

Three Decades of Post-Secondary Strategy in Manitoba

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Abstract

This article explores the impact of post-secondary system reviews in Manitoba in the three decades since 1993. During this timeframe, eight such reviews were undertaken, expressing key objectives for the system that included better alignment with provincial economic priorities, stronger system coordination, and increased accessibility. Despite the consistent appearance of these objectives across all reviews, governments did not always pursue them with sufficient energy to bring them to fruition, shaping how these reviews affected the approach to post-secondary policy in Manitoba.

Keywords: strategy, post-secondary education, government, Manitoba, Canada

Introduction

This article explores the development of strategic directions for post-secondary education in the Province of Manitoba, Canada. Governments often develop an intended post-secondary strategy through comprehensive reports by independent blue-ribbon panels, royal commissions, legislative committees, or similar mechanisms prior to advancing a post-secondary agenda in legislation, budgets, or other policy instruments (Stutz, 2008). Few empirical studies exist on such reviews (Kirby, 2007; Stutz, 2008), revealing a gap in the literature. This study contributes to the scholarly discourse by analyzing existing post-secondary system reviews published in Manitoba over a thirty-year period.

Manitoba presents a notable case in that the number of reviews is significant—eight over thirty years, an average of one review every three years and nine months. Such review efforts are expected to add value to the province's post-secondary system and share lessons that might be learned to help inform Manitoba's system as well as systems elsewhere. However, the actual impact of these reviews on realized policy and system evolution raises intriguing considerations.

The article finds that objectives identified in Manitoba's post-secondary reviews echo trends across Canada regarding the connection between the academy and the economy. Manitoba reviews consistently articulated a desire for greater alignment with economic priorities, stronger system coordination, and greater accessibility. Despite such consistency, governments in Manitoba did not always pursue these objectives with sufficient energy to bring them to fruition. This discrepancy prompts critical questions about the impact of such reviews on post-secondary policy. Analysis was guided by two questions: What objectives were identified in the various post-secondary education reviews undertaken in Manitoba? And, how have those objectives changed over time? This analysis seeks to understand how government objectives for post-secondary education were expressed and pursued during the time period in question.

This study is limited to Manitoba's post-secondary system and eight post-secondary reviews published between 1993 and 2021 (see Table 1). The article framed the analysis within the context of glo-

balization and situated the study in relevant literature. After the methodology is outlined, findings are discussed, and conclusions are presented.

A Brief Review of Manitoba's Public Post-Secondary System

Manitoba has eight highly differentiated public post-secondary institutions (Usher & Pelletier, 2017). The province has three public colleges specializing in trades and technology: Assiniboine College, the Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology, and Red River College Polytechnic. The latter two are located in the provincial capital city, Winnipeg, while the first is located in the City of Brandon. Following *Maclean's* taxonomy, there are two primarily undergraduate universities, Brandon University and the University of Winnipeg, alongside one medical doctoral university, the University of Manitoba, located in Winnipeg. Additionally, Manitoba has two hybrid institutions offering both college and undergraduate programs: the University College of the North, with major campuses in the northern centres of The Pas and Thompson as well as smaller teaching facilities in 12 remote northern communities, and the Université de Saint-Boniface in Winnipeg, offering French language programming.

Unlike in some provinces, each Manitoba institution is governed through separate legislation. Coordinating agencies, first the Universities Grants Commission, and then the Council on Post-Secondary Education, were key governance bodies in the system between 1967 and 2014. However, in 2014, this approach was abandoned in Manitoba and the system has since been governed departmentally (Smith, 2015). Despite having been governed since 1967 by coordinating agencies, many system-like features, such as provincial credit transfer processes, shared application systems, or system-level quality assurance processes, have historically been absent in Manitoba. Based on the various reviews, one might assume that governments in Manitoba have long sought such features to help with objectives such as, increased student mobility within the system, quality assurance, and greater efficiency. In the absence of such coordinating features, setting system-level strategic direction might take on greater importance, perhaps helping to explain the high number of post-secondary reviews undertaken in Manitoba since 1993.

Conceptual Framework

Governments in Canada have identified post-secondary education as a key asset for economic success (Fisher et al., 2014; Kirby, 2007). Globalization has been widely acknowledged as a factor in post-secondary education (Browning & Elnagar, 2022; Eastman et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2009; Fisher et al., 2014; Kouritzin et al., 2021; Metcalfe, 2010; Pocklington & Tupper, 2002; Rounce, 2014; Smith, 2005; Torres & Rhoads, 2006; Trotter & Mitchell, 2018). Globalization was concisely described by Kirby (2007) as a term referring to the integration of market forces into many spheres of society, "... accompanied by increasing levels of state intervention, by recent historical standards, in society and the economy through education, training, and labor market policies" (p. 5).

