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# Education Quality Assurance in British Columbia

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C B I E P h D R E S E A R C H

## INTRODUCTION

**B**ecause immigration and higher education policies relate to issues typically managed at the nation-state level—e.g. demographic and labour market management—they are usually the responsibility of national governments. Canada, however, is unique in that the *British North America Act/Constitution Act* and the *McDougall/Gagnon-Tremblay Accord* give provinces and territories authority over these areas—either entirely (in the case of higher education<sup>1</sup> and immigration to Quebec) or partially (in the case of immigration to all other provinces and territories) (Seidle, 4-5). The evolution of distinct educational and immigration policy systems within each province posits Canadian higher education and immigration as two compelling topics in which to question the nation-state as a given scale of policy inquiry. Given the addition of globalization's more recent challenge to the centrality of the nation-state and its influence on governance processes, Mahon et al. encourage using a specifically “multi-scalar approach to policy analysis rooted in macro political economy” to grapple with the complexities of Canadian policy analysis (51).

This paper seeks to answer that call in a limited way by offering an example of how Canadian federal-provincial jurisdiction dynamics are unsettled by globalization. To do so, I focus on the increasingly intertwined space between two seemingly disparate policy areas: higher education and immigration, in this case referring

to movement of international students entering Canada as temporary residents and, in some cases, remaining as permanent residents. Specifically, I show how a provincial higher education policy (the British Columbia [BC] Ministry of Advanced Education's Education Quality Assurance [EQA] designation) was

influenced by federal immigration policy—and how, seen through a combined political economy and agenda-setting lens, this higher education policy signifies the growing commodification of higher education.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMMIGRATION POLICIES IN A FEDERAL CONTEXT

In Canada, the growing interdependency between higher education and immigration policy is related to a larger struggle faced by all Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) governments: how to simultaneously increase higher education participation while raising sufficient funds to meet the needs of expanding systems (Pechar & Andres, 25). The solution requires a balance of four main goals — “low taxation, low or no tuition fees,

<sup>1</sup> With limited exceptions, e.g. the Royal Military College of Canada and funding the education of Aboriginal peoples.

high non-repayable student aid, and a high participation rate in adequately funded higher-education institutions” (26)—which OECD countries choose to balance based largely on their economy’s welfare regime (Pechar & Andres). Because of its “low degree of de-commodification and a strong role for markets in the production of welfare” (27), Canada is considered a liberal welfare regime—and, relative to other OECD welfare regimes, liberal regimes generally fund the expansion of higher education by “combin[ing] low/medium public expenditures with high tuition fees” (Pechar & Andres 40).

Because each country is “bound by different historical forces and follows distinct trajectories from which it cannot easily or quickly diverge” (49), liberal regimes such as Canada struggle to incorporate new dynamics which step outside their given welfare regime framework (Pechar & Andres). Thus, in an era of decreasing public expenditures for higher education (Bradshaw 1) and a global trend emphasizing “the benefits of markets and to reduce the tax base of governments” (Pechar & Andres 48), Canadian higher education systems have responded to funding challenges by increasing tuition. Over the past 25 years (accounting for inflation), average higher education tuition and fees in Canada have tripled (Shaker & Macdonald 8), accompanied by a shift over the past two decades

“from a focus on education as a public good to education as a commodity, with policy language increasingly infused with the strategies of business” (Johnstone & Lee 209).

Nowhere has this shift been more apparent than in the area of international student recruitment. International students did not pay differential tuition in Canada—and thus were not heavily recruited—until, during the 1976 federal transfer payment negotiations, the federal government “suggested that introducing differential tuition fees was an acceptable way for the provinces to generate additional revenue at institutions” (Canadian Federation of Students 1). With the exception of BC, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Newfoundland and Labrador, all provinces were charging differential international student tuition fees by 1982; today, virtually all higher education institutions charge international students significantly higher tuition fees based on the logic that their education is not subsidized by government funding. Although there are exceptions—international graduate students in research-intensive programs, for example, often pay similar or equal to their domestic counterparts, while both the Canadian government and individual institutions offer limited funding for select students—as of 2013, international undergraduate students pay, on average, more than three times that of domestic

students, while many professional graduate and private college programs charge even more disparate rates (“Tuition Fees for International Undergraduate Students” 1).

