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**An Introduction to Higher Education in Canada**

Glen A. Jones

**Abstract**

*The Canadian “system” of higher education is highly decentralized; responsibility for higher education is delegated to the provinces under Canada’s constitutional federation. While the federal government has played a major role in supporting university research and student funding, the story of Canadian higher education is the tale of ten quite different provincial systems, with different institutional structures and regulatory arrangements. However it is also the story of a highly accessible public system since Canada boasts among the highest participation rates in the world, and has one of the most educated populations. This paper will analyze the success (and failings) of this highly decentralized, largely uncoordinated network of provincial systems, and review current trends and issues.*

**Introduction**

In some important respects higher education in Canada is the story of a network of institutions that break all the rules in terms of accepted norms of organizational theory and system design. There is no national “system”, no national ministry of higher education, no national higher education policy and no national quality assessment or accreditation mechanisms for institutions of higher education. Higher education policy is highly decentralized, but even at this level there is, with a few exceptions, relatively little long-range planning, and a quite limited policy research infrastructure. At the same time, this is a country that boasts one of the highest participation rates in postsecondary education in the world, with widely respected university and college sectors. This is a country with very high levels of educational attainment, and a number of leading research universities.

The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of higher education in Canada. The paper begins with a brief history of the development of higher education, including the complex constitutional arrangements that underscore the highly decentralized nature of higher education policy. This is followed by a description of the current status of higher education, including basic information on institutions, enrolment, and faculty. The concluding sections focus on a number of contemporary issues and challenges, including access, shifting institutional boundaries and categories, quality, and funding.

**A Brief History of Higher Education in Canada**

*The French Regime*

While aboriginal peoples have lived in the territory that was to become Canada for thousands of years, the first permanent European colonial settlement was Quebec, founded by Champlain in 1608. The colony expanded quite slowly, and by 1628 there were still only 65 residents in the original settlement. Even when there were more focused attempts at expansion, the population had grown to only 6705 by 1673 (Phillips, 1957).

Early education initiatives focused on “civilizing” aboriginal peoples through schooling and religious conversion. The assumption that coercing or forcing aboriginal populations to except Western European values, cultures, customs, and religion was necessary for their success was to underscore public policy for the next three centuries.

Under the French colonial period, the Roman Catholic Church assumed responsibility for education at all levels. Civil authority generally assumed the role of supporting the educational work of the church and seeking royal support for schools. The Jesuits founded the first secondary school in 1635, and the Collége de Québec remained the only secondary school in New France until 1760. The college established a program of classical studies for secondary students, and the more advanced courses that were gradually introduced represented the first higher education programs in the territory that would eventually become Canada (Audet, 1970).

The apex of French colonial expansion in North America occurred in 1713, and New France began to decline when Nova Scotia and Acadia were awarded to the British under the Treaty of Utrecht later that year. The French regime effectively ended with the capture of Quebec in 1760, an arrangement that became formalized under the Treaty of Paris in 1763.

*The British Colonies*

The British had conquered territories dominated by French-language and culture. The conquest served to reinforce the importance of the Roman Catholic Church for a population that was now essentially isolated from France, and while the British destroyed many of the institutions that had emerged during the French colonial period, they tolerated the Church and its central role in the provision of education to French-speaking populations. What eventually emerged was a duel educational system in Quebec, with separate Catholic francophone, and English protestant educational structures.

While Harris traces the history of higher education in Canada back to the advanced courses offered by a Jesuit college in 1663 (Harris, 1976), the first degree granting colleges would not emerge for another century. In many respects it was the American Revolution that influenced the initial development of higher education in Canada under the British colonial period. The American Revolution was in many ways a civil war, and many of those loyal to the empire moved north to continue to live under the protection of the British crown. The large-scale migration of empire loyalists had a tremendous impact on the social, economic and political dimensions of the northern colonies. The loyalists sought ways of strengthening British culture and values in their new communities, and higher education became part of this broader agenda.

The first colleges were created by colonial legislatures (Muir, 1994). The first King’s College was founded in Windsor (Nova Scotia) in 1789 and the College of New Brunswick was created in Fredericton in 1800. McGill College emerged in Montreal in 1821 supported by funds from the estate of James McGill. King’s College at York (later Toronto) was awarded a charter from the British Crown in 1827.

In the 1840s a number of colleges with direct denominational affiliations were created, including Queen’s College (Presbyterian), Acadia College (Baptist) and Victoria College (Methodist) in 1841. Private denominational colleges, created and supported by specific church organizations, became the dominant institutional model for higher education until the end of the century.

The rise of denominational colleges raised questions about which institutions, if any, should receive support from colonial governments. The fact that land endowments had been granted to colleges that were implicitly or explicitly linked to the Church of England led to bitter political disputes between religious groups and within colonial legislatures. King’s College at York eventually emerged as the secular, provincial University of Toronto in 1849, and the University of New Brunswick assumed the same role in that colony in 1858 (Jones, 1996).

*From Confederation to WWII*

Higher education was not a major public policy issue in the debates surrounding the federation of the remaining British colonies. As Cameron (1991) has noted, there were only about 1500 university students in total within the colonies that would join to form Canada, and only 5 universities had enrolments of over 100 students. Most of the universities were struggling, church-supported, denominational institutions and the small number of public institutions were largely supported by endowment income.

The Dominion of Canada was created under the British North America Act of 1867 as a federation of the three colonies (Canada, which would become the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia). The BNA Act, approved by the British Government, functioned as Canada’s constitution until 1982 when it was replaced by the Constitution Act, approved by the Government of Canada. The constitutional arrangement created two levels of government, federal and provincial, and delegated authority over specific policy areas to each. Concerned by the threats of American imperialism, and attempting to avoid the catastrophe of the civil war that had just taken place south of its borders, the authors of the constitution had tried to create a strong federal government by assigning it responsibility for key issues such as trade and defence. Less important, local issues, such as education and hospitals, were assigned to the provinces.

