

"You see how circumstances are to blame"

Lydia Davis

## Introduction

When one examines any complex social system showing signs of stress, it is rare that one can identify a single source for the difficulties. Usually, the poor situation is ascribed to circumstances and to an array of faceless forces that have shaped it in a dysfunctional way. Recognizing this reality is a form of wisdom for those who want to focus on problems to be addressed rather than on culprits to be punished. This has many advantages over the propensity to look for a scapegoat: it forces attention on the issue and plausible remedies rather than on crime and punishment. Yet, this is rarely done by commissions of inquiry (usually chaired by former judges); they almost naturally succumb to the temptation of ignorantly pointing the finger toward supposedly guilty parties, while doing very little to help those in charge in redesigning the flawed system.

The Clark *et. al.* (2009) study of the higher education system in Ontario has been exemplary on this front. In its study of the poor state of affairs of the Ontario higher education system and of its necessary academic transformation, it has avoided like the plague naming names. Rather, it has very carefully deconstructed the process that has led to the present situation and has shown convincingly that it is not sustainable.

In its careful efforts to avoid indicting anyone, however, it has not been as explicit as some would have liked about exposing the foundations of the overall governance failures that have resulted in the present situation. As a result, given the vagueness of some of the maybe too delicately worded recommendations, it may allow those channelling an immense amount of public monies into that system, those purporting to properly manage this mess, those agents complacently benefitting from the gratifications of the system, and those poor students being badly treated by such a system to all look at each other in disbelief, without understanding how they should get involved in the repair process, or even that they will all have to get involved as partners in the required renovation.

## The inquiry and the argument

For this study, funded by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, the council mobilized four experts, each with a sound knowledge of the system, quite varied experiences, and significant acumen about the fundamental dynamic conservatism of organizations. This has helped in guarding the inquiry from being hijacked by any of the various interest groups dedicated to the preservation of the *status quo*.

The thesis of the book is that "the present approach to the provision of baccalaureate education in Ontario is not sustainable" (p. 1). The emergence of the present approach is traceable to a number of past decisions that might be summarized as follows:

- the decision that colleges would have no role in producing baccalaureates;
- the decision that publicly-funded universities would have complete autonomy in defining their mission, purpose, and objectives;
- the drift from the universities being focused on teaching to institutions focused on research, regarding themselves as needing to be research universities, and very strong external and internal pressures and incentives to proceed in this direction;
- the concurrent pressure by political authorities to expand accessibility: not only to further increase the university participation rate, but also to ensure a higher participation of disadvantaged groups (requiring more attention than the traditional clientele); and
- the pressure on universities to accommodate the trend away from liberal arts and sciences toward career-focused programs.

This has led to research-focused universities, entirely driven by their own sense of purpose, and funded in such a way that only 40 percent of their faculty members' time is purportedly dedicated to classroom activity, where they are being asked to cope with a greatly expanded clientele and mission. This model has proved

- extremely expensive;
- unable to provide the requisite variety for a clientele with a great diversity of backgrounds, aspirations and learning styles; and
- not necessarily able to provide the quality of education one might expect from universities, as they have come to rely more and more on part-time personnel to provide teaching services.

In 2000, colleges and private post-secondary education institutions saw a policy change: they were allowed to award baccalaureates. But this has not modified the situation appreciably: a very small number of such programs have been approved, and a very small number of students have been enrolled in them over the last decade.

If it is to be able to meet the objectives pursued, with the minimal quality required in the face of the significant increase in enrolment that is foreseen, the only option facing the Government of Ontario, we are told, is either a massive increase in the level of public funding, or a radically transformed higher education system.

## **The report**

The Clark report addresses these issues in three steps. First, it describes the changes in the environment of higher education that have generated the two important pressures on the Ontario higher education system: (1) toward accommodating a greater participation rate and the demand for greater accessibility, and (2) toward a greater focus on knowledge production by universities by demanding that they give more relative importance to research (Ch. 1-2-3). Second, it examines the forces that have constrained the college and university responses to these pressures: one-size-fits-all

funding, the limited accountability and quality insurance in place, and the particular design of the Ontario's post-secondary system. Third, it puts forward some broad recommendations for the modification of the existing institutions and the creation of new ones.

A book that puts forward such a stark argument must be prepared to face the wrath of a higher education system that has successfully resisted externally driven change over the last 50 years every time proposals for transformation have been put forward. Consequently, much of the book's *force de frappe* is built on the evidentiary base it has mustered, and on the sharpness and persuasiveness of the recommendations.

## **Stylized facts**

One of the great strengths of the Clark report is the solidity of the evidentiary base, the clarity of the unveiling of the causation mechanisms generated by decisions arrived at (wittingly or not) over time, and the starkness of the historical review that shows clearly how many reasonable forewarnings and suggestions have been effectively scotched by the effective lobby of higher education institutions, with the result that the situation has been allowed to deteriorate unhampered.

