



Student Employment

Introduction

Employment is an important source of income for students. According to Statistics Canada, income from employment held during the current academic year was the second most commonly used source of funding after personal savings. In fact, 63% of students age 20-24 relied on employment to finance their education and over 25% cited income from current employment as their most important source of funding.¹

Although there are several reasons that students are increasingly combining work with school, rapidly increasing tuition fees are most likely the biggest factor. Undergraduate tuition fees in Canada have increased almost 300% from an average of \$1,706 in 1991-92 to \$4,917 in 2009-10.² International students are often charged tuition fees of up to \$15,000 per year, and some professional students in excess of \$25,000. Tuition fees have grown to become the single largest expense for most post-secondary students.

The 2006 College Student Survey (CSS) asked Canadian college students why they worked. A majority said that they worked to “pay for necessities” while another 10 percent said they worked to “pay for school or school-related debt”. Today, one in four college and university students depend on working to make ends meet.

Working during studies

During the 2008-09 year, 48% of full-time students between the ages of 20 and 24 worked during the school year, compared to just 26.6% of their counterparts in 1976.⁴ Part-time students worked even more, with 91% of those between the ages of 20-29 being employed during the course of their degree.⁵ The number of full-time students working more than 35 hours per week has almost doubled over the past two decades.⁶

Full-time students who work do so an average of 15 hours per week, while part-time students work more than 30 hours per week. Over the course of their degree an increasing number of students rely on employment, with over 50% more students working during the last year of their degree than their first.⁷

Female students report working more than their male counterparts. In 2008, female students were 25 % more likely to be employed during the academic year.⁸

Work and Academic Success

Studies have found that working a significant number of hours (over 20 per week) while in school has a negative impact on academic success. Roughly 60% of university students who worked during the year reported that it had a negative impact on their academic performance. One in four of these students rated the impact as significant.^{9,10}

Working during the year also decreases a student’s likelihood of finishing their degree. Statistics Canada’s Youth in Transition study found that, “working at all and working more hours both have a negative effect on persistence”.¹¹

While employment can help a student gain work experience and pay for expenses, students who work over 20 hours a week and rely on employment to pay for the increasing cost of their education find themselves at a disadvantage. As tuition fees and other costs continue to rise, more and more students are finding little choice but to take on more work.

Summer Employment

In summer 2009 student unemployment rose to over 20%, the second highest rate ever recorded. The combination of students having less savings from summer work, family’s savings and income being diminished as a result of the economic downturn and students facing higher tuition fees than ever before has resulted in one-third of college and university students saying they will run out of money by the end of the Fall semester.¹²

More than 4 in 10 students rely on earnings from summer employment to pay for their tuition fees and living costs. For these students, savings from summer work account for over one-third of their money for the year.

The Summer Canada Career Placement Program

The Summer Career Placement Program was created by the federal government in the mid-nineties to help students find summer employment and get career-building work experience. The Program is a partnership between employers and the federal government in which the government subsidises private, public and non-profit employers to hire students over the summer. In 1996, a study done by the government found that nearly 7 in 10 participating employers would not have hired a student without the program, which indicates that the program created summer employment for over 50,000 students.

Cuts and Rebranding

In 2006, the newly elected Conservative government cut the Program's funding in half and rebranded it as the Canada Summer Jobs Program (CSJP). Along with these changes the government also modified the criteria for organisations to receive funding, making it far more restrictive. As a result, many community and not-for-profit groups that had historically received funding would have become ineligible and 25,000 fewer jobs would have been offered the following summer.

Following pressure brought by the Canadian Federation of Students, the government reinvested in the program five months later (before the summer), bringing funding for the summer of 2007 back to roughly 90% of 2006 levels. In 2008 the government slightly increased the Program's funding, bringing it roughly back to the level of funding as in 2006. However, even though summer 2009 was the bleakest job market for students in recent history, the government did not increase funding for the CSJP above 2006 levels.

Workers Rights

International Students Right to Work Off-Campus

International students have been one of the biggest victims of governments' decisions to off load the cost of post-secondary education onto students. While tuition fees for all students skyrocketed in recent decades, differential fees for international students rose to almost three times those paid by domestic students.

Prior to 2006 international students were unable to obtain permits to work off-campus. This prohibition penalised international students who pay significantly higher fees and don't have access to most student financial aid.

In 2006, as a result of lobbying by the Canadian Federation of Students, the federal government changed its policy to allow international students to work off-campus for up to 20 hours per week.

Living Wage

While the cost of attending post-secondary education has increased substantially in recent decades, minimum wages have not followed suit. An undergraduate student studying Law at the University of Toronto in 1980 would have made been able to pay her tuition fees after 5 weeks of full time work at minimum wage (\$3.50/hour). That same student today would have to work 57 weeks to be able to afford their fees.

Minimum wages range from a low of \$8.00 in British Columbia to a high of \$10.00 in Nunavut. Youth aged 15 to 19 are the most likely of any age group to work for minimum wage. Half of all minimum wage workers fall into

this group. A large majority of workers in this age group are enrolled in school full or part time.¹³

Right to Organise

Students are more likely than the general population to work temporary or part-time jobs in the service sector. This leaves students vulnerable to exploitation, and often in a situation where they have little say over health and safety policies, benefits or pay.

Current federal legislation bans students from being able to join a union in the federal public sector—which seems at odds with the fundamental rights outlined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This past summer the Public Service Alliance of Canada filed a lawsuit with the Government of Canada challenging language in the law that excludes students from being considered employees. Without the protection of a union and a collective agreement, student workers are more easily exploited by employers looking for a cheaper and a more “flexible” workforce that does not have a say on health and safety policies, benefits or pay.

Conclusion

Working is a fact of life for most post-secondary students, whether it be during the school year or over the summer. With tuition fees and cost of living having increased substantially over recent decades, income generated from employment is one of the most important sources of financing for students. As many students are forced to work, an increasing number of hours to make ends meet, the concern over the impact this may have on their academic success becomes increasingly serious.

In tougher economic times it is critical for governments to not only remove up-front barriers by reducing tuition fees and increasing funding to student financial aid, but also to ensure students' earn a living wage and are able to find work by funding employers to hire students over the summer through the Canada Summer Jobs program. Failing to properly support students will exacerbate the participation and achievement gap between low- and high-income families.

Endnotes

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3. College Student Survey. 2006. Millennium Scholarship Foundation
4. Back to School—Back to Work... 2005. Scotiabank
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10. Are Student Employment and Academic Success Linked? 2009. Millennium Scholarship Foundation
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12. Many students say cash won't last past Christmas. 2009. Royal Bank of Canada
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