

# Postsecondary Education in British Columbia

Public Policy and Structural Development,  
1960–2015

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## Introduction

Prior to 1960, British Columbians who wished to remain in their home province for their postsecondary education had limited options. This stemmed partly from a small population of less than 2 million that had the capacity to support only a modest number of specialized educational institutions. As in larger jurisdictions, though, the small postsecondary system also reflected low rates of high school completion: dropping out between Grades 8 and 12 remained common throughout the 1950s. Low graduation rates and a labour market that required few highly skilled workers combined to suppress the demand for more advanced levels of education. But the first waves of baby boom children were reaching college age, and their educational aspirations were rising. The province teetered on the threshold of change.

This book traces the development of the *entire* contemporary postsecondary system in British Columbia (BC):

- the research and teaching universities, community colleges, and provincial institutes that constitute the public sector
- the less known for-profit and not-for-profit career colleges, faith-based institutions, Aboriginal-governed institutions, and private universities that make up the private sector
- and the boundary-spanning apprenticeship system, as well as the continuing education quasi-sector.

In referring to the postsecondary system, I conceive of it not in terms of legal authorities and formal governance, but rather in terms of interactions and relationships among institutions.

Although the focus is on British Columbia, my methodology is broadly applicable to other jurisdictions. The distinctive contribution of this study is to provide an integrative and dynamic analysis that concentrates on the interactions among postsecondary sectors. It sets the stage for future work by others.

The type of development I examine is structural,<sup>1</sup> concerning the establishment and modification of postsecondary institutions, both private and public. In calling for a revival of the attention in the 1960s to the mix of institutions, Skolnik (2005) defines postsecondary structure as the distribution of institutions by size, mission and type, and geographic location. I concur with his rationale for examining structures: “No matter how well each institution does its job, the net result will be less than optimal if the whole configuration of institutions is inappropriate ... Thus it is sometimes important to stand back from the trenches and look at the big picture” (p. 54).

On the surface, the structure of the postsecondary system addresses the questions of what types and how much enrolment capacity exist in a jurisdiction. At a deeper level, seemingly “hard” organizational structures provide clues, as do budgets, about what decision makers value and see as important – clues, in other words, about worldviews. Many other types of development, such as pedagogical or curricular trends, are of course worthy of investigation for understanding value orientations and worldviews, but they fall beyond the scope of the present study.

In 1960, when my historical narrative begins, Sputnik and the American space race with the Soviet Union had sensationalized a societal goal of raising the population’s level of education, especially in science and technology. Another important, if less spectacular, driver propelling the expansion of postsecondary education was the embrace by governments across North America of economic theory about human capital formation. Expenditure on education came to be viewed as an investment that would eventually benefit not only the individual student but also society at large. Furthermore, education was increasingly seen in British Columbia as a

means to a better quality of life in a society that was evolving beyond its frontier roots. The economy was sufficiently buoyant to fund education that previous decades might have viewed as too expensive to be made available to the masses, especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s and the war years of the 1940s.

With increasing popular demand across Canada and the United States for education, the new decade unleashed a series of developments that changed the face of postsecondary education. The changes began in British Columbia when the federal Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act of 1960 led to the establishment of eight postsecondary vocational school campuses throughout the province. Then the University of Victoria opened in 1963, followed by Simon Fraser University in 1965, tripling the number of universities in the province. The British Columbia Institute of Technology started accepting students in 1964. The following year saw the opening of the first of fourteen community colleges (later fifteen colleges when Kwantlen College split from Douglas College) that would serve every region of the province. By the end of the 1960s, British Columbians had far more postsecondary options than at the beginning of the decade, and there were more to come.

Changes in private postsecondary education followed a different trajectory and later timeline than those in the public sector. Although enrolments in the BC private sector have been smaller than in the public sector, they have nevertheless been significant – and all too often downplayed or even overlooked. This study acknowledges the tens of thousands of students who attend private institutions every year, most frequently in vocational and applied programs. It traces the evolution of their institutions not as independent threads but as integral components of the fabric of the postsecondary system.

### **Audience**

This book may be conceptualized as a three-layer pyramid. The bottom layer is a descriptive summary that traces the evolution of the BC postsecondary system. It answers such questions as why some universities offer welding and carpentry, whereas some comprehensive, public colleges provide no trades training at all. Readers who are largely interested in this

historical narrative, in contrast to the theoretical and analytical components, may focus on Chapters 3 through 5.

