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**POLISH POST - SECONDARY VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS VS.
CANADIAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES: A COMPARISON OF
INFORMATION ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

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ABSTRACT

Recent reforms in Polish education, Canadian interest in cooperative education, and differences in government involvement in Polish vs. Canadian education motivate the current comparative study of Polish post-secondary vocational schools (PVSs) and Canadian community colleges (CCs). While PVSs and CCs may initially appear equivalent (e.g., both provide training in specific skill sets), important differences are manifested when the institutions are examined from the perspective of two concepts associated with information technology: *accessibility* and *accountability* of information. A comparative analysis of categories under each concept yields substantial differences between PVSs and CCs in terms of both accessibility (e.g., varied programs of study and course schedules, online application, curriculum comprehensiveness) and accountability (e.g., federal institutional accreditation, surveys of stakeholder groups, unity in program standards).

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Definitions

What are post-secondary vocational schools (szkoly policealne i pomaturalne)?

Post-secondary vocational schools (PVSs) are part of the Polish secondary school system. Thus, curricula are centrally coordinated, and there is continuity between PVSs and the Polish secondary school system. The purpose of PVSs is to prepare students for specialized skilled manual labor or specializations (e.g., nursing) requiring secondary school qualifications (Ministry of National Education 1994, p. 10). There are three types of PVSs, based on ownership: 1) public (i.e., state owned), 2) non-public (privately owned), and 3) non-public with state status (i.e., privately owned; the state status means that the school can deliver the same programs as a state institution). Admission to PVS programs requires having completed secondary school. Admission to PVS medical programs has an additional requirement, namely successful completion of the *matura* (i.e., comprehensive written exams taken at the end of secondary school) (Kucińska: 23 February 1998). PVS programs take up to three years to complete, depending on the occupational track, and all programs lead to a diploma (Ministry of National Education 1994, p. 10).

What are Canadian community colleges?

Community colleges (CCs) exist separately from Canadian secondary school systems. Curricula between secondary schools and CCs are not centrally coordinated with each other; and there is no continuity in student body between secondary schools and CCs (i.e., students enrolling in CCs did not graduate together from a particular secondary

school; some CC students may enroll immediately upon graduating from secondary school while others may enroll years later). The curricula of CCs vary widely, and their purpose is to respond to technical and vocational training needs of private and public sectors (Association of Canadian Community Colleges). There is no typology for CCs; rather, *community college* is a generic term that is characterized by a range of designations (e.g., Institute of Technology, University College, College of Applied Arts and Technology, Collège d'Enseignement Général Professionnel (CÉGEP)). Admission to CCs often requires a secondary school diploma. Traditionally, CCs offer two types of degrees (i.e., certificates and diplomas). Currently, some offer undergraduate university degrees (i.e., a two-year Associate of Arts degree and a four-year Bachelor of Arts degree). In addition, a number of CCs have university transfer programs.

Introduction

Recently in Poland, there have been extensive changes taking place in both the primary and secondary school systems (Kucinska, 2000). Traditionally, the Ministry of National Education and Sport has been responsible for education, and this has given Poland a unified treatment of education matters. However, since 1999, there has been an effort to respond to the particular needs of individual states and districts. Thus, currently there are more levels of government (i.e., state and district authorities) taking part in the administrative issues of education (Ministry of National Education, 2000, pp. 28-29, pp. 31-32) These reforms have also affected post-secondary vocational schools. Additionally, PVSs are now allowed to develop course modules so that programs can be tailored to local employment requirements. As a result of newly defined government participation and new curriculum flexibility, the traditional uniformity of Poland's education scheme has given way to new variation.

In Canada, community colleges (CCs) function “under provincial legislation and within provincial jurisdictions” (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986, p. 179). In practice, this means that some CCs are under direct provincial administration, and others are governed through boards which facilitate direct societal representation (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986, p.179). Government documents that stipulate the exact relationship between provincial governments and CCs with respect to college governance are not always clear, which sometimes leads to conflict (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986, p.180). In addition to provincial governments, the Canadian federal government is also involved in college education matters (ACCC International, 1998/1999). It has established two programs to stimulate college and university cooperation with post-secondary institutions outside of Canada (i.e., the Program for North American Mobility in Higher Education and the Canadian-European Community Program for Cooperation in Higher Education and Training). Given this interest, there is a need to compare education schemes between Canadian CCs and other post-secondary institutions outside of Canada.

