

Executive Summary

The primary objectives of this paper were to determine whether there are significant gaps in Ontario's postsecondary education system with respect to education and research activities, with particular attention to activities connoted by the term "polytechnic", and if so, to consider how to address such gaps. In response to the first part of our task, we identified three major gaps in Ontario's postsecondary education system: a free standing, degree-granting, primarily teaching-oriented institution that concentrates on undergraduate education; an open university that would expand accessibility and enable learners to combine credits from different institutions and different types of learning experiences; and effective pathways for students who start their postsecondary education in a college to attain a baccalaureate degree and be able, if they are so inclined, to continue on to graduate study.

We did not find compelling evidence that there is a shortage of opportunity for polytechnic education in Ontario. Presently students are able to draw upon Ryerson University and the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT), a modest but growing number of joint university-college programs, and baccalaureate and diploma programs of the colleges. In addition, many students create a polytechnic experience for themselves through transfer from a university to a college or from a college to a university, though more needs to be done to improve opportunities of the latter type. Also, we think that there are some other good reasons for not designating some colleges as polytechnic institutions. The term polytechnic is fraught with ambiguity, and thus adding a new sector of postsecondary institutions with that name could be more confusing than helpful for prospective students. The institutions in British Columbia and Alberta that use the term polytechnic, either formally or informally, have since their founding been formally differentiated from other college sector institutions in their province and have a history of specialization in technology-based programming. No college sector institutions in Ontario have had a differentiated role like the institutes of technology in British Columbia and Alberta. We are aware also that five colleges in Ontario have been seeking the polytechnic designation. In regard to both labour market needs and practices in other North American jurisdictions, it is hard to see a justification for adding that many polytechnic institutions to the provincial postsecondary education system, especially when four of them would be in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). We appreciate that many colleges across Canada, including in Ontario, have made valuable contributions to industry through their applied research activities. Our impression is that the expertise and interaction with industry that fosters these contributions is largely situational and contextual related to the existence of particular faculty in particular programs and institutions. Accordingly, we do not believe that designating some colleges as polytechnics is necessary to maintain or enhance the capability of the college sector to make such contributions.

While we do not believe that there are compelling arguments for designating some colleges as polytechnics, we are mindful of the contribution that could be made by enabling at least a few colleges to have a more substantial and broader role in offering baccalaureate programs if they are able to demonstrate that they meet the conditions required for such activity.

Based upon our examination of the issues outlined above, we review a number of possible policy options to address the predicted demand for increased access to university degree programs in the GTA including: 1) creating satellite campuses of existing universities; 2) creating new universities that are of the same type as existing universities; 3) creating new universities of a new type focusing on undergraduate study and with a limited role in research; 4) providing selected colleges with a new substantial role in baccalaureate programming; 5) providing colleges with a greater role in transfer programs in basic university subjects, such as arts and science; and 6) creating an open university. We review each of these options and discuss factors that should be considered by government.