



Category: Long Term System Planning
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Whereas,

Seven Provinces in Canada have recently conducted holistic reviews of their post-secondary education systems. Nova Scotia is not among them. In 1985 a report on the future of Higher Education in Nova Scotia was produced by the Royal Commission on Post Secondary Education. The report called for the creation of a student loans program, cooperation amongst provincial governments for trans-provincial boundary students, a Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education, and more cooperation (but not rationalization) of universities and a clearly defined “system” of post-secondary education¹. Some recommendations from the report, like the implementation of a standardized university preparatory curriculum for university-bound high school students, have been implemented, yet many of the problems that existed in 1985 remain today.

Many of the issues that ought to be addressed in a review would be viewed in a much different light today, than they were in 1985. The report was written prior to the federal funding cuts to education in the early 1990s, which resulted in a polar shift in where universities derived their operating revenue. Since 1985 the IT revolution and the pervasiveness of technology in the classroom have fundamentally changed the way learning happens in higher education. For the past 10 years the federally funded Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation has spent millions of dollars studying access to higher education in Canada, giving valuable data and guidance to those in the higher education sector concerned about eliminating access barriers. Remarkably, not much has changed in the way we deliver student assistance. Since 1985, universities in our province have accumulated 543 million dollars in deferred maintenance that has resulted in low-quality work and study environments for many students and researchers. It has now been 24 years since the commission released its report, and with no clear direction on the future of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia, students and other stakeholders within the higher education sectors are growing dissatisfied with this lack of vision.

Other provinces have adopted the targets and goals established by the commissions. *Campus 2020: Thinking Ahead*, the report commissioned by the provincial government in British Columbia suggested the government adopt several goals, one of which was to equalize post-secondary education and attainment rates across the province’s regions and income quartiles; another called for BC to “consistently be one of the three highest spending provinces in terms of provincial support for basic and applied research”². The Rae Review, commissioned by the Ontario government, called for ambitious medium and long term targets for participation rates in higher education both in the general population but also in underrepresented groups,³ as did the

¹ MacLennan, R.J., Evans, J.G., and Shaw, W.S. (1985). Report of the royal commission on post-secondary education. Government of Nova Scotia.

² Plant, G. (2007). *Campus 2020 – Thinking Ahead: The Report*. Government of British Columbia.

³ Rae, B. (2005). *Ontario, a leader in learning: Report and Recommendations*. Government of Ontario.

comprehensive review of post-secondary education in New Brunswick⁴. If Nova Scotia does not develop a long term vision that includes goal and target setting we will be outcompeted by the provinces that have.

ANSSA recommends the government of Nova Scotia commission a comprehensive review of post secondary education. Such a review would provide direction on issues, including but not limited to, those describe below.

Accessibility of Education in Nova Scotia

When compared to the national average, Nova Scotia boasts a high participation rate in university post-secondary education; however, our performance is below average in participation levels in colleges⁵. Despite a high over post-secondary participation rate, some students have fallen through the cracks. Aboriginal participation rates, for example, need to increase by 118% from their current levels before graduation parity with the non-aboriginal population is reached⁶. While a new grants program has reduced the financial burden on students, some students continue to finish their undergraduate degree with over \$45, 000 in government debt – and the prospect of a debt this large creates huge barriers for students incapable of incurring it. In Nova Scotia, debt is regionalized along the urban-rural divide – graduates from rural backgrounds carry 24% more debt upon graduation than their urban counterparts, calling into question the fairness of existing student assistance programs that facilitate such an increased debt burden⁷.

A comprehensive review of post secondary education should provide guidance to the provincial government on the following questions related to accessibility:

- What targets should the government set in regards to post-secondary participation rates in post-secondary education, both for the general population and for underrepresented groups.
- What programs can be enhanced or created to facilitate ease of access to post-secondary education among the underrepresented groups and the general population?
- Do existing programs intended to promote an increase in accessibility to higher education work?

AFFORDABILITY OF EDUCATION & UNIVERSITY FUNDING

For nineteen of the past 20 years Nova Scotian students have had the highest tuition fees in Canada. In 2009 students from out-of-province continue to pay the highest tuition in Canada at a weighted average of \$5863 annually, while the average tuition fees remain far above the Canadian average as the second highest in Canada⁸. Graduate students in Nova Scotia pay the second highest graduate student tuition in Canada, at more than \$2600 greater than the national average, and despite a tuition freeze for all students, new graduate programs and fee increases full-cost recovery programs keep our annual graduate tuition fee growth rate at 4.3%⁹.

⁴ Miner, R., and L'Ecuyer, J. (2007). Advantage New Brunswick: A province reaches to fulfill its destiny. Government of New Brunswick.

⁵ MPHEC (2009). University Participation: A Maritime Perspective. *Trends in Maritime*

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ MPHEC (2008). Outcomes of rural and urban maritime university graduates. *Trends in Maritime Higher Education* 6(1).

⁸ Statistics Canada (2009). University Tuition Fees. Retrieved on 20 October 2009 from <<http://www.tinyurl.com/tuitionstats>>.

⁹ Ibid.

The latest financial data available from the Canadian Association of University Business Officers (2008) indicates that Nova Scotian universities have the highest Tuition Fee – to – Government Funding ratio in the country, where tuition and other fees account for 49.83% of non-research operating revenue, while government operating grants account for 51.17%¹⁰. The national ratio of Tuition Fees:Government Funding is 62:37, meaning Nova Scotia has much progress to make in order to make the student share of the cost of education a fair one. Even under the government’s current tuition reduction plan and Memorandum of Understanding this ratio is still expected to be the second highest in Canada once the tuition reduction plan reaches its 2011 end-date¹¹.