Beyond generating revenue for higher educational institutions through tuition fees, international students today contribute significantly to the broader Canadian economy through job creation, expenditures, and tax revenues. Global Affairs Canada estimates that in 2015, “357,000 international students collectively spent more than \$10 billion in Canada and generated employment for some 90,000 Canadians”<sup>2</sup> (“EduCanada: New international education brand” 1). In addition, the federal government has come to see international students as a “desirable source of potential immigrants without the challenges of foreign credentials and language”—that is, pre-‘integrated’ into the Canadian labour market (“Imagine Studying in Canada: The Future of Canada’s International Education Strategy” 1). These factors, along with increasing demand for education in Canada, has created a multi-layered federal economic interest in the recruitment and retention of international students.

The federal government is now an active player in this domain of Canadian higher education with clear economic goals in mind. Since the early 2000s, Citizenship

<sup>2</sup> Although this figure likely includes international students from all educational levels (i.e. not only those enrolled in post-secondary education), international students are primarily enrolled at post-secondary institutions in Canada.

and Immigration Canada (CIC, now Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada) began to introduce policies explicitly designed to attract international higher education students both temporarily (e.g. the 2005 post-graduation work permit program) and permanently (e.g. the 2008 Canadian Experience Class), while the 2006 cabinet approved the pilot Edu-Canada initiative, a collaboration between the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada; the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (now Global Affairs Canada); and provinces and territories. Out of the Edu-Canada initiative came the launch the *'Imagine Education au/in Canada'* brand, replaced in 2016 with the updated EduCanada brand and the tagline *'A world of possibilities.'* The 2011 federal Economic Action Plan “included funding for the development of a comprehensive International Education Strategy and called for the establishment of an advisory panel reporting to the Ministers of International Trade and Finance to make recommendations to be considered as the Government of Canada developed its strategy” (“Canada’s International Education Strategy,” 5). The subsequent 2014 *International Education Strategy* called international education “critical to Canada’s success” (4) with a “vital role to play in creating jobs, economic growth and long-term prosperity in Canada” (6), committed to “‘brand’ Canada to maximum effect” (4), and envisioned “a more prosperous, more innovative and more competitive Canada

that capitalizes on [its] vast advantages” by doubling the number of international students in Canada by 2022 from the 2011 level (“Canada’s International Education Strategy”).

The federal strategy is an interesting contrast to provincial-level work in recruiting international students, such as the BC Ministry of Advanced Education’s own International Education Strategy released two years previously in 2012 with a more ambitious aim to increase the number of international students in BC by 50 per cent in just over four years (“British Columbia’s International Education Strategy,” 13). Yet the 2012 BC strategy was just one step in a long line of work done in BC in brining international higher education students to the province. In what follows, I briefly outline some recent policy highlights in BC international student policy before focusing more specifically on the EQA.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMMIGRATION IN A PROVINCIAL CONTEXT

Although not formally distinguished as ‘international students’ in a public way, non-Canadian citizens were part of some of the earliest graduating classes of the University of British Columbia (UBC). It wasn’t until the 1960s when students began enrolling in Canada—including BC—as explicitly international students through a Canadian

International Development Agency program (Sharlandjieva 1). At that time, Canada’s role in recruiting international students was viewed as more of a humanitarian and/or development aid—rather than economic—activity. By the early 1970s, despite the lack of an international education “sector,” international travel and exchange programs began to develop in BC, for example, between Canada and China (Campbell 1). This led to the eventual development of small international departments at BC higher education institutions; by the mid 1980s, these offices were generally small with only one or two individuals responsible for varying mandates under the name of “international education” (Hooker 1). However, by this time Canadian foreign policy priorities had shifted away from development towards trade and economic growth, and funding for higher education was taking significant hits (Sharlandjieva 1). The option of charging international students differential tuition to supplement operating costs had already taken hold in most provinces in Canada by the early 1980s; by the mid 1980s, BC gradually (and, in the case of some institutions, unwillingly) joined suit, and those employed in international education departments became responsible for supporting increasing numbers of international students.

