

Leadership necessary for educational development

By BILL SANDERSON

The OECD Examiners Report on education in Canada is a noteworthy event.

Not just because it is a comprehensive report on the Canadian educational system but because it is an independent evaluation by unbiased examiners.

The OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) undertook this study at the request of the Canadian government. They appointed five examiners, one each from Norway, Belgium, France, Germany and the U.S.

The report was prepared in late 1974 to early 1975 and no one seemed to know that it existed until November of 1975 when a member of a concerned citizens group got a copy of it. From there student groups got copies and there are now copies available at most universities and in most school districts.

In writing the report the examiners took into account historical, geographic, constitutional, linguistic and cultural elements. On the basis of these unique conditions, the examiners' felt that Canadian education policy is one of the least politicized in the world. "Reforms in education are almost totally pragmatic or so generally conceived and relying so heavily on US, British and French models, more or less adapted to Canadian conditions, that the opportunity for party political conflict is, for all practical purposes, excluded."

The major fault of the report is that they rely almost entirely on statistical evidence to prove the growth of Canadian education. Other than this the report is very accurate. The statistics show a real growth of expenditure of 50 percent per student while the system accommodated 50 percent more students.

While the qualitative increase in education is by far greatest in Quebec, there has been a general increase in the quality of education in all provinces and territories. The most important aspect of this increase is the systematic increase and build up of a public comprehensive school system in all areas.

Furthermore:
"There follows upon this comprehensive system an intricately developed post secondary sector, to which is attached a multitude of special provisions for adult education, continuing education, life-long learning, and so forth."

"There are also many opportunities for adult education outside the limits of the formal post-secondary education system. Thus, the most impressive aspect of educational organization in Canada - and this is common to all provinces - is the high participation rate in the system. The completion of 12 years of schooling is a normal expectation and the opportunity for education after this level is quite widely used. Formal hindrances to educational access are limited (relative to other countries), yet the existence of certain restrictions upon access to given universities helps maintain a noticeable institutional pecking order, which serves as a selection mechanism. The examiners' impression is that this phenomenon is somewhat less marked in the western provinces. Probably the system of aid to students in higher

education is sufficient to prevent economic considerations from stopping students motivated for education at this level. The lack of financial aid at the secondary level, may, however, prevent a few from reaching higher education."

The examiners note that the greatest and most expensive achievements have been at the post-secondary level. "The scale of post-secondary provision signifies the massive commitment being made to the educational base of an open, democratic society - a commitment that goes well beyond that of most other OECD member countries."

The provinces seem to have been successful in their efforts to limit federal involvement in higher education and it appears unlikely that they will yield anything on this point in the future. Before 1967 the federal government gave grants directly to the institutions involved; now the money is handled by the provincial treasuries, federal monies are still granted, however, for research

The weightings built into the formulae for financing is having considerable effect on institutional decisions. While the formulae offer good inducements for expansion, expansion is being rigidly controlled into certain area and directions. Although the sharpness of controls is limited by such bodies as the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission. The examiners feel that,

"Universities may not be too trustworthy in their definitions of what 'quality' in education should be . . . they are probably better at this than officialdom at the provincial level." "Reasonable controls over the general financial level of each institution and some direction in terms of capital investments should be quite sufficient . . ." as far as a provincial policy.

Most provinces have set Higher Education Commissions to deal with the intricate problems of financing and organization. Other forms of inter-university co-operation include conference groups such as CAUT and AUCC. Good beginnings in inter-provincial co-operation have started with the MPHEC. These efforts point to a need for inter-university cooperation, but do not seem to achieve what is necessary. Universities and regional organizations tend to avoid controversial matters. It is of note to see that membership in AUCC is dropping, primarily because such organizations are ignored by the authorities in making decisions which affect the member institutions.

"The universities have so far not succeeded in defining unambiguously their joint and common role in society, and making clear and persuasive their case for a particular degree of institutional autonomy and an unchallenged claim on societies resources. Canadian universities and their costs have been exposed to a growing level of criticism. To a degree that these attacks are justified, they need to be opposed collectively with all necessary firmness and determination. This requires a strengthened co-operation and solidarity among the universities, and at all levels."

