**Increasing Access to Higher Education:**

**A Review of System-Level Policy Initiatives**

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**Abstract:**

*Higher education has become a key element of social and economic policy in countries throughout the world. Increasing participation rates in higher education is an important policy objective of most governments as they strive to develop the highly skilled human resources required for developed economies, to obtain the public returns on investment associated with a highly educated population, and to broaden access to include disadvantaged populations and address broader social inequities. While many of the most important mechanisms for increasing access and student success take place at the level of the institution or program, there are a range of policy approaches available to governments to directly or indirectly influence access to higher education. The objective of this paper is to provide a systematic overview of key policy options available at the system-level. Drawing largely from the Canadian experience (Jones, Shanahan, Padure, Lamoureux & Gregor, 2008), the paper will provide a macro analysis of government policy approaches designed to increase access, and assess these mechanisms based on current research in the field.*

**Introduction**

Higher education has become a key element of social and economic policy in countries throughout the world. Increasing participation rates in higher education is an important policy objective of most governments as they strive to develop the highly skilled human resources required for developed economies, to obtain the public returns on investment associated with a highly educated population, and to broaden access to include disadvantaged populations and address broader social inequities. Access is a complex issue, however, requiring strategies that apply to specific regions and subpopulations in order to truly meet the objective of ensuring a highly educated population with broad representation of various ethnic groups and social classes.

The term “access to higher education” means far more than simply increasing aggregate participation rates; access is about which populations are participating, or more accurately, which are not, what students have access to (in terms of programs and institutions), and whether they are successful in completing their education. The overall participation rates of Canadians in higher education are among the highest in the world, though there is variation among the provinces (Kirby, 2010; Jones et al. 2008). The issue in Canada lies primarily in the disparities and inequities of access, including student success, of certain populations, whether because of geographic location (for example, rural), financial issues, lack of social capital (first generation learners), or other disparities. Those from lower economic groups are less likely to obtain a postsecondary credential than those of higher economic status. For example, Frenette noted that 31 percent of youth from the bottom quartile (25%) of the income distribution attend university compared to 50 percent in the top quartile (Frenette 2007). Moreover, Canada’s Aboriginal populations have significantly lower rates of participation when compared with the general population as a whole. Further, those students who are admitted may not have the social capital in terms of family support and familiarity with the system of education in order to successfully complete a program. The ability to plan for a career beyond the credential may be adversely affected by a lack of social capital, as with the pursuit of professional or graduate programs.

Canada offers an intriguing case study of access to higher education given it high levels of participation, but also the challenges that Canadian higher education faces in addressing the needs of an extraordinarily diverse population within the second largest country on the planet. The Canadian approach to higher education policy is highly decentralized, and there is an opportunity to look at how various provinces have focused on certain aspects and methods of increasing access to post-secondary education.

While many of the most important mechanisms for increasing access and student success take place at the level of the institution or program, there are a range of policy approaches available to governments to directly or indirectly influence access to higher education. The objective of this paper is to provide a systematic overview of key policy options available at the system-level. Drawing largely from the Canadian experience (Jones, Shanahan, Padure, Lamoureux & Gregor, 2008), the paper will provide a macro analysis of government policy approaches designed to increase access, and assess these mechanisms based on current research in the field.

This paper will review and discuss four major types of policy approaches:

1. *Government funding tools*: Including the direct support of system expansion, the use of student financial assistance mechanisms to support participation, regulating tuition, targeted funding for special groups, and performance-based funding.
2. *Involving community*: Including initiatives by government to support community-based access initiatives, such as supporting organizations working with disadvantaged populations, outreach initiatives, and expanding geographic access.
3. *Rethinking system design*: Including K-16 initiatives, revisiting the roles of institutions (and the creation of hybrid institutional types), and modifying governance and coordination structures.
4. *Measuring success*: Including the clarification of objectives of access policies, and the role of data systems and policy research in monitoring and evaluating system outcomes.

