

Post-Secondary Education Review: ANSUT's Position

Post-Secondary Education in Nova Scotia is currently under review by Dr Tim O'Neill, who has been commissioned by the provincial government to undertake the task. The text of ANSUT's brief to Dr O'Neill is provided below.

Preamble

As the provincial government has recognized, with its initiative to promote Nova Scotia as Canada's University Capital, universities are critical to the economic and social development of the province. Nova Scotia's universities contribute over \$1 billion to the province's economy, and provide 7,500 direct and 17,500 indirect jobs. As well, the post-secondary sector contributes 60% of Nova Scotia's Research and Development, twice the national average — while the fact that Nova Scotia is a net importer of university students, despite tuition fees that until very recently were the highest in Canada, is an indicator of the attractiveness and quality of the education provided.

As the percentage of jobs requiring a post-secondary education continues to increase, it is clear that the role of universities in promoting the province's economic and social development is becoming increasingly crucial, and any initiatives to further strengthen the system are to be welcomed. Nevertheless, while the present government's desire to promote post-secondary education is laudable, it is the case that the system as a whole has suffered from the consequences of long term under-funding. By way of illustration, in the fiscal year ending 2008 provincial government funding comprised only 42% of total university revenues, compared to a Canada-wide average of 57% — which renders the achievements of Nova Scotia's university system over the past two decades all the more remarkable.

Part of the problem, of course, stems from the inequity of the federal transfer formula, which is based on the province's population, rather than the number of students it actually educates — and this is an issue which is clearly beyond the mandate of the present review to address. Nonetheless, when one examines the extent to which other provinces took measures to at least mitigate the consequences to post-secondary education of the cuts in federal transfer payments during the 1990s, it is hard not to conclude that for an extended period of time the contribution of the post-secondary sector to the province's economic and social development has been under-appreciated. If the present government has a genuine commitment to strengthening the province's university system, then this will necessitate a significant reinvestment in post-secondary education.

Key Issues

In relation to the main themes or issues identified in the material provided by Dr O'Neill to the university presidents, we would note the following:

Unique attributes of the individual institutions

While the university presidents have been asked to provide feedback on the attributes of their specific institutions, ANSUT (representing as it does faculty at the majority of them) wishes to focus rather on the unique attributes of the system as a whole.

In the document provided to the presidents, there is reference under this heading to a range of alternatives for restructuring the university system, from “enhanced program co-operation” to “a reduction in the number of institutions”. ANSUT believes that enhanced co-operation between the various institutions would be to the benefit of all of them — although it must be said that the extent of the co-operation that already exists is often under-estimated. However, ANSUT questions the assumption that there are gains in efficiency or significant cost-savings to be achieved by the amalgamation or merger of institutions.

This approach has been explored before, of course, in the reviews of post-secondary education conducted in the early 1980s and mid-1990s — yet while the latter did result in changes such as the absorption of TUNS into Dalhousie, and the consolidation of Education programs at Acadia, Mount Saint Vincent, St Francis Xavier, and Sainte-Anne, it would be hard to argue that either the quality or cost-effectiveness of the system has been measurably enhanced as a result.

What is certain, however, is that to continue pursuing such initiatives is to risk jeopardizing one of the principal merits of the current university system, namely, the variety of university experiences it offers. What is unique in Nova Scotia is the extent of the choice available to students — not merely choice between different institutional cultures, but between universities with distinct program mixes, and often distinctive approaches to curriculum, even in traditional disciplines. To further reduce the number of institutions would be to sacrifice one of the unique attributes of the Nova Scotian university education experience, to the detriment of our national competitive advantage — which the present government has declared it wishes to promote.

This is not to say that there might not be merit in examining the necessity for the sheer number of academic administrators at some institutions. Several member associations have complained of the proliferation of senior administrators beyond what would seem required by the size of the institution — but this could be quite simply addressed by establishing consistent and transparent reporting procedures for Nova Scotian universities, with mechanisms to ensure that an appropriate percentage of the operating budget be devoted to instruction. By contrast, it is hard to see that there is much to be gained by replacing several small bureaucracies by one or more larger ones — or indeed that there is any evidence to suggest that large bureaucracies are *ipso facto* more efficient than small ones — while the damage to the quality of education is likely to be out of all proportion to whatever savings, real or imagined, might accrue.

