

such is producing graduates equipped only with basic skills, often of poor quality.

- **Degree vs diploma imbalance:** There is a strong “degree vs diploma” taboo in India. The ratio of degree to diploma holders is around 2:1, while a ratio of 1:3 would make the most sense for the economy. On the one hand, there are very few diploma programs available at public institutions—the sector is dominated by private providers charging high fees—and on the other, societal perception on the usefulness of degrees for the job market is such that the prestige attached to diplomas is low. These are significant deterrents for youth when selecting their course programs.
- **Equity:** Finally, disparities in terms of employability skills have regional, socioeconomic, and gender connotations. Multiple factors such as family and cultural background, place of residence, quality and type of earlier education, and capability and ability to access additional learning all result in differential employability quotients across groups and individuals. The problem of skills is far more severe in rural and semiurban centres. Studies show that the gap between the employability of technical graduates between tier I and tier II cities is almost 50 percent, and is much higher for graduates from other streams. Girls and graduates from socially and economically underprivileged segments face heavier disadvantages.

#### CONCLUSION

The challenge to train employable higher education graduates while ensuring quality and equity is considerable. Higher education in India needs to make a leap from education for the sake of education to education for employment, by strategically correcting grave systemic distortions and focusing on “sustainable employability skills” programs, in order to facilitate the transition of graduates to the world of work. ■

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## Graduate Student Unionization: A Unique American Issue?

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Since the turn of the century, the unionization of graduate students has become a phenomenon sweeping private colleges and universities across the United States. Situated in the broader context of student activism, and governed by the laws of the respective states, graduate student unionization in public universities has a longer history and a wider spread. At private institutions—although the movement started back in the 1950s—successive rulings by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in the past 15 years or so has accelerated the demand for graduate unions. With the drive for unionization becoming wider and stronger, and the related pushback from university administrations, there are tensions and even disruptions on several campuses. While the issue continues to be contentious in the United States, this article seeks to identify comparable practices elsewhere.

#### GENERAL CATEGORIES

Broadly speaking, graduate student unions can be divided into two main categories. On the one hand, in the more traditional sense of “student unions”, we may identify the collective body that brings students together, often including both graduate and undergraduate students. Such unions, called by different names in different countries (such as association, union, guild, council, parliament, government, organization, etc.) voice the common interest and concerns of students not only on matters directly related to themselves, but also on a range of broader social, economic, and political issues. On the other hand, graduate student unions, sometimes also referred to as graduate employee unions—the type of unions that are currently a hot topic in private universities in the United States—represent the interests of a specific category of graduate students. They are particularly concerned with the benefits and labor rights of graduate students who provide services to their universities in exchange for compensation.

#### ORGANIZATION

In several countries across Europe, including Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Swe-

den, doctoral candidates are considered employees rather than students. Therefore, they can become members of the respective labor unions. For instance, the Swedish Association of University Teachers (an association of 23 independent unions) and the Finnish Union of University Researchers and Teachers (the largest in the country) both welcome doctoral candidates as members, when certain requirements are met. In the latter case, for example, a student must have at least a one-year contract of employment with the university.

In other cases, graduate student unions may be organized as extensions of labor unions in other sectors, such as the United Auto Workers in the United States and the Canadian Union of Public Employees in Canada. Elsewhere, as in Australia and the United Kingdom, graduate student unions are under the umbrella of student organizations, and are often supported by the respective universities.

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**Both in Australia and the United Kingdom, membership to graduate student unions is automatic upon registration in any one of the graduate programs of the respective universities.**

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#### PURPOSE

In the United States, graduate student unions see themselves as extensions of labor unions, from which they receive support. They seek the legal mandate to represent graduate students in collective bargaining, specifically on contract negotiations for, among others, pay, benefits, and working conditions. In a comparable case in Canada, several leading institutions have had unions of teaching and research assistants since the 1970s. The first such union was established in 1973 at the University of Toronto, which between 1975 and 1977 effectively negotiated to reduce significant pay disparities and to establish procedures for hiring, grievances, and dispute resolution.

While the primary goal of student unions in most places is to represent and defend the interests of the general student population, even those few unions that are specific to graduate students differ in certain ways from the ongoing unionization effort of graduate students in the United States. For example, the Graduate Union of the University of Cambridge (one of the very few student unions in the United Kingdom that is exclusively for graduate students) states as its main objective “the advancement of education” of its members. The union aims to promote the interests

and welfare of its members, to be a channel between its members and the university and bodies external to the university, and to provide social, cultural, sporting, and recreational activities. The objectives and foci of graduate student unions are the same at other leading institutions in the United Kingdom such as the University of York, Imperial College London, and the University of Kent, to mention a few.

