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## **Higher education should be a priority**

According to a recent Corporate Research Associates survey, 77 per cent of Nova Scotians believe post-secondary education should be an important public policy issue in the provincial election campaign.

The Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents agrees. CONSUP has shared specific recommendations with leaders, caucuses and candidates in a public policy paper, **Making a Commitment to Higher Education in Nova Scotia** ([www.atlanticuniversities.ca](http://www.atlanticuniversities.ca)). The paper addresses university operating budgets and tuition rates, capital investment, research and development, student access, and student attraction and retention, all of which have linkages and profound impact on Nova Scotia's economy and society.

Like CONSUP, student-led organizations such as the Alliance of Nova Scotia Student Associations and the Canadian Federation of Students have prepared policy papers on higher education in our province. They too have worked hard at trying to get post-secondary education on the political agenda.

Corporate Research Associates recently advised that education ranked as the third most important public priority among Nova Scotians. Yet education barely rated a mention during the televised leaders' debate.

Post-secondary education has clearly emerged as a key social and economic asset — strategic and vital to Nova Scotia's economic prosperity and quality of life. There is now an opportunity for higher education to become a more critical determinant of the future direction of Nova Scotia. This is a time when more, not less, knowledge and preparation are required to overcome the challenges facing our province.

The most critical issue confronting Nova Scotia's universities is the declining of provincial and regional populations and its impact on enrolments.

All universities have the capacity to absorb more students. Our province, like the rest of Atlantic Canada, needs to attract and retain many more highly qualified people (particularly graduate students) to our growing knowledge economy and research-intensive businesses.

It has been documented that 25 per cent of students from outside the province attending our universities stay in Nova Scotia upon graduation. And there is evidence suggesting more than one-third of international students will seek permanent resident status in Canada either before or following their graduation.

Nova Scotia's universities are talent magnets, providing the graduates who are building the province's knowledge economy and competitiveness, and integral to the success of the population growth strategy.

Despite Nova Scotia's high participation rates, there remain many Nova Scotians who are motivated to attend university but who, due to socioeconomic circumstances, are unable to do so. These under-represented groups include African Nova Scotians, First Nations people, the rural poor and the disabled.

The province, its universities and under-represented groups should set a mutually agreed upon goal for educational achievement and help ensure that Nova Scotia's universities are accessible and affordable to those qualified and motivated to pursue higher education.

In this period of economic uncertainty, university leaders are managing scarce resources and making their institutions more efficient and productive, with an unwavering focus on serving their mission to students.

Universities are looking at long-range, systemic changes, using the current economic challenge as an opportunity to consider making operational and administrative changes, and sharing resources and developing programs with other universities and the Nova Scotia Community College.

The potential of higher education to examine societal problems objectively and thoroughly can be used to advance the policy debate on some of the province's most challenging problems such as health care delivery, and big opportunities like renewable energy, to name only two.

Collaboration and partnerships between universities and the business sector can be a force for economic development. Many of our institutions are successfully pursuing such opportunities, but the times require we double our efforts.

Universities have a duty to think internationally and set up programs that ensure our students are sufficiently trained to participate successfully in the global economy. We must continue to fuel innovative research and commercialize new products, services and ideas for export to the world. Nova Scotia's future lies in its ability to compete internationally. Our universities will produce the workforce, scholars and researchers needed to succeed.

If ever there was a time for higher education to be front and centre in solving Nova Scotia's societal problems, including those related to economic diversification and development, that time is now.

Future Nova Scotia governments must make higher education a top priority and commit to the view that our university system is a powerfully important asset and not a "special interest."

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