**Part I: Government funding tools**

Funding tools used by government to affect access to systems of higher education have changed significantly over the past century.Under the purview of human capital theory, the expansion of the system was thought to lead directly to increased economic growth as well as private and social gains. The “more is better” approach to higher education focused on the assumption that “more students would ‘automatically’ lead to more equality of opportunities, as well as more economic and social benefits” (Maassen, Magalhaes & Amaral, 2007, p. 6). Human capital theory provided an impetus to expand the higher education system with the promise of private and public returns that would lead to economic prosperity and growth.

Maassen, Magalhaes and Amaral (2007) argue that many OECD governments began to question whether increasing investments in higher education were offering appropriate returns in terms of social benefits. In what they termed the “more is problematic” phase, governments began to look at new ways of funding higher education to rebalance private and public contributions to more closely resemble private and social returns on investment.

By the turn of the century government policies towards access entered a “more but different” phase in which governments began to reposition higher education (and access to a higher education) as a key component in economic development. In this light, the push for greater access became linked to the need for highly skilled human resources and governments became increasingly interested in overall participation rates, but also in supporting the expansion of programs that were viewed as being of strategic importance to the new economy, such as the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. Between 2004 and 2008, the provinces of Ontario (2005), Newfoundland and Labrador (2005), Alberta (2006), British Columbia (2007), Saskatchewan (2007), and New Brunswick (2007, 2008) initiated broad review of their higher education sectors. Each of the reports emerging from these investigations emphasized the need to increase system capacity and improve access.

Policy mechanisms that support increasing access through the use of government funding tools are probably the most commonly used instruments in the higher education public policy repertoire. While human capital theory continues to play an important role in providing a theoretical foundation for government support of increasing participation, most governments have come to adopt a much more sophisticated understanding of the importance of human competencies and skills in relation to the goals and objectives of a knowledge economy, and in relation to government policies designed to strengthen national research and innovation systems.

There are four major types of government funding tools related to accessibility. The first, and most common, tool is direct government support for system expansion. As government objectives become more focused on access for specific populations, direct government funding is often targeted on supporting access for specific groups (targeted funding). The second type of government funding focuses on student financial support mechanisms designed to support participation, including the provision of loans and grants, as well as mechanisms designed to encourage families to save and contribute to the costs of a child’s education. The third type of policy mechanism is regulating costs, especially tuition fees. The fourth type of tool is performance-based funding. Examples of each of these four approaches will be discussed.

* 1. *Funding Expansion and System Coordination*

The direct funding of system expansion in order to increase access is a common policy tool in Canadian higher education (Kirby, 2010). The Government of Canada provided incentives for universities to expand in order to admit returning veterans following the Second World War through the use of direct per-veteran grants to institutions. While the federal government’s investments in the growth of higher education continued, the mechanism shifted to take the form of tax point and cash transfers to the provinces in recognition of the constitutional responsibility of the provinces for education (Jones, 1996). The provincial governments became the primary level of government for regulating and directly funding universities and other postsecondary institutions, and most provinces provided some form of direct support for system expansion. There continues to be a relationship between student enrolment and government grants in many provinces.

For example, the major expansion of the Ontario higher education system was accomplished by adjusting the formula funding system so that it was more responsive to undergraduate enrolment growth. Institutions received additional government funding for enrolling more students. A government review by former Premier Bob Rae (Ontario, 2005) argued in favour of additional expansion focusing on graduate education, and Ontario committed a total of $222 million in additional annual funding for higher education institutions specifically to allow for 15,000 new graduate level spaces (Council of Ontario Universities, 2009; Ontario, 2005). In addition to funding increased enrolment through operating grants, the province also allocated funds to support capital expansion.

In addition to funding policies designed to address aggregate participation, governments are also increasingly aware that some populations are losing out and they have created targeted funding mechanisms designed to increase access for under-represented groups. In Canada, in particular, there is a notable underrepresentation of Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions. There has been a persistent gap in educational achievement levels with only 35 percent of Aboriginal peoples attaining a post-secondary credential compared to 51 percent of the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2008).

