Ontario's Universities: An Act of Public Imagination

Transforming Ontario's Public Universities Through Foresight and Social Innovation

By Cheryl Green, Jennifer-Amy Murphy, and Ian Rolston

Submitted to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design in Strategic Foresight and Innovation (SFI).

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ABSTRACT

Ontario's postsecondary education system resembles a *'house of cards'*; fragile, strained, and nearing collapse under the weight of structural inequities, financial precarity, and eroding public trust. This Major Research Project asks not how to preserve a failing system, but how to cultivate new architectures of resilience, imagination, and civic stewardship.

Using a multi-method approach that includes systems mapping, timeline analysis, semi-structured interviews, participatory foresight workshops, and wind tunnelling, the research traces the forces that have shaped Ontario's higher education landscape. Four divergent future scenarios are developed to surface critical uncertainties and strategic tensions, alongside seven strategic intervention pathways designed to foster relational governance, regenerative learning ecosystems, and distributed leadership. A roadmap for phased institutional transformation is proposed, emphasizing adaptive, participatory, and place-based approaches.

The findings show that transformation will not emerge through incremental reform but through courageous acts of imagination, relational trust, and collective stewardship. Futures are not inherited. They are cultivated, through choices made today, and through the relationships we dare to build and sustain.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the guidance, encouragement, and critical insights of many individuals and communities.

We are deeply grateful to Helen Kerr, our advisor, for her thoughtful leadership, steady support, and unwavering belief in both the work and in us. Her questions challenged us to dig deeper, and her encouragement helped carry this project forward.

We are especially grateful to our interviewees and workshop participants. You gave pieces of yourselves to this work, trusting us with your hopes, your questions, and your truths. You were more than participants; you were co-authors of what might yet be. Thank you for offering your wisdom and your courage to a future still in the making. This work carries your imprint.

To the leaders and stewards of post-secondary education. You stand at a doorway between what has been and what must become. Transformation is not only a strategy but a stewardship of hearts, of grief, of hope. We are reminded of interviewee Marc Jerry's reflection, that leading through change requires not just reading balance sheets but leaning into his lessons learned as a palliative care chaplain: to bear witness to uncertainty, to hold space for what is not yet clear, to guide with compassion, and to honour the communities we serve. May you lead with such knowing.

And to the future learners. This work is for you. May you inherit not an education system preserved in fear, but a living system rooted in care, resilience, and wonder, more just, more vibrant, and more alive to your potential. May you find open doors where once there were walls, and may your learning light the way for the futures we cannot yet see. Thank you for walking this path with us.

- Jennifer-Amy Murphy, Ian Rolston, and Cheryl Green

DEDICATION

To David, who held the dream with me when my hands were too full and to my vivacious boys, my companions in learning. Thank you for your patience, love, and support throughout this adventure.
To Jen and Ian. Thank you for walking this path alongside me. Your insight, laughter, and unwavering commitment made this adventure not only possible, but joyful.

To my SFI classmates. Thank you for the conversations that opened new worlds of thought, and for the perspectives, questions, and friendships that shaped my journey. Your curiosity and courage expanded my own.

- Cheryl Green

To my parents, David and Nancy Murphy. Thank you for rooting me in love, and for raising me to stand strong, think critically, and choose courage over comfort.

To Ian and Cheryl. Thank you for showing up, for staying in it, and for dreaming bigger when it would have been easier to settle. Your “yes, and!” spirit reminds me that brave futures are always built together, never alone.

To our SFI cohort. Your curiosity and courage were a constant reminder that both are nurtured in community.

- Jennifer-Amy Murphy

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- Ian Rolston

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Prologue: Precarious Foundations
Why the System Cannot Hold

"The problem is we often know the system isn't working, but we are still trying to patch it instead of imagining something fundamentally different."

- Interview with Lesley-Ann Noel, 2025

Ontario's postsecondary system stands on the verge of collapse, strained by chronic underfunding, deepening inequities, and eroding public trust. Yet this crisis is also a rare inflection point. If Boards, Senates, and institutional leaders are bold enough to embrace imagination, relational governance, and social innovation, the sector need not fall.

Instead, we invited you to cultivate a new future - one that reimagines universities as equitable, resilient, future-ready engines of societal transformation.

BEFORE WE BEGIN, TAKE A MOMENT TO PAUSE AND REFLECT:

If you had to choose just **three words** to capture your vision for the future of higher education in Ontario, what would they be?

Navigating This Document: A Guide for Reflective Readers

This document is both rigorous and reflective. It is an invitation to engage not only with analysis, but with imagination. Each chapter is organized into 3 interwoven elements:

- Overview: A high-level synthesis of the chapter's themes and key insights.
- Systemic Exploration**:** A deeper dive into data, research findings, and narrative framing.
- Provocation: A reflective prompt that invites you to pause and consider how the insights might resonate in your leadership, learning, or lived experience.

In Between: Cultivation Moments

Between chapters, you'll find five Cultivation Moments. These are intentional pauses for reflection, sensemaking, and regeneration. They encourage:

- Slowing down to engage complexity,
- Surfacing tensions that resist resolution,
- Recentering relational, ethical, and imaginative ways of knowing.

Choose Your Own Way In

Whether you are a sector leader, educator, policymaker, or curious individual, you will find multiple pathways into this work.

- If you're a "big picture" thinker:
  Start with the Prologue and Chapter 3. These sections offer a system-level diagnosis and four future scenarios that reimagine the sector's trajectory.
- If you're a "details-first" reader
  Begin with Chapters 2 and 4, where timelines, interviews, and scenario stress-testing provide granular insights into present dynamics.
- If you're a "strategy seeker"
  Go to Chapter 5. It presents intervention pathways and a roadmap for transformation and is designed to move ideas into implementation.
- If you're a "reflective practitioner"
  Linger in the Cultivation Moments. Let the questions guide you. In complex systems, it is relationship, not resolutions, that unlock transformation.

Glossary And Emerging Shared Language

This glossary outlines key terms and definitions that reflect the emerging shared language used throughout the report. The intent is to support consistent understanding across interest holders and decision-makers.

Table 1: Glossary of Key Terms and Definitions

Term	Working Definition
Academic Freedom	The principle that scholars have the right to pursue knowledge, research, teaching, and public engagement without undue interference or restriction, serving the broader public good through critical inquiry and innovation.
Bioregion	A geographic area defined not by political borders, but by natural boundaries-such as watersheds, soil types, native species, and climate patterns. It's also shaped by the cultural practices, languages, and histories of the people who live in deep relationship with that land. Rather than seeing land as property or backdrop, a bioregional perspective sees it as home, teacher, and partner.
Corridor Funding Model	A funding structure that caps the number of domestic students a university can have funded by the province. This model essentially sets an upper and lower limit (the "corridor") for institutional enrolment, with funding remaining stable as long as enrolment stays within that range.
Ecosystem Mapping	A systems practice that visually represents the relationships, flows, and interdependencies between actors, structures, and forces within a given system - helping identify leverage points for strategic intervention and renewal.

Education as a Bioregion	Teaching people how to see themselves as nodes in a living network; co-responsible for its health, resilience, and evolution.
Emergence	The way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions (Brown, 2017).
Foresight	A structured, strategic practice of exploring possible, probable, and preferable futures to inform present-day decision-making, innovation, and systemic resilience.
Horizon Scanning	A foresight method for identifying early signals of change, emerging trends, and potential disruptions across the social, technological, economic, environmental, and political, values, and legal landscape.
Imagination as Strategic Infrastructure	Treating collective imagination as a foundational civic function embedded in governance, learning, and innovation - not a peripheral exercise.
Interbeing	Living with life and *as* life. The idea that we are not separate from nature, from others, or from the systems we participate in, we are part of the web of life itself. Wahl uses the term to signal a relational worldview, where identity, purpose, and knowing emerge through connection and participation, rather than isolation or dominance.
Niche Discovery	Identifying emerging spaces of possibility within complex systems where innovation, relational approaches, and alternative models can take root and flourish, often during periods of structural transition or collapse.

Regenerative Design	Is capable of continuous learning and transformation in response to, and anticipation of, inevitable change (Wahl, 2016).
Relational Governance	Governance models that prioritize shared agency, distributed power, diverse knowledges, and civic trust over hierarchical control.
Systemic Resilience	The capacity of institutions to adapt, regenerate, and thrive through complexity, rooted in relationships rather than only efficiency.
Social Innovation	A collective creative process that addresses social needs through three interconnected dimensions: the creation of products or services that meet human needs, the use of inclusive and participatory processes, and the active challenge of existing power structures (adapted from Bund et al., 2015) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. They are innovations that are both good for society and enhance society's capacity to act (Rob and Murray et al 2010 as noted by Wahl, 2016).
Sustainability	Is a progression towards a functional awareness that all things are connected; that the systems of commerce, building, society, geology, and nature are really one system of integrated relationships; that these systems are co-participants in the evolution of life (Wahl, 2016).
Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA)	Is a formal, multi-year accountability and planning document between a public post-secondary institution and the provincial government.

Systems Map	A visual and conceptual tool that reveals the underlying structures, feedback loops, and relationships within a system, making complexity visible and enabling strategic leverage for systemic change.
Strategic Resistance	Using imaginative foresight and relational design not as escapism, but as deliberate tools to challenge stagnation and build new civic possibilities.
The Great Reset	A reframing of the sector's current crisis as an opportunity for structural and cultural regeneration, not just survival or incremental reform.
Transformability	The ability to build and increase the capacity for learning and adaptation.
Two loop Model	A systems change framework that illustrates how emergent, regenerative systems grow alongside declining legacy systems- highlighting the need to "hospice" old structures while nurturing new possibilities.
Wind tunnelling	A stress-testing foresight technique that evaluates how proposed strategies or innovations would perform across multiple alternative future scenarios; identifying risks, vulnerabilities, and resilient opportunities.

CULTIVATION MOMENT 1

"In the transformative journey towards regenerative human cultures, how we get there - what relationships we form within the human family and with the community of life, our path of continuous learning and transformation along the way- matters more than arriving. In fact, there is no arrival at the end of this journey, only continuous adaptation and transformation."

- Daniel Christian Wahl

Positionality

Cheryl Green - Researcher and Design Strategist Exploring the Impact on Human Behaviour

I approach this work as a white female settler residing in Toronto, navigating life as a design and foresight practitioner, educator, wife and mother. My work focuses on the intersection of technology, design, and human behaviour, exploring how design practices can unintentionally contribute to addictive behaviours and the erosion of autonomy. First-hand experiences as an educator in Ontario's education system have revealed a reactive system misaligned with strategically addressing the sector's complexities, uncertainty, and evolving needs of learners and staff alike, as sustained instability undermines the well-being of both staff and learners. I believe that integrating social innovation in higher education through human-centred design, strategic foresight, and ethical technology practices is critical to supporting better outcomes for staff and learners. My connection to this research is personal as well as professional. I grew up in a sleeper town outside of Toronto, surrounded by cornfields, and spent my summers exploring the forests and lakes near Algonquin Park. This early connection to the natural world has evolved into a deep curiosity about regenerative thinking, influencing the way I see systems, communities, and the possibilities for educational transformation. I am committed to ensuring these outcomes are realized through reflection, imagination, ethical decision-making, and practices that inform physical and digital educational environments, supporting autonomy and holistic well-being.

Jennifer-Amy Murphy - Educator and Design Strategist Shaping the Future of Inclusive Learning

I am a white, cisgender settler woman living in Waterloo, Ontario. My academic background in Life Sciences and Education from Queen's University, combined with my professional experience across Ontario's K-12 public system as a Special Education Coordinator, grounds my understanding of how systemic structures can both enable and limit equitable access to learning. These experiences shape my commitment to designing educational environments that are inclusive, adaptive, and future-oriented. My work with diverse youth communities, along with my expertise in design thinking and Universal Design for Learning, has deepened my awareness of how identity, socio-economic factors, and systemic barriers intersect within education. Through my governance experience as a Graduate Student Senator at OCAD University, I have also gained a deeper appreciation for the complexities faced by educational leaders. This has reinforced my belief that foresight in leadership is an essential competency for driving systemic change and transformation across Ontario's post-secondary system. I acknowledge that my positionality and privilege inform my perspective, and I engage in ongoing critical reflection to commit to inclusivity and innovation in addressing challenges within Ontario's post-secondary education system.

Ian Rolston - Design Strategist and Vision Specialist Seeing our World Differently

I am a Black Canadian male settler of Barbadian heritage, a son of immigrants, a brother, husband, and father. With over two decades of experience in design leadership across sectors such as design, education, and corporate real estate, I have witnessed firsthand how systemic inequities manifest in social systems, built environments, and institutional structures. My journey through Ontario’s educational system, marked by systemic challenges for racialized learners, has deeply influenced my focus on the economic instability and human inequities embedded in higher education. I seek to bridge the gap between people and systems, advocating for social innovations that connect our shared humanity. My commitment to transformation informs my perspective on the challenges within Ontario's post-secondary education system, emphasizing the need for systemic change that centers core issues impacting people and reclaims marginalized knowledge, voices, and experiences to reimagine systems and learner experiences. Engaging in this research has created space for ongoing reflexivity to ensure respectful engagement with people and processes, and to address the challenges higher education faces that threaten its future viability.

What Drove Our Approach to the Work

Ontario's postsecondary education system has been shaped by legacies of settler dominance, industrialized nation-building, and hierarchical knowledge economies. Over time, these histories have calcified into governance siloes, systemic inequities, and financial fragility. Without intentional transformation, we risk perpetuating these inherited structures into a future that they cannot sustain.

With this in mind, we embark on our research journey with critical awareness, informed by concern, curiosity, and steadfast optimism that change is possible. We have listened attentively to the system, to its voices of fear and aspiration, to the human stories that animate its structures and bear the burdens of its impact. The complexities present in Ontario's postsecondary education system are significant: economic volatility, labour inequities, and demographic enrollment shifts have created intense pressures across the sector. Yet within these constraints lies profound possibility. We invite you, the reader, to momentarily quiet the noise of headlines, political posturing, and even personal experience.

Consider with us: What futures might we forfeit if we do not collectively imagine the futures we need?

Our work positions imagination not as escapism, but as strategic resistance to inertia. We do not dismiss the realities of the system; rather, we resolve to imagine and design strategic interventions, strengthening what serves our collective good and replacing what no longer does, in order to cultivate a more resilient, relational postsecondary ecosystem in Ontario.

Our approach rests on three interdependent pillars:

- **Imagination as Strategic Competency:** Embedding foresight and creativity into governance, leadership, and pedagogy.
- **Collective Stewardship and Relational Governance:** Interconnecting power to foster shared value, honouring diverse knowledges and lived expertise.
- **Systemic Resilience through Social Innovation:** Regenerating educational ecosystems to meet complex internal and societal needs holistically.

Futures are not inevitable.

They are relational.

They are contested.

They are possible; if we dare to imagine them.

Shall we begin?

CHAPTER 1

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The story until today.

Chapter 1 - How Did We Get Here?

"We have tweaked and tweaked and tweaked, but the system has accumulated too many anomalies. We are at a tipping point."

- Interview with Jessica Riddell, 2024

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Ontario's postsecondary education system stands at a critical inflection point.

How did we get here?

To explore this question, the chapter begins by outlining the research methodology and analytical approach that shaped the inquiry. Grounded in systems thinking, strategic foresight, and design-based inquiry, the methodology offers a structured lens to examine Ontario's postsecondary system.

Following this, the chapter introduces a systems map that traces the interconnected forces shaping governance, funding, public trust, and institutional purpose. To connect how historical trajectories, rooted in settler colonialism, nation-building, industrialized education models, and hierarchical knowledge systems, have compounded over time to contribute to today's complex challenges:

- The entrenchment of governance siloes,
- Deepening systemic inequities,
- Enduring financial fragility, and
- Growing internal and community-based institutional disparities.

This confluence of challenges has led to considerable instability in institutions - a painful reality likened to a *'house of cards'*, where once-stable structures have become precarious and vulnerable to collapse under the cumulative pressures unless significant systemic redesign is pursued. Like a *'house of cards'*, the system appears stable but is built on precarious funding, fragile governance, and eroding public trust, leaving it vulnerable to sudden collapse.

Research Methodology and Analytical Approach

Research Purpose

Within this uncertainty lies a profound opportunity: to move beyond reactive survival strategies and reimagine universities as regenerative civic infrastructures; institutions capable of advancing collective flourishing, resilience, and relational renewal.

This research critically examines the systemic forces that have shaped Ontario's higher education landscape, while envisioning alternative futures rooted in relational governance, strategic imagination, and systemic resilience.

Specifically, our work aims to:

- Illuminate how historical patterns have produced current structural fragilities;
- Surface opportunities for systemic renewal and regenerative transformation;
- Propose imaginative, ethically grounded interventions to reshape Ontario's postsecondary sector; and
- Foster a shared language and conceptual framework to inform collaborative, cross-sector action.

Rather than only describing systemic complexity, our work seeks to cultivate strategic actions that can enable meaningful renewal across Ontario's postsecondary ecosystem.

Research Overview

Faced with a system marked by fragility, complexity, and eroding public trust, this research was designed with a methodological approach not just to diagnose institutional challenges but to imagine strategic pathways for renewal.

This Major Research Project examines how Ontario's public universities might reimagine their structures, governance, and public purpose to better support social innovation, particularly in the face of growing institutional precarity and declining public trust.

Rather than asking simply what is broken, this inquiry seeks to uncover what new architectures such as governance, pedagogical, and relational frameworks could be constructed in place of increasingly fragile institutional norms. These existing norms in many cases resemble a house of cards more than a foundation for the public good.

Drawing on principles of strategic foresight, systems thinking, and design-based inquiry, the project integrates literature synthesis, semi structured interviews, and participatory futures work to surface institutional tensions and co create alternative narratives of change. Methodologically, the project is grounded in the belief that complex systems cannot be understood or transformed through linear tools alone. It weaves together multiple methods to expose different layers of institutional reality including historical patterns, structural barriers, discursive narratives, and emerging possibilities.

Across all phases, the process emphasizes reflexivity through team dialogue and synthesis, generativity, and systems sensitivity.

Research Process

This research project employed a mixed method approach grounded in systems thinking and strategic foresight to examine the complex dynamics shaping Ontario's postsecondary education system. The central aim was to reveal the structural conditions, historical trajectories, and leverage points that influence institutional performance and policy outcomes across time.

The research unfolded in five integrated stages. First, the challenge was scoped through a comprehensive review of government documents, strategic policy frameworks, historical texts, and scholarly literature. This process enabled the identification of persistent tensions in the system such as fiscal strain, institutional autonomy, and colonial legacies in governance.

Second, a systems map was developed to visualize the interconnected relationships within the postsecondary ecosystem. Using causal loop diagrams and system archetypes, the map illustrates how key feedback loops such as success to the successful or shifting the burden have shaped the evolution of governance, funding, and academic culture from the 1800s through to projected futures in 2050. This mapping work brought coherence to the underlying structures that often remain implicit in policy discourse.

Third, the analysis progressed to identifying emerging patterns and themes across the system. These were distilled into a series of core tensions and insights ranging from governance inefficiency to institutional bloat that helped to reveal both constraints and potential areas for transformation. Historical dynamics were layered with current policy tensions to ground the findings in a coherent systems narrative.

Fourth, the project integrated foresight tools such as back casting, scenario development, and wind tunnelling to explore how future pathways might unfold if structural conditions are left unaddressed or strategically leveraged. The resulting foresight-informed interventions were stress tested across multiple future contexts to assess their resilience and relevance and were designed to guide adaptive responses and support regenerative system redesign.

Finally, the entire process was validated through feedback and iterative refinement. Each phase informed the next, creating a recursive loop of research, reflection, and rearticulation. The resulting methodology emphasizes not only analytical rigour but also relevance to real world transformation, enabling decision makers to see both the forest and the trees.

Sampling and Source Selection

Research began with a targeted literature review synthesizing insights from institutional change in higher education, social innovation, governance, futures thinking, and decolonial scholarship. These are key domains shaping current debates around institutional transformation. Sources included both peer reviewed academic research and grey literature such as government reports, ecosystem mappings, and institutional frameworks including Lapointe and Nemtin 2023.

Rather than aiming for comprehensive coverage, the review focused on surfacing key tensions, patterns, and conceptual gaps particularly those relevant to the Ontario postsecondary context. Grey literature was intentionally incorporated to reflect current discourse and emergent practice.

Interview and workshop participants were selected to capture diverse institutional perspectives and governance experiences within Ontario's higher education sector. Interest holders included university administrators, faculty, students, staff, consultants, and policy experts, representing institutions of varying size, type, and mandate. Selection emphasized individuals with current or recent involvement in institutional planning, governance, sector level innovation, or community-based initiatives, ensuring a mix of system vantage points across both phases of engagement.

Together, these methods create a layered and adaptive approach to understanding and transforming Ontario's postsecondary system. These methods lay the groundwork for the insights, interventions, and future-facing analysis that follow.

With the methodological foundation established, we now turn to a deeper exploration of the system itself. The following section presents the structural dynamics, feedback loops, and patterns that emerged from the mapping and analysis. These insights help explain how Ontario's postsecondary institutions arrived at this moment of fragility and what might lie ahead.

SYSTEMIC EXPLORATION: A Systems Story

To better understand the dynamics shaping our current reality, we dive deeper into the question, *"How did we get here?"* Through a combination of systems and story mapping, we trace the underlying structures, feedback loops, and behavioral patterns that have contributed to today's complex challenges. This approach allows us to move beyond isolated events and surface-level symptoms, uncovering the deeper systemic forces at play.

A system map is a strategic tool used to represent how different components of a complex system interact over time. It serves as a narrative, visually revealing how decisions, relationships, and institutional structures interconnect to shape long-term outcomes. By making these interdependencies visible, system maps help us identify root causes and uncover high-leverage points for meaningful, sustainable change.

This idea of leverage points, which are places within a complex system where a small shift can produce significant and lasting transformation, was introduced by Donella Meadows (2008) in her seminal work on systems thinking. Her contributions continue to shape how leaders and practitioners understand and intervene in systems marked by complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence.

Within systems maps, there are **system archetypes**; recurring patterns of behavior that frequently appear within these maps. Archetypes such as "limits to growth," "shifting the burden," and "escalation" illustrate systemic traps that, if not addressed, can lead to stagnation or unintended consequences. Identifying these patterns equips practitioners with the foresight to intervene more effectively and guide complex systems toward more sustainable and adaptive futures.

The archetypes referenced in this section are drawn from *Design Journeys Through Complex Systems* by Jones and van Ael (2022), which introduces these tools as a practical framework for navigating complexity and driving systemic transformation through design-led approaches and are based on decades of work by systems dynamics thinkers.

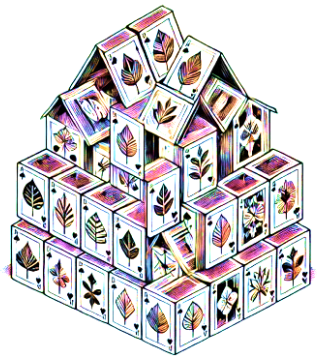
Systems Story: A Summary

Ontario universities are navigating a complex landscape shaped by historical ideals, structural inequities, and evolving public expectations. Once grounded in the romantic ideal of moral cultivation and public good, universities were later reshaped by industrial and national agendas, reinforcing settler dominance and elitist knowledge systems. The bicameral governance model, originally designed to balance academic autonomy and financial accountability, now suffers from inertia and governance silos that contribute to decision-making inefficiencies.

While tenure systems continue to protect academic freedom, they also entrench inequities, marginalizing contract faculty and under-resourced institutions in a two-tiered structure reinforced by current research funding processes, incentives and evaluation systems.

Financial instability across Ontario's universities has deepened due to capped provincial funding, rigid Strategic Mandate Agreements, and an overreliance on international student tuition revenues, culminating in institutional financial fragility and cost-cutting measures that offer temporary relief but further weaken political will for public reinvestment.

This persistent turmoil has left universities struggling to reaffirm their value amid growing skepticism, constrained innovation for the public good, and eroded trust across the province. Yet a path forward lies in imagining a "Great Reset," a strategic realignment where universities and governments become co-creators of public solutions, shifting from adversarial dynamics to regenerative partnerships that rebuild higher education's purpose, legitimacy, and societal relevance in a complex world. This is the story we now have the opportunity to rewrite.



Age of Romance

Overview

The "Age of Romance" in Canadian university history marks a foundational era when “centres of learning” paired students and scholars in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Prior to the 19th century, universities served as monastic space devoted to personal and moral development, rooted in classical traditions and characterized by close scholar-student relationships. This romantic view shifted in the 19th century with the introduction of the German Humboldtian model, which unified research and teaching under the principles of academic freedom and inquiry. Simultaneously, the industrial model gained traction in Germany and the United States, positioning universities as engines of national growth and innovation, aligning their purpose with economic development. Canadian universities absorbed both models, evolving from sites of moral cultivation to strategic institutions that served both nation-building and industrial competitiveness. Despite these transformations, the romantic ideal of the university as a public good, committed to intellectual exploration and societal stewardship, remains a powerful narrative, especially as institutions today confront rising commercialization, performance pressures, and questions of relevance.

1. In The Beginning

Universities, positioned as a centre of learning, supported the consolidation of settler empowerment. This empowerment reinforced British settler culture and loyalty, sustaining the university’s foundational role and perpetuating a colonial educational paradigm from the outset.

2. Building A Nation

The government's extension of influence supported the growth of institutional autonomy, which became a mechanism to advance national ways of being and consolidate state power. As the nation's power grew, it further justified and reinforced governmental influence, advancing the project of nation-building through institutional strength.

3. Increasing Power

This “Success to the Successful” systems archetype illustrates how the distribution of national resources advanced national interests at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty. This dynamic weakened Indigenous peoples’ power reinforced the dominance of the settler class and established systemic inequities that persist across generations.

4. Industrialized Learning

The introduction of the German Humboldtian education model, which emphasized research-driven and autonomous institutions, laid the foundation for the expansion of universities as engines of economic growth and nation-building. As universities grew during industrialization, they diversified their disciplines and institutional scale, aligning increasingly with elitist and settler-state priorities. Influenced by figures like Vannevar Bush, universities became central tools of industrial and technological policy, reinforcing settler culture while justifying continued public investment as a means of driving national economic progress.

