

Students won't stay

Published Friday May 7th, 2010

Jobs: Survey shows 41.4% of New Brunswick university undergrads polled feel they are likely to leave province to find work

Adam Huras

Telegraph-Journal

New Brunswick university undergraduates rank themselves among the least likely in the country to find work in their home province after graduation, a new survey reveals.

University undergraduates in New Brunswick questioned in a recent survey feel they are among the students in Canada least likely to find work in their province.

A nationwide survey released by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations shows that 41.4 per cent of students sampled in New Brunswick say they would be likely or very likely to leave the province in order to find work.

The association said that percentage is among the highest in the country, driving up the survey average of likely migrants to 21.5 per cent nationally.

The survey also found that New Brunswick undergraduate students are saddled with far more debt than the average post-secondary student in Canada.

The heavy debt load means fewer students consider further schooling such as a master's degree or PhD, according to those polled.

"The survey shows the importance of retention initiatives for all provinces," Tina Robichaud, chairwoman of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, said in an interview. "And often, debt is the biggest reason why students leave a province.

"The two are connected in that an undergraduate student has large debt to pay back and will leave to find not just a job, but the highest paying job."

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations is a non-partisan, not-for-profit national student organization composed of 25 student associations, representing over 300,000 students from coast to coast.

The survey polled more than 18,000 full-time undergraduate students.

More than 1,100 of them were studying at either the Université de Moncton or University of New Brunswick in the most recent academic year.

Post-Secondary Education Minister Donald Arseneault said the result show that the Liberal government needs to work harder to inform students about opportunities in the province.

"The facts show that there are opportunities for graduates in New Brunswick," he said in an interview. "This survey shows we have to roll up our sleeves and work twice as hard to do some job matching."

Arseneault said New Brunswick has had some of the strongest job growth figures in the country over the last several quarters.

For example, there are 16,900 new jobs in the province since 2006, according to Statistics Canada.

Also, unemployment rates in forestry-dependent regions of the province pumelled by the global economic downturn have seen a rise in employment rates, Arseneault said.

"In areas like Dalhousie, where the community has lost major industrial players like Bowater, the talk around the dinner table about job prospects is pretty negative and it's hard to shake that," he said. "But even in the north we've seen growth."

The government has set up the Population Growth Secretariat, which has a youth retention branch, to devise strategies to keep more young people in the province, repatriate New Brunswickers working elsewhere and attract more immigrants.

But the study shows that even if there are more opportunities for young graduates in New Brunswick, they're not getting the message.

The study found that students in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island are less likely to remain in their province of study than their counterparts in Ontario and Alberta.

Individuals studying in Ontario are the most likely to remain in their province of study after completing their degrees.

"Graduates are no different than anyone else, meaning they tend to go where the jobs are," said Peter Halpin, executive director of Association of Atlantic Universities.

"Retention is directly related to opportunity and clearly from the university perspective, part of what we do is try to give students a great experience while becoming well acquainted with the communities in which they reside for four or five years.

"Universities are very much a part of the regional economy."

Halpin also said the Atlantic region has been making gains as the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission released numbers last year stating the retention rate of New Brunswick university graduates is 85 per cent, up from 79 per cent in 2004.

"These numbers are important to acknowledge and that is why our universities work closely with both the public and private sector and hope by virtue of that relationship that opportunities for our graduates arise," Halpin said.

The association study entitled "The Canadian Student Survey: Next Steps - Upper Year Canadian PSE Students' Future Plans and Debt" also focused largely on the implications of student debt.

The country's median debt for students who had government loans was calculated at \$20,000.

Of the students sampled in New Brunswick with government loans, that debt averaged \$32,000.

Students with high debt levels were more likely to say that they would delay or suspend altogether further post-secondary education due to their debt, according to the survey.

However, the Liberal government has introduced the "timely completion benefit," which caps student loan debt at \$26,000 once students have completed their university degree.

The government has also increased the tuition rebate for students who work in the province after graduation from \$10,000 to \$20,000.

New Brunswick post-secondary graduates who live and work in the province and pay provincial income tax are eligible for this non-taxable rebate of 50 per cent of their tuition costs.

The province's public universities are also under a tuition freeze for the third consecutive year and a tuition freeze at the community college level for the fifth straight year.

"This survey is to help governments ask themselves if they are doing enough," Robichaud said. "It is also to help isolate if what they are doing is working."

- with files from Brett Bundale