

## **Differentiated Visions: How Ontario Universities See and Represent Their Futures**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is concerned with long term strategic planning in higher education and focuses on Ontario's strategic mandate agreement (SMA) sector planning framework. In 2012, the province initiated its new SMA planning process by requiring all higher education institutions to propose their own strategies for their academic visions, missions, and objectives. The proposals submitted by Ontario's universities furnish the empirical content of this paper: a historically unique, comprehensive and comparable set of documents capturing institutions' self-understanding and plans for their respective futures. Using concepts from organizational theory, content analysis of universities' SMA proposals reveals divergent strategies, both in terms of institutional administrative responsiveness to the SMA process as well as the academic (i.e., education and scholarship) content of the submissions. In addition, two further sub-themes are analysed: proposals for experiential learning and so-called town-gown connections. Both themes also reveal very different visions amongst institutions. In general, the proposals appear to be independent of institution type and community size/location. Setting the stage for future research, the paper concludes with policy discussion of: (i) the possibilities for institutional diversity in the context of policy discourses on institutional differentiation; (ii) implications for system planning given the structure and process of Ontario's ongoing SMA framework.

*Keywords:* Higher education, institutions and systems, strategic planning

### **Introduction**

In 2012, Ontario initiated its new Strategic Mandate Agreement system planning framework by requiring all higher education institutions (HEIs, including both colleges and universities) to articulate their own strategic plans. The proposals generated by the HEIs created a historically unique, comprehensive, and comparable set of documents for a large set of institutions at a single capture point. As such, the proposals constitute the empirical focus of this paper, analysed specifically for insights into institutional and system planning and policy. The SMA process holds lessons for jurisdictions considering whether and how to centralise institutional and system direction. This is particularly true where universities have tended to be only loosely governed by key external stakeholders that have limited experience guiding systems via centralised mandates and associated budget controls. In addition, universities themselves are learning how to satisfy externally imposed planning parameters, including how to elicit internal adaptations to meet commitments. Here too, the SMA exercise furnishes empirical content for conceptual and policy insights.

The following section is an overview of recent Ontario higher education policy focused on the SMA framework and process. Organizational theory (OT) is used to frame the analysis of the twenty proposed SMAs submitted by universities. Content analysis is the principal method used to analyse the proposals as described in the methodology section. The results focus on OT concepts pertaining to the two principal organizations subsystems of the university: the administrative and academic subsystems, or cores, of the university as an organization. Sub-themes are also examined, specifically universities' proposals for experiential learning (EL) and town-gown (TG) connections. The overarching interpretation emerging from the documents is one of 'different and diversified' proposals: self-proposed mandates that are distinct and richly textured on the academic front, including EL and TG. The paper concludes with discussion of policy implications and directions for further research on HEI institutional strategy and centralised system planning.

## Context and Theoretical Frame

### *Recent Policy Discourses in Ontario*

Strategic pronouncements are published by the administrations of HEIs with increasing regularity. In Ontario, strategic plans are now de rigueur in part because recent Provincial governments have required greater responsiveness from HEIs. The arrival of reform pressures to Ontario higher education is comparatively late though it bears the hallmarks of neoliberal policy developments elsewhere (Rigas, 2016), particularly of the new public management. In contrast to earlier decades when HEIs enjoyed rather more tacit agreements for funding and program delivery, the new public management is characterised by stakeholder influence, institutional responsiveness, accountability, cost recovery and return on investment (Hood, 1991). For example, in 2019, Ontario published *Postsecondary Education: Sustainability and Renewal* as a consultation document with all publicly assisted HEIs with the aim of raising financial sustainability and employee renewal in the sector. In another recent example, Ontario has also pursued performance-based funding approaches as advanced by lead exponents like the State of Tennessee (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario [HEQCO], 2014). Though brief, these examples typify reconfigurations of public service provision including centralised target-setting, cost savings, public accountability and policy borrowing.

A more sustained policy drive in Ontario, and a conceptual focus of the present empirical analysis, is the province's policy goal of institutional differentiation (Clark et al., 2009). Also, in keeping with the new public management, institutional differentiation aims to encourage, facilitate, and indeed impose system-level evolution via change within individual institutions. The rationale, in essence, is that differentiation reduces overlap in programmes and credentials among universities. This affords stakeholders the ability to fund and support the full suite of programmes and credentials at the system level while reaping the cost savings of reduced overlap at each institution (i.e., fewer programmes and reduced resource load). The California experience in particular has motivated this drive in Ontario (HEQCO, 2010; c.f., Milian et al., 2018), signalling once again policy borrowing in public service delivery.

