



Notes for a Submission

By

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To the  
Law Amendments Committee  
On  
Bill 64 -  
Financial Measures (2014) Act

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## **Introduction**

Thank you, Madam Chairperson and members of the Committee for this opportunity to speak to you about Bill 64 – *Financial Measures (2014) Act*. Our President (Joan Jessome) would have been here this evening to speak to this Bill, but she could not do so with other prior commitments for her out of town.

As the largest union in the province, we are no strangers to post-secondary education. We represent almost 2,600 women and men who work as support staff at seven universities and with the Nova Scotia Community College. Our members work in the universities and community colleges as library staff, as clerical and administrative support, in IT, in technical positions, in labs, and in maintenance and trades. At this point, this includes faculty at NSAC/Dalhousie University and instructors at Cape Breton University.

We are a member organization of the Nova Scotia Post-Secondary Education Coalition, along with the Association of Nova Scotia University Teachers (or ANSUT) and the Canadian Federation of Students – Nova Scotia (or CFS-NS). Together as a Coalition, we have worked to raise the profile, and increase funding and accessibility for Post-Secondary Education. We've made submissions to legislative committees, met with elected members and candidates from all parties, and organized election forums.

### **Bill 64 – A Betrayal**

For NSGEU, Bill 64 represents a betrayal of the government's commitments to help keep our young people in the province. This is very similar to the government's commitments to maintaining full and free collective bargaining before they brought forward Bills 30 and 37 which has completely undermined collective bargaining in this province.

Yes, there was and is some debate about how effective the Graduate Retention Rebate was and will be, especially in keeping young people in the province. But it was a sizable amount of money, that is, approximately \$50 million, set aside for a dedicated purpose, that is, to help keep young people in the province. And now, this funding has been almost completely eliminated in one fell swoop.

This year's Budget Bulletin for Post-Secondary Education promised "increasing support and offering incentives for graduates to live, work and start a family in our province". There were several initiatives listed after that general commitment. But none of them will match the amount of funding and assistance to be provided by the Graduate Retention Rebate.

This is upsetting because that amount of money was helping some young Nova Scotian graduates, such as a number of our young nursing members, to reduce their costs after graduation. A reduction of income taxes of up to \$15,000 over six years to a maximum of \$2,500 a year for university graduates, or up to \$7,500 per year over six year to a maximum of \$1,250, is no small amount. In addition, time is usually needed to set up and make known a new program. So it is not completely surprising that the Rebate was not being fully used immediately following its introduction in 2009.

What is also upsetting is the way the Rebate was cut, that is, without much apparent consultation and all at once. If there had been more consultation with all affected groups such as students, faculty, staff and administration, there might have been an appropriate transition period established to keep some of the monies to help new graduates while transferring the remainder to help reduce the direct costs of going to university or college such as in student assistance or in helping to reduce tuition.

This support to reduce direct costs is important because one of the key findings in the four polls of 800 Nova Scotians conducted by the PSE Coalition in 2005,

2007, 2010, and, in 2013, has been about the number of people who chose not to attend college or university because it would mean taking on too much debt.

In the most recent poll, we learned that one in three of the people surveyed did not to attend college or university because it would mean taking on too much debt. What is perhaps surprising and disappointing is that this answer has been given by almost exactly the same percentage of people in all four polls. This means that consistently, at least one-third of Nova Scotians are not able to participate in post-secondary education due to high costs. And, what is worse, this situation has not changed in eight years.

Clearly, no government can say they have made major gains to make post-secondary education more accessible and affordable. Much more comprehensive support by government seems to be clearly needed, and this is where the \$50 million could be used.

Providing more funds to increase university operating grants is also important. Our Coalition's most recent poll also shows how much the work of support staff (including our members) in post-secondary education is valued. 92% of the people polled felt that support services such as academic advising, library services and other forms of support in post-secondary education, is important. In addition, approximately 61% thought there should be more of these services. Post-secondary educational institutions could not function without the services of support staff, and yet, they are rarely acknowledged.

Worse still, it has been our experience that these staff is almost always the first group of staff to be affected whenever budget cutbacks are being made. In fact, they may have been the only NSGEU group who did not receive the 2%, 2.5%, and 3% wage increases which was the pattern in the last round of collective bargaining. In addition, money can somehow be found to put up new buildings, but not for reasonable wage increases for our members. For example, St. F.X.

has had new residences built in recent years, but 20% of our bargaining unit there was laid off last year.

### **Other Budgetary Concerns**

More generally troubling for us are some of the general messages being sent by the government with this Budget. For example, under what the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board called "Changing the Conversation" in her Budget Address, she devoted several lines to dampening wage expectations. She talked about the work done by public sector employees being highly valued and public sector workers deserving a fair wage, but then, she said public wage settlements of 2.0, 2.5 and 3.0 were unsustainable if they continue when the current national wage settlement is averaging 1.2 to 2.1% and when Nova Scotia has the second lowest capita GDP in Canada.

At that time, the Minister also spoke, as did the Premier spoke last week, about the need to look how and why the government does things, and in particular, if the government should be delivering certain programs and services, and if how they are delivered makes sense. Quite frankly, we have heard these same messages over and over again by successive governments during the last twenty years. While not at all against considering where programs and services can be improved, our members are wondering how much more can programs and services be cut without further undermining the quality and value of those services which Nova Scotians generally need and highly value. In other words, the government seems to be laying the foundation once again for future cutbacks, layoffs, freezes, rollbacks, restructuring, contracting-out, privatization and outsourcing.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the NSGEU is strongly against Bill 64 and the elimination of the Graduate Retention Rebate. We see it as a betrayal of young Nova Scotians which is on the same level as Bills 30 and 37.

In addition, the Rebate is helping some graduates and could continue to do so. There is time needed to consult broadly about its value and how some of the \$50 million could be used to help reduce the direct costs of participating in post-secondary education. At the very least, the Rebate should not be eliminated all at once.

There may be a slight technical problem for the government in having the Budget vote on Friday before this Bill is passed, because in theory at least, if the Committee wanted to see any amendments to the Bill, they could not be made at this point. At the very least, I would suggest the passing of the FMA legislation and the Budget should be better coordinated.

We are also very concerned with some of the key messages being expressed by the government with this Budget about the pattern of future wage settlements and program review. These "shots across the bow" are doing little to help encourage a close working relationship for the government with front-line public sector workers and their unions.

One final point from my 30-year experience as a presenter to this Committee is that the presentations and questions and answers for any given Bill should be posted on the Status of Bills website, as is now done with posting a list of presenters and a copy of any written submissions. There is an invaluable amount of information and perspectives as well as passion being presented to this Committee on a regular basis. All of this input should be publicly available.

Thank you for your time and attention. I welcome any questions or comments from Committee members.