The Government of British Columbia has made strides in increasing the number of First Nations students who attend post-secondary programs (Jothan, 2011). As of 2003, there were approximately 15,500 Aboriginal students attending higher education institutions in B.C. This represented roughly four percent of the overall student population (Jothan, 2005). A 2002 survey by the Outcomes Working Group found that over half (52%) of the Aboriginal student respondents attended colleges, while 35 percent attended university colleges and 13% attended other institutes. With the 2007 *Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training Strategy and Action Plan*, the government aimed to engage First Nation peoples in higher education and enhance relationship-building between PSE institutions and First Nation communities. The Ministry established an Evaluation Steering Committee to provide guidance, advice and direction in the evaluation. This Strategy is part of the *Transformative Change Accord* (TCA) (2005) and the *New Relationship Vision* as developed to make British Columbia “the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.” This plan involved a multi-year $65 million dollar initiative designed to increase Aboriginal participation in higher education. In 2006 British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell described the new relationship:

This tri-partite agreement stands as a binding declaration of our mutual resolve to act upon the vision and commitment of all first ministers and national Aboriginal leaders, as set out in the Kelowna agreement. That TCA was the product of an unprecedented government-to-government collaboration. More importantly, it is 'a shared commitment to action by all parties'—including the Government of Canada—that speaks to 'a 10-year dedicated effort to improve the quality of life of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada (Government of British Columbia, 2008).

An evaluation conducted in 2011 assessed the degree to which the 2007 Strategy has been successful in increasing access and provided recommendations to improve the depth and breadth of the impact of this strategy. The report indicates that while this initiative appears to have increased access opportunities, there is much more to be done to support increasing the representation of Aboriginal students in higher education (Jothan, 2011).

In addition to these British Columbian initiatives, the government of Ontario provided over $55 million as part of the “Access to Opportunities Strategy” twice in the past decade (2005/06 and 2009/10). This program provided targeted funding to postsecondary institutions to provide additional support services, outreach and recruitment activities for students from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations (Kirby, 2010).

In addition to direct and targeted funding mechanisms, Canada’s provincial governments have been combining funding policies with structural reforms such as:

* Modifying institutional roles and missions in order to increase access to university degrees (transforming colleges/polytechnics into regional or teaching-intensive universities in Alberta and British Columbia;
* Providing community colleges with some restricted ability to offer full degree programs in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Prince Edward Island and the Yukon Territory);
* Differentiating the college sector in binary systems to improve regional access to degree programs (university colleges in British Columbia in the early 1990s; and Institutes of Technology and Advanced Learning in Ontario in 2000);
* Improving the ability of students to transfer between institutions in the post-secondary system and increase access and mobility (Councils focusing on transfer issues in Alberta, British Columbia, and, most recently, Ontario); and
* expanding distance learning (Thompson River University in British Columbia, Athabasca University in Alberta, Télé Université in Québec, as well as supporting collaborative efforts and consortia within provincial systems) (Jones et al., 2008).

*1.2 Student financial assistance mechanisms to support participation*

The costs associated with attending postsecondary education (including tuition, books, supplies and maintenance costs such as food, transportation and accommodation) have long been acknowledged a barrier to access, especially for students from poor families. Canadian higher education institutions have, on average, experienced substantial shifts in the source of revenues; this change is reflected in increasing tuition fees while governments pay proportionally less. From 1989 to 2009, average tuition fees rose from ten percent to 21 percent while funding from government fell from 72 percent to 55 percent. These numbers indicate that tuition has more than doubled as a percentage of total revenues for universities and colleges, and there are concerns that this trend will continue (Schwartz & Finnie, 2002).

There are a variety of financial aid tools used to improve access to higher education, including universal aid programs, need-based grants, merit scholarships and subsidized loans. The research suggests that all but the first of these mechanisms can be used to support targeted access opportunities for underrepresented populations.

