

## GOVERNMENT'S PSE PLAN A RAW DEAL FOR STUDENTS

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When it comes to any government announcement, the devil, as they say, is always in the details. Nearly a week after the NDP's university funding announcement, some details have finally come into focus while others still remain unclear.

After the Dexter government spent the last half of 2010 seriously flirting with Tim O'Neill's doomsday recommendations, reports of a three per cent increase in the tuition cap seemed like Nova Scotia students and parents had caught a break. However, the details told a much different story.

The three per cent increase in tuition quickly became a three per cent increase, year over year until 2013/14. That three per cent spike was really ten per cent - far exceeding the expected increase in the Consumer Price Index for the same time period. That "break" for students and parents turned out to be a raw deal.

There were more details to come, unfortunately - more details and more bad news for the province's students.

The NDP announced that university funding would be slashed by four percent this year, a budget reduction that will affect different universities in different ways. With the only certainty being cuts on campus, students will see fewer programs, bigger classes and higher fees. Students will be paying more for less.

We now know that the student bursary trust program will continue, but the details are scarce. We still don't know how much each student will receive from this program. And we need those details now, because students are making decisions about next year's education today.

Questions also loom over the province's Student Assistance Plan - while Dr. O'Neill indicated student assistance should be aimed at the lowest incomes, that 'lowest' level of income was never quantified. As the Legislature's Human Resources Committee learned on January 25th, Dr. O'Neill considers \$30,000 per annum a 'middle' income for a family of four. If the NDP shares this sentiment, those Nova Scotians eligible for student assistance could be few and far between.

For a government that likes to talk about the importance of a knowledge economy and how much it values a skilled workforce, the decision to make education more expensive in this province is a complete contradiction. On one hand, the NDP touts Nova Scotia as the University Capital of the country - yet on the other hand, the Dexter government's ten per cent hike is positioning our province as the Tuition Capital of Canada.

Many Nova Scotians trusted the NDP with their vote because they thought the party offered "a better deal for today's families". Just like that NDP slogan, this education "plan" sounded good at first. Unfortunately for all of us, the details tell a much different story.