

# Commission report expensive cop-out

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THE LARGE INCREASE IN public funding to Canadian universities in the 1960s was accompanied by a new approach to post-secondary education. Universities were no longer to be the nurturing ground for society's elite.

The new objective of a university system was to provide a high quality of research and education which was accountable to the needs of the community at large and which guaranteed access to all those with the required ability.

The authors of the Report of the Nova Scotia Royal Commission on Post-Secondary Education claim Nova Scotia's universities have failed to reach these objectives. The report says the lack of coordinated planning and the lack of a commonly acknowledged sense of purpose in the university system has pushed the universities to the "the brink of a quality disaster."

The report recommends the establishment of a Nova Scotia Council of Higher Education "with executive authority and discretionary powers over funding in order to ensure that university planning, programming and resource allocation are performed in the context of a provincial university system." The council would oversee the introduction of a core curriculum in universities and the "rationalization" of duplicated programmes in different institutions.

In addition, the report recommends increased tuition fees, the creation of a Nova Scotia Council of Continuing Education, and the setting up of similar central planning and resource allocation

quantity rather than quality.

Sadly, the competition for public funds has led to this situation by encouraging lower standards in order to achieve higher pass rates and therefore higher levels of funding.

In some of the more traditional disciplines, cutbacks in funding have turned the faculty into twentieth-century versions of the Knights of St. John's Cross, who spend their time vainly trying to transcribe the Holy Grail onto floppy disks.

Establishing a clear purpose to a university system, let alone a university or even a department, is inimical to the spirit of a university where a diversity of views and approaches should be celebrated rather than suppressed.

The commission's narrow approach to university education was not more evident than in its embarrassing lack of comment on the important and stimulating role of interdisciplinary institutes and departments at Nova Scotian universities.

The enormous infusion of public funds into the university system in the early 1960s changed the nature of university education forever. Changes in the administrative structure took place so slowly and marginally that twenty years later, most universities are still governed as if they were private institutes.

Saying the university system is a large public expenditure program in which the relatively poor groups tend to subsidize the relatively rich," the council called for increased public accountability for these public funds.

Setting up a government-appointed central council to account to the public for these

By improving communication and input between faculties and the communities they serve, there would be increased accessibility to programs by less-advantaged groups in society and the development of programs more relevant to the needs of the community.

Increased communication

between secondary school, business and government representatives with academic faculty would improve the quality and relevance of the education offered at both secondary and post-secondary levels.

Closer relations between business and government groups with faculties would both increase the

flow of funds from these groups to universities and facilitate the secondment of academic staff to these organizations and vice versa providing universities with a much-needed transfusion of new blood. These closer relations would also increase employment opportunities outside the university for staff and students.