Universal aid programs designed to support participation in higher education can be found in a number of countries (such as Germany, Austria and France), but they have come to play a particularly important role in Canada. The Government of Canada provides major tax credits for tuition, maintenance and other costs, and this universal aid program now represents a major component of the government’s investment in student financial assistance (Neill, 2007). However, research suggests that this universal approach to financial assistance is problematic because these mechanisms have little impact on increasing access, especially for under-represented populations. Tax credits are of limited use to individuals who do not earn income, and they do little to reduce the perceived financial risks of pursuing a higher education since the benefits occur long after the costs have been incurred (Fisher et al, 2006; Junor & Usher, 2004; Neill, 2007). It is generally argued that the government should reduce its emphasis on universal tax credits and devote more resources to targeted student funding mechanisms, including need-based support. .

In addition to providing universal tax credits, the federal government remains a primary source of student loans in Canada through a national program operated in collaboration with the provinces. Loan limitations have increased steadily to reflect the rising costs of education.

There has also been an increasing use of grants in the past decade to support students of low and middle income socioeconomic groups. For example, in 2008, the federal Government of Canada announced that it would provide non-repayable grants to students through income-based loans via the Canada Student Grant Program. Funding was estimated to be roughly $550 million in the 2011–2012 fiscal year, and provides support to over 245,000 students of low and middle socioeconomic status annually. Further, the Student Loan Repayment Assistance Plan (RAP), initiated in 2009–2010 academic year, is intended as a support mechanisms to ensure that students can afford their loan repayments. This program is designed to recognize and reflect the students’ gross income and family size when calculating loan repayments (Kirby, 2010).

In Ontario, the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) has recently been expanded to include targeted funding to reduce the burden for full-time undergraduate students with parents earning less than $160,000 per year before taxes. This targeted funding is intended to increase access opportunities for students from lower socioeconomic brackets. “We know coming out of a global recession, getting students from high school to college, from high school to university isn’t an option any more. It’s a necessity for their employment and for their future,” (Glen Murray as quoted in Abdellatif, 2012). For this program, eligible students can receive up to 30 percent of their tuition fees in the form of a grant reimbursement.

*1.3 Regulating Tuition*

Canadian universities are legally autonomous entities with the right to establish their own tuition fees, but all provincial governments have taken steps to regulate fee levels because of concerns that high fee levels will be a barrier to access. Fee levels have also become an important political issue; perhaps the most extreme example was the reaction to the Quebec government’s decision to increase fees in that province, which included the emergence of a major protest movement in 2012 which eventually led to an election and change in government.

There are now quite different policy approaches to tuition fee levels in different Canadian provinces, and major variations in fee levels. Ontario and Saskatchewan now have the highest fees, while Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador have the lowest. Tuition fee policy has also become more complex through the increasing use of differentiated fees where students in some programs (for example law or medicine) pay higher fees than students in other programs (for example history), frequently based on the notion that some programs will have higher personal rates of return than others.

Tuition fees have been regulated, deregulated, increased and frozen at various times across provinces in Canada. British Columbia and Ontario have both experimented with tuition freezes and fee deregulation in the past two decades. Manitoba and Newfoundland and Labrador decreased tuition fees in order to increase access through affordability.

One example of tuition fee de-regulation and re-regulation occurred in the Ontario system in the late 1990s. The Harris government re-regulated university and college fees by controlling fee increases in some programs, but allowing universities to determine fee levels in others (Jones, 2004). The student aid system was adjusted in order to support students in need though the loans did not support those from the middle class. Davies and Quirke (2002) found an overrepresentation of students from increasingly wealthy families at medical school at the University of Western Ontario following the introduction of this tuition adjustment. Some studies have suggested that the impact of differential fees on access can be address through the provision of additional student financial support (Snowdon & Associates, 2008).

Studies of the relationship between tuition fee levels and participation rates have generally found that participation rates do not decline as tuition increases; the relationship is far more nuanced and complex. Some studies have suggested that some subpopulations may be more sensitive to tuition fee levels than others, and that these differences in price sensitivity may have an impact on access for specific under-represented populations (such as low-income and black students) (Finnie, Laporte & Lascellas, 2004; Wellen, 2004). One of the core challenges associated with research on the impact of tuition fee levels on access is understanding the complex interplay between tuition fee levels, student financial assistance mechanisms, living costs, and student income (from earnings or family support).

