

The challenge of deregulation

This text springs from the local reality and the challenge experienced at Concordia this year. As many of us were expecting, this fall the Concordia administration has reluctantly admitted it was planning to increase the tuition fees, starting next fall, for international students in the deregulated programs of study. They plan to implement what they call “cohort pricing,” a scheme under which every new academic year will be a new cohort, each cohort being more expensive than the preceding cohort. New international students will be enrolled in a cohort (for example the 2017/18 cohort) and pay the same amount in tuition every year, instead of seeing their tuition increase with inflation as it is the case now. It is a “price stability” purchased at the cost of several thousand dollars more in tuition every year!

Another danger of this cohort pricing is that currently the administration refuses to answer whether a student enrolled in a given cohort (say 2017/18), in the event they take longer to finish their degree, or if they decide to change their major (say in 2019/20), will then be bumped up to the new more expensive cohort (the 2019/20 one). That there may be a financial penalty for changing one’s focus of study, or for taking longer to finish one’s degree is of grave concern for us, and is in straight line with a commoditised view of the postsecondary education system. Enrol study and no more, don’t change focus, don’t go part-time and straight through the pipeline to the “job market.”

The point of this text is not to discuss Concordia’s specific situation however, but to address the deregulation program as a whole, that we see as a looming threat to a publically funded accessible post-secondary education. We want to acknowledge that a number of texts have already been produced on the subject, such as CRAA’s *Memoire sur le rapport Tremblay-Roy*.

Since 2008, six programs of studies - engineering, computer science, business, mathematics, and pure sciences - have been deregulated for international students, said deregulation having taken full effect as of 2014.¹ What this means is that these programs are not regulated by the government anymore, i.e. their tuition rate is not fixed by decree every year by the provincial government, but left at the discretion of the university.² At the same time, these programs have been gradually defunded by the government from 2008 to 2014, and are now not allocated any more governmental funding. This raises a number of issues:

- The most obvious one is that universities have an incentive to increase tuition fees in these programs, making them less accessible. This is exacerbated by the dire financial situation universities are facing after years of cuts in their budget under the austerity regime. They are now desperate for additional revenues, and international students are -seemingly- the path of less resistance.

¹ This does not include French students, who on their part have seen their tuition fees raised from the Quebec rate to the Out-of-Province rate in 2015.

² Universities are enabled to increase the tuition rate of these programs as much as they wish, the only constraint being that they cannot set a tuition rate that is lower than the tuition rate for equivalent regulated programs.

- The international *forfaitaire*³ collected by the universities in regulated programs is then transferred to the government, which redistributes across the university network. This redistribution mechanism provides funding for universities that do not attract a lot of international students. In deregulated programs however, the universities get to keep all of the *forfaitaire*, which is a bounty for big metropolitan universities that have the capacity to attract a large international student population. Smaller, regional universities, which are already hit the harder by the effects of austerity, are being further defunded by the deregulation.
- In programs of study that accept a limited number of students, the deregulation may have for effect to close the doors to Quebec students, as they are less profitable for the university. We already have hints of this at Concordia, which has 17% of international students. In its budget presentation this year, the administration explicitly stated that they were now no longer seeking to increase enrolment, but to increase the ratio of international students as they represent “opportunities for funding.”

The deregulation of these six programs is already the source of grave concern in itself. We now witness the situation where a whole segment of the student population in Quebec is experiencing a fully user-payer version of the university. We believe that local tuition increases in these programs must be fought wherever they are proposed. This is difficult as the programs affected are generally not the most militant, if at all. Moreover, we are under the impression that the knowledge of the deregulation of these programs and its effects is relatively poorly disseminated in the student movement at the moment, maybe precisely because of the nature of the programs affected. We feel this is a lack that needs to be addressed rapidly, with a solid discourse and concrete steps. One the one hand, international students are often living precariously, facing other staggering cost for immigration, mandatory health plans, abusive housing, and their status makes it hard for them to stand up and fight back. Making the case for international students - if that is necessary - would require another full text, which we will forgo, but too often they have been left aside and sacrificed.⁴ On the other hand, this is, we believe, only the first step in a direction to further privatize the Quebec university system, and maybe the single direct threat to the accessibility of education we face now.

When the deregulation of these six programs was implemented in 2008, the governmental report explicitly stated that this was a pilot project, and that eventually the deregulation was purposed to be expanded to all programs of studies. We can thus expect there will be a tentative to expand the deregulation to all programs of studies for international students in the coming years. We also fear that this user-payer model will be expanded under one form or another to other categories of students, leading post secondary education in Quebec to be increasingly privatised.

Now that the deregulation of these programs of study has been fully implemented, this framework could be used as a backdoor to increase tuition fees for Quebec residents

³ The difference between the international tuition rate and the Quebec resident rate.

⁴ Such as in 1996, when the FEUQ obtained to maintain the tuition freeze for Quebec resident in exchange of allowing for the increase of tuition fees for international students. Prior to this, there was one single tuition rate in Quebec for all students.

and out-of Province students through the deregulation of some institutions, such as HEC. In the same way that universities such as McGill called for and welcomed the deregulation for international students, within institutions such as HEC there have been calls to adopt a two-tier university system, similar to the one found in France. The French system of so-called *Grandes Ecoles* (mainly engineering and business schools) allows for a (almost) free post-education network, coupled with *Grandes Ecoles* that charge tuition rates ranging up to 15,000 euros annually (and on the rise).

After the 2012 mobilisation, it is doubtful that a frontal tuition increase by the government will be attempted in the short time. Out-of Province rates are now roughly on par with the median rate of other provinces, and thus likely to follow that median. We believe that an ever-expanding deregulation is what the student movement will face in the coming years. It serves both to increase tuition fees, and to rather than promoting a user-payer relation through the government it would do so through the institutions themselves, which is more in line with a neoliberal view of the “delivery” of education.

This poses significant challenges in terms of mobilisation. It may be harder to mobilise against a partial deregulation law than against an “honest” tuition hike. If implemented, the struggles would be mainly between the students and their administration rather than the government. This is why we believe it is important that ASSE develop rapidly a solid discourse against deregulation, and that it be shared and discussed within its members. Outreach towards the programs currently affected also seems necessary.

While the mobilisation at Concordia has already been set in motion, we invite other student associations members of ASSÉ to work on local information campaigns about these recent measure, and to consider tactics that can be used to promote a greater solidarity in the struggle to come as these measures are propagated more largely!

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