

The Governance of Post-Secondary Education Systems in British Columbia and Ontario: Path Dependence and the Provincial Policy Process

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The Governance of Post-Secondary Education Systems in British Columbia and Ontario: Path Dependence and the Provincial Policy Process

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Abstract

This paper examines the coordination of post-secondary education systems by provincial governments in British Columbia and Ontario as an area of “pure” provincial policy-making. The argument is developed in two broad stages. First, developments in the 1960s are examined as representing a “critical juncture” in which differing system architectures are shown to have taken shape in response to similar demographic pressures for a major expansion of post-secondary provision. Second, later attempts at reform are examined, demonstrating in both cases the relatively “sticky” character of the institutional settlements established in the 1960s. An interlocking pattern of institutional and intra-provincial local/regional resistance has created strong path dependent logics of development in both provinces. The paper concludes with a discussion of recent reform efforts in Ontario, potentially marking a new “critical juncture” in contrast to a relative quiescence in the case of BC.

This essay compares provincial post secondary education policy in Ontario and British Columbia, two Canadian provinces, from the early 1960s to the present. Its focus is generally unexplored area of the structure of provincial higher education systems. Why has the system architecture of higher education developed so differently in the two provinces? Ontario and British Columbia, in response to broadly similar social and economic conditions, established higher education systems in the 1960s. Ontario, unlike most Canadian provinces and American states, built a binary system with a rigid division between degree granting universities and technical colleges. (Skolnik, 2010) As Edward J. Monahan notes Ontario’s system was designed as “two solitudes” with universities on one side and colleges on the other. (Monahan, 2002) For its part, British Columbia followed a pattern closer to the North American norm. It built a post secondary education system with degree-granting universities, but unlike Ontario, with colleges that provided technical education and university-transfer

courses. What accounts for these very different approaches? Equally, why has the basic design of both systems remained so little changed over more than fifty years of substantial change in many aspects of provincial life?

In this paper, system architecture refers to four intertwined features – the roles of universities and colleges, the extent of differentiation within and between the two sectors, credit transfer and the structures of system governance. The essay contributes to several important areas of contemporary political science. First, it deals with a core question of modern public management and policy implementation – how do governments influence and control universities and colleges where, especially in universities, institutional autonomy is a paramount value? Second, the essay notes the enduring impact of local political forces on major provincial government decisions. In both provinces, a constant theme in post secondary education is the intraprovincial location of universities and colleges. Finally and most importantly, we argue that the British Columbia and Ontario systems are best explained as strong examples of path dependent policy making and critical policy junctures.

Path dependence is a complex concept whose use and meaning differs considerably between economics and political science. (Pierson, 2000; Hacker, 1998) Some observers simply derive the truism that “history matters”. A somewhat richer line of thought suggests that path dependence means that policy change is shaped and limited by constraints imposed by past policy. A fuller version relates path dependence to historical-institutional explanations of public policy. It speaks to the important idea that characteristics of public policy and political institutions interact to shape available options. As Jacob Hacker puts it: “Policies may alter administrative capacities, create incentives for group formation, teach specific lessons to policy makers or give rise to widespread public expectations or vast networks of vested interests” (Hacker, 1998: 77).

Critical junctures on the other hand are easy to assert but much harder to define. The idea that a critical juncture is a period of major policy change begs a definition of “major change”. Our essay argues that the early 1960s are indeed a critical policy juncture and that path dependence provides a strong explanation of Ontario and British Columbia policy differences.

The essay begins with a rationale for the case selection and a brief methodological statement. It then moves to the 1960s and the context of policy making in British Columbia and Ontario. The early 1960s are a critical juncture when provincial governments greatly expanded their roles in post secondary education and established higher education systems. The heart of the essay, an analysis of the different paths followed by the two provinces, then follows. The essay then explores the possibility of future changes paying particular attention to Ontario where the post secondary status quo is being challenged. Is Ontario at another critical juncture?

The Cases

Why were British Columbia and Ontario selected for detailed examination? First, both provinces administer complex and costly post secondary education systems. Second, British Columbia's system with universities and dual function colleges (vocational education and university transfer) is broadly typical of prevailing Canadian and American patterns. In Ontario, on the other hand, university credit instruction does not involve the public colleges that focus on vocational education. The system's two key components interact in limited ways. Moreover, having historically rejected a BC style system, the problem of developing a provincial credit transfer system now poses itself in a much different way, involving a direct bridging of vocational and academic programs.

Post-secondary education is a fruitful area for the comparative study of provincial government. First, it is a major area of provincial government expenditure. Post secondary education is one of the largest areas of provincial government spending ranking behind health care and elementary and secondary school spending but well ahead of all other major areas of provincial activity. For example, British Columbia is spending \$5, 454, 000 B on operating support for post secondary education in fiscal year 2015-16. Ontario, in the same period, has budgeted \$7, 348, 000 B. Both provinces educate large numbers of students. In 2013, Statistics Canada notes that Ontario has 42 per cent of full time Canadian university and college enrolment while British Columbia has another 18 per cent. (Statistics Canada, 2013)

Second, post-secondary education has assumed greater importance in provincial policy. It is seen as an important determinant of provincial economic well-being and the quality of provincial life. Third, provincial post secondary education systems are little influenced by federal policy. Such basic things as the number, role and location role of post secondary institutions, the range of degrees and programs offered and institutional governance are all driven by provincial legislation, regulation and policy. These core activities are little shaped by federal policy. Post secondary system architecture is thus an important example of “pure” provincial public policy.

The research for this essay is derived from three principal sources. First, we examined the major government documents and secondly, a sparse but very good secondary literature. Third, interviews were conducted over the last six months with senior officials in the relevant British Columbia and Ontario ministries and with senior representatives of the major associations of universities and colleges.

