

Fact Sheet

ACCESS FOR PART-TIME STUDENTS

Part-Time Studies

Post-secondary education students studying part-time face a number of unique challenges. Some of these challenges include: limited availability of programmes and institutions, inaccessible student financial aid, and diminished course selection. Also, part-time students often balance their studies with other responsibilities such as work and family.

Who are part-time students?

Generally, part-time students are defined as those who are taking between 20% and 59% of a full-time course load. The definition of part-time student status may vary between different levels of government and from one institution to another. Additionally, the course load cut-off that defines part-time student status may vary within a single institution. For example, this definition will typically be different for students with disabilities.

As can be seen in Figure 1, enrolment data from the college sector is incomplete past 1999-2000. The overall percentage of part-time post-secondary education students in Canada is declining. Statistics Canada data show that in 1994 part-time students made up one-third of those enrolled at Canadian colleges and universities. The most recent data indicate that, in 2003-2004, part-time students made up 26% of university students across Canada. In the same year, they comprised 20% of all university students in Ontario. In 2003-2004 the average age of part-time students in Canada was 30. The declining percentage of part-time students is largely due to

decreased enrolment among mature students. In the last decade there was a 31% drop in the enrollment of students over 30 years of age and a 20% drop in enrolment for those aged between 26 and 29 years. The only enrolment growth among part-time students over the last decade occurred within the 18 to 24 year-old cohort.

Young Students

18 to 24 year olds are the only growing demographic within the undergraduate part-time student population. From 1997-1998 to 2000-2001 the rate at which part-time enrolment grew among this age group was almost five times faster than the enrolment growth rate of their full-time counterparts. Tuition fees in Canada increased 19% during that period, and 127% throughout the 1990s—six times faster than the rate of inflation. Taken together these data suggest that an increasing number of young students are seeking part-time studies instead of full-time studies as a means to reduce the financial burden associated with rising tuition fees.

Mature Students

A major contributing factor to the decline of mature student enrolment at Ontario universities has been the disqualification of part-time students from OSAP eligibility, a measure implemented by the Progressive Conservative government in the late 1990s and maintained by the McGuinty Liberal government. The impact of the Double Cohort has also negatively affected mature student enrolment. The temporary and large influx of grade 12 and grade 13 graduates into the post-secondary system has resulted in the displacement of mature students.

Women

Part-time undergraduate studies traditionally attract more women than men, as Figure 2 demonstrates. As with other issues in part-time studies, there is little research available to explain this. Studies have shown a disproportionately negative effect on women as a result of increasing tuition fees. This is likely a significant factor in the explanation of the enhanced tendency for women to move to part-time studies.

Between 1997-1998 and 2000-2001 the most significant decline in part-time enrolment was among undergraduate women age 35 and over. Given that women are often the primary care providers for children, this could be attributable to the former Progressive Conservative government’s virtual dismantling of child care subsidies and bursaries in the late 1990s, making post-secondary education more burdensome for students with parental responsibilities.

