Seeking to fix higher education

Carol Goar

Bahram Bekhradnia has a disarming smile and a droll turn of phrase that takes the sting out of what he says.

But the director of Britain's Higher Education Policy Institute has a serious message for educators and policymakers in Ontario. They risk losing something irreplaceable in their quest to build an economically productive, globally competitive university system — the spirit of inquiry that drives social change.

"One of my great regrets is that we (academics) are seldom asked to be the conscience of society, to challenge orthodoxy and conventional wisdom," he told fellow delegates at a conference on the future of Ontario's universities, convened last week by the University of Toronto. "Perhaps it's just taken for granted, but I do worry that there's something sinister in the omission."

To take the edge off his words, Bekhradnia added a whimsical suggestion. "I don't know of a single country that doesn't aspire to be a knowledge economy," he noted. "There may be a market niche in aspiring *not* to be a knowledge economy."

The delegates chuckled politely. With just seven weeks left until former premier Bob Rae releases his blueprint to restructure Ontario's post-secondary education system, they had little time for frivolity.

But is it frivolous to ask searching questions about the commodification of higher education? Is it fanciful, in this era of hard-driving mercantilism, to expect universities to challenge the status quo?

Rae certainly has the latitude to consider such matters. Premier Dalton McGuinty has made it clear he wants strategies that promote both excellence and affordability in the post-secondary sector.

But virtually all of the discussion, to date, has centred on money.

Educators have lined up at microphones across the province to plead for more government funding. Students have called for a cap on tuition fees. Economists have debated the pros and cons of income-contingent loans (which graduates repay, through the tax system, once their earnings reach a certain threshold). Demographers have warned that the financial pressures will continue to build.

So it was at "Taking Public Universities Seriously," the conference organized by the University of Toronto.

Speaker after speaker reminded delegates that Ontario's per-student operating grants are the lowest in Canada; that its tuition fees are the second highest in the country; that its student loan system is inadequate and inequitable; and that education is losing ground to health care in the battle for public funds.

Delegates debated whether post-secondary education is a public good to be financed chiefly by the state, or a private benefit to be paid for largely by the individual.

They explored the possibility of letting universities set their own tuition fees, provided no student who meets their entry criteria is turned away for lack of funds.

They talked about recruiting more foreign students, soliciting more private donations and commercializing more scientific research.

They toyed with various schemes to link a university's government funding to its performance.

There were fleeting references to the importance of stimulating young minds, but most speakers took for granted that, when money is short, producing well-trained, readily employable graduates takes precedence.

Bekhradnia had seen it all before.

In 1997, a newly elected Prime Minister Tony Blair introduced tuition fees, claiming that Britain's universities were underfunded, uncompetitive with their American counterparts and not doing a good enough job of tooling up workers for the global economy. He brought in a scheme of income-contingent loans. He launched an aggressive campaign to boost the post-secondary participation rate.

The first thing that happened, Bekhradnia said, was that enrolment grew faster than revenues, creating a cash shortfall the government could not close. Blair had to go back to Parliament this year with legislation to almost triple tuition. It split his party and nearly brought down his government.

The second thing that happened was that Britain's university system became even more hierarchical than it had already been. A handful of elite institutions received the lion's share of research grants. Mainstream universities became more strategic, trying to attract specific groups of students such as part-timers, business executives seeking to upgrade their skills, science majors and aspiring actors. Some smaller schools withered.

The third thing that happened was that universities started loading up on full-fare-paying international students as "cash cows."

Finally, Bekhradnia said, institutions of higher learning accepted their role as producers of trained graduates and applied research.

The dapper Englishman had no handy tips for avoiding these pitfalls. He is not even sure they are avoidable.

He merely reminded his Canadian colleagues that a nation's education system is more than a repository of marketable knowledge.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.