

The Knowledge-Based Society and the Crisis of Higher Education

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In an article about the making of a derivatives market, American sociologists Donald MacKenzie and Yuval Millo describe how the tendency of people to behave in predictable and economically “rational” ways has been the product of conditioning, of discipline, of a certain kind of education. It is a parable of “homo-economicus”, a telling description of how we have come to hold closely to ideas and beliefs that obtain, at best, only figments of truth, and then for only small segments of our society. Education is, it would seem, not a panacea. And this is what progressive social forces need to bear in mind when contemplating our response not just to the massive array of new governmental initiatives – taken at all levels of government – to “improve” higher education in Canada, but also when deciding who it is our bedfellows will be when we organize that response.

THE ONTARIO EXAMPLE

As a case in point, we can look at Ontario. About 16 months ago, after over a decade of funding cuts, the Government of Ontario introduced its “Reaching Higher” plan for higher education. The plan, which followed closely on the heels of Bob Rae’s much vaunted media relations exercise come “consultation” around higher education, dedicated fully \$6.2 billion dollars in new monies for Ontario’s post-secondary institutions. While the \$6.2 billion has been a welcome injection to Ontario’s increasingly over-crowded and crumbling universities and colleges, it holds little promise of generating any meaningful returns, at least for most Ontarians. Significantly, Ontario’s new plan is similar in form and content to efforts being undertaken both throughout Canada and around the world to restructure systems of higher education so as to give national economies a leg-up in the competitive race that is said to be the emerging glo-

bal and knowledge based economy.

The logic here is rather simple and deceptively benign: as our economy becomes increasingly dependent on “conceptual outputs”, on the production of “ideas” and not “things”, it is vital that our workforce become more highly skilled; as we add more and more to the cadre of knowledge workers upon which industry and corporations can draw, we are in a better position to reap the rewards available in the knowledge based economy. And so it was that Ontario’s Liberal government has sought to ‘reach higher.’

But the \$6.2 billion, which is to be delivered over 6 years, doesn’t really equate to very much at all, not for a system that has been starved of resources for well-over a decade and which is also presently being pressed to grow. In fact, after every single dollar of the \$6.2 billion committed hits the system, total public per student expenditure will, in Ontario, barely at the national average. And if this isn’t telling of the real intent and design of ‘Reaching Higher’, of governmental efforts the world over to restructure systems of higher education, some of the details in such plans are even more indicative of what’s really going on.

In addition to the \$6.2 billion, ‘Reaching Higher’ has also involved the creation of the new Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). HEQCO will be charged with general oversight of Ontario’s post-secondary institutions, with ensuring that the people’s money is well-spent, that called for enrolment growth at both the undergraduate and graduate levels doesn’t undermine quality. This is why enrollment growth in Ontario is being handled via “Multi-year Accountability Agreements (MYA’s)”, essentially quasi contracts between individual universities and the government around capacity and enrolment growth projections; through the Council of Ontario Universities, and in negotiation with individual departments, University

administrations set, at the beginning of each year, enrollment targets for the following year.

Based on those projections, the government in turn delivers two envelopes of funding, though only during the year after an MYA is signed, when growth has already happened. The first envelope comes roughly a year after an MYA is signed, right at the beginning of the school year, thereby allowing University administrations to start – only start - hiring the faculty needed to handle the complement of students that have already started school. Universities can begin to finish the hiring process when the second envelope of funding is delivered, roughly half-way through the school year, when enrolment numbers normally solidify and universities can show definitively the extent to which they’ve been able to meet the previous year’s projections. In other words, enrollment is effectively set to increase well before any resources to handle that growth are delivered. Unless and until enrolment numbers stabilize, faculty to student ratios will grow just as fast as enrolment. It’s no wonder then that many within the field of higher education are beginning to say that the government’s approach is generally wrongheaded, or so it would seem.

The government also is seeking to ensure that growth doesn’t undermine quality. Re-enter HEQCO, this time with a set of “key performance indicators” (KPI’s), essentially a series of measures designed to document and measure quality. Though HEQCO hasn’t announced any definitive set of KPI’s, and in fact just recently closed a call for submissions from stakeholders on how quality should be measured, we do have some fairly good indications of what those measures will be. First, we can expect to see a series of measures which have become increasingly ubiquitous in higher education, in large part due to the on-going efforts of the Organization for Economic Cooperation →

and Development (OECD) to universalize particular forms of measurement: measures of through-put and post-graduate earnings, which are otherwise referred to as Rate of Return analyses. In other words, universities are doing a good job if they enroll and graduate large numbers of students and if those students go on to realize a large enough personal financial benefit for their education. At the graduate level, KPI's are expected to measure attrition rates and times to completion averages in addition to those just mentioned. Other indications are that the government will measure quality by tracking how many students and teachers at each of the province's universities are winning awards or external sources of funding, or how effective individual faculty are in concluding joint university-industry research contracts, and the frequency with which scholarly work is cited.

FAILING MEASURES OF RESEARCH AND QUALITY

Unfortunately, not a single of these measures really speaks meaningfully to quality.

