

## **Negotiating Practice Boundaries:**

### **Identity and Legitimacy in British Columbia's University Sector (0243)**

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In 2008, the Province of British Columbia (BC) created five new universities, precipitating several questions regarding the composition of the public university sector. Prior to this re-drawing of university boundaries in the province, four research-intensive universities that focus primarily on academic programming through the doctoral level defined a relatively uniform sector characterized by similar educational practices. This remained the case despite the recent inclusion of two atypical institutions: a special purpose university focused primarily on career-based, partially online degree programs and a dual sector (Garrod and Macfarlane, 2006, 2009) university college focused primarily on integrated preparatory, trades, vocational and academic programs. With the addition of five new teaching-intensive universities through legislated re-designation of the three remaining university colleges, an art and design institute, and a community college, the university sector is now comprised by a preponderance of institutions that challenge, through many of their historic and current educational practices, the established idea of the university in BC.

Drawing upon organizational culture and neoinstitutional theory (Pedersen and Dobbin, 2006), the conceptual framework for this study suggests legitimation and identity dynamics within universities are recursive processes of interpretation and integration across external normative expectations and internal institutional contexts. Although normative expectations relating to university practices are always being negotiated and may be enacted differently in individual universities, as a whole they represent a set of commonly held sector boundaries within which member universities are expected to operate in any given jurisdiction. Institutional legitimacy and integrity are dependent upon an appropriate level of alignment across a matrix of practice boundaries that delimit the university as an idea without unduly limiting individual institutions.

This study follows a social constructionist research approach employing several grounded theory processes in the collection, organization, and analysis of direct quotations from various documents, including quality assurance guidelines, legislation, scholarship, and professional opinions offered by practitioners and academics across BC's university sector. Two general purposes have guided the research: constructing an understanding of the historical development of the university to inform analyses on the dynamics shaping its contemporary expression in BC and developing hypotheses on the current requisite university practice boundaries that inform peer determinations on the legitimacy of any given public university in BC. To date, several key findings have emerged regarding university practice boundaries, prompting many further considerations and questions for the Province's public post-secondary system of

universities, colleges, and institutes.

In keeping with the conceptual framework, literature reviews on the historic development of post-secondary systems in multiple jurisdictions support an understanding of universities as complex and dynamic institutions composed by and dependent upon shared as well as unique institutional histories, traditions, and practices. The continuing challenge for BC's new universities, a challenge seemingly common to those in the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, and elsewhere, is connecting varied practices in a manner that permits them both to retain their institutional integrity and to establish their legitimacy as universities within their unique national and intersecting international contexts. Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova and Teichler (2007) point out, the "diversity of higher education systems in each national context depends on . . . external and internal boundaries that portray its horizontal and vertical structure . . ." (p. 375). The extent to which new universities are able to occupy a credible space within the post-secondary systems in their jurisdictions is dependent upon the extent to which they are viewed as belonging to a unitary, albeit stratified, sector and / or defining for themselves a distinctive sub-sector position within a more pluralist post-secondary system.

The document analysis suggests three core qualities and conditions—Institutional Autonomy, Academic Rights and Responsibilities, and Organizational Capacity—inform the idea of the university in BC. Further, six major criterion categories of normative expectations—Institutional Autonomy, Bicameral Governance, Degree Programming, Research, Faculty Roles, and Quality Assurance—constitute the bases of current practice boundaries for the university in BC. These findings guide development of six hypotheses on practice boundaries within the contemporary iteration of the BC university sector. The overall significance of this study emerges in the identification of several attendant cultural dynamics, operational practices, and institutional capacity considerations concerning the ongoing operation of BC public universities in manners consistent with practice boundaries of the sector.

A significant challenge for the BC post-secondary system seems likely to be the maintenance of necessary delimitating sector boundaries where and as appropriate to ensure ongoing relevance and recognizable institutional forms. To not maintain appropriate boundaries carries the risk of system dissolution and increasing difficulty for any given institution to convey a legitimate identity outside its own self-referential expression. This is not to suggest that there can be no overlap between aspects of the visions, values, and educational practices of institutions from different sectors; however, as Laredo (2007) suggests, the functional activities of individual institutions must remain in keeping with their core missions as universities, colleges, or institutes, as the case may be, in order to ensure their integrity.

This necessity of integrity is foundational to Scott's (1993) general imperative that universities must remain "able freely to adapt" (p. 1) as well as Plant's (2007) specific imperative that the "BC higher education [system] . . . respond to . . . changes [in societal expectations] or become increasingly irrelevant" (p. 10). An institution cannot

adapt or respond in a legitimate manner if it does not function from a basis of understanding concerning its core missions and practices. These are not constructed in isolation, but negotiated across the unique cultural dynamics and educational practices of specific institutions and the normative expectations delimiting the boundaries of the sector to which they belong. In effect, the capacity of the university to adapt to changing social, political and / or economic contexts is dependent upon maintaining institutional integrity through the enactment of educational practices deemed appropriate and legitimate by peers. Most assuredly, universities cannot restrict themselves to narrow conceptions that prevent their reinterpretation and change over time, but, as Considine (2006) and many others suggest, they must also avoid becoming universalized such that no boundaries seem capable of containing them.

## References

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