

Budget 2010: Why don't you get a job?

By Carson Jerema

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Budget puts grads to work. Nothing for current students

Finance Minister Jim Flaherty's budget, tabled Thursday afternoon, offered little in the way of new spending announcements, or policy revisions, for students. Instead, the 2010 budget makes modest expansions to existing programs that are largely aimed at putting university and college graduates to work, as well as at encouraging low income students to pursue a post-secondary education. Student groups say not enough is being done to help existing students.

The budget commits \$108 million over three years "to assist young people looking to gain skills and experience." This includes a one-year \$30 million boost to the Career Focus component of the Youth Employment Strategy, which funds businesses and other organizations to provide internships to recent graduates. "This will allow more young Canadians to get that vital first job in their field of study," the budget reads.

An additional \$30 million increase is provided for the Skills Link portion of the Youth Employment Strategy. According to the government, Skills Link targets young people who are "at risk," and others in need, including people with disabilities, single parents, Aboriginals, recent immigrants and those who have dropped out of high school. Skills Link is aimed at giving youth "the broad range of skills, knowledge and work experience they need to participate and succeed in the job market."

The Pathway to Education Canada program will see an extra \$20 million aimed at encouraging students from lower income families to pursue post-secondary education. Finally, minister Flaherty's budget promises \$30 million to create "partnerships" with First Nations "to improve the governance framework and clarify accountability for First Nations elementary and secondary education."

In response to Thursday's budget, Canada's two largest student groups expressed disappointment.

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) praised the government's investment in Pathway to Education Canada, which is targeted at increasing university participation rates. However, CASA says not enough has been done to help students who are already attending Canada's post-secondary institutions. "Unfortunately the federal government did not recognize the needs of students that are currently facing a cash and credit crunch due to last year's recession," said Arati Sharma, CASA's national director.

Similarly, the Canadian Federation of Students also denounced the budget as inadequate. "With a record number of Canadians enrolled in college or university, this budget does nothing to help students and their families afford an education," said CFS national chairperson Katherine Giroux-Bougard.

The lack of significant funding announcements is consistent with yesterday's Speech from the Throne, in which students were barely mentioned. In fact, the only reference to students came when the Conservative government pledged to work with Aboriginal communities and province's to "reform and strengthen education, and to support student success and provide greater hope and opportunity."

The only other hint the government offered about today's spending, echoed in the budget, was that there were no major cuts planned. "Balancing the nation's books will not come [...] by cutting transfer payments for health care and education," governor general Michaëlle Jean read, going on to explain later in the speech that restraining program spending overall would protect growth in transfers to pensions, education and health.

With files from Erin Millar