Initially, only UBC, the University of Victoria, and Simon Fraser University were permitted by a provincial directive to enroll international students; however,

as Charles Mossop recalls, the province began allowing schools such as Vancouver Community College and Cariboo College (now Thompson Rivers University) to enrol international students in early 1985 after they started marketing programs in Hong Kong; soon institutions of all levels and sizes were directly recruiting and/or working with agents not only throughout Asia but globally (Campbell 1). Although factor in the complexity of understanding BC's international student recruitment history—and the EQA in particular—is the parallel evolution of the private institution sector. Although private not-for-profit institutions (such as Trinity Western University and graduate theology schools affiliated with UBC) have been in operation since the mid-1900s, it wasn't until the 1980s that private for-profit institutions opened campus in BC. For-profit English as additional language (EAL) schools were initially limited in BC but proliferated during the 1990s, growing from approximately 30 schools in 1993 to 190 schools in 2003 (Cowin, "Private Career Colleges," 33).

The demand for higher education by international students in BC was significant in the mid-1980s and 90s; as Mossop put it, "all [the BC institutions] got students. I mean, good grief, there was enough to go around!" (Campbell 1). Eventually, a committee of coordinators who dealt with international education at BC public sector institutions created what would later become the BC Centre for

International Education (BCCIE, now BC Council for International Education), formally incorporated under the BC Society Act in 1991. BCCIE commissioned a survey of internationalization activities at 22 BC institutions in 1993, resulting in BC's first provincial-wide strategy document entitled "Facing the Future: The Internationalization of Post-Secondary Institutions in British Columbia." The BC Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour followed up shortly after in 1995 with a manual on internationalizing the post-secondary curriculum called "International Literacy: A Paradigm for Change."

The international student recruitment process during these early "golden years," as Mossop calls them, had multifaceted goals in BC. Although the humanitarian aims directed towards non-Canadians of the previous era was replaced by a clear economic imperative to positively impact British Columbians specifically, the focus was not on international student tuition revenue alone. Mossop recalls that while "you can't overlook the financial contribution" of international student enrollment, it also "enriched the communities, particularly the smaller communities which had a limited international perspective before their colleges opened" (Campbell 1). Both "Facing the Future" and "International Literacy" echo this sentiment in their focus on internationalization from a much broader lens than simply the

presence of international students in BC. "Facing the Future" defines internationalization as "a process that prepares the community for successful participation in an increasingly interdependent world...fostering global understanding and developing skills for effective living and working in a diverse world," (Francis 1); still, the report also notes "the generation of funds by international student programs... is a pivotal concern in many of British Columbia's post-secondary institutions" (24) and points to the lack of funding and coordination of internationalization activities across BC institutions despite revenues from international student tuition.

International student enrolment continued to rise in the 2000s, "encouraged by the BC government due to the economic benefits to institutions (fees that exceed costs) and to the communities in which the students live (comparable to revenue from tourism)" (Cowin, "Public Policy," 258-9). As enrolment rose, so did public interest in the role of international students in BC, particularly in relation to their perceived competition with domestic students at public institutions. By 2002, the BC Ministry of Advanced Education released an updated version of its "Guidelines Respecting International Students at British Columbia Public Post Secondary Institutions" explicitly urging schools to "set tuition fees for international students at a level that covers direct cost and overhead" and to ensure

“international students not displace a Canadian citizen or permanent resident from British Columbia or from other parts of Canada from a space funded through institutional block grants” (1). In most cases, international student fees were set high above direct costs, generating a significant proportion of many institution’s operating budget, and recruitment offices and/or relationships with agents became more deeply established.

