

Commission report stresses open doors to higher education

By MARILYN SMITH

Ever since the draft report of the Commission on Post-Secondary Education was released last March, educators and students have been waiting for the other shoe to drop. It happened last Thursday, four months behind schedule, with the release of the final report.

Four years and \$1.5 million in the making, the Learning Society is a blueprint for development of post-secondary education in Ontario in the next two decades. The plans call for a "life-time of learning". Accessibility is the catchword.

More than 60 per cent of Ontario's population drop out from or after high school; "they have an important claim on the services of the post-secondary system that should be fully recognized", the report states early in its 263-page length. Most of the 124 recommendations aim to demolish the class elitism that still dominates the access routes to post-secondary institutions.

The plans are sweeping: eliminate financial barriers to education through loans and grants based on a sliding scale of parental income.

- remove formal lock-step education as the only means of entry to the professions and para-professions
- establish an Open Academy and extension colleges to reach people living in post-secondary outpost regions
- regulate work-study arrangements to allow for leave of absence from the job
- provide special catch-up opportunities for women, native peoples, and the francophone populations in Ontario.
- The whole structure rests on the government's willingness to finance and initiate the schemes. Last year, the Ontario government spent nearly \$600 million on post-secondary education and about \$8 million on the arts. It's a bulky package — but COPSE recommends a more equitable distribution between formal and non-formal educational institutions. There should be open access to all libraries, museums and galleries and more funds for the arts, it says.

HOW TO OPEN THE DOORS

The accessibility scheme hinges on a loan-grant-scholarship program that's geared to give the most assistance to a two-child family with an annual income under \$15,000. Students would receive grants scaled to their parents' income with education and maintenance costs for up to five years. Students from families of higher incomes would receive loans to finance their education — with up to 30 years to repay it. A service contract to the government is another way to repay. In the final report, the 13 members of COPSE rejected the idea of an educational opportunities bank — that is, repayment geared to earnings after graduation. The commission made no recommendation on an age of independence — loans and grants are geared to parental income.

Along with true educational costs, such considerations should be secondary to the issue of accessibility, according to the report. Students should pay from one-third of their instructional costs. But with this year's \$100 fee hike, that means little or no increase for arts and science students — but substantial hikes in graduate and professional programs and for students in colleges of applied arts and technology.

In a dissenting report, commissioner Peter Kelly said; "I suspect that the universities and CAAT's will remain the major focus of our educational activity and of our citizens' aspirations. Therefore we must insist that those institutions open their doors to the gifted of all socio-economic classes. As a first step, tuition fees and associated costs should be abolished by having the government increase its support to those institutions. Next, quota systems should be devised and implemented to ensure that the student population by the year 1990 reflects the socio-economic demography of Ontario. Lastly, our governments have a responsibility to enforce progressive taxation. The burden of these costs should fall upon those persons and corporations who benefit most from our economy, not upon individuals who are merely exercising their right to a full educational experience in Ontario."

But the majority report, while recognizing that "non-educational issues also may be involved in the question of equity", offers only principles and criteria for evaluating priorities in post-secondary education. How much funding or where it comes from isn't an issue: "The reason for this is simple: The decision is a political one".

Consequently, the overall approach — that education is a right, not a privilege — doesn't carry much sting. It's ultimately at the whim of the government to ignore, implement wholly or piecemeal the recommendations of the report. If the government raises tuition fees in colleges and graduate schools without the accompanying loan-grant-scholarship program recommended by the commission, then accessibility will be cut off, not blown wide open. If the government cuts back funds for institutions — without developing the libraries, museums, galleries and other non-formal education areas, then the commission's original intent is circumvented. There is a real danger that the report could become a rationalisation for government cutbacks in certain areas of post-secondary education.

"It's up to the institutions and students to pressure the government to take the whole package," said commissioner David Black.

WHO MAKES THE RULES?

The final report maintains its original stand on public accountability. Institutions should be accountable, both to the public and to the government, and COPSE proposes buffer councils to act as an intermediary between the government and the institution. The councils would have 14

members selected from the public at large, and from ranks within the institution. The majority would be the public representatives.

In the complete proposal, there are four councils; — college affairs; university affairs; creative and performing arts; and the open educational sector (including art galleries, museums and libraries).

These councils would report to the minister of post-secondary education (presently the minister of colleges and universities). The minister would be advised by a 15-member committee on post-secondary education which would also monitor and review institutional policy.

