Towards equitable post-secondary education in Canada:

A literature review on tuition and student debt in Canada and beyond

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Introduction

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states unequivocally that education is a human right. The declaration goes further to say that elementary and fundamental education is to be free to students and that higher education should be made equally accessible to all on the basis of merit (United Nations 1948).

In Canada, governments adhere to this declaration by providing free primary and secondary education for all. However, one can argue that governments' commitments to the mandate of equal access to post-secondary studies have fallen short. This erosion of Canada's commitment to education at higher levels occurs despite the importance of post-secondary education as a public good that benefits everyone, not just the student.

Post-secondary education is a public good. Therefore, it can be challenging to create incentives and structures that encourage potential students to pursue post-secondary education. Out of necessity, students base their decision to undertake post-secondary education on the costs and benefits they would personally incur rather than on its broader social benefits. If a student wants to go to university, they need to consider the costs of doing so (lost income, tuition fees, student debt) and weigh them against the benefits (intellectual fulfilment, well-paying and satisfying work after graduation, a sense of community, etc.). So, to incentivize people to pursue post-secondary education and have our society reap the benefits, we need to provide the financial support needed to tip the scales in favour of undertaking post-secondary education.

In this report, we distinguish between equality and equity. Equality is generally defined as equal treatment for all and providing equal access to the same opportunities. On the other hand, equity places a greater emphasis on achieving fair outcomes rather than a fair distribution of resources. The current education system in Canada is neither equal nor equitable.

The lack of equity and equality in our education system can be seen from lack of funding for early childhood education in many provinces, enhanced programs that receive additional funding but primarily serve children from high-income families, discrimination by teachers and other education professionals, and much more. Inequities are evident when we consider achievement gaps at all education levels, post-secondary access rates, and graduation rates. Any policy that seeks to improve post-secondary outcomes among underserved students must be examined through an equity lens.

This review is organized as follows: the proceeding section informs on the trends observed in tuition costs and student debt in Canada and abroad. The second section provides a detailed literature review on tuition models. The third section continues the literature review and addresses loans and student debt. The final section concludes with a short description of how the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) could approach the task of developing a policy proposal for universal tuition and student-debt abolition.

1. Tuition and Debt in Canada and Beyond

For over five decades, post-secondary tuition fees in Canada have been on the rise, even while accounting for inflation. Tuition increases have come in bursts, driven by changes in governments' attitudes and policies of the time. Further, Canada's fees for post-secondary education make it one of the most expensive countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in which to study (for both domestic and international students). This section examines trends in tuition costs in Canada and how Canada's tuition costs compare to those of other countries.

TRENDS IN TUITION

Changes in attitudes and policy around post-secondary tuition began as far back as the 1970s and have contributed to today's relatively high tuition fees. In this section, we examine the turning points in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that have contributed to Canada's relatively high fees for post-secondary education. We also explore the dramatic impact these turning points have had on tuition cost for both Canadian and international students.

DEREGULATION OF FEES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE 1970S

In 1976, there was a notable increase in the average tuition paid by international students enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate programs. This increase was not the result of a specific policy change. Rather, some universities increased their fees for international students in response to Pierre Trudeau's public musings that, perhaps, Canadian universities should simply charge higher fees to international students (Glover 2018).

Before 1976, universities always had the power to charge higher fees to international students, but before Trudeau's public comments on the topic, few, if any, did. Provinces quickly adopted their own policies for enabling universities to charge differential rates for international and domestic students, and by 1982 all provinces except for British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Newfoundland and Labrador were charging differential tuition fees (Glover 2018). As a result of this shift, international students' fees increased significantly, as Figure 1 shows.

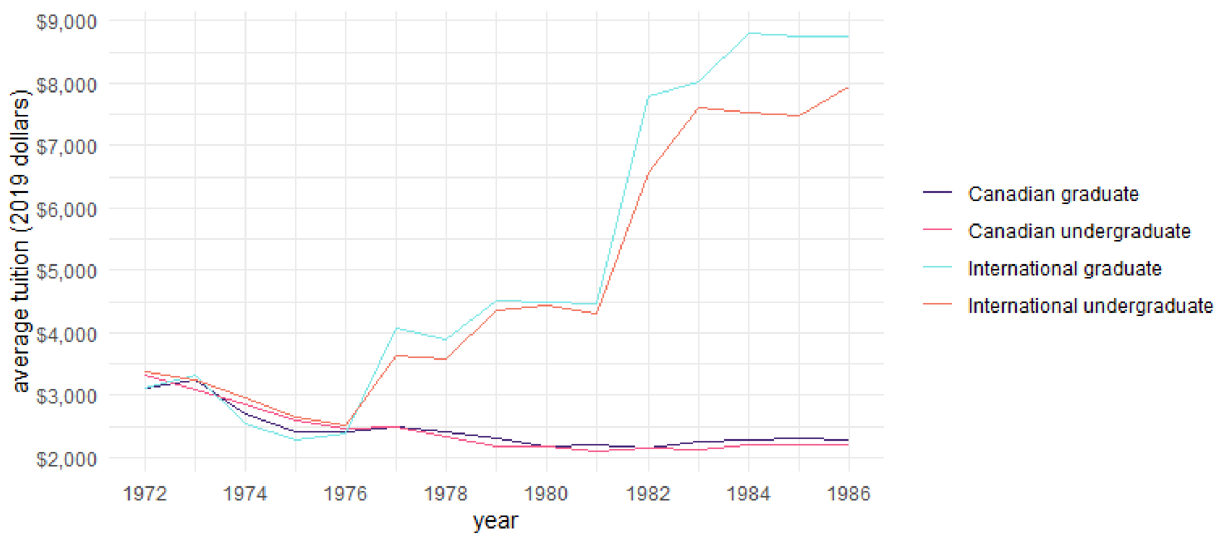

Figure 1: Average tuition fees for domestic and international undergraduate and graduate programs (2019 dollars), 1972 to 1986 academic year (Statistics Canada Tables 37-10-0160-01 and 18-10-0005-01)

From 1976 to 1977, the average tuition fee paid by international students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs increased by 43.8% and 70.8%, respectively. By 1986, the average tuition fee paid by international undergraduate students had increased by 68.3%. Between 1976 and 1986, average fees charged to international graduate students more than tripled (267.8%). In contrast, tuition for domestic students remained relatively stable, decreasing slightly.

THE MULRONEY ERA

In 1986, the Conservative federal government led by Mulroney implemented the Established Programs Financing initiative, which represented the first significant step away from federally funded post-secondary education. This initiative limited cash transfers to provinces to GDP growth minus 2%. Prior to this change, federal government funding accounted for roughly 80% of post-secondary institutions' operating revenue. In 1989, the Mulroney government froze funding for Established Programs (transfer payments to the provinces for post-secondary education), cut the program by 1% and announced an additional $2 billion in cuts over the next three years (Glover 2018). This measure's impact shows up clearly in the data on average tuition fees, as presented in Figure 2.

