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COMMUNICATIONS NS

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***Online Bulletin Board Report
Higher Education Qualitative Research***

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Introduction:

Two online bulletin boards were completed with parents of university and high school students in Nova Scotia and three boards were completed with university students. The first four boards were conducted during the first week of March. A fifth board was conducted between March 18th – 20th in French with students in a French program in the province.

Recruiting for participation was conducted by posting a link to a screening questionnaire on various government and social media sites as well as by random recruiting by phone. The screening questionnaire identified whether respondents were university students (including their program and year of study), high school students (including what grade they were in), or parents of one of those two groups. The screening questionnaire produced a pool of interested participants and then invitations were sent to selected people. Those invited were selected to represent different areas of the province, a mix of males and females and different programs and years of study.

The bulletin boards themselves ran for two days. As participants signed in, they were presented with a series of questions and were asked to comment on each. Questions were presented so that the participant had to answer before they saw the responses of others. At that point they were encouraged to comment on points being made by others.

There were two boards held with university students in English. A total of 22 people logged onto these two sessions, with 12 completing all of the questions. Participants represented a mix of men and women and a range of year of study, primarily at the undergraduate level. For the French board, 14 people initially signed on and 8 completed most of the questions, with only 5 completing everything.

Parent participation was very strong with 15 people logging into each group (one with parents of university students and one with parents of high school students). Most parents completed the majority of the questions, with a total of 19 completing everything.

The following is a summary of the discussion that took place in the boards. The quotes presented in italics are actual comments from participants.

General University Topics

Strengths of Nova Scotia Universities:

University students were reasonably consistent as they identified strengths of universities in Nova Scotia. Smaller class sizes were mentioned frequently and students reported this provided a more intimate learning environment where professors and students would actually get to know one another. Professors care for their students and help them succeed. The administration is also more accessible and easy to deal with: questions are answered right away.

Several in the English student boards and many in the French noted that communities were generally very accepting of the universities and the students attending them.

“People in Nova Scotia are so kind. Students from other provinces and international students can feel at home. This is important for students.”

Some noted that Nova Scotia offers a choice of life styles, with universities in a large city as well as in smaller locations. For some, a small campus was less intimidating. For international students, being in a small campus in a small community facilitated their adaptation to life in a new country.

“I completed nearly all my education in a rural university and I really liked my experience since I felt a lot more connected to campus life.”

A few students noted the number of universities in Nova Scotia as a strength because of the amount of choice this offers.

Finally, a few students felt the cultural diversity present in the universities was a strength that offers the opportunity to learn outside of one’s own culture.

“The small class sizes – most [professors] are very friendly and refer to themselves as your learning allies.”

“How multicultural each one is – helping us learn.”

“More intimate environment where the professor or instructor knows your name.”

“The fact that Nova Scotia has a French-speaking university is a great thing. Very few provinces can say this in Canada.”

Parents (both of university students and high school students) were consistent as they articulated strengths of Nova Scotia universities. They offered a long list of strengths, which included the following:

- The strength and quality of the academics and research.
- The diversity of programs.
- Specific programs were noted such as Dalhousie’s Medical and Law Schools and Saint Mary’s Business Program.
- The belief that Nova Scotia universities are recognized on a national level; several people quoted Maclean’s rankings to support this belief.
- The fact that many Nova Scotia universities are in smaller communities.

- Similarly, the fact that many of the universities offer smaller classes and more access to professors.
- The quality of the professors.
- The convenience for people living in Nova Scotia who do not have to leave the province to attend a quality university.

The overall tone here was quite positive with many parents writing long answers that included a number of strengths.

“They offer high quality education and there is no need for our children to leave the province or area to go to university.”

“Maclean’s magazine always lists them high.”

“The close knit nature of the communities and the university populations can be an advantage in students adjusting to independence and maturing.”

“The programs and courses offered at our universities are both varied and unique.”

Weaknesses of Nova Scotia Universities:

Some aspect of cost (e.g., high tuition costs, costs of living and/or books) was mentioned by most of the students responding to the question on weaknesses. Accessibility in terms of physical limitations was also mentioned by several people.

“Turned off by the high tuition prices.”

“The cost of living can be troublesome, especially in a city with as large of a student population as Halifax.”

“Cost – tuition and book prices are outrageous.”

