

What's Next?

Report on the Forum on the Future of Higher Education in Canada

Ron Saunders

CPRN Research Report | October 2008



THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS



CANADA MILLENNIUM SCHOLARSHIP FOUNDATION
FONDATION CANADIENNE DES BOURSES D'ÉTUDES DU MILLÉNAIRE



Special thank you to Rob Finn, General Manager of the Saint Mary's
University Students' Association

Special thanks to our small group facilitators:

Duncan Gallant, President, New Brunswick Student Alliance

Tyler Charlebois, Director of Advocacy, College Student Alliance o

Howie Bender, Executive Director, Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Scott Courtice, Policy Analyst, University Student' Council at UWO

Zach Churchill, National Director, Canadian Alliance of Student Association

Contents

Introduction	1
Panel 1. Setting the Stage: Where Are We Now?	2
Dr. Jim McNiven, Senior Policy Research Advisor, Canmac Economics Ltd.	2
Dr. Michael Higgins, President and Vice-Chancellor, Saint Thomas University	3
Stuart Gourley, Senior Executive Director, Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Workforce Development	3
Dr. Rick Miner, President, Seneca College	4
Donna Mulholland, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, New Brunswick Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour	5
Discussion	6
Panel 2. What's Possible? Policy Options	6
Dr. Ron Saunders, Vice-President, Research, Canadian Policy Research Networks ..	6
Stephanie Oldford, Policy/Research Analyst, Canadian Council on Learning	8
Alex Usher, Vice-President, Educational Policy Institute	8
Charles Cirtwill, Executive Vice-President, Atlantic Institute for Market Studies ..	9
Noel Baldwin, Policy and Research Officer, Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation	10
Discussion: Questions to and Answers from the Second Panel	10
Breakout Session: What's Next?	11
Access	11
Connecting PSE to the Labour Market	12
System Integration	12
Rethinking Program Delivery	13
The Need for a Pan-Canadian Framework	13
Conclusion	14

What's Next? Report on the Forum on the Future of Higher Education in Canada

Introduction

Post-secondary education (PSE) has been getting a lot of attention in policy circles in Canada recently, with new student aid initiatives by the federal government, and commissions looking at the post-secondary system in several provinces. There has been a great deal of research in recent years, particularly on how best to promote equitable access, but also on issues of quality and accountability in post-secondary institutions.

On August 19, 2008, the Alliance of Nova Scotia Student Associations (ANSSA), in partnership with the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, the Alberta College and Technical Institute Student Executive Council, the Council of Alberta University Students, the College Student Alliance, the New Brunswick Student Alliance, and the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, convened a forum at Saint Mary's University in Halifax to take stock of recent developments in post-secondary education and explore possible new directions for the sector.

The *Forum on the Future of Higher Education in Canada* included two panels with a total of 10 speakers, as well as a small group discussion session that identified policy options in five areas: access, connections between PSE and the labour market, integration of the system, new ways to deliver programs, and the need for a pan-Canadian framework.

Dr. Esther Enns, Acting Dean of Education, Saint Mary's University, welcomed participants to the forum on behalf of the President of SMU, Dr. Colin Dodds. There were greetings also from Karen Casey, the Nova Scotia Minister of Education, Mike Savage, the Member of Parliament for Dartmouth-Cole Harbour, and Paris Meilleur the (outgoing, in more ways than one) Executive Director of ANSSA.

This report summarizes the presentations and the discussions at the forum.

Panel 1. Setting the Stage: Where Are We Now?

The first panel, moderated by Zach Churchill, National Director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, considered the relationship between higher education and the labour market in a knowledge-based economy. It also began to explore future directions for the system.

Dr. Jim McNiven, Senior Policy Research Advisor, Canmac Economics Ltd.

Jim McNiven gave a presentation on “Changing Demographics: Nova Scotia’s Biggest Challenge.” He indicated that, between the ageing of the baby boom cohorts and the low birth rates in recent years, widespread labour shortages are looming. Within eight years, Nova Scotia will not have enough workers to be able to maintain normal economic growth. Shortages are already being felt in the skilled trades and in some entry-level jobs. By 2026, the shortfall will be 73,000 workers in Nova Scotia. The pattern is similar across Canada and even worse in parts of the European Union, where some countries have lower fertility rates than Canada. Japan is already experiencing a decline in the size of its workforce.

This means that, as globalization proceeds, the competition among countries for scarce labour will intensify. It also means fiscal pressure on governments, as the ratio of working age people to total population will decline. Rural areas are particularly hard hit by the demographic shift, as the cities drain workers from rural Canada.

The gap between what economic growth requires and projected labour supply can be solved in only three ways:

- Immigration.
 - This can only be of modest help, short of an enormous increase in the rate of immigration.
- Increasing the share of the population (over age 15) that participates in the labour force.
 - Female participation rates are already close to that for men.
 - Increasing participation by disadvantaged groups (such as Aboriginal people) can help, but not enough to counteract the weight of the demographic shift.
 - The key will be attracting older workers to stay in the labour force. Some may have to, when they discover their pensions are inadequate. But governments and businesses need to do more to make it attractive for older workers to stay working.
- Increasing productivity.
 - Increasing output per person can help sustain economic growth amid scarce labour. However, even a substantial growth in productivity would not be enough on its own.

No single approach will be sufficient on its own. We need progress in all three areas, argued Dr. McNiven, in order to sustain economic growth. “The availability and management of human resources is becoming the determinant of continued prosperity.”

Dr. Michael Higgins, President and Vice-Chancellor, Saint Thomas University

Michael Higgins spoke about the dangers of focusing university education on technical skills with the expectation of “practical” results. He warned that such a focus risks promoting docility among the population in social and political affairs. A liberal arts education, on the other hand, provides students with skills such as critical thinking that are vital to political and social well-being and to maintaining our democratic freedoms (and to questioning dogma), though such skills are not easily quantified.

Dr. Higgins noted that we are entering a new era of learning, marked by the globalization of the world economy, a rapid pace of technological change, and increasing mobility of people across international boundaries. We need the liberal arts to help us navigate the challenges associated with these trends.

Stuart Gourley, Senior Executive Director, Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Workforce Development

Stuart Gourley, in his presentation, “Workforce Development through Education and Training,” emphasized the importance of workplace strategies for both social and economic development. Like Jim McNiven, he noted the demographic imperative and the likelihood of skills shortages, and he linked that to the need to increase labour force participation (for both older workers and historically under-represented groups, such as Aboriginal people and the disabled), attract migration (and be ready to deal with a different mix of cultures) and improve productivity.

The productivity imperative, in turn, speaks to the importance of improving educational attainment and skill development. In the coming years, most new jobs will require some form of post-secondary credential. Employment rates and median earnings are already higher for those with such credentials than those without (and those without a high school diploma have much lower employment rates than those with that credential). In addition, many workers over the age of 45, who tend to have less educational attainment than younger workers, need to improve their levels of literacy and essential skills. Mr. Gourley also stressed that even college and university graduates should plan on continued learning over their lives in order to keep current with changing technology and skill needs.

Employers, facing a scarce supply of skilled workers, will have to make more of an effort to become “employers of choice.” One way they can do this is to increase their investment in the training and development of their workers, as this improves retention.

Mr. Gourley noted the efforts of the Government of Nova Scotia to address the skills and productivity challenge: promoting apprenticeship and skills training; supporting employer efforts in this area with incentive programs; helping under-represented groups to participate in education and training; improving adult literacy; and providing labour market information to help people make informed choices.

Dr. Rick Miner, President, Seneca College

Rick Miner's presentation, "The Future of Post-Secondary Education in Canada," focused on the need for changes to the post-secondary system.

