THE EROSION OF QUALITY and Accessibility in Canada's System of Higher Education

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FOR AT LEAST A DECADE THE STUDENT MOVEMENT HAS BEEN WARNING THAT CANADA'S SYSTEM OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IS FACING A RAPID AND STEADY EROSION OF QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY. RECENTLY A NUMBER OF STUDIES HAVE CONFIRMED THESE TRENDS.

Since 1981 the Canadian Federation of Students has been the progressive and democratic voice of Canada's college and university students. Today the Federation unites over 400,000 graduate, undergraduate and college students from over 60 students' unions from Newfoundland and Labrador to British Columbia. The assumption on which our movement was founded is that education is a fundamental right, not a privilege limited to the wealthy. When we say 'education is a right' we do not make a distinction between primary, secondary and post-secondary education. We mean that a free and democratic society and a vibrant and socially just economy depend upon universal access to post-secondary education. The system of education we promote is one that is based on the five principles of the Canada Health Act: public administration, comprehensiveness, universality, portability and accessibility. In spite of one of the strongest periods of economic growth in Canadian history, the past ten years have brought us farther rather than closer to these goals. Students are more indebted, the system is less accessible and quality has seriously eroded.

GROWING POVERTY AND DEBT AMONG YOUTH AND STUDENTS

On June 1, 2000 the Canadian economy reached a milestone. For the first time in our history the economy, which was already one of the most powerful and stable in the world, pushed the gross domestic product past the $1-trillion mark. On average Canadians are wealthier and more prosperous today than at any other time in our history. Yet there is growing anxiety among the youth and students of Canada. From the massive student strike on January 25, 1995 against Human Resources Minister Lloyd Axworthy's proposed cuts to social programs, to the protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in November 1999, students in Canada are challenging the claim that the economic growth of the 1990s has benefited everyone.

The historic protests of the 1990s remind us that in spite of soaring corporate profits and growing GDP, the Canadian economy has marginalised an entire generation of young people, including students. According to the Canadian Fact Book on Poverty, there are 1.3 million more poor households in Canada than there were 20 years ago. One of the most disturbing trends in family poverty, according to the study, is the rapid increase in the rates of poverty among Canada's young families over the past two decades. Between 1981 and 1997, the rate of poverty among young families (where both spouses were under 25 years of age) more than doubled from 21.7 per cent to 46.1 per cent. Furthermore, poverty rates among families with some post-secondary education or those with post-secondary degrees increased throughout the 1990s, "most notably among university degree holders." It is no coincidence that the growth in poverty levels among graduates occurred simultaneously with the phenomenon of skyrocketing student loan debt. Student debt has risen from an average upon graduation of $8,700 in 1990 to over $25,000 today. Recent studies indicate that 1995 graduates owed at least 60% more than their 1990 counterparts two years after graduation. It is not unusual for students to assume much higher than this average to help pay for user fees, books, supplies and basic living expenses. All this suggests that students are much worse off today than they were ten years ago. Moreover, many Canadians simply cannot afford to get a post-secondary education. And the evidence here is provided by very credible sources.

THE WIDENING 'ACCESSIBILITY GAP' IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

In February 2000 Statistics Canada and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada jointly published a report on the state of Canada's system of post-secondary education entitled *Education Indicators*. According to the report, during the decade of the 1990s a "widening gap" emerged in the post-secondary education participation rates between young people from low socio-economic backgrounds and those from high or middle socio-economic backgrounds. The report concludes that the steady increase in debt among post-secondary graduates, together with this "widening gap" in participation between people from poor and wealthy backgrounds "raise concerns about access to post-secondary education." In other words, this 'accessibility gap' reveals the inequity in Canada's system of post-secondary education: for many Canadians, access to education is now defined by the ability to pay rather than initiative and merit.

The *Education Indicators* report offers some reasons why students are worse off today than they were ten years ago and why access has been eroded. First, the higher debt levels upon graduation "reflect increases in tuition and other costs, at a time when family income (in constant dollars) changed little." Since the late 1980s, universities have been relying more on private funds from tuition fees and less on public funding from governments. Between 1982-83 and 2000, government funding to universities has decreased as a percentage of operating revenue from 74% to 55%. Over the same period tuition fees have roughly doubled, increasing as a percentage of operating revenue from 8% to 17%. Furthermore the changes in student aid policy with respect to grants and loans have "had an impact as well." The

appearance of this inaccessibility gap coincided with a period in which real income for those between 18-24 actually dropped, income inequality increased, and "student assistance moved toward a more loan-based rather than a grant-based approach." Indeed, every province except Québec and British Columbia has eliminated needs-based grants from its student financial aid program.

