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thoughts, ideas, kudos & brickbats from heqco

it'snotacademic

Monthly Archives: October 2014

Harvey P. Weingarten – It's time to get serious about improving Canada's colleges and universities

October 15, 2014 heqco Leave a comment

A recent Globe and Mail article pointed out that Canadian universities appear to be slipping in world rankings. This is not a good thing. Higher education institutions — because of the students they teach, the research and discoveries they make, and the communities they support — are some of the most critical public institutions in Canada positioning us for a robust economy with plentiful good jobs and the quality of life and civil society Canadians want and merit.

The challenge Canada faces in higher education is best summarized in this question: How can we deliver a better education to more students with no more money?

I know that some will suggest that the solution must involve more

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government funding. But, Canada's postsecondary system already enjoys a level of public support higher than most other countries. And, the Ontario system (which represents about 40% of all higher education enrolments in Canada) has seen mounting concerns about quality at the same time that it has been receiving significant increases in government support.

Fortunately, Canada shares this same postsecondary challenge with many other countries around the globe, providing the opportunity to see what other countries are doing to improve their higher education systems. Interestingly, countries have gravitated to a small set of core strategies:

1. **Governments manage the system, and move away from micromanaging institutions.** Governments create a framework of policies, practices and incentives that identify desired public goals and that steer institutions in the system to collectively achieve these goals and to maximize the output of individual institutions. Governments shy away from policies and practices that tell universities and colleges how to achieve these goals. Rather, they leave the means to the experts, who typically are in the institutions, not in the government.
2. **Governments create clear and transparent accountability mechanisms.** Governments monitor the performance of institutions to hold them accountable and to identify areas where improvements are needed. This requires the measurement of relevant metrics and indicators that are meaningful and useful to the public, students and the institutions. Best practice is to make these data available publicly. The most effective accountability mechanisms are those that are tied to funding.
3. **Governments fund institutions on the basis of outcomes, not inputs.** This focuses attention on what matters – whether desired outcomes are being achieved. So, for example, don't fund on the basis of the number of enrolees but rather on the number that actually graduate. This strategy requires that governments be articulate about which outcomes they desire from their system: Higher enrolments? Students better prepared for jobs? More world-class institutions? More commercializable discoveries? It is okay to have more than one desired outcome. But, too many diffuse the efforts of the system and may lead to too few institutions performing at the highest levels. And, it is not required that all institutions contribute equally to all desired outcomes.
4. **Adopt a policy of differentiation.** Differentiation means that there are not the same expectations of all institutions in the system. Rather, the system is designed to allow each institution to do more of what it does best and, therefore, to make its optimal contribution to the system. So, institutions can be different in terms of the students they accept, the programs they offer, their balance between teaching and research, and how they are funded. Differentiation is the major lever available to

governments, particularly in resource constrained times, to improve quality. A differentiated system provides students with clarity of choice among a set of higher quality institutions that best serve their needs and aspirations. Coupled to a sensible transfer credit system, differentiation permits students to move seamlessly and efficiently between institutions if their needs and aspirations change.

These core strategies are interdependent. Thinking about outcomes and differentiation drive system-level thinking. Effective accountability requires clarity around desired outcomes. Differentiation drives changes to funding formulas.

Some provinces in Canada are exploiting some of these strategies. For example, BC and Alberta have a differentiated higher education system that is based on classification of universities as more or less involved in research. Ontario is beginning to pursue differentiation based on individual mandate agreements with each of its 44 institutions. In general, though, Canada lags other countries in the clarity of its discussion about outcomes, the collection of meaningful and useful data to manage higher education, its commitment to continuous improvement of the quality of its higher education sector, its willingness to hold institutions accountable for performance and the willingness to tie funding to differentiated mandates.

Canada has a very good public postsecondary system that has served the country well. We have several institutions in the Top 100 in the world. This is a good platform from which to build. We know the strategies other countries use to drive higher quality in their postsecondary systems. These other countries are moving with an urgency, speed and scale that may leave Canada in their wakes. It is time for Canada to get more serious about improving its colleges and universities and we do not need, nor do we have, 8-10 years to figure this out.

