

When it Comes to University Governance, Sometimes Less is More

-Michael Smolinski – School of Public Policy and Governance (University of Toronto)

The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skill Development's proposal to have all students graduate from university with some form of work-integrated learning experience is a tremendous step in the right direction. Young people across Canada continue to pursue post-secondary education not for the sake of academic endeavor, but simply for a chance at landing a decent job after they graduate. What's worse is that new graduates increasingly describe themselves as feeling unprepared and lacking the skills that they need to actually secure a job. Any opportunity to apply the theory learned in class to the workplace would be a welcomed one.

Research shows that experiences like co-ops and internships offer substantial benefits to students. A 2011 study from Simon Fraser University found that 94% of students who participated in a co-op program felt that the experience made them more competitive in the job market compared to students without co-op experience. A 2009 study of 10,000 Canadian university graduates found that students who had taken co-op programs earned, on average, 20% more than their counterparts who had not participated in co-op.

But this step in the right direction is just that; a single step forward that will face real and potentially progress-halting opposition from the universities that will have to implement the policy. If this proposal is to have any hope of surviving, the Ministry will have to tread carefully to ensure that university administrations see the real value in it and do not feel that it threatens their institutional missions.

You see, universities in Ontario have historically enjoyed a great degree of operational autonomy. This is based on the notion that academic freedom depends on it, and that the core functions of universities, being teaching and research, are best managed by those who are actually experts in it.

So, despite being publically-funded institutions, universities have never taken kindly to government policies that infringe on their autonomy. If the government pushes its higher education initiatives too forcefully, the universities resist and the government takes a step back.

One doesn't have to search hard to see this dynamic at play. In 2012, the Ministry released a report suggesting that universities begin offering more 3-year labour market-focused degrees and make core first and second-year courses universally transferrable across all universities in Ontario. Needless to say, universities did not respond positively to this decision. While many schools supported the *ideas* of the report, they resented the notion that the government was stepping in to mandate them. This was exemplified by headlines like "Post-Secondary Education Faces Serious Attack in Ontario" from university teachers' associations and university administrations.

As a result of the pushback, universities were ultimately not mandated to adhere to a universal credit transfer system throughout the province. Instead, the government founded ontransfer.ca, a simple website where universities can browse each other's' course offerings and decide for themselves which credits should be transferable at their institution. Critically, membership was made optional, and yet eventually every higher education institution in the province joined. Simply by making credit transfer decisions more accessible to universities and students through an online platform, students now have access to 120,000 course equivalencies in one place, according to the Ministry. More importantly, this shows that the Ministry can successfully take a less-interventionist approach to encourage universities to adopt a policy program of interest.

The obligation to respect institutional autonomy puts the Ministry in a tough position as it allows universities to resist almost any major higher education initiative proposed by government. It is a classic example of biting the hand that feeds, except that the biter keeps getting fed. This requires

that the ministry take a creative, yet hands-off approach to realize its policy goals. If the Ministry is serious about providing more work-integrated learning opportunities to students, it will have to accept that it cannot simply mandate that universities offer more co-ops, internships, and research opportunities to students.

The Ministry should look back to the success it experienced with its credit transfer initiative and design a platform that can be a central hub for work-integrated learning knowledge in the province; use a website, conferences, or both to promote the transfer of this knowledge between institutions. Universities should not be mandated to use such a platform, but should be shown the benefits of its use and be encouraged to join. Most of all, remember: When it comes to university governance in this province, sometimes less is more.