

Tuition hikes are wrong way to close university funding gap

Transferring load to students amounts to the privatization of higher education

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University funding is a difficult and complex issue. At the best of times, it must be dealt with thoughtfully, intelligently, rationally and with care and sensitivity.

These are not the best of times. They may be the worst of times. Universities with their capacity to train the next generation of knowledge workers while relieving unemployment have a vital role in both the short-term and long-term health of our economy.

The decisions that are made will affect not just students and their families but Ontario as well.

We cannot roll the dice with our higher education system. It has to be effective and affordable and deliver the quality of education that will keep Ontario knowledge workers at the cutting edge.

Degree mills won't do that, which is what we could be looking at if government doesn't step up to the plate. University financing has to be a provincial and national priority.

A report two weeks ago recommended a tuition hike of 25 per cent to solve the university revenue crunch, saying increased student aid will address the needs of moderate income students. This is an argument that has been disproved by various studies.

Moreover, alarmingly, tuition already accounts for 44 per cent of university revenue in Ontario, up from 21 per cent less than 20 years ago.



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In the meantime, government funding of university revenue has fallen from 79 per cent to 56 per cent in the same period.

This is privatization by stealth. Our public system of university education, long considered one of the most accessible in the world, is en route to becoming privately funded, which inevitably will lead to exclusion of some groups of potential students — such as the less affluent — and the skewing of academic priorities as students pick courses of study that will produce a high income so they can pay off their student debt.

This privatization policy is al-

ready having a negative impact on the quality of education the province is delivering.

Student satisfaction scores show that interaction between student and faculty is the key indicator for success. So how is Ontario doing?

Our student-faculty ratio is 27 to one, while universities funded by the American states Ontario competes with have a 16 to one ratio — and this is before the Obama stimulus package rolls out. These U.S. states, confronted with pressures as bad or even worse than Ontario, have, astutely, made higher education a priority for their population.

The Obama stimulus package contains billions for higher education, which will allow our competitor jurisdictions to hire more faculty, build new laboratories, fund high-level research and admit talented students from all income groups.

In the meantime, without a change in direction, Ontario's university facilities will remain increasingly crowded, rundown and out of date.

Without more public funding, more than half of the new faculty hired will remain low-paid contract instructors whose dedication to their students is undercut by their short-term affiliation with a university, their constantly having to look for their next job, and their not being able to do the research necessary to stay ahead in their field.

And if Queen's Park and Ottawa fail to increase their investment in the high-level basic research that only universities perform, our economic prospects dim.

Universities across the province are dealing with hard times. We hear almost daily about hiring freezes, fewer courses being offered, fewer resources for labs and libraries.

While we are told that this is because of the market-driven plunge in endowment funds, the truth is that endowment funds provide less than 1 per cent of most university operating budgets. What the universities are really dealing with is massive and ongoing government underfunding.

Privatization is not the answer. It has already cost us too much. And the future costs of such a policy will soar as Ontario struggles to regain its economic sea legs.

A renewed public and government commitment to higher education is what is needed.