

No More Farewells:

Making a Place for Youth in Nova Scotia's Economy

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS



September 18, 2014

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Summary of Recommendations

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 create the necessary conditions for young people to succeed in our Province.

Regardless of their various targets, 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. This approach will clearly demonstrate our Province's collective commitment to helping youth find success and will set the conditions to put us all on a path to a brighter future.

Our government and business leaders must commit themselves to developing a comprehensive provincial strategy to transform our Province into an attractive place for young people to live, work, and build a future. A sound strategy – if followed by decisive action and adequate investment – could create many new employment opportunities and change an untold number of attitudes about what Nova Scotia has to offer. The Provincial Government should take the lead in this initiative, with the knowledge that the \$35 million in annual Graduate Retention Rebate-related “savings” it recently realized would provide an excellent resource base to immediately begin funding activities under the strategy.

RECOMMENDATION: In cooperation with students and youth, relevant partners in the private and not-for-profit sectors, and post-secondary institutions, the Province of Nova Scotia should immediately develop and implement a comprehensive Youth Attraction and Retention Strategy.

Government must be the driving force ensuring that the strategy translates into immediate and substantive action, rather than becoming yet another forum for study and consensus building. This can be accomplished by setting ambitious public goals, by placing high expectations of commitment on everyone involved (especially itself and employers), and by investing in public programs and services designed to help partners to meet these expectations.

Nova Scotia employers also have an essential role to play in making Nova Scotia a desirable place for young people to live and work, and must be committed to hiring youth, providing appropriate training, and offering fair compensation. They must not succumb to derogatory (and largely disproven) stereotypes about the work ethic, commitment level, or the attitudes of young workers.

RECOMMENDATION: Nova Scotia's private employers must commit to hiring more students and youth, compensating them fairly, and supporting their individual success within their respective organizations.

For small and medium enterprises, this might mean paying your current employees just a little bit more or offering inexpensive perks to make the workplace more attractive (e.g. flexible work hours, telecommuting options, etc.). For Nova Scotia's larger flagship enterprises, this means investing in your businesses in ways that create more opportunities for co-op students, for research internships, and for entry-level employment targeting recent graduates. In general, it means recognizing that your organizations benefit financially from being located in Nova Scotia and, very likely, from some form of direct public funding for your business activities. As our most successful "corporate citizens," you have a responsibility to invest in the future of this Province by investing in youth.

Of course, for some Nova Scotia employers, the critical importance of hiring youth at this time in our Province's history may not be entirely obvious. Likewise, some employers may also be unaware of the numerous government incentives designed to encourage the hiring of students and youth (see Section 4). Finally, still other employers may be aware of such programs but unwilling to take advantage simply because they consider the administrative costs to be too high to participate. To maximize the opportunities available for young workers in Nova Scotia, the Province must take steps to eliminate these barriers.

RECOMMENDATION: The Province of Nova Scotia should implement and/or fund an information and outreach campaign designed to educate employers about the benefits of hiring youth and the government assistance programs available to help them do so.

Nova Scotia's numerous economic development agencies and the demonstrable commitment to spending on youth-targeted programs are undeniable advantages for creating more employment opportunities for youth. At the same time, the lack of coordination across government and service delivery agencies creates considerable confusion for the students and youth seeking services. In light of this fact, the Province should take the necessary steps to achieve better coordination among these many programs and services, not just through integration in an overarching strategy, but also through effective communication with stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATION: The Province of Nova Scotia should establish a single, easily navigable online resource for youth employment program information as well as a centralized intake and advisement system for youth seeking government-funded services (ideally telephone or web-based).

Such a resource would provide youth job seekers and prospective employers with detailed information on the available government programs and services intended to create job opportunities for youth. In addition to a passive information available through the web portal, the service should also provide personalized guidance to individual youth job seekers and prospective employers of youth seeking government assistance.

In addition to providing better access to program information, the Government must also make a strong commitment to the practice of establishing clear objectives and outcome measures for all youth employment programs (including both new and existing programs).

