

Ontario needs to raise its marks to compete in education market

Lack of an integrated post-secondary system leaves province ill-equipped to attract foreign students... **John G. Kelly** Published On Tue Mar 16 2010 in Toronto Star.

Premier Dalton McGuinty wants to vault the province into the big leagues of export education. Ontario is at present a minor league player in what is an extremely sophisticated global business. The province needs to get up to international speed in a hurry if it wants to become a major player.

First and foremost, it needs to establish a credible accreditation system for its colleges and universities. The Canadian Council on Learning has done an excellent job in pointing out how Canada stands embarrassingly alone among comparable western countries in not having an objective independent accreditation system that can lay any claim to legitimacy. When asked by prospective students why they should opt for a U.K. university over a Canadian one, I can produce objective, independent evaluation criteria such as British Higher Education Funding Council Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) ratings. My Canadian counterparts rely solely on local name recognition. This serves them well provincially but lacks international credibility.

Ontario's colleges and universities are still configured into ridiculous silos. The universities are the main culprits in erecting out-of-date systemic barriers between college diplomas and applied degrees and the "purist" university academic degrees.

In the U.K., there is a streamed system that integrates diplomas and degrees. It's easier for an Ontarian with a college diploma or applied degree to get admitted to law school in Oxford and Cambridge in the U.K. than an Ontario law school. U.K. university marketers are quick to point out to Indians, Pakistanis and all potential applicants from Commonwealth countries that the Ontario college/university system is a convoluted academic quagmire. Ontario needs to follow the lead of British Columbia and force an integrated post-secondary education system down the throats of the universities if they want their institutions to be competitive with other export education marketers.

Every government that has a successful post-secondary export educational marketing business – and it is a business – organizes its institutions into designated tiers. The U.K. has its prestigious Russell Group of 20 universities that are research intensive and funded accordingly. In North America, California, which rivals the U.K. as the most successful export educational marketer in the western world, has its famous three-tier system of post-secondary education. The 10 campuses of the University of California (Berkeley, Los Angeles, etc.) are global leaders in high-end research at the PhD level and replete with Nobel Laureates. The 23 campuses of California State University concentrate on baccalaureate/masters level education. The 110 community colleges focus on applied education and training.

California is perhaps the best example of illustrating that the tiers don't mean the "big 10" are superior to the others. San Jose State University, in the heart of Silicon Valley, is where Gordon Moore, founder of Intel and namesake for Moore's Law on the predictive power of microchips, earned his educational spurs. The state universities are famous for producing the doers that complement the thinkers in the research institutions. Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright Sam Sheppard mastered the craft of scriptwriting in the California community college system. In short, funding is allocated strategically and prospective students are directed toward a centre of excellence that complements their career aspirations.

Queen's Park must take the political lead in allocating funding to a university and college system which promotes excellence education that conforms to a mandate. The province has, at best, the combination of knowledge management capability in academia (the best brains are difficult to recruit; just ask Waterloo and U of T) and public funding to support the designation of three primary international research universities and 16 provincial undergraduate education/masters universities, with the latter integrated with the 24 community colleges. The province will then have a marketable educational product mix to export.

The hard part comes once all of that is in place. Exporting education is a discipline in its own right. In my capacity as an export consultant for U.K. universities, I attend the usual graduate school fairs and network with other educational export consultants. In general, Ontario universities are rank amateurs when it comes to the international marketing of education.

The province needs to take heed of what Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, England and even tiny Wales have done in putting professional export educational marketing consortia in place. This is not a gentleman's game for professors with time on their hands to be assigned to play in. Export education is a hard-core business. Ontario will have to compete to win.



John G. Kelly, a former law professor, is president of Canada Law From Abroad and an export education consultant to a consortium of university law schools in the U.K.