Dr. Miner reminded forum participants that colleges and polytechnics are a big part of the post-secondary system in Canada: equal in total enrolment to universities. He then summarized the key recommendations of the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick, which he co-chaired:

- More integration among institutions in the system: sharing resources and services; improving the ease of credit transfer;
- Greater flexibility in program offerings;
- Making colleges independent of government;
- Improving accountability/quality assurance;
- Focusing student aid on need;
- Increasing financial support for institutions and students; and
- Establishing three polytechnics to combine theoretical and practical approaches to learning. (This included a controversial recommendation, not adopted by the government, to replace the Saint John campus of the University of New Brunswick with a polytechnic.)

The government has responded favourably to many of the recommendations, but also chose to freeze tuition, which the Commission did not recommend.

The rest of Dr. Miner's presentation focused on some key medium- and long-term trends facing post-secondary education:

- The rate of participation by Canadian youth and young adults in post-secondary education is expected to continue to increase; however, the demographic trends are such that after 2018, total enrolment in PSE in Canada is expected to fall.
- The pattern will vary across (and also within) provinces, with some (such as the Atlantic provinces) facing that decline earlier, others later, partly because of the concentration of immigration in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.
- Funding is not expected to match the rise in enrolment over the medium term that is occurring though the increased participation rate, so funding per student is expected to fall.
- Student debt will continue to rise.
- University participation rates are rising globally. In particular, since 2000-01, India and China have more than doubled the awarding of degrees in engineering, computer science, and information technology. Canada's enrolment in engineering fell during 2000-05.

Possible responses to these trends (echoing the recommendations of the New Brunswick Commission) include:

- Improvements in the high schools:
 - Better science, math and technology education;
 - Better career counselling, which can reduce dropout and transfer rates.
- Easier credit transfer between post-secondary institutions;
- More joint programs between universities and colleges to facilitate career focus and reduce total years of study.
- More polytechnics, to blend theory and practice, give students more choices and make it easier for some students to accomplish their learning goals in fewer years.

Donna Mulholland, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, New Brunswick Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour

Donna Mulholland spoke about the Action Plan of the Government of New Brunswick for post-secondary education. The need for change was based on:

- Low participation rates in community colleges;
- Higher than average tuition;
- Concern about under-represented groups, such as Aboriginals;
- Low rate of adult literacy, yet low participation in continuing education and lifelong learning;
- Concerns about skill shortages, weak connections between the PSE system and labour market needs; and weak links between PSE institutions and their communities; and
- The need to increase New Brunswick's research and innovation capacity.

New Brunswick has articulated a vision for the PSE system: student-focused, integrated, accessible, affordable, relevant, responsive, efficient, of high quality and accountable. The goal is to produce the best-educated and most literate population in Canada.

Among the changes planned to realize this vision are:

- Providing more opportunities for applied learning;
- Increasing the number of locations offering university courses;
- Making credit transfer easier between post-secondary institutions;
- Establishing an autonomous governance structure for the community college system and adding 12,000 spaces to that system;
- Increasing the capacity of the apprenticeship program;
- Establishing formal partnerships between universities, community colleges and communities to develop new applied and articulated programs, including two Institutes of Applied Learning and Training; and
- Requiring PSE institutions to submit five-year strategic plans.

Discussion

Questions addressed to and answers offered by the first panel included the following:

- How can one get more attention paid to the importance of a liberal arts education? Michael Higgins suggested that one must put the benefits of a liberal arts education in concrete terms, such as identifying current issues where poor decisions will be made without the kind of critical thinking and historical perspective that comes from a liberal arts education.
- Is there a risk of privatization of the post-secondary system? Stuart Gourley offered the view that the greater likelihood is of some consolidation among public institutions.

Panel 2. What's Possible? Policy Options

The second panel explored the kinds of changes that may be needed in post-secondary education in Canada to respond to current and emerging challenges.

