

# A Response from the University of Saskatchewan to the Interim Report on Post-Secondary Education Accessibility and Affordability

August 31, 2007

The University of Saskatchewan applauds the Government of Saskatchewan both for undertaking this important review of the accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education in Saskatchewan and for the comprehensiveness of the findings and recommendations outlined in its April 2007 Interim Report. We were particularly pleased to see that the most important of the recommendations contained in our own submission to the Review were reflected in the Interim Report and would like to thank the Government for listening so carefully to our input, as well as to that of the many other stakeholders with whom it consulted when developing the Interim Report.

Our overall reaction to the Interim Report is very positive. On the whole, the University of Saskatchewan believes that the Interim Report does an excellent job of identifying the key factors that affect the accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education in our province. Indeed, our only concern is that the thoroughness of its findings and multiplicity of its recommendations are such that in its current form, the Report does not adequately outline what the highest priorities and next action steps should be. This is not a criticism of the Report but rather recognition of the fact that the purpose of a report such as this is to provide a comprehensive and methodical description of “the lay of the land” with respect to the accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education in Saskatchewan. We understand that a major purpose of the current round of consultations is to seek input from stakeholders as to what the key priorities and action steps should be, so that these can be considered as the Final Report is being developed.

With that in mind, the University of Saskatchewan has carefully examined both the Interim Report and our original submission to the Review and identified the themes that we believe are most important and the recommendations that should receive highest priority in the Final Report. They are as follows (in priority order):

## **I. Tuition Fee and Tax Credit Policies**

The University of Saskatchewan believes that resolving the issues related to tuition fee policies should be among the Government’s highest priorities and should feature prominently in the recommendations of the Final Report. The Interim Report makes several recommendations regarding Tuition Fees (recommendations 21 through 23) and suggests that a combination of targeted and universal measures be instituted to address concerns regarding the increasing costs of tuition. We believe strongly that while both universal and targeted measures may have their places, in the longer-term strategies that target financial supports toward those who most require them will be both more effective and make better use of public funds than universal, “across-the-board” tuition measures.

As we are all aware, in recent years, several provincial Governments, including the Government of Saskatchewan, have responded to concerns about the growing costs of post-secondary education by instituting tuition controls of one form or another, tax credit programs, or both. While we are very grateful that the Government of Saskatchewan has increased its funding to the universities to make up for the tuition revenues that they have foregone by holding tuition at 2004/05 levels, we are concerned about both the sustainability and effectiveness of this approach as a matter of public policy.

The experiences of other provinces suggest that in the long run, tuition controls end up squeezing post-secondary institutions of the resources they require to provide students with high-quality programs and services, stretching the resources of Government to the point that they become unaffordable (where such controls have been partially or fully funded), or both. In addition, the effects of universal measures such as tuition controls and tax credits are significantly diluted because they spread their financial benefits across the entire student population, rather than focusing support on those who need it most. The result is that those students who actually could afford to pay higher rates of tuition receive a financial benefit they don't really need, while those who need financial support the most do not receive sufficient financial benefits to address their much greater levels of need.

An additional problem with tax credit strategies is that they do not help students when they need help the most – during their studies. Students most need financial support “up front”, while they are attending post-secondary education, rather than after they have graduated. Thus, while Saskatchewan's Post-Secondary Graduate Tax Credit Program does provide a significant benefit to students after graduation and may help retain some students in the province, it does not really contribute to either the accessibility or affordability of post-secondary education in our province.

We certainly agree that the Government should “work with the universities to make a change in tuition fee structures while continuing to ensure students have access to high quality education” (p. 95, Recommendation 22) but believe strongly that the primary emphasis of the Government's efforts to address concerns regarding tuition costs should be on providing targeted financial assistance (including non-repayable grants/bursaries) to students who most require it, rather than on universal measures such as tuition controls. This is especially true for students who have special financial challenges such as Aboriginal students and students with disabilities. However, as a matter of public policy, the tuition controls that have been in place for the last three years should be phased out, and tuition rates should generally be permitted to increase commensurately with the increases in the cost of providing high-quality programs and services. In the process, the authority of the Board of Governors of the respective university to set tuition fees must be maintained, protected, and respected.

