

Interview:

Miriam Edelson on the new student aid plan



Harry Parrott, minister of colleges and universities

Is Parrott really looking at the question of equal opportunity in education?

What is student aid and what should it be?

In the minds of some, student aid, the loans and grants many of us receive from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) — amounts to easily-come-by handouts to do-nothing lazy students, who have a good time at the taxpayer's expense.

To others, the student assistance plan we have now, is the first step toward making post-secondary education accessible to all sectors of our society, rich and poor. OSAP, then, is viewed as a partial step towards removing financial barriers to education.

The Interim Committee on Financial Assistance for Students, a committee of the provincial government at Queen's Park, apparently agrees with the latter interpretation. When it came down with its report earlier this year, it put forward two things as the most important objectives that a revamped student assistance program should aim for. They were the promotion of accessibility to post-secondary education "so that no individual will be prevented from undertaking or pursuing such studies for financial reasons", and the promotion of equality of opportunity, "by contributing to the reduction of exceptional barriers to post-secondary education and training."

Well, Harry Parrott, minister of colleges and universities has come down with his proposals for a revamped student aid program, and to many who have read them, they seem somewhat at odds with the stated objectives of the committee.

Excalibur's Paul Kellogg interviewed Miriam Edelson, current chairperson of the Ontario Federation of Students (OFS), to discover her views of Parrott's statement. OFS represents over 140,000 university and college students in Ontario, and has done extensive research over the years into the question of student aid.

By Paul Kellogg

EXCALIBUR - The Interim Committee on Financial Assistance for Students outlined two principal objectives when it brought down a report this summer on what it envisioned as improvements to the student aid plan in Ontario. These were to improve accessibility and to create greater equality of opportunity within Ontario post-secondary institutions. How, in your opinion, do the planned changes in student aid announced last week by Harry Parrott, ostensibly based on the Committee's report, actually reflect these two principal objectives?

EDELSON - I think there are a lot of problems with the announcement Dr. Parrott made. To backtrack for a second, I'd like to mention the first announcement (of Aug. 17) which he made. The criticism the Ontario Federation of Students had of that announcement was that he did not address at all the question of accessibility or equality of opportunity.

He stated a number of principles, and the second announcement is sort of a fleshing out of those

principles. And I have to admit that the kinds of things that Dr. Parrott seems to be suggesting, do not adequately deal with those particular questions which the interim committee has raised.

I should add that for OFS, the only kind of student aid scheme that is equitable is one that deals with these questions of accessibility and equality of opportunity: who's at university, and who's not.

EXCALIBUR - The announcement begins with the statement that the OSAP program will be modified to distribute non-repayable grants more fairly among needy post-secondary students. How much more fairly does it seem that these grants are going to be distributed? What is the substance of what he is saying?

EDELSON - The problem with this particular statement is very similar to ones we encounter all the way through the announcement, and that is one of vagueness. The minister does not seem to make any attempt to define what, in fact, a needy student is.

OFS then looks back at the recommendations made by the interim committee to try and understand what he means by needy students. The problem with those proposals were that they disqualified a large percentage of the population from receiving those grants, because of the definition of needy was so restrictive. It came out that only about two per cent of the population would be eligible for grants under that type of a program.

Now if this is what is being offered in the current proposal, there's a large question here - what exactly is the cut-off point going to be?

EXCALIBUR - Another change the minister announced in his statement is that whereas presently, the first \$1,000 of a grant-loan package is mandatorily a Canada Student Loan, that criteria is now being lifted. Won't that change the grant-loan ratio of the average student award in favour of grants?

EDELSON - It depends where the cutoff point is. Dr. Parrott, in his announcement, has said that needy students would be eligible for grants first; and OFS sees this as a victory of sorts in that Dr. Parrott has accepted the argument that we have been making for years, which is that loans are a major disincentive to lower income people. He's doing that implicitly by saying there would be grants for those people first.

But the problem is that if the cutoff is at that very low point which the OLANG report suggests (which, as we pointed out, made only two per cent of the population eligible for an all-grant award), what we have in effect is two programs wherein the most needy students would be eligible for grants, but that the vast majority of students would be eligible for loans. For the vast majority of students, the new program wouldn't be all that much changed, and the possibility exists that they wouldn't be getting any grants at all.

