

No More Farewells: Making a Place for Youth in Nova Scotia's Economy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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In the 2013 Nova Scotia Youth Poll conducted by Springtide Collective, poll respondents identified “jobs and the economy” (42%) and, in a distant second, “social welfare and poverty alleviation” (13%) as the most important issues currently facing Nova Scotia. In other words, a clear majority of Nova Scotians under 30 (55%) expressed a preoccupation with economic issues, above all else.

This poll, which was conducted well before the release of the oneNS Commission's “Now or Never” report, shows that many Nova Scotia youth were already attuned to the daunting economic and demographic challenges facing our Province. Arguably, this is because Nova Scotia's economy has been inhospitable to youth for a very long time. Nova Scotia has been a net loser of young people (aged 20-34) for 28 consecutive years, losing more than 1,200 youth per year (on average) from 1985 through 2013 (Statistics Canada, 2014). And while there are many reasons why those individuals may have chosen to leave, there is no question that Nova Scotia's often-stagnant provincial economy, and a corresponding lack of opportunities for youth, has always been a major factor driving outmigration.

Of course, outmigration is only one part of the problem. A low ratio of births-to-deaths and a remarkably poor record on immigration are also important drivers of our demographic again transition. In combination, these factors suggest a provincial labour force that will be 100,000 persons smaller in 2035 than in 2010, even as our seniors' population balloons from 16% to 28% of the provincial total. The oneNS Commission identified an urgent need for collective action to modernize our economy, stabilize our population, and to create many more economic success stories for Nova Scotia. In particular, the Commission singled out the importance of supporting young people to stay and thrive in Nova Scotia. The implication is clear and it appeals to common sense: Nova Scotia has no future without its youth.

StudentsNS is the largest youth organization in Nova Scotia, representing over 38,000 post-secondary students attending Nova Scotia universities and the Nova Scotia Community College. Of course, our members are concerned about paying their tuition and about their own future employment prospects. But they are also wor-

ried about Nova Scotia’s economic future and its ability to maintain the basic public services that help to make our Province a great place to live. Our organization is committed to taking action to help address Nova Scotia’s many economic problems; and specifically to advocating for the creation of many new opportunities for young people to learn, work, and build lives in Nova Scotia. This research project and position paper is our latest contribution toward achieving these important provincial goals.

Study Description and Key Research Findings

In this study, we focused on our attention on three interrelated areas of inquiry. We:

1. Explored the enormous and constantly growing literature and statistics on the economies and youth labour markets of Nova Scotia, Canada, and the World, including a comparative analysis of the post-recession youth job markets after three Canadian recessions (1981, 1991, and 2008/09);
2. Critically examined existing economic development and youth labour market policies of the Federal and Provincial Governments; and
3. Identified and evaluated the full range of experiential learning and career development programs available at each of Nova Scotia’s 11 post-secondary institutions (10 universities and the Nova Scotia Community College).

Youth Labour Market Analysis

Our review of economic literature and statistics clearly delineates the employment challenges of young Nova Scotians since the “Great Recession” of 2008/09. In the five years immediately following the recession, Nova Scotians under 25 actually lost 7,100 more jobs than they gained; even when collective job losses are removed, this age group gained a paltry 2,300 jobs in an economy that produced almost 41,000 jobs in total. Importantly, most of the jobs gained by young people were part-time in nature.

Contrary to popular belief, a post-secondary credential has been no guarantee of a job since the recession. University graduates under 25 gained only 300 net jobs from 2009 to 2013, while college certificate or diploma holders lost 1,200 net jobs.

Older university and college graduates have swallowed up the vast majority of all the jobs created in Nova Scotia's economy, with the majority of those jobs slanted toward Nova Scotians over 55 years of age.

The post-recession recovery continues to drag on for Nova Scotia's young people. As of August 2014, Nova Scotia's youth unemployment rate was 16.6% (15-24 year olds), which was still more than twice the 7.6% rate of 25-54 year olds. Unfortunately, the tough youth labour market can have lasting implications far beyond a few early years of unemployment. In 2012, Canadian youth graduating in the shadow the recession were projected to lose over \$23 billion in combined earnings between 2009 and 2030 – a phenomenon known as “wage scarring” (Schwartzfeger, 2012). Unfortunately, as the recession impacts on youth have persisted, the total estimated loss is likely to be much larger.

Finally, in addition to all of the above, we examined a number of other labour market issues relevant to students and youth, including the rise of precarious employment in Canada, the unpaid internship and temporary foreign worker controversies, and prevalent prejudicial views of youth workers, among others.