Governance Like It’s 1890

Overview

The bicameral governance model in Canadian universities was designed to balance academic autonomy with financial accountability by dividing authority between the Senate (academic matters) and the Board of Governors (financial oversight). The Senate upheld academic quality, the Boards ensured financial accountability, and governments respected university institutional autonomy so long as they demonstrated public value.

Over time, this balance has weakened under pressure from government performance-based metrics, global rankings, and increased marketization. Boards have adopted corporate management strategies focused on efficiency, while Senates have become procedurally rigid and slow to respond to institutional change. This divergence has contributed to institutional fatigue, disengagement, inflexibility,

and growing tensions between governance bodies, faculty and administration. As the alignment between academic values and managerial imperatives weakens, decision-making becomes adversarial rather than collaborative. Universities risk losing their adaptive capacity and public legitimacy when governance structures no longer support shared purpose.

5. Decision-Making Inefficiency

The Shifting the Burden archetype helps explains how Canadian universities' bicameral governance structures often defaults to Board-led, compliance-driven fixes aimed at satisfying government mandates. While these responses may offer short-term relief, they bypass meaningful collaboration with the Senates, undermining academic ownership, and creating long-term inefficiencies in institutional alignment with provincial and federal priorities.

6. The Siloes

In many Canadian universities, Senates oversee academic matters while Boards of Governors control financial and strategic priorities, creating competing mandates and governance silos. When one body implements a "fix", such as cost-cutting, program restructuring, or governance reforms, the solution often fails due to conflicts with academic autonomy that resists Board-driven processes. Financial decisions made by the Board often overlook academic implications, further slowing adoption. Over time, short-term decisions aimed at stabilizing governance or budgets erode trust, morale, and academic integrity.

7. Institutional Bloat

Financial instability leads to operational strain and resource constraints, which exacerbate financial pressures, creating a vicious cycle of internal overload. In response, universities often pursue revenue-generating activities intended to improve the student experience, but as institutional complexity increases, many become insufficiently equipped to manage these initiatives, further straining resources and financial stability. Together, these feedback loops depict how misalignment and short-term administrative management can undermine financial stabilization efforts and deepen systemic inefficiencies and organizational fragility.

Winners + Losers

Overview

The divide between “winners” and “losers” in Ontario’s postsecondary landscape is widening, driven by structural inequalities embedded in tenure systems, faculty precarity, and research funding mechanisms. While tenure and academic unions were established in the 1950’s to protect job security, scholarly independence, and to resist external interference, the tenure system has also created a class divide: tenured faculty enjoy stable employment and academic freedom, while contract academic staff, who now teach a majority of courses at some institutions, face low pay, limited research support, and exclusion from institutional decision-making. This inequity is further entrenched by the Tri-Council funding system, Canada’s three main federal research funding bodies: the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), which disproportionately benefits top-tier research universities equipped with grant-writing offices and institutional prestige. These universities secure more federal grants, expand their research capacity, and attract elite talent, reinforcing their dominance. Meanwhile, smaller or under-resourced institutions lack the infrastructure to compete, restricting their research contributions and advancement. This feedback loop privileges already-advantaged universities and undermines equity across the sector, raising critical concerns about the future of knowledge production, institutional relevance, and fairness in Ontario’s public university system.

8. Unions to the Rescue?

The Escalation archetype illustrates how efforts to retain decision-making power can lead to increased polarization and reduced collaboration between government bodies, university faculty, staff and communities. Breaking this cycle requires renewed commitment to collaboration, dialogue, and mutual understanding.

9. Haves And Have Nots Part 1: Tenure vs. Non-Tenured

The "Fixes That Fail" archetype represents the unintended consequences of relying heavily on adjunct and non-tenure-track faculty to address budgetary constraints in higher education. While this approach offers short-term financial relief, it inadvertently fosters systemic inequities, and long-term challenges such as classism, precarious work and undesirable working environments that could harm an institution's reputation and deter talent from associating with faculty. This archetype underscores the importance of addressing root causes, such as sustainable funding models and equitable employment practices, rather than resorting to short-term solutions that compromise institutional integrity and educational outcomes.

10. Haves And Have Nots Part 2: Tri-Council

The Attractiveness Principal archetype articulates how Ontario's top-tier universities continue to dominate Tri-Council research awards by offering strong faculty incentives and institutional support. This dynamic reinforces their prestige and ability to attract further funding, while lower-tier universities struggle to compete, perpetuating structural inequities in research capacity across the system.

No Money, More Problems

Overview

Ontario universities are facing deepening financial challenges, shaped by a history of provincial corridor funding and Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) that restrict institutional autonomy. Since the early 2010s, the corridor funding model has frozen provincial base grants, allocating funding based on enrollment ranges rather than growth, while SMAs tie funding to narrowly defined performance metrics. These mechanisms limit universities' ability to raise domestic tuition, especially after the province's 10% tuition cut and freeze in 2019, further straining their financial resilience. To offset these constraints, institutions increasingly turned to international student tuition, which remains substantially higher than domestic rates. The federal government's 2024 international student cap abruptly disrupted this dependency,

exposing the extent to which financial stability had become reliant on global student flows. Compounded by decades of underinvestment from both federal and provincial governments, Ontario’s universities now face a structural funding crisis that threatens their long-term sustainability, academic quality, and accessibility.

11. Provincial Posturing

Ontario universities' attempts to grow are increasingly constrained. The Limits to Growth loop articulates how a fixed provincial funding envelope and performance-based Strategic Mandate Agreements restrict institutional expansion. Although universities seek to expand enrollment and improve performance metrics, capped funding and tuition freezes limit revenue growth contributing to persistent systemic financial strain.

12. Federal Capping

Ontario universities have increasingly recruited international students to stabilize budgets yet have often failed to match this growth with investment in services and infrastructure due to financial instability. As demand surges and support systems lag, the Growth and Underinvestment archetype reveals how these pressures trigger federal intervention such as the international student cap further limiting growth. This dynamic illustrates how short-term revenue strategies, without adequate reinvestment, exacerbate ongoing financial vulnerability.

13. Not Feeling the Funds

The Shifting the Burden archetype illustrates how universities have addressed chronic public underfunding through resource austerity and private revenue streams, offering short-term relief but masking the core issue. This reliance weakens political will for public reinvestment, undermining efforts toward long-term financial sustainability. Over time, the system becomes locked into a cycle of short-term fixes, delaying meaningful structural change.

Crisis Hangover

Overview

Canadian universities are experiencing a “crisis hangover,” marked by existential uncertainty about their public purpose, value, and long-term sustainability. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a shift to online learning, challenged the legitimacy of traditional credentials, and opened space for alternative education providers, including tech firms and corporate-led platforms. Their perceived relevance to society, the economy, and the environment hinges on how effectively they can rearticulate their public mission, societal contributions, and value proposition. Simultaneously, growing public skepticism, fueled by questions of relevance and limited visible impact, has weakened trust and reduced political appetite for reinvestment. This collective disillusionment leads to underinvestment, which, in turn, further erodes perceived value. Government funding caps and rigid economic mandates constrain universities’ ability to engage in transformative partnerships, deliver social innovation, or reach marginalized communities authentically. If unaddressed, these reinforcing cycles risk rendering universities irrelevant.

14. Universities: Who I am?

This reinforcing loop captures how universities' sense of purpose and mission shapes their relevance and perceived value to society, the economy, and the environment. In the wake of COVID-19, the rapid shift to online learning, increased public scrutiny of credential value, and the rise of alternative tech-based education models have challenged traditional institutions to prove their worth. Without reaffirming their distinct public mission, universities risk being eclipsed by corporate-led credentialing and market-driven education platforms, making their continued relevance contingent on how clearly and boldly they articulate their evolving societal role.

15. What's in it for Me/Us?

"Tragedy of the Commons" archetype depicts how public distrust in the value of universities leads to investment apathy, further eroding perceived benefits and reinforcing societal disillusionment. This reinforcing loop highlights how the persistence of inequitable systems fails to incentivize social innovation. Government funding limits constrain universities' ability to deliver value through sustained engagement, while continued reliance on traditional economic models restricts transformative partnerships. Together, these dynamics sustain unrealized collective benefits, diminish critical investment and threaten the broader public good of higher education.

The Great Reset

Overview

In the wake of growing fiscal pressure and social complexity, Ontario universities and governments increasingly behave as "accidental adversaries," pursuing parallel but misaligned goals that unintentionally undermine shared outcomes. Governments seek economic efficiency and workforce development, while universities aim to preserve academic autonomy and knowledge production. Yet these goals need not conflict. If reimagined as mutually reinforcing partners, universities and governments could co-create solutions to public challenges and advance social innovation, making higher education more relevant to the lives of everyday Ontarians.

This strategic realignment would require a shift away from austerity policies and funding caps, which currently constrain institutional capacity for social innovation. A renewed social contract, rooted in collaboration, would enable universities to act as civic infrastructure, fostering inclusive innovation and bolstering regenerative resilience. Instead of competing interests, the 'Great Reset" envisions an interdependent system where both parties thrive by focusing on long-term public value rather than short-term outputs.

16. Can You Imagine...

Universities and governments often act as Accidental Adversaries pursuing parallel but misaligned goals instead of collaborating as partners. By evolving into mutually reinforcing allies, they could more effectively realize their shared aspirations. Together, they could focus on delivering social innovation and solving public challenges, enhancing their collective value to everyday citizens rather than serving primarily academic or industry interests. Such collaboration would foster economic innovation, benefiting government, the public, and industries alike, while shifting resources from austerity towards reinvestment. To facilitate this transformation, all levels of government need to reconsider funding and funding caps that currently limit budgets and underfund universities, constraining their capacity to embrace this future role. By addressing these funding challenges, a new cycle of co-created public value could emerge; shifting from scarcity thinking to strategic reinvestment in higher education as public/civic innovation infrastructure.

A Systems Map: A Map of Ontario's Postsecondary System

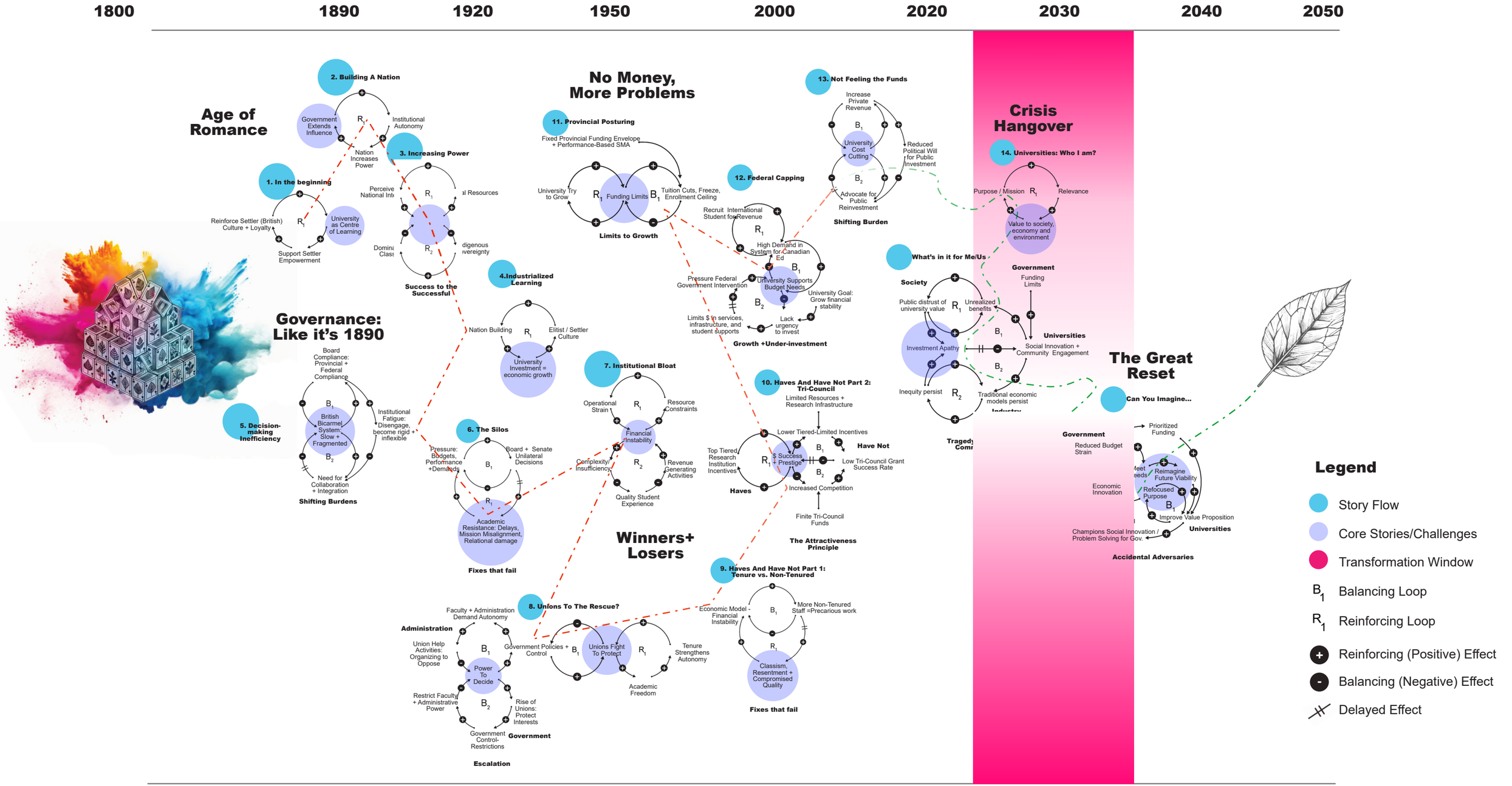


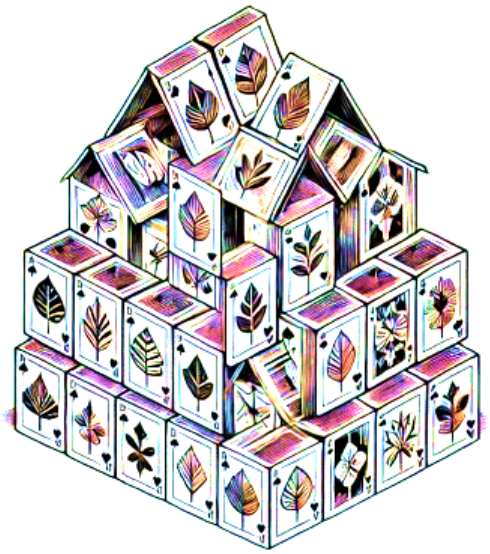
Figure 2 Systems Map of University Governance and Funding Dynamics in Canada (1800–2050)

Metaphor - Introducing the 'house of cards'

Ontario’s postsecondary education system resembles a *'house of cards'*: a structure that appears stable but is fragile and susceptible to collapse due to strain, environmental shifts, or foundational weaknesses.

The ***'house of cards'*** metaphor emerged during interviews with interest-holders and aptly captures the sector’s current fragility: seemingly stable on the surface yet anchored to a precarious foundation of short-term funding strategies, siloed governance, politicized decision-making, and wavering public trust.

In plain terms, a *'house of cards'* cannot be stabilized through mere realignment. It requires a reinforced foundation and strengthened connection points - rooted in future-oriented thinking, relational governance, systemic equity, and resilience.



PROVOCATION

The time for incremental reform has passed. Ontario's universities must engage in intentional, strategic reimagining to develop regenerative, adaptive institutions that are responsive to the complexity, diversity, and collective purpose in a rapidly changing society.

The path forward demands courage, imagination, and a collective redefinition of what higher education is - and who it must ultimately serve.

REFLECTION QUESTION

What structures, relationships, and values must we be willing to dismantle or reimagine?

What new foundations will we design to sustain a regenerative future?

CULTIVATION MOMENT 2

What Holds This House Up?

At first glance, Ontario's postsecondary education system seems orderly: structured by established policies, mandates, and traditions. However, this system precariously balances on intersecting vulnerabilities from rigid governance silos, financial instability, increasing inequities, and a diminishing public perception of its value.

What currently supports this fragile structure is not genuine resilience, but rather a series of reactive, and at best, temporary reinforcements, which include;

- Short-term funding strategies that conceal chronic underinvestment,
- Performance-driven metrics that reward visibility rather than meaningful contribution.
- Governance traditions are intended for stability rather than adaptability,
- Ideological rigidity that favours singular institutional models at the expense of diverse missions, and
- Political pressures that restrict universities to narrow economic roles.

These elements are held together by governance inertia, habit, and political expediency, resting atop a fractured foundation that is on the verge of failure.

As one interviewee poignantly noted, "The 'house of cards' will collapse... and how we choose to rebuild it will determine whether we repeat the same patterns or cultivate something truly regenerative."

CHAPTER 2

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Systems stories and the metaphor.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

"Social innovation is not a place that you arrive at. It's about building the capacity for ongoing response over long stretches of time."

- Frances Westley

This chapter offers a systems-level analysis of Ontario's postsecondary sector, synthesizing findings from the literature review and four phases of research to highlight key dynamics, structural vulnerabilities, and emerging pathways for transformation.

Literature Review

The literature situates Ontario's challenges within broader academic debates on governance, financialization, public trust erosion, and the evolving civic role of universities. It shows how colonial legacies, industrialization, and hierarchical knowledge systems continue to constrain institutional adaptability, equity, and legitimacy.

Analysis and Key Findings

Phase 1: Timeline and Systems Framing

Maps historical developments and structural patterns from the 1800s to the present.

Phase 2: Drivers, Trends, and Signals

Identifies emerging forces shaping the future of postsecondary education.

Phase 3: Semi-Structured Interviews

Draws insights from 23 interviews with sector leaders, surfacing four core tensions:

- Fragile governance cultures
- Financial precarity and volatile funding dependencies
- Constrained institutional imagination
- Conflicting narratives about the public purpose of higher education

These tensions underscore the sector's fraying coherence and the urgent need for systemic redesign.

Phase 4: Scenario development and foresight workshops

Through participatory foresight exercises, four alternative future scenarios (Disciplined, Growth, Transformation, and Collapse) were developed and stress tested through participatory foresight. This revealed key leverage points and strategic fault lines that will shape possible futures.

Financial Dynamics

Special attention is given to the current financial dynamics underpinning systemic fragility. The analysis traces the sector's growing dependence on tuition-driven revenue, international student recruitment, and performance-based funding metrics, trends that have amplified vulnerabilities, intensified competition, and exacerbated disparities across institutions.

Points of Discussion

Critical points of discussion include:

- The profound misalignment between institutional aspirations and funding realities
- The structural limits of incremental reform approaches
- The vital role of imagination, relational governance, and regenerative social innovation as core pathways to systemic resilience and renewal

Ontario's postsecondary education system, while fragile and deeply challenged, possesses latent capacities for transformational renewal - if institutions, policymakers, and communities are willing to courageously cultivate something new.

Research Question and Guiding Question

How might Ontario's public universities transform into resilient centres of social innovation to achieve sustained impact using foresight-driven actionable strategies?

SYSTEMIC EXPLORATION: Insights and Systemic Patterns

Building on the methodology outlined in Chapter 1, this section presents a deeper dive into the analytical insights that emerged through a literature review, system mapping, interviews, and a foresight workshop. Here, we trace the underlying dynamics shaping institutional fragility, tension, and transformation potential across Ontario's postsecondary landscape.

Literature Review

Framing the Transformation: Why Ontario Universities Must Evolve

Ontario's public universities are balancing precariously atop a 'house of cards': structures that appear stable but are increasingly fragile under systemic pressures. Designed to serve the public good through education, research, and civic engagement, today's institutions rest on increasingly fragile foundations: rigid governance models, financial precarity, declining public investment, and performance metrics, such as publication incentives and research funding tied to narrow academic outputs, that often undermine their broader social mission (Cinar & Benneworth, 2021; Milley & Szijarto, 2023).

These risks are no longer hypothetical. In 2023, a government-appointed Blue-Ribbon Panel confirmed that Ontario's postsecondary institutions face a "serious risk" to financial sustainability, citing the lowest per-student funding in Canada, a long-standing tuition freeze, and an unsustainable reliance on international student fees (Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2023).

These financial vulnerabilities amplify broader systemic pressures; from pandemic recovery and rising inequality to climate instability and eroding public trust. This moment is not merely a breakdown in operations; it is an inflection point- an opportunity to dismantle outdated structures and imagine more resilient architectures of purpose, pedagogy, and public good.

Riddell (2024) captures this moment with clarity and urgency, arguing that the solution lies not in shoring up failing systems through individual resilience, but in rewiring the institutional architecture itself. At the core of her analysis is the widening gap between what universities profess to value and what their systems incentivize in practice; a dissonance that generates mistrust, disengagement, and institutional inertia. Addressing this gap requires a shift from transactional, performance-based models toward structures that are ethically grounded, socially responsive, and capable of sustaining human flourishing.

The systemic imperative for renewal is echoed by Wahl (2016), who envisions regeneration requiring both hospice workers for the dying system and midwives for the new. This dual responsibility entails acknowledging the unsustainability of current structures while creating space for transformative emergence. In his vision, resilience arises not from control or prediction, but from the capacity to adapt and build systems deeply connected to the conditions of life. For universities, this translates into cultures of experimentation, narrative transformation, and civic relevance. Riddell (2024), drawing on Arundhati Roy's metaphor of crisis as a "portal," describes this moment as "an invitation to locate choice over stagnation and helplessness." Transformation, in her framing, must begin not with technical fixes, but with the courageous act of reimagining institutional purpose. This aligns with Ruha Benjamin's (2022) argument that institutional transformation is not about repairing broken systems, but about redefining what is possible and desirable in the first place. The university of the future must become a site of radical possibility-capable of holding space for complexity, emergence, and collective transformation.

Framing Social Innovation within Higher Education Institutions

The rising interest in social innovation (SI) within higher education reflects a deeper urgency: the need to realign institutions with public purpose amid mounting complexity. Yet while many universities in Ontario and beyond claim a commitment to social impact, systemic transformation remains constrained by entrenched structures and misaligned incentives (Cinar & Benneworth, 2021; Milley & Szijarto, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024).

Ahmed et al. (2024) frame SI as a collective, creative process that addresses human need, engages participatory methods, and challenges power dynamics. They propose an “upside-down” framework grounded in systems thinking, decolonial pedagogy, and intergenerational collaboration, centering community wisdom over institutional authority. Innovation, in this view, arises not from efficiency, but from reimagining relationships and knowledge systems.

This systems-oriented approach echoes Frances Westley’s concept of social innovation as the “reconfiguration of institutions” within complex adaptive systems (as cited in McGowan et al., 2020). For Westley, transformation involves disrupting dominant logics and enabling new flows of resources, routines, and mental models.

Institutions are well-positioned to act as platforms for this kind of innovation. As anchor institutions, they connect diverse communities and hold intellectual and material capital. However, this potential is undermined by bureaucratic structures that favour predictability and prestige over responsiveness. Cinar and Benneworth (2021) argue that universities’ lack of systemic impact stems from academic cultures that prioritize narrow outputs, while Milley and Szijarto (2023) critique evaluation systems that reduce innovation to standardized, linear metrics.

Still, emerging practices point toward new possibilities. Ahmed et al. (2024) describes the Social Innovation Organization (SIO), a student-led initiative in South Asia operating outside formal governance structures while co-creating intergenerational responses with faculty and community. These hybrid, trust-based approaches show how innovation can emerge from relationships, reflexivity, and imagination: even without formal institutional backing.

Ultimately, framing social innovation within higher education requires more than inserting programs into existing systems. It demands a reorientation toward values-driven, community-engaged, and emergent transformation. In this vision, universities act not as isolated knowledge producers, but as conveners of dialogue and co-creators of collective futures.

Lapointe and Nemtin's (2023) national assessment of Canada's social innovation ecosystem reinforces this view, emphasizing the need for definitional clarity, cross-sector coordination, and system-level capacity building. Universities, they argue, serve as "enablers" within innovation ecosystems: boundary-spanning institutions that support knowledge exchange, resource flows, and inclusive narratives for addressing wicked problems. Rather than working in isolation, higher education must operate in deep interdependence with the communities and systems it seeks to transform.

Foresight and Futures Thinking as Catalysts for Change

If Ontario's universities are balancing atop a 'house of cards', then foresight offers not a way to reinforce the stack, but a pathway to reimagine the entire structure. Futures thinking, as Chen and Hsu (2020) emphasize, is not simply about predicting change; it is about cultivating the capacity to navigate complexity, challenge assumptions, and design long-term responses grounded in ethical responsibility. Their work identifies five core competencies for institutional transformation: change agency, systems thinking, long-term visioning, concern for others, and openness to alternative futures. In this framing, foresight is positioned not as a technical skillset, but as a strategic mindset: an essential capability for institutions seeking to move beyond fragile architectures toward systemic resilience.

Foresight also functions as a critical governance tool. Van Eerd (2023) argues that imagining preferable futures- those we actively desire- requires co-creation, long-term stewardship, and leadership willing to embrace uncertainty and emergence. Foresight, in this framing, is not about forecasting disruption but about designing for resilience, adaptability, and regenerative possibility.

Woodgate and Veigl (2020) extend this perspective through experimental foresight, deploying immersive methods such as role-playing, speculative design, and future scenarios to help university leaders step outside entrenched assumptions and reimagine structures of pedagogy, governance, and institutional purpose.

This approach aligns with Riddell's (2024) framing of hope as a disciplined method - not sentiment, but a strategic practice of imagining systemic alternatives. She contrasts finite game logic, which centers performance and control, with infinite game logic, oriented toward purpose, emergence, and collective flourishing. Within a fragile *'house of cards'* system, this demands rejecting brittle blueprints and reimagining institutions from the foundation upward.

Wahl (2016) similarly argues for regenerative cultures rooted in participation, relational governance, and systemic sensitivity. He positions foresight not as prediction but as a generative practice - inviting institutions to surface hidden assumptions, ask deeper questions, and lead from values rather than fear.

Taken together, these scholars suggest that foresight is both method and ethic - a necessary orientation for dismantling brittle systems and co-creating universities capable of holding complexity, fostering emergence, and sustaining collective public purpose.