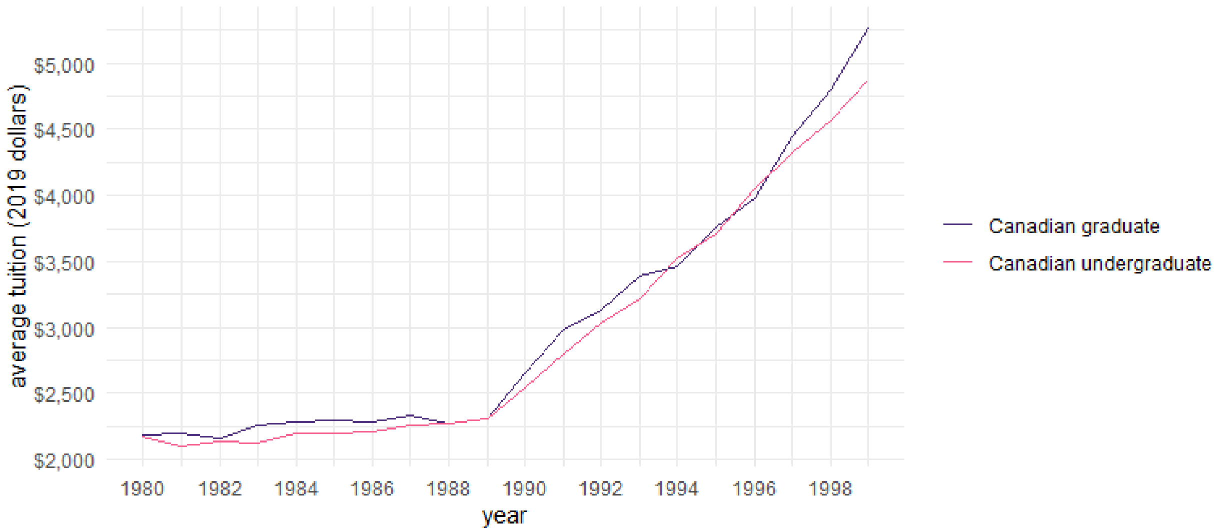

Figure 2: Average tuition fees for domestic undergraduate and graduate programs (2019 dollars), 1986 to 1999 academic year (Statistics Canada Tables 37-10-0160-01 and 18-10-0005-01)

While the immediate increase in the average cost of post-secondary education for domestic students was not as dramatic as that for international students in the 1970s, the long-term rise in tuition costs has been significant. From 1989 to 1990, average tuition fees for undergraduate and graduate students increased by 9.9% and 15.0%, respectively. Ten years later, average fees for domestic undergraduate and graduate students had increased by 110.8% and 128.7%, respectively, more than double that of 1989.

THE 1990S: COST PRESSURES AND DEREGULATING PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS

In 1995, the Liberal Chrétien government passed the Student Financial Assistance Act, which gave the banks a 5% risk share for student-loan losses. Prior to the passing of this act, the federal government guaranteed banks for student loan defaults. The following year, the Chrétien government reduced transfers to the provincial governments by $7 billion and bundled together federal cash transfers to the provinces that were previously earmarked for specific purposes. As a result, some provinces chose to have universities and colleges bear the burden of the federal government's cuts, resulting in higher tuition fees. In Ontario, the provincial government, led by Harris' Progressive Conservatives, also moved to deregulate professional programs. This further enabled universities in the province to raise fees (Glover 2018).

According to the data, average tuition fees for domestic graduate and undergraduate students continued to increase during this period, with a notable increase in average graduate fees over time. As shown in Figure 3, from 1996 to 2006, the average tuition fee for domestic undergraduate and graduate students increased by 33.8% and 101.3%, respectively. For international undergraduate and graduate students, fees increased by 40.8% and 46.9%, respectively.

Figure 3: Average tuition fees for domestic undergraduate and graduate programs (2019 dollars), 1995 to 2006 academic year (Statistics Canada Tables 37-10-0160-01 and 18-10-0005-01)

MODERN TRENDS

The trends in tuition costs of the last century have set the stage for the tuition costs we see today. As of the 2020/2021 academic year, the average tuition cost for domestic undergraduate and graduate students is $6,580 and $7,304, respectively. As Figure 4 below demonstrates, international students' tuition fees have continued to climb, even after controlling for inflation. For the 2020/2021 academic year, the average tuition paid by undergraduate international students is $32,019. For international graduate students, the national average fee is $19,252, respectively (Statistics Canada 2021d).

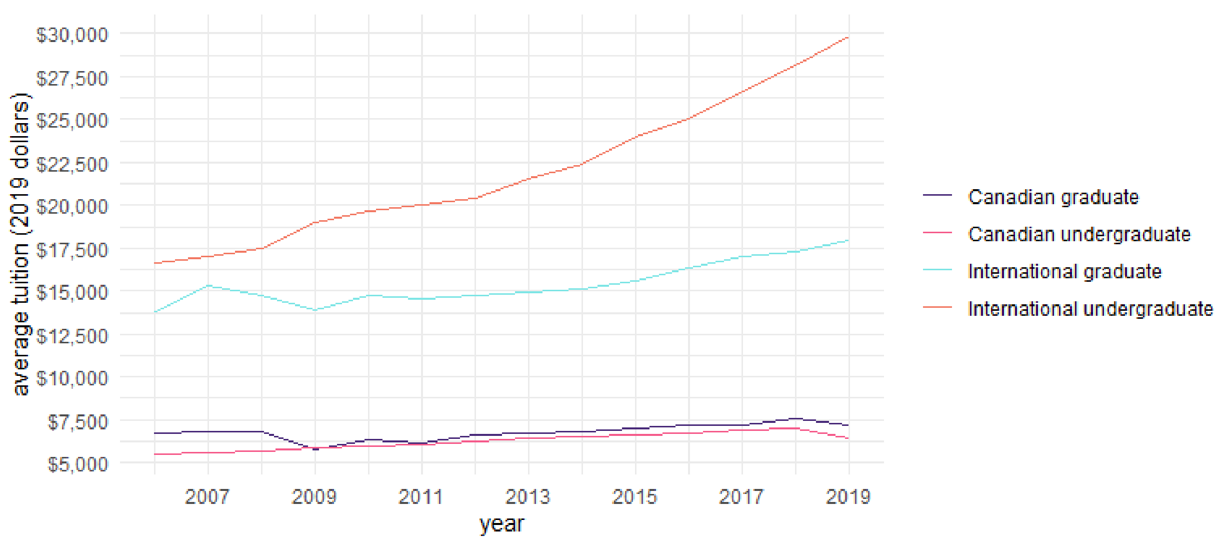

Figure 4: Average tuition fees for domestic and international undergraduate and graduate programs (2019 dollars), 2006 to 2019 academic year (Statistics Canada Tables 37-10-0045-01 and 18-10-0005-01)

For domestic undergraduate students, fees have increased across nearly all study areas. Figure 5 compares the average tuition for undergraduate degrees for various subject areas and shows a consistent increase in fees between 2006 and 2019. Subjects with the largest increase in average fees are architecture, engineering, and business, management and public administration, with average fees in 2019 of $6,470, $7,949, and $6,795, respectively.

