

John Evans

## University Continuing Education in the 1980's

*Financial constraints, or the threat of them created by declining enrolments, are rapidly compelling universities, like schools, to look at the relevance of their educational practices in modern society. Dr. Evans takes a careful and discriminating look at the details of demographic changes to come, at some disconcerting declines in part-time enrolments, and at the need for universities to adapt, with a thorough change of style in university studies, to the character of the demand for non-credit education being made by a large element of the population not at present served by the conventional academic programs.*

It is our 150th anniversary at the University of Toronto and a time when the university is very much aware, not only of its past, but also of its future, trying to decide what are the best opportunities for its future growth and development. One of the very important areas, obviously, is in the field of credit and non-credit part-time study and continuing education. The crystal ball in which we have gazed so confidently over the past few years seems to get cloudier and cloudier. Many of the bases of predictions in which we had great confidence seem not to be standing up, judged by the results that we are seeing. Some of the statements that I shall be making here about directions based on demographic trends and on our experience in relation to those expectations will illustrate what is really a conflict between logical planning based on past trends, and actual experience.

Let me begin with the quantitative factor. Predictions based on Statistics Canada data<sup>1</sup> deal primarily with the full-time student base, that is, the base that can be projected most accurately from the 18-24 age group. The projections of demographic changes in the 18-24 year old age group suggest a roller coaster pattern of enrolment of full-time students. By 1981, all five of the major regions of Canada show some projection of increase in students based on that 18-24 age group. Looking to the next quinquennium, by 1986 the situation will have dropped back to the 1976 level. However, this masks very striking differences in those five regions. The Prairies will remain 16% over the base, British Columbia about 12%, Ontario about 8%, and there will be decreases of about

6-8% in the Atlantic Provinces and in Quebec. By 1991, the 18-24 age group in Canada will be about 15% less than it was in 1976. The prediction is that British Columbia will be about 9% above the 1976 level, Ontario will be slightly down, about 3%, the Prairies and Atlantic Provinces down about 20%, and Quebec 33% below the 1976 level. These divergent trends continue through 1996 in intensified form except that Ontario returns to the 1976 level by 1996; and by the year 2001, when the age group in the country as a whole returns to the 1976 levels, British Columbia will be up 42%, Ontario up 21%, the Prairies down 3%, the Atlantic Provinces down 9% and Quebec will be down 20% below the current levels of enrolment.\*

### **Regional disparities**

As you can see, universities in different parts of Canada will face strikingly different circumstances for the balance of this century depending on the stage of their growth, the enrolment prospects in their particular regions, the mix of programs that they have, the age profile of their staff, the basis of government support, and the degrees of freedom that they are allowed to exercise in relation to raising tuition or obtaining outside support from the private sector. I think we have to anticipate a significant depression in full-time university enrolment during the period from 1986 to the turn of the century in Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces, and to a lesser degree in the Prairie Provinces, in contrast with more modest changes in Ontario and a buoyant outlook in British Columbia.

Just as the over-all Canadian figures mask differences between regions, so the regional figures mask major differences at the local level which may affect profoundly the enrolment expectations of individual universities within that region or within that province. In Ontario,<sup>2</sup> over-all full-time enrolment is expected to rise about 10% over the next five years or so and then begin to fall. But there is a striking contrast between the early and protracted decline in the 18-24 age group in northwestern and eastern Ontario compared with the south-central counties of Peel, Halton and York, where the corresponding population group is expected to continue to increase progressively throughout that period. Southwestern Ontario tends to show a significant decline in the 1980's. It must also be remembered that demographic projections are only one factor. Local accessibility and economic factors are also important. In the Ottawa region, for example, what is predicted as a significant decline in full-time students could be a catastrophic fall if it coincided with a program of decentralization of the federal civil service.

