

Declining enrollment in the 80's: Universities in Entropy

by Rory Leishman

How many students are going to show up on university campuses across Canada next fall and in the years ahead? This is more than an academic question. At stake are literally thousands of faculty positions and millions of dollars in university funding.

Desperate to conserve both jobs and money in the face of an apprehended decline in enrollment, some universities have already resorted to lowering admission standards and ebbing the quality of their undergraduate programs. A downward spiral has set in, which will be more difficult to reverse in the years ahead.

For the next year, however, most universities should get a temporary reprieve. Last spring, they outdid themselves in competing for students. Such ploys as hard-rock radio jingles extolling the pleasures of campus life at some of the academically less distinguished universities seem to have had the desired effect on many high school students. Preliminary statistics in Ontario indicate that university applications in the province are up by about three per cent over last year.

That's good news for the universities, whose funding is largely tied to enrollment. But taxpayers aren't likely to be too pleased to learn that the cost of the lavish recruitment drives by Ontario universities alone this year has exceeded \$1 million.

Moreover, the hard sell, lower admission standards, and greater entrance "scholarships" are not likely to stave off a precipitous decline in university enrollment for more than two or three years at most. Sooner rather than later, the halving of the fertility rate for Canadian women, which occurred during the 1960's, is bound to have a drastic impact on the universities. To be specific, Statistics Canada projects that the 18-24 age group in Canada is now levelling off at about 3.4 million and will decline to less than 2.7 million by 1994.

It is conceivable that university enrollment could hold steady, if the participation rate — that is, the proportion of the 18-24 age group attending university — increases sharply, but that is not likely. In a report released last December entitled *University Research in Jeopardy: The Threat of Declining Enrollment*, the Science Council of Canada acknowledged that "there is a great deal of uncertainty in predicting participation rates."

"However," added the Council, "there is no doubt that the size of the 18-24 age group will decrease by about 20 per cent between 1982 and 1994. Therefore, it would seem reasonable to assume that full-time university enrollment will decrease by at least this amount over that period."

To drive home the enormity of this trend, the Council has noted that the anticipated reduction in the number of students attending university in 14 years is likely to approximate the present full-time enrollment at every university west of Manitoba.

During the past three years, a modest decline in university enrollment has already begun in several sections of the country, but matters have been made much worse for the universities by the failure of most provincial governments to increase operating grants by even as much as the pace of inflation. When the

public clamors for spending restraint, it is relatively easy for politicians to clobber universities, because the damages caused by cutbacks in spending in higher education are difficult to compute and do not show up for several years.

A related factor has been adoption in 1977 of the Federal Established Programs Financing Act, which changed the rules of the game for conditional grant programs in the fields of medicare, hospitals, and post-secondary education. The adverse impact on medicare has been well documented; the consequences for the universities in Ontario have been hardly less severe.

Prior to 1977, each dollar allocated by the provinces to university operating grants was more or less matched by the federal government. Since then, the federal government has automatically increased its contribution to the provinces through a transfer of tax points and grants tied to growth in the gross national pro-

This, in turn, means that unless the present faculty: student ratio is reduced or professors start leaving the universities for reasons other than normal attrition, there will be no openings for new faculty members until about 1995. In the meantime, an entire generation of young scholars will be lost to the Canadian university system and that, says the Science Council, "would cause almost irreparable damage to the universities."

Perhaps the most alarming aspect of this crisis is that the universities are helpless to deal with it. There is excessive university autonomy. Spending restraint is not centrally co-ordinated, but left to each university acting alone. Within each institution, the administration is largely beholden to the university senate, which is dominated by faculty, and the last place the faculty will look for budget cutbacks is in reduced teaching posts and lower salaries. Instead, they will first loot the libraries, plunder scientific equipment,



duct, but the provinces have not followed through with the corresponding increases to the universities. Indeed the total increase in university operating grants by the Ontario government last year was less than the increase in the federal contribution alone.

Such stinginess is deplorable, but the hard truth is that not even the most generous provincial governments (with the exception of Alberta) can be expected to increase operating grants sufficiently to eliminate the necessity for universities to make drastic cutbacks in service and staffing in response to declining enrollment. Therein lies the essence of the crisis for the university system in Canada.

During the 1960's and early 1970's, a large number of young professors were recruited into the then rapidly growing universities. In 1977-78, only 17.9 per cent of faculty members were over age 50. The implication drawn by the Science Council is that only a 20 per cent reduction in faculty — just enough to match the expected drop in student enrollment — "could probably be obtained through normal attrition" during the next 14 years.

and allow physical plant to deteriorate. The inevitable results will be poorer teaching and worse research.

Compelling evidence to support this alarming proposition is contained in the latest report of the Ontario Council on University Affairs (OCUA), an independent advisory body to the Davis government. Since enrollment peaked in 1976-77, the value of books and periodicals purchased by Ontario universities out of operating income has declined by more than 18 per cent. In the opinion of OCUA, "the decline in funds available is now causing real difficulty in the ability of universities to maintain adequate collections."

Between 1976-77 and 1977-78, university expenditures out of operating income for equipment and furniture in Ontario increased only 5.4 per cent. Preliminary figures for the following two years indicate that spending in this area actually declined. Last fall OCUA estimated that Ontario universities were spending out of their operating funds just slightly more than one half of the \$45 million a year that is required to maintain their existing inventories of equipment and furniture.