Importantly, elements of employee renewal, performance-linked funding and institutional differentiation are bound up in what has become the centrepiece of higher education policy in Ontario: the SMA planning framework. In broad outline, HEIs were required by the province to first participate in the SMA process by proposing their own mandates in 2012 - the empirical focus of this paper. An initial pilot study of five research-intensive institutions traces these developments in detail and develops the analytical structure used here for all twenty universities in the province (Buzzelli & Allison, 2017). In the years since the 2012 proposals initiated the process, Ontario has negotiated mandates with each HEI (colleges and universities) in stages: SMA-1, 2014-17; SMA-2, 2017-20; SMA-3, 2020-25. Each wave has a particular history and draws on elements of prior discourses. For instance, SMA-3 reintroduced, in possibly the most impactful way yet (c.f., Usher, 2020), explicit performance-based funding indicators and associated resource tuning. In fact, SMA-3 was negotiated but temporarily held due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognising that performance is institution-specific as well as context-dependent, SMA-3 was released in November 2020 and implementation of performance indicators is further held until 2022-23. Further pertinent details are provided in the sections that follow and more detailed treatment of the SMA process can be found in Ontario (2020) and Buzzelli and Allison (2017).

### *Organizational Theory and the University*

Organizational theory (OT) aids in understanding how institutions may respond to such external pressures as Ontario's SMA planning framework. Universities' responses, as seen through their own 2012 visioning documents, can be framed by two defining features of HEIs in Ontario: first, a high degree of historical autonomy from external influences; second, internal organizational complexity (Eastman et al., 2018; Manning, 2018; Scott, 2015). Respectively, these defining features map onto what OT identifies as the distinct though potentially overlapping 'cores' or subsystems of the university: the administrative core, on the one hand, and the academic core on the other. The administrative core (e.g., strategies, performance, organizational alignments) and academic core (e.g., teaching and learning, discovery) are the key analytical concepts of this paper as they capture the essence of the university as an organizational type (Gumport, 2012).

Turning to institutional autonomy, much has been written about the historical independence of the Canadian public university, even if variable and evolving in scale and scope (e.g., Eastman et al., 2018). As a conglomerate enterprise, the HEI's leadership/administration (here treated as one given the externally imposed SMA exercise) is a defining core of the university; the external 'face' that engaged directly with stakeholders like the province. Accordingly, the administration is expected to respond and be accountable in such exercises as the SMA process by pursuing internal institutional adaptations. In the context of institutional differentiation, one could expect the province to insist on programme rationalisation, as discussed earlier. In Ontario as elsewhere, however, history and theory suggest persistent conservatism and isomorphism (Hearn, 1996; Milian et al., 2018; Skolnik, 2005). Indeed, rather than attempt internal reforms, OT suggests that institutions may protect the status quo by buffering against external influence (Mayer & Rowan, 1983; Zucker, 1986). Thus, OT points to a need to focus on the administrative core of the institution for the nature and extent of its response to external pressures and how, if at all, it may reform internally; all in the context of inherited university autonomy.

In addition to autonomy is the university's other defining feature: its internal complexity, a feature constituted by the university's structures and processes of the academic core, namely its *raison d'être* of education and discovery (Gumport, 2012). In contrast to the administrative core, the academic core is instead a 'collegium' characterised by devolved administration amongst academic divisions and units and, more importantly, distinct scholarly merits and rewards. The work of education and discovery is craft-based and creative. The professoriate has a high degree of independence and self-direction as supported by shared goals, trust and even formally legitimated principles such as academic freedom. These characteristics suggest 'loose' rather than 'tight coupling' (Orton & Weick, 1990) between the administrative and academic cores in which leadership's priorities may not translate into functional alignment of academic work. Observing these characteristics in the US research-intensive university, Hearn (1996) invoked the touchstone garbage can model (Cohen et al., 1973) of organizational decision-making. This model points to organizational goals that may not be shared, means of achieving goals or outcomes that are unclear and participation that is voluntary and uneven. Notably, Milian et al. (2018) echoed these points with empirical evidence indicating loose coupling to explain the Province of Ontario's stalled progress toward its goal of greater institutional differentiation.

The present research takes a similar approach to frame universities' expressions of vision, mission, and priorities in the SMA context. Section 3 begins with an analysis of universities' administrative and academic responses to the 2012 SMA proposal task, focusing on their relative emphasis and content. The analysis then builds on this foundation through two further themes that are part of the SMA framework and reflect shared policy and priorities, arguably, across the university sector in Canada and abroad: first, the nature and scope of commitment to experiential learning (EL). EL is used as an umbrella term to include a range of teaching approaches (co-ops, internships, service learning, etc.) motivated originally by Kolb (1984) who emphasised the value of connecting theory with practice through experience, reflection, and application. In Ontario, as elsewhere (Curran et al., 2018), EL has gained momentum across the sector in part because the province wishes to see students graduate with skills it regards as necessary for employment (Borwein, 2014; National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], 2014; Sattler, 2011). What is important for our purposes is that EL is substantially altering the scope and practice of the university's educative processes by: relocating, often literally, the place of learning off campus in many instances; altering the pedagogy and the practice of the professoriate, including bringing instruction into direct

contact with the community; modifying the curriculum by incorporating professional practice, and requiring this for earned credentials in some cases. Ontario universities' 2012 SMA submissions provide a comprehensive case-by-case picture of where the emergent EL pedagogy stood and what institutions planned to do with it in the years ahead.

