

YUFA's study document on

The executive of the York University Faculty Association appointed in January a committee to bring in an analytic study of the presidential advisory committee on rights and responsibilities in the university — the Laskin report. The executive have received it and are pleased to circulate it to the wider university community as a part of that continuing process of debate about these issues — a debate the Laskin report rightly sees as indispensable to future adoption of any principles and procedures.

We find ourselves struck by three major ambiguities or confusions in the Laskin Committee Report — problems which we believe can only perpetuate present difficulties and lead to new ones in the near future. We state these problems below, following each one with our general and then specific recommendations.

1 What is the university? The report answers this question in a number of ways. At times it is defined by its task, as seen by the committee ("a vibrant shared experience in a life devoted to intellect and imagination." Sec. 1, par. 9). Or it is characterized by its "functions of teaching or research" (3/6). At other times, the university is defined by its membership. But usage here is so inconsistent as to leave the reader with no clear impression of what the committee means. One strand in the report is prepared to identify the university, in certain contexts at least, as its administration ("the university itself" (that is, those in administrative positions)" (2/3). Another strand declares that the university is "a community of faculty and students" (1/7).

Further on, this community is described as tripartite: faculty, students and administration (3/2). It would be possible to cite the many places in which first one version, then another, is employed in describing "the university".

When combined with the committee's wise decision to refuse to build a code of conduct, these ambiguities begin to create mischief. The report takes its stand firmly against "disruption". It will not countenance protagonists of views "inimical to the values and purposes of the university itself" (1/10). But in a situation of confused definitions, who decides what constitutes disruption; and who can undertake to state, without making it "official doctrine" (1/10), what are the values and purposes of the university itself?

General recommendation

We wish to emphasize that the university is essentially a community of people engaged in learning and teaching. In using the phrase "learning and teaching" we do not mean the word learning to apply to students and the word teaching to apply to faculty. The reality is far more complex than this. Faculty and students live together in an environment in which the most important things that go on are learning and teaching; we do not specify who is doing which at any given moment.

The Laskin report states: "It is easy enough to be specific about activities which directly disrupt the university's functions of teaching or research: a strike of faculty members and a concerted refusal by students to vacate a classroom intended for others are examples" (3/6). Indeed it is easy to be specific also, about bad budgetary decisions on the part of the board of governors and the administration; bad decisions that could be expected to have disruptive consequences more far reaching and more serious than any action that either faculty or students are in a position to take.

How then are "disruptive" actions to be

defined? How is it to be established which actions are "inimical" to the values and purposes of the university?

It is easy to be specific about how disruption is not to be defined. It is not to be defined by the interests or convenience of those who are neither learners nor teachers. Such interests are at best extraneous to the process of higher education. Learning and teaching require a favourable environment to prosper. But the definition of that environment is part of the educational process itself. It is for those who teach and learn to say what is necessary for teaching and learning.

It is to be hoped that there will never be complete agreement among members of the university about all aspects of the learning environment or about specific educational purposes. For a university without controversy is dead on its feet. Commitments to conflicting viewpoints are the source of intellectual progress. Anything which prevents the free expression of these commitments is clearly inimical to the values and purposes of the university; and the university which suppresses internal controversy does so at the risk of self-destruction.

Specific recommendation

In view of the unfortunate ambiguity of the Laskin report in matters of principle we would strongly advise against YUFA participation in a university court if that court were based on sections 1 and 3 of the Laskin report. Establishment of a university court should not in general imply the acceptance of the premises on the basis of which the Laskin report recommends the institution of such a court.

2 There are two kinds of people in the university, according to the report. On the one

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