A final point merits brief attention. Discussion in post secondary education whirls around the meaning of institutional differentiation, the extent to which it has been achieved in different jurisdictions and, from the vantage of effective public policy, the characteristics of ideal post secondary systems. (Weingarten and Deller, 2010). That said, California’s post secondary system as established in the early 1960s remains a revered system, the gold standard. (Johnson 2013, Ryan 2016) California’s enduring legacy has several sources. First, it rests on an impressive vision about guaranteed, low cost access for Californians to some form of higher education. Affordable and accessible post-secondary education was deemed a basic responsibility of the state government. Second, the system rests on a precise division of labour between three integrated components – entry-level community colleges with vocational, general interest and university transfer capacity; the California State University system for the majority of undergraduate teaching; and the University of California system whose campuses would excel in graduate studies and research. The system relied on an understood system of transfer between its components. Third, to ensure easy access, California colleges and universities were located in major centres throughout the state. The California system, even as buffeted by severe

budget restraint, remains post secondary education's most admired system and a continuing point of reference for reformers. It is an inescapable force in North American policy debate.

The Context of System Establishment

The 1960s were years of major and lasting change in Ontario and British Columbia's post secondary education systems. It was the decade when the current systems were built. In the 1960s, both provinces faced the same policy drivers - burgeoning provincial populations with huge potential post secondary enrolment increases, changing ideas about the economic importance of higher education and a potent brew of claims about the need for broader access to different kinds of post secondary education. In a short period, the provincial governments assumed major new roles in post secondary education that established political and economic forces and institutions that remain visible and powerful as we write in 2016.

In the 1950s, the Government of Canada began to provide operating grants to universities. But universities were modest affairs with limited undergraduate enrolments. Graduate education was woefully underdeveloped especially when compared with the United States. Many universities especially in central and Atlantic Canada remain tied to organized religions. Yet in only a few years in the early 1960s, provincial governments adopted aggressive post secondary education policies. Universities, in J.A. Corry's famous words, quickly became "public utilities", institutions that the provincial governments defined as important to their economic futures. (Corry, 1970) Once passive provincial governments developed post secondary education systems that are among the most impressive policy achievements of post war Canada. The extent and rapidity of these changes constitute a policy revolution.

The decades after the end of World War II witnessed significant population growth in Canada. Between 1941 and 1961, British Columbia's population doubled and grew from 817, 861 to 1, 629, 082. In the same period, Ontario's population grew 65 per cent from 3, 787, 655 to 6, 236, 092. One observer argued that British Columbia's population grew faster than any other part of North America prior to and during this period. (Macdonald) Both

provinces grew faster than Canada overall whose population grew 59 per cent over the two decades. And in both provinces, elementary and secondary school enrolments also burgeoned. Underdeveloped post secondary education systems awaited growing numbers of high school graduates.

Changing ideas about the economy also altered provincial government policy. In both provinces, policy makers saw major economic changes looming. In his influential plan for the future of post secondary education in British Columbia, John B. Macdonald, president of the University of British Columbia, defined a substantial expansion of post secondary education as a provincial responsibility of the “gravest urgency” (Macdonald, 1962). He worried that UBC, the province’s only university, would be overwhelmed by demands for entrance into its degree programs and possibly by demands that it provide non university courses for which it was ill prepared. Macdonald was persuaded by economic ideas that were echoed in Ontario. He spoke of an impending “scientific revolution” where organized knowledge was the currency. “Muscle power” was of declining importance as provincial economies diversified away from their resources bases.

In this environment, higher education suddenly assumed unprecedented importance. It was now a central force in provincial economic life. Economic well-being, in words that were harbingers of more recent claims about a “knowledge economy”, would increasingly be driven by the quality of provincial human capital. Strong modern economies required well-educated citizens who in turn required easy access to excellent universities and colleges that provided technical, scientific and social scientific education. No such system existed in either province.

Explicitly economic arguments were joined by new ideas about access to higher education. Post secondary education, heretofore limited to very few citizens, would be extended to qualified Ontarians and British Columbians. As Edward J. Monahan put it: “,,, Canada and its wealthiest province, were part of an unprecedented expansion of university-level education across the Western world and beyond, an expansion that has been aptly characterized as the movement from elite to mass to universal post-secondary education” (Monahan, 2002: 5). A corollary was that tuition fees must not impede access. Provincial

governments would have to become major funders of post secondary education. They would have to establish policy, build and expand campuses, fund complex student loan and grant systems and pay for university and college operating expenses.

Access was defined in different ways. In the early 1960s, women, hitherto limited participants in post secondary education, entered in large numbers and swelled enrolments. Access was also encouraged by a strong policy emphasis on proximity to place of residence. Provincial residents were to be provided with post secondary education in ways that removed the need to travel to major urban centres or to commute long distances in heavily populated areas like the lower mainland British Columbia or metro Toronto. A post secondary education system, to be effective, had to be widely distributed across two large provinces. This emphasis on location quickly generated new policy communities with strong local political bases and citizens who became guardians of local universities and colleges. Ease of access became a building block of provincial policy in both provinces.

The early 1960s were undoubtedly a “critical juncture” in provincial public policy. First, the provinces quickly transformed their role in post secondary education from passive observers to substantial funders and system planners. They assumed important new roles and obligations. Significant new policy ideas, with lasting influence, emerged during this period. A major provincial government role was justified by new economic thinking that stressed the importance of an educated citizenry. Access to higher education was defined as a qualified right of provincial citizenship. Higher education was to be widely provided throughout the province. Seen together these are extraordinary changes of lasting consequence. In the almost sixty years since the heady days of the early 1960s, post secondary education in Canada has not been subject to any other period of such major change.

