

# UPEI plans to influence new E.I. policy

BY TODD MACLEAN

Colin Bassett, a first year UPEI student, held a press conference on February 3 to announce the release of a nationwide petition against the government's inconsistency in offering Employment Insurance (EI) to college students, while making it unavailable to full-time university students across Canada.

The Federal and Provincial governments are presently working on the Skills, Loans and Grants benefit, a plan which will soon replace the present EI system. Bassett wants to give university students a chance to voice their concerns before the new policies are put into place.

"I'm getting people from B.C. to Newfoundland together to fight this injustice," said Bassett. "If you qualify for EI, you should be entitled to it, regardless of what type of institution you are attending. It's just illogical that 2.9 percent of our salaries are devoted to something that we aren't even considered eligible for."

His petition is presently being faxed to roughly 50 universities across the country. Bassett said that even though many individual students have voiced their opinion on this subject before, their complaints have never had a great effect.

"University students have been battling this case for a number of years," he said. "Nothing much has ever resulted, but hopefully this time it will be different."

Cheryl Guymont, Records of Employment Specialist at the Charlottetown branch of the HRDC, said that it is relatively unclear as to why full-time university students are exempt from EI.

"I can't answer exactly why the program has always been geared toward college or high school," explained Guymont. "But our first man-

date is simply that the student must be actively seeking employment. After that, we think of how restrictive the school is. We don't say 'if you're in university, you're cut off,' but when you start getting to a point where you're paying tuition, the commitment gets higher."

She mentioned that college students likely were provided with these benefits because college programs generally exist on a short-term basis. These programs are designed to get students directly involved with technical jobs immediately after graduation.

But Guymont did admit that college tuitions are getting increasingly higher, and that the duration of such programs is becoming more extensive as well.

"Over the years, we've found that we should be looking at the issue more carefully," she said.

The new Skills, Loans and Grants benefit will be put in place within the next five months. This new plan will be looking more towards individuals who are in need of EI, rather than their course load.

"It would be convenient for the people working on it to not take into consideration the needs of university students," said Bassett. "But if the universities all voice their opinion on this, it should have enough weight to influence the final draft of the Skills, Loans and Grants benefit."

Bassett also said that at least some of the national budget's \$20.3 billion dollar surplus should be devoted to the cause of student poverty.

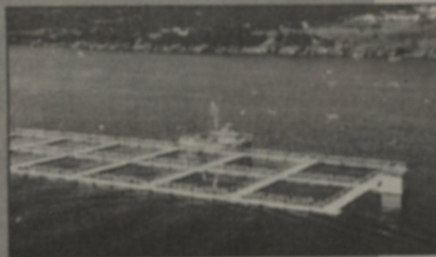
"A lot of it does rely on the national decision of where we want to put our money," said Guymont. "But any policy that comes into force must change when the labour market changes."

The petitions will be returned to UPEI by March 1, 1998, and will then be sent to Prime Minister Jean Chretien

in hopes of influencing the finalized Skills, Loans and Grants benefit.

*The petitions will be made available throughout the campus (i.e. the Pit, or the Breezeway) over the next couple of weeks.*

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