The second theme examined through this 2012 'database' of intentions is university-community or so-called town-gown (TG) connections. Boyer's (1990) watershed scholarship of engagement shored up a history of calls for community-engaged scholarship and signalled the rise of town-gown connections as a theme in its own right. TG literature has a number of academic and community foci (Gavazzi, 2015), including: community-engaged scholarship (research, applied knowledge exchange/mobilisation) in aid of local issues; institutional contributions to addressing societal challenges (Ramaley, 2014); non-academic community concerns such as the 'studentification' of local housing markets (Kemp, 2013); and of course, in EL arrangements with partners beyond campus gates. As with EL, capturing universities' TG plans is important to identify where they stood in their commitment to changing definitions of university relevance and impact, particularly as these may be imposed by a key external stakeholder through system-level planning.

### Research Methodology

The principal methodological approach in this paper is a keyword in context (KWIC) analysis of the twenty SMA proposals submitted to the province by each university (note affiliated institutions and university colleges are aggregated into the 'parent' institution, as per the SMA exercise). KWIC utilises a combination of quantitative and qualitative textual analysis by capturing the frequency of key words used in texts and documenting and analysing the context of their use (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). The methodology has a high level of accuracy (Jones-Diette et al., 2019), and is especially useful for comparing the contents across documents (Hermann et al., 2020), which is, in part, the goal of our analysis. For example, a search for the word 'teaching' across all SMA documents permits exploration of the frequency with which teaching was discussed in each document. Close reading and interpretation of moments when teaching is documented and discussed then permits interpretations of this aspect of the university's mission.

The analysis began by 'cleaning' the documents of images and other ancillary materials. This required little change in some cases but substantially more in others. Some universities submitted brochure-like proposals (e.g., prominent visuals and testimonials appended); others text-only submissions as the stakeholder would have expected. Of the twenty SMAs analysed, they averaged 5,901 words but with notable variability. Some surely exceeded the stated 8-page limit of the exercise while others opted for little text in lieu of visuals, for example. After cleaning, the documents were formatted and imported into NVivo text analysis software for analysis.

Examination of the documents focused on word frequency and usage context both within individual SMA proposals and across the full set for comparison. The focus is the most frequently used terms across all the documents, which makes it possible to compare different SMAs. Table 1 summarises the 418 most frequently occurring words; the terms used to code the language of the proposals according to the theoretical constructs discussed. This number is constituted by first removing high-frequency words that are irrelevant or non-pertinent. Proceeding conservatively, numbers, pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, and articles were removed. Doing so derived a 'base 200' of the most commonly used terms across all documents. Given the number of documents used (i.e., 20), a further 218 terms were added to this base 200. This was arrived at by drawing the 100 most commonly used terms in each individual document. Repeats across individual documents were counted/included only once. This included truncation of words such that all instances are captured for analysis but counted once only. For example, 'University' was truncated to "Universit\*" to capture all singular, plural and possessive instances. This latter step ensures that each SMA (i.e., each university) is not underrepresented by use only of the 'base 200' terms and that all institutions are represented in the final analysis. The aim of the KWIC analysis is to quantitatively code the most commonly appearing words in order to: first, capture the level of attention given by universities to specific themes and topics in their respective SMAs; second, to qualitatively identify and interpret the sub-themes of interest. Accordingly, coding was guided by earlier discussion of OT as well as EL and TG. Thus, coding followed these categories:

1. Terms referring to the **academic core**, focusing on the teaching, learning and discovery mis-

- sions of the university. Coded into this category are any words pertaining to curriculum, pedagogy, programmes, credentials, students, and faculty.
2. Terms referring to **administration** (incorporating our focus on coupling). Coded here are words relating to strategies, goals, objectives, performance, and related terminology such as scorecard, reporting and evaluation.
  3. Terms related to **EL** such as work-integrated learning (WIL), internships and co-ops and community service learning (CSL), among others.
  4. Terms related to **university-community connections** such as place names, community relations, town-gown partnerships, and terms relating to connections or associations such as partnership.
  5. Other terms not otherwise coded – terms not coded into the above categories as well as grammatical articles, conjunctions, and adverbs not otherwise coded or already cleaned, and other items such as dates and numbers.