Federation represented an attempt to balance the need for a unifying national government, with the rights of provinces to address the needs of their quite distinct local populations. Higher education was far from a major issue given that it involved only a very small percentage of the population, but even in this early period it became clear that the provinces had quite different approaches. The Roman Catholic Church continued to play the major role in the education (and higher education) of the Quebec francophone population, while a year after confederation Ontario decided to only provide government financial support to secular universities.

Given that the responsibility for education was assigned to the provinces, it is not surprising that the federal government’s role in this area was quite modest until after the Second World War, but it also became clear in the early decades of the country’s history that the federal government had an interest in higher education. The federal government created the Royal Military College in Kingston in 1874, an educational institution that was rationalized as an initiative under the government’s constitutional responsibility for defence (Cameron, 1991). Impressed with the way that German university professors had contributed to manufacturing advances in key industries as part of the WWI war effort, the federal government created the Advisory Committee for Scientific and Industrial Research, later known as the National Research Council, in 1916 (Neatby, 1987). While the Council was originally designed to encourage industrial research, it moved quickly to fund the work of university researchers and support graduate training in the sciences. The Council soon began to argue that investments in basic scientific research and training were needed in order to develop a national infrastructure for industrial research (Thistle, 1966).

Higher education in the eastern Canadian provinces involved a diversity of institutional types (public, private, secular, denominational) but the relationships between these institutions and government, even for those universities that were viewed as public and received government support, was limited and ambiguous. Provincial governments sometimes found themselves embroiled in disputes between denominational institutions, and, given the government’s constitutional responsibility for education, trying to determine the appropriate role for government in the affairs of publicly funded universities.

The need to review these boundaries became clear when political leaders in the Ontario government were accused of partisan interference and petty patronage at the University of Toronto, including appointing professors without consulting the administration of the University. The Government attempted to address these issues by creating a Royal Commission with a mandate to review the relationship between the Government and the University, and the internal governance structure of the institution. The Flavelle Commission studied university governance arrangements in both Great Britain and the United States, including site visits to a number of American universities, and its central conclusion was quite clear:

We have examined the governmental systems of other State universities upon this continent and have found a surprising unanimity of view upon the propriety of divorcing them from the direct superintendence of political powers (Alexander, 1906, p. 276).

The Commission argued that the interests of government in the oversight of the University should be delegated to a governing board composed of wise citizens appointed by government. The Commission also concluded that the University senate should be maintained, and that there should be a division of responsibility between these two governing bodies; academic policy should be the responsibility of the academic senate while the responsibility for the overall administration of the university would be delegated to the board. The Commission’s final report included a proposed new University of Toronto Act incorporating its recommendations, and the Act was speedily approved by government with few changes (Jones, 1996; 2002).

The basic bicameral model of governance articulated by the Flavelle Commission was almost immediately taken up by the new western provinces and their creation of provincial universities. Recognizing the importance of higher education for the development of these new jurisdictions, and attempting to avoid the denominational disputes that had emerged in the east, each of the new western provinces decided to create a single “provincial” university with a monopoly over the authority to grant degrees. The University of Manitoba was created in 1877, seven years after Manitoba had become a province, though the new University was essentially an examining body until it received a large endowment in 1904 that allowed it to hire instructors, and the University’s expanded role was finally clarified in legislation approved in 1917 (Harris, 1976; Morton, 1979). The news provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan were created in 1905, and their legislatures moved quickly to establish new provincial universities; the University of Alberta was created in 1906 and the University of Saskatchewan was created in 1907. British Columba had become a province in 1871, and while there was an initial attempt to create a university in 1880, the University of British Columbia finally emerged under provincial legislation approved in 1908 (Harris, 1976).

In addition to a similar governance structure and being assigned a monopolistic role as the “provincial university,” all four western universities were heavily influenced by the American land-grant universities, especially the notion of service to the economic and social development of the broader society. Each of these universities quickly developed academic programs in agriculture and engineering, as well as schools of extension that were designed to take the work of the university into the community (Campbell, 1978).

The network of small universities that characterized Canadian higher education before the Second World War represented a diverse collection of public and private, secular and denominational institutions. The institutions served a very small fraction of the Canadian population, and the small number of “public” universities received quite modest levels of government financial support. The Flavelle Commission had influenced the governance arrangements of many of these public institutions, and they operated with considerable autonomy from government, in part because of what Neatby has argued was a common understanding of the role of the public university:

Universities trained the children of the political elites; they served as a finishing school for their daughters and prepared their sons for admission to the liberal professions. These social functions were understood by governments and university officials; there were no major confrontations over admissions, over course content or over student discipline because both groups shared the same social values. Cabinet ministers and members of the Board of Governors might belong to different parties but they were all men of substance with similar views of the social order (Neatby, 1987, p. 34).

While most universities were primarily teaching institutions, several universities, especially McGill University and the University of Toronto, were gradually developing quite extensive research activities and graduate programs. These two universities became the only non-US members of the American Association of Universities.

*WWII and the Massification of Higher Education in Canada*

Public perceptions of the role of higher education in Canadian society began to change dramatically following the Second World War. Canada had been a major contributor to the war effort, and the veterans benefits program provided qualified returning soldiers with the option of receiving a free university education; tuition fees and basic living costs would be paid for by the federal government. The program was hugely successful both in terms of encouraging the further education of returning veterans, and in spreading out the transition of veterans into the rapidly changing post-war labour market. The expansion of enrolment was funded by direct per-student grants to universities by the federal government. In 1945-46 the enrolment of Canadian universities increased by 46% when 20,000 veterans entered the university system. A year later, 35,000 veterans enrolled (Cameron, 1991).

While the expansion may have started with returning veterans, it soon became clear that other segments of the Canadian population wanted to obtain a university education. Even excluding the veterans, university enrolment increased by almost 70% between 1941 and 1951 (Cameron, 1991). Universities began to request financial support for expansion from both the federal and provincial levels of government in order to address the increasing demands for enrolment.

Support for strong federal government involvement in the university sector emerged from various sources, including the 1951 report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences which recommended that the government provide direct grants to the universities based on provincial population. The government responded by allocating an additional $7 million in direct grants in 1951-52. The National Conference of Canadian Universities (NCCU, later to become the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada) had developed a positive working relationship with the federal government during the war, and now wanted the relationship, and federal government funding, to be sustained. In 1956 the NCCU organized a major conference on Canada’s “crisis” in higher education that included projections on increasing demand for higher education and experts suggested that enrolment would almost double in the next decade (Bissell, 1957). At the conclusion of the conference, Prime Minister St. Laurent announced new federal government funding to support the continuing expansion of the university sector.

