editorial

Is this the beginning of the end?

The crunch is on for university finances across Canada. Students at the Universite de Moncton are taking to the streets to make their concerns known, although even they are probably less than optimistic about what they will accomplish.

The problem seems to be that a period of declining enrollments in universities has been projected at about the same time that governments are faced with severe financial difficulties. This gives governments, which are the major source of funds for post-secondary institutions in this country, a very handy excuse to cut funds in the educational sector and take some pressure off other areas where it is less easy to convince the general public that cutbacks are in order.

When we say convenient, of course, we mean convenient to politicians and bureaucrats who are frantically looking for areas to cut spending to satisfy public demands for more efficient, less costly government.

Although there is no referendum law in New Brunswick or Canada (yet - anyway), politicians were much affected by the outcome of the infamous Proposition 13 referendum in California and want to at least give the appearance of controlling expenditures so that there will not be a repeat of that disastrous vote in this country.

Never mind that the poorest people in California will be hardest hit by the vote to drastically cut taxes, and never mind that it was the bureaucrats and politicians themselves who caused the tax revolt.

The fact is, that a move to eject a bunch of rabid tax cutters could have drastic social and economic effects in this country. The problem remains, however, that universities are feeling the crunch.

There is talk of cutting staff, and, in some quarters, even preferring younger and less experienced staff and faculty, since they would demand less money.

It would seem as well that the recommendations by university administrations are usually to cut back on faculty without paying too much attention to problems within the administration itself.

Faculty have reacted, in some cases, by forming labor unions in an attempt to, protect their deteriorating economic positions since administrations, apparently, are looking out for their own necks.

It has been pointed out that cutbacks in grants to universities, which lead to higher tuitions, which in turn lead to higher fees, causing less students to come to university, causing an even smaller government grant - a vicious circle.

The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that unlike the 1950's and 1960's, it now seems that students are not willing to take the advantage of a university education for granted, and will no longer make excessive sacrifices of their lifestyles or go into debt to fund their educations when they can go to community college at much more reasonable rates.

The question boils down to one of quality. As University of New Brunswick president Dr. John Anderson has said in the past, it take money to provide a quality education and to attract students. This means grants to universities large enough to at least keep up with inflation, and it means a generous student aid program to make it possible to keep student enrolments up when the summer job situation is tight.

Students might as well forget about the dream of free tuition in the near future.

Universities are taking holding actions right now, until later on in the 1980's when enrolments are supposed to pick up again. In the meantime, they have to do all they can to make sure there is still something here when the enrolments do pick up again, and, hopefully, governments will be a little more free with the money.

It would be disastrous to allow a decline in the quality of education not to mention research activities carried on here at this point.

We wish the Moncton students luck in their efforts. We will all need it.