

The Future of Higher Education on PEI

by Amy Gallan

There were two round-table discussions held recently to discuss various issues concerning education, and university in particular. Combined, about 80 people attended the meetings. A cross section of people were invited, including business, labour, students, parents, and educators. All were given some material to read ahead of the discussion.

Both meetings were hosted by the Minister of Higher Education, Jeannie Lea, who said that there were two purposes for the meetings. The first reason being, "We wanted for people to have more information on the post-secondary system and the challenges that lie ahead," said Lea, and "We wanted to hear peoples' opinions." With the help of Dr. Tim O'Neill, they also looked at how technology has changed our economy and workplace and the effect this has had on education.

The first was held in Summerside, on October second, where people raised many hard-hitting questions. These included the cost in general of having a university, the cost to the students, the cost of running programs, the cost to the Island having two post-secondary institutions -- UPEI and Holland College.

Also brought up at the meeting was the question of whether or not the areas outside of Charlottetown have been well-served by the university. "Some people worry that this is the university of Charlottetown instead of the University of Prince Edward Island," said UPEI President Epperly. "It definitely is not."

Lea said that the people at the Summerside meeting felt that the university could do more to make the whole Island feel like it is their university. "Part of that, I think, is, look at the students who are attending UPEI. A large number of them come from the three high schools located in the Charlottetown area. . . so I think what they were saying was maybe the university should get out and recruit and promote itself

more in other parts of the Island." Other issues that were looked at were social benefits versus the individual benefits. Who should pay? Should it be the taxpaying public? How much should the students pay? "We even talked about what a university should look like, and how big a role this education might play," said Lea. Also talked about were tuition fees in general.

Lea also said that, because there will be less money coming from the federal government, there is no easy answer to the tuition question. "Everybody wants the university to be accessible to anyone regardless of your income, and the balance there is how much can students afford to pay, and the area of student loan. . . to make sure there are loans there for those who do not have the money to go. . . how high can tuitions go before they start affecting students."

The Charlottetown meeting, held on October third, had a different angle, possibly because of the attendance of many more university students. Dr. Epperly said that this round-table discussion was much more supportive of post-secondary education. This was supported by the fact that the people spoke up. "We must make it clear to the government that this is a top priority," said Dr. Epperly, summarizing the peoples' point-of-view, "If it does not get priority with the government and if it's not a big item, they're going to cut it so that it's not recognizable as a university. . . we can't do that and still expect quality programs."

"It's a real challenge for the university system," Lea said about the cutbacks. Over the next several years, the federal government will be taking a large sum of money out of the higher education system. The grant that the PEI government gives to UPEI actually comes from the federal government. This means that the province is going to have to decide whether there is enough money to make up for the loss. There will be less money flowing to the

universities, which could mean loss of programs. "So the university then must decide how its going to cope with that," the minister pointed out.

"That is why we wanted to hear from the public, in terms of how much should students be paying. What kind of university do we need in PEI? Should all students pay the same fee? If you are in an undergraduate program as compared to a more expensive program, such as medical school,

should the tuition fees be the same? Right now they are, but it costs much more to put someone through medical school," said Lea, explaining the problems facing the education system, and saying that there are more complex issues facing the system than most people realize. Lea also said that she was examining a way to have a similar kind of discussion with more students, as these were the final round-table discussions.

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