*1.3 Performance-based Funding*

Performance funding of post-secondary institutions became increasingly common in the United States, starting with Tennessee’s 1979 program, though the use of these mechanisms receded in the early 2000s as many states began to rethink these measures (Dougherty & Natow, 2009). As Dan Lang (2012) notes in his comprehensive analysis of incentive funding mechanisms, eight of the ten Canadian provinces have introduced some form of performance indicators within higher education, all of which are directly or indirectly tied to funding. It is not unusual for performance funding to be tied to access, either in terms of participation (incentives to increase overall enrolment), targeted participation (incentives to increase the enrollment of individuals from particular groups), or student success (incentives to increase graduation rates or graduate employment).

Lang (2012) notes that the success of performance-funding mechanisms depends largely on the degree to which policies incentivize change. Mechanisms involving new money essentially provide institutions with a choice of whether to engage in the activity, and institutions will make a decision based on a cost-benefit analysis. Mechanisms involving existing money (shifting the distribution of existing funding from one mechanism to another) are difficult for institutions to ignore since failing to respond may lead to a decrease in resources. There is also the important question of whether the level of performance-funding is enough to incentivize change; institutions may decide that the incentive funding associated with a particular initiative may simply not be enough to address the costs associated with increasing performance. Lang concludes that the track-record of performance funding as a policy mechanism is not good; these mechanisms are frequently expensive and inefficient tools of public policy.

**Part II: Involving community**

While governments and institutions play important roles in promoting access, it is important to recognize that there are a wide range of complex factors associated with the decision to attend postsecondary education, as well as a plethora of factors that influence student success. Governments are increasing working with local communities that can play an important role in motivating students to attend, assisting students in preparing for higher education, and supporting student success. These relationships may be particularly important when discussing access for under-represented populations. Some students may simply choose not to apply, and “this self selection process eliminates many qualified students, often on the basis of family background or other characteristics over which they have no control” (Canadian Policy Research Network, 2002, p. 6). A number of Canadian provincial governments have supported initiatives designed to increase access through community-based social and academic student support programs. For example, the more successful initiatives designed to further access for Canada’s Aboriginal peoples often involve community-based initiatives, including the British Columbia Strategy (2007) discussed above.

The Canadian Policy Research Network (2002) found that financial support is insufficient for expanding access and encouraging success in post-secondary education. One of the strongest indicators of whether a student will continue with post-secondary education is related to the students’ own expectation and plan to pursue this education. Community based programming is implemented due to the need to provide a network of support and encouragement for students who may otherwise not have the opportunity to consider post-secondary education. For example, the Rae Report (2005) emphasized the importance some outreach programs. It was argued that “outreach programs for low-income groups, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, some rational minorities and francophones could be better encouraged and supported” (p. 18) through community based programming and outreach.

One important example is Pathways to Education[[1]](#footnote-1), a charitable foundation that was originally created by the Regent Park Community Health Centre in Toronto. Pathways to Education provides four different types of students located in the community (academic, social, financial and advocacy) in order to help young people graduate from high school, continue on to higher education, and succeed in their career development. Evaluations of the initial program were so successful that the foundation now receives support from the governments of Canada and Ontario the Ontario government and the initiative has expanded into 12 communities across Canada.

Manitoba enacted *The Adult Literacy Act* and the specific addition of the *Adult Literacy Regulation*, both of which came into effect as of January 2009. As of 2010, these literacy programs involved 45 adult learning centres that provided programming to just over 9000 adults. Forty-one (41) adult learning centres operate in 57 locations across the province, many specifically operating in areas where there are underrepresented populations. Under the *Adult Learning Centres Act* (2003), the accountability standards require that these community centres offer a minimum of six hours of instruction per week for learners and be accountable for their portion of the provincial grants totaling $16,458,000 (Manitoba, 2011).