**Table 1**

*Words Used for Conceptual Coding of University Strategic Mandate Proposals*

| Concept/Theme   | Search/Coded Words   |
|---|--|
| 1, Administrative Core (both leadership and administration) | access, address, administrative, agenda, agreement*, align*, Approach*, approval*, arrangements, balanced, baseline, build*, Campus*, capacit*, capital, change, charter, Commit*, contain, Cost*, deliver*, Demand*, Develop*, different*, distinctive, document, drive, Effective*, efficien*, effort*, Enable*, Enhance*, enrolment*, Establish*, expan*, finan*, flexible, Focus*, framework, Fund*, goal, growth, Improve*, increas*, incremental, information, Initiative*, integrated, Invest*, key, Lead*, legal*, maintain, Mandate*, measure, meet, million, Mission*, mobilization, Model*, new, Objective*, operating, Opportuni*, Organization*, pilot, Plan*, polic*, postsecondary, President*, Process*, productiv*, Propose*, Provide*, quality, rate, redesign*, Require*, Resource*, risk, saving*, scorecard, Sector*, statement*, strateg*, Strength*, submission, survey*, System*, Tool*, Transfer*, transformation, tuition, unique, Vision* |
| 2, Academic Core (teaching and discovery)                   | ability, Academic*, achieve, advanced, applied, architectur*, art*, assessment*, Average*, bachelor*, best, better, bilingual*, biomedical, blended, Business*, certificate*, chair*, choice, class, Collabora*, comprehensive, computer*, core, Course*, courseware, creat*, Credential*, credit, critical, cross, Culture*, curriculum, Degree*, Design*, digital, diploma*, disciplines, discovery, doctoral, Econom*, Educat*, Engineer*, Environment*, Excellen*, expertise, exploration, Facult*, field*, french, Graduate*, Health*, idea*, imagin*, Impact*, Innovate*, Institu*, instruction*, Interdisciplinar*, knowledge, law, Learn*, level*, liberal, librar*, literacy, management, master, media, multi, nursing, online, Outcome*, Pathway*, pedago*, phd, program*, Research*, School*, schulich, Science*, stream, Student*, studies, studio*, study, Success*, Sustainab*, Teach*, Technolog*, thesis, transdisciplin*, Undergraduate*           |
| 3, Experiential Learning                                    | Career*, employer*, Entrepreneur*, Experience*, experiential, immers*, internship*, practice, Professional*, Skill*, Train*, Work*   |

| Concept/Theme                | Search/Coded Words   |
|------------------------------|--|
| 4, Town-Gown Connections     | algoma, algonquin, anishinaabe*, area, barrie, bay, border, brantford, brock, Canad*, carleton, cit*, St. clair, College*, Communit*, compan*, consortium, county, destination*, dmz, domestic, dominican, downtown, durham, eastern, Engage*, essex, fleming, francophone, global, Government*, guelph, home, humber, indigenous, Industry*, international, joint, kingston, labour, lakehead, lands, laurentian, laurier, Local*, london, market, mars, mcmaster, milton, mining, minister, Ministr*, muskoka, national, niagara, nipissing, northern, northwestern, ocad, Ontario, oshawa, ottawa, Partner*, peterborough, place, Provinc*, public, queen*, Region*, relation*, rural, ryerson, sault, seneca, simcoe, Societ*, ste, sudbury, thomas, thunder, together, toronto, trent, university*, uoit, uottawa, urban, uwindsor, uwo, village, waterloo, western, wilfrid, windsor, world, york, Zone*   |
| 5, Terms Not Otherwise Coded | aboriginal*, act*, Activit*, additional, advantage*, aging, allow, already, alumni, appropriate, approximately, around, associated, based, benefit*, block, broader, care, century, Challenge*, communication, Complet*, complex, confederation, considerable, continue, contribute, current*, cusp, directly, diverse, endowment, energy, Ensur*, especially, example, existing, face, facilities, fall, first, forward, foundations, full*, future, garage, generation, greater, help, high*, hospital, important, include*, infrastructure, intensive, issues, language*, large, least, life, links, lives, make, many, mobil*, multiple, Need*, next, number, Offer*, one, open, order, part, people, percent, physical, potential, principle, Priori*, Priva*, Project*, pse, Range*, recent, related, relevant, Role*, secondary, see, serve, Service*, set, significant, Small*, social, Space*, staff, strong, summer*, Support*, table, take, term, three, time*, today, total, traditional, two, use, velocity, water, ways, well, wide, within, without, year |

*Note.* Words captured and coded as they appeared in the original documents, except where truncated. Coding is not case sensitive.

### Different and Differentiated Strategies

The quantitative aspects of the analysis are presented in Table 2 showing the frequency with which key terms appear within the four conceptual categories described in the methods. The percentages on the other hand represent the occurrence of words in the four categories relative to all other words within each institution’s SMA. It should be noted that Hearst University is not included here mainly because of its highly focused academic scope. Roughly thirty full-time academic staff deliver French-only programmes, almost entirely in business and psychology. Important in its own right, Hearst is nonetheless an outlier but one whose presence would return many null values and skew the resulting picture. Recalling that all coding terms were built out of the SMAs themselves (Table 1), as described above - - including steps to ensure each is represented - - the set of terms is constant for all and thereby allows comparison within and across institutions.