Economic Development and Youth Labour Market Programs

To identify appropriate policy solutions, we also critically examine the full range of government programs and services aimed at youth labour market development and youth skill development.

Importantly, our analyses are built upon the premise that post-secondary institutions appropriately fulfill a dual mandate: they must be active and deliberate contributors to the development of a skilled and knowledgeable labour force even as they continue to be sites for pure academic pursuit.

We find that, despite hundreds of millions in public resources directed toward these overlapping priorities, it is often difficult to isolate the impact of many programs and initiatives on actual student and youth employment in Nova Scotia. Moreover, whatever their individual and collective impacts, it is clear that the existing suite of programs and services (i.e. business-as-usual) will not be sufficient to dramatically alter our Province's demographic or economic trajectories.

Post Secondary Experiential Learning and Career Development

Finally, our analysis also includes a close examination of career-oriented programs and services – primarily student career counseling centres and co-operative education options - offered at Nova Scotia’s post-secondary institutions.

Based on the large pool of institutional data collected through FOIPOP and interviews with staff at five campuses, we were able to draw a few important conclusions.

Without exception, co-op and career program staff members we spoke with were knowledgeable, passionate, and committed to providing excellent service to their students. But most of these programs operate on tight budgets with limited staffing resources. Even members of the best-staffed programs suggested that they could help more students, more intensively, and in a more timely fashion, were it not for these constraints. All program staff expressed interest in expanding their programs to serve a wider segment of the student population, including earlier outreach to students about the programs on offer (i.e. earlier in students’ programs of study) and better coverage of students for whom some services are not currently available (i.e. policies limiting co-op programs to students in specific programs or faculties).

Nearly all program staff stressed the importance of providing students with opportunities for self-reflection and experiential learning as preferred educational practices. They also emphasized that the value of their services to students increases dramatically when the students are motivated and actively engaged with the services offered. In other words, students achieve the best results when they consider this core part of their PSE learning rather than as a supplement or a short cut to a job. In this regard, StudentsNS has identified NSCC’s E-Portfolio program as a gold standard approach to career education.

Recommendations

Based on our analyses, we make a number of recommendations aimed at the Nova Scotia government, our post-secondary institutions, and every single employer in the Province of Nova Scotia. We identify the urgent necessity for a Youth Attraction and Retention Strategy to be led by the Province and implemented collaboratively by government, employers, and relevant youth-serving organizations. Embedded within the proposed strategy is the critical objective to ensure maximum impact from each public dollar spent on student and youth employment; this means investing more in

the kinds of programs that lead to actual employment opportunities and spending less on program that do not.

Under this strategy, we recommend:

- That employers in all sectors of Nova Scotia's economy - but particularly the Provincial Government and large flagship employers in the private sector – show leadership in hiring more youth, remunerating them appropriately, investing in their professional development, and providing meaningful opportunities to contribute and advance;
- That the Province implement numerous policy changes aimed at helping youth to access government-funded employment services and at ensuring that more youth are connected with actual employment when they do participate in such programs; and finally
- That all of our post-secondary institutions take the necessary steps to improve and/or expand opportunities for their students to participate in experiential learning (with the help of more targeted resources from government).

The common theme unifying many of our recommendations is the establishment of youth service philosophy that refuses to say 'no.' Whatever a youth's background, current barriers, and future goals might be, he or she should be able to find an answer within a well-funded, highly-coordinated youth employment network that is more tightly focused on connecting individual youth to actual employment opportunities and appropriate training. If a youth wants to learn a new skill, find an existing job in their field, or explore the possibility of starting a business, Nova Scotia's government and its committed private sector partners must find a way to help.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence throughout this report, it is clear that Nova Scotia's recent history of economic stagnation has had a profound impact on the life choices of our Province's young people. By any objective measure, 28 consecutive years of lost youth starkly indicates a prolonged failure to help young people succeed in our Province.

Given that vast landscape of existing youth labour market programs available in Nova Scotia – and the correspondingly large government investments that fund them – StudentsNS agrees with the oneNS Commission’s conclusion that government, by itself, cannot hope to fix Nova Scotia’s economic woes. What government arguably can do is attempt to bring coordination and focus to the many activities that are already taking place and make it as easy as possible for young people lacking opportunities to connect to the resources they need. Measuring progress toward achieving this goal should be relatively straightforward, as it translates into more young people choosing to live and work in Nova Scotia and, in the long term, a healthier economy and more sustainable future for the Province as a whole.