

# Strategic Options in a Changing Enrolment Landscape

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### Universities for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century - *Nolens Volens*. Clive Keen

Jim Coté has set anyone running a university a truly serious challenge. He's seen a vital part of the picture very clearly.

But let's think bigger picture.

Ask almost any senior university professor what he'd like universities to be in 15 years time, and he'll say "Like they were 30 years ago!" His vision for the future is to head back to the 1970s.

We've a serious disconnect here. The world of the 2020s will be very different from the world of the 1970s. Parental and societal expectations for education have constantly risen since the seventies and they won't suddenly plummet. The economy has radically changed – we are already deep into a knowledge economy, and we'll be even deeper into a knowledge economy in 15 years. Society wants mass post-secondary education. We're simply not going to go back to the 1970s, whether we like it or not.

Thus "Nolens Volens" in the title of my talk. Whether we like it or not, we're going to have to provide a very different university education in 2023 from 1973. Governments, schools and parents will insist on it.

And I'm reluctantly glad about it – that we will be forced to develop a very different university system. When I heard I was going to give this talk, I started by writing down the following paragraph:

"The coming 20-year demographic crunch is the best thing that can happen to Maritime universities. It will force them to think deeply about what a 21st century university must be and make them implement painful but essential changes. As a

result they will emerge after twenty years *undiminished in size* and immeasurably stronger.”

I didn't write this for effect. I fully believe it. But what *was* I thinking, particularly when I wrote “undiminished in size?” It is very easy to argue that Maritime universities are facing a perfect recruitment storm over the next 20 years, and have nothing to look forward to but decline.

I'm sure you know the demographic statistics off by heart.

Between 2006 and 2026, the number of young people (19-24) will reduce by:

39.7% in Newfoundland; 31.6% in New Brunswick; 23.9% in Nova Scotia; 22.5% in Prince Edward Island

But this is only part of the story. Equally important is the issue of the participation rate. And with Jim Coté here, it is extremely easy to conclude that the participation rate should and will go down, not up.

The AUCC in its complacency says that the participation rate will under every scenario rise – no problem, it always has, and always will. And *perhaps* they are right. But rather than being an easy solution, this can be an essential part of the problem.

What is the true young adult participation rate? This is where we have been fed utterly misleading figures.

The AUCC says that the young persons' participation rate is 23.1%: well, that's not many. Surely more of our young people could enter university than that! Going up to 26% would surely not be a stretch!

But how do are those figures derived? By adding up all the 18-21 years in the country, counting all the 18-21 year olds currently in university, and working out the percentage.

But some 18 year olds are still in high school and will go to university *next* year, so don't show up in the participation figures. Some 18 and 19 year olds are taking a year out, so *they* don't show up in the participation figures. And a huge number of

18, 19, 20 and 21 year olds have been to university but have dropped out, so *they* don't show up in the figures. Some 21 year olds have graduated, so even *they* don't show up in the figures. The participation figures quoted by the AUCC are thus utterly misleading.

Those of us dealing with small jurisdictions know that far more than 23% of our local young people are heading to university. We've been saying for some time that the true young-adult participation rate is around 40%. And, thank heavens, StatsCan confirmed the fact this summer. And it's closer to 50% for young women.

Is that beyond saturation rate?

Jim Coté says yes, and so do most faculty members I come across. I agree - *for the university experience we now offer*.

Ask almost any faculty member what proportion of the first-year class are not suited to university study, and they'll say 20 – 30%. And the students agree, because around 25% and more of first-year students do not come back for the second year: most have not been failed: they've come to recognize that the university experience on offer is simply not for them. The average Canadian university graduates only around 55% of the students that it enrolls. The dropout rate is around 45%, most disappearing by the end of year two.

Jim is not crying in the wilderness. If you ask virtually any professor what is the main problem with universities at the moment, they'll say that it's due to universities taking in people who are not simply suited to the education they are trying to provide.

If we accept this, a natural conclusion is that the true participation rate needs to go down. Say we take it down from the true 40% participation rate to 30% - perhaps still too high by Jim's standards. But what would it mean?

Put together reduced participation rates with declining numbers of young people, do some simple arithmetic, and you'll get the following figures

Newfoundland would see a decline of 55% of its young-person intake between 2026 and 2006. New Brunswick would see a decline of 48%; Nova Scotia a decline of 43%; and Prince Edward Island of 42%.

Now a faculty member might say “This is wonderful. I’ll be teaching half as many students, and they will be of higher average quality. I’ve got tenure, so I don’t have to worry about the financial implications. Come to think of it, the university will be forced to fire a bunch of administrators – life doesn’t get any better than this!”

But the financial consequences can’t be overcome just by firing some administrators. Fee income would be nearly halved. There’s not a chance that governments would both make that up *and* continue to give the same level of block grant when we’re teaching far fewer people.

The reality would not be firing some surplus administrators but drastic reduction of university capacity. You can do the sums. You’ll find that we’ll have at least eight Maritime universities too many.