Provincial post-secondary reviews between 2004 and 2007 in Alberta, British Columbia, Newfoundland, and Ontario demonstrated "the pervasive influence of economic globalization, which is accompanied by an increasingly utilitarian, market-oriented ideological outlook on post-secondary education's *raison d'être*" (Kirby, 2007, p. 2). This shift signifies how higher education departs from "traditional academic-humanist perspectives" toward prioritizing economic considerations, labour market development, and competitiveness (Kirby, 2007, p. 5), although post-secondary education has always served both functions (Kirby, 2007; Levin & LeTourneau, 1991; Skolnick, 2004). Reflecting on these two functions, it is also argued, although not universally, that globalization can be a negative force (Levin & LeTourneau, 1991; Pocklington & Tupper, 2002; Torres & Rhoads, 2006). Unquestioned, however, is the belief that higher education is developing in a framework of globalization (Kouritzin et al., 2021; Rounce, 2014).

Torres and Rhoads (2006) argued that globalization is too complex to present monolithically, introducing the concept of "multiple globalizations" (p. 8) and highlighting the "globalization from above" (p. 8) approach driven by trans-national agencies such as the World Bank, and governments. Post-secondary priorities pursued within this globalization paradigm can include privatization, which, in Canada, is often associated with market behaviour, reliance on tuition, commercialization of research products, and the growth of non-government funding (Fisher et al., 2014). Additionally, system coordination is another objective that includes performance measurement, accreditation, and credit transfer (Fisher et

al., 2014). Goals around improved competitiveness and entrepreneurialism are reflected in initiatives, including a greater focus on labour market development, expressed recently in Manitoba as a desire for more work-integrated learning opportunities in academic programs (Manitoba, 2021a). These priorities, as expressed and realized throughout post-secondary systems in Canada and Manitoba, suggest that globalization is undeniably a force in Canadian higher education.

Post-Secondary Reviews in Canada

As a policy instrument, post-secondary education creates opportunities for governments to influence social and economic development, support immigration strategies, and strengthen diversity in society, among other objectives (Riddell, 2003; Rounce, 2014; Skolnick, 2004). Public policy, in turn, can drive the evolution of Canadian post-secondary education (Gaber, 2002; Kirby, 2007; Rounce, 2014; Skolnick, 2004). In Canada, innovation policy is largely guided by federal research granting councils and initiatives such as the Canadian Foundation for Innovation (Fisher et al., 2009; Metcalfe, 2010). Canada's constitution ensures that policy associated with teaching and learning is shaped by provinces; provinces sometimes seek to shape higher education systems through post-secondary reviews (Kerr & Hoise, 2013).

Post-secondary reviews may be comprehensive, covering all aspects of a system, or may consider a specific area such as accountability, accessibility, or affordability. The recommendations presented in the reviews often reflect economic priorities. For example, New Brunswick's 2005 report on *Quality Post-Secondary Opportunities* included an objective to "embrace the globalization of our post-secondary education and training sector" (p. 8). More generally, Fisher et al. (2009, 2014) studied post-secondary reviews, legislation, and other policy instruments, finding that between 1980 and 2010, reviews in BC, Ontario, and Quebec shared five themes, including accessibility, accountability, marketization, labour force development, and research.

At least 28 post-secondary reviews have been conducted in Canada between 1993 and 2021 (see Appendix). A cursory examination of the tables of contents of these reviews reveals some common topics, including accessibility, accountability, affordability, government funding, student and learning-related focus areas, and system-related topics such as coordination and governance. Focus areas that were also observed but were less common included research and excellence.

The majority of these reviews integrate economic considerations throughout, and in some instances spotlight economic priorities. Kirby's 2007 analysis concluded that across Canada, post-secondary "reviews ... leave little doubt that Canadian provincial governments have embraced the view that important economic dividends can be derived from public investment in education" (p. 18). Kirby's conclusion underscores ongoing efforts by provinces to leverage post-secondary reviews to strengthen the economic purposes of colleges and universities. For example, in 2020, Alberta Advanced Education initiated a review of post-secondary education to create "an evidence-informed, co-created map for systemic transformation... enabling prosperity and better outcomes for learners and all Albertans both now and in the future" (Alberta Advanced Education, 2020, p. 7). Similarly, in 2021, Newfoundland issued its *All Hands on Deck: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century by Leveraging Public Post-Secondary Education*, seeking "to provide a strategic vision for the next decade and beyond for a public post-secondary education system that delivers high-quality education, contributes to knowledge creation and transfer, and prepares post-secondary students for the future, both personally and professionally" (Kennedy et al., 2021, p. i). Post-secondary reviews across Canada over the past two decades have consistently focused on achieving economic objectives (Fisher et al., 2009).

Methodology

The article employed content analysis, identifying patterns and themes from the eight post-secondary reviews published in Manitoba in the three decades since 1993. The year 1993 was selected as the starting point for the study as it marked the publication year for *Doing Things Differently: The Report of the University Education Review Commission* (UERC). The UERC was Manitoba's first comprehensive expression of the role of post-secondary education in economic development (Browning, 2015; Saunders, 2006; Smith, 2011; University Education Review Commission [UERC], 1993). The eight reviews in the study were sourced from government department annual reports, a 2006 departmental summa-

ry (Britton, 2006), and my observations after more than 30 years of direct involvement in Manitoba's post-secondary system.