Tuition and other costs were a common theme as parents described weaknesses of Nova Scotia universities. Another common theme was the number (too many) of universities seeking funding for the same programs, particularly in light of the size of the province. There were a few comments about the reliance on part-time or sessional lecturers instead of professors and also a few comments about the lack of work term and Co-op opportunities.

“I would have to say that the cost to enroll is a barrier.”

“Too many universities seeking funding for the same programs.”

“Tuition fees are very high.”

“How many liberal arts, business and science programs does the student population need?”

“My son attends Memorial in Engineering. The Co-op program was a key attraction.”

Some students at Université Sainte-Anne complained about the lack of choice in science classes, and that their university does not offer a major in science. One student suggested that Université Sainte-Anne, having the ‘greenest campus in Canada’, would be an ideal place for an R&D program in green renewable energy.

Definition of a Quality Education:

Several themes emerged in the students' comments about what a quality education entails. There is definitely a sense that a quality education prepares you for the next stage in your professional development. It is not just about learning, but learning that can be applied. There is certainly also an element of teaching critical thinking in the comments, which is seen as part of a quality education. There is also an expectation that the education will at least help lead to a job in a chosen field. Being able to afford the education is also an element that emerges in the discussion.

"For some, education is a means to an end and for others it is an end in itself."

"It is not over at graduation, it should live on in some form of career."

"Should be accessible, affordable and prepare students for life after graduation."

"Receive adequate information that will lead to a sufficient career."

"Leaves graduates able to think critically and engage constructively with their community."

The comments from parents regarding a quality education are largely similar to those offered by students. Parents also focused on a well-rounded education, work experience and an environment that provides a foundation for either the job market or more advanced education. There was more focus on the quality of teaching from the parents of high school students.

"A good education would include work experience especially in the health and medical fields."

"Would provide students with an engaged learning environment that is relevant to today's job market."

"Learning to think critically, becoming well-rounded and well-read."

"More than just textbook material, but how to apply what they have learned."

"First and foremost, there needs to be quality faculty/specialists."

Do Nova Scotia Universities offer a Quality Education?

Most student participants did feel they were receiving a quality education. Some justified their answer by noting that they were receiving the type of education for which they were looking. For example, some noted the smaller class sizes and more intimate teaching environment they were receiving.

Parents were equally positive about the quality of education offered by Nova Scotia universities. A few commented again on the smaller communities (even Halifax when one thinks of large Canadian cities) and the smaller class sizes to support their position.

Do University Students Receive “Good Value” for their Tuition?

There were definitely some students who felt strongly that they were receiving value for their tuition dollar. These students tended to focus on the value of what they were receiving instead of the actual costs. Some thought universities in Nova Scotia offered a better value than those in other provinces because of low student/professor ratio.

More people commented negatively in this section and seemed to be more focused on the actual cost.

“While expensive, tuition is one of the greatest bargains out there.”

“Tuition costs are extremely high for NS universities and students could definitely receive a greater value for said costs.”

“Offers good value, but is known for ridiculous costs.”

“Tuition fees are so high, many students consider abandoning their studies.”

As was the case with the students, there was some disagreement over the question of whether or not students receive good value for their tuition. However, most parents commented that good value is received. Even so, the cost of the education was definitely a recurring theme through this questioning.

“They do get good value for their tuition. The academic part is excellent.”

“No! Tuition costs are getting out of hand in NS, as are residence costs.”

“Yes it is still a good value despite rising tuition costs.”

The Value of a University Education:

English-speaking students were almost evenly split when asked if the main role of a university education is to prepare people for jobs (46%) or if it is more education for education’s sake (54%). In the French-speaking group, 71% thought a university education’s main role was to prepare for employment while 29% thought it was more for education’s sake.

Students’ response about the value of a university education is more consistent. Most suggest a university education will help them get a better job and offer more opportunities than would be the case without one. However, several students were quick to note they felt the opportunity to get a better job was less certain than it was in the past. One participant in the French board commented that college education offered more employment opportunities than university despite its shorter duration and lesser costs. A few also noted that while they see a university education primarily as an investment, the magnitude of that investment causes some to think less positively about it.

“At the high price that school is, it definitely feels like a cost – and a burden at that.”

“University is no guarantee of a better job, but it is an opportunity for one.”

“University is indeed an investment; however it is a costly investment.”

“Financial security in life knowing you have a solid career.”

