

Green Party of New Brunswick Policy Proposal: Post-Secondary Education

(items in GREEN exist in current policy)

Context:

Universal access to education is the ability of all people to have equal opportunity in education, regardless of their income, gender, ethnicity, or physical and mental abilities. Education should provide everyone with the knowledge and full range of skills they require to participate fully in society and lead a fulfilled life. When it comes to post-secondary education, it is no longer considered a “bonus” to have a college or university degree; instead these are increasingly becoming pre-requisites for participating in the labour market. At least 70% of new jobs require some form of post-secondary education¹.

There are significant social returns when the government invests in education; it is the key to equity of opportunity, personal growth and enrichment, informed democratic debate and decision-making, social mobility, and the research and development that are essential to deal with climate change and a multitude of other challenges. It is the key to a good economy and a prosperous society.

Issue 1

Since the federal funding cuts of the 1990s, an increasing proportion of the cost of post-secondary education has been passed on to students and, as a consequence, post-secondary education is no longer the social equalizer it once was². This does not reflect the significant social returns when the costs of post-secondary education are seen not as the responsibility of individual students and their families, but as the responsibility and smart investment of an enlightened society that sees the value of a highly educated population.

The increase in tuition costs over the last few decades does not affect all students equally. Wealthier students are still able to participate in post-secondary education, while “...marginalized students more likely to earn lower incomes – Indigenous students, students with disabilities, student parents, racialized students, queer and trans students – are increasingly left behind” (Canadian Federation of Students, April 2017). Canada’s Indigenous populations in particular have significantly lower rates of attaining a post-secondary credential (35%) when compared with the general population as a whole (51%).

In the Spring of 2016, the Gallant government announced the Tuition Access Bursary (TAB) which offered free tuition for students entering publicly funded post-secondary institutions whose family’s gross annual income was \$60,000 or less. This was followed in February of 2017 by the Tuition Relief for the Middle Class Program, which provides assistance to those whose families make more than \$60,000 per year. These programs, however, only apply to the costs of tuition, and not the many other associated costs with a post-secondary education such as

¹ Post-secondary education refers to **all** the forms of education beyond high school.

² Canadian Federation of Students, The Political Economy of Student Debt in Canada. April 2017.

<http://dev.cfswpnetwork.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/71/2015/07/2017-Political-Economy-Student-Debt.pdf>

materials, transportation, and living expenses. In Canada, average annual tuition for an undergraduate degree is \$7,451 per year³, while the average cost of a post-secondary education is \$19,498.75 per year⁴.

Action Plan I

A Green government would:

1. Provide sufficient additional funding to public post-secondary educational institutions in New Brunswick to enable them to offer tuition-free access for all academically-qualified New Brunswick residents;
2. Provide all New Brunswick residents enrolled full-time in post-secondary educational institutions a minimum monthly stipend to assist them in meeting their living and other expenses during two academic terms each year;
3. Offer interest-free loans to students in need of additional financial support to meet their associated post-secondary educational costs;
4. Develop culturally and linguistically appropriate community-based programs, in partnership with Indigenous leaders and communities, that encourage and support participation in post-secondary education; and
5. Provide targeted funding to post-secondary institutions to provide additional support services, outreach, and recruitment activities to students from lower-income populations and Indigenous communities.

Issue II

The TAB and the TRMC programs do not address the serious levels of student debt incurred by those who graduated or left post-secondary education before the programs were introduced; those who are currently carrying student debt, which has far-reaching social and economic implications. Student debt is limiting people's ability to make major investments such as purchasing a home; in some cases it limits their ability or desire to have children of their own due to the costs of raising a child. Now becoming an intergenerational problem, a 2015 study⁵ conducted by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations states that nearly one-third of families are forced to remortgage their homes, take on additional employment late in life, or postpone retirement to help support their children's education. New Brunswick students graduating with debt owe an average of \$35,200, which is over 50% higher than the national average of \$22,300.⁶ The issue is not simply the amount borrowed, but also the interest rates. Under the Canada Student Loans Program, a student with \$30,000 in debt can expect to pay an additional \$10,318.87 in interest over 10 years.⁷

³ Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, *All About Post-Secondary Education in Canada*, December 12, 2017.

