Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission

Highlights of Discussion

Symposium
Strategic Options in a Changing Enrolment Landscape

This document does not reflect the opinion of the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission. Rather, it is a summary of the discussions and suggested actions voiced by participants of the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission's February 12th, 2008, symposium, *Strategic Options in a Changing Enrolment Landscape*.

This summary is not intended to capture all possible courses of action nor is it intended to be a workplan for the Commission or its stakeholder groups. Instead, readers should reflect on the suggestions offered and use this document as a starting point for discussion on how to address the current and forthcoming changes in enrolment patterns. The Commission too, will be considering the lines of thought presented during the symposium to determine how it might be able to assist in meeting these needs.

Symposium - Strategic Options in a Changing Enrolment Landscape
Highlights of Discussion

In 2005-06, undergraduate enrolment in Maritime universities entered a decline after four successive years of growth. Though it had been widely known that projected demographic changes could lead to decreased enrolment of students in the region's universities, the effect of this demographic slide was not expected to have an impact until the 2009-10 academic year. In order to gain an understanding of the factors at play, the Commission's stakeholders called for an analysis of this trend and, in June 2007, the Commission released, "Surveying the Enrolment Landscape: Factors and Trends in Maritime University Enrolment 2000-2001 to 2006-2007" under its *Trends in Maritime Higher Education* series. Through this analysis, it was found that universities are faced with challenges that extend beyond demography: a strong economy, here and elsewhere, the increasing popularity of other education providers and the cost of a university education, have all contributed to the recent decline in Maritime university enrolment. The impact of these factors will likely be exacerbated by the anticipated decrease in the overall university-age population.

On February 12th, 2008, the MPHEC held a symposium, by invitation-only, to encourage senior-level decision makers to engage in a dialogue on this changing enrolment landscape and to start thinking about how they might address it. *Strategic Options in a Changing Enrolment Landscape* drew together approximately 60 participants from the region's universities and relevant government departments and provided an opportunity for them to share their views and hear the opinions of others on the future of post-secondary education in the Maritimes. Martha Piper began the day with a thought-provoking presentation of her views on embracing future opportunities in higher education through creative thinking. James (Jim) Côté and Clive Keen followed, presenting their opposing views on the future of university education, and in the afternoon, Wade MacLauchlan took a region-specific perspective on the changing enrolment landscape, commenting on how we can prepare for the future. Throughout the day, participants had an opportunity to engage in question-and-answer sessions, as well as small group discussions, facilitated by Rick Myers.

Over the course of the day, it became very clear that participants saw many of the same things as key to strategically moving forward. Through an analysis of the presentations and discussions, four interconnected themes, or needs: (1) relevant and timely data and research, (2) expansion in quality assurance, (3) a greater degree of mobility between the region's post-secondary institutions and (4) collaboration and assistance to collaborate.

The reader is asked to remember that this document is meant as a summary to ensure that the richness of the discussions held during the Symposium and the many suggestions made by participants are not lost. It does not reflect the opinion of the Commission.

Relevant and timely data and research

It was noted that the region currently benefits from a strong body of data and research. This is, and will continue to be, a need for post-secondary education. High quality data that is monitored and updated regularly is an important component of any academic planning process. To collaborate with others and be more innovative, institutions need access to relevant and timely data that can inform their decision-making processes.

The Post-Secondary Student Information System (PSIS) is an example of how Maritime universities have come together to create a rich body of PSE-related data. Many participants were of the view that expanding this type of data collection and sharing process to include other Maritime post-secondary institutions, as well as the publication of additional measures or trends using these data, could go a long way in building on the foundation currently in place.

Many post-secondary institutions collect and analyse institution-specific data. Some suggested that inventory of research conducted at the institutional level could facilitate collaboration between institutions; additionally, if the majority of institutions were researching the same topic, there might also be an opportunity to pool resources and conduct the data collection and/or research at a regional level to reduce costs and enrich the data being collected.

Several participants felt that publication of best practices would be helpful as this information would contribute to a broader understanding of various aspects of post-secondary education and provide guidance on what works well for other institutions.