So, people that run universities will fight very hard to avoid this scenario. They’ll do their best to *increase*, not decrease, participation rates, and - this is the kicker - the whole of the culture will be on their side in the attempt.

Even if Maritime universities did volunteer to commit suicide, swayed by Jim’s arguments, there’s no way that governments, parents and schools would let them. All the social pressures are to *increase* participation, not decrease it.

- University for their newborn child is now almost a universal aspiration for parents
- 90% of grade nine students say they want to go to university or college, and look closer and you find they want university if at all possible, not college
- The economy is increasingly knowledge-based. A grade 12 education really doesn’t cut it any more, and even if we were to take away credentialism, won’t cut it in 2023.
- Governments are competing to raise the educational ante. Last summer the US announced that it intended to have 50% of its young people in university,

and a couple of days later Britain said that its goal was 55%. So a few days later, Japan said it was shooting for 60%.

Increasing access to university is a political and social imperative. We are constantly told that we must reduce barriers to university education, not increase it.

So what do we do? If we carry on our operations as usual while taking in a higher and higher proportion of young people, we'll just make the problems that Jim Coté has spoken about even worse.

But that's what we're apparently planning to do. "Take in more people from social groups that are presently under-represented" is the current war cry. But if we take them in without changing what we do, we'll be fully deserving of a public scandal. We already know that students from the bottom quartile by family income are dropping out in droves. Look at figures from the US:

**Degree attainment rate by family income (US, 2006)**

Top quartile: 72.6%

Bottom quartile: 12.3%

I put it to you that we are not just doing great damage to a huge number of young people, but disproportionately from kids from disadvantaged backgrounds. The results of failing or dropping out are not benign, but usually mean a severe check to development and years of drift.

But what do we say when students drop out or fail: "Not Our Fault!"

We say that those students simply don't have the ability, or aren't willing to put in the hard work, or the schools haven't prepared them properly.

In short, it's the fault of the kids for being dumb and lazy and the high schools for being useless. Nothing to do with us. Nothing to do with how we teach or what we teach. Oh no.

But try another thought. Perhaps we haven't waken up to the fact that the world is now very different from 30 years ago, meaning that WE have to change, not simply abuse the kids and the schools.

Think again about the last half century.

1950 - 5% of young people went to university. The median student was gifted. It was a very rare thing to get into university. "Got to university? - you must be *really* smart."

1970 – 15-20% of young people were going to university, and the median student was bright, delighted and honoured to be allowed into university, and willing to work hard to prove they could cut it.

2007 – 40% participation. The median student is average ability, coming to university simply because that's what is expected of them. There's nothing the matter with them. They're not brain damaged. They are simply perfectly NORMAL kids.

But universities are still acting as if they are taking 15%-20% of young people. We are in 2007, acting as if we are in 1970. **THAT is the essential problem.**

Look at our standard university pedagogy. We give lectures, with the instruction that students should hit the books for two hours for every hour of lecture. Are we kidding ourselves! We know perfectly well that the average student doesn't do it. NSSE nails the fact decisively. So we live out a lie. Of course gifted and fully engaged bright kids might do it. But ordinary ability kids – not a chance in hell, and we know we are lying to ourselves when we say we expect it.

Now look at our programs – in Canada, university programs are virtually unchanged from 30 years ago. In the Maritimes, the majority of students are still taking liberal arts and sciences degrees, just like the degrees of 30 years ago, taught in the same way. These degrees can be marvellous for gifted kids, and pretty good for bright and engaged kids. But for the perfectly normal kid, they are little more than a boring chore.

I'd been puzzling over why it is that young males are now so under-represented in university. We know they are switching off between grade 10 and 12. I then thought through the dialogue I'd need to have with a perfectly normal, average ability, grade ten male to try to persuade him to work hard at school so he can enter a traditional degree program. If I was entirely honest, I'd tell him that if he knuckles down at his academic studies, even though he doesn't much like it or even believe in it, he'll get a reward: four more years of studying things that he has no interest in, after which he'll have a degree guaranteeing him absolutely nothing in the world of work.

It's not much of a turn on, is it?

So let's try something else.

If you tell your average sixteen year-old male that if he works hard he could go to university to take a degree in a subject you know interests him, which involves a great deal of hands-on and practical activity, and that will lead to a job – you've got a pretty good chance of getting his attention. What subjects? Say he's thinking of joining the police force. On PEI in a year or so, I'll be able to say that if he knuckles down he'll be eligible to enter a UPEI degree program in Police Studies, and that will virtually guarantee him a police job. If instead he's interested in computer games, I'll be able to say the same about a degree in Computer Game Creation.

And say he's not interested in these, but I can tell him that elsewhere in the Maritimes he can pick from the following new degrees ...

