint four-year programs, e.g., Guelph-Humber, need to be established to minimize the demand for college seats presently occupied by graduates of universities.
3. Establish a university similar to UOIT west, physically located in the area presently underserved by baccalaureate education (Halton Hills, Vaughan, Newmarket) specializing in unique undergraduate programs and primarily within commuting distance for students. This could be a stand alone institution of, say, 10,000 students over four years, or a joint project with one or more of the existing universities. (For reasons argued above, however, a stand alone institution seems preferable to a separate campus of an existing university.)
4. Change the status of one or more ITALs to full polytechnic, with a concomitant growth in baccalaureate programs.
5. Invite other Canadian universities having excess capacity (e.g., UNB, Bishops, Acadia, Mount Allison) to accept more Ontario students, with the Ontario government paying the grant normally provided by the home province, and subsidising tuition as an enticement to students to leave the GTA. (This approach in the short term might be more financially attractive than might at first appear).
6. Other Ontario universities could be invited to deliver programs in the GTA, similar to the plethora of MBA programs today. Unlike the suggestion in 5 above, however, space and quality of life concerns might make this unfeasible.

7. Subsidize GTA universities and students to attend full-time summer sessions.
8. Open Ontario's doors to private university competition (Phoenix), a step which might put pressure on the monopoly presently enjoyed by the universities, but which nonetheless would provide more choice for students and help with the capacity issue at the same time.

While the foregoing might suggest a seemingly disjointed approach to the emerging enrolment issue, the serious nature of this issue dictates that any viable solutions utilize multiple options.

In addition, the current and rapid turnover of faculty will call for targeted measures to ensure there are enough adequately prepared faculty to take on this monumental task. Scholarships/stipends etc., will be required to attract candidates in areas of shortage – this has already been done for nursing so it would not be a stretch – with the proviso that financial award recipients must agree to stay in academia for a minimum duration. Similarly, there must be strategies developed to prepare a new cadre of postsecondary leaders – especially in the colleges – through flexible graduate programs, executive leadership/management programs, etc. It is important that leaders in colleges offering degrees hold advanced credentials from respected graduate schools, particularly if the colleges expect to become accepted partners with the universities in baccalaureate education.

It is only by levelling the playing field in crucial areas that the universities will agree to cooperate and seek innovative solutions, and it is incumbent upon the colleges to understand this. Yet, the onus is not just on the colleges. In the final analysis, success can only come from the cooperation and professional attitudes of the institutional leaders of both sectors. The future of postsecondary education in Ontario and the GTA demands nothing less.