## Recommendations affecting students

1. A body, preferably established by and representing all the provincial universities, should set tests of ability for all prospective university students. There should be a Use of English (or, for francophone institutions, a Use of French) examination to test reading, writing and reasoning, and a Use of Mathematics examination to test ability to understand mathematical reasoning and perform mathematical operations.
16. A university education should be synonymous with a liberal education. In consequence, all students wishing an undergraduate or first degree, regardless of their field of specialization, should take a core curriculum.
18. Programmes at undergraduate or first-degree level that do not include the core curriculum should not result in a baccalaureate or higher degree but in diplomas or advanced certificates.
35. Tuition fees should increase so that students, as the primary beneficiaries of their university education, assume 50% of the costs of their instruction.
36. Visa students should pay the full instructional costs associated with their programme except for students from the countries defined by OECD as the twenty-five least developed nations.
37. The universities should introduce differential fees that reflect major differences in programme costs. A differential fee structure based on the following classifications is suggested:
  - Arts and Commerce
  - Science and Engineering
  - Medical/Clinical
  - Professional Programmes
  - Graduate Programmes
39. The Government of Nova Scotia should introduce an Educational Opportunity Fund, created by statute and financed by the government, which would provide assistance in the form of loans to students in approved post-secondary educational programmes who demonstrated a need for financial assistance.
40. The Educational Opportunity Fund should replace the Nova Scotia Bursary Programme as a supplement to the financial assistance provided by the Canada Student Loans Programme.
41. Student loan assistance obtained under the Educational Opportunity Fund should be repayable contingent upon, and according to a schedule directly related to, the recipient's ability to pay after having completed his or her education.
42. The amounts of defaulting loans should be repaid from provincial government revenues as a subsidy to the Educational Opportunity Fund.
47. The universities of the province should be considered, and should consider themselves, as forming a provincial system, and the plans and priorities of each university should take cognizance of, and be in accord with, the plans and priorities of the system as a whole.
49. A provincial intermediary body, called the Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education, should be established and endowed with executive authority and discretionary powers over funding in order to ensure that university planning, programming and resource allocation are performed in the context of a provincial university system.
50. Once the Council is established, provincial government decisions to accept, adopt or approve would be required in the following areas only:
  - level of resource available to be provided to higher education.
  - provincial policies at the highest level with respect to university education. These policies would originally be developed by the Council and should be approved, amended or rejected by government only after consultation with the Council.
  - continuation of the Council's mandate with respect to higher education.
51. The Council must respect the autonomy of the universities and the academic freedom of the faculty. Ultimate decisions in certain matters must be left to the universities themselves. These matters include:
  - academic policies
  - academic standards
  - admission standards
53. The future composition and responsibilities of MPHEC or its successor should be established by negotiations between the three Maritime provinces. It is advisable that a regional agency be maintained for the purposes of data collections and coordination of specific programmes of regional importance.
54. The Council on Higher Education should be created by statute, conferring upon it the powers of an administrative tribunal with the right to enquire into any and all things relating to higher education in Nova Scotia.
56. The council, not a section in the Department of Education, should be given the responsibility for advising the Minister of Education in university matters.
75. Should the Council on Higher Education prove inadequate to coordinate the academic programmes and expenditures of the universities, the provincial government should consider the consolidation of the separate institutions in a University of Nova Scotia.
91. A core curriculum should be introduced in the secondary schools to ensure that students obtain the general educational background necessary to encourage them to seek a wide range of job skills. Mathematics should be compulsory in junior high school to Grade IX level, and senior high school students should experience a core curriculum including mathematics, English, a science, a social science and a language, all taught to a rigorous standard. They should also receive liberal exposure to the arts.
104. Universities should consider the introduction of three to five-year study schedules for part-time students.
105. Consideration should be given to providing loans with the same repayment terms as full-time student loans to part-time students registered in a three to five-year study schedule.

### Centralized control of universities repugnant.

committees at each of the universities.

The facile and poorly-considered recommendation of imposing "selective retrenchment" on universities by a central planning council would be the surest route to further erosion of the quality of the province's university system. Not only is centralized control of a university curriculum repugnant to the traditional character of a decentralized university system in Canada and in Nova Scotia in particular, but experience in other countries has shown centralized control of university curricula results in institutionalized mediocrity.

As proposed, the council would be completely unworkable. A council of seven people capable of expressing "different points of view on any subject" and on the hundreds of different programmes in the province's universities would be hard to find, even if they were Dal graduates.

Decline in quality of academic programs, where it has occurred, has resulted not from a lack of clear purpose in these departments but from an emphasis on

expenditures would be an expensive and dangerous cop-out.

A much more fruitful approach would be to negotiate a more extensive agreement on credit transfer between Nova Scotia colleges and universities and the creation of inter-university faculty committees with real power over finances and program development. On these committees would be academic and student representatives from the different universities, sitting with representatives from government, business groups, secondary school teachers and interest groups representing disadvantaged groups in the community.

Representatives from outside the university would be on a rotational and voluntary basis so that those groups most concerned with certain disciplines would have the opportunity to contribute to the fields of study they are most involved with.

The benefits of such a system would be significant. It could pave the way for greater coordination of programme development between different universities than is presently possible under the MPHEC.