

Current Trends and Recurrent Themes in Canadian Higher Education

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Abstract

The COVID-19 global pandemic has resulted in significant challenges and disruptions for higher education institutions around the world. In Canada, the pandemic has created new financial pressures that will continue to impact colleges and universities as the country focuses on returning to some semblance of normality in 2021. Owing to the constitutional delegation of authority for the provision of education to its individual provinces, Canada's higher education sector is comprised of a number of individual provincial systems with their own distinctive features. As a result, the policy choices affecting higher education at any time, prior to, during, or following the pandemic, highlight differences in priorities, values, and goals amongst the provinces. One aspect of higher education that the sector as a whole shares in common is the continuing influence of market-driven and commercially-oriented perspectives on the sector and the consequent priorities for its institutions. This paper reviews the contemporary conflict between liberal-humanist and economic-utilitarian objectives for Canadian higher education and provides insight into how the dominating influence of economic-utilitarian aims are reflected in recent higher education policy choices and higher education trends across the country.

1. Introduction

In a previous article [1], I explored some of the dominant policy trends which emerged in Canada's higher education sector with the dawn of the 21st century. Combined, these trends, including privatization, marketization, emphasis on quality assurance, and increased internationalization, demonstrated the pervasive and growing influence that economic globalization has had on the sector since about the mid-1970s. The continuing commercialization of higher education and the prioritization of private interests over public ones have fostered an increasingly utilitarian, market-oriented ideological outlook on the *raison d'être* of higher education. Economic globalization, with neoliberalism as its central, hegemonic doctrine, has contributed to a relative decline in the influence of liberal-humanist academic aims in favour of an orientation which is of a more economic-utilitarian persuasion.

In this paper, the continuing consequences of the shift toward the economic-utilitarian dimension of higher education are explored in the context of more recent issues and developments in Canadian higher education. These include the furtherance of marketization and corporatization, stagnant and declining public funding for institutions of higher learning, the reemergence of performance funding as a governmental priority, challenges to internationalization (i.e., international student recruitment as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, and a new focus on the development and delivery of microcredentials by colleges and universities.

2. Liberal humanism vs economic utilitarianism

Higher education has to some extent always served both economic and non-economic objectives, but a more globalized world has increased the tension between objectives of a liberal-humanist nature and those which are more economic-utilitarian [1]. Liberal-humanist objectives recognize the benefits of higher and advanced learning for the sake of the learning itself and its contribution to the growth, development, and fulfillment of both the individual and the collective benefit of society. This outlook values the pursuit of higher education more so for its moral, civic, cultural, and broader intellectual purposes. This includes the full development of the human personality beyond opportunities for personal advancement to the promotion of understanding, tolerance, friendship, and community. These objectives encompass education for citizenship, which promotes and strengthens equality, human rights, and fundamental freedoms.

As free market forces around the world have become a dominating influence with more liberalized trade, technological advances, and increased labour mobility, the consequent cultural, ideological, political, and social changes have served to place a higher value on higher education for its critical role in economic productivity, growth, and prosperity. While liberal-humanist objectives may be regarded as complementary or important for the continuation of the academic traditions of institutions of higher learning, economic-utilitarianism emphasizes training and vocationalism which is more oriented toward labor market development for the purpose of

enhancing global economic competitiveness. In addition to workforce development to provide human capital to sufficiently meet the changing demands of businesses and industries, the economic-utilitarian discourse also places a high value on higher education as a domestic economic investment because knowledge production and innovation through research is viewed as critical to gaining a competitive advantage and succeeding in the exceedingly competitive globalized marketplace [1].

3. Marketizing and corporatizing the system

Accelerated globalization towards the end of the 20th Century raised a continuing debate in higher education regarding the twin forces of marketization and corporatization. Increasing deregulation and alignment with corporate and commercial interests has seen higher education systems progressively restructured to operate in a more commercial fashion through the adoption of the corporate practices of private-sector enterprises [1], [2]. This has been accompanied by increasing marketization whereby traditional liberal-humanist values are steadily and incrementally supplanted by the market-based principles of competition, profit, and private-interest. With these forces, public and citizenship interests have been displaced by an emphasis on collaboration with the private sector, the promotion of commercial interests, and increased educational consumerism.