Dr. Ron Saunders, Vice-President, Research, Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN)

Ron Saunders spoke about the key findings of two CPRN projects. The first was a series of studies on how to foster quality in Canada's post-secondary institutions. It included an examination of: issues in measuring quality in PSE; implications of the funding cutbacks of the 1990s; and case studies of innovation in teaching methods or the dissemination of research. The main recommendations that emerged from this project were as follows:

- We should measure the value-added of the learning experience. Too many measures focus on inputs (such as the size of the library) or outputs (employment rates), whereas the focus should be on how the institution facilitates learning, taking into account the characteristics of students as they enter programs.
- To balance institutional autonomy with the need for accountability, PSE institutions should be given much discretion in developing strategic plans, but they should be transparent about those plans and their progress in implementing them, and also more transparent about key characteristics of their programs.
- Provinces should provide multi-year funding and multi-year tuition plans, to provide more stability and predictability for both students and institutions.
- We need more formal evaluation of experiments in teaching methods in PSE. A lot of innovation is occurring, but it is not being evaluated (which is ironic, for research institutions).

The main focus of Dr. Saunders' presentation was on the CPRN project, *Pathways for Youth to the Labour Market*, which has involved nine studies published over the last two years. The purpose is to identify policies needed to improve the ability of young people to identify, select, and navigate learning pathways that lead to rewarding careers. The project was motivated in part by the discussion of learning issues at CPRN's 2005 dialogue with Canadian youth, who felt that they had little support in career planning and limited learning options in high school, with too much emphasis on the path to university.

Among the findings of the *Pathways* project are the following:

- Parental education attainment is strongly related to participation in PSE by their children;
- Marks matter, but one-third of those who dropped out of high school by age 17 had marks of 70 percent or better at age 15;
- Non-linear learning paths, with changes in programs or time off to work or travel, are common;
- University, college, and trades graduates earn significantly more, on average, than others, but the range of earning outcomes is large. Eighteen percent of university degree holders have earnings less than half the median. And Canadians are more likely to report being overqualified for their jobs than are workers in most other OECD countries;
- Career development programs that start early (as early as grade six) and involve multiple interventions (experiential learning, role models, labour market information, work experience, engagement of parents and employers) lead to higher rates of completion of high school and PSE. However, most provinces do not have a career development strategy. Most guidance programs focus on support with immediate education decisions in the late high school years rather than career planning; and
- Provinces are making an effort to revitalize vocational options in high school, but so far this has been sporadic and with limited take-up. There is little formal evaluation of the initiatives that exist.

The key recommendations are:

- All provinces should put in place a strategy for career planning services, for people of all ages. It should feature: curriculum that begins by middle school, with parental involvement; not just information, but the tools to develop career planning skills; and plans and funding for program evaluation.
- We should give young people lots of learning options, but help them change course when they need to.
 - Provinces/school boards should continue to revitalize vocational options in high school and expand co-op and dual credit offerings.
 - To avoid prematurely streaming students, and to recognize that many will want to change learning programs, more bridges need to be built between different learning paths (in both high school and PSE – the latter speaks to the need for better credit transfer arrangements).

Stephanie Oldford, Policy/Research Analyst, Canadian Council on Learning

Stephanie Oldford noted that the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), in its efforts to provide Canadians with current information about all aspects of lifelong learning, has done a great deal of work on the subject of post-secondary education, noting in particular CCL's annual post-secondary education report. She also described several other key products of the CCL, including the Composite Learning Index, which is based on learning indicators and measures in four areas ("pillars"): learning to know (literacy, numeracy, general knowledge, critical thinking); learning to do (technical, hands-on skills), learning to live together (respect and concern for others, social and interpersonal skills), and learning to be (development of the mind, body, and spirit through personal discovery, creativity, and achieving a healthy balance in life).

As had speakers in the first panel, Ms. Oldford noted that demographic trends are likely to have a large impact on PSE. As smaller cohorts reach the age of usual entry to PSE, overall enrolment will decline (despite the trend towards higher participation rates and the "massification" of higher education). Possible responses to this include:

- More branding and marketing by institutions;
- Greater attention to the student experience and to supporting student success;
- More flexibility and options for students;
- A greater effort to attract new types of students (such as mature students who pursue learning and work in parallel);
- Reducing informational and motivational barriers to participation in PSE; and
- A search by institutions for new ways to generate revenue.