Casting the Mould

As detailed above, British Columbia and Ontario were faced with very similar challenges in the construction of their post-secondary systems in the immediate post-war period. Both faced unprecedented demographic pressures to expand

the provision of higher education, ensuring a broad access in both socio-economic and geographical terms. Yet, as outlined in the introduction, these two Canadian provinces opted for very different models to meet this demand. Why, at this critical juncture, were such different choices made?

Undertaking a detailed examination of the key policy choices made in the early 1960s, this section seeks to understand the rationale for the emergence of these very different system models. In the case of BC, strong policy entrepreneurship from the (very limited) sector itself is shown to have played a key role, setting out a system blueprint that was then broadly adopted by government.¹ A further element of contingency then also came into play, providing an interconnection between the academic and vocational streams that owed as much to chance as to design. Ontario, a larger jurisdiction with a more complex pre-existing structure, presents a correspondingly more complicated picture. A strong logic of sequencing may be seen to have shaped the development of the university sector, as a serious consideration of overall system architecture took place only after a process of creating new universities had already begun in earnest. It was also within the framework that the creation of an entirely distinct college sector took place, reflecting a complex interplay of interests including but not limited to those of the existing universities.

British Columbia

Serious reflection on the development of post-secondary education in British Columbia during the expansionary 1960s has a clear starting point, the report prepared by University of British Columbia President John B. MacDonald in 1962 (MacDonald, 1962). Freshly arrived from Harvard to take up the UBC presidency, MacDonald undertook on his own initiative to examine the ways in which the demands that would be placed on the province by burgeoning student numbers could best be met. In so doing, he produced a report of exceptional detail, setting out not only the range of new institutions that would be required

¹ In this, British Columbia corresponds to a wider pattern seen in all four Western Canadian provinces, whereby the PSE system essentially developed around “the” provincial university. With thanks to Prof. Glen Jones for his insight on this point.

and the requisite governance arrangements, but also entering into a depth of detail as to the financing of the system and even the siting of campuses (with reference to traffic flows and site accessibility). The system, as MacDonald envisaged it, would consist of UBC as the lone research university providing both graduate and undergraduate education; two four-year colleges (an upgraded Victoria College and a second college located in the western Lower Fraser Valley); and a network of two-year colleges that would provide both university transfer and vocational programs. The new colleges would be governed by a provincial Academic Board, charged with maintaining overall academic standards, while a Grants Commission would further be established to advise the ministry on the overall strategic development and financing of the system. The vision was thus very much that of an integrated system from the outset, with MacDonald's own UBC – often styled simply “the University” in the report – at its centre.

The Social Credit government of the day gave MacDonald's report a lukewarm reception at best, both convincing MacDonald to delay its release for its own political reasons and highlighting the “staggering costs” of the proposal when it was finally released (McGeer, 1972: 24-26). Nevertheless, the demographic tide could not be held back and the government accepted, even if somewhat unenthusiastically,² the need for major system expansion. In important respects, the government did not follow MacDonald's lead. It did not establish a University Grants Commission. UBC was not to enjoy a monopoly of university status; the upgraded University of Victoria and the newly created Simon Fraser University were both to be universities, rather than more limited four-year colleges. More generally, however, MacDonald's report did serve as the blueprint for the creation of a PSE system in BC that was very much conceived of as a system.

² The rather ambiguous attitude of the long-serving premier, W.A.C. Bennett, to the PSE sector is well voiced in the following observation, made during a retrospective interview with Mitchell (1983): “A lot of people thought I was opposed to universities. I'm in favour of good, clean minds that come from universities. What I was opposed to was all the people in universities who just waste their time cross-piling sawdust through a knothole, having no original ideas themselves on anything – just part of the establishment...”

The emergence of this system logic was significantly reinforced by two further developments in the 1960s. First, there was an important element of “contingency”, in which “small events, if they occur at the right moment, can have large and enduring consequences” (Pierson, 2000: 263). Created by way of an amendment to the Public Schools Act in 1963, the envisaged new regional colleges were to be placed under school board control, and as such required the holding of local plebiscites in order to authorize the required component of local financing. As detailed by Dennison (1997: 38), it quickly became apparent that voters in different localities across the province were unwilling to provide the necessary funding for capital construction. Not wishing to foot the bill for the long-term leasing of premises, the government hit upon the solution of amalgamating the colleges with existing (and partially federally funded) vocational schools. There was thus a “meld” of university transfer courses and a broad range of vocational programs in a single institution – corresponding to a certain vision of breaking down the barriers between the two, but also responding to a very contingent, practical need.

At the same time, and in this area by more deliberate system design, an Academic Board of Higher Education also came into being way of an amendment to the Universities Act in 1963. Following MacDonald’s recommendations, the Board, made up entirely of university representatives, assumed responsibility for overseeing the development of academic programs in the new colleges, ensuring their quality and compatibility with existing university offerings. A key role was played in the early years by Dr. Sperrin Chant, a former Dean of Arts and Sciences at UBC, who served as the first Chair of the Academic Board. Chant, as Dennison (1992: 20-21) describes it, drove forward an agenda that combined a commitment to accessibility with a rigorous insistence on the maintenance of academic standards – laying the foundations for a broadly based system of credit transfer.

The immediate response to the pressures of expansion in the case of British Columbia thus established a clear system frame from the outset. Colleges were closely linked to the universities through their participation in a structured system of credit transfer that developed in parallel to the creation of the colleges themselves. The vocational and the academic elements of the system were

“melded”, or at least co-located, in a province-wide network of colleges. The differing institutions were conceived of, and conceived of themselves, as fulfilling particular roles within a wider provincial framework. Even in the absence of formal governance structures, a significant degree of systemic logic and coordination characterized BC PSE in its early expansionary phase.

