

PUBLIC OPINION ON UNIVERSITY COSTS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF A DEGREE FOR POST-GRAD EMPLOYMENT

INTRODUCTION

Based on recent public opinion polling commissioned by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA), an overwhelming majority of Ontarians (79 per cent) agreed that students and their families have to borrow too much money to pay for their education. When asked to rank (on a scale of 1 to 5) how important a university degree was to finding a good job, 53 per cent of those surveyed selected 4 or 5, indicating that a degree was 'important' or 'very important'. Only 11 per cent of the respondents ranked a degree as 'unimportant' or 'very unimportant' to securing a good job. Finally, nearly half of Ontarians indicated that they would be willing to pay more taxes to decrease student costs and increase student financial assistance.

PROJECT OVERVIEW & METHODOLOGY

As part of its efforts to raise public awareness about the importance of post-secondary education in Ontario, and to highlight voter thinking on issues of student debt and the value of a degree during the 2014 Ontario Election, OUSA partnered with Ipsos Canada to field a public opinion poll.

An Internet survey of 1000 Ontarians aged 18 and over was conducted between May 22nd and May 28th, 2014. The statistics of a random sample of 1000 respondents are accurate to within 3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The sample is made to be representative of Ontario's gender balance and age range.

About OUSA

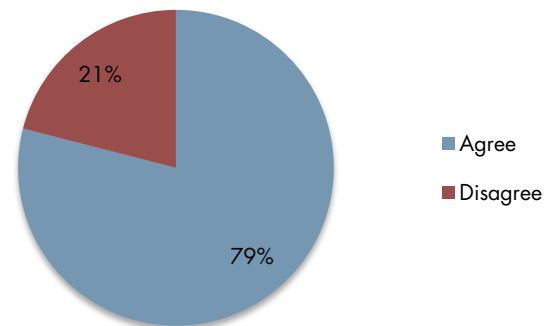
The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) is a non-partisan advocacy organization representing the interests of over 140,000 full and part-time undergraduate students at 7 student organizations across Ontario.

EVALUATING PUBLIC OPINION OF STUDENTS HAVING TO BORROW TO PAY FOR UNIVERSITY

The first question asked of respondents was intended to capture overall public sentiment towards the cost burden, specifically debt upon graduation, associated with attaining a university degree. The question was phrased as follows:

Agree or Disagree: students and their families in Ontario have to borrow too much money to pay for their post-secondary education.

FIGURE 1: STUDENTS AND FAMILIES HAVE TO TAKE ON TOO MUCH DEBT TO ATTEND UNIVERSITY, PERCENTAGE



An overwhelming majority of 79 per cent of respondents believed that students and their families had to borrow too much to finance a university education. This belief varied slightly across age demographics, but a majority of Ontarians in all age ranges included in the poll responded to this question with an 'agree' response, including those aged 55+.

FIGURE 2: STUDENTS AND FAMILIES HAVE TO TAKE ON TOO MUCH DEBT TO ATTEND UNIVERSITY

Age Range	Agree	Disagree
18-34	83%	21%
35-54	81%	19%
55+	74%	26%

When adjusting for household income, the results are even more telling. Among respondents whose household incomes were less than \$40,000, 86 per cent of respondents agreed that students and their families took on too much debt. Respondents from households whose combined income exceeded \$100,000, while still overwhelmingly agreeing with the statement, were less likely to at 73 per cent. This discrepancy reflects the continuing access gap between high and low-income students, as well as reinforcing research indicating that students from low-income households are more likely to perceive the cost of a degree as a barrier to participating in university.

Surprisingly, agreement with the statement was still very high (79 per cent) among respondents without children – indicating that the high cost of education is understood by, and a concern for, even those who are not immediately faced with paying it.

EVALUATING PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF A DEGREE IN EMPLOYABILITY

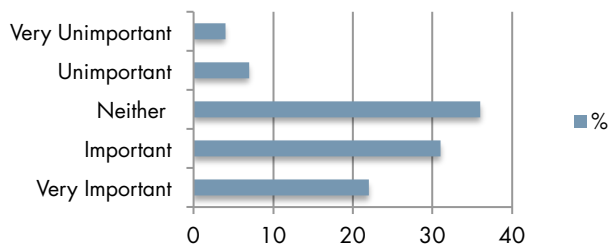
OUSA was also interested in the public's opinion regarding the importance of a university degree in finding a good job. Research has demonstrated that university graduates can still expect the best long-term employment and earnings outcomes, but due to high youth unemployment – particularly in the period immediately after graduation – there is sometimes a perception that university does not offer students an employment advantage.

OUSA asked the following question in order to gauge the public's perception of this issue:

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very unimportant, and 5 being very important, how important is a degree in finding a good job.

Of the Ontarians polled, 53 per cent of respondents selected either 'important' or 'very important', while only 11 per cent selected 'unimportant' or 'very unimportant'.

FIGURE 3: IMPORTANCE OF A DEGREE IN GETTING A GOOD JOB



Among respondents from households with a combined income of more than \$100,000, the perceived importance of a degree was much higher than the average at 68 per cent. This is perhaps due to higher income earners themselves being in careers that may require higher education.

Interestingly, respondents who were 55 or older were most likely (24 per cent) to consider a degree 'very important', while 35 to 54 year olds were most likely to answer 'important' at 36 per cent.

There was also a slight increase in answers of 'important' or 'very important' among respondents with children when compared to respondents without children – 56 per cent and 52 per cent respectively.

DESIRE FOR MORE FINANCIAL AID OR REDUCED COSTS FOR STUDENTS

Finally, OUSA sought to gauge public support for increased student financial assistance and reduced tuition costs for students. To this end, OUSA asked survey participants:

Agree or disagree: the government should reduce students' tuition fees and improve student aid even if I have to pay more taxes.

Results were almost evenly split among the general population surveyed, with 47 per cent agreeing with the statement and 53 per cent disagreeing.

At almost 60 per cent, people aged 18 to 35 were the most likely to agree with the statement. Those who had completed a post-secondary credential were more likely to answer in the positive as well. A slight majority, 53 per cent, of survey participants with children agreed with the statement.

Respondents from households with a combined income of less than \$40,000 were most likely (53 per cent) of all earnings groups to agree with the statement. The majority of respondents from the Greater Toronto Area answered the question in the affirmative, while only 30 per cent of respondents from Eastern Ontario agreed with the statement.

CONCLUSION

These three questions help frame the issue of post-secondary education in a few ways. First is that a large majority of Ontarians see value in a university education but feel that students and their families face a financial burden in participating. It is especially interesting that lower-income households both see the costs as more prohibitive *and* are more likely to pay increased taxes to make it more accessible.

Ontarians are largely split on the issue of being willing to pay more taxes in order to address cost barriers and increase financial aid however. That said, responses to this statement offered some of the most pronounced differences along age, sex and geography however – indicating that some complex relationships with university access as a social investment exist in the general population. However, OUSA cautions that the difference between the positive and negative responses are within the margin of error for this study.

Overall, this study would indicate that the perceived value of a university degree, as well as its perceived cost, warrant government attention through public policy and investment of existing resources.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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