

# HOW BIG SHOULD OUR UNIVERSITIES BE?

DESMOND PACEY\*

FOR the past four years Canadian universities have been literally filled to the rafters. Swollen by large numbers of veteran students, total enrolment figures have doubled, tripled, even quadrupled. The expansion has affected all universities, those in the East and those in the West, the small institutions and the large. Now the flood is showing signs of abating; many of the veteran students have graduated or are nearing graduation; and university authorities can catch their collective breaths and consider for a change not what is the maximum number of students they can accommodate but what number they can serve best.

Veteran students began to trickle out of the services and into the universities in the fall of 1944, but the real flood began in the fall of 1945. The end of hostilities in Europe was quickly and surprisingly followed by the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and the end of the Pacific war; the government made special arrangements for the early discharge of men and women qualified to enter college; and far sooner than they had expected the universities were besieged with applications for admission.

There is general agreement that the universities responded splendidly to this challenge. All qualified students were accepted, and everything was done to see that they suffered as little as possible from overcrowding and emergency facilities. Army camps were taken over and converted into residences and lecture-rooms. All sorts of buildings were adapted to serve as auxiliary university plants: factories, churches, gymnasiums, auditoriums, private houses. New instructors were engaged. Graduate students were pressed into service as demonstrators, tutors, seminar leaders. Retired professors returned to take their turns again in the class-room. Public address systems were installed to enable professors to lecture audibly to students thronged together in groups of hundreds, even occasionally of thousands. The university year was re-arranged to permit students to enter three times a year instead of once, and lectures were carried on for twelve months of the year instead of the usual eight or nine.

\*Professor of English in the University of New Brunswick.

But this sudden transformation was not effected without strain or loss. The army camps were not always well adapted to serve as residences: the thin partitions did not keep out noise, and students found it hard to concentrate on their books. Heating facilities were often not of the best, and living-room and lecture-rooms were cold and draughty. Many of the new instructors were not properly qualified—there just weren't enough properly qualified men or women to go round—and complaints were heard that the level of teaching had fallen. Graduate students, torn between the demands of their own studies and those of their students, often did not do either of them full justice. Retired professors sometimes had not the stamina to withstand the strain of lecturing, and died prematurely as a result. Students complained of the mass-production methods of the public address systems, disliked the anonymity of this new kind of educational process. Professors and administrators, suddenly asked to carry loads far beyond their normal expectations, often grew tense and anxious and consequently irritable.

In other words, though the university authorities were glad to cooperate in a national emergency, and though students for the most part accepted the makeshift conditions good-naturedly, there was general agreement that our universities suffered, during these years, from over-expansion. You cannot expect a university to triple in size in the space of a few months and maintain its previous standards of efficiency.

What of the future? Three paths are open to our universities. In the first place, they could seek to hold their enrolments at or near their present levels. Secondly, they could arrive at an estimate of the number of students they could serve to best advantage, and restrict their enrolment to that figure. Thirdly, they could adopt a laissez-faire attitude, and allow their registration to find its "natural" level in accordance with the so-called law of supply and demand.

Each of these alternatives has something to be said for it. Even to-day, the proportion of university trained citizens in Canada is far below that in the United States, and there is little evidence to suggest that this country suffers from a surplus of trained personnel. It is probable that Canada could support all the graduates of our universities even if present high enrolments were maintained. This choice might involve us in a more positive and creative exploitation of our economic, social, and cultural resources than we have so far displayed, but

that in itself would be a desirable thing. If we are properly to conserve our forest wealth, we need far more graduate foresters than we were turning out in the thirties; if we are to have a proper national health plan we certainly need more doctors than our medical schools have been producing; and if we are to have a social and cultural life worthy of a modern civilized community we certainly need more trained social workers, librarians, teachers, musicians, writers and artists.