Institutionalizing Innovation: Governance, Culture, and Metrics

If foresight invites universities to reimagine their future, institutionalizing innovation asks them to commit to embed those reimagining's into governance, culture, and everyday decision-making. Yet doing so requires a fundamental shift in how universities define success, allocate power, and evaluate impact. As several scholars argue, institutions cannot deliver on futures-oriented visions while clinging to hierarchical structures, short-term incentives, and performance regimes that reward stability over transformation (Cinar & Benneworth, 2021; Milley et al., 2020; Stauch, 2022).

Governance serves as a critical systems lever in this transition. Both Riddell (2024) and Wahl (2016) challenge legacy and transactional models, advocating instead for adaptive, human-centered systems that prioritize learning, ethical purpose, and relational accountability. Riddell calls for an "infinite mindset" in governance: reframing it as a value-driven practice oriented toward long-term flourishing rather

than control (p. 192). Wahl (2016) extends this critique, arguing that regenerative cultures cannot emerge through managerial tweaks alone. Instead, they require reimagining the institutional architecture itself from scarcity-based frameworks to those grounded in trust, reciprocity, and civic imagination.

This challenge is especially pronounced in the Canadian context. Cheryl Foy (2022) highlights a long-standing tension between collective bargaining and academic self-governance, a contradiction first raised by the Duff-Berdahl Commission in the 1960s. While the Commission endorsed bicameral governance to balance state control and faculty autonomy, Foy notes that faculty have yet to gain the voice or influence envisioned. Today's universities operate under a dual-track model where unions manage labour matters and Senates oversee academic ones. Yet these boundaries often blur, and the unresolved tension between adversarial bargaining and collegial governance continues to complicate institutional coherence. As Foy argues, this 'logical inconsistency' remains a structural barrier to the forms of participatory governance that innovation and transformation demand.

Reforming governance also requires rethinking how impact is defined and measured. Ebrahim and Rangan (2014) argue that many organizations, including universities, focus disproportionately on outputs-like the number of partnerships, papers, or programs, while overlooking longer-term outcomes or systemic impact. Ebrahim and Rangan's (2014) Results Chain Framework offers a more aligned alternative: mapping inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts according to an institution's operational mission and scope. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach, they recommend tailoring metrics to an institution's actual ability to influence results: encouraging universities to shift from measuring prestige-based outputs to tracking their contributions to public value, social resilience, and deeper societal change.

Of course, institutional transformation cannot occur in a vacuum. Lapointe and Nemtin (2023) emphasize that successful innovation requires enabling conditions-coherent policy frameworks, intermediary organizations, and multi-level infrastructure to support sustained systems change. They argue that without

strategic alignment across governance, funding, and measurement systems, even promising initiatives remain fragile and isolated.

Păunescu et al. (2021) reinforce this view, advocating for participatory governance, co-creation platforms, and long-term resourcing. These elements are not just tools- they are cultural signals that reveal what institutions value and how they relate to their wider ecosystems.

Ultimately, institutionalizing innovation means choosing structural alignment over symbolic commitment. It means rebalancing the tower: not by pulling a card and hoping for stability, but by designing new foundations that not only carry the weight of complexity and accountability but also make space for the expansive work of imagination.

Equity, Decoloniality, and Community-Engaged Innovation

If the university's current structure is a *'house of cards'*, then equity and decolonial approaches invite us to reconsider not just the design but the hands that build it: and who is left holding the structure when it collapses. While many institutions champion inclusion rhetorically, their practices often reinforce extractive knowledge systems, rigid hierarchies, and forms of engagement that prioritize institutional convenience over community transformation (Ahmed et al., 2024; Peters, 2024; Wahl, 2016).

Ahmed et al. (2024) offer a powerful reframing of social innovation through a decolonial and grassroots lens. In their case study of a student-led initiative in South Asia, they describe an "upside-down" framework that centres community wisdom, intergenerational accountability, and non-Western knowledge systems. Rather than scaling up through conventional institutional pathways, the initiative scaled deep- cultivating localized, trust-based change through informal networks and collaborative governance. In this model, innovation is not a product of technical efficiency, but of reimagined relationships and epistemic humility. It bypasses the rigidity traps that often stall transformation within higher education-traps sustained by bureaucratic inertia, performative inclusion, and academic credentialism.

Peters (2024) similarly critiques the limitations of traditional university structures, highlighting how activist-in-residence programs offer relational, justice-oriented alternatives. These programs recognize activists as knowledge holders and invite them into co-educational roles within the academy. Yet, as Peters notes, such initiatives often operate precariously, relying on the goodwill of individual faculty, informal labour, and temporary funding. Without structural support, they risk becoming tokenistic rather than transformative.

These critiques align with calls from Indigenous scholars for more systemic approaches to transformation. Pulling Together: A Guide for Curriculum Developers (Antoine et al., 2018) emphasizes that meaningful Indigenization is not about adding isolated content or symbolic gestures, but about fundamentally reorienting systems around relationality, holistic knowledge practices, and community accountability. True transformation, in this framing, requires dismantling colonial logics and rebuilding governance, pedagogy, and institutional culture on principles of mutual respect, reciprocity, and relational stewardship.

Wahl (2016) situates these shifts within a broader cultural transition: from extractive to regenerative systems. He argues that regenerative cultures are built not through control or replication, but through relationship, emergence, and participation. In this vision, universities act not as gatekeepers of knowledge but as stewards of the commons, valuing interdependence, community well-being, and epistemic diversity over prestige or performance (Wahl, 2016).

These calls for transformation echo long-standing critiques from Indigenous and decolonial scholars who argue that Canadian universities remain structurally misaligned with the knowledge systems and relational practices necessary for meaningful community innovation. Stauch (2022) describes how universities privilege theoretical knowledge and individual achievement, undermining collective, place-based, and problem-driven approaches to social change. Despite repeated institutional commitments to reconciliation, these dominant logics continue to shape how partnerships are formed, whose knowledge counts, and what gets rewarded.

Ultimately, community-engaged innovation demands more than partnership: it requires redistribution of power, a redefinition of value, and a fundamental reshaping of institutional norms. For universities to move from equity talk to equity practice, they must be willing to relinquish control, reimagine governance, and create spaces where the wisdom of marginalized communities is not only invited in as data but recognized and honoured as foundational.

Examples and Models for Transformative Practice

As the *'house of cards'* begins to collapse, what matters most is who rebuilds, and how. Across Canada and globally, a growing number of universities are experimenting with governance models, pedagogical practices, and community partnerships that challenge conventional academic logics. These initiatives do not offer universal templates, but they provide generative glimpses into what institutional transformation can look like when rooted in purpose, equity, and foresight.

The University of Technology Sydney (UTS) offers a compelling model. As Gusheh et al. (2019) describe, UTS developed its Social Impact Framework through a participatory process involving over 150 staff and students. Guided by Appreciative Inquiry and Theory of Change, the framework embeds social impact into six institutional domains, including access and equity, civic-minded graduates, empowered staff, and ethical operations. Importantly, UTS institutionalized this work by integrating it into its strategic plan and appointing an Executive Director of Social Justice to lead implementation. Rather than treating social impact as an extracurricular ambition, UTS positioned it as a structural priority, backed by governance, metrics, and leadership accountability.

Internationally, institutions like Aalto University in Finland and Mondragon University in Spain provide further inspiration. Aalto's Living Labs approach supports co-creation between students, faculty, industry, and community stakeholders, fostering real-world experimentation and applied learning (Păunescu et al., 2021). Mondragon, a cooperative university rooted in the Basque social economy,

exemplifies a radically different academic model, one that prioritizes democratic governance, social entrepreneurship, and local economic development. In both cases, the university functions less as a gatekeeper of expertise and more as a platform for distributed problem-solving.

In the Canadian context, the Change Lab Action Research Initiative (CLARI) in Nova Scotia offers a promising regional example. As highlighted by Universities Canada (2020), CLARI enables interdisciplinary university teams to co-design solutions with community partners on issues ranging from food security to rural development. Hosted by Mount Saint Vincent University and involving several Atlantic institutions, CLARI demonstrates how shared infrastructure and place-based priorities can support deeper, more equitable community engagement-especially when decoupled from extractive research cycles.

These models are not without tension. As the Universities Canada report notes, many of these efforts rely on temporary funding, external grants, or individual champions-raising questions about scalability and sustainability. Institutional barriers such as bureaucratic inertia, rigid evaluation systems, and risk aversion continue to limit the spread and longevity of these initiatives.

Nevertheless, taken together, these examples signal a shift-from institution-centered to community-centered design; from siloed operations to ecosystem engagement; from fragile systems to more resilient, adaptive architectures. They illustrate that transformation is not only possible but already underway in diverse contexts, though often at the margins of institutional life.

What binds these efforts is not uniformity but orientation. Each example reflects a commitment to public purpose, ethical accountability, and shared learning: not as abstract ideals, but as operational principles. If transformation is to move beyond metaphor, it will require universities to invest in these experiments, learn from their contradictions, and scale not only what works, but what matters.

Gaps and Research Opportunities

If Ontario's universities are to rebuild from a *'house of cards'* into structures capable of holding complexity and care, they must first recognize the gaps between vision and infrastructure. While the literature surfaces promising frameworks, models, and emerging practices, it also reveals persistent tensions: places where further inquiry, experimentation, and systemic redesign are urgently needed.

One critical gap is the integration of foresight into institutional governance. While foresight is gaining traction as a leadership and learning tool (Chen & Hsu, 2020; Van Eerd, 2023; Woodgate & Veigl, 2020), few studies explore how it can be embedded into policy cycles, Board-level planning, or long-term institutional strategy. Riddell's (2024) call for infinite game governance remains more conceptual than operational, suggesting a need for applied research into how foresight can evolve from visionary exercise into governance competency.

A second gap concerns the scaling of innovation, specifically, the tension between scaling deep and scaling wide. Ahmed et al. (2024) illustrate how grassroots, student-led initiatives thrive by scaling deep: building relational trust, cultural relevance, and localized impact. Yet these efforts often lack institutional infrastructure and support, raising critical questions: How can universities enable slow, embedded innovation without defaulting to top-down replication models that risk diluting their transformative potential?

A third area for exploration involves the development of new metrics. Traditional academic performance systems continue to dominate evaluation, often sidelining broader impacts of social innovation (Cinar & Benneworth, 2021; Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014; Milley et al., 2020). While models like the Results Chain and UTS's Social Impact Framework offer starting points, there is a pressing need to co-create indicators that reflect resilience, trust-building, epistemic inclusion, and community benefit, particularly in ways aligned with decolonial and place-based values.

Additional research is also needed into the enabling conditions that allow promising models to endure and scale. As Universities Canada (2020) notes, even strong initiatives like CLARI or Mondragon often rely on temporary funding and individual champions. What policy, governance, and financing environments could move such efforts from the periphery to the core of institutional life?

The structural challenges of governance itself demand deeper exploration. Cheryl Foy (2022) highlights the long-standing contradiction in Canadian higher education: the dual-track model in which unions negotiate labour issues while Senates oversee academic matters. This tension, rooted in the unresolved legacy of faculty organizing and governance reform, continues to generate friction, particularly where innovation meets institutional authority. Foy argues that a lack of strategic leadership from university management in the 1970s created a vacuum, allowing union voices to dominate governance spaces. This legacy includes financial exigency clauses and a recurring pattern of conceding governance ground to avoid labour disputes, a "logical inconsistency" that continues to undermine participatory, coherent governance today.

Finally, universities must also examine how they unlearn: how they might let go of inherited systems, assumptions, and incentives that no longer serve their missions. This includes exploring how institutions navigate rigidity traps (Ahmed et al., 2024), resist co-optation, and create cultural conditions for sustained, community-rooted innovation.

Another critical gap lies in how innovation ecosystems are visualized and narrated. Ecosystem maps, often used to illustrate relationships between actors, institutions, and resources, tend to rely on static, linear representations. Lapointe and Nemtin (2023) argue that such maps often fail to capture the nonlinear, relational processes at the heart of social innovation. They call for shared, flexible narratives and dynamic resource systems that reflect emergent, boundary-spanning value creation. Future research could explore how universities co-develop these infrastructures, not only to track impact, but to enable systems learning, trust building, and shared accountability across sectors.

In many ways, these gaps reflect the larger project of this review: not simply to describe where the *'house of cards'* is weakest, but to ask what new structures might emerge, and what values will guide their formation, animate their purpose, and allow them to adapt, regenerate, and sustain public good over time.

Reimagining the University's Future

This review has mapped a dynamic field of scholarship that grapples with the systemic tensions, possibilities, and emerging futures shaping higher education. It has examined the systemic tensions between purpose and performance, tradition and transformation, imagination and inertia that underpin the current crisis in university governance and legitimacy. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from social innovation, futures thinking, governance reform, and decolonial scholarship, the review has mapped both the limitations of existing models and the possibilities that lie beyond them.

Despite decades of transformation discourse, universities remain bound by legacy structures that limit their ability to realize their public purpose. As the literature makes clear, institutional transformation will not be achieved through technical fixes or isolated programs, but through systemic reorientation grounded in values of equity, imagination, interdependence, and care. This reorientation includes rethinking governance as a participatory practice, designing evaluation systems that reflect complexity and community benefit, and cultivating cultures capable of unlearning, emergence, and shared accountability.

The review has also surfaced persistent gaps in both scholarship and practice. These include the lack of embedded foresight in governance, unresolved contradictions between union and Senate relations, and the absence of tools for visualizing and supporting social innovation ecosystems. These gaps signal opportunities for further research, experimentation, and institutional learning. Ultimately, the university of the future cannot be built atop the fragile architecture of the past. If the *'house of cards'* is falling, the task is not to prop it up, but to design new foundations: ones that hold complexity, honour community wisdom, and make space for the expansive work of imagination.

Findings, Insights, and Thematic Analysis

Building on the literature review, the following sections provide a deep dive into the findings, insights, and thematic analysis generated through each phase of the research. These include:

- Phase 1: Timeline and systems framing
- Phase 2: Drivers, trends, and signals
- Phase 3: Semi-structured interviews
- Phase 4: Scenario development and foresight workshops

Together, these phases reveal recurring patterns, institutional tensions, and opportunities for transformation across Ontario's postsecondary system.

Phase 1: Timeline and Systems Framing

To situate present dynamics within deeper historical patterns, we created a STEEPVL (Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, Political, Values, and Legal) timeline. It traces key developments in Ontario's higher education system alongside major global events, from the late 1800s to the present day. The timeline informed our foresight work by illuminating how institutional structures have been shaped by specific conditions, decisions, and disruptions over time. A detailed version is included in Appendix A.

Evolution of Ontario's Higher Education System: Historical Events and Trends

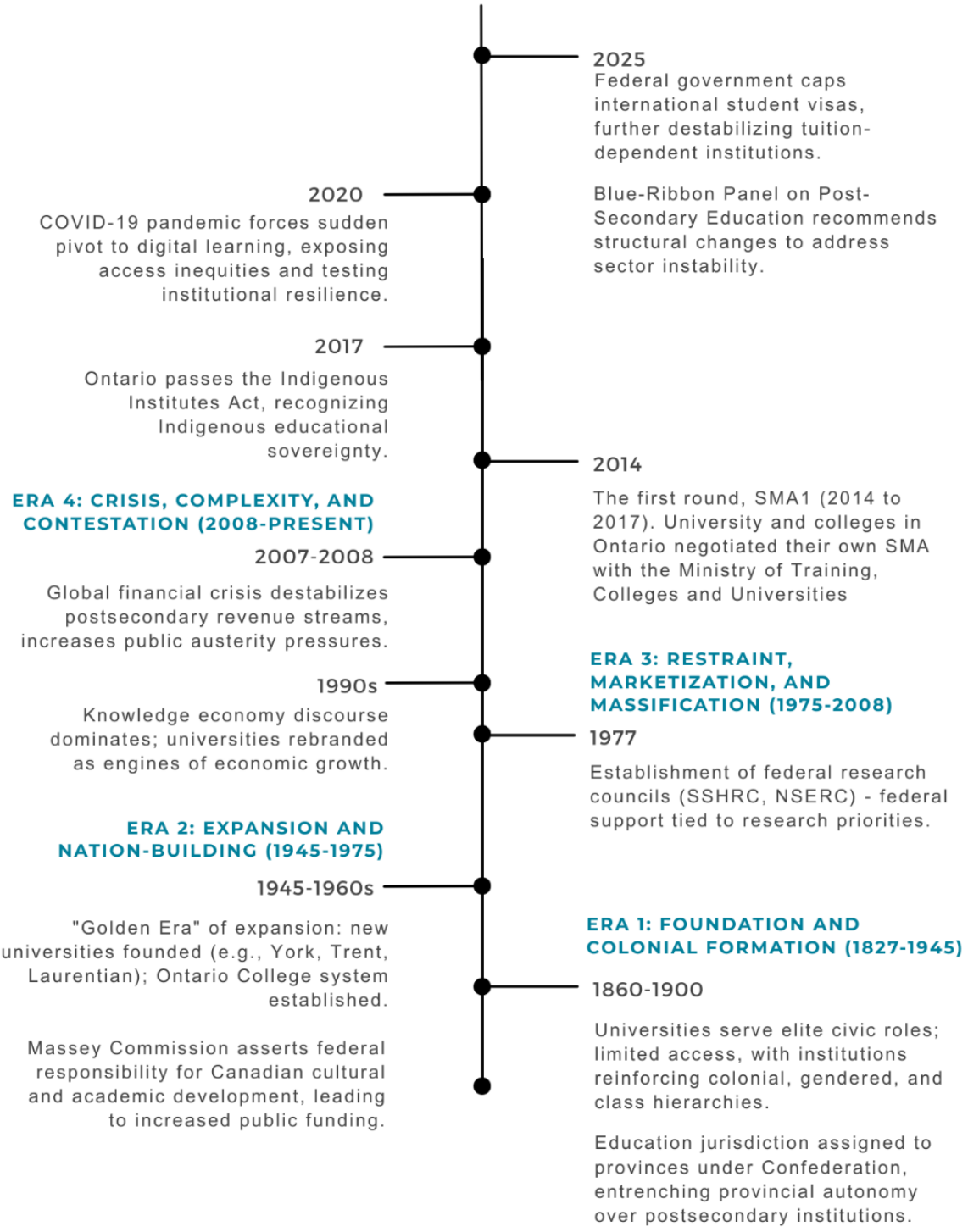


Figure 2: Timeline of Key Events in the Evolution of Ontario's Higher Education System (1860 to 2025).

Phase 2: Drivers, Trends, and Signals Overview

To ground the research in the broader context shaping Ontario's postsecondary sector, we conducted a horizon scanning exercise using the STEEPVL framework. This scan aimed to identify relevant trends, emerging signals, and systemic drivers that are actively influencing or reshaping the conditions under which universities operate. Sources included foresight literature, government reports, think tank analyses, media coverage, and professional insights from across the sector. The following table summarizes **selected signals and trends** identified through this horizon scanning process. Additional details on the full scan and methodology can be found in Appendix B

Table 2: A summary of selected drivers, signals, and trends, influencing the future of Ontario's higher education system.

Domain	Selected Drivers, Trends and Signals
Social	Intergenerational activism; student mental health movements; shifting expectations of care, connection, and institutional relevance
Technological	Expansion of AI-enabled learning; growth of open education and platform-based models; equity concerns around digital access and algorithmic bias
Economic	Rising tuition and cost of living pressures; push for performance-based funding; growing demand for demonstrable value in higher education
Environmental	Increased precarity in academic employment; burnout and workload pressures; climate anxiety shaping student and faculty priorities
Political	Institutional autonomy under pressure; culture wars affecting policy and curriculum; growing mistrust between academic and political actors
Values	Renewed calls for equity, reconciliation, and inclusion; tensions between prestige and purpose; generational shifts in trust and expectations
Legal	Unionization and labour activism; disputes over academic freedom and governance roles; rising legal complexity in data, contracts, and collaborative research

Phase 3: Primary Interviews

To deepen the literature review and capture lived experience, we conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of postsecondary interest holders across 14 institutions. Most participants were drawn from Ontario's research-intensive universities and sector-wide organizations, with selected participants from other Canadian and international contexts to enrich the systemic perspective. Participants included university leaders and administrators, faculty, staff, policy experts, and sector consultants, purposively sampled to reflect a diversity of roles, mandates, and perspectives within the higher education ecosystem.

Participants included university leaders and administrators, faculty, staff, policy experts, and sector consultants, purposively sampled to reflect a diversity of roles and perspectives within Ontario's higher education ecosystem.

Interviews explored perceptions of institutional transformation, innovation readiness, governance culture, barriers to change, and broader sectoral dynamics. Recordings and notes were transcribed and coded using first-and second-cycle methods drawn from Saldaña's (2013) Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers, supporting pattern recognition and thematic synthesis. Coding was conducted collaboratively using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, which enabled systematic comparison and visualization of emerging themes. Team members reviewed and discussed interpretations throughout the process to enhance analytic depth and reduce bias.

The following thematic analysis in interviews revealed patterns that both echoed and extended the literature review; surfacing emergent systemic tensions around trust, decision-making, risk cultures, and competing visions of institutional purpose.

PHASE 3 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Diverse Interpretations of Social Innovation

The interviews revealed that while social innovation is widely referenced across institutions, it is interpreted in markedly different ways, For instance, Ahmed Sagarwala from Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) emphasized pedagogical innovation at the course level, describing the development of interactive web-based learning tools that significantly boosted student performance: "*We ended up making really good tools for learning that were interactive, accessible, and the class average went up.*" By contrast Alexandre Sevigny from McMaster University framed social innovation more strategically, at the institutional level, advocating for broader systemic shifts c toward inclusive educational practices and varied course delivery models to meet the demands of contemporary students. Ana Serrano, President and Vice-Chancellor of OCAD University offered yet another interpretation describing institutions as talent incubators driving societal impact through critical pedagogical practices and partnership-driven initiatives, such as sustaining community-focused hubs.

The Rhetoric-Practice Gap

Despite prominent institutional declarations around community engagement and social impact, there is often a significant discrepancy between stated missions and actual implementation. Cheryl Foy, a university governance expert explicitly described this as institutions losing sight of their original social missions, stating that while universities traditionally served as "*pillars of democracy*" and protected a "*marketplace of ideas,*" today's practices frequently diverge from these ideals, limiting practical implementation. Several interviewees echoed this theme, emphasizing that while universities increasingly promote social responsibility, structural and bureaucratic constraints often inhibit the translation of these ideals into practice.

Transformative Pedagogies and Curriculum Innovations

Participants widely supported reimagining pedagogical methods and curriculum design to foster societal impact. Andrew McWilliams, from Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU), provided an illustrative example of a Social Innovation Zone. Through the integration of entrepreneurial learning into curricular frameworks, students created a successful entrepreneurial venture selling designer socks, using proceeds to donate wool socks to local charities. This initiative demonstrated how entrepreneurial learning could directly benefit communities. Serrano affirmed this, highlighting the importance of project-based and practice-based pedagogies, which equip students to become "*creative lateral problem solvers,*" preparing them for diverse leadership roles in society.

However, some interviewees noted that the traditional academic environment, particularly tenure and incentive structures, can present barriers to pursuing innovative teaching practices and community-engaged work. Several shared that the prevailing advice remains to *"wait until you have tenure*" before taking such risks, suggesting that non-traditional activities like community-engaged work or innovative pedagogy are often deferred until academic security is achieved. Walsh reflected on this dynamic, emphasizing how publishing for tenure is typically valued differently than writing for an undergraduate audience. Geobey further noted that faculty incentive structures are "*wildly misaligned*" with community-engaged scholarship, which is often "actively disincentivized" in terms of measurable outputs rewarded by the university. LaPointe also addressed the critical influence of incentives, particularly research council funding, in shaping what is valued within academic work. She suggested that while shifting academic cultures is difficult, changing incentive systems, such as implementing an "*Impact Charter*" that recognizes impact as a form of excellence, could support this transformation. Past shifts in areas such as equity, diversity, inclusion, and knowledge mobilization, she noted, demonstrate that meaningful change is indeed possible.

Impact of Digital Transformation

Digital transformation emerged as both an opportunity and a challenge, viewed as a significant driver for social innovation. Interviewees acknowledged that digital platforms could democratize educational access and foster innovative teaching methodologies. Alex Ryan, co-founder of Synthetikos, a consultancy focused on futures thinking, design, and strategic innovation, articulated that digital and hybrid learning models are reshaping educational delivery, making education more accessible and affordable, yet he also cautioned that without proper training and infrastructure, these innovations risk falling short of their transformative potential. Sagarwala similarly reinforced this, advocating for more structured institutional support for faculty and students adapting to rapidly evolving digital pedagogies.

Community Relations: Towns and Gowns'

Bridging the gap between universities and their surrounding communities, frequently referred to as "*town and gown*" relationships, represents a critical but often unrealized dimension of universities' social missions. Several administrators report significant gaps between aspirational mission statements and practical implementation efforts. Interviewees emphasized the importance of deepening community relationships and integrating academia with societal needs. An example given was the Queen's University "*Walls to Bridges*" program, where university students assist penitentiary inmates to earn academic credits, illustrating practical community impact through education and social reintegration. Charles Achampong, Executive in Residence at Capacity Canada, similarly highlighted community empowerment initiatives, underscoring the necessity of genuine collaboration between universities and external partners for mutual benefit and societal advancement. Jon Beale, Director of Community Engagement at the Centre for Peace Advancement, similarly emphasized that authentic community relationships require universities to "*show up consistently*," fund community priorities, and act as long-term partners rather than extractive researchers. George Aye, co-founder of Greater Good Studio, further reinforced the need for universities to acknowledge

historical harms and rebuild trust through small, community-initiated partnerships developed over long timelines.

However, interviewees emphasized that prevailing academic reward structures actively discourage the sustained community-engaged scholarship needs to drive meaningful social innovation. Sean Geobey, of the University of Waterloo remarked that faculty are pressured to produce traditional academic outputs, adding that "*the time-intensive work required for effective public engagement is marginalized by existing institutional norms*." However, even well-intentioned community initiatives often encounter systemic barriers rooted in governance structures, organizational culture, and institutional norms.

