

**Reforming Postsecondary Education in Ontario:
Nine Ways to Know if You Are Succeeding**

A submission to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
in response to the invitation in the paper
Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge

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About the Authors

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors.

Readers who would like to see a fuller treatment of these and other issues are referred to:

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

Ian D. Clark, David Trick and Richard Van Loon, *Academic Reform: Policy Options for Improving the Quality and Cost-effectiveness of Undergraduate Education in Ontario*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011.

Links to other recent articles and commentary by the authors on postsecondary education in Ontario can be found at www.academicreform.ca.

On June 28, 2012, the Ontario government released a discussion paper on postsecondary education titled *Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* to begin "the process of transforming this sector" and initiated a round of consultations to generate ideas for achieving this. The consultation process is now nearing an end.

We propose that Ontario should have five goals for postsecondary education:

- accessibility – a place for every qualified and motivated student
- learning quality – high-quality education that prepares students for the workforce or further education
- research contribution – generating the advanced knowledge and innovation that will be essential for economic and social well-being
- accountability – transparent ways to demonstrate how the money being paid by students and the public is being used to their benefit
- affordability – costs that do not grow so quickly as to make postsecondary education unaffordable.

Over the years Ontario has created many additional places for qualified students, although the job is not complete and we are not yet prepared for the growth that will come in the next decade. As a province, we fall short on the other four goals.

The consultations will likely leave the government with a seemingly overwhelming number of critical choices. Many will advocate for one or two of these goals, but the government's task is find ways of advancing them all simultaneously. We would respectfully suggest the following nine measures of success.

1. Will the reforms provide enough capacity for growing numbers of students?

The first rule of higher education policy in Ontario is that there needs to be a place in university, college, or apprenticeship for every young person with the ability and motivation to attend. It is reasonable to expect the demand for baccalaureate education to increase by 50,000-100,000 spaces over the next 15 years. Demand for postsecondary diplomas may increase by 40,000-60,000 students in the same period.¹ Ontario relies too heavily on research universities to provide undergraduate spaces. The two largest university campuses in Toronto are at their limit, and the growth plans and capacities of other campuses are unlikely to meet the increase in demand, especially in the Greater Toronto Area. It is time to create some teaching-oriented institutions that respond to the growing demand and that meet the needs of students for a more personalized learning-oriented environment. These should have their own governing structures, with a teaching-oriented approach to faculty workload, tenure and promotion.

We also need to make plans for expanding existing universities and colleges selectively, where demand warrants. Many colleges have shown the ability to offer high-quality baccalaureate programs, and the range and size of these should be expanded.

2. Will credentials prepare students for the workforce or further education?

The benefit of expanding three-year baccalaureates will come from creating more flexibility for students to choose the postsecondary pathways that are right for them.

Most universities offer three-year degrees today in at least some fields of study. After three years, a student can enter the workforce directly, proceed to a fourth year in a baccalaureate program, enter a professional degree program, or enrol in an advanced one-year career-oriented program at a college. Colleges as well as universities should be able to offer three-year baccalaureates that prepare students for the workforce or further education.

Any of these pathways may be valuable depending on the student's talents and career goals. Fully introducing a student tracking number in postsecondary education – as was done in the K-12 system more than a decade ago – would make it possible to analyze the relative merits of each of these pathways.

3. Will the reforms improve pathways to graduation for students?

Students need more and better pathways between colleges and universities and more options for completing degrees. Colleges should expand their offerings to include clearly defined 2-year programs which would, upon completion with adequate grades, guarantee admission to the third year of university baccalaureate programs. Other pathways should also be clearly defined and well publicized, as is done in British Columbia and Alberta.

After two decades of voluntary initiatives, it is time to assign deadlines and accountability for making these changes happen. Both colleges and universities may need to change their existing curricula to facilitate efficient transfer. To encourage universities to seek and enrol qualified transfer students, the government should fund additional seats in third- and fourth-year university that are reserved for qualified college graduates, as is done in California.

4. Will Ontario start measuring what university and college students actually learn?

A recent U.S. study found that 36 per cent of students who were sampled showed no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills during four years of university.² Although most institutions make broad claims about education quality, no one really knows whether Ontario students would show better results. We need to find out.

We should also recognize that universities and colleges aim for many learning outcomes beyond these core skills. Finding good ways to measure what students learn will be difficult and may take a long time, so we should start now. Being good by Ontario standards is not enough. We ought to find every way we can to compare our students' learning and workforce preparedness with the achievements of students in other jurisdictions. Students and parents need to know. The government, universities and colleges need to know too, so we can evaluate whether our goals for higher education are being met.

5. Will the reforms address the largest opportunities for improving productivity?

Universities' operating revenue per student has roughly kept pace with CPI inflation since the mid-1980s, but this is only because students are paying so much more. Government revenue per student has fallen far behind. Meanwhile, cost escalation in Ontario universities, driven mostly by compensation costs, has consistently outpaced CPI inflation. Universities have coped mostly through increased class sizes and greater reliance on part-time faculty.

To deal with this problem we need to reverse the long-term drift towards less teaching among full-time university faculty. Ontario should have a funding mechanism, as many other jurisdictions do, that encourages the minority of faculty who are the most productive researchers to do more research and the majority to do more teaching.³ Doing so would mean that more full-time faculty would be teaching undergraduate students, and more graduate students would have the benefit of working with great faculty researchers.