Ms. Oldford also noted that Canada lacks data that are comparable across institutions on many aspects of PSE – Canada lags behind many other OECD countries in this regard.

Alex Usher, Vice-President, Educational Policy Institute

Alex Usher warned participants in the forum that the "good times" are coming to an end. The past four years have seen sizeable investments by governments in the PSE system, but with the economy slowing, that will stop.

Much of this recent reinvestment has been to fund tax benefits for students or tuition freezes, so the net increase in resources to PSE institutions has been small. The amount (net of student aid) that students pay for PSE has gone down in the past few years, but that is over: expect the costs of participating in PSE to go up. So far, the student aid system has worked fairly well: increases in tuition have not reduced participation in university, though there is some evidence that tuition increases at community colleges do affect participation.

Mr. Usher argued that continuing cost pressures in the universities will force some change in the way they provide education. While it is difficult to increase class sizes further at the undergraduate level, we may see this in graduate education. We can also expect to see more separation of the teaching and research functions, as research has shown no correlation between research performance and teaching ability.

Mr. Usher noted a trend in Europe towards defining the competencies expected from degree holders. Such an initiative in Canada would have to be pan-Canadian in scope.

Finally, Mr. Usher argued that we continue to have difficulty in measuring the quality of education delivered by post-secondary institutions, and since what gets measured affects what investments are made, we should anticipate some tension over this as government resources become scarce again. He urged student groups to actively engage in this debate.

Charles Cirtwill, Executive Vice-President, Atlantic Institute for Market Studies

Charles Cirtwill's presentation, "Time for Something Completely Different," emphasized that the demographic imperative will require major change in the PSE system. The ratio of the working age population to dependants will fall everywhere except Africa. This ratio is currently higher in Atlantic Canada than the rest of the country, but will fall steeply over the next 30 years – even more steeply than for Canada overall. Productivity will have to rise if we are to avoid a real decline in our standard of living.

The demographic trends imply that the post-secondary education sector will have to shrink. We should expect to see fewer PSE institutions in the future. Some changes are already occurring in the sector: more adult learners; increased demands for English as a second language courses; a greater focus on skills and technology; more emphasis on articulation/portability between institutions; more demand for assessment of competencies developed through prior learning; and increased demand for shorter, focused, and flexible programs. Mr. Cirtwill cited the "open learning" system at Thompson Rivers University as an example of a more modern approach: continuous enrolment; flexible scheduling; distance learning; minimal admission requirements; credit for work done at other institutions or knowledge gained through prior work experience; and online tutors.

We have to decide who we are educating and to meet what needs. To take Nova Scotia (NS) as an example, we could decide that the NS PSE system should focus on educating Nova Scotians for the NS workplace. That leads to decline. The way to sustain and develop the PSE sector in Nova Scotia is to educate people from around the world for the global workplace.

Mr. Cirtwill also argued that we need a much more student-focused approach to PSE in Canada, which requires a more student-centred approach to funding. Instead of providing most of the funding to institutions, we should provide it to students and let them choose. That will promote a more flexible, efficient system: "highest quality at lowest cost." In his view, the status quo is not an option.

Noel Baldwin, Policy and Research Officer, Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation

Noel Baldwin's presentation focused on the "access agenda." He argued that Canada has had a student debt agenda, with a number of policies and programs affecting the cost of participating in PSE, but that we have not paid enough attention to non-financial factors affecting access. There is an emerging consensus, partly as a result of the research sponsored by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, that to further widen access to PSE, the following actions are needed:

- Pay attention to the particular needs of adult learners;
- Foster success for Canada's Aboriginal population;
- Build partnerships, both cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral;
- Strengthen career development in every jurisdiction;
- Target financial support to those who need it most;
- Focus on the transitions students make and intervene early to smooth them out;
- Ensure we have national data on PSE and a research strategy focused on access so can more easily see what does and does not work;
- Develop clear goals and communicate them clearly; and
- Identify or create an agency or organization that will be focused on access to PSE in Canada.

