

PRIVATE PATHWAY PROGRAMS/COLLEGES: WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US?

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First they outsourced the university cafeteria, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a cafeteria worker. Then they privatized the University bookstore, and I didn't speak up because I didn't work in the bookstore. Then they outsourced university libraries cataloging, but I didn't speak up because I was not a librarian. Now they are coming for the Intensive English Program. (Winkle, 2014, p. 3).

Pathway programs – a program that recruits international students who would not otherwise be eligible for entry to a foreign university, and then prepares them for entry (matriculation) to the university

Pathway colleges -an institution or segment of larger institution (e.g. College) that recruits international students who would not otherwise be eligible for entry to a foreign university, and then prepares them for entry to the larger higher education institution

Private/for profit pathway programs/providers: Bridge Pathways, Cambridge Education Group, Culture Works, INTO University Partnerships, Kaplan Global Pathways, Kings Education, Navitas (formerly IBT and now owned by BGH Capital), Shorelight Education, and Study Group International.

For profit pathway providers are a part of a group of educational multinationals that either establish or take-over existing education programs/providers or establish new programs/colleges themselves, which are integrated into their network of global education services. Due to their size, they are able to offer economies of scale and market intelligence for student recruitment, curriculum development, assessment, teaching and management often at competitive costs. (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015)

Curricular models

- a) EAP (English for Academic Purposes) program - assists students to upgrade their academic language skills (WELC at Western; Culture Works). This is a pathway program. They are also known as intensive English programs (IEP).
- a) Language classes + academic support program (Navitas offers an academic program with built-in language supports rather than only separate language classes.)

Ownership models

- a) Pathway programs/colleges owned by their parent institutions (e.g. WELC at Western; Vantage College at UBC); the majority (almost 70%) of pathway programs/colleges in Canada are owned by their parent higher education institution
- b) Private, for-profit programs/colleges that engage in formal partnership agreements with public universities (e.g. Culture Works; Navitas)

Longer history of these for-profit educational providers offering these programs or colleges in the UK and Australia, and more recently (over the last 15 years) in the U.S. and Canada. Two examples of Navitas in Canada:

- I. Simon Fraser University (SFU) entered an agreement with Navitas in 2006 and established the Fraser International College (FIC)
- II. The University of Manitoba (UM) entered an agreement with Navitas in 2007 and established the International College of Manitoba (ICM)

Navitas (www.navitas.com)

“Navitas remains focused on delivering quality student outcomes and strong shareholder returns.” (Navitas, 2018).

Navitas University Preparation and Pathways Programs is one of the world’s largest global education service providers. It is headquartered in Australia. As a for-profit enterprise, Navitas is responsible to its shareholders. In its fiscal year 2018 report the Navitas group stated that their University partnership division grew enrollments by 6% ahead of their 2020 target of 5%. In 2018, its after-tax profit 2018 was \$19.5 million (Canadian). Its parent company, a private equity firm, Navitas Ltd was bought out by the consortium BGH Capital in July 2019 for \$3.2 billion (Canadian). (Navitas Limited, 2018; Union, 2010)

Before the takeover by BGH Capital, Navitas had 2 major divisions (having scaled down from 4 previous divisions), offering educational services to students and professionals including university programs, creative media education, professional education, English language training and settlement services.

After the corporate take-over, BGH wanted Navitas to focus on the university partnership business of the company, as this was the most lucrative division of the company. So now, Navitas focuses on partnering with universities, receiving fees from students to prepare them to enter first-year courses at universities. Thus far they have 35 partnerships with universities in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the U.S. the U.K., the Netherlands, U.A.E., Singapore and Sri Lanka.

CRITIQUE OF PRIVATE PATHWAY PROGRAMS/COLLEGES: WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US?

Lack of transparency and accountability

Overall, there is very little research on private pathway colleges like Navitas. It is difficult to gain information about Navitas, its profits, operations, #s of students who enrol in its programs, #s who leave, #s who matriculate to university programs, etc. (Maschmann, 2018)

Negotiations to develop partnerships between private pathway program providers and other Canadian and US universities have been done rapidly, shrouded in secrecy, and without meaningful input from local stakeholders (CAUT, 2013; Maschmann, 2018; Winkle, 2014)

Secrecy/lack of information (e.g. financial) in contracts between Navitas and universities it partners with Manitoba - “[S]ecret brokering of the deal with no notice to the university senate, board of governors or faculty association...” (CAUT, 2016); lack of oversight by Senate (U of Manitoba)