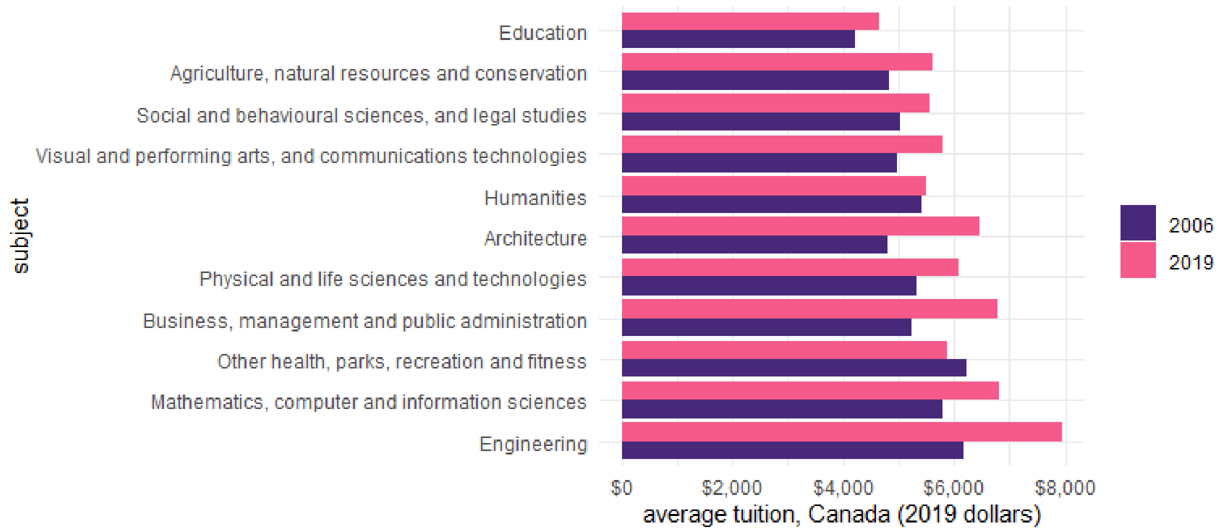

Figure 5: Average tuition for undergraduate programs by subject, 2006 and 2019 academic years (2019 dollars) (Statistics Canada Tables 37-10-0003-01 and 18-10-0005-01)

The same trend in fee increases has also occurred for graduate programs, except for graduate programs related to business, management and public administration. The fees for these programs, on average, fell from $18,548 to $13,145, as shown in Figure 6. This may be due to changes in the variety of programs considered in this subject.

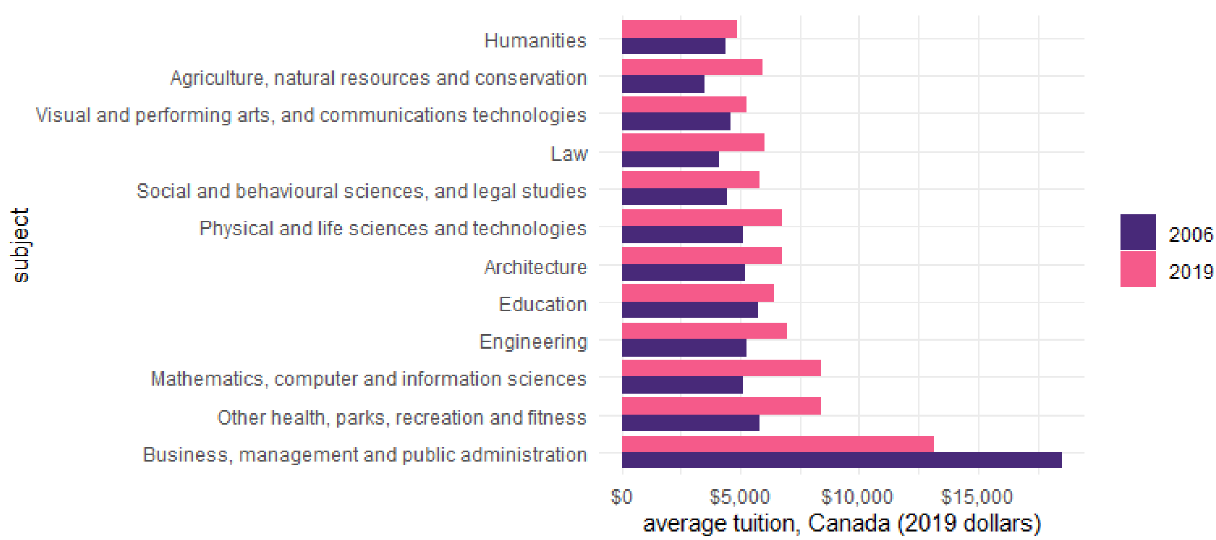

Figure 6: Average tuition for graduate programs by subject, 2006 and 2019 academic years (2019 dollars) (Statistics Canada Tables 37-10-0004-01 and 18-10-0005-01)

INTERNATIONAL TUITION TRENDS

Canadian students pay more to participate in undergraduate and graduate programs than both domestic and international students in several other nations. In the graphs presented in this section, we use OECD data produced in the report *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators* to compare Canada's tuition fees for undergraduate and graduate programs to those of other countries (OECD 2019). Figure 7 below presents the average tuition paid by domestic students for undergraduate and masters programs for select countries with comparable data and shows Canada's relative ranking in terms of affordability.

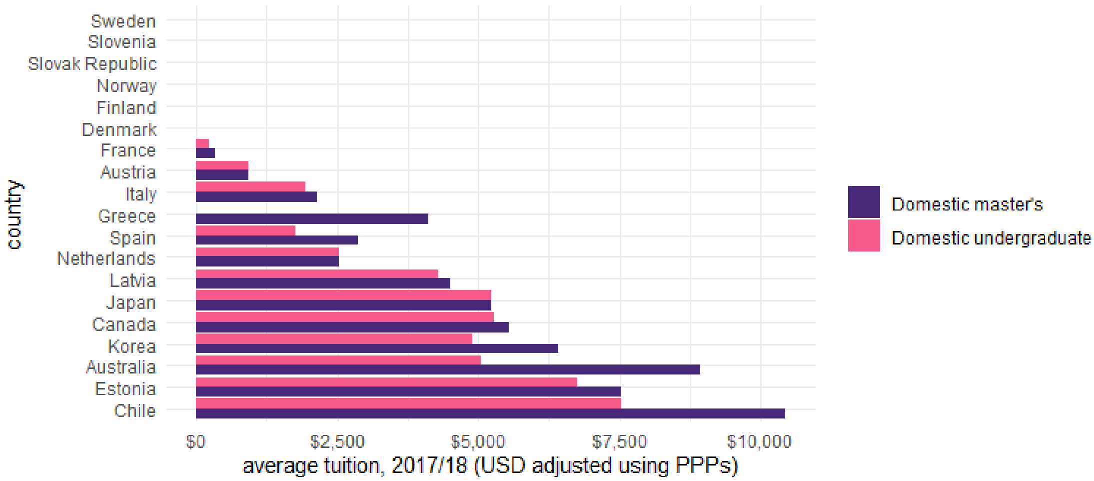

Figure 7: Average tuition for domestic undergraduate and graduate student of comparable OECD countries, 2017/2018 (as reported in *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*)

Of the countries included in this sample, domestic students enrolled in undergraduate and master's programs in Sweden, Slovenia, the Slovak Republic, Norway, Finland, and Denmark pay no tuition. Domestic undergraduate students that study in Greece also do not pay tuition fees. Students that study domestically in France, Austria, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and Latvia pay substantially less for access to both undergraduate and masters programs than Canadian domestic students.