The federal government’s direct involvement in funding universities was beginning to cause major constitutional concerns for some of the provinces. The federal government was providing direct support to both secular and denominational universities, which frustrated the Ontario provincial government which had determined that only secular universities would receive government support. More importantly, Quebec vehemently argued that the federal government was interfering in an area of provincial responsibility under the constitution, and it strongly requested that its universities refuse federal government funding in 1952. Most of the lost revenues were made up with increases in provincial grants.

While there was a broad consensus that it was in the public interest to expand higher education, the two levels of government struggled to find ways of working together to address the increasing demands. The federal government eventually shifted from direct operating grants to universities towards grants to the provinces, initially based on a share of total expenditures, and then, under the Established Programs Financing arrangements of 1976-77, towards unconditional transfers to the provinces. These arrangements involved both tax and cash transfers to the provinces using a formula that included an equalization component to address the needs of poorer provinces (Jones, 1996).

Each of the provinces moved to build capacity in the university sector. Newfoundland became Canada’s 10th province when it joined the federation in 1949, and the new provincial government moved to reposition Memorial College as Memorial University. Each of the four western provinces abandoned the notion of a single provincial university and provided independent status to what had formally been satellite colleges (for example, Victoria in British Columbia, Calgary in Alberta, Regina in Saskatchewan, and Brandon in Manitoba). New Brunswick rationalized its university sector by consolidating university programs in two English-language institutions (the University of New Brunswick and Mount Allison University) and one French-language institution (the Université de Moncton). As the level of provincial government funding increased, a number of denominational institutions in Ontario transitioned into secular institutions in order to access government support and address the needs of local populations. A number of provinces created new universities.

Higher education was now seen as a key area of public investment in the economic and social development of the nation, and the Canadian provinces began to plan for the multi-dimensional nature of this expansion. Many of the provinces created government task forces or commissions in order to study provincial needs and provide recommendations for developing a provincial system. These recommendations generally called for the continuing expansion of the university sector, often through the creation of new universities and the further expansion of existing institutions, but they also called for the creation of new non-university postsecondary institutions that would further increase access to higher education as well as address the needs for new technical/vocational skills within the labour market.

The mission and role of these new institutions varied considerably by province since they were designed to address specific needs within provincial systems (see Dennison, 1995; Dennison and Gallagher, 1986). Both British Columbia and Alberta decided to create community colleges that closely resembled the American institutional model. These colleges offered a comprehensive range of specialized vocational programs, as well as offering university transfer programs where students could obtain the first two years of university at the local college and then transfer into year three at a provincial university. Ontario created a provincial network of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology which operated in parallel to the university sector; the new colleges offered a comprehensive list of technical/vocational programs, including a range of three-year diploma programs, but the colleges were not designed to have a university-transfer function. In some other provinces the role of the new community colleges was limited to providing a range of short-cycle technical programs.

Undoubtedly the most comprehensive plan for developing a provincial higher education system emerged in Quebec, where reforms to education had become a component of a much broader social and political transformation that has become known as the “quiet revolution.” The entire educational system was restructured in favour of strong public institutions, and away from the historic role of the Roman Catholic Church (Henchley & Burgess, 1987). The entire school curriculum was reformed, and students completed secondary school at the end of grade 11. A new extensive network of colléges d’enseignement généal et professional (CEGEPs) which offered technical vocational programs as well as two-year pre-university programs, was initiated in 1967. In order to address the low university participation rates of francophone students, the government created the Université du Québec, a new multi-campus university with campuses located throughout the province. Two universities offering programs in English were merged to create Concordia University, and a number of Catholic universities gradually moved towards secularization, including the universities of Montréal, Laval, and Sherbrooke.

As these provincial systems expanded, governments created mechanisms for coordinating or regulating these increasingly complex institutional arrangements. At different time periods, every Canadian province eventually experimented with the creation of a “buffer” or intermediary agency between government and the institutions. These committees or councils, frequently modelled to some degree on the universities grants commission in the United Kingdom but with a primarily advisory role, were designed to provide the government with strategic advice on policy issues while protecting the institutions from direct government intervention. The role and history of these bodies varies a great deal by province. The university-sector intermediary bodies in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario were abandoned, though Ontario created a Higher Education Quality Council in 2007 with a mandate to conduct research on the system and provide the government with advice. Intermediary bodies continue to exist in Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Manitoba, and a regional intermediary body, the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, provides advice to the three Maritime provinces (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island).

The universities themselves were also reviewing their internal governance arrangements. Both students and faculty were demanding a greater role in the internal decision-making processes of the universities. In order to provide some guidance on these reforms, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada and the Canadian Association of University Teachers co-sponsored a national review of university governance conducted by Sir James Duff and Robert O. Berdahl. The final report of the review team, frequently called the Duff Berdahl report (1966), recommended that the basic bicameral governance structure be maintained, but that there should be greater representation of internal constituencies on senates and boards, and greater transparency. By the early 1970s most Canadian universities had reformed their governance structures to include representation by faculty on their governing boards, and representation by students on both boards and senates. Senate and board meetings became more open and transparent, though certain types of business would continue to be conducted in closed session. The same principles of participation that underscored the composition of the senate were usually extended to other levels of the institution, with faculty and student participation in decision-making in department and faculty councils, and search committees with representation from a range of constituencies assigned a major role in recommending senior administrative appointments (Jones, 2002; Jones, Shanahan & Goyan, 2004).

