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Redirecting Rae:

*Some Proposals for Postsecondary
Education in Ontario*

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The Backgrounder in Brief

The Rae Report and the Ontario Government's quick response to some of its recommendations for postsecondary education are most welcome, but there is room for improvement. Complete tuition deregulation, supported by Rae's enhanced student-loan program, could help the system become more responsive to students' needs. Recently introduced income-contingent grants to low-income students impose high marginal effective tax rates on their families. Replacing them with large first-year tuition subsidies to all students is worth considering.

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Recent federal initiatives such as the Millennium Scholarship and Canada Research Chair programs, and more generous grants for research overheads, as well as the partial deregulation of tuition fees by the province of Ontario, have eased the financial strain on the province's postsecondary education (PSE) system. These piecemeal measures have not, however, addressed deeper-seated problems with the system's efficiency. That is why the comprehensive Rae Report (henceforth Rae) on PSE in Ontario was so widely welcomed.

Here, however, it will be argued that some of Rae's proposals and the Ontario government's response to them — beginning with its 2005 budget — threaten the PSE sector with more bureaucratic control than is good for it, and that policy needs redirecting. It will be suggested that tuition fees become, overall, a more important source of institutional revenue than they are now, but that, for the first year of PSE, they should be dramatically reduced. Such measures would increase access to the system, as well as improve the quality of students' choices about their programs of study, which would then play a bigger role in guiding the system's evolution than Rae or the Ontario government envisage.

Rae's Mandate and Ontario's Response

Rae was asked for advice on "the design of a publicly funded postsecondary system" and on, among other matters, "funding model(s) that would link provincial funding to government objectives for the system, including better workers for better jobs in an innovative economy and an accessible, affordable and quality system." Those models were to "establish an appropriate sharing of...costs...among the government, students and the private sector" and "identify an effective student assistance program that promotes increased access to postsecondary education."¹

Rae's Recommendations

In response to this challenge, Rae argues that a broadly accessible PSE system is vital to the Ontario economy, but that access to educational opportunities is also intrinsically valuable in its own right in a society that pursues social and economic equality. It presents the PSE sector as an important source of innovative ideas that make their own contribution to the province's prosperity as well as to its more general social and political well-being. PSE is judged to be seriously underfunded, however, with rising tuition fees causing financial hardship for many students who must rely on a hopelessly complex loan system to finance their education, while particular problems of access seem to face young people from low-income households.

Rae's major recommendations follow: provincial funding for PSE should be enhanced and stabilized; research funding should be made more secure; new

¹ Rae's Terms of Reference are set out in Rae (2005, 1-3). This *Backgrounder* is not comprehensive. It deals only with an important subset of Rae's recommendations.

advisory bodies should be created to coordinate the pursuit of goals jointly set by the government and the colleges and universities; individual universities and colleges should cooperate more closely, particularly to make it easier for students to transfer among them; and tuition should remain frozen pending an overhaul of the student loan programs and the introduction of tuition grants targeted specifically at low-income students, and thereafter it should be regulated, though not set, by the government.

Economic and Social Benefits of PSE

To the extent that the returns to PSE accrue solely to its recipients, there is no case for a society that has chosen market mechanisms as the default option for organizing its economic life to give the sector public support.² Such a case must rest on significant spillover effects from the system, or the promotion of broader social values.

Rae deals skillfully with these matters, noting that “learning is a value in itself” and a source of “indispensable cultural values that need to be championed,” as well as stressing the “practical fact that education, research and innovation lie at the heart of our economy” (p. 20). When Rae insists that wide, easy access to PSE is required for it to “fulfill its role in society,” it is clear that the promotion of equality of social and economic opportunity is subsumed within this broad goal, and its recommendations for significant government involvement in PSE gain force from a presumption that market mechanisms do not work well to serve social values beyond the narrowly economic.³

Implementing Rae’s Proposals

The Ontario government began to implement Rae’s proposals in its 2005 budget. In particular, public base-funding for PSE was increased, which should enable the sector to hire more faculty and reduce class sizes, even while its student intake increases, thus promoting Rae’s fundamental goals: namely, “great education for students, more opportunities for people to attend and a secure postsecondary education system for the long run” (p. 20).

Rae, however, assigns much of the responsibility for giving more precision to these goals to the provincial government, and, apparently following Rae’s advice, the budget proposes the creation of an “arm’s-length Higher Education Quality Council” to “undertake research in indicators and outcomes, advise on system

2 Herb Emery (2005) surveys available estimates of the returns to PSE in Canada, and provides references to much recent literature dealing with this topic.

