

Teacher's organization criticizes N.S. rationalization

BY MARK REYNOLDS

The provincial government has come under fire for creating five years of turmoil, with little result, in reorganizing Nova Scotia's universities.

A report by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) condemns the Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education (NSCHE) — a body responsible to the Department of Education — for its mismanagement of rationalization.

Rationalization was an attempt to streamline the costs associated with higher education in Nova Scotia through the elimination and concentration of duplicate programs at different universities in the province.

The report took issue with both the process and the results of Nova Scotia's rationalization, particularly what it characterized as a "heavy handed, secretive and rigidly bureaucratic system".

The NSCHE was responsible for overseeing rationalization from 1992-96.

Formed by the Nova Scotia government to plan for what they saw as an integrated post-secondary education system — the goal was to take autonomous and individual universities and make them a functioning, cooperative whole.

Designed as a sub-group of a Maritime-wide advisory body on higher education, the council did not have executive authority over individual universities in the province.

In 1990, the province's university presidents were asked to determine the course of rationalization without direction from the NSCHE. The programs to be rationalized included faculties of education, computer science and Halifax's business schools.

The universities attempted to achieve rationalization, but could not meet their self-imposed deadline. As a result, the process was taken out of their hands in 1992 and handed over directly to the NSCHE.

The NSCHE faced institutional and departmental rivalries while trying to rationalize. As a result, over the past five years there was a loss of faith in the council's abilities to complete the task and faculties requested that CAUT investigate the process of rationalization.

"Things are so big and so complicated...there is an appearance of activity...but the results were simple," said Gerald Clarke, chair of the CAUT commission that wrote the report.

After five years of what Clarke terms "the paper blizzard", the changes made to university landscape in Nova Scotia look essentially the same as those proposed by the universities themselves five years earlier.

"There was chaos, they [NSCHE] really were in chaos for half a decade, and what happened? The results had been on the table in 1992," said Clarke.

The commission's report has agitated those involved in the rationalization process.

"I think it was a very shoddy, one-sided analysis," said David Cameron, interim president of the Maritime Provinces Council on Higher Education.

Cameron pointed out that the commission did not speak to either Janet Halliwell, chair of the NSCHE during the rationalization process, or the Nova Scotia Department of Education before publishing its report.

"I basically felt that [the commission's] methodology was seriously flawed," said Cameron. "I thought that they had a more subtle agenda...there had to be something underlying this that just never came out."

Clarke defended the commission's decision not to contact Halliwell, saying that she made it abundantly clear that she would not participate in the report.

"The conclusions are drawn from what we could obtain," said Clark, "with regard to Janet Halliwell, she refused to participate...she questioned our right to exist."

Peter Rans, senior policy advisor to the NSCHE has a different interpretation of events.

"Janet Halliwell wrote and asked what the purpose [of the commission] was and what process would be followed, and those reasonable questions were never answered, and therefore [NSCHE] and the government did not participate in the inquiry...the conclusions are neither legitimate or fair," said Rans. "We don't feel that there is any point in commenting on the conclusions."

Halliwell could not be reached for comment, but has already made her opinion of the report clear.

"The CAUT process itself exhibits...lack of due process, coherence and integrity," Halliwell wrote in a response to the report.

In retaliation, Clarke said that it was Halliwell and her commission that ignored due process in the course of rationalization.

"Statements that came from stakeholders in public documents [regarding specific university programs] were all very positive. Criticisms in council documents came from private conversations. The stakeholders spoke differently in private than they did in public," said Clarke.

The report also criticizes the NSCHE and its Cowan Report that

dealt with faculty displacement.

"We felt the Cowan Report scared people, stampeded them...people retired and took buy-outs because they didn't know the future," said Clarke.

The Commission also found that there was no real evidence of savings through rationalization.

"The whole exercise began as a way to save money...nobody knows how much was saved...no one knows if we saved a penny," said Clarke.

He points out that there were costs to the process that weren't calculated.

"[The NSCHE didn't] account for duplication [among affiliated programs], and opportunity cost."

Opportunity cost is the amount of time professors and administration devoted to rationalization, time they might have been spent on research and teaching.

The report's findings also demonstrate that Nova Scotia universities

need more than excellent academics to preserve their programs — they need the "strong, politically astute and active representation in both Ottawa and the provincial capitals," that can effectively lobby political leaders to save their programs.

When programs were threatened at the education departments of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and St. Francis Xavier University, it was political involvement, not good programs that saved them.

"They went on the streets and in the backroom and that counts. I don't want to say that they were not good, but having a good program was not enough" said Clarke.

Highlights of the Canadian Association University Teachers' report conclusions:

1. University officials made a "serious mistake" in not taking the chance they had in 1992 to undertake the rationalization themselves.

2. NSCHE exercised a "heavy hand" over the rationalization process, exercising a "top down management process" with overly short time-lines.

3. NSCHE has taken a persistently negative tone in referring to Nova Scotia's universities, often with little or no documentation to justify these comments.

4. The rationalization process was often filled with confusion over whether decisions on programs were made on merit, or political fallout, as exemplified in the manner the decision to save the St. Francis Xavier education program was made.

5. There is altogether too little information on how much money has actually been saved. The report recommends a public accounting of such savings in any future rationalization program.

6. Faculty displaced by the closing education departments were "stampeded" into accepting early retirement packages because of a lack of secure employment in the new combined faculties at Acadia and Mount Saint Vincent's Universities.

7. The NSCHE rationalization had the effect of eliminating public discourse from the process. The CAUT concluded that the process, which was intended to be rational, was essentially political.

8. Any minister who wants amalgamation of any two institutions should say so directly, so it can be debated in legislature and in public forums.

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