By the early 1970s, each of the provinces had developed a distinct system of higher education that involved an expanded university sector and a non-university postsecondary sector (usually called a college sector, though the institutional types varied by province). Supported in part by unconditional federal government transfers to the provinces, the provincial governments had come to assume by far the major role in the funding, regulation and coordination of what were now ten provincial higher education systems. While the provinces generally treated the university and college (non-university) sectors quite differently. Aside from coordinating funding, the province generally supported, or at least tolerated, high levels of university autonomy. The universities continued to have both substantive and procedural autonomy, with each institution determining its overall objectives and the best way to meet those objectives. In contrast, the provinces tended to view the colleges as instruments of public policy and the sector was much more tightly regulated, in some cases the colleges were directly managed by the Ministry responsible for higher education (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986).

While the federal government was no longer involved in providing direct operating grants to the universities, it continued to be involved in a range of policy areas that had a direct impact on higher education. The government’s role in supporting university research had expanded following the Second World War through the creation of the Canada Council, and it would later create three distinct research granting councils (the Medical Research Council, which would later become the Canadian Institutes of Health Research; the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council).

The federal government had also come to play a major role in providing student financial assistance to students. A Dominion-Provincial Student Aid program had been operating since 1939, and an expanded program, renamed the Canada Student Loan Program was introduced in 1964. The program offered government-guaranteed loans to students with financial needs, but it was coordinated with provincial student loan and grant programs and administered by the provinces.

With the economic recession of the early 1970s, the provinces applied the brakes to what had been two decades of large annual increases to higher education funding. Canada now had a mass system of higher education, and was one of the examples Trow would use in his classic analysis of the transition from an elite to mass system, but declining tax revenues meant that institutions could no longer count on receiving the level of support that their leaders were asking for. Universities were expected to find their own solutions to their new financial pressures.

Concerned that universities were looking at faculty salaries as a way of dealing with their budget problems, faculty associations began to look towards unionization as a mechanism for ensuring that the rights of the professoriate were protected. The unionization movement was strongly encouraged by the national umbrella organization, the Canadian Association of University Teachers, which provided local associations with information and tactical support. By the 1980s, the majority of Canadian university faculty were members of institution-based labour unions (Tudivor, 1999).

The impact of unionization was not limited to discussions of faculty salaries. While some universities had policy documents dealing with tenure and promotion, these decisions had usually been left in the hands of the university administration. Unionization led to the development of quite detailed appointment, tenure and promotion policies that involved peer-review and collegial decision processes. These policies were negotiated through collective bargaining and solidified in collective agreements (Horn, 1999).

In many respects the basic structure of mass, provincial, higher education systems had emerged by the middle of the 1970s, and these structures and arrangements, with minor modifications, continued to define these systems for the next two decades. For the provinces, the central policy issues focused on funding and access. Governments continued to encourage universities and colleges to increase enrolment to address the continuing demand for postsecondary education, but they also limited funding growth, in part because the provinces were increasingly preoccupied with the rapidly increasing costs of public health care (Jones, 1996).

*From 1995: Contemporary Developments and Recent Reforms*

Ever since the creation of the federal government’s unconditional transfers to the provinces in support of postsecondary education, the size of the transfers and their relationship to actual provincial expenditures had become the subject of political jostling between the two levels of government. In the 1980s and early 1990s the federal government unilaterally modified the formula arrangements. When the federal government in the mid-1990s began to look at ways of addressing the budget deficit, fiscal transfers became a key mechanism for savings. The federal government first reorganized its transfer arrangements to create a social transfer envelope, and then dramatically reduced the level of funds going to the provinces for health, education, and a range of other social programs. Between the 1995 budget and 1997-78, the federal government cut cash transfers to the provinces by $4.5 billion (CDN) (Fisher, et al, 2006).

Most provinces moved to cut funding to the postsecondary sector, often as part of broader austerity programs, though, once again, the approach varied by province. The Alberta and Ontario

Governments began broad based reforms designed to reduce the size and role of government. Ontario dramatically decreased funding to universities and colleges and then reregulated tuition fees so that all fees would increase, but that there would be very large increases for designated professional programs. In the absence of a national policy framework, the provinces reacted to the sudden decline in case transfers in quite different ways. Significant differences in tuition fees by province began to emerge as provinces like Ontario and Nova Scotia relied heavily on fees to support university operating costs, while Quebec intentionally maintained low university fees, and the CEGEPs had no tuition. Ontario experimented with marketization strategies that increased competition between institutions and encouraged new public-private sector funding partnerships (Jones & Young, 2004).

By the end of the century the federal government had eliminated the budget deficit. While the government increased transfers to the provinces associated with health care, it decided to shift it invest in higher education in two different directions. The first was in student financial assistance. The government created the Canada Study Grants program that provided grants of up to $3000 to students with children who had serious financial need; the program was administered through the Canada Student Loans Program. The program was later expanded to provide support to students with disabilities and women in doctoral programs.

Tuition in most provinces had increased in response to declining government operating grants to institutions, and there were concerns that too many students were assuming too much debt in order to pay for their higher education. The federal government announced the creation of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation in 1998. The Foundation was created as a separate, non-profit agency funded by a $2.5 billion endowment from the federal government. It was assigned a ten-year mission beginning in 2000 to award student financial assistance. Most of the funds were used to provide bursaries to students with financial needs (Fisher, et al, 2006).

Given the increasing importance that tuition fees were playing in funding postsecondary education, the federal government also initiated a program designed to encourage families to save money to pay for the education of their children. The Registered Education Saving Program (RESP) had been establish in 1972 to allow parents to establish special saving accounts that could only be used to pay for higher education. Interest earned on funds deposited in the account would not be taxed. In 1998 the government announced the creation of the Canada Education Savings Grant. Contributions to an RESP would now receive a government grant of 20% of the contribution to top-up the account, to a maximum of $400 (currently $500) per year. With this incentive in place large numbers of new RESP accounts were created, especially by middle-class families.