Expansion in quality assurance

Repeatedly, speakers and participants pointed to the need for institutions to be more "innovative." While historically part of a university's mission, the context in which this was discussed was in applying the concept of innovation to not only the *things* universities produce (e.g., through research and development) but also to the highly qualified personnel that they help to develop through education. In order to do this, expansion in the areas of quality assurance is needed and there are a number of ways in which this could possibly occur.

An analysis of the discussions suggests that a quality academic program can take many forms; it is not easily defined and people can have different (and valid) ideas of what constitutes "quality." That being said, most agreed that there can be minimum standards – and institutions in this region might benefit from more leadership in establishing these standards. Participants suggested that University Presidents might want to consider, perhaps through their annual meetings, a core curriculum for university programs and/or that program benchmarks be established at the regional level.

In the current academic environment, participants noted that quality assurance is a key component of a university's accountability mechanisms and its self-improvement initiatives. Several felt that the establishment of core curricula and/or a set of standards or benchmarks can inform these processes and

potentially facilitate a greater degree of collaboration and buy-in from the universities' main stakeholder groups. At the same time, they could provide a clearly articulated foundation from which to design new academic programs or assess credentials granted at other post-secondary institutions in terms of the degree to which they meet the rigour, breadth and depth deemed necessary for post-secondary study.

It was suggested a program inventory could also help in this regard as it would assist institutions in identifying other institutions and/or departments with which they might partner to offer joint academic programs, particularly at the graduate level. If this inventory were to include a compilation of programs offered inside and outside the region it could also facilitate the establishment of networks and partnerships at a national level. The inventory could provide information on what is currently offered (and possibly enrolments), and could potentially expose institutions to alternative program formats, as well as alternatives for program content, that might otherwise be more difficult to access.

Publication of best practices can add to this by providing models or examples from which to guide the development and implementation of regional, provincial and/or institutional practices and policies.

Building on these ideas, it was suggested that the Maritime Provinces, and perhaps Atlantic Canada as a whole, might want to engage in a type of Bologna-process of its own. The Bologna Process is a European reform process aimed at creating the European Higher Education Area by 2010. It is underpinned by ten 'action lines': adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles (bachelor's and master's); establishment of a system of credits; promotion of mobility; promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance; promotion of the European dimension in higher education; focus on lifelong learning; inclusion of higher education institutions and students; promotion of the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area; and doctoral studies and the synergy between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. [1] Others noted that Canada as a whole already had in place many of the elements contained in the Bologna Process.

A greater degree of mobility between the region's post-secondary institutions

Students in the Maritimes, as elsewhere, can pursue post-secondary education through a variety of means, including private career colleges, community colleges, religious schools and other degree providers, without ever having stepped foot (or "virtually" stepped foot) into a Maritime university. The educational options available, however, do not work in collaboration and participants clearly identified the need to smooth paths between and among not only the Maritimes' 16 public universities but also other post-secondary institutions within and outside the region. The establishment of minimum standards or core curricula, as well as other suggestions outlined above, could help in this regard.

Participants repeatedly stated that post-secondary education should not be thought of as a grouping of parallel paths from which students choose to embark. Instead, post-secondary education should be thought of as a collection of learning opportunities that can span a lifetime. Lifelong learning could

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[1] http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe_unit2/resources/Guide%20to%20the%20Bologna%20Process%20-%20Edition%202.pdf

include completion of a university program but could also include college, continuing education and/or both. Students might enter into a college or university program and then transfer from one to the other, or they might complete a program at one institution and pursue further study elsewhere. Learning occurs no matter the mechanism and all are important components in a successful post-secondary environment.

Participants noted that one way to recognize this is to take steps to increase mobility between universities and also between and among universities, community colleges, private career colleges, private degree-granting institutions and other post-secondary institutions. Participants expressed a value, for example, in the development of a comprehensive credit transfer system, citing The BC Transfer System as a potential model. It was suggested that course or program mapping across the various post-secondary institutions could also be of benefit, even without the development of a full-scale transfer system. These could allow not only for an understanding of how courses and/or programs relate but also an opportunity to discuss course and program objectives which could potentially facilitate block-transfer agreements or the development of new articulated programs.