Marketization and corporatization have been facilitated by restructuring and transitioning higher education funding away from unconditional public grants to new models which include a focus on incentivizing accountability. In some cases, new funding envelopes for public institutions are designed to meet predetermined labour market-linked targets that serve government and private-sector interests as opposed to the objectives of institutions. Growing marketization and corporatization has placed increasing emphasis on the commercial value of research and private sector investment in research at public institutions while overshadowing the traditions of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and curiosity-driven research pursuits [1], [3].

4. Stagnant and declining public funding

Higher education in Canada is constitutionally the responsibility of each respective provincial government. As such, while there are similarities, each of the 10 provinces have developed relatively distinctive systems. Despite regular suggestions from interest groups that some of these provincial higher education systems have been 'chronically underfunded', overall public funding for higher

education in Canada has been remarkably stable over the past 13 years [4], [5]. Provincial authorities have carried out no fewer than two dozen evaluations of their higher education systems since 2005, with these reviews culminating in official reports on the status of and future directions for their respective systems. There are important similarities and differences between these review exercises and their outcomes; however, they have consistently urged governments to expand system capacity and improve student access to meet growing demands for spaces in college and university programs.

In the oil revenue dependent provinces of Alberta and Newfoundland and Labrador, recently completed higher education system reviews have echoed familiar themes from the economic-utilitarianism perspective while recommending more governing autonomy for higher education institutions [6], [7]. At the same time, governments in these two provinces have signaled that students should pay a far greater proportion of the direct costs of their participation in higher learning. In the western province of Alberta, recently proposed double-digit percentage increases in tuition fees have followed multi-year higher education funding reductions of more than half a billion dollars by 2022-23 [8], [9]. In the easternmost province of Newfoundland and Labrador, a widespread economic review commissioned by the fiscally challenged government recently recommended a 30% reduction in public funding for the province's college and university programs [10]. The latest funding measures in Alberta and Newfoundland and Labrador have been by far the most austere amongst the Canadian provinces in recent times, owing in part to post-oil boom economic hardships. A review of provincial budgets introduced across the country in 2021 reveals that where additional higher education funding has been announced, these initiatives amount to only modest investments which do not keep pace with rising costs due to inflation [4].

5. Performance funding debates

Funding formulas have been widely used by governments and higher education authorities to apportion funding to colleges and universities since about the mid-20th century. Performance funding formulas in higher education are most commonly combined with other types of funding formulas to provide a portion of overall institutional funds based on one or more identified outputs. These outputs may include student retention rates, rates of graduation, external research funding awarded, graduate employment, or other measureable outputs. The question of which output measures to include is debatable and often contentious, especially since the costs associated with improving on certain outputs

may far exceed the amount of performance funding made available.

It is generally agreed that performance funding is specifically designed to modify institutional behaviour in one way or another and that, like all formula funding in higher education, performance funding is not intended to nor capable of resolving issues associated with institutional underfunding [11], [12]. Analyses of performance indicators and associated performance funding initiatives in Canada and the United States have found that they may, in some instances, not actually reliably assess the outputs they are intended or purported to measure. In some cases, performance funding fails to have the impact it was originally designed to have and can lead to unintended outcomes, such as restricting access for marginalized populations or further disadvantaging institutions which were under-resourced to begin with [1], [13], [14]. For these reasons, the introduction of performance funding in Canada and elsewhere has been frequently regarded with some combination of skepticism, critique, and opposition.

Since 2019, governments in the provinces of the Alberta and Ontario have announced plans to implement performance funding models for universities. As with previous models, these plans would see a portion of public funding for universities tied to specific labour market and/or economic outcomes selected by the provincial governments. As a result of this renewed interest, the pros and cons of higher education performance-based funding models have re-emerged as a subject of debate and scrutiny.