RECOMMENDATION: The Province of Nova Scotia should offer a range of programs and services to help Nova Scotia youth from all backgrounds to attach to the labour market, including basic training and skills development programs for vulnerable youth populations.

RECOMMENDATION: The Province of Nova Scotia should prioritize increased spending on programs and services that connect students and youth to actual jobs in Nova Scotia, including wage subsidies and/or tax breaks to employers hiring students, youth, or recent graduates.

Nova Scotia simply cannot afford to squander scarce resources on ineffective programs. The Province should continue to offer a broad range of basic training programs targeting different subpopulations of youth; but it should also prioritize programs and services that connect youth with actual employment opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION: New or expanded incentive programs encouraging private employers to hire students and youth, including the Graduate to Opportunities Program, should be carefully designed to ensure new incremental youth job creation.

To ensure that new and existing programs have the desired impact of attaching Nova Scotia youth to the local labour market, all such programs should be designed to ensure that subsidized youth hiring does not simply replace youth hiring that might have occurred independently. A working mechanism to enforce this principle could be as simple as limiting eligibility for such programs to employers that can clearly demonstrate annual growth in the number of youth hired (i.e. that the employer hired more youth than it did the previous year).

Along the same lines, the Provincial government's role as an investor and/or lender to private businesses – whether through Nova Scotia Business Inc., Innovacorp, or Invest Nova Scotia (formerly the Jobs Fund) – should be used as leverage to ensure that government-supported economic development activities create employment opportunities for Nova Scotia post-secondary graduates and other youth.

RECOMMENDATION: The Province of Nova Scotia should attach specific provisions for the hiring of students, youth, and recent graduates to all public investments and/or loans made with private businesses.

While promoting creation of youth jobs in other organizations should be improved and expanded, the Provincial Government should also seek to establish itself as a best practice leader for youth-friendly hiring. To facilitate this, the Province should initiate a full review of its hiring policies (including a focus on maintaining job-appropriate experience requirements), new employee training policies, and other human

resource policies to ensure the creation of maximal opportunities for youth within the Provincial public service.

RECOMMENDATION: The Province of Nova Scotia should review its hiring, new employee training, and other human resource policies to minimize any existing barriers to youth employment. Based on this review, the Province should develop a human resource strategy to create specific opportunities for youth to enter the public service.

Just prior to publication, the Province announced its intention to develop just such a strategy to expand youth opportunities within the public service (Public Service Commission of Nova Scotia, 2014). StudentsNS applauds the stated intention of this announcement and calls upon the Government to design and implement this strategy transparently, and with the full participation of actual Nova Scotia youth.

While the Provincial Government needs significant help from the Federal Government to improve our immigration outcomes, the Province can, on its own, make a commitment to providing open-ended counseling and administrative assistance to all potential immigrants interested in settling in Nova Scotia.

RECOMMENDATION: The Province should invest in comprehensive immigrant settlement assistance resources through post-secondary campuses and/or Immigrant Settlement and Integration Services.

In particular, the Province should prioritize reinvestment in the lapsed International Graduates Pilot Program to insure that all international students at Nova Scotia PSE institutions have access to specialized employment, career, and immigration counseling.

Unfortunately there will always be employers that choose not to be good corporate citizens, by offering minimal compensation and working conditions, or perhaps by choosing to exploit employees with limited bargaining power (e.g. internship candidates, low skilled youth, temporary foreign workers). For this reason, it is crucial that the Province of Nova Scotia takes seriously its role in enforcing labour laws.

RECOMMENDATION: The Province of Nova Scotia should strengthen and enforce existing labour laws to eliminate the exploitation of unpaid labourers, excepting the case of pre-approved internships associated with academic programs.

To further support youth workers, many of whom earn minimum wage through part-time employment, the Province can also take further steps to strengthen Nova Scotia's minimum wage policies, most notably by enshrining annual consumer price index-based increases to the minimum wage in the Labour Standards Code.