EXCALIBUR - The part of the announcement that received the most publicity stated that students would be eligible for what are now being called Ontario Study Grants of only eight non-renewable periods of ten to nineteen weeks each, which means that most students will be eligible to apply for grant assistance for only four years. There's been a question as to what kind of impact this will have upon graduate studies.

EDELSON - As far as graduate students, what it means is that if a student, as an undergraduate, has had to use the Ontario Student Assistance Program for their four years before being eligible for a grad program, then they are not going to be able to receive grants later. What this leads to is a decrease in the accessibility to a graduate education, and also professional schools, for students of lower income brackets. Those students are

not going to be able to attend graduate school and professional school. This kind of trend concerns OFS in that the current mix in those graduate schools and professional schools, even more so than in colleges and universities, is one where the lower income groups are under-represented.

EXCALIBUR - Is there any indication as to how many students currently in graduate studies on grants are going to be affected next year, such that they will not be able to get any grants?

EDELSON - It's vague as to what will happen next year. As yet we don't know if there is any provision being made for students already in the program. But if we apply the program that Dr. Parrott is suggesting, almost 20 per cent of the students now receiving grants would be affected. That's about 7200 students.

EXCALIBUR - I understand also from the announcement that part-time students' eligibility periods will be defined in the same way as full time students.

'If the corporations were paying their share of the taxes there would be enough money for anyone who could benefit from education.'

EDELSON - That's right. That, I think, is a major problem that is going to be facing part-time students. A part-time student is lucky to do two courses in a year, over the eight-month period. Most perhaps do even less than that. But subject to the same criteria, they might finish a third or a half of their degree and then be cut off student assistance.

We should be aware that this is the first time that grants are being offered to part-time students, so in that sense it is a progressive measure. But the question that OFS has to pose is, "Is Dr. Parrott really



looking at the question of equal opportunity in post-secondary education?"

The answer is no.

EXCALIBUR - Another aspect of the program that will have an impact on the ability to collect student aid is the change in definition of a student's independent status. Whereas previously one way of qualifying for independent status was working two years in the work force, now it's three years. That's going to make it harder to collect grants. Does OFS have an alternative definition of independent status?

EDELSON - Yes. OFS would like to see independent status when applying for a loan or grant defined the same as independent status in anything else that we do - that is the age of eighteen. That's a fairly simple way of saying it.

EXCALIBUR - Wouldn't making eighteen the definition for independent status be - for parents who are now giving money to their kids to attend university - a disincentive to them to providing that money?

EDELSON - There would be ways of legislating around that. For example we've suggested to the ministry that parents who wish to contribute to their child's education could have a certain amount of tax credit for that kind of contribution. Now all these things require a lot of thought and a lot of working out of principles and application, but it's all very possible.

EXCALIBUR - There's one item of the report that will perhaps mean that some students will be able to receive OSAP when they previously weren't. That is, a change in how students' resources are calculated. As I understand it, no longer will a flat figure of say, \$500 be assumed as a student's contribution from the summer, but their real summer earnings will be looked at. Is that correct?

EDELSON - That's what the release that the ministry made suggests. At this point we don't know very much more about it than that. Back in July OFS met with some of the ministry's officials and discussed the possible ways a student's real resources could be assessed. At that time we received from Dr. Parrott an in principle agreement that we should get rid of summer savings.

By July students will know how much they have earned up to that point and should have some idea as to what they'll be earning for the next two months. So that you could make applications as of July 1, and if you had earned money then, you would project what your earnings would be. If you hadn't earned anything and didn't expect to, you would project in the same fashion. Then in September you would file again if there were any changes. You'd either appeal for more money or actually give some back if you had got a job.

There are a lot of details there to be worked out, and the minister's first response to it was positive. If that kind of thing is implemented, we're looking at a more equitable student aid program, in a sense.

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Is Parrott, perhaps, realizing the implications of his new student aid program, and covering his eyes in horror?

Danny Lam photos