

Universities bring economic, social benefits to N.S.

By **PETER HALPIN**

Nova Scotia's universities now generate an estimated \$840 million in annual export revenue, placing the university sector second when compared to the province's traditional top exporting sectors. Curiously, this great achievement generated neither news media interest nor commentary among pundits.

During the past year, Nova Scotians have been overwhelmed with difficult news about the failing forestry and pulp and paper industries, closure of resource-based industries across rural Nova Scotia, controversy surrounding aquaculture operations and, of course, power rates.

The lack of public recognition for the incredible economic value of our universities may also be a case of some wanting to find a black cloud in every silver lining.

The tone may have been unintentionally set by the 2010 O'Neil report, which characterized

universities as a problem that needed to be solved as opposed to an asset warranting greater investment and leveraging.

Nova Scotia's opinion leaders might benefit from the perspective of HRM Mayor Mike Savage, who recently told a Halifax Chamber of Commerce audience: "As a result of our universities and college, we have a well-educated workforce. We graduate thousands of bright young people every year, eager to make their mark and share their fresh skills with the world. Many are local students with family and community ties. Of the 45 per cent who are from another province or country, many want to stay."

Like Mayor Savage, who characterizes the city's six universities as a "great asset," I would venture mayors and wardens of metro Sydney, Antigonish and Pictou counties, Truro, Wolfville and area, and southwestern Nova Scotia would also share the view that their respective communities

would be considerably different places without the positive economic and social presence of their local university.

According to Gardner Pinfold Consulting Economists, our universities "play an increasingly important role in generating resources from outside the province and providing a greater export component of the province's aggregate demand, providing a substantial and important contribution to economic growth of the economy."

The estimated \$840 million in annual export revenues generated by Nova Scotia's universities is largely attributable to increased out-of-province enrolment and tuition fees for international students. It also includes the nearly \$220 million in research funding annually attracted to Nova Scotia by its universities.

Also noteworthy is that the estimated \$840 million export revenues do not include the

value of additional exports in the form of contract work or training with researchers or educators from Nova Scotia's universities in overseas markets. Or expenditures made by companies attracted to the province due to the presence of the research capacity and educated labour force provided by the province's 10 universities.

Mayor Savage understands the strategic economic value of higher education when he says, "Our universities and college are economic drivers in a creative, knowledge-based economy. And they are significant partners with business and in finding solutions and marketing those solutions beyond our shores."

A Dec. 6 New York Times editorial shared its close examination of the practice of U.S. state and local governments giving tax breaks and subsidies to attract companies. The study conducted by the Times concluded: "That money could go a long way to

improving education, transportation and public services that would have a far better shot at promoting real economic growth. ... (L)ocal governments would be much better off investing tax dollars in education and public works that would deliver long-term benefits to both businesses and workers."

The Gardner Pinfold study confirms the university sector generates huge economic and social benefits for the province. In order for universities to continue their success in attracting students and research funding, it is vital that our institutions sustain their high quality and national competitiveness.

Now just may be the time for our provincial leaders in politics, business and civil society to carefully and thoughtfully reconsider future funding priorities.

Peter Halpin is executive director, Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents.