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Disadvantage New Brunswick

**An assessment of the Report of the Commission on Post Secondary Education
from the Association of University of New Brunswick Teachers (AUNBT)**

The Report

When the Commission on Post-Secondary Education (CPSE) in New Brunswick finally released its much-leaked report on September 14, one of the Commissioners stressed repeatedly that acceptance of its recommendations was an "all or nothing" proposition. They advised Premier Shawn Graham of the same in their letter transmitting the report. They also urged readers, before reacting, to spend "time understanding the dynamics and relevance of the issues raised".

Having done so, AUNBT concludes that the recommendations of the CPSE are so flawed that we must urge the government of New Brunswick to reject the report in the main. Like UNB, we favour change in higher education but the change proposed by this report would betray the interests of New Brunswick and its citizens.

"The report is misleading and contradictory" notes AUNBT President Dr. Saba Mattar. For example, it claims to give "first priority" to the needs of students (p. 1); yet it recommends that institutions be free to raise tuition as they see fit (pp. 37, 49) and that university education in some communities be replaced by polytechnic training (pp. 16-22). It suggests that the proposed "New Brunswick polytechnics" will be comparable to "MIT" and "Caltech" (pp. 17-18); yet these are among the world's premiere universities with programs in the humanities and social sciences, as well as science and engineering, and their faculty members have full academic freedom. It urges the province to "expand its productivity in graduate education and research" (p. 28); yet it recommends a radical reduction in the size and capacity of UNB (pp. 19, 20, 24), New Brunswick's main generator of research, technology transfer and graduates with higher degrees.

The Commissioners appear hostile towards collegial governance and propose downgrading the university senates, from academic governing bodies to mere advisory councils. This governance recommendation would reduce the New Brunswick universities to the level of academic outcast, in the eyes of national accrediting bodies, such as the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. It is preposterous to suppose that qualified scholars can be recruited to offset the projected wave of retirements at institutions whose standards of collegial governance and academic freedom do not meet those prevailing in all other provinces.

Academic freedom, the defining characteristic of university research and teaching, is nowhere mentioned. It is well known that academic freedom is in short supply in community colleges and the type of polytechnics that the report recommends. Notoriously, teachers and administrators at NB community colleges are now under a gag-order, prohibiting them from commenting on the PSE report (editorial, Telegraph-Journal, 22 Sept. 2007).

Dr. Mattar observes that the language of the report obscures an underlying agenda: to make an already-underfunded PSE system cheaper in the long term (after a three-year transition period); and to channel many students away from university education programs into "just in time" technical training programs to satisfy short-term labour market needs.

The PSE Commissioners recommend extinction for UNB Saint John. Then some combination of the remains, together with a community college, would be fashioned into an institution offering programs to train workers for industry. Whatever this new entity might be called, it would bear little resemblance to the full-service offerings of the current UNBSJ. Disingenuously, the Commission that recommends that UNBSJ be destroyed does not say in what way it has failed in its mission or why that mission was not worth pursuing. What is the problem for which destruction of UNBSJ is the solution? How will the Saint John region be better off if students who want to attend a real university are forced to leave to do so? How would teachers and researchers of reputation, or students anxious to earn a *credible* degree, be lured to this new institute that would offer far less than is available currently. The Commission does not say.

The Commission's recommendations regarding the funding formula and performance criteria, together with the extinction of UNBSJ, would mean that UNB would no longer have any claim to be a national,

comprehensive university. Their recommendations would have radically adverse consequences for the remaining university's operating budget and could jeopardize nationally-accredited degree programs on the Fredericton campus. To diminish the province's flagship university is to harm all New Brunswickers. We would join Prince Edward Island as the only provinces without a significant research institution.

Aggrandizing its vision, the CPSE compares itself to the Deutsch Commission (pp. 1, 16). The 1962 Deutsch report was central to the vision of Premier Louis-J. Robichaud - that all citizens should have equal opportunity to participate fully in society. If implemented, the 2007 Report's recommendations would erode the advances of the last forty years in education and research. The consequence for the province would be an erosion in equality of opportunity generally.

Solutions to actual problems

In spite of the report's claims to having been driven by the demands for an evidence based approach (Letter of transmittal) there is none provided for the trumped up problems or their spurious solutions. Chief among these is the proposition that it is somehow in interest of the province and its students to remove from communities universities which offer a range of certificates, diplomas and degrees leading to gainful employment.

It lies well within the power of this government to reform and strengthen, rather than degrade, post-secondary education in New Brunswick. Here are the key problems and some feasible solutions.

1. Address Underfunding

By the report's account, "New Brunswick currently spends the second lowest amount of all the provinces in transfers to universities."(p. 40) Converting the \$50 million one-time cash infusion, as the report proposes into a permanent addition to base PSE operating funding, would help in addressing this problem significantly.

The province should also institute scholarship and bursary programs for undergraduate and graduate students that are at least as robust as the Canadian average.

2. Provide Matching Grants for Research and Graduate Training

The province should provide matching funding for all research grants awarded to New Brunswick scholars by Canadian research funding agencies using peer-review adjudication of applications, and for all postgraduate scholarships awarded by the federal granting councils to students who choose to study in this province.

The province should abandon the notion (adhered to by the New Brunswick Innovation Fund and endorsed by the PSEC) that it can 'pick winners'. The PSEC report makes it clear that its authors have neither an understanding nor an appreciation of modern research and its interdisciplinary character.

3. Give Community Colleges Independence

The Community College system in New Brunswick should be removed from direct government control. Unlike its counterparts in every other province, NBCC is a division of government under the jurisdiction of the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour. If given the opportunity and funding to do so, the NBCC system could grow and develop in ways that could meet the needs of the citizens of this province to a greater extent than they are currently able.

4. Encourage Cooperation Between Institutions

The government should institute cash and other incentive programs to encourage further cooperation between universities, and between universities and community colleges.

5. Work with the Universities

The government should work with the universities to bring about change which will strengthen New Brunswick post secondary education.

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