

THE EDUCATION GENERATION: a blueprint for an economically competitive and socially just Canada

WHO WE ARE

- We are a collective of eight provincial and national student organizations representing approximately 600,000 post-secondary students from across the country.
- Our collective includes: Alliance of Nova Scotia Student Associations, Alberta College and Technical Institute Student Executive Council, the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, College Student Alliance, Council of Alberta University Students, Graduate Students' Association of Canada, New Brunswick Student Alliance, and the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance.
- Over the past 18 months, our organizations have convened several meetings to discuss the many challenges facing our post-secondary system at both the federal and provincial levels. The following document contextualizes our reasons for working together, and represents common priorities of the students of Canada.

CONTEXT: A BRIGHT FUTURE BEGINS WITH HIGHER EDUCATION

Post-Secondary education is the key to an economically prosperous and socially just Canada.

Above and beyond infrastructure investments, business subsidies, or tax cuts, a highly educated population is the primary vehicle for driving economic development in Canada. By creating better employment opportunities for graduates, post-secondary education has a broader economic effect of raising graduates' wages, lowering unemployment rates, and increasing the tax base. Statistics Canada examined 15,000 families in 2002 and found that college and university graduates make up 40 per cent of the working-age population, and pay nearly 65 per cent of all personal income taxes, while receiving less than a third of government transfers.¹

In the next decade the number of persons retiring in Canada will surpass the number of newcomers to the workforce. In twenty years, retirees will outnumber new workers four to three. It is clear that in order to compete in the global knowledge economy Canada will need more highly-educated, skilled workers. Experts agree that while increased immigration will help, the only way to truly respond to this issue is to help Canadians who are traditionally under-represented in our colleges and universities to obtain post-secondary credentials and become highly-skilled workers. This would require an immediate improvement in the accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education for under-represented groups, such as low-income Canadians and Aboriginal Canadians.

Post-secondary graduates are also essential contributors to a more socially just and civically engaged Canada. Higher education produces critical thinkers and innovators, as well as an informed and engaged citizenry. According to a recent study in the United Kingdom, post secondary graduates are "...less depressed, healthier, more likely to vote in elections and help with their children's education..." Graduates were also found to be more tolerant of other races and were almost twice as likely to read to their children when compared to individuals who had not graduated from secondary school.

Canada lacks a coherent national vision for post-secondary education

Almost all industrialized economies have implemented aggressive national post-secondary strategies to advance their interests, especially in terms of innovation, productivity, and economic growth.² The European Union exemplifies this new trend, particularly through the Bologna Declaration of 1999 that pledges member countries 'to reform their higher education systems in a convergent way while ensuring the fundamental principles of autonomy and diversity are respected.'³ This declaration was a commitment to find common European answers to common post-secondary problems; more than a simple political statement, it is a binding agreement among EU members to develop and adhere to a framework to eliminate obstacles to student mobility and increase access and quality of post-secondary education. Our competitors recognize the importance of taking a coordinated approach to improving higher education – intergovernmental squabbles surrounding post-secondary education cannot be sustained, or Canada will lag behind other jurisdictions.

¹ Alex Usher and Sean Junor, *The Price of Knowledge 2004* (Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2004), p.322.

² Council for Learning.

³ Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences and the Association of European Universities, "The Bologna Declaration on the European space for higher education: an explanation"; accessed online at <http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf>.

Many 'developing' nations are also poised to out-do Canada by building top-quality post-secondary systems. The primary challenger is China, which now has the largest and fastest-growing university population in the world. According to government sources, 11 million students enrolled in post-secondary institutions in 2000, and this grew to over 16 million in 2002.⁴ Whereas in 1990 China had a little over twice the number of university students as Canada, by 2010 the country projects its enrolment to be 27 million students, which is almost the size of Canada's entire population. While the country is already home to numerous top universities, China is also working to build 100 world-class institutions in the 21st century in an initiative called 'Project 211.'⁵ This intensive focus on higher education could vault China into the position of a global higher education leader, and indeed, most likely an economic and political leader as well. Canada must develop a national strategy, or we will risk being overtaken by China and other emerging economic powers.

OUR PRIORITIES: TOWARDS AN ECONOMICALLY PROSPEROUS AND SOCIALLY JUST CANADA

Priority One: Develop a Pan-Canadian accord on post-secondary education

Recommendation: Provincial premiers, territorial leaders, and the prime minister must dedicate a First Minister's Conference to post-secondary education.

- The outcome of the conference must be an accord that articulates a vision, goals and objectives for post-secondary education at the national level;
- The conference must involve all post-secondary stakeholders, including significant participation from students;
- Please see appendix for our recommended agenda items for the conference.

Rationale: As argued in a recent report by the Canadian Council on Learning, "Canada lacks mechanisms at the national level to ensure coherence, coordination and effectiveness on key priorities, such as quality, access, and mobility."⁶

- Leading industrialized countries are developing national strategies and implementing major reforms to respond to national needs and global realities. Canada risks falling behind our competitors if we do not develop a coordinated strategy;
- Current data available to track Canada's performance are incomplete, uncoordinated, and difficult to compare between provincial jurisdictions. This stark gap is telling proof of incoherent system planning on the national level, and presents a clear barrier to pan-Canadian goal setting and performance measurement. The accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education is stratifying between provincial jurisdictions, and students across the country worry that the system is heading towards a stratification of quality as well.