Ontario

The Ontarian equivalent of the MacDonald Report was the Deutsch Report, also delivered in 1962. The report was produced by a sub-committee of the Committee of Presidents of the Universities of Ontario, chaired by Queen’s University Vice-Principal John Deutsch. The Deutsch Committee’s work represented the first sustained reflection on the operation of the provincial PSE system as a whole against the background of major expansionary pressures, providing “the blueprint for the development of a university system for Ontario” (Monahan, 2002: 18). Two major recommendations stand out from the report. First, it was recommended that no further full universities be established. Rather, the committee proposed that further expansion take the form of the creation of four-year liberal arts colleges affiliated with existing universities (two in the metro Toronto area and one in the Niagara-Welland region). Second, it proposed the creation of a new college sector exclusively dedicated to the provision of vocational education, and as such entirely unconnected to the university system. It thus rejected the more common North American model of a community college system, in which vocational and academic transfer paths co-exist within the same institution. In two landmark decisions that continue to shape the Ontario PSE sector through to the present (a clear “critical juncture”), the government largely ignored the advice of the Deutsch Committee as regards the first point (the creation of liberal arts colleges), but followed it as regards the second (opting for a hard binary division between colleges and universities).

In the years immediately after the publication of the Deutsch Report, two colleges affiliated with the University of Toronto (Scarborough and Erindale) were established. At the same time, however, four further universities were also created. New universities in Peterborough (Trent) and St. Catharines (Brock) were both founded with full mandates on the existing model, while colleges in

Guelph and Thunder Bay were further upgraded to university status on the same terms. As Monahan (2002: 22) writes, “the decision broadened and reinforced the understanding that all Ontario universities are equal”. As such, “a ‘two-tier’ university system would never become a serious option in Ontario” (Ibid). In effect, by putting all universities on an equal footing from the outset, a dynamic had been created in which all could aspire to be research universities, with no significant differentiation in institutional mission. Any subsequent attempt to pull back from this was thus likely to be met by fierce institutional resistance, even against the background of diminishing resources and inevitably differential institutional performance (Clark et al., 2009: 7-22). This defence of a uniform institutional status could, moreover, further rely on strong political support, as local politicians would rise to the defence of “their university” in the face of any perceived threats to its status. As Monahan (2002: 22) observes, “every MPP in whose riding there was a university could be counted on to defend the right of this institution to be a ‘real’ university”.

If decisions in the early 1960s entrenched this pattern of an “undifferentiated” university system, rooted in both institutional interest and local support, its origins may nonetheless be traced to the preceding years. Prior to the Deutsch Report, a significant number of higher education institutions had already been created as or upgraded to full universities on the basis of essentially local negotiations or decisions, in anticipation of burgeoning student numbers, but with no real consideration given to their fit within an overall system architecture (Royce, 1998: 82). Carleton (1957), McMaster (1957), Waterloo (1959), York (1959), Laurentian (1960), and Windsor (1962) were all chartered along these lines. In consequence, a strong practice had been established of new entrants being given the same terms and conditions as existing institutions, from which it would have been very difficult to depart at a later stage. For example, given regional sensitivities in Northern Ontario, it would have been politically untenable not to have upgraded Lakehead College (in Thunder Bay) to university status, or to have done so in terms which differed from those already given to Laurentian University (in Sudbury).

A clear logic of “sequencing” may thus be identified (Hacker, 1998; Pierson, 2004: 54-78). In the case of Ontario, unlike British Columbia, the creation

of new institutions predated the serious consideration of the overall architecture of the PSE system in its post-expansionary form. A pattern of institutional development consequently established itself that could not then, retrospectively, be easily remoulded to meet the needs of a more systemic logic. Whereas BC's institutions were created within a system frame, in Ontario an attempt would have to be made to fit a frame around existing institutions.

The second major decision taken at the time, establishing an entirely distinct college sector, has been of even more enduring consequence. Skolnik (2010: 2), in a re-examination of the factors surrounding the decision to create the new Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs), has termed it "one of the most second-guessed in the history of Ontario higher education". Before turning to the enduring controversy – the "second-guessing" – the terms of that initial decision nevertheless bear closer scrutiny. As Skolnik demonstrates, the oft-repeated argument that the government merely followed the universities' lead does not stand up to careful examination. The universities undoubtedly had an interest in restricting the space that might be occupied by a "competitor", not wanting to give the colleges license to develop academic programs in a context where an expanding university system was already poised to offer comparatively comprehensive regional access. Yet, other factors also came into play. Voices were heard in the then small vocational sector itself supporting a hard binary division as a means to ensure that the new institutions would be able to develop distinct profiles, out of the shadow of the universities. The then minister, Bill Davis, also appears to have been a proponent of the hard binary model. A mix of factors thus appears to account for the initial design of the system, which cannot be reduced to university influence alone. Whatever the origin of the divide, however, it is even clearer that, once established, it rapidly became institutionalized in terms that could not readily be reversed.

The college sector in Ontario sprung into existence at an "amazing" speed (Jones, 1997: 146). Whereas in BC long local consultations saw the incremental establishment of ten institutions over the course of a decade from the mid-1960s through to the mid-1970s, in Ontario nineteen colleges opened all at once in 1967, only two years after the adoption of the relevant act. The sector thus quickly assumed its own unique characteristics and logics, distinct from those of the

separate(d) university system; the two types of institutions would come to be marked by a palpable “cultural” divide. At the same time, the strategic positioning of the universities in relation to the colleges could also be seen to harden. In particular, many of the more recently established universities, defending institutional interests and often regional academic monopolies, were consistent opponents of any attempt to blur the hard binary line between themselves and the colleges (Interview, 11 January 2016, with a former President of the Council of Ontario Universities). Very much in contrast to the situation in BC, the historical development of the system consequently pushed the component parts of PSE apart, in terms that have subsequently proved very difficult to bridge, even as student demand increases for less conventional pathways and flexible credit transfer. The contrast is well summarized in the remarks of a senior official in the Ontario college sector (Interview, 11 January 2016), recounting a conversation with a British Columbian colleague:

[In BC] they had embedded in their culture going in the sense of transfer as important to the system, and colleges and universities as much more closely aligned. In Ontario, it was very clear from the get go that this was intended to be an entirely separated system, and really never the twain shall meet. So our culture started in a much different place.... In Ontario it then became a struggle against culture to start to talk about credit transfer.

