



21st-century scenarios

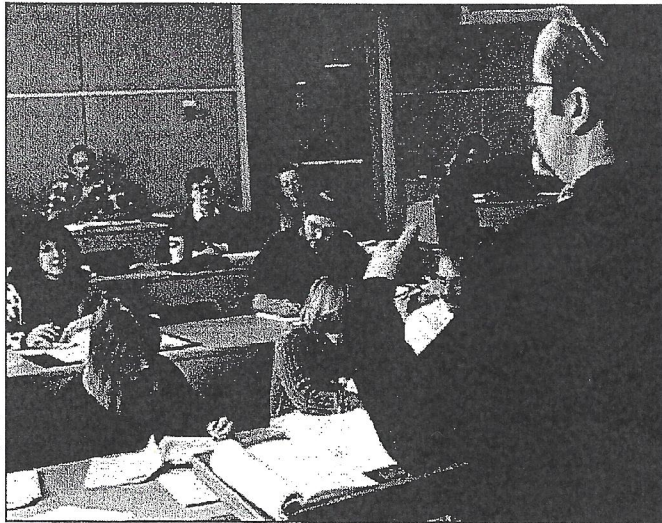
How should universities respond to growing participation rates?

By Chad Gaffield

While university educators in Ontario rightly focus their attention on the double cohort at present, the key underlying trend for many jurisdictions is the steadily increasing participation rate of 18- to 24-year-olds in university education.

This trend raises a critical question: should university attendance become a characteristic life-cycle experience during the 21st century, just as formal education became obligatory for seven- to 12-year-olds in the 19th century and for teenagers in the 20th century?

The trajectory of increasing societal expectations for formal education has remained constant over the past two centuries in many countries including Canada and the United States.



In 1800, only a small minority of children received any formal schooling. By the end of the 19th century, almost all seven- to 12-year-olds spent at least six months each year in tax-based school systems. Similarly, only

a small minority of teenagers went to school on a regular basis in 1900, but by the late 20th century secondary schooling had become an expected feature of growing up in a modern society.

During these centuries, universities expanded in size from institutions with a few hundred students to an array of large and small institutions. But in terms of participation rates, universities at the opening of this century look much like the primary school system during the early 19th century and the secondary school system during the early 20th century. Should this trajectory of growing participation rates be supported? If so, how can universities continue expanding to accommodate the complete postsecondary cohort during the coming decades? If not, how should universities position themselves for the new century?

I can illustrate the importance of addressing these questions with three possible scenarios.

In the first scenario, the argument that university education is appropriate for everyone in the knowledge-based society and modern economy proves completely persuasive. This argument carries the day, just as mass schooling came to be seen as essential for modern democratic societies in the 19th century and secondary schooling became requisite for industrializing urban jurisdictions in the 20th century. As a result, the relative importance of universities grows by a factor of four during the 21st century, in keeping with massive economic, social, cultural and political changes. New universities are created in every community as postsecondary education becomes a characteristic of the life-cycle.

In the second scenario, the public accepts the argument that universities are essential to society's quality of life but that these institutions have a specific and limited role. Rather than

follow the expansion of primary schools and secondary schools in the two previous centuries, universities chart a future in which they occupy a specific place within an overall expanding postsecondary landscape. Few new universities are created during the century and participation rates never rise above perhaps a third of the population.

In the third scenario, rapidly rising societal expectations and only modestly increasing university size continue on a collision course. Pressure on universities to accept more and more students leads to steadily declining quality in university education. Over the decades, the public increasingly directs its frustration and anger at universities, in the same way that primary schooling came under attack by 1900 and that secondary schools came to be seen as failures during the late 20th century.

The policy implications that flow from these scenarios are profound. For example, support for the first scenario would imply enthusiasm for initiatives to build new universities.

Belief in the second scenario would imply enthusiastic support for the expansion of other types of postsecondary institutions, such as colleges and technical institutions.

If we don't think through such scenarios, we won't be able to develop consistent and coherent policies. Instead, we'll put up with a series of ad hoc, reactive moves that reflect, at various times and in incompatible ways, quite different assumptions – for example, assumptions that universities should serve as the predominant postsecondary institution and (at other times) that universities should be only one part of a diverse postsecondary landscape.

In thinking about the future of universities in the 21st century, we need to consider much more than such sweeping historical generalizations as the ones provided here.

The question of the double cohort in Ontario and the echo baby boom in most regions of the country make it urgently necessary for universities to think deeply about these options in order to position themselves within the changing context of a new era.

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