

What Lies Beneath the Debate Around Increased Tuition? Quebec Public Opinion on the Issue of Tuition Hikes

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For the Montreal Gazette

April 28th, 2012

As the student protests continue over the Quebec government's proposed tuition hikes, the public's attention has been directed at the failed negotiation process and whether the preservation of social peace should require the government to talk with certain student leaders that sometimes seem reluctant to denounce acts of violence. At times, the issues that underlie the current impasse seem to fade into the backdrop. The principal question is whether the increase in tuition fees is affordable and what consequences it will have for Quebecers with fewer resources. Will increases in tuition result in lower enrolment and make access to universities considerably more difficult for those individuals and families with lower on average income? Some studies have attempted to address the question but very often the methods they employ do not consider all the dimensions of the issue. Such things as the level of opportunities for financial support to students (i.e. government and/or family assistance) and whether the outcome is a debt for students that is difficult to bear. Some of these issues involve a perception of what is financially feasible and therefore they defy the so-called scientific measures around the potential impact of tuition increases on the attainment of a university degree.

To provide insight into these questions, the Montreal Gazette and the Association for Canadian Studies commissioned the firm Leger Marketing to ask Quebecers a series of questions about the affordability of tuition and their view of the possible affects of such increases. The survey was conducted via web panel during the week of April 23rd, 2012. The survey is divided into three themes: (1) the degree of interest in the debate; (2) the perceived value Quebecers attach to a university degree and; (3) the accessibility and affordability of tuition fees and who should be responsible for bearing the costs.

The Gazette-ACS Leger Marketing survey reveals that some three in four Quebecers are closely following the debates over increases in tuition fees and 45% of Quebecers feel that personally affects them or a member of their family.

Quebec (Gazette-ACS-Leger Marketing)	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know/Refuse to Respond
I am closely following debates about increases in university tuition fees	76	22	2
Debates about university tuition fees personally affect me or members of my family	45	50	6

A slight majority of some 52% of Quebecers do not agree that a university degree is needed to succeed in our society. On the other hand some 57% of Quebecers agree that many skilled people are unfairly shut out of jobs because they don't have a university degree

Quebec (Gazette-ACS-Leger Marketing)	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know/Refuse to Respond
A university degree is essential towards succeeding in today's society	47	52	1
Many skilled people are unfairly shut out of jobs because they don't have a university degree	57	37	6

On the issue of the importance of a university degree there is a substantial difference of opinion between francophones and non-francophones.

A university degree is essential towards succeeding in today's society	Francophones	Non-Francophones
Total pondéré :	790	210
Total absolu :	836	163
TOTAL agree	39%	69%
Strongly agree	10%	24%
Somewhat agree	29%	45%
TOTAL disagree	59%	30%
Somewhat disagree	35%	17%
Strongly disagree	24%	12%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	2%	2%

On the issue of affordability, accessibility and the question of who should shoulder the burden for the fees, Quebecers views are somewhat nuanced. A slim majority (52%) agree that quality education can continued to be offered at universities without raising fees. Quebecers are divided around the extent to which they agree that the cost of tuition is the principal obstacle for people with lower income who wish to attend university. That said, 58% of Quebecers disagree that higher tuition fees will result in lower enrolment and 59% do not think that a student carrying too much debt will have difficulty getting a university degree. Nearly two-thirds of Quebecers agree that family members should share the cost with children that wish to pursue a university degree. The issue around which a significant share of Quebecers agrees is that raising personal income taxes is by no means a preferred alternative to raising tuition fees when it comes to securing additional monies for universities.

In sum, the survey suggests that those contending that increased tuition fees is prohibitive have not successfully made their case to the majority of the Quebec population which do not appear to endorse that increases are the principal obstacle to securing a university degree or that it would create an unmanageable burden on the students. The majority of Quebecers also appear adamant about a possible alternative for increasing funds for university education. They seem more inclined that a university education should mainly be the financial responsibility of those who desire to obtain a degree.