"The most serious aspect of the tendency to tighten access to the universities may be the abandoning of efforts by the universities to reach new, and usually less-privi-

leged, groups."

Now that the boom conditions of the 1960's is over universities are taking a hard look at enrolment and financing. All financing formulae are now under reconsideration by both federal and provincial governments. It is hoped that the discussions now being held between the two levels of government will result in increased cooperation and communication.

"These discussions ought, though, be more than this. It is to be hoped that the opportunity will be taken to think through the advantages and disadvantages of the present system of providing the federal funds that eventually go to support university operations in the provinces. At present, entitlement to funds from Ottawa are calculated as a percentage (50 percent) of the expenditures in each province on higher education, though there is a somewhat transparent convention that these federal subsidies are not transfers for higher education. They are supposed to disappear into each province's treasury, where they commingle with other funds, and emerge in some way 'provincialised' and no longer distinguishable as federal funds. All this harmless enough - except that it has the unfortunate effect that, while the provinces relate to the federal government financially, this form of relationship has not included a careful and systematic co-ordination by the provinces of their higher education plans. This was never in Canada a very strongly developed approach, but the examiners' view, it would be unfortunate if present discussion about the extension of the 1967 Federal subsidy arrangements simply confined themselves to bargaining over the exact percentage to be fixed to the cost-sharing formula, and did not grasp the necessity to establish ways of defining and co-ordinating provincial, federal, and national interests and policies in higher education."

"The demand for greater economy and more 'rationaliza-

tion' in the operation of universities is understandable in times of financial stringency. But one has to proceed carefully here, 'efficiency' versus 'quality' are not helpful alternatives for universities. The leading principle of the academic university is variety and complexity, not the isolation of specialized disciplines . . . It would be especially unfortunate if financial constraints were used as an excuse for not pushing ahead vigorously with the development of bilingual training programmes and course offerings in the minority language."

While the examiners are pleased with the progress in the availability of graduate programs they are concerned with the prospect of employment of new graduates. Over 35 percent of university teachers in Canada are non-Canadian and it is not expected that that percentage will decrease in any significant amount. Thus the prospect for new doctoral graduates have in regards to employment in teaching positions at universities looks bleak, except in a few areas, i.e., nursing, law, and architecture.

The strength of the community colleges lies in their accessibility and adaptability.

"Three stages in the effort to realize equality of education opportunity are seen. The first is free access to all schools in a locality. When this does not work the second stage of remedial measures through compensatory education is attempted, with emphasis on pre-school education, introduction of practice-oriented courses and changed methods of teaching. When this does not eliminate disadvantage and inequality of opportunity there is a third stage of attempting to overcome important external causes for school failure by providing within the school social, health and welfare measures. There is the recognition that the right of educational opportunity should be a life-long, recurring principle. The precondition for this policy is an open educational

system, that has eliminated institutions and curricula that are dead-ends. It is a system that avoids writing children off as failures and encourages 'drop-ins' at all post-compulsory ages."

There are practices which might hinder equality in educational matters. These include two and one half hour kindergartens; insufficient early recognition of learning disabilities; tendencies to specialize and divide the responsibility for education among a group of people who do not work well together; the 'supermarket' approach to high school learning; the inadequate quality of practical and vocational courses which eliminate them as alternatives to academic programs; and the failure to conceive of composite high schools as closely integrating technical and humanistic materials."


While the principle of flexibility of program is much valued in Canada the examiners find that this principle may be nothing more than slogans to cover up the devotion of the best teaching programs to the most gifted pupils.

The examiners praise the growth of education and educational opportunity in Canada but they point out specific areas of difficulty. One of the major problems with education in Canada is the lack of involvement of parents, students, and community interest groups in the decision-making process. The second and most important problem is the need for a national policy for education. "If those responsible for educational policy are not promptly able to base to development of schools and education on a firm goal-oriented footing, then they risk being pushed aside in the general political competition for resources. Without political leadership and responsibility - and after all neither of these is forbidden under the BNA Act - a severe backlash against future educational development in Canada may be unavoidable."

Copies of the OECD Examiners' report can be obtained, for \$0.4 from:
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