

Fate of NB universities in the air

Report on postsecondary education recommends transformation of universities into polytechnic institutes, as well as revamp of funding process

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CUP Atlantic Bureau Chief

WOLFVILLE, NB (CUP)—The recommendations of a recent commission on postsecondary education in New Brunswick have left some institutions wondering if they'll be considered a university much longer.

The report, commissioned by the provincial government, calls for UNB's Saint John campus, along with the Université de Moncton's Shippagan and Edmundston campuses, to be converted into polytechnic institutes. According to the report, the shift would mean an education system "that embraces many aspects of a traditional university but grounds it in a more practical approach that is quite easily meshed with college programs."

The report comes in the face of declining postsecondary enrolment across the province and the growth of community colleges. The report cited a need for a shift to education that is more "community-based, learner-focused, industry-connected, and global in perspective."

More than 1000 students, alumni, and community members marched through Saint John, NB on 17 September to protest the suggested transformation of the University of New Brunswick's Saint John campus.

Eric Savoie, a spokesperson for the student's council at UNB Saint John, said that they are strongly opposed to the recommendation. According to Savoie, the recommendation raises issues of access to education.

"Limiting access to university education limits choice," he said.

At the rally through Saint John, Savoie said that "[students] sent the message that, while agreeing that change needs to happen, if UNB's Saint John campus loses their university standing, it would not be a positive step for the University."

Kathryn Hamer, Vice-President at UNB Saint John, said that UNB's

administration is also opposed to the recommendation.

"Rather than a polytechnic, which would severely limit access to liberal arts and science programs, there are other ways to meet the goals of accessibility, affordability, transferability, and choice for students, building on the strengths of existing institutions—the Community College and the University campus first and foremost," Hamer said.

"Much effort has clearly gone into this ambitious report, which, if adopted by the government, will have significant repercussions for the four public universities in the province."

ROBERT CAMPBELL
PRESIDENT
MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY

According to Hamer, the University believes that they can effectively respond to new challenges by continuing partnerships among institutions that are adequately funded and supported. She explained that existing programming partnerships that UNB Saint John has developed with the city's community college have proven the effectiveness of that approach.

New Brunswick's Ministry of Post-Secondary Education is not responding to the report quickly. In a release, the Ministry announced that the government will take the necessary time to reflect upon the Commission's work and will provide a comprehensive response once the document has been thoroughly discussed and the final decisions have been made.

University administrators, students'

unions, and lobby groups are eager to be a part of that decision-making process.

"Much effort has clearly gone into this ambitious report, which, if adopted by the government, will have significant repercussions for the four public universities in the province," said Mount Allison University President Robert Campbell.

Aside from the recommended polytechnic institutes, the report also forwarded suggestions on a number of other issues, most notably how students pay for a postsecondary education.

Justin Robichaud, President of the New Brunswick Student Alliance, praised the suggestions on financing postsecondary education, saying they believe "that the government should act on the financial aid suggestions as soon as possible. We are lobbying the government to push those issues onto the agenda quickly, so that we can have those elements in the next provincial budget."

The report advocates the re-regulation of tuition fees, provided that universities turn some of the excess revenue into student aid packages. It also provides recommendations for a "three-pronged" student aid program that would cap the amount of debt a student is allowed to accumulate at \$7000 per year and reduce tuition fees for low-income students. It also calls for the introduction of an improved debt-management program.

The province is currently in the process of analyzing the different recommendations made in the report. But until a decision is made, Savoie is hopeful that students will continue to be at the centre of the decision-making process.

"The government seems adamant that the primary goal is for the results of the commission report to be beneficial to students. Our hope lies in students being at the centre of the decision-making process."

Student health plan covers HPV vaccine

MAGALLY ZELAYA
The Manitoban

WINNIPEG (CUP)—Female students under the age of 26 at the University of Manitoba now have the cost of the new HPV vaccine Gardasil covered by their students' union's health plan.

This is the first year that the vaccine, which provides immunity against four strains of the virus that can cause cervical cancer, will be covered by the plan. The vaccine was approved for use in females 9–26 years old by Health Canada in July 2006.

"The HPV virus is ubiquitous, and that really means that it's not a question of if you will be exposed to HPV—it's a question of when," said Dr Tim Hilderman, director of communicable disease control for Manitoba Health.

Hilderman said the vaccine "is another tool for advancing women's health and sexual health overall."

"The health insurance plan committee decided to look further into a safer-sex awareness campaign and include, on top of that, having an HPV campaign," said Garry Sran, President of the University of Manitoba Students' Union.

However, Hilderman cautioned that the vaccine should be used in

conjunction with healthy sexual practices, such as the use of condoms.

"People need to realize that while this vaccine offers protection, it does not mean Pap smears and cervical cancer screening stops," Hilderman said.

Gardasil, manufactured by Merck & Co Inc, is one of the most costly vaccines available, with a base price of \$405. It isn't covered under Manitoba's provincial health plan and is only available by prescription.

In Winnipeg, the vaccine, which is administered as a series of three injections over six months, ranges in price from \$455 to \$495, depending on pharmacy dispensing fees and markup. Because all three doses must be purchased separately to ensure correct storage, dispensing fees are also issued for each dose.

The vaccine offers protection against the four most prevalent strains of the human papilloma virus: types 6 and 11, which are the low-risk strains responsible for 90 per cent of genital wart cases, and types 16 and 18, which are the high-risk strains that cause 70 per cent of all cervical cancers.

HPV is also the cause of abnormal cell changes on the cervix, and increases the risk of cancers of the anus, vagina, vulva, and penis.

HPV is one of the most common

sexually transmitted infections in the country, according to Health Canada. Most people who contract the virus will not have any symptoms, and the immune system will clear the virus from their bodies. It's estimated that 75 per cent of sexually active men and women will have at least one HPV infection in their lifetime.

The virus is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, and condoms don't necessarily provide protection. Because most people don't have any signs or symptoms, it's impossible to tell if someone is carrying the virus by visual inspection. There are over 100 strains of HPV, 30 of which are sexually transmitted.

"This vaccine does not protect against some of the other cancer causing types—that's why [there's] the need for ongoing screening," Hilderman said.

The 2007 federal budget allocated \$300 million to support the HPV vaccine program. How the money is spent is left up to each province and territory.

Hilderman said that the Canadian Immunization Committee is coming out with a report designed to answer some of the questions about how to best deliver the program in the coming months.

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