

# The worst times for Nova Scotia's universities

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Dalhousie University's Arts and Administration building stands at the end of Halifax's University Avenue like a sentinel—its enduring columns representative of an earlier time when education was seen as a priority and a symbol of Nova Scotia's faith in its future. It now rises up above the rest of the sprawling campus on a small hill, witnessing the struggles of one of Canada's oldest educational institutions.

Down the hill the university's student union building is crowded to capacity with the lunch crowd. The cleaners do their best to cope with the pools of water developing in the foyer from the melting snow tracked in on the shoes of students.

Long line-ups wrap around the cafeteria while a P.A. system asks students who have finished their lunch to leave the cafeteria to make room for others.

Like Nova Scotia's other institutions, Dalhousie is filling up with the refugees of a poor economy—people who would rather be in school than be out on the street collecting unemployment cheques.

Over the past four years enrolments in the Maritimes have increased by 25%, or by 8,000 full-time students.

Conversely, funding has not only failed to keep up with this surge in enrollment, but it has actually decreased by 15% after inflation has been taken into account.

The disparity between rising enrolments and decreasing funds has created a delicate situation on the campuses.

Administrators, together with a host of internal committees, battle it out in the quest for sustenance funding. When the money's scarce it's inevitable that somebody is going to get hurt.

The cuts are usually politically calculated and take place in budget-line items that are less physically tangible. Rather than cut a particular department, universities have opted for less visible cuts—slightly larger class sizes, less acquisitions for the library, and slower replacement of technological equipment.

The other option to cutting the university's tools has been to seek alternative non-governmental funding. There are two sources of non-governmental funding—tuition fees and private sector contracting and donations.

But considering governmental funding makes up over 80% of university funding in the Maritimes, massive increases in tuition fees and private sector funding would only amount to a drop in the bucket.

So the battle for governmental funding is a crucial one for the survival of post secondary education in the region. The difference of a percentage point in funding is critical.

In 1974 the Council of Maritime

Premiers created an advisory body to recommend realistic levels of funding for universities in the three provinces.

The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) is made up of five representatives each from government, business, and the universities.

Its annual recommendations are usually made in late January and go to the Council of Maritime Premiers who respond two months later.

For the first few years of the MPHEC's life the recommendations were generally accepted by government, although they weren't always considered to be substantial enough to maintain a healthy post secondary education system.

Then the latest economic crunch hit. Although New Brunswick and PEI continued to respect MPHEC's recommendations, Nova Scotia—which maintains the lion's share of institutions—did not.

John Terry, chair of the MPHEC, said that despite this the commission has maintained its credibility.

"Government has to take our recommendation and consider it in the light of other responsibilities—health, housing, transportation, highways, social welfare—the only difference is that the commission's report is made public whereas departmental budgets are not," said Terry. "Other departments may be equally cutback."

"I'd say our recommendation is as objective as it can be," said Terry.

This January the commission recommended an overall increase in funding for the region of 7.5% for 1984-85. The Association of Atlantic Universities had earlier called for an 11.9% increase.

Despite the difference between the two recommendations most university presidents said they could work with the MPHEC's recommended level of funding.

St. Mary's University president Kenneth Ozmon said the difference between the two recommendations is a result of the universities taking into account the underfunding in the past, whereas the MPHEC has based its recommendations on sustenance at the previous year's level.

Nevertheless Ozmon said St. Mary's could "keep its head above water" should the MPHEC recommendations be followed.

But that's where the problem lies.

Two days after the release of the MPHEC report Nova Scotian education minister Terence Donahoe stated that the universities can expect to receive considerably less.

In an interview with the Halifax *Chronicle-Herald* Donahoe said when items not covered by the MPHEC are worked in, "they are really recommending close to 9.6 per cent."



## DEATH BY DEGREE

"As I have said and as the premier has said to many organizations, we're unfortunately not living in a 9.6 per cent world anymore. We're in a four, five, or maybe six per cent world."

For the universities that means big trouble.

"I don't see how we can do other than retrench on that kind of die," said Ozmon. "It means a further squeeze on facilities, crowded classrooms, profs teaching more, longer lines—how long can you do that, be efficient, and maintain staff morale?"

Dalhousie president Andrew MacKay echoes Ozmon's concerns.

"I think if the MPHEC's recommendations could be accepted by government we'd be able to sustain and be a little better off. It wouldn't do a great deal in moving us forward to have students working with the most up to date equipment," he says.

"An increase of only 4-5 per cent would mean very severe restraints for Dalhousie. It means we won't be replacing a number of people who are leaving. It means no money for equipment and renovations. It means larger classrooms."

Limited enrolments could mean that qualified students may be denied an education of their choice.

The province's post secondary institutions are already choked with students and are going to have difficulty accommodating a projected further increase in enrollment of 6.5% next year.

"St. Mary's has just about reached the limit of students we can accommodate," said Ozmon. "We've talked about limiting enrollment, but we're reluctant to do it."

At the University College of Cape Breton, president William Reid is going to have trouble cramming in an expected increase enrollment of 25% in facilities that already are jammed full.

UCCB is in a particularly difficult position. Having changed from college to university-college status two years ago, it is experiencing rapid growth but not receiving corresponding funding. Over the past three years UCCB's enrollment has expanded by 70%.

The overcrowding is noticeable in the school's cafeteria, where long line-ups exist and temporary tables are wheeled out and placed in the corridors to accommodate the lunch time crush.

"Our classes are filled to 90 per cent capacity every hour of the day," said Reid. "To accommodate more we'd have to start looking at scheduling classes on Saturdays—and that wouldn't be very popular, would it?"

This is the first time in four years that the MPHEC has recommended an increase in funding to cope with the huge increases in enrollments. But the increase—likely to be lost in Nova Scotia—is only 2 per cent.

The MPHEC has been reluctant to budget for enrollment increases because it has been expecting enrolments to decrease for some time now. Economic conditions coupled with a rapidly changing technology has artificially propped up figures beyond normal enrollment patterns. A lot of students are returning from the work force to upgrade skills in an extremely competitive job market.

Hard times are also beginning to change the nature of the Maritime universities themselves. Students have been shifting away from the traditional academic core of arts and sciences into more expensive job-oriented programmes.

While arts and sciences have declined in enrollment by 26 and 15 per cent respectively since 1975-76, engineering has increased by 75% and business administration by 72%. Computer science expanded from 186 students in 1975 to 1,246 students in 1982.

Since 1974, 180 new programmes have either been introduced, modified or adapted in the universities. Of these new programmes, about 40% represent new programmes that are for the most part professional or job skills oriented.

These programmes have been funded through the reallocation of resources in the universities.

Ozmon said he was a bit disturbed by this element of the MPHEC's report.

"I would have preferred that they would have underscored that arts and sciences are the base of all of this," said Ozmon.

John Terry, MPHEC chair, said the universities are just responding to pressures from the students.

"Students are responding to what they see as opportunities for them," he said. "That's freedom of choice."

Unfortunately the channelling of students into job-oriented programmes by hard times creates the danger of a rigidly trained society that lacks the adaptability a broader academic background has to offer.

Robert Evans, an "executive headhunter" stated in an October 1982 article in *Toronto Life*; "those who opt for job training rather than a basic university education are actually running the greatest risks, not only because our projections of what jobs will be in demand in the future are notoriously wrong, but the pace of industrial change virtually guarantees

they will have to retrain themselves in the future regardless of what happens."

Some analysts predict university grads will have to retrain themselves as many as five times during their lifetime.

Funding cutbacks don't offer the universities many options for survival. If Nova Scotia's universities receive only 4-5 per cent in operating grants from the government students could be faced with a world that for them exceeds 6 and 5 guidelines.

"It's too early to say what tuition fees will be next year," said Dalhousie's Mackay, but if government grants do not exceed 4 or 5 per cent "I will be urging that fees will be increasing more than what the MPHEC is recommending. That could be 10-12 per cent."

"I wonder if we haven't reached a limit in using tuition as a buffer against cutbacks," said Ozmon.

Nova Scotia has the highest tuition fees in the country. The MPHEC recommends they rise by 5.5 per cent.

"It's inevitable that more of our funding is going to have to be found in the private sector," says Mackay.

But private sector funding has always played a minimal role in Canadian university funding. Unlike schools in the U.S. which receive on average 20 per cent of their funding from alumni alone, Canadian schools just don't have a history of private sector funding.

By comparison, the University of Toronto received a total of \$1.4 million from alumni in 1981—a token sum in a \$300 million budget.

Private sector funding in Canada will most likely take the form of direct university ties to business and industry—further endangering the autonomy of post secondary institutions.

"I think the system has been irreparably harmed," said Dalhousie student union president Tim Hill. "We're going to see damage that's going to take many years to repair."

Hill believes the MPHEC has an important role to play, but is being undermined by the Nova Scotia government.

"I'm not questioning the abilities of Mr. Terry, but if I was the chair of the MPHEC I would have resigned a long time ago. The government has no confidence in it," said Hill.

"Why have the bloody thing if you're going to be arbitrary in setting fund levels?"

"Our universities are going to be denuded of scholars. The best ones are not going to be in Nova Scotia," said Hill.

The question is, with underfunding of universities a national problem—where do the students go?

A tourist bus slowly makes its way through the Dalhousie campus. It looks out of place—like a guided tour through the remains of a battlefield. Some of the soldiers are still out there kicking and screaming, but for the most part, in Nova Scotia the universities are resigned to their slow demise.