



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

April 30, 2020

Austerity Agendas, COVID and Universities: an inside view

As I write this, the University of Manitoba and all other post-secondary institutions are desperately working to meet the Pallister governments edicts, issued last week, to make plans to reduce their annual budgeted salaries by 10 per cent and to realize those savings within four months. They were also to envision plans for cuts of 20 per cent and 30 per cent. This was to be done within seven days, with consultation with unions. The government suggested that workers adopt two day work weeks, and make use of the federal government workshare program to obtain EI level benefits for the other three. This ignores the fact that the program is neither designed nor approved for this purpose.

The problems with this scheme are obvious. It seemed the essential goal was to extract needed funds for the COVID battle from the federal government rather than increase the provincial deficit. For most taxpayers, it makes little difference which level of government holds the debt: we pay taxes to, and bear the costs of debt of all government levels. Instead, it appears that this is a costly and painful vanity project to allow Pallister to meet his self-imposed most important performance metric of keeping the provincial debt “under control”.

There are at least three reasons why this course of action is so costly. First, it is well established that austerity measures such as these are enormously detrimental in a crisis

like this and the recession likely to follow. In European countries following the 2008 financial crisis, every dollar reduction in deficits through cuts in spending on post-secondary education and other government responsibilities reduced GDP by \$1.70 (see Link: “Austerity is the Wrong Path for Manitoba during coronavirus pandemic”)

Secondly, from a human perspective, we all understand that affordable access to post-secondary education is necessary to have a well-functioning society that provides opportunities for all its citizens to prosper. We are already distressingly distant from that vision - to move it further away from the people of this province in this time of crisis is irresponsible.

Finally, we must ensure that our labour force is positioned for the needs of the country. The Canadian Occupation Projection System projects there will be 1.4 million new jobs by 2028, 89% of which will require post-secondary education. If the post-secondary education system is gutted, we deprive people of good jobs and deprive consumers of those goods and services, creating a downward economic spiral.

If this plan goes ahead, how will universities look in the fall? As President of the University of Manitoba Faculty Association for the last three years, I have had the opportunity to hear from members all over campus.

there is an alternative.

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For years we have seen a gradual erosion in the quality of our institution in many respects. Classes are larger. More classes are “cross-listed”; that is, undergraduate students and graduate students take essentially the same course rather than courses tailored for their level. Far more courses are delivered by overworked and underpaid casual academic staff. Our members spend far more of their time performing administrative tasks that used to be done by support staff. Support staff in turn are demoralized and overworked: turnover is high, and stress leaves seem more common. In my own department, we had three full time support staff when I started. In recent years, there have been as few as one. In the past decade or so, the department office administrator position has turned over six times by my count.

As students bear a greater proportion of the cost of their education, their stress levels are higher, their performance is lower, and the time and ultimate cost of their education increases.

These problems will loom larger in September. It is likely that many of the youth in the province will be unemployed or underemployed. They, and workers of all ages in similar circumstances, will need post-secondary institutions more than ever: to keep them busy, to enhance their human capital, and to give them hope. They will need our existing programs to be available. Those programs may require modification to alternative delivery if social distancing continues: while post-secondary workers made heroic efforts to adapt “on the fly” for the last half of their winter courses, they will need to do this for entire courses, for courses that have not yet been adapted as they were not offered, and will likely want to make improvements. And perhaps entire new courses or even programs, such as shorter extended education or certificate programs will be necessary to help people re-tool and adapt to new circumstances, challenges and opportunities.

I fear our post-secondary institutions will not be able to meet this challenge if the Pallister government continues its wrongheaded course. If staff are

furloughed throughout the summer, none of these changes will take place. Neither will the core activities of research and service and summer teaching: all will grind to a halt.

It is fortunate for the rest of Canada that our government appears to be alone in this course of action. Luckily for other provinces such as Ontario and British Columbia, their governments are increasing funding for their post-secondary institutions. Unluckily for us, this will worsen the impact in Manitoba.

If research programs are halted, graduate students will likely have to leave. Their professors may soon follow. Due to years of lower revenues, and in some cases choices made by university administrations, salaries at Manitoba universities are among the lowest in the country. We have already lost many talented people, and failed searches are common. Many faculty are looking for jobs elsewhere as we speak, and our chances of attracting faculty are low. It is not just the draconian cutbacks that are motivating this: it is knowing that this is the government that the majority of citizens voted for, this is how this government operates, and this is how little the administrators of these institutions push back. To change their minds, the people of Manitoba will need to speak out, pressure this government, and vote differently next time. Otherwise it may be many years before our post-secondary institutions recover.

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References available upon request.