

Are your classes overcrowded?

By JULIA STEINECKE
Classes at York are "larger than we would like," says York President H. Ian Macdonald. "The University is overcrowded," a student writes to the editor of *Excalibur*. Classrooms are "overpopulated," and people have to "sit on the floor at the back."

Do large classes result in a lower quality of education at York?

York's student/faculty ratio reflects this trend. The figure compares student and teacher populations by indicating the number of students per faculty member. (See Sidebar.) The ratio increased almost 21 percent between 1979-80 and 1982-83. Associate Vice-President Sheldon Levy is quite certain that ratio has risen again this year.

Macdonald was hesitant to believe the 21 percent figure when it was quoted to him. He did explain that this is an "experience shared with all universities. Because of our increasing enrollment, it hit us harder."

To translate these statistics into something concrete, we can look at the class sizes in a typical department in the Faculty of Arts. Political Science is one of the largest departments. In November 1982, there were 2460.5 enrollments. (That is, counting an enrollment in a full course as 1 and an enrollment in a half course as 0.5.) Of the 16 first and second year classes evaluated by the Political Science Students Association, 12 had 60 students or more. One of these lecture groups had a whopping 312 members. In contrast, all of the third and fourth year classes were smaller than 60, some of them dipping as low as nine.

This November there are 3,158 enrollments in Political Science courses, an increase of almost 700. There has been no significant increase in the number of class groups to accommodate the extra students.

The reason most people give for the growth of class sizes is the lack of money to pay for more professors. As Macdonald points out, although York's grant from the government is up 13.4 percent from last year, financial shortages are

worse. There are three main reasons for this.

- Some costs, such as those for library materials and fuel, have increased a great deal since last year.
- Even though York limited the entrance of some 1,400 qualified student applicants this year, it has more students than it had last year. (Through tuition and residence fees, most students pay only about a quarter of the costs they incur to the University.)
- Finally, York is committed to spending about \$1.7 million this year to pay off half of its debt. (York only paid off \$800,000 of the debt last year.)

Pamela Fruitman, a student representative on the Board of Governors, links accessibility to class sizes. According to Fruitman, with its

limited amount of government funding, the University has two choices: it can allow classes to become larger or it can close its doors to more qualified students in order to remain small and intimate. "I'd rather sit with 500 people than not get in," she says.

What is this doing to the quality of our education? John Ridpath, professor of Economics 1000, tackles about 500 students single-handedly every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday in Curtis Lecture Hall I. Ridpath believes "all other things being equal, small classes are better." But, he continues, "all else is not equal." There is not enough faculty in Economics to allow for smaller classes. Even if there were enough teachers, using each one to teach a small section of an introductory course would do more harm than good, says Ridpath.

His own course serves as an example: Ridpath and Professor Avi Cohen currently teach 500 students. Imagine that the two were replaced by 20 professors, teaching classes of 50 each. If this were to take place, there would be 20 different formulas of what concepts to emphasize, and 20 different marking schemes. When the students finished the course, each group would have a different understanding of the basics of economics.

Ridpath also sees large classes as an advantage because more students are likely to get "high-quality" teachers. If only two profs are to be hired to teach 1,000 students, the university will employ the best two in the department. "If you take someone (i.e. a teacher) who is able to cope with large numbers, it's better than having small classes," says Cohen.

As far as student involvement goes, in a class of 500 Ridpath agrees that "participation is almost zero." He mentions that there is a question room staffed by graduate students where people can ask questions from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. almost every day of the week. Ridpath does not think it is important to encourage more participation in first year because he says its value is not as high as in upper-year courses.

Professor Cohen agrees that Economics can be effectively taught to a large group if the right lecturing style is used. For his own class, he must be extremely well-organized, he says. At the beginning of each lesson he tells the class "where they are going to go," and at the end he reminds them of "where they've been." He must be extremely clear, must "say everything important at least three times," and cannot make a single factual mistake during the lecture.

The material in Principles of Economics 1000 is "straightforward," says Cohen. There is a logical sequence to it. Unlike Philosophy,

Introductory Economics can be taught well in a large group, he says.

President Macdonald also believes that large classes do not hamper one's education in some subjects. "Some professors rise to the occasion in a big class. You can give an exciting lecture to a large group in Introductory Economics."



Some students use glowing words to describe their large classes. Leah Balgaroo's favorite class, Introduction to Psychology, has about 200 students. Her professor uses a variety of methods to retain everyone's attention:

- He announces each topic with a colored slide bearing its title.
- He demonstrates the distortion of perceptions by having a student try on a pair of glasses that make everything look upside down.
- He shows movies and tells jokes.

On a more serious line, Balgaroo says that her professor plans his lectures well and sticks to his topic schedule. He explains the concepts so well that she feels little need to ask questions. "There's an atmosphere of excitement and discovery . . . I've never heard someone lecture so well," she says.

Mary Rose Farewell, who is studying Conformity and Deviance is also pleased with her class. There are almost 500 people with her in Curtis L. Although she usually sits in the back of the hall, she can hear the professor because he speaks slowly and uses a microphone. She can read the board because he makes the letters large and thick. Her classmates seem interested and attentive. She does not feel frustrated by unanswered questions because she can ask them

in her tutorial.

On the other side of the issue are the arguments of those who feel that students are missing out on something in one or more of their large classes.

Kim Dzyngel describes her Introduction to Psychology class of about 200 as "slightly impersonal." She feels like she is "just a mark, or a number." She finds it necessary to sit in front to avoid distractions. She is more nervous writing tests for this class because she doesn't feel free to ask the professor about specific questions she does not understand. For these reasons, she does not like Introduction to Psychology as much as her smaller classes.