Putting aside the issues of through-put and rates of return for a moment, it is interesting to consider that increasingly, awards and external funding grants go only to scholars whose work organizations like the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council classifies as "useful." And in the natural sciences, basic and curiosity driven research is being driven underground as awards and funding programs are re-tooled to favour industry-partnered and commercializable forms of research. Indeed, everywhere one turns "usability" defined as a research deliverable that can be privatized, commodified, and sold at monopoly rents, is that which is winning awards. And there is good reason to suspect the quality of this research.

York University's Joel Lexchin, for instance, in conducting a meta-study of the results generated by research funded by pharmaceutical firms relative to those conducted with other sources of finance, found that "studies sponsored by pharmaceutical companies were more likely to have outcomes favouring the sponsor than were studies with other sponsors."

And the Canadian Federation of Students is now helping to wage a campaign of support for one academic whose work was allegedly stolen and manipulated by award winning researchers at the University of Toronto. Worse still, there is evidence to suggest that those same researchers manipulated the results of a water study they conducted in Warton, Ontario, the very project for which they earned said award. If true, there is reason to believe that their experiment wasn't just dishonest and of poor quality, it also posed a significant risk to public health.

The frequency with which certain works are cited is also problematic as an indicator of quality. First, there simply is not a strict correlation between the quality of a faculty and the quality of the student population that they teach, particularly at "research intensive" universities where faculty-to-student ratios are high and face-time is limited. Second, the frequency with which a source is cited says nothing about its apparent quality. By way of example, President Bush recently made reference to Samuel Huntington's infamous, impoverished, and nonetheless much cited work, *The Clash of Civilizations*. Third, in an environment where "good" research increasingly means "commercializable" research, KPI's based on citations might radically understate the "quality" of sound, critically minded, and curiosity driven work. In fact, many citation indexes favour certain, more mainstream and less critical publications. In other words, a faculty might score high on an index precisely because it doesn't produce critical scholarship. Finally, in subjects like English, where expert scholars might take years to write novels, not lengthy analyses of Shakespeare, the frequency of citations tells us almost nothing.

As for through-put and rates of return, behind them lurks a sordid tale of manipulation, obfuscation, and illiteracy, one that gets at the very heart of the government's real agenda, and of the complicity of University administrations in it. Quite obviously the only thing of which through-put is a measure is through-put – there is simply no reason to assume, particularly in a measure designed to ensure quality – that more is better. Of course, through-put is

generally a conjunctive measure, one viewed in relation to post-graduation earnings as well as student and job satisfaction data. And while this would seem a more reasonable proposition, this is only the case so long as we conceive of education as nothing more than a lengthy job-training process.

According to data published by Human Resources and Services Development Canada, only 42.42% of so-called knowledge workers can read or write at a high level of literacy. And while that number increases markedly when one considers the number of university and college graduates that are classified as knowledge workers, (around 80% of university/college grads who are knowledge workers can read or write at a high level of proficiency), it is mystifying that the number is anything shy of 100%.

In fact, we need to be wondering why it is that so many graduates, regardless of the occupational categories into which they are later deposited, can't read and write at the very highest level. And it's important too to keep in mind that what HRSDC and the OECD consider high levels of literacy aren't really very high. In fact level 4 and 5 on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which is the standard measure of literacy used around the world, indicates nothing about a person's ability to deal with abstract theories and concepts, critical ideas and the like.

By way of example, one of the more difficult questions on the IALS, requires that survey respondents read from a chart the total number of grams of fat contained in a Big Mac, and then to multiply that number by a given quantity in order to determine how many of the 500 calories contained in the sandwich are derived from fat. In other words, the respondent is given the formula: "1g of fat = 9 calories" and then asked to find on an associated chart how many grams of fat, 26, is contained in a Big Mac. An ability to use the given formula to determine the number of calories derived from fat is said to demonstrate the highest level of literacy on the IALS.

