The University Is an Economic Engine and a Major Player in the Future of our Workforce

Dr. Wendy Rodgers on the Atlantic Prosperity Charter, student pathways and keeping graduates on the Island.

Dr. Wendy Rodgers

President and Vice-Chancellor, UPEI

Adapted from an interview with Dr. Wendy Rodgers, President and Vice-Chancellor of UPEI, by Bianca McGregor, CEO of the Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce, at Speakers Corner at Confederation Court Mall on October 21, 2026.

What is Atlantic Canada's Prosperity Charter?

It was an initiative of the Atlantic Chamber of Commerce and the Atlantic Association of Universities. Its purpose is to build awareness of the links between universities and businesses, to create pathways to employment for students, and to give businesses pathways to recruit employees and for provinces to maintain and grow their populations.

What do those pathways look like in practice?

They come in all varieties. Co-ops are a good example, and work-integrated learning is a lighter version where students do smaller engagements with a business. Structure matters, because it helps us create those opportunities and keep them going.

It is not only about giving a student a job. At the launch of the Charter, students talked about how much they appreciated working in businesses where people asked their opinions and welcomed their ideas on how a process could be adjusted. Businesses valued that fresh view. So it helps businesses grow in creative ways, and it helps students grow through their academic pathways.

What will it take to get smaller businesses to take on a student?

First, awareness. Companies need to know that there are learners out there who can do the work they need. Universities and programs need to know what employers are looking for so they can prepare students accordingly. Programs, like our co-op program, take responsibility for preparing students, gathering feedback from employers and passing it back to students, and matching opportunities to the preparation students have. The tasks have to fit the student's capabilities and year of study, and that depends on open communication between the company and the university, ideally at the program level.

Second, and this is where my background in behaviour change comes in, you need a reminder. Build a regular alarm clock into the year: it is time to reach out to the university, find out what students are available, tell us what you need and get the process rolling. When the process itself supports the outcome, it works better.

There are other ways in too. We hold open houses and employment fairs, and the MacDougall Faculty of Business runs pitch competitions where employers can see students in action. A reverse job fair, where businesses come to meet students, is a great idea that was generated today that I will take back to the deans.

Are there pathways for every program?

They take different shapes, because they are tailored to the educational goals of each discipline. Not every program is built around a direct employment connection, but we can find a pathway for any student who wants one. Nursing students have preceptorships and clinical placements in the community, and they have no trouble getting hired. There are also opportunities with not-for-profits through work-integrated learning and volunteering. In every case there has to be an educational outcome for the student as well as a benefit to the employer.

What is UPEI's role in economic growth?

Think of the full continuum of post-secondary education on the Island: Holland College, Collège de l'Île and UPEI together train the Island's workforce. Some UPEI programs, like nursing, lead directly into a job. Others prepare the future leaders, the people who will run the businesses. The Catherine Callbeck Centre for Entrepreneurship, created through a philanthropic gift, helps students start sustainable businesses. As a company grows, so do the number of employees. They can come back for an MBA or another advanced degree when they are ready to move into leadership.

We are also an economic hub in our own right. We have about 1,200 employees and 5,200 students, and all of those people need to live somewhere, shop, buy groceries and enjoy the performing arts, sports and everything else the community offers. That puts healthy pressure on the community to deliver, and it creates employment and business opportunities in turn. The Atlantic Economic Panel's report calls universities economic infrastructure, and I agree with that.

How do we keep graduates, and what has happened with international students?

Universities across Canada are feeling the same pressure from a deep and rapid decline in international students. Many institutions had become dependent on that revenue as their main growth strategy, and it was not sustainable. The change was so large and so sudden that we have not been able to fully pivot. We need a sustainable economic model for the institution, because it in turn sustains the growth of the province.

There is really good cooperation among the Atlantic universities, led by the Atlantic Association of Universities, and the whole region faces the same demographic challenges of an aging population and a low birth rate. We can work together on recruiting students to the region. Then we have to make sure that when students finish, there is somewhere for them to go and a place for their families to grow, with good schools, health care and opportunities. When students see a pathway to a career in our region, they are more likely to stay.

If people are here for four to seven years (degree + three-year post-secondary work permit for international students), they become attached to our communities. We want people to feel part of the community, not extra to it, so that they stay and contribute to our social, cultural and economic sustainability.

Is there anything you would like people to know?

Remember that the university is a business itself. We are connected to the community in deep and extensive ways, and we want to be more connected to businesses, organizations and charities across the Island and beyond. Don't be afraid to approach us and ask, "What are you doing about this?" or "Would you be interested in doing something about that?" The answer is usually yes. We have to serve our own students first, because that is our primary mandate, but within that frame we are happy to collaborate on all kinds of projects, especially those that enrich the experience of our existing students.

LEARN MORE

- UPEI
- Atlantic Canada's Prosperity Charter
- Catherine Callbeck Centre for Entrepreneurship

- Atlantic Economic Panel: Final Report
- Dr. Wendy Rodgers: About the President

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