Priority Two: Increase public investment in high-quality post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The federal government must introduce a dedicated post-secondary education transfer to provinces and territories.

- All money in the dedicated education transfer must be applied to post-secondary education;
- An initial funding level of at least \$4 billion in annual *cash* transfers is urgently needed in order to match funding levels from 1992/1993, adjusted to inflation and demographic growth.
- The transfer agreement must stipulate that provinces would not decrease their own post-secondary education spending when additional federal funding is provided.⁷

Rationale: Provinces and territories require adequate and stable federal funding to meet Canadians' need for education, training, and innovation.

- When adjusted for inflation and population growth, federal transfers to the provinces to fund post-secondary education in 2004 were 40 per cent lower than 1992/93.
- Stable and predictable federal funding would allow Canada to achieve broad national objectives for learning, and ensure an accessible and high quality post-secondary education is available from coast, to coast, to coast.

⁴ Li Heng, "China's higher education accessible to the masses: minister", *People's Daily*, October 20, 2003; accessed online at http://english.people.com.cn/200310/20/eng20031020_126428.shtml

⁵ China Education and Research Network, "Project 211: A brief introduction"; accessed online at <http://www.edu.cn/2001101001/21851.shtml>.

⁶ Canadian Council on Learning. *Canadian Post-Secondary Education, A Positive Record – An Uncertain Future, Summary*. Ottawa: 2006. Pg. 4

⁷ Entire recommendation taken from: Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, *Think Bigger Picture, Brighter Future* (Ottawa: CASA, 2004), p.5.

Priority Three: Reform student assistance to improve access and affordability.

Recommendation: The federal and provincial governments must conduct a holistic review of the student financial aid system in Canada.

- The federal government should work with the provinces and territories to ensure the review is pan-Canadian in scope. The review should examine federal and provincial student loans, grants, tax incentives, savings programs, and the Millennium Scholarship Foundation.
- The review should address the needs-assessment process and focus on providing students assistance without an unreasonable debt load.
- The review should focus on allocating funding to students in need and towards grants targeted at improving access for under-represented groups.

Rationale: The current system is a Byzantine mix of tax credits, loan programs, and grants that are not effectively or efficiently meeting the needs of students.

- There are serious problems with the student financial assistance system. Students' needs are not accurately assessed. Students often cannot get enough assistance – or any assistance at all. Students are borrowing large amounts of money and graduating with huge debt burdens.
- The biggest expenditure on "student financial aid" in Canada is not loans or grants, but untargeted initiatives such as tax credits and savings programs that are available to anyone regardless of income or need, and cost taxpayers over \$2.5 billion per year.⁸
- Governments spend over \$1.7 billion on education-related tax credits for students, and new tax credits were announced by the federal government and several provinces over the past year. Yet this money does not go to students in need – only 31 per cent of tax credits are used by students while they are studying.
- Grants are the most effective way of reducing student debt and increasing access for students from under-represented groups.

⁸ Finnie, R., Schwartz, S., and Lascelles, E., "Smart Money? Government Spending on Student Financial Aid in Canada," How Ottawa Spends, Ed. G. Bruce Doern, Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2003, 155-171

Education: Our Collective Priority

First Ministers Conference on Postsecondary Education

DAY ONE:

Overview of Canada's Postsecondary Education System

The role of postsecondary education in the economy and society

Towards an uncertain future: current climate and condition of post secondary education in Canada

– *Canadian Council on Learning Canadian Post-secondary Education: A Positive Record – An Uncertain Future*

Progress through Partnerships: Who is doing what? Clarifying roles and responsibilities

– *Human Resources and Social Development Canada Report*

Disproportionately underrepresented groups:

- a) Aboriginals
- b) Rural Canadians
- c) Students with dependents
- d) Low-income and high-need Canadians
- e) Students with disabilities
- e) Other

DAY TWO:

Discussion Sessions

Improving the internationalization of education and education for international students in Canada

Universities, Colleges, Technical Institutes: a comparative perspective

Postsecondary Education: the public v. private debate

Provincial/Territorial postsecondary education systems: comparative perspective

Who's funding research in Canada? Research Councils? Postsecondary Institutions? The Private Sector?

Learners' perspective: diversity, choice and success

DAY THREE:

Action Sessions

Student Financial Aid

Moving Forward: Integrating and harmonizing student financial aid for the benefit of affordability, accessibility, and efficiency

Pan-Canadian Strategy

Developing shared objectives, targets, and principles
– *Council of the Federation Report: Competing for Tomorrow: A Strategy for Postsecondary Education and Skills Training in Canada*

- a) Accessibility
- b) Affordability
- c) Quality
- d) Innovation

Establishing reliable and predictable funding

- a) Federal Government to Provincial Governments
- b) Provincial Governments to Institutions
- c) Governments and Institutions to the Student

Enhancing accountability in the current postsecondary system

- a) Measurables

Conclusion

Summary of action items and next steps

Concluding remarks

*Guest Speaker:

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