

Ambitious growth plan lacks funds

by

Desmond Morley

Less than a year ago, we commended Premier Bernard Lord on his statesmanship in having endorsed all the recommendations in the report, released last May, of the Working Group on Accessibility to Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick, and in having immediately allocated meaningful funding to some of them.

Credit again must be given where credit is due.

Recently, the Premier has pulled another rabbit out of the hat with the unveiling of his government's 10-year plan for economic growth in the province, in which the role of the universities, and their research function, figure prominently.

The Premier has, of course, stated publicly that the goals of the 10-year plan are targets and not promises.

Obviously, he acknowledges that the ambitiousness of the plan requires financial participation far beyond the means of this small province's coffers, and that its potential will be lost without federal and other help.

However, even if the required support from sources other than the New Brunswick treasury is forthcoming, in the implementation of the plan detailed attention still must be paid to key factors, for which the province presently is solely responsible, by which it will live or die.

In attempting, for example, to encourage university faculty to come to, or to remain in, this province by creating an environment in which the research performed here is at the so-called "cutting edge", such an environment cannot be slavishly devoted only to "innovation" (a word with which the plan is peppered) that can be commercially exploited immediately.

Provision, in the form of adequate provincial funding, also must be made for the pursuit of basic research – that is, inquiry for its own sake.

The best and brightest academics, whom we wish to attract to be the nucleus of the research culture that must be developed here if the plan is to succeed, will insist on this because that is where the cutting edge of research often resides.

Furthermore, the successful establishment of a research culture in New Brunswick hinges on the state of its universities' libraries, where much of the research will be performed.

At present, far from being at the cutting edge, they are struggling just to keep up.

Consider the following statistics:

The library acquisitions budget at the University of New Brunswick has increased by only 13% since 1990. During that time, though, the average cost of acquisitions has increased by more than ten times that amount.

As a result, UNB had to cut back its purchases of books from approximately 12,000 in 1991 to only 6,000 in 2001.

Over the same period, it also reduced the number of its subscriptions to printed scholarly journals from around 6,500 to only 3,500 - even though, owing to growing sub-specialization in the reporting of the latest developments in many areas of research, the number of such publications had doubled.

The libraries at New Brunswick's other universities are in similar or worse distress.

As well, timing is of the essence in the success or failure of the plan.

Although the plan itself quite properly asserts that the accomplishments to which it aspires will not happen overnight, nevertheless certain things must be done immediately if dreams are to become realities.

There already is a shortage of university faculty whose expertise is even now in a seller's market, and empty library shelves – among many other things – are not going to encourage faculty to locate or remain here.

Libraries cannot be restocked with platitudes such as “doing more with less” and “managing smarter”.

They need money – enough money to pay for the necessary number of current books and periodicals to make them dynamic research centres.

Furthermore, the shortage of funding for university libraries are merely symptoms of a more widespread malaise, and merely reflects the inadequacy of the overall university operating funding from which it flows.

Clearly, then, it is essential that provincial operating funding for the universities – for which, it must be emphasized, subsidies will not be available from any of the federal or other sources identified in the plan – must immediately become commensurate with their centre-stage role in this ambitious undertaking.

Moreover, students must not instead be forced to pay for the implementation of the plan through increased tuition fees. If it is for the benefit of all of us, we should all pay for it.

In spearheading the formulation of this long-term vision, Premier Lord has again displayed statesmanship.

He must now demonstrate the political will to ensure that the plan comes to full fruition – first and foremost by providing adequate provincial operating funding to the university sector on which its success so greatly depends.

(Desmond Morley is the Executive Director of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations).