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thoughts,  
ideas,  
kudos &  
brickbats  
from heqco

it'snotacademic

# Suffering from a troublesome societal dynamic? Got ulcers? Consider the merits of differentiation.

[October 26, 2010](#) [heqco](#) [3 Comments](#)

Here's a question to ponder in the wee hours of the morning – or right now. How can a government respond to the following societal dynamic?

1. A persistent and growing demand for more availability of public postsecondary education.
2. Fewer public dollars to sustain or grow public postsecondary education, especially in Canada with the insatiable financial appetite of the health care system.
3. A political imperative to minimize tuition increases.
4. Greater scrutiny and accountability around everything governments and public institutions do.

In short, a dynamic more conducive to ulcers than smiles. But, this is exactly the dynamic provinces in Canada, states in the USA, and many countries in the world face as they try to sustain a high quality, internationally competitive public higher education system

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in the face of more students and fewer dollars.

To meet the objectives in spite of the challenges, many governments have adopted a policy of promoting increased differentiation of their postsecondary systems. Simply put, what differentiation means is encouraging and enabling each postsecondary institution to pursue a mandate and mission appropriate for it. The system becomes differentiated because different institutions have different objectives and, as a consequence, are treated (and funded) differently by government. The government assures that the system as a whole fulfills public needs but not every institution is expected to make the same contribution as sister institutions.

Recently, HEQCO was asked by the provincial government to identify the benefits of adopting a policy of greater differentiation of the 20-member Ontario university system and to recommend how such a policy could be implemented if the government chose to pursue it.

I won't rehearse the paper here. Aficionados can read it at [here](#). Mini-aficionados are assured that there is an Executive Summary that distills the key points. Suffice it to say that we see a lot of benefits to students, government and the public of allowing greater differentiation of the Ontario university system. A policy like this does not solve all of the problems but it does advance the quality, competitiveness, accountability and financial sustainability of the postsecondary system in Ontario – something that we can only see as a positive in the future of the province.

The paper is meant to promote discussion and debate so we would appreciate hearing what you might think about the arguments advanced in the paper. The societal dynamic identified above is not going away so something has to change. As shown in the Appendix to the paper, it is interesting to us how many have gravitated to some form of differentiation policy as the direction of change.

Thanks for reading and responding.

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**3 thoughts on “Suffering from a troublesome societal dynamic? Got ulcers? Consider the merits of differentiation.”**



**Marc Furstenuau**  
November 17, 2010 at 10:39 am

The first line of the “Executive Summary” of this report reads: “The Ontario university sector is already somewhat differentiated.” Indeed! And this is a result of the normal processes of academic adjudication, evaluation, and distribution. That is, a properly functioning university system will allow for the emergence of top quality research and programs, but only within the context of robust academic freedom, opportunities for mobility within the system, and a thriving and extensive disciplinary culture. To impose differentiation, to impose broad and poorly defined criteria from above, to decide in advance where quality will emerge, will only and necessarily distort the normal and traditional scholarly process.

This report displays an astonishingly cavalier attitude towards the very idea of the university. If we believe in the value of the university, as a distinct kind of institution, as the site for the advanced research and teaching of the humanities, and the social and natural sciences — broadly defined — then it must be allowed the freedom to develop its full range of capacities. “Differentiation,” as described in this report, will necessarily restrict that freedom. If we no longer believe in the ideal of the university, then let’s just say that, and admit that we no longer have the interest or the political will to pay for the realization of such an ideal. But let’s not pretend that this sort of proposal will do anything more than transform the enormously successful university system of Ontario into a collection of vocational and training colleges.

I encourage all who read this report, those who still believe in the idea of the university, to voice their opposition strongly and widely.

[Reply](#)

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☐ **Elaine Todres**  
November 29, 2010 at 11:09 am

Really enjoyed your report.Fiven my subject interst in governance, would like to hear your thoughts about the future role of Boards of Univesrsities, and their oversight/insight role with respect to qualitiy, and differentiation, given the obvious.The work is important. Thank you.

☐ [Reply](#)



☐ **Sue Bloch-Nevitte**  
December 3, 2010 at 12:12 pm

Boards play a foundational role in institutional differentiation. As a starting point, the differentiation paper notes the importance of the institutional mission statement, which would be approved/endorsed by the Board (and Senate). Boards have responsibility for strategic planning so their alignment with mission is critical.

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