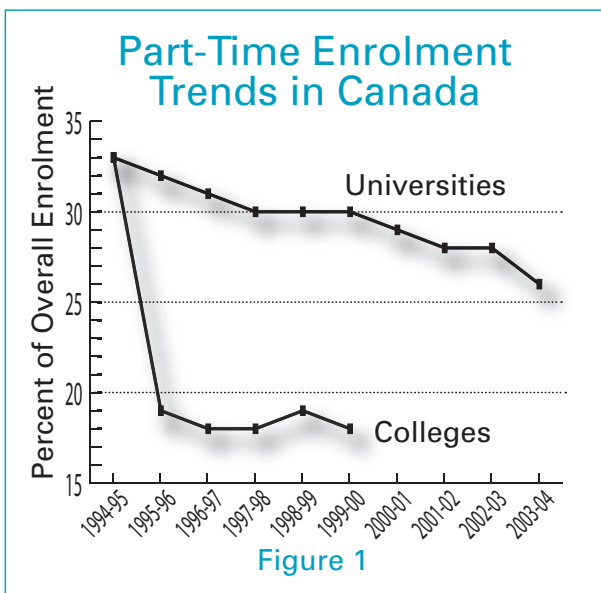


Figure 1

Student Assistance

In Ontario part-time students are excluded from financial aid programmes. Part-time students are not eligible for OSAP, the Ontario Millennium grants, Millennium Scholarship Foundation bursaries, or Canada Access Grants. Students taking less than a 60% course load (less than 40% for students with disabilities) can access Part-time Canada Student Loans. This loan program differs from provincial student loans in that it is immediately interest bearing and has a limit of \$4,000. The most recent annual average value for part-time student loans is roughly \$1,700. This is the result of a downward trend since 1994-1995 when loans were valued at \$2,800.¹ In addition there exists the Canada Study Grant for High-Need Part-Time Students. However, this grant only offers part-time students a maximum of \$1,200 annually and is highly restrictive. Eligibility for this grant is restricted to individuals from families with very low incomes, who must also be any of: a single parent with a young child (under the age of 11), the primary care taker of an elderly dependant, or a student with a permanent disability that prevents the individual from taking at least 60% of a full course load. To date this grant has very low visibility and usage. Since the number of grants disbursed peaked a 5,000 in 1999-2000, the number of recipients has steadily declined to 4,000 as of 2004-2005. Despite the low maximum grant value of \$1,200, eligible “high-needs part-time students” have consistently received an average of approximately \$800.²

Ontario Student Assistance Program

Disqualifying part-time students from OSAP has prevented them from accessing loans and bursaries and has also denied access to a whole host of financial aid opportunities at the institutional level, such as work-study programmes. Moreover, it has a secondary impact on full-time students who may have qualified for OSAP, but owing to a death in the family, illness or financial crisis, were forced to withdraw from a full-time course load. Under the present system, these students are ineligible for student aid and are expected to begin repaying their existing

loans six months after their full-time status changes to part-time. This policy places a huge burden on those students who are often already physically, financially, or emotionally exhausted. Students who find themselves unable to repay may find themselves permanently unable to qualify for OSAP. According to the Student Support Branch of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, in 2003-2004, 58% of student loan recipients were female and 42% were male.³ This demonstrates that women are more likely to be forced to borrow for their education and are most negatively impacted by part-time students’ disqualification from OSAP.

Credit Checks

The strict eligibility requirements originally imposed by the Progressive Conservative government in 1998 and maintained under the Liberal government have served to reduce the total number of OSAP recipients by over 40%. Given that mature students typically have a more developed history of credit, and given that those without post-secondary education are among the lowest income earners, it is very likely that the punitive measure of disqualifying those with sub-standard credit ratings has further impacted disproportionately on mature students.

Public Education at Risk

Private Career Colleges

Private career colleges (PCCs) are often the only option left for students with family responsibilities or those who cannot afford to forgo the earnings of their current job. These colleges have dubious records of financial corruption that consistently produce the highest levels of student loan default rates. Default rates on student loans at PCCs in Ontario are 23.5%. This is 7.1% higher than the default rates at public colleges and 16.4% higher than at universities. Private career colleges are a poor substitute for a flexible and accessible public system of post-secondary education.

Digital Diplomas

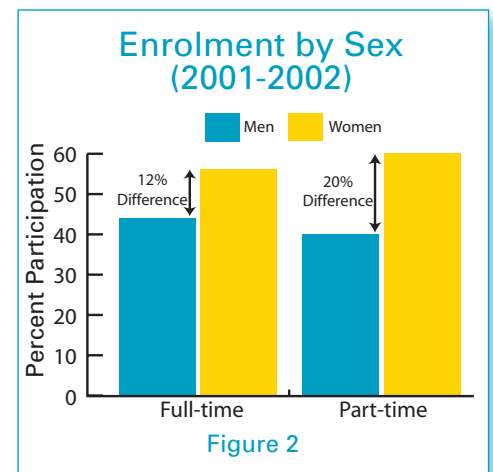
Part-time and mature students have become the primary group targeted as users of digitised course material, or “online learning.”

Institutions such as Athabasca University that specialise in distance education target students “working full-time or part-time or shifts,” “students with disabilities,” and students who are “raising a family,” among other scenarios familiar to part-time students. The University prides itself on being “flexible and convenient,” but critics explain that such initiatives can contribute to a detrimental learning environment. Online courses give administrators more direct control over faculty performance and course content, increasing the potential for censorship,⁴ and enable administrators to hire less skilled workers to deliver pre-packaged courses.⁵

Life-Long Learning

Given the significance of higher education as a determinant of social mobility, it is imperative that post-secondary education continue to be accessible. Flexibility is a key component of access and this applies not only to the programmes being offered, the scheduling of classes, the hours of operation of library facilities to name only a few, but also to the availability of student financial assistance and child care.

Part-time studies must be an accessible choice for students—not an option forced upon them as a result of personal and family circumstances nor an option closed to them because of financial or other burdens.



References

1. Human Resources and Social Development Canada
2. Ibid
3. Canadian Federation of Students, “Lower Tuition Fees for Lower Student Debt, Discussion Paper”, 2004.
4. Noble, David. “Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education”, 1998
5. Ibid