

Tuition freeze gets warm reception

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National student and teacher associations would welcome a tuition freeze in New Brunswick, but only if the province backs it up with increased funding.

Today's provincial budget is expected to contain a \$12-million funding boost to enable a tuition freeze at New Brunswick's four public universities.

"It's a good policy and definitely a step forward," Graham Cox, a New Brunswick representative of the Canadian Federation of Students, said Monday. "Our tuition fees are the second highest in the country right now and basically we're the last province in the country to regulate tuition fees."

The federation, which represents more than 500,000 students, has long advocated for governments to freeze and reduce tuition to improve access to post-secondary education.

"(Freezes) definitely do work," said Cox. "Every time you increase tuition a little bit it basically slices off another huge chunk of low-income students going into post-secondary education."

Jim Turk, executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, agreed accessibility is a concern lower tuition fees can address.

"We have great concerns about how we make universities more accessible so it's the student's ability, not the wealth of his or her family, that determines who goes," said Turk, whose organization represents 55,000 staff members.

However, he said freezing tuition without additional public funding will only erode the quality of education.

"We want to make sure the money that would have been raised through tuition fees is being provided by the government, so you're not making students pay for less quality education," said Turk.

Zach Churchill, national director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, agreed.

"The biggest problem that happens with tuition freezes is that it's not accompanied by funding for those increases," he said.

Turk said the \$12 million, a six-per-cent increase, should offset a one-year freeze. But he added that it's unclear what the Liberal government's long-term plans are for post-secondary education in the province. Turk pointed out that the report of the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick created controversy and uncertainty. And there has been no definitive word from the expert working group the premier appointed to review it.

"It's a little bit hard to comment on this one piece when we don't know the bigger picture just yet," said Turk.

According to Statistics Canada, the province's students experienced the highest undergraduate tuition increases in the country this year, a 4.8-per-cent jump to an average of \$5,733.

Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island both moved to reduce tuition this year, while tuition remained frozen in Newfoundland and Labrador and Saskatchewan. Quebec has the country's lowest tuition after having a freeze in place for more than 10 years. British Columbia lifted a six-year tuition freeze in 2002-2003, after which there were three years of double-digit increases.

Churchill said a freeze is a good thing, but the province needs to do more.

"At least they recognize the plight of students in the province and the problems New Brunswick's high tuition is causing for students and families," said Churchill. "But a one-year freeze is not going to fix the problems in New Brunswick's post-secondary education system and it's not going to make education more accessible for students from low-income backgrounds."

CASA, which represents more than 200,000 students, advocates for targeted funding for potential students that aren't participating, such as aboriginals, rural and low-income students.