

\$25-billion ÷ 20 years

Liberal postsecondary platform is “greatest investment in recent history,” student groups say

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Student groups are buzzing in the wake of last Wednesday’s release of the Liberal party’s new postsecondary education platform, which over the next 20 years will put \$25-billion in the hands of students facing rising debt and tuition.

Zach Churchill, National Director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA), said the platform addressed backlogged student demands.

“This represents the greatest investment in recent history, and probably in the history of Canada,” he said. “It reflected a lot of the things that CASA has been pushing for the past few years.”

The Liberal platform promises 200,000 need-based bursaries of up to \$3,500 per year, as well as 100,000 access grants of up to \$4,000 per year allocated to traditionally underrepresented minority groups, such as Aboriginal Canadians. These programs would replace the Canada Student Grants (CSG), set to commence for the 2009-2010 school year which will replace the expiring Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. The platform also adapts the targeted and need-based grants that were a large focus of the CSG.

Nova Scotia MP Michael Savage, the Liberal critic on postsecondary education issues, said past grant systems have not been sufficient for many students looking to pursue postsecondary studies.

“We need to make sure that students who are not able to get to postsecondary education, students who can’t afford it, are represented in the system,” said Savage. “We need to make sure that we have a more robust system of need-based grants.”

The Liberals also promised annual \$5,000 student loans available to all students regardless of income, lowered interest rates on student loans, and an extension of the interest-free grace period for loans. Savage noted that the current cutoff for financial assistance based on family income left students from middle-income brackets in a tricky situation where they remained ineligible for government assistance, yet also unable to fund their education themselves.

“Because of the high cost of postsecondary education, there are many families who aren’t poor by normal standards, but are still not able to afford a postsecondary education,” said Savage.

The platform also promises to scrap the non-refundable income tax credits for postsecondary education and directly grant students about \$1,000 a year, distributed quarterly with the GST rebates. These tax credits often come under fire since they are only redeemable once the students' salaries are high enough to be taxed, which few students achieve until after graduation.

In addition, the plan calls for increased support for university research through a number of federal grant programs to drive innovative research and development projects.

However, Alex Usher, the vice-president of research and the Canadian director for the Educational Policy Institute, a higher-education research organization, said in a Macleans article that the \$25-billion policy over a 20-year timeline was not focused and resembled a "grab bag" of ideas "plucked out headlines from a number of research reports."

Katherine Giroux-Bougard, National Chairperson for the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), also spoke against the general positive reaction.

"The only concern is that it doesn't address rising tuition fees," said Giroux-Bougard, explaining that rising costs outstripped the benefits of loans and grants.

Giroux-Bougard suggested that a federal transfer payment structure that funded provincial governments with grants earmarked specifically for postsecondary institutions could be more effective.

"[We want] something very similar to what's been done for health care," she said.

But according to Churchill, the federal government cannot establish tuition frameworks, which are regulated at the provincial level, and should focus on student grants and loans.

"The role that the federal government can play is in alleviating the burden for students."

Savage agreed, noting that equal access to grants would assist students in need.

"We can't control tuition, but we can make sure that there is equality of access across this nation," said Savage, adding that the pan-Canadian agreement pursued by CFS would be a desirable goal, but could not be expected in the foreseeable future.

But although generous, the Liberals' focus on postsecondary education does not come as a surprise.

"We expect good things from all of the parties," said Churchill. "We're faced with the reality in this country that if we don't invest in the education system now, there are going to be huge repercussions to the economy and the people."