In addition to vision, mission and objectives, Ontario’s HEIs were required to submit SMA proposals that also articulated means for achieving stated objectives, identification of institutional comparative advantage and performance metrics (Ontario, 2013). The exercise would appear to have been relatively constrained and yet significant departures from the parameters are an early and telling signal of institutions’ autonomy and independence, whether by intent or inherited autonomy. Starting with the academic core of education and discovery, the system-level differences are relatively small, ranging from Brock’s 13.7% to Nipissing’s 21.6% of coded language in the proposals. There is rather more diversity of emphasis between universities in the proposals’ administrative content; approaching an order of magnitude from 7.9% at Nipissing University to 13.5% at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Keeping with these two constructs, we also assessed the relative presence of the administrative and academic cores in each institution’s proposal and the sector as a whole. Figure 1 aids in doing so by sort-

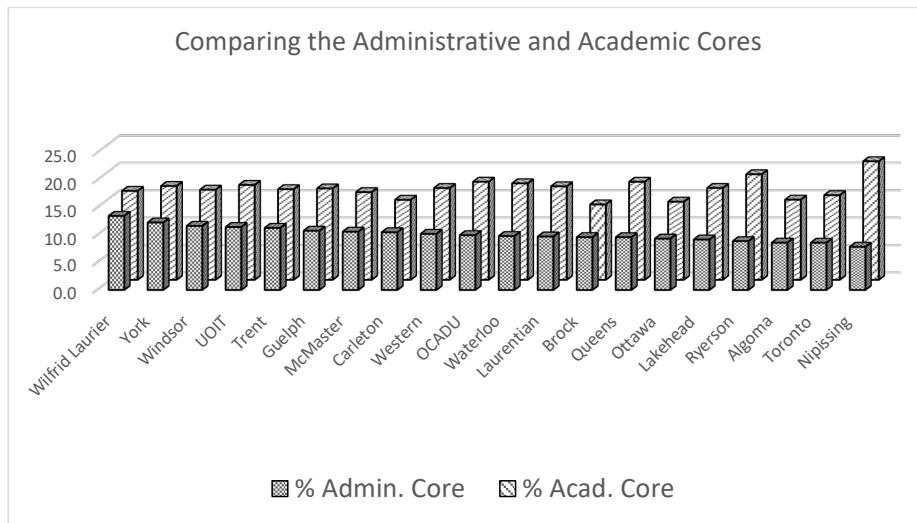
ing the institutions from greatest to least administrative coding. While a clear inverse relationship with the academic core does not exist, the academic mission is substantially more pronounced across half the sector. The reader may have noticed Nipissing's disparity between education and scholarship on the one hand and administration on the other. Others approached Nipissing's distinction in this respect: Ryerson, (research-intensive comprehensive university), Queen's (research intensive with medical education and research), OCADU (comprehensive with an arts and design focus), Waterloo (research intensive 'MIT-north') Lakehead (primarily undergraduate, serving Ontario's north) and Laurentian (primarily undergraduate, serving mid-northern Ontario) all exhibited similarly high disparities between the relative expression of administrative responsiveness to the SMA exercise and discussion of their academic cores. The annotations for each institution above add a further dimension: that the imbalance in favour the academic core occurs among very different institutions. The academic mission is not only prevalent but also appears to be independent of institution type, whether primarily undergraduate or research-intensive, for example.

