

A Youth Voice on Post-Secondary Education:
Engagement, Preparedness and Accessibility

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INTRODUCTION

Post-Secondary Education: Investing in Our Youth, Investing in Our Province

“Post-Secondary Education” (hereinafter “PSE”) is a topic which affects everyone, everywhere. We can easily pinpoint a number of obvious stakeholders: students, parents, educators, various levels of government, as well as public and private educational institutions. However, we now realize that higher education is an issue which plays out on a much larger scale, having broad societal, economical and political implications.

In fact, in New Brunswick this topic is especially of growing importance having regard to increased concerns with a dwindling population and, consequently, a dwindling workforce. There is no doubt that our economy depends on our most valuable resource: our people. It is therefore paramount that we invest in this resource in order to develop and maintain a skilled and educated workforce, able to actively contribute to the Province of New Brunswick. In turn, this will help foster a growing economy. Accordingly, it is important to ensure that our PSE system is best-suited to help achieve these ambitious, yet important, goals.

A Hot Topic

It seems that these issues have been topics of discussion and debate for numerous years. From the dinner table to the floor of the Legislative Assembly: everyone has an opinion and everyone has something at stake. The most contentious issues surrounding PSE of late focus on “accessibility”. In fact, tuition rates and student debt seem to grab the most attention, being the frequent subject of “headlines and sound-bites” in media and politics. There is no question that the cost of PSE is ever increasing and that, as “consumers” of the product which is PSE, the brunt of that burden is being borne by youth. To what result?



For many youth in New Brunswick, furthering their education and acquiring specialized skills is often accompanied by crippling debt. This, in turn, often delays youths' active contribution to society and to our economy. For those who can afford to stay in New Brunswick, many are putting off purchasing homes or starting a family, as tackling debt becomes their most important priority. This is not a new "tune". In fact, like a broken record, we are repeatedly reminded of these serious concerns.

Most stakeholders tend to agree that the immense debt being swallowed by youth is problematic. If we mostly agree on the issue, then why is it still *an issue*? Why does student debt continue to make headlines in our newspapers and fill the sound-bites on our radio and television news? Evidently, because we have yet to agree on how the issue should be resolved.

The Youth Voice: "A New Tune"

The importance of accessibility, tuition rates, fiscal responsibility on behalf of the educational institutions, and government intervention are sub-issues of importance which cannot be overstated. In fact, these are often at the forefront amongst the concerns as expressed by youth. However, like "headlines and sound-bites", these sub-issues only begin to scratch the surface of the all-encompassing issue which is PSE.

Rather, while the PSE system as it exists today should be reviewed and critiqued in order to ameliorate it; it is essential to realize that a common denominator between every PSE institution is its main consumers: youth. Further, it is essential to understand that the "baggage" which these youth accumulate throughout the years and bring with them to the PSE institutions form part of the issues which are in need of being tackled in order to ensure their success and, in turn to ensure the success and viability of the PSE system.

In any business, it is paramount to identify the customer and its needs. PSE is no different. In order to maximize the benefits attributed to PSE, it is essential to identify



the needs of its “customers” and, in certain instances, to adapt the services provided to the them.

Discussions and consultations with various New Brunswick youth have revealed concerns with PSE that lie deeper than tuition rates. In fact, the cost of PSE accumulates due to various reasons other than the “entry fee” represented by tuition rates. Chief amongst these other sub-issues is our youth’s lack of preparedness entering PSE institutions, making the transition from the public school system to higher education is a daunting task.

Undoubtedly, sub-issues related to accessibility will be thoroughly canvassed by numerous stakeholders. Therefore, this submission will focus on other sub-issues, identifying the hazards mentioned above: a lack of youth engagement, a lack of preparedness for PSE, and a difficult transition from public schools to PSE.

INVESTING IN OUR YOUTH: THE APPROACH

It is paramount that youth be able to envision themselves, at an early age, accomplishing great things and becoming valuable contributors to society. We have a responsibility to provide them with the tools which enable them to meet their objectives. However, we also have a responsibility to provide them with the tools to set these objectives!

