

Students Speak Up

In the face of increasing cutbacks in government spending on post-secondary education, student unions across Canada are planning their "day of discussion" on the issue and its ramifications.

"November 9 is National Student Day" is the slogan for the locally-initiated but provincially and nationally-coordinated action on rising tuition, decreasing student financial aid and record unemployment.

The plan was adopted at the May conference of the National Union of Students, at the urging of the NUS Central Committee who claimed the historical context was favorable for a nation-wide student action.

NSD activities will mostly consist of seminars and workshops on the individual campuses, with little emphasis placed on demonstrations or other forms of "protest." At the national and some provincial levels, meetings with cabinet ministers are planned by student leaders.

The national and provincial student organizations have concentrated on promoting NSD through extensive poster and leaflet campaigns, and through a series of background papers which will form the basis of discussion of the four major themes: cutbacks in government funding, tuition fee hikes, regressive changes in student aid, and high unemployment.

Students in every province have experienced or will experience rises in tuition fees this academic year.

Post-secondary institutions in Alberta have increased fees 20 to 150 per cent, and further rises of 25 per cent are expected next academic year. The minister of colleges and universities in Ontario will likely announce an anticipated 15 per cent hike soon, and has already tripled fees for foreign students attending the province's colleges and universities starting January 1977.

Nova Scotia plans to eliminate the differences in tuition at its various post-secondary institutions and raise them to the level of Dalhousie University's, the highest in Canada.

In all provinces where tuition varies from institution to institution, one or more schools have hiked fees. The University of New Brunswick raised fees 10 per cent this year while fees increased an average of 9 per cent at the University of Manitoba. In Quebec the Universite de Montreal raised its fees two to eight per cent and McGill University charged agriculture students 15 per cent more, in the face of a province-wide increase expected soon.

Increases were 10 to 32 per cent at the University of Prince Edward Island and between 9 and 12 per cent across Saskatchewan. Notre Dame University in British Columbia charges 41.2 per cent

more for the international student. Fees were recently hiked at Memorial University in Newfoundland.

The provincial and national student organizations have argued for some time now that rising tuition, coupled with regressive changes in already inequitable student aid programs, act as a deterrent to the federal government's professed desire to see universal accessibility to

post-secondary education a reality.

While fighting tuition increases and increased loans over grants in the various student aid schemes, the organizations all have as their long-term goal the abolition of tuition and the institution of grants for living stipends.

Chris Allnut, a researcher with the Ontario Federation of Students, argues for the abolition of tuition on the grounds that it acts as a financial barrier to many who desire a higher education and is a type of "regressive" taxation.

Tuition is regressive, he argues, because all students, regardless of their financial circumstances, pay the same amount. Rather than set up student aid structures which aim at increased financing for "poor" students, governments should abolish tuition and replace it by a reformed tax system which ensures that those who benefit most from post-secondary education pay for it through their increased incomes.

Allnut's main argument is that an increased share of the costs of higher



education should be borne by the sector that benefits most from a skilled labor force: private corporations.

His paper shows that while corporate profits rose 250 per cent during 1967-74 - the "boom" years for education - the corporate contribution to public revenues through taxation dropped from 11.3 per cent to 10.7 per cent. Personal income tax contributions rose from 16.2 per cent to 18.3 per cent.

The figures show that "the corporate sector depends on a constantly increasing level of education in society as a whole to maintain its relative position in the world economy ..."

Rather than responding with demands that tuition be increased to lighten the tax burden on working people, organized labor has joined student groups in demanding the abolition of tuition. Allnut notes, pointing to the recent support for this position from the 2.3 - million member Canadian Labour Congress. While social and environmental factors also determine who gets a higher education and who

doesn't, both students and labor see the abolition of tuition fees as the first important step in eliminating social inequities, says Allnut.

Student Aid

Those who favor a continuation or increase in tuition often pose changes in student financial aid programs as a solution to financial barriers to post-secondary education.

Higher grants and fewer loans, all-loan programs with repayment contingent upon the student's ability to pay after graduation, and all-grant plan for students from low-income backgrounds have all been proposed in various forms.

Allnut in his paper takes issue with all these schemes, pointing out studies which show working people find loans of any form a deterrent. The latter proposal includes a means test, which Allnut says "discriminates against middle income families who are usually assessed as being able to contribute an unrealistically high sum to their child's education."

The important thing to note, however, is that despite proposals for radical changes in student aid, the existing programs have generally gotten worse, not better. Allnut notes that the last hike in Ontario tuition fees in 1972 was accompanied by a \$200 decrease in the grant portion of the Ontario Students Awards Program, while the loan portion was increased by the same amount. Since then the loan portion of OSAP has increased by another \$200, bringing it to \$1000 for this academic year.

Provincial student aid programs vary from differing loan/grant ratios to Alberta's all-loan plan. Most are less generous than Ontario's program, starting with loans based on either the old or new maximums allowed under the Canada Students Loans Plan (CSLP) - \$1400 or \$1800.

The National Union of Students has been seeking changes in CSLP which they claim operates "with rigid and arbitrary criteria and an increasing use of supplementary application and appeal schedules to the point where large numbers of students are being denied assistance."

In a brief on financial aid the national union cites the observation of the recent OECD Examiners' Report on Canadian educational policy that CSLP "has not made a significant impact on the representation of students coming from the lower half of the family income range in post-secondary education."

Significant among the NUS recommendations in the brief are demands for the elimination of the arbitrary summer savings contributions and the lowering of the age at which a student is considered financially independent under CSLP criteria.

NUS also demands that repayment loans begin six months after the student finds full employment, instead of months after graduation, as is currently the case.

The demand for the elimination of summer savings requirement was highlighted by unemployment among students last summer estimated by New Democratic MP John Rodriguez at between 15 and 20 per cent.

The exact figure is impossible to determine since the department of manpower and immigration cancelled a special survey on student employment following the elimination of the Opportunities for Youth program and the 300 jobs it provided this year.

Rodriguez, in a statement, cited studies showing that students from families with incomes less than \$6000 yearly had only a 25 per cent chance of attending university this fall, and a 47 per cent chance to attend other post-secondary institutions. Another study shows students from income backgrounds of \$15,000 upwards are three times as likely to go on to higher education as the former group.

NUS recommends that student contribution be assessed on the basis of their actual earnings, as is the case in Nova Scotia.

Cutbacks

Cutbacks in public expenditures - service and education costs - have been felt in every province at steadily increasing rates in the past three years.

In Ontario increased funding for post-secondary education decreased 14.4 per cent last year from 16.9 per cent the previous (1974-75) academic year. This year, university presidents are talking about raising an additional 11 per cent covered by government funding through tuition fee hikes.

Alberta has had an 11 per cent decrease in increases in operating grants for the past two years. The British Columbia government is shutting down a university.

Nationally, the current estimates from Statistics Canada for the 1976-77 academic year show a decrease in non-university sector of post-secondary education to 17.8 per cent the previous year, a 10 per cent drop from a previous 19.5 per cent for universities.

That the decreases are slated to continue can be seen in current negotiations in cost-sharing between the federal government and the provinces covered under the Fiscal Arrangements Act (FAA) which expires next April.

Under the FAA there is already a 10 per cent ceiling on increases in federal transfers, through which the federal government matches dollar-for-dollar

By DAN KEETON
Canadian University Press

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