Governance, Organizational Structures, and Institutional Culture

Governance structures, organizational culture, and institutional policies significantly influence universities' capacity to foster social innovation. Foy highlights specific challenges, including overly complex governance mechanisms, slow decision-making processes, and adversarial dynamics between faculty and administration, all of which impede timely and meaningful innovation. In particular, interviewees noted that traditional governance structures, originally designed around ideals of academic autonomy, often struggle to adapt to today's expectations for alignment, accountability, and collaborative decision-making. Foy referenced Alex Usher's use of the "jazz band versus orchestra" metaphor to illustrate this tension, contrasting the traditional "jazz band" governance style, characterized by individual autonomy, with the contemporary need for a coordinated "orchestra" model requiring collaborative engagement. Andrew Walsh, of Western University, further underscores faculty resistance as a critical barrier, noting that many professors remain entrenched in comfortable routines and are hesitant to adapt to evolving societal and market demands. Interviewees also observed that effective governance requires not just structural changes but a cultural shift toward seeing faculty and administrative leaders as collaborative partners in decision-making, rather than adversaries in a divided system.

System Fragility: A 'house of cards'

An Associate Vice President of Research and Innovation, reflecting on the future of Ontario's postsecondary system, warned, "The 'house of cards' is going to collapse, and then how or whether we rebuild it, I hope that how it is rebuilt gets to be more intentional." Their comment underscores the fragility of the existing system, especially in relation to under-resourced mandates like commercialization and degree expansion in colleges, which were introduced without sufficient planning or support infrastructure. Rather than advocating for incremental reform, they call for a fundamental reimagining of the sector, one grounded in intentionality and systems design, rather than reactive responses to short term pressures.

The ideological rigidity that upholds the system is further critiqued with the observation that, *"One big, like fundamental flaw of like this 'house of cards' that we've built is… there is a predominant narrative.*" This prevailing narrative privileges a singular institutional model and fails to account for the diversity of missions, capacities, and contexts within Ontario's post-secondary landscape. The invocation of the *'house of cards'* metaphor suggests not only instability but also the risk that superficial fixes may only delay a more profound collapse. Her analogy aligns with broader critiques across interviewees that Ontario's higher education system is not simply under strain but constructed in a way that makes collapse likely unless a substantive, values-based redesign is undertaken.

Classism Within Faculty

Interviews revealed a persistent and systemic form of classism embedded within faculty structures across Ontario's postsecondary institutions. This classism is most acutely expressed through the differentiation between tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure-track or sessional contract faculty. The status associated with tenure continues to reinforce inequities in institutional power, access to resources, and recognition, creating a stratified academic environment that undermines both collaboration and the pursuit of socially innovative work.

Lesley-Ann Noel, Dean of Design at OCAD University, reflects on her own tenure experience at North Carolina State University, where she was granted tenure before transitioning to a leadership role in Canada. She notes that her research narrative centered on equity, including epistemological and social dimensions, and that she viewed the move to OCAD as an opportunity to have greater impact within a leadership role aligned with her values. However, her commentary implicitly suggests that the traditional tenure process did not adequately support or reward the kind of equity-driven work she was pursuing. She states, "*Even though I didn't make it public because I was already leaving when I got tenure… my research narrative was about equity… health and education are two spaces that I worked in.*"

Similarly, Geobey highlights how the incentive structures that underpin academic advancement perpetuate hierarchies of legitimacy that favour tenured faculty and traditional outputs over community-engaged or socially impactful research. *"I can pump out five [academic] articles in the time it takes me to do one community-engaged journal article*," Geobey explains, adding that although community-based scholarship is often lauded in principle, it remains "softly valued" within the academy. He critiques the institutional norm that values peer-reviewed journal articles, often inaccessible due to paywalls and written in non-public-facing language, over more inclusive, participatory knowledge practices.

This critique is echoed by Sandra LaPointe, from McMaster University and Director of the Canadian Forum for Social Innovation, who argues that universities fail to reward the deeply human, collaborative labour required for social innovation. She observes that "*you don't get academic publication by working with community stakeholders… building relationships to transform reality*," and notes that such work is "*not incentivized and not rewarded by universities.*" LaPointe's reflections underscore how institutional cultures around faculty recognition continue to marginalize knowledge systems and practices situated outside the dominant research paradigm.

The issue of institutional hypocrisy is further elaborated by Jessica Riddell, who holds an endowed chair at Bishop's University. Riddell critiques the sector's

unwillingness to turn its critical gaze inward, observing that "*higher education is really good at studying everything but itself*" and expressing concern about institutions failing to live into their mission statements, especially regarding equity and innovation. Her role, which involves facilitating national conversations about the quality and integrity of undergraduate education, reveals a broader frustration with the disconnect between institutional values and everyday practices, particularly those that perpetuate class distinctions within faculty.

Taken together, these reflections reveal that classism in higher education is not simply a matter of employment status but a deeply rooted cultural and structural dynamic. The prestige and protections afforded to tenured and tenure track faculty contrast starkly with the precarity and marginalization faced by contract and teaching-focused instructors. These inequities inhibit interdisciplinary collaboration, silence emerging voices, particularly those engaged in community-based or socially responsive work, and limit institutions' capacities for transformation. Until tenure and advancement systems are reimagined to reflect the full spectrum of scholarly contributions, the academy will continue to replicate a class-based hierarchy that undermines its stated commitment to equity, innovation, and impact.

Hospicing

A key insight that emerged from the interviews is the need to "hospice" existing systems within Ontario's higher education sector, to acknowledge what is no longer serving institutions or their communities and to create space for meaningful transition. Riddell speaks directly to this idea, observing that universities are grappling with the loss of a shared narrative about their purpose. "*We are grieving the loss of what we thought universities were,*" she reflects, emphasizing the importance of creating spaces for collective sensemaking in a time when "*even common sense is up for grabs*." Aye similarly emphasized that transformative change in higher education requires a full accounting of past harms, arguing that authentic renewal must be rooted in truth-telling and trust-building rather than superficial reinvention. Together, these perspectives suggest that genuine

institutional transformation must be grounded in both a reckoning with the past and a reimagining of future possibilities. Drawing from thinkers such as Adrienne Maree Brown and bell hooks, Riddell frames her work as an act of stewardship, guiding higher education through processes of cultural unlearning and reorientation rather than resisting the inevitability of systemic change.

Marc Jerry, President and Vice-Chancellor of Renison University College, offers a parallel perspective through his approach to institutional strategy. Upon inheriting a strategic plan he had not shaped, Jerry chose not to discard it outright but instead reconvened the college community in a reflective process to reassess its direction. Describing “old school” engagement sessions using red dot voting and open dialogue, Jerry emphasized the importance of asking foundational questions: “*Why do we matter? Why would someone want to be involved in us?”* This approach, much like Riddell’s, prioritizes reflection and community sensemaking over disruption and unilateral change. This insight challenges the dominant paradigm of innovation-as-acceleration and instead pauses to acknowledge what must be let go for something new to take root. Together, these perspectives suggest that foresight-driven transformation requires not only vision, but also the courage to honour and release outdated structures with care.

Collective (3rd) Spaces

Interviewees consistently emphasized the critical need to establish *'third spaces’*, neutral, flexible, and collaborative environments that foster interdisciplinary innovation, experimentation, and meaningful community integration. Jerry identifies these spaces as "*essential platforms for interdisciplinary dialogue and innovation*," emphasizing their role in overcoming rigid institutional constraints and promoting more inclusive and adaptive educational practices. Expanding this idea, Geobey stresses that *'third spaces’* can bridge the divide between rigorous academic research and tangible community needs, thereby creating learning environments that are responsive, dynamic, and inclusive.

Building on the concept of *'third spaces'*, several interviewees, including Achampong, Serrano, and Walsh, advocate for the creation of centralized teaching and learning "nodes" across Ontario. Peter Madden, from Cardiff University, articulates the potential benefits of such hubs as "*a nexus for innovation and cross-institutional collaboration,*" allowing institutions to aggregate best practices, streamline resources, and share expertise more equitably. Sara Diamond, former President and Vice-Chancellor of OCAD University, similarly envisions a provincial teaching and learning center as essential for fostering cohesive pedagogical strategies and addressing the fragmentation that currently characterizes Ontario's educational landscape. In this sense, centralization is seen as an opportunity to democratize innovation and expand access to resources and foster a broader distribution of knowledge and professional development opportunities across institutions.

Considerations of Equity and Democracy

Ontario's postsecondary system disproportionately benefits traditionally advantaged students, with structural barriers such as high tuition fees and limited affordable housing deepening class-based inequities, as described by McWilliams and Sagarwala. Interviewees also noted that applied research initiatives often inadvertently reinforce these inequities because "*the benefits…often circulate within established academic and professional networks*," leaving marginalized groups, non-traditional learners, and community organizations significantly underrepresented. Geobey further highlights how classism manifests through institutional reward structures, emphasizing that prioritizing high-impact, peer-reviewed academic outputs "privileges those already entrenched within established networks," thereby marginalizing community-engaged scholarship and critical voices necessary for fostering an equitable knowledge society. These inequities are not incidental but embedded within the structures of the academy, requiring systemic approaches to address root causes rather than isolated interventions.

Addressing these systemic inequities necessitates genuine democratic renewal within university governance structures. Riddell underscores this need by emphasizing that "*universities have an essential role in fostering civic engagement and nurturing democratic participation,*" positioning them as critical platforms for inclusive public discourse and societal transformation. Additionally, Diamond proposes that initiatives such as cultural consortia can effectively "*bridge the gap between academic knowledge and democratic practice*," fostering more dialogues between academia and community stakeholders.

Financial and Economic Dynamics

Interviewees highlighted how chronic underfunding, frozen tuition policies, and growing financial dependency on external revenue streams are reshaping the priorities and capacities of higher education institutions. Rather than fostering community engagement or social innovation, financial pressures increasingly drive universities toward revenue preservation and operational fragility. They emphasized that mandates like commercialization and college degree expansion were introduced without corresponding investment in support infrastructure, exposing deeper systemic vulnerabilities. Geobey similarly noted that austerity cycles and disinvestment have eroded the experimental spaces where universities once cultivated adaptive capacities, observing that, "*the places first to get cut are the ones where innovation happen*s". Jerry underscored that stagnant public funding and reliance on international tuition streams have created an unsustainable financial model, warning that many institutions *"no longer have the fiscal resilience*" to absorb ongoing shocks

Aye extended this critique, arguing that sustainable transformation would require not only cultural change but a radical rethinking of how universities structure economic access, opportunity, and accountability. Without addressing these underlying financial dynamics, efforts at institutional renewal risk remaining superficial and short-lived.

Imagination

Interviews revealed the critical role of imagination as a foundational driver of social innovation within higher education institutions. Several interviewees underscored imagination's significance, emphasizing its necessity for envisioning and actualizing transformative futures. Ryan highlighted imagination as a pivotal skill, suggesting that universities must actively nurture imaginative capacities among faculty and students to foster deeper social impact. He remarked, “We need to cultivate imagination, because without imagination we can’t even conceive of the futures we are aiming to create.” Expanding on this perspective, Riddell emphasized that fostering imaginative thinking enables university communities to perceive opportunities beyond traditional frameworks. She articulated the connection between imagination and institutional change, emphasizing that fostering imaginative thinking enables communities within universities to perceive opportunities beyond traditional frameworks: “I*magination is not just a creative exercise; it is a powerful strategy for institutional transformation*.” Aye similarly emphasized the transformative power of imagination, envisioning future models where universities invest directly in students from historically marginalized communities, equipping them to lead and teach within their own neighborhoods. Madden further connected imagination to strategic foresight, asserting, *“Imagination is essential in foresight; without the ability to imagine radically different futures, foresight exercises become limited and ineffective*.” Collectively, these insights suggest that strengthening imaginative capacities within Ontario’s universities is essential to their ability to evolve into resilient centers of social innovation capable of sustained societal impact.

Design and foresight methodologies

Interviewees identified design and foresight methodologies as powerful tools for driving institutional transformation, particularly in fostering systemic thinking and inclusive future-oriented practices. These approaches help institutions proactively engage with future possibilities, fostering inclusivity and system-oriented thinking. Alongside structured methodologies, interviewees such as Lewis, emphasized the role of narrative and storytelling in mobilizing collective action, shaping institutional

identities, and promoting broader societal contributions. A distinctive insight emerging from the interviews was the integration of design thinking and futures-oriented methodologies to create more adaptive, socially responsive institutions. Jessica Riddell discussed her role in stewarding conversations about high-quality undergraduate education, stating that her approach "*ensures the inclusion of marginalized perspectives*" and uses design as a tool for systemic change. In a similar vein, Madden stressed that universities must adopt a futures lens, not only in research and teaching but also in strategic planning, remarking that universities must ensure their *"institutional legacies contribute positively to long-term societal outcomes."*

Phase 4: Scenario Development, and Foresight Workshop

Building on the systemic tensions surfaced through Phases 1-3, we turned to scenario development to move beyond problem identification toward structured imagination. Drawing on insights from the literature review, horizon scanning, and interviews, we developed four exploratory scenarios - Growth, Collapse, Discipline, and Transformation - inspired by Dator's (2009) Generic Images of the Future. These archetypes represent recurring patterns in futures thinking: Growth (continued expansion or status quo), Collapse (systemic breakdown), Discipline (stability through constraint or reform), and Transformation (radical innovation or emergence of something new).

Scenario development enabled us to surface structural tensions, test assumptions, and reimagine Ontario's postsecondary future through a systems lens. To refine and interrogate these narratives, we hosted a foresight workshop with ten interest holders from the sector. While all four scenarios were developed, only three- Collapse, Discipline, and Transformation- were workshopped. This decision was made to allow participants deeper time for engagement, reflection, and layered contributions.

Participants were randomly assigned to scenario groups and rotated between stations using structured prompts to critique, expand, and build upon each narrative. This iterative format enabled each group to build on prior insights, deepening and complicating the scenarios with every round.

To further provoke reflection, each group randomly selected one of four wildcard disruptions during the Discipline and Transformation rounds. Wildcards, unpredictable but plausible shocks, were designed to stress-test assumptions about institutional resilience and adaptability. These included:

- **The Great Cyberattack on Higher Ed:** A massive cyberattack wipes out student records, research databases, and accreditation systems across Ontario universities, forcing institutions to shut down indefinitely.

- **The Death of Digital Learning:** A global youth movement rejects screen-based education, demanding unplugged, face-to-face learning. Online programs collapse as institutions scramble to adapt.

- **The Student Debt Rebellion:** A national student movement leads to the cancellation of all student debt and free public higher education. Private institutions collapse, while public universities struggle to absorb surging enrolment.

- **The University Climate Exodus**: Escalating climate disasters force the abandonment of multiple university campuses. Academic communities relocate, prompting the rise of mobile, climate-resilient education hubs.

Each group adapted its assigned scenario in response to the wildcard, revising assumptions and exploring new dynamics. A final collective debrief surfaced cross-cutting insights, narrative gaps, and structural tensions, highlighting potential leverage points for systemic transformation.

While the workshop was not intended to produce formal interventions, it generated a series of provocations and scenario refinements that informed our subsequent analysis and identified strategic areas for institutional redesign.

The analysis synthesizes these insights into five overarching thematic categories: Governance and Leadership; Social Innovation and Grassroots Adaptation; Technology Access and Equity; Educational Credentials and Purpose; and Generational Perspectives and Future Directions.

PHASE 4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Governance and Leadership

Governance and leadership structures emerged as decisive elements shaping the future trajectory of higher education institutions. Scenario analyses illustrated divergent governance paths, ranging from institutional collapse under stringent governmental controls to transformative decentralized models. In the disciplined scenario governance was characterized as centralized, compliance-oriented, and performance-driven, significantly restricting institutional autonomy. Conversely, the transformative scenario demonstrates decentralized leadership, that promotes participatory decision-making structures rooted in community and interest holder accountability.

Reflections from participants emphasized a reoccurring tension between individual autonomy and collective responsibility, a dynamic evident across all scenario conditions. Participants critically discussed how rigid or excessively centralized governance frameworks threaten institutional adaptability and societal cohesion. There was a clear preference for leadership models that enable flexibility, transparency and relational trust, suggesting governance paradigms capable of fostering responsive rather than reactionary institutional behavior are desired.

Social Innovation and Grassroots Adaptation

The framing and implementation of social innovation varied substantially across scenarios. In scenarios characterized by institutional crisis or collapse, social innovation was reduced to a coping strategy, narrowly focused on survival and immediate practicality rather than long-term societal benefit. In disciplined scenarios, corporate influences co-opted social innovation initiatives, redirecting them toward narrow economic objectives and largely stripping them of their transformative potential. Contrastingly, in transformative scenarios, social innovation flourished as a core institutional mission, deeply embedded within community engagement, participatory learning frameworks, and regenerative educational practices.

Reflections emphasized the importance of grassroots adaptations and informal educational networks as critical counterbalances to centralized or restrictive institutional frameworks. Participants highlighted the resilience strategies emerging from community-based movements, suggesting their essential role in fostering social resilience and adaptive innovation. These grassroots networks provided viable, innovative alternatives to traditional educational structures, suggesting an essential capacity for adaptive innovation and social resilience at community levels.

Technology, Access, and Equity

Technological developments emerged as significant drivers of both educational access and systemic inequity. Across scenarios, advancements in artificial intelligence, blockchain technologies, and decentralized knowledge-sharing platforms were seen as offering substantial opportunities to broaden accessibility and democratize educational resources. However, the scenario analyses also cautioned that without proactive interventions, these same technologies could exacerbate existing inequalities, particularly around digital access and literacy.

Participant reflections echoed these concerns, emphasizing that external technological and economic forces increasingly shape the direction of higher education. Participants emphasized that technology must move beyond serving market-driven priorities to actively integrate ethical considerations around equity and inclusion. As a result, ensuring equitable digital access emerged as a pressing concern, underscoring the need for intentional, inclusive technological infrastructure that supports broader societal participation and educational equity.

Educational Credentials and Purpose

The meaning and value of traditional educational credentials were deeply contested across scenarios. In collapse and disciplined contexts, formal credentialing became fragmented and narrowly instrumental focused primarily on certifying immediate employment skills rather than fostering broader intellectual, civic, or social development. Degrees and diplomas were treated less as markers of

comprehensive learning and more as transactional proofs of minimal qualification. Conversely, the transformative scenario imagined new models of credentialing that were fluid, relational, and community validated. Learning was endorsed through experiential demonstration, peer recognition, and collective assessment, rather than exclusively through institutional certification. These shifts suggested a future where educational legitimacy derives not solely from centralized institutions, but from networks of trust, participation, and lived contribution to societal needs.

Building on these tensions, participant reflections surfaced a critical value conflict between transactional (employment-oriented) and relational (community-oriented) educational paradigms. Participants questioned the fundamental purpose of education, asking whether its primary role should be producing workforce-ready individuals or fostering holistic citizenship and personal growth. Calls to slow the educational pace, promoting contemplative, integrated, and reflective learning experiences, emerged prominently, reflecting a deeper aspiration for meaningful integration of education within individuals' lives and communities.

Generational Perspectives and Future Directions

Lastly, generational perspectives provided insightful reflections on the future directions of higher education. Despite acknowledging pervasive structural challenges and a degree of institutional pessimism, participants expressed hope grounded in generational resilience, significantly shaped by recent societal disruptions, notably the pandemic. The generational dialogue underscored a strong desire to reframe educational experiences around deeper relational connections, community belonging, and identity formation rather than solely professional achievements. Participants urged a shift from conventional, institution-centric perspectives to broader, integrative educational ecosystems that explicitly incorporate Indigenous and land-based knowledge systems. They described embedding these knowledge systems through curriculum redesign, community partnerships, and governance reforms that position diverse epistemologies as central rather than peripheral

Such inclusive frameworks were advocated as essential for creating genuinely transformative educational spaces that respect and integrate diverse cultural and epistemological traditions, fundamentally reshaping how educational value is conceptualized and enacted.

Synthesis of Workshop Insights

Collectively, the insights from the workshop emphasize that the resilience and future relevance of Ontario's higher education system depend on multiple interconnected transformations: adaptive governance frameworks, authentic and community-driven social innovation, equitable technological infrastructures, reimagined credentialing practices, and inclusive generational visions of education. These findings point toward an imperative for institutions to move beyond narrowly defined economic or instrumental purposes toward deeply relational, reflective, and socially integrative models of learning. Ultimately, these findings highlight pathways toward creating resilient educational ecosystems characterized by active community engagement, inclusivity, and genuine societal transformation.

Discussion

This chapter reflects on the findings in relation to the central research question: How might Ontario's public universities transform into resilient centres of social innovation to achieve sustained impact using foresight-driven actionable strategies? Drawing from interviews with university leaders, faculty members, governance professionals, and strategic advisors, the data reveals a dual narrative: one of genuine aspirational intent, and another shaped by deeply entrenched structural and cultural constraints. The findings point to a sector caught between the promise of transformation and the limitations of its own institutional architecture, particularly faculty hierarchies, governance cultures, and reward systems that reinforce inequality and stifle innovation.

The potential for transformation remains strong. Across interviews, participants acknowledged that universities hold a unique and vital position within the social fabric of Ontario. They expressed a shared belief in the university's role as a site of public good, a space for experimentation, and a mechanism for addressing the complex, interrelated challenges of our time. Yet this aspirational orientation is persistently undermined by the operational realities of academic life. Riddell captured this contradiction with her observation that universities are "*really good at studying everything but themselves,"* capturing a recurring theme across the dataset: institutions often resist the very forms of introspection and innovation they encourage in others. This reluctance reveals a key misalignment between institutional rhetoric and institutional practice, an incongruence that must be addressed if universities are to become truly resilient and socially impactful. This insight echoes Barnett's (2000) call for increased institutional reflexivity, essential in an *"age of supercomplexity,"* where universities must evolve from static knowledge producers to adaptive, learning institutions capable of critical self-assessment.

A salient finding to emerge from this study is the pervasive classism embedded within faculty structures. The differentiation between tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure-track appointments operates as more than an employment classification; it reinforces a hierarchy of value, legitimacy, and influence. Tenured and tenure-track

faculty typically control access to institutional decision-making spaces, research opportunities, and formal recognition systems, while non-tenured and contract faculty are often relegated to teaching-heavy roles with limited voice in governance. This structural imbalance perpetuates inequities in professional development, compensation, and academic influence across the institution.

Several interviewees, including Sevigny, criticized the protective culture around tenure. As Sevigny observed, “People have tenure and they are used to a certain rhythm of life and, quite frankly, they're comfy… they don't like their comfy world to be disrupted, exposing a complacency that often resists pedagogical or structural innovation. This dynamic becomes particularly problematic when innovation or equity initiatives are driven by contract or precariously employed faculty, whose work is frequently unsupported, undervalued, or dismissed. These internal hierarchies align with Kezar’s (2012) concept of a “two-tiered academic labour system,” marginalizing non-tenured faculty and restricting their participation in institutional decision-making. Sagarwala’s experience offers a powerful illustration of these structural dynamics. As a non-tenured instructor, he developed innovative, student-focused digital learning tools that significantly improved learning outcomes. However, his contributions were initially met with skepticism rather than support, reflecting an institutional culture that often marginalizes innovation emerging from non-tenured ranks. Only after significant personal initiative, and without formal institutional backing, was his work eventually recognized. Even then, the precarity of his employment status limited his influence and ability to scale his innovations. This account is not an isolated anecdote but reflects a broader phenomenon described by Settles et al. (2020) as “epistemic exclusion,” where scholars are systematically marginalized based on employment status or identity. In this case, innovation was not institutionally nurtured but tolerated at the margins, underscoring the need for systemic change in how academic labour and knowledge production are recognized.

The undervaluing of community-based, equity-driven, and applied research emerged as a consistent theme across the interviews. Institutional cultures were seen to privilege high-impact journal publications, often behind paywalls, over meaningful

community engagement or publicly accessible scholarship. This misalignment resonates with critiques from Geobey and Noel, who assert that traditional academic reward systems inadequately support the goals of social innovation. Mulgan (2006) similarly argued that social innovation demands new forms of collaboration, risk-taking, and long-term thinking capacities that traditional academic structures are ill-equipped to support. The resulting disincentives not only marginalize certain forms of knowledge but also dissuade scholars from engaging in the very forms of work that are critical to social innovation. Without systemic changes to evaluation metrics and promotion pathways, socially engaged research will remain marginalized despite rhetorical commitments to equity and impact.

Governance structures were revealed to reinforce patterns of exclusion and inhibit institutional adaptability. Foy observed that faculty often approach governance from an adversarial stance, rather than as co-creators of institutional strategy. She suggested that this dynamic emerges from outdated governance models, a limited understanding of governance processes, and a persistent lack of shared purpose between academic and administrative bodies. This pattern reflects Kezar's (2012) observation that non-tenured faculty are systematically excluded from governance roles, perpetuating institutional inequities. Traditional bicameral governance models, which disproportionately empower Boards over Senates, further constrain inclusive and participatory leadership necessary for strategic foresight.

Despite persistent structural challenges, the research participants identified emerging resilience and innovation within Ontario's higher education system. Participants described efforts to reframe institutional partnerships, broaden public engagement, and develop more adaptable governance and operational structures. Serrano's work at OCAD University highlighted the concept of strategic institutional adjacency, exemplified by OCAD's support for community art hubs in the city as a means of extending institutional impact without overreaching operational capacity. Another participant similarly described how policy review and leadership hiring processes were used to make governance structures more responsive and

transparent, even if change was incremental. Together, these initiatives suggest that systemic change, though incremental and often less visible, is already underway.

Pedagogical innovation emerged as a critical lever for advancing institutional transformation. Participants emphasized the creation of *'third spaces'*, - hybrid environments that transcend the classroom-community relationship dynamic and facilitate collaborative learning, co-creation, and embedded social practice. These spaces envision universities as not only sites of knowledge dissemination but also platforms for civic engagement and democratic renewal. However, their effective implementation depends on intentional structural support.

Although the concept of foresight was not always named explicitly, participants articulated ideas consistent with foresight-informed practice, including scenario planning, long-term thinking, systems thinking, and anticipatory governance. Participants emphasized the need for institutions to become more future-oriented, collaborative, and reflexive. The emphasis aligns with what Miller (2018) describes as “anticipatory capacity”, the ability to strategically imagine and respond to multiple futures in the present. References to hybrid pedagogies, flexible learning environments, and community-responsive curricula further suggest a shift toward what Soja (1996) describes as *'third spaces'*: integrated zones where institutional, civic, and learner interests converge. These *'third spaces'* are critical for transforming education from a transactional model to a relational practice, one embedded in, and accountable to, broader social and ecological systems.

