

REDEFINING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

DAVID H. TURPIN

A year ago, the Ontario government established a blue ribbon panel to review post-secondary education in Ontario. Chaired by Bob Rae, the review examined the design and funding of higher education with the goal of providing Ontarians with a high-quality, accountable and affordable system. After eight months of study, consultation and widespread input from all important stakeholders, the 132 page report, *Ontario: A Leader in Learning*, was released in February. We asked two university presidents from outside Ontario to look at the Rae report from a national perspective. Both authors begin by noting that the report attracted national attention – for a moment, at least. We hope their comments will help lengthen the national attention span on the future of post-secondary education in Canada.

FOR AT LEAST A BRIEF PERIOD OF time, the release of Bob Rae's review of post-secondary education in Ontario served to focus public attention on the importance of post-secondary education, not only in Ontario, but across Canada. If implemented, the recommendations have the potential of improving the quality of higher education for the benefit of all Canadians.

Five themes informed the committee during their deliberations:

1. *Accessibility*. How can we increase participation and success in higher education?
2. *Quality*. How should we improve the quality of higher education?
3. *System design*. How can we make sure that our institutions constitute a coherent, coordinated system to meet Ontario's goals for higher education?
4. *Funding*. How do we pay for higher education to ensure opportunity and excellence?
5. *Accountability*. Do we have the right structures in place to know our systems are achieving the results we want?

These important issues, when taken together, were used to chart an exciting course for the future of higher education. Three goals emerged: Great Education; Opportunities for More People; and a Secure Future for Higher Education. To achieve these goals, Rae outlined seven strategies and 28 recommendations. The big question now is will the proposals of the "Rae Review" be adopted and if so,

to what degree? Can we expect the Ontario government to rise to the challenge and provide the funding and policy support necessary to make the Rae Review a reality?

Interestingly, the report signals an important shift of onus to the provincial government. It expects the government to induce increased participation in post-secondary education rather than simply responding to student demand. Of particular note is the desire to increase the participation, not only from the general public, but from under-represented groups. Specifically, Rae calls for funding support for "first time families". It is well established that the most significant factor determining if individuals participate in higher education is whether their parents did. By proposing a grant for "first time participants" or "first time families", Rae sees a role for government to induce increased participation in post-secondary education. This shift in onus would mark a turning point in the government's role by imparting a responsibility to generate demand for higher education.

In every aspect of this report, the quality of higher education is seen as paramount. Simply put, without a high quality, globally competitive system, the province of Ontario – and Canada in general – will suffer an erosion in ability to create a socially, culturally, and economically prosperous society. The call for investment to support the primary mission of higher education is clear, and both education and research are recognized as central

to the province's growth.

Rae is clear. There is a need for more funding. That funding has to come from several sources: an increase in government grant, and an increase in tuition. The provincial operating grant must increase and a transparent funding formula needs to be developed. The federal government must play an important role as a partner with the province.

With respect to tuition, the report states that the government should not set tuition but provide a framework that ensures predictability, transparency and affordability. The increases in tuition would accompany an increase in government support and should follow a revamping of the provincial student financial aid system. Grants of up to \$6,000 per year for low income and disadvantaged students should be available to offset tuition. Rae recommends an income sensitive loan repayment plan and explicitly challenges the arguments against such initiatives. Institutions that increase tuition above \$6,000 must provide institutionally derived grants for low income students. This initiative provides a mechanism through which institutions may differentiate themselves, but presents a challenge for the legislative framework which would affect tuition deregulation. Given the costs of these grants, an institution drawing students disproportionately from high income families would have a greater marginal return on tuition than those that serve a disproportionately larger student

EN BREF Dans son rapport sur le système d'éducation postsecondaire de l'Ontario, Bob Rae souligne l'importance cruciale des études supérieures et recommande que l'on investisse davantage en éducation et en recherche. Ses conclusions sont claires, il faut accroître à la fois l'aide financière aux étudiants et les frais de scolarité. Les recommandations prescrivant que les frais de scolarité de plus de 6 000 \$ soient liés à des subventions aux établissements afin que ceux-ci soient en mesure de subventionner les étudiants à faibles revenus ainsi que celles préconisant une augmentation substantielle du financement pour les établissements d'études supérieures faisant face à une plus grande demande donnent aux universités et aux collèges un mécanisme pour se démarquer les uns des autres. Fait intéressant, le rapport propose que le gouvernement adopte une approche plus proactive en encourageant la participation aux études postsecondaires plutôt qu'en répondant simplement à la demande. Les recommandations de M. Rae peuvent permettre à l'Ontario d'exceller. Reste à savoir ce que la province en fera.

