

MPHEC: When universities go fishing

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A few weeks ago, an austere group of academic and business figures handed the premiers of the three maritime provinces a document that included a pricetag, somewhere around 150 million dollars.

That exact amount is what the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) believes the governments of the three provinces will have to give the region's post secondary institutions during the 1978-79 academic year.

The governments, represented by an ad-hoc committee of civil servants, ministers, and their assistants in consultation with the provincial treasury boards, will scrutinize the figure, and in all probability cut this, and hand it back to the MPHEC which will divide up what it is given among the 30 institutions under its jurisdiction.

This is the second year the MPHEC has gone through the motions of preparing estimates on the costs of running post secondary education in the maritime region and making an impartial request to government on behalf of the institutions for subsidies. The commission, if true to last year's form, will have no hesitation telling government what effects their cuts in the recommended subsidies will have: poorer academic quality and reduced educational opportunity for the people of the maritimes.

History

Per capita, there are more degree granting institutions in the Atlantic Provinces than anywhere else in the world, 17 in all, with about 20,000 students from a population of over

two million. An unusual statistic, taken by itself, for a region that is commonly accepted as the bottom end of the socio-economic scale in North America, and has far less non degree granting and technical institutions than the national average.

Historically, however, that statistic makes plenty of sense. Post-secondary institutions in the Atlantic Provinces were originally formed almost completely along religious sectarian lines—the Catholics founding, among others St. Mary's and St. Francis Xavier, the Baptists, Acadia, the Methodists Mt. Allison, and the leader in denominational higher education, the Anglicans, who opened Kings College near Halifax in the early nineteenth century. Although reactions against rampant sectarianism produced some developments, notably the creation of Dalhousie, and the Nova Scotia Technical school, the situation remained much the same until the latter half of this century when governments began direct public involvement in higher education.

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Government Intervention began in the early sixties when public financing of the institutions increased dramatically: Nova Scotia formed a "grants committee" in 1963; the New Brunswick Higher Education Commission was formed in 1967; and Prince Edward Island formed a grants committee in 1968 in conjunction with a major reorganization of post-secondary in-

stitutions into UPEI. Within the Atlantic, the only exception to the trend has been in Newfoundland, where Memorial University was formed at the initiative of the government, first as a college in 1923, and later as a university in 1949.

Until 1967, the federal government financed Post secondary education by providing a direct per capita subsidy to the provinces (\$5.00 in the last year it operated, 1965-66); the provinces divided up the money among the institutions on the basis of enrolment. With the negotiation of the federal Fiscal Arrangements act in 1967, the Atlantic provinces were given the option of continuing a per capita arrangement, or entering into a 50-50 matching grants system with the federal government. Nova Scotia was the only province to opt for the matching system, the other provinces apparently not being able to match the federal government dollar for dollar.

Federal funding reduced some of the provincial burden for direct funding but the provincial higher education committees assumed more control in the decision making process as the provinces moved toward non-sectarian, public, higher education. The institutions, meanwhile remained autonomous entities, ultimately responsible through their charters to the legislatures of each province.

A regional approach to post-secondary education began in 1964 with the formation of the Atlantic Association of Universities (AAU). The AAU began as a voluntary association among the presidents of a number of Atlantic institutions and had as its stated purpose "to assist the co-ordination of higher education, to ensure high academic standards in a period of rising costs and to avoid unnecessary duplication of faculties and courses of study". The administration of their own-institutions had led the universities to ignore the simple fact they had common interests and cooperation on a regional level could only improve matters.

on the possibility of interprovincial union.

A regional approach to maritime issues was politically inhibited, and until 1971, got no further than a study. However, in the summer of that year, the maritime premiers saw the regional overlap demanding

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more than fleeting attention and decided to solidify cooperation somewhat more with the creation of the Council of Maritime Premiers (CMP). The decision to launch the MPHEC was the first tangible result of cooperation among the three premiers following the creation of the council.

The premiers were, however, a little ahead of themselves. As Jeff Holmes, executive director of the AAU, put it in a report to the Interna-

Financial Planning

The commission did eventually form with the passage of an act in the three maritime legislatures giving the MPHEC the purpose of "assisting the provinces and in-

stitutions in attaining a more efficient and effective utilization and allocation in the field of higher education in the region".

