



Category: Accessibility
Topic: Underrepresented Groups
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Whereas,

In 2005 and 2006, a number of new grants were introduced through the Department of Education. These grants are intended to target students underrepresented in post-secondary education, namely: students with dependants; female doctoral students; students with disabilities; low income students; and high need part time students.

While this is step in the right direction, some students are falling through the cracks. Aboriginal Nova Scotians, African Nova Scotians, and first generation university students continue to face barriers to higher education. Targeted grants are one way of lowering those barriers. The Nova Scotia Department of Education's Annual Accountability Report stated in 2006 that "grants are seen to be the most effective instrument in improving access."¹ Of course, financing is only one piece of the accessibility puzzle, and a myriad of elements must work in harmony to remove the barriers that prevent students from furthering their education.²

Aboriginal Nova Scotians

While participation rates of Aboriginal students within Canada's post-secondary system has significantly increased over the last 20 years, these students are still far less likely to pursue post-secondary education, when compared to other non-Aboriginal students. Nova Scotian Aboriginals face significant challenges in accessing and persisting through post-secondary education³.

In 2001, only 745 Aboriginal students graduated from universities in Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia is the province that is closest to closing the participation gap – the point when aboriginal students achieve graduation parity rates on par with that of the non-aboriginal population. However, we shouldn't celebrate yet; Mi'kmaq participation rates need to increase by 118% (or 881 students) before graduation parity is reached.⁴

According to the Nova Scotia Office of Aboriginal Affairs, 44% of the Aboriginal identity population in Nova Scotia is under the age of 25. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate of aboriginals aged 25 – 64 is

¹ Nova Scotia Department of Education (2007). Accountability Report.

² Mendelson, M. (2006). Aboriginal People and Post-Secondary Education in Canada (Caledon Institute of Social Policy) Retrieved on 01 October 2009 from <<http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/595ENG.pdf>>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

nearly double that of the non-aboriginal population⁵. Estimates indicate nearly two-thirds of the jobs created by 2015 will require a post-secondary education. If higher education is not made more accessible to Aboriginal Nova Scotians, the job opportunities available to them and Nova Scotia's ability to meet the demands of the labour market will continue to diminish.

African-Nova Scotians

The African-Nova Scotian community makes up the majority of the visible minority population in our province. Little is known about the post-secondary participation rates of this group, but all available evidence points to the fact that they are underrepresented in our post-secondary institutions. African-Nova Scotian unemployment rates continue to be higher than those of non-African Nova Scotians⁶, yet not nearly as high as Aboriginal-Nova Scotians. The same concerns with job opportunities and access to education apply to African-Nova Scotians as are present with Aboriginal-Nova Scotians, albeit likely to a lesser extent.

First Generation Students

First generation students are students whose parents did not attend university or college. Recently, a wealth of research has been conducted on this demographic, illuminating academic challenges associated with this group. As reported in *The Price of Knowledge*, first generation students are "less likely to agree that higher education is needed to get a good job, that paying for advanced schooling is a good investment and that there are benefits to post-secondary education beyond a good job."⁷

In addition to skepticism around post-secondary education, first generation learners tend to score lower marks in high school and rely more on student loans than their peers, whose parents attended post-secondary. The research is clear: first generation learners face an intersection of financial, academic, informational, and motivational barriers to post-secondary education.

Underrepresented Groups and the Economy

A recent study conducted by the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies projects that the Nova Scotia population will slowly decline by 43,000, or 4.6%, from 938,000 in 2004 to 895,000 in 2026.⁸ To compound this frightening statistic, the university age population in Nova Scotia will decline by 29.8% from 73,000 in 2001 to 51,000 by 2026⁹. The authors of this study assert that "sometime towards the middle of the next decade and for the first time in at least a century, the number of people willing and

⁵Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Workforce Development (2008). Nova Scotia Labour Market Review. Retrieved on 10 October 2009 from < http://novascotiareeroptions.ca/images/LMI%20portal%20documents/LabourReview_08_EN.pdf>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Berger J, Motte A, and Parkin A. (2007). *The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada* 3rd Edition. Toronto: Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

⁸ McNiven, JD & Foster, M. (2008). *The Developing Workforce Program: Confronting Labor Shortages in the Coming Decades*. Halifax: Atlantic Institute for Market Studies. Retrieved on 3 April 2009 from <<http://www.aims.ca/library/workforceproblem.pdf>>

⁹ Ibid.

available to work in Canada will be smaller than the number of jobs potentially available for them.”¹⁰ The looming population decline and labor shortage is well documented and will be felt across most of the developed world, but it is widely viewed that Nova Scotia will be impacted sooner than other provinces as a result of persistent outmigration and declining birthrates. The demographic challenges that we face are severe and should not be underestimated.

Education must play a critical role in addressing these demographic challenges. As the world transitions into the knowledge economy, Nova Scotia must ensure that it can meet emerging labor demands with creative and educated citizens. Reaching this goal will involve a critical examination of who is *not* pursuing post-secondary education in Nova Scotia and *why*. While Nova Scotia has relatively high levels of participation in post-secondary education, participation rates of Nova Scotia’s Aboriginal, African, and first generation learners lag far behind the general population. It is vital that the provincial government begin to remove accessibility barriers for these students, in an effort to encourage higher participation rates.

Therefore, ANSSA:

1. *Calls* on the Province of Nova Scotia to expand its definition of under-represented students to include Aboriginal, African, and First Generation students.
2. *Calls* on the Province of Nova Scotia to invest in community based early outreach programs that can increase awareness among youth from these groups to the opportunities available to them after high school.
3. *Calls* on the Province of Nova Scotia to expand the Nova Scotia Study Grant program for low income students, taking into special consideration the promotion of these grants to , Aboriginal Nova Scotians African Nova Scotians, and First Generation students
4. *Calls* on the Province of Nova Scotia to develop monitoring methods that will measure the participation and graduation rates of each of these groups in our post-secondary system.
5. *Calls on* the Province of Nova Scotia to set a target of raising post-secondary participation rates of Aboriginal and African Nova Scotians to parity with the post-secondary provincial graduation average by 2014.

¹⁰ Ibid.