

Comments on the PSE Report
by the
Association of University of New Brunswick Teachers (AUNBT)

GENERAL CONCERNS ABOUT THE REPORT

We agree with the government that post-secondary education is of crucial importance to the future of New Brunswick. In order to fulfil its tremendous promise, our degrees, diplomas and training certificates must meet national standards. We need people who can attest to the reliability or safety of goods we produce or services we provide. In order to attract grants or contracts from outside, or inside the province, the work of our researchers must meet international peer-review standards. This is what UNB has done for many decades and will continue to do if, and only if, the recommendations of the PSE commission are rejected.

The Commission's Report proposes that the province and its citizens undertake a radical experiment. The Report presented no evidence to justify such an experiment, proposed no pilot projects (the Commissioners advised the Premier to take an all-or-nothing approach) to test it, and cited no genuine precedents for such a transformation elsewhere in Canada. Recommendations in the report, if implemented, would destroy much of the province's capacity for research and development, and debase the coin of its educational standards.

KEY SPECIFIC CONCERNS

1. UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

a) University status is contingent upon having a nationally recognized governance model. The senate of a university is the most important link in the extensive array of quality control measures in university systems across Canada. In the absence of a senate with authority, degrees will be discredited.

The Report recommends that the current role of university senates over academic matters become merely advisory to Presidents. This recommendation disregards the fact that, in order to remain a member of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), a degree-granting institution must have the following characteristic among others:

Authority vested in academic staff for decisions affecting academic programs including admissions, content, graduation requirements/standards, and related policies and procedures through membership on an elected academic senate or other appropriate elected body representative of academic staff.

(http://www.aucc.ca/about_us/membership/criteria_e.html)

b) The Report recommends an elaborate control structure for the provincial PSE system that can only impede innovation and responsiveness. The AUNBT agrees with Mount Allison University President Robert Campbell that this also would be "a radical change", through imposition of a model emphasizing "rules, regulations, and perpetual bureaucratic submissions." (Telegraph Journal, 13 October 2007, A9)

The adverse implications for academic freedom and the university autonomy necessary to protect it would make New Brunswick a pariah in North America, and bring the prospect of censure of all of our universities by CAUT (Canadian Association of University Teachers). With tens of thousands of professorial jobs becoming available across Canada now and into the next decade, our universities will not be able to recruit or retain faculty who can compete nationally.

2. NEED FOR A NATIONAL COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITY

New Brunswick must continue to have a national comprehensive university in order to be self-sufficient in a globalized economy. UNB is the only such university in the province, and it performs above and beyond the level of resources currently provided by the provincial government because it has well-focused strategies and pursues them aggressively. Implementation of any one of the following three recommendations in the Report could irreparably damage UNB's capacity and make New Brunswick into an intellectual, technological and economic backwater.

a) The proposed new funding formula makes operating grants much more dependent on student enrolment. This would create very damaging instability in university budgets. It would become necessary to decrease graduate student and faculty numbers to guard against the financial impact of fluctuations in enrolment. This in turn would cause nationally accredited degree programs which require specific courses such as some engineering programs, to lose their accreditation. Funding instability would also result in the loss of many of UNB's leading researchers. These highly qualified research leaders would leave the province for universities in Ontario, BC and Alberta. These provinces will meet their expected high demand in the coming decade by offering New Brunswick's best and brightest financial stability and thus better research environments. A funding formula tied very strongly to enrolment may work in a province dominated by large metropolitan centres and with a growing population where enrolment pressures exceed available university spaces; it would not work in a province like NB.

b) National universities require a certain size to be competitive for research grants. Removing UNBSJ from UNB would cause UNB as a whole to drop below critical size from the national perspective. This would make it impossible for UNB to compete effectively for research grants and contracts on the national level. It would also result in many of the best young faculty leaving Saint John, along with UNBSJ's leading senior researchers.

c) Channelling first and second year students into programs in towns and villages across the province would further aggravate the serious funding instability for UNB resulting from the proposed funding formula, and, no less importantly for the future of the province, deprive the stronger among these students of the opportunity to study and work with faculty on research projects, as part of their overall undergraduate experience.

3. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The Commission's Report does not consider the complexities of disentangling UNBSJ from UNB. For example:

a) Faculty have tenure and their employment is governed by a single collective agreement, which has provisions that must be followed in the event of changes to academic units. Canadian precedents have established that collective bargaining rights are protected by the *Charter*.

b) AUNBT and the University have through extensive negotiations developed a program to stabilize the seriously under funded pension plan, ensuring its future viability. The SJ members comprise about one-quarter of the bargaining unit and their removal from the pension plan would have serious consequences, including a windup.

c) Allocating ownership or entitlement to endowment funds, property, buildings, licenses, contracts, land, and research grants will be extremely difficult. For example, the vast array of electronic resources, licensed by UNB Libraries would need to be reacquired at significant cost by each independent institution.

Appendices: (i) AUNBT press release, (ii) CAUT fact sheets