It is the recent reforms in Polish education (including the ongoing changes to PVS) the Canadian interest in cooperative education, and the differences in government involvement in Polish vs. Canadian education that motivate the current study, whose aim is to compare Polish PVSs and Canadian CCs (Kucinska, 2005). Initially, it may seem that PVSs and CCs are equivalent (e.g., both provide training in specific skill sets; PVSs

do not award university degrees and neither do most CCs). However, this is not the case, and a more in-depth analysis reveals important differences. These differences become readily apparent when examined under the light of two concepts adopted from information technology, namely *accessibility* (to learning) and *accountability* (of information).

Conceptual Framework

Since the 1980s, landmark changes have occurred in information technology resulting in large amounts of knowledge becoming quickly and easily accessible (e.g., the development of CD-ROMS, the US government permitting public access to the Internet; Byron & Glagiardi, (n.d). This instantaneous access to knowledge has created a demand for new frameworks that organize the evaluation of information in terms of its *accessibility* and *accountability*. This paper evaluates Polish PVSs and Canadian CCs in terms of how the institution-student relationship manifests accessibility and accountability.

For this study, **accessibility** is operationalized and evaluated according to the following eight categories: *online admission processes, tuition fees support, varied programs of study, varied academic schedules, curriculum comprehensiveness, student diversity*. **Accountability** is described in terms of these three categories: *institutional accreditation, surveys of stakeholder groups, and unity in program standards*. In the following sections, this framework serves to organize comparative descriptions of Polish PVSs vs. Canadian CCs.

Accessibility

This section compares Polish PVSs and Canadian CCs in terms of how accessible learning and information are to students. Figure 1 presents an overview of the comparative categories, which are then discussed in more detail below.

Figure 1: Overview of Information Accessibility for Polish PVSs vs. Canadian CCs

Accessibility Categories	Polish PVSs	Canadian CCs
Online admission processes		√ (partial)
Tuition support	√ (public only)	√ (partial)
Flexible program schedules	√	√
Flexible academic schedules		√
Comprehensive curriculum		√
Admits diverse student body		√

Online admission processes. Online application procedures are currently unavailable for Polish PVS, which reduces students’ accessibility learning and information. Establishing one online application service for all parts of Poland would be comparatively easy, though, because of the country’s single, unified education scheme. In contrast, online application procedures have been introduced in Canada (at CCs in

Ontario and Alberta), making Canadian CCs slightly more accessible than Polish PVSs in this category. Ontario's application procedure permits students to apply for more than one college and program at a time. Setting up a similar facilitative service across Canada would be ideal but unrealistic to achieve because each of the 13 provinces and territories has its own scheme of education.

Tuition support. Polish public PVSs do not charge tuition fees and are thus highly accessible to students. Private PVSs, however, do charge tuition fees. With the exception of the Province of Québec¹, Canadian CCs also charge tuition fees. However, Canadian students who enroll full-time have access to government grants and loans, which is intended to make college education more accessible.

Program schedules. Both Canadian CCs and Polish PVSs offer full- and part-time programs. This indicates that educators in both countries have tried to make their programs accessible to working students who can study only part-time.

Academic schedules. In this category, Polish PVSs are less accessible than Canadian CCs because they operate only from September to June. Canadian CCs are more accessible because they deliver courses year round (all 12 months). There are two reasons why PVSs should consider increasing accessibility by offering their programs during the summer months: 1) current learners could graduate sooner, and 2) student enrollments would increase. However, if PVSs were to do this, district authorities and states would have to augment their spending on education, and this could cause other government services to suffer.

Comprehensive curriculum. Polish PVSs are more limited than Canadian CCs in the types of curricula they offer, thus limiting access to different types of knowledge. Polish PVSs are permitted to deliver only diploma-level courses (Kucińska 2001). Additionally, they can cover only a specific number of occupations, which are listed in the Classification of Occupations and Vocational Education Specialties (Kucińska 2001).

In contrast, Canadian CCs offer a widely varied range of curricula (Dennison and Gallagher 1986, pages 70-72). Two- and three-year technical, para-professional, and career programs are available at all CCs. In addition to these mainstay programs, a CC may offer one or more of the following:

- *Apprenticeship training programs*
- *Contract programs*
- *English as a Second Language (ESL) programs*
- *General academic programs* (not intended for university transfer credit)
- *Personal interest/community development programs* (e.g., Playing Bridge)
- *Pre-college/upgrading programs*
- *University transfer programs*²

¹ <http://www.quebec.ca/education>

² <http://www.ccc.edu>

- *Vocational and trades training programs*³

This degree of curriculum comprehensiveness is not duplicated in any other type of Canadian institution (secondary or post-secondary). Therefore, not only do CCs offer high accessibility to varied types of learning, they are also strong competitors in the Canadian marketplace (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986, pp. 72-73).

