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The political economy of post-secondary education: a comparison of British Columbia, Ontario and Québec / Donald Fisher ...

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Abstract

A policy sociology approach is taken to examine the connections between neo-liberalism, post-secondary provincial education (PSE) policy in Canada and the impact of those policies. Our thesis regarding the broad political economy of PSE is that over the last two decades the adoption of this ideology has been a major cause of some dramatic changes in these policies and has brought about a fundamental transformation of PSE in Canada. The discussion builds on a comparative, multiple, nested case study conducted at the provincial (Québec, Ontario and British Columbia) and national level. Through the analysis of key provincial and federal documents, the team concludes that five themes dominated the PSE policy-making process. These themes are Accessibility, Accountability, Marketization, Labour Force Development and Research and Development. In discussing these themes, we illustrate their impact on and within the three provincial PSE systems: BC, Ontario and Québec. In the conclusion, we place the changes in their political and economic contexts and explicate the intended and unintended consequences of these policy priorities. We argue that the pressure for access has led to the emergence of new institutional types, raising new questions about differentiation, mandate and identity and new lines of stratification. A trend toward

21.4.2025

vocationalism in the university sector has coincided with 'academic drift' in the community college sector, leading to convergences in programming and institutional functions across the system, as well as competition for resources, students, and external partners. Unprecedented demand has made education a viable industry, sustaining both a proliferation of private providers and a range of new entrepreneurial activities within public institutions. Levels and objectives of public funding have swung dramatically over the period. Public investments in PSE, in the form of capital grants and tuition subsidies, have alternately expanded and contracted, being at some times applied across the board and at others targeted to specific social groups or economic sectors. Likewise, policymakers have treated PSE at times as a mechanism for social inclusion and equality, at others as an instrument for labour force development, and at yet others as a market sector in its own right. (HRK / Abstract übernommen) Fisher, Donald, E-Mail: donald.fisher@ubc.ca