The Limits of Reform

In both British Columbia and Ontario, the policy choices of the 1960s significantly “locked-in” governments in relation to the subsequent development of PSE systems. Configurations of institutional and wider stakeholder interests emerged in terms that corresponded to those choices, and as such placed limits on later processes of reform – or, at least, imposed costs on such reform efforts beyond that which government might be willing to bear. In the case of BC, the situation was long quiescent, with possible reform being put on the agenda only after the creation of a new, and somewhat anomalous category of university colleges. System reform, however, did not advance far. While some recategorization of institutions took place, system governance remained resolutely based on a model of informal cooperation. In Ontario, by way of contrast, system reform generated regular public debate and a score of official reports. Yet, such discussions produced few, if any tangible results as regards the

development of more robust arrangements for system coordination, or (until recently) the issue of college/university transfer arrangements.

British Columbia

There was no sustained attempt to look again at the questions of overall PSE system structure and governance in British Columbia for a good three decades after the MacDonald Report. Consistent with patterns seen elsewhere in the country (Skolnik and Jones, 1992: 130-132), an intermediary body came and went, with little apparent public discussion. The Universities Council, established in 1974 by the NDP government in line with a number of long discussed proposals (Dennison, 1992: 10), was abolished by its Social Credit successor in 1986. The Council, partly abolished for reasons of cost, had also “long been unpopular with at least two of the universities who saw it as an expensive additional layer of bureaucracy obstructing their access to government” (Ibid: 15).

Of far greater longer-term significance, credit transfer arrangements continued to develop and institutionalize, giving rise to the formal establishment of BCCAT (the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfers) in 1989. BCCAT provides the administrative support for the conclusion of the thousands of inter-institutional articulation agreements that are the bedrock of the credit transfer system. Building on the logic initially developed in the 1960s, the system has moved towards relatively comprehensive coverage, while (because of) respecting institutional autonomy in a non-hierarchical arrangement with no formal regulation.

Issues of system structure and governance came to the fore again only in the aftermath of the creation of the “university colleges”. Responding to demands for greater regional access, the colleges were a distinctive British Columbian institutional hybrid that was devised in response to demands for growing regional access. The university colleges were mandated to offer four-year degrees, as well as limited Master’s level provision, while remaining within the overall comprehensive college structure that also continued to include vocational programs. As such, the new structures could be viewed as an innovative break with past institutional forms, but also brought with them a host of new problems (Dennison, 1992; Fleming and Lee, 2009). The institutions were

not readily understood elsewhere in the country, potentially posing problems as to the readability or, even, the recognition of the qualifications awarded. It was further unclear, over the longer term, how the different missions of the institution would continue to sit and develop together. Equally, the upgrading of academic programs entailed the recruitment of academic staff who often had backgrounds and aspirations different to those of the existing staff. These intra-institutional dynamics came to a head in the case of Okanagan College, where an attempt by the board of the college to move unilaterally towards university status prompted direct provincial government intervention, dismissing the board and setting in motion a process that would eventually result in the establishment of the Okanagan campus of UBC.

It was against this background of a sense of growing system fragmentation, if not instability, that the Campbell Liberal government commissioned former Attorney-General Geoff Plant to undertake a study of the future direction of post-secondary education in the province. Plant essentially viewed his mandate as that of proposing structures that would restore a degree of order and clarity to the system. Those structures, moreover, were to be conceived in terms that responded to the twin imperatives of broad “access” and necessarily selective “excellence”. As Plant describes the task which he had set himself (Interview, 3 December 2015):

The inspiration was my observation that there was a lack of system thinking in the design of the system, a lack of system thinking in its administration, and that the disaggregation of ambitions and aspirations was more likely to create unnecessary competition, or conflict, or people going off into unhelpful places, and that what was needed was something that stitched the elements of the system together.

The response took the form a comprehensive set of proposals addressing both system structure and systemic governance (Plant, 2007). On system structure, Plant opted for a robustly differentiated design, with institutions being held within clearly defined mandates. Following this logic, he argued for a “Georgia Strait Global Leadership Initiative” in which the allocation of new graduate spaces would be concentrated in the three large coastal universities (UBC, Simon Fraser and Victoria). Next to this, it was proposed that a new category of “regional universities” with a predominately teaching mandate

would be created, encompassing the three remaining university colleges (Kwantlen, Malaspina, and Fraser Valley) together with Thomson Rivers University. Finally, Plant sought to “restore the primary focus of community colleges” (Ibid: 73) by precluding them from offering degrees. Existing applied degree programs would be phased out, or offered only in cooperation with a university.

On systemic governance, a rather complex tripartite series of structures was proposed. This was to consist of: 1). A Higher Education Presidents’ Council (bringing together all of the presidents of post-secondary institutions across the province in an advisory body); 2). A Higher Education Board (comprised of nine representatives drawn from the general public and six nominated by the Presidents’ Council); and 3). Regional Learning Councils (whose membership was to consist of all post-secondary institution presidents in each of five designated regions together with the superintendents of boards of education and community representatives). The overall structure thus sought to provide for overall coordination, planning and oversight at different levels, in a comprehensive, interlocking design.

