

Free Higher Education: On and Off the Agenda with the Political Tide

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With all that happened in 2020, it is not surprising that debates on the cost of higher education have been subdued. The free tuition movement that developed between 2016 and 2019 has stalled, a logical outcome of a year of health and economic hardship. And 2020 will certainly have economic repercussions on higher education for many years to come. Yet, in some countries, 2020 was also an election year, bringing with it promises and disappointment on the matter of free tuition higher education.

The United States

In the United States, free tuition was an important topic during the Democratic primary. Two frontrunners, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, strongly supported free tuition for all. In 2020, Joe Biden was chosen as the Democratic candidate—a candidate whose position on tuition fees was less vocal. His platform, however, included making community colleges free for all, as well as support for free four-year college education for low-income students. Biden's vice-president running mate, Kamala Harris, was not a supporter of free tuition. Yet her campaign platform included a plan to make education at four-year institutions debt free, and as a senator, she cosponsored the Debt-Free College Act.

The issue of tuition fees came to the foreground as the COVID-19 pandemic put an end to on-campus instruction in the Spring semester 2020. Students rebelled against the idea of paying full tuition fees for online courses, which they deemed of lower quality—to little effect. Even with instruction resuming on campus, the long-term economic crisis that might result from the pandemic will keep the issue of tuition fees on the political agenda. Affordability of four-year institutions will be questioned again, as families affected by the crisis have fewer financial resources, changing enrollment patterns and student college choices.

In this particular context, the support of President Joe Biden for free community college and free four-year-institution education for students from families earning less than USD 125,000 will be a welcome improvement to the current system, ensuring that low-income students, including those whose families were negatively impacted by the pandemic, have access to higher education. Pending a few improvements, such as swapping the strict parental income cut off for a fade-out rule, Biden could secure an important political win for Democrats.

New Zealand

By contrast, New Zealand's new free-tuition scheme took a hit in 2020, despite it being an election year, and despite the government's exemplary management of the pandemic. In 2017, New Zealand's Labour government introduced a "fees-free" program eliminating tuition fees for first-year students, with the intention of expanding this measure to the second year in 2020 and to the third year in 2024. However, expansion to the second year was absent from the 2020 Labour political platform.

Several reasons can explain this change of position. First, owing to its successful control of the pandemic, the Labour Party was assured victory and probably did not need publicity gains from free tuition promises. Second, the evaluation of the tuition-free first year showed disappointing results, including disproportionate benefits for rich students and a failure to boost enrollment. Third, the Labour party replaced its original

Abstract

This article provides an update on the international free tuition movement as of 2020. Through the examples of the United States and New Zealand, it shows that free tuition is a highly politicized issue used by policy makers who need to gain power. The economic crisis stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic will, however, make such an expansive policy unviable in the short-term, but might be an opportunity for income-targeted free tuition to develop.

expansion to the second year with a “fees-free” program for apprenticeship, in effect choosing to target low-income students through postsecondary vocational training.

The Politics of Free Tuition

Highlighted in [Gayardon and Bernasconi’s article](#) in *International Higher Education*, issue 100, was the fact that the free tuition movement is above all else political, with free tuition promises making their appearance on campaign platforms or before potential reelections. This is demonstrated in the two sections above: Free tuition higher education was on the agenda in the United States when elections were disputed, while it was no longer part of the Labour platform in New Zealand when victory was certain.

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The case of New Zealand also shows that despite its initial appeal, free tuition often fails to fulfill its promises and is an expensive policy. This reality has been recently felt in many countries. In the face of budgetary constraints and lack of political interest, Chile is no longer expanding its free tuition policy to more students or more institutions. Similarly, Ontario terminated its free-tuition program for low-income students in an effort to cut the deficit. These examples stand to show that the cost of free higher education is hard to justify in view of its limited benefits, leading to short-lived or restricted policies. The free-tuition movement that started in 2016 in Chile and brought a number of countries onboard in the three years that followed faces an uncertain future.

The Future of Free Tuition

It is currently hard to see where the future of the free tuition movement lies. While it remains a powerful tool in the belt of would-be political leaders, the economic crisis stemming from the pandemic is likely to severely restrict higher education’s budget. Higher education has never been a top priority for governments, and the years ahead will certainly place more emphasis on economic recovery and healthcare than on any other sector. Free tuition for all does not appear to be a viable policy in this context.

However, with low-income households being the most gravely hit by the pandemic economically, it might also be the right time for governments to consider *targeted* free tuition. This is what President Biden proposes through free tuition at community colleges for low-income students—following the example of Italy, New Brunswick, and Japan to name a few. Targeted free tuition would be an efficient use of the scarce resources devoted to higher education, which could prove particularly useful while recovering from the pandemic. ▲

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