The significance of the descriptive layer arises from the wide disparity in the types and amounts of historical writing about the various post-secondary sectors. For example, there are hardly any histories of British Columbia's private career colleges, the former public postsecondary vocational schools, and the faith-based sector. It seems that the less prestigious the institutional type, the less scholarly attention has been devoted to it. I illustrate how scrutinizing public policy affecting students and programs in *all* sectors leads to a better understanding not only of the system as a whole but also of *each* particular sector – even of the universities and public colleges that are currently its most thoroughly studied components.

The middle layer considers how three general goals, or policy rationales, for education have fluctuated and endured in British Columbia since 1960. The rationales, which are social justice, human capital formation, and marketization, exist to varying degrees throughout the Western world. I use them to interpret the cumulative impact of decisions made to address immediate needs. I also see them as some of the evaluative criteria that should be used in assessing future public policy options. This methodology of assessing events through multiple theoretical lenses is not new, having famously been employed by Alison (1971) in his analysis of the Cuban missile crisis, but it is rarely seen in the postsecondary literature.

The top layer uses the other two layers to illustrate a systems approach to the study of postsecondary education. This systems approach is discussed below.

My envisaged audience became my basis for determining where to position this study on the spectrum between simplicity and memorability versus a more nuanced but less accessible discussion. Because I have written for readers who are knowledgeable about the field of higher education but who may be largely unfamiliar with many aspects of the BC postsecondary system and its history, I have chosen to focus on predominant forces and developments. Without some sort of an easily remembered framework, the details and untidiness of real life can quickly become overwhelming for readers who are new to the subject.

I have therefore chosen a rather tidy analytical approach, which provides an introductory framework that can lead to more in-depth study.

Readers who are already expert will undoubtedly also use their own frameworks for interpreting the historical narrative; I have chosen an ordered and easily comprehended approach that I trust will be appropriate for most readers.

My preference for clarity and memorability influenced my decision not to be granular in defining historical periods. I chose to demarcate only three periods of similar duration, partly because analyzing one or two historical moments in each period from three policy perspectives across disparate postsecondary sectors generated as much complexity as I wanted my readers to sustain.

To help bound the analytical aspect of this study, I focused on the initial intent and rationale for policy decisions, steering away from the subsequent complexities of implementation and ultimate impacts. Furthermore, I concentrated on the structural implications of the rationales, asking how the aspirations influenced the types and locations of postsecondary institutions rather than posing the broader question of all the ways in which these decisions mattered. The result was more analogous to a map than to a satellite photo, but for some purposes and users the simplicity of a map can be the more useful tool.

### **Book Organization**

This book consists of three sections. In the first, the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2 set the stage for the historical narrative that appears in the second. This introductory chapter explains what I set out to do in terms of a holistic systems approach and how my readership influenced my methodology. Chapter 1 provides background about postsecondary education in British Columbia: the particular ways that certain terminology is understood in the province and the state of postsecondary education as of 1960, when my account begins. Chapter 2 is theoretical, presenting three enduring public policy rationales that affected the structures of both public and private postsecondary sectors. It brings together a number of concepts from a variety of literatures.

The second section is historical, tracing the structural development of the contemporary BC postsecondary system. It divides the years since 1960 into three periods and devotes a chapter to each one. After providing an overview of the period, the chapters examine one or two historical

moments in greater detail. Each moment is then analyzed from the perspectives of the three enduring policy rationales. Five historical moments considered from three perspectives yields fifteen discrete analyses.

Finally, the Conclusion steps back from the analytical details to identify broad fluctuations over time in the importance of the various policy rationales. This interpretive step of moving from the trees toward identifying the forest makes some trends or patterns evident, but it is, of course, just one contribution to the historiography of BC postsecondary education.

### **Systems Perspective**

My goal is less to present new information about education in British Columbia than to assemble existing knowledge in new and revealing ways. My approach draws upon systems thinking (Mella, 2012) and falls firmly within Boyer's (1990) formulation of the scholarship of integration: that is, the giving of meaning to isolated facts, of putting them in perspective, and of interpreting past research within larger intellectual patterns. It is compatible with the notion of horizontal history, taking account of interlocking circles of influence and fluid networks rather than only of isolated postsecondary institutions or groups of institutions (Thelin, 2010).

I chose this all-encompassing approach because I wished to understand postsecondary education in the ways that students actually experience it throughout their life, often crossing boundaries to take courses in differing types of institutions,<sup>2</sup> and in the ways that governments view it when setting multi-sectorial policies such as student financial aid. The utility of looking at systems, and not simply components, can be illustrated by two examples of boundary-spanning interactions.

