

Society Must Rein In Education Costs

This week, despite tuition fee increases averaging more than seven per cent over last year, approximately 23,000 students will enroll in New Brunswick's four universities to either commence or continue their studies.

Having seen a slight downward trend in the late 1990's, enrolments rose again in the first two years of the new Millennium, even though the size of the 18-24 year-old age cohort continued to decline. No doubt this recent reversal of the downward trend has resulted from a compensating increase in the "participation rate" – the percentage of eligible individuals actually enrolling. (Reportedly, the University of New Brunswick alone is expecting a 30 per cent increase in first-year enrolments this Fall.)

According to Human Resources Development Canada, in 2002 a total of 97 per cent of the university graduates in the New Brunswick labour force were employed – 87 per cent of them full time.

In the last decade, the number of university graduates employed in this province has risen from slightly more than 40,000 to nearly 58,000. Granted, the overall size of the labour force has expanded during that time, but not by the 45 per cent or so which would have been required for it to absorb a similar increase in university graduates without a corresponding increase in its demand for academic qualifications.

In fact, the number of employed university graduates has grown, and will continue to grow, regardless of fluctuations in the size of the labour force. For example: as they retire, nurses in New Brunswick who did not obtain Bachelor of Nursing degrees will only be replaced by individuals who have done so.

As society clamours for more and better educational credentials, the proportion of university graduates in the workforce can only continue to grow; and soon there may be a bigger demand for them than there is a supply. Reportedly, in the United States last year there were a million challenging, well-paid jobs which were not filled because qualified personnel could not be found.

Consequently, former New Brunswick premier Senator Louis J. Robichaud had good reason to suggest recently that the federal and provincial governments should put their heads together to offer free university tuition.

Senator Robichaud observed that, at present, only students with means can participate in higher education, and that many students with the potential to succeed cannot afford the cost.

He is right.

Owing to the relatively easy availability of loan financing, a university education is accessible to just about everyone with the academic capability to be admitted. Accessible, however, does not mean affordable. As provincial Liberal education critic and respected former student leader Kelly Lamrock, MLA (Fredericton-Nashwaak) points out, university students who graduate with debt loads of the order of \$40,000 are not uncommon. He compares this with starting our working lives with a \$40,000 mortgage before we even have a full-time job.

In the last few days, Conservative MP John Herron (Fundy-Royal), New Brunswick's seemingly indefatigable federal advocate for the proper funding of post-secondary education, has unveiled a policy paper which, generally speaking, proposes meaningful increases in core funding for post-secondary education, improved student financial aid, and student debt load reduction strategies.

For a long time, the university community has acknowledged the reality that education is a lifelong continuum which does not come to a shuddering halt at the end of the high-school years; and that, in its formal stages, its delivery at an affordable cost – and preferably at no cost at all – should be a priority of governments at all levels.

It is rewarding, therefore, that some of our politicians - from different generations, political persuasions, and levels of government - now appear to have arrived at the same conclusion.

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