While many view “accessibility” as the biggest hurdle one faces in entering PSE, in some ways it should be viewed as the last hurdle before getting to that stage. In fact, before youth even consider entering any PSE institution, it is imperative that they have the requisite tools to form their objectives and to maximize their chances of success.

Providing youth with these tools requires reflection on two areas: engagement and preparation. We should engage our youth at an early age to help them develop a good sense of self and to give them the confidence which enables them to set valuable goals.

Then, we should prepare our youth and provide them with the necessary tools to reach these goals. Once their goals of attaining PSE are set, and they have the tools to reach them, then the issue of accessibility becomes live.

Nevertheless, if accessibility is a major concern from the outset, it will be even more difficult to engage youth and to motivate them to prepare themselves in order. As such, all three sub-issues need to be addressed wholly, and this three-tiered approach can be viewed as a cycle:

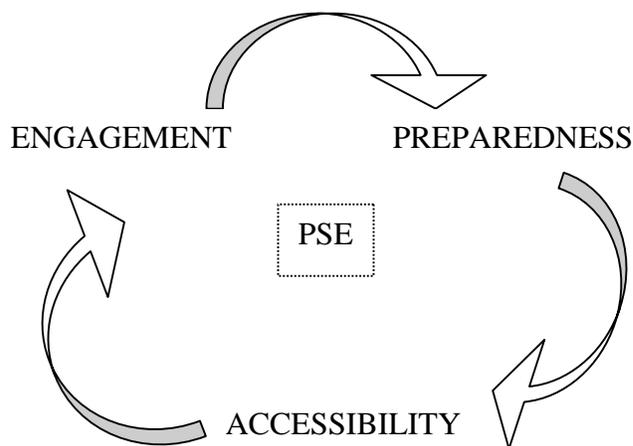


Table 1: Engagement, Preparedness and Accessibility Cycle

This cycle depicted above portrays the “thesis” which encompasses this “Youth Voice” with relation to PSE. It is provided for further context to the submission within.

As outlined previously, accessibility will surely be canvassed at length by many other stakeholders. However, lack of engagement and preparation are significant, and likely



amongst the most tangible, hurdles which our youth face today. Accordingly, the heart of this submission will focus on the same.

ENGAGEMENT

Self-Determination: “Who do You Want to Be?”

Engaging youth is crucial to enabling them to strive to be contributing members of our society. They must recognize the value in the same, and develop their own personal sense of being which will permit them to do so. Youth need to be able to see themselves as valuable members of their community and should be able to see their place in this community. Therefore they will be able to see themselves successfully completing a PSE program which will be personally valuable for them.

Successful Involvement: “How will You Get There?”

In the realm of PSE, the road to our universities is arguably the most traveled. Even if the enrolment numbers do not reflect the same, most youth echo the same story when stating that they were most often encouraged, by parents or educators, to attend university. There is no dispute that a university education is valuable for many. On the other hand, it is not the best route for everybody. In fact, for some it is entirely inappropriate.

Breaking the Trend: Encouraging “Alternative” Routes

In New Brunswick there is a myriad of available quality PSE programs. From academic programs to specialized trades institutions, the youth of New Brunswick have a wide range of options to further their education or training in a direction which will be personally valuable. However, we should ensure that we encourage and enable youth to follow the route which will be most appropriate for them.

In many instances, this process of encouragement is stifled by the same setting in which youth develop their ideas and objectives. As discussed above, the “university route” may be the trendiest amongst those which have the biggest influence on youth.



We are all the best spokespersons and advocates for what we have personally done. Clearly, most teachers, administrators and guidance counselors in the public school system are graduates from various universities. Consequently, they are great spokespersons for, and carry a wealth of personal knowledge about, the university system. Inevitably, the availability of this route may be presented most often to the youth in the public school system.