RECOMMENDATION: Nova Scotia's Labour Standards Code (R.S.N.S. 1989, c. 246) should be amended to include the precise consumer price indexation formula used to calculate annual increases to the provincial minimum wage, which can currently be found in the Minimum Wage Order (General) (Regulation 257/2011, Section 6).

Based on our analysis, it is clear that most of Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions capably provide student employment programs that help to prepare students for the labour market. Unfortunately, existing resource constraints help to ensure that even the strongest programs are only available to a small minority of students. To expand the access and impact of such services, the Province should ensure that all institutions are adequately funded to serve the diverse and growing employment-related needs of Nova Scotia's post-secondary education students.

RECOMMENDATION: The Province of Nova Scotia should provide additional funding to universities and colleges through a targeted funding envelope to create and/or expand the student career services programs available on all campuses.

Unfortunately, the same resource constraints also limit the availability of experiential learning opportunities to a fraction of students at each of our post-secondary education institutions, typically limiting these opportunities to students in specific programs. New provincial funding for co-operative education programs would not only create new opportunities for students to gain career-related experiences, it would also reinforce the educational goals through the practical application of academic learning.

RECOMMENDATION: All of Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions should be funded to make experiential learning opportunities available to students across all academic departments.

In combination, increased funding for student career services and experiential learning programs strongly support the broader goal of retaining more post-secondary graduates in Nova Scotia. Students that gain specific career-related experience and/or connections with local employers are more likely to attach quickly to the labour force upon graduation, thereby avoiding the difficulty many students face in the immediate post-graduate period.

In addition to expanded student services and experiential learning opportunities, institutions can also do more to empower students to take responsibility for enhancing their own employability, by helping students to capture and communicate the skills and knowledge they acquire in their academic and extracurricular activities. To facilitate this, all institutions should commit to establishing clearly defined learning outcomes (and corresponding graduating student competencies) for all course and program offerings (Youden Walsh, 2014).

RECOMMENDATION: Post-secondary institutions should publish clearly defined learning outcomes, and corresponding graduating student competencies, for all program and course offerings.

Similarly, all institutions should also establish alternative tools for communicating student achievement, preferably based on the Nova Scotia Community College's mandatory E-Portfolio program. Such a tool not only allows students to capture a broader range of activities; it also encourages students to explore their experiences more deeply than a simple transcript, thereby helping them recognize the key attributes they can offer to prospective employers. Finally, while the portfolio approach is not currently available at any Nova Scotia university, it has been highly successful at the Nova Scotia Community College and has also proven effective in a Canadian university setting at McMaster.

RECOMMENDATION: Post-secondary institutions should establish alternative tools allowing more comprehensive reporting on student achievement, capturing a broader range of extracurricular activities and requiring significant commitment and self-reflection on the part of the student.

Finally, in addition to all of the above, Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions can also send a clear signal – to their students, their employees, and the public – that, as high profile public employers, they are strongly committed to ranking among Nova Scotia's very best youth employers. First, they can establish a practice of publicizing key statistics regarding the employment of students by their institutions. This practice would help to legitimate post-secondary institutions as key players in the broader effort to employ students and youth and encourage graduate retention.

RECOMMENDATION: Nova Scotia's post secondary institutions should maintain and regularly publish statistics on the students employed by the institution and the wages and benefits paid to these students.

While employing thousands of students and youth is certainly an important contribution to the youth labour market, institutions could send another strong signal by affirming their commitments to a basic standard of wage fairness. By obtaining Wagemark Certification, Nova Scotia's PSE institutions would ensure that their very lowest paid employees are adequately compensated and that their highest paid employees are not egregiously overcompensated in relative terms.

RECOMMENDATION: Nova Scotia's public post secondary institutions should obtain Wagemark certification, certifying that their highest paid employee does not earn more than eight times the wages of their lowest paid 10% of their workforce.