Another way identified by participants to enhance student mobility was through the establishment of a unique identifier for those who enter post-secondary education. A unique student identifier could be used to track student's educational paths and facilitate, for example, credit transfer. It could also facilitate research on Maritime post-secondary education students and as a result assist with program planning and policy development initiatives. For example, research conducted on student retention, attrition and/or mobility trends would be simplified. The implementation of a unique student identifier could also reinforce the concept that post-secondary education is a collection of learning opportunities since that identifier would travel with the student as s/he moves in and around the system as a whole.

Collaboration and assistance to collaborate

Given the willingness of participants to come together and discuss the changing enrolment landscape, it may not be surprising to learn that the need to collaborate more, and for assistance in doing this, also emerged as a main theme. Participants appreciated the opportunity to engage in an open and frank dialogue with their counterparts from across the region and although each institution has its own strengths and challenges, there emerged a call for more of these types of events and for more collaboration in general.

"Collaboration" permeated a range of topics discussed and, indeed, is evident in the three themes identified above. There are specific aspects, however, in which the discussion of collaboration, and the need for assistance to engage in collaborative efforts, stood on its own. For example, it was suggested that institutions consider pooling their resources to make more (and perhaps better) use of the technologies and services that they currently offer. This might be manifested through a consideration of the pros and cons of a central ethics review body or application centre, for example, so that rather than having individual institutions manage these processes there could be a provincial or regional body working on behalf of all (or a group) of post-secondary institutions.

Participants noted the increasing diversity of adults attending Maritime post-secondary institutions and the expectations that they bring with them. Not all students want their education to take place in the classroom from Monday to Friday from 9 until 5. Many students look for flexibility in program offerings, delivery modes and allowable time to completion; this is expected to continue. It was suggested that there might be a way for institutions to collaborate in online learning technologies and various other delivery modes and services, to share and build upon the expertise already in place to meet the needs of these varying student populations.

Conclusion

Participation in the February 12th symposium, *Strategic Options in a Changing Enrolment Landscape*, identified many elements of a response to the challenges at hand which can be grouped under four main themes: timely and relevant data and research, expansion in quality assurance, a greater degree of mobility between Maritime post-secondary institutions and collaboration and assistance to collaborate. These themes often overlap, and of the many suggestions made to potentially meet these needs, most would assist in more than one area.

The Commission will be considering the comments and suggestions made by symposium participants at an upcoming meeting to determine how it might be able to assist in meeting these needs.

List of Participants

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Dr. William Barker, President, University of Kings College
Mr. Wayne Beaton, Chair, Cape Breton University Board of Governors
Mr. Tom Buckley, Registrar, University of New Brunswick – Saint John Campus
Mr. Ken Burt, Vice-President (Finance and Administration), Dalhousie University
Mr. Ron Byrne, Vice-President of Student Affairs, Mount Allison University
Mr. Neil Carruthers, Vice-President (Administration), Acadia University
Rev. Jane Clattenburg, Vice-Chair, Atlantic School of Theology Board of Governors
Mr. Paul Dixon, Associate Vice-President and Registrar, Saint Mary's University
Mr. Lawrence Durling, Vice-President (Finance and Administration), St. Thomas University
Ms. Leanne French-Munn, Director, Enrolment Management, Nova Scotia Agricultural College
Dr. Jane Fritz, Acting Vice-President (Academic), University of New Brunswick
Ms. Susan Graham, Manager, Student Financial Services, Prince Edward Island Department of Education
Mr. Peter Halpin, Executive Director, Association of Atlantic Universities
Dr. Kathryn Hamer, Vice-President, University of New Brunswick – Saint John Campus
Dr. John Hamm, Chair, University of Kings College Board of Governors
Mr. David Hinton, Registrar, University of New Brunswick
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Ms. Rosemary Jotcham, Registrar, Acadia University
Mr. Michael Langman, Senior Advisor, Nova Scotia Department of Environment and Labour
Ms. Kathryn Laurin, President and Vice-Chancellor, Mount Saint Vincent University
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Mr. Bernie MacDonald, Co-President (Administration), Nova Scotia Agricultural College
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