According to the data in Figure 7, domestic undergraduate and graduate students in Estonia and Chile pay more for post-secondary education than students in Canada. Domestic undergraduate students in the United States (not reported in the figure) also pay more than those in Canada, with an average tuition fee of $8,804.[1]

Domestic students in Canada pay more for tuition than students in many other nations, and the same is also true for international students. Using data from the same

[1] Higher cost of education for students is not necessarily linked to higher quality of education. One study by Millot (2012) found that only public spending on post-secondary education had a positive impact on the quality of education.

OECD report, Figure 8 ranks Canadian tuition fees for international students against those of other countries that charge differential rates to international students. The figure presents the ratio of average international tuition to domestic tuition to demonstrate how much greater international students' fees are than those for domestic students, proportionally. Importantly, most countries represented in the OECD report do not charge differential rates to international students. These countries include Chile, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Norway, the Slovak Republic, and Spain.

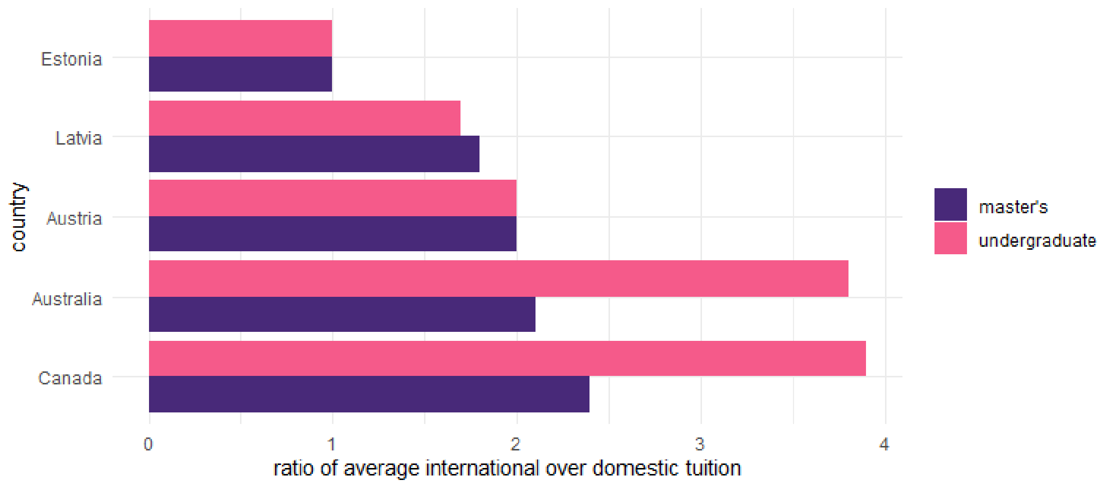

Figure 8: The ratio of average tuition for international students over that of domestic students, undergraduate and master's, for comparable OECD countries, 2017/2018 (as reported in *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*)

Based on the data presented in Figure 8, the average tuition for an international student in Canada is 3.9 times more than the average tuition of a domestic student. Likewise, the average tuition fee for international graduate students is 2.4 times greater than that of a domestic student. Sweden is not included in the chart but charges differential rates to international students. Domestic students pay no tuition, but international students pay $14,679 (OECD 2019).

STUDENT DEBT BOTH IN CANADA AND INTERNATIONALLY

The average tuition fees for domestic and international students of all academic levels in Canada have increased significantly since the 1970s. Meanwhile, tuition fees in other countries have fallen over time, making Canada an OECD nation with some of the highest post-secondary education fees. Canada's high tuition costs are coupled with high student debt. Data from 2015 show that 50% of post-secondary students in Canada had student debt upon graduating. The median student debt for Canadians at graduation was $17,500. Of students that graduated in 2015, 29% had a debt of over $30,000.

The majority of students that graduated in 2015 with debt owed money on government-sponsored student loans. Of all students that graduated that year, 38% owed money on their government student loans, and the median amount owed was

$15,000. A proportion of students also owed money to non-government sources (24%) and the median amount owed to these sources was $10,000.

The typical student debt of both undergraduate and graduate students varies by the subject of study, as Figure 9 below shows. The typical amount of student debt for those studying the following subjects is $20,000: 1) social and behavioural sciences and law; 2) business, management and public administration; 3) architecture, engineering, and related technologies; 4) STEM; 5) BHASE (non-STEM); and 6) mathematics, and computer and information systems. These data also show that the typical undergraduate student leaves their program with more student debt than a student graduating from master's programs.

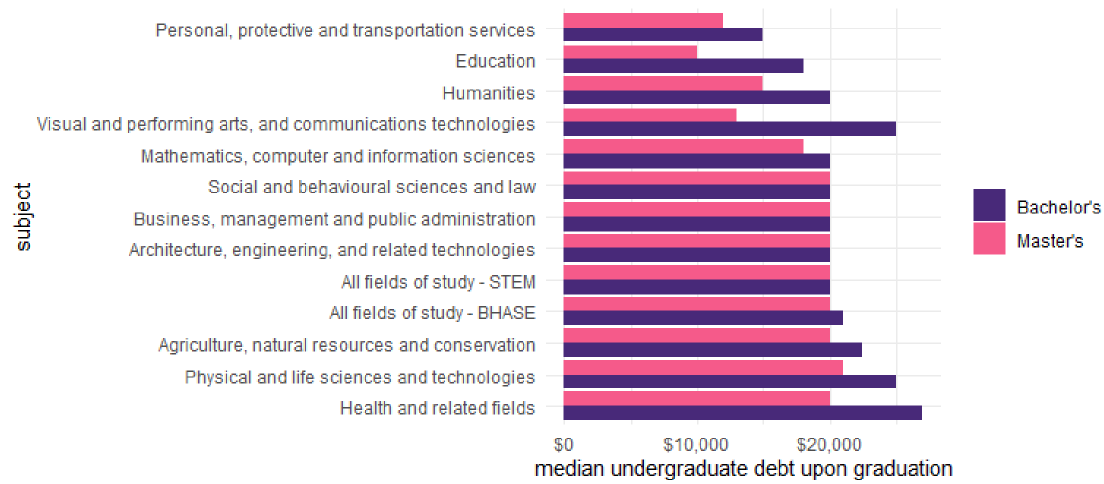

Figure 9: Median Student debt (government and private) of undergraduate students upon completion, 2015 (2015 dollars) (Statistics Canada Tables 37-10-0200-01 and 18-10-0005-01)

Given that many nations have free tuition or much lower tuition costs than in Canada, Canadian students graduate with more student debt than domestic students in many other countries. Figure 10 below provides the average amount of government-issued student debt held by students upon graduation for various nations where government loans are available (and where data are available).