If the reductions in full-time enrolment materialize in the 1980's,

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\*These data come from the 1971 census. Preliminary figures from the 1976 mini-census indicate a spreading out of the roller-coaster effect over a longer time, along with a general lowering of the actual level of enrolment.

there will be under-utilization of existing facilities in some regions while shortages of capacity exist in others. This will call for co-operation among institutions to match more effectively the demand with the resources, and to minimize the perturbations which would otherwise be expected at the local level.

There will have to be serious reconsideration of the funding policies under which we have operated for the past decade. More specifically, the sensitivity of funding to fluctuations in enrolment must be reduced.

In spite of projections for increased enrolment for the next five years most universities are faced with adaptation to a steady state of enrolment. For almost all the institutions, the end of the growth period is in sight and the spectre of declining enrolment and declining revenue looms ahead. Without any decline in enrolment the budgets of most of our institutions have not kept pace with inflation, and for this reason the emphasis in our planning has shifted from the accommodation of growth to the management of stable or declining resources.

Let me conclude these quantitative observations by saying that the demographic projections have left little doubt that enrolment of full-time students in the universities will fall significantly in the 1980's. There is some indication that the projected enrolment bulge which is supposed to occur in Ontario between now and 1982-1983 will not in fact materialize, and that full-time enrolment in arts and science will begin to decline as early as 1978-79. The professional programs will probably hold up longer in most fields, but in areas of surplus manpower such as teacher education, there could be an abrupt decline. In graduate studies, first-year doctoral enrolments are down in the humanities, natural sciences, and life sciences at many universities, and the Master's programs which relate to those doctoral fields are also showing weakness in new enrolment.

### **The vanguard of a change in style**

Part-time undergraduate degree studies seem to have reached a plateau, to the surprise of a great many people. The numbers enrolled at some Ontario universities declined this year. Is the market for part-time studies in fact being met adequately at the present time? Is the increase that was projected being masked by a large reduction in the number of teachers seeking credits towards their first degree? Is there a requirement for significant changes in the content and style of part-time education for credit? The unexpected plateau in enrolment should stimulate all of us to address these questions seriously.

What are some of the fields of study that may not be adequately available at the present time? We have talked in terms of the quantity of people coming to universities, but is there a need to provide a different dimension in universities that would attract individuals who are not being served? New fields of substantial interest are appearing that will

broaden the job opportunities in professionally related fields; such are industrial relations, operations research, languages for purposes of communication, law for the non-practitioners of law, and clinical medical science for individuals with advanced level training in basic sciences. Combined programs by universities and colleges of applied arts and technology could offer practical skills as well as basic education. Some examples already in existence have been very successful, including several in which this University participates. Finally, upgrading or renewal of qualifications and retraining for new fields is an enormous challenge.

Which areas should be chosen? Which fields are most important? Others may have better ideas than I have, but all of us are going to have to go out and talk to people to try and understand better what the needs are that are not being met. This is a field for careful market research, and that research should address what is really needed, not what will sell.

There is also the question of the style of university studies in the years ahead. It may be that continuing education and part-time studies are in the vanguard of those changes in style. I am sure that formal full-time programs of three and four years' duration at undergraduate and graduate levels will still predominate, but I would speculate that there will be increasing demand for very short, intensive full-time programs, immersion programs, often on a co-operative basis with employers. In addition there will be off-campus programs carried out at work. The changes in style will not follow one mode; indeed our flexibility to respond with different "packaging" of our educational programs may be the most important asset in making them accessible to a large fraction of the population. As long as we stick to the rigid format of the conventional academic year, we will exclude a significant number of people from participation in programs which they want and from which they would benefit.

This Council has made a case for government funding of all continuing education, non-credit as well as credit courses. This same priority was envisaged in the Wright Report, in 1972, with the concept of the open sector.<sup>3</sup> One might expect that the response of government to the request for funding would depend on the priority which it attached to meeting the demands for non-credit education. On the one hand, there are pressures for recognition of the great value of non-credit education which the Threlkeld Committee described as a true learning experience, an experience of enhanced understanding, not motivated by a desire just to obtain credentials or degrees.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, there is the very real pressure which government is feeling for economies throughout the public sector, and this would militate against adding more educational costs to the taxpayers' burden.