MPHEC membership is ultimately the sole concern of the CMP which holds the final appointment responsibility. There are 15 members, 5 chosen from the public and 5 from government and other non academic institutions, all selected by the premiers, and 5 members chosen by the universities through

tions outline general budget areas and allocations for the year ahead including a request for subsidy to supplement tuition fees and other revenue sources; that information is compiled for the CMP by the MPHEC which usually modifies the requests to fit regional consistencies. The commission then decides on an arbitrary figure that represents the government cost of financing post secondary for the year in question.

The total figure is passed to the regional and provincial treasury boards who decide to either accept or reject the MPHEC proposal, and in the latter case arrive at another figure that will be passed back to the MPHEC, the commission considers the amount given by the governments and allocates a certain amount to each institution through a Formula based on enrolment and other weighting factors.

In addition to handling the real grant amounts for the year ahead, the commission also provides the CMP with projections two years in advance of the budget year, which the premiers and their representatives, presumably, at least, also take into account when making decisions about the year under discussion.

The MPHEC last year recommended the governments increase subsidies to the institutions for this year by 11.5 per cent. In its presentation to the CMP, the commission stated clearly its concern that "the gap in the level of support for post secondary institutions between the Maritimes and the rest of Canada is widening. . . . Further increases in disparities will undoubtedly result in a lower quality of post-secondary education in the Maritime provinces and a reduction in the educational opportunities for Maritime students".

The best the premiers could muster for a response to the commission was a seven per cent increase in total grants, adding they felt tuition fees should not increase by more than four per cent, "a strong guideline for restraint."

The premier's view is shared by few: the MPHEC said last year the 10 percent tuition increase the year previous was more than any other increase in Canada and that fees should be constant for three years.

the AAU, frequently including representatives who are not necessarily with a university.

The Atlantic Federation of Students and the Atlantic Conference of the Canadian Association of University Teachers have deplored the lack of either student or faculty representation on the MPHEC.

The body is mandated by the Premiers Council to carry out a number of specific activities within the general functions of planning and recommending policy in the area of higher education in the region.

The most significant function of the MPHEC, the one that affects everyone involved in the regional higher education system is the matter of financial planning and recommendation to the premiers council. During the autumn of each year, the MPHEC receives a budget and five year spending projections from each institution. The administra-

based on grants that will most likely fall far short of the requests made by the institutions. The administration's obvious concern that the MPHEC is a government red herring being used to cover up government's inability or outright unwillingness to increase funding to post secondary education is shared manifold, by students and faculty.

sions and studies made during the two years of its existence to that point. Major concerns of the commission until that point were connected with developing a regional information base on post-secondary institutions, completing inventories on available course programmes and space in the region, finalizing the funding decision making pro-

cess, and arriving at a number of policy statements for submission to the CMP.

The commission also recommended the CMP establish a uniform student policy for the region in conjunction with the development of a truly national student aid plan. The recommendations include a regional committee to monitor and eventually administer a program that would be consistent throughout the region. The report said the Maritime provinces were not offering uniform programs of student aid and had ignored MPHEC recommendations made a year earlier that were intended to somewhat unify the provincial programs.

The MPHEC has its hands tied in many areas of concern. As far as telling government who needs how much money and when, the governments politely listen and, acutely aware of the electorate and their own precarious position, reply to MPHEC with grants that more often reflect their own position much more than that of those involved in education. On the other hand the commission has to walk the line with the institutions to the governments modifying the position from either side ultimately playing a give and take game with both.

Though its real effectiveness is questionable, the commission is entrenching itself in the bureaucracy, and establishing decision-making processes, that are being used and recognized by the key groups in the university community.

