

Grad exam security to affect students

By Sophie Leake (CUP)

A STORM IS BREWING BETWEEN TWO COMPANIES over the computerized version of the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), and threatens to thwart students wishing to get into graduate school.

Educational Testing Services (ETS), the company which provides the exam is suing Kaplan, a test-preparation company.

The conflict started when Kaplan tried to recreate the exam and succeeded. The ETS lawsuit alleges Kaplan's success was a violation of copyright and electronic communication laws. Kaplan compiled its own version of the exam after sending 10 employees to take the computer version. The employees were then asked to remember as many questions as they could. Kaplan found it could predict the questions with a 70 per cent accuracy rate.

Bill Osborne, a Kaplan representative, said Kaplan did this after hearing student concerns that the exam is easy to remember and pass on. Osborne said that the question pool from which the computer draws to create each version of the exam is too small. He said the company is concerned that someone may take advantage of the high level of repetition to sell 'computer GREs' to students.

"We launched our investigation so we could bring these concerns to ETS. We didn't share [the Kaplan version of] the exam with our students. Someone, though, is going to do it to profit and destroy the credibility of the GRE," Osborne said.

Jonathan Grayer, president and chief executive officer

of Kaplan, said, "The lawsuit is a frivolous attempt to prevent third-party evaluation and criticism of ETS's exams."

Grayer said: "ETS is trying to divert attention away from the security flaws by shooting the messenger. But suing us doesn't stop the fact that the test is easily compromised. The suit is a monumental waste of time."

He added that Kaplan went to ETS with its security concerns, and that the only copy of the GRE it compiled is in a Price-Waterhouse vault.

But some people defend the ETS lawsuit.

"A good analogy here would be protecting money in the bank," said Vicky Glazar, a representative of Sylvan Learning Centre in Tsawwassen, B.C., which administers the computer exam.

"ETS had security systems in place to protect its money in the bank. Kaplan was like a robber that went in with a bomb, exploded the bomb, and then went back to the bank to say, 'See, we told you your security wasn't good enough.' With the lawsuit, 'ETS is saying to the bank robber, 'You can't do that; it's illegal.'"

In the meantime, students seeking to enrol in graduate programs this year may face a logistical nightmare. Kaplan's Osborne alleges that ETS has severely curtailed the availability of the computerized GRE after his company brought its security concerns to ETS.

"The GRE was available five days a week, four weeks a month. Now it will only be available for three days in

February and three days in March. We're concerned that some students were counting on being able to take the test on the computers, and they won't be able to do it. Students need to be very active in pursuing [exam spaces]. There are going to be more students than spaces."

Osborne says that the computer-based GRE will only be available February 2, 3 and 4, and March 9, 11 and 13. The next date for the more traditional pencil-and-paper exam is April 1, too late to be included with graduate applications for next year.

Kathleen Casporwitz, another Sylvan Learning Centre representative, disagrees with Osborne's dismal predictions.

Casporwitz said, "I don't know where Osborne is getting that [cuts to availability] from. You have to remember, Kaplan and Associates don't even deliver computer-based testing."

She said: "We are not going to be turning people away. That's the nice thing about computer-based testing -- we can be very flexible."

Glazar said, "ETS is committed to offering the GRE at least one week per month until June. Then the security thing will be reassessed. There will be full availability by the end of the year."

The GRE has been available on computer in Canada since September 1993. Kaplan says ETS plans to eliminate the traditional exam format in favour of complete computerization by 1997.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Editor

X-Press

University of PEI

There has been a great deal of debate over the last few months on the subject of the federal government's proposals for change in post-secondary education funding. I have been listening with a keen interest not only from the vantage point of Minister of Human Resources Development Canada, but also as a former (and long-time) university professor, and I have heard a number of useful suggestions.

We have entered an era in which knowledge, skills, and education are the keys to security and prosperity. Students will need to launch their careers with an education that meets international standards, and they will need to keep upgrading throughout their careers. At the same time, people already in mid-career need to go back to school -- moving in and out of college, university and workplace courses, constantly upgrading knowledge and skills. Many post-secondary institutions themselves are likely to change dramatically as a response to the information age and new learning technologies.

While post-secondary education is more important than ever, the costs of getting an education have been rising for the past decade. Tuition fees, which it must be noted, are controlled solely by the provincial governments and the institutions, have outpaced inflation for the past decade. The federal government, which contributes 50% of the 16 billion annual cost of post-secondary education, cannot tell the provinces how to spend their post-secondary education dollars. Institutions should be considering all avenues for increasing efficiency and cutting cost, not just raising tuition fees.

The challenge then is clear: how can the federal government help provide long-term sustainable funding to colleges and universities and make post-secondary education more accessible? The discussion paper "Improving Social Security in Canada" outlines an option to create an expanded and more flexible program of student aid. It would include the following features:

- it would provide \$2 billion in loans each year to students, in addition to the \$1 billion in aid under the existing Canada Student Loans Program;

- students would also continue to be able to claim approximately 25 % of their tuition as a credit against federal and provincial income tax, or to transfer the credit to other family members;

- it would increase flexibility, as it would be available to all post-secondary students in recognized courses, not just limited to students passing a needs test;

- it would include a better system of grants for low income students and those with special needs (the federal government is currently working with the provinces to implement grants for persons with disabilities and for women in certain Ph.D programs);

and,

- loan repayment would be based upon earnings after graduation. This income contingent repayment (ICR) principle would guarantee that students wouldn't be burdened with loan payments they couldn't afford. Those who didn't get a job right away could wait to repay the loan. Those with jobs would have payments geared to their income.

Some have said this proposal would mean more borrowing by students. Yet, 70% of university students graduate without any debt, or owing less than \$5000. Consider the payback for this investment:

- the average wage in Canada is \$23,700, yet for university graduates it is \$34,900, a difference of \$11,200 more per year, or about half a million dollars more in lifetime earnings;

- the unemployment rate for university graduates is under six per cent versus a national rate of 9.6%.

All of society benefits when someone gets a university or college degree. Governments pay most of the cost. Right

now, students only pay about 12% of the total costs of post-secondary education while taxpayers pay the rest.

Putting more money in the hands of students gives them the buying power to insist on a wider variety of courses tied close to the job market. It could result in more cost-effective and efficient institutions.

It isn't true that this proposal would result in less money for post-secondary education -- on the contrary. What is true is that this proposal requires changing the way the federal government supports post-secondary education. Let me explain:

- the provinces are responsible for post-secondary education, but the federal government funds half of its \$16 billion annual cost;

- the federal government provides \$6 billion in tax and cash transfers to provincial governments under the Established Programs Financing (EPF) arrangements;

- it also provides direct funding for university research and student assistance;

- the value of the tax transfers will continue to grow with the economy, from nearly \$4 billion in 1996-97 to a projected \$6 billion by 2006; under the present federal/provincial agreement, the cash portion will decline correspondingly.

So we propose using the cash while it's still available and investing it in an enriched student assistance program. This way, we would make available \$2 billion per year in loans and grants to help students pay their portion of their education costs. The combination of growing federal tax transfers and this new loans program would mean \$10 billion more in resources available for post-secondary education in Canada over the ten-year period starting in 1996-97.

The federal government has brought forward some options for change. But we don't pretend to have all the answers. If you have other ideas, I want to hear from you. Call 1-800-735-3551 to get background information and a detailed supplementary paper outlining the federal government's proposal for post-secondary education. Let's work together to make the system better.

Sincerely,

Lloyd Axworthy

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