



COMMENTARY*

"THE TAB IS A START. WHAT'S NEXT?"

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The Tuition Access Bursary (TAB) is not perfect. We should acknowledge that upfront.

We also need to have the earnest conversation about where and how retention and accessibility policies for post-secondary education differ. The New Brunswick Student Alliance (NBSA) has said before that the TAB addresses the latter; it is not a retention tool.

This leaves the province and organizations like ours in an awkward place: austerity measures have gutted or rendered retention tools ineffective. This directly hurts the members that we represent. Eliminating the Tuition Rebate (as debatable of a policy as that was) and raising the debt cap on the Timely Completion Benefit was a kick in the teeth to students and recent grads across this province.

With no strategy for a viable retention policy on the government's horizon, students are left with only a single accessibility tool. Now, from the NBSA's perspective, the TAB is a good start for students in New Brunswick. Debt alleviation for current and future students has been a constant priority for us and will continue to be. The TAB contributes to this. Furthermore, upfront, needs-based grants have proven more effective at assisting students than education tax-credits. In this light, the TAB is also good news.

But let's get this straight: there are a lot of funding issues for post-secondary education in this province and the TAB is not the panacea for them all. We should not expect it to be. This was a good news day that students greatly welcomed, but it also leaves us, rightly, wanting more. Frankly, we expect the government to deliver more.

The government has an awful lot of work to do before this program reaches its potential, including working out kinks like the hard \$60,000 cut off. For starters, the government has



to put in the data tracking work on usage and efficacy at changes to enrolment and accessibility. Without those kinds of numbers, we will not know the true extent of the TAB's impact on the post-secondary sector in New Brunswick.

So this is a start. This is a start desperately needed in a province where the child poverty rate is higher than the national average — in cities like Saint John, the child poverty rate is double — and where the average debt load of students graduating with debt is more than 50 percent higher than the Canadian average. For an economy in which 70 percent of jobs over the next decade will require a post-secondary degree, knocking down the financial barriers to publicly-funded university and college education is fundamental.

The 7,100 students that the TAB directly and immediately affects are a start. Almost 4,000 children live in poverty in Saint John. Combined with programs like The Promise Partnership, championed by one of the NBSA's board members and UNB Students Representative Council President, Jordan Tracey, the TAB could open doors to the scores of young New Brunswickers that previously would have remained locked. That 7,100 tally will grow. And that gives us cause for optimism.

Optimism is often found wanting in times of austerity. It's easy to be pessimistic when, adjusted for inflation, operating grants to universities have not increased in New Brunswick since 1990. It's easy to be pessimistic when, for the second year in a row, no new money has been invested into post-secondary education. It's too easy to be pessimistic when a generation of university graduates in this province feel abandoned by their government because of programmatic cuts.

But pessimism is a cheap escape to holding the government to account. It's a copout to ensuring they keep their promises to the thousands of young voters who helped them secure their governing mandate. And those thousands of young people, many of whom I represent, expect more of this government, including at the very least the reinvestment of the missing \$25 million from the post-secondary budget. The TAB is a start. What's next?

Students and graduates might well be served by a new retention initiative that adequately addressed debt alleviation problems. A return to the debate and tax credit system would be counterproductive, to say the least. However, the government might settle immediate concerns and consider phasing out the last generation of NB graduates with remaining rebate credits, for example.

Perhaps another strategy that we might better put our efforts toward would be one that limits the amount of debt accrued during the course of a new degree. Such a strategy



would require a review of the debt cap imposed by the Timely Completion Benefit — a cap that implicitly encourages debt levels 40 percent higher than the national average.

These are but a few ideas. Admittedly, they are not novel and we need more. But we won't achieve the richness of discourse that this file needs if we cannot resist the temptations of impulsive policy reversals. Consistent underfunding and political shortsightedness hurts students. We have to be serious about changing the way we finance post-secondary education in this province. I represent more than 12,000 students in New Brunswick. Their message to me is clear: students are ready for that discussion. Is everyone else?