

Submission to the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick
From
UNB College of Extended Learning

The University of New Brunswick College of Extended Learning (CEL), as the primary lifelong learning outreach vehicle for the University, serves the citizens of the Province and beyond through a wide range of programming designed for part-time, distance, ESL, and professional and/or personal development learners. As such, CEL offers some unique perspectives to the Commission. Our responses to the questions below are intended to reflect the concerns of the non-traditional and continuous learner. We strongly believe that, given the demographic realities of New Brunswick, as well as the need to reskill and refresh the N.B. workforce for economic prosperity and, given the proven benefits of lifelong learning to society as a whole, these are populations that must be considered in the Post-Secondary Review.

1. In your opinion, what would the ideal post-secondary system for New Brunswick look like?

The ideal post-secondary system would reflect the following characteristics:

- **Responsive**—A well-functioning post-secondary system in N.B. would provide options for its various stakeholders, e.g. learners of all ages and stages, employers, N.B. society. Learners should have access to a wide range of program options—from those with a more applied focus (community colleges) to more academic streams (universities)—and should be able to move between the two as needs and interests change. Graduates should be able to expect that their continuing education needs will be met within the province. Employers should be able to expect that the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed in their businesses will drive program and curriculum development in N.B. post-secondary institutions. Citizens should be able to expect that post-secondary institutions can respond to their lifelong and life-wide learning needs.
- **Accessible**—The post-secondary system should provide pathways for learners of all ages and stages. In particular, individuals who return to the post-secondary system after stopping out need good guidance and a clear route to achieve their goals and their

potential. Part-time and/or distance study should be available for individuals whose life circumstances make these options more appropriate. Personal and/or professional development learners should be able to expect that the N.B. post-secondary system will be open to them.

- Outcomes-based—Programs and courses should be described in terms of their intended outcomes for the learner. This would allow for much more effective transition between programs, between colleges and/or universities, and would also remove barriers to prior learning assessment.
- Integrated—Learners should be able to move much more seamlessly between community college and university options. Transfer guides similar to those available in B.C. and Alberta need to be developed to remove barriers to transferability. Likewise, more work needs to be done in developing articulation agreements between college and university programs. In addition, colleges and universities should work together to serve the needs of special populations, e.g. rural, linguistic, Aboriginal.
- Well managed—The N.B. post-secondary system is big business and needs an appropriate balance of academic and professional management. Leaders and managers in the post-secondary system need training to be effective in developing people as well as systems. In addition, a New Brunswick council of leaders of post-secondary institutions may be a helpful forum for discussion, problem solving and the promotion of cooperative efforts.
- Promote a culture of continuous learning—New Brunswick has not yet fully embraced the significance of continuous learning to the economy and civil society, and our post-secondary institutions do not sufficiently prepare graduates to be continuous learners or sufficiently educate employers to the importance of ongoing learning for employees. We know that workplace skills need to be consistently refreshed if the N.B. economy is to flourish; we know that learning is critical for the development of strong families and good citizens; we know that learning is a key factor in maintaining health and well-being in older adults. Despite this knowledge, continuous learning is not monitored, measured, supported or encouraged. This needs to change.

3. Can you suggest ways to improve accessibility, particularly in rural areas?

Accessibility for rural communities would be promoted by initiatives such as the following:

- Distance Education—UNB/CEL has a history of outreach to the rural areas of the province through distance education formats from face-to-face to online delivery. Online (either fully or blended) options offer the greatest promise for outreach (both within the province and for export purposes) but also require investment. Unlike most other provinces, however, N.B. has not made the development of online educational products a focus in recent years, and institutional investment funding has been severely limited. As a result, N.B., once considered a leader in distance learning, can no longer make this claim. A concept that deserves further consideration is a centralized delivery model of online learning opportunities similar to that used by the university system in Arizona, whereby a number of institutions develop programming and one has the responsibility to maintain a joint portal to serve and support learners.
- Infrastructure--Better use can be made of existing infrastructure in rural areas, e.g. schools, school networks, videoconference facilities, Department of Health network.
- Collaboration—A number of examples of collaboration exist and can be extended. The collaboration of UNB, STU and Mt. Allison to offer credit courses in the Miramichi is one example. Others include cooperative efforts to develop and deliver the Autism Intervention Training Program (UNB, UdeM, Department of Health & Community Services) and the Critical Care Nursing Program (UNB, UdeM, Regional Health Authorities).