3 Spillover effects, both economic (perhaps, for example, more-educated workers contribute indirectly to the productivity of those whom they work alongside) and social (perhaps, for example, a more educated population provides the basis for a more critical and better-informed electorate) were until recently very hard to pin down using orthodox economic tools. Recent work surveyed by Craig Riddell (2005), however, has made great progress in confirming their existence, though it has not yet quantified them precisely enough to answer questions about just how large are the public subsidies that they might justify. Rae emphasizes education as a value in itself, and access to it as a means to the promotion of social equality. The evaluation of these important goals is beyond the scope of economic analysis.

wide results, and report on system performance." It sees the government entering into "multi-year agreements with institutions [that] will set out, among other expectations, enrolment and quality improvement targets" (Budget, p. 16), with "the government's new investments [being] tied to performance and results targets" (Budget, p. 6).

Rae also suggests the establishment of "a Council, reporting to the premier, to advise on and co-ordinate research priorities, and...in partnership, where appropriate with federal funding agencies..." to allocate "funding on behalf of the province for basic research and commercialization..." (p. 89), while the budget proposed to soon "establish a Research Council of Ontario to advise on and co-ordinate research priorities and allocate funding based on these" (Budget, p. 16).

Incentives in PSE

Rae and the Ontario government pay considerable attention to administrative means whereby the government's goals for PSE can be achieved, but little to the institutional arrangements through which students, donors, teachers and researchers interact within the sector, and none at all to promoting the harmonious coordination of these two sets of mechanisms.

Tuition Fees

Rae recommends "shifting the locus of the tuition decision from central planning to the individual institution" and linking fee increases "to tangible improvements in quality for students" (p. 100), but envisages such decisions being made within "a regulatory framework enshrined in legislation to guide institutions in making [them]" (p. 99), and the budget commits the Ontario government to immediate negotiations with "students, colleges and universities on a new tuition framework to be in place by September 2006" (Budget, p. 12).

Ominously, however, Rae treats tuition solely as a residual source of funds, available to meet any shortfall between the actual level of financing provided by government and the amount that the system requires to fulfill the goals set by that same government.

The point of the multi-year exercise in mutual accountability has to be understood: focus on the revenue requirements of the institutions and the need for better outcomes. The provincial government...should set out its commitment to help the institutions meet their revenue needs. It is this multi-year commitment that will allow the institutions to assess the degree of help they will need from students and the private sector. (P. 20).

Rae thus completely misses the point that students' tuition payments, in both amount and distribution, can provide information and incentives to help guide the evolution of PSE in Ontario as it responds to the demands generated by a highly competitive and ever-changing world economy.

To the extent that payments made by young people preparing for careers, and older workers adapting to change, are themselves a significant source of funding for universities and colleges, these institutions would become responsive to their choices, and to the extent that students are good judges of the relative payoffs to be expected from alternative forms of education and training, such responsiveness is highly desirable. It would help to produce exactly the diverse and adaptable labour force that we want from the PSE sector. It would have desirable effects on its research activities too, another connection that Rae misses.

Rae argues that “research nourishes excellence...by attracting great teachers and students from around the world and enriching the learning environment” (p. 90), but does not see that great teachers capable of meeting the demand of students are unlikely to be drawn to places where even basic research must be justified in terms of its capacity “to generate pure advancements *that result in long-term spin-offs,*” and where research priorities in general are set on the advice of a council made up of “leaders with expertise in primary and applied research *and research commercialization, business and technology transfer, and from the donor community*” (p. 90, italics added).⁴

Nor does Rae see that research best serves the demands of society and the economy when faculty are hired because they are interested in teaching what students want to learn and are then left free to satisfy their own curiosity. This happens because those fundamental demands are reflected in the choices of students, and, where students’ choices influence institutional behaviour, they help determine which faculty are appointed.

Letting Incentives Work

In short, an economically efficient PSE system is one in which the teaching offered is sensitive to the demands of students who respond to market incentives in the light of their individual tastes and abilities, and in which the faculty who meet those teaching demands in the university sector are themselves involved in research that satisfies their own curiosity. Provided that students’ demands for teaching are well informed, and are allowed to influence the rewards paid to faculty, making their tuition payments a significant revenue source will tend to attract a mix of research expertise well aligned to that required for teaching, and hence to the economy’s needs, without any direction from a bureaucracy.