Reviews were categorized as a “government” or “non-government” review. A government review articulated the intentions of the Government of Manitoba, and a non-government review met the other criteria but was prepared by non-government actors. A post-secondary review undertaken during this period was determined to be in-scope if it (1) articulated a “consciously intended course of action, a guideline (or a set of guidelines)” (Mintzberg, 1987, p. 11); (2) focused on Manitoba's post-secondary system; (3) articulated actions accepted by government or intended for government; (4) recommended substantive change(s) to the inputs, processes, and/or outcomes of the post-secondary system; and (5) required action from the government and from more than one Manitoba post-secondary institution.

The units of analysis in the study are the combined 168 actions from all eight reviews. Notably, while most reviews explicitly presented actions, some, like the 2015 *Post-Secondary Education Strategy* (PSE Strategy) and the 2019 mandate letters, expressed actions in narrative form. In instances where actions were so expressed, I constructed action statements where the review narrative expressed a clear actionable directive. Finally, actions from each of the reviews were assessed, inductively revealing seven ‘policy action categories’ or, more simply, objectives: (1) Accessibility, (2) Alignment, (3) Cost Management, (4) Marketing, (5) Reconciliation, (6) System Coordination, and (7) Other —themes that mirror those previously identified by Fisher et al. (2009, 2014), and common among reviews in other Canadian provinces. For the present analysis of the Manitoba reviews, I coded each individual action against the seven categories, allowing for multi-category coding. Subsequently, actions in each policy action category were tabulated, a percentage rate was calculated, and actions were ranked ordinally.

My involvement in post-secondary reviews in Manitoba contributed directly to the methodology of the analysis. I worked in Manitoba's post-secondary system for 29 of the 30 years of this study's timeframe. From 1994 to 2012, I served in political staff and civil service positions in the Government of Manitoba, with responsibilities in the post-secondary sector. Since 2012, I have served as an executive in a Manitoba post-secondary institution. Through these roles, I have been an active participant in post-secondary reviews in Manitoba, having been involved in major and minor capacities, contributing to analysis and development, and participating in some aspects of each review included in this study. As such, I have had privileged insights into the internal workings of both government and post-secondary institutions in relation to post-secondary reviews in Manitoba, helping to contribute to and enrich narrative description and analysis.

Table 1
Manitoba Post-Secondary Reviews, 1993 - 2021

Publication Year and Title	Type	
	Govt	Non-Govt
<i>1993: Doing Things Differently: The Report of the University Education Review Commission (UERC) and the related 1994: Doing Things Differently: Response of the Government of Manitoba to the Report of the University Education Review Commission (Response to the UERC)</i>	X	
<i>2001: Manitoba Training Strategy (Training Strategy)</i>	X	
<i>2015: Manitoba's Post-Secondary Education Strategy: A Partnership for Excellence and Student Success (PSE Strategy)</i>	X	
<i>2017: Post-Secondary Education in Manitoba: A Blueprint for Opportunity and Growth (HESA Report)</i>		X
<i>2017: Manitoba Colleges Review (Colleges Review)</i>	X	
<i>2019: Institutional mandate letters (Mandate Letters)</i>	X	
<i>2019: Horizon Manitoba: Building a Brighter Future Together (Horizon Report)</i>		X
<i>2021: Skills, Talent, and Knowledge Strategy (STKS)</i>	X	

Findings

The eight reviews in Manitoba appeared at a rate of one every three years and nine months. Between 1993 and 2015, reviews appeared in longer intervals (i.e., 1993, 2001, and 2015). However, after 2015, the frequency increased, with reviews appearing every two years: 2017, 2019, and 2021. Notably, two reviews appeared in the same year, in 2017 and again in 2019.

Government Reviews

Six government reviews were published between 1993 and 2021. The 1993 UERC was accompanied by the 1994 Response to the UERC (Manness, 1994), which articulated the actions that the government accepted from the UERC that were the focus of this analysis. Accordingly, both documents were treated as a single review. Subsequent reviews included the 2001 Training Strategy (Manitoba, 2001), the 2015 PSE Strategy (Manitoba, 2015), the 2017 Colleges Review (Usher & Pelletier, 2017), the 2019 mandate letters (Manitoba, 2021b), and the 2021 STKS (Manitoba, 2021a). Table 2 shows a strong focus on alignment and system coordination, with accessibility registering a distant third. The other objectives appeared less frequently in government reviews.

