

Malcolm MacBeath – Comments to N.B. Post-Secondary Education Commission

Post-secondary education is becoming both more necessary and less accessible. It is an increasingly vital component of a knowledge-based society. Accessibility, affordability and relevance problems can be addressed. To do this we would have to leave behind the existing models. If New Brunswick reforms its post-secondary education system, it would probably be the first jurisdiction in North America to do so. Let's not wait for everyone else to do it first, there may not be a province left by then.

Costs need to be controlled and reduced:

The cost of post-secondary education has risen to levels that are un-supportable for the majority of students. Post-secondary education is becoming a job-buying club for the upper-middle class. Because of this, the education system has become a major source of inequality in our society. New Brunswick can not afford to continue to follow an outdated post-secondary educational model that is too expensive and inefficient for our society.

Costs can be controlled by:

1. Making post-secondary education an option and not a requirement:
 - a. Every career path should be accessible through apprenticeship after high school, as well as through formal education. This is the only way that economic fairness can be offered to those from the poorest parts of society.
 - b. Objective, relevant tests should be offered as an option to post secondary education. A particular university degree should always be accepted as proof of basic career knowledge, but it should never be an absolute requirement. This is particularly important in recognizing the expertise of immigrants. A particular university degree is never a bona fide occupational requirement for any job; a particular set of knowledge is.
2. Standardizing basic courses across the country and using pre-packaged video and other media learning packages.
3. Increasing class size through teleconferencing etc.
4. Using Master's level people to teach rather than PhDs.
5. A greater use of libraries so that people can teach themselves.
6. Ensuring all courses and all programs are available throughout the province so that students don't have to take on the tremendous burden of out-of-town living expenses:
 - a. Technology is now available to permit the diffusion of specialized teaching in every corner of the province.
 - b. The barriers to adopting new technologies in higher education are primarily cultural and administrative.
7. Shorten degrees and diplomas.
 - a. The 60s, 70s, and 80s have witnessed a trend to increasing the length of degrees and the number of required courses. This trend was driven by the population bulge of the baby-boom and has very little to do

with actual increases in education needs of the labour market. This trend must be reversed to restore a fair and affordable post-secondary education system. Many programs should be returned to community colleges.

- b. Professional degrees and diplomas should only contain the courses and assignments that are clearly essential to that profession.
- c. New Brunswick needs to stand up to Ontario and the other large provinces who establish the de facto standards and demand that they scale back their inflating educational standards, or else contribute a lot more to equalization so that New Brunswickers can afford to keep up.

Funding Model

Ideally all post-secondary studies should be free. It is unreasonable to expect young people with no assets and no savings to go deeply into debt to finance an education which may or may not be economically beneficial to them in the long run.

Parental support should also not be considered the main source of funding for a number of important reasons:

-Relying mostly on parental support seriously hurts the chances of success of students from lower economic backgrounds.

-Not everyone who can afford it would encourage their children to undertake post-secondary education.

-If parents pay the bill, they will also decide what university will be attended and what program is studied; this is a serious misallocation of time, effort and resources. People who have finished high school have a right to enter adulthood; this can't happen if they remain financially dependent on their parents.

A new funding model should be adopted that will make post-secondary education truly accessible regardless of income level and which will impose accountability back on the institutions.

The institutions themselves should be the ones to provide loans to students to cover tuition and living expenses. The universities and colleges should be given an initial endowment from government with which to do this.

After the students have graduated, the Universities and Colleges should only be able to demand payments:

- after the student has finished all their studies,
- only at a limited percent of income, and
- only for a limited number of years after the studies are finished.

Quality and accountability need to be enhanced.

The current post-secondary system is overly focused on its relationship to the international university community. It needs to be much more focused on the needs of New Brunswick's population, especially its students and industry. Elitist universities that are more concerned with international academic comparisons should operate without funding from the taxpayers. Government supported universities should recognize their role as being to provide as much relevant education to as many New Brunswickers as possible.

Our post-secondary education system has to have the courage to lead in new directions. If we persist in following the prevailing trends we will remain in last place.

Quality can be improved by doing the following:

1. **Accountability:** Programs and professors must be held accountable for the quality of their programs and teaching. Professional programs must be accountable to their relevant industries.
 - a. For a University or College to maintain a program it should have to continually respond to independent surveys of:
 - i. Previous students: do they think the program structure, courses and assignments were appropriate?
 - ii. The industry sector: do managers agree that graduates have the skills and abilities that are needed to work in these fields?
 - iii. The customers: do the clients of these professionals feel that their lawyer, doctor, engineer, whatever is properly trained in all the skills they need to do their jobs well, including ethics and client relations?
 - b. The quickest, easiest, least expensive method to ensure accountability is to enable students to choose which courses they want to take, which professor they want to teach their course and some degree of choice about what type of assignments they do. The current programs are excessively dictatorial in their structure. This is a condescending perspective. Students do know what is best for their educational needs and will most often choose in their own best interests. Students should be free to choose whichever courses they want within a major and minor and should be fully free to combine majors and minors amongst different faculties.
2. **Quality.** The following things could be done to improve the quality of post-secondary education in New Brunswick:
 - a. Separate research from teaching. Different people should do these two things. Researchers (PhDs. should guest lecture, but should not do standard lectures, and give out and mark assignments, etc.
 - b. For professional programs hire more people with substantial work experience and fewer pure academics.
 - c. Ensure that everyone who teaches has some basic training in teaching and is periodically evaluated on their actual ability to teach.