Student diversity. Since Polish PVSs have a more narrow range of curriculum, the student bodies might not be as diversified in terms of learner abilities in comparison to Canadian CCs. Also, there is no provision for mature students⁴ to enter Polish PVSs (as there is for Canadian CCs). Completion of secondary school is a requirement for all PVS programs. Admitting mature students would make them more competitive in the marketplace (given that higher schools and higher vocational institutions do not enroll them) and lead to more varied learner populations. If Polish PVSs were to admit mature students, they (like Canadian CCs) might be required to deliver academic upgrading programs, which would in turn add to operating costs. In the case of state PVSs, these additional costs would have to be absorbed entirely by tax payers, unless state PVSs began charging tuition fees. Private PVSs, however, might be able to offer such programs with relative ease because they already require their learners to pay for their studies.

Because of variation that exists in Canadian CC curriculum, CCs attract people of various ages, goals, interests, and abilities, which leads to enriched learning experiences (Dennison and Gallagher 1986, pages 72-73). Additionally, some institutions require that learners enrolled in different programs study together (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986, p.74).

Summary of Accessibility. In general, the analysis of accessibility indicates that PVSs do not perform as well as CCs across most of the categories considered. While Polish public PVSs seem to perform well in the categories tuition support and flexible academic schedules, there appears to be room for improvement across the other categories examined. A lack of online application procedures, limited operation schedules, and limited types and range of curricula all place restrictions on accessibility to learning and information. In addition, these constraints in turn reduce diversity in student bodies because the institutions do not appeal or support diverse student interests or needs. In comparison, CCs seem to perform better across the categories examined since they offer the delivery of courses year round and a widely varied range of curricula that attracts a diverse student body. However, CCs could improve in the area tuition support.

Accountability

This section compares Polish PVSs and Canadian CCs in terms of how the institutions go about making the information they offer to students accountable. Figure 2 presents an overview of the comparative categories, which are then discussed in more detail below.

Figure 2: Overview of Information Accountability for Polish PVSs vs. Canadian CCs

Accountability Categories	Polish PVSs	Canadian CCs
National institutional accreditation	√	
Surveys		√ (Ontario only)
Program standards		√ (Ontario only)*

* At the time of this study, only a proposal for program standards existed.

Institutional accreditation. In general, PVSs offer more accountability than CCs because they are evaluated by the Ministry of National Education and Sport every five years. This suggests that institutional accountability is important to Polish educational authorities (Ministry of National Education, 2000, p. 231). Since 1999, superintendents (kurators) have been obliged to write a report on “the quality of education” in each PVS (as well as in each primary and secondary institution) in their state (voivodship; Ministry of National Education, 2000, p.31). Preparation of the report includes visiting classes, reviewing educational documents, and interviewing teachers, parents and students (note that the opinions of graduates or employers are not solicited). The superintendent’s findings are shared with head teachers, parents and local authorities (Kucińska, 2001). Prior to 1999, less comprehensive quality reports were written after a two-week inspection. The expansion of the report process suggests that quality in education has increased in importance in Polish schools. Additionally, interviews with representatives of three PVSs which took part in a recent study conducted by one of the author’s indicate that the Ministry of National Education actually does conduct evaluations, although the nature of these evaluations is unclear (Kasolik, 1999; Masio & Sarnak, 2000; Wilusz, 2001).

It is important to note, however, that the accountability of the quality report is decreased by two issues. First, the federal accreditation reports are not necessarily carried out in the same manner across states, and thus state PVS systems can not be compared with reliability (Kucińska, 2001). Second, the reports are completed only for state PVSs and private PVSs with public institution status (Kucińska, 2001). Private institutions that do not have this designation are supervised differently, and the Ministry of Education and Sport Regulations does not clearly specify how this supervision should be carried out; therefore, each state is responsible for developing and implementing its own supervisory practices (Kucińska, 2001). One exception is the Małopolska Region in which school performance is measured against institutional objectives, and infringements on students’ rights are a concern (Kucińska, 2001).⁵

In contrast to PVSs, no national quality assurance scheme exists for CCs (Dennison, 1995, p. 236). However, two Canadian provincial governments have demonstrated an interest in college performance within their respective jurisdictions. Saskatchewan colleges have been reviewed (Dennison, 1995, 36), and the New Brunswick province government has conducted research to determine if student needs were being adequately met by college programs (Dennison, 1995, p. 64). Institutional accreditation at a national level would make CC programs more credible, and it would make them more competitive in the marketplace given that universities are not accredited. Nevertheless, a national accreditation body for colleges would be difficult to

create given that Canada is made up of 13 different educational schemes (Dennison, 1995, p. 237).