**Table 2**  
*Conceptual Coding of Proposed Strategic Mandates, By Institution*

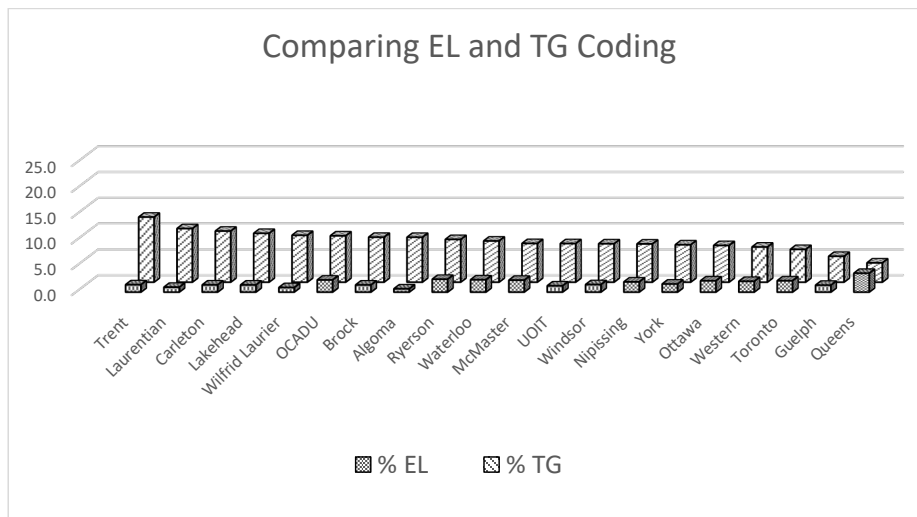
| University      | Administrative Core |      | Academic Core |      | Experiential Learning |     | Town-Gown Connections |      |
|-----------------|---------------------|------|---------------|------|-----------------------|-----|-----------------------|------|
|                 | Count               | %    | Count         | %    | Count                 | %   | Count                 | %    |
| Algoma          | 308                 | 8.6  | 498           | 14.6 | 26                    | 0.7 | 325                   | 8.7  |
| Brock           | 913                 | 9.6  | 1335          | 13.7 | 120                   | 1.4 | 919                   | 8.7  |
| Carleton        | 606                 | 10.5 | 866           | 14.6 | 73                    | 1.4 | 586                   | 9.9  |
| Guelph          | 428                 | 10.8 | 642           | 16.6 | 49                    | 1.4 | 207                   | 5.0  |
| Lakehead        | 476                 | 9.2  | 837           | 16.7 | 62                    | 1.4 | 471                   | 9.5  |
| Laurentian      | 482                 | 9.7  | 820           | 17.0 | 48                    | 1.0 | 490                   | 10.4 |
| McMaster        | 422                 | 10.6 | 608           | 16.0 | 77                    | 2.3 | 282                   | 7.5  |
| Nipissing       | 426                 | 7.9  | 1151          | 21.6 | 94                    | 2.0 | 374                   | 7.4  |
| OCADU           | 520                 | 10.0 | 915           | 17.9 | 101                   | 2.4 | 481                   | 9.0  |
| Ottawa          | 227                 | 9.3  | 361           | 14.2 | 47                    | 2.2 | 185                   | 7.1  |
| Queens          | 515                 | 9.6  | 925           | 17.8 | 153                   | 3.7 | 222                   | 3.8  |
| Ryerson         | 860                 | 8.9  | 1902          | 19.2 | 187                   | 2.5 | 858                   | 8.3  |
| Toronto         | 389                 | 8.6  | 707           | 15.4 | 77                    | 2.2 | 278                   | 6.4  |
| Trent           | 475                 | 11.3 | 651           | 16.5 | 54                    | 1.5 | 538                   | 12.6 |
| UOIT            | 334                 | 11.5 | 505           | 17.3 | 32                    | 1.2 | 269                   | 7.5  |
| Waterloo        | 378                 | 9.8  | 613           | 17.6 | 66                    | 2.4 | 283                   | 8.0  |
| Western         | 621                 | 10.2 | 1069          | 16.7 | 118                   | 2.1 | 466                   | 6.8  |
| Wilfrid Laurier | 530                 | 13.5 | 658           | 16.2 | 30                    | 0.9 | 357                   | 9.1  |

| University     | Administrative Core |             | Academic Core |             | Experiential Learning |            | Town-Gown Connections |            |
|----------------|---------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------|
|                | Count               | %           | Count         | %           | Count                 | %          | Count                 | %          |
| York           | 536                 | 12.3        | 739           | 17.1        | 51                    | 1.6        | 332                   | 7.3        |
| <b>Average</b> | <b>508</b>          | <b>10.2</b> | <b>841</b>    | <b>16.7</b> | <b>77</b>             | <b>1.7</b> | <b>420</b>            | <b>8.0</b> |

**Figure 1**  
*Visualising Coded Themes in Ontario Universities' SMA Proposals, 2012*  
*Comparing Administrative and Academic Cores*



**Figure 2**  
*Visualising Coded Themes in Ontario Universities' SMA Proposals, 2012*  
*Comparing EL and TG Coding*





Underscoring this point and providing perhaps the most fruitful comparison with Nipissing is Ryerson University. Their contrast could hardly be greater: the former a small, primarily undergraduate university located in North Bay and serving local and mid-northern Ontario students; the latter located in Toronto's urban core, originally a polytechnic institute granted university status in 1993 with a research-intensive profile, a substantial graduate enrolment and global reach. Both prioritise teaching and discovery but do so very differently. Nipissing's 8-page proposal (including images) states its three priorities as: (i) academic programming (i.e., teaching), including emphasis on serving northern, first-generation, and Indigenous learners and those from smaller urban centres; (ii) flexible and accessible pathways to credential completion; (iii) a community focus, including via experiential learning. By contrast, Ryerson's 31-page submission (including substantive covering letter and appendices) prioritises: (i) economic innovation involving student and faculty entrepreneurialism; (ii) educational innovation to prepare students for the creative economy; (iii) community-institutional innovation, aimed at neighbourhood- and city-building. A common thread to these two institutions is their stated commitment to more online teaching: a focus in fact required by the SMA exercise. Close reading of their priorities nevertheless underlines the vast differences in their student populations, geographies, and institutional profiles.

