

Policy Manual

Issues Policy

Issues Policy 01 (IP-01): Tuition Fees

Adopted by: Board of Directors

Adopted on: March 22, 2011

Amended by: Board of Directors

Amended on: September 09, 2014

Summary:

Tuition fees are user fees charged to students by post-secondary institutions. The significant increase in these fees is a symptom of the crisis in the financing of post-secondary education institutions in British Columbia (BC) and Canada. While failing to ameliorate this crisis, tuition fees have also created a crisis in the affordability, equity, and efficacy of post-secondary education. Finally, the function that proponents suggest that tuition fees play – the financial contribution to post-secondary education by those who access it – is more effectively performed through a progressive income taxation system.

The financing of post-secondary education is in crisis. Declining per-student public funding over the past two decades has left institutions in search of alternate financial resources. Dramatic increases in tuition fees have been used to meet this need, but have been unsuccessful due to the inability of fees to sufficiently scale to replace public funding, leaving post-secondary institutions facing steep financial shortfalls. At Thompson Rivers University (TRU) this trend was exacerbated by the increased expectations, and thus financial demands, of becoming a full university in 2004 without a corresponding increase in per-student public funding. In fact, since 2004, the tripling of tuition fees has failed even to maintain total per-student resources at (TRU) due to nearly one-quarter decline in per-student funding. This trend, further, is not localized phenomenon, as it is evident in post-secondary education systems in other provinces and countries.

While tuition fees have failed to maintain the quality of post-secondary education, they have also undermined its affordability and equity. Tuition fees are a tax levied at one rate from all who attempt to access the post-secondary education regardless of individual ability to pay. As such, they represent a disproportionate burden relative to income for middle and low-income students. The income gaps that persist for women, racialised persons, and Aboriginal persons also mean that tuition fees perpetuate inequalities for these populations. The result is that participation in post-secondary education is negatively correlated with income, and those with lower incomes must access debt in order to participate.

The financial burden created by tuition fees requires students to access debt, and often to maintain employment during their study periods. Research demonstrates that working during studies and increasing levels of debt – due to time commitments, financial worry, lack of sleep, and so on – are both negatively correlated to academic performance and program completion. As a result, tuition fees reduce the overall return on investments in post-secondary education for both individual students and the public.

Finally, proponents of tuition fees argue that they are a means to correlate the cost of post-secondary education with its financial beneficiaries, namely students. However, while it is true that post-secondary graduates on average have higher incomes than those with lesser educational attainment, there is a significant variance of incomes within the graduate population that tuition fees do not account for. A progressive income taxation system, which already exists in BC and Canada, provides a means for graduates to contribute to financing the post-secondary education system from which have they benefited in a way that accurately accounts for the level of financial benefit they have received.

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In sum, the financial and academic sustainability and vitality of post-secondary education as a system and as it is experienced by individual students is ill served by the charging of tuition fees.

Policy:

- I. The Union supports:
 - a. The expedient elimination of tuition fees by means that do not compromise the functionality or quality of academic instruction, inquiry, or support services;
 - b. Where fees do exist:
 - i. Flexibility in fee payment deadlines including fee deferral opportunities;
 - ii. Opportunities to pay over a set period of time in lieu of paying all upfront at one time;
- II. The Union opposes:
 - a. The increasing of tuition fees;
 - b. Institutional financial strategies that view tuition fee revenue as a viable means to compensate for declining or inadequate public funding;
 - c. Student financial aid strategies that view any tuition fee rate as acceptable given compensatory access to debt and means of servicing debt;
 - d. The charging of differential fees on the basis of program, province or country of origin, academic status, or any other basis.
 - e. The charging of fees for mandatory practica and internships where students perform employment functions with little or no compensation.