- d. Recognize that everyone needs a mix of academic and non-academic (practical) courses and make programs flexible enough to accommodate this.
- e. Don't try and combine practical and academic content in the same course; this is highly inefficient.
- f. Recognize that post-secondary students are adults and allow them to choose which courses they want to take as part of their programs.
- g. Whatever their field of study, the primary thing University students should learn is how to confidently teach themselves something new without relying on yet another course to learn.
- h. Do not try and align community college programs with university degrees. Universities do not have it completely right in higher education matters. Colleges should vigorously pursue an alternative approach to higher education. Students should have a real choice. Colleges should not be turned into second-rate university imitations. The college system should have its own degree granting structure to top off its diplomas.
- i. Get rid of the busy-work assignments. People don't need to go to University to learn how to work efficiently. They can learn that at MacDonald's. Students need time at university to think deeply about issues. Our current system focuses on producing people who are super-efficient at some technical specialty. It is more important for graduates to be able to grasp the big picture and make enlightened, thoughtful decisions.

Adult/ Continuing Education:

Universities and colleges have not responded to the growing need for continuing education. They have tended to view continuing education as a cash cow. They have not modified their programs and schedules to accommodate mature students and post-graduation re-training.

New Brunswick should establish a separate institution for adult education.

In particular continuing education should offer:

- Province-wide access.
- Both targeted short courses and full degrees and diplomas
- A focus on helping people improve their working lives and/or changing careers.
- Shorter night classes: a maximum of two hours long, not three. A three hour class is just too long after a full days work.
- Access to the full range of professional programs through continuing or part-time education.
- Tailored professionally oriented programs to ensure that only courses and knowledge clearly needed for that profession are part of the required curriculum.

Specific Problems:

Underserved Cities:

Saint John and Moncton are the economic growth engines of New Brunswick, yet they are both under-served by the university and college systems. Universities are a key element of economic survival in today's knowledge based economy. To maximize the economic potential of our largest cities it is essential that they both have better post-secondary education. Excuses have been made for too long. Resources need to be re-allocated.

Outdated Models:

This whole K-12, college and university model is completely backwards, going from the general to the specific. Students should learn specific skills, trades and business techniques in junior and senior high. University should be for intellectual development of people who already have career training.

However, as long as this model remains up-side down it is vitally important that universities and colleges align their programs with labour market needs.

Second Language Teaching:

This is an area of vital importance to national unity and provincial harmony. With the time, effort and money that has been put into this in New Brunswick everyone under 40 should be bilingual by now. That is not the case. Second language acquisition need not be a tortuous process; but it often is. It is a fully realizable goal for most people to be able to understand the other language.

Some key points need to be addressed to make it work better:

1. Teaching models that focus on nit-picking grammar and relentless testing is counter productive and should not happen.
2. Teaching must flow in a manner similar to natural language acquisition; beginning with comprehension, and only after a strong base of understanding is built moving on to speaking and then writing.
3. Second language teaching needs to recognize, respect and incorporate the local dialects of French. Those who are determined to change the reality of French as it exists in New Brunswick today should teach French as a first language, not as a second language.

Quantitative Bias:

Our university degrees and college diplomas have developed a very pronounced bias with their overbearing focus on mathematics, statistics and the hard sciences.

A successful knowledge based society needs to be able to draw on the talents of creative, intuitive, communicative people as well.

Our professions need to be open to a wider variety of intelligent people. The current crisis in health care has much to do with programs that select people who are not

suited to health care professions, worse yet they exclude those who would be best suited to such careers.

Outdated Degrees:

Our universities run on a model of rigidly defined subject areas with tightly controlled curricula. This leaves those in professional programs without the opportunity to take some of the more enlightening courses that are offered in the humanities for instance. It also leaves Arts and Science students without the opportunities to learn key business skills. Universities need to recognize three important things:

1. This is a capitalist society and therefore, to some extent, every degree should be a business degree. Whether a student is in Science, Engineering, Arts, Fine Arts, or Social Sciences it is vitally important that they be empowered to take sufficient numbers of practical, business-oriented courses to be able to function and be valued in our economy.
2. Any university degree should permit the inclusion of a reasonable amount of history, philosophy, etc. to enable students to develop a professional capacity for enlightened reflection
3. Enable students to vary their studies; don't force it on them.

Final point:

Economic and social inequality has many causes. It is however, the post-secondary education system, and the professionally oriented programs in particular, that are becoming the main gatekeeper of inequality in our society. Post-secondary education has become obligatory for access to good paying jobs. Yet the costs are excessive. Programs are too lengthy. The curriculum is filled with irrelevant courses and assignments that are there for academic purposes and not for the needs of the job market or the students. The programs also frequently fail to teach some of the key skills and knowledge that are actually needed to practice various professions.

Unless these issues are addressed our society will continue to push more and more young people into the underground economy. Unless these issues are addressed too many of our society's brightest people will be excluded from the professions and other leadership activities.