

STUDENTS, UNIVERSITIES, AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

BACKGROUND

This paper discusses decision-making dynamics and roles that emerge when post-secondary institutions partner with the private sector to pursue common goals and projects. In particular, it refers to three types of public-private partnership (PPP) that occur commonly in the PSE sector: research projects with the private sector, academic programs linked to private sector groups, and the use of private entities to provide teaching, research, or administrative services normally handled by institutions.

PPPs can serve several major functions. They can pursue the development of new technologies that can be commercialized and brought to market. They can allow private companies to obtain expertise and assistance from university experts and experts-in-training. They can lay the groundwork for new entrepreneurial activity while training needed skills, and they can otherwise serve a wide range of purposes.

Consistent with the types and purposes described above, PPPs in Ontario are often arranged in one of three ways: Technology Transfer Offices which facilitate technology commercialization and innovation, Public Research Institutes that are founded or operated jointly between the sectors, and Idea Accelerators that offer resources and technical expertise to aspiring entrepreneurs.

PRINCIPLES

Recognizing the value and potential of PPPs, OUSA believes that certain core principles must be respected when establishing or operating within such an arrangement:

- 1) Private entities must never be allowed to limit the freedom of the academic to explore, express, publish or teach new ideas and research. Universities, instructors, and students must be able to freely pursue knowledge and fulfill their responsibilities.
- 2) As much as possible, collaborative partnerships should create opportunities for students. PPPs should provide excellent learning and networking opportunities in addition to common goals such as the research mission of the university and the generation of marketable technologies.
- 3) Where knowledge or resources generated by the university have the ability to directly benefit the broader province, infrastructure should exist to facilitate the

process. The government should invest in pathways to allow the fruits of PPPs to be applied across the province.

4) The Government must remain the primary financier of public post-secondary education and public research in Ontario. Otherwise a risk emerges that universities could become effectively privatized and unable to set priorities independent of corporate interests.

5) If students are involved in a public-private partnership or entrepreneurial venture, universities must ensure transparency and fairness of students' intellectual property rights within the agreement. Ideally this would be set out clearly in any partnership contracts between universities and external partners.

6) Each individual institution shall have the authority and responsibility to define academic freedom within their institution, in consultation with students. Universities have diverse needs and objectives; academic freedom must be defined according to these unique perspectives at the ground level.

7) A knowledge economy, fuelled by university research, will pay significant dividends to students.

With respect to these principles, OUSA identifies concerns in three areas of interest: private involvement in programming, entrepreneurship, and research and innovation.

CONCERNS

Private Involvement in Programming

Lack of clarity in PPP agreements has led to concern over academic freedom in privately funded academic programs. While it is beneficial for private sector actors to invest in academic endeavours, such groups often have narrow interests and financial objectives. It has been the case in the past that external partner organizations have tried to influence academic freedom and alter the direction of universities towards the fulfillment of their own goals.

Entrepreneurship and Student Involvement in the Private Sector

There is an insufficient supply of work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities to meet rising student demand. Students, employers, and government officials have all

recognized the tremendous value of work-integrated learning for meeting workforce needs and improving employment prospects for students. However, opportunities for valuable co-op placements and WIL experiences are too few to meet current demand.

Many Ontario business incubation initiatives are focused solely on faculty, missing a valuable opportunity for student involvement and entrepreneurship. Some schools have limited support for student entrepreneurs, but few grant students access to fully-fledged incubators. The programming and infrastructure that exists across Ontario universities is insufficient to fulfill the government's desire for increased student entrepreneurship.

Not enough students have the opportunity to explore entrepreneurialism within their field of study. Existing support for student entrepreneurship is not well integrated into academic programs even when the field would seem ideal for it. Too few academic pathways embrace entrepreneurship as part of their core programming, and instead universities rely on students to opt-in through other means. The result is that students who are focused on their studies are insufficiently exposed to entrepreneurship.

Research and Innovation

Canada has stagnating productivity and innovation rankings within the OECD. Canada's productivity growth was less than half of that of its peers from 2000 to 2009. Research has shown a considerable link between innovation and productivity growth, however, the post-secondary sector is not sufficiently funded to exploit this relationship to the fullest by advancing research innovation as far as possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the areas of concern above, OUSA recommends that the following steps and policies be implemented in order to safeguard academic freedom, better foster student entrepreneurship, and spur valuable research and innovation activity.

Ensure academic freedom remains uncompromised by partnership and funding arrangements

- Recommendation One: Ontario universities should renew or create additions to their donation policies to ensure that they properly ensure the protection of academic freedom in the establishment of new programs.
- Recommendation Two: Governance documents, financial agreements and all foundational documents leading to the creation of an academic public-private partnership must be made public to all actors in a university.

Actively foster student entrepreneurship through expanded supports and greater integration with academic programming

- Recommendation Three: Ontario's universities should strive to introduce more students to entrepreneurship through active promotional campaigns.
- Recommendation Four: The provincial government should create new incentives for universities to explore entrepreneurial activities.
- Recommendation Five: The provincial government should create new support-based initiatives for student entrepreneurs.

Prioritize research and innovation in post-secondary institutions, and spur activity in this area with the involvement of government, universities, and private sector actors

- Recommendation Six: The provincial government must leverage and promote the post-secondary education sector as a key player in enhancing Canada's innovation potential.
- Recommendation Seven: The provincial government must work with local and federal partners to create policy incentives to enhance the creation and growth of regional knowledge clusters and innovation systems.