The public colleges of British Columbia have been studied as a distinct sector (e.g., Dennison and Gallagher, 1986; Gaber, 2002), but with their extensive university transfer component and more recent limited authority to grant baccalaureate degrees, they also maintain strong relationships with universities. Contradictory curricular changes in similar programs at differing universities can send college faculty into a tizzy as they struggle to maintain course transferability to as many universities as possible. Vacillations in university admission thresholds (high one year to admit the "brightest and the best," low another year to serve "all qualified applicants") can significantly affect college enrolment demand.



Public colleges provide some, but not all, of the classroom components of apprenticeship training, a quite separate sector in British Columbia. They partner regularly with Aboriginal-governed institutions, sometimes to award credentials but also to deliver programs and even to channel government funding to Aboriginal clientele. At times, responding to government funding incentives, public colleges have co-operated with private career colleges in some program areas while competing with them for students in other areas; a federal funding change in the mid-1980s was simultaneously bad news for public colleges and good news for private career colleges.

The development of the college sector has thus been affected by characteristics and trends in other sectors. Studies of individual sectors can miss these important interdependencies and interactions, as well as such nuances as how student dropouts from one institution may simply be mobile, eventually graduating somewhere else.

A second example of the usefulness of a systems approach is how it helps us to understand the failure of private and out-of-province universities to thrive when new legislation in 2002 made it much easier for them to operate in British Columbia. The minimal impact of this policy initiative is best interpreted against the backdrop of the BC government's concurrent expansion of student spaces in all the public institutions and its introduction of bachelor's and master's degrees in applied subjects in selected public institutions other than universities. Private universities suddenly faced much more competition for students from public institutions that could charge lower tuition fees.

The connections and interactions between private and public institutions in British Columbia, as in many jurisdictions, are stronger than might be suggested by the distinct policy environments in which they operate. Private degree-granting institutions frequently serve mature students who began their studies at public institutions but later found that the course scheduling or availability of seats in such institutions were incompatible with their life situation. Aboriginal-governed institutions routinely partner with public ones. Some courses and programs from faith-based institutions and private career colleges are granted transfer credit by public institutions, and half a dozen faith-based institutions are affiliated with the University of British Columbia. Apprenticeship straddles the public-private

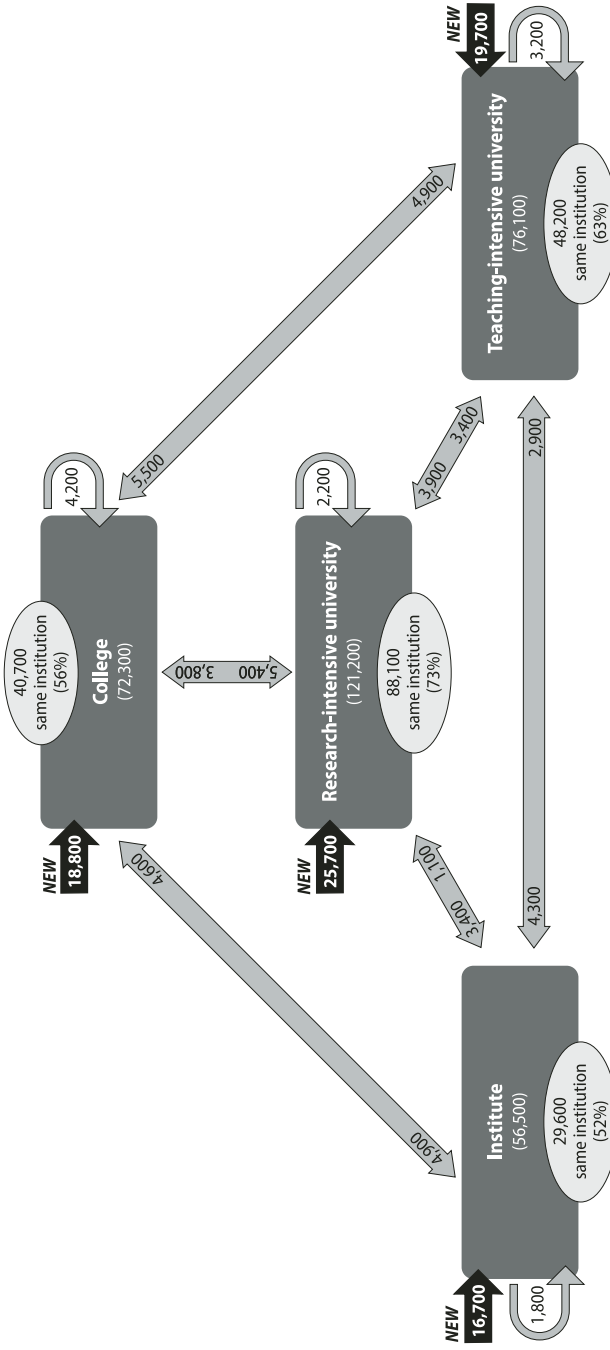
divide. A number of private English as a second language schools are designed to prepare students for further education in both public and private systems.