- BEng Renewable Energy
- Bachelor of Coaching Science
- BA Events Management
- BEng Pollution Control
- BA Digital Arts
- BA Recruitment
- BA Professional Communication
- BA Arts Management
- BA Sports Tourism

- BSc Security Technology
- BA Sports Journalism
- BSc Restoration Ecology
- BA Robotics
- BSc Hacking Countermeasures
- BSc Mobile Computing
- BSc Animation Technology
- BSc Interactive Media
- BA Sports Marketing
- BA Adventure Recreation
- BA Disaster Management
- BSc Fire Safety
- BSc Exercise and Nutrition
- BA Moving Image Production
- BA Sonic Arts
- BSc Medialab Arts
- Bachelor of Property Management
- BA Fundraising and Sponsorship
- BA Managing a Small Business

... I reckon I'll find that one of these won't just get his attention, but his enthusiasm. Young males are not naturally a bunch of lazy slob. The truth, rather, is that we're turning them into lazy slob by giving them no reason to study. Young males will work very hard at something that interests them and they see the point in.

Something interesting happens when I show this list to faculty members.

The first reaction is "that's not what universities do."

Well actually they do. The list of programs I've just given are actual programs recently introduced in Britain and Australia. There are hundreds more like them - nearly all the new degrees created in these countries are of this type.



A second, more considered, reaction from the faculty member is “If only we’d offered that degree, my son would not have dropped out of university.”

Bingo.

If we suit our pedagogy and programs to the students we have today, rather than try to fit today’s students to 1970s programs and pedagogy, we will see a significant increase not just in recruitment but in retention.

Where are our best retention figures at the moment? In programs like Nursing, where it is around 90%, compared to 45% in liberal arts. Retention is high because the average student sees the point of what they are studying and sees where it leads. Britain, with its very wide range of applied degrees, has a completion rate of 78%, compared with 55% in Canada.

If Maritime universities had that completion rate, and attracted as many males to university as females, it would completely solve the demographic crunch – in fact we’d be awash with students and could afford to take only those that were truly committed to working for their degree. And as a somewhat useful by-product we’d provide graduates that the economy actually needs. (!)

Now I’m not talking about turning universities wholesale into polytechnics.

I’m talking about universities providing a range of offerings and pedagogies to fit the range of students that we now have: a differentiated system, not a one-size-fits-all system. We need International Baccalaureate-type programs for those students who come to us already engaged. We are doing such students a terrible service now and leaving them unmotivated because they aren’t being challenged. We also need lots of the degrees that we have now. Of course. But for the average-ability student who has a purely pragmatic view of education, yes, we need many more applied degrees.

But faculty members will still be uneasy. They’ll be likely to say “this is not what universities are all about. Universities should be places for intellectual exploration and academic rigour; the applied stuff all ought to be done by colleges.”

In fact, universities have always been in the business of applied degrees as well as liberal studies. Their meat and potatoes for centuries were medicine, religion, and law, intended to train physicians, the clergy, and lawyers. Eventually, after dragging their feet for a long time, they realized that they should also offer things like engineering and business studies.

But there's this lurking feeling that applied degrees are educationally second-rate, failing to develop high-order thinking skills. The Ramsden study from the University of Lancaster showed that this is simply not true. The study showed that for the average student, applied degrees actually lead to higher-order thinking than liberal degrees. It showed that when you teach average-ability students subjects like Philosophy, they revert heavily to rote memorization – to the gulp and vomit style of learning. The study showed that when such students are taught instead applied subjects, they will much more readily employ imagination and critical thinking.

### Sum up

My vision of the university system in the 2020s is a system which has ACCEPTED the challenge of taking in 45 – 50% of young people, and thus provides both the programs and the pedagogy SUITED to 45 – 50% of young people.

To the layman, this might seem blindingly obvious, and yet it is far from obvious to most people within universities, and getting there will be a huge challenge. For one thing, MPHEC's traditional approach to program approval could stop things in their tracks. I tremble at the thought of getting a degree in Mobile Computing or Sports Journalism through the MPHEC peer review system. (Questions: "Does your Sports Journalist person have a Phd? And what has he published in academic journals?") Many will despair, and not even try.

But more significantly, universities will need to change their deep-held views about what universities are FOR.

In our heart of hearts, we feel that universities are really not concerned with *teaching* people, but rather with the *advancement of knowledge*. It's why we treat first years as though they are PhD students in waiting. It's why we've never really

cared much about all the students falling by the wayside – such students will never, after all, assist in the advancement of knowledge.

But if universities are to deal successfully with 45 – 50% of young people, they will have to see teaching as their primary duty. Faculty members will have to see themselves primarily as teachers, not primarily as researchers. Universities will need to make the same sort of declaration as the University of Waikato: that 80% of their efforts concern teaching; 20% research. Try proposing that in your Senate, and you'll get an inkling of the struggle ahead.

There's no doubt that making the change in internal perceptions about what universities are *for* will be an enormous challenge, and will require inspired, tenacious, and visionary leadership.

But remember *Nolen Volens*.

If we make the change, we'll have a university system that makes sense in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and meets what the world expects and needs from us. The alternatives are utterly bleak. If we refuse the challenge of creating universities for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must accept either a system dramatically smaller in size which fails to meet society's mandate, or one mired to breaking point in Ivory Tower Blues. Let's not go down those roads through drift and indecision.