Many knotty problems that will inevitably arise under the performance-indicator-based planning implicit in both Rae and the Ontario government’s response to it can also be better handled by such a system. Awkward questions posed by different average returns to education in various disciplines, and our total lack of information about what these imply for how teaching resources should be allocated, will be answered by students themselves taking their fees to

⁴ Such arrangements are unlikely to work well even for those donors who support contract research with the aim of generating immediately marketable results. If some university research is to be funded by such donors — and subject to important qualifications about the preservation of academic freedom and integrity, which space does not permit to be discussed here — it is hard to argue against this. It would surely be far more efficient to allow individual clients and researchers to get together without the intervention of a centralized bureaucracy.

the departments that they think will serve them best. The “right” balance between courses with an immediate economic payoff, and those alleged to yield less-direct returns in the form of promoting social values of one sort or another, will also be chosen by students. Finally — a particularly contentious question — the extent of tiering in research intensity and academic quality among institutions will be settled by allowing universities to find out how many students are willing to pay for the inevitably more expensive instruction that is on offer when faculty are permitted to devote a greater proportion of time to scholarship and hence less to the classroom.⁵

Promoting Social Goals

As we have already noted, Rae makes a compelling case for substantial government support of PSE in terms of the pursuit of social values beyond the purely material. Such support can come as grants from government to institutions allocated by a bureaucracy, as subsidies paid to students who then spend it on programs and institutions of their own choosing, or as a mixture of the two.⁶

Within the third mixed option, on which Ontario has long relied, it has already been argued that a shift of emphasis toward putting money directly into the hands of students would promote greater economic efficiency and flexibility in the sector, but, properly implemented, it could also help promote “education as a value in itself.” Transfers to students can be costly, however, and Rae and the budget’s reliance on loans rather than outright grants to students as the main means of implementing them becomes even more important if funding is to be tilted in this direction, as do measures to simplify and increase the generosity of current government loan programs.

Providing Access

Rae pays particular attention to the fact that people from low-income families, particularly those with no previous exposure to PSE, are badly underrepresented in PSE in general, and universities in particular, even though loans are available to them and the expected returns from participation are attractive.⁷ To address this problem, Rae recommends PSE tuition grants — up to a limit of \$6,000 per annum

5 Individual institutions anxious to recruit well-qualified fee-paying students are likely to adopt the easy acceptance of credits earned elsewhere as a competitive device without much bureaucratic prompting, thus helping to accomplish another of Rae’s goals. (See Rae pp. 41-43.)

6 It is impossible to put a cash value on spillover effects in the current state of knowledge, and certain values that PSE promotes — such as social and economic equality — are simply not susceptible to such analysis. This author is therefore willing to accept Rae’s recommendations about the overall amount that the Ontario government should aim to spend on this sector for the sake of getting on with arguments about how the amount in question should be disbursed.

7 Rae identifies a number of overlapping groups that are underrepresented in PSE — for example families with low income and no previous experience of PSE, recent immigrants, people with disabilities, aboriginals and francophone Ontarians — and makes a series of suggestions for dealing with their specific problems. For other recent discussions of the effects of low income and other family characteristics on PSE participation, see, *inter alia*, Junor and Usher (2004, Chapter 3), Corak, Lipps and Zhao (2005) and Finnie, Lascelles and Sweetman (2005).

— for dependent students coming from families with incomes of less than \$22,615 (the threshold at which the National Child Benefit Supplement begins to be clawed back), these to be reduced as a function of income until an upper limit of \$35,000 is reached. Already, the Ontario government, acting in collaboration with the federal government, has followed Rae partway on this. The 2005 budget introduced such grants for low-income first-year and (at a reduced rate) second-year students.

This is not a welcome development. Households in the relevant income range already face high effective marginal tax rates because of other taxes and claw backs, and Rae's scheme seems to imply an increase in these of just over 48 percentage points for a household with one child in PSE, nearly 97 percentage points with two, and so on. Its implementation would imply overall marginal effective tax rates well in excess of 100 percent for some low-income families, with all too readily imaginable effects on the incentives facing them in the labour market and elsewhere.

A Subsidized First Year

Nevertheless, the low participation rate of low-income households in PSE is a serious social problem. As Usher (2005) has argued, it seems to stem significantly from a tendency among this group to overestimate the costs and underestimate the payoffs from PSE. Rae's proposed grants would surely help to offset this misperception, but they do not need to be made for four years to have this effect. Once tempted into the system, students are likely to attain a more accurate perception of the costs and benefits of further participation rather quickly, and the need for further subsidies to offset systematic misperceptions will diminish.⁸

Misinformation about PSE, moreover, is not confined to those with low incomes. Much scepticism about the benefits of allowing student choices a greater role in shaping the system, such as has been urged above, stems from the suspicion that these choices are often badly informed. This consideration argues for subsidizing the acquisition of more accurate information by all students eligible to undertake PSE, and to make grants generally available independently of income would eliminate the effective tax rate issues implicit in Rae's proposals.

