

THE BRUNSWICKAN NATIONAL NEWS

FROM UNIVERSITY NEWSROOMS ACROSS CANADA

Quebec leads Canada in commitment to higher education: report

by Mark Greenan,
Ottawa Bureau Chief

A recent report ranking provincial governments' commitment to post-secondary education has awarded high marks to Quebec but suggests Ontario and New Brunswick are falling behind the rest of the class.

The report, released by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, a left-wing think tank, ranks all 10 provinces in four areas: accessibility, equity, accountability and quality. This is the third year the organization has released the rankings, based on publicly available statistics, as a part of its publication Missing Pieces III: An alternative guide to post-secondary education.

Erika Shaker, one of the reports' authors, said the rankings are meant to show the context in which universities are in and can complement the well-known Maclean's rankings of individual universities.

"We compare the record of provincial governments based on their commitment to post-secondary education," she said. "You can't ignore the context that universities function in and to which they're responding."

"Obviously, we're looking at this in the context of federal funding cuts, but within that context we've seen provinces with very different priorities."

Shaker said all four areas are given equal weight in determining the final ranking.

"All four of these indicators have to work together to achieve the kind of post-secondary education system we want," she said.

Quebec earned the top spot, up from second place last year, based on top rankings in the quality, accountability and accessibility categories. British Columbia was ranked second, down from first last year. The authors warn, however, that with recent actions by B.C.'s Gordon Campbell government, including the deregulation of tuition

fees, the province will likely fall further in years to come.

A spokesperson for the Quebec government said its commitment to a tuition freeze and a generous loans and grants program was validated by the report.

"We are very proud of Quebec's performance compared to the rest of Canada," said Francois Lefebvre, communications officer for the provincial Ministry of Education, adding that the province intends to continue its tuition-freeze.

However, Shaker said Quebec, or any other province, should not rest on their laurels.

"All provinces really need to improve in terms of their commitment to post-secondary education," she said.

Shaker added that Quebec needs to reevaluate the role the private sector plays on campuses, noting that the province ranks second in terms of percentage of university operating funds coming from private sources, a

key component of the accountability ranking.

"Students and faculty are increasingly concerned about the role corporations are playing in research on campus," she said, referring to recent cases involving David Healy and Nancy Olivieri.

Ontario ranked last in the overall ranking for the second consecutive year and in the quality and accountability categories. New Brunswick fell sharply to ninth in the rankings, from sixth place the year previous.

However, the Ontario government said the report does not reflect the quality of education in the province, noting that Ontario universities have consistently placed near the top in the Maclean's rankings.

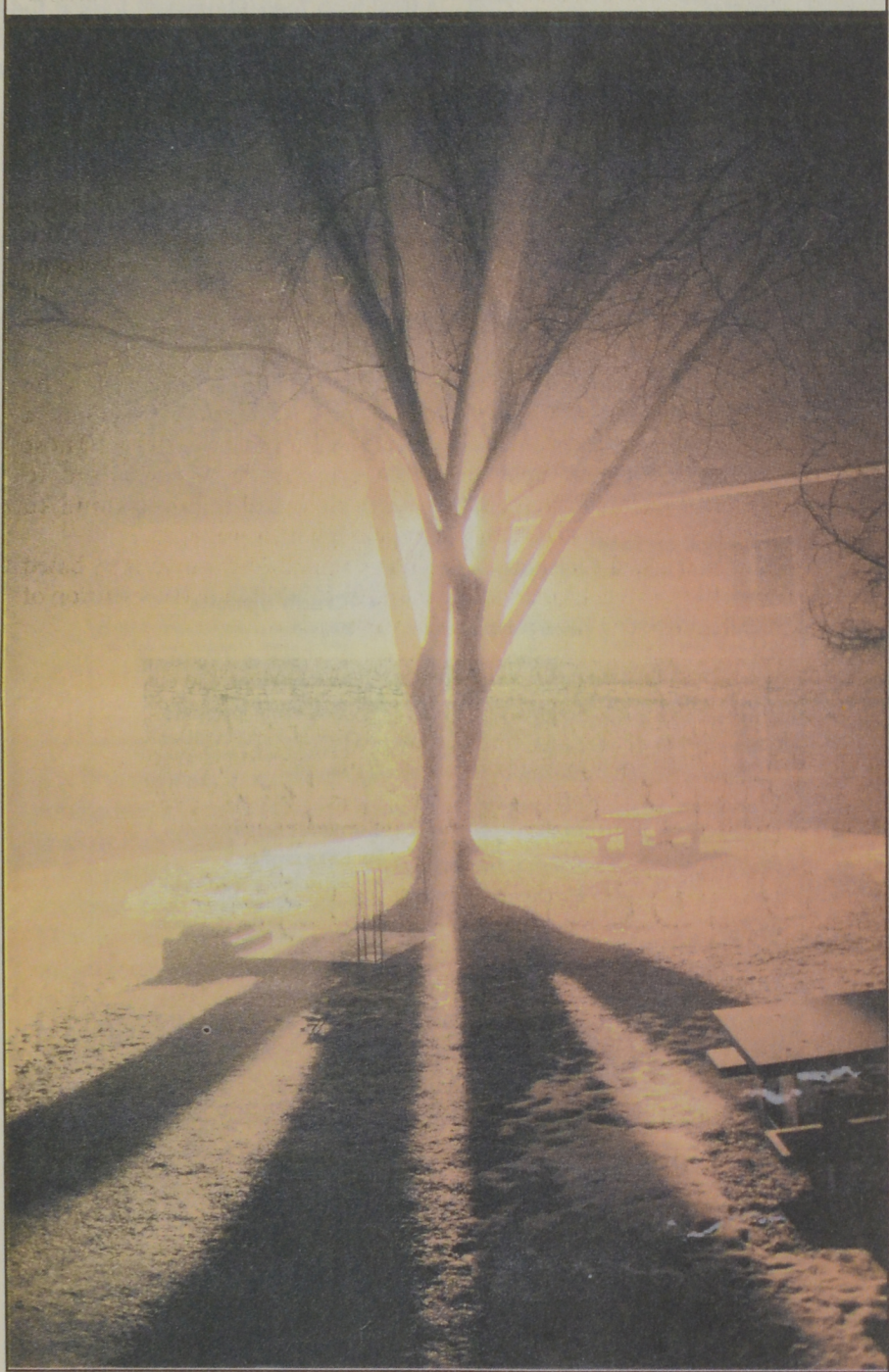
"We feel that the study has a very narrow focus and really doesn't show the support that universities in Ontario have," said Bruce Skeaff, spokesperson for Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

