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Fee hikes not forcing students away

Fears that rising tuition has limited access to university may be misplaced, study suggests

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Rising tuition fees are not keeping students off university campuses.

A new Statistics Canada study shows that the gap between students from high- and low-income families attending university has narrowed in the past decade, flying in the face of critics who say rising tuition fees limits access to higher education.

Still, the price of a university education is high. Young people are borrowing more and holding down part-time jobs just to finance their schooling, student lobby groups say.

"University has always sort of been the domain of the more well-to-do. But we've got good news – the lowest income group are doing better," said Miles Corak, director of family and labour studies at Statscan.

The study, which assessed the relationship between schooling and family income, showed that the number of students attending university with family incomes of $25,000 or less has doubled over the past two decades.

Furthermore, the participation rate of this group is slowly sneaking up to that of students whose parents make more than $100,000.

Bur Mr. Corak finds it disturbing that the percentage of students from middle-income families attending university has not changed over the past two decades. In some instances, that number has even slipped.

"Tuition fees are high enough to be expensive, but their [family] income is too high to allow these kids to get more access to loans."

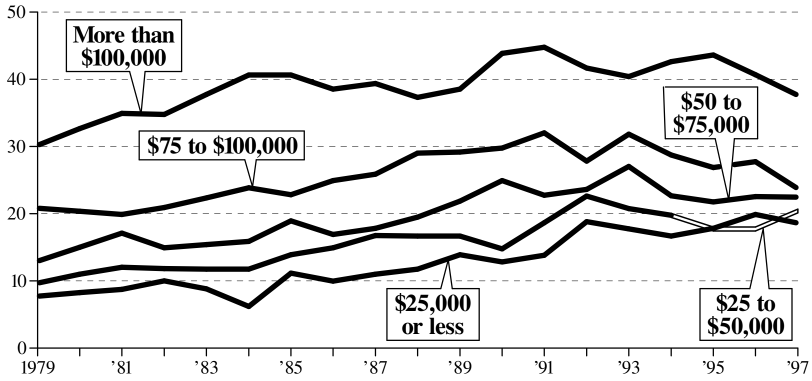
James Kusie of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, a student lobby group, blames student assistance programs for this trend. He said that these programs set unrealistically high parental contribution expectations. "The system just isn't working for them."

Mr. Kusie added: "The participation gap may not have increased, but the burden of participating on lower- and middle-income families definitely has."

Who's attending

Despite rising tuition fees, there's been a narrowing of the gap between the number of university students from high- and low-income families over the past 2 decades. Lower-income students are borrowing more to go to school.

Percentage of university participation rates of 18- to 24-year-olds by income



SOURCE: *STATISTICS CANADA* BERNARD BENNELL / THE GLOBE AND MAIL

For Curtis McGrath, attending university is the only way to land a good job, despite coming from what he describes as a low-income family and being saddled with a $35,000 debt when he graduates.

As he completes his degree in business management at Dalhousie University in Halifax this year, Mr. McGrath, 22, is working to pay for his schooling and living expenses – both of which have been increasing each year.

His friends from higher-income families have used their spring breaks to go on vacation, while Mr. McGrath has worked during his time off.

"You have to plan, you have to budget and you have to be careful about how much you spend because if you go over, then you can't return the next year."

Still, Kjell Rubenson, a professor at the University of British Columbia and co-director of its Centre for Policy Studies in Higher Education and Training, says the Statscan study provides evidence that tuition-fee increases do not necessarily keep students away.

He acknowledged that students' loans are not high enough to cover present-day costs, but they did increase for a period in the early 1990s to keep up with tuition.

"One could make an argument that with higher fees, the system managed to create a good amount of scholarships and bursaries for those who cannot afford [a university education]," he said.

The Statscan study, however, did not examine the past couple of years, a time in which B.C. students faced large fee increases. With the lifting of a freeze on tuition, the cost of studying rose 30 per cent this fall.

Mr. Rubenson said time will tell how this fee increase affects students. He added, however, that proper financial aid may help avoid a big decline in the number of students attending university.

But Mr. McGrath, who survives on the bare necessities so he can pay his tuition, said the rising costs may keep him from going to graduate school.

"Education needs to be considered an investment and not an expense on the income statement."