



## POINT COUNTERPOINT



ALEX NURSALL/THE VARSITY

### *Post-secondary education is a right and should receive more funding from the government*

**Mersiha Gadzo**  
VARSITY CONTRIBUTOR

High tuition fees negatively impact students' academic success. A survey conducted by the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations revealed that 64 per cent of Ontario professors agree that university students struggle to keep up in school because of their jobs. In order to stay in school, students have no choice but to work and this inevitably leads to lower grades. Tuition fees defeat the whole purpose of university, which is for students to learn as much as they can, for their skills to develop, and to prepare them for their future careers.

The fact that we have been hit hard by the recession makes the situation even worse for students. Student unemployment in July and August of 2009 broke records, and those who were lucky enough to even have a job faced fewer hours and lower wages. Despite this, tuition still increased about 5.4 per cent for the 2010/2011 academic year.

The government should take into consideration the scarcity of student jobs, and set the fees at a reasonable standard. Yet they have allowed tuition fees to increase at double the rate of inflation over the past decade, while grants can't keep up with increasing enrollment. Today, almost 50 per cent of university costs are endured by students and their families.

"Our students are facing huge pressures that we are not adequately addressing," said Mark Langer, president of OCUFA. "We expect our students to pay for a larger share of their education, engage in more paid work, attend larger classes, have less interaction with faculty, and pursue remedial courses on top of their regular studies to succeed in a demanding university curriculum. This is a recipe for disaster."

Fees are soaring but our quality of education is decreasing. Student satisfaction results show that interaction between student and professor is key for success. Brian E. Brown, former president of OCUFA, stated that the student-faculty ratio in Ontario is 27 to 1, while our top university competitors in the states have a 16 to 1 ratio.

The financial mess in the U.S. is far worse than in Canada, yet it has still made education a top priority, with President Obama's

stimulus package providing billions of dollars for higher education. Canada's 2009 federal budget contained over \$50 billion in stimulus spending with nothing allocated for students. U.S. competitors will be able to advance further than us by hiring more faculty, building new labs, funding research, attracting more students, and allowing qualified students from all income groups to attend university.

Insufficient funding is threatening the global competitiveness of Ontario's universities and the provincial economy. Classes have become so overcrowded, that essays are slowly becoming extinct with more and more professors having to resort to evaluating students with multiple choice computerized tests. If students do get the chance to write essays, they send it through turnitin.com because there isn't a large enough staff to check for plagiarism. Many professors are on contracts with no job security, which also prevents them from completing the necessary research in order to stay ahead in their field. Our economy and society can't progress without investment in education and research.

Education is increasingly becoming privatized, which will inevitably result in many qualified students being excluded. It isn't fair if a student who has excellent grades simply can't attend university because of their family's income. Students are being limited to education based on high financial costs, widening at the same time the gap between income groups.

Students in Ontario pay the highest tuition fees in the country but yet are not receiving the same quality of education. The government is wrong in forcing dramatic tuition hikes to supposedly fill the funding gap. All this does is create problems for students and prevents Canadian universities from competing globally. University funding should actually be a provincial and national priority — investing in education means investing in the economy and a brighter future.

With a total Canadian student loan debt at over \$13 billion, students are graduating with mortgage-sized debt loads while the Harper government is spending \$16 billion for 65 fighter jets. The government shows no respect or understanding for students who are suffering because of these horrible decisions. The only question is: how long are we going to remain silent while the government robs us of our right to quality education?



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### *Post-secondary education is not a right, but a privilege*

**Yves Guillaume A. Messy**  
VARSITY CONTRIBUTOR

Amidst recent history's worst financial crisis, U of T is once again fraught with both anguished protest and righteous debate. The reclamation at hand: a costless higher education. The impending penance of higher interest rates on Canada's highest ever student debt level is reanimating the debate on whether higher education should be a right. History is mired with tales of brave struggles. Struggles for freedoms deemed to be universally needed, essential to humane living, and key requirements of a free society. Let it be clearly stated: higher education is very far from being one of them.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms entails every citizen's right to an education. The hope being that it will help produce an enlightened citizenry, for the good of country. These requirements are largely met by primary and secondary schools whose educational mandate is sponsored and monitored by the federal government. This national education mandate covers essential points of Canadian political, economic, and civic life in addition to the body of knowledge so essential to modern living. Any further level of education is thus an additional option fully available to anybody willing to take up the challenge.

Higher education is a prized distinction available to any student sufficiently desiring and minimally equipped to cope with its required amount of work. There are scarcely any financial obstacles to the acquisition of a higher education. Between OSAP, government grants, scholarships, family contributions, and part-time employment (with sufficient planning) are a few of the many ways one can finance an education. The sole remaining prerequisite for entry into higher education is a demonstrated scholastic aptitude of the right level. Even this obstacle is dealt with appropriately with transitional options like JUMP courses that pretty much remove that barrier to entry. With such a variety of access points available, it is rather clear that higher education is available to whoever is willing and able to do the work. In fact, any argument to argue for a right to higher education is little more than a vain attempt to justify paying for both the unwilling and the unable; one that typically is doomed to fail.

There are significant dangers to having a universalist approach to higher education attendance. These are already clear in display at Canada's largest (and best) public institution of higher learning: the University of To-

ronto. One of the immediate drawbacks of massive indiscriminate public institutions of higher education such as U of T, is corporatism. One surely doesn't need a PhD in sociology to decipher the significant influence of blue chip corporations over U of T's curriculum. Our university's experience shows that a regime of universality in higher education attendance will leave a hitherto world class institution squabbling for corporate R&D funding. The freedom demonstrated in New York University's recent expansion to the Middle East NYU Abu Dhabi demonstrates one of the many possibilities that a rights-based approach to higher education attendance will cost us. Is this not obvious as the university is now closing fundamental houses of modern learning such as the Center for Ethics? A strong merit-based non-public approach to higher education would strengthen and deepen the research span of many Canadian institutions of higher learning. A rights-based approach to the latter would lead to just the very opposite.

Additionally, akin to any other public institution of higher learning, the university's staggering size (now upwards of seventy thousand) has made it ever less able to meet its students' needs. This is plainly evident in the level of drop-out along with a notoriously bland student experience rating according to the most recent issue of Maclean's. These sad outcomes are directly linked to U of T's government-regulated status, with its less than competitive undergraduate admission standards, and its significantly large admission quota for students issued from the secondary school system. It is no secret that a larger than average proportion of our undergraduates are so acutely unprepared, unassisted, and unsatisfied that they simply wholly underperform throughout their degree. The resulting unemployment and failure to reach graduate school are just two of the many consequences of this universalist push for university enrollment.

Construing higher education as a right, and not an earned distinction, is sure to devalue and deteriorate, the process and the proceeds of our higher education system. A flooded job market of whimsically (and sometimes randomly) educated young people is likely to make it ever harder for deserving students to prove their worth as they seek employment. If this isn't bad enough, those whose path into higher education was motivated by simple whim, the exertion of a right maybe, are likely to find themselves unhappy, hopelessly indebted, and eager to oppose any argument that higher education is anything less than a distinction, an earned privilege.