



Category: Long Term System Planning
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Whereas,

This policy outlines a governance framework for establishing a higher quality and more accountable university system in Nova Scotia based on the model of an empowered provincial Higher Education Council.

In 2008 the universities of Nova Scotia received over \$316 Million in operating grants from the provincial government. Yet, universities, unlike most bodies that receive public funding, have very few public accountability mechanisms. As the Auditor General noted in his 2003 report, “The Department of Education could give us no examples of items that would be ineligible expenditures” in reference to university operating grants. Of course, the primary reason for this is for the preservation of university autonomy – a founding pillar of the modern university. Academic freedom is a product of university autonomy, and must be protected at all costs.

ANSSA’s concern here is primarily in advocating for a more accessible, affordable and higher quality university system in the province. Given that the two largest revenue sources for universities in Nova Scotia are tax dollars and tuition payments, the universities ought to be answerable to a body other than themselves, when spending public and student contributions. By advocating for the strengthening of accountability within the university system in Nova Scotia, we hope to ensure that the funding the universities receive is spent in a manner that best achieves an accessible, affordable and quality post-secondary education system. In the interest of academic freedom, any measures of accountability that seek to reach further into the university system than necessary to ensure these principles are considered, ought to be dismissed. Accountability for the university system in Nova Scotia must be delivered at arm’s length from government to ensure this does not occur.

Accountability in this policy should be taken to mean the manner in which the institutions represent those who fund and are affected by its operations – in the university’s case, students, faculty and taxpayers are the obvious groups. The universities’ financial expenditures, its operational practices and strategic priorities and their alignment with the interests of its funders and its stakeholders are considered to be indicative of the level of accountability within the university system.

Currently, there are a few mechanisms within the Nova Scotia University system that provide accountability assurance from outside the individual institutions. Universities, like all corporations, are required to adhere to annual financial audits by third parties, but these audits focus more on the universities’ adherence to Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) and ignore the prioritization of funding and the spending interests of funders. The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission exists to ensure quality of education and monitor program development, but its role, even after its mandate renewal in 2005, still appears largely advisory and more or less toothless. While the provincial government has begun the practice of negotiating three year memorandum-of-understandings primarily for funding purposes, these agreements are typically negotiated on political terms and do not appear to take into consideration the measured successes or failures of beneficiary institutions.

The Office of the Auditor General for Nova Scotia has had a more pronounced role in providing accountability within the university system than any of the aforementioned mechanisms and bodies. Unfortunately, within the past two decades the Auditor General has produced only four reports on universities – 3 audits and one governance review, at a frequency that is hardly confidence instilling. However, these reports were highly critical of the lack of accountability structures present within Nova Scotia’s university system. A 1990 report noted that the accountability of the universities to the province with respect to outcomes and results needed to be defined. In the 1996 university governance study, the auditor general called for more detailed objectives, standards and targets for the university system within a “comprehensive accountability framework for the university sector” within the then existent Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education (NSCHE). This call was again echoed in the audit of universities in the year 2000.

Until the year 2000, the NSCHE existed with the mandate to provide recommendations on the university system to the Minister of Advanced Education and Job Training. Its mandate was primarily to recommend operating and capital funding amounts to government, to review financial information from universities and to provide advice on the cost-effectiveness of programs. It was composed from members of the public from a variety of backgrounds. In 2000, the responsibilities of the NSCHE were taken over by the now defunct Nova Scotia Advisory Board on Colleges and Universities.

Several other jurisdictions within Canada are implementing or receiving recommendations from experts to implement arms length councils, boards and commissions to oversee higher education. A recent review of the post-secondary education system in New Brunswick called for a Post-Secondary Education commission to help ensure a more accountable and efficient system¹. In British Columbia a similar review has called for the creation of a Higher Education Board to represent the “whole public interest in the higher learning enterprise” and to measure progress of the sector in achieving goals set by government². In addition to multi-year funding agreements, universities in Ontario are required to adhere to Multi-Year Accountability Agreements, as well as report to the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario in addition to regular reporting to the Post-Secondary Education Quality Assessment Board.

Nova Scotia needs accountability for our universities – both at the system level and at the institutional level. ANSSA advocates the recreation of a Nova Scotia Higher Education Council to provide this. In the past we have failed to achieve meaningful arm’s length accountability in this manner, which is why we are echoing the Auditor General’s recommendation for government to create a “comprehensive accountability framework for the university sector”, to empower such a council. This council should be charged with mandating the reporting of informative and measureable indicators of quality, access, affordability and innovation. It should be charged with reviewing the goals and targets set by the institutions and by the province and should also measure progress on the timely achievement of those goals. It should be adequately funded (the former NSHEC had governmental staff resources at their disposal). It should be responsible for providing recommendations to the Education Minister, the department and the universities themselves on issues that either the council, the Education Minister or the institutions find of relevance.

¹ Miner, R., and L’Ecuyer, J. (2007). Advantage New Brunswick: A province reaches to fulfill its destiny. Government of New Brunswick.

² Plant, G. (2007). Campus 2020 – Thinking Ahead: The Report. Government of British Columbia.

Therefore, ANSSA

1. *Calls on* the Government of Nova Scotia to establish a Higher Education Council with a mandate to ensure quality education and accountability in Nova Scotia universities.
 - a. Such a council should establish a set of province-wide indicators that are to be collected from each institution that measure various components related to quality, affordability, and accessibility of education as well as innovation within institutions.
 - i. Indicators for quality of education should be representative of student learning outcomes and student satisfaction, and should be considered separately from research capacity or research potential.
 - b. Such a council should establish and oversee the execution of a province wide strategic-plan and vision for higher education.
 - c. Such a council should establish province-wide quality and accountability standards for universities.
 - d. Such a council should receive annual quality and accountability reports from the universities that report on indicators, standards and the strategic direction and priorities of the university.
 - e. Such a council should be responsible for identifying and eliminating administrative redundancies and duplications of effort and expenses amongst Nova Scotia's Universities.
 - f. Such a council should be responsible for setting system-level goals and targets for the university system and implement appropriate measures to track progress on these goals
 - g. Such a council should be external to the university system and would contain representatives from the largest contributing stakeholder – students, as well as experts unattached to the university system in Nova Scotia.
 - h. Such a council should be charged with providing recommendations to the Minister of Education and the Universities on any issues deemed relevant by the council, the Minister or any of the Universities.
 - i. Such a council should be composed of a membership that is representative of those who those who fund and are affected most by the operations of the university system – specifically students, members of the public and faculty representatives.