

✉ THE
BRIEF



NB MEDIA CO-OP

SHARE A
STORY

- [New Brunswick](#)
- [Canada](#)
- [World](#)
- [Environment](#)
- [Indigenous](#)
- [Labour](#)
- [Gender](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Culture](#)
- [Videos](#)
- [NB debrief](#)
- [Articles en français](#)

[Home](#) > [Education](#)

University funding in New Brunswick gets failing grade: FNBFA

Commentary: Role of post-secondary education goes beyond training workers, says Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations president

by Hector Guy Adégbidi — June 1, 2022 Reading Time: 4min read





An aerial photo shows the Moncton campus of l'Université de Moncton. Pundits calling for public universities to focus on the labour needs of industry ignore the important contributions of post-secondary institutions and the long-term withdrawal of provincial governments from funding those institutions, argues Hector Guy Adégbidi. Photo: www.umoncton.ca.

A recent editorial in the *Telegraph-Journal* (“Universities must meet workforce needs,” April 22, 2022) as well as the subsequent commentary (“Take a hard look at N.B.’s universities,” April 26, 2022) made a lot of claims about public universities which require rectification.

Both pieces were direct offshoots of the recent announcement made by the Department of Post-secondary Education, Training and Labour (PETL) that an additional one percent increase in funding is available to public universities once they have demonstrated that their student enrolment has increased. This is proposed as part of the solution to the labour shortages experienced by New Brunswick.

What is constantly missing when the topic of public universities is addressed by the government and the media is the recognition of their contributions, not only with respect to teaching and graduating well-educated young people, but also of the quality research that is conducted within those institutions. Constantly referring to public universities, more or less subtly, as training institutions for the labour force of New Brunswick is dangerously reductionist for the good of the province and what education truly means.

I want first to acknowledge the decision announced by the Minister of PETL that the interest on student loans will be eliminated. That said, we must realize that this is unlikely to be a game changer with respect to lagging enrolment when compared with the \$40,000 average debt held by New Brunswick students upon graduation. When a potential student and their family contemplate the financial implications of attending university, the deciding factor is rather the tuition costs, not the interest rate on the loan.

Independent studies show that the best way to attract students to university and ensure their graduation is to make education truly affordable. This requires much bolder moves than what the various governments of New Brunswick have had the courage to make thus far, such as lowering

tuition rates significantly, aiming for their total elimination as quickly as possible. Dozens of countries, in all regions of the world, provide university education while charging either minimal tuition or no tuition at all. Those countries have not gone bankrupt, far from it, nor is their population less responsible as a result.

The reluctance to act boldly in that direction is even more difficult to understand when we constantly hear that international students are a significant part of the solution to our labour force shortages. That is basically asking our universities to be “immigration agencies” while that is not their role nor their forte. Besides, after they deploy huge efforts and resources to recruit and admit those international students, a minimal proportion of them (less than 10 percent) are granted a Canadian visa.

Furthermore, letting our universities charge international students double the tuition fee paid by their Canadian counterpart is beyond comprehension. We need to make our universities attractive to all students, and that begins with making them truly affordable.

Then there is the issue of the additional one percent increase in funding, available to public universities that will have demonstrated an increase in their student enrolment. Although additional funds are always welcomed by public universities, that initiative is problematic for at least two reasons.

First, it is a very small amount of money for a problem as large and long lasting as attracting and ensuring the successful graduation of significant numbers of new students. Second, making the money available once enrolment numbers have already increased does not help achieve the expected results. It is like putting the cart before the proverbial horse. One wonders about the concrete basis upon which the initiative was even considered by the Government of New Brunswick.

The real story here is the drastic withdrawal of the government from its responsibility to properly fund public university education. Three decades ago, Canadian provincial governments, New Brunswick included, covered approximately 80 percent of the operating costs of public universities. That portion now stands at 57 percent in New Brunswick. Limiting the increase of the operating grant to one, or even one and a half percent annually, does not keep pace with the rate of inflation experienced by public universities, which stands at approximately three percent annually.

Those many decades of underfunding result in accumulated deficits in all public universities which, in addition to the various cost-cutting measures in which they consistently engage, try to close the funding gap between the operating grant and the true cost of operating a university through ever increasing tuition fees. This defeats the very idea that universities be made more attractive to

students. Money should never stand in the way of education; resorting to student loans of \$40,000 per student is not a viable solution, despite the elimination of the interests on those loans.

Furthermore, the insinuation that New Brunswick is losing a significant number of students to other provinces, seemingly due to the unattractiveness of the programs on offer at our public universities, according to the *Telegraph-Journal* editorial, is simply not borne out by the data available from the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission.

It is precisely to get past such misguided thinking and to set the stage instead for significant improvements to the outcomes of the teaching and research missions of the public universities of New Brunswick that the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations (FNBFA) has been asking, for years, that the Government of New Brunswick host a post-secondary education forum with all the stakeholders at the table. New Brunswick is still waiting.

The FNBFA has made the case for many of the arguments I raise above in our 2020 [Position Paper on the Implementation of Performance-based Funding in New Brunswick Public Universities](#). Unfortunately, a lot of the things which are still being said and done about public universities in New Brunswick are without the benefit of the knowledge afforded by reliable information. And because of that, we are jeopardizing the fundamental missions of teaching and research fulfilled by the public universities of the province.

Hector Guy Adégbidi is president of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.

Tags: Department of Post-secondary Education education

Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations Hector Guy Adégbidi Training and Labour



Related Posts
