

The Changing Politics and Policies of Ontario Higher Education

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Compared to many other jurisdictions, the basic structure of higher education in Ontario has remained remarkably stable for the last quarter-century. There seems to be little doubt that these structures and mechanisms are about to change, but like most of the history of higher education in Canada's most populous province, these changes will undoubtedly take place with little sense of common direction or system planning. More than anything else, these changes will represent responses to the intersection of the current provincial arrangements and the new political landscape.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN ONTARIO

There are a number of rather unusual characteristics associated with higher education in Ontario. First, like several other Canadian provinces, Ontario has one of the highest participation rates in postsecondary education in the world, rates that have continued to increase in almost every year of the last decade. Second, almost all of this activity is in publicly funded institutions. There is no significant private sector except in the area of vocational education. Third, Ontario has two distinct higher education sectors corresponding to two institutional types: the 17 universities and the 25 colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs). The CAATs have no mandate to provide transfer programs, and the two sectors are treated differently and separately by government. Fourth, all institutions in each sector are treated as equals under government policy. There are no formal institutional hierarchies within the two sectors and even targeted funding programs have utilized an allocative formula or mechanism designed to treat all institutions within each sector the same. Finally, Ontario universities enjoy a very high level of institutional autonomy. Government controls the amount that will be given to the sector and indirectly controls the level of tuition fees. However, almost all public support is in the form of general operating grants, and institutional shares are determined by an allocative formula designed by the sector.

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education, the lack of systemwide planning or system rationalization is perhaps not surprising. What is unusual is that the same is true at the sectoral level of discussion. The combination of high levels of institutional autonomy, sectoral intermediary bodies, and the checks and balances associated with the allocative funding mechanism served to inhibit certain types of change, including any form of institutional differentiation that might be associated with attempts at sectoral planning or rationalization. With high participation rates, institutions generally recognized as providing a quality education, and the lowest per-student expenditures on postsecondary education of any Canadian province with the possible exception of Nova Scotia, it is difficult to argue that there is a direct relationship between planning and success. Yet it is certainly true, as Michael Skolnik has argued, that at a policy level Ontario's higher education might be described as "just drifting."

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THE CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

In its provincial politics, Ontario has taken sudden turns to the left and right during the last decade. The election of the New Democratic Party, with its roots in social democratic philosophy, led to a series of new policies designed to increase social equity and strengthen the role of provincial unions. Bob Rae's government became best known, however, for the "Social Contract," a policy initiative designed to reduce government expenditures and guarantee jobs by allowing management in the broader public sector to designate unpaid holidays for public employees. Since the legislation effectively ignored collective bargaining rights, the Rae government soon found itself ostracized by both public- and private-sector unions.

Defeating the Rae government in 1995, Ontario took a sudden turn to the right. The new conservative government, led by Michael Harris, moved quickly to initiate what it has called a "Common Sense Revolution" in Ontario politics. Welfare programs were reformed, employment equity policies were largely dismantled, and huge cuts in the number of public servants were announced. The reaction from labor groups, as well as a broad range of social and educational organizations, has been extremely negative. Public servants, who survived a three-year wage freeze including new unpaid holidays under the "Social Contract,"

now found themselves employed by a government that planned to cut well over 10,000 jobs. The 55,000 Ontario Public Service Employees Union went on strike for five weeks in February and March of 1996 with arrangements for severance, rather than salaries, as the major element of disagreement. A wide conglomeration of labor and social organizations have organized a series of "Days of Protest" in different Ontario cities designed to demonstrate opposition to the policies of the Harris government, including a two-day protest on October 25th and 26th in Toronto where the entire transit system was shut down on a workday.

POINTS OF INTERSECTION

In its first budget speech of November 1995, the Harris government decreased the allocations to each sector of Ontario higher education by 15 percent and increased tuition fees by 10 percent (with an additional 10 percent of flexibility in the university sector). Since that time the government has **also** completely deregulated foreign student fees, abolished the intermediary body in the university sector, and created a systemwide advisory panel review of postsecondary education in the province, designed to address such questions as the appropriate relationship between sectors and the appropriate balance of public and private support for the funding of higher education. These initiatives have led to some of the most dramatic changes in Ontario higher education in the last two decades. Most of these changes are obvious reactions to the new financial environment: cutting expensive programs, especially in the CAAT sector; reducing staff; increased competition for enrollment, especially in the university sector; and a rationalization of institutional fee structures in universities. There are clear signs of greater institutional differentiation.

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I would argue that there have also been three more subtle changes in the basic structural arrangements of Ontario higher education. The first has been the decreasing emphasis on the sector as a unit of authority and an increasing focus on institutional interests, a response to modest forms of deregulation and gradually increasing competition between institutions. Sectoral interests are abandoned as some institutions argue for full deregulation of

tuition fees and the development of a more hierarchical system, a line of thought clearly associated with institutions that view themselves as forming the top level of any new institutional hierarchy. The abolishment of the Ontario Council on University Affairs has clearly changed the structural arrangements of the university sector.

The second is a growing sense among higher education pressure groups that they are powerless to influence public policy. This phenomenon is partly a function of a government that simply does not seem to respond to pressure groups, especially those on the left of the political continuum, but it is **also** a result of the fact that the government has moved on *so* many fronts at the same time that the interests of any single sector are crowded together with the interests of many others. The interests of faculty and students of higher education have almost become a subset of a much wider range of concerns including welfare reform; the funding of schools, labor policy, and equity policy. Financial concerns at the institutional level have also served to strengthen the movement toward faculty unionization at a number of universities, and several new faculty unions have been formed in the last year, the most recent at Brock University.

The third has been an increasing interest in viewing Ontario higher education as "system" rather than simply a collection of institutions and sectors. The creation of a new advisory panel with a systemwide mandate is an obvious example of this phenomenon, and the very existence of the panel has served to stimulate a discussion of systemwide issues. The government is also about to fund a series of new university-CAAT collaborative projects, and there seems to be a growing interest in at least parts of CAAT and university sectors to find ways of working together.

All of these obvious and more subtle changes signal the end to the quarter-century of stability in the structural arrangements of Ontario higher education. On the other hand, the "drifting" nature of Ontario higher education continues; this previously stable network of arrangements and mechanisms is now moving, but there is no clear sense of direction and some concern as to whether there is anyone at the wheel.

NOTES

1. Glen A. Jones, "Modest Modifications and Structural Stability: Higher Education in Ontario," *Higher Education* 21 (1991): 573-87.
2. Michael L. Skolnik, "Design, Deregulation, or Just Drifting: Where Is Ontario Postsecondary Education Headed?" (paper presented at an OISE/UT Symposium, November 1996).