

Proposed Reforms to Post-secondary Education

Post-secondary education is a powerful lever for tackling poverty and promoting the economic health of the nation. Unfortunately, barriers related to information, motivation, academics and financing close the doors to many low-income students.

Welfare recipients are at an even greater disadvantage. They often lack the literacy and numeracy proficiency for participation at the post-secondary level. The reforms proposed here are intended for a broad population of prospective students, including those on welfare.

No magic-bullet solution will improve access to education. A series of linked measures is required.

There is a lack of accessible information about post-secondary education and adult learning opportunities, more generally. More information is required about the range of programs and available financing – in both direct aid and repayment options.

The federal government is one of many players that can promote access to post-

secondary education through improved information. At the provincial/territorial level, contact at an earlier stage between the education and social service ministries around welfare recipients, in particular, would help ensure that prospective students are informed of upgrading and educational options as well as financing and repayment arrangements.

Welfare recipients who seek to pursue post-secondary education generally require substantial assistance in terms of educational choices and financial aid. The decision to choose an educational route is not an easy one because it entails many years of commitment to a course of study with no guarantee of a good job. This reality is especially true for students with disabilities who typically face work-related discrimination.

Unfortunately, there are insufficient resources for individualized case management.

Welfare recipients and other disadvantaged learners often need to complete high school or upgrade their literacy and

numeracy skills before they can consider advanced education. While much of this upgrading is offered at community colleges, student aid programs usually do not cover this form of training. It is paid for through the provisions of the federal-provincial/territorial labour market development agreements.

But educational measures themselves are of little value in the absence of basic supports. Quality, licensed child care is essential not only to ensure that parents can participate successfully in training or education, but also to promote healthy child development. Child care is vital for low-income households struggling to climb the welfare wall in order to find and maintain employment.

The demand for high-quality affordable child care far outstrips the available supply. Services are uneven between and, in most cases, within provinces and territories.

There is nothing approaching a national system – other than in Québec, which has woven high-quality affordable child care into its economic and social fabric. The newly-announced early learning system in Ontario may relieve some of the pressure in that province. Most families in the rest of Canada rely on unregulated child care, typically from neighbourhood providers or made available by relatives.

The cost of health- and disability-related special needs, including prescription drugs and dental care, also presents a barrier to moving off social assistance. When recipients try to leave welfare, they may lose access to this vital assistance.

Ideally, provinces and territories should extend supplementary health-related benefits to the low-income population more broadly, including the working poor. No one should be tied to social assistance in order to maintain access to these essential benefits. Several provinces have moved in this direction, though they typically limit available assistance or the range of eligible recipients.

Disadvantaged learners have been found to benefit from “wrap-around services,” a concept which reflects the need for a comprehensive array of related measures.

The approach begins with the student at the centre of the intervention and creates an integrated and individualized package of educational, personal and financial supports. It includes tutoring and academic assistance in program-specific subjects and general language proficiency, mentoring and career workshops.

Wrap-around services are especially helpful for post-secondary learners who may be facing multiple challenges such as personal, physical or mental health difficulties, a learning or physical disability, and lack of financial resources.

The price of post-secondary education remains a major barrier for many students, despite the significant increase in student aid in recent years. The ability to pay is a challenge for welfare recipients, who have few resources to direct toward the costs of advanced education.

Finally, students who live in rural and remote regions of the country face additional hardship when it comes to post-secondary

education. There are few advanced education options in the North, in particular, and significant costs for travel.

Scarce resources for technology-enabled education and limited broadband access in these regions are broader systemic problems.

It is not in our national interest to leave unresolved these barriers to post-secondary education – not with what we know about advanced education and its powerful economic and social returns.

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