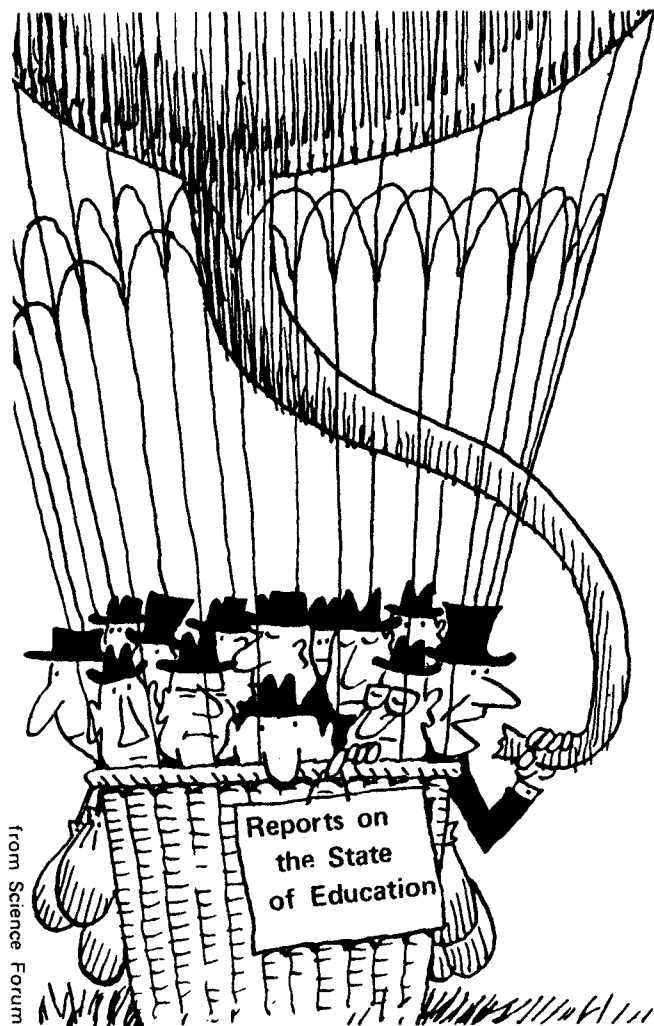


Rationalizing

the

Rationalization

of Research



from Science Forum

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Their empires slowed by fiscal restraints, academic-administrators have found a new pastime for their otherwise idle hands. It is the writing of reports on the state of education.

The latest in a long line of such reports comes from the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). The report, entitled *The Quest for the Optimum*, confines itself to the rationalization of university research.

Authored by two academic-administrators, J. A. Corry and L.P. Bonneau of Queen's and Laval Universities respectively, the report's two hundred pages are enticingly well-written and seemingly well-reasoned.

Rationalization of university research is of necessity for two reasons according to the report. (1) The strained Canadian taxpayer needs assurance of his money's worth from university research, and (2) Canada has too much basic research conducted in university (and government) as compared to other nations.

Alleviation of the taxpayer's burden by tax reform is not considered in the report. Neither is the fact that university people are taxpayers too. Nor that Ottawa's National Arts Centre cost us taxpayers \$45 million, while government's main subsidizer of university research, the National Research Council (NRC), spent only \$9 million more than this \$45 million on university research in 1971-2. The taxpayer's money's worth of the National Arts Centre is not discussed in the report either.

Evidence from the Science Council of Canada's Special Study No. 21 which contrary to widespread opinion, shows Canada's investment in basic research to be comparatively low in fact, is equally ignored.

Sixteen specific recommendations are made in the report. Included are (1) stiffer assessment of research proposals, (2) creation of a national index of on-going research, and (3) a revision of university policies for promotion and tenure.

The recommendations go well beyond the legal and moral suasion available to the AUCC, any level of government, any university, or granting agency. Implementation of these recommendations would require extensive cooperation amongst these parties and they are not used to cooperating, for how else could university research have gotten to be in need of rationalization?

Ranging from unobjectionable motherhood statements like (1) above and vague, immense suggestions like (3) above, the recommendations are those common to the present welter of reports on education in particular and national science policy in general.

Often repeated, recommendations of this kind have either attracted no adherents at all, or have failed when implemented. Even Corry-Bonneau recognize this, but offer nothing to cause belief that their report will meet a different fate. Thus the specific recommendations are in some ways the least interesting part of the report.

More interesting by far is the reasoning that led to the recommendations, the process of rationalization of the recommendations themselves.

Interesting and undeniably original in *The Quest for the Optimum*, is the elaboration of the concept of reflective research. Reflective research, when all is said and done--and that is a while, is synthetic mental work. It requires little or nothing in support, equipment, personnel or travel.