Systemic constraints or advantages

As enrolments have become more unpredictable, and the traditional university-age population has declined, Nova Scotia’s universities have become more competitive with each other, each striving for a piece of the “market”, rather than collectively offering a service. Yet while we are encouraged to view competition as a good thing, in this particular context it is by no means an unmixed blessing. Certainly expenditures on advertising campaigns aimed at in-province

students have increased significantly in recent years, which in light of the funding challenges outlined above may not represent the most efficient use of financial resources. ANSUT believes that the necessity for at least some of this expenditure might be obviated by the institution of a common applications and admissions system, akin to that operating in Ontario, and also by taking steps to make it easier for students to register for courses at sister institutions.

As well, given the government's commitment to promoting Nova Scotia's post-secondary education system nation-wide, greater co-operation in recruitment initiatives should be encouraged. Here there is real potential for greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness, given that the diversity and choice available is one of the distinctive features of Nova Scotia's universities. A common recruitment strategy, both nationally and internationally, promoting the virtues of the system as a whole, is likely to prove more effective than a series of initiatives by individual universities. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that the experience of countries such as Australia suggests that excessive reliance on international recruitment as a source of revenue has the potential to cause more problems than it solves, given the extent of the resources required to provide sufficient support mechanisms to enable international students to obtain an adequate quality of education.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the extent of the co-operation between institutions that already exists. At the administrative level, there has been the institution of Interuniversity Services Inc., which takes advantage of the economies of scale provided by common purchasing — while on the academic side, the creation of the Novanet Library system, making it possible to borrow and return books easily and quickly among member libraries, has created what is effectively one library, larger than that of any single institution.

More recently, there has been the establishment of a doctoral program in Education, jointly administered by Acadia, Mount Saint Vincent, and St Francis Xavier — while still more recently Mount Saint Vincent and Saint Mary's have signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a Master's program in Applied Science. As well, faculty from Mount Saint Vincent and Saint Mary's routinely serve as Adjunct Professors in a range of Graduate programs at Dalhousie. Collaborative ventures that maximize the effective use of resources, without compromising the distinctiveness and academic integrity of individual institutions, are in fact one of the strengths of the present system.

Potential policy changes

Policies designed to encourage further co-operation between institutions as outlined above are to be encouraged to the extent that they make the admissions and registration process simpler and more user-friendly for students. Likewise, common strategies for promoting the merits of Nova Scotia's post-secondary education system are likely to prove more effective than a range of competing initiatives on the part of individual institutions. Mechanisms to ensure consistent and transparent financial reporting would provide reliable measures of cost-effectiveness.

Quality/performance measurement

The belief that more widespread application of performance indicators actually improves the quality of education, to the extent that they can act as a substitute for the provision of adequate funding, has become increasingly widespread in recent years. In reality, the effect of such initiatives can often prove counter-productive — witness the case of the United Kingdom, where the amount of time devoted by academics to either reviewing programs, or preparing programs to be reviewed has had a significant adverse impact on the amount of time devoted to the actual business of teaching and research being reviewed.

It is important to note that there is already in place a system for the regular review of programs by external adjudicators — namely, that provided by the MPHEC, which provides quality assurance together with safeguards against the unnecessary duplication of programs, not merely in Nova Scotia, but throughout the region. The MPHEC also collects data on enrolment and retention. Yet while ANSUT shares the government's commitment to ensuring that the quality of post-secondary education is maintained, it is important to note that many results of a university education are intangible and difficult to measure: university-educated women and men not only enjoy significantly higher income levels than the average (which means that their contribution to government tax revenues is also greater), but they make a contribution to the citizenship and culture of their province that is impossible to quantify.

In any event, to return to the point noted in the preamble, the fact that not even tuition fees considerably in excess of the national average have prevented Nova Scotia remaining a net importer of students is yet another indicator of the quality of the education its universities provide.