

## OPINION

### **Pallister undermines university autonomy**

*By: Jim Clark and Scott Forbes*

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Although disturbing, the recent statement by Ralph Eichler, provincial minister of economic development and training, that university funding will be used to "align programming to labour market demands" is not surprising. The first hint of government overreach came when the Progressive Conservatives moved universities out of Education to Eichler's portfolio: under the current government, higher education evidently is subordinated to job training.

Premier Brian Pallister has now created a new Premier's Economic Opportunities Board to execute the new policy. It embraces the job-training perspective of the Horizon 2020 report on post-secondary education. Programs tied directly to work appear more worthy of government support.

But nowhere mentioned by the premier or his minister is the fate of those programs that do not "align" with current government priorities. These programs — especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences — teach essential critical thinking, communication and problem-solving "power skills" that are in such high demand in the workplace. These programs are foundational to any university curriculum. Are they to be left behind, or worse?

Pallister is undermining the university autonomy that is enshrined in the legislation that established our universities. By design, universities across the western world are set up at arm's length to avoid such political interference.

University programs are governed by the University Senate, a body composed of students, faculty and administrators. They represent the diverse interests of the university community and are sensitive to current needs and future challenges that students and society face; and they understand local conditions, such as the interests and aptitudes of students.

Historically, institutional autonomy has faced much resistance. For centuries, external doctrines dictated what scholars could study and teach freely. History shows that when states interfere directly with scholarly independence, they do so to their detriment. Soviet agriculture, for example, was crippled for decades after premier Joseph Stalin eliminated classical biology in favour of a new Marxist-Leninist biology. Evidently crops respond less well to the principles of Marx and Lenin than the principles of natural and artificial selection built into conventional agricultural practice.

It is therefore surprising that our premier chooses to replace university autonomy and student choice with a similar model of central command and control for this key area of

the economy. This approach has been tried from time to time elsewhere, usually incorporating government quotas, five-year plans, and expanded bureaucracies, with limited success.

Institutional autonomy and academic freedom protect society from the harmful consequences of such political interference. It prevents, for example, Pallister from disbanding departments of economics if pesky economists disagree with current government fiscal policy. Importantly, it similarly prevents future governments from disbanding business programs that promulgate conservative philosophy.

Rather than a central bureaucracy to dictate programs, university autonomy has served students and society well. Graduates earn more and are more likely to be employed. Not surprising, since universities have always considered preparation for work an important function along with the aforementioned "power skill" valued in the workplace. But in a rapidly shifting landscape, job-related skills valuable today can become obsolete tomorrow. What universities do best is develop graduates who know how to teach themselves, how to adapt to changing circumstances, and how to develop new skills as needed.

As well as preparing students for life and employment, universities create change by allowing independent research and scholarship that benefits our economy and society. Many emerging job markets and technologies began in university research laboratories, including the Internet that is now an essential utility.

Such benefits did not emerge because politicians knew better what universities should do. They happened because universities were largely free of political intrusion into their activities.

Such benefits of university autonomy demonstrate how misguided Pallister was to claim recently that professors display their "ivory-tower attitude" when they resist universities being subservient to economic needs. He claimed, as one example, that we need more nurses and fewer teachers at the moment. But the province already limits nursing spaces at universities. And faculties of education incorporate government priorities and market realities into their strategic plans.

Critically, students and their families consider job opportunities when they choose programs: that creates market demand. And quite properly, when there is market demand for a program, universities respond to it.

Pallister's recent statements show he does not understand what universities do; what the proper relationship between government and university is (arm's-length); and why university autonomy is important.

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