

The Role of dual sector universities in widening participation: part of the solution or part of the problem?

Institutions that offer dual provision combining further education (FE) and higher education (HE) courses in one organisational entity are a small but growing segment of post compulsory education (Garrod and Macfarlane, 2009). In England, for example, these dual sector institutions may have been encouraged and supported by public policy initiatives to widen access and to enhance progression to degree level education (Bathmaker *et al*, 2008) .

In British Columbia (BC), Canada, presidents of dual sector institutions in advocating for changes in institutional designation from college to university (Kwantlen University College, 2006, p. 8; Malaspina University College, 2004, p. 11; Okanagan University College, 2004, p. 13; University College of the Fraser Valley, 2006, p. 8) have grounded their arguments in the rhetoric of “social justice, access and equity” (Wheelahan, 2009). They have argued that their institutions are better positioned than other organisational types to widen access and enhance student progression. This claim, at least in part, is based on an assumed superiority of a ‘one-stop-shopping’ model – once students are admitted to community college (further education) level courses, they are more likely to continue on to higher education if they can do so at the same institution. Moreover, by offering seamless student pathways between college (further) and university (higher) education, these institutions claim they enhance student progression. As well, since admission criteria to community college or FE are lower, these institutions assert that more non-traditional students can begin their post secondary education at a dual sector institution and that this is an effective and efficient way to widen access. Similar rationales have been used in England, Thames Valley University being one example (Garrod, 2009, p. 80).

This paper asks if there is merit to these claims. Are dual sector institutions more successful than others at widening access and enhancing student progression? The evidence to date is mixed at best. In 2010 at the SRHE Annual Conference, Garrod and Macfarlane reported that the Thames Valley University experiment

had ended with the split of the university and further education components into two institutions (Garrod and Macfarlane, 2010). They reported that progression between FE and HE had not materialised, and not only was the ‘marriage’ over, the university had announced that it would now be known as known as the University of West London.

My paper will report on empirical research undertaken in British Columbia, Canada where 5 dual sector universities were established between 2003 and 2008. It will look at provincial enrolment, transition and student outcome data sets and compare the performance of these dual sector universities with those of more traditional institutional configurations – community colleges and research universities.

The evidence collected to date does not support the assertion that the BC dual sector universities have been better at widening access than other institutional configurations in the province. In reviewing gross enrolment data from 2005-2010 (See Table 1), it is clear that the dual sector universities experienced less enrolment growth than the more traditional combination of community colleges and research universities. This data comes from a time in which the Provincial Government had committed to a major 25,000 space expansion of the province’s public post-secondary education system (Campagnolo, 2004, p. 21), so new spaces were available to all institutions. As well, it covers a period in which there was significant economic growth followed by a major recession.

Table 1
FTE₁. Enrolment Growth for BC Dual Sector University Regions and Regions with both Community Colleges and Research Universities, 2005-2010

	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	Five Year Growth
Regions w/ Dual Sector Universities	32,576	32,837	32,901	34,626	36,137	10.9%
Regions with a Community College and a Research University	35,410	37,421	38,286	41,556	44,487	25.6%

Source: Institutional FTE Reports

1. One FTE is equivalent to one student enrolled full-time at an institution.

Moreover, not only did the dual sector university enrolments not grow as much as enrolments in provincial regions with community college/research university combinations, their performance in providing lower level access to further education wasn't as good as was the provincial community colleges (See Table 2).

Table 2
2009/10 Final FTE Report: Funded Actual and Utilization for Developmental Programs with regional FTEs per related population

	Developmental FTEs	FTE Target	Utilization	Pop 25-64 w/o High School	Actual ABE FTEs per 1000 w/o HS
Dual Sector University Regions	3,491.8	3764	92.8%	114,727	25.3
Community College Regions	9,995.2	8285	120.60%	160,266	41.2

Source: Ministry of Advanced Education, April 2011

Based on preliminary evidence collected to date, not only are the dual sector universities not widening access as much as other institutional configurations, but they are not providing the same level of access to developmental programs as are the community colleges. (Section 47.1 of the University Act states that the function of dual sector universities (Province of British Columbia, 2010) includes developmental education). Table 2 demonstrates that they are underperforming at 92.8% of their FTE target and are providing less access per 1000 population without high school completion.

The conference presentation will incorporate more detailed analysis of data on widening access and enhancing progression including participation data on gender, lower, socio-economic groups and aboriginal people.

The presentation will discuss possible internal and external tensions that may be hindering greater student diversity at these dual sector universities. The internal tensions identified include changing academic identities, evolving program mix, and institutional conflicts between isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) in

search of legitimacy and recognition on one hand, and polymorphism (Morphew and Huisman, 2002) striving for distinctiveness in mission and program mix on the other. The external tensions include legislation that defines mandate and constrains institutional drift, limited funding and the role of faculty unions.

Finally, the paper presentation will compare the British Columbia experience with dual sector universities with experience in other jurisdictions including the United Kingdom.

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