

Welfare Routes to Post-secondary Education

Social assistance (or welfare) recipients who choose to pursue some form of post-secondary education at the college or university level can take one of several routes.

Welfare recipients considered employable are required to meet with a caseworker to develop an individualized plan intended to lead to self-sufficiency. These individuals are expected to participate in some form of literacy and numeracy upgrading, skills training, post-secondary education or work-related activity.

If post-secondary education has been deemed the appropriate pathway for a given individual, welfare then seeks all possible sources of support or reimbursement. Selected examples are presented below.

Student aid is the obvious and most common source of financing. Most welfare systems work out a shared-cost arrangement in respect of “case managed” recipients pursuing post-secondary education. These individuals generally remain on social assistance, which continues to pay for basics such as food, clothing and shelter. Student aid, in

turn, covers tuition, books and compulsory fees.

It should be noted that “generally” is the operative word. In *British Columbia*, for example, students who are “case managed” to pursue post-secondary education must go off social assistance and onto StudentAid BC.

For welfare recipients who may not be ready to pursue advanced education immediately, a different form of financing may apply.

Many of these individuals face literacy and numeracy challenges – one of the reasons they end up unemployed and on welfare in the first place. They are not usually considered good candidates for post-secondary education unless their basic skills improve.

Most welfare systems try to seek compensation for this upgrading trajectory through special funds tagged for this purpose.

The recipient may qualify for employment support measures through federal-

provincial/territorial labour market agreements, the Multilateral Framework for Labour Market Agreements for Persons with Disabilities or the Aboriginal Human Resource Development program.

Labour market programs typically pay tuition, books and other fees while social assistance covers basic living expenses. In some jurisdictions, the labour market program offsets additional costs, such as child care.

Welfare recipients enrolled in a secondary or college-level professional training program provided through *Emploi-Québec* or in a university program recognized by student aid and *Emploi-Québec* may continue to receive social assistance for basic needs. Student aid covers tuition and other compulsory educational costs.

To pay for this arrangement, *Emploi-Québec* works with the *Commission des partenaires du marché du travail* (Labour Market Partners Commission) and the regional councils of labour market partners, which comprise the *Canada-Québec Labour Market Agreement*. Under this agreement, Québec is responsible for implementing so-called “active employment measures” financed through the federal Employment Insurance Fund.

In *Manitoba*, welfare recipients approved for post-secondary education stay on Employment and Income Assistance for basic living costs. They receive a combined loan/grant from Manitoba Student Aid for tuition, books, school fees, modest personal expenses and vehicle operating costs. These students are also eligible for child care up to \$500 a year – though they typically get access to subsidized child care under the provincial program.

Participants have the option to go off Employment and Income Assistance and onto Manitoba Student Aid because they potentially could get higher benefits under the latter. However, the move is not to their advantage because they are required to repay funds they receive as a student loan.

Welfare payments, by contrast, are non-repayable. Recipients who leave social assistance and apply only for student aid potentially could lose access to welfare-delivered health benefits, prescription medications and dental/optical care for themselves or their children.

A recent change in Employment and Income Assistance through an enhanced education and training program called *Get Ready!* means that welfare recipients may now be eligible for this new measure. Single persons can take a skills training or education program of two years or less as part of an approved training plan while single parents and people with disabilities can enroll in skills training or educational programs for up to four years.

The payor of the education costs in these cases varies, depending on the nature of the skills training or education. Tuition may be paid by Employment Manitoba within the Department of Entrepreneurship, Training and Trade. For persons with disabilities, Vocational Rehabilitation in the Department of Family Services and Housing may cover tuition fees and social assistance pays basic living costs. These students may also be eligible for additional disability-related assistance.

In the *Northwest Territories*, prospective students remain on social assistance, which seeks financing from student aid, a

special program intended for aboriginal students or other source.

Social assistance itself can help with funds for training, education and required books. Students continue to have access to health-related costs, which are financed through the Department of Health and Social Services. There are two separate sources of support for child care for students with dependent children.

Unfortunately, the pan-Canadian practice in theory reads more easily than the practice in practice.

The two ministries or branches within the same ministry responsible for social assistance and student aid often do not have sufficient contact to ensure a smooth transition from welfare to post-secondary education. Neither do the relevant ministries appear able to provide the kind of individualized attention and ongoing support that disadvantaged students typically require.

Welfare recipients may find that various ministries use different definitions related to status or income, or may allow variable exemptions on assets. Eligibility for benefits or services under one ministry often results in loss of benefits or services from another source, effectively leaving individuals no better or even worse off.

Some interface problems are rooted in administrative complexities. Many students get caught with a cash flow problem because of administrative lags – the time period during which support from one program ends and another begins.

Program rules inadvertently can create pressures. Certain financing arrangements make provision for time-limited assistance.

Disadvantaged students often require more time to complete their studies – whether the result of personal learning needs or household circumstances.

Another student aid/social assistance problem derives from the fact that no single authority is responsible for supervising this relationship or ensuring the accountability of interacting policy and programs.

Neither is there any political or administrative oversight of the policy foundation or implementation apparatus for joint files. Unfortunately, there is no designated body to which a student or social assistance recipient can appeal between-program decisions.

Improved coordination would help low-income students who typically require a variety of supports to pursue post-secondary education. Better coordination would also enable officials to understand the interface problems that their respective programs often create.

Additional proposals for reducing barriers to post-secondary education are discussed in the commentary *Proposed Reforms to Post-Secondary Education*.

Sherri Torjman

Copyright © 2010 by
Caledon Institute of Social Policy

401-1390 Prince of Wales Drive
Ottawa, ON K2C 3N6
CANADA

Tel/Fax: (613) 729-3340

E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org

Website: www.caledoninst.org