Among the 12 parents of university students who answered, most believe the primary role of universities was to provide education for education's sake (58%), while 42% believe the role was to prepare people for jobs. However, all of the parents of high school students (14 in total) indicated the primary role was to prepare people for jobs.

Most parents saw a university education as an investment. Some felt a university education was essential and many felt a university education would lead to a better job. As some students also noted, parents also felt a university education, particularly in some fields, was not as likely to lead to a better job or career as it might have in the past.

"Definitely more of an investment than a cost. I do see those with a degree more apt to get a job as it seems to be a tool to screen people out."

"I see it as an investment. That said, community college can be just as good an option as university for some students."

"I see university as a cost – the cost of entry for many jobs."

"Getting ready for a job or career is why we go to university."

Student Debt:

There was general agreement amongst students that student debt is too high. Some went on to comment that this level of debt was unfair to the student because they felt having an educated population benefits more people than just the graduate and because they felt that a university education is a necessity for many jobs.

Two students did not feel the amount of debt was too high. One commented at length about the value of their education and the long term benefits of having such an education to conclude that the investment and debt were really not that high.

Parents too agreed that an average debt of \$25,000 is too high. Some qualified their answer by suggesting that depending on the degree and what a person might expect to earn, \$25,000 would be more manageable, but the general feeling was the amount was too high.

"How is it possible to come out of university and get a job that allows them to support themselves fully while having to pay a debt like that off?"

"It discourages graduates from staying and contributing to the NS economy."

University Budgets

Priority Areas for Budgets:

Several of the students noted they did not have enough knowledge or experience to comment on this section. A few said they either felt a good job was already being done by their university or that they trusted the people making the decisions to make reasonable decisions. Otherwise, there were a variety of suggestions:

- Improving the pay of part-time professors (specific details were not provided, but some students did suggest the pay is too low).
- The library.
- Facilities.
- Student services.
- Faculty.

Several parents also commented that they were not informed enough to comment on how budgets are or should be spent. The quality of faculty was raised as a priority area by parents in order to maintain educational quality. Related to this were a few comments about an over-reliance on part-time or sessional instructors.

“The priority should be effective teaching.”

“Hiring quality faculty who are skilled and passionate about education should be top of the list.”

“Universities should spend the bulk of their budgets in education and facilities.”

The Role of Universities in Controlling their Costs:

Most students did feel that universities have a role in controlling their costs. Some equated this responsibility as being similar to any business or organization that would have to do the same. This was summed up by one student who said, *“They have a responsibility to be as lean and efficient as possible for the sake of their paying students.”*

Parents were even stronger in their assessment that universities should have a substantial role in controlling their costs.

“A very active role! For every penny that is spent, that’s another penny added to tuition and tuition right now is too high.”

“Well don’t ask taxpayers to subsidize your costs of operating if you are not prepared to run the university like a business.”

“They should have a central role, but I recognize that they have to offer salaries that are competitive for faculty, maintain buildings that are safe and pay for operating costs such as fuel.”

Federal Government Role in Controlling Costs of Nova Scotia Universities:

Parents and students were asked what they felt the role of both the federal and provincial government should be in controlling the costs of universities in Nova Scotia. There was a general sentiment from students that the federal government should have more of a role in funding a university education. In general, this was in the form of increased funding to universities, but in some cases, there were suggestions to regulate tuition costs, to offer more scholarships and financing options, and to help with tax incentives such as RESPs.

“They should play a part in funding universities.”

“Obviously providing more funding would be great.”

“The government should better fund the schools and students to make university more accessible.”

While a minority of the opinions, there were certainly a number of parents who felt the federal government should not have a role in controlling the costs of universities in Nova Scotia. Others felt there was a role for the federal government in controlling costs at universities, but only in line with their level of funding. This seemed to be positioned as a sense of fairness in that the federal government would have some say over the spending of their contribution. Continuing with the sense of fairness, some parents argued that the federal government should have a role in ensuring that there is equitable access for all Canadians.

“The feds should make higher learning a priority. These students are our future.”

“I believe the federal government should hold universities accountable for money that comes from them, but that is it.”

“They could establish reasonable salary ranges for professors and give tax breaks where they can.”

“I don’t believe they have a role. Universities aren’t federally run or operated.”

Provincial Government Role in Controlling Costs of Nova Scotia Universities:

Even though the questions were split into the role of the federal government and the role of the provincial government, the suggestions from all groups were quite similar. There were general calls to increase funding so that tuition costs could be lower.

