

OPINION

Course correction needed at Pallister U

By: Robert Chernomas and Ian Hudson

MANITOBA Court of Queen's Bench Justice Joan McKelvey recently ruled that the Manitoba government's Bill 28, which legislated wage freezes for all public-sector workers, represented "substantial interference" that resulted in unnecessary disruption that harmed the operations of the University of Manitoba.

Unfortunately, the provincial government's disruption and harm to Manitoba universities has been a reliable feature of the summer months. First, the province announced that universities had to come up with a plan to cut 30 per cent of their wage bill. Then it was "only" 10 per cent. Then it was about five per cent (for the U of M).

Most recently, those cuts would be reversed, as long as universities could put together a strategy that satisfied the province's desire to "orient programs toward labour market demands" by September. To this end, the Manitoba government formed the Manitoba economic opportunities advisory board, made up almost exclusively of business representatives, tasked with providing advice on what skills are in demand in the province.

In support of his demand, Premier Brian Pallister claimed that "virtually every academic leader in the country" is on side. This is simply not true. When similar proposals were advanced in Ontario and Alberta, the opposing coalitions not only included faculty on the front lines faced with micro-management of thoughtfully honed curriculum, but also student groups such as the Canadian Federation of Students.

Pallister's statement was also misleading because university administrations — whose budgets depend on provincial funding — can hardly be expected to speak frankly about their disapproval. Finally, the Alberta and Ontario plans have been shelved, at least temporarily. So why did proposals almost identical to Pallister's falter so quickly in two other jurisdictions?

First, it should be noted that universities are already delivering labour-market skills. Manitoba universities follow (and contribute to) the standards established by the national and international university community and professional certifying organizations so that their students can enter graduate programs and qualify for jobs around the world.

Manitoba universities train the vast majority of the province's professionals in health sciences, agriculture, engineering, science, social work, business and education.

Second, the proposal suggests an inappropriately narrow function for universities in a number of ways. The composition of the advisory board would appear to focus

predominantly on the requirements of private/for-profit enterprises. The bias towards the private/for-profit sector ignores the public sector and the not-for-profit sector, which provides an enormous array of vital services which, regrettably, are taken much for granted.

It is only in times of crisis, such as the financial meltdown of 2008, the flood of 2011 and now COVID-19, that some individuals and businesses recognize the importance of the public sector as their only source of critical aid.

The final point on the constraints of the plan is its narrow concept of imparting particular skills for particular occupations. Microsoft president Brad Smith argued that the broader skills of the liberal arts were crucial to the future of artificial intelligence research. Real economic prosperity is highly dependent on basic research and development, and a broad-based education enables students to adapt to a rapidly changing economy.

The role of a university is not only to subsidize firms by training their future workers. Along with labour-market skills must come abilities and values required for a properly functioning democracy, which are especially important in this time of public-health, economic and social crisis. Part of the role of a university is to educate society to participate in a public debate about how to address wide-ranging social questions.

A recent article in the *New York Times* argues these "answers will sooner come from history, philosophy and literature than from drug companies, social media and outer space. Put another way, whom do you trust: Pfizer, Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk, or the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Plato and Jane Austen? It's not a close call."

Last, but by no means least, university independence from the interests of business is crucial. Learning and research that benefit democratic societies sometimes have little direct commercial application. Indeed, they can, in some cases, run counter to short-term business interests.

For example, the policy solutions that are required to combat the environmental crisis and inequality have been opposed by many businesses. The skills necessary to evaluate policies that will effectively combat climate change and the broader economic impact of those policies are not narrow labour-market skills.

The underfunding and narrowing of purpose of Manitoba universities will damage their ability to deliver high-quality education, harming their reputation and, therefore, the ability of their graduates to find employment. The situation has worsened in the short time since a *Free Press* editorial argued Pallister "could cripple academic programs and the future education of students."

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