To maintain our university population at its present level, however, would demand a creative, long-term national educational policy. Emergency measures such as have served us during the past four years will not do for the long pull. The present D.V.A. scheme for the payment of the university fees of veterans would have to be continued in some form for the benefit of all students. Under present conditions, there simply are not enough parents who can afford to send their children to college. It is probable, too, that some other form of federal help would be needed by the universities: grants for the erection of new, permanent buildings and for the purchase of laboratory equipment and other necessary supplies, scholarships and fellowships for the encouragement of research and advanced study, subventions for extension work in the surrounding communities.

But even if we were to grant that the total enrolment of all our universities together should be kept at its present level and that we were likely as a country to have the vision and determination to take the necessary steps to bring this about, the individual university would still be left with the problem of deciding what its own best size should be. A university might well feel that although the national level should be maintained, its own level should be deliberately lowered or restricted. Some self-examination upon the part of each university would seem far superior to the third alternative suggested above, that of letting the enrolment take its own course. A university can effectively provide for its future only if it has to some extent planned that future.

How big should a university be? No precise, universally valid answer is possible. There are so many variable factors involved that each university would have to be considered separately. To give some examples of these variable factors, let us look at a few representative institutions in this country. Our largest university, Toronto, is situated in a large metropolitan area and is the state university of our most populous

province. It has four Arts colleges, and literally dozens of faculties, schools, institutes, and diploma courses. Its present total enrolment of 17,000 may, as its Chancellor, the Right Honourable Vincent Massey, recently suggested, be too large; but it obviously can stand to be much larger than an institution such as the University of Bishop's College. Bishop's is situated in a small town in a predominantly French-speaking province, and its aim is to give a thorough liberal arts training to a relatively small number of students. For that purpose, its present enrolment of a few hundred is an ideal figure. To choose another example, it is clear that McGill, situated in the metropolis of Montreal, can reasonably support a larger registration than, say, Mount Allison or Acadia, which are situated in small Maritime towns and cater primarily to the needs of their religious denominations in that area.

But if it is impossible to give any precise answer to this question, it is, I believe, possible to establish certain general principles in terms of which the question can be profitably discussed. Such a discussion must be based upon the needs of the three groups who are directly affected by the size of our universities: the students, the faculty, and the community.

If it is to serve the welfare of its students most effectively a university must be small enough to guarantee them some measure of individual instruction and attention, and large enough to guarantee them the possibility of participation in a well-rounded curricular and extra-curricular programme. It is not here a matter of absolute but rather of relative numbers. A university of five thousand students can give as much individual attention to its students as a university of five hundred—if the former has a faculty ten times as large as the latter. One professor to every five students would probably be the ideal proportion (since each student would take an average of five courses per year this would give an average class of twenty-five students); one professor to every twelve students is probably nearer the Canadian average; any higher proportion is certainly unfair to student and professor alike.

It is in the matter of a well-rounded curricular and extra-curricular programme that the large university has most to offer the student. It is usually not financially practicable for the small university to attempt the variety of courses offered in the large institutions, and facilities for recreation such as are afforded by Toronto's Hart House are very rare in our smaller universities. If the small university is to be fair to its

students, it must do everything possible to diversify its academic programme and to provide, on a smaller but proportionately adequate scale, opportunities for athletics, dramatics, debating, and the other extra-curricular activities that make up so large a part of a full university education.

If the best interests of the faculty are to be served, a university must be big enough to provide the professor with a diverse and balanced group of colleagues and to pay him an adequate salary, but small enough to permit him to develop and maintain a strongly personal relationship with his students.

The university or college which is so small that it can retain on its faculty only one man in each department is at a serious disadvantage. The sole professor of history, for example, will then be compelled to lecture on ancient, medieval, and modern history; he will be expected to be as familiar with Renaissance Venice as with modern America. This means that he will have to spend so much time acquiring and retaining the rudiments of knowledge about all these periods and places that he will never be able to develop a specialized knowledge of any one of them. Having no specialized knowledge, he will be at best an "inspirational" but poorly informed lecturer, and at worst a mere hack, a regurgitator of second-hand opinions. (There have been, and are, of course, conspicuous exceptions to this rule, but the general tendency cannot be denied). Moreover, this unfortunate individual will be deprived of the stimulation that results from the discussion of ideas with someone trained in the same discipline. Above all, only one limited point of view on the subject will be available in that university. Hence, a university should be sufficiently large to permit the retention of at least two qualified professors in each of the major departments of study.

