

Ontario mandates 10% tuition increase

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With last week's tuition announcement, Provincial Education and Training Minister John Snobelen has ruffled a few more feathers.

Snobelen gave Ontario universities the green light to raise average tuition fees by up to 10 per cent for the 1997/98 academic year. In addition, he announced the Ontario government will increase student assistance by 37 per cent and invest an estimated \$100 million in the government matching program, the Student Opportunity Trust Fund.

"Our approach to post-secondary education is to target those students who are truly in need. We want to ensure that qualified Ontario students for years to come have the highest quality post-secondary education," said Snobelen.

The increased students assistance includes an extra \$150 million from the 1995/96 level to Ontario Student Assistance Program and a new Ontario Merit Scholarships program that recognizes the top two per cent of students in Ontario colleges and universities. OSAP was also affected by an increase in the loan forgiveness ceiling from \$6,000 to \$7,000.

The government is also currently working on an Income Contingency Loan Repayment Plan which will allow students to pay back their loans in accordance with their level of income.

But many student and university groups are disappointed by the announcement.

The announcement prompted Ryerson students to send a block of ice to their president calling for a tuition freeze, and University of Toronto students to organize a sit-in at their president's office.

The Canadian Federation of Students, the lobby group which currently represents McMaster students, criticized the Tories for increasing the student debtload and "de facto deregulation" of tuition fees. They marched to Queen's Park to give Snobelen a fact sheet and a pair of hiking boots so "he can walk in our shoes."

"Universities and colleges have now been given the green light to charge different levels of tuition for different programs," said Vicky Smallman, chair of CFS's Ontario component. "Although the Minister is attempting to slip this by the public, this is de facto deregulation, and it brings us closer to a system where academic choices will be determined by a student's financial circumstances."

McMaster President and Vice-Chancellor Peter George, however, supports the move to give universities more leeway in setting their own fees. He does not feel students lose accessibility through that avenue.

"I don't accept tuition fees in and of themselves as a barrier. Tuition is only part of the cost of education, and a relatively small part," said George.

George also believes tuition fees could increase for the betterment of all. "We are in a difficult transition period. The question is not whether the government is shifting the blame, but why do we assume that the old tuition fee structure is the optimum one, or the just one," said George, who believes it is unrealistic to push for zero tuition.

Although Smallman questions the motives of Ontario university presidents, she does believe Minister Snobelen to be ultimately responsible.

"We want Snobelen to acknowledge that he is responsible for tuition hikes, not the university administration," she said. "But the way the president's have dealt with the situation is more of a short-sighted vision and demonstrates that they do not understand the plight of the students."

"They aren't representing us, they're representing themselves," she said.

While George and Smallman disagree on tuition fees and the effects of deregulation, they both agree that the Ontario government should increase funding to post-secondary education.

"I strongly endorse the Smith Panel's recommendation to increase funding and restore it to the level of the other provinces," said George.

The tuition fee increase is an average of 10 per cent, which means university

administrations can increase individual programs by different amounts provided they stay within the average.

This means some programs could be hit harder than others.

The administration is currently examining the best options and is unable to give a concrete decision on the increases. But George said they will be evaluating the increases according to three criteria: demand for the program, differences in cost and future earning potential.

"I don't want to signal any intent, but I'll provide an example," said George. "It costs more money to provide an education to an engineering student than a social work student and then there is earning potential after graduation. The same analogy can be made for philosophy majors and economics majors."

Smallman also criticized the government's changes to OSAP. "OSAP is already stretched to the seams so they had to do something. Besides, no new government money will go into this because they have raised the forgiveness limit from \$6,000 to \$7,000, and the money saved through this will be funding the increase," she said of the fact students will now have to borrow more for forgiveness.

Smallman also criticized President George and his approach to tuition.

"He should stop looking to students as an endless supply of money," she said. "He is turning universities into elitist institutions."

"Dr. George has no understanding of student life and maybe we should give him a pair of hiking boots so he can walk a mile in our shoes," she added.

George rejected such an idea, contending he always works for students and often walks about campus to stay in touch with students.

"Why have I been busting my ass all year on McSoft [a fundraising program for students] if it isn't because I have the interest of students at heart?" asked George.

"And tell Vicky that I already have a pair of hiking boots," he mused.

<http://www-msu.mcmaster.ca/ll>

SU budget continued from page 1

Trish Davidson, Vice-President (Student Services) commended Peters on the recruitment and involvement of his society. She moved that the society receive the maximum allowable funding, \$2,733.60.

This maximum comes from the SU Finance Policy, which states that a student society may not receive more than 20% of the contributions of the previous year's students. For example, if a faculty of 100 paid \$10,000 in fees, they were eligible for only \$2,000 in funding for their society.

Scholten weighed in to say that although the Forestry Engineers were under the 20% cap, the Faculty of Engineering, taken as a whole, was not. She urged Council not to increase the budget, which would violate the financial policy.

Peters responded by saying the 20% cap was unfair to his faculty group because the University has capped enrollment in forestry engineering.

Council passed the maximum budget, 14 in favor, 7 opposed, with one abstention.

The last group to enter the fray was the Arts Undergraduate Society. Zeina Salloun, Vice-President of the AUS argued that the association for the largest faculty on campus should have a greater allocation than \$1,546.30. The proposal had

been for \$11,000. There was considerable debate over whether a society needed a large budget to bring in more members, or whether it should be required to gradually increase its budget over time, and build up the society.

Vice-President (University Affairs) Anoushka Courage, an Arts student, pointed out that although they have similar enrollments, Arts societies receive much less than Engineering societies. In fact, the sum of budgets for all Arts societies is only \$5,660.61, while the total for Engineering stands at \$23,699.60, nearly four times as much.

After a protracted debate, Council voted to increase the budget for the AUS to \$2,000.

President-elect Anthony Knight brought forward three increases to the budget.

His first, a bid to increase the budget for the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations conferences by \$3,100 in order to allow President-elect Knight, to accompany the Vice-President (External)-elect Bob Prince.

There was fierce opposition to this proposal from VP Finance Scholten who read out the duties of the President and Vice-President (External) from the SU Bylaws.

Even a revised motion, which would have seen the President accompany the VP (External) on

only 2 of the 3 conferences could not muster enough votes to pass.

Knight also requested that \$500 be allocated to the purchase of periodicals for the SU office. Knight stated that such things were fitting of "an organized office." The motion passed 11 to 7 in favor.

In his third act, Knight requested \$500 be put aside for promotion and advertisement of the Student Union. After some philosophical debate on the value of marketing the union, Council passed the motion.

Matt Hanrahan, Business representative, asked Council to increase its allocation for the Student Pride and Alumni Relations Committee from \$1,625 to \$2,000. Hanrahan, who is a member of the group, pointed out that SPARC provides many valuable services to the University, such as guided tours of the campus, and recruitment.

Scholten refuted his arguments, adding that SPARC receives nearly \$5,000 from the UNB Alumni Office. This year, the UNB Alumni Office plans to spend \$495,000. The motion was defeated 7 to 10.

President Joie Hellmeister attempted to raise the budget for AIESEC a group to which she belongs, from \$1,699 to \$1,980. Although she described her three years as beneficial, Council voted against the motion, 3-15.

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