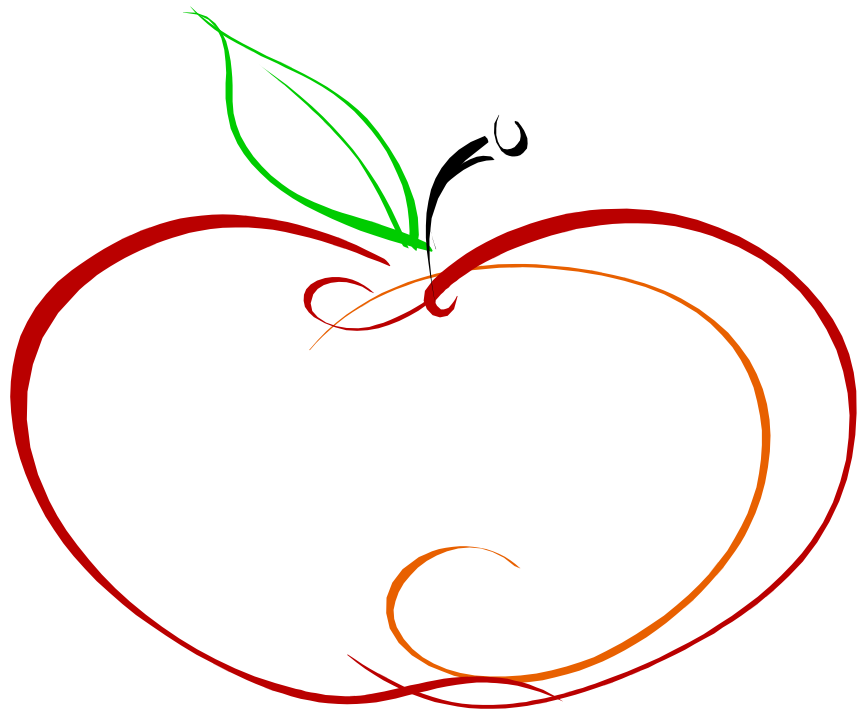


MAKING THE GRADE



Election
2009

Recommendations and expectations on the future of higher education



The Alliance of Nova Scotia Student Associations (ANSSA) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit organization representing over 35,000 students at five post-secondary institutions across the Province of Nova Scotia. ANSSA's mandate focuses exclusively on post-secondary education, and is committed to advocating for a high quality system that is accessible and affordable to every qualified student.

ANSSA Member Associations include:



Cape Breton University Students' Union

St. Francis Xavier University Students' Union

Dalhousie Student Union

Saint Mary's University Students' Association

Acadia University Students' Union



Head Office Staff:

Mark Coffin Executive Director



Contact Information:

233 – 1657 Barrington Street

Halifax, NS

B3J 2A1

902.422.4068 (P)

902.422.5831 (F)

ed@anssa.ca

www.anssa.ca



Making the Grade

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ANSSA believes that investing in Nova Scotians is one of the most effective ways of ensuring the long term prosperity of our province. During these troubled economic times our province faces great challenges: an aging population, the outmigration of youth, an uncertain economic future, environmental crises, a strained health care system, and the threat of a retiring workforce. These are just some of the issues facing our province. ANSSA believes the best way to meet and overcome the challenges of tomorrow is to invest in a higher education system that is accessible and affordable to every Nova Scotian and of the highest quality. While efforts have been made in recent years to reduce the financial burden on students, Nova Scotia retains its decade old title of being the most expensive Canadian province in which to pursue a university education.

Nova Scotia's students are putting forward the following recommendations to all political parties to ensure that our higher education system is accessible, affordable, and of the highest quality.

Holistic review and master plan

ANSSA is calling on all parties to commit to a comprehensive review of the post-secondary education (PSE) system in Nova Scotia. This review will encompass all aspects of the PSE system including, but not limited to: student financial aid, university financing, research funding, graduate student programs, international students, quality, and Nova Scotia's long term vision for the post-secondary education system. The outcome of such a review will serve as a road map in creating a master plan higher education in our province. Future Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) between the province and the universities will take the outcomes of such a review into consideration. ANSSA is also calling on all parties to honor and better the existing MoU which outlines the provincial funding system for our universities.

An access guarantee for all Nova Scotians

ANSSA is advocating for the institution of a guarantee that no academically qualified student shall be denied a university or college education for financial reasons alone. ANSSA recommends the expansion of existing grant programs for students with demonstrable need alongside continued tuition reductions and other policy tools described herein.

