

Grads face bleak market
By TYLER KULA
THE OBSERVER

March 27, 2009

Melia McLardy spent three years racking up \$30,000 of debt at Lambton College. As she graduates from the massage therapy program she's feeling anxious about the job market.

"It's kind of hard sometimes because you're wondering, 'Am I going to get a job? . . . (and) freaking out about money,'" she said.

Federal officials agree with some economic forecasts that suggest Canada's unemployment rate could reach 10 per cent in early 2010.

The average graduate owes more than \$24,000 in loans after four years of school, so many could default on repayment and have ruined credit ratings for years, said Zach Churchill, national director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations.

"This is a challenge. Students graduating this year are going to enter into a tough marketplace with the high potential that there are limited jobs out there for them."

Some students are weighing the benefits of staying in school longer, either to pursue supplementary degrees and certificates, or to improve their marks.

Lindsay Bueckart is graduating from Lambton College's child and youth worker program after four years. She has about \$27,000 of debt and is considering taking an additional year of school.

"It's very hard to find work here . . . for a child and youth worker, let alone with all the child and youth workers graduating and the past graduates," she said.

The alliance of student associations is meeting this week in Ottawa with MPs, senators and major political party leaders to appeal for more accessibility to loans.

The alliance is pushing to scrap a penalty fee for students who have defaulted on their loans and want to use the government Repayment Assistance Plan.

The alliance is also seeking money from the 2008 budget for students struggling with debt and to get rid of a 10-to-15 per cent premium importers place on the price of books coming into Canada.

Churchill said the Canada Student Grant program should focus on social factors, rather than income when providing support.

"This is a knowledge-based global marketplace that we're dealing with and we need to invest in students to make sure that they're going to school and they can graduate without large sums of debt," he said.

McLardy said most graduating students feel there isn't much that can help them face a struggling economy.

The only option is to concentrate on their studies and perform as best they can.

"Sometimes I know people can feel like 'Am I doing this for nothing? Am I doing it all in vain?'" she said.

"I don't think students really think about that until it's your graduating year. When you're in school, (school is) all you're thinking about."