What has happened to the number of professors during these years? A drop did not occur until 1978-79 when the number of faculty members was somewhat less than 0.3 per cent below the peak set in the previous year. During those same two years, enrollment in Ontario universities dropped more than five per cent. (The figures represent both full-time and part-time faculty and enrollment, measured in equivalent full-time units).

For one reason or another, few senior faculty members protected by tenure have accepted salary restraint as a means of saving jobs for junior colleagues. Contract settlements for Ontario university professors last year provided for income increases averaging close to eight per cent (six per cent as a standard, plus another two per cent for progress through the ranks). In the words of the OCUA report, it is now "extremely difficult for universities to offer teaching and research careers to young people."

This, then, is the nature of the universities' crisis. What should be done about it?

In the first place, provincial governments might fund early-retirement programs for professors which would make it possible for universities to hire some talented young faculty members in the years ahead. Another proposal would be for the provincial governments to increase university funding for books, periodicals, furniture, and scientific equipment in the form of conditional grant, which would not be used to finance faculty salaries. But these would be only partial solutions.

Saving the quality of the Canadian university system requires not just across-the-board retrenchment, but consolidation. In the words of the Science Council, "In the interests of good scholarship, as well as economy, inter-university transfers of faculty members and facilities in specialized areas should be undertaken whenever they are likely to fall below the critical mass in a particular university, and when the transfer could bolster a more flourishing activity in another university."

"Today, such action may seem drastic," admits the council, "but in the long run a rational redistribution of specialization among universities may be the only way to avoid mediocrity in many areas. Public regard for the universities and the preservation of their autonomy would be greatly enhanced if the universities would initiate such action themselves."

This last observation is a pipe dream. To cite just one example, there are now seven schools of library science affiliated with Canadian universities. It is certain that all of them cannot maintain their current standards of teaching and research as enrollment drops. But it is conceivable that the University of British Columbia might agree to drop voluntarily its library science program so that a larger and better one can be maintained at the University of Toronto (or vice versa)? Not very likely.

Such interprovincial consolidation could best be directed by an agency of the federal government, but under the pressure of the provinces, Ottawa has renounced all responsibility for university administration. No other industrialized country has a central government with so little influence over university affairs.

Of course, considerable consolidation among the several universities of Ontario and Quebec could be directed by their

respective provincial governments. But this is not a task for politicians, who, for obvious reasons, should not have responsibility for evaluating university departments. Besides, both Ontario Colleges and Universities Minister Bette Stephenson and her Quebec counterpart, Jacques-Yvan Morin, have made clear that they don't want to take the political heat for ordering regional universities to axe programs.

What both provinces need is an independent university council composed of laymen and academics exercising executive authority in a manner similar to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission. Creation of just such a council was recommended in 1972 in the prescient report of the Wright Commission on Post-Secondary Education in Ontario. The chief purposes of this council, the commission suggested, "should be, not the administering of the programs and universities under its jurisdiction, but the planning and co-ordination of an orderly development of its sector in post-secondary education in the closest consultation with the universities and related voluntary associations."

A similar proposal for Quebec was made in the May 1979 report of the Commission d'étude sur les universités (Commission Angers). So far neither the Ontario nor Quebec governments have acted on these recommendations. The longer they delay, the more certain will be a serious decline in the quality of their universities.

Nationally, there can be no hope of sustaining, let alone improving, the quality of the Canadian university system unless the federal government assumes responsibility for promoting centres of excellence. Ideally, Canada should have at least one outstanding institution which could rival in academic achievement the great universities of the United States, France, or Great Britain. But that's an impossibility for Canada, because the federal and provincial governments could never agree on where that single best university should be located.

Alternatively, an independent grant-giving agency of the federal government could identify and promote superior departments at universities across the country. For example, the economics department at Western, the political studies department at Queen's, the commerce school at the Université de Montréal, and the English department at the University of British Columbia could all be targeted for special federal development grants, which could be made contingent upon hiring new young faculty members.

It would not take much additional federal money on top of regular provincial funding to enable recipient departments to attract the best professors and purchase the best equipment necessary to outstanding teaching and research. The result would be centres of a superior quality which would surely have a positive impact on the rest of the university system.

For the federal and provincial governments to do nothing to save the universities would be disastrous. OCUA has well stated that, "the universities now stand at the brink of a decline which threatens the continued existence of a quality university system." That is true not just of Ontario, but of Canada as a whole.

Reprinted from *The Varsity*, the University of Toronto's student paper

Classic Design **optics** Ltd.



Chris Holland
Dispensing Optician

Student Rates ☆ Free Parking

Open Saturday to serve you better
We give your eyes the Classic Look

LeMarchant Towers 429-2937
6155 Coburg Road
Opposite corner to O'Briens Drug Mart

Have you ever thought about a career in Banking?

Career Information Hour



Don't wait until your graduating year to start thinking about a career.

Speaker: Mr. Ian Webb — Royal Bank
Date: Thursday January 15
Place: Room 410 — Sub
Time: 12 noon-1:00

For further information, contact the Canada Employment Centre on Campus, 4th Floor SUB