

## Stakeholder Summary

### Global trends in bachelor's degree: What can Ontario learn?

The time-honoured bachelor's degree has undergone some serious tinkering if not transformation over the last decade, driven by enrolment growth, constrained funding, demands for increased student mobility and greater alignment with the labour market.

Some countries have shifted from three-year to four-year degrees while others have gone from four to three. In Canada, where universities have always offered bachelor's degrees of various lengths, the three-year degree has been in decline since the 1960s, although it is still common in some provinces. Also informing the evolution in Canada are college-based degree programs and joint degree programs between universities and colleges. Globally there is an increased focus on the harmonization of degrees as well as defining and measuring learning outcomes. What can Ontario learn from this evolution?

#### Project description

A new report commissioned by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, explores global trends in undergraduate education as well as degree-granting programs in the "non-university" or (especially in Canada) the college/polytechnic sectors. The report, ***Changing Times, Changing Places: The Global Evolution of the Bachelor's Degree and the Implications for Ontario***, is based on a comprehensive environmental scan, a survey of more than 850 Ontario students in university bachelor's degree programs and the views of key college and university stakeholders who participated in a seminar on the topic in March 2011. The report was produced by Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA).

#### Findings

Over the last decade, Europe engaged in the Bologna Process to standardize degrees for improved student mobility and responsiveness to the labour market. This set into motion a series of changes that led not only to the introduction of bachelor's degrees in countries where they had not previously existed, but also to a pan-continental harmonization of the length of the bachelor's degree at three years.

More recently, a number of universities in the United States have started experimenting with shorter degrees. However, Ontario research shows that despite options for quick progression, students tend to take longer to complete their programs. A HEQCO study found that only 45 per cent of Ontario students complete an undergraduate degree by their fourth year, and that 80 per cent complete their programs by the sixth year.

As part of HESA's survey, students were asked whether or not they would enroll in a three-year program that allowed them to graduate with honours but required them to work harder during their studies. The survey found that 41 per cent said they would enroll, citing a faster start in the work world as their top rationale, while 59 per cent said they would not, citing the challenges of an increased course load.

The HESA seminar participants were generally resistant to any standardized degree lengths, in part because the advent of learning outcomes, which they welcomed, might make degree length irrelevant.

There has been a trend in Europe and elsewhere – including in Ontario and other parts of Canada – for non-university institutions to offer degrees. In British Columbia, where many advanced degree-granting colleges became universities, granting bachelor's degrees in these institutions seems to be hastening the elimination of the line between the two sectors, says the report. Experiences elsewhere suggest that without sufficient regulation or political direction, the main effect of expanding degree-granting power into non-university institutions will be to reduce institutional differentiation.

Among surveyed students currently taking degrees at universities, few seem to think that a degree in a different setting would be as valuable as getting one from a university, although they generally agree that colleges are better at short-term job preparation and in keeping class sizes low. While the HESA survey sample was limited to university students, the results might indicate that under current policy conditions, students at universities are not sufficiently discontented with large classes and longer time before entering the labour market to make college-offered degrees an attractive alternative.

The authors note that growth in college degrees would require a wholesale shift in policy given that the current system is designed to avoid competition between universities and colleges. Arguably, the ability to compete in some degree programs (business, accounting or social sciences) could result in more competition between the systems, ultimately increasing quality.

Yet the report says that there appears to be little reason to shift more of the traditional bachelor's-level teaching load to colleges, as many of the issues that spurred the growth of non-university degrees elsewhere are not relevant to Ontario. While there might be a cost rationale, many stakeholders feel that any cost advantage could be lost as bachelor's degree-granting status will inevitably increase teaching costs. Further research might look at unit teaching costs over time in colleges that award bachelor's degrees, as well as the academic performance of graduate students who received undergraduate degrees from colleges.

### **Policy Implications**

One of the biggest innovations in recent decades, in the view of stakeholders, is the development of joint/collaborative college diploma/university degree programs. These, it was felt, need to be more prominently included in policy discussions.

According to the report, the province could be “at the cusp of a significant evolution around learning outcomes as leading to better ways of measuring degree outcomes and thus permitting shorter degrees if they could be shown to deliver substantially similar outcomes.”

The authors suggest creating a standard Ontario definition of a credit, which could lead to improved credit transfer. The report also suggests broadening the discussion on learning outcomes, initially by experimenting with Tuning, which originated in Europe to promote mobility, credit transfer and degree

recognition, and was designed to establish what students should know and be able to do within a discipline. In one of three projects on learning outcomes to be conducted over the next 18 months, HEQCO is spearheading a Tuning project in Ontario, working with interested Ontario college and university faculty members in the social sciences, physical sciences, and life and health sciences to identify, implement and evaluate learning outcomes. The results will be widely available.