

# Budget Does Little To Promote Accessibility

According to figures recently published by Human Resources Development Canada, the unemployment rate for university graduates who were available for work in the New Brunswick labour force rose last year, but by less than one-third of one per cent, to only 3.6 per cent. On the other hand, the average unemployment rate for workforce participants from all other educational backgrounds stubbornly remained at more than 10.5 per cent.

For decades the majority of economists, demographers, and social policy analysts, taking into account that a certain portion of the available labour force will always be temporarily sidelined (owing, for example, to illnesses, layoffs, or resignations) have agreed that a three per cent level of unemployment can be considered, for all intents and purposes, to be “full employment”.

In fact, with the rapid growth of technology, the vast reduction in recent years in the length of working relationships between employers and employees, and the resulting transitory nature of much of the workforce, some of the experts now even postulate an unemployment rate of as much as four per cent as the true measure of full employment.

In this setting, university graduates in New Brunswick are doing extremely well, relatively speaking, when it comes to finding gainful employment. As a result, the vast majority of them quickly become the young taxpayers upon whom the aging population of this fair province is becoming increasingly dependent.

The “National Occupational Classification” for Canada has four different skill categories. Category “A” includes “occupations requiring a university diploma (bachelor’s, master’s or doctorate)”.

Again according to recently-published HRDC figures, in 2003 the members of this category - perhaps not surprisingly - commanded, on average, the highest earnings.

What may come as a surprise, though, is the magnitude of the disparity between their earnings and those of their counterparts in the next-highest earning bracket. This category (“B”) encompasses

“occupations requiring two or three years of post-secondary studies in a community college or institute of technology; or a two-to-four-year apprenticeship; or two to four years of secondary studies and more than two years of on-the-job training, outside training courses or specific work experience”.

The average earnings of a member of category “A” in 2003 were a whopping 45 per cent higher than those of a member of category “B”. Consequently, there was a corresponding increase in the contributions of university graduates to the tax rolls as well. Surely, then, we should be doing everything we can to ensure that our universities continue to be accessible to all who wish, and are qualified, to attend them.

However, to be accessible, they must first, of course, be affordable.

The Lord government’s recent provincial Budget, therefore, leaves much to be desired in its potential for the attainment of this goal.

Yes, Finance Minister Volpé promised that, ultimately, the full “13 per cent over four years” in operating funding promised by Premier Lord in May, 2003 would still be forthcoming. Nevertheless, M. Volpé gave only a two per cent increase for fiscal 2004-2005, instead of the increase of the order of more than three per cent - similar to that given in 2003-2004, the first year - which the universities not only had expected, but upon which they had predicated their own short-term budgetary projections.

Undoubtedly, the result of this will be even larger tuition fee increases than may otherwise have been imposed; and this will certainly hinder, rather than promote, university accessibility.

Despite the assurances of government that all the promised funding eventually will be forthcoming, unfortunately most of today’s bills have to be paid with hard cash and not with promises, no matter how reliable the latter may be.

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