In working out the university approaches to non-credit continuing education, we must have a clear idea of that role which universities can most effectively serve in relation to Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, industry, professional associations, school boards and other groups engaged in related activities.

In the present circumstances, with the prospect of university enrolments growing much more slowly for the next five years and actually declining during the 1980's, it is tempting to suggest that excess capacity in teaching personnel and physical plant be deployed by expanding non-credit programs. The Deans of our faculties of education in Ontario face this problem as an immediate possibility, and they have been working out a plan that would emphasize renewal of qualifications and upgrading of skills during the expected dip in enrolment. Once again, if this is a logical and valid plan in its own right, it should be promoted, but if it is only designed to fill in a dip in financial circumstances then let us face that and try to negotiate a different financial arrangement which makes sense for the institution and for government.

### **Options and priorities**

If we turn to the more general areas of continuing education, the question raised by the enrolment projections is that there is a complete mismatch between the universities that will have the most opportunity for continuing education and the universities that will have the problems with the enrolment. In the urban centres, Ottawa, Toronto, Hamilton and London, there is a large and diverse population that will probably support broad programs of continuing education, but it is not in these areas, with the possible exception of Ottawa, that the greatest declines in enrolment are likely to occur. What is much more likely is that the universities located in smaller centres will experience both the drop in enrolment because of the significance of local accessibility on full-time enrolment, and a consequent curtailment of continuing education programs. There will be exceptions to this pattern, and certain universities in Ontario have already succeeded in mounting imaginative continuing education programs in areas of less dense population.

It may be necessary to examine whether there are distinctive roles in continuing education that should be assigned to specific universities. Dr. Dupré in his remarks to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada meeting in Regina suggested that the intensive full-time programs of continuing education might be centred in universities located in less densely populated areas, thereby giving a boost to those areas and to enrolment in those universities. This implies differentiation of the role or function of the various universities in the province in relation to the over-all task of continuing education, and that is a challenge which I think the Ontario Council of University Continuing Education should explore. Is there a role for some small university in Ontario comparable to that of St. Francis Xavier in the depression years in Nova Scotia?

A further question about continuing education in the 1980's concerns the scale of priorities that might be attached to different programs that fall within the rubric of continuing education. It may be advisable to differentiate the components of continuing education and to recognize distinctions over and above credit and non-credit courses. There are the obvious areas of general cultural activity, identified mainly but not

exclusively with the humanities and social sciences; upgrading of professional qualifications; and recurrent education. One of the challenges which faces continuing education and the universities is, to what extent will universities be partners, participants, or the responsible agents for these programs? To what extent will professions try to hold onto these programs exclusively, under their own control? I believe a shared responsibility can be developed which will be advantageous to both parties. One needs the knowledge and skills of both the profession and of those who are experts in the fields of continuing education. One needs to organize on a regional basis to reach those who will not make the effort themselves to go out and improve their qualifications.

There is, of course, the question of who should pay. Some professions can pay for these programs or at least contribute significantly, while for others the programs will not occur unless there is a sponsoring agent.

### **Adaptable universities**

Continuing education can only be as adaptable to changing needs as are the universities in which it has to function. How shall we get universities to recognize and respond to the changing style, the changing fields, the changing needs and the changing priorities for continuing education? It is very hard for many of us who are older members of the staff of universities to visualize a hierarchy of needs within the institution that does not have doctoral studies at the top followed by a sequence of Master's studies, honours studies in arts and science and professional fields, part-time credit studies and then, right at the bottom of the ladder, continuing non-credit studies. This hierarchy of scholarship and learning has dominated our thinking, and one of the most serious challenges is to try and assist the university in adapting its priorities to look at the opportunities for higher education in relation to the community's needs, rather than following the traditional hierarchy. Adaptability to change is going to be an important measure of the future strength of the universities and will determine the extent to which the public supports universities and the leadership role which universities will have in a future society.