In 2005, the BC Progress Board (established by Premier Gordon Cambell in 2001) issued an influential report highlighting the current and potential economic benefits of international students for the province entitled “The Role of International Education: Expanding Student Opportunity and Economic Development in British Columbia.” The report urged the province to strengthen its international education sector to better compete for international students not just with other provinces (e.g. Ontario and Quebec) but also internationally, noting it was at risk of falling behind due to a lack of coordination (i–ii). The previously mentioned 2012 BC government strategy followed, as “essentially an economic development strategy and not an effort to internationalize pedagogy and the curriculum” (Cowin, “Public Policy,” 211). By this time provincial efforts were focused almost entirely on direct economic benefits with much

success; between 2008 and 2014, international students enrolled in BC public postsecondary institutions increased 85%, reaching 37,000 in 2014, an increase of 85% from 2008 (Cowin, “Public Policy,” 258).

The most recent significant provincial development regarding the higher education of international students is the way in which the BC Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) has expanded its view of international students not only as temporary residents but as potential permanent residents as well.<sup>3</sup> The Canada–BC Immigration Agreement of April 2010 included a special annex on international students beginning with the statement, “Canada and BC agree that attracting and retaining international students is an important element of BC’s international education and immigration agenda...” and including “cooperate on policy changes that facilitate attraction, transition of certain international students to PR, and their retention in the province” as one of its five objectives (“Canada–British Columbia Immigration Agreement” 1). This view is similar to that of the federal government’s as discussed earlier, and in some instances BC’s PNP international student pathways competed directly with those of the federal government (e.g. the Canadian Experience Class) for the same international students.

As the agenda-setting approach to public policy analysis shows, “exploring how issue salience changes over time is critical to our understanding of politics and policy making” (188), given that “attention is a finite resource—policy makers can pay attention to only a few issues at a time” (Soroka 187). We also know from a political economy perspective that policy making is an “act of power” rather than “a technical exercise of sorting and evaluating policy options” (Grafe 35). As the previous examples show, not only is the recruitment of international higher education students a priority of both the federal and the BC government for primarily economic reasons, but the “traditional provincial jurisdiction of education has expanded to Federal Government partnership with immigration services, resulting in a Canada-wide program designed to increase the international student market” (Johnstone & Lee, 210). In what follows, I discuss how BC’s Education Quality Assurance (EQA) designation policy serves as an example of these two trends.

## EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Pechar & Andres point out that the “globalization of labour markets will advance the standardization of, and need for, education certificates” (47). From a globalized economic perspective, this increased demand

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of the past 15 years of policy evolution in this area, see my 2016 paper “Higher educational institutions as emerging immigrant selection actors: a history of British Columbia’s retention of international graduates, 2001–2016.”

for standardization is not only required by employers seeking to ease readability challenges in recognizing foreign degrees, but also by students as prospective consumers seeking to ease the same readability challenges. Reports on multiple scales—internationally, nationally, and provincially—have tackled the issue of education quality standards in the past decade, such as the 2005 OECD/United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization *Guidelines for Quality in Cross-Border Education*, the Council of Ministers of Education Canada’s 2007 *Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework*, the 2007 *BC Private Career Training Institutions Act Review*, and the 2011 *BC Degree Process Review Report* (“Discussion Paper” 2–3). These four reports showcase the task’s complexity by recommending a variety of approaches to standardizing education certification; indeed, as Weinrib and Jones write, Canada is “an outlier in the international trend towards the emergence of national quality assessment mechanisms” with “a decentralized network of provincial systems that now largely leave the responsibility for quality assessment in the hands of the individual universities” (225).