This thirst for colleagues partly accounts for the drift of Canadian professors from the small universities to the large. The other factor, of course, is salary. As long as the larger universities pay markedly higher salaries to their staffs, so long will the small universities have difficulty in retaining first-class men. There is really no good reason why the professor in the small university should be paid less. Some slight difference might be acceptable since living costs are usually lower in the smaller centres, but there is no other reasonable explanation. The professor in the small university usually works longer hours, takes a greater personal interest in his students' individual problems, and carries a heavier load of extra-curric-

ular responsibilities. Universities are not like baseball or hockey clubs, which can be organized into major and minor leagues. Each student everywhere in Canada deserves the very best instruction, and if the small universities are to provide it, they will have to raise their salaries. If university education in this country is to thrive, we must get rid of our national tendency to regard the smaller universities as training-grounds for the staffs of the large ones.

The professor in the small university has, however, one very real advantage over his colleagues in the large ones: he knows his students as individuals, and they in turn know him. If any university is permitted to expand to the point where its professors know its students simply as names on a class register or numbers in a seating arrangement, then it has grown too large. Either the size of its faculty must be increased, or that of its student body restricted, until the personal relationship is once more possible. For the personal relationship of teacher and taught is the very core of the educational process in a democratic community.

This brings us to the needs of the community as they bear upon this question of the optimum size of a university. The university should be large enough to provide a sustained flow of trained personnel that will serve to maintain and expand the present level of social welfare. It should be large enough to absorb all the young people of that community who are equipped to benefit from the special type of training that a university provides. On the other hand, it should not be permitted to grow to the point where (i) its support is beyond the financial resources of the community or (ii) it drains off people who would be better employed elsewhere.

Each of these large generalizations, of course, begs many questions; each demands qualification and analysis. We have space here only for a brief preliminary analysis of a very complicated subject. For example, the needs for trained personnel will vary as our national life varies; the future of our universities is bound up with the future of our country. If we are to go forward, as a nation, towards the goal of full social security for all, with all that that implies of health and allied services; if we are to develop the life of our people to the point where libraries and community centres and other cultural facilities are within the reach of all—if we are to do these things, our universities must and will expand both in quantity and quality. If, however, we are to be satisfied with the *status*

*quo*, and still more if we permit ourselves to slide back into the trough of the early thirties, then our universities are probably too large already. Disgruntled intellectuals are notoriously dangerous characters.

How are we to decide which of our young people are equipped to benefit from a university education? If there is to be restriction, on what grounds is the restriction to be made? Not, certainly, on the basis of class, creed, colour, race, religion, or the ability to pay, but on the single ground of intellectual capacity and aptitude. By scholarships, loans, bursaries and the like we should see to it that every student who has the ability to make a strong showing on the annual matriculation examinations is afforded the opportunity of attending university. Once he is in university, his record should be closely watched, and if he shows lack of capacity or aptitude at any point during his course he should be ordered to leave.

For certainly the growth of our university population must be consciously controlled. If it expands too rapidly or too far we may find ourselves resorting again to the makeshifts of the last four years, and universities cannot survive such strains for long or frequent periods. The quality, not the quantity, of our universities must be our primary consideration. We should allow them to expand only so far as we are willing and able to maintain them at a high level of efficiency. This efficiency must apply equally to their physical and human resources. The finest equipment, the most highly trained staffs, and the keenest students—these are the things that matter, far more than the numbers enrolled.

Canadian universities have a long record of achievement behind them, they are just emerging triumphantly from a period of great strain, and they have earned the admiration of us all. Let us see to it that their standards are maintained, and let us be very careful not to sacrifice these standards for the sake of mere "bigness". On the other hand, let us see to it that "smallness" does not become a synonym for inadequacy. Big or small, let us be sure that they are good.