## 2. Matching Grant Program

For several years, the University of Saskatchewan has advocated that the Government of Saskatchewan should establish a “matching grant” program similar to those that exist in Ontario, Manitoba, and elsewhere. As we indicated in our initial submission to the Review, a new “matching grant” program would nicely complement the Centennial Merit Scholarship Program, provide institutions with a powerful tool to help them raise additional funds to support student awards, and help build institutional fundraising capacity.

We were pleased that the Department of Advanced Education and Employment took the time last year to investigate how these programs function in other provinces and found the report of its findings (*Canadian Incentive Programs for Post-Secondary Education Endowment Funds*, January 2007) both informative and thought provoking. Based on the valuable information that was gathered as part of that project, the University's longstanding view regarding the critical importance of establishing a “matching grant” program for Saskatchewan's universities, and most importantly, the tremendous benefits that such a program would provide in terms increasing the amount of financial assistance available to students, we believe that the creation of such a program should be among the first and highest-priority actions that flow from the McCall Review.

If such a program is established, the University of Saskatchewan believes that it should be as clear, simple, flexible, and balanced as possible. As the *Canadian Incentives Program for Post-Secondary Education Endowment Funds* document points out, the new program needs to establish clear guidelines with respect to how the program will operate, simple and flexible criteria for both donors and student recipients, and policies that afford participating institutions considerable flexibility so that they can effectively balance the needs of students, donors, and the institutions themselves.

### 3. Improvements to Student Loan Program and Processes

The Interim Report does an excellent job of outlining some of the many and complex problems that exist within the current student loan program. While we recognize that it is tremendously challenging for the Government to make significant changes to a system that is so tightly integrated with the federal government's program, we believe that the time has come for major reforms of the student loan program to be undertaken. To put it succinctly – the student loan system is seriously broken and must be fixed!

Some of the important issues that need to be addressed are identified in the Interim Report (Recommendations 29, 31-35, and 37) and in our original submission to the Review (Recommendation 12). Given the tremendous number of students who rely upon student loans as their primary source of income during their post-secondary studies, the University of Saskatchewan believes that the Government of Saskatchewan should commence working with the federal government to overhaul the program and address its many shortcomings as a matter of urgent priority. We would, of course, be happy to work closely with Government representatives, students, and other stakeholders as work on this important initiative proceeds.

In addition to making improvements to the substance of the student loan program, the University of Saskatchewan believes that it is also critical that work begin as soon as possible on simplifying existing administrative policies and procedures. In particular, we believe that the Government should invest in developing and implementing fully electronic, online application, approval, and confirmation systems and processes (see Interim Report Recommendation 29 and Recommendation 11 of the University of Saskatchewan's original submission). Making the student loan application, approval, and confirmation processes simpler, faster, and easier to use will help make the student loan program more accessible, which in turn improves the accessibility of the post-secondary education system itself.

### 4. Experiential and Workplace Learning

Recommendation 8 of the Interim Report calls for “increase(d) access to experiential and workplace-based learning, through the expansion of co-op opportunities”. The University of Saskatchewan strongly endorses this recommendation and believes that action in this area should be identified as a high priority in the Review's final report.

For numerous historical, demographic, and fiscal reasons, Saskatchewan universities in general, and the University of Saskatchewan in particular, lag behind many other universities with respect to the number and variety of experiential learning opportunities (co-op programs, internships, service learning, etc.) that are available to their students. Not only does this mean that fewer students benefit from the tremendous learning and career opportunities that such experiences provide, but it also puts Saskatchewan universities at a competitive disadvantage relative to universities in other

provinces and contributes to the out-migration of our young people as they seek educational and experiential learning opportunities that they believe give them a competitive edge as they transition from their educational institutions into the workplace.

The University of Saskatchewan is eager to work collaboratively with government and with public and private sector employers to expand experiential learning opportunities for our students and urges the Government of Saskatchewan to facilitate the further development and expansion of co-op and other workplace-based learning programs by strategically investing targeted funding to support them.