Some of the resistance to change is based on the belief that the part-time adult and continuing education programs have lower standards than traditional full-time study. Some is based on the belief that the program areas selected are gimmicky and not worthy of the role of the university.

One of the questions that one has to face is whether non-credit continuing education should have the same requirement for Senate approval as any other university program. Would such a condition impair the flexibility and responsiveness of continuing education programs to such a degree that it would totally inhibit the ability to adjust to these changing needs? The advantages of using the same academic

approval mechanisms as for other university programs are, first, that it deals with the question of comparability of standards, and second, it ensures that the university, when considering the allocation of resources, judges the priority for these programs in the same context as all other of the university's programs.

To conclude, I believe it is reasonable to expect that there will be an increasing role in this next decade for both credit and non-credit continuing education. Universities need to be persuaded to change their hierarchy of values in education, and if that is achieved continuing education should be reviewed in the same context as other academic programs within the university. There is an enormous challenge in dealing with professional groups, who may be persuaded of the advantages of co-operation and whose programs may be materially enhanced by working through the university office of continuing education programs. Finally, and most important, the public must not be sold something that they do not need; we must start with what the needs are rather than what can be sold. We must try to avoid the temptation of seeking to solve our financial problems for the future by plugging vast amounts of continuing education. That is not the answer. Continuing education should be promoted on its educational merits and not as a panacea for defects in financing of the other spheres of university activity.

I would like to say just a word or two about an opportunity that presents itself to all of you and which represents the most important issue that faces Canadians at the present time. The events of November 15, 1976, confronted each of us with the question — do we watch this passively on television, like the Olympics, a national spectacle of the future of our country, or do we play an active role in the resolution of the problem? I found that almost everyone I talked to shared the same feeling that I have, that this was an issue that was different from almost any other issue which we have faced in this country, in that the future of Canada was at stake. Like almost all the others I talked to, I felt a genuine sense of humility about my understanding about how people in different parts of this country felt about these problems, not just in Quebec, but also out west and in the Maritimes. It was natural for those of us associated with universities to consider whether the university has any special role. After chatting with a great many people, it did seem to me that there was a specific role that universities could play, and that was in the review and analysis of some of the important issues and by encouraging heightened public awareness and understanding by public discussion of the issues.

It is certainly my hope that conferences and activities, exchange of information and seminars, will develop all across Canada, and that universities will collaborate to make this possible through a network of exchange of resources developed in relation to this topic. Many of the universities my audience represents are making efforts in this direction already. But we must do more than talk to ourselves! We must establish a network of information so that it will be available all across the country in more co-ordinated fashion for individuals in different regions to draw

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on, so as to ensure that in the debates and deliberations the perspectives of different regions are presented.

There is a special challenge to departments of continuing education to rise to the occasion in 1978 and promote in their communities a full debate of the issues and direction of Confederation, drawing on a network of information from all parts of Canada. It could be a vital contribution to public understanding of this critical challenge to the future of Canada.

This is just one example of what continuing educators as a group have manifested more practically than any other aspect of the university: a willingness to respond to very immediate challenges and a type of organizational mechanism with a speed of response that the rest of the university finds virtually impossible. I hope that this and other challenges that are extremely important will be successfully met. There is no doubt that increased attention will be given to the activities of continuing education in the next period of time.

#### NOTES

This paper is adapted from a speech presented at the Spring Meeting of the Ontario Council of University Continuing Education at Woodsworth College, University of Toronto, in April, 1977.

1. *Advance Statistics of Education 1976-77*, Statistics Canada Cat. 81-220 annual.
2. Source: Ministry of Treasury, Economics and Intergovernmental Affairs, Province of Ontario.
3. *The Learning Society*, Report of the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in Ontario, 1972, Chap. 7.
4. Report from Council of Ontario Universities Special Committee on Non-Credit Continuing Education, 1975.