Yet foresight integration into strategic planning remains largely ad hoc and peripheral. Most institutions lack formal foresight infrastructure, including scenario planning processes, horizon scanning capabilities, and anticipatory governance mechanisms. As Miller (2018) emphasizes, foresight must move from the periphery to the core of institutional strategy if universities are to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world. Foresight is not only a tool for managing uncertainty but a methodology for democratizing institutional visioning, particularly when used to elevate marginalized perspectives and to challenge legacy systems of authority and value.

This analysis reveals the nuanced interplay between aspirational goals and operational realities within Ontario's higher education system in the pursuit of social innovation. Interviewees' insights underscore the sector's transformative potential, as well as the persistent structural challenges constraining institutional progress.

The findings highlight an urgent need for comprehensive, integrated institutional transformation, challenging assumptions that innovation can flourish within current academic governance and reward structures. Achieving meaningful social innovation will require universities to dismantle class-based barriers, reform governance structures toward inclusivity and democratic participation as well as fostering reciprocal community collaborations. Institutions must also embrace flexible pedagogical models, including developing *'third spaces'*, and strategically leverage digital tools to expand access and impact. Ultimately, while universities are positioned as catalysts for societal transformation, realizing this potential depends on their capacity to move beyond performative commitments toward sustained, systemic innovation. Navigating these complexities effectively can enable higher education to become a responsive, equitable driver of meaningful social progress.

Discussion Conclusion

This research, based on both interviews and workshop discussions, reveal a nuanced and complex interplay between aspirational goals and operational realities in Ontario's higher education system in the pursuit of social innovation. Insights collectively underscore the transformative potential of post-secondary institutions, while highlighting the persistent structural and cultural challenges that continue to constrain progress. Participants consistently identified adaptive governance frameworks, authentic community-driven social innovation, equitable technology infrastructures, and inclusive credentialing practices as critical elements for institutional resilience and sustained societal impact.

Insights indicate that achieving meaningful social innovation will require comprehensive institutional transformation. These insights challenge the assumption that innovation can flourish within current academic governance and reward systems. Participants emphasized the urgent need to dismantle entrenched class-

based hierarchies within faculty roles, reform governance structures toward inclusive, democratic participation, and foster deeper, reciprocal community collaborations. Participants also emphasized the strategic importance of flexible pedagogical models, particularly through the development of interdisciplinary 'third space*s'* -and the intentional use of digital technologies to expand access and promote equity. Workshop reflections further stressed the importance of relational, contemplative educational experiences that align learning practices with broader societal values and community needs.

Ultimately, while universities are positioned as catalysts for societal transformation, realizing this potential depends on moving beyond performative commitments toward authentic, systemic innovation. Integrating diverse generational perspectives, especially those advocating for holistic and integrative educational frameworks inclusive of Indigenous and land-based knowledge systems, emerged as essential for achieving genuine transformation. Navigating these complexities with intentionality can enable Ontario’s higher education institutions to evolve into truly responsive, equitable drivers of meaningful social progress.

Reflection on Our Approach and Our Metaphor

The layered, multi-method approach allowed us to engage the system from multiple vantage points: narrative, structural, experiential, and imagined. The literature review and STEEPVL timeline clarified historical patterns and systemic trajectories, highlighting points of stress and fragility in Ontario's postsecondary sector. Semi-structured interviews surfaced contradictions, lived tensions, and institutional complexities that deepened and complicated these patterns. Foresight tools, including scenario development and wildcard disruptions, opened space for collective speculation, enabling participants to reframe assumptions and imagine alternative institutional futures.

Each method complemented the others, helping us trace not only what holds the current ***'house of cards'*** together, but also what might make future structures more resilient, regenerative, and relational. The breadth of data presented challenges, as did the discomfort some participants expressed when confronting speculative futures. Navigating the space between critique and possibility requires ongoing team sensemaking. Yet it was precisely in these tensions- between diagnosis and imagination, between fragility and resilience- that some of the richest insights emerged.

This project illuminated system leverage points and prompted generative questions about governance, culture, financial design, and institutional alignment. Our methods helped not only to map the existing fragilities of the system, but to ask more daring questions: What else might be built? For whom? With what values? Toward what kind of public future?

Ultimately, our methods were not simply instruments of observation but acts of strategic resistance against linear thinking; creating space to listen differently, to imagine otherwise, and to plant seeds of systemic renewal.

PROVOCATION

Reimagining the *'house of cards'*: From Collapse to Cultivation

This research reveals a sector defined by structural precarity, systemic inequities, and a persistent gap between institutional aspirations and operational realities. As several interviewees reflected, the image of Ontario's postsecondary institutions as a *'house of cards'* captures a system carefully assembled for stability, but fundamentally fragile, unable to adapt under cumulative pressures.

What emerged from this inquiry is a recognition that reinforcing existing structures will not lead to meaningful or lasting change. Instead, institutions must dismantle what no longer serves, nourish new practices, and cultivate more adaptive, inclusive systems rooted in community, collaboration, and care.

Cultivation, unlike patching or rebuilding the same unstable foundations, invites universities to imagine different relationships between knowledge, governance, and society: relationships grounded in adaptability, relational trust, and systemic resilience

Building on these findings, the next chapter explores four divergent futures for Ontario's postsecondary sector, examining how different structural trajectories could unfold depending on how institutions respond to systemic tensions and opportunities.

REFLECTION QUESTION:

What futures are we unknowingly building today - and what futures might we cultivate if we dared to imagine differently?

CULTIVATION MOMENT 3

Connective Bridge - From Collapse to Possible Futures

While the persistent gap between institutional aspirations and operational realities has left Ontario's postsecondary system resembling a *'house of cards'*, our research suggests there is hope. Reinforcing or patching the existing structures will not produce meaningful or lasting change. The sector is not merely experiencing turbulence; it is approaching a threshold where foundational shifts are both necessary and possible.

True transformation requires more than adaptation - it requires **cultivation**: the weeding of outdated practices, the nourishment of emergent ones, and the reimagining of new relationships between knowledge, governance, and society, grounded in collaboration, trust, and systemic resilience.

To explore the possibilities ahead, we developed four divergent futures oriented in **2035**. This horizon was chosen because it is close enough to feel tangible for today's institutional decision-makers, yet far enough to allow for meaningful structural, cultural, and governance shifts to take root. It invites universities to move beyond incremental thinking and seriously imagine what new architectures might emerge over the next decade.

CHAPTER 3

WHERE COULD WE GET TO?

Possible futures and essential questions.

Chapter 3 - Where Could We Get To?

"Another world is not only possible, she is already on her way. On quiet days, I can hear her breathing."

- Arundhati Roy

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

To the Future! This section shifts from diagnosing the fragility of Ontario's postsecondary education system to envisioning potential futures through structured foresight and scenario development. World building through scenario development offers an opportunity to explore multiple plausible futures and to use these imagined futures to surface strategic insights, identify critical uncertainties, and pinpoint potential leverage points that leaders must engage if they are to cultivate a more resilient, equitable, and imaginative higher education system.

Through the construction of four alternative futures- Discipline, Growth, Transformation, and Collapse- we invite institutional leaders to expand their strategic horizons, confront uncomfortable possibilities, and more intentionally steward the transition from fragility to flourishing.

Scenarios are designed as tools for deepening strategic imagination and building systemic resilience. They move leaders beyond linear extrapolation of past trends, challenging them to confront the implications of disruption, emergence, and contested values directly.

Scenarios enable leadership to:

- Recognize early signals of systemic shifts,
- Surface hidden assumptions that constrain strategic thinking,
- Explore strategic responses across a diversity of plausible futures, and
- Develop adaptive capacity, relational foresight, and ethical imagination.

For Ontario's higher education leaders, scenario exploration is not a luxury; it is a strategic imperative.

SYSTEMIC EXPLORATION: Visions of the Future

2035: Where Futures Take Shape

We begin our deeper dive into where Ontario's post-secondary system could go by extending our timeline to 2050. This longer view allows us to hold space for the slow arcs of systemic change and to trace not only where the system has come from, but where it might be heading as today's inflection points ripple outward. We ground our scenarios in the year 2035, not because transformation begins then, but because it marks the moment when the implications of choices made today will be unmistakably felt.

The year 2035 is not a distant future, it is the horizon where today's decisions converge with lived consequences. It is near enough to feel urgent, yet far enough to allow for meaningful reimagining. The stories told here are not predictions, but provocations, glimpses of what could unfold, depending on our capacity to act, adapt, and imagine differently.

Defining Scenarios: Dator's Four Futures

The scenario work in this research draws from the foresight methodologies pioneered by Dr. Jim Dator. Dator introduced the concept of the Generic Images of the Future, commonly referred to as Dator's Four Futures (Dator, 2009), as a way to systematically consider different trajectories of societal development. According to Dator, all plausible futures can be categorized into one or more of four distinct images each representing a fundamental way society might evolve in response to current challenges.

These four distinct images include:

- **Continued Growth:** Futures in which the current dominant trends, such as economic expansion, continue relatively unchanged.

- **Discipline:** Futures where societal constraints are imposed to correct unsustainable paths, often involving stricter governance, social order, or ecological stewardship.
- **Collapse:** Futures marked by systemic breakdown, where institutions and structures fail to adapt, leading to disruption or disintegration.
- **Transformation:** Futures where fundamental technological, social, or cultural shifts create entirely new paradigms of living, learning, and governance.

These images serve as scaffolding for thinking beyond the present, allowing researchers and decision-makers to stretch their imagination and prepare for a range of complex, plausible futures.

Higher Education in 2035: Four Future Scenarios

Building on Dator's framework, four distinct scenarios for Ontario's postsecondary education system have been developed, each rooted in different patterns of adaptation, constraint, collapse, or transformation, to stimulate strategic reflection and proactive institutional cultivation. The scenarios, also known as worlds, explore tensions, opportunities, and systemic shifts that could define Ontario's postsecondary sector over the next four to five decades. Together, they challenge institutions and leaders to ask:

What forces must be resisted?

What emerging practices must be cultivated?

And what futures are still possible, if we choose to imagine and build them? The following four worlds explore divergent possibilities for Ontario's postsecondary education sector, each shaped by distinct patterns of resilience, risk, adaptation, and imagination. Each world brings to life a timeline and story that reveals who benefits, who is under pressure, and what choices matter most. They invite us to consider not just what might happen, but for whom. **Take a closer look…**

GROWTH: Academic Arms Race

An Image of Continued Growth: Futures in which the current dominant trends, such as economic expansion, continue relatively unchanged.

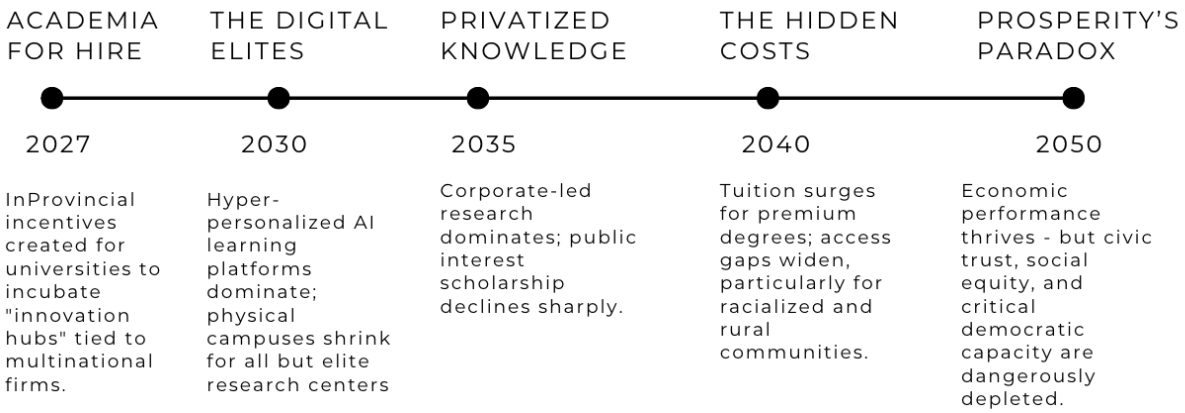


Figure 3: Timeline of the Growth Futures Scenario

The skyline flickers with augmented projections of knowledge rankings, corporate logos, and personalized learning dashboards. It is 2035, and Ontario's post-secondary institutions have evolved into global performance machines, finely calibrated for optimized learning, commercial innovation, and economic momentum. In this world of acceleration, universities no longer ask why, only how fast. Growth has become a belief system, a shared faith that with the right mix of technology, metrics, and market alignment, even learning can scale. But quietly, in the spaces left unmeasured, questions about meaning, equity, and belonging begin to re-emerge.

Ontario's universities have transformed. No longer bound by quaint lecture halls and seasonal enrolments, they now operate as global education enterprises: slick, data-driven, and branded for lifelong engagement. Degrees are just one option in a modular, stackable skills economy, where credential subscriptions and algorithmically sequenced learning paths mirror a market portfolio. Students, now dynamic learner-consumers, navigate AI-optimized pathways monitored by biometric signals and verified through blockchain, as micro-credentials follow them across careers, continents, and crises.

Government ministries, once hesitant, now position universities as the core engines of economic growth. Public-private partnerships aren't just encouraged, they're embedded. Ed-tech firms and multinational employers co-design programs in exchange for adaptive workforces and socially responsible branding. Campuses now resemble hyperconnected innovation districts: part coworking space, part luxury residence, part biometric testing lab. At the center, the university enterprise, driven by real-time labour market data and performance metrics that link funding to graduate outcomes. In this new knowledge economy, education is fast, personalized, and perpetually in motion. Growth is tangible, visible, and rewarded.

Who this World Serves: The Winners of Acceleration

In this world, the metrics align beautifully, for some.

Corporate actors are deeply embedded within university infrastructure. Research-intensive institutions with early AI adoption and global partnerships evolve into Ontario's mega-universities, consolidated from smaller colleges and governed by corporate advisory boards. These institutions operate like multinational enterprises, delivering a steady stream of narrowly skilled, just-in-time workers. In return, corporations shape curricula, fund research with high-profit potential, and gain access to student and faculty generated IP. Campuses resemble innovation districts, equipped with immersive VR classrooms, autonomous labs, and co-branded student housing. Academic priorities shift toward market outcomes, community-based learning is marginalized, and access becomes increasingly unequal. Governments champion this model as a blueprint for economic advancement. In turn, they loosen regulatory frameworks, fast-track industry partnerships, and provide subsidies, so long as institutions show growth.

Even provincial governments gain. Economic nationalism fuels investment in domestic talent. Credential inflation is spun into economic growth. The university becomes a "good citizen" again, contributing jobs, tax revenue, and a workforce aligned to evolving national security and AI strategic priorities.

Elite faculty thrive too, but differently. The traditional professor is rare. In their place: celebrity researchers, entrepreneurial educators, and hybrid academic influencers. They teach, consult, and co-own patents. Academic freedom is retained, selectively. Intellectual independence that aligns with innovation economies is rewarded. Dissent is not silenced, but it is outcompeted.

International students, once seen as temporary tuition sources, are now lifelong subscribers. They flow between digital and physical campuses, guided by AI mentors, accessing real-time coursework adapted to labour market shifts. Ontario is their launchpad, its universities rebranded as career catapults. Their success stories, gamified and broadcast in real-time, feed alumni investment engines and global rankings. It works, by many definitions. For this demographic, Ontario becomes a gateway to global opportunity.

Thriving Under Pressure: Strategic Trade-offs and Social Silences

This world is thriving, but under pressure. It has compressed, contorted, and narrowed.

Re-engineered to perform, universities thrive as hyper-efficient institutions, yet the space for dissent, nuance, and slow learning has steadily narrowed. Faculty resistance grows, but tenure protections erode under pressure. Legal reforms designed to promote transparency create performance surveillance cultures instead. AI monitors flag underperformers; recommendation systems reroute students away from faculty who teach "controversial content." Academic freedom is not legislated away, it is outcompeted.

Workload equity reforms, initially framed as justice, entrench new hierarchies. Precarious instructors, now the teaching majority, are optimized for output by algorithm, while their well-published peers are fast-tracked to leadership roles. Workload metrics replace collegial governance. Unions win procedural battles, but decision-making lives on executive dashboards aligned with market logic.

Public trust in academia is up, on paper. Yet behind the metrics, misinformation spreads, and curriculum debates polarize. As nationalist ideologies gain traction, political actors increasingly assert control over what counts as “value” in higher education. Contentious topics are flagged for de-funding and policy rewards institutions that train for growth, not justice. Social cohesion is thin. Deep racial, gender, and class divides persist beneath the surface of personalized learning and glossy institutional dashboards. DEI survives, but only in rebranded form as ‘Resilience Leadership,' where inclusion is measured, audited, and optimized. Measurable inclusion replaces lived equity.

What is certain is this: a society that trains only for efficiency will forget how to dream. It will lose its poets and provocateurs. It will forget that education, at its core, is a public act of imagination.

Summary of Possibilities within Academic Arms Race (Growth)
Positive Impacts
• Growth of accessible, flexible micro-credential ecosystems. • Global mobility through AI-optimized lifelong learning networks. • Stronger technological infrastructure supporting continuous education.
Negative Impacts
• Narrowing definitions of academic freedom and critical inquiry. • Deepening inequities in access and career outcomes. • Loss of space for community-based and interdisciplinary learning.
Seeds of Possibility
• Emergence of slow-learning, relational education networks. • Critical humanities protected in parallel underground cooperatives. • Relational accreditation models alongside blockchain verification. • Ethical corporate partnerships supporting community-based learning networks.

FOUR ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR DECISION MAKERS IN THE ACADEMIC ARMS RACE GROWTH WORLD

1. How do we prevent innovation ecosystems from deepening inequality and exclusion?
2. What does ethical growth look like when market metrics dominate public missions?
3. How can relational learning, civic engagement, and human well-being be preserved in a hyper-commercialized sector?
4. What safeguards are necessary to ensure that academic freedom and critical inquiry are not outcompeted?

DISCIPLINED: The 5-Minute University- Higher Ed on a Short Leash

An Image of Discipline: Futures where societal constraints are imposed to correct unsustainable paths, often involving stricter governance or ecological stewardship

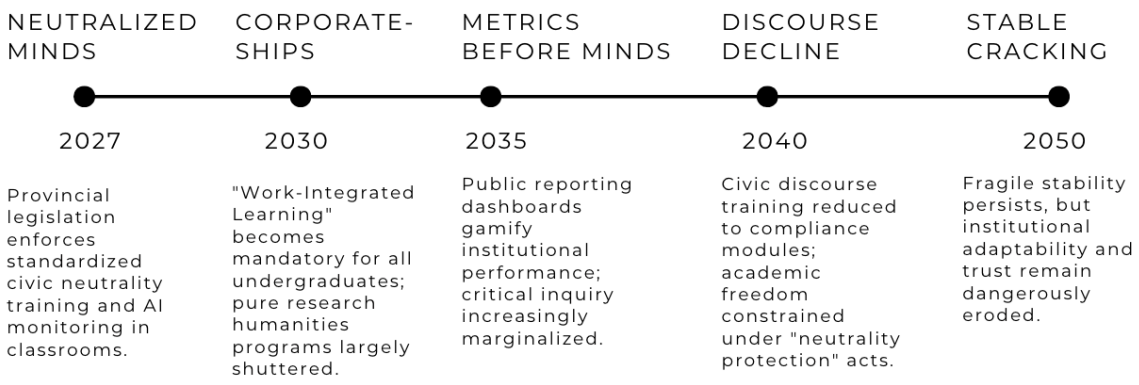


Figure 4: Timeline of the Disciplined Futures Scenario

From a distance, it looks like order. The year is 2035 and data dashboards gleam across campus walls, reporting progress in real time. A regulated hum pulses through every corner of higher education; controlled, compliant, and efficient. The system, long teetering on the edge of uncertainty, has not collapsed. It has been reigned in.

The path here was paved in austerity and ambition. Years of economic nationalism, pandemic fallout, and declining public trust left governments unwilling to fund what they could not measure. Strategic Mandate Agreements, once seen as accountability tools, became instruments of transformation. Only programs with quantifiable market value survived. The “5-Minute University” was born: modular, accelerated, unbundled. Learning was stripped down to its economic core.

Social pressures reinforced this shift. A deeply polarized society, divided along lines of gender, speech, and race, demanded order. Politicians responded with legislation that narrowed what could be taught, and how. A surge in cyberattacks and the proliferation of misinformation blurred lines between free inquiry and public risk. Faculty workloads were made public. AI monitored “civic neutrality” in classroom discussions. Work-integrated learning became mandatory. Autonomy became a memory.

But for those who adapted, students, institutions, and policymakers alike, a fragile equilibrium emerged, promising clarity and efficiency at the cost of breadth and freedom.

Who This World Serves: The World that Stabilized

This world rewards those who deliver. Institutions that adapted to funding models survived; some even thrived. Colleges, polytechnics, and agile universities realigned their missions to national economic priorities, often supported by corporate partners. Research commercialization, once a point of friction, is now a system imperative. Social innovation, narrowly defined, supports economic inclusion, not transformation.

For students, the pathways are clear and cost-effective. Education is faster, cheaper, and designed for employability. Predictive analytics begin steering learners as early as high school. There is little room for detours, but high job placement rates reinforce the logic of the system.

Governments feel vindicated. By aligning immigration, education, and economic policy, they've created a streamlined pipeline to support national labour needs. Digital currencies fund skill-based credentials. Performance dashboards inform public trust, if not enthusiasm. On the surface, order has replaced chaos.

Navigating the Narrow Path Ahead

But beneath this order lies a tension between containment and possibility.

This disciplined world curbs the chaos of the early 2020s, but in doing so narrows the horizon of what higher education can be. Curiosity has structure. Equity has metrics. Research has deliverables. Learning is no longer a journey of becoming; it is a route to predictable outcomes.

Still, not all is lost. Indigenous communities, bolstered by legal wins and policy shifts influenced by UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), are building autonomous education systems rooted in sovereignty and care. Some have found ways to adapt. They teach between the lines, embedding

meaning in modules, slipping slow questions into fast learning. Cooperative teaching models and cross-sector ecosystems quietly thrive within the spaces between key performance indicators.

Even students, trained to follow data-defined paths, begin to question. They begin to remember that learning was once a place of becoming, not just arriving. Microlearning pods form around emergent issues like AI ethics, climate justice, and community healing. While not part of the formal curriculum, these efforts breathe life into the system's rigid shell.

This is a world that has traded volatility for stability, but at the cost of possibility. It is a world not in freefall, but in quiet containment, sustainable for now. Yet beneath its order lies a quiet forgetting of what once made learning a human act.

Summary of Possibilities within 'The 5-Minute University' (Disciplined)

Positive Impacts

- Clear, cost-effective pathways to employment.
- Expanded use of digital credentials and verification systems.
- Reduced time and cost for credential completion.

Negative Impacts

- Loss of breadth, autonomy, and slow learning.
- Suppression of dissent, debate, and deep curiosity.
- Reinforcement of rigid hierarchies and learning inequalities.

Seeds of Possibility

- Cooperative learning pods offering alternate, curiosity-driven learning.
- Indigenous-led systems embedding care and sovereignty in curriculum.
- Informal microlearning communities around ethics, climate, and justice.

FOUR ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR DECISION MAKERS IN THE DISCIPLINE WORLD

1. What freedoms and capacities are we willing to trade for stability and efficiency?
2. How do we protect critical inquiry and civic discourse when neutrality is legislated?
3. Where can we seed resilience in a system engineered for compliance, not adaptability?
4. What quiet spaces for imagination and resistance can we sustain within the structure?

COLLAPSE: The Great University Meltdown - When Higher Ed Falls Apart

An Image of Collapse: Futures marked by systemic breakdown, where institutions and structures fail to adapt, leading to disruption or disintegration.

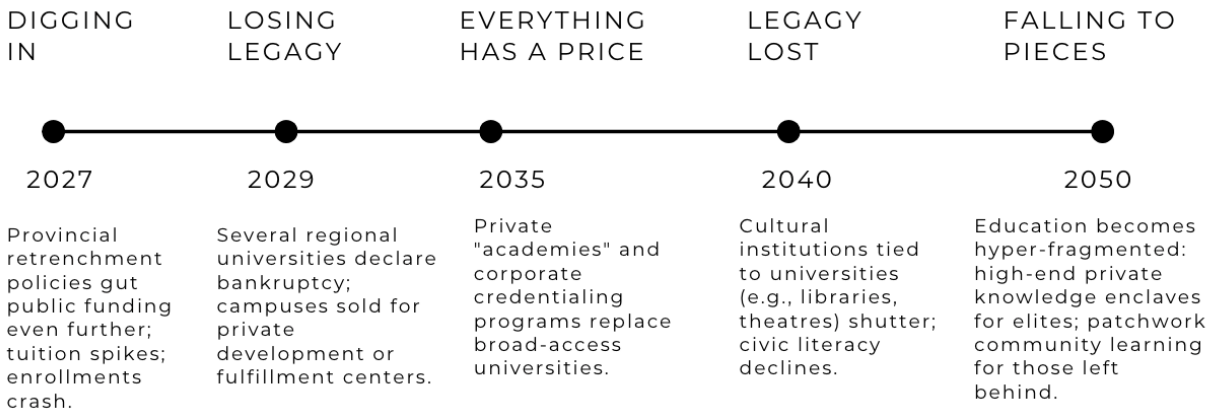


Figure 5: Timeline of the Collapse Futures Scenario

The echoing halls and vacant lecture rooms across Ontario in 2035 whisper a somber tale of a broken education system. Ontario's universities, once global beacons of scholarship and innovation, lay abandoned, victims of a reckless reliance on tuition fees, government neglect, restrictive immigration policies, and cascading economic crises. Enrollment plummeted, sending institutions into financial insolvency. In a cruel twist, campuses transformed overnight; ivy-covered walls now house condos, startup hubs, and industrial fulfillment centers.