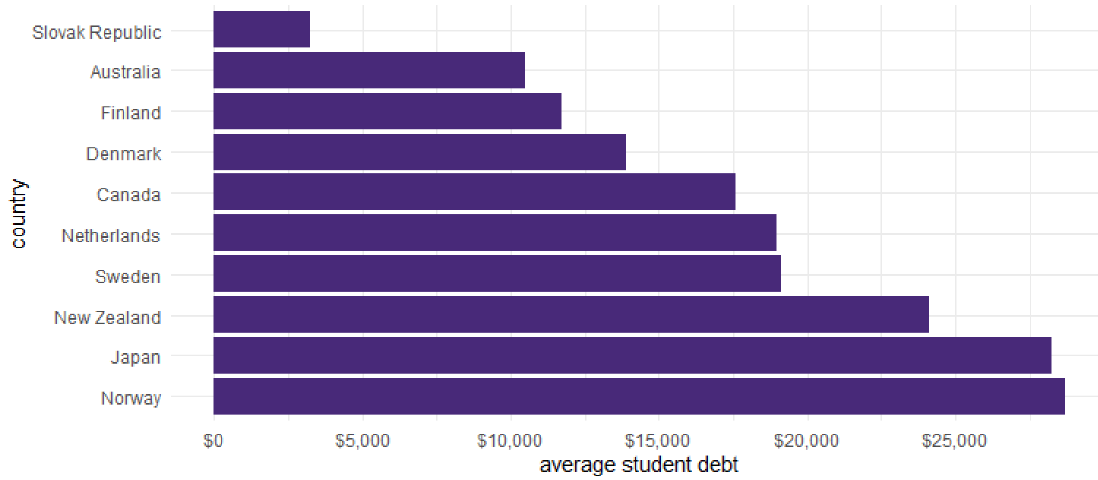

Figure 10: Average public student debt of undergraduate students upon completion for select OECD countries, 2017/2018 (USD) (as reported in *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*)

The average student debt in Canada is greater than that of the Slovak Republic, Australia, Finland, and Denmark. Canadian students do not have more government-issued debt on average than students in other OECD countries like Norway, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, or the Netherlands. However, it is important to note that these data do not consider private student debt, which many Canadian students incur. Interestingly, many of the nations with the highest average student debt from government-issued loans also offer free tuition to domestic students, specifically Norway and Sweden.

2. The Benefits of Tuition-Free Post-Secondary Education

Over the past 40 years, Canadian post-secondary institutions have grappled with a continuous reduction in federal government funding. Concurrent with this trend is the increasing privatization of the post-secondary sector (Fisher *et al.* 2009, Glover 2018), increased marketing efforts to attract international students (Kirby 2007) and increasing compensation for university executives above inflation (Usher 2017).

Beginning in the 1970s, universities and colleges began charging differential tuition for international students at a significantly higher rate. However, as federal funding became increasingly scarce, and with provincial governments choosing not to supplement the forgone funding, revenues from international tuition payments were no longer enough to sustain operational costs. This crunch triggered tuition fee increases for domestic students as well.

Before the 1980s, tuition fees accounted for, on average, 15% of institutional operating costs, with government funding covering the remainder. However, by 1998 the proportion of operating revenue provided by the federal government had fallen to only 64.5%, with tuition covering 30.6% (Schwartz and Finnie 2000). Now, except in Quebec and Newfoundland, tuition fees account for up to 50% of operating costs, an all-time high (Glover 2018).

The financial burden of post-secondary education has, over time, been shifted from government and placed squarely upon the shoulders of students and their families. The previous section's analysis highlighted how this shift has significantly increased tuition fees in Canada. Post-secondary education is becoming increasingly inaccessible, particularly for traditionally underrepresented groups, including BIPOC students, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families.

In the sections that follow, we investigate the social problems that arise due to high tuition costs. We also investigate the benefits and limitations of affordable post-secondary education, using Quebec as a case study. Finally, we present three international cases that highlight alternative models of affordable post-secondary education, pointing out each's strengths and limitations.

PROBLEMS WITH HIGH TUITION: THE CASE OF ONTARIO

Increasing tuition rates in Ontario and other provinces has led to the crowding out of low-income and underrepresented students[2]. In the broader Canadian context, the relative number of people from underrepresented groups that enrol in post-secondary programs has decreased in provinces where tuition has increased. Likewise, in provinces where tuition rates have been frozen, this enrolment equity gap has fallen (Glover 2018).

Furthermore, over the past 30 years, the number of low-income students enrolling in Canadian universities has increased. However, during this time the overall share of low-income students in post-secondary institutions declined, suggesting that our post-secondary system is more accessible to high-income students (Glover 2018). Far less research has been done on how tuition increases impact middle-income students. However, a 2015 study by Finnie, Mueller and Sweetman found middle-income students to be the most affected by tuition increases as they are often not eligible for financial aid.

Historically, students from Ontario pay on average the highest tuition fees and have the highest debt loads among all other provinces, disadvantaging low- and middle-income students[3]. This trend is especially evident since 2006, when the

[2] Underrepresented groups include 1) students from low-income families and single-parent families, 2) first-generation post-secondary students, 3) students from rural areas, 4) students whose mother tongue is French (except for those residing in Quebec), 5) students who are immigrants or the child of an immigrant, 6) Indigenous students, 7) Black students, and 8) students with disabilities.

[3] However, as of the 2020/2021 academic year, average tuition costs for domestic undergraduate students in Nova Scotia have exceeded those in Ontario: $8,478 versus $7,931 (Statistics Canada 2021d)

McGuinty government (Liberal) set annual tuition fee increases at 4% for most university programs and 8% for professional programs. After tuition fees increased by $1,000 from 1993 to 2004, university enrolment of low-income youth fell by 13 percentage points relative to high-income youth (Coelli 2009).

In an effort to make post-secondary education more accessible to low- and middle-income students, the provincial Liberal government led by Wynne introduced major reforms to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) in the 2017/2018 academic year. The major change included turning many loans into grants. As a result, 98% of financial aid would be provided as grants rather than 60% the previous year. The new measures also included restricting student debt to $5,000 per term (Office of the Auditor General, 2018).

The office of the Auditor General of Ontario released a report in 2018 suggesting that the small increases in enrolment that would likely result from Wynne's measures (1% increase in university enrolment and 2% increase for colleges) could not justify the associated increase in spending (Office of the Auditor General, 2018).

However, the report fails to mention that many low-income students who were already enrolled would be under less financial pressure while studying and experience lower debt at graduation. Furthermore, there is no mention of mental health in the report, equity, or race. Based on the report, the Ford government reversed the previous government's changes in 2019.

BENEFITS OF LOW TUITION: THE CASE OF QUEBEC

Since the 1960s in Quebec, the post-secondary Collège d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel (CÉGEPs) have been tuition-free. University tuition has also been kept low for Quebec residents, largely due to widespread and consistent student mobilization (Trottier 2018). However, in 2019 tuition fees for international students were deregulated, meaning institutions could set international tuition prices independently (Authier 2018).

While the evidence from Ontario suggests that higher tuition reduces access to post-secondary education for underrepresented students, evidence from Quebec presents a more nuanced picture. The equity enrolment gap has not increased, but it has not fallen for most groups either.

