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Doug Ford's Plan to Reduce Student Services Is Working

Optional student fees have hit some Ontario universities harder than others.

by [Tyler Griffin](#)

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Ten months after Ontario Premier Doug Ford introduced his controversial plan to curb “crazy Marxist nonsense” on campuses, some student groups are now learning their budgets were hit harder than others.

Under the rollout of the Student Choice Initiative (SCI) this fall, post-secondary students were able to opt out of fees deemed “non-essential” by Ford’s Progressive Conservative government. Mandatory fees include services such as academic counselling and walksafes programs.

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Paying for students’ unions, societies, campus media, refugee support, and equity centres focused on providing resources to marginalized students became optional—meaning students could pick and choose the services they want to fund. Much of these organizations’ operating budgets now depend on whether or not students shell out enough money for a cup of coffee.

And regardless of whether they survived the initial round of opt outs, fluctuating numbers from semester to semester have thrown their long-term plans into the dark. University newspapers and political commentators across Ontario are calling the initiative not only an attack on student press but [an attack on the journalism industry at large](#).

The University of Ottawa’s English-language news outlet, the Fulcrum, reported that [1 in 4 students on average opted out](#) of the university’s ancillary fees. Fulcrum editor-in-chief Matt Gergyek said the funding received was much higher than expected. The publication budgeted for an opt-in rate of 50 percent, hiring only half the number of editorial positions they usually do in case numbers were really low. “It felt to me like we weren’t reaching our full potential as a news outlet.”

The high turnout means the Fulcrum can add more staff and increase their coverage. “That’s given us the drive to work even harder this year to show how much we appreciate every cent students give us,” said Gergyek.

Still, 1 in 4 students opting out translates to roughly \$155,000 in lost funding for student life at the University of Ottawa. The Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG-Ottawa), an environmental and social justice group, is losing about \$32,750 in funding for the semester. “We’re glad the cuts weren’t worse but we’re not jumping for joy about a 25 percent budget cut,” OPIRG-Ottawa action groups coordinator told the Fulcrum.

La Rotonde, the French-language newspaper at uOttawa, will lose roughly \$30,000, and plans to transition to a solely online publication to cut costs.

While campus groups are beginning to know what their operations will look like under the SCI, that knowledge remains short-term. “Opt-in numbers can change every semester. That makes it really tough to look ahead to future initiatives or to strategically plan for even a year in the future,” Gergyek said.

For *La Rotonde*’s general manager Mathieu Tovar-Poitras, the issue is work contracts: SCI makes it more difficult to guarantee a full year of pay for staff members. It could also make working for the publication less attractive, he told the Fulcrum. “We might get a completely different [opt-in] rate in the winter,” he said.

The *Varsity*, the University of Toronto’s main student paper, had an average opt-in rate of about 75 percent, in line with other U of T societies who averaged 78 percent.

But even with that high number, student life at U of T has already felt the consequences of Ford’s policy. According to Josie Kao, the *Varsity*’s editor-in-chief, some students’ unions have been forced to cut down on their mental health coverage in anticipation of budget cuts. Meanwhile, U of T students are still grieving over the [third apparent suicide in the school’s Bahen Centre in two years](#), and urging the administration to [formally declare a “mental health crisis.”](#)

For Kao and her team, the only thing to do looking forward is to stay vigilant. “It’s a logistical feat to have gathered all of these societies together and be able to speak for one common voice,”

Not everyone had such high opt-in numbers. Ryerson University’s 35-year-old, 80-member [Oakham House Choir was told to disband](#) when it lost all of its funding after the SCI was implemented.

At the *Eyeopener*, Ryerson’s independent student newspaper and where I work as the arts and culture editor, we saw an opt-in rate of 44 percent, perhaps due to Ryerson being a large commuter school, which makes for less sense of community and engagement in campus life. We’ve had to cut two editorial positions, our podcast producer, and virtually all of our monthly story budgets, and can no longer compensate our masthead and volunteers with meals for their work.

University radio stations also took a hit. According to a [New Democratic Party media release](#), half of campus radio stations in the province are at risk of closing because of the government's cuts. Ryerson's campus radio station, the CJRU, has laid off staff and cancelled honorariums for local musicians. Still, it looks healthier than those who will be struggling to exist, says station manager Jacky Tuinstra Harrison. Like most of us, Harrison has taken on the workload of vacant staff positions.

Ford's policy hasn't gone unchallenged. Last weekend, [an Ontario Divisional Court heard](#) that the decision to make student fees optional is an attack on universities' independence and is in bad faith. A lawyer for the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) read aloud from a Ford fundraising email, in which Ford says, "I think we all know what kind of [crazy Marxist nonsense](#) student unions get up to, so we fixed that."

Lawyers representing the CFS argued Ford's email—sent a month after the government announced they would implement the policy—shows the SCI's true purpose. "At its core, it's union-busting, it's anti-democratic," Kayla Weiler, a national representative of CFS-Ontario, told the courtroom filled with students from across the province. The justices are reserving their decision for a later date, and students may not hear a decision until after students are able to opt out of winter semester fees.

"Extrapolate this ideology to our tax base in Ontario," said Harrison. "How tragic would it be if only the people who want to pay for the cardiology unit paid for the cardiology unit, or if folks who don't have kids decide they don't want to pay for schooling anymore?"

With files from the Eyeopener.

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