

MEDIA RELEASE – 19 February, 2008

Population Better Schooled, But No Smarter, says new education report.

HALIFAX, NS – Formal educational attainment has never been higher—but there is no indication that levels of knowledge and literacy are increasing in the Canadian or Nova Scotian populace. Indeed, in some areas—like civic literacy and political awareness—knowledge is declining. Those are among the startling findings of the just-released *GPIAtlantic* Education Indicators Report.

Between 1984 and 2000, said Dr. Ronald Colman, one of three co-authors of the report, political knowledge scores among the young (aged 18-23) fell by 20%, by 17% for the next youngest group (24–29), by 8% for those aged 30–34, and by between 4% and 6% for middle-aged Canadians. At the same time, scores improved for Canadians 50 and over.

Basic levels of literacy have not increased, and Canadians also have a low level of scientific and environmental knowledge, says the report. Fewer than half of Canadians know that burning fossil fuels contributes to the greenhouse effect, for example, or that antibiotics can kill bacteria but not viruses.

The new *GPIAtlantic* Education Indicators Report explores how an educated populace can be defined, how it can be measured, and whether Canadians know what is needed to create a healthy, wise, and sustainable society. The report also presents trends and analysis for indicators of access, independence, and quality in the formal education system.

Nova Scotia students burdened with heavy tuition and onerous debt

University students in Nova Scotia are graduating with unprecedented debt loads. Student debt from government loan programs in Nova Scotia increased by 36% in a five-year period to a level 1.7 times higher than in Quebec where tuition is only one-third the level in Nova Scotia.

In Nova Scotia, in 2005, the average student debt from all sources was more than \$27,000, and 40% of all graduates with student debt owed more than \$30,000 in loans. The most recent data (just released this year) show that average student debt levels from all sources in the Maritimes have continued their seemingly inexorable rise—increasing by a further 10% between 2003 and 2007.

Student debt is disproportionately affecting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The *GPIAtlantic* report found that by far the largest holders of student debt in Canada are households in the lowest wealth quintile (i.e. the poorest 20%)—who account for fully 50% of Canada's student debt.

Students working long hours even during term, report finds.

Data on student work hours, never before publicly reported, indicate that average work hours during the school year for employed full-time students in Canada between the ages of 18 and 24 years increased steadily from 14 hours a week in 1992 to nearly 17 hours in 2006—the highest ever recorded in the 30 years that consistent records have been kept. It is not known what effect this is having on time for study, and on equity, since lower income students may have to work longer hours to pay for degrees.

Report discovers emerging two-tier education system

The *GPLAtlantic* report notes that Canadians (including Nova Scotians) may increasingly be facing a two-tier private-public education system based on the capacity to pay. Enrolment in private schools is increasing nationwide while public schools are increasingly fundraising and charging user fees for services that once were provided free to students. Nearly 50% of all Canadian schools presently have to fundraise for library books, 73% fundraise for school trips, 24% fundraise for academic programs, and 18% fundraise for supplies.

“Private fundraising and user fees invariably favour schools in higher-income neighbourhoods,” Dr. Colman noted.

Increasing commercialization may threaten independent university research

The last 30 years have seen a marked increase in private sector funding for university research. Between 1972 and 1998, the public share of sponsored research declined from 83.3% in 1972 to 64.2% in 1998, before rebounding to 72.4% in 2005. During the same time period, the private share of sponsored research more than doubled from 16.7% in 1972 to 35.8% in 1998, before declining to 27.6% in 2005.

Evidence—particularly on clinical drug trials paid for by pharmaceutical companies—indicates that increased reliance on private funding for sponsored research can threaten the independence and integrity of university research. As well, the pressure to commercialize research findings has become steadily stronger as the granting of funds has come to depend increasingly on the marketability of the research—potentially threatening the viability of vital basic research that does not have commercial applications.

University graduates are environmental Sasquatches with big feet.

This *GPLAtlantic* Education study presents the first data ever assembled on the ecological footprints of Canadians based on their educational attainment—and it shows that higher levels of formal education lead to less sustainable lifestyles. If the Earth’s bio-production were divided equally among the world’s population, each of us would be entitled to the production of 1.8 hectares. That would be our “ecological footprint.” The average Canadian’s footprint is an



unsustainable 7.6 hectares. The ecological footprint of Canadians without a high school diploma is 6.76 global hectares per capita, while high school graduates use 6.96 global hectares, and university graduates use a whopping 8.67 global hectares each—nearly five times the sustainable limit calculated by scientists.

“These findings make me think of the legendary Bigfoot, the Sasquatch of the western mountains,” said Dr. Colman with a smile. “I suppose that fellow has a Ph.D.”

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The complete Nova Scotia GPI summary education indicator report is available at:
<http://www.gpiatlantic.org/pdf/education/nseducation.pdf>, and an electronic version of this press package is at: http://www.gpiatlantic.org/releases/pr_education_full.pdf

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