

Accessible post-secondary education key to success

Strong Canadian economy needs educated workers

Zach Churchill, Freelance

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"The Economy is Also About Education, Stupid ..."

Amidst hoopla surrounding "Puffingate" and "Scandalpedia," there has been a growing narrative emerging in this election about job security and the state of Canada's economy. With the mighty investment titans falling in the United States and Canada's own economic growth projections looking dismal, political leaders and candidates have begun a battle of partisan rhetoric that, although spirited and quotable, has neglected to touch on one of the fundamental necessities for Canada's economic success (not to mention our social well-being): an accessible and high-quality post-secondary education system.

Over the course of the last three years, over 70 per cent of jobs created in this country have required a post-secondary credential. In a globalized system of economic competition, where success is characterized by the ability of a business or industry to rapidly respond to changing demands and inputs, we can only assume the need for skilled workers will continue to increase. Compare this with the fact that only 42 per cent of our student-aged population attends some form of post-secondary education; and when looking at the specific groups in the country, this picture becomes far more alarming.

Canadians from low-income families are half as likely to attend university as are those from high-income families. Sixty-seven per cent of Canadians with disabilities of working age do not have a post-secondary credential, and eight of 10 aboriginal students are not enrolled in a form of higher education, fifteen percentage points below the non-aboriginal population. This problem is compounded by an impending demographic challenge: the fact that our population is aging, with only three workers entering the workforce for every five retiring.

Participation rates among significant portions of our population are far too low to sustain an employable workforce and competitive economy.

Furthermore, they are disgracefully low when compared to our national values -- that special emphasis we place in the ability of every Canadian to not just dream of a better future, but to realize it.

The current state of affairs for our post-secondary system is unacceptable and it will cost individuals, families and the entire country if it is not remedied. Now, more than ever, our

leaders need to include in their discussions about economic policies their plans to reach out to these groups of students who aren't currently participating in post- secondary education. The consequences for failing in this are intolerable: we won't have people to fill these jobs and a large portion of our population will not be given the opportunity to succeed or contribute to our economy. Our leaders need to put forward a clear, long-term strategy to ensure that all students in Canada have the opportunity to pursue a higher education; otherwise they are failing students, families, and the entire country.

Zach Churchill is national director of the Ottawa-based Canadian Alliance of Student Associations.