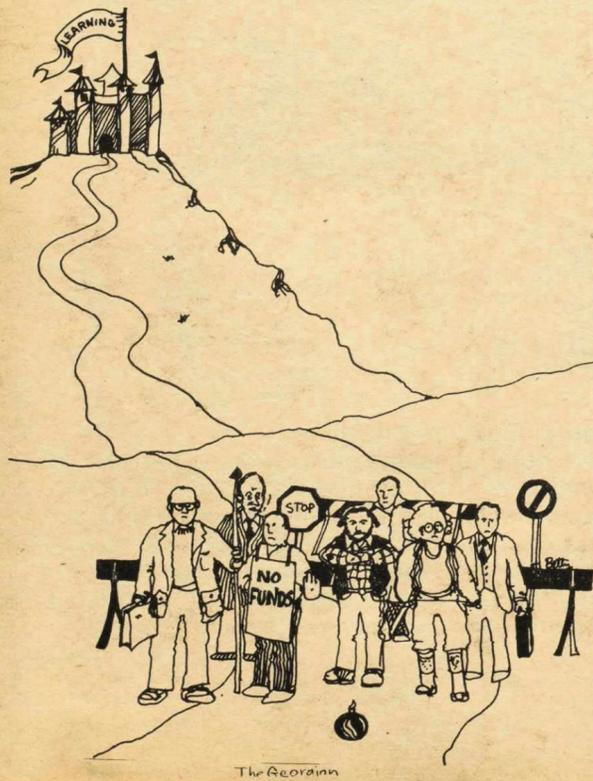
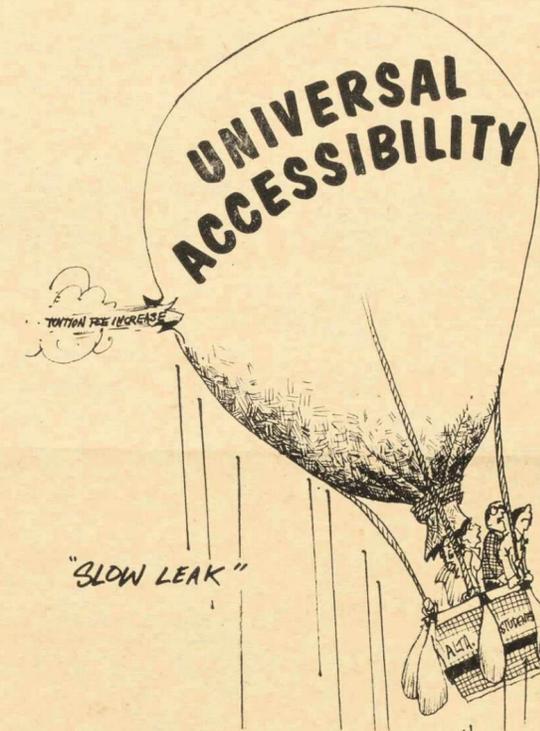
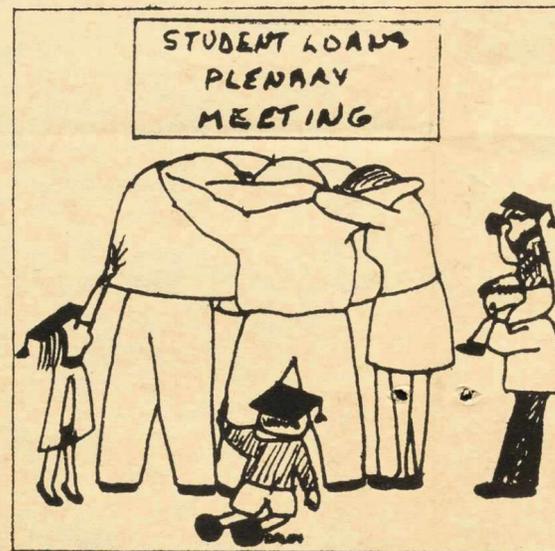
Whether the MPHEC will become the real policy group in the post-secondary/political relationship in the maritimes, perhaps even the Atlantic, will depend on what type of stance the commission is prepared to take on crucial issues.

The AAU was to "assist the co-ordination of higher education, to ensure high academic standards in a period of rising costs and to avoid unnecessary duplication of faculties and courses of study."

The commission reported policy recommendations in three major areas in the report, which was released in the late summer, Accessibility, Funding, and Student Aid. The major policy statements dealt with the accessibility question where the commission asserted the principle of accessibility by merit, if only in vague terms, and left the premiers with the option for introducing differential fees for foreign students in the region at some point in future. The policy states, "post secondary education is to be accessible to all Canadian Students who qualify and for whom there are places available: however funding related to such students may be on a reduced basis." The commission pointed to the differential fees recently implemented in Ontario and Alberta and suggested

As it now stands the body is little more than a political fish-pond from which the governments annually toss out grab bags to the institutions in lieu of a straight face to face handout.

Unless the student regional group, AFS finds some way to radically infiltrate the organization within a relatively short time, the existence of the MPHEC will matter little to students on campuses throughout the maritimes. Governments' unwillingness to accept the commission's recommendations that tuition fees be frozen, and a refusal to recognize the need for continual funding increases will mean the universities are in a financial bind for some time to come, and will undoubtedly look to the perennial "last resort", the students, for more money.



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