At the federal level, the *Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework* seeks to ensure that universities in Canada are recognized internationally and meet common standards (“Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance” 1). At the provincial level, since BC’s 2002 *Degree Authorization Act*, the Degree

Quality Assessment Board has been authorized to review and approve the province’s degree program proposals. Three additional major acts affected degree granting privileges for public universities (the *University Act*), public colleges, public university colleges, and provincial institutes (the *College and Institute Act*), and private and out-of-province public institutions (the *Degree Authorization Act*) (Weinrib and Jones, 232).

However, a challenge arose for the provincial recruitment of international students due to some failing and/or unscrupulous for-profit private institutions impacting the reputation of BC as an educational destination, particularly amongst those which enrolled a high number of international students in EAL programs. In the early 2000s, BC’s private postsecondary sector was explicitly encouraged to expand by governmental policy changes deregulating language schools, increasing institutional self-regulation, and easing the incorporation process (Cowan, “Overview,” 20). International students are ineligible for BC student financial aid, rendering the primary “incentive for voluntary accreditation, namely designation of the institution as an approved school for financial aid purposes” ineffective for schools primarily marketed towards international students (Cowan, “Private Career Colleges,” 34). This led to significant issues of quality assurance within the sector, leading a 2006 *BC Business* article

to claim that “the picture of a motley, squabbling, government-neglected ESL industry is exactly what overseas students and advisers see when they compare BC to alternative destinations such as Australia, the UK and the US” (as quoted in Cowin, *Private Career Colleges*, 34).

In late 2009, BC’s—then Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development took a novel approach to quality assurance by announcing an additional new system: in exchange for a \$300 application fee and an annual \$1500 fee, institutions province-wide could apply for an Education Quality Assurance (EQA) designation described not as an “accreditation” but as voluntary education “brand” or “seal of quality”—the first of its kind in Canada. Although the press release announcing the EQA began by explaining its ability to enhance BC’s reputation “by enabling *both* domestic and international students to readily see what post-secondary institutions, both public and private, are recognized as having met or exceeded government-recognized quality assurance standards” (emphasis added), it otherwise conveyed its design for a primarily international audience (“Canada’s First Education Quality Brand Launched,” 1). After offering assurance that BC already had “many measures in place to ensure quality,” the Ministry claimed that the EQA would “make [BC’s] post-secondary system shine in the global spotlight,” be used “around

the world,” and be “recognizable worldwide,” ending the press release with a note that BC is “one of the top destinations for international students in Canada” and hosted “approximately 150,000 international students a year” in 2009 (“Canada’s First Education Quality Brand Launched” 1). The independent society BC Council for International Education (BCCIE) was designated as the EQA administer at that time, leading the BCCIE board chair to thank the province for “their investment in [BC’s] international education sector, as evidenced by the development and implementation of the [BC EQA] designation” (“Canada’s First Education Quality Brand Launched” 1).

Enthusiastic responses from some institutions were immediate. Vancouver Island University’s president, for example, spoke a week after the announcement, applauding the EQA for its ability to attract more international students (“VIU President sees long-term value”) while Thompson Rivers University responded with similar accolades for helping position “BC post secondary institutions in a highly competitive international student marketplace” (“Education Quality Assurance Designation”). These responses differ subtly from the official press release in that they both explicitly stress the need for assistance at the policy level to compete for increased international student recruitment. From a neo-pluralism perspective—that is, recognizing businesses’ privileged role in policy

making due to “the dependence of capitalist democracies on decisions taken privately by business in a context where businesses must compete to survive” (Grafe, 21)—we can see how the province’s decision to invest in a EQA *brand*—despite already claiming to have measures in place to ensure quality—posits public higher education institutions in a business framework where they are expected to compete in the free market to serve private interests.

