

Students concerned federal efforts to slay deficit could mean cuts to post-secondary education
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Timothy Cullen, second left, president of the UPEI Student Union, is flanked by Emma Cullen of Acadia University and Dan Moulton of the University of Western Ontario as federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty discusses his most recent budget. University students are worried efforts to balance the books could mean cuts to post-secondary education. Photo special to The Guardian

University students meeting in Ottawa this week say they don't want the federal government to balance its books on the backs of post-secondary education.

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations is holding a series of meetings in the nation's capital. Those meetings include face time with Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty and Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff.

Timothy Cullen, president of the UPEI Student Union, says students are concerned that efforts to slay the deficit could result in cuts to post-secondary education.

Cullen, in Ottawa for the meetings, said this is the association's first meeting with Flaherty.

"We understand, as an organization, the economic situation this country is in," Cullen said in an interview from Ottawa.

"We know, from the budget he just delivered, that the government is going to be facing some very tough choices going forward."

Hard decisions will have to be made to wrestle a monstrous federal deficit.

The budget forecasts a deficit of \$53.8 billion this year, down slightly from the most recent \$56-billion projection, and red ink totalling \$49.2 billion in 2010-11.

Flaherty has said deficits will plunge dramatically after that, falling to a modest \$1.8 billion budgetary shortfall in 2014-15.

Cullen said university students also want a dedicated transfer to the provinces for post-secondary education, reforms to the student loans programs, as well as improving the financial knowledge of Canadian students.

“(Flaherty) was very receptive to some of the things we were proposing,” said Cullen.

“The things that we are bringing forward today are pragmatic solutions, in many cases a lot of the things that we are asking for of government right now are revenue-neutral requests but they’ll be of big benefit to students.”

A dedicated transfer for post-secondary education, added Cullen, would provide more accountability on how the provinces spend money earmarked for colleges and universities.

“All we’re asking is that the federal government and the provinces come to some agreement on how the provinces are going to report on how much money they received and how they spent it,” he said.

“Certainly every Canadian should know where their tax dollars are going.”

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations is an alliance of student associations and student unions from across Canada.

Through this network of student governments, the association represents and promotes the interests of post-secondary students to federal and interprovincial levels of government.

Cullen said the Finance minister recognized their concerns about future cuts to post-secondary education.

“Certainly (Flaherty) did reaffirm his government’s commitment to post-secondary education and that was great. We appreciate that.”