Unlike other provinces, students from rural regions in Quebec are not disadvantaged in terms of post-secondary participation, and neither are second-generation immigrants. However, first-generation immigrants are disadvantaged to an even greater extent than those residing in Ontario. For all other underrepresented groups, enrolment trends in Ontario and Quebec are similar and statistically indistinguishable (Finnie and Mueller 2017).

Quebec's inability to narrow the equity enrolment gap while having free CÉGEP and low-cost university affirms evidence found in other countries with zero-tuition: barriers to accessing post-secondary education manifest much sooner than the date a student must pay tuition. Parental education level, sociocultural factors, and academic preparation (high school grades & quality of high school education) all impact access to post-secondary education significantly more than does tuition cost (Finnie, Mueller, and Sweetman 2015, Finnie and Mueller 2017).

Parental income is a large determinant of post-secondary enrolment since it is a key determinant of academic preparedness. For example, one study found that students, on average, decided by grade 10 if they would apply to post-secondary education programs (Finnie, Mueller, and Sweetman 2015). Therefore, early intervention programs to address barriers need to be targeting younger students (Finnie and Mueller 2017). Universal tuition can enhance the equity of the post-secondary system once early barriers to post-secondary education have been eliminated.

EVIDENCE FROM ARGENTINA

Argentina has had tuition-free post-secondary education since 1918, a policy that has been vigorously defended by advocates both nationally and worldwide. Free tuition has eliminated a large barrier to post-secondary education, and in 2014 the gross enrolment rate sat at 83%.

However, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Argentina are less likely to graduate than higher income students. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds had only a 13% chance of graduating within 11 years compared to 57% of students from the highest socioeconomic background (Adrogué and Gracia de Fanelli 2018). The disparity in graduation rates is driven by the fact that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have different experiences while pursuing post-secondary education than their higher-income counterparts.

Despite Argentina having zero tuition, 90% of the students in public universities have incomes higher than the per capita median, and nearly 50% attend tuition-financed private high schools (Rozada and Menendez, 2002). In a context where predominantly high-income students have access to post-secondary education and can afford to forgo employment earnings while completing their degree, universal tuition has the drawback of providing a subsidy to predominantly wealthy students.

EVIDENCE FROM IRELAND

The abolishment of tuition in 1996 in the Republic of Ireland had no impact on access to post-secondary by income group, a phenomenon largely explained by Ireland's extensive grant program for low-income students. The program was in existence before 1996 and made tuition effectively free for low-income students, meaning the 1996 abolishment of tuition only impacted mid- to high-income students.

Ireland's experience provides proof that grants can be effective in providing targeted free tuition for low-income students.

The limited equity impact of low or free tuition in Quebec, Ireland, and Argentina raises the question: what non-tuition-based policies could be enacted to encourage post-secondary enrolment and completion? Evidence from research conducted in the US, discussed below, provides some inspiration.

EVIDENCE FROM THE UNITED STATES

The United States is known for its extremely high tuition fees. While the post-secondary education system is largely inaccessible for low-income and traditionally underserved students, various pilot projects and state-level policies can be examined to understand the linkages between tuition and the equity gap.

Given the socioeconomic division between in-state public post-secondary education and private institutions, one policy option gaining traction is for in-state public post-secondary institutions to be made tuition-free. Such a policy could partially avoid subsidizing the rich as only 3% of students attending in-state public colleges and universities come from families earning more than $250,000 (Goldrick-Rab & Steinbaum 2020).

Targeted tuition models, like what used to be in place in Ireland, may also provide support to students for which post-secondary education is inaccessible. One problem with targeted tuition models is that they require students to commit significant time finding and applying for grants, scholarships, or loans. Often, the outcomes of this time investment are uncertain. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that some low-income students may not apply due to community norms or biases they hold. As a result, low-income students are less likely to apply to more selective schools, despite not being any less likely to be accepted (Dynarski, Libassi, Michelmore, and Owen 2018).

However, intriguing research by Dynarski, Libassi, Michelmore, and Owen (2018) in the United States offers a solution. This study framed financial assistance as a scholarship and notified all eligible low-income students in the control group to apply to a more selective school. Once framed as recognition of high-achievement rather than needs-based assistance, the intervention successfully eliminated the income gap in college attendance among the study participants. The authors point out that acceptance into selective schools is particularly positive since students are more likely to graduate if they attend the best school in which they can enrol.

The approach put forward by the researchers provides several important insights. First, needs-based grants can increase access to post-secondary education (even in institutions with high tuition fees). Further, successful interventions must facilitate decision making by eliminating the time and effort required to seek out funds and apply for programs. Lastly, traditionally underrepresented groups may need additional support and encouragement to apply for more selective schools or programs (Dynarski, Libassi, Michelmore, and Owen 2018).

FUNDING FOR UNIVERSAL OR TARGETED TUITION

In the past, the cost of education in Canada was generally borne by the government and funded through progressive taxes on higher incomes. After the Second World War, nearly all post-secondary funding came from the federal and provincial governments. As described in previous sections, this changed with funding cuts from the federal government in the 1980s and 1990s (Glover 2018). Operating grants from the provinces to institutions continue to be the largest funding source in the post-secondary sector (Usher 2020).

In multiple countries, including Germany and the Nordic countries, education is financed through their dual income tax system where labour income and capital income are regarded as two separate tax bases (Schindler 2010). Under certain economic conditions, this model of funding can be quite progressive[4].

Another model for funding the post-secondary system is a graduate tax. In this model, graduates pay a certain percentage in tax towards funding post-secondary education once they reach a certain income threshold (Dietsch 2006). The tax rate could be set at a level that creates enough revenue to cover the full cost of higher education, making the program a self-financing funding model. Because the graduate tax is conditional on reaching a certain level of earnings after graduation it would be a redistributive tax. Ideally, a graduate tax would require cooperation among multiple countries so that the tax could be enforceable on income earned abroad.

The United States does not fund post-secondary education. However, we can draw insights from their funding models for primary education to learn how *not* to fund a post-secondary system. A large portion of revenue for primary education comes from property taxes, explaining some of the major inequities generated between districts (Semuels 2016).

Tax credits targeted to students also factor into the cost of post-secondary education at the national level, and the experience of Ireland demonstrates how these credits can be repurposed to fund free tuition. Prior to eliminating tuition for undergraduates in Ireland, families who did not qualify for needs-based exemptions could receive a tax break equivalent to the fees. The government since abolished that tax rebate and the funds are used to help finance the tuition-free model (Denny 2014).

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[4] Within such a model, the tax system is most progressive when unskilled labour responds more to changes in the average wage rates relative to skilled labour The terms "skilled" and "unskilled" labour are common in economics and therefore used in this review when referencing this specific article. More accurate terms would be "high wage" and "low wage" work because skill is subjective, and wages are determined by supply and demand. Furthermore, the terms "skilled/unskilled" often perpetuate gender and racial stereotypes.

Canada has a similar a tuition tax credit which, like in Ireland, could be abolished to help pay for universal post-secondary (Government of Canada 2020b).

3. The Benefits of Post-secondary Debt Cancellation

Sections one and two discuss the high tuition fees paid by students in Canada and the problems these high fees cause for students. This section discusses governments' historical use of grants, loans, and merit-based loans to help students access post-secondary education. We highlight governments' increasing use of loans instead of grants over time and the implications of this trend on student debt.