While COPSE leaves the institution to set up its own internal governance "with maximum local autonomy", it also "supports increased participation of faculty and students on all levels of institutional decision-making". At the same time, the laymen on the governing bodies "should be more than groups who meet and dine and follow the wishes of the president. They still have important functions as community spokesmen and as public trustees". They should also come from various public groups, and not just big business, as is the case for most outside representatives in post-secondary institutions.

When the draft report first recommended council governing bodies, academics feared an erosion of the university's autonomy. The newer CAAT's had been set up by the government with duplicate governing bodies and a central government body to formulate policy. But the universities saw themselves as independent bodies with a long tradition of self-governance. The final report, while endorsing institutional autonomy as a means to generate diverse and creative educational opportunities, says the government has long controlled buffer bodies like the Council of Ontario Universities, but has never flexed its muscle.

"Behind the undefined authority of the advisory system lies the wholly undefined executive power of government residing in the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. The only limit on government intervention in the affairs of individual institutions is the discretion of those exercising authority on its behalf. In different circumstances, this could become restraint by political expediency."

Jack McNie, minister of colleges and universities, announced last week that his ministry was undergoing a complete reorganization. Perhaps as a prelude to future changes, the ministry is expanding from two sectors to three — college, universities and cultural affairs. The staff of 700 civil servants is being cut back and the creation of a small policy-making group and management committee are part of the shuffle.

McNie also announced plans for a new means of financing post-secondary institutions. In 1966, the province began administering funds according to student enrolment. During the boom era, this plan of formula financing based on enrolment projections kept the institutions well endowed. But now that enrolment is falling off, the method no longer works to the institution's advantage. Successive shortfalls in enrolment leave the institutions uncertain about the size of their next government pay cheque. Formula financing based

on the slip year — the previous year's enrolments — is the base of McNie's new plan. Funny enough, this is the same scheme suggested in the COPSE report — with the added suggestion that leeway be made for enrolment projections and that the institutions set their own tuition fee rates.

RESEARCH BUCK PASSED

In allocating funds, the COPSE report suggests that research and scholarship be funded as a charge on instructional costs. But for other kinds of research, "it is imperative that much of Ontario's research effort be viewed as part of a national research strategy... The federal government and its agencies should provide the necessary leadership instruments and funds to achieve nation-wide coordination in this area. But the provincial government must also establish its own research policy..."

The issue of research — what, how and for whom — is a subject of frequent debate. Academics defend their "academic freedom" while facing the threat of government intervention in research policy. But the commission has come down on the side of recent studies urging the development of a national policy. They make their case — and then turn the fight over to the federal government. The onus of a government directive on research and the fuss it's sure to create is thus removed from the provincial educational arena.

CATCH-UP PROPOSALS

Perhaps fearing too many charges of government intervention, COPSE backed down on its original stand of quotas for women students, faculty and administrators in post-secondary institutions until equity is established. The report recognizes the dual biological role of parents, and backs provision of daycare at all post-secondary institutions. For the rest, there's broad sweeping statements that discrimination should not take place — but the institutions are left to make their own plans. The only bite to such proposals is the reminder that the proposed Committee on Post-Secondary Education will monitor and review the institution yearly. The committee has no executive or administrative authority, nor any authority to force an institution to make changes.

"We thought it more realistic to ask each institution for its plans to equalize the position of women. The pressure to make the issue a priority must come from within the institution," said Reva Gerstein, a COPSE commissioner and York psychology professor.

For native peoples in Ontario, COPSE makes extensive recommendations. Extra grants should be allocated to take extension programs farther north and these programs should relate to regional needs with academic upgrading a priority, the report states. But any planning should be done in conjunction with a proposed Advisory Committee on Post-Secondary Education for Native Peoples in Ontario.

COPSE also gives special encouragement to the development of bilingual studies in Ontario. Franco-Ontarians should have access to programs of study in their mother tongue. French should be promoted through library acquisitions and the development of post-secondary French programs in all subjects. Extra funding for bilingual post-secondary institutions is mandatory says the report in the section Bilingual Balance.

REMEMBER HALL-DENNIS?

COPSE, in its attempt to be a report about people and education and not institutions, covers every conceivable combination of post-secondary living and learning — part-time, full-time, casual, recreational as a mature student, as a drop-out come back, as a member of a minority catching up. The proposals cover the whole range, but it falls to the provincial government to create some reality from the proposals. The Hall-Dennis report, Living and Learning, created much of the same excitement several years ago about primary education. Much of that report remains educational theory — will COPSE be more of the same?

