

**Consultation of the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC)  
Held at Mount Allison University in Sackville, NB  
on November 28, 2010**

**Topic: Expectations of stakeholders regarding information on the quality of universities**

Participants

Close to 100 people, members and employees of the Commission, university administrators, representatives of students' associations, and members of faculties took part in this meeting.

Note: Only seven (7) professors were present, namely two (2) from the AUNBT, one (1) from the ABPPUM and the signing officer representing the FAPPUNB. Students' associations were represented by fourteen (14) delegates.

Goal of the meeting

The main goal of the meeting was to determine which data must be collected by the MPHEC to measure the quality of universities and to decide which data could become public.

Quality of universities = quality of teaching

While the statement of the goal and the topic didn't limit the academic activities subjected to a quality assessment (preservation and conservation of knowledge, research, services to community, and teaching), stakeholders directed almost all of their attention on teaching quality and the way professors share their knowledge.

The opening presentation by Mireille Duguay (Executive Director of the MPHEC) likely played a role in the orientation of discussions because she focused on the amendment brought to the law during the 1990s, emphasizing the student:

*The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission Act, SNB 2003 c. M-2.5, art. 11(1):*  
"The Commission shall, in carrying out its duties, give first consideration to improving and maintaining the best possible service to students as lifelong learners..."

The Commission also identified in its strategic plan for 2009 to 2012 the need to collect more data on the quality of education. At present, its monitoring of quality is done through: 1) The assessment of the quality of academic programs when they were created, modified or abolished; and 2) the monitoring of quality assessment programs put in place by the universities. Ms. Duguay brought up the fact that more than half of the sixteen (16) universities didn't have curriculum assessment mechanisms, didn't examine their teaching practices, and didn't assess the level of support they offered to students.

For the data presently collected, see pages 7 to 9 of MPHEC's Multi-Year Business Plan 2009-2010 to 2011-2012 at

[http://www.mphec.ca/resources/Business\\_Plan\\_2009\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.mphec.ca/resources/Business_Plan_2009_Eng.pdf).

### Summary of discussions

Most of the participants believe that data on teaching quality is essential in order to allow students a more informed choice (marketing) and because universities must be held responsible. Some think that this data will allow universities to justify their existence to the public, which they don't do really well at the present time. There still remains some ambiguity as to the definition of quality (is it absolute or relative?), the possibility of having universal standards for extremely diversified programs (e.g. visual arts and engineering), and the relevant indexes (development of critical analysis or access to a job?).

The inability of the statistical data to take into account the complexity and the diversity of situations was also noticed. For example, while we're assuming the students (and their parents) choose an institution because of the employment rate after graduation, numbers reveal that the geographic proximity of the university is actually the determining factor for most. These placement rates can also be confounded by, for example, graduates who decide to volunteer with a development agency. Such students will be considered to have not found a job in their fields, according to these numbers. As for the retention rate, it can reveal how easy or how poor a program is as well as the good quality of teaching and support measures.

A Dalhousie University professor mentioned that even during the current program assessment carried out by the MPHEC, there are no standards as to the minimal amount of professors necessary to execute a program. This lack of standard is particularly problematic during austerity periods, because job cuts (or unfilled vacant jobs) could compromise the validity of the program itself.

In conclusion, there is no consensus regarding the range and the definition of quality indicators. It is for this reason, and in order to take into account all facets of the subject, that the Nova Scotia's representative insisted that these indicators be developed for all groups involved: "All voices must be heard," as she said.

### Comments and suggestions

1- For all voices to be heard, the FNBFA should make sure, along with colleagues of other provinces, that the indicators are not only approved with the support of the administrators but that they're also submitted to the professors' and students' representatives before they are approved.

2- By ignoring this type of consultation meeting, professors' and librarians' unions reinforce the idea that the management of universities belongs to senior administrators and a growing amount of technocrats (middle managers, usually in the field of services to students).

3.- We have to predict increased pressure on faculty due to the teaching assessment forms and the fact that publication of such forms are both imposed on the faculty. Therefore, it would be better that the unions take the lead and negotiate assessment mechanisms that are meaningful and respectful of their members' right to privacy. The FNBFA could play a role in the development of this mechanism.

4.- Participants were ambivalent toward the public dissemination of this data. They fear false interpretation of the information or that the data may be taken out of context. Some suggested leaving it up to each institution while others (a minority) fostered a great deal of transparency. Considering that salaries and performance assessments, among others, are included in this data, the FNBFA must consider the issue and facilitate the establishment of a shared position.

Michèle Caron, vice-president of the FNBFA and delegate to the meeting