

# AfterGrad NB: Responding to Youth Outmigration through Postsecondary Education

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## Introduction

The AfterGrad NB research project emerged from the statistics regarding the high rate of youth outmigration and the declining enrollments in postsecondary education (PSE) institutions in New Brunswick (Haan, 2012). It is estimated that over 50,000 young adults have left the province in the past two decades (GNB, 2013). From 2009 to 2014 PSE enrolment rates for Canada overall increased by 7.5%, yet in New Brunswick they declined by 2.8% (Statistics Canada, 2015). There is a rising demand for skilled workers in the changing economy (Miner, 2010; Canadian Council on Learning, 2006) yet the proportion of the New Brunswick population with a university degree is only 14.7% (HRSDC, 2012). In order to investigate whether or not graduating high school students understand the role that PSE can play in building future careers in their home province, the SSHRC-funded AfterGrad NB research project looks at what graduating high school students know about the provincial labour market demands, how they make choices about PSE, and the PSE pathways of a cohort of students.

## Literature Review

Students face multiple barriers when making the decision to pursue PSE. One barrier found in the literature is the high cost. The cost of pursuing a PSE can be divided into two types: the first is the monetary cost, which includes tuition fees and books. The second is an opportunity cost, which includes the loss of earnings for the time that the individual is enrolled in PSE (Finnie, 2012

p.1163). The number of students who pursue PSE who come from low income families, “as well as other families that may lack financial resources (eg. Aboriginal students, those living in rural communities, and those from single parent families),” is low and has been for some time (Finnie, 2012, pg. 1162). This is consistent with Rational Choice Theory (RCT), which explains how choices are made through an analysis of lowest cost versus maximum gain. However, in a study by Daoud and Puaca (2011), it was found that students do not follow RCT but rather their data shows a “relatively high degree of possible inconsistency,” thereby indicating an influence of other possible barriers (p. 608).

Research projects such as *Future to Discover* have demonstrated that there are also social barriers influencing a student’s ability and desire to pursue PSE (SRDC, 2012). For example, one’s social or cultural capital, terms popularized by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), can influence whether or not children are taught to value PSE (Finnie, 2012). Bourdieu (1977) theorized that an individual’s decisions are structured by the practices of their daily lives (both conscious and unconscious), their belief systems and attitudinal repertoires. Therefore, an individual’s attitudes towards PSE are at least partially generative of her/his life chances and the reproduction of inequalities or differences in PSE enrolment and attainment can be linked to more than just financial constraints or innate differences in ability (Guppy and Davies, 1998; Krahn and Hudson, 2011; Looker and Dwyer, 1998). In other words, the decision to pursue PSE includes more than just financial considerations (Finnie, 2012 p. 1164). As a result, talented young people may never pursue PSE, not because they do not have the ability, but because it is not part of the beliefs and attitudes that they have constructed about their future.

## **Methodology**

Research Ethics Board approvals for the research were sought and obtained from the University of New Brunswick, St. Thomas University, Mount Allison University and the Université de Moncton. The initial research activity occurred in high schools which were selected to represent the Anglophone, Francophone and Aboriginal as well as rural and urban diversity of the province's population. After meeting with Administrators, 12 high schools agreed to participate in the project and were randomly assigned the status as a control or experimental school. Students in the experimental group, participated in a labour market seminar, completed a universal application form to the province's four publicly funded universities without application fees, completed a short survey and consented to application and PSE tracking. Students selected for the control group participated in a labour market seminar, completed a short survey and consented to PSE tracking. The school visits were completed in February and March 2016, for potential intake into universities in September 2016. 265 students participated in the project: 128 students in the experimental group and 137 in the control group.

The labour market seminar was designed as an interactive experience relating up-to-date provincial labour market information, outlining possible PSE pathways and sharing career profiles of recent New Brunswick PSE graduates. The seminar was based on a report written by project leads (Haan, Travis and Holtmann, 2014) as well as information shared with the team by the New Brunswick Department of Postsecondary Education, Training and Labour (PETL). The presentation and supplementary information are available on the AfterGrad NB website: [www.unb.ca/research/aftergradnb/](http://www.unb.ca/research/aftergradnb/).

A universal application form was created based on the information from the application forms of the four provincial

universities. University administrators reviewed the universal application form, ensured that it was compliant with privacy laws, and agreed to accept these applications from the research team on the students' behalf. An Information Management Agreement was negotiated and signed with the University of New Brunswick and Data Sharing Agreements were negotiated and signed with the other three universities.

Each student in the research is identified by his/her New Brunswick Education Number (NBEN). Their PSE pathways will be tracked from 2016-2021 identifying application acceptance, enrolment and retention rates as well as fields of study and reasons for withdrawal. The analysis will assess the impact of the labour market information seminar and the application process support in enhancing PSE enrolment. The experimental and control groups of study participants will be compared. Additionally, the students in the research will be compared to the entire 2016 high school graduating cohort.

