

NOTES FOR A PRESENTATION TO  
THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY ON CANADIAN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION  
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We are very pleased to have the opportunity to appear before you to address how higher education in Canada might be improved. We are here as individuals, rather than as representatives of Dalhousie, and we will be expressing our own personal views. They may strike you as unorthodox, and since you are evidently in pursuit of practical suggestions, they may at first seem unhelpful. But we hope that you will not dismiss what we have to say about the process of fostering change in Canada's universities.

In preparation for these hearings, we sat down to prepare answers to the questions to which you specifically invited responses. We have done so - and will provide the answers to you in due course. We don't think that you will find them very useful. This is because, in our view, you are asking the wrong questions - and the answers to them are unlikely to produce real insight into the quality of university education in Canada.

In view of the origins of your commission, it is not surprising that the questions you have posed reflect the preoccupations of Canada's university presidents - in other words, those of people who are managers. They focus in particular on the types of things that managers are interested in, that is, on the bureaucratic aspects of universities - their missions, objectives, policies and practices, assessment mechanisms, and so on. All of these things are unquestionably necessary for the effective functioning of universities, but they are not central to their purposes.

What is at the centre of the educational process? The answer is the shaping of minds - the most complex, challenging and personal of activities. The way people teach and learn varies not only from one level of university education to the next, and from discipline to discipline, but also from one individual to another. Education is fundamentally a human, rather than a bureaucratic, activity, and the problem before you is not primarily an administrative one - or even a financial one - but rather, an intellectual one.

Excellence in education obviously calls for books, equipment, support services and so on, but the two primary ingredients are:

1. faculty members who are on top of their fields, who are committed to working with their colleagues to offer the best possible programmes, and who are keen to teach their particular portions of those programmes,

and

2. students who are well-prepared and eager to learn.

This sounds simple, but a number of obstacles stand in the way:

- **Low professorial morale** is one of them. It is caused by frustration over resource constraints, the bureaucratization associated with mass education, lack of "new blood", and assorted other factors such as ennui and age. This problem is by no means unique to universities. It is in large part a demographic phenomenon, which plagues the public service, the so-called "learned professions", and the private sector as well.
- **Excessive pre-occupation with research, or with professional practice or consulting**, is a second obstacle to educational excellence. Research is obviously not only desirable, but essential, and professional practice and consulting represent important forms of service to society. But pre-occupation with these activities becomes a problem if it is so great that anything else - for instance, teaching - comes to be regarded as something of a chore. In a recent cartoon, a professor was depicted as observing to a colleague: "my research has generated a couple of positive results. One is that I haven't taught for two years." That appeared in an American publication, but if they are scrupulously honest, most members of the Canadian university community will probably admit that flight from teaching is a problem in this country as well. The question we must ask ourselves is, why? To this, the answer is not that most faculty members do not care about their students or that they are poor teachers. The answer lies rather in the natural and understandable pursuit of novelty, excitement, income, perks and prestige.
- **The boundaries between disciplines** are a third obstacle. The primary allegiance of most faculty members is not to their institutions or departments, but to their disciplines. Since research or professional practice is what most of us have been trained for, and since it is for academicians the primary source of prestige and rewards, it can be difficult to sustain interest in questions (e.g. the coherence of the undergraduate curriculum) that transcend disciplinary boundaries. This should not be interpreted to mean that faculty members lack commitment to teaching. In fact, most of them are very much committed to the teaching of their

disciplines or professions - to the development of new generations of chemists or political scientists, for example. The problem - especially at the undergraduate level - is that the sum of good instruction in a smattering of disciplines is not necessarily a good "education". The educational experience of many canadian undergraduates lacks coherence and is not shaped by a clear guiding philosophy or common understanding of the goals of higher learning.

- The competition between the demands universities' primary mission, on the one hand, and society's agenda, on the other, is also an important problem. The higher education system, like the school system, is bombarded by a diversity of demands - demands that it teach men to respect women, that it inoculate students against racism, that it provide access to opportunity for members of disadvantaged socio-economic groups. In addition, universities confront demands from industry and government to produce relevant skills and knowledge - to contribute to the commercial success of private corporations and to the solution of problems of public policy at all levels. These are all worthy objectives, but they tend to distract universities from - and in some cases, they actually conflict with - the pursuit of their primary educational missions. In our view, this need not be so. It is because most universities lack a strong collective view of their educational mission that efforts to meet specific social demands divert them from, rather than leading them to contribute to, the achievement of their educational goals. For the same reason, the competing interests of different socio-economic groups and constituencies are now, more than ever before, fragmenting and politicizing the internal affairs of Canada's institutions of higher learning.

What do these obstacles to educational excellence imply, given that we are concerned with academic bodies that are, to a large extent, self-governing?

- One implication is that improvements in quality will require leadership and motivation, as well as the bureaucratic techniques of planning and regulation. They will involve stimulating and sustaining the interest of faculty members in fundamental academic and educational issues; fostering serious and sustained debate across disciplinary and institutional boundaries; encouraging faculty members to see themselves, not only as specialists in particular disciplines, but as educators in the broadest sense.
- A second implication is that excessive reliance on bureaucratic mechanisms for effecting change may be counterproductive. (If, for example, we were to respond to concerns about the quality of teaching by developing

detailed "specifications" for each course and programme and by monitoring closely the "delivery" of these, we would run the risk of turning teaching into a mechanistic activity with little scope for creativity. Should it then surprise us if people turn increasingly to their research as a means of intellectual self-expression?) We must recognize that - by further eroding faculty morale and reinforcing the tendency to flee from teaching - a bureaucratic response to concerns about the quality of education may exacerbate the very problems it is intended to address.

What does this suggest about the potential for improvement in the quality of higher education? One implication is that revitalization must come largely from within. It will be incumbent upon people such as us to encourage and assist faculty members in our institutions to come to grips with the fundamental academic questions which must be resolved if we are to develop a clearer, stronger sense of collective purpose. This will involve something of a departure from the role that most academic administrators have played in recent years! We have tended to emphasize the financial and the bureaucratic, thereby deflecting attention from intellectual and educational matters and eventually undermining the faculty's sense of mission and pride. Academic planning bodies pre-occupied by questions of cost are the result. It is arguable that we have relied on bureaucratic levers to such an extent that there is now profound doubt - particularly among members of the faculty - that people in academic administrative positions should even try to foster the resolution of intellectual problems. A new approach to academic administration will be required if we are to succeed in re-igniting serious and sustained consideration by members of the professoriate of the fundamental academic questions confronting our institutions.

This must be accompanied by clarification of society's expectations of us. We as a society appear to have lost whatever consensus we may once have had about what it means to be an educated person. Instead we have diverse and, in some cases, incompatible, expectations. We demand highly-specialized professionals, business graduates with practical skills, scientists ready to step into industry. Given the specificity and diversity of our demands, it is no wonder that we as a society find the results of universities' attempts to meet them unsatisfying.

We would urge you as a commission to avoid the temptation to reduce Canada's higher education system to the sum of its ability to meet the country's diverse and competing expectations. In our view, it is by promoting the development of a greater sense of intellectual purpose within the universities - and of clearer and more coherent expectations within society - that you can make a fundamental contribution to the revitalization of Canadian

higher education.

Thank you.