

## **Universities Hope For Sustained Funding Breeze**

If its recent Budget is anything to go by, at long last the province of New Brunswick has a government which is willing to acknowledge, with tangible financial resources rather than mere lip-service, the notion that its universities are critically important to its future economic success.

Since 1976 the demand in the full-time labour force for university graduates has doubled for both males and females, and has continued to grow exponentially. One out of every four jobs created between 1999 and 2004, whether full-time or part-time, will require a university degree.

Even after allowing for inflation, university tuition fees are now twice what they were only 10 years ago, as a corresponding shortfall of government funding has been thrust onto the pocketbooks of half a generation of hapless students and, in many cases, their parents.

Consequently, the announcement in Tuesday's Budget that there will be an overall increase in the coming fiscal year of 3.4% in the basic operating funding for the province's universities, as part of a funding commitment totalling 10% over the next three years, is a breath of fresh air in the mildewing climate of government support for them which has prevailed during the last several years.

Premier Bernard Lord's government is to be praised for its enlightenment concerning the imperatives of post-secondary education, as is the Premier himself for having kept the promise, made to university faculty earlier this year, that he would increase university funding by as much as his government could afford. Obviously, he meant what he said.

Regrettably, our congratulations must be tempered by the fact that the total annual operating funding allocations to New Brunswick's four universities fell by 8.6% (again after allowing for inflation) over the last decade, and that most of the announced increase will simply allow the universities to recover lost ground over the next three years. They will not be getting ahead of the game, by any means.

Nevertheless, the foregoing caveat is not intended to damn this funding breakthrough on the part of the Lord government with faint praise. As a former student leader, with siblings who are university faculty members, the Premier knows – probably better than any of his predecessors - the dire financial situation into which the universities have been plunged through years of chronic underfunding. Apparently, he also is more acutely aware of the universities' fundamental socio-economic role, and intends to act accordingly.

Let us hope, then, that this realistic approach to funding them survives more than one Budget, and that this breath of fresh air develops at least into a sustained breeze from now on.

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