Thus, it is mainly the first year of PSE that should be heavily subsidized, and for all academically qualified students. Such a measure implemented in isolation, however, would involve a potentially massive transfer to higher-income families whose children would attend university in any event, so it would be better to require PSE institutions to set very low, perhaps in the limit zero, fees for the first year, but simultaneously to permit them to recoup the cost of doing so to any extent they desire by raising fees for subsequent years of their programs. Such a combination of measures, along with an adequate loan program (because tuition is by no means the only cost of enrolling in PSE), would widen the scope for all

8 Perhaps the Ontario government shares this doubt. That would help explain why the 2005 budget puts such grants in place only for two years, and at a less generous level in the second of these. It is worth noting that the Alberta government is currently considering proposals to make the first two years of PSE tuition-free for all students. Details of such a program, however, remain to be worked out. See Tetley (2005).

potential students, including those from low-income households, to find out at first hand what opportunities PSE offers, and which of those opportunities they are best suited to exploit.⁹

PSE institutions might also like such a program. For them, the most welcome element in the 2005 budget was the greater financial security implicit in its promises not just of immediate increases in direct grants but also of further gains over a five-year period. But there is always the danger that these longer-term promises will not be kept because of unforeseen economic or political circumstances. A desirable element of insurance against such eventualities would come with the complete deregulation of fees beyond the first year of study. And PSE institutions, which are nowadays themselves an increasingly important source of financial support to able and/or low-income students, would surely welcome the chance to base such aid on a more accurate reading of the promise of potential recipients than now comes from high-school grades.

Some Loose Ends

Such a scheme as this would clearly need to be backed by an efficient and well-funded student loan program, as well as measures to ensure that PSE institutions maintain adequate student support programs of their own, so there is nothing here to cast doubt on Rae's recommendations on these matters. Nor, given Ontario's meagre level of direct support to the PSE sector in the recent past, is there anything to suggest that increases already implemented should be rolled back. Some thinking about the longer-run time path for direct grants would be appropriate, however, were tuition fees financed by government-subsidized loans to become a more important and flexible source of revenue than they now are.

Current plans for councils to advise the provincial government on the allocation of its funds to both the teaching and research activities of PSE institutions might also need some scaling back, with their activities reoriented toward providing information on performance indicators and the like to the public at large as well as to the government, and, in the case of research funding, making the allocation of government funds more responsive to the priorities of researchers themselves.

9 In round numbers, first-year students make up about one-third of undergraduate enrollment in Ontario universities, so, if we follow Rae in thinking of \$6,000 per year as a reasonable level for tuition fees to reach in the near future under current arrangements — this estimate is extrapolated from his proposed upper limit for tuition grants to low-income students — then fees for second and subsequent years would have to be raised to about \$9,000 for the universities to recoup the costs of a completely tuition-free first year. By North American standards this would still be a bargain. Students taking a subsidized first year in Ontario and then transferring elsewhere to complete their degrees could be asked to pay first-year tuition in arrears, a requirement that could rather easily be policed and enforced, because transfer students have to have their transcripts sent by their original university to their new university if they are to obtain credit for their already completed studies.

Summing Up

In short, the Ontario government was surely right to respond quickly to Rae's advice about the importance of PSE for the province's society and economy, but in subsequent stages of its program for helping the sector, it should begin to deviate from Rae's recommendations.

Specifically, tuition fees should be treated not as a residual source of funding available to ensure that the PSE system meets the government's own version of society's priorities but as a significant source of revenue that individual institutions should be free to compete for by responding quickly to the ever-changing priorities of their students. These do, after all, represent an important and nuanced source of information about many of the social interests that government is seeking to serve. For such an interaction to be effective, the student body needs to be well informed, and the provision of heavily subsidized access to the first year of PSE for all academically qualified applicants would help to ensure this, as well as promote the greater use of the system by young people from low-income families.¹⁰

With such measures in place, the Ontario government should then stand back a little and allow the interaction of well-informed and adequately funded students with institutions that are free to experiment both with what programs they offer and what they charge for them to play a major role in determining the future development of PSE in the province.

10 And to the extent that the problem arises from deeper social causes than mere misinformation about PSE, it would be better to investigate those causes directly, and then address them as matters of social policy, than to expect the PSE sector to cope with them.

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