The Ontario higher education system (when it pertains to baccalaureates) has been until very recently *de facto* a monopoly of publicly-funded universities subject to tuition-control. It is not surprising that it has not displayed the sort of capacity and willingness to differentiate and innovate that has been experienced in other jurisdictions where more competition prevailed. Traditional universities have lobbied effectively to prevent colleges from granting baccalaureates, arguing that as a condition of quality of education, teachers had to be researchers (a mythical argument clearly demolished by empirical evidence), while cynically subjecting a substantial portion of their undergraduates to baccalaureate teaching by part-time faculty with little or no research activity (p. 12).

This crass defence by universities of their funding base (getting government to enforce barriers to entry in the baccalaureate market) might not have been so disastrous had it not been that universities (encouraged by many sirens) have concurrently shifted their focus of interest and attention away from teaching toward research. This shift toward a research-focus paradigm was defended in the name of national competitiveness and productivity. This entailed a dramatic relative reduction of the resources allotted to teaching – the very task they wanted to monopolize. The chasm between responsibilities and resources was made all the more dramatic by the one-size-fits-all philosophy adopted by the Government of Ontario that refused to discriminate and deal differently with the University of Toronto and Nipissing University – both supposedly being research universities!

The Clark report shows how the challenge of a politically mandated increase in accessibility, combined with an expectation to contribute to national productivity and competitiveness, could not be met – given the limits on fiscal resources, the monopoly granted to universities, the indiscriminating government funding formula, and the unfounded myth of the teacher-scholar as a non-negotiable *sine qua non*. Something had to give.

The thing that was sacrificed was the quality of education. Some universities contracted out more than half of their undergraduate classes to low-paid, part-time, freelance instructors (some of them harried graduate students) having to handle ever-larger classes while allowing their regular professors to retreat to other activities.

This system is unsustainable: the lack of external competition and the effective rejection of any effective coordination mechanism among universities have generated a system that does not have the requisite variety; the existing undergraduate education system serves the students badly; and because it is cost ineffective, it represents a wasteful use of public monies by the government. The only group that would seem to benefit is the elite group of regular full-time faculty members unburdened by teaching – but even this group is now under stress, since it is slowly becoming a vanishing breed which the system cannot afford any longer (Stainburn, 2010).

The problem has been long in the making and, at different times over the last 50 years or so, different committees have been set up to examine ways in which the system might be refurbished. While the Clark report does not dwell at great length on these efforts, it says enough for the reader to understand that such recommendations as came out of these committees have been effectively scuttled by the dynamic conservatism of the university lobbies.

## **Dealing with the governance failures**

Although the language of the Clark report is particularly careful, and the use of adverbs is at times aesthetically impressive, the subliminal message is stark: it is the diagnosis of a series of governance failures. Governance might best be defined as effective coordination when power, resources and information are widely distributed into many hands. Efficiency, effectiveness, continuous improvement and social learning, and innovation depend on effective coordination and collaboration.

The whole analytical part of the report richly documents a variety of disconnections and blockages, the effective cartellization process, the resistance to change, the remarkable cognitive dissonance and myopia of key actors, etc. – all forms of governance failures. Consequently, the simple tweaking of some mechanisms here or there could not suffice. The report had to propose a set of reforms that would transform the governance of higher education in Ontario (i.e., reshuffle the deck of rights and responsibilities, and modify the way in which the higher education system in Ontario is steered).

The blueprint for transformation starts with a friendly reminder of two sets of imperatives.

The first imperatives are the features of a higher education system that would best meet the expectations of the stakeholders in general: accessibility, diversity, specialization, efficiency, effectiveness, economy, flexibility, quality, giving due attention to teaching, appropriate attention to high-quality research, etc. It is meant to remind the reader of the multi-dimensional character of the system, and of Ashby's law of requisite variety that states that one cannot regulate a system of complexity X with an apparatus of regulation of complexity less than X.

The second set of imperatives is the principles that can legitimately be defended as foundational for the higher education system if it is to make the highest and best use of its diverse loci of power, of the resources available and of the information in the minds of all the stakeholders (autonomy of the institutions, stewardship of the government, freedom of choice of students, etc.). It also is insistent that none of these principles – and this is a very crucial point – should be allowed to trump all the others, if one has any hope of meeting the legitimate expectations of the stakeholders, including clients obviously.

While these basic statements appear to be uncontroversial, they set the stage for a major overhaul of the system. In order to get a higher education system that meets the standards aimed at, it is clear that the autonomy of the institutions is going to be eroded (or at least restricted) if only by new competitive and regulatory arrangements that need to be put in place, and that are bound to have some impact on the margin of manoeuvre of the individual institutions.

