

Universities Need More

The baby of the family turns 40 this year. Its oldest member is considerably older than that, but still participates fully in its day-to-day operations.

The family's presence is province-wide, and its activities have affected, directly or indirectly, the lives of all New Brunswickers for generations. Furthermore, as its importance in the economy grows, so does the measure of its influence.

No, it doesn't have a fishing camp on the Restigouche.

The seven members of this family are the campuses of New Brunswick's four universities: the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton and Saint John; Mount Allison University in Sackville; St. Thomas University in Fredericton; and l'Université de Moncton in Edmundston, Moncton and Shippagan.

At the recent fall convocation of l'Université de Moncton, founded in 1963, its president referred to the institution's youth and stated that, nevertheless, it has deep roots.

Indeed, it does have deep roots, as do all our province's universities; and they enjoy a level of support among the public-at-large exceeded solely - and then only marginally - by that given to health care.

For good reason.

According to the New Brunswick Review, the quarterly publication of the New Brunswick Branch of the Pan Canadian Operations Branch of Human Resources Development Canada, between January and August, 2003 Canada's labour market improved in comparison with the same period in 2002. As a result, the unemployment rate across Canada fell slightly.

In contrast, however, during the same period the unemployment rate in New Brunswick actually rose by three times the amount by which it had otherwise fallen nationwide.

HRDC reports that the overall unemployment rates in New Brunswick in 2001 and 2002 (the most recent years for which figures are available) were, respectively, 11.2 per cent and 10.4 per cent. Yet in those years, the corresponding unemployment rates for university graduates were only 4.1 percent and 3.3 percent.

Nevertheless, two studies recently published by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, one in 2001 and the other earlier this year, show that 15 per cent more students had to borrow to complete their university degree in 1999 than in 1996 and that, on average, they also borrowed almost 25 per cent more, even after allowing for inflation; \$20,918 in 1999 as opposed to \$16,814 in 1996.

Given the importance of a university education in the labour market, as demonstrated by the foregoing HRDC figures, this state of affairs is both incomprehensible and unacceptable in a society which supposedly recognizes that its future depends on economic growth.

Let's give credit where credit is due. The Lord government is in the process of giving an increase in operating funding of the order of 13.5 per cent to this province's universities over a four-year period. Grateful as the university community may be, though, this simply is not enough to meet the rising costs of providing a university education to everyone who is qualified to receive one.

As a result, more and more of the financial burden is being thrust onto the unwilling shoulders of the students.

Granted, there has been a trend towards declining enrolments which has hiccupped up and down over the last few years. Nevertheless, declining enrolments - and there is no guarantee that they will continue to decline as the economy demands more and more university graduates - are an insufficient rationale for government failing to provide adequate funding to cover the rising costs of running a university.

Unless and until enrolments fall to such a radical extent that we have to consider equally radical alternative means of delivering what they provide, the maintenance of our universities must continue to be the responsibility, primarily, of government.

It is unfair that university students should be forced to pay an exponentially-increasing portion of the cost of their education, on the pretext that they are its major beneficiaries. They are not.

Society as a whole benefits from it most of all.

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