Another student, who wishes to remain anonymous, has a Natural Science class of 450 which she calls "awful." She says the professor writes so sloppily on the blackboard that the students in the back of the room cannot read it. He does not use a microphone and he "eats his words." His lectures follow no outline; the student describes them as sloppy and disorganized. The professor does not allow all the students with hands up to ask questions because there are too many. Those questions that are asked he doesn't always repeat for the entire class to hear. At the end of the lecture he leaves, before students can confront him with more questions.

There are no tutorials, and as far as the student knows, there are no teaching assistants. The professor asks class members not to come see him in his office unless they know what they are asking, and that their questions are relevant.

The student says class members are apathetic and disrespectful. They talk to each other, blow gum bubbles, and walk in and out during the lecture. The moment the class period is over, they pack up and depart, cutting the professor off in mid-sentence.

Professor Ann Pilgrim directs English Literature and its Backgrounds, a class of 500. Guest speakers lead the short bi-weekly lectures. Every student has three hours of tutorials weekly, in which they discuss the material in a group of about 25 to 30.

Professor Pilgrim claims that it is "almost impossible to preserve a personal relationship with the audience. They can't even see more than one-third of the students very clearly and is unable to gauge their response to what is being said," she says.

"Lecturers have noticed an increase in bad manners from students this year, such as walking out (while they are speaking) and letting the door slam. I think this reflects the students' feelings of anonymity in a huge crowd. Their

behavior, while deplorable, is a natural consequence of that lack of connection."

Even the tutorials are too large to encourage participation. "Students who are well-prepared and want to contribute to the discussion are forced to wait their turn, often till the right moment has passed," says Pilgrim. "As an instructor in other courses I can say the sheer size of my tutorial groups prevents me from teaching as effectively as I might and as I would like to."

Jos Lennards, a professor of Sociology and Education, believes that York is the type of university at which small classes are particularly important. "Schools like the University of Toronto are highly selective of the students they admit," he argues. The variety of their backgrounds is limited.

York, on the other hand, is more accessible to all types of students, he says. This is "nothing to be apologetic for," he says. Because of the variety in its population, however, York's classes must be tailored to suit a wide range of needs. Only in a small group can this be done, says Lennard. It is easier to provide a "sense of involvement" to highly-motivated and less-motivated students in small classes.

Those who are deficient in an area of study can receive remedial help. Students from different cultural backgrounds can request that the material be explained to them in terms they understand. Thus, it is through smaller classes, according to Lennards, that York can meet the challenge of instructing all sorts of people, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

When teachers offer solutions to the problem of over-sized classes they most often talk about leaving lectures large, but supplementing them with small group discussion. Professor Ridpath suggests the use of video lectures, which would give instructors more time to deal with their students on an individual basis.

Professor Lennards claims that even a factual subject like Introductory Economics warrants discussion. It is not the unified field it used to be, he says, using the Marxist denunciation of its basic premises as an example.

Ronald Sheese, Associate Dean of Arts, believes that "students themselves bear some responsibility to participate in the learning process. The University's responsibility should be to ensure that every first year student has at least one small class or tutorial." Perhaps students can have the choice between a formal tutorial and the use of a question room staffed by tutors, he suggests. "Without participation, the process of learning is reduced to memorization."

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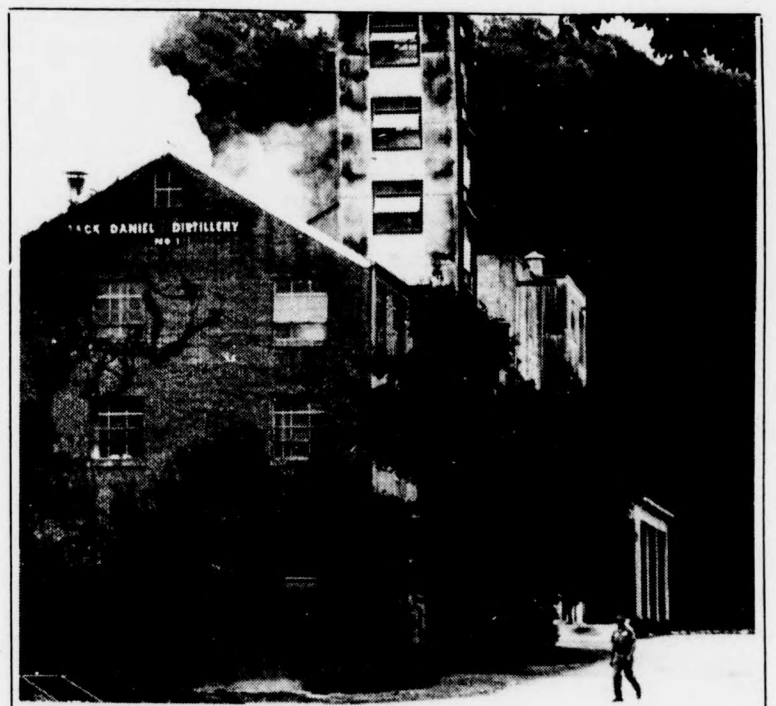
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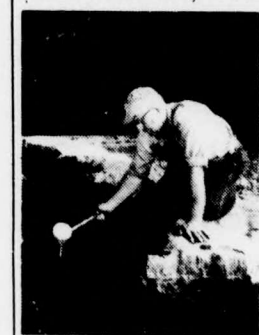
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