The second area of major investment was in research and development. While the federal government had been supporting research councils that provided grants to university researchers, its interest in more strategic investments in research and development began to increase in the 1980s with the development of National Centres of Excellence that were designed to support research in strategic areas and facilitate interaction between university researchers and industry. Two new, mammoth initiatives for strengthening Canada’s university research infrastructure emerged at the end of the twentieth century and continue to have a major influence on Canadian higher education. The first was the creation of the Canada Research Chairs (CRC) program which was designed to create 2000 new research chairs at Canadian universities. These chairs were allocated to institutions on the basis of each institution’s prior success in research council grant competitions, meaning that more than half of the chairs were assigned to a handful of research-intensive universities. Chairs were divided into two levels (for junior and senior research chairs) and into internal and external appointments, the former to support the retention of leading researchers and prevent brain drain, and the latter to attract leading researchers through external, international searches. The program obviously represented a major investment in top researchers, and an entirely new mechanism for building research capacity. In 2008 the government announced a initiative called the Canada Excellence Research Chairs program in which institutions submitted proposals to attract world class researchers. Successful proposals received up to $10 million per year for seven years to cover the salary and research team costs associated with recruiting the specific researcher. Both initiatives have been criticized for not taking gender into account in initial appointments (a large majority of initial CRC appointments, and all of the initial Excellence Research Chair appointments were male), and for their contribution to the creation of a research start system, but they have also played a major role in the retention of senior researchers, provided additional status to top researchers, and generally strengthened university research capacity (Fisher et al, 2007).

The second major initiative was the creation of the Canadian Foundation for Innovation (CFI). While the CRC program focuses on researchers, the CFI focuses on research infrastructure and represents a major new sources of support for the develop of new laboratories, the purchase of research equipment, and a wide range of other infrastructure initiatives required for leading edge research. The Foundation awards funding on the basis of a review of proposals submitted by institutions and requires matching support (from industry, universities, other levels of government, etc.). The Foundation has also linked its initiatives with the CRC program – so that holders of research chairs can, if they compete successfully, obtain start-up support for new labs or other infrastructure needs.

These two major investments in research, combined with some increased funding for the granting councils, a modest expansion in graduate fellowship programs, and some funding to try and compensate institutions for indirect costs, mean that there are far more resources associated with research than was the case twenty years ago. Research is no longer viewed as simply the sum of research activities of independent scholars working in a university, but is increasing seen as an activity requiring central institutional planning and strategy since many of these new initiatives require institution-level proposals, or involve large-scale, collaborative research proposals that need central seed-funding or administrative support.

These recent changes have involved a major change in the role of the Government of Canada in higher education policy. Issues and challenges at the provincial and institutional levels will be discussed in a later section of this essay.

**Current Status of Higher Education**

*Enrolment and Institutions*

As already noted, higher education in Canada can be understood as the sum of ten provincial and three territorial “systems.” As illustrated in Table 1, the provinces and territories differ dramatically in area and population, and while the ten provinces all have relatively high participation rates, there are huge differences in the size and infrastructure associated with these provincial systems. At one extreme is Prince Edward Island, Canada’s smallest province, with a total area of 5660 square kilometres and a total population of approximately 146,000. This province has one university and one college. Canada’s largest higher education system can be found in the country’s second-largest province, Ontario, which has a population of approximately 13.5 million and enrols over 760,000 students. Ontario has 20 publicly-supported universities, and 24 Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, as well as a number of private universities, theological institutions, and private career colleges (Jones & Skolnik, 2009).

Each of the three territories faces enormous challenges in serving the postsecondary education needs of their jurisdiction given their size and sparse populations. The combined size of these three northern territories is larger than the country of India, but with a population of less than 120,000. Nunavut, the largest of the three territories, has a land mass larger than the country of Mexico, but with a total population that could fit easily into a major sports area. Each territory has created a college that offers a range of programs in satellite campuses located throughout the jurisdictions, as well as through on-line offerings. In addition, these colleges often work collaboratively with universities in the southern provinces, for example by facilitating degree programs offered by universities in collaboration with colleges, or through credit transfer arrangements. There are no universities in the three northern territories, though Yukon College has been given the authority to offer degree programs by the territorial legislature.

**Table 1: Area, Population, University Enrolment and College Enrolment by Province and Territory\***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Jurisdiction** | **Area km2** | **2012 Population** | **University** | **College** | **Total** |
| Newfoundland and Labrador | 405212 | 512700 | 18324 | 9549 | 27870 |
| Prince Edward Island | 5660 | 146100 | 4401 | 3081 | 7482 |
| Nova Scotia | 55284 | 948700 | 42834 | 11811 | 54645 |
| New Brunswick | 72908 | 756000 | 23415 | 8217 | 31635 |
| Quebec | 1542056 | 8054800 | 287475 | 214761 | 502236 |
| Ontario | 1076395 | 13505900 | 483783 | 276948 | 760731 |
| Manitoba | 647797 | 1267000 | 43632 | 18390 | 62025 |
| Saskatchewan | 651036 | 1080000 | 31770 | 20541 | 52308 |
| Alberta | 661848 | 3873700 | 128361 | 60246 | 188607 |
| British Columbia | 944735 | 4622600 | 173583 | 93165 | 266745 |
| Yukon | 482443 | 36100 | - | 246 | 246 |
| Northwest Territories | 1346106 | 43300 | - | 525 | 525 |
| Nunavut | 2093190 | 33700 | - | 279 | 279 |
| CANADA | 9984670 | 34880500 | 1237584 | 717756 | 1955340 |

\*Source: Area data from Natural Resources Canada. Population data from Statistics Canada, CANSIM, table 051-0001. Enrolment data for 2010/11 from Statistics Canada, CANSIM, table 477-0019.

There are approximately 163 public and private universities in Canada (CMEC, 2013) though this figure is based on an inclusive definition that includes private theological institutions that offer degrees in theology. The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the umbrella organization for the university sector, has 97 members, but this figure also includes a number of institutions that have the legal right to operate as independent universities, but currently operate within federation arrangements with provincial universities. Excluding these unique historical arrangements, there are about 90 universities that are recognized as such under provincial legislation and offer recognized university degree programs.

The vast majority of these 90 universities are considered “public” universities. These are not state-owned enterprises, but rather private, non-for-profit institutions that receive government funding and are regarded as having a broader public purpose. While private denominational universities were the dominant institutional model for higher education in Canada in the early years of the twentieth century, the post-war expansion of the university sector lead to the secularization of the university sector. By the 1970s Canadian universities were generally characterized as public, secular institutions and governments viewed university degree granting as a public monopoly. The number of universities was tightly controlled by government. While provinces still tightly control the number of universities, several provinces have allowed for the emergence of a limited number of private universities (Skolnik, 1987). Most of these private universities are quite small and are associated with a religious denomination (such as the Canadian Mennonite University in Manitoba) or offer programs within an institutional environment that supports the beliefs and values of a religious faith (such as Trinity Western University in British Columbia). These institutions enrol a very small fraction of the total population of university students and there is little sense that the private sector will expand in the near future.

