

Provincial Government unveils its new plan to provide aid to UPEI and its students

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On Friday, February 25th, the government of Prince Edward Island announced plans to spend \$2 million on post secondary education through three initiatives. These initiatives included a new interest relief plan, an Island Awards program, and a \$1 million investment in UPEI's future student center. Reaction varied towards these initiatives.

Student Union (SU) President John Desrosiers was happy commenting, "it shows that the government feels post secondary education is important. However, I was surprised by the timing of it. The Friday before spring break with nobody around, 3 days before the federal budget, and with a provincial election pending," Desrosiers said. SU VP Finance Stephen Lewis also expressed his general surprise.

"[There was] no advance warning. I got a call Thursday asking me to come in the next day for an

important announcement" Lewis said.

UPEI President Wade MacLauchlan added, "it is an indication that government is increasingly of the view that the University is an asset in the knowledge economy, and that university educated students are an important part of their

newly earned degree.

President MacLauchlan stated in a Guardian commentary that he expected this relief to cost "upwards of \$100,000 per year... it enables students to repay debt in a way that is flexible and sensitive to their earning capacity, with

"[The plan] is a step in the right direction when what we really needed was a leap" Studnet Union President John Desrosiers

long term vision for provincial development."

The first initiative is a new interest relief plan similar to the one the federal government uses with its Canada Student Loans program.

The plan states: "Island students with low or no income will be eligible to have the province pay the interest on their student loans during an agreed upon period of interest relief." The plan comes into effect on April 1 and should be beneficial to students who are testing the job market with their

the possibility of relief extending up to 60 months." This is important to graduating students especially when they see their monthly loan repayment equivalent to their rent.

The second initiative was an Island Students Awards program. It will give \$600 dollars to 3rd and 4th year UPEI students as well as 2nd year Holland College students. It is estimated the program will cost about \$400,000 per year and is targeted towards about 800 students. The money comes from the provinces share of the Millennium Scholarship

Fund which is \$1.3 million per year. The Millennium scholarship fund has been problematic for PEI because two thirds of that money goes to students studying off Island.

Education Minister Chester Gillan stated that, "we need to cover as many as possible" in reaction to why the money was targeted towards students close to graduation. He then added, "we have heard students when they say they can not afford 3% tuition raises. Without this initiative, tuition could have risen by 18%." But after raises of 89% in the last decade, the last statement rings a little hollow.

Desrosiers added, "it will help keep brain gain in university...\$600 is an upper level gift but first year students are important as well. It is unlikely this amount will be enough for some prospects to stay on the island." Which is one of the ar-

eas being targeted by this program.

Another is the fact that 9000 Islanders have University credits but have not finished their degree. Hopefully, this new initiative will act as an incentive to those people as well as those considering leaving their studies.

The final initiative was the \$1 million for the new Student Center. This unsolicited amount followed the provincial government practice of trying to match student contributions. In that area, \$1.1 million has been raised (primarily through student fees). Alumni and staff have contributed another \$200,000. Altogether the two and a quarter million dollars brings the student center, with an estimated price tag of \$3 million (3 years ago), a lot closer. But as Lewis points out, this is from an old estimate that did not include all of

the facilities and options being discussed to be included.

Desrosiers stated that, "it is nice to see the province taking initiative in seeing a need for the student center and following the lead of the student union and administration. Now it is time to get the general community on board as they will benefit from it too."

As Gillan pointed out, "there is nothing wrong with more money regardless of the timing." And he is right. All parties contacted were pleased that the province stepped forward and all see the utility in the initiatives. However, all that being said, Desrosier seemed to offer the best synopsis when he said, "it is step in the right direction when what we really needed was a leap."

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