

Tuition Fees for International Undergraduate Students

Introduction

While all students in Canada have faced dramatic fee increases over the last decade, tuition fees for international students have become particularly burdensome in recent years. By fall 2010, average tuition fees for international undergraduate students were \$16,768—more than three times the already high fees paid by Canadian citizens. At some universities, international students pay up to \$20,000 a year in tuition fees, and this figure rises to over \$25,000 for some graduate programs, and a staggering \$40,000 per year for some professional programs such as medicine and law. High differential fees are an unfair burden and a barrier to post-secondary education for international students. Ultimately, such fees could threaten Canada's ability to attract and retain foreign scholars.

The Root Cause: Government Underfunding

International students were not charged differential tuition fees prior to the late 1970s. During the negotiations of federal transfer payments to the provinces in 1976, the federal government suggested that introducing differential tuition fees was an acceptable way for the provinces to generate additional revenue at institutions. Over the next several years many provincial governments responded by cutting or eliminating grants that had previously been provided to post-secondary institutions for the purpose of funding international students. By 1982, all provinces except British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Newfoundland and Labrador were charging differential tuition fees. In Ontario, fees charged were as high as \$6,960.

Throughout the 1990s, tuition fees in Canada skyrocketed for both international students and Canadian citizens as federal and provincial governments cut funding for post-secondary education. Cash-strapped university administrators have increasingly turned to tuition fees to cover operating expenses. In 1988, government funding accounted for roughly 84 percent of university operating budget. Today, that figure had dropped to just over 57 percent.

Governments and post-secondary institutions know that high tuition fees are unpopular with students and their

families. However, because international students have little direct political influence in Canada, many provincial governments and institutional decision-makers see them as an easy target. In some provinces, governments have completely deregulated fees charged to international students so that universities are free to exploit them as a replacement for government funding. Differential tuition fees have thus become an important and politically convenient way of generating revenue for many post-secondary institutions in Canada.

Differential Tuition Fees Across Canada

As shown in Table 1, tuition fees for international students during the 2010-11 year vary dramatically between provinces and institutions. Overall, tuition fees for international students tended to be highest at institutions in Ontario and Alberta, each of whom had universities in the top five positions. Even in provinces where Canadian students are protected by a tuition fee freeze international students are often excluded.

Recently, students have successfully mobilised to defeat tuition fee increases for international students. In August 2008, the Minister of Education and the Minister of Human Resources, Labour and Employment in Newfoundland and Labrador wrote a joint letter to the Board of Regents and suggested that Memorial University consult with the Canadian Federation of Students and shelve a proposed 10 percent fee hike. The Board agreed to stop the hike and study the issue further.

Differential Fees: Short-sighted and Unfair

Access

High tuition fees have already put post-secondary education in Canada beyond the reach of many international students. Low and middle-income students—particularly students from developing countries—face tremendous obstacles in accessing post-secondary education. In fact, international tuition-fees at Canadian universities are usually more than the annual wage of most families in the Global South.

Continued increases could ultimately see access to

TABLE 1: Minimum tuition fees for international undergraduate students, enrolled in the social sciences, 2010-11

U. of British Columbia	\$20,457
U. of Toronto	\$20,420
U. of Waterloo	\$18,110
U. of Alberta	\$17,995
U. of Calgary	\$17,836
Queen's U.	\$17,133
Ryerson U.	\$16,159
U. of Ottawa	\$15,815
Simon Fraser U.	\$15,810
York U.	\$15,514
U. of Victoria	\$15,422
Carleton U.	\$15,270
U. of Western Ontario	\$15,240
Wilfrid Laurier U.	\$14,691
Grant MacEwan College	\$14,550
Bishop's U.	\$14,462
McGill U.	\$14,462
Université de Montréal	\$14,462
Université Laval	\$14,462
Université de Sherbrooke	\$14,462
Concordia U.	\$14,462
U. Québec System	\$14,462
Télé-université	\$14,461
Trent U.	\$14,372
Mount Allison U.	\$14,112
U. of King's College	\$14,100
U. of Ontario Institute of Technology(UOIT)	\$14,040
Brock U.	\$13,871
Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology	\$13,860
Laurentian U. - Université Laurentienne	\$13,700
Royal Roads U.	\$13,635
Lakehead U.	\$13,600
U. of Regina	\$13,596
McMaster U.	\$13,563
Douglas College	\$13,500
Dalhousie U.	\$13,290
U. of Windsor	\$13,260
Acadia U.	\$12,939
St.Lawrence College of Applied Arts and Technology	\$12,848
Capilano U.	\$12,750
Kwantlen Polytechnic U.	\$12,600
Conestoga College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning	\$12,500
St. Thomas U.	\$12,480
St. Francis Xavier U.	\$12,410
U. of Saskatchewan	\$12,347
U. of New Brunswick	\$12,232

Canadian universities and colleges choked off to all but the wealthiest international students and a limited number of poorer students lucky enough to receive full scholarships.

Until recently, the detrimental effects of excessive tuition fees were compounded by regulations that prevented international students from earning money while studying in Canada. However, the Canadian Federation of Students has successfully lobbied to have these restrictions eased. In April 2007, the federal government announced that international students could apply for off-campus work permits.

Some of the support for relaxing the off-campus work regulations came from university and college presidents, some of whom may see the increased income for international students as an excuse to increase tuition fees.

Diversity

International students enrich Canadian academic and social life in innumerable ways. Differential tuition fees are a threat to the intellectual, cultural, and social benefits that a diverse international student population adds to Canadian campuses. The presence of international students in this country also provides a foundation for strengthening relationships between Canada and other societies around the world.

Canada's Immigration Needs

Charging differential tuition fees to international students is drastically out of step with the long-term needs of Canadian society. By 2015, immigration will account for all new labour force growth in Canada.¹ According to the federal government's own research, immigrants who have previously worked or studied in Canada have the easiest time integrating into the Canadian workforce and prospering in Canadian society. Differential tuition fees are a barrier that will discourage such talented people from studying, and eventually settling, in Canada. High tuition fees work directly against the Canadian government's professed goal of building an educated, prosperous, and innovative society.

Canada's International Obligations

As a wealthy country, Canada has both a duty and the material resources to provide assistance to countries and individuals in developing countries. Providing access to affordable education should be an important part of Canada's contribution to international development.

Towards Full and Equal Access for International Students

Restoring funding for post-secondary education to the provinces would reduce the incentive for universities to rely on tuition fees as a means of generating revenue. Provincial re-regulation of differential fees to international students would also help bring skyrocketing costs under control.

In the long term, federal agencies such as Human Resources and Social Development, Industry Canada, and Citizenship and Immigration must coordinate with provincial governments and university administrators to develop strategies that improve access and financial support for international students wishing to study in Canada. Particular attention needs to be focused on ensuring access for international students from lower income backgrounds. Removing barriers faced by international students should be an important component of Canada's international and foreign policy objectives. Improved access for international students would also be an important step towards ensuring Canada's own future as a destination of choice for skilled immigrants.

End Notes:

1. Government of Canada 2010: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/releases/2010/2010-11-01a.asp>

