Globalizing University or How Canadian is Canadian Higher Education?

Higher education in the Western tradition has always been global or international. Even in the Middle Ages students were wandering across all Europe looking for the best education. From the very beginnings of universities faculty members were crossing frontiers, looking for the best place for their academic research. Of course, nowadays students and faculty have more opportunities for mobility and there exist ties among various academic institutions we have never seen before. Colleges and universities from various and distant parts of the world are closely connected and interdependent. The exchange of academic journals, very often published in English or in French, makes the kingdom of knowledge really global (Thelin, 8-10).

In this context the question – how Canadian is Canadian higher education in our global world – seems to be especially interesting. This question is even more tempting because it was the Canadian – Marshall MacLuhan – who coined the term “global village”, part of which “global university” or “academia” is now. One could look for the answer examining the history of Canadian colleges, contemporary curriculum of Canadian higher education institutions, and the interrelation with so called environment – that is society, economy, government (Massolin, 172).

It is necessary for us to remember that Canada is the G7 country with the highest rate of high school graduates deciding to continue their education at postsecondary level. And this is one of the reasons why the Canadians are so proud of their higher education. With the increasing percentage of the population holding higher education degree, colleges have become an important factor shaping Canadian society and economy, politics and culture. Even some constrains of today, among others: budget cuts (both federal and provincial) or negative tendencies in student/faculty ratio, do not change the general impression of the importance of higher education in Canada (Lewington; Paskey; Education; Johnston).
The Canadian higher education system was shaped by two main sources of influence: United States, and Western Europe (mainly Great Britain). The very first institution in Canada was Séminaire de Québec, founded by Archbishop Laval in 1663, only 28 years after Harvard. But comparing it to then existing colleges we should doubt if it was an institution of higher education at all. Programs preparing young men to be catholic priests could last less than one academic year, while Harvard started with the four years program of studies. The unquestionable beginning of Canadian higher education is marked by royal charters of King’s colleges. The first one was founded in Windsor, Nova Scotia, in 1789 (now affiliated to Dalhousie University), then King’s College at York (now University of Toronto) in 1828 and King’s College at Fredericton (now University of New Brunswick) in 1829. It is worth remembering, however, that in the year of the foundation of King’s College at Windsor in the United States such colleges as: Yale, Princeton, Brown, College of William and Mary as well as schools known today as Columbia, University of Pennsylvania and Rutgers University had already been founded (History: Quickfacts; Historical).

New schools in Canada were established by the king with the obvious aim of educating priests for the Episcopal Church in Canada as well as preparing the officers for the work in the British administration there. The creation of Canadian colleges was also to restrain the Canadians from going to the United States to continue education there. So the beginnings of Canadian colleges were marked by the desire of creating something similar to British institutions and different to the US ones. The adjective used here, the “British” not “English”, is meaningful because many of the first Canadian colleges were closely connected to Scottish universities, very often by the person of the first president. Scottish universities, for example University of Aberdeen, University of Glasgow or St. Andrew’s University were more open than Oxford or Cambridge. They put much stress on teaching “natural philosophy”, which we should call rather natural sciences today. Thanks to these origins Canadian colleges were more open to different points of view than US ones, too deeply involved in religious discussions. But on the other hand the Canadian colleges were rather small, even too small. The perfect example is Dalhousie College where first three B.A. degrees were granted just 48 years after founding. And that was the reason why Canadian colleges were not as important in the life of the citizens as their American counterparts; especially that many interesting courses (like engineering) were not the part of curriculum but were organized as lectures open to the public (History).
Later on we can see the influences of France at the beginnings of higher education in Quebec, and of course we can see there the influence of Vatican, too, since the branch of Laval University in Montreal was opened with the papal blessing. Yet, in the second half of the 19th century the most influential was the experience of the US universities. The United States faced a substantial change, sometimes called first academic revolution, in their higher education system. With the creation of new private universities such as Johns Hopkins University or the University of Chicago, as well as the passing and implementing of the Land Grant Act in 1862, American colleges became more connected to the needs of employers and the society. The degree itself became an important force in the social advancement of people (Rudolph, 248-253).

With growing competition of the US colleges and universities the Canadian higher education also had to change, this time following the example of the Southern neighbor. During that period we can see the creation of new institutions: (University of Manitoba, 1877; University of Alberta, 1906, of Saskatchewan, 1907 and of British Columbia, 1908) all of them following more or less the pattern of the American Land Grant Act colleges, devoted to education in agriculture and mechanics. The second important change was the forced federation of different colleges under the auspices of one large and strong institution. This was started by the province of Ontario where Victoria College and St. Michael’s College were affiliated to the University of Toronto in 1890. Thanks to all these changes Canadian higher education became more connected with the economic needs of the country and became more competitive. We should remember, however, that even before World War II only the University of Toronto and McGill University were recognized internationally. The rest of the institutions were rather of local fame only (Quickfacts).

The second substantial change of the Canadian higher education took place after World War II. Once again following the example of the United States, Canadian Parliament passed GI Bill for veterans, providing them sufficient financial support to go to colleges. Very soon total enrollment doubled; the growth of enrollment did not stop after completion of GI Bill but tripled reaching the astonishing number of more than 160 thousand full time students in 1963. At present more than 580 thousand university full time students are enrolled and almost 250 thousand part time students; there are enrolled almost a half of a million students at community colleges. With the population little larger than 30 million these are really astonishing numbers (Access, 6-
Yet, during the second half of the 20th century, Canada and the Canadians were eager to stress the difference between American and Canadian colleges. The problem was discussed by many prominent scholars (including Harold Innis, Donald Creighton, George Grant, Vincent Massey, Hilda Neatby Northrop Frye and Herbert McLuhan), stating that Canadian education should not follow the US example without any hesitation. One of the core differences between the USA and Canada can be easily noticed in the curricula of the universities (Massolin, 131-133).