There were a few parents who argued the provincial government should not have a role in controlling costs in Nova Scotia universities. However, the tone of the comments from most parents suggests they see a larger role for the provincial government than the federal.

“Same as federal. Hold the universities accountable for the money that was provided, but that is it.”

“They should be playing a significant role. Universities are increasing their tuition and residence costs annually for a number of reasons; the province should be looking to see why they are doing that and what can be done to help mitigate those increases.”

“They should be very involved. Universities are subsidized by the provincial government.”

Accountability:

Most students believed that universities should be accountable for their operations and spending. Most felt this accountability should be to students and to government.

Similarly, parents strongly agreed with the idea of universities being accountable for their operations/spending. Like students, parents tended to think that this accountability should be to students and government primarily. Some phrased this as being accountable to taxpayers to the extent that the university receives government funding. Several parents also noted that universities should be accountable to their own Boards.

Quality Concerns:

A few of the students specifically commented that they had not noticed any quality declines, but there was an underlying concern that there may be declines in facilities, faculty, student services and the overall student experience.

Several parents also commented that they were not seeing quality issues, but the general tone of the comments was similar to those offered by the students; there is a sense that quality declines are certainly a risk. Parents seem to have a particular concern about the quality of faculty, seen here again with several references to the need to maintain the quality of faculty. The over-reliance on part-time instructors was also raised again. The other area of concern was that facilities might be neglected.

“The decline in quality of educators and education is the biggest concern.”

“Yes, as mentioned, a particular concern is the use of sessional lecturers – untenured, underpaid...”

“Of course it concerns me. I believe that sharing and upgrading the administrative infrastructure amongst NS universities will save on costs.”

“I think infrastructure/facilities will be put at risk unless external donors can be found to help with funding.”

University Revenues

Steps for Nova Scotia Universities and Government:

The second day of questions and discussion began with the broad topic of Nova Scotia universities increasing revenues and what the universities themselves and what government might do to increase revenues.

There were three themes that emerged when students were asked what the universities themselves could do:

- Attract more students.
- Secure more sponsorships and donations from corporations.
- Lobby for more government funding.

The suggestions for government tended to concentrate on increased funding for universities. There were also suggestions to make loans, grants and bursaries more available. Some students suggested that reducing tuition would allow more students to enroll.

“Provide more funding for universities/students and also provide 0% interest loans and more grant opportunities.”

“Better and more accessible loans to students.”

“Many high school graduates will choose not to pursue university education because of a lack of funding.”

“Giving the universities more funding; hopefully they could make more scholarships and bursaries.”

Parents also highlighted the idea of attracting more students, but their focus was on international students. Partnerships with business were also noted, although again, there were some concerns expressed about business influence on universities if they were partnering. Parents saw several potential roles for the provincial government:

- Develop programs to link universities and industry/offer incentives to the private sector.
- Provide better funding/provide relief on infrastructure costs.
- Offer easier repayment terms and non-repayable grants.

Tuition Caps:

Most students were in favor of tuition caps. They saw a cap as a way to at least reduce the speed of the increase in costs. This reaction is entirely in line with earlier comments about tuition costs when students were asked to identify weaknesses of Nova Scotia universities. Some thought fees should be frozen while, interestingly, some of the students allowed that the amount of the cap could be increased.

“Tuition [increases] should be limited to the increase in the cost of living.”

“I am all in favor of education prices being as low as possible.”

There were a small number of parents who were in favor of “letting the market decide” on tuition levels, but the concern about the level of costs led most to suggest that a cap should be in place. A few noted that caps might be increased, but the underlying concern about costs certainly came through again in this discussion.

“As someone paying tuition, I appreciate the cap; however if the universities’ cost increase and they aren’t able to raise tuition then they have to start trying to raise funds another way or making cuts.”

“Leave the cap where it is. Students and their families are finding it hard to fund university now so increasing the cap would make it more exclusionary.”

“Government should set the cap; otherwise universities will continue to increase depending on how much they need.”

Paying for University

Current or Planned Funding:

When asked how they pay for their university education, most students gave a long list of sources that included savings from their own employment or help from parents, student loans, grants, scholarships and bursaries. The English groups were almost equally divided on whether or not they currently have a student loan.

Parents too cited a long list of methods being used to pay for university including student loans, student saving/working, bank loans, RESPs and family contributions as well as scholarships. Most noted several ways of paying university tuition, rather than a single source of funding. Like students, parents were almost equally divided on whether or not student loans were part of funding university costs.