By contrast, Brock, Carleton, Wilfrid Laurier, and York are among those exhibiting greater parity between the administrative and academic cores. As a group, these institutions are more similar with a clear undergraduate teaching mandate as well as a graduate and research profile: what Maclean's magazine (an established Canadian periodical with ample higher education reportage) would term 'comprehensive' institutions. But sisterhood in his classification is not *a priori* reason to expect balance or uniformity. For example, specific initiatives are both proposed departures for each institution as well as signals of differences between them, such as: Brock's proposal for five new transdisciplinary institutes and partnerships; Carleton's 'Capital Advantage' (i.e., located in Ottawa, the nation's capital city) and new global academic and summer institutes for international students; Wilfrid Laurier's multi-campus presence for research, teaching and partnerships; York's priorities of becoming more comprehensive (rather than specialised or focused, as implied by the others), pursuit of degree learning outcomes and knowledge mobilisation. Together with distinct and contrasting academic plans, all of this belies uniformity and points instead to quite substantially different institutional visions of teaching and discovery.

This takes us to the two sub-themes identified earlier: EL and TG connections. Each is coded as shown in Table 1 and allows, as above, a comparison across institutions. Table 2 documents marked differences in the presence of language associated with EL pedagogical approaches. Examining the range of content, Algoma, Laurentian and Wilfrid Laurier discuss EL less (<1% of text) than most. At the other extreme, several institutions allotted greater than two percent of their proposals to EL alone. Queen's led all others at 3.7%. As a comparison, whereas Algoma's EL proposals can be described as secondary or nested within its stated priorities, Queen's proposes EL as a priority objective unto itself. This emphasis by Queen's reflects existing EL offerings via community service learning and other modes in Engineering and Arts and Science, for example, as well as planned EL expansion both on- and off-campus including via co-curricular credentialing. OCADU, Ryerson, Waterloo and Western similarly weave EL into their proposals. Whereas some (e.g., Western) put forth plans for EL, others, notably Waterloo (regarded as a long-standing EL leader), reflected existing EL arrangements. This general profile matches most of the other proposals, such as Trent and Windsor, where EL is discussed within other priorities and initiatives that hold primacy in their overall strategies. In contrast, McMaster, Ottawa and Toronto foreground EL as a distinct priority or initiative; all premised on plans for development going forward. Like Queen's, the latter three are distinct because their leaders gave EL primacy in their plans. For example, McMaster proposes the Experiential Learning Centre as a pilot teaching hub through which curriculum would be adapted in order to make this modality more accessible across campus. Widening the lens, a pattern gleaned from examining the proposals as a whole is the considerable text committed to EL. Nearly all institutions discussed EL in their future plans. The SMA's self-study exercise would appear to have generated serious thought about change to the pedagogy and curriculum of the teaching mission at the Ontario university, albeit in differentiated ways.

Turning to TG connections, Table 2 captures about the same disparity between the least (Queen's, 3.6%) and most (Trent, 12.6%) EL-coded proposals, though with clearly much more space devoted to this theme. Queen's discusses community connections in support of its primary priorities, especially devel-

opment of entrepreneurial and experiential learning. Trent, by contrast, dedicates its second institutional priority to a proposed ‘Community Catalyst’ initiative for increased and shared prosperity ‘in our local communities’. Given the TG theme, the contrast between Queen’s and Trent is notable also because both reside in small urban regions (<150,000 in 2016). Indeed, when it comes to the proportion of TG coding by institution, there appears to be no consistent city-size grouping. For example, Guelph (5.0%) and Windsor (7.5%) show middling coding for TG and are also located in smaller urban centres. Despite residing in large urban centres, Carleton (9.9%; in Ottawa), McMaster (7.5%; Hamilton), Toronto (6.4) and Western (6.8%, London) also show no clear pattern or distinction of greater or lesser TG coding. Similarly, there appears to be little clustering of TG connections by institutional ‘type’. Examples of primarily undergraduate (Algoma, 8.7%), comprehensive (York, 7.3%) and medical-doctoral/research intensive (Waterloo, 8.0%) universities do not appear to push discussion of TG connections systematically one way or the other.

Perhaps we find a more consistent picture in examining TG together with EL since these themes share a degree of mutual interdependence. Figure 2 shows a mix of institutions between the Queen’s and Trent end points, including McMaster, Nipissing, OCADU, Ottawa, Ryerson, Toronto, Waterloo and Western. Each has unique features as suggested by the coding terms for TG in Table 1 and yet, as a group, they constitute a mixed system-wide relationship with TG. Still, close reading of each proposal is necessary to ensure TG is captured as intended. Consider Algoma: its moderately high 8.7% TG coding belies its trailing EL coding noted earlier. The reason is clear in the text: its TG connections are much less community-based than one would expect in ‘town’ arrangements. Instead, its off-campus connections are academic rather than community-based, such as a new MSc. (Environmental Science) with cross-border Lake Superior State University in Michigan, USA, and curriculum articulation with off-site feeder programmes and other colleges. In general, as with EL, Ontario’s universities responded with a variety of TG elements in their SMA proposals that can be summarised as present but different. Virtually all proposals made significant mention of the theme but envisioned TG connections in different and unique ways independent of their host community’s size, institution type and indeed their EL plans with which one could expect a degree of interrelatedness.