Universities' governance structures imploded, hollowed out by financial exigency clauses weaponized against tenured faculty and vital programs. Collective agreements disintegrated, replaced by lawsuits and bitter internal disputes, as disenfranchised faculty sought justice against broken promises. Legal battles intensified distrust, severing the fragile connection between institutions and the public. As misinformation permeated society, academic freedom crumbled under political manipulation, fracturing social cohesion and fueling polarization.

Disillusioned but not defeated, students coalesced into learning collectives, using open-source tools and encrypted networks to share knowledge beyond corporate or state control. These students led nodes- part hacker hub, part mutual aid group-

cultivated critical thinking, self-governance, and peer credentialing in defiance of the commodified education machine. Corporate interests swiftly occupied the vacuum. Education fragmented into hyper-local ecosystems shaped by corporations. Knowledge commodification surged, prioritizing productivity over critical thought and civic engagement. The digital realm amplified inequality, as prestigious institutions hoarded resources, leaving regional universities to collapse under unbearable economic strain. And yet, a small number of public universities resisted collapse by forming knowledge cooperatives: lean, decentralized institutions co-owned by students, faculty, and communities. These holdouts provided open-access education grounded in critical thought and cultural inclusion but operated under constant legal and financial siege.

Who This World Serves: The Privileged Few

This collapsed educational world disproportionately benefits corporate giants and elite institutions. Wealth and opportunity concentrate in the hands of private entities, whose proprietary training programs churn out narrowly skilled workers suited only for immediate corporate needs. Hyper-specialization deepens societal divides. Small communities and disenfranchised groups, unable to access costly corporate academies, remain marginalized and educational inequality entrenches further economic disparity.

In towns where universities once anchored civic life, libraries shuttered, theatres darkened, and democratic participation withered. Cultural institutions decayed alongside economic ones, leaving behind ghost campuses and disconnected youth. In a few regions, local cooperatives emerged; barebones, hope-fueled attempts to preserve learning, culture, and public discourse. These initiatives reflected a stubborn human agency, with students and communities fighting to reclaim education from collapse. Indigenous communities, reclaiming cultural identities and resisting colonial educational models, operate isolated, unsupported by mainstream institutional frameworks.

Private industry lobbyists secure governmental compliance to privatize certification standards, deepening the workforce divide and hindering cross-sector innovation. Without collective oversight or ethical considerations, these corporations streamline the education system into an economic conveyor belt, devoid of critical reflection or cultural diversity. However, not all corporations pursued extraction. A handful attempted to realign with social purpose, experimenting with inclusive governance models, redistributing profits to fund open learning labs, or partnering with local cooperatives to uplift underserved regions. These efforts, though often met with skepticism, planted seeds of possibility.

Barreling Towards Uncertain Certainties

This fragmented future looms ominously, driven by declining societal trust, polarized political climates, and rampant misinformation. Faculty burnout, coupled with widespread precarity, signals educational dysfunction and human capital depletion. Economic nationalism heightens geopolitical tensions, exacerbating enrollment declines and isolating Canada further in a protective but impoverishing shell.

Corporate consolidation, while initially solving the immediate crisis of employment training, erodes the broader societal fabric, extinguishing critical, innovative, and culturally diverse education. Universities lose their ability to foster ingenuity, leaving society ill-prepared to address future pandemics, environmental crises, or technological disruptions. Decentralized networks, despite their resilience, lack cohesion and shared vision, unable to compensate for the lost public good once embodied by vibrant academic institutions.

And yet, amidst collapse, whispers of an alternate future flicker and begin to take root. A network of land-based, Indigenous-led learning sanctuaries begins to coalesce, autonomous from the market, guided by ceremony, and grounded in stewardship. While underfunded and overlooked, they quietly reimagine education not as a system, but as a reciprocal relationship between knowledge, place, and people.

A future without thoughtful, public, and inclusive education leaves society vulnerable, fragmented, and bereft of the critical capacities needed to navigate the complexities of an uncertain world.

Summary of Possibilities within 'The Great University Meltdown' (Collapse)
Positive Impacts
• Growth of decentralized, community-owned education ecosystems. • Reclamation of Indigenous knowledge systems and sovereignty. • Renewed focus on critical thinking and inclusion.
Negative Impacts
• Dominance of corporate, skills-based training models. • Widening educational inequities across regions and demographics. • Loss of universities as civic, cultural, and democratic institutions.
Seeds of Possibility
• Indigenous-led learning sanctuaries preserving relational education. • Knowledge cooperatives sustaining critical, open-access discourse.

FOUR ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR DECISION MAKERS IN THE COLLAPSE WORLD

1. What knowledge, practices, and relationships must we protect during systemic breakdown?
2. Where can we build micro-systems of learning, resilience, and solidarity outside collapsing institutions?
3. How can we ensure that marginalized communities are not further abandoned in the rubble?
4. What seeds of regeneration can we plant now that will outlast collapse?

TRANSFORMATION: Decentralized Learning Networks - Higher Education as a Living System

An Image of Transformation: Futures where fundamental technological, social, or cultural shifts create entirely new paradigms of living, learning, and governance.

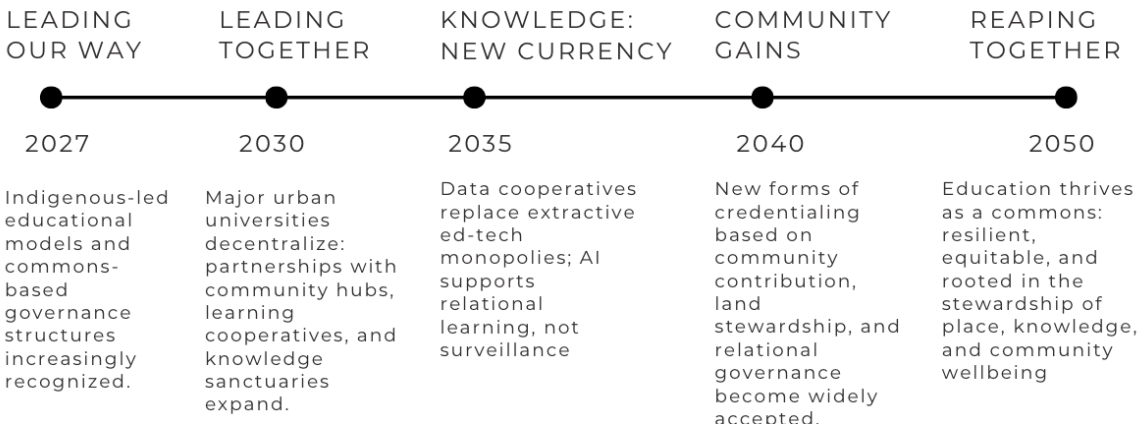


Figure 6: Timeline of the Transformation Futures Scenario

Mist still clings to the edges of the rebuilt lecture greenhouse at the base of this Ontario communities' hills. Here, classes begin with quiet observation, of soil moisture, of wind patterns, of each other. The year is 2035, and education has stopped asking how to do less harm. It now asks how to heal.

Across Ontario, the remnants of a crumbling *'house of cards'*, legacy universities strained by extraction, burnout, and knowledge elitism, have been interlaced with living threads. These threads, mycelial in nature and function, spread across rural and urban landscapes alike, carrying nutrients in the form of stories, skills, relationships, and reverence.

This is not a world of collapse, nor one of managed constraint. It is a world transformed by communities who, together, lived the question: How do we create cultures that choose life? Yet, this transformation unfolded unevenly, shaped by both hope and hesitation.

Who This World Serves: The Co-Creators of Interbeing

This world emerged from the compost of crisis. Economic nationalism, political apathy, institutional distrust, and ecological devastation had rendered the education system brittle. Yet, at the edge of chaos lies the emergence of greater intelligence. A collective awakening, rooted in reciprocity, humility, and imagination, began to take hold, even as pockets of resistance and old narratives of competition and control lingered at the margins.

Communities had reclaimed learning as a commons. No longer confined by disciplines or degrees, post-secondary education became an ecosystem of bioregional learning hubs, digital guilds, land-based apprenticeships, and intergenerational circles. Indigenous knowledge keepers, designers, caregivers, engineers, farmers, and artists co-wrote curricula. At times, tensions surfaced as diverse ways of knowing collided, requiring ongoing commitment to dialogue, care, and ethical co-creation.

Credentials became portfolios of contribution, validated by community, by land, by life itself. Data was owned in common, and AI was regenerative by design, used to scaffold relationships, not replace them. Learning was not separate from living; it was embedded in the slow rhythms of place, ceremony, and care. Still, vigilance remained necessary to ensure technologies served the commons rather than creeping back toward enclosure.

Education became a kind of mycelium, facilitating nutrient exchange across communities, worldviews, and knowledges, rooting people in their places while connecting them globally through shared purpose. The *'house of cards'* did not fall; it became host to something deeper, a lattice for life. Still, even living lattices require ongoing tending to resist old habits of hierarchy and exclusion.

Tensions in the Regeneration

Even here, transformation is not free of tension. Transformation is not a destination, it is a path walked together in uncertainty. Efforts to scale regenerative models occasionally risked replicating the extractive logics they replaced. Regional ecosystems adapted unevenly, some communities thrived, while others, long marginalized, struggled to secure the resources needed to build their hubs, highlighting that healing ecosystems takes more than inspiration, it requires material justice.

State and provincial governments recognized the value of regenerative education and introduced enabling policies, but some systems sought to brand or own what was meant to remain emergent. Debates flared over accreditation, over the place of AI, over how to honour both structure and emergence.

In this evolving landscape, educators are no longer content deliverers, they are pattern weavers, co-sensing with their communities what is needed. Learning is responsive, not reactive. Students are not empty vessels, but stewards of becoming, engaged in reciprocal relationships with land, knowledge, and each other.

Feedback loops- ecological, social, spiritual- guide decision-making, through communities remain alert to the dangers of drifting back into brittle hierarchies when vigilance fades. Still, unlike the brittle institutions of the past, this world bends. Governance is polycentric and participatory. Resilience is understood not as resistance to change, but as capacity to adapt while holding integrity.

The questions have changed. And in changing the questions, the world changed.

Summary of Possibilities within Decentralized Learning Networks (Transformation)
Positive Impacts
• Education systems are rooted in reciprocity, care, and emergence. • Reconnection of learning to land, story, and shared stewardship. • Collective resilience through adaptive, decentralized infrastructure.
Negative Impacts
• Uneven resource access between communities and ecosystems. • Tension over accreditation and legitimacy of new models. • Risk of extractive systems re-emerging through branding or enclosure.
Seeds of Possibility
• Polycentric coalitions protecting regenerative education from enclosure. • Cross-generational knowledge circles linking wisdom and innovation. • Open, relational learning platforms rooted in land and

FOUR ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR DECISION MAKERS IN THE TRANSFORMATION WORLD

1. How do we nourish emerging ecosystems without replicating past hierarchies or extraction models?
2. What governance models can sustain diversity, reciprocity, and local sovereignty at scale?
3. How do we balance innovation and coherence across decentralized networks?
4. What new stories of belonging, resilience, and purpose must we craft and carry forward?

Conclusion: Navigating the Futures We Face

The four scenarios explored in this chapter are not predictions, but provocations, strategic stories designed to stretch our collective imagination, illuminate emerging tensions, and surface the critical choices ahead. Each world offers a distinct trajectory shaped by different societal responses to disruption, risk, and opportunity. Together, they remind us that Ontario's postsecondary future is not fixed. It is contingent on the decisions we make today.

These futures call on leaders to engage with uncertainty not as a threat, but as a space for ethical imagination, adaptive strategy, and long-term thinking. They ask us to look beyond institutional self-preservation and toward the transformation of learning systems capable of serving both people and planet in a time of accelerating change.

For a detailed timeline of each scenario world from 2025 to 2050, see **Appendix C**.

To explore the foundational drivers, trends, and critical uncertainties that play a role in these futures, refer to **Appendix D**.

PROVOCATION

The futures explored through the scenarios are not inevitable; they are invitations to imagine, contest, cultivate, and reshape what is possible. They challenge universities to leap toward futures that are not only desirable, but also viable and feasible: defined through strategic interventions and deliberate action.

The final chapter outlines pathways for this work, inviting institutions to reorient not by preserving what was, but by co-creating new architectures of care, collaboration, and collective imagination for the future of higher education.

The time to cultivate is now.

REFLECTION QUESTION:

What must we release, and what new architectures of care and complexity must we dare to grow?

CULTIVATION MOMENT 4

Cultivating Relational Resilience: From *'house of cards'* to Living Systems

Ontario's public universities remain precariously balanced like a *'house of cards'*. The task ahead is not to reinforce that fragility, but to cultivate a living system: one that strengthens relational pathways, supports adaptive learning, and sustains resilience over time.

Building on the systemic patterns surfaced through research, the framework that follows outlines seven pathways for institutional renewal: flexible entry points for Boards, Senates, leaders, and communities to reimagine governance, culture, and public purpose. Each intervention is an act of ecological stewardship, moving beyond patching a brittle system toward nurturing the emergence of adaptive, regenerative infrastructures of higher education.

Up to this point, fragility has been described through the image of a *'house of cards'* - carefully assembled but inherently unstable. As we move into the work of cultivating transformation, we introduce a new metaphor: the living, mycelial system, one that weaves connections, shares nutrients, and anchors change in networks of care. This shift signals a deeper change in perspective, from shoring up brittle structures to strengthening relational pathways capable of supporting resilience, complexity, and regenerative public purpose.

These are not cards to be stacked. They are roots taking hold, fortifying the *'house of cards'* into a living network - adaptive, relational, and grounded in collective imagination.

CHAPTER 4

WHAT COULD WE DO ABOUT IT?

Strategic pathways and niche discoveries.

Chapter 4 - What Could We Do About It

“The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make and could just as easily make differently.”

- David Graeber

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

"What Could We Do About It" transitions from exploring potential futures to cultivating strategic action. Building on the systemic diagnosis, scenario exploration, and futures analysis from earlier sections, this chapter introduces seven strategic intervention pathways to guide Ontario’s postsecondary institutions toward more resilient, equitable, and imaginative futures.

This section serves three interrelated purposes:

- **Insights and Objectives:** It distills the critical insights gathered throughout the research process, highlighting the limitations of incremental reform, the erosion of public trust, and the undervaluation of imagination as a civic resource. It also frames actionable objectives for institutional renewal.
- **Strategic Intervention Pathways:** It proposes seven dynamic strategies, each grounded in systems thinking, relational governance, and social innovation. These pathways offer practical yet adaptable entry points for Boards, Senates, senior leaders, and communities to engage in meaningful transformation.
- **Strategic Foresight Analysis of Strategic Pathways via Wind Tunnelling:** This component applies wind tunnelling foresight techniques to stress-test each pathway across four divergent future scenarios. It identifies each strategy's resilience, vulnerabilities, and required adaptations, ensuring that institutional transformation efforts remain viable and regenerative across multiple systemic conditions.

Stress Testing

Recognizing the volatility and uncertainty of the sector's future, each objective and strategic pathway was **stress-tested** through a **wind tunnelling process** to systematically assess each across the four divergent future scenarios (Growth, Disciplined, Collapsed, and Transformation).

This foresight-informed stress test evaluated each intervention:

- **Desirability:** Does it resonate with emergent societal needs and civic purposes?
- **Viability:** Will it endure over time across shifting landscapes?
- **Feasibility:** Can it be implemented under different systemic conditions?

The wind tunnelling revealed that while no strategy is universally resilient, certain pathways, particularly those investing in relational governance, systemic imagination, and distributed leadership, demonstrate higher adaptive capacity. Institutions must proactively enhance their adaptability, relevance, and regenerative potential to thrive in diverse futures.

Tending the Work Together

These pathways offer structured starting points, not static blueprints. They are living frameworks designed to be revisited, adapted, and deepened as conditions evolve. In dynamic systems- where relationships, environments, and needs are constantly in motion- any pathway must remain responsive and regenerative.

Transformation does not happen all at once. It unfolds through conversations, through decisions made differently, and through quiet experiments that grow into new ways of being. These pathways are scaffolds for action, not fixed maps. Their relevance will depend on the courage, care, and imagination with which they are cultivated over time. In a landscape shaped by volatility and constraint, this is also a call to creativity. To imagine not only what we are moving away from, but what we are moving toward, and to steward that future together with humility, resilience, and collective hope.

SYSTEMIC EXPLORATION: Strategic Pathways Forward

Strategic Pathways to Transformation and the Two Loop Model of Change

This systemic exploration introduces seven strategic pathways, each grounded in critical system insights and aligned with core institutional objectives. Framed by guiding interventions and supported by actionable practices, these pathways collectively form an adaptive, values-driven framework for institutional transformation.

The pathways are intentionally non-linear, offering multiple points of entry based on each institution's context, strategic priorities, and readiness for change. They mark a shift from reactive adaptation to relational stewardship of emergent futures.

Our starting point is a set of systemic insights surfaced through the research process, which inform core objectives designed to build resilience and regenerative capacity. These objectives in turn shape the strategic pathways, offering practical and actionable routes to transformation across diverse futures.

To understand how these pathways support transformation in dynamic environments, we draw on the Two Loops Model of Change (Frieze & Wheatley, 2011); a systems-informed approach that maps how transformation unfolds in living and social systems. The model helps institutions navigate disruption by recognizing patterns of decline and emergence, clarifying what must be released, what is taking shape, and how to intentionally support emergent practices and structures. It emphasizes that meaningful, sustainable change is not linear, but arises through connection, experimentation, reflection, and alignment with deeper purpose.

Widely used in foresight and systems change work, the model outlines six key phases:

- **Name** what is breaking down or emerging
- **Connect** ideas and actors
- **Nourish** promising experiments
- **Transition** into new structures
- **Illuminate** what is working
- **Sustain** what is ready to grow

Each activity in the strategic pathways is tagged with one or more 'Two Loop Model' phases to show how it supports transformation; whether by enabling reflection, building capacity, or embedding new practices.

These pathways are not sequential or siloed strategies. Rather, they are interconnected interventions designed to support intentional, context-sensitive transformation that is anchored in shared values and responsive to complexity.

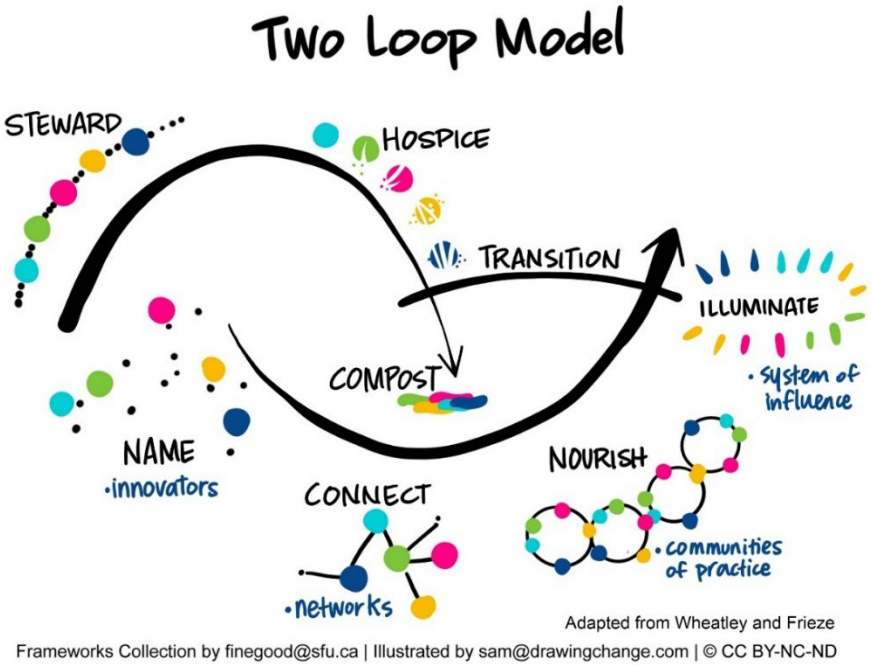


Figure 7: Two Model for Systems Transition. Image from Finegood, D. T. (n.d.).

Core Insights for the Future of Higher Education in Ontario

Transforming Ontario's postsecondary institutions demands a foundation of emotional safety, relational trust, and shared meaning-preconditions that are currently fragile or absent. Seven key insights emerged from the research

- **Readiness** requires emotional safety, relational trust, and frameworks for social innovation. Without them, change remains fragmented and superficial.
- **Authentic community engagement** is foundational for social innovation. Current models are often transactional, driven by institutional priorities rather than reciprocity.
- **Trust is a civic asset.** Hierarchical governance, opaque decision-making, and transactional engagement erode it, but trust can be deliberately restored through reciprocal relationships.
- **Reward systems** that prioritize individual achievement and short-term outputs systematically undervalue relational, civic, and social innovation work.
- **Empowered, distributed champions,** particularly those closest to systemic inequities, are critical drivers of meaningful innovation.
- **Governance structures** shape innovation capacity. Ontario's traditional bicameral governance tends to reinforce hierarchy and fragmentation, inhibiting agility and collaboration.
- **Systemic innovation requires shared infrastructure.** Current promising initiatives remain siloed due to a lack of coordination, risk-sharing mechanisms, and collective learning systems.

Core Objectives for the Future of Higher Education in Ontario

To build a resilient and regenerative future for higher education in Ontario, institutions must ground their efforts in a core set of objectives. Developed through systemic analysis and stress-tested across divergent future scenarios, these objectives define the conditions and capacities needed to navigate uncertainty and shape change with purpose and imagination.

In a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, strategic prioritization is essential. Not all objectives carry equal weight across divergent futures. Stress testing through wind tunnelling revealed two distinct tiers of objectives, reflecting their relative criticality across multiple scenarios. Together, they form the strategic base for deeper institutional transformation.

Tier 1 - The Seeds (Absolutely Foundational)

The following three objectives **must be** secured first. Without them, institutions will struggle to maintain legitimacy, adaptability, and relevance across all futures. These are the non-negotiable.

- Foster Distributed and Adaptive Resilience
- Embed Deep, Relational Equity and Democratic Trust
- Develop Polycentric, Foresight-Informed Governance

Tier 2 - The Fertilizer (Highly Strategic, Context-Dependent)

These five objectives are **critical accelerants** of long-term transformation. Their advancement should be supported by policy innovations, particularly in futures where relational practices and slow innovation may be devalued.

- Design Regenerative Learning Ecosystems
- Institutionalize Regenerative Social Innovation
- Advance Relational and Multimodal Evaluation Systems
- Cultivate Commons-Based *'third spaces'*
- Center Human and Planetary Well-Being

Prioritized Strategic Pathways for the Future of Higher Education in Ontario

Each strategic intervention is intentionally designed to advance multiple core objectives, enhancing systemic resilience, innovation capacity, equity, and future readiness across Ontario's higher education landscape. These pathways also embed buffering mechanisms, adaptive design principles, and emotional sustainability practices to support long-term institutional vitality.

Each pathway is defined through four elements:

- **Strategic Intent*:*** The core purpose the intervention aims to fulfill
- **Strategic Overview:** The rationale and primary mechanisms for action
- **Alignment with Core Objectives***:* How the pathway connects to foundational system goals
- **Activities Mapped to the Two Loops Model***:* Concrete practices aligned to key stages of systemic transition

Together, these seven pathways form a values-driven roadmap for adaptive and regenerative transformation across Ontario's postsecondary sector.

PATHWAY 1: SEEDING ADAPTIVE GOVERNANCE

Strategic Intent

To build agile, participatory, and pluralistic governance structures that can sense change, distribute power equitably, and respond adaptively.

Strategic Overview

This pathway embeds foresight-driven councils and modular governance pilots within existing structures. Structured dialogue between Boards and Senates strengthens shared values and collective decision-making, while reconciliation practices ensure diverse voices are embedded meaningfully in governance processes.

Alignment with Core Objectives:

- Foster Distributed and Adaptive Resilience (foundational)
- Embed Deep, Relational Equity and Civic Trust (foundational)
- Develop Polycentric, Foresight-Informed Governance (foundational)

Activities Mapped to the Two Loop Model

Table 3: Activities to support Strategic Pathway 1

ACTIVITY	TWO LOOP MODEL PHASE	DESCRIPTION
Participatory Foresight Councils	Transition	Cross-functional scenario-building and futures councils reporting to Boards and Senates
Culturally Responsive Adaptive Governance Practices	Transition, Sustain	Modular governance pilots, time-bound scenario planning, reflective rituals, and evaluations using narrative, financial, and culturally diverse temporal lenses
Governance Capacity Building	Connect, Nourish	Governance literacy, facilitation skills, and relational leadership training across staff, faculty, students
Imagination as a Governance Competency	Transition	Scenario rehearsals, narrative foresight, and imaginative visioning integrated into governance development

PATHWAY 2: RESTORATIVE ROOTS AND REBUILDING TRUST

Strategic Intent:

To rebuild institutional legitimacy through equity-centered trust processes rather than compliance or reputation management.

Strategic Overview:

Restorative trust infrastructures, including councils, literacy training, and reconciliation processes, anchor emotional sustainability and rebuild public confidence. Addressing grief, burnout, and healing become core to leadership and change processes.

Alignment with Core Objectives:

- Embed Deep, Relational Equity and Civic Trust (foundational)
- Center Human and Planetary Well-Being (strategic)

Activities Mapped to the Two Loop Model

Table 4: Activities to support Strategic Pathway 2

ACTIVITY	TWO LOOP MODEL PHASE	DESCRIPTION
Restorative Practices	Name, Nourish	Structured restorative circles, reconciliation practices, co-creation residencies, and relational retreats to rebuild trust
Shared Accountability Mechanisms	Transition, Sustain	Transparent evaluation criteria, relational trust audits, and community-informed success metrics

PATHWAY 3: BUILDING THE LIVING COMMONS

Strategic Intent:

To create shared civic infrastructure for distributed learning, innovation, and experimentation across communities and institutions.

Strategic Overview:

This commons-based platform supports land-based hubs, digital knowledge gardens, and civic labs governed by open access principles. Strong relational governance and shared ownership structures ensure equity and long-term resilience.