Alberta offers some interesting examples of community based initiatives to raise literacy rates and increase access to post-secondary education. The *Living Literacy* report was released in 2009 and provides a framework for action that coordinates the efforts of the Government of Alberta (Enterprise and Advanced Education, Alberta Education, Alberta Human Services, and others) and its many partners to improve literacy levels for Albertans so they can thrive and contribute to the next generation economy. This report proposed numerous priority actions for the Government of Alberta to undertake between 2009 and 2013 involving community oriented action in order to achieve improved access and literacy across the province.

The *Increasing Learner Access through System Alignment* report (2010) provided recommendations for action and proposes guidelines related to the stewardship role of Comprehensive Community Institutions, the regional access planning process, and further develops of the concept of community learning centres.

A Community Adult Learning program provides funding and support for community organizations for the purpose of promoting and facilitating adult learning opportunities. These programs are available in more than 350 communities, with the goal of improving literacy, essential skills, and assisting people in reaching their own learning goals. As of 2011 the program funded four streams, including: $6,041,545 for the base Community Adult Learning Council grant for expenses incurred by organizations conducting adult learning activities; $825,000 the rural innovation and access program grant; the family literacy initiative fund at $2,088,663; as well as the volunteer tutor adult literacy services grant worth $2,492,300 (p. 5).

**Part III: Rethinking system design.**

Governments in a number of Canadian provinces have taken steps to increase access that involve a rethinking of institutional roles and objectives, and of the relationships between institutions and sectors within the broader educational system. Examples include initiatives designed to facilitate movement between the school system and the higher education system, facilitate student transfer between institutions, revisiting the roles of institutions (and the creation of hybrid institutional types) and modifying governance and coordination structures.

*3.1 From School to Postsecondary Education*

In Canada, the education sectors of K-12 and post-secondary have traditionally been discussed as distinct and separate. In early formation of the Canadian education system, it was assumed that secondary education would be sufficient for the majority of the population, with post-secondary conceptualized as an elite system. However, it is increasingly recognized that post-secondary education is required for entry into many fields of employment. Further, there are connections across the boundaries of these systems that, if supported, could engage students who might otherwise fail to enter into the higher educational system. Policies have begun to appear in Canada to facilitate pathways and a general reframing of the strict boundaries between these two systems of education.

Canada is a leader in terms of overall access to post-secondary education, with nearly half of Canada’s population (age 24-34) obtaining a certificate, diploma or degree (Kirby & Sharpe, 2011). One method of supporting student success in transitioning from K-12 to post-secondary is to enable students to successfully complete their secondary education and upgrade their grades and coursework. The province of Newfoundland and Labrador introduced high school online course delivery in the 1990s with a limited selection. The system expanded from roughly 200 students in 2001-2 to approximately 900 in 2007-2008. This expansion has primarily supported students from rural schools, according to a recent study by Kirby and Sharpe (2011). High school students who complete their studies online tend toward attending further post-secondary education, according to Barbour and Reeves (2009), who suggested that these students tend to have higher academic achievement.

In Ontario, college preparatory programs provide students with an opportunity to upgrade their academic skills and abilities. These programs are offered within the college sector and are designed to assist individuals who have not completed secondary school or lack other requirements but aspire to enroll in a postsecondary program. Reviews of these government-funded initiatives have been positive, and have noted that colleges can offer a supportive environment for those re-entering the education system following an extended number of years in the labour market (Gorman, Tiu, & Cook, 2013).

*3.2 Transfer*

Many provinces in Canada, particularly British Columbia and Alberta, have long recognized the value of transfer systems to enable students to access educational pathways from numerous directions. Both provinces have a council on admissions and transfer, and each council facilitates transfer arrangements between institutions on a system-level basis, publishes information on transfer so that students will know how a course offered by one institution will be treated by others, and conducts ongoing research on student mobility and success (Jones, 2009).

The transfer system in Alberta was formally established in 1974 as an independent body by the title of the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) (2009). ACAT is responsible for developing and implementing policies, procedures and guidelines that facilitate agreements between post-secondary institutions in order to formalize the process of transfer. In the 2007 report on the ACAT system, public consultations revealed that the system was providing opportunities for students who might otherwise not have the ability to transfer into programs to better suit their needs. ACAT was found to allow “for greater student choice and mobility between institutions” (2007, p. 2).