Quebec (Gazette-ACS-Leger Marketing)	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know/Refuse to Respond
Universities can continue to offer the same quality education without raising tuition fees	52	45	3
The cost of tuition is the principal obstacle for persons with lower income that wish to attend university	50	48	2
Higher university tuition fees will mean that less students will be able to go to university	40	58	2
It is difficult for students that have too much debt to get a university degree	36	59	5
Students and not family members should pay the cost for going to university	44	52	4
Family members should share the cost with children that wish to pursue a university degree	63	33	4
Raising personal income taxes is preferable to increasing tuition fees to raise funds for universities	17	79	4

Clear Cleavages on the Basis of Income and Age

As observed in the tables below, around questions of affordability and accessibility there are considerable gaps between those between the ages of 18 and 24 and those earning under 40 000 dollars and those earning above that amount. The youngest cohort is the least persuaded that universities can offer the same quality education without increasing fees. Other cohorts are more divided and the 35-44 group is more inclined to agree that tuition fees need to be increased.

Universities can continue to offer the same quality education without raising tuition fees	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +
Total weighted	170	120	192	200	136	180
Total absolute	131	115	166	196	165	227
TOTAL agree	68%	54%	45%	54%	58%	38%
Strongly agree	41%	33%	20%	30%	26%	18%
Somewhat agree	27%	22%	25%	25%	32%	19%
TOTAL disagree	28%	41%	54%	39%	37%	58%
Somewhat disagree	20%	29%	31%	21%	18%	24%
Strongly disagree	8%	11%	23%	18%	19%	34%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	4%	5%	1%	6%	5%	4%

Those earning less than 40k are more likely to agree that tuition fee increases are unnecessary to preserve quality education, Those earning above 60k are more divided around the question.

Universities can continue to offer the same quality education without raising tuition fees	-40k	40-59k	60-79k	80-99k	100k +
Total weighted	256	184	124	130	160
Total absolute	241	201	129	129	169
TOTAL agree	66%	54%	51%	47%	41%
Strongly agree	42%	21%	26%	26%	18%
Somewhat agree	24%	33%	26%	22%	22%
TOTAL disagree	28%	44%	46%	49%	56%
Somewhat disagree	14%	25%	30%	28%	27%
Strongly disagree	14%	20%	16%	21%	29%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	5%	2%	2%	3%	3%

A significant majority of the 18-24 group agree that higher tuition will lead to lower enrolment. The next age cohort (25-34) is evenly divided around the question and those over 35 years of age do not agree that tuition fees will result in lower enrolment.

Higher university tuition fees will mean that less students will be able to go to university	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +
Total weighted	170	120	192	200	136	180
Total absolute	131	115	166	196	165	227
TOTAL agree	68%	50%	35%	39%	37%	28%
Strongly agree	37%	26%	16%	23%	21%	13%
Somewhat agree	31%	24%	19%	16%	16%	15%
TOTAL disagree	30%	49%	65%	58%	60%	70%
Somewhat disagree	15%	31%	30%	29%	32%	39%
Strongly disagree	14%	18%	35%	30%	29%	32%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	3%	1%	1%	2%	3%	1%

Only the group earning less than 40k agree that higher tuition will negatively affect enrolment. Those earning over 40k agree to a roughly similar degree that tuition fee hikes will not result in lower enrolment.

Higher university tuition fees will mean that less students will be able to go to university	-40k	40-59k	60-79k	80-99k	100k +
Total weighted	256	184	124	130	160
Total absolute	241	201	129	129	169
TOTAL agree	57%	38%	40%	34%	32%
Strongly agree	34%	14%	25%	17%	18%
Somewhat agree	24%	25%	15%	17%	14%
TOTAL disagree	39%	61%	59%	66%	68%
Somewhat disagree	25%	32%	30%	35%	31%
Strongly disagree	14%	29%	29%	30%	37%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	4%	1%	1%	0%	0%

Significant borrowing is not seen by the majority as an obstacle to getting a university degree. In effect the perceived need to borrow is not seen as an obstacle to getting a university degree across the age spectrum.

