

BUSINESS SCHOOLS AND THE FUTURE OF NOVA SCOTIA'S UNIVERSITIES

By Howard C. Clark

In recent weeks, the future of Business Education in Metro universities has become a topic of discussion. This follows the statement in January, issued jointly by Joel Matheson, then Minister for Advanced Education and Job Training, and the Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents that a number of recommendations aimed at the improvement of Nova Scotia universities are under study. This is an important issue for Nova Scotia, and goes far beyond questions of the internal efficiencies of the universities. Post-secondary education and the universities will increasingly play a major role in the social and economic development of the Province. The resources and skills within the universities, in areas relating to social policy, health, science and technology, engineering, management, and so on, can provide much of the competitive advice that the Province urgently needs. The future structure, and efficiency of the universities in the province is important to all in Nova Scotia.

One of the recommendations asks that Dalhousie and St. Mary's universities consider, together with the Nova Scotia Council for Higher Education and other universities currently offering degree programs in business, the situation with respect to business education in the two universities. The preamble to this recommendation outlines some options that should be considered. One is the possibility that either Dalhousie or St. Mary's might withdraw from the field. Another proposes that

either the full sharing of resources or differentiation of roles might be considered. The recommendation concludes by suggesting that "if agreement cannot be achieved, the universities recommend the engagement of mutually agreeable external consultants to study and report on the situation".

The assumption by some that all this might mean is simply a transfer of the Business School from Dalhousie to St. Mary's obviously does not come from any serious study of the various suggested options. Moreover, one large business school, at either university, will not necessarily give Nova Scotia "a school of business and management as good as or better than any in Canada" which is a desirable objective for any change. Combining the two schools may guarantee size; it will do nothing to ensure quality.

Any change from the present situation should only occur if it will improve on the present situation and if it will clearly give Nova Scotia a major business school of international stature. Given the controversial nature of the recommendation, it seems best -- indeed, it seems essential -- that external and highly reputable experts be asked to examine closely the nature and quality of the programs now being offered by the two universities and to advise on those steps that might indeed lead to a world-class business school in Nova Scotia.

It is also important to realize that this recommendation cannot be considered seriously in isolation from the other recommendations, or from the potential future of universities other than Dalhousie or St. Mary's. Not only are the recommendations inter-connected, but there is also clearly a need to examine all recommendations with some overall objective in mind.

Let's consider some hypothetical alternatives. If the St. Mary's Business School were transferred to Dalhousie, St. Mary's would be reduced to about 50-60% of its present size and would lose a faculty that is perceived to be at its heart. If combination of the Business Schools occurred at St. Mary's, the latter institution would become in large part a business school, and Dalhousie would have little or no involvement in business education. This would be inconsistent with another recommendation advanced by the Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education; namely, that there be much closer links between the Technical University of Nova Scotia and Dalhousie University. One of the many benefits of such links would be to strengthen interaction between business and engineering - an outcome that will only occur if business education remains at Dalhousie. Clearly, the recommendations of the NSCHE cannot be considered in isolation, if the responses to them are to be consistent and mutually supporting.

Again, if Dalhousie and TUNS cooperate more closely and share resources more extensively, does it then follow that Engineering need no longer be taught at St. Mary's or other institutions? And if, as is suggested, there is a need to consider a possible reduction in the number of universities offering programmes in Geology (since enrolments are presently low), does it follow that other science programmes should be similarly reviewed, especially given the cost of the required facilities for advanced classes? The above questions and alternatives are, of course, highly simplified but even the most casual consideration of them quickly leads to the conclusion that some overall objective or rationalized structure needs first to be agreed upon before the many recommendations can be constructively considered.

In today's highly competitive world, and especially in the context of a rapidly changing Canada, we in the Maritimes can no longer afford the luxury of using any of our limited resources in competing with each other. And those of us in Nova Scotia universities cannot deny that we do indeed so compete. Competition is, of course, desirable and essential, but in today's world our competition must be directed outwards towards the major universities across Canada, in the U.S., and around the world. To be effective in such competition, and we must be if Nova Scotia is to develop socially and economically, the Province's university system must be of an international size and quality. While collectively, the system has size, its quality and competitiveness could

undoubtedly be improved by a level of coordination that is now lacking and by the prevention of competition within the Province.

Any move towards the necessary level of coordination will inevitably mean that Dalhousie, and every other institution must give up some degree of autonomy. I and many others at Dalhousie, and I believe elsewhere in Nova Scotia universities recognize this, and are fully prepared to accept it. We believe that now is the time, in view of the major issues facing Nova Scotia and Canada, for this move to be made. It is quite unacceptable, however, if such a move could possibly lead to the loss of the identity and fine traditions and history of institutions such as Acadia, or St. Mary's, or Dalhousie and indeed, of every institution. There is no reason why it should, since there are many models elsewhere in the world from which we can learn. For example, what about the Federated Universities of Nova Scotia, operating under a coordinating Board, with a sufficient degree of authority and decision-making, defined by legislation, to rationalize and to reduce competition? Any necessary legislation could guarantee the continuing existence of each institution and the preservation of its general character and identity. Is it, indeed, possible to consider and act constructively on the present recommendations in the absence of such a coordinating mechanism, and of this overall objective?

This type of question, in its several possible forms, needs to be addressed now. And Nova Scotians have the right to expect that all in the university community, especially those of us charged with providing leadership - will rise above individual or institutional interests, in the search for the best answer. And finally, we must do so quickly - a competitive world has no patience for a laggard!!

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