There are approximately 183 public colleges and institutes in Canada. As noted much earlier in this essay, there are significant differences in the mission and role of institutions that fall under this broad category. The Quebec CEGEPs offer both pre-university and vocational programs, and completion of the pre-university program is required before students will transition to the university sector. This mandatory pre-university function helps to explain why the share of postsecondary students attending colleges is higher in Quebec than in all of the other provinces (see Table 1).

In addition to these public colleges, there are also private institutions that offer technical/vocational programming in every province. The institutions are commonly referred to as private career colleges, and range in size from small family businesses that offer specialized short-cycle programs (English as a second language, hair styling, bus driving) to larger, more comprehensive institutions that may compete with the private college sector. The level of government regulation of this sector varies by province, but in general terms governments have tended to more tightly control the public college sector rather than the private career college sector, and most colleges do not assess the quality of programs offered by the latter but assume that such issues will be dealt with by the invisible hand of the market.

*Faculty*

Canadian university faculty are employees of the university and the terms and conditions of their employment are determined at the level of the institution. Generally speaking, full-time university faculty are expected to engage in a combination of research, teaching and service activities. The vast majority of full-time faculty are in the “tenure-stream” in that they either have tenure or hold an appointment that will be reviewed for tenure at the end of a probationary period. Junior faculty are normally appointed at the rank of Assistant Professor. Reviews for tenure and promotion are taken very seriously, and usually involves a quite elaborate process where the candidate submits a tenure file including detailed information on research, teaching and service activities, and where the university obtains information on teaching from multiple sources, and external assessments of research. Tenure committees, located at one or more levels of the institution, review these materials and provide recommendations on whether tenure and/or promotion should be granted. There are three common ranks: Assistant Professor, Associate Professor and Professor (or Full Professor).

Data on full-time faculty at Canadian universities by rank and sex are presented in Table 2. Gender inequity within the professoriate has been and continues to be a major issue of concern. Males far outnumber females, especially in the higher, more prestigious, better paid ranks, though the gender balance at the assistant professor level suggests that there have modest been improvements over time. Females only outnumber males in ranks below the level of assistant, which tend to be non-tenured instructor positions, and in the “other” category.

**Table 2: Full-time teaching staff at Canadian universities by rank and sex (2010-11)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Rank** | **Males** | **Females** | **Total** |
| Full Professor | 11447 | 3354 | 14946 |
| Associate Professor | 9550 | 5923 | 15473 |
| Assistant Professor | 5446 | 4715 | 10161 |
| Rank Below Assistant | 1612 | 1875 | 3487 |
| Other | 431 | 436 | 867 |
| TOTAL | 28486 | 16448 | 44934 |

Source: Statistics Canada, CANSIM, table 477-0017.

Recent studies of full-time faculty at Canadian universities, such as the Changing Academic Profession comparative study of the professoriate in 19 jurisdictions, and a study of faculty compensation, present a picture of a hard-working professoriate with reasonable working conditions and levels of remuneration, and relatively high levels of reported job satisfaction (Weinrib, Jones, Metcalfe, Fisher, Gingras, Rubenson & Snee, 2013). A comparative study of faculty remuneration found that Canadian faculty salaries, taking purchasing power into account, were the highest at both the junior and senior levels compared to the salaries at public universities in other countries included in the analysis (Altbach, Reisberg, Yukevich, Androushchak & Pacheco, 2012; Jones & Weinrib, 2012). Canadian university faculty are clearly worried about the future of the academic profession, including increasing pressures for external research funding, declining working conditions, and concerns about the quality of university faculty. However, unlike some other countries, Canadian universities have cleared protected the full-time, tenure-stream professoriate and there is little indication of generational differences: junior and senior faculty report working roughly the same number of hours and have quite similar perceptions of their work (Jones, Weinrib, Metcalfe, Fisher, Rubenson & Snee, 2012).

There is surprisingly little national data on part-time, contract faculty employed at Canadian universities, though there is at least anecdotal evidence that the relative stability of the full-time professoriate has been sustained through the increasing use of contingent, contract university teachers. It has been suggested that there has been both a horizontal and vertical fragmentation of academic work within the Canadian universities. Horizontal fragmentation refers to the increasing specialization of the professoriate associated with the continuing growth of knowledge, but also the increasing emphasis placed on service workers that support the academic enterprise but are not located within traditional academic units. These units include student affairs, which is increasingly assigned an educational role in terms of improving the student experience and supporting student success, and educational/faculty development units which support the improvement of teaching, the adoption of new technologies in support of teaching and learning, and curriculum development. The vertical fragmentation of academic work refers to the growth of new categories of contingent labour which are often “managed” by traditional department structures. An undergraduate course may be taught by a tenured professor, but the same course may also be taught by a sessional instructor employed on a stipend basis, a graduate student teaching assistant, a full-time contract faculty member, etc. At many universities these different categories of workers are unionized, with separate unions representing different categories of employment (Jones, 2013).

There is no national data on teachers in the college sector (full-time or part-time). As in the university sector, most college faculty are unionized, though in some provinces these unions bargain at the provincial level (which is quite different than the universities where these negotiations take place at each institution). Generally speaking, college teachers have much higher teaching loads than their university peers. In most provinces college teachers are not expected to engage in research activities.

**Current Issues in Canadian Higher Education**

There are many challenges and issues associated with higher education in Canada. This section will focus on some of these key issues, namely accessibility, shifting institutional boundaries and categories, quality, and funding.

