

Opening up Canadian Federalism the European Way
Coordination of Research and Postsecondary Education Policy
April 16th, 2014, Edmonton, Alberta

Workshop report by George Benson, University of Victoria Student Rapporteur

On April 16th, 2014, almost 20 individuals gathered at the University of Alberta to consider the European Union's Open Method of Cooperation (OMC) and its possible application to Canadian research and higher education policy. The discussion focused first on the general conduct of the OMC as it occurs in the EU, then moved to how Canadian postsecondary education and research policy have developed historically, where they stand now, and finished by considering if the Canadian postsecondary education system needs a significant reworking, and if so, how the OMC might assist in this process.

Dr Amy Verdun, Professor of Political Science and Jean Monnet Chair Ad Personam from the University of Victoria gave an explanation of how the OMC emerged in the EU during the 1990s. It served as an informal coordinating tool between technical experts and national leaders, as a way to coordinate common goals, indicators, and perspectives on issues - especially in social policy which remained a national concern of the member states under the European Union (EU) treaty. Because of the EU's limited capacity to act in social policy, it has to use 'soft' governance approaches including peer-pressure and sharing best practices as there are limited incentives to drive policy creation and convergence.

Dr Lori Thorlakson, from the University of Alberta European Union Centre of Excellence stressed that the key way in which the EU coordinates in areas in which member states have competence is through shaping the discourse on a particular issue. By helping create a shared language for policy goals on a particular topic, experts and officials can come together to develop a common understanding of mutual goals. Dr Thorlakson noted that a critique the OMC faces is that of a democratic deficit, as its deliberative style and 'muddle through' approach does not necessarily bring all stakeholders to the table. At the end of the day, the OMC is not a singular method, but rather a spectrum of 'weak' and 'strong' responses that can be used to meet policy inertia or policy failure. It is by its nature a flexible, case-by-case approach utilised by stakeholders looking for policy changes.

Looking at the Canadian experience, Dr Merli Tamtik, a SSHRC post-doctoral fellow at York University in Toronto noted that while Canada continues to rank highly in international research rankings, its scores are slipping, particularly with reference to the EU, which is improving in part as a result of the OMC. Canada's fundamental innovation capacity has been judged to be limited and is falling further behind, where the lack of coordination between the federal and provincial governments provides mixed signals to knowledge-producers. Dr Donna Wood from the University of Victoria elaborated on the Canadian historical experience in postsecondary education (PSE) to the 1990s, when the federal government became decidedly more unilateral in how it spent its money, investing in university research directly as opposed to transfers to the provinces to support teaching. The lack of a formal way to coordinate federal PSE programming with the provinces – who work on their own through the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) – has resulted in increased fragmentation and a bifurcated PSE system.

Britta Baron, the Vice Provost and Vice President International of the University of Alberta, underscored this same point when talking about the lack of a national conversation or discourse on postsecondary education and research policy and a lack of learning opportunities across the country. This will have

significant consequences, especially in our inability to connect into international sources of funding. She noted that what is missing in Canada is leadership: Ottawa cannot play this role and attempts by other organizations (including universities themselves, CALDO and the Conference Board of Canada) have been less than successful. Drawing on her past experience of coordinating efforts in education policy in Canada, Maria David-Evans, former Deputy Minister for the Government of Alberta, noted that there are natural reasons for this situation within Canada: with such a large country, coordinating these kinds of policies with a limited budget is very difficult. She noted that Canada already has significant collaborative organizations working in postsecondary education, for example the Association of Community Colleges of Canada (ACCC), the Association of University and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC), as well as industry involvement. She attempted to dispel the idea that things were broken within Canadian postsecondary education, noting that the efforts of these organizations to help bridge skills gaps and harmonise grading and other practices had earned Canada glowing recommendations from the Asian Development Bank. She also noted the OMC method had yet to accumulate the length of historical experience that Canadian postsecondary education policy has. In her view the best approach in Canada is to work to enhance and improve the collaborative systems we already have, rather than adopting and overlaying the OMC model on the Canadian context.

Speaking from the perspective of students, Monty Bal, from the University of Alberta Graduate Students Society, felt that while the work of the ACCC and AUCC was useful, there were greater failings that existed that these organisations could not meet, and that the OMC offered the potential to create a national conversation on postsecondary education in Canada. As Tamtik noted, the OMC was successful in creating common objectives for policy makers in the EU member states, but this success still had to extend beyond the government executive level and involve all levels of implementation and stakeholders, otherwise the institutional memory would be too short to see lasting changes made. There was a sense of urgency that permeated the discussion, underscored by comments from Monty Bal that students were worried about the quality and portability of their education in the global marketplace, and from Britta Baron that the global research agenda was coalescing in such a way that Canada needed to present a united face, otherwise it would be left out of incoming developments.

Even if some doubted its ability to produce hard policies on its own, the larger discussion among workshop participants concluded that, while the OMC method was still in its infancy, Canadian institutions could certainly learn something from EU coordination efforts. The substantial differences between the two systems was noted - particularly the overarching role of the federal government in the Canadian process being different from the European Commission. With no enforcer body or stronger spending authority, the EU examples always fell short of the federal government's power here in Canada. All participants agreed on the need to create a system whereby the federal government could be held accountable and consistently kept invested in national postsecondary education policy, whilst still allowing for provincial freedom and respect for its jurisdiction. Participants felt that the gradual, technical nature of the OMC could offer lessons for the Canadian context – in particular, insofar as a conversation of all relevant stakeholders was clearly missing today and the challenges facing post-secondary education in Canada were only growing larger. Participants felt that a process like the OMC, which brings together all stakeholders as well as all governments, is needed in Canada. The final 'solutions' discussion proposed the funding and creation of more forums at the federal, interprovincial, and intra-provincial levels to spark dialogue between stakeholders in the postsecondary education process in order to build connections and converge on shared goals.