

Human Resources: Are We Investing Enough?

As we head towards a provincial election, we should take the time to evaluate the spending record of the government of premier Bernard Lord in the area of social programs.

To many of us, that simply means we must make sure this government has been paying enough attention to health care. After all, as the population ages, more of us are becoming preoccupied with whether or not we will be able to get adequate health care services in the – increasingly likely – event we will need them.

That mindset is fine in the short term, but we also have to become equally preoccupied – and soon – with the amount of attention being paid by government to ensuring there is an adequate supply of the human resources who will be delivering health care services to us in the future.

Doctors, nurses, radiographers, physiotherapists, kinesiologists, psychologists and the myriad other “-ists” and health care professionals upon whom we so gratefully rely, are obliged to start their careers by obtaining at least one university degree. Yet not one penny of government funding comes directly from the health care envelope to subsidize the expense of educating them – even though, generally speaking, their courses are among the most expensive offered by our universities.

Consequently, we also must keep a watchful eye on the provincial education budget – that’s where all the funding for these professionals’ education comes from.

Not only the health care field, of course, relies on our universities to produce well-educated individuals. The exploding demand for them in the economy as a whole also has been well documented over the last few years, both in these pages and in other authoritative media.

Therefore, a careful examination of some recent – and perhaps disquieting – statistics may be in order before we go to the polls. Some of them may have a cause-and-effect relationship – it’s hard to say – and some

are unrelated to the others. Nevertheless, taken together, they make thought-provoking reading:

- Provincial government funding per full-time student for New Brunswick’s universities has fallen, overall, by more than 10% in the last decade – even after taking into account the 3.4% increase granted last year.
- New Brunswick now spends 16.7% less of its Gross Domestic Product on post-secondary education than it did ten years ago.
- Average university tuition fees in New Brunswick have more than doubled in only the last decade.
- In New Brunswick last year university tuition fees alone were, on average, 10% higher than students’ earnings from summer employment.
- University enrolments in New Brunswick recently fell while they increased, overall, by 6.6% in the rest of Canada.
- Since 1991-92, the number of students attending New Brunswick’s universities part-time has fallen by almost 30%.
- The percentage of the New Brunswick population holding university degrees is 26% lower than it is in Nova Scotia.
- Nova Scotia allocates one-third more of its total provincial expenditures to post-secondary education than New Brunswick does.

Last year, the current Conservative government gave an increase in university funding of 10 percent over three years. This was considerably more than the 6.12% three-year subsidy most recently given by its Liberal predecessor. Nevertheless, this government’s relative generosity still falls short of what the universities really need to produce the health care and other professionals New Brunswick is going to need to stay in the game.

In fact, whoever we elect in the next election must commit New Brunswick to spending at least as much on post-secondary education, relatively, as Nova Scotia does. Otherwise, we won’t even be able to stay in the game being played in our own back yard.

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