Infrastructure for Education: Bricks for brains

ANSSA encourages the next government to make a commitment to match federal infrastructure money allocated to universities. ANSSA recommends that Provincial Government direct funds toward the deferred maintenance projects recommended by the Council of Nova Scotia University President, and that future monies ensure the environmental sustainability and physical accessibility of our institutions

A Pan-Canadian Accord on Higher Education

ANSSA calls on the next government of Nova Scotia to actively advocate for the creation of a Pan-Canadian Accord on post-secondary education that allows a national plan on higher education to be developed. ANSSA Urges the Province to work with federal and provincial governments to negotiate a Pan-Canadian Accord on post-secondary education and the establishment of a dedicated transfer payment from the federal government to the provinces for post secondary education.

HOLISTIC REVIEW AND MASTER PLAN

The students of Nova Scotia have grown uncomfortable with the lack of clear vision for the university system, Nova Scotia has a patchwork system of student financial aid programs, a habit of negotiating only short term plans for funding universities, and no clear direction on issues like research, graduate programs, international students, quality of education and long term vision.

In 2006-07, Nova Scotia spent approximately \$22,079,100 on student financial assistance, almost exclusively through the Nova Scotia Student Loans Program, a new student grant program and debt reduction¹. In direct university and college investment, Nova Scotia will spend \$227,872,000 through the Assistance to Universities fund in the 2006-07 fiscal year².

Six provinces in Canada have now conducted comprehensive reviews on their post-secondary education systems. Nova Scotia joins Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador (provinces where tuition has remained relatively low despite federal funding cuts) and Prince Edward Island (a province with only one university) in the small group of provinces who have yet to conduct a comprehensive review. Nova Scotia boasts the highest tuition in Canada, eleven degree granting institutions and thirteen community colleges it is time for Nova Scotia to join its competitors in conducting a holistic review!

In the 2006 Nova Scotia General Election, the three main political parties proposed a variety of measures to address the crisis in post secondary education. There is a clear desire to do something about the problem of high tuition and student debt in Nova Scotia but little clarity on the best way to tackle this problem. One area where Nova Scotia has failed is establishing a high level commitment for what they want to accomplish with higher education. A comprehensive review can provide direction on this matter. Reviews, however, are only as good as the recommendations that are implemented. Jurisdictions such as California (*California Master Plan for Higher Education*), New Zealand (*Tertiary Education Strategy 2002-2007*), or the United Kingdom (*Higher Education Act 2004*) have put the recommendations of reviews into action to ensure the long term efficacy of their advanced education systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ANSSA urges the Province of Nova Scotia to conduct a review of the system of post-secondary education provision and financing in Nova Scotia. This review should cover all aspects of the post-secondary education system, including, but not limited to: Student financial aid, university and college financing (tuition and operating grants), research infrastructure and annual funding, graduate student programs and targets, capacity, governance, international students, quality, and Nova Scotia's vision for the post-secondary education system.
- This review should be conducted before a long-term extension of the Memorandum of Understanding with the universities of Nova Scotia.
- The Province of Nova Scotia should take the results of this review and create a comprehensive and long-term master plan that sets concrete goals for the higher education system.

¹Department of Finance. (2006). *Supplementary Details*. Retrieved 2 September 2006 from <http://www.gov.ns.ca/finance/budget06/2006-2007%20supplementary%20detail.pdf>

²ibid

AN ACCESS GUARANTEE

ANSSA believes that anyone who is academically qualified, with the desire to pursue post-secondary education, should not be prevented from doing so due to financial barriers – perceived or otherwise. Government restraint in the funding of post-secondary education has resulted in costs being off-loaded to the student and their family. This has resulted in escalating tuition fee levels and extreme increases in student debt levels – tripling over the past twenty years³. The past decade has also seen the federal and provincial student assistance programs rely less and less on grants and almost exclusively on student loans, until recently. While costs of education remain high, it is also important to recognize that there are barriers that exist beyond the price-tag of an education. These barriers have reduced the accessibility of our post-secondary education system. Nova Scotia must do more to eliminate them.

An efficient up-front student financial aid system is critical to ensuring the accessibility of higher education. While back-end retention strategies like tax credits and rebate programs may be useful economic development tools that retain and provide relief to graduates, they must be recognized as such, and not as a means of enhancing accessibility. Nova Scotia joined the majority of Canadian provinces last year by implementing an up-front student grant program, such that twenty percent of every Nova Scotia student loan is now a non-repayable grant. Unfortunately, in its early stages, there are some weaknesses, and many high need students that are not identified by the current criteria are falling through the cracks. African Nova Scotians, Aboriginal Nova Scotians, and first generation university attendees are some of the obvious demographics that are disadvantaged by our current grants system.