Both the federal and provincial levels of government equally share the blame in the inaccessibility and debt crisis that now exists because they collaborated in the move toward more private and less public expenditure on post-secondary education. From 1985 to 1989 the federal Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney introduced five pieces of legislation affecting transfer payment to the provinces. By 1993 these measures resulted in an estimated $7 billion in lost revenues for colleges and universities. The cuts continued in earnest with the election of the Liberal government in 1993. Since 1993, the combined federal cuts to post-secondary education have totaled over $5.2 billion (even higher if we include cuts to training). To make matters worse, in the February 2000 federal budget the Liberals chose to allocate $58 billion in tax cuts but only $2.5 billion to the Canada Health and Social Transfer to be used for both health and education. In the October 18, 2000 budget update, the tax cut was increased to $100 billion, but no new spending was proposed for education.

The drastic and severe federal cuts to transfer payments provided provincial legislators an ideal scapegoat. First, they tried to compensate for lost revenues by dramatically increasing user fees. Between 1990 and 2000, tuition fees increased by 126%. Average tuition fees in undergraduate arts programs more than doubled across Canada. They are now $3,378, up from approximately $1,500 in 1990. The costs of other programs have increased even more dramatically. In short, the decade of the 1990s was the worst period in Canadian history for tuition fee hikes.

Almost two decades of massive federal and provincial public divestment constitutes the backdrop for an even more disturbing development: the establishment of private for-profit universities. These institutions will not be excluded from the Canada Student Loans Program, from scholarships and bursaries programs, from research granting councils, nor will they be excluded from tax-credits and indirect grants programs such as the Canada Education Savings Grant. Thus, they will drain scarce resources from the public system, despite claims to the contrary. They will also charge outrageously high tuition fees. By conservative estimates the total annual cost of a private for-profit post-secondary degree will be $40,166. This is based on the sum of two figures: the average tuition fee at US privately funded institutions is US$15,380 or about $23,400 in Canadian dollars. Add to this $16,766 — the cost of books and supplies, room and board, transportation and other basic costs of living for a single individual. This figure also assumes that the student does not go on to do a graduate degree or a professional degree. The implications here are obvious: in order to attend the 'elite' private for-profit university, an average student will have to incur a staggering life-long debt. Private for-profit universities will be exclusive places of privilege, open only to those who can afford to pay.

AVERAGE UNDERGRADUATE ARTS TUITION • CANADA*

	1990-1991	1999-2000	2000-2001	% CHANGE 1990 to 2001
Canada	$1 496	$3 281	$3 380	125,9
Newfoundland	1 344	3 300	3 300	145,5
Prince Edward Island	1 840	3 480	3 480	89,1
Nova Scotia	1 943	4 101	4 408	126,9
New Brunswick	1 898	3 329	3 519	85,4
Quebec**	902	1 868	1 898	110,4
Ontario	1 653	3 865	3 971	140,2
Manitoba	1 415	3 018	2 873	103,0
Saskatchewan	1 526	3 164	3 409	123,4
Alberta	1 244	3 658	3 841	208,8
British Columbia***	1 727	2 470	2 520	45,9

* Using the most current enrolment data available, average tuition fees have been weighted by the number of students

** Fees for both local and out-of-province students are included in the weighted average calculation. Note that the weighting methodology was revised to reflect more accurately the impact of Quebec's differential fee policy. Hence, average tuition fees by program at all Quebec university and subsequently at the Canada level have been revised for the years 1997-1998 through 2000-2001

*** Fees at both public and private institutions are included in the weighted average calculation

Source: Statistics Canada, Education Quarterly Review, 2000, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 50

COMPROMISING QUALITY

Facing this massive public underfunding, university and college administrators pursued a variety of measures that exacerbated the growing inaccessibility and also seriously eroded quality. Access was further eroded as additional costs were downloaded onto students in the form of a myriad of 'administrative' user fees. Quality was eroded as a result of a number of decisions: universities and colleges turned to contracts, donations and sponsorships from privately owned corporations and wealthy individuals, which meant greater private influence and control in setting curricula. They closed departments and programs and they dramatically reduced the numbers of full-time faculty. In fact, today's universities are relying more on part-time faculty to deliver their educational programs. Between 1992-93 and 1997-98 while the number of full-time faculty in Canada declined by nearly 10 per cent, the number of part-time faculty increased 6 per cent. Furthermore, wages and benefits of Teaching Assistants and administrative support staff were reduced and the jobs and working conditions of maintenance workers were threatened and degraded by contracting out and attrition. With fewer people sharing the teaching workload, professors have less time to undertake basic research. Sessional professors and teaching assistants are increasingly overworked and underpaid as they assume increased duties and everyone has less time either to prepare courses or provide students the personal attention and mentoring they require and deserve. All this, with fewer course offerings, means that students must settle on much lower expectations. In this sense quality is seriously compromised.

