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## **Academic Transformation The Forces Reshaping Higher Education in Ontario**

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### **Full Research Report:**



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### **Research Summary:**

The book is available for purchase at <http://mqup.mcgill.ca/book.php?bookid=2363> (English only).

The thesis of this book is that the present approach to the provision of baccalaureate education in Ontario is not sustainable and is in need of significant modification. The stage for the present approach was set by two higher education policy decisions that were made in the 1960s: (1) that the colleges would have no role in the provision of baccalaureate credit activity; and (2) that the publicly supported universities would have complete autonomy in deciding on their purpose, mission, and objectives. While the universities had been primarily teaching institutions until the 1960s, since then a single idea of the mission of the university—the research university—has been adopted by all. A key element of the research university model to which the university community in Ontario has subscribed is that of the teacher-researcher ideal: that undergraduate students should be taught only by professors who are active researchers.

Not only have all the universities embraced the research university model, but in the past two decades there has been a growing

expectation from the public and the government for universities to produce knowledge that will enhance Canada's economic well-being and international economic competitiveness. This new model has fostered substantial growth in university research, brought changes to the traditional research paradigm, and introduced new costs—both human and financial. At the same time as the universities have experienced growing internal and external pressure to expand research, the pressure to expand accessibility to baccalaureate programs has continued unabated. Further increases in the university participation rate—already high by international standards but seen as necessary by many to the province's future competitiveness and productivity—will involve substantial advances with respect to groups that historically have been underrepresented in higher education. The academic success of the additional members of these groups may require more attention and resources than universities have provided their students in the past.

As it struggles with the challenges of massive increases in enrolment, Ontario is relying exclusively on a publicly supported system of research-focused universities—the most expensive type of postsecondary institution—to provide baccalaureate education to a population of students with increasingly diverse educational requirements. Besides being expensive, this model provides insufficient variety in the types of baccalaureate experiences available to students relative to the diversity of backgrounds, situations, aspirations, and learning styles. At the same time, serving the needs of a much larger student body while also meeting societal expectations of knowledge production creates substantial resource allocation tensions for individual professors and institutions that might be better met within a more diverse post-secondary system.

While the universities were undergoing a transformation from being predominantly teaching institutions that served a small percentage of each cohort into institutions that had the dual roles of providing mass higher education and producing the knowledge that is deemed vital to the province's economic future, the rest of the postsecondary system has not experienced a corresponding change in its role. When the colleges were established, their primary function was to provide preparation for employment. Offering the first two years of university-level arts and sciences courses, as did colleges in Alberta, British Columbia, and many American states, was specifically excluded from the mandate of colleges in Ontario. Although some colleges have, over the years, on their own developed programs of this type, these are quite small—comprising only about two percent of total college enrolment—and transfer to university for students in these programs is not supported by a provincial policy framework or infrastructure. Another equally modest development in the colleges has been the development of baccalaureate programs in selected applied fields of study, enrolment in which also comprises about two percent of total college enrolment. The same act of the legislature that enables colleges to offer baccalaureate programs also allows private

postsecondary institutions to make application for the right to offer degree programs. However, to date, only two small and highly specialized secular private institutions have obtained this right. Thus, even with the modest changes that have occurred in the colleges and that have been enabled by recent legislation, the responsibility for providing mass baccalaureate level education in Ontario rests almost exclusively with the universities, that is, with institutions that also have a major and vital role in producing knowledge.

Adherence to the model of relying almost exclusively on a set of publicly funded research universities for providing mass education at the baccalaureate level has several noteworthy consequences. Perhaps the most visible consequence is chronic financial strain; it has been difficult to obtain the resources necessary to support this expensive model for the provision of mass higher education. Although the government has pushed the universities to expand enrolment continuously and substantially, government funding to universities has not kept pace with the combination of enrolment growth and inflation for most of the past two decades. Instead, governments have allowed the universities more flexibility in regard to tuition and mandatory fees. The result has been that total revenue per student from government grants and student tuition and fees, adjusted for inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), has remained approximately constant over the past two decades.

The problem is that per-student costs tend to grow more quickly than CPI inflation. Compensation costs face pressures from wage settlements, progress-through-the-ranks increases for faculty, and higher employee benefit costs. Other costs such as utilities may climb faster than CPI inflation as well. In the meantime, there has been a long-term shift among full-time university faculty towards greater research responsibilities and reduced undergraduate teaching loads. The heightened competition among institutions for research grants, capital grants, high-quality students, private sector partnerships, and gifts from donors has also imposed substantial new costs. A primary device by which universities have accommodated higher per-student costs has been to enroll additional students. The unstated strategy has been to minimize the costs of teaching these additional students such that the associated marginal revenue will exceed the marginal costs and so leave a surplus to cover inflationary costs that would otherwise be unfunded. The prevailing funding system of the past 20 years has left the institutions little choice but to adopt this coping strategy. The conflicting pressures to teach more students and to win more research grants have transformed the nature of the full-time faculty. Undergraduate teaching loads—measured as the average number of courses taught by a full-time faculty member per year—have declined. Average class sizes have increased. The share of undergraduate teaching performed by temporary and part-time faculty has risen and is now reported by some universities to be in the range of half of all instruction in the largest undergraduate faculties. If current trends in per-student funding and expenditures continue, it is reasonable to expect

that average class sizes and the share of teaching performed by instructors who are not permanent faculty will continue to rise indefinitely into the future. As the proportion of faculty who are in full-time tenured positions has decreased, there are relatively fewer people to perform duties that require a presence on campus, such as meeting and mentoring students, professional development and departmental meetings. At the same time, faculty must cope with the increased complexity of the new research environment that has resulted from such programs as the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the strategic research initiatives of the national granting councils, and direct research collaborations with the private sector. Research now commonly involves unprecedented levels of collaboration across disciplines, sectors, and geography, and also of accountability to funding agencies. The simultaneous pressure to increase both enrolment and the volume of research in this environment has resulted in over-commitment of individuals and institutions.

