

Students speak out

By G. J. Prosser

The popularity of online share trading may have waned but it has helped bring new terminology into common parlance. Most students would now recognize that 'market timing' isn't a new take on 7-Eleven and that ROI has nothing to do with baseball. But "Return on Investment" has everything to do with education. So what value do today's students ascribe to the education they're receiving? We went out and about to gauge satisfaction levels.

Dallas Luther, a third year student of Radio and Television Arts at Ryerson University has no qualms about the investment value of the \$7,000 he's spending on tuition and books annually. "A degree like mine allows a person to develop excellent people, organizational and creative skills." As he warms to the theme you can sense there's a "but" coming. Dallas is frustrated by how regimented study can be, and would like more freedom to go off piste. "Why not, say, allow English students to submit their own reading list to a professor for approval? Otherwise the danger can be a graduate who understands the craft, but has nothing worthwhile to communicate."

Like many other students Konrad Obara is keen to get out into "the real world". He's in the middle of a Finance and Administration degree at the University of Western Ontario and grateful that his \$5,000 annual fees have been fairly flat. But what with rent, books and other stuff to find money for, he wishes the fees were lower. He runs a decorating business in the summer months to help fund his studies and has to fight hard to win business and preserve a profit margin in a very competitive market. He gets riled by unwanted add-ons to his tuition fees. "Our fees include things like a bus pass which you can't opt out of even though school is within walking distance for many students," he says.

Statscan says that the average annual rise in university undergraduate tuition fees has slowed to 5.3% since the 1999-2000 academic year from the unprecedented average annual increase of 9.7% during the nineties. On average Canadian students pay another \$608 per annum in additional compulsory fees for things like athletics and health services, student association dues and, in some instances, bus passes. Konrad can thank his lucky stars that he's not studying in

British Columbia where these add-ons have increased more than threefold in the past four years.

The cost of add-ons in Toronto has proven to be an expensive choice for Alicia Sung who moved to the Ontario College of Art and Design after two years at Dawson College in Montreal. Her tuition fees took a significant hike as a result but she felt the major impact in her cost of living. “Living [in Toronto] is very expensive in comparison and, if I didn’t have family here to help me, it wouldn’t be possible”. Fortunately she has found the increased emphasis on the conceptual aspects of her arts studies to her liking and has no regrets about making the move from Montreal. And, she likes the OCAD building extension, at least from the outside. “Inside, it’s not so decorative” she said.

The costs of “all the other stuff” are a major problem for photography students it seems. Annie Daynes had the problem in spades. Annie graduated with honors in Photography Studies from Ryerson last year and saw her annual fees increase by about \$1000 during that time. That was bearable if unwelcome, but the level of spending on other stuff was brutal. “I typically spent between four and five thousand dollars a year on equipment and supplies,” she reckons. She also found access to the university’s equipment resources strained as the school laboured to stay up to date with digital trends. “Access to equipment is definitely an area for improvement,” she says.

Felicia Yukich is rounding out a BBA at Wilfred Laurier with a six month stint in Paris. Her fees over the past four years have been flat but “for the new students our program has recently been *deregulated* so they’re required to pay more now.” But the cost of books has been a constant irritation. In her last semester alone she spent \$600 on books despite strenuous efforts to keep this cost under control. This frustration was magnified when tutors made little use of these texts during the term and then drove down resale values by insisting new students buy the latest editions. As she puts it, “It was very rare that you were able to buy a used text book for a course as the professor always instructed us to purchase the latest one.” So Felicia has seen hard earned dollars from her vacation work at CIBC wasted.

Aspects of her Laurier courses that Felicia particularly valued were the small class sizes and the use of some of the concepts and

tools taught in years one and two in her final year. “This validated that material taught in years one and two was really relevant and could be re-used in our later years.”

But the marking regimen at Laurier was a general cause of concern for Felicia and her fellow undergraduates. “Everyone would get low marks; many even failed, due to the fact that the markers would not carry through errors. If you make a tiny arithmetic error in the beginning of the problem and carry it through to your final answer, you might only receive 5/20 on that problem, regardless of the fact that your method was perfect!” The faculty emphasis appeared to be bent on keeping marks low with the consequence that overall grades would be “belled” higher to make them more respectable.

A culture of rigorous grading hasn’t been the experience of two continuing education students at Ryerson that we spoke to. Anna-Marie Culiniac and Carla Silva share a strong determination to get value from their chosen courses. They’ve been collaborating on a business plan to build a photographic business for the past two years. Getting a good education from their \$12,000 training budget is crucial to the success of that plan. They have carefully audited feedback on the tutors for their chosen courses before signing up but have still been disappointed a few times. “I don’t think the evaluation mechanism is taken seriously,” says Carla. Anna-Marie added, “Many people complain privately, but you don’t see that criticism reflected in the feedback record.”

And Anna-Marie is more critical of her classroom experience when she compares it to her undergraduate studies in marketing and management in her native Poland. “The teaching was tougher. If your work sucked, you were told it sucked, even in front of twenty people, and asked to resubmit. But here I’ve found that things are too soft,” she said.

Ironically some of the courses they have found most useful and inspiring have not been credit courses. “We took a fashion course last summer where the tutor was very motivated and very enthusiastic but it didn’t count towards accreditation,” says Carla. “Luckily there have been a few tutors who have gone the extra mile and they have made us feel ready to go forward,” she adds.

The feedback issue sparked some reticence from other students. One student was willing to talk about it but with anonymity. “Our college measures a tutor’s effectiveness by feedback forms. But these are usually collected before the end of a course, before grades are published. You have to be nuts to think a bad rap might not get back to a tutor before the grades are submitted. It’s not that it would happen, but that it could,” this student complained. “They should have inspectors dropping in from time to time instead,” she suggested.

Patricia MacGregor is an experienced educator herself and so bound to draw comparisons between her Continuing Education tutors at Ryerson and best practice. She has to bite her lip on occasion. “”Do the work to please yourself. You’re not here to please me” seems to be their theme song. Yet when you have what pleases you, they tell you that isn’t what was wanted,” she says.

It’s clear that money and quality are a serious concern for those who often have to go into long-term debt to fund their education. Perhaps the last word should go a chap who struggled when asked to put a value on his education. Paul Morin graduated from U of T recently and saw his annual fees increase from \$4600 to \$5700 during his time there. With financial help from the Ontario Government’s Summer Company program, he launched a cleaning company, Mopsters, to help pay his way but still found finance a challenge. He volunteered this suggestion: “Most people leave school with a small mortgage, so should I compare [my education] to a house?

January 2005