*Accessibility*

Accessibility to higher education has been a key policy issue in every Canadian province. Canada’s participation rates in higher education, if one includes both universities and colleges, are among the highest in the world, depending on which indicator is used. If one excludes college enrolment, Canada continues to have a high university participation rate, but its international ranking moves down considerably. As the OECD (2012) has noted, Canada depends more on its college sector for the provision of postsecondary education than other OECD nations, though it is hard to interpret these findings since Canada’s college sector is extremely heterogeneous and it offers a wide range of programs that range from short-cycle programs to, in some provinces, four-year degrees.

High participation rates are party related to strong provincial schools systems. Secondary school attainment is close to universal. Canadian students in almost all provinces perform at or above the OECD average on PISA tests in all areas, suggesting that Canadian postsecondary institutions can expect students to be reasonably well prepared for higher education. More importantly, international testing suggests that performance is relatively equitable. While there are differences in performance by socio-economic status, these differences are smaller than the inequities found in other OECD nations.

High participation rates have also led to high levels of postsecondary attainment. Canada leads the world in the number of adults with some level of postsecondary education, though once again attainment in terms of university degrees is somewhat lower; Canada ranks tenth among OECD nations in terms of the ratio of adults who have completed a university degree (OECD, 2012).

While Canada already has quite high participation rates, access continues to be a policy issue for two reasons. As the Canadian population ages, there are continuing concerns that participation rates will need to continue to increase in order to meet future labour market needs for highly skilled labour. The push to continue to increase aggregate participation rates has led to funding for continuing expansion in several provinces, as well as continuing debates over issues of affordability associated with tuition fees, and periodic reforms to student financial assistance. More recently, several provinces have indicated a need to expand graduate education in order to meet the needs very high-level technical expertise, and to strengthen the nation’s research and development infrastructure (Jones & Weinrib, 2011).

The second policy dimension to the access issue is that while Canada has had high overall participation rates, some populations have higher rates of participation than others. There continue to be differences in participation by educational background and socio-economic status, especially in the university sector. Policy approaches in some provinces have shifted towards focusing on access for under-represented populations, in addition to supporting growth in aggregate participation. Canada’s aboriginal populations have historically had much lower levels of participation than the population as a whole. There are signals that these participation rates are improving, but this is a highly complex policy area given the federal government’s responsibility for specific aboriginal populations, the responsibility of the provinces for education, and the growing consensus that higher levels of aboriginal self-governance are an important part of the equation. A number of institutions with an explicit mandate to serve the needs of aboriginal populations have emerged, including First Nations University in Saskatchewan, the University of Northern British Columbia, the University College of the North in Manitoba, and Algoma University in Ontario.

*Shifting Institutional Boundaries and Categories*

The institutional arrangements that emerged during the post-war expansion period involved a clear differentiation between universities and colleges. In some provinces, such as British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec, the college sector had a direct relationship with the university sector through the provision of pre-university or university-transfer programs. In other provinces, such as Ontario and Manitoba, the two sectors operated in parallel and there was no formal transfer function. Despite these differences, one of the clear lines dividing the university and college sectors in every Canadian province during this period was the fact that universities awarded degrees and colleges did not.

Beginning in the 1990s, several provinces decided to expand access to university-level degrees by allowing non-university institutions to award degrees, subject to ensuring that appropriate quality standards were maintained. This expansion of degree granting was designed to expand access to under-represented populations, who were more likely to attend colleges than universities, reduce some of the challenges associated with university transfer, and generally provide students with more choices.

To-date, half of the Canadian provinces have now provided colleges with at least some limited form of degree-granting authority (Jones, 2009a). Several provinces have also approved the development of new hybrid institutional forms that continue to blur the boundaries between institutional types. British Columbia transformed a number of its community colleges into university colleges, and then later repositioned these university colleges as teaching-intensive universities. These new universities offer a range of undergraduate programs, but they also continue to operate programs that were associated with their historic mission as community colleges, including short-cycle vocational and trades programs. Two community colleges in Alberta have become universities where teaching plays a more important role in the institutional mission than research. Legislation in Ontario created a process where the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology could seek approval to offer degree programs in applied areas. While the option was open to all colleges, the vast majority of degree programs are now offered by a relatively small number of institutions, leading to greater differentiation between institutions in the same sector.

These institutional transformations and the expansion of degree granting in non-university institutions have blurred what had been some relatively clear boundaries between institutional types within provincial systems (Marshall, 2008). These changes are complex and multifaceted. With the expansion of degree-granting, institutions have placed greater emphasis on hiring faculty with doctoral degrees. There has been an expansion of research activity in the non-university sector, both in terms of emphasizing the importance of applied research, often characterized as a natural extension of the traditional role of colleges in serving the needs of local industry, and in terms of competing for traditional grants from federal research councils. Faculty at these “new” institutions have much higher teaching loads than faculty in traditional universities.

These changes provide students with more options for accessing degree programs. The hybrid institutional forms that have emerged from some provincial reforms also have the potential to create institutional cultures that are quite different than those associated with the more traditional university sector (for example, cultures which value teaching much higher than research in contrast to the traditional balance associated with Canadian universities). However, given key differences in institutional missions, they also raise questions about the quality of new degree programs, the expansion of research in an environment where there is already stiff competition for research funding, and, more broadly, the question of whether these new institutions represent true hybrid institutional types, or whether they will evolve, over time, into traditional Canadian universities by abandoning their distinctive characteristics (Jones, 2009a).

*Quality*

The expansion of public universities following the Second World War led to the creation of a relatively homogeneous university sector. Universities were publicly supported, secular, degree-granting institutions with similar governance and administrative structures. None of the provinces created a stratified or hierarchical university structure; they generally treated universities as equals. These universities were all members of the same national club, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, and there was a relatively common understanding of a university mission.

Given this environment, there was no perceived need for a national quality assessment mechanism. Universities generally treated each other as peers. An undergraduate degree from one university was treated as equivalent at another. Decisions about who to accept into a masters degree program were based largely on undergraduate grades, regardless of which Canadian university the student had graduated from. There was no need for a national institutional accreditation system since the provinces tightly controlled the authority to grant degrees.

