

Niche markets? Context on “differentiation” in Ontario

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The current Ontario government has been formulating ideas for systemic change in higher education since at least 2005, when the [Rae Review](#) was released. Some of the issues raised in that review are still with us now – and one of those issues is university differentiation, which has come up yet again via [a data set](#) (PDF) from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) and most recently in the [provincial government’s draft](#) (PDF) of a framework for differentiation (here’s a [good summary](#) by Gavin Moodie).

Differentiation refers to the idea that universities should each take on a distinct “mission”, one that sets them apart from other institutions, and that their activities and priorities should flow from the mission so chosen. The [point of differentiation](#) (PDF) in this way is to curtail or reduce costs through the elimination of activity that does not contribute to the university’s “mission”, and to increase quality by having institutions focus their various resources on a reduced range of programs and/or functions. Past discussions of teaching-focused universities (which already exist in some other provinces) were borne of the same logic.

Earlier in this process, the Ontario government required universities to produce [Strategic Mandate Agreements](#) outlining how they would take on specific roles in a larger provincial system. However, an “[expert panel](#)” who reviewed the results of this exercise concluded that universities had failed to generate mandates that show significant diversity. Since they haven’t been able to implement differentiation “from the bottom up”, universities are now haunted by the spectre of increased government intervention. Based on the reports we see so far, attaching external funding to internal change is the government’s [primary tactic](#) for making the desired change happen.

There are a number of reasons why Ontario’s universities haven’t spontaneously differentiated themselves in the “right” way, and thus why the government may begin to impose more conditions on funds. Asking ([or telling](#)) universities to define specific “mandates” isn’t just about saying what they will be doing; it also requires them to make decisions about what they *won’t* be doing, and the implication is that as some areas are strengthened, other areas will be pruned. Such changes are difficult to make at the best of times, and they cannot be made quickly if there is to be adequate consultation. At the moment, program reviews at the [University of Guelph](#) provide an example of this kind of process in action.

Not only are the required decisions difficult to make (and to implement), but most universities are striving to be a similar kind of institution: a “world-class research university”. Universities are not like regular products in a market, as much as their sophisticated branding efforts might indicate this. One of the great contradictions of increasingly marketized university systems is that universities run on prestige, and thus they’re unlikely to accept voluntarily a lower status in the hierarchy as a means of accessing a different, less prestigious slice of the student market. This explains – at least in part – why so many universities seem to have the same “vision” and “mission” in mind (an example is provided by Alex Usher in [this blog post](#) on Western’s new strategic plan).

It also helps explain why HEQCO’s categorization of universities is focused on two criteria, research and “comprehensiveness” (reduced from five criteria in their [2010 report](#), PDF). The strong association of research with prestige means that universities that focus on either teaching or research (for example) are not “different but equal”; differentiation becomes a form of hierarchization because some activities are valued more than others *globally*. This is possibly why some Ontario universities would applaud formalized stratification, since it would freeze the existing order in place and prevent lesser institutions from trying to climb the prestige ladder. Such a process would have the more tangible benefit of bringing research funding and higher quality students to universities closer to the top of said ladder, without pesky competition from those lower down. It takes resources to be “world class”, after all.

Being internationally competitive means looking at the big picture and where Canadian universities appear in it. Often, comparisons between Canada and other countries such as the United States emphasize that Canadian

universities are much more homogeneous than their U.S. counterparts. In Canada, there is said to be a much more “level playing-field” as it were. This is at least in part because almost all Canadian universities are publicly funded, and they have a fairly low level of marketization compared to (for example) the United States.

Yet this situation, which some might see as beneficial, is [bemoaned as an obstacle](#) to achieving true “world class” quality. What we see is the conflation of egalitarianism with mediocrity, at least in the rhetoric of justification that is employed. As the argument goes, if we don’t deliberately narrow and target our funding to the “best and brightest”, then how can we have any universities that “compete” internationally? By this logic, spreading the money around is like spreading fine manure too thinly over a large garden. Better to choose a few spots where we want significant growth to happen, rather than reap a weedy crop from a more dispersed fertilization.

The assumption that we must compete internationally, that we must be “world class” (according to a fairly narrow definition), is taken as a given in almost every case where this is discussed. Who would dare to suggest we not strive to be closer to Harvard, MIT, Oxford, and the like? Surely it’s obvious that these are the standards to which we all must aspire. Who could be against “quality”? Such considerations are more important than ever at a time when Canadian universities are ramping up their efforts to recruit top international students. Every university must be “world-class” if it wants to attract the best and brightest from “emerging [student] markets” in countries like India, China, and Brazil. Being world-class is part of the brand; and of course, Canadian universities [aren’t the only ones](#) relying on [these arguments](#).

Trying to curtail costs by limiting the expansion of universities’ mission isn’t a new practice, but it’s one that (in Ontario) would be [seen as impinging](#) on the significant degree of autonomy that universities have enjoyed in the past. Not only will funding change, but it will be steered by a logic of competitiveness that invokes global trends, even as it confers on only a few universities the permission to pursue them. Bolstering those universities that already dominate in the (international) rankings and in research funding is viewed as strategic allocation in the service of “excellence”.

Universities can’t be all things to all students, and there are no easy answers here. The government must also consider factors like geography and its effect on access; meaningful partnerships between universities and their local communities; and of course, the quality of teaching, which is a stated imperative for every institution (though how they follow through on it may be another story). But even the relentless obsession with recruiting the “best” students leaves us with the question of how “other” students will fare, and who will focus on their needs, if this mission doesn’t bring the global accolades that universities so cherish. While the Ontario government may insist that all mandates will be valued equally, it remains to be seen how this “value” will manifest in the current environment.