We can also see how federal immigration influences the perceived need for broader standardization. As Weinrib & Jones note, “despite the relatively [*sic*] stability of provincial systems to this point, there is a growing sense in some jurisdictions that a major reevaluation and restructuring of post-secondary systems will be required in the near future” due to, among other factors, “efforts at the federal level for a comprehensive internationalization strategy” and “stronger quality assurance mechanisms to ensure institutions hosting international students have attained the highest level of educational quality” (235). As Grafe writes, “globalization involves restricting the state and public policies in order to serve the global economy, in response to powerful domestic social forces seeking precisely that end” (30). BC was thus at the forefront of this trend.

Although institutions were granted EQA designation almost immediately after the initial

press release, the EQA was far from settled. In spring 2012, BC’s Ministry of Advanced Education initiated engagement with the post-secondary education system on a comprehensive quality assurance review by starting a formal consultation process (“Consultation Timeline” 1). However, in December 2012, a CIC announcement outlined proposed changes to a federal policy—the International Student Program—including that “CIC would work with provinces and territories...to develop a framework to designate educational institution that will be permitted to host international students” for more than six months, and thus obtain a study permit (“Proposed Changes Would Strengthen Canada’s ISP” 1). CIC’s proposal was an attempt to “address concerns that some institutions are providing poor-quality programs or facilitating, knowingly or not, the entry of foreign nationals to Canada for purposes other than study” (“Proposed Changes Would Strengthen Canada’s ISP” 1), implying that the federal government did not accept the province’s existing regulation mechanisms. Although BC was constitutionally responsible for education, the federal government used its immigration policy to supersede the province’s ability to autonomously manage their higher education system. Even though EQA remained “voluntary,” it was now required for institutions to maintain international student tuition as their supplemental revenue source.

As the regulatory changes were approved and set to come into force on June 1, 2014, BC noted in its March 2013 Quality Assurance Framework *Green Paper* that it was “the opportune time to enhance the quality of post-secondary education in [BC] through improvements to the system as a whole” (p. 3) by developing a more coordinated, transparent, consistent, and aligned policy (“Green Paper”). This particular instance of immigration and higher education policy interplay thus offered an opportunity for the province to capitalize upon. The Ministry of Advanced Education took over the administration of EQA from BCCIE as well as the responsibility for “monitoring” the federally trademarked brand. However, the Ministry still publicly describes the five institutional benefits of EQA designation as (1) government recognition, (2) inclusion on CIC’s designated learning institutions list, (3) marketing and promotion abroad, (4) use of a brand recognized worldwide, and (5) increased ability to attract international students (“Questions and

Answers,” 1)—in other words, now even more explicitly focused on the recruitment of international students. Today, institutions with EQA range from major public research institutions (e.g. the University of British Columbia [UBC]) to relatively small private career training institutions (e.g. the Orca Institute of hypnotherapy). While UBC’s EQA designation is not easily accessible on its website, many smaller schools (such as the Orca Institute) display the brand prominently at the top of their homepage—illustrative of the differential impact the EQA has on less well-known (and also private, explicitly profit-generating) institutions.

## CONCLUSION

Grafe encourages us to consider “how particular social actors have used globalization to legitimize particular strategies of state reform reflecting their interests” since we can now observe “institutions with close links to capital and its project... coming to the fore and ensuring that other state institutions either remake themselves along neo-liberal lines

or remain in marginal positions within the state hierarchy (30). As this paper shows, BC’s EQA seems to primarily serve not students (domestic or international) but capital, in the sense that it more deeply entrenches international student tuition as an ongoing funding model for BC higher education and serves profit-generating activity at both private *and* public institutions.

The story of the EQA is just one small piece of the larger commodification puzzle as provinces across Canada struggle to balance both the expansion and funding of higher education amidst a withdraw of public expenditures. As this balancing act continues to transform higher education, international education specifically will likely continue to be a crucial area for research. As Cowin notes, “in the short-term, international education has more potential to change the character of BC postsecondary education, for better or worse, than any other force that the system is currently experiencing” (“Public Policy,” 259).

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