

The post-pandemic recovery of New Brunswick must include public universities

The Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations (FNBFA) first wants to acknowledge the work of the Government of New Brunswick in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also acknowledge the efforts that were made, since the start of the crisis, by the universities, the faculty members and the administration personnel in order to guarantee the education of the students. Finally, we want to acknowledge the tenacity, courage and resilience demonstrated by the students in order to pursue their learning objectives under trying conditions. It is together, in solidarity, that we will achieve success in our province while facing the difficulties resulting for the pandemic.

In order to ensure that this solidarity and good will continue, the FNBFA wishes to contribute to the discussions by addressing, below, three subjects of paramount importance if we are to maximize our post-pandemic provincial recovery.

Public universities must be part of the solution in the resumption of activities in New Brunswick

Social, human and economic development in New Brunswick rests, to a significant degree, on the knowledge stemming from university education and research. In order to make the best decisions regarding our collective future and the development of innovations, we need significant and sustained government support. Important and recurrent investments in fundamental research programs are absolutely mandatory in order to succeed. Public universities, and the education and research conducted therein, must not be perceived as a luxury item that one can afford only when everything is going well; they are a public good, the essential components of a modern, free and democratic society, and the engine of a strong economy, even more so when society is facing a major crisis.

The chronic fallback position of the New Brunswick government, that we must always do more with less, is no longer tenable. We would also like to bring to the forefront the negative consequences that could be faced by international students who, at this time, seem to have been forgotten in the context of the government's emergency aid programs. What will become of those international students and their plans to study in New Brunswick? We have always made a strong case for the need to facilitate international immigration through post-secondary education. The contributions of international students to the province's reactivation and its future wealth are not less important now. When those students chose to pursue their studies in New Brunswick's universities, commitments were made to them that must not be forgotten.

We must not come to see the COVID-19 pandemic as a "state of exception", as argued by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in order to use it as a pretext to unilaterally and expeditiously impose drastic austerity measures, nor react to the situation by refusing to tolerate any disagreement or any questioning of the measures contemplated.

Strong public universities can help us prevent crises and be more efficient in solving them when they do occur

The vast range of expertise that our professors, librarians and researchers possess contributes to understanding and finding solutions to phenomena such as the one we are now experiencing. Scientific research often yields answers to the problems and events affecting us.

Public health issues, psychological problems related to confinement, work reorganization, the education of youth and adults, risk management, and the consequences specific to children, parents and seniors are particular areas where university research will be very useful in order to help us bounce back once the crisis has passed.

There is no doubt that university research will have to make exceptional efforts, everywhere in the world and for many years to come, in order to analyze the COVID-19 pandemic and develop the best preparation and response strategies for future crises. New Brunswick cannot afford to lag. The expertise of our economists, sociologists, historians, philosophers and other human and fundamental sciences, to name just those few, will be crucial.

Neglecting university research and education would be a grave mistake that would weaken the government, as well as the rest of society. We must double our efforts to increase the public funding of university education and research in New Brunswick.

A better educated population is more able to face crises

An educated society is able to come up with sensible and practical solutions in order to face crises, no matter what they are. Educated individuals are less vulnerable to fake news, more resilient and better able to reorient themselves and to innovate when they are affected by an economic downturn and lose their job.

Given that New Brunswick has the lowest proportion of population holding a university diploma, in comparison to every other provinces in the country, our province has been experiencing a university education deficit for many decades already, and the gap is steadily widening. The post-pandemic period must not result in the creation of a “lost generation” made up of the young citizens of New Brunswick who will not have the chance to attend university due to our lack of courage and vision to maintain the efforts necessary in response to the crisis. In the current circumstances, we must show our resolve and aim for no less than the elimination of tuition fees as well as the elimination of student debt.

A quality education for our fellow citizens is just as important to the development of our society as it is to our economic recovery. Thus, in order to adequately fulfill this responsibility, universities will have to count on stable and adequate funding that is sustained through time. It is crucial, in our opinion, to restate the importance of preserving all the current programs, to ensure that all students already registered in our public universities can pursue their programs of study. The same goes for those who would like to attend university following graduation from high school in the coming years, and this, in all disciplines. Budget cuts will only weaken our university institutions at the expense of the population and of a solid resumption of the province’s activities.

The current circumstances, which we may continue to experience for months or even years to come, cannot become a pretext for the government to make unilateral decisions that will negatively impact the future of public universities. The experience acquired and the studies conducted in numerous areas have taught us that it is easy to succumb to the pressures that

are brought to bear by grave events and to choose expedient and short-sighted solutions. However, reacting hastily and drastically has never effectively solved anything. On the contrary, it only sets the stage for casting aside the democratic processes and the diversity of our knowledge while jeopardizing our province's long-term, strong and stable recovery.

As was the case before the pandemic, the professors, librarians and researchers of the public universities of New Brunswick are ready to face the challenges awaiting the province. New Brunswick must seize this opportunity for the good of one and all.

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