

B7 Chepstow Wednesday 5 December 12.45-13.15

Internationalization, pathway colleges, and the privatization of Canadian higher education (0193)

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Introduction:

International students are significant economic contributors to higher educational institutions in Canada, where the recruitment of international undergraduates paying market-based tuition fees is an opportunity to offset stagnating governmental operating grants. Thus, there is considerable economic incentive for institutions to recruit international students. In this context, many Canadian universities have created “pathway colleges” to recruit international students who do not have the necessary qualifications for direct entry. These pathway colleges offer students an opportunity to upgrade their linguistic or academic skills, often with conditional enrolment attached to successful completion of these programs, while paying international undergraduate fees. Although they have received some attention in other countries (Agosti & Bernat, 2018; A. Brewer & Zhao, 2010; Dooley, 2010), there has been very limited research examining them in a Canadian context, or exploring why they have emerged. Seventy-two per-cent of Canadian universities have a partnership with a pathway college, making them a common yet understudied element of contemporary Canadian higher education (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018).

This paper attempts to examine the emergence of pathway colleges in Canada. By examining archival records at four universities with pathway college partnerships, it analyses the development of these partnerships. In so doing, it attempts to explain why a significant number of these pathways are with private, for-profit providers (32% according to McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018) considering the dominance of public institutions in Canada’s higher education system, and what the impact of these partnerships has been on Canada’s higher education system more generally.

Theoretical framework

This paper is part of a larger project examining pathway colleges in Canada from a variety of angles, attempting to understand them in the context of internationalization of higher education (Tamtik, 2017; Viczko & Tascón, 2016); increasing precarity of academic labour (Cardozo, 2017; Morgan & Wood, 2017; Rhoades, 2017); and corporatization of the public higher education system in Canada (Brownlee, 2015; Fisher & Chan, 2008). It is a work of critical policy analysis (Ball, 2006) which aims to recapture the structural and discursive elements that contributed to the creation of pathway colleges. To do this, it pays close attention to what educational historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban call “policy talk,” the

debate and discussion about education that does not always translate directly to policy, but shapes the context out of which the final policy emerges (Tyack & Cuban, 1996).

Research design

The paper examines archival records, including academic senate discussions, internal reports, and public media debate, to better understand the development of pathway college partnerships at four Canadian universities, two of which are major research institutions, and two of which are smaller, “comprehensive” universities. It uses these records to reconstruct the debates about creating these partnerships in an example of a historically informed critical policy analysis (C. A. Brewer, 2014; Gale, 2001).

Findings:

This paper argues that the roots of these pathways can be found in the political and economic context of the 1990s and 2000s, an era of a general movement towards what John Levin calls “liberal market practices” in the higher education sector in Canada (Levin, 2017, p. 213). More specifically, public higher education institutions found themselves trapped by stagnating government support and strictly regulated domestic tuition rates (Fisher, Rubenson, Trottier, & Shanahan, 2014). However, governments generally deregulated international student tuition, pushing institutions to look for new ways to recruit international students.

While this context helps explain why universities were amenable to creating pathway partnerships, it does not explain why some institutions chose to form partnerships with private, for-profit education companies, while others chose to create pathway programs owned and operated by the public partner institution itself. Archival research indicates that it was private operators themselves who first constructed these pathway systems, and brought with them their experience in the international context. Institutions in Canada, though, generally chose their preferred model at least in part because of their relative stature, with more prestigious institutions operating their own programs while universities with less international profile developed partnerships with private companies. However, another factor was the local response, and resistance to private partnerships shaped the decisions in several cases.

Perhaps most strikingly, examining the roots of these pathways reveals that while some institutions chose to operate publicly owned colleges, they modelled these on the private, for-profit pathway colleges already in operation in the field, including employing precarious academic labour, charging tuition fees that were high enough to generate surplus income, and formally (and sometimes geographically) separating the pathway college students from the rest of the student population. The result is that this paper, while tracing the emergence of this institutional form,

reveals that the boundaries between public and private institutions are being increasingly blurred in the pathway college model.

Contributions

This study advances knowledge of pathway colleges, a growing phenomenon around the world (Agosti & Bernat, 2018) which has not received much attention in Canada, especially not critical attention. Moreover, the paper offers an example of historically informed policy analysis, drawing on archival sources that have gone unexamined in the Canadian context to this point.

But perhaps the most useful contribution of this study is to a broader understanding of how public education systems are changed and shaped by the private sector, and how they come to be “privatized,” in form if not always officially. In this way it contributes to a rich international literature that critically examines the effects of internationalization on higher education systems and people (e.g. Anderson, 2014; Cantwell, 2015; Ilieva, Beck, & Waterstone, 2014; Stein, 2017).

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