



Commentary

Quality of Post-secondary Education: What We Don't Know Is Hurting Us

Ross Finnie and Alex Usher

Canadians are vitally aware of the importance of advanced education. They know that Canada's competitiveness and their living standards depend on the knowledge and skills of the work force. But are Canada's universities and colleges offering quality education?

Many of us would like to know. Students and parents who want to make good schooling choices. Governments that want to spend the right amount of money on PSE (instead of health care and other competing envelopes) and get value for the resources allocated. Institutions and systems that want to provide the best education they can. Professors and others at the front lines who are dedicated to the task of excellence in teaching.

How do institutions and systems rank according to their quality? Can we tell if resources are being well spent? Would we recognise an improvement (or deterioration) in quality when we saw one? Are students getting the education they should?

These are all good questions. Unfortunately, today, none of them have good answers. Here's what we need to do to fix that situation and help build the post-secondary education (PSE) system we can and should have.

Let's first look at the current state of the art. The Maclean's Annual University Survey is a good example. Wildly popular as it is, it does little more than string together bits of institutional-level data on certain resources available (e.g., numbers of books in the library), student characteristics (average

entry grade, etc.), and a few aggregate “performance indicators” (e.g., the percentage of students that complete their programs).

But this barrage of statistics tells us virtually nothing in terms of *value added*, or what is actually gained from the education, or what that learning is then worth after graduation. The information contained in the survey does not – despite the myriad rankings offered – really tell us which institutions are doing the best job of teaching students what they need and want to know. It does not tell us which pedagogies are the best and most cost effective for achieving the desired results. It does not tell us which schools are getting better, or worse, and why. It does not, in short, tell us much of what we really want to know.

What I have proposed, in a recent paper written with Alex Usher and published by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN), is a framework for thinking about these questions and a roadmap for at least beginning to find answers to them.

Our conceptual model is rather simple: education experiences can be defined in terms of the relevant “inputs” (resources, pedagogies, etc.) to which a student is exposed, and it is the effects of the different kinds and amounts of these inputs on the graduating student and the quality of their post-PSE lives in which we are interested when we set out to first define, and then measure, “quality”.

More specifically, we need to first measure the aptitudes, characteristics and skills with which students begin their studies, because these will affect how well and how much they learn, as well as their post-schooling outcomes (employment and so on). We must then identify all the dimensions of what constitutes a student’s education – class size, professor contact, types of exams, resources available, and much more. The third step is to assess the learning outputs: what technical skills does the graduate leave school with? – can the person work independently, or in teams? – has he or she learned how to learn? And finally, how do students do after graduation. Are they employed? Are they good citizens? Are they contented, self-realising individuals?

The ‘higher quality experiences’ are those that result in superior learning outputs (taking into account where the student began), and better final outcomes.

It should be obvious that we are now far beyond the Maclean’s survey, and anything else that is currently being done in this country – and indeed, in most other countries. The challenge is to identify the data, much of it not currently available, that we need to conduct the evaluation exercise we propose. We argue for a two-step strategy. First, to identify existing data which could begin to provide us some of these answers in the short-run – say, in the next year or so. And second, to develop the new data required to carry out the full exercise. This would likely include following a

large, representative sample of individuals from their entry into the PSE system through their post-schooling years and measuring all that we can and should that pertains to their beginning characteristics, educational inputs, learning outputs, and final outcomes. Once quality and its determinants were thus identified, current – or proposed – practices could be evaluated; quality could be measured.

Some might argue that the relevant relationships and processes are complex. Of course they are. But it is better to *try* to measure them than not do so. And with time and experience we will become better at identifying what is important and how to go about measuring the relationships and processes in question. In any event, if we don't do this, we will simply remain mired in our current state of ignorance. And to state that option is surely to dismiss it.

Would this be a costly exercise? In the millions, for sure, but what is this in comparison to the costs of not knowing?

There is no 'silver bullet' in looking at quality of PSE. There are no simple measures we can point to and say "Yes, there is quality. Let's have some more of it." What we have proposed is, instead, a framework for thinking about this important and difficult issue in an intelligent fashion, and some specific, practical suggestions for how we can move towards doing a better job of measuring quality in both the short- and longer-run.

*Ross Finnie teaches in the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University and Alex Usher is Vice President of the Educational Policy Institute. They are co-authors of **Measuring the Quality of Post-secondary Education**, published by the Canadian Policy Research Networks and available at www.cprn.org.*

May 2005