Ontario began to implement policies to move the province toward creating more transfer opportunities by creating the College University Consortium Council (CUCC) in 1996. This council was established to facilitate and coordinate education ventures by the colleges and universities in Ontario. The CUCC established an Ontario College University Transfer Guide (OCUTG) which was designed in order to guide students in accessing and understanding learning pathways, transfer agreements, and mobility opportunities for transfer between institutions. Though somewhat successful in this regard, the council operated as a facilitative body rather than one of authority and therefore the transfer initiatives were developed primarily at the college and university level.

The Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT), established in 2011, provides information regarding transfer opportunities in Ontario. ONCAT was established with an “enhanced leadership, research and communications mandate, including the *responsibility to develop and maintain a new transfer portal and a more robust online transfer guide*” (ONCAT, 2013, n/p). The purpose of ONCAT is to facilitate academic collaboration as well as support transfer pathways among Ontario's publicly funded colleges and universities, lowering the barriers for postsecondary options for students wanting to continue their education (ONCAT, 2013).

*3.3 Revisiting the Roles of Institutions*

A number of provincial governments have taken steps to increase access to degrees by expanding the range of institutions with the legal authority to award degrees within the postsecondary system, and these changes have frequently blurred the boundaries between the community college and university sectors and allowed for the creation of hybrid institutional types (Jones, 2009). At one point the community college sector in every province was in some respects defined by its status as providing sub-degree programs; none of the colleges were assigned the authority to grant university-level degrees, though in some provinces they provided university-transfer or pre-university programs, and in all provinces they provided diplomas and certificates associated with vocational programs. Some provinces have modified the roles of the colleges in order to increase access to degrees to a broader population, a strategy that builds on the reality that the colleges have generally provided greater access to students from under-represented populations than the universities.

Five provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Prince Edward Island) and one territory (Yukon) now provide at least some limited authority to grant degrees to the community college sector. British Columbia and Alberta have taken additional steps to transition colleges into new institutional forms; British Columbia shifted several community colleges into “university colleges” (institutions with the ability to offer university degree programs while retaining their previous role in the provision of technical/vocational programs) in the 1990s, and more recently recast these institutions as teaching-intensive universities, while Alberta has transformed two community colleges into universities with special undergraduate teaching missions.

Other initiatives have involved the creation of hybrid institutional forms. First Nations University in Saskatchewan has a special mission to address the needs of the province’s Aboriginal peoples. The University College of the North in Manitoba plays a similar role by providing geographic access to postsecondary populations in the province’s northern region. In Ontario, some new initiatives have linked colleges and universities in order to draw on the strengths of both sectors, such as the University of Guelph at Humber and Seneca at York University (Jones, 2009).

*Part IV: Measuring success.*

As in all other areas of public policy, measurement and evaluation become important tools in determining whether policy initiatives are leading to desired outcomes. This section includes a discussion of the clarification of objectives of access policies, and the role of data systems and policy research in monitoring and evaluating system outcomes.

One may assume a straightforward conclusion that success can be measured in terms of increased numbers of students in post-secondary programs. However, given part of the objective of increasing access is not just for general students but for specific subpopulations, there is a more specific measure of this success. This does not, however, take into account the real issues surrounding access to postsecondary education for underrepresented subpopulations. Access is necessarily a precursive step to the issue of retention and increased graduation rates for these subpopulations. An OECD report on this issue presented that “the growing portion of disadvantaged students enrolled in tertiary education makes the ongoing issue of their retention and programme completion an increasing important concern in tertiary education” (Santiago et al., 2008, p. 50).

The objectives of access policies cannot stop at the entrance to post-secondary. Rather, the accountability of institutions in retaining and supporting these students, many of whom represent high-risk for failure to complete the program. For a variety of reasons, these high risk groups need to be considered and supported throughout their academic careers if ‘access’ is to make any kind of meaningful difference. These types of students not only face greater barriers to access but potentially are also more likely, for academic, financial or cultural reasons, to abandon their studies before graduation.