It is difficult for students who have borrowed a lot to get their university degree						
	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +
TOTAL agree	46%	36%	34%	35%	41%	33%
Strongly agree	27%	14%	10%	11%	17%	13%
Somewhat agree	19%	22%	23%	24%	24%	19%
TOTAL disagree	42%	57%	65%	59%	54%	65%
Somewhat disagree	28%	36%	43%	37%	38%	43%
Strongly disagree	14%	21%	22%	22%	16%	22%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	12%	7%	1%	6%	5%	2%

The view around the possible effects of borrowing on securing a university degree divides the group earning under 40k.

It is difficult for students who have borrowed a lot to get their university degree					
	-40k	40-59k	60-79k	80-99k	100k +
Total weighted	256	184	124	130	160
Total absolute	241	201	129	129	169
TOTAL agree	50%	31%	34%	36%	24%
Strongly agree	25%	8%	8%	16%	11%
Somewhat agree	25%	22%	26%	20%	13%
TOTAL disagree	42%	64%	62%	63%	72%
Somewhat disagree	31%	44%	42%	37%	46%
Strongly disagree	12%	20%	20%	26%	26%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	7%	5%	4%	1%	4%

As to whether tuition fees are seen as the principal obstacle for persons with lower income that wish to attend university some 68% of the 18-24 group agree as do 57% of the 25-34 group. However persons over the age of 35 are far more divided around a question that is a key argument of those rejecting tuition fee hikes.

The cost of tuition is the principal obstacle for persons with lower income that wish to attend university	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +
TOTAL agree	68%	57%	43%	51%	50%	43%
Strongly agree	40%	27%	17%	25%	28%	19%
Somewhat agree	28%	30%	26%	26%	22%	23%
TOTAL disagree	28%	40%	57%	47%	48%	55%
Somewhat disagree	18%	26%	31%	32%	31%	35%
Strongly disagree	10%	15%	25%	15%	17%	20%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	4%	3%	0%	2%	2%	2%

Those earning under 40k are far more likely to agree that the cost of tuition is the principal obstacle for persons with lower income that wish to attend university than are those persons earning over 40k who are more divided around that observation.

The cost of tuition is the principal obstacle for persons with lower income that wish to attend university	-40k	40-59k	60-79k	80-99k	100k +
Total weighted	256	184	124	130	160
Total absolute	241	201	129	129	169
TOTAL agree	65%	52%	52%	45%	37%
Strongly agree	39%	23%	23%	20%	11%
Somewhat agree	25%	29%	29%	25%	26%
TOTAL disagree	34%	46%	46%	54%	62%
Somewhat disagree	24%	31%	27%	32%	35%
Strongly disagree	9%	15%	19%	23%	27%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%

The idea of raising personal income taxes as an alternative to increasing tuition fees is strongly rejected across all age cohorts though somewhat less so amongst the 18-24 group.

Raising personal income taxes is preferable to increasing tuition fees to raise funds for universities	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +
TOTAL agree	38%	21%	12%	9%	13%	11%
Strongly agree	14%	10%	3%	4%	4%	4%
Somewhat agree	24%	11%	9%	6%	8%	7%
TOTAL disagree	55%	75%	85%	87%	83%	86%
Somewhat disagree	24%	21%	21%	26%	21%	21%
Strongly disagree	31%	53%	64%	62%	62%	65%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	7%	5%	3%	3%	4%	3%

The idea of raising taxes is also rejected by all income groups.

Raising personal income taxes is preferable to increasing tuition fees to raise funds for universities					
	-40k	40-59k	60-79k	80-99k	100k +
Total weighted	256	184	124	130	160
Total absolute	241	201	129	129	169
TOTAL agree	25%	9%	15%	16%	17%
Strongly agree	11%	3%	9%	6%	4%
Somewhat agree	14%	7%	7%	10%	13%
TOTAL disagree	70%	87%	77%	83%	83%
Somewhat disagree	22%	24%	21%	25%	22%
Strongly disagree	48%	63%	56%	58%	60%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	5%	4%	8%	1%	0%