Alignment with Core Objectives:

- Foster Distributed and Adaptive Resilience (foundational)
- Institutionalize Regenerative Social Innovation (strategic)
- Cultivate Commons-Based 'third spaces' (strategic)
- Advance Relational, Multimodal Evaluation Systems (strategic)

Activities Mapped to the Two Loop Model

Table 5: Activities to support Strategic Pathway 3

ACTIVITY	TWO LOOP MODEL PHASE	DESCRIPTION
Shared Innovation Infrastructure	Illuminate, Sustain	Co-governed platform with open tools, learning exchanges, and public knowledge assets
Community-Based Innovation Labs	Nourish, Illuminate	Land-based living labs, community-driven innovation studios, and pilot hubs for civic experimentation
Open Sharing Protocols	Transition, Sustain	Creative Commons licensing and open intellectual property agreements across institutions
Collaborative Funding Mechanisms	Transition	Jointly resourced, cross-institutional funding for sustained civic innovation

ACTIVITY	TWO LOOP MODEL PHASE	DESCRIPTION
Establish *'third spaces'* for Innovation	Nourish, Illuminate	Activation of libraries, learning commons, online platforms for cross-sector experimentation
Social Infrastructure Stewardship	Nourish, Sustain	Investment in relational networks, public forums, and systems of care to sustain community-driven innovation
Amplification and Storytelling Loops	Illuminate, Sustain	Narrative sharing through open platforms, community showcases, and public storytelling initiatives

PATHWAY 4: DISTRIBUTED AND FUTURE LITERATE LEADERSHIP

Strategic Intent:

To cultivate a broad leadership base fluent in foresight, emotional resilience, decolonial thinking, and systems transformation.

Strategic Overview:

This pathway builds distributed leadership networks across roles and communities. It centers cultural fluency, futures literacy, and shared governance as core leadership capacities for adaptive institutions.

Alignment with Core Objectives:

- Develop Polycentric, Foresight-Informed Governance (foundational)
- Foster Distributed and Adaptive Resilience (foundational)
- Institutionalize Regenerative Social Innovation (strategic)

Activities Mapped to the Two Loop Model

Table 6: Activities to support Strategic Pathway 4

ACTIVITY	TWO LOOP MODEL PHASE	DESCRIPTION
Inclusive Leadership Pathways	Name, Connect	Leadership programs rooted in foresight, relational systems change, rotational governance roles
Surfacing Signals of Change	Name, Connect	Listening sessions and environmental scans to surface emerging practices and leadership signals
Visibility and Integration Pathways	Illuminate	Integration of reclaimed knowledges, Indigenous and diasporic worldviews, and relational epistemologies into strategy and curriculum
Collaborative Learning Networks	Nourish	Peer mentorship networks, strategic dialogue convenings, and shared leadership development spaces
Imagination & Futures Literacy	Transition	Use foresight, prototyping, and speculative design in leadership development

PATHWAY 5: CLARIFYING THE SHARED SOIL AND ALIGNING MEANING AND VALUES

Strategic Intent:

To foster shared meaning and institutional coherence through narrative stewardship and collective values alignment.

Strategic Overview:

To foster shared meaning and institutional coherence through narrative stewardship and collective values alignment.

Alignment with Core Objectives:

- Embed Deep, Relational Equity and Civic Trust (foundational)
- Foster Distributed and Adaptive Resilience (foundational)

Activities Mapped to the Two Loop Model

Table 7:Activities to support Strategic Pathway 5

ACTIVITY	TWO LOOP MODEL PHASE	DESCRIPTION
Shared Understanding Practices	Name, Connect	Story-based workshops, shared vocabulary development, and language clarification tools
Relational Rituals	Nourish	Storytelling practices to build emotional coherence and trust
Change Literacy Series	Name, Connect	Systems change learning programs grounded in storytelling and futures thinking

PATHWAY 6: ROOTING DEEP AND REFRAMING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR CIVIC STEWARDSHIP

Strategic Intent:

To transform community engagement into co-owned civic stewardship rooted in mutual care and governance.

Strategic Overview:

This pathway fosters long-term, place-based alliances through shared power, mutual accountability, and sustained funding. Community leadership is positioned as central to educational and institutional innovation.

Alignment with Core Objectives:

- Cultivate Commons-Based *'third spaces'* (strategic)
- Institutionalize Regenerative Social Innovation (foundational)
- Design Regenerative Learning Ecosystems (strategic)

Activities Mapped to the Two Loop Model

Table 8: Activities to support Strategic Pathway 6

ACTIVITY	TWO LOOP MODEL PHASE	DESCRIPTION
Community Innovation Hubs	Nourish, Illuminate	Build enduring, community-chosen partnerships beyond short-term funding cycles; activate living labs, innovation studios, and civic commons hubs for mutual learning and co-creation
Relational Accountability Practices	Nourish, Transition	Co-create participatory impact dashboards using spider-web metrics, storytelling evaluations, and reflective dialogue processes to support transparency, shared learning, and long-term relational trust

PATHWAY 7: FERTILIZING THE GROUND FOR REIMAGINING ACADEMIC RECOGNITION AND REWARD SYSTEMS

Strategic Intent:

To redesign recognition systems that value relational impact, public service, and systemic transformation over narrow output metrics.

Strategic Overview:

This pathway reimagines tenure, promotion, and credentialing to reward slow scholarship, community engagement, and relational leadership. It legitimizes alternative credentials (e.g. community-endorsed) and embeds non-traditional contributions into formal recognition structures.

Alignment with Core Objectives:

- Advance Relational, Multimodal Evaluation Systems (strategic)
- Institutionalize Regenerative Social Innovation (foundational)
- Center Human and Planetary Well-Being (strategic)

Activities Mapped to the Two Loop Model

Table 9: Activities to support Strategic Pathway 7

ACTIVITY	TWO LOOP MODEL PHASE	DESCRIPTION
Relational Scholarship Incentives	Illuminate	Establish teaching fellowships co-mentored by students and communities; create incentives for slow scholarship, community-based research, and story-based knowledge dissemination
Eldership Pathways	Nourish, Transition	Redesign tenure and promotion systems to recognize community eldership, reconciliation leadership, and emotional stewardship contributions
Weaving System Bridges	Transition, Sustain	Identify, support, and embed relational leaders who bridge legacy and emergent systems through mentoring, cross-silo integration, and guiding cultural transitions

Summary of Strategic Pathways for Postsecondary Transformation

PATHWAY	CORE STRATEGIC FOCUS
1: Seeding Adaptive Governance	Embed foresight-driven, participatory governance that can sense change and adapt responsively
2: Restorative Roots and Rebuilding Trust	Rebuild public legitimacy and trust through relational infrastructures, restorative practices, and emotional sustainability
3: Building the Living Commons	Create co-governed, open-access civic platforms for distributed learning, innovation, and social stewardship
4: Cultivating Distributed and Future Literate Leadership	Develop leadership networks fluent in futures thinking, relational systems change, and emotional resilience
5: Aligning Meaning and Values	Foster shared institutional meaning and relational coherence through structured narrative and storytelling practices
6: Reframing Community Engagement for Civic Stewardship	Transform community engagement into deep civic stewardship and mutual governance partnerships
7: Reimagining Academic Recognition and Reward Systems	Redesign academic recognition systems to reward relational impact, community service, and systemic transformation

Together, these seven strategic pathways form an integrated, values-grounded framework for institutional transformation. They are not fixed solutions but living strategies that adapt to local contexts and emerging futures. By cultivating distributed leadership, embedding relational equity, regenerating ecosystems of learning, and reimagining academic recognition, Ontario's postsecondary institutions can shift from incremental reform to stewarding resilient, regenerative, and civic-minded futures.

Wind Tunnelling: Strategic Foresight Analysis of Pathways

Strategic foresight requires more than imagining possible futures, it involves systematically evaluating how different interventions might perform under diverse and often disruptive conditions. This section applies a wind tunnelling analysis to seven strategic pathways, stress-testing their viability across four future scenarios: Growth, Disciplined, Collapse, and Transformation.

The analysis reveals that while no single pathway offers universal resilience, each can remain viable when paired with proactive design adaptations and continuous signal monitoring. Institutional transformation, therefore, must be approached not as a fixed blueprint but as a dynamic, relational process.

Strategic resilience lies not only in the durability of individual interventions, but in an institution's collective capacity to sense, adapt, and evolve through systemic uncertainty. The following results provide a high-level view of how Ontario's postsecondary institutions can translate foresight into implementation and thereby embed adaptability, stewardship, and long-term value into the heart of their transformation strategies.

Wind Tunnelling Results: Performance of Strategic Pathways Across Future Scenarios

The table below presents the results of the wind tunnelling analysis. Each strategic pathway is evaluated within four distinct futures (Growth, Disciplined, Collapse, and Transformation) based on how it performs under those conditions. Each pathway is classified using one of five scenario-based performance categories:

- **Robust Strategy:** performs well under current conditions in this scenario; highly resilient.
- **Flexible Strategy**: adaptable with modifications; remains viable if aligned with local dynamics.

- **Monitor Closely:** uncertain fit in this scenario; effectiveness depends on emerging signals or shifts.
- **Transformational Potential:** high-impact, future-shaping strategy; bold and visionary, with potential to drive systemic change.
- **Limited Fit:** misaligned with this scenario's conditions; likely ineffective without major adaptation.

Table 10: Performance of Strategic Pathways Across Four Future Scenarios Using Wind Tunnelling Analysis.

STRATEGIC PATHWAY	GROWTH	DISCIPLINED	COLLAPSE	TRANS-FORMATION
Seeding Adaptive Governance	Flexible Strategy	Monitor Closely	Flexible Strategy	Robust Action
Restorative Roots and Rebuilding Trust	Monitor Closely	Flexible Strategy	Robust Action	Robust Action
Building the Living Commons	Flexible Strategy	Robust Action	Flexible Strategy	Transformational Potential
Distributed and Future Literate Leadership	Monitor Closely	Flexible Strategy	Robust Action	Robust Action
Aligning Meaning and Values	Monitor Closely	Limited Fit	Flexible Strategy	Monitor Closely
Reframing Community Engagement	Flexible Strategy	Monitor Closely	Transformational Potential	Robust Action
Reimagining Academic Recognition	Monitor Closely	Flexible Strategy	Limited Fit	Monitor Closely

Detailed Analysis of Strategic Pathways Across Divergent Futures

Each analysis considers the resilience of the strategy, its vulnerabilities, necessary adaptation strategies, and the early signals that may indicate shifting conditions. This foresight-informed review helps prioritize investments, de-risk innovations, and design proactive governance approaches that are both visionary and adaptive

While the wind tunnelling analysis table offers a high-level view of how each pathway holds up under varying conditions, the complexity beneath each rating warrants deeper exploration. The following section unpacks the rationale behind each classification, highlighting core vulnerabilities, adaptation strategies, and early signals to watch. These detailed insights provide practical guidance for institutional leaders, Boards, and Senates seeking to tailor strategic action in an unpredictable and rapidly evolving landscape

1. Seeding Adaptive Governance

Resilience Across Futures: Moderate. Performs well in transformation, but fragile under disciplined and growth due to political inertia or hierarchical dominance

Key Vulnerabilities	Strategic Adaptations	Signals to Monitor
Risk of co-optation by corporate models in Growth scenarios	Pilot within protected “shadow governance” units inside legacy systems	Rise of participatory governance at municipal or sector levels
Resistance from compliance-driven systems	Build early alliances with community leaders, not just formal structures	Calls for decentralization or local autonomy
Bureaucratic drag even in supportive futures	Design for scale diversity: local hubs and federated models	Pushback from centralized powers resisting authority redistribution

2. Restorative Roots and Rebuilding Trust

Resilience Across Futures: Strong. Particularly at local and micro-network levels. Vital survival function in collapse, transformation.

Key Vulnerabilities	Strategic Adaptations	Signals to Monitor
Risk of co-optation by corporate models in growth scenarios Resistance from compliance-driven systems Bureaucratic drag even in supportive futures	Pair relational strategies with structural incentives Protect trust-building work from being commodified or hollowed out Embed emotional resilience frameworks into leadership development.	Public sentiment indicators: trust surveys, social capital studies. Rise/fall of civic movements that demand transparency and reciprocity. Emotional burnout or attrition among facilitators and frontline community builders.

3. Building the Living Commons

Resilience Across Futures: Moderate. Promising in transformation, but fragile in centralized or inequitable contexts.

Key Vulnerabilities	Strategic Adaptations	Signals to Monitor
Risk of commercialization and corporate interference Fragmentation due to resource asymmetries	Hardwire equity protocols and redistribution mechanisms into the commons Build internal redundancy to avoid collapse of single nodes Guard against corporate co-optation	Proliferation of open-source, decentralized platforms Corporate encroachment on commons models Funding patterns for networked vs. siloed innovation

4. Cultivating Distributed and Future-Literate Leadership

Resilience Across Futures: High. Remains critical even in collapse and disciplined

Key Vulnerabilities	Strategic Adaptations	Signals to Monitor
Burnout under systemic pressure Risk of elitism if access is not democratized	Prioritize accessible micro-credentials, peer mentorships Decentralize leadership into ecosystems Embed emotional and cultural resilience in curricula	Uptake of futures literacy and civic leadership programs Leadership churn and burnout data

5. Clarifying the Shared Soil: Meaning and Values Alignment

Resilience Across Futures: Fragile. Struggles under disciplined and growth; only slow traction in transformation.

Key Vulnerabilities	Strategic Adaptations	Signals to Monitor
Politicization, fragmentation, or shallow narrative co-optation Difficulty scaling across polarized or diverse communities	Localize meaning making (e.g., regional narrative circles) Ritualize ongoing alignment processes Create safeguards against capture by dominant cultural/political forces	Narrative shifts in media and public discourse Emergence of shared civic rituals or collective storytelling practices Signs of polarization or parallel publics

6. Rooting Deep: Reframing Community Engagement

Resilience Across Futures: Strong in transformation and collapse; disruptive in disciplined, fragile in growth.

Key Vulnerabilities	Strategic Adaptations	Signals to Monitor
Can be reduced to token consultation or public relations branding	Formalize community governance rights in institutional charters	Sector-wide shift from consultation to co-governance
Threatens legacy power structures, likely to provoke institutional resistance	Use relational accountability tools (e.g., impact dashboards, dialogue rituals)	Rise of community sovereignty or mutual aid models Institutional willingness to share power structurally

7. Fertile Ground: Academic Reward Redesign

Resilience Across Futures: Visionary but precarious. Even fragile in transformation if prestige systems remain untouched.

Key Vulnerabilities	Strategic Adaptations	Signals to Monitor
Entrenched academic hierarchies and incentive systems Cultural resistance from within disciplines	Pilot dual-recognition models (e.g., relational impact + traditional metrics) Build early alliances with funders, accreditation bodies Normalize community-validated credentials and narrative portfolios	Shifts in hiring, tenure, and promotion criteria Funding criteria prioritizing social impact Growth of alternative validation metrics (e.g., land-based acknowledgment, civic impact)

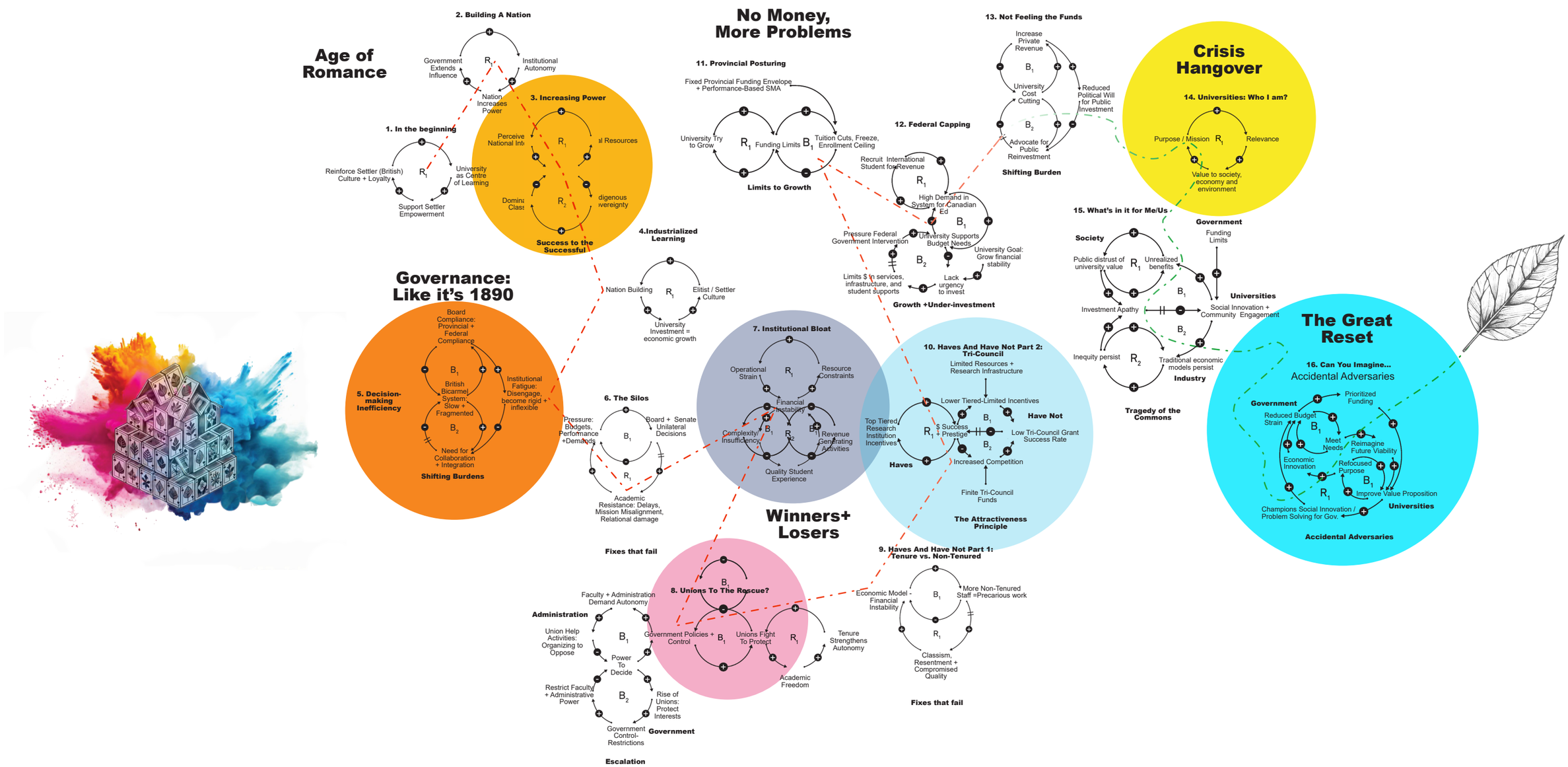
The Systems Map Revisited

Transforming higher education requires reimagining possible solutions by thoughtfully intervening to rebalance the system rather than dismantling it entirely. Our research and insights have shaped seven interventions to form a regenerative approach designed to support institutions and sector actors reorient toward resilience, equity, and imagination. These interventions aim to:

- **Increase power at the margins** by building living commons and networked innovation platforms that redistribute knowledge, authority, and resources to Indigenous sovereignty movements and historically excluded communities.
- **Address governance inertia** by seeding adaptive, foresight-informed systems capable of navigating uncertainty without reinforcing procedural stagnation.
- **Counter centralization** by cultivating distributed leadership that is literate in complexity and grounded in flexibility rather than control.
- **Heal fractured institutional relationships** by restoring trust between labour, leadership, and learners through relational legitimacy and shared civic responsibility.
- **Rebalance resources** by anchoring institutions in models of community engagement stewardship that dismantle elitism and reconnect universities to the public they serve.
- **Reaffirm public purpose** by clarifying the civic mission of higher education and aligning institutional identity with societal well-being and democratic participation.
- **Catalyze cultural change** by redesigning academic reward systems to sustain long-term, relational, and imaginative scholarship beyond narrow performance metrics.

Together, these strategic pathways constitute a living system of transformation, not a single Institutional fix, but an explorative strategy to regenerate higher education as a resilient civic infrastructure fit for future learners and communities, The following graphic returns us to the systems story map and highlights where the strategic interventions intersect with key system dynamics

Figure 8: Strategic Pathways Within the Systems Story Map



Strategic Interventions

3. Increasing Power

Building the Living Commons (Networked Innovation Platform)

Redistributes knowledge, authority, and innovation capacity across marginalized communities and Indigenous sovereignty movements.

5. Decision-Making Inefficiency

Seeding Adaptive Governance

Creates distributed, foresight-informed governance systems that can move beyond procedural gridlock.

7. Institutional Bloat

Cultivating Distributed and Future-Literate Leadership

Equips institutions to handle complexity adaptively rather than through further centralization.

8. Unions to the Rescue?

Restorative Roots (Trust and Relational Legitimacy)

Heals systemic labour/ management divides, allowing re-fusion of civic and institutional purpose.

10. Haves and Have Not (Funding Inequity)

Rooting Deep (Community Engagement Stewardship)

Connects institutions back to diverse communities to counter resource hoarding and elite capture.

14. Universities: Who Am I?

Clarifying the Shared Soil (Meaning and Values Alignment)

Rebuilds a bold, inclusive civic mission that reconnects the institution with broader public good.

16. Can You Imagine... (The Great Reset)

Fertile Ground (Academic Reward Redesign)

Catalyzes the culture shift needed to sustain long-term regenerative scholarship beyond transactional metrics.

Niche Discovery and the Seeds of Systemic Transformation

As part of the strategic foresight analysis, it is critical to identify not only dominant trends, but also the emerging “niches” where alternative futures are quietly taking root. Niche discovery focuses on recognizing small-scale, often experimental initiatives that challenge existing systems and offer seeds for larger systemic transformation. These protected spaces allow new practices to be tested, cultivated, and refined until they are resilient enough to influence broader societal structures. The following examples illustrate how diverse forms of civic innovation, educational redesign, social entrepreneurship, and bioregional regeneration are already shaping the contours of more equitable, regenerative futures.

- **Participatory City (Tessy Britton)**
  A large-scale initiative founded by Tessy Britton that empowers residents to collaboratively design and lead everyday projects, building participatory urban ecosystems beyond institutional walls. Rooted in the philosophy of taking civic life outside traditional institutions, Participatory City fosters everyday participation as a foundation for inclusive, resilient communities.

- **Mexico: Civic Networks of Retired Professors**
  An emerging grassroots movement where retired professors extend their expertise into community development, social learning, and civic projects beyond traditional university structures. These networks model how academic knowledge can be repurposed toward direct social impact and lifelong contribution.

- **Queen’s University: Walls to Bridges Program**
  A program that brings university students and incarcerated individuals together in shared learning environments within correctional facilities. Walls to Bridges showcases practical community engagement by advancing educational access, social justice, and mutual learning across institutional boundaries.

- **OCAD University: Art Hubs Partnership**
  An initiative where OCAD University partners with local art hubs to sustain community infrastructure, cultural vibrancy, and creative entrepreneurship. Through strategic collaboration, the university helps support inclusive spaces that nurture local creativity and social innovation.

- **TMU: Social Innovation Zone**
  A platform at Toronto Metropolitan University that bridges curricular and co-curricular learning with social entrepreneurship. By supporting student and community-led ventures, the Social Innovation Zone fosters real world impact and cultivates ecosystems of innovation.

- **Dark Matter Labs: Free House**
  A project that reimagines housing as civic infrastructure rather than private commodity. Free House pioneers shared ownership and regenerative living models, offering alternative pathways to resilient, community-rooted urban life.

- **Joe Brewer: Barichara Regenerativa**
  A bioregional regeneration initiative led by Joe Brewer in Barichara, Colombia. Using natural systems mapping, such as river systems, Brewer's work guides ecological restoration, cultural renewal, and community stewardship grounded in place-based resilience.

- **Social Innovation Organization (SIO)**
  A student-led initiative in South Asia operating outside formal governance structures while co-creating intergenerational responses with faculty and community.

- **Change Lab Action Research Initiative (CLARI)**
  A Nova Scotia based research network that enables interdisciplinary university teams to co-design solutions with community partners on issues ranging from food security to rural development.

PROVOCATION

The collapse of trust, imagination, and civic coherence is not a distant future scenario. It is already underway. Postsecondary institutions can no longer claim neutrality or delay transformation without consequence. In a world unraveling through extraction, exclusion, and acceleration, institutions must choose whether they will reinforce the old system or become stewards of regeneration.

The pathways, scenarios, and prototypes explored in this chapter are not endpoints. They are seeds of stewardship, an enduring practice of tending to relationships, meaning, and imagination in a world that will continue to shift and surprise us. Transformation is not inevitable. It is a decision. The question is no longer whether change is possible, but how bravely, how relationally, and how intentionally we are willing to cultivate it together.

REFLECTION QUESTION:

What future are we unconsciously maintaining through our inaction, and what new futures could we choose to steward if we dared to reimagine our roles, relationships, and responsibilities today?

CULTIVATION MOMENT 5

Calls to Action

At this threshold moment, we call upon Ontario's postsecondary leaders, policymakers, faculty, staff, students, and communities to move beyond reactive adaptation and into intentional cultivation.

The findings of this research make clear; the fragilities of the current system will not be mended by incremental adjustments. Nor will resilience emerge from reinforcing outdated architectures designed for stability, not adaptability.

This moment demands that we:

- Release governance models, incentive structures, and knowledge hierarchies that no longer serve a relational, equitable, and future-oriented mission;
- Nourish emerging experiments in community-rooted governance, inclusive leadership, and regenerative learning ecosystems.
- Invest in systemic imagination as critical civic infrastructure - not as ornamentation, but as the strategic core of renewal.
- Steward transformation as an ecological act, recognizing that meaningful change is not engineered, but cultivated through trust, time, and collective care.

Transformation will not arrive fully formed. It must be cultivated and grown. From seeds planted today, and through the courageous choices we make about what to release, what to nourish, and what to imagine into being.

Significance of Imagination

Imagination is not peripheral to the renewal of higher education; it is foundational.

Without imagination, institutions remain trapped within inherited assumptions: reinforcing fragilities, repeating inequities, and shrinking the futures available for those they claim to serve.
Imagination is the leverage point from which systemic transformation becomes possible.

Strategic imagination enables institutions to:

- Name what is breaking down with clarity and courage,
- Connect across siloes, building new civic and relational ecologies,
- Nourish emergent experiments that resist extraction and hierarchy,
- Illuminate alternative models of governance, knowledge, and belonging.