Where they have been proposed, the imposition of performance-based funding systems have been variously decried as a thinly veiled effort to reduce university funding and an ideological attempt to reorient the core mission of universities. While the provincial governments advocating their merits have assured the public that their aims are to ensure accountability for public funds, critics alternatively regard these proposals as overly bureaucratic, coercive, and an unnecessary intrusion upon the autonomy of public universities. Critics of higher education performance funding continue to contend that the imposition of the proposed performance models will serve to further corporatize universities while unintentionally narrowing scholarship. It is further argued that where they have been adopted, such as the introduction of the Research Excellence Framework in the United Kingdom, performance funding has led to a de-emphasizing of teaching in favour of incentivized research [15], [16].

6. Internationalization challenges

International exchange has been an important feature of higher education since ancient times. However, idealized notions of wandering scholars

undertaking cross-national quests for knowledge have been supplanted by the forces of globalization and the commodification of information, knowledge, and scholarly works [1]. While increasing internationalization in higher education policy to some extent continues to serve liberal-humanist objectives, such as facilitating cultural exchange, enhancing diversity, and promoting mutual understanding, economic-utilitarian considerations are very much in the foreground of 21st century Canadian higher education. The merits of internationalization in contemporary higher education are frequently spoken of in terms of trade and investment opportunities, building expertise and attracting talented workers, and accelerating Canada's overall economic output.

Since the 1980's, Canada's higher education institutions have increasingly adopted an international orientation in their outlook. This is exemplified by intense overseas international student recruiting and marketing strategies employed by colleges and universities. Competition with other Western nations for recruitment of international students has received significant attention and analysis in recent years. Prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the number of international students enrolled at Canadian institutions was steadily on the rise [17]. At Canadian universities, international student enrolments more than tripled between the years 2008 and 2019. Over the past decade, Canada has become one of the top four higher education host countries for international students. It is surpassed in this regard only by the United States, the United Kingdom, and China [18], [19].

Recruiting international students is a top priority for Canadian institutions as they seek to generate revenues from beyond their domestic student market. In part, this approach was adopted in order to make up for reduced government grant funding as well as shortfall in tuition and fee income that are a consequence of declining domestic student enrolments. This increased dependence on international student fee revenues has been put into much sharper relief with the COVID-19 global pandemic. Since the pandemic began, newspaper headlines and higher education trade publications have revealed much public hand-wringing amongst institutional leaders over the operating revenues lost due to pandemic-related travel restrictions and associated disruptions to the international student recruitment business model [20]. And, the impact of the pandemic has been significant for colleges and universities across Canada. Perhaps most concerning, compared to 2019 figures the number of international study permit holders in Canada dropped by 34% in 2020 due to the global pandemic and a coinciding reduction in international student visa processing [21]. It is widely acknowledged that the resumption

and growth of international student attendance at Canadian institutions will be vital to their post-pandemic recovery. As Rizvi [22] has observed “much of the talk of recovery continues to valorize cross-border mobility for the purposes of commercial gain. The value of international students continues to be measured in terms of their contribution to the financial sustainability of universities, rather than in any transformative possibilities of international education” (p. 2). Evidently, the pandemic has helped to make clear that internationalization in the form of international student fee revenue has become critical to the continued dominance of the economic-utilitarian dimension of higher education.

7. Rising microcredentialism

While occupationally focused training programs of short duration, such as corporate contract training, have been a feature of Canadian higher education institutions for decades, especially in the community college sector, microcredentials have been the focus of increasing attention in recent years. Their emergence and growing recognition by institutions, employers, and interest groups are consistent with the economic-utilitarian outlook which has come to dominate discourses on the purpose of higher education since the later part of the 20th century [1].