Table 2
Objective Rankings in Government Reviews, 1993-2021

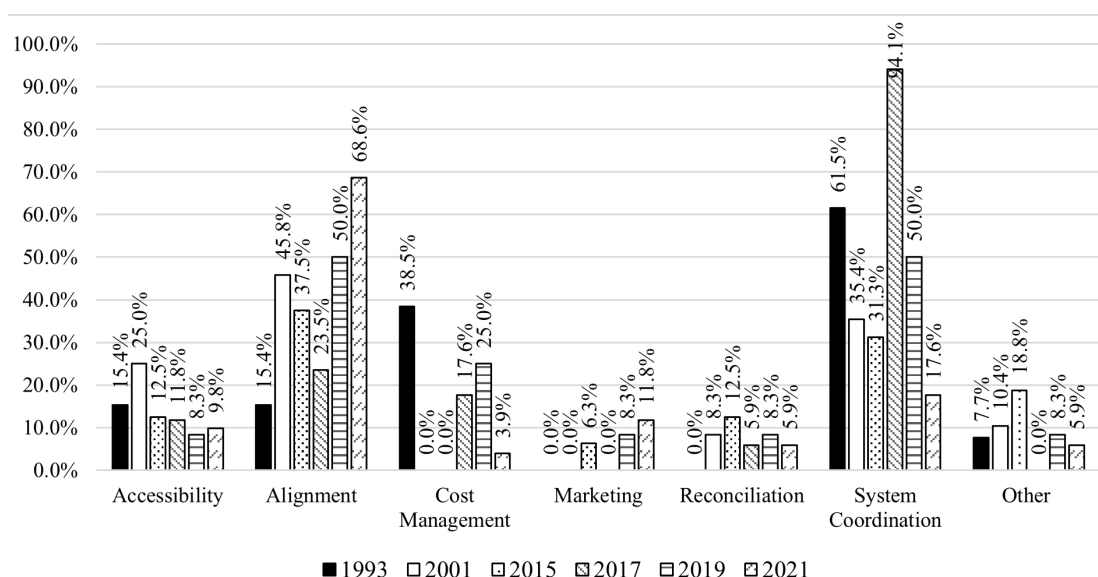
Objective	1993		2001		2015		2017		2019		2021		TOTAL	
	UERC / Response to UERC		Training Strategy		PSE Strategy		Colleges Review		Mandate Letters		STKS			
	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank
Accessibility	15.4	4	25.0	3	12.5	4	11.8	4	8.3	3**	9.8	4	15.3	3
Alignment	15.4	2	45.8	1	37.5	1	23.5	2	50.0	1**	68.6	1	47.8	1
Cost Management	38.5	3	0.0	--	0.0	--	17.6	3	25.0	2	3.9	6	8.3	4**
Marketing	0.0	--*	0.0	--	6.3	5	0.0	--	8.3	3**	11.8	3	5.1	6
Reconciliation	0.0	--	8.3	5	12.5	4	5.9	5	8.3	3**	5.9	5	7.0	5
System Coordination	61.5	1	35.4	2	31.3	2	94.1	1	50.0	1**	17.6	2	38.9	2
Other	7.7	5	10.4	4	18.8	3	0.0	--	8.3	3**	5.9	5	8.3	4**

* "--" means that the item is not ranked because no actions were associated with the objective.

** Denotes a tie in ranking whereby an equal number of actions were associated with the objective.

Considering government reviews over time illuminates changes in governments' priorities for post-secondary education. Figure 1 illustrates these results by year, showing the primacy of alignment and system coordination. Cost management emerged as a significant concern in the 1994 Response to the UERC and again in the 2019 mandate letters. Cost management was not emphasized in the 2001 Training Strategy nor the 2015 PSE Strategy, likely reflecting the economic and political circumstances of the time. The 1993 UERC, the 1994 Response, and the 2019 mandate letters appeared during periods of increased concern regarding provincial finances (Progressive Conservative Party of Manitoba, 2019; Saunders, 2006). Interestingly, that objective was not reflected in the 2021 STKS, which was released by the same government just two years after the release of the 2019 mandate letters.

Figure 1 also shows the growth of alignment as an objective, rising from 15.4% in the 1994 Response to the UERC to 68.6% in the 2021 STKS. In contrast, the emphasis on system coordination decreased from 61.5% in the 1994 Response to the UERC to 17.6% in the 2021 STKS, despite a notable uptick associated with the 2019 mandate letters. Examining government reviews over time offers insight into the persistence of objectives. Some objectives, like cost management, may be more likely to occupy a relatively higher place in the ranking at specific times. However, while their relative emphasis changed over time, alignment and system coordination consistently occupied a more prominent place throughout.

Figure 1*Persistence of Objectives in Government Reviews, 1993 - 2021***Government Reviews and Governing Parties**

Since the late 1950s, governments in Manitoba have alternated between the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Progressive Conservative Party (PC). During the 30-year period under study, the PCs held office for 13 years, while the NDP governed for nearly 17 years. PC governments released four reviews: (1) the 1993 UERC/1994 Response, (2) the 2017 Colleges Review, (3) the 2019 mandate letters, and (4) the 2021 STKS. NDP governments produced two reviews: (1) the 2001 Training Strategy and (2) the 2015 PSE Strategy.

Table 3*Objective Rankings from Government Reviews by Governing Party, 1993-2021*

Objective	PC	Rank	NDP	Rank	Total	Rank
	(%)		(%)		(%)	
Accessibility	10.8	4	21.9	3	15.3	3
Alignment	50.5	1	43.8	1	47.8	1
Cost Management	14.0	3	0.0	--*	8.3	4*
Marketing	7.5	5	1.6	6	5.1	6
Reconciliation	5.4	6**	9.4	5	7.0	5
System Coordination	41.9	2	34.4	2	38.9	2
Other	5.4	6**	12.5	4	8.3	4*

* "--" means that the item is not ranked because no actions were associated with the objective.

** Denotes a tie in ranking whereby an equal number of actions were associated with the objective.

Table 3 shows similar findings for both governing parties: alignment was the highest-ranked objective for both governing parties, followed by system coordination. Cost management represents the most significant divergence, ranking third for PC-led reviews, but not registering at all in the NDP's reviews. Accessibility was ranked third in the NDP's reviews and fourth in PC reviews. The remaining objectives appeared less frequently for each party.