LOANS AND GRANTS

Student assistance is an area of joint responsibility between the provincial and federal governments. The Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP) is funded by the federal government and provides loans and grants to Canadian students pursuing post-secondary education (Government of Canada 2020a). In addition to this program, each province has its own student aid program.

In the 1990s, several governments converted their grants to loans. In Ontario, the Rae government (NDP) converted most funding received through OSAP from grants to loans (Glover 2018). Current policy in the province states that student loans are subsidized during the study period (zero nominal interest rate) and must begin to be repaid six months post-graduation.

Over-reliance on loans as the primary tool for student financing, coupled with increasing tuition costs, has led to increasing student debt. Debt aversion is an important barrier to post-secondary education for students who cannot afford to pay their tuition upfront. Compared to high-income students, low-income students are more reluctant to take on student debt and thus less likely to participate in post-secondary education. Low-income students are more likely to view education costs as burdensome debt, while high-income students view these expenses as an investment (Haker and Saltis 2018).

In 2016, the federal government addressed growing concerns surrounding student debt by committing to making student aid more effective. The government increased the maximum amount of support given to low-income recipients of the Canada Student Grant and modified the income thresholds. It also cancelled the education and textbook tax credit and announced that the saved tax revenue would be put towards either grants or loans. As well, the government amended the Repayment Assistance Plan (RAP) to allow students to postpone the first payment of a student loan until they are earning at least $25,000 per year (Trottier 2018). These changes partially contributed to 2016/2017 being the first year in nearly a decade where government expenditures on post-secondary education increased (Usher 2020).

MERIT-BASED AID

In addition to the general shift from grants to loans, financial support has shifted from needs-based to merit-based. In 2017/2018, universities and colleges provided almost $2.5 billion in scholarships and bursary funding to students. Most of this aid was provided by universities to graduate students. Scholarships are the fastest-growing segment of university expenditure (Usher 2020).

However, merit-based grants increase inequality and have no impact on enrolment rates (Herbaut and Geven 2019). Studies show that students from a lower socioeconomic status are less likely to qualify for merit-based awards (Heller 2004). Research from the United States that considered race and class found that "merit aid was primarily awarded to class-privileged Caucasian men and women and that African Americans and Hispanics were less likely to receive merit-based scholarships as part of their financial aid packages, with few exceptions" (Price 2001:16). One study found that merit-based scholarships widened inequality between students since merit is generally measured by academic preparedness, which is correlated with family income (Mueller 2008).

It is not surprising that institutions use merit-based grants; perhaps these grants are a way to attract the best students and maximize the institution's private gains (like prestige). However, higher education is important from a government's perspective because it increases human capital and reduces inequalities. When governments provide merit-based aid, it is contradictory because they do so at the expense of students with unmet financial needs and intensify inequalities.

IMPACTS OF DEBT

Tuition fees and debt are positively correlated. However, other factors influence the amount of student debt one may take on, like living expenses. For example, the percentage of students with loans in zero tuition countries ranges from 11% to 68% (Haker and Saltis 2018). These loans are often used to cover students' living expenses while enrolled in post-secondary education, where they are unlikely to be earning enough income to support themselves.

Due to student loans, low-income students that take loans pay higher tuition than their higher-income peers who have the financial means to pay for their degree upfront. Furthermore, debt creates economic drag and causes students to delay making large purchasing decisions such as buying a house or car and life choices such as having children (Glover 2018).

The downsides of student debt are compounded by poor bankruptcy protections in Canada. In 1998, lobby groups successfully organized to remove consumer protections from debt, including bankruptcy protection. New rules were put in place that disallow people from discharging their debt through bankruptcy within seven years after completing a degree (Glover 2018). These changes make the prospect of taking on debt even more risky, to the detriment of students that cannot pay high tuition fees upfront.

Large debt (like student loans) can contribute to social stratification (class divide) and reverse the positive upward mobility associated with pursuing a post-secondary degree (Pyne and Grodsky 2019). In the United States, downwards mobility has been documented among economically successful African American parents, and some research suggests that education debt may be an aggravating factor. Parents with debt might be unable to support their children's educational outcomes, which limits their ability to pass on intergenerational wealth.

Financial insecurity resulting from high tuition fees and debt is a determinant of poor mental health (Glover 2018). Furthermore, financial stress is linked to poorer academic performance and lower graduation rates (Goldrick-Rab & Steinbaum 2020). Low graduation rates often result in individuals having student debt but not having completed a post-secondary degree, further exacerbating the financial stress of having to pay back a loan.

Stress related to debt begins while students are still pursuing their degree. Debt can be equally harmful for the mental health of parents who have taken out loans on their child's behalf (Walsemann, Ailshire and Hartnett 2019). It is crucial to note that studies have shown that mental health outcomes are not correlated with the amount of debt but with financial difficulties associated with paying off debt (McCloud and Bann 2019).

Students from low-income families experience worse mental health outcomes when they or their family members struggle to pay off debt compared to their peers who do not struggle with debt. Additionally, students who graduate during a period with poor labour market conditions (which is particularly relevant given COVID-19) are more likely to experience difficulties paying back their loans, further exacerbating financial uncertainty and related stress (Mueller 2008).

DEBT FORGIVENESS

Policy surrounding debt cancellation is complex as it depends on which institutions absorb the debt. Roughly 60% of publicly owed student debt in Canada is owed to the federal government, and the remainder is owed to provincial governments. Excluding privately owned debt, Canadian students owe roughly $15 billion to the federal government and $10 billion to provincial governments (Glover 2018). Therefore, student debt cancellation would likely increase federal and provincial budget deficits.

Despite its complexities, debt cancellation would likely deliver several positive impacts, such as increased home buying and retirement savings, mobility in the labour market, and a greater likelihood that individuals return to school (Huelsman 2019). It would also create macroeconomic benefits by increasing household net worth and disposable income, in turn increasing consumption and investment spending. As a result, there would be an increase in the gross domestic product (GDP), a decrease in average unemployment, and only modest inflationary pressure and increases in the interest rate (Fullwiler, Kelton, Ruetschilin and Steinbaum 2018).

In addition to reduced inequality and macroeconomic gains, debt forgiveness has important social impacts. As mentioned before, debt and the accompanying financial insecurity have negative mental health consequences and forgiving debt can alleviate this harm. Further, student debt forgiveness can address the problem of debt aversion as a barrier to pursuing post-secondary education. It also better enables first-generation students to achieve social mobility and gain intergenerational wealth transfers associated with their expected lifetime earnings.

Debt cancellation needs to be targeted to maximize equity impacts. Debt cancellation that targets low- and middle-income households will have the greatest impact on minimizing the wealth gap. Evidence from the United States suggests that a complete debt jubilee would increase the racial wealth gap despite increasing median incomes for all households (Sullivan, Meschede, Dietrich, Shapiro, Huelsman, and Draut 2015). Compared to high-income families, low-income families often have more debt as a share of wealth and earnings but less debt in absolute terms. As a result, high-income families would benefit more, in absolute terms, from universal debt forgiveness than low-income families.