In the volatile landscape ahead, the most resilient institutions will not be those that adapt most efficiently to a broken status quo.
They will be those courageous enough to imagine new foundations rooted in equity, relational trust, ecological care, and collective purpose.

To imagine is to resist collapse. **To imagine is to begin the work of change.**

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Why it matters and an invitation to imagination.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

“Isn’t this the purpose of education? To learn the nature of your own gifts and how to use them for good in the world.”

- Robin Wall Kimmerer

Ontario’s postsecondary education system stands at a critical crossroads: to continue propping up a fragile *'house of cards'*, or to cultivate bold, regenerative infrastructures capable of advancing collective flourishing.
Our research demonstrates that imagination, relational governance, and systemic resilience are not optional; they are the living foundations necessary to navigate complexity, restore public trust, and renew the civic mission of higher education.

This work matters because the choices made today will shape not just the survival of institutions but the futures available to generations of learners, communities, and societies.

Together, we must move beyond incrementalism, to imagine courageously, and to cultivate a postsecondary system rooted in equity, belonging, and resilience.

Invitation to Imagination

In a time of cascading uncertainty, our greatest untapped resource may not be technology or capital, but imagination. As Ruha Benjamin powerfully argues in *Imagination: A Manifesto* (2022)- a text that includes the insights of Robin D.G. Kelley, Alex Rivera and James Baldwin- imagination is not peripheral to justice work; it is the foundation from which new worlds are built. Humanity faces an imagination crisis, not by accident, but by design: systems that benefit from narrowing our collective dreams actively work to arrest them. Geoff Mulgan (2022) calls this the “imaginary crisis,” a social malaise stunting our ability to picture alternatives and possibilities. When we lose faith in the future, we are less likely to make a better future happen.

In Ontario’s postsecondary system, imagination has often been constrained by historical structures designed for settler dominance, industrial nation-building, and narrow definitions of value. What began in the Age of Romance as an ideal of public good has calcified into governance siloes, systemic inequities, and financial fragility. Today, the sector risks repeating old patterns: shifting burdens rather than addressing root causes, entrenching "winners and losers" rather than cultivating collective flourishing. As Robin D.G. Kelley reminds us, the most transformative visions are not dreamt in isolation but are incubated within movements, spaces where grieved communities confront and resist systems of oppression.

Imagination, then, must not be fetishized as a private act of wishful thinking, but cultivated as a collective, strategic force, rooted in concrete engagement and relational struggle. As Westley et al (2019) urge, social innovation thrives on “possibility perception”, the ability to see institutions not only as they are, but as they could become. Change does not unfold through grand strategy alone, but through small safe-fail experiments, improvisation, and the courage to act in complexity. We must “detect the patterns,” “read the current,” and “let the flow find us,” learning from jazz musicians who know that co-creation requires deep listening and responsiveness to one another.

To imagine boldly is to resist the forces that seek to contain us; it is to participate in shaping what justice, equity, and belonging could look like. As Alex Rivera reminds us, the battle over real power tomorrow begins with the struggle over who gets to dream today. And as Mulgan (2022) adds, imagination is not a luxury, but a functional capacity, essential to societal resilience, adaptability, and democratic vitality.

Imagination is a resilience skill, one that demands cultivation, collaboration, and care. It matters profoundly who we imagine ourselves, and each other, to be. James Baldwin's observation that imagination creates the situation, and the situation creates the imagination, reminds us that futures are not linear; they are relational and recursive. Toni Morrison cautions that every utopia reveals itself by who they exclude. If we wish to create a future that is truly regenerative and inclusive, a "Great Reset" where universities become regenerative civic infrastructures, we must treat imagination as the central formative agency in our institutions, our communities, and our governance, moving it from the periphery to the core of institutional renewal. Not as a decorative exercise, but as a tool of survival, a strategy for liberation, and a pathway for relational stewardship. As Westley et al (2019) put it, those who attempt to address intractable problems are "motivated by glimpses of a better world." These glimpses, these frames of reference, are how possibility becomes practice.

We extend this invitation to all those who share an interest in the future of education to engage and dream with us. We welcome your voices and perspectives in an ongoing conversation about how Ontario's postsecondary system can evolve over the next four to five decades. The future will not be won by those who adapt best to old systems, it will be shaped by those courageous enough to dream together and remake the world.

Reflections on Imagining Higher Education's Future

When asked to describe higher education ten years into the future in just **three words**, interviewees revealed a deeper systemic tension. Although they were invited to respond openly, many felt a strong, almost reflexive obligation to articulate hope. Even when their initial instincts leaned toward critique, using words like precarious, siloed, bureaucratic, and inequitable, participants often balanced these with aspirational terms such as inclusive, adaptive, resilient, and collaborative.

This quiet split between aspiration and anxiety reflects the emotional systems state of Ontario's postsecondary sector: a landscape caught between longing and loss, hope and hesitation. Beneath the desire to imagine flourishing futures lies a persistent awareness of fragility, relational breakdowns, and systemic inertia. Participants' choices of words were not simply reflections of institutional critique or personal cynicism; they were indicators of the communication culture that defines and constrains what feels possible within institutions.

These words revealed that authentic systemic renewal will require more than structural reform, it will require transforming the relational and communicative foundations upon which institutions are built. When hope feels obligatory rather than organic, it signals that trust must be repaired, narratives must be reimagined, and relational spaces for authentic dialogue must be cultivated. In this sense, the future of higher education will not be determined solely by strategic plans or innovation initiatives, but by the slow, relational work of restoring clarity, trust, and courage within and across institutions.

And so, we ask: if you were to choose three words NOW to describe the future of higher education, what would they be?

Our Aspirations

We aspire to engage with leadership across Ontario's postsecondary education sector to co-create space for courageous dialogue, systemic experimentation, and the exploration of a preferred future for higher education in Ontario. Our research has been envisioned as a living and evolving record of collective imagination, informed by institutions, governments, industries, and communities, that activate a shared creativity to explore the role and responsibility of higher education in shaping equitable futures.

We desire to partner directly with institutions to bring this future into being. We want to collaborate with leaders, faculty, staff, and communities to imagine universities not just as sites of instruction, but as regenerative civic infrastructures. We look forward to facilitating co-design workshops with higher education ecosystems to prototype new models of governance, pedagogy, and public engagement. This includes testing, monitoring, and adapting "living prototypes" over time as part of a shared commitment to iterative engagement for future learners.

We want to see a future in which imagination and transformation are embedded as enduring practices, not reactive exercises that respond to disruptive forces. In this future, campuses operate as living laboratories, where students, faculty, and communities work together to confront complex challenges, grounded in social innovation, place-based learning, and entrepreneurial ventures for benefit beyond financial interests. Governance becomes genuinely participatory, offering students and communities meaningful agency in institutional decision-making. Learning is lifelong and interwoven with civic, ecological, and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Education becomes a responsive, relational process, grounded in care, imagination, and adaptability. Let us take thoughtful, courageous steps together to prototype, test, and steward the futures we wish to see. A future rooted in possibility.

To those who dare to dream a new world into being:

May you trust the unfolding emergence, walk boldly with uncertainty, and believe in the quiet power of possibility. May you find the courage to nurture fragile beginnings, and the grace to steward change beyond the reach of any one vision.

In the words of Lesley-Ann Noel, “I want you to dream about the magic carpet.” For her, this isn't escapism but a call to move beyond current constraints and imagine what feels impossible today. By embracing playful, even absurd ideas, she reminds us that imagination is a serious practice, one that opens space for transformation beyond what is merely practical or probable.

The work of social innovation calls for heart, for resilience, and for hope, thank you for carrying the dream forward.

CONCLUSION: AN OPENING, NOT AN END

This work is not a conclusion, but an opening. It is a beginning for those willing to steward new architectures of learning, governance, and public imagination. Futures are not inevitable. They are relational. They are built through choices made in uncertainty, and through relationships tended with care, courage, and collective vision. The future of Ontario’s universities, and the public good they serve, will not be inherited. It will be cultivated, if we choose it.

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APPENDICES

References, signals & trends, and workshop.

APPENDIX A

Timeline: Evolution of Ontario's Higher Education System

This timeline outlines key political, social, economic, legal, environmental, and technological developments that have shaped Ontario's higher education system across five major eras: Foundation and Colonial Formation (1827–1945), Expansion and Nation-Building (1945–1975), Restraint, Marketization, and Massification (1975–2008), Crisis, Complexity, and Contestation (2008–present), and The Era of Renewal and Imagination (speculative 2025–2050). The timeline highlights historical milestones, systemic inflection points, and potential future shifts that influence institutional governance, funding models, and the evolving societal role of universities.

ERA 1 FOUNDATION AND COLONIAL FORMATION (1827-1945)

Table 11: Timeline of Ontario's Higher Education System – Era 1: Foundation and Colonial Formation (1827 to 1945)

Year	Domain	Event
1827	**Political / Social**	Founding of King's College (later University of Toronto), embedding British colonial values in postsecondary education.
Mid-1800s	**Social / Values**	Secularization of universities begins (e.g., University of Toronto becomes non-denominational).
1867	**Political / Legal**	Education jurisdiction assigned to provinces under Confederation, entrenching provincial autonomy over postsecondary institutions.
Late 1800s-Early 1900s	**Social / Economic**	Universities serve elite civic roles; limited access, with institutions reinforcing colonial, gendered, and class hierarchies.

ERA 2 EXPANSION AND NATION-BUILDING (1945-1975)

Table 12: Timeline of Ontario's Higher Education System – Era 2: Expansion and Nation-Building (1945 to 1975)

Year	Domain	Event
1945-1960	**Social / Economic**	Massive post-WWII enrollment expansion (Baby Boom, Veterans), transforming universities from elite to mass institutions.
1951	**Political / Economic**	Massey Commission asserts federal responsibility for Canadian cultural and academic development, leading to increased public funding.
1958	**Political / Economic / Social**	The Fowke-Laskin Committee report in Canada emphasizes the importance of tenure as a safeguard for academic freedom.
1960s	**Political / Economic / Social**	"Golden Era" of expansion: new universities founded (e.g., York, Trent, Laurentian); Ontario College system established.
1971	**Social / Values**	Ontario Human Rights Code updated, slowly pushing universities toward accessibility and anti-discrimination practices.
Early 1970s	**Economic / Political**	Financial restraint era begins; universities face pressures to become more fiscally self-sufficient.
1975	**Economic / Political**	The first formalized academic unions in Ontario higher education were created. Carleton, Ottawa and York lead the way.

Era 3 Restraint, Marketization, and Massification (1975-2008)

Table 13: Timeline of Ontario's Higher Education System – Era 3: Restraint, Marketization, and Massification (1975 to 2008)

Year	Domain	Event
1977	Legal	Establishment of federal research councils (SSHRC, NSERC) - federal support tied to research priorities.
1980s	Economic / Political	Provincial funding begins declining per capita; universities increasingly pursue private-sector partnerships.
1990s	Economic / Social	Knowledge economy discourse dominates; universities rebranded as engines of economic growth.
1995	Political / Economic	Ontario's Harris government freezes tuition, cuts operating grants, increasing reliance on tuition and ancillary revenues.
Early 2000s	Technology / Social	Digitalization accelerates; rise of e-learning, learning management systems, online course expansion.
2007-2008	Economic	Global financial crisis destabilizes postsecondary revenue streams, increases public austerity pressures.

Era 4 Crisis, Complexity, and Contestation (2008-Present)

Table 14: Timeline of Ontario's Higher Education System – Era 4: Crisis, Complexity, and Contestation (2008 to Present)

Year	Domain	Event
2014	**Legal / Political**	The first round, SMA1 (2014 to 2017). University and colleges in Ontario negotiated their own SMA with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
2015	**Social / Values**	Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) releases Calls to Action; universities face pressure to address colonial legacies.
2017	**Legal / Political**	Ontario passes the Indigenous Institutes Act, recognizing Indigenous educational sovereignty.
2020	**Environmental / Social / Technology**	COVID-19 pandemic forces sudden pivot to digital learning, exposing access inequities and testing institutional resilience.
2020-2025	**Political / Economic**	SMA3 introduces performance-based funding tied to narrowly defined economic outcomes.
2022	**Economic**	Provincial funding as a share of institutional revenue reaches historic lows; heavy overreliance on international student tuition.
2023	**Political / Economic**	Blue-Ribbon Panel on Post-Secondary Education recommends structural changes to address sector instability.
2024-2025	**Political / Legal**	Federal government caps international student visas, further destabilizing tuition-dependent institutions.

Era 5 The Era of Renewal and Imagination (Speculative 2025-2050)

Table 15: Timeline of Ontario's Higher Education System – Era 5: The Era of Renewal and Imagination (2025 to 2050)

Year	Domain	Critical Event
2025	**Political / Economic**	University expansion of austerity measures to manage funding and financial instability.
2030	**Political / Economic**	Universal Work-Integrated Learning Mandate enacted; civic neutrality compliance frameworks expanded across institutions.
2030	**Economic / Political**	Financial insolvency peaks at regional universities, triggering major public debate over higher education's role.
2035	**Social / Environmental**	Living Learning Ecosystems are recognized as legitimate decentralized education models by provincial and federal governments.
2035	**Technological / Economic**	Emergence of hyper-personalized, AI-driven, mega-corporate universities disrupts traditional enrollment patterns.
2040	**Political / Social**	Ontario Civic Learning Compact ratified; mandates community representation within university governance structures.
2040	**Values / Political**	National backlash against academic commercialization; Education Commons movement drives legislative proposals.

Year	Domain	Critical Event
2045	**Values / Social**	Civic Resilience Education Index (CREI) adopted nationally to measure universities' contribution to community flourishing.
2045	**Economic / Legal**	Accelerated privatization of legacy institutions creates widened educational access gaps and new community cooperatives.
2050	**Social / Environmental**	Launch of Ontario Living Civic University Network; decentralized, regenerative, relational learning infrastructure.
2050	**Economic / Values**	Bifurcation of the postsecondary system: elite corporate knowledge enclaves vs. flourishing decentralized public ecosystems.

APPENDIX B

Summary of Key Signals and Trends Informing Scenario Development

This appendix provides an overview of the critical signals, trends, and drivers that shaped the construction of the four future scenarios. These insights form the foundation for exploring plausible trajectories of change in Ontario's postsecondary education system.

Signals and Trends Inventory

SOCIETY
• A widening gap in perspectives between women and men on societal issues (i.e., marriage, household work, etc.) • Declining marriage and birth rates • Economic Nationalism – US warns BRICS nations against replacing the US dollar • Cross-sector collaboration develops supportive innovation ecosystems • Erosion of trust between people and public institutions • Indigenous communities reclaim cultural identities, languages, traditions lost to colonial practices • Increased demand for faculty to engage in activities beyond traditional teaching and research • Impact of misinformation on social cohesion • Rapid shifts in racial and ethnic composition create opportunities for diversity but also pose challenges in social integration • Tension between academic freedom and political pressures • Increasing social divide on issues of freedom of speech in academic settings
TECHNOLOGY
• Unbundling of services (i.e., music, legal services etc.) • Increase in cyber-attacks of public Canadian institutions • Digital currencies alternatives being considered globally • Budget constraints slow down research, pushing Canadian talent and discoveries to other countries • Lack of commercialization of research leads to a weakened technology and innovation sector • Expanding online learning allows broader accessibility

• Social media platforms amplify misinformation, radicalization, and hate speech, influencing public perception and behaviour

• Emerging technologies make it easier to manipulate public opinion through fabricated content

• Music and film are restructured to customized individual reality (e.g., AI-generated content)

ENVIRONMENT

• Majority of Ontario faculty are precariously employed

• Variations of employment categories creates a class system

• Previously well-funded institutions have increased advantages to navigate uncertain futures

• Unsustainable academic workloads creates burnout and dissatisfaction among faculty

• External pressures create an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship

ECONOMICS

• The OECD, in 2018, said 33% of Canadians were at risk of falling below the poverty line if they missed just three months of income

• Projected increases in the rate of future pandemics

• Decreased government funding diminishes long-term sustainability of institutions

• Potential tariffs decrease the value of the Canadian dollar

• Public-private partnerships between province and industry tied to beneficial relationships that undermine accountability for public funding of PSE

• Disproportionate growth of PSE administration

• Rising immigration, coupled with inadequate infrastructure investment, fuels public frustration over housing, healthcare, and employment

• Canada's low birth rate makes immigration essential for economic stability, despite public resistance

POLITICAL

• Geopolitical conflicts cause dissent among student populations

• Change of leading political party leadership could shift funding priorities

• US trade policy shift creates potential for political retaliation

• Government apathy toward higher education

• Government's reluctance to address systemic issues in education reflects broader governance failures

• Desire for government to mandate transparency of institutions

• Nationalist and extremist ideologies gain traction, exploiting economic and demographic fears

• Politicians exerting influence over what is taught in universities, either through laws or financial pressures

• External pressures force removal of interprovincial training and licensing barriers

VALUES

• Economic sovereignty over globalization reduces multilateral cooperation

• Diverging international norms leads to stronger regional partnerships

• Resistance to feminism among men reinforces patriarchal attitudes

• Reliance on international student tuition raises ethical questions about fairness and responsibility

• Shift away from diversity, equity, and inclusion practices and initiatives

• Ethics workload measurements; all faculty should be accountable for their workload

• Privacy concerns of making faculty workload data public

• Erosion of Multiculturalism as a National Identity

• Politicians and media increasingly scapegoat immigrants instead of addressing systemic policy failures

• Shift from top-down expert-driven approaches to collaborative, community-led models

LEGAL

• Union actions disrupt collegial relationships and student learning

• Geopolitical conflicts cause dissent between students and institutions

• New policy regulations limit international student enrollment

• The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) influences policy changes in Canada

• Push for academic workloads to be transparent require legal frameworks around employment contracts and privacy rights to be reconsidered

• Shift in workload policies creates legal disputes over work conditions

• Growing pressure to hold tech companies accountable for the spread of misinformation and extremist content

• Calls for stronger laws and enforcement against hate groups and racially motivated violence

• Legal reforms needed to streamline community-driven projects

• Legal distinction questioned between whether academic freedom is a legal or moral right

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APPENDIX C

Scenario Timelines: Key Events and Signals to Watch (2025–2050)

This appendix presents a timeline of potential events and early signals to monitor within each of the four future worlds. Spanning from 2025 to 2050, these timelines highlight pivotal moments, disruptions, and indicators that may shape or signal the emergence of each scenario, offering guidance for anticipatory strategy and systems sensing.

Growth: The Academic Arms Race (Widening Gap of Inequities)

Here, relentless economic competition drives universities to become global education enterprises, powered by data analytics, corporate partnerships, and perpetual credentialing. While some institutions thrive as performance-driven machines, deep inequalities widen, and the civic mission of higher education becomes increasingly marginalized.

Growth World Timeline: The Academic Arms Race (Commercial Hyper-Acceleration)

Year	Key Events
2025	Global rankings fully drive strategic priorities; Ontario universities aggressively pursue corporate partnerships.
2027	Provincial incentives created for universities to incubate "innovation hubs" tied to multinational firms.
2030	Hyper-personalized AI learning platforms dominate; physical campuses shrink for all but elite research centers.
2033	Credential inflation accelerates: "stackable skills" subscription models become the norm.
2035	Corporate-led research dominates; public interest scholarship declines sharply.

Year	Key Events
2040	Tuition surges for premium degrees; access gaps widen, particularly for racialized and rural communities.
2045	A few mega-universities consolidate power; smaller institutions either merge, specialize, or vanish.
2050	Economic performance thrives but civic trust, social equity, and critical democratic capacity are dangerously depleted.

Disciplined: The 5-Minute University

In this future, Ontario's postsecondary institutions have been tightly regulated and streamlined in response to political pressures, economic austerity, and societal demand for efficiency and order. Learning is modularized, civic discourse is constrained, and institutions survive but at the cost of breadth, freedom, and adaptive capacity.

Disciplined World Timeline: The 5-Minute University (Efficiency over Breadth)

Year	Key Events
2025	Performance-based funding fully entrenched; universities tightly tied to short-term labour market outputs.
2027	Provincial legislation enforces standardized civic neutrality training and AI monitoring in classrooms.
2029	Significant curriculum narrowing only programs with high economic returns (e.g., STEM, business) survive public funding audits.
2030	"Work-Integrated Learning" becomes mandatory for all undergraduates; pure research humanities programs largely shuttered.
2035	Public reporting dashboards gamify institutional performance; critical inquiry increasingly marginalized.

Year	Key Events
2040	Civic discourse training reduced to compliance modules; academic freedom constrained under "neutrality protection" acts.
2045	Universities resemble credential factories: fast, modular, market-optimized, but socially disconnected.
2050	Fragile stability persists, but institutional adaptability and trust remain dangerously eroded.

Collapse: The Great University Meltdown

Without effective adaptation, Ontario's higher education system fractures. Financial insolvency, political instability, and public disillusionment drive widespread institutional collapse. New learning collectives, knowledge commons, and Indigenous-led sanctuaries emerge from the ruins - but access to quality education becomes highly uneven and precarious.

Collapse World Timeline: The Great University Meltdown (Systemic Breakdown)

Year	Key Events
2025	International student visa caps destabilize institutional budgets across Ontario; layoffs and closures begin.
2027	Provincial retrenchment policies gut public funding even further; tuition spikes; enrollments crash.
2029	Several regional universities declare bankruptcy; campuses sold for private development or fulfillment centers.
2032	Faculty unions fragment; collective agreements disintegrate amid litigation battles.
2035	Private "academies" and corporate credentialing programs replace broad-access universities.

Year	Key Events
2040	Cultural institutions tied to universities (e.g., libraries, theatres) shutter; civic literacy declines.
2045	Regional knowledge cooperatives and Indigenous-led learning sanctuaries emerge in isolated pockets.
2050	Education becomes hyper-fragmented: high-end private knowledge enclaves for elites; patchwork community learning for those left behind.

Transformation: Decentralized Learning Networks

In this future, the system undergoes fundamental reimagination. Universities evolve into decentralized, bioregional learning networks rooted in reciprocity, land-based knowledge, social innovation, and relational governance. Education becomes deeply embedded in communities, ecosystems, and lifelong civic stewardship.

Transformation World Timeline: Decentralized Learning Networks (Living Systems)

Year	Key Events
2025	Growing movement for land-based, bioregional learning hubs gains traction in response to system fragmentation.
2027	Indigenous-led educational models and commons-based governance structures increasingly recognized.
2030	Major urban universities decentralize: partnerships with community hubs, learning cooperatives, and knowledge sanctuaries expand.
2032	Federal and provincial frameworks begin incentivizing regenerative education models rooted in reciprocity and care.
2035	Data cooperatives replace extractive ed-tech monopolies; AI supports relational learning, not surveillance.

Year	Key Events
2040	New forms of credentialing based on community contribution, land stewardship, and relational governance become widely accepted.
2045	Universities function as living civic ecosystems - responsive, adaptive, and deeply embedded within their local communities and environments.
2050	Education thrives as a commons: resilient, equitable, and rooted in the stewardship of place, knowledge, and community wellbeing.

APPENDIX D

Drivers and Trends Shaping the Four Future Worlds

This appendix outlines the key structural drivers, emerging trends, and critical uncertainties that informed the development of the four scenarios. These forces—ranging from technological shifts and demographic change to policy realignments and cultural movements—serve as the foundational elements influencing how Ontario's postsecondary education system may evolve over the coming decades.

Growth: Academic Arms Race

Drivers

Economic Nationalism –Domestic talent prioritized for national security and innovation.
Public -Private Partnerships – Corporate actors embedded in curriculum, governance, and funding.

Technological Surveillance – AI and biometric systems manage student performance and outcomes.

Deregulation of Higher Education – Standards loosened to accelerate innovation and expansion.

Performance Based Funding – Institutional success tied to graduate outcome metrics.

Trends

Modular Credentialing – Degrees replaced by stackable subscription-based learning paths.
Algorithmic Pathway Optimization – Students guided by AI-generated learning trajectories.

Hyper-Personalized Education – Biometric data used to tailor educational experiences.

Commodification of Academic Freedom – Intellectual independence permitted only if market-aligned.

Resilience Leadership Framing – DEI rebranded as measurable corporate leadership capacity.

Discipline: The 5-Minute University

Drivers

Austerity Governance – Funding only flows to high-performance programs.

Political Oversight – Curriculum content and classroom neutrality are monitored.

Market-Aligned Learning – Programs judged by immediate employability outcomes.

Technological Efficiency – AI systems structure and monitor teaching and workload.

National Labour Strategy – Education pipeline aligned with workforce forecasting models.

Trends

Standardized Microlearning – Short, modular content replaces deep curriculum.

Civic Neutrality Mandates – Faculty constrained by surveillance and speech controls.

Institutional Conformity – Risk-averse leadership and rigid performance cultures.

Work-Integrated Learning Requirements – Professional placements are mandatory and monitored.

Student Tracking Systems – Learners steered via predictive analytics from early stages.

Collapse: The Great University Meltdown

Drivers

Chronic Underfunding – Public disinvestment collapses university operations.

Privatization of Education – Corporate academies replace degree-granting institutions.

Fragmented Governance – Internal legal battles dissolve institutional decision-making.

Economic Nationalism – Enrollment declines and isolation from global academia.

Political Manipulation – Academic freedom weaponized to erode trust and dissent.

Trends

Rise of Learning Cooperatives – Community-led education models emerge.

Loss of Academic Freedom – Political interference silences critical discourse.

Social Polarization – Trust fractures and civic cohesion erodes.

Transformation: Decentralized Learning Networks

Drivers

Systemic Collapse – Institutional legitimacy eroded by burnout and extraction.

Ecological Crisis – Communities organize education around climate and land stewardship.

Decentralization – Learning ecosystems emerge beyond institutional control.

Knowledge Commons – Data and IP are collectively owned and governed.

Imagination Cultures – Futures literacy and relational thinking drive design.

Trends

Bioregional Learning Hubs – Locally grounded, globally connected education models.

Polycentric Governance – Decision-making shared across roles and communities.

Regenerative Use of AI – Tech scaffolds relationships instead of replacing them.

Portfolio-Based Credentials – Recognition of contribution over performance metrics.

Land-Based Pedagogies – Learning rooted in place, ceremony, and care