A shared outlook on post-secondary education by political parties has been observed previously.

Rounce (2014) noted that both governing parties in Manitoba have valued alignment since the 1990s. Usher (2021) argued that the 2021 STKS would be acceptable to any political party in Manitoba. Moreover, Browning (2015) observed that the post-secondary policies of Manitoba's NDP after taking office in 1999 were consistent with policies in other provinces, regardless of political affiliation. The present analysis confirms these observations in Manitoba, extending findings to include alignment and system coordination as shared objectives, while cost management and accessibility appear as distant third priorities for the PCs and NDP, respectively. These findings demonstrate shared political objectives for Manitoba's post-secondary education system.

Non-Government Reviews

Two non-governmental reviews were published in the timeframe under study. In 2017, Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) presented an unsolicited study, *Post-Secondary Education in Manitoba: A Blueprint for Opportunity and Growth* (Usher, 2017), and in 2019, colleges, universities, and the Business Council of Manitoba formed Horizon Manitoba and published *Horizon Manitoba: Building a Brighter Future Together* (Horizon Manitoba, 2019).

Table 4

Objective Rankings in Non-Governmental Reviews

Objective	2017		2019		Total	
	HESA	Rank	Horizon	Rank	(%)	Rank
	(%)		(%)			
Accessibility	40.0	2	16.7	2**	27.3	2
Alignment	60.0	1	100.0	1	81.8	1
Cost Management	0.0	--*	0.0	--	0.0	--
Marketing	0.0	--	0.0	--	0.0	--
Reconciliation	20.0	3	16.7	2**	18.2	3
System Coordination	0.0	--	16.7	2*	9.1	4
Other	0.0	--	0.0	--	0.0	--

* "--" means that the item is not ranked because no actions were associated with the objective.

** Denotes a tie in ranking whereby an equal number of actions were associated with the objective.

Table 4 shows that, by a considerable margin, the top-ranked objective was alignment, with accessibility and reconciliation as a distant second and third, respectively. System coordination did not appear in the HESA review and was ranked last in the Horizon review. Minimal interest in coordination on the part of institutions is consistent with other analyses of Manitoba's post-secondary system that found institutional autonomy vigorously guarded, and coordination viewed with suspicion (Levin & LeTourneau, 1991; Mallea, 2002; Prairie Research Associates [PRA], 2009). This lack of interest in coordination is a fascinating observation worthy of further study, but beyond the scope of the present analysis due to this study's focus on institutional objectives and policy trends.

Overall, the two non-government reviews garnered little reaction. The HESA review appeared in the *One Thought to Start Your Day* blog but garnered no action or commentary from Manitoba's system. The Horizon review was supported by the post-secondary institutions that prepared it, but not by the government that was called upon to fund it. Notably, both the non-governmental reviews – by a wide margin – agreed with the government review that alignment was the key objective for post-secondary education in Manitoba.

Pursuing the Top Objectives

Answering the two research questions, identifying objectives, and how they have changed in the various post-secondary education reviews undertaken in Manitoba, the findings show three consistent objectives. In rank order, these are: alignment, system coordination, and accessibility. Exploring what was presented in the reviews and what was pursued revealed dissonance in expressed intentions and realized policy.

Alignment

Alignment with economic priorities was most often related to academic matters. For example, the 1994 Response to the UERC challenged universities to “...identify potential centres of specialization related to the government’s *Framework for Economic Growth* and to such other areas deemed important to the province and report to the Minister of Education and Training within six months” (Manness, 1994, p. 2). However, by 2021, the focus changed to include industry in academic programming, and the language used was more directive. The 2021 STKS said that colleges and universities “...will be tasked to identify and shift programs that oversupply the labour market, as well as program opportunities in high-demand areas. They will work in partnership with industry to re-balance programs and resources to align with industry needs” (Manitoba, 2021a, p. 9). However, challenges to alignment remained. In 1993, through the government’s *Framework for Economic Growth*, institutions had a strategy against which they could align. However, after the 1999 change in government, there was no articulated economic strategy with which to align (Auditor General of Manitoba, 2020).

Nevertheless, recent years have seen a modest pursuit of alignment. The Manitoba Industry-Academia Partnership (MI-AP) was established by the government in 2020 to “enhance [post-secondary institution] and Industry Collaboration, Indigenous inclusion and work-integrated learning” (Manitoba Industry-Academia Partnership [MI-AP], 2020a, para 2). MI-AP arose from the 2019 mandate letters that committed to facilitating more discussion between colleges, universities, and industry in the province (Minister of Economic Development and Training, Personal Correspondence, 2019; Manitoba, 2021b). One of MI-AP’s first projects was to pursue a mandate letter action relating to work integrated learning (WIL) in Manitoba’s post-secondary system. In 2020, MI-AP committed to arranging WIL “engagement tables” (MI-AP, 2020b), and met with post-secondary leaders a number of times in 2021. However, this work yielded limited results. The 2021 STKS also incorporated WIL, seeking to “set annual targets for work-integrated learning opportunities for post-secondary institutions and industry” (Manitoba, 2021a, p. 10). This activity is both more specific and more directive than the mandate letters which simply established the objective to “work with institutions to move [WIL] forward” (Minister of Economic Development and Training, Personal Correspondence, 2019, p. 3). Notably, the targets referred to in the STKS were not established, and minimal action was taken by the government to advance this item prior to the 2023 provincial election, and none since the change in governing parties after that election.