Such actions require not only changes in government policy, argued Mr. Baldwin, but also change on the part of post-secondary institutions.

Discussion: Questions to and Answers from the Second Panel

- If new government funding will become scarce, how can gaps in student aid be addressed? Alex Usher suggested that the key is for governments to avoid new general tax benefits for PSE students and focus on targeted initiatives.
- How can we attract more non-traditional students to PSE? Both Charles Cirtwill and Noel Baldwin offered the view that we need to do a better job in high school – finding ways to motivate disadvantaged students.
- Should the Thompson Rivers approach (outlined earlier by Charles Cirtwill) be emulated? Alex Usher raised some cautions about the "bits and bytes" model of PSE: it misses the socialization component that is a key part of the experience. In his view, while this approach may be needed to help adults who are already working to take PSE courses, it is not the best approach for young people. Mr. Cirtwill argued that, for some, it is that approach or nothing. Alex Usher suggested that one might envision a mixed model that he termed, "clicks and mortar," wherein people attend classes in much the same way as currently, but the undergraduate teaching is done mainly by younger faculty using curriculum that may have been developed by senior faculty at another institution. Noel Baldwin urged that new methods of teaching in PSE be formally evaluated.

Breakout Session: What's Next?

Following the two panels, the forum divided into discussion groups, facilitated by student leaders from across the country. Each focused on one of five issues: access, connecting PSE to the labour market, system integration, rethinking the delivery of PSE programs, and the need for a pan-Canadian framework. Highlights of these sessions were then reported back to the final, plenary session of the forum.

The questions examined by each group, and the key ideas emerging from the discussion of these questions, are summarized here.

Access

What should be the goals for access to PSE by young people and mature entrants? What steps are needed to achieve these goals?

Goal

- For youth and mature learners, any qualified Canadian resident should have access to high quality PSE programs within reasonable proximity, with the opportunity to choose a field of study, and with access to sufficient resources to be able to participate.

Actions

- Begin career counselling in the schools much earlier than is current practice.
- Provide information, about both programs and available student aid, to support informed decisions.
- Reform the student aid system so that students are able to cover the actual costs of PSE.
- Provide peer counselling/mentoring/tutoring for PSE students.
- Undertake more research (and better communication of research results) on the effectiveness of different programs to promote access and persistence.
- Provide more flexibility in timetables and in course loads. This will be of particular benefit to mature learners.
- Provide child care and other supports for mature students.

Connecting PSE to the Labour Market

What should characterize the relationship between post-secondary institutions and the institutions of the labour market (employers and employer associations, unions, career planning services)? What steps should be taken in this regard?

Goal

- The goals here are different for community colleges and universities.
 - The colleges need to be closely linked to labour market.
 - Universities should be more focused on critical thinking (along the lines of Michael Higgins' address to the forum, summarized above). We need to protect the integrity of the university mission: universities should not be seen as “job factories.”

Actions

- Online learning may help some people shorten the time to degree/diploma completion, but not all courses are fit for digital learning.
- Provide more career planning supports, in both K-12 and PSE.
- Make it easier for students to change their courses of study without having to start over.
- There may be scope for closer integration of high school and PSE programs.
- More attention should be paid to improvements in teaching quality in PSE. Perhaps we should have a funding council that focuses on this?
 - This requires measuring incoming/outgoing skill development, so that we can better identify methods that improve learning.

System Integration

Should the roles of colleges and universities become more or less distinct? Should the polytechnic model be explored? Should governments intervene to bring about articulation arrangements between universities and colleges?

Goal

- We need more clarity on what the overall goals of the PSE system should be in order to set goals regarding system integration.
- Presumably we want to provide education that addresses personal, economic, and social needs.