In the context of this recommendation, we would again like to suggest that the Government consider establishing “a work-study program that provides on-campus work opportunities for students” and enables them to “gain meaningful work experience, and make a greater connection with campus life” (University of Saskatchewan Submission, Recommendation 10, p. 12). Given the fact that so many of our students currently spend significant amounts of time (on average, almost 20 hours/week) working to pay for their education, we believe that the establishment of an on-campus work-study program would be one of the best ways to address students’ concerns regarding the affordability of post-secondary education and encourage the Government to seriously consider this recommendation (see University of Saskatchewan Submission, p. 12 for more information).

## **5. Information – Promoting Value of Higher Education and Improving Career Guidance**

The first recommendation in the University of Saskatchewan’s submission to the Post-Secondary Accessibility and Affordability Review was to “provide Saskatchewan citizens, especially young adults, with more timely and accurate information regarding their future educational options and better opportunities to explore their academic/career interests and options.” We were very pleased to see that the Interim Report echoed this theme and that the first three recommendations of the Report identified the importance of improved career and educational information as key factors affecting the accessibility of post-secondary education.

While we recognize that strategies to improve the dissemination and quality of academic and career information provided to prospective students and their families may take longer to implement than some of the Review’s other recommendations, we believe that investment in such strategies is definitely worthwhile, will have tremendous long-term benefits for both students and the Province, and should be identified as important priorities in the Final Report. Improved information for decision making will not only help individuals make more informed and appropriate academic and career choices, but it will also reduce the tremendous waste of human and financial resources that occurs when individuals make wrong choices, promote higher post-secondary participation rates, and ultimately contribute to the longer-term growth and development of the province.

## **6. Transfer Credit and Post-Secondary System Coordination**

The University of Saskatchewan acknowledges that it has probably lagged behind universities in other jurisdictions in the extent to which transfer credit (especially “block” transfer credit), 2 + 2 programs, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and similar articulation and transfer arrangements have been part of our “core” operations. While such activity has always been present at the University of Saskatchewan, it has traditionally operated at the margins of the institution, rather than as part of the mainstream.

In recent years, we have come to recognize that the University of Saskatchewan can no longer function in such an insular manner and that there are tremendous benefits to students, to the institution, and to the post-secondary system as a whole for the University to demonstrate more flexibility in the way that it recognizes transfer credit and other forms of prior learning. We understand, in ways we may not have only a few years ago, the importance of improving transfer credit arrangements for students who have studied elsewhere, and we are committed to significantly increasing the number of transfer agreements we have with other post-secondary institutions and to dramatically increasing the number of transfer students we admit to the University.

Recent developments at the University of Saskatchewan demonstrate that our commitment to improving our performance in these areas is real. The University of Saskatchewan approved a formal “Challenge for Credit” policy in 2002, and we have been processing Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) applications since that time. More recently, SIAST and the University of Saskatchewan announced that they have developed their first formal “block transfer” agreement, whereby students from SIAST’s Chemical Technology program can receive up to two full years of credit towards a BSc Chemistry degree from the University of Saskatchewan. Negotiations regarding several other “block transfer” arrangements between the University of Saskatchewan and other institutions are currently underway and should be finalized in the near future. The University is also striving to improve its transfer articulation policies and streamline its procedures so as to increase the number of courses from other institutions for which we will grant transfer credit and make the process of applying for transfer credit simpler and easier.

Having said this, there is still much to do, and the University is committed to working with students, government, SASKCAT, and other post-secondary institutions to improve transfer credit, RPL, and overall system coordination policies and processes. We believe that a strong commitment to continuing efforts on this front should be identified as a high priority in the Review’s final report.

In closing, the University of Saskatchewan would again like to congratulate the Government for its efforts to better understand and address the many factors that affect the accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education in our province. We very much appreciate the opportunity to provide input into the review process and to respond to the recommendations contained in the Interim Report. We believe that the Interim Report provides an excellent overview of the accessibility and affordability challenges we all face and that the next important step will be for the Review Team to review, carefully consider, and determine which of the many recommendations in the Report should be given the highest priority in both the short and longer terms. We thank you for the opportunity to provide our own suggestions in this regard and look forward to seeing the final report soon.

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