

Atlantic Institute of Education post mortem

by Alec Bruce

The closure of the Atlantic Institute of Education earlier this year has thrown vital teacher-training programmes into disarray. While fifty displaced students complete their studies at Dalhousie, sickly government funding promises a bleak future for AIE graduate degrees.

Earlier this month, the Dalhousie senate moved to allow students of AIE to finish their interrupted degrees on campus. The motion stipulates AIE students continue in their current programmes, which will remain separate from Dalhousie's own degree-courses in education. Moreover, no new students will be admitted to AIE programmes, and all such programmes will terminate with the last student to graduate.

Right now, there are no plans at Dalhousie to integrate AIE pro-

grammes with pre-existing ones, nor does it appear likely these programmes will find a home in Nova Scotia for a long while. According to L.E. Haley, Chairman of the department of Education at Dalhousie, "We haven't been granted the right to offer these programmes by ourselves, or continue them on behalf of another institution. These are tight money times for post-secondary education in the Atlantic region, and I can't see any existing institution offering AIE-type graduate programmes in the near future."

The Educational programmes, which now appear as ill-fated as AIE itself, were the only ones of their kind in Atlantic Canada. Loosely grouped under one heading - the Open Access Study Plan - they allowed teachers to pursue graduate degrees at the part-time

level in many places in the Maritimes. Under the direction of the Atlantic Institute in Halifax, supervisors consolidated resources at a variety of universities for students' independent research. Through the Open Access Study Plan, AIE became, other than Dalhousie, the only degree-granting institution in the region awarding doctorates in education. Unlike Dalhousie, AIE doctoral programmes had no residency requirement.

Joe Hrastak, a doctoral candidate in music education who qualified just before the provincial government closed AIE's doors, knows the value of the Open Access Study Plan. He fought with his school board for years to let him study towards a Ph.D. His strife was to no avail until he enrolled in the Open Access Plan. According to Hrastak, "In my case,

my district board wouldn't allow me to go. They said I might not have a job if I left on a two-year sabbatical to Dalhousie. I made nine applications for doctoral candidacy, before I enrolled in part-time studies at the Atlantic Institute."

Hrastak believes the Open Access degree rates with degrees from the most revered universities in the world. He attended four separate institutions in North America to pursue music education, and only the Open Access program gave him any difficulty.

"At Boston University and Julliard I spent very little time worrying about my courses," he said. "I had only 10 or 12 required credit hours to fill. But in the AIE programme, I found much to be a challenge. I had 49 credit hours to fill towards my degree, and some of the independent study was as difficult as the courses."

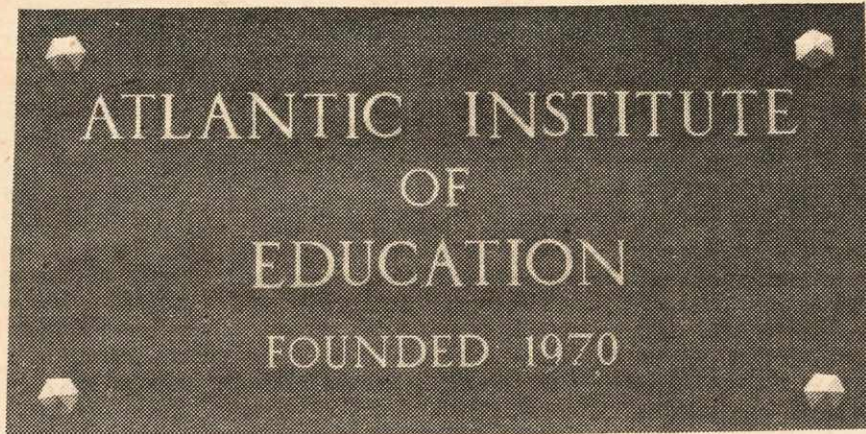
Hrastak feels certain the provincial government made a big mistake in closing the Atlantic Institute without making adequate arrangements to continue the Open Access Study Plan at another institution. "The government took away from the students a vital program of study," says Hrastak. "I sincerely hope the program will not be terminated although Dalhousie is quite firm on that issue. But it would be a very sad state of affairs, since this is the only program available to the Atlantic Provinces that allows fully-employed teachers to get graduate degrees. We simply

cannot afford to take two years off to get a Ph.D.," he says.

Dr. Haley confirms the Open Access Study Plan had a vital function in educating teachers, who for a variety of reasons couldn't obtain graduate degrees through normal processes. According to Haley, "AIE was fulfilling a role - that's clear. It was responding to circumstances in the 1970's which created an unusual concentration of students graduating from universities with B.Ed. degrees. Some of those students, aspiring to graduate work, simply couldn't afford more school, and had to get jobs teaching."

But, as Haley points out, our society is still full of teachers who aspire to graduate work. The discontinuance of AIE programs will, in his view, affect the whole scheme of teacher-training in the Atlantic Provinces for years to come. "Resources at specific institutions don't change," says Haley. "But the fact there are no immediate plans to continue with these programmes will affect a large body of graduates in education very seriously."

Still, all hope may not be lost for students like Joe Hrastak. While education minister Terry Donahoe remains characteristically tight-lipped on the fate of AIE educational programmes, the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) is looking into long-range plans for similar programs at other institutions. For these, however, students may have to wait 10 or 15 years.



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