The government quickly leapt on the proposal for the creation of “regional universities”, adopting an amendment to the Universities Act in 2008 that created a new category of “special purpose, teaching universities” (later “teaching intensive universities”), encompassing the three university colleges (see above), as well as one community college (Capilano) and one institute (the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design). In broad outline, the profile of a three-tiered system could correspondingly be discerned, consisting of research universities; teaching universities; and colleges and institutes.³ That three-fold profile was also to be reinforced by an attendant reorganization of the associational representation of BC PSE institutions. The Research Universities Council of British Columbia (RUCBC) was founded in 2008, following on the dissolution of The University Presidents’ Council of British Columbia. In similar

³ It should be noted, however, that BC, unlike neighbouring Alberta, did not adopt a comprehensive categorization system for all PSE institutions. Indeed, although they later joined the RUCBC, Thomson Rivers University and Royal Roads University at first were not clearly placed in the new tripartite structure.

terms, the British Columbia Association of Institutes and Universities (BCAIU) was formed in 2009, after the dissolution of the British Columbia University Colleges Consortium. RUCBC and BCAIU, together with BC Colleges, provided a spectrum of stakeholder representation that mirrored the contours of the renewed system structure.

The remaining recommendations of the Plant Report, including all of those to do with system governance, nevertheless remained essentially dead letters. In part, there was a clear failure of agenda setting. Plant himself expressed the regret that he didn't "do a good enough job of preselling my view before the report became public" (Interview, 3 December 2015). More immediately, the ministry failed to generate any momentum around the report, choosing only to launch a further round of consultations, rather than pushing forward with key recommendations. As one former ministry official candidly laments, "it could have been a watershed moment for postsecondary education, and we lost the opportunity completely, we blew it" (Interview, 24 November 2015). Beyond such failures of agenda setting, it was clear as well that the report's more radical proposals had also generated significant institutional opposition. Certainly, as regards the proposed system governance structures, there is considerable evidence to support the observation that "These suggestions were opposed by the research universities, and there was no political will to challenge this opposition, with the result that British Columbia still suffers from a lack of system-wide coordination" (Fisher et al., 2014: 49-50).

In effect, the BC PSE landscape post-Plant strongly resembled the landscape post-MacDonald. In the aftermath of the Plant Report, a higher degree of system logic could again be seen, with institutions assuming identifiably differentiated missions. This, moreover, continued to have a strong undergirding in the form of reasonably comprehensive credit transfer arrangements through BCCAT. Yet, at the same time, a move towards more formal structures of system governance had again been rejected.

Ontario

In sharp contrast to the situation in British Columbia, where public discussion of PSE system reform has been something of a rarity, such discussions have been a

regular refrain in Ontario. Both of the key system choices made in the early 1960s – producing an “undifferentiated” university system on the one hand and a hard binary division between colleges and universities on the other – have been the subject of ongoing discussion and frequent proposals for reform. Nevertheless, as detailed below, such ongoing discussion has produced little in the way of results. The system has shown itself to be remarkably “sticky”, with an in-built resistance to reform that readily exhausts the limited political capital that governments are willing to invest in the sector. Attempts at introducing a degree of centralized coordination and institutional differentiation to the university sector have thus far invariably met with failure, while a significant softening of the binary divide has only recently started to take place.

A proposal for the reform of Ontario’s newly minted university system in the aftermath of the 1962 Deutsch Report was not long in coming. Already in 1966, the Spinks Report sharply criticized “the complete absence of a master plan, of an educational policy, and of a coordinating authority for provincial institutions” (Cited in Royce, 1998: 11). The report then went on to call for a “drastic reform of the whole system governance”, advocating the creation of a “University of Ontario” on the model of the state university systems in California and New York. Ontario university presidents quickly coalesced to douse the flames. Winning the backing of the minister, Bill Davis, they were able to bury the report. The document was publicly released in the week between Christmas and New Year’s Day, with none of its authors present at the press conference and the minister already giving voice to his reservations (Royce, 1998: 109-114; Monahan, 2002: 29-31). The case for reform thus had no chance to be made, setting what was to prove to be the pattern for future reform efforts as well.

As amply documented by Royce (1998), every decade since the 1960s has seen at least one major attempt to bring about a higher degree of system coordination in the Ontario university sector. The Wright (1972), Fisher (1981), Bovey (1984), and David Smith (1996) Reports could all be seen to share a broadly similar line of argument. While the exact terms varied, all essentially argued that the Ontario system needed a higher degree of coordination and institutional differentiation, generally further involving some form of more

centralized decision-making.⁴ All saw this as necessary, particularly against the backdrop of decreasing funding for the sector, so as to ensure its longer-term sustainability. All also met the same fate, being shelved by governments that might cut funding to the sector as a whole, but that did not want to weather the political storms which would be created by making more selective choices within the sector. As Royce (1998: 404) adeptly summarizes the recurring pattern:

While the shortcomings of existing structures and processes for system coordination and planning were clearly examined over the past thirty years by a steady stream of reports, commissions and initiatives identified in this paper, many Ministers chose to avoid the complex policy issues and political ramifications of institutional differentiation by role and function. Rather than test the political muscle of the university community, and the regional sensitivities of Cabinet colleagues, Ministers have opted for a more politically neutral approach by approving across the board funding increases or reductions to the system as a whole.

In effect, the choices made in the 1960s had created a reform trap. Those choices had put in place a province-wide system of universities with a broad geographical footprint in which all institutions had been formally placed on an equal footing. Any attempt to “retrofit” a more differentiated or tiered system would consequently encounter an intermeshed pattern of institutional and regional resistance. As regards the institutions themselves, all would have a shared interest in seeking to minimize the scope for governmental intervention, defending a model of sectoral self-governance that in the Ontario case came to be articulated as a principle of “collective autonomy” (Monahan 2002). More specifically, the well-documented tendency towards isomorphism and focus on prestige in the sector would further ensure that any move towards differentiation would draw fierce resistance from those institutions that saw themselves as most vulnerable to a potential “relegation”. Any such move towards “relegation” – and it would be perceived and portrayed as such – would also then draw opposition from local political elites, not wishing to see (as previously discussed)

⁴ The later (2005) Rae Report also recommended the creation of a “Council on Higher Education” “whose job it would be to bring the sector together, to encourage collaboration and to limit the scope of the ‘empire of the silos’” (Rae, 2005: 15). Rae, however, stressed that it was to serve essentially a research function, and be neither a “funding body” nor a “buffer body”. This became the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

“their university” put at an apparent disadvantage. Given the specific political salience of the issue of “access” to post-secondary education, and the wider lack of political salience of the sector, this proved more than enough to keep government at bay. The system as a system developed with strong inhibitors in relation to fundamental structural change, operating at the potential cost of its longer-term performance.

