

To: Members of the Law Amendments Committee

From: Dr. Bruce Greenfield, Associate Professor, Department of English, Dalhousie University

Regarding: Universities Accountability and Sustainability Act

Thank you for considering my concerns about the proposed "Universities Accountability and Sustainability Act." I am not convinced that this legislation will be beneficial.

1) There appears to have been no public consultation about such legislation prior to its proposal; I expect certain interests have been talking, but it's a surprise to faculty and students at Dalhousie, for example. So who has defined the "problem"?

2) What are the motives for such legislation? At least for the Halifax universities, I think the record of value for tax-payer dollar is good, better than when I began to work at Dalhousie thirty-two years ago. During my working life at Dalhousie, the provincial grant, as a percentage of the operating budget, has declined from somewhere in the 70% range to about 51%. Meanwhile, Dalhousie, and I think most Nova Scotia universities, have grown and become stronger. Speaking about what I know, purely in terms of numbers, my department now has fewer full-time faculty than in 1983, but many more students.

3) Most of the goals of the Act are, or should be, part of the normal planning and management of a university. To quote the Act (12/1/a): "A university's revitalization plan must include assessment of the university's strengths and weaknesses and the opportunities and risks that may affect the university's future, taking into account where the university fits within the national and international university environment and expected future changes in post-secondary education."

Dalhousie, at least, has for many years consistently balanced its budget, grown its student population (including lucrative international students), revised its programs, attracted increasing amounts of research funding, carried out mergers with other post-secondary institutions (TUNS and the Agricultural College). All without extraordinary legislation.

4) Making the existence of a long-term – or merely a one-year – operating deficit the criterion for the application of the Act's "Revitalization" provisions seems potentially an INVITATION TO MISMANAGEMENT. Administrators and Boards, having created, or failed to anticipate, problems, are then afforded extraordinary means, added authority. At the very least, the criteria for the imposition of the terms of the Act constitute a VERY LOW BAR for access to extraordinary powers by University Governors and the Department of Education.

5) The Act's provisions to suspend collective agreements are unnecessary. (Thus, they arouse suspicion that the main motivation of the government is to enable wholesale interference with collective agreements.) If the incentive for the creation of a revitalization plan is an additional grant to enable its realization, why put Administrators and Boards at odds with students, staff, and faculty as the plan is developed? As I said, this approach seems to further empower administrations and boards who have failed up to this point to properly run the university.

My experience of faculty members is that they are well aware of the benefits of collaborating widely, and that pretty much all of the creative changes in how programs are delivered and how research is carried out originate with faculty members and students.

6) While I think that universities in Nova Scotia have been, necessarily, modernizing their administrative structures, there has also been an increasing lack of connection between administrative decisions and those carrying out the core missions of the university. The proposed ACT seems to encourage top-down decision making.

7) The bill seems to impose government priorities on university research and teaching. Although there is a clear link between vibrant research cultures at universities and economic growth, there is very little evidence that research can be effectively directed to serve top-down economic priorities. Research can be directed to the solution of specific problems or challenges, but there is little evidence that research can be effectively focused on short-term economic goals. THE FREE MARKET APPLIES TO IDEAS, as well as to the organization of economic activity. Foster and support research culture, but don't distort the "market" for creativity. The Province of Nova Scotia has a poor record of fostering economic development; part of the way forward is to encourage, collaborate with, and respect the creative research and teaching that goes on in the province's universities.

Effective reorganization of a university, a complex entity with its own institutions for carrying out such changes, will only happen with the full participation of all members of the institution. I'm disappointed that the government seems to encourage a top-down, externally imposed model of reform, with little apparent consultation of the stake-holders.

Thank you for considering these comments.