## **Findings**

The preliminary analysis of the data from the survey illustrate the demographic characteristics of the sample (N=265). From the survey results, the average age of the research participants is 17.3 years. 64% are female and 36% are male. In terms of the languages spoken at home, 69% of the sample speak English, 19% speak French, 10% indicate that both French and English are spoken at home, while 2% reported some other language. 8.7% of the students identified as Aboriginal, 8.3% as a member of visible minority and 83% as other than these minority groups.

Universities are concerned with declining enrolment and have invested in the recruitment of New Brunswick high school graduates. At the outset of the project we worked with the Vice Presidents Academic and personnel in the Admissions and

Registrar's Offices at each university to explain the research and work out the details for data sharing. It became clear to us that the universities recruit extensively throughout the province. Their visits to high schools begin early in the fall months and are followed up with invitations to students to visit their campuses. Students are given assistance with completing application forms and some are given on-the-spot conditional acceptance.

In conversations with the Admissions and Registrars Offices, we raised the possibility of using the AfterGrad NB project as a pilot for a universal online application form, although there was little interest from the universities. Half of the students in the experimental group completed the universal application form and application fees were paid for by the project (64 of 128). This leads us to believe that the provincial universities are doing a good job at recruiting eligible graduating high school students.

In April 2016, the provincial government announced that tuition for PSE will be free for New Brunswick students from families whose annual income is \$60,000 or less (GNB, 2016). The government anticipates that 7,100 students will be eligible to benefit from the bursary, which represents 23% of students already in the province's public post-secondary institutions. From our experience in the field, we are unsure if cost is the biggest barrier for graduating students pursuing PSE. According to our survey, 49% of the study participants plan to pursue studies at a provincial university and 15% plan to study at New Brunswick Community College. Since this funding was announced after our data collection was completed, we do not know what impact this will have on students' decisions to enroll in university.

Two aspects of the research project led us to believe that the provincial universities are competing for the dwindling pool of graduating high school students in New Brunswick. First, there were concerns raised that the labour market seminar would not promote

disciplines associated with the Liberal Arts, like English and History to the same extent as applied disciplines like Engineering and Computer Science. We assured university personnel that the labour market seminar would take a balanced approach, highlighting the career profiles of young New Brunswickers from a range of disciplines as well as illustrate that non-linear PSE pathways have become normative in today's society.

Administrators at the Université de Moncton expressed concern that the project might direct Francophone high school students in the province away from the only Francophone university. We assured them that our project would emphasize the advantages of a Francophone PSE not only for Francophone students but for bilingual Anglophone students as well. Of the 64 students who applied to the provincial universities, 5 applications were for the Université de Moncton.

There is a prevailing public rhetoric of there are “No Opportunities in New Brunswick.” In speaking with high school staff prior to data collection, we were given the impression that students have ample access to information about opportunities in the New Brunswick labour market. This information is in the curriculum content, available in print from guidance counselors as well as online through the PETL website. Following our labour market seminars teachers were interested in learning about the sources of the statistics we used for the labour market demands in the coming decade in New Brunswick. Students were interested in the career profiles available through the PETL website. These career profiles include basic duties, education requirements and projections about the level of demand in New Brunswick in the coming years. From this initial feedback, we assume that the career profiles that we had created for the labour market seminar made a strong impression on some individual students (Holtmann & Nason-Clark, 2016) but not on all.

We administered a 15-question survey immediately following the 45-minute labour market seminar. The survey had one qualitative question that asked students to write about their overall impression of the current job opportunities in New Brunswick. Here are examples of some of the answers students gave:

“I don't believe that I will be able to get a good paying job that I enjoy in NB because we have no money and no jobs.”

“There aren't very many opportunities for young people in NB at this time.”

“That New Brunswick does not have much to offer when it comes to work, especially in my hometown.”

“The presentation made me feel as if our province isn't is as bad of shape as far as jobs as we thought.”

“Not that great still, more than I had thought though.”

“There are a lot more opportunities than I expected.”

The negative tone of some of these responses leads us to believe that the predominant rhetoric of there are “no job opportunities in New Brunswick” is strong and influences cultural attitudes towards the relationship between PSE and the labour market. It will take much more than our research intervention to convince high school students otherwise.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that PSE can help prepare graduating high school students to meet the demands of the labour market in the coming years and pursue careers in their home province. Provincial universities are successfully recruiting eligible local high school students but should see themselves as allies in that particular market.

Specialization rather than competition should be the recruitment driver. High school and university students in New Brunswick will benefit from continuing information about the wide range of current and upcoming labour market opportunities if we want them to contribute to the prosperity of this province.

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