Diversification in Higher Education

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Sustaining Growth and Prosperity through Diversification

Like many countries, Canadian society is transforming in response to the forces of globalization and an increasingly competitive, technologically sophisticated economy. Canada’s labour market demands advanced skills that are more sophisticated than those expected even one decade ago. Studies show that in Canada, 70% of new all new jobs will require a post-secondary level of education.

Higher education systems in Canada need to respond to these changes and develop greater capacity to diversify into different forms of post-secondary education delivery. With natural population growth falling below the replacement rate, future economic success will depend on a labour market that maximizes the skill levels of all Canadians.

Canada’s network of 135 publicly-funded colleges, institutes, cégeps, and polytechnics,\(^1\) have a long-standing track record of successful strategic collaborations and partnerships with all levels of government, the private sector, the public sector and local communities to produce a highly skilled workforce for today’s economy. They serve over 3,000 urban, rural and remote communities across the country and offer a diversity of programs leading to trade professional certificates, technician and technologist diplomas, bachelor degrees and post graduate diplomas. Over 90% of college students obtain employment within six months upon graduation.

The Challenges

The expansion and diversification of higher education delivery models to meet the needs of all types of learners is not without challenges.

Funding

The demand for postsecondary education and increased enrolments across the country have grown by such proportions that governments can no longer support these institutions at the level that they have in the past. In addition, funding mechanisms and students fees vary from province to province. As such, the trend is for colleges and institutes to explore alternate sources of revenue to cope with reduced funding. In some cases, institutions face reductions from 70% to 40%.

\(^1\) Hereinafter, colleges, institutes and polytechnics are referred to as colleges and institutes.
Some examples of sustainable financial strategies include:

- Colleges and institutes are developing within their institution systems, processes, practices, pathways and leadership to encourage staff, faculty, and students to think and act as entrepreneurs. This requires leadership and governance commitment; policy transformation; entrepreneurship development in teaching and learning; opportunities for college-wide engagement in entrepreneurial activities and outreach to community and stakeholders.

- In Ontario, colleges and institutes are working in partnership with the provincial government in implementing strategic mandate agreements which will enable these institutions to further develop their individual institutional strengths, and ensuring students continue to have access to a quality postsecondary education. These goals of these strategic mandates are to support student access and success, increase the global competitiveness of Ontario’s post-secondary education, build on and help focus the strengths of Ontario colleges while avoiding unnecessary duplication; and maintain an efficient and financially sustainable postsecondary education system.

- In Alberta, Olds College opened the Pomeroy Inn & Suites, a four star hotel and conference center which also doubles as the learning centre for the college’s Canadian Institute for Rural Entrepreneurship. This multi-million dollar facility is integrated into the college’s academic programming by housing the Brewmaster and Brewery Operations Management Diploma. The college’s meat program supplies the meat to the restaurant, the landscape design and upkeep is done by Olds College, and the Tourism and Hospitality program is partially run out of the hotel.

- Okanagan College, in British Columbia, launched a $7 million fundraising campaign for a trades training complex led by three prominent professionals in the media and marketing sector in the community. The innovative and environmentally sustainable facility will elevate the perception of trades and reinforce the important role that Okanagan College plays in establishing a robust economy that will secure the province’s future.

- Working with government and post-secondary partners, we market Canadian colleges and institutes abroad and increase opportunities for colleges and institutes by attracting greater numbers of international students.

Diversity of Learners

Canada’s colleges and institutes are uniquely positioned to provide diverse delivery models to a diverse clientele. They embrace under-represented groups, reach out to those who may not otherwise have access to a post-secondary education, provide access and laddering opportunities to further education for Aboriginal peoples, people with disabilities, the unemployed, low-wage earners and those who have not completed high school or are under-prepared for post-secondary programs.

Innovative delivery models include:

- Mobile classrooms travelling to northern and rural regions to meet demand for advanced skills in mining, hydropower construction, forestry and oil and gas.

- An Indigenous Education Protocol for Colleges and Institutes to profile nationally college and institute approaches for serving Indigenous learners and communities. The Protocol is being developed in partnership with representatives colleges and institutes, Indigenous institutes and the Assembly of First Nations.

- Essential skills development has been at the forefront of improving access and supporting learner success. Findings of 17 pilot projects across Canada reported that 40% to 60% of learners and workers tested were below level 3 literacy. After only 24-40 hours of essential skills training and
individual coaching resulted in sustained learning gains and increased motivation and performance in both learning and workplace environments.

Relevance of programs

Colleges and institutes are hubs of socio-economic development in the regions they serve. They must respond to industry and community needs and to students who expect 24/7 access to learning, a diversity of programs and more and more on-line education. Through flexible and diverse delivery models, the college and institute system is more responsive to labor market requirements and has increased the range of options available to learners.

College Program Advisory Committees comprising local employers develop and update curricula to ensure college graduates have the leading edge knowledge and the practical skills required by employers.

Integrating applied research as a core facet of experiential learning while helping firms to innovate is what also defines colleges and institutes. Complementary to university research, college/institute applied research partnerships are an essential node in Canada’s innovation system; both by helping firms make incremental changes to production processes and adopt new technologies and producing human capital for innovation.

Canada’s colleges and institutes’ focus on applied learning is increasingly attracting university students. Up to 22% of college and institute students have previously attended university and 13% have a university bachelor degree.