Debt forgiveness targeted to low-income families can be very beneficial because low-income families are more likely to default on their debt, which negatively impacts credit scores that are essential for making large purchases (Fullwiler, Kelton, Ruetschilin, and Steinbaum 2018). This higher risk of default can be partially explained by the fact that individuals who hold small amounts of student debt may not have completed their degree. Therefore, these people do not have the same means to pay off their loans (Sullivan, Meschede, Dietrich, Shapiro, Huelsman and Draut 2015).

4. Knowledge Gaps and Recommendations for Future Research

The data analysis and literature review undertaken for this report highlight the shortcomings of Canada's post-secondary system and the need for reform to promote equity. However, evidence from other countries and Canadian provinces illustrate that free tuition alone cannot guarantee equal access to post-secondary education.

For universal access to tuition and debt forgiveness to benefit all students, these policies need to be coupled with other interventions that encourage students to consider post-secondary studies. These interventions must also provide students with the resources they need to stay enrolled and complete their degree.

The research we have undertaken so far provides some direction for the CFS in its goal of designing an equitable free-tuition and debt forgiveness policy. From this work, we found that any policy that aims to promote equity would be complex and must address the many factors outlined below.

Early interventions. Additional research is required to best understand which early interventions effectively foster post-secondary participation and completion. A longitudinal study in Chicago found that interventions as early as preschool that address environmental factors, such as family-school partnerships, can have long-term positive impacts (Ou 2005). One comprehensive literature review on policy interventions in higher education found that outreach policies combined with need-based grants were the most effective tools for increasing access for disadvantaged students (Herbaut and Geven 2019). Successful Canadian interventions could include after-school activities for high school students combined with guidance for students and their parents. Other interventions could include programs targeted to tenth-grade students to help foster an early commitment to post-secondary education. Pilot projects based on successful experiments should be expanded and implemented across the provinces.

Diversity and inclusiveness in post-secondary institutions. Post-secondary institutions have an important responsibility to make their environments more accessible to students, particularly those that are traditionally marginalized. Students from underrepresented backgrounds have lower graduation rates and require different interventions (Sullivan, Meschede, Dietrich, Shapiro, Huelsman, and Draut 2015). Effective interventions that improve graduation rates include culturally responsive education such as respectful and inclusive curricula, culturally responsive assessment tools, representative leadership, and respectful and welcoming learning environments (Longboat 2015). Additional interventions include having more inclusive degree options (ex: major in African Studies, Indigenous Studies, Middle East Studies) and providing specialized support services.

Equity trade-offs between universal and targeted programs. As previously described, there are benefits and drawbacks of having universal free-tuition and debt forgiveness programs. One clear advantage of the universal model is the simplicity of design when compared to targeted programs. However, a targeted model has greater equity implications and is less expensive. Despite the many benefits that can only be achieved with a universal model, in the short term, a targeted model may be better able to reduce attainment gaps when combined with early interventions. For targeted programs, further research is needed to determine the income or wealth levels (individual or household) at which debt should be forgiven or tuition reduced or waved.

Bankruptcy protection. In addition to programs that alleviate the pressures of student debt, a policy proposal should also consider changes to bankruptcy protection rules to better protect students that hold student debt.

Treaty rights and universality. A policy towards universal access to post-secondary education should consider and advance treaty rights to education. This inclusion would require a legal analysis. The Numbered Treaties promised education, which would have been interpreted as a lifelong journey and therefore extended to post-secondary education (Assembly of First Nations 2010). In the Treaties, education was promised as a way to allow the Indigenous peoples to prosper, which in today's context would include post-secondary education given that education is a social determinant of health (Carr-Stewart 2001). Universal tuition would reaffirm that the right to education includes post-secondary, but education as a Treaty Right goes beyond tuition-free access. It has important implications for Indigenous sovereignty by advancing the case for recognition and accreditation of First Nations owned and controlled post-secondary institutions (Thompson and Hill-MacDonald 2018).

The role of loans and grants (merit-based and otherwise). The literature is clear that using loans to finance post-secondary education is detrimental. It can also contribute to our current debt crisis. Grants are a more equitable source of financing because they do not benefit students who have the means to pay for their education upfront. However, merit-based grants do little to promote fair access to post-secondary education. While grants may not be as necessary under a system of universal tuition, they may still play a role and should be considered as a part of a proposed policy.

Taxation. To move towards an equitable, accessible post-secondary system, governments will need to invest substantially more funds. These funds will need to come from increased tax revenue. Furthermore, the strategy for raising these revenues may differ across provinces depending on how much financial support the CFS expects the federal government to provide. Many options for funding an equitable post-secondary system are available, including cancelling Canada's tuition tax credit like was done in Ireland or raising income taxes. Tax modeling using microsimulation models like the Social Policy Simulation Database/Model would be required to determine the precise measures needed to cover these costs.

Bringing everything together. The ideal post-secondary system is not achievable overnight. If Canada were to implement a universal tuition system today, experience from Quebec, Ireland, and Argentina suggests that this may do little to promote equitable access to post-secondary education. We propose that each of the factors described above need to be combined and interwoven into the CFS's policy. Each of the measures within the policy should then be implemented over a specified period according to a schedule. By implementing this policy in a staged approach, beginning with more targeted interventions, the CFS can ensure that traditionally marginalized students are benefited from these programs.

Conclusion

The benefits to free tuition are clear: tuition fees are a significant access barrier for many low-income and marginalized students, and abolishing tuition will eliminate any upfront cost to accessing post-secondary education. The literature outlines the numerous benefits associated with universal and low-cost tuition. Unfortunately, trends in Canadian tuition fees, both for international and domestic students, are rising, clearly diverging from these identified best practices.

Universal tuition reinforces the notion that education is a right. As well, universality in public policy is highly desirable – universal programs are more cost effective and garner more political support (Goldrick-Rab & Steinbaum, 2020). Given that tuition and debt are intrinsically linked, a tuition free post-secondary system will also reduce debt for many graduates.

However, complications arise when examining universal tuition through an equity lens within our current context. Barriers to accessing post-secondary education arise beginning at a young age, and present significant obstacles for students coming from underrepresented groups. These obstacles exist regardless of the cost of pursuing post-secondary education. Because fewer low-income and marginalized students are applying to post-secondary institutions, most students who would benefit from a universal policy would be higher-income and more privileged.

Furthermore, while universal education is more cost effective, it would not be cheaper. Universal tuition would require significant government expenditure, spending which could draw investment away from early education interventions that could address current inequities.

The literature is also clear that student debt is detrimental to students and society. While the economic drag associated with student debt in Canada is not well studied, evidence from the United States allows us to suggest that high levels of student debt cause students to delay large life decisions such as buying a house and having children. It can also have significant mental health impacts on students and their families.

However, like universal tuition, the universal abolition of student debt is complex and may not be equitable. Not only would abolishing student debt increase the deficits of both the federal and provincial governments, but it may also benefit higher-income families more because they have more student debt, in absolute terms.

Designing an equitable policy plan for universal free tuition and student debt forgiveness is a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. Therefore, we put forward several factors that the CFS should consider when developing its policy proposal. Such a study would provide the CFS with a powerful advocacy tool for promoting accessible post-secondary education to the benefit of Canadian students and society.

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