

Budget Wasn't Friendly To Universities

On Valentine's Day, many organizations involved in the consultation process which preceded the National Summit on Innovation and Learning found the 495-page summary of its deliberations in their mail boxes.

The university community, especially, was pleased that this comprehensive report indicated the federal government – in true Valentine's spirit – appeared to be on the point of making a serious attempt at rekindling the close relationship it had enjoyed with post-secondary education until the early 1990's.

The recommendations of the Summit, held in November, 2002 and sponsored federally by Hon. Jane Stewart, Minister of Human Resources Development, and Hon. Allan Rock, Minister of Industry, were unequivocal in advocating increased federal support in all areas related to post-secondary education.

Among these recommendations were the expansion of capacity in the post-secondary system by increasing physical, human and financial infrastructure; the introduction of a Canada Post-Secondary Education Act similar to the Canada Health Act; and the adjustment of the system of student financial assistance “to meet the needs of students, the post-secondary education sector, and the needs of the economy”.

A survey was also published locally last week showing the dilemma faced by a large percentage of University of New Brunswick students – though UNB students are not alone in this - in balancing study time with working extra hours to pay rising tuition fees.

In response to the UNB survey, New Brunswick Education Minister Dr. Dennis Furlong observed that the underlying cause of the universities' ongoing need to increase tuition fees has been cutbacks in federal funding transfers to the province.

Consequently, the release of the Summit report could not, it seemed, have been more timely.

Unfortunately, however, the recent federal Budget has failed dismally to embrace the Summit's wisdom. True, the Budget has created a Canada Graduate Scholarship Program, and has allocated increased funding to research; but by not dealing with the issue of their basic operating funding, it has completely ignored the universities' most fundamental need.

It is particularly unhelpful to New Brunswick that the Budget also ignores Census data -some of it, again, released last week - which tell us that, while almost half of the 1.3 million new jobs created nationally between 1991 and 2001 required university qualifications, and only 25% required high school graduation, this province's workforce continues to have an inordinately high percentage of high-school graduates, and a below-average number of post-secondary graduates.

Without doubt, the global “good-help-is-hard-to-find” phenomenon, which is expected to begin with the first massive baby-boomer retirements less than a decade from now, will siphon away even more of our skilled workers than the 1,700 or so who are already leaving every year. If so, and if we fail to educate far more of our workforce at the post-secondary level than we are now doing, New Brunswick will have a hard time meeting its growing internal requirements for them.

This big-spending Budget (in which, nevertheless, the overall allocations for post-secondary education are only one-fifth of what would be needed to restore federal funding for it even to levels of a decade ago) has been widely acknowledged to be a “something-for-everyone” budget.

Regrettably, such budgets usually have a “not-enough-for-anyone” outcome as well - and this one is no exception.

(Desmond Morley is the Executive Director of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.)