Similarly, in Australia, graduate student associations at prominent institutions like the University of Melbourne, as well as the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, aim to promote the general educational and welfare interests of students. As the national voice of graduate students, the council serves as an authoritative source of information on relevant issues and works with government and nongovernment bodies to influence higher education policies.

It is, however, unjust to portray graduate student unions in the United States as exclusively concerned with benefits for its members. Although economic benefits and job security are predominant issues, unionization campaign organizers across different institutions have also raised educational and noneducational issues, including quality of education, gender relations, diversity and inclusion, sexual identity, immigrant and undocumented students, etc.

#### MEMBERSHIP

Both in Australia and the United Kingdom, membership to graduate student unions is automatic upon registration in any one of the graduate programs of the respective universities, including master’s programs in research degrees. There are no requirements related to university employment during enrollment. In fact, at some institutions (e.g., the University of Cambridge), graduate researchers and postdocs who are not students, visiting graduate students from other universities, and spouses or partners of full members are eligible as “associate members” and benefit from different services provided by the union. In others (e.g., the University of York), recent graduates are qualified to be members and may serve in union leadership positions. Unions are often affiliated with the university and receive support like any other student organizations.

In the United States, eligibility to become a member of a union is restricted by the condition of employment. In fact, for decades, the question of whether or not graduate teaching and research assistants can unionize has been pinned on the question of whether or not they can be considered employees. In its most recent ruling, the NLRB in 2016 broadly defined the requirement to entitle anyone, including undergraduates, to seek collective bargaining as long as they provide services to the university in exchange for compensation. This will probably continue to make membership a contentious issue.

In general, the literature on graduate student unionization reveals three trends: graduate students with employment contracts, generally considered as employees and able to join unions (e.g., Finland, Sweden, etc.); graduate students considered as students and represented only by general interest unions/associations (e.g., Australia and the United Kingdom); and graduate students considered as both students and employees and able to participate in unions (e.g., Canada and United States). What is unique to the United States is perhaps that, no matter how contentious, the unionization effort is likely to continue vigorously, fueled by sentiment against the growing corporatization of higher education institutions, which some strongly associate with the “exploitation” of graduate students and adjunct faculty. This is, conceivably, further exacerbated by the ever-increasing tuition and fees that leave graduates with a pile of debt, and the overall divisive political climate. ■

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## The Future of American Undergraduate Education

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Progress toward universal basic and secondary education in most countries has been slow and difficult, but the global trend over time is toward greater opportunity for more students from different backgrounds and regions. Building upon its history of educational expansion for young learners, the United States is now approaching universal access to post-secondary education with almost 90 percent of high school graduates enrolling in a two- or four-year college or university during young adulthood. Unfortunately, serious limitations must be addressed for more students to gain the economic

and personal benefits that come along with a college education and for the country to continue as a democratic nation of economic opportunity. To ensure that students receive the education they need, we must focus on completion and affordability while more strongly emphasizing quality.

### IMPROVING COMPLETION AND AFFORDABILITY

Like many higher education institutions worldwide, American colleges and universities struggle with completion and affordability. In the United States, too few students graduate, with only about 55 percent of students completing a college credential. More students are borrowing more money to pay for college, with over 60 percent taking out loans; and those who do not graduate are the most likely to have trouble paying back their loans, further limiting their economic opportunity. These obstacles are particularly acute for underrepresented minorities and students from low-income families, meaning that the country is missing out on large reservoirs of human potential. Many institutions, policy groups, and researchers now focus on completion and affordability and many promising practices show solid results. For example, Florida State University increased its completion rates from 63 to 79 percent over a period of years using data to identify barriers and implementing support structures to help students. The Australian and English income-based loan programs are exemplars in helping to reduce default rates and the United States should draw upon these models.

In addition to completion and affordability, greater attention needs to be paid to the purposes of the learning that takes place during college and how we may realistically deliver on this promise of future prosperity.

### TAKING COLLEGE TEACHING MORE SERIOUSLY

Debates over the value of vocational versus liberal arts education have a long history in the United States, but this perceived division is a false choice; college graduates need to master a range of academic, practical, and civic skills. Students in every field need to acquire a blend of abilities associated with the liberal arts such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork in addition to technical and practical skills. These students will stand the best chance of performing effectively at work, participating in their communities, and learning over their lifetimes.

Over the past 40 years, a growing body of research has deepened our understanding of how people learn and, in turn, has brought insights into how teachers can best teach. This research offers a range of evidence-based teaching practices linked with a host of positive outcomes including increased student learning, reductions in achievement gaps, and increased persistence. Yet the use of evidence-based teaching techniques throughout the country's 4,700 colleges and uni-