In summary, the alignment of the post-secondary system with economic priorities has been a consistent theme in post-secondary reviews in Manitoba, reflecting governments’ increasing perception of post-secondary systems as economic policy instruments. However, the pursuit of alignment has been inconsistent throughout the years, hampered by the absence of a clear economic strategy against which to align, and by changes in the governing party of the province.

System Coordination

System coordination seeks greater cooperation between institutions in terms of student mobility, integration of programs, and collaboration between institutions and with government. Despite consistently appearing in post-secondary reviews, successive Manitoba governments have worked against system coordination. Examples include credit transfer, accountability, and system governance.

The 1994 Response to the UERC committed to creating a credit transfer system (Manness, 1994), as did each subsequent review. Indeed, the 2021 STKS committed to “design, develop and implement a credit transfer portal” (Manitoba, 2021a, p. 10). To date, no credit transfer system has materialized because resources (i.e., staff, funding) were not allocated (PRA, 2009). Although a credit transfer system had been developed and was ready to launch in 2016 (Winnipeg Sun, 2016), in one of its first budget decisions, the newly elected PC government eliminated the project’s funding. Despite consistent appearances in all post-secondary reviews, the government’s commitment to establishing a credit transfer system has

been limited.

Accountability followed a similar path. In 1994, the government committed to developing a post-secondary accountability framework and a funding formula (Manness, 1994). Similar commitments were made in the 2017 Colleges Review and the 2021 STKS (Usher & Pelletier, 2017; Manitoba, 2021a). Despite such commitments, the Auditor General of Manitoba (2020) observed persistent weaknesses in post-secondary accountability, noting that the then government agency responsible for oversight and coordination of post-secondary education in Manitoba, the Council on Post-Secondary Education, acknowledged systemic gaps in accountability in a 2011 discussion paper, *Manitoba's Post-Secondary Accountability System*.¹ Despite a year of development, in 2022, Manitoba's Premier, Heather Stefanson, signaled that the government would be "stepping back" on creating performance measures for Manitoba's post-secondary system (Stefanson, 2022).

Coordination can also be achieved through system governance processes – something that governments in Manitoba have worked against. Two examples highlight this trend. First, over time government has changed the legislative framework supporting Manitoba's post-secondary system, introducing legislation providing each institution with individual acts, moving away from collective legislation, thereby reducing opportunities for incorporating coordination into law (Rounce, 2014; Smith, 2011). Second, in 2014, the government eliminated the Council on Post-Secondary Education (COPSE) in favour of direct departmental oversight (Smith, 2015). Exacerbating this circumstance was the unexpected emergence of disruptive changes in the government's post-secondary department that further militated against system coordination.

COPSE was eliminated at a time when Manitoba's government was entering a period of political disarray. Initially, this disarray was a result of an unprecedented Cabinet revolt in the NDP government that contributed to that government's electoral defeat in 2016 (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC], 2014; Henry, 2016). With the need to replace five rebel NDP Cabinet ministers (CBC, 2014), including the minister responsible for post-secondary education, significant changes in the post-secondary portfolio occurred beginning in 2014.

During the eight years from 2014/15 to 2021/22, a period when four government and two non-government post-secondary reviews were released, post-secondary education in the province was overseen by two different governments, four different departmental configurations, seven different ministers, six different deputy ministers and five different assistant deputy ministers, not including a significant portion of the 2020/21 fiscal year when the assistant deputy minister position was vacant (Manitoba, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022). Further, staffing levels declined from around 20 to less than five staff managing the post-secondary file (Auditor General of Manitoba, 2020). While the reasons for this chaotic state of affairs are beyond this article's scope, it meant that the capacity of the government to oversee and monitor post-secondary education was compromised during these years (Auditor General of Manitoba, 2020; Eastman et al., 2018).

The findings do not suggest that the government has completely ignored system coordination. Some actions outlined in the 1994 response to the UERC were completed. For example, the commitment to make Keewatin Community College (now University College of the North) the coordinator of post-secondary education in northern Manitoba was achieved (Manness, 1994), although not until 2004 (University College of the North, 2005). Further, the commitment to create the Council on Post-Secondary Education (Manness, 1994) was completed in 1997 (Smith, 2011). Like alignment, system coordination repeatedly appears in government post-secondary reviews. However, steps taken with respect to system coordination have been inconsistent, sometimes supporting coordination, but often not.

Accessibility

Examples of accessibility actions found in the reviews included strengthening the participation and success of under-represented groups, such as Indigenous Manitobans (Horizon Manitoba, 2019; Manitoba, 2001, 2015, 2021a, 2021b; Manness, 1994; Usher, 2017), as well as tuition fee policies (Manness, 1994; Usher, 2017). All eight Manitoba reviews addressed the issue of accessibility in various capacities.