Curriculum

Until the 1980s the testing point of the Canadian curriculum was the absence of the common American course – composition. It is a must of undergraduate programs of studies in the United States and it is rather hard to find any college there, which does not have composition or English 101 among its core courses and basic requirements. In America it became extremely popular just after World War II. The Americans found that the knowledge of technique of communication in writing and in speaking is necessary for success in the professional life of the alumni. The development of composition not only as an educational tool, as a course, but also as a field of study with its own scholars, academic journals and so on, was regarded by the Canadian as something rather non-academic, not too refined to be a part of college requirements. Strong connection between composition and the economic or managerial skills was considered to be especially dangerous (Brooks, 674-675). In Canada many of the critics kept on saying that the ability to write properly and effectively should be taught at high school not at the university. They were suspicious that American students are not well prepared to start higher education at all therefore they need a course like composition. Unlike the Canadians, who, being well educated at the moment of high school graduation, can attend more literature-oriented courses. Canadian universities offer courses on English literature or literature in English instead of rather practical courses on academic and professional writing (Brooks, 677).

The Canadians were also afraid that strong ties with external, that is non-academic, world undermines the fundamental ideal of higher education – non-utilitarian zest for knowledge. The conclusion of the discussion is – if we support the presence of the composition in the curriculum of the Canadian colleges we will agree to change higher education from academic one to something more similar to vocational training.

However, the example of the University of Winnipeg Writing Program
Globalizing University or How Canadian is Canadian Higher Education?

(now Center for Academic Writing), where some American teachers were employed, proves that Canadian students are very eager to attend composition courses, and it does not mean undermining of the ideals of Canadian education. What is stressed by the teachers of the Winnipeg’ Center for Academic Writing – higher education cannot pretend that the world outside does not exist, and it is student’s right to be well prepared for work competition after graduation. Especially that after signing Free Trade Agreement with the USA the term “national” should be redefined as well as national, that is Canadian, way of teaching writing skills (Brooks, 686; Levin, 239). On the other hand many of the critics of introduction of composition into the curriculum still think that following the example of the United States endangers Canadian colleges and universities, misplacing the stress in a binary opposition of high and popular culture. (The USA representing here popular culture, of course). Following the USA, Canada is going to lose its identity. So in the 70s, 80s and even 90s as far the curriculum is concerned, Canada tried to stress and maintain the difference between these two educational systems.

Environment
The difference between the US and Canadian higher education as well as between the Canadian and European one, can be easily found in the relation to the society and politics. Here Canadian higher education is something absolutely unique in the world. Unlike in Europe there is no ministry of education responsible for financing and supervising colleges and universities. Although there are some federal agencies financing researches and scholarships, these are the provincial governments that are authorized to take care of the education at all levels. And in this aspect Canada resembles the United States.

In comparison to the United States the role of private higher education in Canada is minimal. Even in Europe or in Japan private higher education is far more important. Through “forced federation” a vast majority of higher education institutions in Canada have become public. They receive public money for operational funds and thanks to it, Canadian higher education can be more open than the American one, first of all by lower tuitions and fees. As everywhere, Canadian education receives less money than it needs, but still the support of the governments (federal and provincial combined) is much higher than in the United States. So Canada is somewhere in a midway between the United States and Europe with higher education not centralized in the European manner and with more public support and involvement than in America (Access; Orton; Geschwender et al.).
This involvement is reflected by a unique organizational pattern of Canadian higher education institutions. There are three main forces (or branches) governing universities: Senate, (composed of the faculty, students and alumni and responsible for academic matter); Board of Governors (with the representatives of the government, prominent managers and of the faculty, too, responsible for financial issues); and last but not least – president (who in Canada quite often serves as a mediator between Senate and Board of Governors).

The role of federal and provincial authorities as related to colleges and universities could be explained by a unique philosophy of education (higher education in particular). In Canada studying at university is not considered to be a privilege, by which a group of society, no matter how large, becomes elite, dominating social, cultural and economic life. As Jamie-Lynn Magnusson proves in her article Examining higher education and citizenship... college and university play very important role in the process of forming responsible citizens of particular provinces and of the state. Without higher education there would be no real democracy in Canada (Magnusson). This attitude towards higher education is very unique and almost not existing in other parts of the world. Just to compare it with Australia or New Zealand, where college degree is treated as a kind of personal investment, as a privilege, indeed, therefore graduates have to pay back some money spent by the state on their higher education.

Conclusions
The answer to the question: Does Canadian higher education have some unique qualities making it distinctly different? – should be a firm “yes”. Canada, being a kind of melting pot of different philosophies of education and two different traditions, created its own, unique features of colleges and universities although they are more and more involved in the process of globalization, in great part thanks to the use of internet and new technologies of communication.

“Canadian” means here, by contrast, less practical than American and less theoretical than European, more open than American, and more strictly connected with the world outside than European. One of the most interesting achievements of Canada is the philosophy of education seeing it as the fifth freedom, as the integral part of the human formation. This is only possible because so many high school graduates decide to continue their studies. A recent Japanese report suggests that public policy in Japan should follow
the Canadian example with the high quality of teaching and amazing quantity of students. And this is one of the reasons why Canadian higher education should be an important field of studies (A Vision).

Works Cited


shared/shared_main.jhtml;jsessionid=SKAEXYMOTGXRTQA3 

Rudolph, Frederick. The American College & University. A History. Athens: 
The University of Georgia Press, 1990.