In the absence of a universally agreed definition for them, governments, institutions, higher education accrediting authorities have sought to create frameworks to appropriately codify microcredentials. Compared to traditional higher education credentials, such as degrees and diplomas, microcredentials are frequently defined by their shorter duration and much more narrow scope [23]. Chakroun and Keevy [24] noted that microcredentials “focus on modules of learning much smaller than those covered in conventional academic awards, which often allow learners to complete the requisite work over a shorter period” (p. 10). Owing to their emergence and proliferation on digital platforms, microcredentials are frequently recognized through digital badges which are embedded with sharable metadata from the issuing institution. These digital badges, certificates, and other forms of digital credentials outline the skills and achievements acquired by the learner in the process of completing specific learning outcomes and acquiring particular skills or knowledge.

Depending on one’s point of view regarding the purpose of higher learning, microcredentials are either a key component of an effective lifelong learning system, an innovative means of providing education and essential skills for 21st Century learners, or part of a continuing plot to vocationalize and further diminish the role of traditional higher education institutions in Western society. Across Canada, as governing authorities seek to facilitate a strong period post-Covid-19 economic resurgence,

microcredentials have been increasingly embraced as a mechanism for aligning higher education programs more closely with labour market needs. For example, the province of Ontario included a \$60 million microcredential strategy in its 2020 budget. As suggested, however, while they have strong proponents microcredentials are not without detractors and some controversy. For example, Wheelahan and Moodie [25] have argued that micro-credentials “undermine principles of coherence, sequence and hierarchy in the disciplines, and they contribute to fragmenting the knowledge base of practice in the applied disciplines” and “contribute to fragmenting occupations by disaggregating components from the whole” (p. 224). Similarly, the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations [26] has argued that microcredentials serve to further commercialize higher education and “truncate the knowledge provided by university degrees and serve to de-skill students and workers—undermining their career prospects and future earnings”. While their merits will most certainly continue to be contested, microcredentials are increasingly prevalent as Canadian authorities embrace them in economic strategies to ameliorate the impacts of post-Covid-19 unemployment. For their part, leaders of higher education institutions regard them as another opportunity to fill budgetary gaps that have been further exacerbated by the pandemic-related reductions in the numbers of international student enrolments.

8. Implications

As stated at the outset of this paper, tensions between the liberal-humanist objectives of higher education and more economic-utilitarian interests have advanced to the fore of academic and public policy debates in the era of globalization. This tension shows no sign of abating. Despite occasional gestures toward de-globalization, such as Brexit or the insularity of Donald Trump’s doctrine of America First, the trade and investment liberalization and tight economic linkages of globalization remain dominant.

More than a century and a half ago, American educator Horace Mann [27] envisioned educational opportunities as “the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery” (Mann, 1868, p. 669). While access to higher education is still regarded as an important means to reduce inequality and provide citizens with opportunities for personal advancement, the values implicit in globalization and neoliberalism continue to accentuate sharing the burden of funding higher education between the private (i.e., the individual) and the public (i.e., the state). This emphasis on the private responsibility of individuals for higher education costs further demonstrates the embrace of

the values of higher education economic-utilitarianism and the continued expansion of neoliberal ideology as more liberal-humanistic goals are further eroded by commercialistic goals. At the same time, the interests of business, industry, and commerce have placed a heightened external pressure on higher education institutions to change past practices and to produce advanced education that better serves economic needs. Through direct and indirect means private and public sector interests have sought to make higher education more self-sustaining by trading reliance on public funding for the entrepreneurial pursuit of income-generating international students. Similarly, private capital is sought after through the development of more profitable, shorter-term vocational credentials that are a more attractive educational commodity for servicing private interests as compared to traditional tertiary credentials such as baccalaureate degrees.

As the Canadian economy, like others around the world, emerges from challenges of COVID-19 and institutions maneuver to overcome the problems created by the pandemic, higher education will inevitably be relied upon to help facilitate recovery. The choice between liberal-humanist values and economic-utilitarian values will be part of this process. These are choices between increased public investment and scarce financing due to cuts or increased autonomy for institutions or tighter controls over the direction of higher education. One thing is for certain, this will continue to be a competition between neoliberal sensitivities of conservative forces and the traditional academic and community aims of liberal humanism.

9. References

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