The hard binary division between colleges and universities in Ontario had also long proved similarly impervious to reform efforts, but with more recent signs of a significant shift attributable to renewed governmental attention spurred by underlying demand. As in the university sector alone, a pattern emerged in which governments would put reform on the agenda and discussions would be engaged, only to produce no tangible results and to set the stage for the same cycle to repeat again some years later. As described by one senior figure in the college sector, these exercises followed a predictable script in which “the universities will rag the puck because they are completely disinterested”, on the premise that “eventually the government will get tired and move on to another issue” (Interview, 11 January 2016). Thus, for example, the much-vaunted 1999 Port Hope Accord, setting out a matrix for college-university cooperation, produced relatively little in the way of follow-up. Only a limited number of accords between colleges and universities in Ontario were concluded, with an increasing tendency displayed at one point for colleges to seek out-of-province degree completion arrangements instead (Stanyon, 2003).

More recently, however, the picture, at least as viewed from the college sector, has quite significantly changed. The establishment of ONCAT (the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer) in 2011 is seen as marking a step change, in which the government has now signaled a clear commitment to the development of a more comprehensive credit transfer system. The practical obstacles to building such a system remain considerable. There continues to be a relatively strong “cultural divide” between the two sectors. Also, in contrast to BC, credit transfer in the Ontario case very largely concerns the more difficult area of articulating academic and vocational programs, rather than the comparatively more straightforward development of a university transfer function. Nevertheless, there is evidence of an “invasive determination” and

“moral leadership” on the part of government (Interview with senior figures in the college sector, 11 January 2016) to see the process through. This, moreover, no doubt reflects an underlying political pressure, as students (and their parents) demand clear rules and means of recognition for increasingly mixed or less conventional study pathways.

Future Possibilities

The structures of post secondary education in British Columbia and Ontario are in large measure unchanged since the policy revolution of the early 1960s. As noted, the 2007 Plant report in British Columbia led to further institutional differentiation with the replacement of the former university colleges by teaching universities. Many issues remain unsettled in British Columbia but none is high on the provincial government’s agenda. The provincial government appears unwilling to invest political capital on further system reform.

Ontario, where an active reform agenda is at work, is a different story. Critics of Ontario’s post secondary status quo note its excessive costs and its failure to provide students with educational options necessary for the modern labour market. They also unite on the need for greater institutional differentiation among Ontario’s universities. While the provincial government has not consistently been a leader in these areas, it is actively engaged with the issue of system differentiation and enhanced student choices. Will powerful forces of continuity prevail? Or is Ontario’s post secondary education moving toward a critical juncture of policy change? Will the binary divide be bridged in ways that move Ontario’s system toward one more like British Columbia’s or Alberta’s?

British Columbia’s system is not likely to change in major ways in the foreseeable future. As discussed above, Geoff Plant’s aggressive proposals for a more differentiated and better co ordinated provincial post secondary education system produced only a partial success. Although his report led to the establishment of several teaching universities, his proposals for formal institutions of system governance, like those of the 1962 Macdonald report, were not adopted. The system relies on informal co-ordination and interviewees

stressed that the system was now working together on questions of common cause like overall funding.

British Columbia's post secondary education system requires further policy change. Policy participants see mandate creep where all universities aspire to be "research universities" and where colleges seek university status. Concerns remain about whether UBC and other parts of the system can maximize their potential. Regional politics, as they have since the system's inception, limit reform options. At the end of the day however, qualified satisfaction, certainly not complacency, characterizes British Columbia in 2016. Informal system coordination is generally seen by those in the policy system as providing an appropriately flexible model relative to the limited size of the jurisdiction. There was little support from such insiders for more formalized governance, with interviewees cautioning against "layering in more institutions". Substantively, BC's strong credit transfer regime is seen as vastly superior to Ontario's system. Other policy successes, such as the creation of the multi-site differentiated medical program centred on UBC, are also cited as pointing to the results that may be delivered by a more informal system.

Is Ontario at a "critical juncture"? Will provincial universities become more differentiated in mission and will the college/university divide be bridged? Three forces suggest a major change might occur in the face of an entrenched, path dependent system. New ideas about student learning and about the needs for an educated provincial work force demand a more "student sensitive" post secondary education system. Advocates of this idea stress that students require more educational options. And the modern economy puts a premium on employees' adaptability and easy access to technical education and more advanced theoretical instruction. Such ideas demand student "pathways" in a system that allows easy transfer between programs and institutions. More generally, ideas about pathways and the modern economy assume a post secondary education system where institutions have well differentiated roles and that are, at the same time, well integrated and ensure easy student access and transfer. As the Government of Ontario put it: "Institutions will focus on areas of educational strength and specialty so that **collectively** they offer the maximum choice, flexibility and quality experience to Ontario students." (Ontario, 2013: 10)

A strong commitment to institutional diversity is now advocated by various voices in Ontario's post secondary education policy community. A vocal advocate of system differentiation is the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). Established in 2005 by provincial statute, HEQCO has a mandate to provide independent advice about the overall structure and quality of Ontario's post secondary education system. Under the vigorous leadership of Harvey Weingarten, the Council has continuously urged a more flexible, differentiated and integrated university system. In a 2010 report, it argued that institutional differentiation was required if Ontario's universities were to become financially sustainable and responsive to student needs:

A more differentiated system is part of a government vision of a progressive, modern, accessible, higher quality postsecondary system. It strengthens a commitment to student mobility through system wide credit transfer. It supports access by recognizing a heterogeneous student population with varying needs and demands. It supports labour market 'readiness' of students and enhances the competitiveness of some institutions to compete in the global arena of research universities. (Weingarten and Deller, 2010: 6-7)

Pathway ideals and institutionalized advocacy combine with a financial blueprint to form a reform constituency. In an influential 2011 book, Ian Clark, former president of the Council of Ontario Universities, David Trick, formerly a high ranking official in Ontario's Ministry of Training, Universities and Colleges and Richard Van Loon, a former president of Carleton University argued that Ontario's post secondary education system required an overhaul (Clark, Trick and Van Loon, 2011). They advocated new Ontario universities that, unlike the current universities, were to provide outstanding undergraduate education only. Clark, Trick and Van Loon stressed that the Ontario status quo based on research universities was too costly and unsustainable over the long term. Their financial analysis suggested that teaching universities could deliver excellent undergraduate education with a thirty per cent cost savings. Their reform proposal stressed the financial advantages of teaching universities. Ultimately, however, their case rests on the broader ideas notably that Ontario universities are too autonomous, that the provincial government has abandoned its leadership role and that Ontario universities are too focused on research and too little interested in undergraduate teaching. The status quo provides costly

undergraduate education of continuously declining quality. Ontario's rigid post secondary education system with its autonomous research universities and separate public college system required radical reform.

Is Ontario at a critical juncture? Will major changes be undertaken to differentiate Ontario's universities, to weaken the binary divide and to build a much more robust credit transfer system? Powerful forces of path dependency suggest that the system will remain entrenched. Associations of universities and colleges with strong interests in system continuity have been in place since the 1960s. Local political forces resist major changes to the status and role of post secondary institutions. Universities, whatever their strengths, see advanced research and graduate studies as their preeminent roles.

On the other hand, the Higher Education Council has broken down the monopoly of established university associations and has advocated major reforms. Ontario's binary divide seems rigid and old fashioned compared with BC and Alberta for example where students have superior transfer capacities. Critics of the status quo have astutely anchored their arguments in claims about excessive costs and deteriorating system quality. New ideas about the changing needs of students have purchase among policy makers and probably parents and students themselves.

The conclusion in 2013 of Strategic Mandate Agreements with all 44 universities and colleges has also provided a framework within which the differentiation process may move forward. While the initial agreements were not in themselves strong differentiators (HEQCO, 2013), both ministerial and institutional participants have stressed the manner in which the process has put the relationship between the ministry and PSE institutions on a much clearer, more informed footing. Considerable further work is nonetheless required. Virtually all interviewees stressed the comparatively data poor character of the existing policy environment, and the corresponding need for a major investment in the development of appropriate indicators in relation to institutional performance. Equally, the thorny question of how differentiation might be driven or reinforced by resource allocation instruments has not yet been seriously addressed. A recent (December 2015) report concluding a consultation exercise on the funding formula pointedly sidestepped making any major

substantive recommendations, in a perhaps telling sign of the lack of clear political direction to date.

As the discussion above underlines, the provincial government is the dominant force in sorting out the rival claims at play. But it remains to be seen whether it will fully engage with the ‘stewardship’ role that it has identified for itself. Will it assume a strong leadership role and modernize Ontario’s post secondary education system? And, will it prove willing and able to invest in the development of the policy capacity necessary to deliver on a robust agenda of system differentiation and coordination? Or like British Columbia, will it define the status quo as satisfactory if not ideal and convince itself to put its energies in other problems? What further combination of forces is required to generate major provincial action, to unhinge path dependent continuity and to establish a critical juncture?

Conclusion

Several major conclusions emerge. First, our analysis highlights an area of “pure” provincial policy. The structures of post-secondary education systems are primarily, almost exclusively, shaped by provincial governments. The Government of Canada certainly plays major roles in higher education but not in the area of system structure. As a result, we find an area that is shaped by provincial forces alone. And given the substantial British Columbia – Ontario differences, an interesting case of comparative provincial policy making emerges.

Second, our essay shows how the 1960s are a “critical juncture” in policy making. In a very few years, the provincial governments shed their complacency and built modern post secondary education systems that were to be cornerstones of changing provincial economies. The provinces provided operating funds, built new campuses and established student loan systems. Participation in higher education grew substantially under provincial direction. Equally, we see how the initial systems have proven impervious to major changes thereby highlighting an excellent case of path dependent policy making.

Path dependence is highlighted by the powerful institutional imperatives established by the original system designs. For example, Ontario’s rigid binary system is heavily reinforced by interest associations that perpetuate the divide.

In both provinces, we see how the early emphasis on broad geographic distribution of post secondary institutions has built powerful local political networks that defend the status of local colleges or universities.

A third broad theme emerges that highlights an area seldom explored by political scientists. What combination of forces allows major changes to system architecture? In this regard, Ontario is the focus. Its post secondary education system now features advocates of two basic changes – a greater differentiation of university roles and/or a breakdown of the entrenched college/university divide. Given existing patterns of Ontario politics, can the power of past practice be overcome by advocates of a less costly, more differentiated and more student focused alternative? The underlying policy puzzle is essentially that identified by Plant in the case of BC as the need to provide for both “access” and “excellence”, and is obviously of far wider relevance. In this, Canadian developments join broader international debates concerned to understand the conditions of the successful coordination of higher education systems, as they seek respond to the growing range of societal and economic demands placed upon them.

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