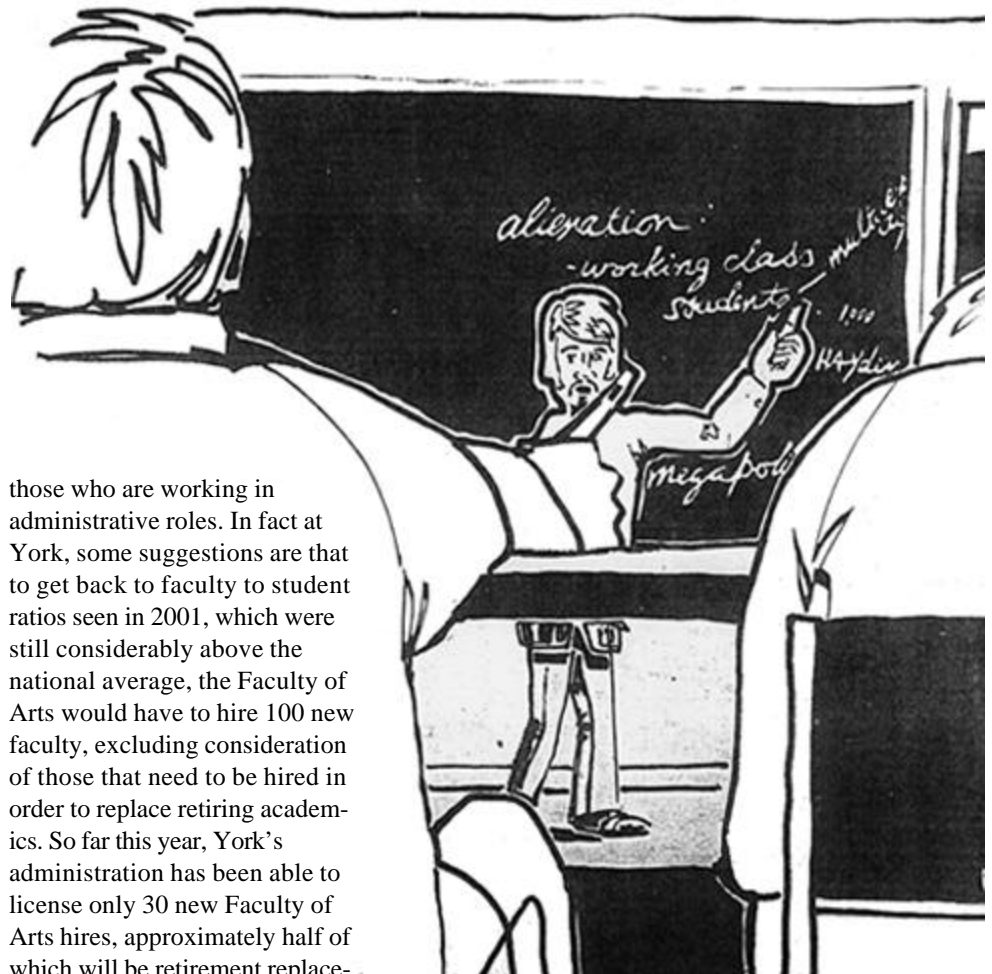
What this means is that rhetoric about the knowledge-based economy is a load of bunk, that what people earn – and the incomes of "knowledge workers" do tend

to skew above average – is nowhere near a good indication of how they think, of the quality of their education. And this is precisely the point: the design and function of our system of higher education, understood provincially, nationally, globally, isn't at all about quality, it's about the market. And the market stands to benefit tremendously from a highly trained but poorly educated electorate come flexible workforce, that is adept at reading and following directions, but not at questioning their efficacy, their morality. This is of course the great secret of higher education, why it was hardly noticed that 45% of high-school graduates in Toronto last year graduated with an A-average or better, why no one ever talks about the fact that approximately 25% of university and college graduates can't do better than score at level 3 on the IALS.

FAILING UNIVERSITY & GOVERNMENT POLICY

Here's the rub: graduate schools and faculty everywhere are increasingly staffed by the products of our system of higher education. No wonder that positivistic social scientism and commercial research agendas are enjoying a rather happy time these days. No wonder too that "critical thinking skills" are increasingly described as something akin to a person's ability to problem-solve; as the quality of higher education is thinned, "critical thinking" will increasingly become an unintended euphemism for an ability to practice convention really well.

And so it shouldn't come as a surprise that university administrations across Ontario aren't more than a little concerned about the way in which they're being asked to grow, that is long before the resources necessary to meet the demands of that growth arrive. Even the practitioners of convention recognize that training is easier when faculty to student ratios are not quite as high as they now are at places like York University where there is only a single tenure-stream faculty member for every 36 undergraduate students. At the graduate level the numbers appear less appalling, though only because they aren't broken down by department and don't consider faculty on leave, those on sabbatical, or



those who are working in administrative roles. In fact at York, some suggestions are that to get back to faculty to student ratios seen in 2001, which were still considerably above the national average, the Faculty of Arts would have to hire 100 new faculty, excluding consideration of those that need to be hired in order to replace retiring academics. So far this year, York's administration has been able to license only 30 new Faculty of Arts hires, approximately half of which will be retirement replacements. Just 85 to go... this year.

Telling here is the fact that upset over the situation hasn't yet translated into any kind of visible action. As York's Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies put it during a recent Council meeting, "the carrot for growing is more money, the stick for not growing isn't less money, it is potentially no money." And so through backdoor channels, behind closed doors, in and around the Council of Ontario Universities, university administrations are talking with government officials about changing the status quo, about making more funding available more quickly and on the front end of enrolment growth. Good thing, right? Potentially.

To be sure, the way resources presently get delivered to universities has to change. But there are several ways to skin a cat here and so long as the discourse around higher education continues, both at the University and at the governmental

level, to be about the so-called, "knowledge based economy" its unlikely that we'll get very far, even if we do see lower faculty to student ratios, in building a high-quality system of higher education. Indeed, we have at least to pause and consider whether growing programs within an increasingly commercialized and market-based environment will do more harm than good. With corporations on the dole, and with the welfare trough nestled firmly on University campuses, quality will remain a phantom. But then no critical mind ever conceived of training as human salvation. That was always the job of a good education. **R**

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