The Free-Tuition Movement

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Abstract
This article gives an insight into the free-tuition movement observed globally. It analyses the forces that led to the adoption of free-tuition policies and questions their sustainability in light of recent events in countries that adopted such policies.

In recent decades, rising costs and massification in higher education have led to an increase in cost sharing, shifting the cost from governments to students. As a result, debates around the financing of higher education have focused on rising tuition fees, the use of student loans, and increasing student debt. In this context, it is surprising that the 2010s have seen a revival of the opposite policy: tuition-free higher education, with political decisions the world over to revert to solely, or dominantly, government-funded higher education.

The Free-Tuition Movement

The recent free tuition movement arguably started in 2011 in Chile, with massive student demonstrations requesting free tuition. This movement was the result of a high student debt burden and a call for the end of the marketization of higher education. The student movement's agenda permeated the presidential election of 2013, which Socialist candidate Michele Bachelet won, largely on the promise of making higher education free for all.

Similar events happened in South Africa in 2015–2016, with the #FeesMustFall movement that led students to the streets. Against the advice of his own experts, President Zuma announced a plan to introduce free tuition in 2017. Other countries followed suit. In 2017, New Zealand elected a prime minister whose electoral platform included free tuition. The Philippines signed free higher education into law in 2017. In 2018, Liberia's president announced the start of free public universities, followed by Mauritius in 2019.

Discussions around tuition-free higher education are also alive in the United States, where it is an issue in many 2020 Democrat candidates' programs, including Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. The free-tuition movement is therefore an important trend to understand for the future of higher education.

The Rebirth of an Ideology

Amid the cost-sharing trend, a few countries around the world, most with state-welfare ideologies, have maintained free higher education (in public institutions), including, but not limited to, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and most of Latin America. Only recently have countries that used cost sharing decided to reverse and embrace the tenets of free tuition.

In the majority of cases, student discontent seems to have been the reason for the shift to free tuition. This discontent was usually fuelled by equity concerns because of rising tuition fees. In Chile, high tuition fees and student debt were central to the students' claim that higher education was "marketized." As a result, one of the demands of the Chilean movement was better access to higher education for the poorest through free higher education. In South Africa, the #FeesMustFall movement focused on rising fees, but concerns about racism, decolonization, and equity underlied the demands. The Liberia announcement of free tuition also came after student protests over hikes in tuition fees.

From the various governments' perspectives, embracing this bottom-up idea seems to be politically motivated—aimed at gathering votes—rather than based on rigorous analyses of policy options. In Chile and New Zealand, free tuition was an argument on electoral platforms for elections. In Mauritius, the president's declaration happened at the beginning of an election year. In South Africa, the law was announced as President Zuma was mired in scandals. For many politicians, free tuition seems an easy to understand and powerful proposal that guarantees strong popular support.

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The Reality about Free Tuition

Free tuition may be good politics, but it might be rather poor policy. It has led many of its supporters to power, while failing to consistently improve equity in higher education. In Chile, the promise of free tuition brought Michele Bachelet to power, but it did not improve participation of the most disadvantaged populations, since enrollment is conditional on prior academic achievements. Indeed, free tuition often benefits mostly high-income groups, while students from poorer backgrounds are kept out of free public institutions. Similarly, free-tuition policies have been linked to underfunding of universities and quality issues.

But the main issue with the current free-tuition movement is the inability of politicians who champion it to make it a sustainable reality. In Chile, only students from the 60 percent poorest households currently receive free-tuition higher education—and only in eligible institutions. Although the idea is to fund free tuition for all, difficult economic conditions have stalled progress. In South Africa, the proposed law also targets the poorest students. In New Zealand, university budgets have been frozen soon after the free-tuition announcement. In an age of massification, sustaining free tuition financially is difficult and scarce government resources need to be better targeted.

Targeted Free Tuition

As a result, a new trend has emerged, somewhat accidentally in Chile, but more purposefully in other countries: targeted free tuition, where free higher education is limited to students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. This solution has been implemented recently in the state of New York, and in Italy, Japan, and South Africa, among others. Targeted free tuition has the political appeal of a free-tuition policy, but with better economic efficiency. It provides financial resources to those who need them most, thus answering to both issues of equity and university funding. The future will tell if this approach succeeds and could be more widely adopted. ◢

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