Increasingly, it seems as though this “trendy” university route is being fostered by the education curriculum itself. There are less quality trades or arts courses available in public schools and co-op or apprenticeship programs are not as accessible or effective as they could be. In order to engage youth and inspire them to reach for their goals, we must import some value in what interests them. Then, and only then, will we succeed in channeling our youth through the right PSE forums successfully.

The Role of the Public School Curriculum

Accordingly, reviewing the public school curriculum is an essential component to reviewing the effectiveness of the PSE system. Youth should have the opportunity to have a “taste” of what comes next prior to making that leap. Thought should be put into providing more apprenticeships, co-op programs, as well as shared credit agreements between the PSE institutions and provincial educators.



PREPAREDNESS

Breaking the Trend: Providing Access to “Alternative” Routes

As previously discussed, in the public school system most youth are inundated with examples of university success stories and the like. However, in that setting, mentors in other fields are few and far between, whether it be trades, entrepreneurship, arts, the technology sector, the private care sector, etc. It is vital that we fill this void by providing youth with the necessary information and by facilitating their access to the best programs in their fields of interest in order to enable them to follow these routes if they deem to do so.

There are various methods in which to access these alternate routes, and this submission does not purport to provide a “solution” to this sub-issue. It does, however, serve the important purpose of pointing out areas of concern as they relate to youths’ preparation to enter into PSE, which is their stepping stone into the workforce.

It’s Not a Race!

More often than not, youth feel pressured to pursue PSE immediately after graduating from high school, despite the fact that they may be unsure as to what they want to study, or what they want to accomplish. Many youth feel societal pressures, be it from their parents, peers or teachers, to enter into PSE immediately after completing high school.

For those who have a clear idea of the direction in which they want to head, this is not a problem. However, for those who are unsure, this may lead to rash decisions which are often accompanied by disappointment.

Attending PSE is not as easy as it used to be. Going to school was once a great life experience as well as a learning experience. It still is, but the cost associated with the same seems to augment exponentially year after year. It is thus a very expensive self-discovery route.



There is no shame in taking some time to make a decision, or to gather information as to the best programs available. As such, for youth who are not yet sure what steps to take after high school – we need to value the experience that can be gained from other sources such as work terms and various apprenticeships. We should make these more readily available in order to smooth the transition into PSE.

The Transition to PSE

Enrolling into a PSE institution for the first time is a big step from the public school system. It is important that this transition be done as smoothly as possible in order to maximize students' chance of success and the effectiveness of the system itself. In order to do so, we need to ensure that our youth are ready to attend once they leave the public school system, and that they are welcomed, guided and assisted once they enter the PSE system.

The transition from the public school system to PSE institutions is often fraught with difficulty. Often, students leave a school where they are treated as “responsible youth”, consistently monitored and have personal interaction with other students and with school staff, only to join another institution where they are expected to be independent, hard-working “adults” and have minimal direct interaction with other students or staff. When do these youth acquire these skills? Certainly not during the summer break after grade 12!

Consequently, we should better equip our youth before they leave the public system. Importance should be placed in acquiring more independent study and work skills and in helping them acquire the desire to succeed and the ambition to challenge themselves. If the public school system does not prepare youth for “what comes next”, it fails to serve their needs.



Preparing Youth for “What Comes Next”

Each and every youth in a public school classroom will have different goals and embark on a different route once they graduate. However, there are some basic skills which each and every one of them will need as they prepare to embark on a more independent work or study route.

“With independence comes responsibility” is an oft-repeated *cliché* that parents tell their children time after time. However, it is an essential ideology, which should also be instilled in our youth when we have their attention! Once they leave the public education system, we lose our chance to reach most youth at the same time. Accordingly, a sense of responsibility should be instilled in them relating to work ethic as well as a realistic perspective of the investment which is PSE.

Financial Readiness

The biggest void in student preparation for PSE relates to their finances. There is no doubt that an education is a valuable investment. However, when this investment is financed through loans, it becomes an even riskier investment. In fact, most students are unable to pay for their education themselves and therefore need to have recourse to various loan services. Loans are a huge financial responsibility, whether they are obtained from government or from private lenders. Unfortunately, for many students these loans represent “free money”, as the prospect of repayment is far into the future. Yet, the reality is rather that “free money today”, once interest accrues, becomes “very expensive tomorrow”.

