



Largely a matter of degrees: Quality assurance and Canadian universities

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Abstract

There is no national accreditation or quality assurance mechanism for Canadian higher education. This paper argues that a number of structural characteristics that emerged as a function of the transition to mass higher education have served to stymie the development of government quality assurance mechanisms, including the decentralization of higher education policy, the development of a relatively homogeneous university sector, and the limited policy capacity of provincial ministries. The development of new types of degrees, combined with an expansion of degree-authority to new institutional types have led to the emergence of new quality mechanisms in several provinces designed to assess the quality of new degrees, but it is the universities that continue to play the central role in terms of quality assurance.

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1. Introduction

Canada has long been an outlier in the international trend toward the emergence of national quality assessment mechanisms and the expanding use of these mechanisms to regulate universities. Like the United States and some other federal systems, higher education policy in Canada is largely in the hands of the provinces, but even at this level, Canadian higher education largely avoided the “quality debate” of the 1980s and danced around the push for new quality assessment mechanisms and demands for accountability associated with the neo-liberal agenda that has ebbed and flowed through the country over the last few decades (Fisher, Rubenson, Shanahan, & Trotter, 2014; Jones, 1996a). The end result is a decentralized network of provincial systems that now largely leave the responsibility for quality assessment in the hands of the individual universities, and where the government’s modest interventions have primarily been a response to quality assurance issues associated with new university-level degrees offered by new providers.

Our objective in this paper is to explain why Canada has not followed the international trend toward the development of elaborate quality assurance mechanisms. Recognizing that the methodological issues associated with proving why something did not happen are far more challenging than documenting that it did, it is important to acknowledge that our core arguments are based largely on our detailed understanding of the history and evolution of the Canadian case. We begin by reviewing the contextual features of the Canadian system that have served to stymie

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the emergence of large-scale reforms in terms of quality assurance. We then discuss how issues of quality have been taken up at the national and provincial levels in the new millennium before offering some concluding observations.

2. Evolution of higher education in Canada and the issue of quality

Following decades of rapid transformation as a function of the post-war transition from elite to mass higher education, the 1970s were a period of relative structural stability within Canadian higher education. The institutional types, structures and system-level arrangements that had emerged by the end of the 1960s continued to characterize the university sector, with only minor modifications to policy, until at least the mid-1990s (Jones, 1996a, 1996b). The structural characteristics that had clearly emerged during this period played a central role in how issues of higher education quality were taken-up, and largely framed the political discourse of accountability.

The first and most important of these characteristics was decentralization. The Canadian constitutional arrangements assigned responsibility for education to the provinces, and while the federal government had played a large role in initiating and funding the dramatic post-war expansion of universities and university enrolment, by the 1960s it had become clear that the provinces were unwilling to tolerate federal interference. Unlike the United States, there would be no national department of education or higher education, or anything resembling a national strategy. Higher education policy was highly decentralized, with each province creating its own provincial “system” of universities and other institutional types that would address the specific needs of the province. For the most part, these provincial systems were also characterized by high levels of university autonomy, effectively decentralizing policy decisions for most key academic issues, such as admissions, curriculum, degree standards, and program quality, to the individual institutions. The emergence of quite distinct provincial systems, combined with the fierce protection of provincial powers under the constitutional debates of the 1970s and 1980s, effectively silenced any discussion of national higher education initiatives, including a national quality assurance framework (Jones, 2009a).

The second important characteristic was the emergence of a relatively homogeneous university sector. While higher education policy was decentralized to the provinces, a common “model” of a Canadian university had emerged in the post-war period, largely influenced by the traditions and structures of the mature, established public universities (Jones, 1996b, 1998). Canadian universities were secular, publicly supported institutions with both a research and teaching function. They shared similar degree structures and governance arrangements. Most were comprehensive institutions with some combination of undergraduate, professional and graduate programs. An entire sector of private denominational universities transformed into publicly funded secular institutions or affiliated with secular provincial universities in response to government funding policies. Isomorphism ran rampant as new universities moved quickly to take on the characteristics of their more established peers. The homogeneity of the sector was also reinforced by the national association of university leaders, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, which provided a forum for the exchange of information on institutional issues. There were clearly differences between institutions in terms of program mix and research strength, but the universities were generally treated as equals by governments, and there was no formal stratification within the sector. Perhaps more importantly, the universities treated each other as equals, largely treating each other’s degrees and standards as equivalent. There was no need for a national accreditation system or standardized graduate admissions testing because there was an assumption within the system that all universities were providing a good quality undergraduate education (Jones, 2009a).

This homogeneity was further reinforced by the fact that each province essentially treated degree-granting as a public monopoly (Skolnik, 1987). It was impossible to create new universities or offer degrees without provincial government approval, and the provinces tightly controlled the number of universities and only assigned degree-granting authority to these provincially designated institutions.

A third important characteristic was the limited policy capacity within the provincial government ministries that were responsible for universities. High levels of institutional autonomy meant that there were only modest levels of system coordination. Ministries were generally preoccupied with the three key policy issues that dominated provincial policy discussions across the country: access, tuition and government grants (Jones, 2009a, 2012). Increasing access to higher education was, and continues to be, the core policy issue for provincial governments across the country, and funding and accountability were commonly tied to these key themes. Only the most populace provinces had policy units within government with some capacity to study higher education issues, and the modest policy capacity of these

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