

University faculty slams province for cutting tuition assistance



Mary Lou Babineau, past president of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.

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Katrina Clarke | The Daily Gleaner | May 24, 2019

The union representing New Brunswick university faculty members has sent an open letter to the minister of post-secondary education slamming the province for cutting tuition assistance programs.

"In a province with such grave concerns relating to economic and demographic growth, it is difficult to imagine a more ill-advised and short-sighted policy decision than this one," reads part of the letter sent Thursday from Mary Lou Babineau, past president of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations, to Trevor Holder, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour.

The Higgs government recently replaced the previous government's free tuition program and Tuition Relief for the Middle Class (TMRC) program with a bursary program and tuition tax credit. Students at private institutions can now access tuition assistance, too.

Holder, speaking to the Daily Gleaner, said he consulted faculty associations and student groups before tuition assistance program decisions were made. The groups "made it very clear" to him they wanted upfront bursary money left in place and that's what the government's done, he said.

"We've taken the same envelope of money and we've spread it across the board so students that are attending private institutions can get part of that envelope too," Holder said. "We thought that was fair. We didn't get rid of the upfront bursary money. It's still very much in place in conjunction with the federal upfront bursary money."

The letter states the federation is concerned about the implications the changes will have on students - particularly those from rural and economically depressed areas who counted on the previous programs.

"These changes will unquestionably make it more difficult for our poorest and most marginalized young people to attend university and to achieve upward economic and social mobility. They will also result in higher debt levels for graduating students, which is directly linked to slower economic growth and outmigration," Babineau states in the letter.

She called on the province to reinstate programs that were cut or altered and to "make further investments to strengthen them."

Liberal MLA and post-secondary education critic Guy Arsenault echoed her demands.

"I think the premier should tell his minister to go back to drawing board and reinstate all of these programs," he said. "[Premier Blaine Higgs] doesn't really care about students. He just cares about the almighty dollar."