

Blueprint for action: a solution to underfunding?



by Kenneth Turriff

Nobody can disagree. Ontario's universities are facing a serious underfunding crisis. The symptoms range from outdated equipment in our science and engineering labs to overcrowded classrooms and lecture halls.

A forum on a controversial proposal, called the Blueprint for Action, was recently held at York's Glendon College.

Rod Fraser, a professor at Queen's University and author of the document, was the feature speaker at the event, organized by the York Student Federation and the Glendon College Students Union. Professor Fraser believes his plan offers an innovative approach to improving funding and the quality of education at Ontario universities.

The Blueprint calls for a partnership between students, the government, universities, and the private sector.

Students: Students entering university or switching to a new programme would see a rise in tuition fees (not including inflationary raises) of \$125 per year, for five years, to a maximum of \$625. This means that students entering into their first year of university or into a graduate programme, for example, in the first year of the plan, would pay a \$125 more than students did the year before. Those entering in year two would pay \$250 more; year three, \$375; year four, \$500. By the fifth year students would have seen an increase of \$625 plus inflationary increases.

Government: The provincial government would be expected to contribute additional funding at a ratio of 3:1 to student contributions. This would require that the government pay out \$325 per Full-Time Equivalent student per year, not including inflationary increases. This would total \$1,875 over five years. None of the invited representatives from the provincial Liberal government came to the forum to present their viewpoints.

Universities: Universities would assume greater responsibility for student assistance and accessibility. Each institution would be left to decide for itself the extent to which it would supplement OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Plan) and expand support for bursary programmes and student services.

Private Sector: The private sector would be encouraged to contribute to university funding by either matching or exceeding the rate of increase by the contributions of students and government.

As expected, people are divided over whether or not to accept the Blueprint.

CYSF president Peter Donato, who supports the Blueprint in principle, told *Excalibur*, "It's better to proceed with an idea than to say no without any ideas behind us."

"We're for action, and this is a start," Peter Merrick, CYSF vice-president (external) said. "It's easy to cut something up."

Donato said that a CYSF committee has been examining the Blueprint and its effect on students in detail. He said the council will soon vote to establish its official stand on the issue.

Access to universities for students from low to middle income and disadvantaged families appears to be one of the largest concerns about the proposal.

"The issue about having a better funded system," Fraser told *Excalibur*, "means that universities have more resources. Coming with that is usually more facilities, more professors, more places for students. I really believe that if the Blueprint were accepted and introduced, that you'd find that there would be a higher participation rate in Ontario's universities."

York University professor, Ellen Baar, doesn't share Fraser's optimism. "I don't think that many of our students would be unable to manage a \$125 increase," she said. "That in itself shouldn't necessarily be detrimental to access. But if you talk about the consequences over a five year period... the question arises whether that total sum will constitute an obstacle to accessibility. You're really talking about a \$625 increase, and you have your inflationary increases on top of that."

The use of OSAP as an instrument to close the accessibility gap is also disputed.

Fraser suggests OSAP be changed to include a Contingent Loan Repayment Scheme. He said the scheme "is one in which you pay back (the student loan) if you earn more than a certain income once you graduate. I think the likelihood is, that would be a better way to deal with students whose parents determine that they are either not prepared or unable to help (with education costs)." Fraser also suggested that student assistance be decentralized, with the surplus being distributed to the individual universities instead.

Again, Baar doesn't share this positive outlook where OSAP is concerned. "OSAP works very ineffectively for many kinds of students," she said. "There are many students under the existing OSAP system who really do need financial assistance and do not get it. If in fact you are going to rely on OSAP as a mechanism for insuring access, one of the questions becomes: are all students prepared to take loans?" Baar explained that many students come from families where taking loans is not seen as financially responsible behaviour.

Donato also sees problems with OSAP. "I think that before more money is given to OSAP, it should be reviewed and examined, because a lot of people abuse the system. Therefore students that really need OSAP, get turned away."

With reference to university contributions, as outlined in the proposal, Baar indicated that there exists great inequalities among universities in their abilities to raise funds. She said that Ontario's older universities, including Queen's, have a broader financial base, including more committed alumni, which can provide greater access to funding for students. She added that this is not the case where new Ontario universities like York is concerned. She further said that the little money spent on bursaries at York is proof of this.

Also in question is whether the government and private sectors can be relied upon to keep their ends of the partnership.

Fraser said that, where the private sector is concerned, it's a simple matter of offering tax incentives.

But Baar argued that the tax credit system, under the recent tax reforms, has reduced the incentive for firms to donate funds.

Richard Harris, MPP and former New Democrat colleges and universities critic, told *Excalibur*, "The business sector has just not ever been a major source of funding for Ontario universities." He said the private sector only contributes seven out of every \$100, and he didn't anticipate any significant increase now.

Donato thinks the private sector would pull through. "There's no guarantee that the government will match student contributions," he said. "The private sector has more potential. York is showing that it can work with the private sector. The private sector is there; it just has to be pursued," he added, referring to the York land sale to Bramalea Limited.

Baar also anticipates problems with the government in matching student contributions. "... any government can't bind future governments and therefore it can't negotiate increases which some future government would be required to impose... I don't think it's ironclad in any sense. I think that's been lost sight of in the design of the programme."

The Blueprint for Action is certainly, on the part of Fraser, a brave initiative, but it is only the first proposal to be given real consideration. Accessibility under the proposal is still too questionable and there are too few guarantees that students won't end up with the short end of the stick. Something has to be done to improve the university underfunding crisis. Whether the Blueprint is the best plan is yet to be seen.