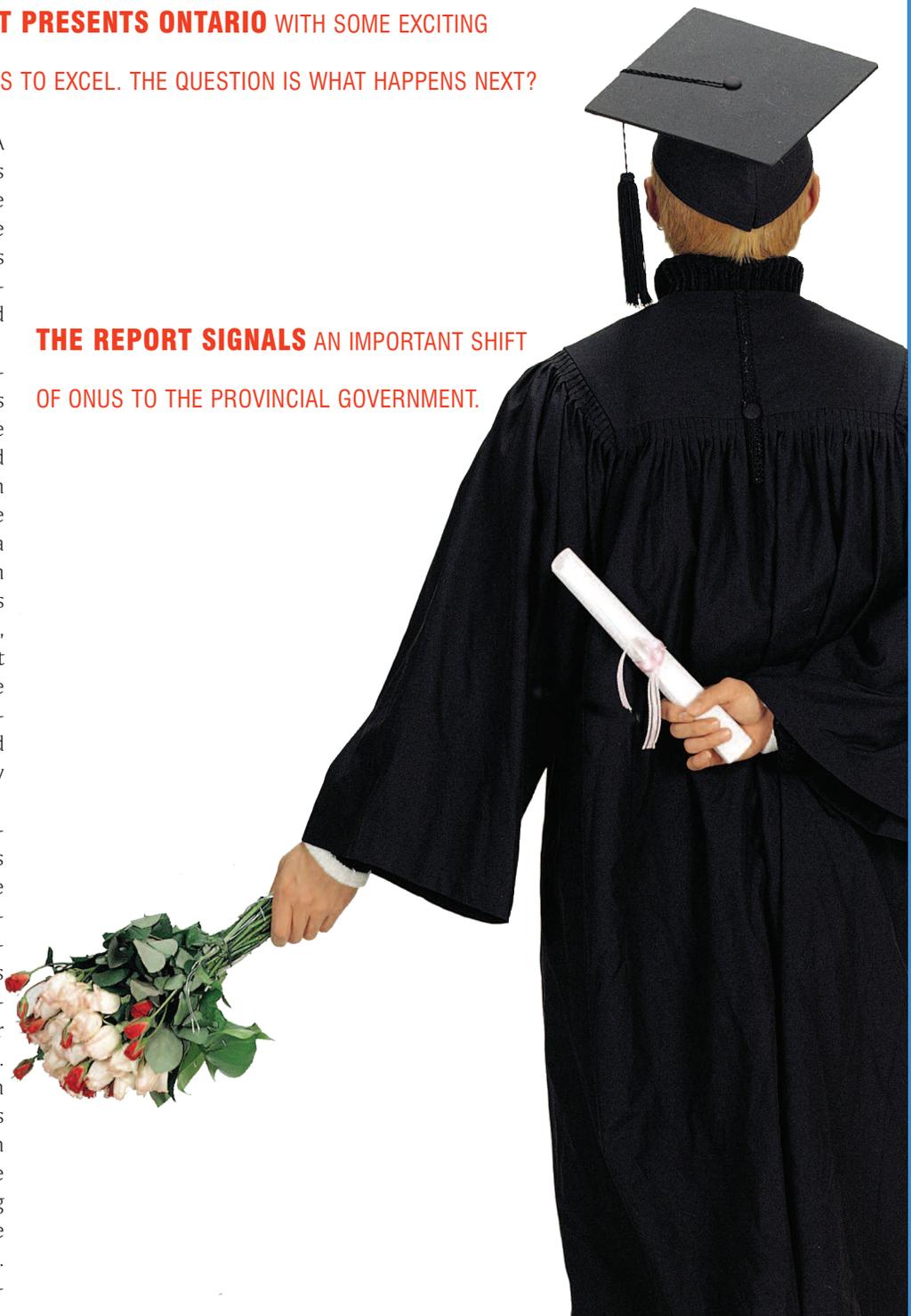
THE REPORT PRESENTS ONTARIO WITH SOME EXCITING OPPORTUNITIES TO EXCEL. THE QUESTION IS WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

group from low income families. A result could be greater improvements in the quality of education at those institutions that draw higher income students. This interesting and perhaps unintended consequence would present a challenge to the legislative and policy framework to be developed.

Another significant element allowing for institutional differentiation is the recommendation that graduate funding be increased dramatically and that it flow to those institutions with the highest demand. In this case, we would see further development of a differentiated university system with resources flowing to those institutions best able to attract graduate students, presumably those with the highest quality faculty, research and graduate programs. This quality-based mechanism for differentiation recognizes and supports the differentiation already apparent in the Ontario system.

The Review reinforces the distinctions between colleges and universities in Ontario. It does not suggest a move towards an integrated college/university system and views colleges and universities as separate and distinct. It sees an important and growing role for colleges in apprenticeship training and for supporting education for the trades. This reaffirmation of the system design is important in that it allows educators across Ontario to focus on their core mission. It will prevent the use of scarce resources in promoting institutional "mandate creep", unlike the situation in some other provinces. Nevertheless, the importance of allow-

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THE REVIEW REINFORCES THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN ONTARIO



ing appropriate credit transfer within the post-secondary education system is emphasized as an important system goal.

As the Review's recommendations suggest, accountability will be critical. Rae cautions that enthusiasm for accountability not be viewed as a "synonym for more government control". Consequently, institutions will have to ensure that robust internal accountability frameworks are firmly in place. Although the role of the institutional Boards is not addressed in the Review, I believe it is the Boards that must be used to ensure public accountability in higher education. Although Boards are important in all areas of accountability, Rae raises the concern that additional funding to the system not simply translate into higher salaries, but instead be used to improve the quality of education. Boards will certainly have an important role to play as the Review's recommendations are brought into effect.

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The recommended development of a Council of Higher Education has the potential to provide an important research focus on post-secondary education. In recommending its establishment, Rae points out the irony that institutions that focus on evidence-based decision making spend little time researching higher education itself. The challenge for Ontario is to ensure that this Council not become a bureaucratic encumbrance on post-

secondary institutions but instead an organization that fosters a truly cohesive, integrated and accessible high quality system of higher education.

The report presents Ontario with some exciting opportunities to excel. The question is what happens next? Will the report inform the budget in the years to come? Will the necessary legislative framework be developed? In short, will Ontario be able to play a leadership role in redefining the importance of higher education in Canada? |

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