

# UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA Faculty Association

## Austerity and Manitoba Universities: the view from the Ivory Tower

May 29, 2020

In his latest assault on post-secondary education, Brian Pallister has offered to restore university funding to its original levels, which was one percent below the previous year's levels. However, that funding is not in the form of an operating grant: it is a fund that universities must apply to, based on their proposals meeting the whims of this government.

Pallister dismisses the objections of faculty associations to the provincial government funding cuts, stating these objections were made from our "ivory tower". He asserts that "virtually every academic leader in the country is on board with this philosophy" of aligning post-secondary programs with labour market needs and priorities.

While true that many university presidents, including our own, have failed to raise objections to this continued incursion on the autonomy of our universities, it is naïve of Pallister to believe that their silence indicates compliance, much less agreement. It is far more telling to seek the advice of past university leaders, who are not facing the repercussions from politicians seeking to score points in the polls.

Faculty members do not live in an ivory tower. We are in classrooms, research laboratories, and libraries, and work with our students every day. We understand their goals, their challenges and their struggles. We know the value of the education we provide, and want secure, multi-year funding that will allow our institutions to provide the resources students need to succeed, hold enough sections of courses to allow them to meet their goals, with appropriate class sizes to educate them properly, in facilities that meet health, safety and accessibility standards. We conduct basic and applied research of value to society, and train future generations of students to continue in our footsteps.

We have also seen the folly of adopting "flavour of the month" programs to chase some emerging market need, which invariably follow a similar pattern. An opportunity emerges in the market, often identified and serviced by well-educated, hardworking individuals. As that market matures, expensive niche programs are developed to serve that particular labour market opportunity. Students flood into that program-some get jobs, but others find themselves with overly narrow training entering into a now mature field where supply exceeds demand.

This does not mean that universities do not adapt. They do: courses are continually adapted, new courses and programs are developed. This is a careful process, overseen by the university Senate, and approved by the Board of Governors (or equivalent). As Eموke Szathmary, past president of the University of Manitoba, said in provincial government hearings in 1996 about changes to the University of Manitoba Act:

"What I would like to bring to the committee's attention is the phrase in Clause 3.2 that needs removal from Bill 32 to be consistent with the minister's intention, to leave academic policy

within the jurisdiction of colleges and university boards and senates as defined in their own pieces of legislation and not to micromanage the universities”(Second session, 36<sup>th</sup> session of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, Standing Committee on Law Amendments, October 31, 1996, Page 844).

Universities are structured by legislation to govern themselves prudently. As noted in the University of Manitoba act, it is the role of the university to:

- a) establish and maintain such colleges, schools, institutes, faculties, departments, chairs, and courses of instruction as to the board of governors may seem meet and give instruction and training in all branches of knowledge and learning, including physical instruction and training;
- b) grant degrees, including honorary degrees, diplomas and certificates of proficiency;
- c) provide facilities for the prosecution of original research in every branch of knowledge and learning and conduct and carry on such research work; and
- d) generally promote and carry on the work of a university in all its branches.

This is done through a system of bicameral governance: The Senate, a large body with wide representation from student associations, faculty, and administration has “general charge of all matters of academic character”. The Board of Governors, with input from Senate, determines upon and provide for the establishment of, or the abolition of, or any changes in faculties or departments. The Board of Governors consists of 23 members, the majority of whom are appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council. It is reasonable to assume that these individuals, chosen by the government, share most of the government values. Through this lens, they have a duty to do what they believe is in the best interests of the University and its stakeholders. Any government in power, concerned with the short-term necessity of being re-elected does not need, and should not have, greater influence than that.

Instead of diminishing public institutions vital to the economic and social fabric of the province, the government must increase University funding and autonomy. (Manitoba Organization of Faculty Associations: see <http://mofa-fapum.mb.ca/issues/mofa-demands-accountability-investment-in-pse/>).

The members of the legislature, and we, need to understand what the funding cuts have meant to the quality of education we can offer our students, and how UMFA members have been spending their time during the pandemic to continue their teaching and research, and what resources we need. Please contact your MLAs, and please copy us at [umfa-communications@umfa.ca](mailto:umfa-communications@umfa.ca). The addresses of our MLAs are below:

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