While several provincial governments have established broad goals for increasing participation in higher education, few have developed clear goals related to the participation of under-represented groups, or more nuanced forms of access related to completion and student succeed. For example, there has been little clarity related to either the definitions or goals for student retention and persistence, and the complexity of these issues have been highlighted several studies using the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) data (Martinello, 2007; Finnie and Qiu, 2008). Retention and persistence are complicated issues, with many students changing programs or taking breaks from their programs for extended periods. For the general population, as Martinello noted, “only 21.7 percent of students who did not complete their first university program ended their post-secondary education” (2007, p. 13, 16). This is comparable college students who reach roughly 35 percent. Further, Shaienks, Eisl-Culkin and Bussière (2006) report that of those who had dropped out relatively early in their studies, particularly by 20 years of age, roughly 35 percent returned within two years with a full 46 percent returning within four years. Similarly, Finnie and Qiu find that “by one year after first having left school, 22.3 percent of college leavers and 35.6 percent of university leavers have returned. By three years later… the returns stand at 40.3 percent and 54.0 percent, respectively, for college and university leavers. These are substantial numbers” (2008, p. 29).

One of the basic challenges associated with measuring success is studying students through the life-course of their educational experience, especially given that students move from institution to institution and program to program. The province of British Columbia has now created a provincial education number that will facilitate longitudinal tracking studies, and Ontario is in the process of adopting a quite similar approach.

However, perhaps the greatest challenge for the measurement and analysis of success within higher education in Canada has been the overall decline of Canada’s national data and research systems related to postsecondary education. Federal budget cuts over more than a decade have forced Statistics Canada and other relevant units to rationalize their data collection and dissemination portfolios. For example, there have been serious problems with the reporting of community college enrolments. Some data systems, such as the collection of data on university faculty, and the Youth In Transition Survey discussed above, have been discontinued. National bodies that have played important roles in the analysis of access issues, such as the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation and the Canadian Council on Learning have been terminated or unfunded (Jones, 2012). The declining state of Canada’s national data and research capacity related to the higher education sector signals a serious problem for increasing access to higher education since Canada is missing a number of core tools related to the ability of the federal and provincial governments to monitor and measure success of government initiatives designed to increase access.

**Conclusions**

The objective of this paper was to provide an inventory and macro-level analysis of the various tools and strategies available to government in order to increase access to higher education. Drawing from the Canadian experience, we have noted a wide range of funding mechanisms, community-based initiatives, and system-level reforms that are or have been used to support increased access, as well as highlighting findings from recent research and government reports.

A central theme emerging from the review is that there is no single “best” approach or policy instrument; in fact, given the tremendous complexity of access and student success issues, governments generally pursue a range of different approaches simultaneously. Approaches are also idiosyncratic because while initial attempts to increase aggregate participation rates focused on the population as a whole, the newer challenge is to find ways of increasing access for particular populations, and this means developing policy approaches that address the needs of these individuals -- needs that frequently can only be understood in terms of community, geographic location, and social, economic and family background.

Accessibility appears to be a top priority for many policy makers across Canada, however, these goals are often expressed in different manners across various provinces. Canada offers a number of select contexts from which to compare and analyze the various approaches to expanding accessibility. Context is an important factor in that each jurisdiction has specific barriers to expanding access to education that may present different opportunities or challenges. This is to say that importing a “one size fits all” model is not a model we would recommend, rather, understanding the specific barriers and opportunities of a jurisdiction can enhance the ability of policy makers to meet needs of the people within that context.

Though we have details as to the policies in place to promote access, there is a lack of data regarding the outcomes and whether or not these policies are correlating with a desired outcome. Canada needs to strengthen its research policy infrastructure for the higher education sector by improving and expanding data collection, and supporting additional data and policy analysis in order to ensure that policy makers have a better understanding of whether specific policy initiatives are working..

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1. More detailed information on this organization can be found at: http://www.pathwaystoeducation.ca/en/home [↑](#footnote-ref-1)