The practice of employing substantial and increasing numbers of part-time faculty who are given no time for research is in dramatic conflict with one of the espoused norms of the Ontario university sector: that students should be taught by scholar-teachers. This current practice became widespread because it is financially impossible for all undergraduate teaching in Ontario to be done by scholar-teachers. The key question facing policy-makers is whether the necessary differentiation in arrangements for undergraduate teaching should be left to come about by happenstance, as has been the case in recent years, or whether the patterns should be determined through a more rational deliberative approach.

## **Conclusions and Implications for the Future**

Some of the changes that the authors believe are crucial to improve post-secondary education in Ontario would bring about greater differentiation among post-secondary institutions. These include the establishment or emergence of new types of post-secondary institutions, and measures that would lead existing institutions to concentrate more on certain kinds of activities and less on others. The design change that would do the most to enhance the current system would be the creation of degree granting institutions that are highly focused on undergraduate education. To be effective, the degree programs offered by such institutions would be solely at the baccalaureate level, and the emphasis of the institution would be teaching rather than research. The responsibilities of faculty, therefore, would be primarily undergraduate education.

A high quality, carefully designed and implemented three-year degree would serve students well as a pre-professional degree for those going on to professional study in disciplines such as law, education, journalism, business, social work, and media studies, and as a final degree for those who pursue on-the-job professional training in the financial, government, management,

retail, public service, and other sectors.

Improvements in efficiency and effectiveness may be sought both through modification of the division of roles and responsibilities among institutions and through internal changes within institutions. The present “one-size fits all” approach to funding exerts an essentially irresistible force toward institutional homogeneity, reinforcing the tendency within academic culture for all institutions to aspire toward a uniform activity profile in which discovery research and graduate education hold pride of place over innovative and high quality undergraduate education. There is considerable potential for increasing institutional differentiation by using substantial portions of the total operating grant for distinct mission-related envelopes which would provide a real incentive for institutions to excel in both different areas and types of activity.

The presence of substantially more members of full-time faculty holding predominantly teaching appointments also would reduce the reliance of universities on part-time, contract instructors. A small number of colleges should play a greater role in providing baccalaureate programs. The college system continues to have the important mission of educating and training workers in a wide range of levels and fields for the provincial economy, and offering opportunities for career and personal development for individuals. Within that broad mission, there should be greater emphasis on ways in which this role might be enhanced and the whole system made more efficient through institutional differentiation and specialization. This differentiation could take a variety of forms including greater emphasis on trades training, more focus on serving underprepared learners, or greater involvement in the provision of career-focused baccalaureate programs that rest on a solid liberal arts foundation.

Students in career-related college programs should have more opportunities to transfer to university. The experience of other jurisdictions suggests that there are two principal ways of improving transfer opportunities for students in college career programs. One involves the establishment of provincial committees that consist of representatives of the colleges and universities and have a specific mandate to improve transfer opportunities; the other is the development in universities of specific programs aimed to facilitate transfer for students from college career programs. An open university could make an important contribution to Ontario’s post-secondary education system. Open universities deliver most or all of their courses online or through other electronic media. Yet it is not the technology through which courses are provided that defines an open university. Rather, it is an educational philosophy, a key element of which is open admissions, i.e., although students must meet traditional course requirements and standards once enrolled, admission to programs and courses is not based upon prior academic achievement, but on learners’ needs and aspirations. An open university could play a particularly important role in facilitating degree completion for graduates of the colleges.

It would be valuable to have a structured dialogue among key stakeholders concerning the idea of quality and quality assurance practices in higher education that are appropriate for the 21st century. Several aspects of the present model for the provision of undergraduate education may threaten quality, for example the increasing reliance on part-time faculty. Also there is reason to question whether the “one size fits all” model provides the best quality for all students given the enormous diversity in the academic backgrounds and preferred learning styles of students. Moreover, as traditional conceptions of academic quality that emphasize admissions selectivity and resources as the main determinants of quality give way to newer conceptualizations of quality like value-added and student engagement, it may become harder to defend traditional academic structures and practices. The next phase of the evolution of higher education in Ontario would also benefit from a systematic framework for policy oversight and direction. Such a framework would allow for a balance between reasonable constraints in the public interest and the preservation of institutional autonomy. The global economic recession has made policy leadership in higher education all the more urgent and may make an increased government role more acceptable to interested parties. The current circumstances make it easier to imagine sustained government action, supported by enlightened institutional leadership, to facilitate the next phase of transformation in Ontario’s post-secondary education system.

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