Mostly it requires a library card, inter-library loan, and some free time like evenings or Sunday mornings. It is cheap. It invigorates teaching, but it does not add to our store of knowledge, though it may throw-up questions which lead the way to knowledge in the hands of others.

A dream may do so as well and is even cheaper, but dream research is not taken up in the report, at least not in this volume number one. Reflective research is the recommended fare for most Canadian universities, doubtlessly including the University of Alberta.

Nothing is said of how excellence is to be measured so that such centres can be spotted. Indeed, it is not even clear that such centres can be spotted. Indeed, it is not even clear whether these centres are to be created by funding agencies or nurtured where they already exist or both.

In calling for an administrative and policy reorganization of research Bonneau-Corry note that the laissez-faire method by which research has operated till now has been rejected in all other departments of life. Laissez faire should therefore be rejected in research too, it is concluded.

No evidence or argument are introduced to substantiate this conclusion with respect to research. What is good enough for other activities is good enough for research seems to be the view of the authors.

There seems to be a basic ambivalence in the report. It is not clear to whom it is addressed, to those in universities or to those taxpayers outside universities. If it is addressed to the university community, then it will not be taken seriously.

While it is not a prima facie joke like Alberta's Worth Commission Report, it is not adequate to the scholastic eye. Nor would its injunctions to the university to change its ways seem strong enough to satisfy those taxpayers. If it is addressed to taxpayers, then it will also fail.

It will fail because government is not interested in the rationalization of research. It is interested in economizing. Economizing at the expense of universities is politically expedient.

The report recommends cutbacks in some areas--though always discreetly by implication--and buildups in others. Its arguments for cutbacks will be used as ammunition by governments in continuing to reduce university and research funds. Its recommendations for buildups will be duly noted and ignored. Only four years ago this was the fate of the American Coleman Report on education, which was based on the second largest social science research project ever conducted and which produced perhaps the best single topic study of education ever.

The ordinary concept of research is called "frontier research" in the report. It requires expense and must therefore be formally reserved to selected "centres of excellence" according to the report.

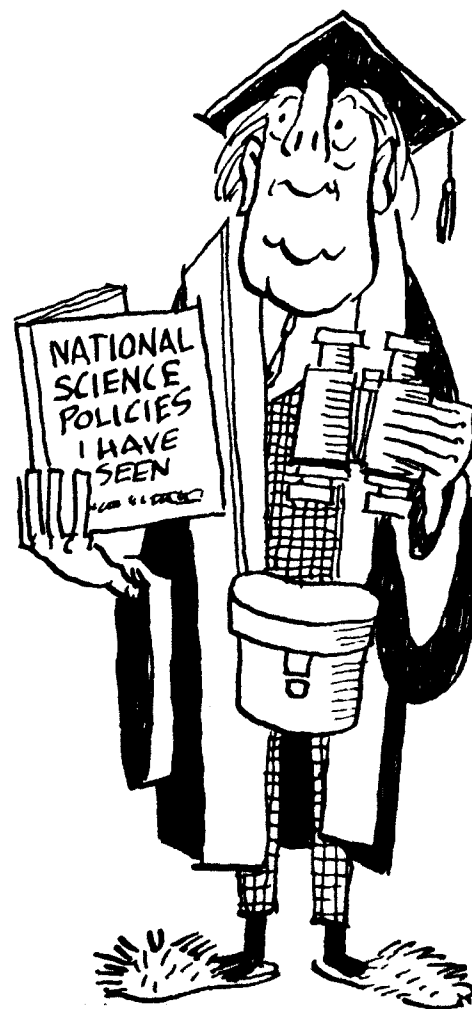
Review of the grant distribution of even the most equitable granting agency, the NRC, suggests that informally this is already the case. Excellence must be in central Canada because funds are concentrated there, even on a per capita basis.

By giving priority to multi-disciplinary and mission-oriented research, the report would further this tendency, the unit at which excellence must inevitably be determined is an entire university, not single departments. The universities with the widest range of excellence are those which are the oldest and they are in central Canada. This implication is not addressed in the report.

While Alberta's foreign-born Minister of Culture speaks of programmes to preserve our cultural heritage, he does not mention universities. Universities elsewhere have been, since the decline of the church, the major means for the preservation, transmission and creation of the very cultures from which our mosaic springs. Ironically, our own universities are passing into a hiatus at the height of a new sense of Canadian national and cultural awareness.

Zealously guarded by the Hon. Horst Schmidt, our cultural heritage does not seem to include Alberta's own history for his own Department shows little or no interest in the preservation of Rutherford House here on campus.

Corry-Bonneau hold that decisions made within universities in times of the complacency of largess are unacceptable. No less unacceptable are decisions made by government in times of the panic of financial squeeze.



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