Programs:

Two programs were described. Through the debt cap program, Nova Scotia graduates could have their provincial loan completely wiped out, saving them up to \$15,000. Through the interest relief program, graduates who either stay in Nova Scotia or come back to Nova Scotia no longer pay interest on their provincial student loans, saving about \$800 over the lifetime of their loans. Awareness of these programs was equally split with half of the students aware and half not familiar with them. In the French-speaking group, none of the students had heard of these programs. In general, comments suggested the programs would help make a university program more affordable, but there were two main criticisms:

- First, a few students suggested that it would be better for students if they got the money up front instead of at the end of their education.
- Second, one student noted that while helpful, eliminating \$800 was a relatively small amount in terms of how much is spent on a university education.

Parents of university students were equally divided on whether or not they were aware of the two programs and whether aware or not, tended to think they would help make university more affordable. Parents of high school students were much less aware of the programs, but also tended to feel they would help.

Cooperation - Business Community and Among Universities

Business:

Students commented on a number of potential ways that business and universities could cooperate. Of these, work terms, scholarships and donations were mentioned most often. There is an underlying concern with business funding research and even paying for solutions that the payment will bias the results. In general, students did not mean to avoid these ideas, but they did suggest they needed to be monitored for possible abuse.

“The problem is that if _____ funds research on sugar, it’s not going to be reliable research.”

“Those are great ideas, but be careful as large business money means they also control what departments they want to fund.”

“Universities are public institutions and should function independently of the private sector.”

In an atmosphere of proper oversight, students readily saw advantages of businesses and universities cooperating and included:

- Paid work terms would help students to finance their studies.
- Access to potential employment upon graduation.
- Valuable experience for the student and fresh ideas for the business.
- Financial rewards.
- Somewhat subsidized skilled labour for the business.

Work terms were mentioned most often by parents when they were asked for ways universities and the business community could cooperate. These were followed by scholarships, joint research and donations. A few parents echoed the concerns that were raised by students about some types of assistance possibly compromising the relationship.

“All of the above have huge benefits for both business and universities.”

“I think universities and the business community should work together on research projects.”

“I think that joint funded research definitely assists the graduate student.”

The advantages noted by parents were quite similar to those mentioned by the students. Parents reported advantages for the student included work experience and building contacts that might later lead to employment. For the business, parents suggested they would benefit from fresh ideas and a pool of potential employees. Universities would benefit from revenue and the side benefit of keeping the curriculum.

Universities:

Several examples of ways that universities could cooperate with each other were presented to students and parents and they were asked to consider these as well as other ideas. Students noted that cooperation amongst universities in terms of allowing students to share courses and credits across different universities

has a high degree of acceptance, but ideas that limit the amount of choice such as amalgamating or specializing more are generally seen in a negative light. Sharing administrative functions was a common suggestion and student also suggested sharing professors.

“Since there are professors who only teach once or twice a week, sharing staff as well as administrative personnel is a good idea.”

“If you reduce the number of programs that are offered, then you are limiting students in the choices they have.”

“Specializing and offering fewer programs – terrible.”

“None of the above; universities should be independent and offer the courses required for the degrees they grant.”

“I really like the idea of universities collaborating together and connecting through programs and courses, but the idea of amalgamating is not a good one.”

Benefits of sharing included reduced costs and greater access to resources for students – in essence, increasing their choice. There are also opportunities to increase networking and generally offer a better-rounded educational experience.

For the parents, the two main ways mentioned for cooperation between universities were sharing courses and credits across different institutions and shared administrative services. There were also suggestions that certain universities should offer a level of specialization, but this suggestion was made by fewer people. Cost savings was the main advantage of the suggestions made. The advantages for sharing courses and credits mostly related to the students who would have greater choice and flexibility and the opportunity for exposure to different professors and institutions.

Conclusion

The five online bulletin boards that were conducted with students in universities in Nova Scotia and parents of university students and high school students offer an important perspective from these groups. The boards, which offered a question and answer format and the opportunity for participants to comment on the points of others, did provide very rich information on the topics of interest.

As a general comment, the essential findings from the general public online survey that was conducted shortly before these boards were held were very similar to the discussion here. In particular, the positive perception of Nova Scotia universities and the suggestions to increase revenues for universities were similar. Reaction to current tuition costs was also similar across both research phases.