

Province raking in the bucks from student loan user fees

BY ANGELIA PACIENZA

TORONTO (CUP) — The Ontario government doesn't think there is anything wrong with charging user fees to needy students re-

questing help to fund their education, a ministry official says.

"It's like a whole lot of things in our modern lifestyle," said Danièle Gauvin, communications officer for the Ontario Ministry of Education, of the user-fees. "The

people who are actually using the service sometimes are asked to cover the cost of it rather than others who aren't using that particular service."

The provincial Tories were criticized last month when the Ontario Liberals learned that user fees charged to students borrowing money from the province totals more than \$800,000.

"It's like a slap in the face for students who are applying to the government for help to be able to go to school," says Lyn McLeod, a Liberal member of provincial parliament.

The information was contained in a report obtained through a Freedom of Information request filed by McLeod's office. The report shows that money collected from Ontario Student Assistance Program user fees is put into a general revenue fund.

A \$2 user fee on a 1-900 telephone number for information on student loans was implemented in November 1996 and has since collected nearly \$400,000 from students.

This month, the line will be operating at its busiest, as students find out about the status of their loans.

Another \$420,000 has been collected from a \$10 fee for students filing paper appli-

cations. But the ministry says it wouldn't be practical to do so.

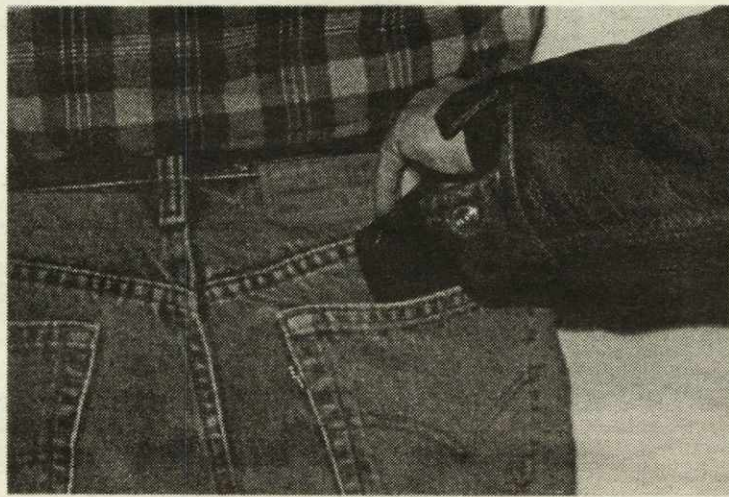
"There's so many thousands of different individual fees in government that it would cost a lot to administer, to put back into its file," said Gauvin, adding the money earns interest in a general account and is used for various government expenditures.

Students who wish to avoid user charges are asked to file applications and check their status via the Internet.

After the release of the report, Johnson said students could use a 1-800 telephone line instead of the 1-900 line which charges them a \$2 fee. However, he later retracted his statement when the 1-800 number turned out to be out of service.

The toll free line was disconnected in December 1996 and replaced with the 24-hour service line.

Ontario is the only province to charge students these types of user fees.



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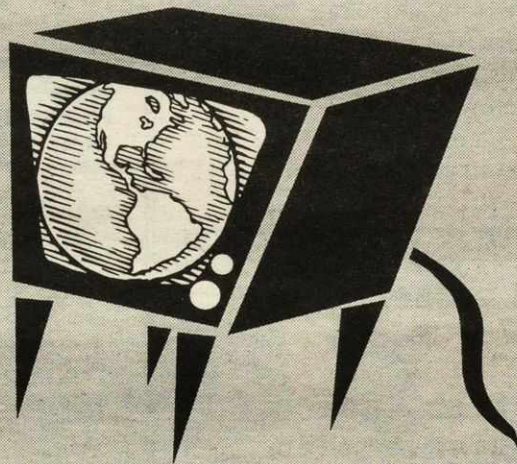
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