⁴ Brown, Mark. *The Cost of a Canadian University Education in Six Charts*, *MacLean's*, October 19, 2017

⁵ Study conducted by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations.

⁶ New Brunswick Student Alliance, *Mandating a Better New Brunswick*, 2017.

⁷ Canadian Federation of Students, *The Political Economy of Student Debt in Canada*. April 2017.

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Currently in New Brunswick, the only program in place that provides student debt relief is the Timely Completion Benefit (TCB). The TCB caps the amount of provincial debt a student can incur at \$32,000, while concurrently acting as an incentive for students to complete their degree in a timeframe established by universities (ie. a BA must be completed within four years to be eligible). The time limits do not reflect students' reality: data released by the Maritime Provincial Higher Education Commission in 2016 revealed that students now take an average of 4.8 years to complete their undergraduate programs and up to 5.6 years if the student changes programs or transfers institutions. The New Brunswick Student Alliance is calling on the provincial government to reduce the student debt cap to \$22,000.

Action Plan II

A Green government would:

1. make provincial student loans interest-free;
2. reduce the cap retroactively on student debt (for all New Brunswick residents, regardless of the length of time taken to complete their degree) to \$20,000 by forgiving the provincial portion of their debt; and
3. extend the grace period for paying back student loans from six months from graduation to one year.

Issue III

Currently, only 58% of university graduates in Atlantic Canada participate in a work-integrated or experiential learning opportunity during their studies. This is decreasing our universities' competitiveness with others across the country; half of first year students noted that these opportunities were important in determining where to study.⁸ Postsecondary students who complete in-study experiential learning opportunities such as co-ops, internships, and or work-study placements are more likely to secure employment after graduation. Furthermore, graduates not participating in experiential learning are less satisfied with their academic experience.

Action Plan III

A Green government would:

1. examine the CEGEP model in Quebec as a possible model for providing a better transition between high school and post-secondary studies by, among other things, making the first year or two of post-secondary education available locally, with the goal of reducing the drop-out rate from universities and colleges and increasing the possibility of success for all students; and
2. in collaboration and cooperation with post-secondary education institutions and their student governments, coordinate, assist and provide incentives to all economic units in

⁸ New Brunswick Student Alliance, *Mandating a Better New Brunswick*, 2017.

New Brunswick (private, public, and non-profit) to provide experiential learning opportunities for all full-time post-secondary students, including income to students sufficient to support their living expenses during their period of full-time engagement in post-secondary learning, with a focus on meeting New Brunswickers' needs for essential goods and services otherwise not freely available to them, with emphasis on environmental protection, education, health, transportation, natural resource management, tourism and recreation.

Issue IV

UNESCO-sponsored educational conferences, meetings, and reports from the 1970s onward have advocated lifelong learning as the conceptual framework and organizing principle for education.⁹ Yet even today, when nearly two-thirds of adult Canadians have attained post-secondary education qualifications¹⁰, accessibility to our major research libraries and related learning resources remain largely inaccessible to those not presently enrolled or teaching at our post-secondary educational institutions.

Action Plan IV

A Green government would:

1. As a condition of provincial financial support, expect post-secondary educational institutions in New Brunswick to make their libraries and other learning resources open and accessible to all residents of New Brunswick without cost; and, to make this possible,
2. Provide post-secondary educational institutions with additional financial support sufficient to accommodate increased public usage of their educational resources.

⁹ Learning to Be, Faure Report, 1978; Learning: The Treasure Within, Delors Report, 1996; and The Belem Framework for Action, UNESCO, 2010 (<http://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning> and <https://en.unesco.org/world-education-forum-2015/5-key-themes/lifelong-learning>)

¹⁰ Education in Canada: Attainment, Field of Study, and Location, Statistics Canada, 2011 <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-012-x/99-012-x2011001-eng.cfm>