

Post-secondary overpriced, polls show

SURVEYS SUGGEST HIGH TUITION KEEPS N.S. YOUTH FROM HIGHER EDUCATION

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One-third of people polled in a recent survey say they or someone they know didn't attend college or university to avoid student debt, Chris Ferns says.

The president of the Association of Nova Scotia University Teachers and professor of English at Mount Saint Vincent University spoke at a press conference at Province House on Tuesday.

The Nova Scotia Post-Secondary Education Coalition held the conference to present the findings of the latest poll they commissioned, "What the Public Thinks." The coalition, which represents teachers, students and staff at post-secondary institutions across the province, says ever-increasing tuition costs are harming the province's economy.

Eighty-eight per cent of Nova Scotians say tuition fees are too high, reveals the poll conducted by Ottawa-based Opinion Search Research over a week in December.

It also revealed more than two-thirds of respondents believed

high tuition prevents people qualified to go to university or college from going.

More than half of respondents were concerned people would have to leave the province in search of higher wages in order to pay off their student debt.

"That's one of the reasons my daughter is currently in Alberta," said Ferns.

This is the fourth poll conducted by the coalition since 2007. Ferns says it confirms the existence of a continued level of public support and concern for post-secondary education.

He says during the last provincial election campaign, post-secondary education was not a significant issue on any of the three major parties' platforms.

The new poll reveals that two-thirds of respondents are willing to pay more in taxes if it would make university education more affordable.

Since the late 1970s, the level of government funding for post-secondary education has gone down from 80 per cent of university funding to less than half.

According to Anna Dubinski,

president of the student union at the University of King's College, high tuition leads to high debt — "a crushing \$35,000 on average, per student."

She pointed to the one-third of Nova Scotians who said high prices precluded them from attending university.

"Who can blame them, when education means taking on a mortgage-sized debt with no guarantee of a payoff? They're at the mercy of the job market."

While a date has yet to be set, the coalition is planning to meet with officials of the provincial Department of Labour and Advanced Education to present the poll's findings.

Chrissy Matheson, spokesperson for the department told the *Commoner* in an email that "after three years of funding cuts, the province is providing universities a one per cent increase in their operating grant for next year.

"This represents a \$3.3 million increase. We'll continue working with universities so they can continue to provide students a high-quality education, while making sure our universities are here for the long term."



Chris Ferns, Anna Dubinski and David Etherington are trying to raise government support for lowering tuition. (Photo by Nicolas Haddad)

She says the province will invest at least another \$5 million in innovation funds to help Nova Scotian universities respond to change while they "lobby the federal government to transfer post-secondary education funds based on province of study, rather than province of birth."

The coalition paid about \$13,000 to commission the poll.

David Etherington, Maritimes co-ordinator, says having up-to-the-minute information is

crucial.

"In lobby meetings, the government pushes back, saying that the numbers may be out of date, so they'll suggest we have more up-to-date polls."

The department is also preparing for the meeting, when the province should sign a memorandum of understanding with the universities, laying out plans to provide more support to post-secondary institutions for at least the next four years.

Union fee increase should erase deficit, King's VP says

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Financial vice president Alex Bryant says without an increase in fees, King's students will lose some of their services. (Photo by Evan McIntyre)

The King's Student Union is asking students if they want their dues raised by \$18.80 next year.

The University of King's College organization faces a deficit of almost \$10,000 and financial vice president Alex Bryant believes that without raising fees, union services will suffer.

"We're at the point now, where unless we decide to cut out full services that we offer, we're just not going to be able to do them properly," said Bryant.

He mentioned services like free sexual health products and educational travel bursaries could be on the chopping block.

The union is holding a referendum next week to permanently raise dues by \$9.40 per term.

Based on the current budget, the hike would cover the deficit and put the union \$12,000 in the black, which would help pay for new employees and services.

If the referendum passes, full-time students will pay \$112.60 in union dues in September.

Bryant said the deficit resulted from poor record keeping and planning while the union expanded its services.

He said incomplete paperwork from the 2012-2013 academic year made it difficult to budget this year's expenses.

"We had tons of receipts that hadn't been documented. We knew money was being spent, but

we didn't have a total record of how that money was spent," said Bryant.

The union also didn't budget for a new employee, Nick Wright, who manages the campus bar and canteen.

In the spring, the union expected Wright would be paid \$12,960 for the 2013-2014 academic year.

"They originally budgeted him

to work for, like, 20 hours a week and he has been working more like 25," said Bryant.

Additionally, Wright was paid to run the bar for special events in the summer.

A revised budget increased Wright's salary by \$9,040.

Even without the \$9,882.40 deficit, Bryant still believes that the budget is stretched too thin.

He said the \$3,000 contingency fund isn't enough for emergencies.

"If we were to ever have a situation where we needed to call on a lawyer for more than just reviewing contracts, we would have absolutely no money to pay these people," said Bryant.

Student response to the increase has been generally positive.

At a town hall meeting on Jan. 31, the proposed increase was discussed without criticism.

However, one student disagreed online.

The increase "seems pretty ridiculous when our \$98 per semester fees are already higher than Dal's \$62," said Ben Snair, a third-year economics student, on Twitter.

"Maybe decreasing the size of the union should be considered,

since we have access to many of the same services through Dal."

"Our major criticism is that it's too low, which is wild to me," said Bryant.

The other proposed increase was higher: \$14.40 per semester, which councillor Colleen Earle supported.

"It makes sense for them to raise it all now and then they can have more savings for future years," said Earle.

Voting will take place on Feb. 12 and 13 and it would take only 150 people to raise fees for all students at the school by \$9.40 per semester.

Student Taylor Saracuse supports the increase, but he's concerned a minority of people could pass the hike and make university unaffordable for some students.

"The people that are voting are potentially all people that can afford the fee hike," said Saracuse.

"We need people to come out and vote," said Bryant.

In October, a King's Student Union election had to be held twice due to low voter turnout.

If the increase is approved, it will be up to next year's student council to decide how the money is spent.