Surveys of stakeholder groups. Although no national accreditation exists for CCs, the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training annually surveys all colleges within its jurisdiction for the purpose of making them more accountable to the people they serve (Association of Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology). The survey is given to all stakeholder groups: college students, graduates and employers. A fuller understanding of college performance would result if the opinions of college partners were also considered. However, recent survey results suggest that Ontario colleges are performing well (Association of Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology):

- 91.7% of employers were satisfied with the quality of the educational preparation of college graduates
- 88.7% of recent college graduates found jobs within six months of graduation
- 81.4% of graduates were satisfied with the usefulness of their college education in achieving their goals after graduation
- 74.4% of students were satisfied with the overall quality of programming, resources and services available to them (note: 7% were dissatisfied)

Unity in program standards. In addition to annual surveys, the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training published an extensive review of Ontario colleges called “Vision 2000” (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1990). A main contribution of the review is the recommendation for system-wide college program standards. Program graduates, college personnel, employers, and professional and industry associations would take part in the development of these requirements, hence ensuring their relevance and validity (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training 1990). The establishment of such standards would also make evaluating CCs more systematic, and this would increase reliability in making comparisons across institutions.

Summary of Accountability. Overall, the accountability of educational information needs to be increased in both the PVS and CC systems. National accreditation procedures are not currently standardized across Polish states, nor are they applied to all types of PVSs. In addition, no federal accreditation scheme exists for CCs. While the implementation of a federal accreditation scheme may be unrealistic for CCs given the diversity of Canadian CC systems, accountability could be increased through the use of national surveys. Additionally, the concept of program standards proposed by Ontario should be implemented, which would make evaluation more systematic and reliable.

Concluding Remarks

A main suggestion for improving information accessibility would be for policymakers to consider broadening the function of PVSs. Specifically, the function of PVSs could be expanded from mainly providing vocational training to recent secondary school graduates to including involvement in government initiatives related to the re-

structuring of the Polish economy (e.g., job re-training schemes). This would result in PVSs becoming more visible and thus more desirable to prospective learners (Gallagher 1995, p. 259). For example, Collèges d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel (Cégeps) have played an important part in the democratization of schooling in the Province of Québec. However, private schools might be reluctant to take part in such programs because they may not be profitable, and therefore public institutions would have to deliver them. This would result in additional operating costs which district and state authorities would be forced to bear.

Educators in Poland as well as those in Canada must respond to the needs of an aging population (Dunlop, 1998). Sixty eight percent of the people in both countries are between 15 and 64 years of age, and about 13% are 65 years and over (/pl. <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ca.html> and the website: <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/facbook/geoshtml>). Public post- grammar schools might have more difficulty dealing with older learners than their Canadian counterparts because they are part of a secondary school educational scheme and colleges are not. Secondary institution systems of schooling are designed with younger people in mind. Nevertheless, post-secondary vocational institutions could favourably respond to the educational requirements of older people by admitting “mature students” into their programs.

NOTES

1. In the Province of Québec, full-time students do not pay tuition fees, whereas part-time students do. This provision impedes access to knowledge because it divides the college student population.
2. Bargains concerning credit transfer take place between colleges and universities on a provincial or bilateral basis. Also, on December 1, 1998, a website for the Ontario College University Transfer Guide was launched, which provides information about post-secondary learning opportunities available to Ontario residents.
3. These are usually short programs intended to lead directly to employment. (Graduates would be “job-ready”).
4. Mature students are individuals who have been away from school for some time and are thus unable to satisfy conventional student selection criteria (Seldenthuis, 1996, XXV).
5. The procedure used in the Małopolska region is outlined in the following publication: *Biuletyn Informacyjny Małopolskiego Kuratorium Oświaty*, 2000, pp. 11-17).

Interviews

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