Systems thinking helps not only with anticipating how policy changes in one sector will affect other sectors but also in choosing among potential policies in the first place. Sometimes one policy goal must be compromised to achieve other goals; making tradeoffs and finding the appropriate balance among conflicting goals is a value-laden exercise that is an inherent part of politics and economics. The fostering of competition among institutions in recruiting students, for example, could potentially undermine the achievement of some social justice goals. A government's interventions to increase the number of apprentices in anticipation of future labour shortages might not be compatible with its other views regarding the desirability of free markets.

As well as aiding in the choice between value-laden alternatives, systems thinking helps in the technical domain. The Student Transitions Project (2015a), for example, found that numerous BC students who initially appeared to be dropouts from the point of view of a single institution subsequently graduated elsewhere in the BC system: 45 percent of individuals who completed their bachelor's degrees in 2013–14 had attended two or more institutions. Such analyses at the system level had previously led to the reconceptualization of the administration of transfer credit in the province, from one in which some institutions (colleges) were seen as senders of students to other receiving institutions (universities). The new model perceived all institutions as both senders and receivers (British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer, 2006).

Although BC legislation prevented the Student Transitions Project from collecting data about students in private institutions – a situation that is changing – its results illustrate the utility of systems thinking in post-secondary education. Figure 1 was created by the project's staff to show the magnitude of multi-directional student flows in credit courses across public sectors, including mobility within sectors (moves between institutions of the same type), across sectors (moves to a different type of institution), stopouts (students who spent time away from their studies), entrants, and leavers. The diagram is complex and the details about its

**FIGURE 1**  
**Student mobility among sectors in the BC public postsecondary system, 2012–13**



*Notes:* Mobile pathways include students moving to a new institution (↔) and returning to a previously attended institution (↔). Data includes direct mobility from the previous year (2011–12) and re-entering stopouts from earlier years.

Students may take multiple pathways between one or more institutions in a single year. The sum of pathways will therefore result in double-counting of unique students. 52,500 unique headcount students (17% of 314,000 unique academic credit course registrants) followed a mobile pathway to their institution of registration in 2012–13.

↔ 32,800 moved to a new institution; ↔ 20,600 returned to an institution they previously left.

*Source:* Adapted from a model and diagram developed by Joanne Heslop for the Student Transitions Project (2015b).

interpretation are not essential for my purposes. It suffices to note that it reveals that one in ten students switched institutions, and one in fifteen returned to his or her institution after stopping out for a year or more.

The high degree of mobility portrayed in Figure 1 is partly a reflection of the transience of students' lives, but it is also partly the result of a public system that was designed to facilitate transfer, reverse transfer, concurrent enrolment in two or more institutions, and what has generally become known as "student swirl" and a "seamless system."

Although not centrally co-ordinated or governed – potentially both a strength and a weakness – the constellation of postsecondary institutions in British Columbia does in fact partially function as a system from the viewpoint of students. I am not arguing for policy to force more system interaction but simply for policy to be developed with the recognition that there may be effects for students and institutions beyond those to which the policy directly applies.

### **Systems Approaches in the Study of Postsecondary Education**

Calls for a systems perspective in the study of Canadian postsecondary education are not new (Jones, 1997; Sheffield, Campbell, Holmes, Kymlicka, and Whitelaw, 1982), but progress has been slow. Jones (2014) is typical of the continuing scholarly focus on university and public education, with only passing reference to private institutions and vocational programming. Some studies take a partial systems approach; Diallo, Trottier, and Doray (2009), for example, present a synthetic review but focus on public education. They attend to student transitions from colleges to universities but not to other student flows within postsecondary education.