Accessibility's third-place ranking overall was unexpected given its prominence in post-secondary education throughout Canada (Fisher et al., 2014), and especially the priority afforded it by Manitoba's

¹ An earlier version of this discussion paper was prepared by this article's author while he was working for the Council on Post-Secondary Education.

NDP government between 1999 and 2016 (Browning, 2015). Accessibility initiatives pursued during the NDP's administration included a strong commitment to increasing college seat capacity, and a 10% tuition fee reduction and freeze between 1999 and 2008 (Council on Post-Secondary Education [COPSE], 1999, 2000; Levin, 2005; Rounce, 2014). Further, accessibility actions from the 2001 Training Strategy were pursued, such as the 2003 legislative change that achieved the commitment to free adult basic education in colleges (Manitoba, 2004). The NDP pursued accessibility vigorously, with post-secondary accessibility mentioned in every NDP budget between 1999 and 2013 (Rounce, 2014).

In the context of the limited attention devoted to pursuing alignment and system coordination, the third-rank status of accessibility and the effort given to accessibility by the NDP reveals a dissonance between realized and intended post-secondary strategy. The NDP's focus on access may help explain why other priorities were not fully pursued during their years in office.

Analyzing Manitoba's post-secondary reviews over three decades showed differences between identified objectives and the policies that governments pursued. Alignment received limited policy attention, and the government actively took steps that reduced system coordination and accessibility, which, while ranked lower in the reviews, was nevertheless very prominent in the realized post-secondary agenda during the NDP administration.

Following Up on the Objectives

Of all the reviews, only the 1994 Response to the UERC sought to follow up with institutions (Manness, 1994). Yet, this did not yield to the full adoption of the identified objectives. Returning to alignment, the University of Manitoba (1995) responded to the government's challenge to create centres of specialization aligned with provincial economic priorities by saying, "The University is in effect Manitoba's centre for specialization in a variety of fields" (p. 4). The University of Manitoba went on to refer to all 14 of the faculties that existed at the University of Manitoba in 1995, suggesting that all program areas were "centres of excellence"; little actual program prioritization had been undertaken (Smith, 2004, p. 295).

In contrast, subsequent reviews saw little follow-up. The 2015 PSE Strategy was, by 2016, moribund (Auditor General of Manitoba, 2020), and there were no inquiries from the government as to how colleges progressed on the Colleges Review, released in 2017. Further, with the exception of MI-AP and WIL, there was little engagement with institutions on the 2019 mandate letters or the 2021 STKS, acknowledging that this latter review was released in the midst of a global pandemic.

The Auditor General of Manitoba (2020) observed that from 2014 to 2018, there was no formal, structured monitoring of any kind in the post-secondary system, including tracking progress toward achieving objectives in the reviews. Thus, it is not possible to systematically determine whether objectives were implemented, or outcomes achieved.

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings show that, over three decades, consistent objectives appeared in the government and non-government reviews of Manitoba's post-secondary system. Since 1993, the top objective for the system in Manitoba was alignment with economic priorities, with that emphasis growing in each subsequent review. System coordination declined in emphasis over time but retained its second-rank status. Accessibility was the third most significant objective, rounding out the top three. Cost management, marketing, reconciliation, and other identified objectives garnered lower emphasis. Over the last 30 years, all governments in Manitoba have, regardless of political stripe, articulated consistent objectives for post-secondary education that focus on supporting economic priorities. This pattern is consistent with post-secondary reviews from other provinces.

Despite the consistency, there was dissonance between the objectives articulated in Manitoba's reviews and what the government chose to pursue, particularly evident after 2015. While there is evidence that aspects of the 1994 Response to the UERC and the 2001 Training Strategy were pursued, reviews issued in 2015 and later may only be helpful in identifying objectives that governments wished to communicate, but less helpful in identifying long-term, realized strategies for post-secondary education.

The absence of follow-up on the reviews offers lessons for Manitoba's post-secondary system. For instance, colleges and universities may have learned that governments are not necessarily committed to findings in the reviews, and, in some cases, governments may act contrary to those findings. Further-

more, regardless of the commitment, government is not always able to act. For the last eight of the 30 years under review, the Government of Manitoba lacked organizational capacity and consistent leadership, resulting in “reduced focus and attention being paid to post-secondary education issues” (Auditor General of Manitoba, 2020, p. 42).

Objectives such as alignment, coordination, and accessibility are complex and difficult to achieve. Without a committed plan, sufficient resources, a robust staff, or consistent leadership, the government might not have been able to achieve system objectives. As a result, should colleges and universities be displeased with a particular post-secondary strategy, they may need only to wait for the next review, for the next minister or deputy, or the next government. In any event, in recent years, the chances of implementation were low. Minimally, post-secondary institutions might be well-advised to adopt review elements only at the same pace as the government so as to maximize the economy of effort.

There was little follow-up by governments. Only the 1994 Response to the UERC explicitly asked institutions to report back, although that reporting did not necessarily equate to implementation. Subsequent reviews saw selective follow-up, such as with Work-Integrated Learning, yet comprehensive engagement with institutions was consistently absent. Further governments did not track progress toward achieving objectives over the last three decades. Colleges, universities, and perhaps governments themselves may face no or minimal consequences should they ignore some or all of a post-secondary system review.