The Clark report shows its respect for the awesome power and immense dynamic conservatism of the universities' lobby in refusing to confront the universities head-on with an obligation to change. Indeed, it is only in its last recommendation (pp. 201-2) that the report lobbs the real grenade: the need for a system redesign that cannot and will not emerge from individual institutional adjustment or voluntary agreements, but through government action to ensure appropriate capacity, structures and processes.

In a way, this last recommendation is a requiem for the leadership and direction of existing institutions that have failed so miserably. While the government redesign imperative takes the form of a veiled threat in the report, it is clear that this last recommendation represents the starkest and most important challenge to the Government of Ontario – the need to follow the lead of Alberta and BC and accept the responsibility for redesigning the system and for providing leadership and direction in the light of needs and circumstances.

Despite the superbly diplomatic way in which this last recommendation is couched, the Clark report is throwing down the gauntlet: it remains to be seen if the government of Ontario will have the courage to take it up.

The other proposed transformations presented in the earlier portion of the last chapter might be summarized under three headings: new institutions, new products, new processes. But it should be clear that all such major or minor tweaking will not amount to much if the redesign work called for in the last recommendation is not firmly in place.

On the new institutions side, the report is bold.

Given, on the one hand, the dynamic conservatism of the universities and the unlikelihood that they will willingly transform themselves; and, on the other hand, the probability that if and when colleges embark on baccalaureates they will immediately want to become research universities also, the Clark report has a sense that the conversion of existing institutions into what is now needed would be immensely difficult. Between the lines, one may read a strong impression of both an anticipation of massive resistance by existing institutions to pressure for change, and a whiff of the

probable lack of courage of the Government of Ontario in confronting them. So, in what might at first appear to be a *solution de facilité*, the report suggests the creation of a new institution – the teaching-focused university. It might be costly, but since there will soon be a need for a massive extension of baccalaureate-producing facilities, especially in the GTA but also elsewhere, it may be a very astute way to create instantly a new sector ("designed and staffed to fulfill a new type of mission, unencumbered by their history, institutional culture, and contractual relationships" (p. 183). It might be easier than trying to convert existing institutions, and might allow the design of new funding arrangements that might entice universities and colleges to adjust later.

On the new products side, the report is skilful and subversive.

First, it resuscitates the idea of the three-year degree (but it does not dare to suggest an extension of the idea: the acquisition of a three-year degree through various certificates). This is seen as both a cost-reduction initiative, but also implicitly as a way to indicate that there is much more one can cover now with the help of new technologies in three years than what used to be possible in yesteryear. In an effort to mollify the academic snobs, the report makes soothing remarks about its not becoming the old pass-BA, but the logic for this is elusive. Second, it suggests a new array of products offered through an "Ontario Open University." This is a concept that has been extraordinarily successful in the United Kingdom, and has been embraced in other regions of the country. The dual possibility of open admissions and much flexibility through technology to outreach to individuals who do not have access to universities and colleges would be valuable, and would provide alternative ways of accessing post-secondary education. Thirdly, it proposes a rethinking of the notion of quality of post-secondary education products. This is subversive because it openly challenges the old view of "quality" defended by traditional research universities. While the report does not take a stand on the issue, it calls for a debate that is bound to reframe completely the notion of quality of higher education. Such a debate will undoubtedly force all stakeholders off their traditional defence mechanisms, and may even trigger a refoundation of the whole notion of what we mean by quality education.

On the new processes side, the report focuses on obvious blockages that have prevented the higher education system from making the highest and best uses of existing resources. Some of these exhortations to efficiency and effectiveness, balance and differentiation within college and university sectors, and ease of college-university transfers is likely to fall on deaf ears: this has been the case for the last 50 years.

The ace in the hole here is the invitation to the Government of Ontario to revisit, in a comprehensive way, its approach to funding. The call for detailed public reporting and the invitation to a "more differentiated system of funding that would allow for a balance between reasonable constraints in the public interest and the preservation of institutional autonomy" (p. 190) is presenting the Government of Ontario with the major tools it will need to be able to redesign the system: (1) the transparency that will tend to eliminate abuses and feather-bedding, and (2) the incentive-reward systems that need to recognize that the difference between the University of Toronto and Nipissing University is not one of degree but one of kind, calling for unashamedly differential treatment.

## Envoi

This project has been an initiative of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, which deserves much praise. The role of such a group is to provide fruitful new perspectives on pressing issues and advice as to how one might respond to them.

The Clark report was released in November 2009. The seriousness of the governance failures of the higher education system in Ontario can no longer be denied. It can only be hoped that the council will advise the Government of Ontario accordingly, and in the strongest of terms.

Whether the Government of Ontario will heed such advice (and challenge the corporatist interests in the pursuit of the public interest) is another matter altogether.



## References

Clark, Ian D., Greg Moran, Michael L. Skolnik, and David Trick. 2009. *Academic Transformation – The Forces Reshaping Higher Education in Ontario*. Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Stainburn, S. 2010. "The Case of the Vanishing Full-Time Professor" *New York Times* (January 3).