Given this, the unevenness of the literature regarding the development of the BC postsecondary system should not be surprising: some sectors in some periods have received good coverage, whereas others have garnered only a brief mention. The literature is mainly descriptive, not apt to employ theoretical lenses, and is richest with respect to beginnings – namely, the establishment of institutions or points of significant transformation. Less attention has been devoted to detecting trends and patterns in subsequent institutional and sectorial development or to interactions within and across sectors.

Some of Dennison's work (1979a, 1979b, 1992) provides a more comprehensive overview of development, but his gaze falls mainly on the BC public sectors. Fisher et al. (2014) come closest to the approach I am advocating. However, they organize their analyses of public policy changes according to governing political parties, whereas I use three policy themes that have endured across governments.

In contrast to these integrative efforts in British Columbia, and despite a robust historiography of many aspects of American postsecondary education, some standard historical works on the United States (e.g., Altbach, Gumport, and Berdahl, 2011; Cohen and Kisker, 2009; Thelin, 2011) reinforce the distinction between higher (academic) education and other forms of postsecondary education (a divide that also characterizes much of the European literature). Nevertheless, some helpful integrative analyses of current American enrolment patterns across a range of postsecondary sectors are becoming available. Pusser and Turner (2004) articulate the need for integrative approaches in noting how changing patterns of student mobility were challenging policymakers.

The National Student Clearinghouse, a non-profit organization founded in 1993 by the US higher education community, is building on the work of Adelman (1999) to map student flows among postsecondary institutions. As of 2016, it had records for 97 percent of currently enrolled students. A series of longitudinal enrolment reports is emerging that includes data about persistence and attainment across state boundaries and about student flows from high school into public, private, for-profit, international, career, and technical institutions, and even from educational institutions into the workforce.

The Clearinghouse found that in 2013–14, 46 percent of all students who completed a degree at a four-year institution had enrolled in a two-year institution at some point in the previous ten years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015, Spring). A more extensive report subsequently provided a national view of student movement in postsecondary institutions (Shapiro, Dunbar, Wakhungu, Yuan, and Harrell, 2015, July).

Historians of American postsecondary education have been slower than enrolment analysts to embrace a comprehensive systems perspective.

Part of the reason is that robust histories of individual sectors are needed before relationships among sectors can be assessed. These are not always available. Beach (2011), for example, notes that even in the extensively studied community college sector, very little historical work has been done.

Histories of vocational (career and technical) education in the United States are more apt to bridge the divide between K-12 and the post-secondary realm, tracing developments in secondary schools along with those in community colleges (e.g., O'Lawrence, 2013). In chronicling several centuries of career and technical education, H. Gordon (2014) also briefly considers tribal colleges, apprenticeship, and the impact of land grant universities.

The California Master Plan (California State Department of Education, 1960) has fostered systems thinking about relationships among sectors, albeit only among public sectors. Smelser (1993), for example, describes California as a multisegment system. Terms such as the “ecology” of higher education (Kirst and Stevens, 2015) sometimes appear in the literature. All too frequently, though, authors such as Bok (2013) mention four-year colleges, community colleges, and for-profit institutions in their opening descriptions of the American system but make little more than passing reference to them in subsequent pages that focus on universities.

In the literature from overseas, Australia, along with New Zealand, where tertiary education is defined in the same comprehensive way that I have conceptualized postsecondary education, is fertile ground for systems thinking. The elimination of the binary system of colleges and universities in favour of a Unified National System following the Dawkins Report (Dawkins and Australia, 1988) prompted Australian analysts to take a comprehensive view of the postsecondary system. Thus, for example, a recent Department of Education and Training review of post-secondary educational reviews (Australia, Department of Education and Training, 2015) was organized chronologically over a twenty-six-year period and encompassed both universities and non-university providers (offering programs of at least two years' duration) across public and private sectors. This policy analysis encompassed both academic and vocational institutions.

A decade after the Dawkins Report, Marginson (1997a) examined the historical roots of thirty years of educational policy, using citizenship

as the central motif. Although he did not assess the proportion of academic versus vocational programming or their interactions, he did stress the relationship between public and private sectors. It is not surprising that Marginson, an Australian, should have used the California Master Plan (California State Department of Education, 1960) as the touchstone for his analysis of global trends in access and social stratification in post-secondary education (Marginson, 2016a).

Tight (2009) notes that a full twenty years had passed since the previous comprehensive account of post-Second World War higher education in the United Kingdom (W. Stewart, 1989). He examines the shifting binary divide as non-university institutions of technical and further education were redesignated as universities, a profound form of interaction between postsecondary sectors. However, his focus is on academic education, and thus vocational and continuing education do not feature in his analysis.

