

Micromanagement? You be the Judge

“The gist of the mandate letter is ‘you figure it out ... I’m not going to micromanage schools’”, Government of Alberta Department of Enterprise and Advanced Education (EAE) Minister Thomas Lukaszuk is quoted as saying in the *Edmonton Journal*, in its April 9, 2013 issue. This statement was made by the Minister in relation to the draft “letters of expectation” published on the EAE Ministry Web site:

<http://eae.alberta.ca/post-secondary/letters-of-expectation.aspx>

These (draft) letters of expectation, which are now being characterized as “letters of understanding”, as reported in the *Calgary Herald* on April 12, 2013, are intended by the Minister to be agreed to by Alberta’s twenty-six post-secondary educational institutions (PSEs). The purpose of these letters, if/when signed by the Minister and the PSEs, is to allow for “additional direction (to be) provided by the Minister” (quoted from the draft letters), in relation to the PSEs’ activities.

At first glance, it might seem reassuring and a commitment (given the Minister’s quote, above) that “direction” by the Minister would be broad and innocuous, not getting into detail of institutions’ operations. However, recent history at, for example, the University of Lethbridge, gives some pause for any such reassurance, because that institution has been dealing with increasing intrusiveness on the part of the Ministry, with respect to basic University operations, in providing timely, relevant programming to students. Furthermore, the University of Lethbridge experience in this regard is not unique, relative to PSEs in Alberta.

As is well known, individuals who leave high school to become students and pursue higher education at universities, or who transfer to universities in Alberta from other PSEs (in our province, or from other provinces in Canada) seek to graduate with a baccalaureate degree, in the first instance. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for universities in Alberta to offer changes to their degree programmes, or to introduce new degree programmes which are of interest to students and society. A number of examples which follow serve to illustrate the nature of this problem.

In 2005, the University of Lethbridge had the opportunity to build increased capacity in the field of remote sensing. This is a discipline which involves the development and use of sensitive detectors, often on aircraft, or on satellites orbiting the earth. The data collected by these detectors is processed and used for numerous applications in agriculture, natural resource exploration and extraction, and environmental monitoring, to name a few. The University has had a lot of success in this area, a graduate from this discipline having founded the local company, Blackbridge Geomatics Inc., which has become an internationally known and respected organization in the professional remote sensing community.

For the purposes of capacity building in remote sensing at the University, we successfully recruited two of the top scientists from the Canadian Centre for Remote Sensing (CCRS), a unit within the Government of Canada Department of Natural Resources (NRCan). These scientists commenced their appointments at the University in 2006. At the same time, University curriculum procedures sought to explicitly introduce a separate degree, the B.Sc. degree in remote sensing. Formerly, this area had been a sub-discipline, and accommodated through the B.Sc. degree in geography. In structuring the new remote sensing degree, a composite of thirty-nine courses (which were already being offered at the University) was assembled, along with the creation of one new course. These forty courses constituted the structure of the new B.Sc. degree in remote sensing. Academic approval (within the University) for the new programme was completed in late 2006. However, the University

was not permitted to offer this programme at that time, since the Ministry required that the programme be submitted to the Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC), a body created by the Government of Alberta under the provisions of the Post-Secondary Learning Act (PSLA). Once reviewed by the CAQC, that body would then make a recommendation to the Minister as to whether the programme could be offered by the University. Final approval for the B.Sc. degree in remote sensing was received by the University in November, 2009, and the Ministry-approved programme first appeared in the University Calendar (the prospectus containing all academic programmes) in Spring, 2010. Thus, almost four years later, students were now able to enroll in this new programme, despite the University having been in a position to offer the same quality programme since 2006.

The above example is not unique, and is described in some detail to give an impression of the nature of the bureaucratic processes with which universities are faced, even when making minor changes to programme offerings, which are of major benefit to students, society and future generations. Two other cases serve to illustrate that the above example is not an isolated case.

In 2005, the University submitted a proposal for B.A. and B.Sc. degrees in Rural and Urban Planning and Design to CAQC. This programme did not receive Ministry approval until Spring, 2008, and it was not possible to include this in the University Calendar until Spring, 2009. However, it has not been possible to offer this programme, since additional funding to support it was committed to the University, and was then cancelled by the Government of Alberta. Similarly, a B.Sc. in statistics proposal (which required no new funding) was submitted for approval through the CAQC process in January 2010, and has not yet been approved. This, despite all courses for this programme already being offered at the University, and at least twenty faculty members being available to teach the various programme courses. With major numbers of statistics professionals retiring from Statistics Canada over the next several years, we are likely to see significant labour market shortages in this field, yet the development of academic programming and training which could assist in addressing this kind of issue is being stymied.

The delay in programme approval through the current system illustrated above is now becoming even more intractable. Within the past year, the Ministry has directed that any degree programme for which the University seeks even minor changes must first be submitted to CAQC and from thence to the Ministry for approval of such changes. It is thus becoming increasingly difficult for universities (and colleges, which are subject to CAQC, as well) to maintain the relevance of their programmes for students, since delays in implementing such programme changes, or the offering of new programmes, pending Ministry approval, can take years.

The Minister of EAE has assured the public that he is “not going to micromanage schools”, under new proposals currently in process, relating to the letters of understanding. However, the evidence does not support this claim. The Alberta PSE system is already subject to a draconian form of micromanagement, and the introduction of the letters of understanding are likely to make this even worse, as PSEs are subjected to “additional direction ... by the Minister”.

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April 12, 2013.*