## Conclusions and Discussion

The 2012 SMA proposals are historically unique, comprehensive, and comparable documents that permit analysis of where universities stood at a particular point in time and what they envisioned for their futures. Generated within the parameters of the province’s then-new SMA system planning exercise, OT suggests that institutions’ responses would be conditioned by their inherited autonomy and internal organizational complexity. Examination of the administration-related evidence revealed scales and qualities of responses that differed in important ways. Fundamentally, the collection of strategic plans indicates that universities in Ontario were prepared to behave quite differently. The same was found for teaching and discovery. In relation to the latter, the analysis also examined the themes of EL and TG. Here too, institutions put forth divergent plans.

Having produced such differentiated proposals, one asks how and why this varied picture emerged, particularly given the sector’s conservatism and isomorphism noted by earlier scholars (Milian et al., 2018; Skolnik, 2005). There are several possibilities. Perhaps autonomy is culturally ingrained and transcends central planning. Alternatively, though possibly in concert with autonomy (Mayer & Rowan, 1983; Zucker, 1986), the university’s internal complexity sows difference and external independence (Carroll & Hatakenaka, 2001). It is worth remembering that the analysis is an examination of self-generated proposals. The empirical opportunity to interrogate them together, arguably, reveals difference occasioned by the exercise’s shared capture point. A further explanation may lie simply in historical contingency: that, notwithstanding what binds institutions to a sector (Gumport, 2012), each university nonetheless has its own history from which its particular vision, mission and objectives spring.

Together, the differentiated 2012 SMA proposals and the explanations of how they have come to pass, lead us back to policy. A fundamental consideration is the basic tension that system planning must always confront: the balance between centralised authority and institutional autonomy (Lane & Johnstone, 2013). As outlined earlier, Ontario’s SMA framework is still relatively new. We may ask, for example, whether performance-based funding in SMA-3 signals a need for university administrations to impose internal reforms more directly. From the analysis presented, the University of Ottawa is an

interesting case. Ottawa proposed administrative functions that included expertise of the academic core to monitor progress on proposed strategies. This is a case history worth following as others scarcely approached this level and kind of within-institution coupling. Contrast this with the University of Toronto. Evident from its proposed SMA, Toronto used its size and research-based primacy to in fact critique the SMA framework and attempt to exert some control over the parameters of the exercise to protect its lead standing. At points, the proposal reached beyond administrative buffering of its academic core to recalcitrant boldness. Jurisdictions contemplating a similar path should see caution in these contrasting examples. ‘Systemness’ may be conceptually simple and appealing but, in practical terms, its implementation may be characterised more by compromise than conformity.

A related policy issue is system management complexity and the realistic need for bespoke, institution-by-institution arrangements. Consider the examples of Algoma and Nipissing. As shown earlier, their SMA proposals read rather more like ‘institutions’ than mere organizations (Bouma, 1998; Rochet et al., 2008; Zucker, 1986). Though very different than the University of Toronto, their proposals were no less committed to their respective academic cores. They eschew system norms and imitation and instead demonstrate generative leadership. System planners should be sensitive to the potential loss of firebrands for the sake of conformity with system-wide metrics. If not, they will nonetheless face practical challenges. Ontario’s SMA framework continues to grow out of a history of non-federated affiliation. Though not a monolith, to be sure, the US state system is an important contrast (Lane & Johnstone, 2013). In Ontario, universities have had rather more freedom for such initiatives as branch campus developments and joint venture programmes (e.g., medical education). These examples alone are specialised, structural features of the sector that suggest a need beyond flexibility; that federation may have to build in special dispensation and exemptions.

Hanging in the balance of the foregoing discussion is Ontario’s expressed interest in institutional differentiation (Clark et al., 2009; HEQCO, 2010). As discussed earlier, Ontario’s desire for different and complementary institutions informed the development of the SMA framework. Divergent SMA proposals may satisfy the stakeholder’s desired differentiation, but it may have come by institutional history, autonomy and complexity; traits fitting uneasily into system planning or indeed at odds with centralisation. Unless system complexity is embraced *prima facie*, including bespoke agreements and freedom to innovate outside of metrics and budget enforcement, one wonders whether the imposition of systemness will raise isomorphism and perversely diminish differentiation. As these dynamics unfold, jurisdictions will watch with interest to understand how a federated approach like Ontario’s may be adopted, adapted, or avoided altogether.

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