Two developments may be creating a European audience that is looking to North America and Australia for examples of integrative analyses and systems thinking in the study of postsecondary education. The Bologna Process, intended to significantly enhance student mobility across nations, has already resulted in a number of major reforms and has seen some countries restructure their university systems more along the lines of the Anglo-American tradition (Adelman, 2008). The second development is the growth of dual-sector or comprehensive postsecondary institutions that span the divide between European notions of higher and further education, with academic and vocational functions coming to exist within universities themselves and not only across differing types of postsecondary institutions (Garrod and Macfarlane, 2009). The emergence of hybrid qualifications that blur the distinction between academic and vocational programs accentuates the integrative significance of dual institutions (Deissinger, Aff, Fuller, and Jorgensen, 2013).

### **Other Types of Synthesis**

I have also incorporated two other forms of synthesis into this study. One is to blend the knowledge developed by practitioners in the professional world with that from the scholarly literature. The other involves using differing theories concurrently to interpret the historical record.

Government officials, institutional administrators, and university scholars all view postsecondary education from different vantage points and employ different frameworks for interpreting what they see. Collectively, these multiple sets of knowledge enable fuller understandings to emerge and stimulate the rise of new interpretations.

Supplementing the scholarly literature on the history of the BC postsecondary system are eight historical reports that I completed for professional audiences (Cowin, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b). Several of these were prompted by gaps in the scholarly literature.

I drew extensively upon practitioner and participant observation methodologies in preparing these reports. The interviews I conducted while employed full-time in a BC college, for example, certainly did not correspond to the academic model taught in research methodology classes: at province-wide meetings with my postsecondary colleagues, I regularly inquired at coffee breaks and lunch as to what they knew about a particular topic, or if they could consult within their institution to determine who might know something about it. I eventually amassed a rich pool of information, but it was difficult to reference according to traditional academic conventions because it was gathered in such bits and pieces. Nevertheless, peer reviews of my draft reports and the positive reception of the final versions by those working in government and institutions attested to their rigour.

After studying in the BC system, I worked for over three decades in postsecondary positions that gave me a ringside seat to some of the events I describe here, as well as access to people who were involved in other events. I was fortunate to have held positions that required me to pay attention to what was happening across the province, and I draw heavily upon those experiences.

Most of us who lived through the evolution of the contemporary system, and who therefore have a sense of its overall gestalt, are now retired. Some are dead. The fact that the eyewitnesses are vanishing from the scene was partly responsible for my decision to write this book. I find it hard to imagine that a newcomer would have much success in piecing together a history in as comprehensive a fashion as I have offered here.

As well as synthesizing across all postsecondary sectors and combining sources from academic and professional literatures, the third way I sought



a more holistic gaze was by drawing upon more than one theoretical perspective for the analytical portions of this study. My process involved examining the various rationales adopted by policy actors to interpret the persistent background forces that have propelled developments in the BC postsecondary system over the past half century – policy rationales that resonate across the English-speaking world.



This study encompasses the entire system of postsecondary education in British Columbia, presenting a comprehensive overview of how the structure has changed since 1960. It is especially relevant to those working in the system or studying it, but its methodology can inform others. My methodological contributions lie in considering the entire system by describing all its components and exploring how they interact, integrating information drawn from professional sources with academic sources, and going beyond proximate causes to assess some enduring policy rationales (drawing upon a variety of literatures and theories to explicate the rationales).

As more nuanced understandings emerge of student mobility across institutions, more dual institutions and hybrid credentials are established, the ramifications of the Bologna Process become better understood, and notions of organizational fields (W.R. Scott, 2014) and the ecology of postsecondary education are elaborated, British Columbia offers a glimpse of what the future might hold for the study of postsecondary education. Not that the province is necessarily a model for other jurisdictions to emulate – its postsecondary system has as many quirks and weaknesses as any other – but a number of forces have converged for it to serve as a good case study.

For example, the distinctive geographical challenges of the province became a key driver in the creation of an outstanding system of university transfer from community colleges. Although the BC approach to transfer is not very transportable even to some other provinces in Canada, much less abroad, the lessons learned from the BC experience have enabled the province to provide leadership in the Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions and Transfer. In the same manner, the historical narrative and analysis that follow are intended to serve as a catalyst for related studies in other jurisdictions.

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