Accessibility for special populations also needs to be considered. Some examples include:

- Mature, part-time, working—Pathways and options are needed to meet the learning needs of individuals with family, community and workplace responsibilities. Flexible delivery models are important, e.g. online, evening, weekend, but more significant is the mindset of our post-secondary institutions, in truly treating these populations as legitimate learners through adult-friendly policies (e.g. prior learning assessment) and procedures (e.g. including adult faces in promotional materials). Financial aid, both scholarships and bursaries, can be a critical accessibility factor for

mature full-time and part-time students. N.B. offers assistance to full-time post-secondary learners but not to those who need to study on a part-time basis. The Canada Student Loans Program for part-time students has been in need of a complete overhaul for many years.

- **Aboriginal populations**—In a province with stagnant population growth, we cannot afford to do less than a stellar job in helping members of N.B.'s Aboriginal population to reach their highest potential. Access to post-secondary is a critical factor.
- **Disabled**—Federal accessibility guidelines need to be applied to learning products. Greater knowledge of and investment in assistive technologies are required
- **Immigrants**—Immigrants to N.B. face issues of foreign credential recognition, ESL needs, educational gaps before being able to enter the job market. Post-secondary institutions can play a significant role in attracting and retaining immigrants to our province.

5. Can you suggest initiatives that would help decrease the drop-out rate?

As a start, we need to be better informed about why learners do not complete their program of study. There is a body of literature but N.B. specific data are few. Other initiatives to promote retention include:

- Appropriate guidance/advising at the front end
- Retention programs, e.g. writing skills, study skills, math assistance, content-specific tutoring
- Mentoring
- Support services for distance learners
- Second chance opportunities for program completion
- Financial aid for part-time, mature

6. Is New Brunswick's post-secondary system meeting the needs of students and employers?

The term "student", as used in the Commission's Discussion Paper, seems unnecessarily narrow and exclusive, if we are concerned about post-secondary level learning in its entirety. "Learner" allows for the inclusion of professional or personal

development learners in either degree credit or other credentialed programs—or in a myriad of uncredentialed programs or courses that can add significantly to skills and knowledge needed in the workplace—or in life in general.

Post-secondary institutions have huge resources that can and should be directly servicing the needs of employers. But employers often have very specific, applied learning needs that may not be well understood by academics. A continuing education unit, such as CEL, can play a vital role in helping to marry the needs of employers with the resources of institutions. Likewise, educational institutions can be seen by employers as insular or difficult to work with; an outreach unit experienced in working with employers can again play an important role in making things happen in the timeframe and with the flexibility needed by employers. By affiliating educational offerings with credentials of professional associations, institutions can also assist employers more effectively.

7. How do you think New Brunswick's universities and colleges rank in comparison with others?

This is a difficult question to answer in the broad strokes. Within the world of continuing education, UNB/CEL stands proudly as a well-regarded and diverse university unit worthy of a national comprehensive university. Several programming and marketing awards in recent years from the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education attest to this recognition.

9. What do you think should be the relationship between New Brunswick's community colleges and universities?

As stated earlier, a more integrated approach to a continuum of learning opportunities is needed. Laddering should be the norm, both between and within institutions. Although, in general, community colleges have a more applied focus and universities stress broader academic approaches to disciplines, the boundaries are not hard. So, too, with research.

Several examples exist of collaborative approaches in continuing education, e.g. with the Certificate in Human Resources Management, in which development and delivery are shared, as is ownership of the program. More of this kind of activity is needed.

10. What would be the fairest and most effective way of paying for post-secondary education?

Post-secondary learning is an investment; there are multiple stakeholders who share in the benefits and who should, therefore, share in the financing. These include learners and their families, governments, employers, citizens. The first principle, however, is that lack of finances should not be the determining factor in whether or not a qualified individual can access learning opportunities. The current Canada Student Loans Program does a reasonable job of promoting accessibility for traditional full-time students but is not effective for part-time or professional development learners. A new scheme is needed, perhaps partially funded through Employment Insurance.

11. Any other comments or suggestions?

In a province like N.B., with its immigration challenges, post-secondary education should be a major partner with government in attracting and retaining immigrants. This issue was not addressed in the Commission's Discussion Document but bears significant discussion.

For further information on any of the elements raised in this submission, please contact Dr. Judith Potter, Executive Director, UNB College of Extended Learning