This does not mean that issues of quality within Canadian higher education were not debated and discussed, but most provinces were more concerned with access and funding issues than quality, in large part because of a general sense that while the quality of undergraduate programs offered by Canadian universities could be and should be improved, there was no quality crisis to worry about. Issues of quality were largely left in the hands of the autonomous universities. In Ontario, in order to prevent threatened provincial government intervention, the universities created the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies to review proposals for new graduate programs and to periodically review the quality of existing programs (Jones, 1996).

Performance indicators emerged in the provinces of Alberta and Ontario in the 1990s, and the indicators were later tied to the funding mechanism, though their influence on institutional funding levels was quite modest. Other forms of quality assessment emerged as a function of the expansion of degree granting; several provinces, including British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario, created councils with authority to review and make recommendations on proposals for new degree programs. Several provinces, including Alberta, Ontario and Quebec have experimented with multi-year agreements between universities and governments which establish institutional expectations.

The quality of higher education has emerged as an important issue in many provinces over the last decade. At the most basic level, provincial governments are looking for mechanisms to hold autonomous universities accountable for quality, but they have generally resisted investing in provincial accreditation systems or major quality assessment mechanisms, in part because there is still a high level of trust between governments and the public universities they support. The expansion of degree-granting and the emergence of hybrid institutional types has raised new questions about the characteristics that institutions that offer university degrees should have, and issues of degree quality (Marshall, 2008).

In 2007 the Council of Ministers of Education responded to some of these concerns by creating a Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework that identifies expected competencies associated with each degree level; this approach emphasizes outcomes rather than inputs (such as differences in institutional characteristics) in determining degree standards. A similar qualifications framework emerged in Ontario.

Much of the current discussion of quality has focused on the development and assessment of learning outcomes. Ontario universities have created a new quality mechanism based on the assumption that programs will develop measureable outcomes that are congruent with degree qualification expectations, and that these programs will be reviewed in accordance with institutional guidelines. These processes will be periodically audited by a Quality Council created by the Council of Ontario Universities, the university-sector umbrella organization. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario has also become extremely interested in learning outcomes, but with a view towards establishing broader outcome standards that could become the basis for a provincial quality assessment mechanism. The Council is currently participating in the OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes feasibility study, and is supporting studies of the development of discipline-based learning outcomes.

*Funding*

The two major sources of income for Canadian universities and colleges are government grants and tuition, but the balance between these two revenue sources varies by province and has changed dramatically over the last few decades. In most provinces both of these revenue sources are effectively controlled by government. Provincial governments determine the amount of financial support that they will allocate to higher education, but they also, directly or indirectly, influence or control university decisions on the level of tuition fees.

Tuition fee policies vary quite dramatically by province. Quebec has generally maintained the lowest tuition fees in Canada, and a provincial government initiative to substantively increase fees led to mammoth student protests in what has been termed the “maple spring” of 2012. The government’s attempts to limit these protests through legislation led to new concerns that the government was limiting freedom of speech and the right to peaceful protest, and the reform movement expanded to include a wide of individuals and groups supporting the rights of students to continue their political action. The Charest government eventually called an election, and tuition, and the related protest movements, became key election issues. Charest’s Liberal Party lost, and the new government moved quickly to roll-back the tuition increases and freeze fees.

The Quebec case is both unique and extreme, but there is little doubt that tuition fees have become a major political issue in many provinces. There has been an increasing expectation in many provinces that students need to pay a reasonable share of the costs of their education since they are major beneficiaries, but there is little agreement on what constitutes a “reasonable share,” and student organizations and other groups have been quite successful in linking affordability to government priorities for access. Outside Quebec, the result has been a sort of political cycle of fee increases, fee freezes, and fee reductions, depending on the ideology of the party in power in each province, and, of course, election promises. Student organizations have been quite successful at linking the issue of affordability with government priorities for access, and more media attention is probably given to tuition fee debates than any other major policy issue.

The tuition fee discussion focuses largely on the university sector, in part because most provinces have clearly differentiated fee levels by sector. There are not tuition fees in the Quebec colleges, and tuition fee for students attending colleges in most provinces are much lower (for most programs, there are exceptions) than for students attending universities.

The second major source of revenue for institutions of higher education is provincial government operating grants. The mechanism used to determine these grants vary by province, but there is usually an explicit relationship between grants and enrolment (such as in Ontario and British Columbia), or an implicit relationship based on historic allocations. There are major differences in the level of operating support provided to institutions by government if one considers per-student allocations, but there are also major differences by province in terms of scale, program mix, and overall provincial government revenues (that is, some provinces are poorer than others). While provinces are currently (in 2013) either reducing the size of operating grants to institutions, or providing very small increases.

Given the control of tuition fees and the reductions in government operating funding, most universities are looking for ways of reducing expenditure and turning towards new sources of revenue. One of revenue that has received considerable attention in recent years is international student recruitment. While governments have tightly controlled tuition fees for domestic students, they frequently allow universities considerable flexibility to raise revenues by charging much higher fees to international students. International education, and internationalization more broadly, is an interesting policy issue in Canada because involves both the federal government (which has responsibility for international relations and controls visas) and the provinces (which have responsibility for education). Coordination of policy in this area has been challenging (Trilokekar, Jones & Shubert, 2009). There has never been a national strategy for international education, though a recent federal government task force has articulated a series of recommendations that would involve both levels of government in an ambitious plan to double the number of international students (Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 2012). There is a growing consensus of the need for both levels of government to work together to strengthen Canada’s position within the increasingly competitive international market, to support what has already become a major revenue-generating industry for the Canadian economy, and to encourage the recruitment of international students given the important role these students may eventually play as highly-education, future Canadian citizens. The key, once again, is coordination, and while the recommendations of the report focus considerable attention on this issue, they tend to emphasize the role of the federal government and provide little explicit attention to recommendations of the Council of Ministers of Education Canada.

**Conclusion:**

Canada may have the most decentralized approach to higher education than any other developed country on the planet. This decentralization has led to a complex arrangement of quite distinct provincial and territorial higher education systems. This complexity presents a range of challenges of Canadian higher education related to the absence of pan-Canadian quality assessment mechanisms, policies, standards, and even comprehensive, integrated national data systems. At the same time, there are clear indications that the Canadian approach has led to high participation rates, and high levels of postsecondary attainment.

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