Actions

- Facilitate mobility (credit transfer) within the college and university systems as well as between colleges and universities. This may allow for more specialization among institutions; it should also improve PSE completion rates and help meet labour market needs.
- Improve mobility between colleges and universities before promoting the polytechnic model.

Rethinking Program Delivery

What new models should be explored for the delivery of diploma and degree programs? Should there be more emphasis on distance education? Should there be greater flexibility regarding course load?

Goals

- PSE programs need to balance the theoretical and the practical; they should serve both social and economic objectives, including fostering cultural literacy and ethical behaviour.

Actions

- Develop a common understanding of what is meant by quality in PSE and what we expect for each credential.
- Consider the potential for private learning institutes to deliver PSE programs.
- Provide more career development support for PSE students.
- Offer more interdisciplinary programs.
- Undertake more research on pedagogy: which teaching methods in PSE are most effective? How can we best make use of new technologies while meeting the need for human interaction?
- Provide better links between high school and PSE.
- Offer credit for knowledge gained through work experience.

The Need for a Pan-Canadian Framework

Do we need a pan-Canadian framework for post-secondary education? What issues could usefully be addressed on a pan-Canadian basis?

- We need a pan-Canadian process to discuss PSE issues. We are not yet ready for a pan-Canadian framework.
- Harmonization in certain areas (such as the meaning of a credential) may be important, especially to facilitate mobility and enhance equality of opportunity. However, not everything needs to be standardized.
- The issues that ought to be discussed in a pan-Canadian process include:
 - the overall vision for the system;
 - mobility;
 - how best to address access, affordability, quality, transparency, and accountability; and
 - the meaning of credentials, as well as common approaches to the recognition of foreign credentials.

Conclusion

The *Forum on the Future of Higher Education in Canada* examined key trends in post-secondary education and discussed a wide range of issues about the future of PSE in this country.

There was a fairly broad consensus at the forum about some trends and challenges. For example, several speakers identified demographic change as a force that will have major implications for post-secondary education. The aging population heightens the importance of productivity improvements in order to sustain our standard of living, in which process PSE plays a central role. Moreover, as educational attainment rises around the world, it will be important to continue to increase participation in PSE here, particularly among groups that are currently under-represented.

The student aid system has helped to achieve rising enrolment even as tuition has increased. However, further increases in participation in PSE will require more than student aid: better support is needed for students in high school or earlier to help those who are disadvantaged to aspire to higher education and to succeed in their learning choices. In addition, post-secondary students need better mobility between programs and institutions to help them complete their studies with minimal disruption when they need to change course.

However, as Stuart Gourley pointed out, the demographic projections suggest that even continued growth in participation cannot prevent an overall decline in enrolment, beginning in about 10 years. Institutions will have to compete for students even more aggressively than they do now. Some consolidation in the sector is possible. More attention to the student experience, and to providing greater flexibility in schedules and course loads, particularly to attract mature students, seems likely.

The forum also discussed several issues where the implications and choices were less clear or contested. For example, there was some disagreement about the degree to which universities will or should adopt the open learning model (based on online resources), with some seeing this model becoming the dominant approach, while others saw classroom teaching as still central to the university experience. Most speakers seemed sympathetic to Michael Higgins' call to emphasize critical thinking and the liberal arts in university education, but some also spoke of strengthening career planning supports in universities and fostering ties between universities and colleges in the development of applied programs.

With regard to research gaps, a theme that cut across much of the presentations and discussion at the forum is that we need to develop a better, shared understanding of how to measure quality in post-secondary education, and that identifying and implementing sound measures will be important in shaping future investment in the sector. It is also clear that we need more systematic evaluation of new initiatives designed to improve access and/or quality in PSE, so that we can identify and emulate effective practices.



Canadian Policy Research Networks – Réseaux canadiens de recherche en politiques publiques
214 – 151 Slater, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5H3
613-567-7500 www.cprn.org