Harvey P. Weingarten is President of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

This originally appeared in the Globe and Mail.

Martin Hicks – Wrenches and scalpels

October 7, 2014 heqco 3 Comments

I was thinking about this fall's HEQCO conference "Hands on: Exploring apprenticeship and the skilled trades." We are broadening our focus to embrace pieces of the postsecondary mosaic beyond public colleges and universities, and the conference is but one manifestation. And yet, even as we do so we are aware of a trade off (pun intended): we are not likely to attract as many university colleagues to our conference this year. It feels like a reach too far across the silos. Do universities and the trades share nothing beyond the occasional story of a student straying over the fence in one direction or the other?

Then I was thinking about my daughter who is working her way through medical school. The way physician training is organized has strong parallels to apprenticeship. Perhaps the distance between the academy and the shop floor is shorter than we believe.

Apprentices train for up to five years, some of it theory and foundation in the classroom, most of it hands-on in the workplace. Medical school begins in the classroom in year one, but moves completely to hands-on practice in hospitals and in the community by year three and four (the clerkship), and remains there through the additional two to six years of residency. Apprentices are earning-learning employees. So are residents. Apprentices learn complex and critical procedures by first watching, then assisting, then leading under supervision, finally performing solo followed by evaluation. So do medical students. Both have to master – through doing and through theory – a comprehensive list of learning outcomes and pass a provincial or national exam before being licensed by their respective professional colleges.

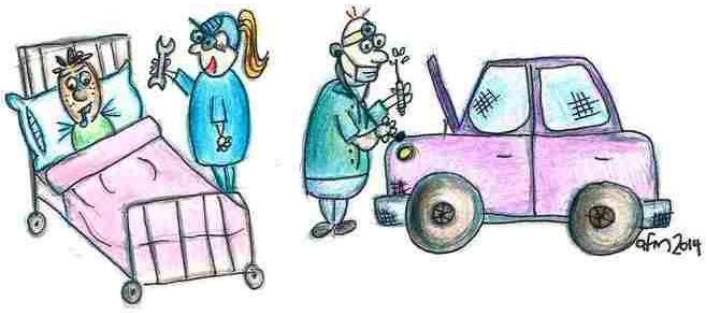
How is it that these silos have, independently, settled on the same fundamental approach to teaching-learning? Perhaps this reflects the demands we place on these seemingly disparate graduates. Consider the broad parallels between what you need and expect from your automotive service technicians and your doctors. On a good day (for you) one fixes a dent on your hood; the other removes a wart from your arm. On a bad day (for you), one replaces a worn valve in your engine's cylinder head; the other a worn valve in your heart. On a challenging day (for them) one diagnoses an intermittent electrical problem hidden in a haze of electronics, the other a rare condition signalled by sporadic symptoms you have difficulty describing. The stakes can be high: whether a botched brake job or bungled surgery, you're dead. Your performance expectations are correspondingly high.

Of course there are big differences, too, between trades and docs training. And that's the beauty of it. If someone else has evolved something fundamentally similar to what you are doing but in another arena and with significant variances in approach and execution, well then there is real potential to learn and adopt big new ideas into your world. Way more so than if you go only to

conferences of fellow technician or physician educators, who collectively explore incremental change on the margin.

Now perhaps some from the liberal arts will say “Yes that may apply (pun intended) to medicine and other professional programs, but not so much to us. We’re the thinkers, not the doers. It’s not like our graduates are going to open a philosophy shop. ‘Broken syllogisms repaired here.’” But you face students who are increasingly asking: “show me how this applies.” And you deal with the pressure to weave variants of workplace based or workplace applicable learning into your programs.

Besides, Descartes was likely mistranslated. He really said “I do, therefore I am.” Think about it. (HEQCO Conference November 5-6, InterContinental Toronto Centre Hotel,register through our web site.)



-Martin Hicks, Executive Director, Data & Statistics