At SFU, negotiations in 2006 around the Navitas (then known as IBT) partnership were contentious with much opposition from students and faculty. Some felt that the partnership was motivated by profit over what was best for instructors and students:

For those who attended that Senate meeting... It was a very intense debate... But, the university [administration] was able to intimidate some faculty members by threatening [them] that if IBT [did] not pass then revenue was going to be lost. So, once their employer begins to make those kinds of threats, I just can’t see how IBT would have failed because the consequence to the faculty members was you either go with IBT and maintain the funding levels that you have now and possibly increase it or you go against IBT you can be sure that your budgets will be cut. ...So, as much as some [faculty members] opposed the agreement in principle, the practical reality [is that] they didn’t want to see their budgets cut. I think that was really the key argument that swayed the vote. (Buenaventura, 2007)

Outsourcing faculty - Pathway partnerships create a two-tier workforce in higher education

Pathway programs/colleges – private pathway companies hire their own faculty

In general, courses in these programs are “taught by faculty who have little or no experience teaching international students with developing English proficiency and who may be neither willing or able to provide the cultural and linguistic support which those students need” (Quoted in Winkle, 2014).

Pathway college instructors

- not unionized, thus not protected by faculty collective agreements
- forbidden from engaging in any kind of labour action (see below about anti-union clauses)
- lower salaries, unprotected, vulnerable, and precarious labour
- their labour is undervalued, and perceived as less scholarly (as they teach courses that are generally considered ‘remedial’ and they not expected to engage in research)
- sessional EAP faculty move from teaching at the university to teaching at Navitas college
- take jobs away faculty teaching in ‘in-house’ EAP programs (e.g. WELC)

(Brophy & Tucker-Abramson, 2012; Maschmann, 2018; Richert, 2013; Steele, 2010; Union, 2010)

Contracts between universities and Navitas include anti-union clauses:

Instructors employed [at SFU’s FIC] are not covered by either of SFU’s collective agreements with academic workers, and are thus subject to a privatized and union free approach to labour management. The flexible exploitation of a precarious workforce at FIC has been engineered into the institution. The contract between Navitas and SFU has an anti-union clause stipulating that the University may terminate the agreement if any of the colleges employees provoke a Labour dispute and if “the college does not obtain and implement a lawful order or direction requiring that all persons cease and desist from picketing, or from conducting disruptive Labour action, on the campus, the University may, in its sole discretion terminate this agreement forthwith” (Brophy & Tucker-Abramson, 2012, p. 31).

“Pathway colleges may contribute to the vulnerability of academic staff by increasing the number of contingent faculty within the academic production cycle for public postsecondary degrees...[T]here has been a slow and steady rise of contingent faculty working in public institutions in Canada...with corresponding issues of exploitation, the effects of which are worse for women and racialized teachers. Pathway colleges represent a potential acceleration of this trend” (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018, p. 213).

Exploiting international students

Questionable Recruitment Strategies

-students recruited who would otherwise have been able to gain entry to the university

Navitas works with local (e.g. Asian) student recruitment agencies.

These recruitment agents, are not Navitas employees and they are incentivized by Navitas to get students. They take a cut of the tuition dollars (as high as 10%) in addition to charging students directly (Brophy & Tucker-Abramson, 2012)

- lack of transparency and misleading claims from recruitment agents (about where they will study; opportunities to work and gain citizenship in Canada; guarantees to progress to degree programs); refund policies

(CAUT, 2013; Larsen, 2012; Richert, 2013; Union, 2010)

International Students as Commodities

- overall marginalization of international students, especially those at pathway colleges
- lower student admission standards with for-profit pathway programs/colleges (Winkle, 2014)
- tuition paid directly to for-profit pathway college company
- students treated forms of revenue generation

International College of Manitoba 2020/21 fees and charges:
1st year Mixed program (1 term) = \$5,485
1st year University Transfer Program (UTP) (2 terms) = \$34,748
2nd year UTP (3 terms) = \$55,581
Plus ancillary fees = approx. \$2000/year
Total for 2 years = approx. \$100,000 (per student)

30% of the tuition fees collected by Navitas (FIC) is redirected to SFU
In 2006, anticipated to be approx. \$1 million after 2 years and \$10 million after five years.
(McCuaig, 2006 in Maschmann, 2018)

