

Is There a Case for Free Post-Secondary Education in Canada?

At first glance, the idea of free post-secondary education would seem amazing. A free ride to a university or college degree of your choice, sign me up. This is the reality for twenty-four countries worldwide. You would think that a developed, progressive nation such as our own would be one of these twenty-four. Unfortunately for me, and all my fellow peers applying this year, Canada is not a member of that list. So why doesn't Canada have free post-secondary education? As it turns out, there are many positives, as well as negatives that come with free post-secondary education, and finding a median between these two options is a tough challenge.

Firstly, we can look at the positives. There are many positives to free education and perhaps the largest positive would be the fact that it is affordable for a much larger demographic of students. Thousands more students will be able to attain a level of education they never thought to be possible. People from all across Canada, no matter their economic status, will be able to receive an education. This will decrease poverty, and ultimately create a more educated population. This would also help with student debt following post-secondary education. The current student loan debt average in Canada is \$28000. By eliminating this debt, students are able to jumpstart their careers, rather than have to carry the burden of paying off their debts. Education can also be seen as a fundamental human right. No matter your social or economic status, everyone should have access to the education they need to reach their full potential. With more students furthering their careers, it will also be beneficial to the economy.

A more educated workforce is a more productive one. A highly educated workforce would increase Canada's productivity as people begin to take on much higher paying jobs.

Secondly, we can look at the negatives. Although the influx of new jobs would boost the economy, it would also take value away from having a higher level of education. If more and more people were graduating from university, the value of these degrees would decrease. Free education would also affect the dedication of students to their studies. A student who had to work hard to pay for an expensive education is more likely to try harder than someone who is accessing a free education. Both my parents are first-generation Canadians whose parents could not afford to send them to university. They had to work hard to raise enough money for post-secondary education and both graduated with debt but feel like it was completely worth it. As a result, they expect me to work just as hard and find a way to pay for my education. In addition to working part-time, I have been researching scholarship possibilities such as this OMDREB scholarship to help me raise money for my education. This is a time-consuming process but has taught me that I have to work for what I want and can't take my education for granted. Through my research, I have determined there are various foundations and not-for-profit organizations that offer bursaries, scholarships and grants that can help individuals pay for post-secondary education. In Halton, we have the HLF (Halton Learning Foundation) whose mandate is to help students in Halton overcome financial barriers to learning. Each University I applied to also offered many scholarships and information on how to apply for financial support. My guidance counselor was also a great resource on what was available to me and provided information on many scholarship opportunities I could apply to. I honestly believe

even though post-secondary is not free to students in Canada, there are options to help make your educational goals a reality.

The larger demographic of students attending if it was free would put strain on limited resources provided by these universities. Universities will become overcrowded and access to adequate materials such as textbooks would be in short supply. Also, free post-secondary education doesn't necessarily mean it is free. The money to cover the charge will have to come from taxes. Estimates from 2018 suggest that to provide free post-secondary education, the government will need an extra \$1.3 billion. There will be an influx of a new, larger, labour force eager to start making money. Additionally, making post-secondary education free doesn't necessarily aid as many people in achieving degrees as you would think. In Denmark, where post secondary education is free, only 30% of the population hold a university degree. Meanwhile in Canada, where post-secondary education is not free, 30% of the population still hold university degrees. This proves that even if post-secondary became tuition free, it does not guarantee more graduates.

For the reasons mentioned above, I don't believe free post-secondary education is the correct choice for Canada. It's no secret that the cost of post-secondary education has recently been rising. According to a study from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the average cost of a four-year program has more than doubled since 1995. Despite this increase, I'm not convinced it is the correct path for Canada. Although several European countries have

successful methods of providing free post-secondary education, there are a few countries with similar issues that I discussed. For example, German universities face a massive overcrowding issue. This issue prompted the government to allow schools to start charging tuition again in 2006, however, this idea was very short-lived as tuition began to phase out in 2014. German tax payers also experienced a 37% increase in the college subsidy tax. As a result, popularity of free post-secondary education has greatly decreased amongst the German population. A similar situation occurred in the UK. In this case, free post-secondary education resulted in lower access for low-income students, a shortage in academic resources, and an erosion of education quality. To avoid experiencing the same struggles as these countries, I think the government should implement subsidies to make post-secondary education cheaper. Although it will not fully compensate for the full charge of tuition, it will make post-secondary education much more affordable. The fact that students are still required to pay tuition will prevent schools from becoming overcrowded and face a lack of resources. It will also be more tax friendly to taxpayers as they wouldn't have to pay as much if the full price of tuition was covered by the government.

At the end of the day, the idea of implementing free post-secondary education is very subjective. Despite the many positives free post secondary education would bring to Canada, I am not convinced it is the correct path. With subsidized schooling, more students will be able to attend post-secondary education, the quality of schooling won't decrease, and students won't have excessive amounts of debt once they have graduated. With the provincial election on the horizon, each of the candidates have ideas on how they plan to make post-secondary

education more affordable. We need to pursue these politicians and ensure they follow up with their promises. If governments change policies to make education more affordable and we access the other organizations and resources available to students, a post-secondary education can be a reality for everyone regardless of your economic status and we can make a difference for future generations.

Bibliography

- Amselem, Mary Clare. "Free College in Europe: A Cautionary Tale for the United States." *The Heritage Foundation*, 13 Dec. 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/free-college-europe-cautionary-tale-the-united-states>.
- Brunner, Nathan. "The Pros and Cons of Free College [in-Depth Analysis]." *Salarship*, 26 Oct. 2021, <https://salarship.com/article/free-college-pros-cons/>.
- Josephson, Amelia. "The Pros and Cons of Free College." *SmartAsset*, SmartAsset, 12 Apr. 2022, <https://smartasset.com/student-loans/the-pros-and-cons-of-free-college#:~:text=Pro%20%231%3A%20Free%20college%20would%20expand%20access%20to,of%20free%20college%2C%20it%E2%80%99s%20a%20question%20of%20fairness>.
- Institute, Montreal Economic. "Higher Education: 'Free' Tuition Would Cost \$1.3 Billion." *Cision Canada*, 28 Dec. 2018, [Higher education: "Free" tuition would cost \\$1.3 billion \(newswire.ca\)](https://www.newswire.ca)