There is a significant lack of education provided to youth relating to managing their finances and many do not do so very well. Consequently, once they exit the PSE system, many have overwhelming debt loads. It cannot, and must not, be left to individual families to teach financial responsibility to their children. In fact, it is irresponsible to assume that each New Brunswick family is equipped with such tools! Thus, it is



paramount that we stress the importance and the meaning of “borrowed money” to our youth prior to providing them with access to the loans. It is crucial to develop a program by which they can obtain this education and be equipped with these tools.

At the Gates: Welcoming Youth into PSE

If we do not succeed in providing youth with the sufficient tools necessary to succeed in the PSE system prior to leaving the public school system, it is essential that youth are greeted in a welcoming environment which acknowledges that they still face this learning curve to independence. Large anonymous classrooms are often disenchanting and intimidating and may tend to discourage full participation in the classroom. This, in turn, may hinder their chances of success and diminish the effectiveness of the PSE system itself. There is no doubt that public schools and PSE institutions should work together to bridge the gap that separates both in order to smooth the transition for New Brunswick youth.

PSE's Role: Preparedness for the Workforce

In the same manner that it is necessary for youth to be prepared in the public school system for what comes next (PSE), youth in the PSE system also need to be prepared for what comes after that: the workforce. Ideally, once a student successfully finishes their studies, they should be able to use the knowledge and skills acquired during the same and apply them in order to embark into the workforce. Unfortunately, this often is not the case. Too many PSE programs fail to recognize the practical implications of the education and skills that they provide.

In reality, many recent graduates also do not know how to use their skills and education in the workforce. Due to lack of engagement and lack of preparedness, many still have not determined “what to do next”. Consequently, many remain in the PSE system in order to delay the inevitable and put off their entry in the workforce. At that stage, some youth may accumulate various degrees. Further education is not necessarily a bad thing



but it can be very expensive and may in fact not be necessary to attain their end objective. Thus, it is also paramount that the various PSE institutions also equip their students with the tools necessary for them to apply their education and skills to the workforce. Otherwise, the cycle of indebtedness unnecessarily continues.

Expensive Consequences

Aside from the basic “cost” issue, the financial impact of youths’ lack of preparedness entering PSE manifests itself in various ways. In some cases, students enter PSE institutions and enroll in programs that they are not best suited for. Faced with a less-than-interesting or an overly-challenging course load, some of these students quickly become disenchanted with the PSE system and drop out. Where the initial PSE experience with PSE leaves a bad taste with students, many do not return. To that end, the system thus fails to reach its goal of developing skilled and educated citizens.

In other cases, students shop around from program to program, in hopes of finding the one which suits them best. For these students, this preliminary exploration of PSE results in a lengthy road to graduation. Common sense dictates that the less preparation, the lengthier the road, and the more expensive the diploma.

CONCLUSION

It may seem, at a first glance, that some of the topics canvassed in this submission exceed the scope of this Commission. However, as previously stated, the effectiveness of the PSE system in New Brunswick is impacted by numerous variables, only a small portion of the same being the PSE institutions themselves. In fact, when students reach the door of their chosen PSE institution, they bring with themselves an accumulation of experiences which significantly impact their chances of succeeding. Accordingly, in



order to maximize the efficiency of the PSE system in New Brunswick, it is fundamental that we take these into consideration.

At the end of the day, it is a reality that the success of the PSE system is highly contingent on the baggage which the students bring with them once they reach its doorstep. It is therefore paramount that the PSE institutions, the communities and the public school systems feeding those institutions work hand in hand to bridge the gap and smooth the transition. Only then will the students be sufficiently equipped to maximize their chances of success in their PSE program and their work objectives that follow. In the eyes of many youth, the best way to maximize the efficiency and value of the PSE system itself is to ensure that those who access it are provided with the greatest opportunity to succeed.

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