

# Student Employment: Eroding academic success

In 1977, 12 percent of all youth ages 15 to 24 were attending some form of postsecondary education on a full-time basis. This percentage has steadily increased over the decades. In the 2010 academic year, 27 percent of all youth were full-time postsecondary students attending community college, CEGEP or university. Increased participation in postsecondary education is tied to the rise in the knowledge-based economy and the demand for higher-skilled jobs.

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 the most recent Statistics Canada survey of post-secondary graduates, 52 percent of students aged 20-24 relied on employment to finance their education and over 25 percent cited income from employment as their most important source of funding.<sup>1</sup>

Although there are several reasons why students are increasingly combining work with school, rapidly increasing tuition fees are the predominant factor. Undergraduate tuition fees in Canada have increased four-fold in the past twenty years, from just over \$1,200 in 1990 to over \$5,000 in 2010.<sup>2</sup> International

students often pay three times what Canadian students do, with some charged tuition fees in excess of \$17,500 per year, and some professional students in excess of \$50,000. Tuition fees have grown to become the single largest expense for most post-secondary students.

## Working During Studies

During the 2010 academic year, 52 percent of full-time students between the ages of 20 and 24 worked during the school year, compared to just 26.6 percent of their counterparts in 1976.<sup>3</sup> Part-time students worked even more, with 91 percent of those between the ages of 20-29 being employed during the course of their degree.<sup>4</sup> The number of full-time students working more than 35 hours per week has almost doubled over the past two decades.<sup>5</sup>

Full-time students who work do so an average of 16 hours per week, while part-time students work more than 30 hours per week. Over the course of their degree, an increasing number

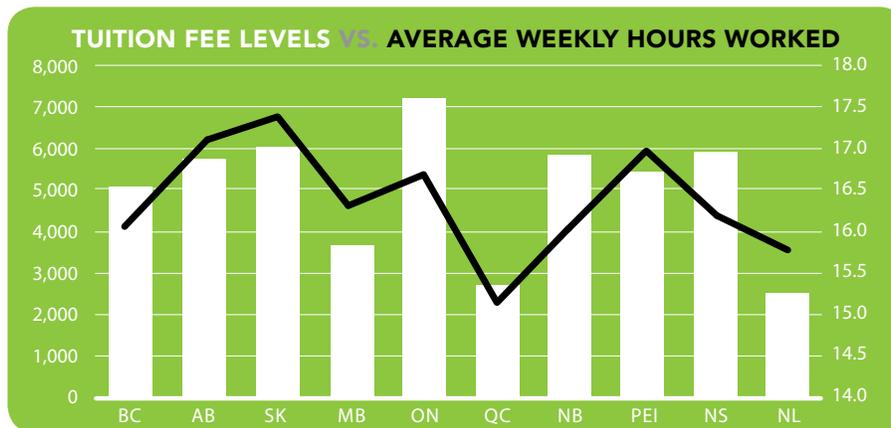
of students rely on employment, with over 50 percent more students working during the last year of their degree than during their first.<sup>6</sup>

Female students report working more than their male counterparts. In 2010, female students were 25 percent more likely to be employed during the academic year.<sup>7</sup>

## 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 percent 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.<sup>8</sup>

Working during the year also decreases a student's likelihood of finishing their degree. Statistics Canada's Youth in Transition survey found that, "working at all and working more hours both have a negative effect on persistence"<sup>9</sup>



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 students have little choice but to find more hours of employment during the school year.

## Summer Employment

### Summer Career Placement Program

In the mid-nineties the federal government created the Summer Career Placement Program to help students afford their post-secondary degrees and get career-building work experience. The Program is a partnership between employers and the federal government, which works by subsidizing 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. The program originally provided funding for between 45,000 and 55,000 students to work each summer.

## 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 became ineligible and 25,000 fewer jobs were to be offered in 2007.

Following pressure brought by the Canadian Federation of Students, the government re-invested in the program five months later, bringing funding for the summer of 2007 back to roughly 90 percent 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 50 years, 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 largest groups to fall victim to the government's 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 do not 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 during the academic year and for 40 hours per week in the summer with a permit. In 2013, the federal government announced that international students would no longer require an Off-Campus Work Permit to work off-campus as of the 2014 academic year.

### 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 enough to be able to pay their tuition fees after 5 weeks of full time work at minimum wage. That same student today would have to work 57 weeks to be able to afford their fees.

Minimum wages range from a low of \$9.75 per hour in Alberta to a high of \$10.30 per hour in Nova Scotia. 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.<sup>10</sup>

## 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. The Public Service Alliance of Canada has 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 is during the school year or through the summer. With substantial tuition fees and cost of living increases 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 the current economy 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 give incentives 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.

### Sources:

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