Students identified a series of problems related to accessibility in 2007 when the Department of Education conducted a review on student financial assistance. While ANSSA has seen improvement on many issues, significant access barriers prevail. A lack of public information on existing student aid programs is encouraging the perception of barriers that need not exist for students interested in entering the system. Many of the financial aid programs that do exist don't offer the degree of flexibility necessary to accommodate the diverse situations that many potential university students find themselves in. Additionally, the appeals mechanism for student loans and grants was shown to be poorly understood and facilitated and has created additional stress for already burdened Nova Scotian students who need this mechanism the most. Finally, the administration of student financial assistance is overly complex, not user-friendly and includes too many obstacles for students in repayment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ANSSA calls on the Provincial Government to introduce a "Student Access Guarantee" which would include a number of short-term and long-term policy tools and programs, including, but not limited to the recommendations that follow;
- ANSSA calls for the creation of a foundation to fund community-based early outreach programs to encourage increased participation in post-secondary education for students from under-represented groups.
- ANSSA recommends the Provincial Government develop a comprehensive grants system that will address the barriers currently faced by African Nova Scotians, Aboriginal Nova Scotians and first generation college attendees.
- ANSSA encourages the province to develop a clear, transparent and geographically accessible appeals mechanism, equipped to assist with appeal regarding levels of parental contributions and other special circumstances.

³Statistics Canada. (2008). *The daily: tables*. Retrieved 2 May 2009 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/060901/t060901a-eng.htm>

INFRASTRUCTURE FOR EDUCATION: BRICKS FOR BRAINS

Although Nova Scotia enjoys world-class universities, the quality of these institutions is being significantly threatened by crumbling infrastructure. As accumulated deferred maintenance (ADM) has built up over time – the cost of repair, compounded by inflation and high energy costs have skyrocketed. As a result, institutions have downloaded repair costs onto students through tuition and ancillary fees. Without a dramatic intervention, the cost and detrimental effects of accumulated deferred maintenance will continue to prevail.

The 2009 Federal Budget earmarked \$2 billion for investment in Accumulated Deferred Maintenance for Canadian Universities and Colleges. However, the allotted money can only be used to fund half of the cost of any project, leaving universities to scramble to fund the remaining 50%, before federal funds can be accessed. The federal

ANSSA does not want to see this opportunity wasted. In a 2008 study by the Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education & Training (CAMET), the assessed impact of a \$500 million investment in university infrastructure projects within Atlantic Canada would be roughly \$1.7 billion for Canada, \$987 million for Atlantic Canada specifically, and would create 6,400 person years of direct and spin-off employment. This is an opportunity for Nova Scotia to offer employment to its citizens, stimulate the economy and better the learning environment of its students.

In anticipation of this announcement, the Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents (CONSUP) released a report detailing \$85 million in shovel-ready ADM projects in each of Nova Scotia's Universities. The federal government has since approved the projects proposed for funding by CONSUP; all that remains is for the Nova Scotia government to pitch in their share of the funding. ANSSA believes that this \$85 million proposal is a practical starting point for Nova Scotia's infrastructure investments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ANSSA urges the Provincial Government to match federal infrastructure money. ANSSA *recommends* that Provincial Government direct funds toward the CONSUP recommended investments.
- For future projects, ANSSA *recommends* that the provincial government place priority on accumulated deferred maintenance, and projects which promote environmental sustainability and accessibility.

A PAN CANADIAN ACCORD ON HIGHER EDUCATION

ANSSA believes in a quality public post-secondary education system that is properly funded, effective and accountable; cooperatively maintained and enhanced by the federal and provincial governments. Without the development of such a system, the accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia are in jeopardy. ANSSA believes that the federal and provincial governments must work together to form a long-lasting partnership that will improve and preserve the quality and public integrity of our public post-secondary institutions. ANSSA believes that in addition to creating an accord on post-secondary education, both levels of government must work together to create an independent transfer from the federal government to the provinces for post-secondary education.

It is of particular importance that in establishing a dedicated transfer for post-secondary education that both levels of government work to ensure the principle of equity. Currently funds for social programs, including post-secondary education, are distributed on a per-capita basis. This does not take into account provinces such as Nova Scotia who educate a disproportionate number of out-of-province students⁴ for which they receive no federal funding. ANSSA believes that in negotiating a dedicated transfer for post-secondary education both levels of government must work to implement mechanisms to ensure that provinces that are net-importers of post-secondary students are compensated.

RECCOMENDATIONS

- *ANSSA Calls on* the Province of Nova Scotia to actively advocate for the creation of a Pan-Canadian Accord on post-secondary education;
- *ANSSA urges* the Province to work with the federal and provincial governments to negotiate a Pan-Canadian Accord on post-secondary education;
- *ANSSA encourages the* Province to negotiate with the Government of Canada for the removal of funding for post-secondary education from the Canada Social Transfer and for the creation of a dedicated transfer for post secondary education to the provinces.

⁴ According to the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, after Alberta, Nova Scotia is Canada's largest net-importer of post-secondary students. The Nova Scotia Department of Education has indicated that currently, the net-influx of students from other provinces stands at approximately 29 – 30%, representing a net gain of approximately 5,000 students.