

Federal Budget: Gets Mixed Reviews from Post-Secondary Community

By Adam GRACHNIK, Ottawa Bureau

OTTAWA (CUP) – Last week's federal budget, with its emphasis on health care and social spending, met with mixed reactions from the post-secondary community.

The introduction of a \$105 million Graduate Scholarship fund providing aid for 2,000 masters' students and 2,000 doctoral students, as well as tweaking to the Canada Student Loan Program (CSLP) to now include convention refugees, increasing In-study income from \$600 to \$1,700, allowing recipients to earn up to \$1,800 of merit based scholarships and making debt relief easier to access are all welcome changes.

The real problem we're struggling with is the reduction in core operating grants to universities and colleges," Catano explained. "As long as the federal government continues to ignore this reality, there just won't be enough funds to keep tuition fees down or to hire the faculty we desperately need."

However, Finance Minister John Manley announced that the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST), a transfer payment to the provinces for health, social programs and post-secondary education, would now become two payments, thus

creating a separate transfer solely for health care. While health care received billions of dollars in new money, the transfer for post-secondary education wasn't even mentioned.

"We were looking for increases in core funding and it didn't happen," said Victor Catano, president of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). "There's the opportunity for provinces to still play games. We wanted more accountability and transparency."

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"It's disappointing the government did not use this opportunity to create distinct funds for post-secondary education and social assistance," he added.

Ian Boyko, national chairperson for the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), said, "this budget is damage control. We're pretty disappointed there is no commitment to funding to post-secondary education."

"It's a very interesting development," said Boyko, referring to the changes with the CHST, whose current total is estimated at \$19.1 billion in cash transfer, with the majority earmarked for health care. "We're cautiously optimistic – it's a step in the right direction."

"Ideally post-secondary education has its own fund [but this] is just work for us over the next couple of years," he added.

"We're pretty happy, we see progress being made," said Erin Stevenson, communications officer for the Canadian Alliance of Students Associations (CASA). "A lot of people were expecting more. We're pleased we can work with it."

She was apprehensive that the government didn't do anything for core funding, which she explained, "could be a big concern for us."

The Association of University and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), were "very pleased with the budget," but said they weren't surprised that there was little money for core funding.

"The emphasis from provinces

has been asking for health money. It doesn't mean in future there won't be increases for post-secondary education," said Robert Giroux, president of the AUCC. "I look at it positively. It's more targeted and easier to ensure that it goes towards post-secondary education," he added, about the government splitting up the CHST.

"They're investing in the wrong places," added Catano. "Until we have separate funding envelopes for all three programs, the Canadian public won't have any accountability over how federal dollars are being spent."

"The emphasis from provinces has been asking for health money. It doesn't mean in future there won't be increases for post-secondary education," said Robert Giroux, president of the AUCC.

Other new initiatives announced by the finance minister include more money for research. The budgets of the

three granting councils will be increased by a further \$125 million per year, or about 10 per cent, beginning in 2003-04. This budget will also provide \$225 million per year through the granting councils beginning in 2003-04 to help fund the indirect costs associated with federally supported research at universities, colleges and research hospitals.

The biggest winner seems to be the Canada Foundation for Innovation, established in 1997 to support the modernization of research infrastructure at Canadian institutions, will receive an additional \$500 million for health research.

"For the same amount of money, we could immediately cut tuition fees by nearly 15 per cent across the board, or we could hire up to 3,000 full-time professors," Catano said.

A one-time \$100 million contribution for the creation of the Canadian Learning Institute, with a mandate to "broaden and deepen data and information on education and learning," was also announced by the Liberal government.

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