

Higher Education and the Economy in Western Canada: Is Institutional Autonomy at Risk?

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Abstract : Canada's westernmost provinces of British Columbia and Alberta are similar in many respects as they are both reliant on volatile natural resources for major portions of their economies. The two provinces have banded together to develop mutually beneficial trade, investment and labour market mobility rules, but in terms of developing systems of higher education, the two provinces are attempting to align higher education programs to economic development objectives by means that are quite different. In British Columbia, the recently announced initiative, B.C's Skills for Jobs Blueprint will "make sure education and training programs are aligned with the demands of the labor market." Meanwhile in Alberta, the province's institutions of higher education are enjoying the tenth year of their membership in the Campus Alberta Quality Council, which makes recommendations to government on issues related to post-secondary education, including the approval of new programs. In B.C., public institutions of higher education are encouraged to comply with government objectives, and are rewarded with targeted funds for their efforts. In Alberta, the institutions as a system tell the government what programs they want to offer and government can agree or not agree to fund these programs through a ministerial approval process. In comparing the two higher education systems, the question emerges as to which one is more beneficial to the province: the one where change is directed primarily by financial incentives to achieve economic objectives or the one that makes recommendations to the government for changes in programs to achieve institutional objectives? How is institutional autonomy affected in each strategy? Does institutional autonomy matter anymore? In recent years, much has been written in regard to academic freedom, but less about institutional autonomy, which is seen by many as essential to protecting academic freedom. However, while institutional autonomy means freedom from government control, it does not necessarily mean self-government. In this study, a comparison of the two higher education systems is made using recent government policy initiatives in both provinces, and responses to those actions by the higher education institutions. The findings indicate that the economic needs in both provinces take precedence over issues of institutional autonomy.

Keywords : alberta, British Columbia, institutional autonomy, funding

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