Given that post-secondary reviews in Manitoba have not always aligned with actual policy decisions, reviews may provide an incomplete representation of policy priorities when it comes to understanding Manitoba’s post-secondary agenda. While such reviews may situate the post-secondary system at a specific point in time, providing a sense of how a government considers its post-secondary system in relation to the larger environment, analysts of post-secondary education must also consider other sources if they are to understand how Manitoba’s post-secondary system is evolving.

Finally, the objectives identified in the eight reviews were challenging and fraught with controversy. For instance, as Levin and LeTourneau (1991) noted, institutions may react with suspicion when governments seek greater coordination in Manitoba’s post-secondary system. A decade later, in 2002, the observation was made that, in Manitoba, attempts “to bring about greater articulation between [institutions] is a sensitive, even daunting task” (Mallea, 2002, pp. 17-18, emphasis in original). A 2009 study of Manitoba’s system suggested that little had changed since 2002 (PRA, 2009), and in 2019, the Horizon review, conducted by colleges and universities themselves, also ranked system coordination low among its priorities. System coordination has been a long-hoped-for but elusive objective in Manitoba’s post-secondary system.

These findings highlight the impact of such reviews; they may only provide a starting point for discussion about post-secondary priorities. Reviews might also present an opportunity for governments to consolidate policy objectives, helping to articulate them more holistically and establishing priorities, such as alignment or system coordination as aspirational features for the system, even if specific actions to realize those features are not pursued, measured, or tracked. This last point may also help to explain why these objectives continue to appear in reviews: there may be no way to know if they have been pursued, let alone achieved.

There is a rich history in Canada of post-secondary strategy development, and provinces have undertaken reviews to detail intentions for their respective post-secondary systems. While other scholarly analyses of such reviews compare provincial systems to help identify national trends, the present analysis examined such reviews in a single jurisdiction, seeking to identify strategic priorities as expressed through those reviews and understanding factors related to how those priorities were pursued, adding to the slim portfolio of research on the topic.

Space considerations meant that the ability to pursue in-depth comparisons between Manitoba and other jurisdictions was limited. Future research could undertake more detailed comparative analysis to understand national trends, including shifts in the perspectives of political parties, or articulate the different approaches in terms of policy instruments used to realize post-secondary priorities. Other research could examine in more detail the connection between post-secondary reviews and realized post-secondary policy to better understand that relationship and the impact on different stakeholders in the system under study. Greater focus on globalization may allow for a broader analysis of how global trends influence post-secondary strategy, providing insights into the challenges of adapting global

trends to local contexts.

Post-secondary reviews continue to be a valuable approach to identifying and articulating strategic priorities for systems across Canada. More structured approaches to implementation, including resourcing the bureaucratic apparatuses to manage and oversee implementation, as well as funding new directions, may go a long way to ensure that post-secondary reviews are more effective in bringing strategic objectives to fruition.

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Appendix: A Partial List of Post-Secondary System Reviews in Canada, 1993 to 2021

Province	Year and Post-Secondary System Review Title
BC	2007 Campus 2020: Thinking Ahead
Alberta	2002 Alberta Post-secondary Education System: Developing the Blueprint for Change 2006 A Learning Alberta 2007 Advanced Education and Technology Review
Saskatchewan	1998 Saskatchewan Universities Funding Review: Final Report 2007 Post-Secondary Education Accessibility and Affordability Review
Manitoba	1993 Doing Things Differently: The Report of the University Education Review Commission and the related 1994 Response by government. 2001 Manitoba Training Strategy 2015 Manitoba's Post-Secondary Education Strategy: A Partnership for Excellence and Success 2017 Post-Secondary Education in Manitoba: A Blueprint for Opportunity and Growth 2017 Manitoba Colleges Review 2019 Institutional Mandate Letters 2019 Horizon Manitoba: Building a Brighter Future Together 2021 Skills, Talent, and Knowledge Strategy
Ontario	1993 Task Force on Advanced Training: No Dead Ends 1996 Report of the Advisory Panel on Future Directions for Postsecondary Education 2001 Portals and Pathways: A Review of Postsecondary Education in Ontario 2005 Ontario: A Leader in Learning 2005: Reaching Higher: The McGuinty Government Plan for PSE
Quebec	1998 Universities and the Future: Government Policy Options Regarding Quebec Universities (Consultation Paper) 2004 Parliamentary Committee on Education for the Quality, Accessibility and Funding of Universities 2005 Ministerial Guidelines for the Future of College Education in Quebec
New Brunswick	1993 To Live and Learn: The Challenge of Education and Training 2005 Quality Post-Secondary Opportunities: The Quality Learning Agenda Policy Statement for Post-Secondary Education and Training in New Brunswick 2007 Advantage New Brunswick: Report of the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick
Nova Scotia	2010 Report on the University System in Nova Scotia
Newfoundland	2005 Foundation for Success: White Paper on Public Post-Secondary Education 2021 All Hands On Deck: Responding to the Challenges of the 21 st Century by Leveraging Public Post-Secondary Education