



FASTFACTS



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TUITION FEE FREEZE: DEATH OF A THOUSANDS HIKES?

After five years of frozen tuition fees, the Manitoba provincial government faces enormous pressure from university presidents to eliminate its most popular and universal university and college access policy.

Now, as we enter the sixth year of the tuition fee freeze, the Doer government faces a turning point in the life of the policy.

PRESSURE FROM THE TOP

In defiance of the spirit, if not the letter, of the provincial tuition fee freeze, universities in Manitoba voted last spring to increase mandatory user fees charged to students by as much as 19%.

In March 2005, Brandon University decided to increase ancillary fees by \$412.50 per student – for a wellness centre, technology, student services, and the library – plus levy an additional \$100 registration fee that was approved in the previous year but not scheduled to be implemented until fall 2005.

Emboldened by the lack of repercussions, the University of Manitoba quickly side-stepped its usual budget process and approved user fees increases of \$465 for a full course load – ostensibly for registration, student services, libraries, and technology – constituting a 12-15% tuition fee increase. The University of Winnipeg, with budget surpluses for two years running, then followed with a proposal for \$365 in ancillary fee increases, for non-academic projects. Without providing any notice, the Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface approved a fee increase of \$150.

At first, the Minister of Advanced Education, Diane McGifford, publicly stated her opposition to the increases,

but lamented they could not be stopped. By the time the Minister stated that measures to stop fee increases were being considered, the campaign against the freeze was in full swing.

Unfortunately, Minister McGifford seems to have allowed problems to mount—despite repeated warnings about impending fee increases—then dithered about what course of action to take while options disintegrated as the new academic year approached. A \$2.9 million special funding deal negotiated with the University of Winnipeg had the potential to protect the freeze in the short-term. However, instead of eliminating the ancillary fee, it was reduced to \$125 (still a 4% tuition fee increase), in spite of suggestions from the University of Winnipeg Students' Association that the funding would be sufficient for the projects identified by the University, without fee increases.

Deals with the other universities followed over the spring and summer. The “special grants” to the University of Manitoba (\$6.9 million) and Brandon University (\$545,000) side-stepped more democratic campus budget processes, and still leave students with fee increases of \$150 (a 5% tuition fee increase).

THE FREEZE AND FUNDING

From 1992-1993 to 2002-2003, overall provincial funding to education in Manitoba declined by 4%, much less than the double digit drops in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and several other provinces. The Manitoba tuition fee freeze has been funded each year by a separate grant. National trends in education funding show that federal funding cuts, compounded by provincial cuts, have had the greatest detrimental effect on quality of education in Canada.



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Yet critics continue to make the unfounded claim that it is the freeze that has prevented universities and colleges from raising the funds needed to offer high quality post-secondary education. Their argument assumes a natural rate of increase in user fees, and ignores the experience of countries like the United Kingdom, where it has been shown that tuition fee deregulation only leads to further government funding cutbacks.

Critics of the tuition fee freeze are essentially suggesting that the federal funding cuts of the 1990s should be borne by today's students, at the expense of the tuition fee freeze, a policy that has helped increase enrolment in Manitoba's universities and colleges at a greater pace than provinces without controls on tuition fees.

If the government allows the freeze to be pitted against university funding, budget priorities will be perverted. Clearly, this has occurred with the allocation of the "special grants" that have been used to buy peace with the university presidents. The funding was provided with no strings attached, and the university presidents are not spending it on improving the quality of education. A better solution would be to work with the university and college communities to determine what levels of funding might be adequate. Given that the provincial government has made half a billion dollars in tax cuts in recent years, while only offering modest increases to operating grants for universities and colleges, it should be possible to expand universities, hire more faculty, and offer more courses.

DO IT RIGHT

Under pressure from university and college presidents since the inception of the freeze, Minister McGifford has allowed numerous major exceptions to its tuition fee policy. A dubious vote in the Faculty of Law of the University of Manitoba in 2001 set off a chain reaction of nearly a dozen major user fee increases – ranging from fifty to ten thousand dollars. Brandon University, the University of Winnipeg, and Red River College have quietly increased fees for services such as registration and course materials.

But all these increases, coupled with annual grant increases and capital funding allocations, have not satisfied the university presidents. Universities always want the ability to raise user fees, whether for necessities or pet projects. Last spring, they decided to test the provincial government. The results suggest that the government has failed to protect the tuition fee freeze and establish clear criteria for funding. The casualty has not only been the tuition fee freeze, but any possibility for a reasonable discussion about what operating grant increases are needed.

The 2005 budget announcement of a continued tuition fee

freeze will be meaningless if Manitoba's universities are allowed to pursue mandatory ancillary fee hikes that have the effect of increasing tuition fees. In Quebec, which has a longstanding university tuition fee freeze, ancillary fees have mounted rapidly, especially at anglophone universities. Even at francophone institutions, ancillary fees are as high as \$483 a year. Ancillary fees of \$150 in Manitoba may be just the beginning.

Fortunately, solutions are still within reach.

Since 1998, supporters of tuition fee controls have argued that legislation is required to make a fee freeze work. Simple, annually-approved legislation from the British Columbia fee freeze of the 1990s has been ignored. Although it is too late to enact legislation for this academic year, the provincial government could issue a memorandum to the universities barring fee increases (as Ontario has), renegotiate with the universities so that special grants are explicitly conditional on eliminating the ancillary fee increases, and legislate the freeze for 2006-2007.

If funds ever flow from the much-publicized federal budget amendment that includes \$1.5 billion for improving access to post-secondary education, this should also help extend the Manitoba tuition fee freeze, provide grants to students, and further reduce fees.

- Elizabeth Carlyle

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