There is little available data about the #s of students who enter Navitas college pathways, return home, and/or complete and matriculate into the university. Navitas has also admitted its difficulties with retention. (Maschmann, 2018)

Students held back

In some cases, pathway students report that courses are too easy; they are 'held back' and not able to enter the university so that Navitas earns more from their tuition fees (Larsen, 2012; Richert, 2013)

Grade Inflation

In other cases, staff working in private pathway colleges report being pressured to ensure that students pass their programs (grade inflation) even if they have not fulfilled the program requirements
Curriculum materials used as standardized and not produced by EAP specialists
Concerns that pathway programs provide a backdoor through which otherwise unqualified students gain entry to university programs
This leads to pressure on academic standards at the university to support these students who might not have the academic skills to succeed. (Bataille, 2017; Maschmann, 2018; Steele, 2010; Union, 2010)

Other concerns/issues

Private pathway colleges get to use the name brand of the university they partner with for marketing and recruitment purposes.

Impact on Existing EAP (IEP) Programs at the University (e.g. WELC)

Private pathway programs/colleges undermine (and in some cases, takeover) the work of existing EAP and EAL (English for Academic Purposes and Learning) programs on campus
– this happened at SFU as their existing EAP and EAL programs disappeared and/or moved into programs which pathway students into FIC's programs (Maschmann, 2018)

Winkle's (2014) research also demonstrates the threats existing EAP programs in 2 US universities faced when the university entered into negotiations and agreements with private pathway providers
Private partnerships, which created for-profit pathway programs (in place of existing in-house programs) left existing EAP administrators and instructors feeling frustrated, under-valued and, in some cases,

leaving their positions due to admissions fraud, lack of transparency, accountability and inequitable course content and requirements, as well as lowered program standards. There is also evidence that they contribute to a “declining employment status of the teaching faculty – including those who teach English to speakers of other languages – at university level” (Winkle, 2014, p. 217).

Threats to accreditation of EAL/EAP programs

There is also evidence that partnering with private companies to operate pathway programs threatens existing the accreditation status of existing ‘in-house’ EAP programs; this and other threats to existing EAP programs has led to bodies such as TESOL advising caution when considering private partnerships with such companies (Winkle, 2014).

Competition with university for use of resources

Navitas Colleges (e.g. FIC, ICM) get access to the use of facilities on campus– compete with university for access to use of resources (e.g. library, sports facilities) on campus (Richert, 2013)

Navitas business plans may include eventually delivering full degree programs in partnerships with universities such as the U of Manitoba (Steele, 2010)

Lack of Diversity

The argument is made that Navitas will diversify the international student population (i.e. recruit students outside of China). This is a weak and unfounded claim. No evidence to suggest that they have had success in diversifying international student body beyond Asia.

The majority of Navitas students at SFU’s Fraser International College (run by Navitas) continue to be from Asia (Brophy & Tucker-Abramson, 2012).

There is a limited market of international students and families able to afford international tuition fees like Navitas charges. Navitas’ recruitment agents are no better able to recruit students from other countries (outside of Asia, for example) than other recruiters. (inside source)

ALTERNATIVES/WHAT CAN WE DO?

The most important thing we can do is educate ourselves about the impact of initiatives to privatize higher education. Everyone needs to understand the issues associated with these processes and then educate others (university administration, students, the public) about these initiatives and the particularly negative impact of them on precarious faculty, staff and students.

Professional associations such as UWOPA have a role to educate, organize and unify faculty and develop actions and strategies for resisting the increase of corporate influence in higher education.

University faculty can combat the corporatization of higher education by working to re-establish and reaffirm the public contract between society and academia through educating themselves and others, within and outside of their institutions, about the mutual responsibilities of the public and the professoriate about the academic mission of higher education institutions within a civilized society. (Winkle, 2014)

“EAL/EAP instructors and students would benefit from less precarity and contingency in their work... Increasingly, issues of health and well-being ... might be places to increase awareness of how the pathways system places growing pressure on the most vulnerable, and contingent populations (students, sessionals, and contract labour). The discourse and enactment of ‘individual success’ lends to a silencing and shaming

of those who don't succeed. Contingency and vulnerability create competition and fear. These taken together with an investment on the part of all to support discourses of institutional success lead to complicity in the face of unethical practices. Senior teachers with professional security should be encouraged to work with their unions and professional associations to create more equitable spaces all around." (Maschmann, 2018, p. 130)

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