

## **Postsecondary Education: An Investment in Ontario's Future**

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Investing in Ontario's postsecondary education system and in the future of education and training are critical for this province's economic competitiveness and quality of life. Changing technology in the workplace, retiring baby boomers and increased competition from emerging economies such as India and China contribute to the increased need for a highly educated and skilled work force.

The Ontario government has made significant investments in postsecondary education in the past. Today, we enjoy one of the highest participation rates among OECD members. However, the province's historical commitment alone will not sustain us in the new economy. We must invest in Ontario's future by soundly investing in colleges and universities on a continual basis.

In this year's provincial budget, Premier Dalton McGuinty and his government made a significant commitment to Ontario's ongoing viability by announcing more funding for colleges and universities. It is important for all of us to consider what we can expect from this show of support.

To get to this point of reflection, it is useful to remember a bit of the past. As you know, postsecondary education in Ontario experienced significant growth after World War II. Existing universities expanded and new ones were created to meet higher demands from the baby boom generation. In 1965, Ontario took its commitment to higher education one step further by creating a new type of postsecondary institution. After considerable study, then Premier John Robarts and the education minister at the time, Bill Davis, introduced legislation to create Ontario's community college system.

Today, Ontario's postsecondary system includes 24 colleges of applied arts and technology and 19 universities. Colleges offer about 600 postsecondary programs in health sciences, business, arts, skilled trades, engineering and community services, and produce 56,000 new graduates each year. Universities award more than 58,000 undergraduate degrees, 10,000 master's degrees and 1,400 doctorates each year.

We can all agree that postsecondary graduates make a vital contribution to Ontario's economy – a fact that was supported in the recent provincial budget. This document, which provides a long-term commitment to improve operating funding to colleges and universities, is an important step in Ontario's investment strategy for its future. With its funding commitment to colleges and universities, the government recognized the need to invest in the continuing prosperity of the province in addition to the immediate consumption needs of today.

Now, the public policy challenge we face is determining how to get the best results from the funding commitment. This investment challenge for the province is similar to the one

we face in personal finances. When you set your own financial strategy, you consider how much to spend on today's needs, versus how much you invest in retirement savings. Ideally, you have the flexibility to make changes as life progresses and circumstances change.

Just as the basket of financial services and investment tools has evolved, so has the universe of education and skills-training opportunities. In the early 1970s, slightly more than 10 per cent of our population had a university education and a similar percentage had college credentials. Today, those numbers have more than doubled.

Yet, although postsecondary education has grown and evolved, advances in technology and science have exploded – creating new jobs while eliminating others, and changing the way people work and how goods and services are generated and delivered. Combine these changes with increasing competition both domestically and abroad and you see that the need for postsecondary education is no longer a nice-to-have but is becoming a must-have.

There is a need for a comprehensive public policy strategy to address this need. Ontario must have a long-term plan that transcends the immediate issues on the front pages of today's newspapers. A comprehensive strategy would have to consider a several questions. For example, should more people attend college? Should more attend university? Should Ontario consider a third type of institution – possibly a hybrid of colleges and universities? How can a culture of lifelong learning be realized?

We must be realistic about the challenge in front of us. The majority of jobs require a more sophisticated level of skills and training than in the past. All workers in all sectors of the economy need to have a higher level of skills and education to make a positive contribution.

Ontario is not producing as many postsecondary graduates as it needs. While experts suggest that more than 70 per cent of new job openings in Canada will require a postsecondary education, about half of our high school population in Ontario will go directly to college or university. In fact, only 53 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds in Ontario have attained a postsecondary education.

Ontario must strive to do better, providing postsecondary education and training opportunities to as many people as possible.

In his new book, *The World is Flat*, author and *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman explains why higher education is crucial – for everyone – in today's knowledge economy.

As Friedman explains, the United States correctly responded 100 years ago when the economy shifted from an agriculture-based economy to an industrial economy. The shift in the economy meant there would be less need for physical muscle and a greater need for an educated workforce.

America responded by controlling its immigration and making high school education mandatory for young Americans. This helped to create the middle class and ensure there wasn't too wide an income gap between the highest and lowest wages in America.

Now, Friedman argues, the advanced technology has created "a whole new leap upward" in the demands for skills and knowledge in the work force. The income gap is widening as the U.S. and Canada struggle to keep up with these advances.

The solution is much the same as 100 years ago but at a higher level. Much as a high school education became a necessity in the industrial age, a postsecondary education is essential in today's economy. And, it must be available to everyone.

As Friedman states, it isn't enough to expand the university system. Colleges and technical training must also expand. Otherwise, Friedman predicts that young people from lower-income households will never get the chance to make a meaningful contribution in today's economy.

"JFK wanted to put a man on the moon," states Friedman. "My vision is to put every American man or woman on a campus."

In Ontario, we must provide more skills and training to groups that have not traditionally gone on to postsecondary education – aboriginals, people in rural and remote areas, students with disabilities and those with low literacy skills.

We must reach many of those students who haven't traditionally been interested in academics. Not everyone is going to want to study Ulysses or get an MBA – as significant as those credentials are. To achieve new successes in higher education, we must recognize that many of the young people we must reach are most likely to respond to the career-focused, applied learning offered in Ontario's 24 colleges.

Investing in knowledge through postsecondary education is the critical to the economic success of Ontario. Developing an appropriate strategy for all socio-economic groups and in all fields of study will ensure that we maximize returns for individuals and all Ontario society.