



The Daily Courier

Students unfurled a banner on the Highway 97 pedestrian overpass Wednesday morning. They were protesting rising tuition fees.

# Students protest crippling tuition debt

**Average Canadian student will accumulate \$27,000 in student loans**

By Daily Courier Staff

Feb 2 A3

Post-secondary students are paying more for their education than ever in B.C., and the debt load is crushing them, a rally at UBC Okanagan heard Wednesday.

More than 200 young people from Okanagan College campuses from as far as Salmon Arm joined their university counterparts on the UBCO campus during a nationwide protest against rising tuition fees.

They complained the fees have doubled in the last decade and operating grants to colleges are frozen. Meanwhile, inflation and salary increases for staff are placing a heavier financial burden on students.

"College students are forced to pay more for their education every year, while the government shirks its responsibility and commitment to build the best-educated jurisdiction in North America," said Chad Athay, executive chair of the college's students union.

"B.C. will lose in the long run . . . but don't worry, we have 500 million new reasons to put a leaky roof on B.C. Place."

Canadian students are accumulating an average \$27,000 worth of debt after a four-year program, speakers said. If they graduate in Kelowna, where good-paying jobs are few, they often have to flip burgers to cover the interest payments, said Kirk Chavarie, financial co-ordinator for the UBCO students union.

"So you graduate. There's a six-month period with no interest, and bam. You're into the system. If you can't pay off that interest, you've got to pick up a job, working part time - not doing the career you want to do, but paying off the interest on your student loan."

Students started the day by unfurling a large banner reading "Honk to drop tuition fees" from the Dayton Avenue pedestrian bridge. Many morning commuters complied as they drove past.

The lunchtime rally was at times light-hearted. A woman got the crowd chanting "We don't want no mac and cheese; Christy Clark reduce those fees."

Students jeered at one speaker's reference to Premier Clark's advice to students complaining about a tuition hike last year - drink less coffee.

Michelle Mungall, the NDP's advanced-education critic, gave away a pound of Kootenay-roasted coffee to a student who best answered trivia questions about student loans.

The NDP caucus is gathering in Kelowna, allowing Opposition Leader Adrian Dix and Mungall to weigh in. They said B.C. charges its students the highest interest rate on loans in Canada, at prime plus 2.5 per cent.

"It is unfair to make money to this extent on student loans. That is borrowing against your future and our future as a society," said Dix.

"There are people who need to go to post-secondary education who aren't going at all because of these policies."

Dix reiterated his call to restore non-refundable grants for students who otherwise can't afford to go to school after Grade 12. The Liberal government scrapped the program in 2004.

To pay for the grants, Dix said he'd reinstate a minimum tax on banks - a revenue generator that existed under the Liberals until 2008. He calculates it would raise more than \$100 million.

"(It) will benefit business because they'll have more and better-qualified workers," Dix said. "Banks make a lot of money in B.C. and don't pay as much in the way of taxes here."

Dix reminded the crowd that seven out of 10 voters under 30 cast ballots in the last provincial election. He encouraged them to vote in the next election in May 2013.