

\$120 -130 million in fed money for student debt

BY GORDON LOANE

FREDERICTON (CUP) — Leaked federal documents obtained by the National Post indicate Ottawa is considering spending an additional \$120-\$130 million a year on student loan programs.

But Sam Saintonge, president of the University of New Brunswick Student Union, says the new spending will only help students if the federal government increases student bursaries instead of just upping the maximum student loan from \$12,000 to say

\$15,000 a year.

"If the extra money is in the form of student bursaries, perfect," said Saintonge. "If it is in the form of basically upping the maximum loan limit per year, that would not be welcome at all."

According to 1998 Human

Resources Development Canada figures the average student debt load upon graduation in Canada is \$25,000.

Saintonge says new statistics provided by the New Brunswick government to the New Brunswick Student Alliance, a

provincial student lobby group, paint a grim picture about the number of students who must incur a large debt load to get a university education.

"In 1992-93, there was one student in New Brunswick with a debt load of more than \$30,000 upon graduation, but last year some 495 students had debt loads in excess of \$30,000 upon graduation," said Saintonge. "Not only are students indebting themselves, but they are indebting themselves a lot more."

The student union president adds that tuition increases have been a regular fact of life for students for many years.

According to Statistics Canada, tuition fees across the country have increased by 126 percent since 1990. Federal figures also show that, on average, tuition in Canada has increased at a rate of nine percent annually over the last five years.

Saintonge also says a new trend seems to be developing. "Students are taking longer to finish a university degree than ever before now because they have to work part-time in order to pay the bills and wind up taking only four courses per term instead of the usual five or six courses," he said.

"The net result is that students will spend more to get a university education with the potential impact of greater indebtedness."

Martin refuses request to eliminate GST on textbooks

BY GORDON LOANE

FREDERICTON (CUP) — Federal Finance Minister Paul Martin has refused to eliminate the seven percent goods and services tax on university and college textbooks.

Sam Saintonge, president of the University of New Brunswick Student Union, was one of 30 Canadian Alliance of Student Associations' (CASA) lobbyists who met recently with Martin in Ottawa.

"Martin told us that if he eliminated the GST on textbooks, then he would have a flood of requests from other groups seeking a similar benefit," said Saintonge.

The federal minister, however, did open the door to the possibility of providing university

students with a benefit in another program that could equal the amount Ottawa currently collects from GST on textbooks, said Saintonge.

Saintonge added CASA delegates from the Maritimes were hoping the federal government would follow the lead of provincial governments in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, which do not charge taxes on textbooks.

CASA delegates also asked Martin to reinstate federal funding to the provinces for post-secondary education to the levels provided in 1995.

"We asked the Minister to put back the \$3.6 billion that has been cutback since 1995 which has resulted in huge tuition increases for students," said Saintonge.

Students were also looking for improvements to the Canada Student Loans program.

"We have asked that interest rates on student loans be kept at prime plus one percent for floating rates and prime plus two percent for fixed rates," he said.

Saintonge said the delegates asked Martin to come out against inter-provincial differential tuition fees that are currently in effect for Canadian students from other provinces studying in Quebec.

The Student Society of McGill University is currently challenging the Quebec government's differential tuition fee policy in the courts.

A similar move was studied by the British Columbia government but recently rejected.

Saintonge said he came away from the meeting with

Martin with the impression that the federal minister is worried extra money from Ottawa for the provinces for post secondary education may not necessarily go where it should.

"I think the federal minister is concerned that the provinces in some instances might divert the federal money to other purposes such as road construction," said Saintonge.

The weeklong Ottawa lobby trip also featured meetings with at least 100 members of Parliament from each of the federal political parties, as well as senior bureaucrats with Human Resources Development Canada and the Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

CASA is set to launch a national education campaign on November 17.

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