

Universities aren't broken. Don't try to fix them

Mary Lou Babineau | Commentary | The Daily Gleaner | March 13, 2019

It is said that the search for a scapegoat is the easiest of all hunting expeditions, and yesterday's Editorial "Align Education Spending with Economic Needs" is not the first to reproach our public universities for their supposed failure to address, and solve, the province's economic and demographic challenges.

What are our universities doing for New Brunswick? As it turns out, quite a bit more than most of us appreciate. Let me be very clear: it is not the role of our public universities to fix economic and demographic problems, nor to train the labour force. Despite this, research shows that New Brunswick's universities are, in fact, already contributing more to economic development and demographic stability than perhaps any other sector. Herein lies quite a lovely paradox.

The mandate of public universities in strong democratic societies is to develop citizens' ability to analyze, question, criticize, solve problems, innovate and create, adapt and contribute to a constantly changing world. To do this well, they must be **dedicated to free inquiry and research that is independent from government and private-sector influence.**

This mandate is not at all disconnected from the economic needs of the province; in fact, research shows that the opposite is true. According to data compiled by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 88% of New Brunswick's university graduates are employed two years after graduation, and 75% report that their job is related to their degree.

In addition, recent studies carried out by the University of New Brunswick and the Université de Moncton estimate their impact on the province's economy to be in the range of 1.5 billion and 1.6 billion dollars, respectively, as a result of research and development activities, innovation and start-up companies, universities' operations and employment, and contributions made by graduates.

The numbers also show that all four of our public universities attract students from outside New Brunswick and Canada, and they contribute to keeping youth and talent in the province. Mount Allison University, as one example, reports that 60% of students come from other Canadian provinces and other countries. St. Thomas University has found that 71% of their graduates stay in New Brunswick, a number that ascends to 88% in the case of the Université de Moncton.

This is a tremendous success story for our post-secondary institutions, and it needs to be supported by broader economic and policy initiatives. Because, unfortunately, even the most outstanding universities cannot attract more students to this province when those students can pay lower tuition fees elsewhere; nor can they entice more graduates to stay when they can earn more in other parts of the country; nor can they compensate for tax evasion and tax havens that prevent us from making greater investments in our universities and in other types of initiatives that this province needs in order to grow and prosper.

We recognize that New Brunswick's challenges are complex and require us to work together, but the answer does not lie in fixing a university system that is not broken.

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