

Post-secondary education, it seems, has finally elbowed aside health care as the number-one policy priority of our elected leaders across the nation.

In October, 2005 Premier Bernard Lord hosted the “Premier’s Consultation Forum on Post-Secondary Education and Training” in Fredericton.

Among those present were approximately 40 of post-secondary education’s leading proponents, several members of the provincial Cabinet, and a number of high-ranking civil servants.

Similar gatherings, it seems, were concurrently being convened in the other provinces and territories as well, in preparation for subsequent dialogue and consensus building between them on the future of post-secondary education and skills training in Canada.

Sure enough, on February 24 last the promised inter-provincial dialogue on post-secondary education began in earnest. The Council of the Federation called together around 400 of Canada’s post-secondary education opinion leaders in a conference entitled “Competing for Tomorrow – A Post Secondary Education And Skills Training Summit” in Ottawa. Co-hosted by premiers Dalton McGuinty of Ontario and Jean Charest of Québec, the conference left no room for doubt that post-secondary education is the new rallying cry of provincial politicians across the land.

During the recent federal election, then-Opposition leader Stephen Harper promised a dedicated funding transfer for post-secondary education. In view, though, of the recent announcement by federal Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Michael Chong (reported in the Telegraph-Journal on March 9, 2006) that there will be “no special side deal from Ottawa to help New Brunswick with its ambitious \$1.875 billion prosperity plan” and that the Harper government does not intend to follow the previous Liberal government’s example of signing side deals with the provinces, this newfound spirit among the provincial premiers of commitment to, and co-operation on, the issue of post-secondary education could not be more timely.

No doubt, the sooner the provinces are singing from the same hymn book on post-secondary education, the sooner Mr. Harper's promised dedicated funding transfer for it is likely to become a reality.

Under the "Prosperity Plan" for New Brunswick announced by the Lord government in 2002, stable – though not overly generous – funding support for the province's four universities, whose expected contribution to the plan's success figured prominently in it, began to flow. After an initial three-year commitment of university operating funding increases amounting to 10 per cent overall, this allocation was subsequently raised to 13% over four years. Two years, and funding increases amounting to approximately six and one half per cent overall, remain on this commitment.

However, on February 14 of this year, Mr. Lord announced the introduction of an ambitious acceleration of some of the major components of the Prosperity Plan: the "Five in Five" program, in which his government undertook to achieve specific priority objectives in five policy areas over the next five years.

First among these five priorities is the attainment by this province of the goal of "New Brunswick – the Smart Province" with "the highest increase in workers with post-secondary education in Canada" during that time.

At the same time, a new Department of Post-secondary Education and Training was created, with Oromocto-Gagetown MLA Jody Carr as Minister.

Heady stuff – nevertheless, a university degree takes either four or five years to complete, depending on the program of study followed. If the universities are, then, to increase their contribution to the accomplishment of the "smart province" goal they must be put in a position to do so right away.

Consequently, the university community will no doubt be looking forward to seeing, in the provincial budget which will be announced at the end of March, a corresponding

acceleration in the flow of already-budgeted university operating funding which will permit them to provide greater accessibility immediately, and to a meaningful commitment of additional funding for the foreseeable future, at least.

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