Every faculty member should have adequate time to remain up-to-date in his or her field, but the common assertion that one needs to be an active researcher to be a good teacher is simply not supported by the evidence.⁴

6. Is online learning used to provide high-quality education and improve accessibility?

Many institutions are creating online courses, with or without the government's support. To improve accessibility and reduce duplication, a student should be able to take an online course from one institution and have the credit recognized at another.

A reasonable approach would be to select the most popular programs (such as Arts, Sciences and Business) and set a goal that at least half of the required credits should be available online, fully recognized by every university or college that offers the program. Universities with subject expertise and demonstrated strength in online delivery should be asked to develop rigorous courses that could be recognized by all other universities. The same should be done at colleges. Students could choose how many courses to take

online and how many in a classroom. Online courses should be available in every year of study.

This online strategy would have benefits for prospective students, current full-time and part-time students, and former students who may only need a few credits to complete their degree or diploma. It would provide far more access to online education than a stand-alone online institution whose credits were not transferable.

7. Do the reforms support graduate and professional programs that meet the needs of a creative and innovative economy?

We need to get the best value from our spending on graduate education. The public cost per graduate student is 2 to 5 times higher than for an undergraduate student in the same field.

Admitting the best students to doctoral programs and making sure they graduate in a timely fashion will be more valuable than simply adding new spaces to these programs. Every year Ontario adds about 3,000 new PhDs to the workforce, through new graduates and immigration. We are adding more PhDs in most disciplines than we are likely to need.

Professional master's degrees – similar to the MBA, but in more fields of study – may be a better choice for many students and for the economy. Adjusted for population, Ontario produces about half as many graduates who hold master's and first professional degrees as the United States.⁵

8. Have we made the system more affordable and accessible?

Neither students nor the government can afford to pay annual increases to fund postsecondary institutions' current rate of inflation. Improving productivity in higher education will be the best way to ensure that tuition increases are affordable.

In a market where universities and colleges have few competitors, students deserve the security that comes from regulated tuition fees. Enhancements to make student aid more responsive to the situation of students with low incomes after graduation would be a further step forward. So would a concerted effort to simplify the current thicket of tuition calculations, mandatory ancillary fees, federal and province loans and grants, institutional student aid, and government tax credits. Collectively these tend to hide the real costs that the student will actually pay.

The barriers to accessibility are not just financial, but also social, cultural and academic. Increasing numbers of student from historically underrepresented groups are showing that these barriers can be overcome. This is essential as a matter of social justice, and it is vital to renewing our workforce. As researchers gather more

information about what programs are most effective in serving students from different backgrounds, we need to allocate resources in ways that make the greatest difference.

9. Have we created better ways of evaluating whether Ontario's goals for higher education are being met?

The higher education sector must be accountable to Ontarians, and this accountability should extend to the government as well as to education providers. There should be a government plan that sets out the province's goals for higher education, strategies for achieving them, and a framework for evaluating progress. This plan should include, for example: expected enrolment levels, space and resources to support a high level of access; measures to address the barriers, both financial and non-financial, that students face in attending higher education; programs of study at different levels, and across a wide range of disciplines; pathways from one program or institution to another; what level of learning quality is expected and how this will be measured; expectations for the higher education system's role in creating new knowledge and making that knowledge available outside the academy; and how these goals will be achieved at a cost that is affordable to the government and to students.

The government should negotiate with each university and college its appropriate role within this plan, so the parts add up to the whole. Some of the productivity gains the province is seeking will come from assigning roles to institutions that may not be their first preference.

Institutional transparency is best achieved through accountability agreements, such as the new Strategic Mandate Agreements, that are clearly related to the government's goals for higher education. These agreements should contain clear mutually-agreed-upon objectives and performance indicators, be updated annually, and be made publicly accessible. The government should publish an annual report card showing whether the government's goals for higher education are being met.

Just as government decisions in the 1960s have shaped Ontario's higher education system for the past half-century, the present government has an historic opportunity to lead the renewal of the system for the decades to come. There will be temptations to deflect reform in favour of pet goals or local ambitions, or to claim that the status quo is all we require. The government has the responsibility of demonstrating that the proposed reforms are in the interest of the public as a whole – increasing accessibility, improving quality, generating research and innovation, and improving transparency, all at a cost that will provide good value for students and the public.

¹ The projections published in *Academic Transformation* (page 26) and *Academic Reform* (page 106) have tracked well with actual enrolments to date. Participation rates continue to rise: the number of 18-year-olds in Ontario has been falling since 2008, yet the number of qualified applicants entering university and college has risen every year. Some analysts have suggested Ontario now has “enough” postsecondary students; for a critique of this argument, see *Academic Reform*, pages 107-108.

² Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, and Esther Cho, *Improving Undergraduate Learning: Findings and Policy Recommendations from the SSRC-CLA Longitudinal Project* (Brooklyn, NY: Social Science Research Council, 2011), 4.

³ A suggestion for how to do this is contained in Ian D. Clark, [*A new process for assessing and funding research performance in universities: How research contribution units could be calculated using on-line resources*](#), submission to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, July 30, 2012.

⁴ This literature is reviewed in *Academic Transformation*, pages 130-132.

⁵ Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity, *Canada’s Systematic Underinvestment in the Education of Managers: A Review of the Research* (Toronto: January 2011).