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Dr. Tim O'Neill's recent Report on the University System in Nova Scotia operates from an assumption - that universities in Nova Scotia are a problem that needs fixing.

Certainly some universities have found themselves in severe economic straights as a result of decisions made by past administrations. But these institutions are dealing with those problems. And others - like MSVU and CBU - have cut and pared to keep themselves lean, while mounting aggressive recruitment campaigns.

Nonetheless, Dr. O'Neill set about fixing those "problems". In his book, this means cutting money from a system that is a prime economic engine in this province. It means raising tuitions. It means throwing up our hands in the face of declining Canadian enrolments.

Universities are big business in our province. Their economic output is over \$2 billion per year. They employ nearly 14,000 people and generate annual tax revenues of \$227 million.

Unfortunately, the report contains no discussion of the economic impact of the cuts Dr. O'Neill recommends. Does he think jobs lost in small university towns will have no impact?

The report contains no recommendation that this province insist the federal government change its post-secondary funding formula from per-capita to per-student funding. Since Nova Scotia is a net importer of students, we're currently penalized for our academic success. Dr. O'Neill completely misses that point.

The study recommends we remove any cap on tuition fees -- just as the numbers of potential students in Canada begin to decline. Instead of looking at ways to help universities continue to attract students from around the world, Dr. O'Neill recommends we handicap our universities as they recruit - that we price ourselves out of the game.

The report does recommend we increase aid to students - which is a good move, since our students currently carry the highest debt loads in the country. But, as Dr. O'Neill made clear in a pre-report briefing, this aid would be limited to students who are in the lowest income bracket. No information is provided to indicate what "low income" means, or how much aid will be forthcoming.

The report conveniently avoids the example of Newfoundland, which has kept young Newfoundlanders at home by keeping tuition low and debt minimal. Nova Scotians are flocking to Memorial University in record numbers for the simple reason that tuition is thousands of dollars cheaper than here at home.

The report proposes to "Remove the creation of a University of Halifax from consideration, at least over the next five years". In fact, it does nothing of the sort. Mentioning a five year limit to the status quo actually revives the spectre of merger. Leaving that option hanging has cast a cloud over the smaller

universities in HRM and hampers their ability to raise money among donors and alumni in the short term.

This effect of this report commissioned by the NDP will be to shrink our universities, not to grow them, and certainly not to boost our economy. These recommendations will, if implemented, reduce our universities' ability to compete for students.

The government must repudiate these recommendations or risk damaging a vital sector of our economy - and our future. And it must go after the federal government to stop penalizing Nova Scotia for attracting students.

If we are (as this government likes to claim) "Canada's Education Province", then we should act like it.

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