THE FAILURE OF THE LOAN-BASED STUDENT FINANCIAL AID STRATEGY

The latest studies and statistics on the state of post-secondary education clearly demonstrate a glaring paradox. Canada now has a trillion-dollar economy that co-exists with record-levels of student debt and a system of post-secondary education that is of low quality and out of reach for low and modest income families. As *Education Indicators* reveals, people from the middle and lower socio-economic status "must make a relatively greater financial sacrifice to attend university" than individuals with higher incomes. The consequence of soaring tuition fees and stagnating salaries combined with the existing student financing arrangements is stark: the poorest members of our society are registering "the smallest increase in participation."

Two other studies support this conclusion. A September 2000 study by Statistics Canada published in its Education Quarterly Review supports the findings of *Education Indicators*. The federal agency reports that "One of our most significant findings...is that there has been a widening gap in university participation by family socio-economic status" and this raises questions of "accessibility and equality of opportunity." When the study was reported in the mainstream press, one journalist wrote that it "finally adds credence to the anecdotal evidence of educators and student groups that the escalation in tuition fees has meant that fewer lower income youth can afford to attend university." A study by the Canadian Association of University Teachers confirms that the burden of increased fees has disproportionately fallen on modest income Canadians. When measured as a share of after-tax disposable income, households in the lowest income category spent 11 per cent of their income on tuition fees in 1992. By 1998 that had increased to more than 19 per cent — six times more than households in the highest income bracket.

These recent studies and reports are a clear repudiation of the public policy decisions adopted by both the federal and provincial governments between 1984 and the present concerning post-secondary education. They demonstrate that the cuts have affected the poor more than the wealthy and they demonstrate the complete failure of the loan-based student financial assistance strategy. At a time when everyone is being told that higher education is the key to survival in the 'new' economy, the poor are being driven away by high tuition fees and the spectre of debt. Post-secondary education is already a privilege for the wealthy. Still, the student movement has many practical suggestions that might militate against this growing crisis. If the federal, provincial and territorial governments are serious about ensuring a high quality accessible system of education, they must restore the billions of dollars that have been siphoned from the system in the last two decades. More importantly, they cannot continue to ignore soaring student debt levels and tuition fees. They must develop relevant and appropriate policies to eliminate the financial barriers to an accessible system of education. One option is to follow the lead of many European nations and abolish user fees. Another way to ensure access is to abandon the loan-based system of student financial assistance. Instead, Canadian legislators must join the rest of the industrialised world by making funding available in the form of grants for individuals in need. As Statistics Canada and the Council of Ministers of Education themselves concluded, without such funding even greater inequities will result from financial circumstances, "regardless of the ability of the student."

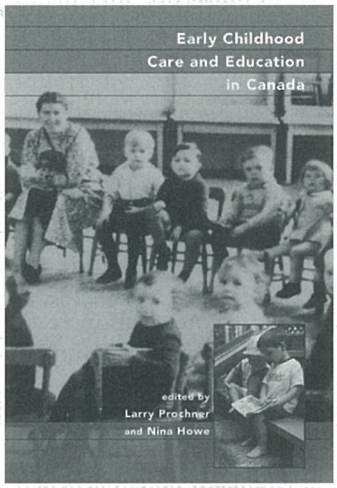
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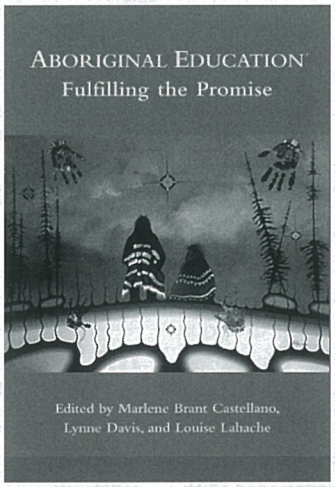
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