

Federal budget grants some PSE wishes

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OTTAWA (CUP) – The Canadian post-secondary community was promised billions in new spending last week by a federal government desperate to please.

Finance minister Jim Flaherty presented the 2009 Canadian federal budget last Tuesday in Parliament.

The government is attempting to spend its way out of the recession by investing in projects and betting these investments will pay off in a recovered economy years down the road.

The budget promises funding for a number of areas, including tax relief, business and industry investments, skills training, housing construction, municipalities, environmental sustainability, infrastructure, and more.

“Our government will spend what is necessary to stimulate our economy, and we will invest what is necessary to protect our future prosperity,” said Flaherty in a speech to the House of Commons last week.

All this spending means the government will go into deep deficits for at least the next four years.

If all budget projects are implemented as proposed, the government expects a federal deficit of \$33.7 billion for the upcoming

year (2009-10).

The country will then endure a \$29.8 billion deficit in 2010-11, followed by a \$13 billion deficit in 2011-12, and a \$7.3 billion deficit in 2012-13.

The government does not expect to reach a federal budget surplus again until 2014.

The budget has several elements in it that directly impact students and post-secondary education in Canada.

Chief among these is \$2 billion budgeted towards “deferred maintenance and repair projects” at post-secondary institutions.

According to the budget, 70 per cent of these funds will be directed towards universities, and 30 per cent towards colleges. The funds will be managed by Industry Canada and “based on project merit and readiness.”

The funds are also only intended to be matching, as they can only pay for up to half of project costs.

As well, the budget provides Public Works and Government Services Canada with \$250 million over two years to “undertake an accelerated investment program to address deferred maintenance at federal laboratories.”

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations had been lobbying the government for investment in accumulated deferred maintenance in post-secondary institutions.

In a Jan. 6 pre-budget letter, CASA called for \$1.5 billion to be invested in the federal budget towards accumulated deferred maintenance.

Last week in Parliament, CASA National Director Zach Churchill called that a “win.”

“We were the only national group pushing for infrastructure funding for universities,” he said. “We’re encouraged that the federal government is committed to infrastructure spending for post-secondary education.”

Churchill, however, was less impressed with the overall commitment to post-secondary funding.

“What this budget was missing was targeted funding for students and families who are suffering the most from the economic downturn,” he said.

Students affected by job layoffs, pay freezes, and drops in investments had little recourse in this budget, he says.

As well, “there was not an influx of funding to universities in provinces that deal with the funding gap,” Churchill said.

“We’re impressed with the infrastructure spending, [but] we’re curious to see how this pans out as far as how the implementation goes.”

The Canadian Federation of Students also saw some of their lobbying requests considered.

For example, during pre-budget consultations, the CFS lobbied for the doubling of the Canada Summer Jobs program budget.

The 2009 budget promises a Youth Employment Strategy that will invest a two-year targeted funding of \$20-million to the Canada Summer Jobs program.

Dave Molenhuis, CFS national treasurer, acknowledged the gain.

“That change is going to help small businesses create positions for students,” he said.

But Molenhuis tempered his overall response, calling the budget “very underwhelming in terms of student aid.”

“It doesn’t address generally what students are looking for,” he said.

“We’ve been asking for enveloped transfers for a number of years, and again we’ve seen a failure, a dedication to short-sightedness, to not address that issue, and that’s very problematic for students.”

Molenhuis pointed to promises by the Barack Obama administration in the United States as an example of where Canada’s budget could have derived inspiration.

“Where we were able to make gains, I think they were relevant to the economy, the frustrations that students are feeling right now . . . but the central issue remains out-of-control tuition fees,” Molenhuis said.

Other post-secondary elements in the budget include the Canada Foundation for Innovation, which will receive \$150 million in 2009-10

to aid their Leading Edge and New Initiatives Funds Competition.

The Foundation will also receive another \$600 million for “future activities” such as a launch of “one or more new competitions” by December 2010.

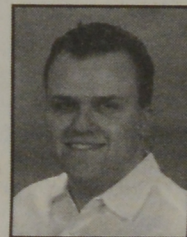
As well, the Institute for Quantum Computing at the University of Waterloo will receive \$50 million towards the “construction and establishment of a new world-class research facility.”

The Canada Health Infoway will also receive \$500 million “to support the goal of having 50 per cent of Canadians with an electronic health record by 2010.”

The budget also allocates money for several specific subareas of the knowledge economy. For example, \$87 million is budgeted over the next two years to “maintain or upgrade key Arctic research facilities.”

As well, \$225 million is budgeted over three years to Industry Canada to “develop and implement a strategy on extending broadband coverage to all currently unserved communities beginning in 2009-10.”

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