

▶ POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC QUALITY: AN ISSUE TO BE DISCUSSED URGENTLY

Post-secondary education has been challenged in many ways in the last years. Several major companies, such as Google, Apple, Home Depot and Bank of America, no longer require degrees for many positions as they did in the past¹. Part of that is due to the impression that academic quality has declined and that a significant number of students finish their tertiary studies with a serious lack of basic general skills. The hurried transition to online classes, done quickly due to COVID-19, added to concerns about quality.

Among experts in higher education, there is a widespread impression that there has been a general lowering in post-secondary education quality around the world. Academic types of research show that new graduates often lack basic knowledge and general skills². Around the world, some institutions have developed evaluations based on value-added, often, comparing **first and last year student performance** using the same test to estimate learning gains. A survey from 1985 aimed to study the effect of education on thinking skills 35 years ago. Students from high schools and colleges were asked to build an argument orally regarding daily topics. After grading the quality of responses on a 1-5 scale, 1st-year high school students scored 1.6, compared to 2.1 from the 4th-year ones. Considering college students, 1st and 4th-year students had the same score: 2.8³. Most recently, a study with 7,500 students from 20 Ontario postsecondary institutions, developed by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, found that a quarter of graduating students from that province has limited literacy and numeracy skills⁴. Canada, a country that is seen as having one of the best post-secondary systems in the world, also has significant problems in this regard.

There are several possible explanations for the decline in academic quality. A common explanation has been the sharp rise in the number of for-profit post-secondary

education institutions. Not all of them function at the quality levels required by the public institutions. In Brazil, one of the biggest post-secondary education systems worldwide, data from the government shows that 48 percent of the undergraduate programs with poor outcomes (less than 3 on a scale from 1 to 5) are offered by for-profit institutions⁵.

What could be done in terms of public policies to address this matter? The first one is to strengthen accreditation mechanisms to ensure that institutions operating with poor academic quality will improve their instructions. In the United States, Education Corporation of America (ECA), a for-profit education company based in Alabama, finished its activities in December 2018 after losing its accreditation, abandoning 20,000 students. According to a 2018 report, 94 percent of credits earned in for-profit private schools are not transferable to public community colleges; 83 percent are not transferable even to other for-profit institutions⁶.

Other ways to address the academic quality issue were pointed out by the Commission of Reform of Ontario⁷. The commission suggests “encouraging experimentations with alternate career paths, including formalizing teaching-only or research-only streams. We consider this to be a viable option for top-performing teachers and top-performing researchers”. It could not only contribute to increasing academic quality but also offer different pathways than four-year bachelor’s degrees, delivering students with skills possibly more linked to the job market. Lastly, the document mentions linking “further provincial funding allocations to quality objectives, which will encourage post-secondary institutions to be more responsive. In addition, the province should alter the funding model to also reward degrees awarded, rather than just enrolment levels.”

“Movement toward transparent and meaningful quality control has been slow and will remain thus, in part because of the challenge of finding and applying appropriate metrics.”

Although such solutions may seem applicable worldwide—an outcome that is highly unlikely—the reality is that post-secondary institutions protect their autonomy and resist strong government oversight. Movement toward transparent and meaningful quality control has been slow and will remain thus, in part because of the challenge of finding and applying appropriate metrics. The pressures created by the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly the wide adoption of online learning, have raised many questions about the effectiveness of new instructional methods and the quality of the educational experience. To date, however, there is little sign that institutions, governments and the public at large are serious about pulling back the curtains on higher education and examining the effectiveness of instruction and the impact on students and, therefore, future employees.

Endnotes

¹ Conlley, C. (2018, October 8). Google, Apple and 12 other companies that no longer require employees to have a college degree. CNBC. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/16/15-companies-that-no-longer-require-employees-to-have-a-college-degree.html>

² Arum, R. & Roska, J. (2011). *Academically adrift: limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³ Perkins, D. N. (1985). Postprimary education has little impact on informal reasoning. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77(5), 562–571.

⁴ Weingarten, H. P., Brumwell, S., Chatoor, K. & Hudak, L. (2018). *Measuring Essential Skills of Postsecondary Students: Final Report of the Essential Adult Skills Initiative*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

⁵ Rezende, H. (2020, October 10). Enade: confira o desempenho de todos os cursos avaliados. Correio Braziliense. Retrieved from <https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/euestudante/ensino-superior/2020/10/4883319-enade-confira-o->

[desempenho-de-todos-os-cursos-avaliados.html](#)

⁶ Newton, D. (2018, August 19). Are Teachers About To Be Replaced By Bots? Forbes. Retrieved <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dereknewton/2018/08/19/are-teachers-about-to-be-replaced-by-bots/#7e002835ec7c>

⁷ Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services. (2012). *Public Services for Ontarians: A path to sustainability and excellence of Ontario's public services*. Retrieved from <https://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/reformcommission/chapters/report.pdf>

References

Arum, R. & Roska, J. (2011). *Academically adrift: limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services. (2012). *Public Services for Ontarians: A path to sustainability and excellence of Ontario's public services*. Retrieved from <https://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/reformcommission/chapters/report.pdf>

Conlley, C. (2018, October 8). Google, Apple and 12 other companies that no longer require employees to have a college degree. CNBC. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/16/15-companies-that-no-longer-require-employees-to-have-a-college-degree.html>



KEN COATES, PROFESSOR AND CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR IN REGIONAL INNOVATION, Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan; SENIOR FELLOW, Macdonald-Laurier Institute

Prior to joining the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School in 2012, Ken served at universities across Canada (UNBC, UNB and Waterloo) and at the University of Waikato (New Zealand), an institution known internationally for its work on Indigenous affairs. He has also worked as a consultant for Indigenous groups and governments in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia as well as for the United Nations, companies, and think tanks. Ken has also served as the past president of the Japan Studies Association of Canada, and was inducted into the Royal Society of Canada in 2015.



LENIN GUERRA, LICENSED PROFESSOR IN PUBLIC POLICIES, Federal Institute IFRN (Brazil)

Lenin Guerra earned a PhD in Public Administration from Brazil, in the area of post-secondary education policies in Brazil and Latin America. In his postdoc at the University of Saskatchewan, he has been working with Dr. Ken Coates, broadening his studies to global post-secondary education issues. He has examined issues such as student access, teaching, students' performance, non-completion rates and factors in student retention, like the rapport between professors and students and the impact on academic outcomes. In Brazil, he is a licensed professor from a Federal Institute in the area of teaching Public Policies. Lenin also works as a researcher for the First Nations University of Canada in Regina. He has published articles in international media about post-secondary education and Latin American politics.