A comprehensive review of post secondary education should provide guidance to the provincial government on the following questions related to affordability of post-secondary education and university funding:

- What is the appropriate proportion of government funding that should account for a student’s cost of education?
- How should tuition be regulated? Should it be in the hands of the government? A higher education council?

QUALITY OF EDUCATION

There are several factors that contribute to a university’s ability to provide a quality education to its students. In 2009 the amount of accumulated deferred maintenance of university infrastructure in Nova Scotia universities reached \$ 543 Million¹², resulting in poor quality work-study environments. Funding restrictions are being created within universities in Nova Scotia that limit the quality of teaching. Departments at some universities have established hiring freezes to compensate for the increased costs of providing pensions to retired faculty members, while the teaching burden of retired faculty members is transferred to existing instructors who then become overworked. Additionally, as mentioned in the Royal Commission on Post Secondary Education in 1985, research remains a priority for many faculty at universities throughout much of the province, resulting often times in less faculty attention on teaching students, who ultimately lose out.

A comprehensive review of post secondary education should provide guidance to the provincial government on the following questions related to quality of education:

- What role should government have in addressing the infrastructure deficit at universities in Nova Scotia?
- How should government support universities and provide the resources they need to ensure quality teaching and financial support in Universities in Nova Scotia?

¹⁰ CAUBO (2009). Financial information of universities and colleges: 2007 – 2008. Retrieved on 7 September 2009 from <http://caubo.ca/pubs/documents/CAUBO_2007_2008_FINANCIAL_INFORMATION_OF_UNIVERSITIES_AND_COLLEGES.pdf>.

¹¹ Based on estimates provided by the MoU and funding growth models based on CAUBO financial data.

¹² Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents (2009). Making a commitment to higher education in Nova Scotia.

INNOVATION AND RESEARCH

Nova Scotia spends proportionately less on provincially sponsored research than any other province in Canada¹³. In 2001 the Nova Scotia Government established the Nova Scotia Research Innovation Trust (NSRIT), which has served as an effective mechanism for attracting matching dollars from federal and private sources. Despite this investment, our universities continue to pale in comparison to our competitors across Canada. As mentioned previously, while research and innovation is an important part of every post-secondary experience, research and teaching have oft been pitted against one another within the university system – where research can often take precedent over teaching within faculty and administrative agendas.

A comprehensive review of post secondary education should provide guidance to the provincial government on the following questions related to innovation and research:

- How can government promote research in the Nova Scotia university system without sacrificing quality of education?

GOVERNANCE & ACCOUNTABILITY

The Royal Commission on Post Secondary Education in 1985 discussed, in great detail, the balance between accountability for publicly funded institutions and university autonomy and academic freedom. Despite pages of recommendations and the call for a council on higher education to regulate affairs between the universities and taxpayers, no significant changes in university governance or public accountability have occurred since then.

From an institutional governance perspective, the public accountability of university Boards of Governors is questionable. The primary beneficiaries of these institutions, students, have dismal representation among most Boards. Yet those who dominate many university Boards, regional and national business leaders and university donors are not the most obvious choices for representatives of the public will.

There is some concern surrounding the issue of balancing university autonomy with public accountability. Universities have traditionally held the role of providing forthright criticism and observations on government, public affairs and societal trends with no fear of retribution. ANSSA's call for a review of university governance practices is by no means a call for a depression of the critical role universities play in society, but rather for a similarly critical assessment of these structures and recommendations on how they can better ensure public accountability and efficiency while maintaining the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

A comprehensive review of post secondary education should provide guidance to the provincial government on the following questions related governance and public accountability:

- How can government ensure public accountability is while maintaining institutional autonomy?
- Do existing mechanisms in place to ensure public accountability work?
- Is there a role for a provincial act that legislates on university governance? If so what specifications on university boards and representation should that act contain?
- Is there a role for an intermediary regulatory body between governments and institutions?

¹³ Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents (2009). Making a commitment to higher education in Nova Scotia.

VISION AND SUSTAINABILITY

The three-year memorandums of understanding that guarantee funding for the provincial government are effective and useful tools for providing short-term stability for university administrations and the students who depend on them for predictability in tuition prices. Unfortunately a three year vision that is restricted primarily to financing does not allow for long-term system planning or system sustainability for stakeholders of the higher education system. A comprehensive review is a starting point for developing a long term vision for plan.

A comprehensive review of post secondary education should provide guidance to the provincial government on the following questions related to vision and sustainability:

- How can universities within Nova Scotia collaborate and cooperate to increase the efficiency of the “system” of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia?
- What long term structures or initiatives can ensure the long-term sustainability of the post-secondary education system in Nova Scotia?
- What higher education targets should the province set for university participation rates, provincially funded research, quality of education, tuition levels and more?

Therefore, ANSSA

1. *Calls on* the Government of Nova Scotia to commission a holistic review of the post-secondary education system in Nova Scotia.
2. *Calls on* the Government of Nova Scotia to enlist a panel of unbiased experts to oversee such a review.
3. *Calls on* the Government of Nova Scotia to ensure a holistic review examines and provides recommendations on each of the issues outlined in this document.
4. *Calls on* the Government of Nova Scotia to conduct a public consultation and stakeholder engagement process as a part of this review. All relevant stakeholders should be consulted, including but not limited to: student groups, faculty and staff unions, university administrations, representatives from the public education system.
5. *Calls on* the Government of Nova Scotia to consider the results of such a review as it develops a long term plan for the higher education system in Nova Scotia which should include measureable targets and deadlines to track progress.