

GOVERNMENTS MUST ADDRESS UNDERFUNDING

At one time, the financial reality of attending university didn't set in for many students until after graduation; and even when it did, the majority of them had manageable amounts of debt.

Regrettably, that is no longer the case.

One of the findings of the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission's recent report "A Lasting Legacy: The Impact of Family Educational Background on Graduate Outcomes" is that, by the time students in the Maritimes' 1999 graduating class had obtained their first degree, six out of ten (58 per cent) of them had borrowed money to complete their education.

This was an eight per cent increase over the number of students in the 1996 graduating class who had incurred similar debts; moreover, on average the 1999 graduates had been obliged to borrow 30 per cent more than their 1996 counterparts.

Following a disturbing national trend, tuition fees in New Brunswick – already having more than doubled in only the last decade - have again increased this year, by an average of 5.9 per cent

Surprisingly, this trend does not appear to threaten university enrolments, which continue to increase. Nevertheless, according to another of the report's findings, it is already contributing significantly to an alarmingly rapid narrowing of the societal base from which these enrolments are drawn.

Between 1996 and 1999 there was a six per cent drop in the number of Maritime graduates who came from households where the level of parental educational attainment was high school graduation or lower.

Generally speaking, household income levels correspond with educational attainment, and this reduction in participation has taken place, as a result, among those members of our society who face the greatest economic challenges.

It is perhaps no coincidence that this decline in numbers began to take place immediately after the three Maritime provincial governments, between 1993 and 1995, had tinkered with the non-repayable "bursary" portions of their student

financial assistance schemes, and had instead converted some or all of this money into repayable loans.

Over the same period, though, there was an increase of five per cent in the number of graduates from households where the level of parental educational attainment was a bachelor's degree or above.

Unfortunately, when dealing with gross representative samples – the MPHEC's averages were drawn from data supplied by a group of 2317 members of the 1999 graduating class – it is not possible to determine the decision-making dynamics which come into play in individual households.

However, it cannot be too far-fetched to assume that in most of those households in which at least one parent possesses an undergraduate degree, or an even higher educational credential (and where, presumably, there is also a commensurately higher-than-average level of household income) there is likely to be a significant level of parental encouragement to obtain a university education.

No doubt a correspondingly lower level of aversion to the associated debt can be expected in these households as well; owing, in many cases, to parental willingness to give financial support, and in almost all cases to parental perception, based on personal experience, of the favourable cost-benefits equation in the long term.

Nevertheless, surely the converse of this also must be true; and parents with limited financial resources will think twice before encouraging their children to assume the burgeoning debts associated with a university education.

We are, therefore, imminently facing a return to the times when the universities were the private preserves of a cultural and economic elite.

This won't happen by design. It will happen simply through the failure of governments to put the issue of university underfunding on the front burner of social policy.

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