Skeaff noted that Ontario universities rank third in the country in terms of total operating income per student, but cautioned that financial resources do not necessarily mean quality. Also, he said that while the government feels tuition fees are "manageable," the province has limited the amount that universities can raise tuition by for the five years in most programs.

Shaker said the rankings appear to show that political will is the largest determinant of a province's success in supporting post-secondary education, noting that the country's most populous province is at the bottom, while many smaller provinces, such as Newfoundland, which recently introduced a tuition rollback for university students, have moved up in the rankings.

"The rankings have nothing to do with the relative wealth of a province, but with a recognition that post-secondary education is important," she said.

The Hearth



Mark McGinnis/The Brunswickan

Trees are poems that earth writes upon the sky,
We fell them down and turn them into paper,
That we may record our emptiness.
-- Kahlil Gibran

If trees could scream, would we be so cavalier about cutting them down? We
might, if they screamed all the time, for no good reason.
-- Jack Handey

For Ryan Sherwood, who gave me my first camera.

Newfoundland gets needs-based grants

by David Skinner,
The Muse

Newfoundland is making big changes to its student loan program.

Last week, Post-Secondary Education Minister Sandra Kelly announced several changes to the student aid system in Newfoundland and Labrador. The new measures, she says, are aimed at reducing student debt and making post-secondary education more affordable.

The changes will replace the current loan remissions program. Under this, the province forgives a portion of a graduate's loan debt, if they meet certain conditions.

"Many students felt the former loan remissions program was restrictive in terms of who qualified," said Kelly. "The new program will benefit more students, will be easier to access, and will be automatic."

The new system is the result of committee talks between the province, students and post-secondary institutions. Beside financial changes, it will also introduce more government control over the loan process.

For starters, if a student receiving a loan wants to change their academic program after five semesters, they will have to go through an evaluation. A career finance council will consult with the student to determine whether or not the changes represent academic progression, said Kelly.

"Students need to be aware of the debt they incur when they switch programs," she said. "This new requirement is designed to get students through their program and keep borrowing at a minimum."

If the new program choice has good prospects for the labour market and does not leave the applicant with an unmanageable amount of debt, then it will be approved and student loans will continue.

If, however, a student's new program choice is not marketable or a good financial move, then they will not be able to get a loan for it.

"What we're attempting to do here is not say no to students," said Kelly. "What we're asking them to do is sit down with us, and ask them to look at what information we have available to get career counselling before they make a final decision."

Students will be able to appeal any decisions, said Kelly. The council will also be open to special exceptions, though the criteria for those has not been totally determined yet.

According to Liam Walsh, provincial chair of the Canadian Federation of Students, this process could cause difficulties.

"I think we could run into problem with... students trying to go after careers that aren't economically as lucrative, however it's what they would like to see and what they want to do with their lives," he said.

"We don't want a cookie cutter mentality at our universities or our colleges. We want people to take education and embody it, and do what they want to do in their lives."

Another major change is the eligibility requirements for a loan. Students will now have to take four courses instead of the current three to apply.

"A committee report revealed that an increasing number of students were taking longer than normal to complete their program because they were doing a reduced course load," said Kelly.

New debt-reduction grants have also been introduced. They will allow students to receive up to the full amount of their loan in a non-repayable sum.

According to Kelly, there is no application process for this benefit. Students who meet the necessary requirements will be contacted directly. Other grants are being offered to students enrolled in early childhood education programs.

There are also new income regulations. Currently, students have to contribute 80 per cent of their study period income towards paying their loans. This will be cut down to 50 per cent.

The province will also offer 30 months of interest relief, up from 18. Added to this is another optional 24 months for students with financial difficulties.

Overall, Walsh is pleased with the program. "I think they did hear us on many occasions, and I think this is a pay-off today for the Canadian Federation of Students," he said. "Our lobbying has actually worked in this province."

"We've been calling for the scrapping of the loan remission program for many years. Finally [government has] done that, they've reworked the money, and added more money to get back to a needs-based grants program."

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Snake River, Wyoming, 2002

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