

Anatomy of a Tuition Freeze: The Case of Ontario

Deanna Rexe
Simon Fraser University

Abstract

Using two conceptual frameworks from political science—Kingdon's (2003) multiple streams model and the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993)—this case study examines the detailed history of a major tuition policy change in Ontario in 2004: a tuition freeze. The paper explores the social, political, and economic factors that influenced policymakers on this particular change to shed light on the broader questions of the dynamics of postsecondary policymaking. The study found that the Liberal Party's decision to freeze postsecondary tuition fees was a function of stakeholder relations, public opinion, and brokerage politics, designed for electoral success. The policy implementation strategy was intended to facilitate the cooperation and interests of the major institutions. Within the broader policy community, student-organized interest groups and other policy advocates were aligned in a policy preference, a critical component for successful change.

Résumé

À l'aide de deux cadres conceptuels en science politique, le modèle à volets multiples de Kingdon (2003) et le cadre de coalitions de défense de Sabatier et Jenkins-Smith (1993), la présente étude de cas examine l'histoire détaillée d'un changement majeur en matière de politique de frais de scolarité qui a eu lieu en Ontario en 2004 : le gel des frais de scolarité. Le présent article examine les facteurs sociaux, politiques et économiques qui ont dirigé certains responsables politiques vers ce changement particulier, afin de faire la lumière sur les questions plus générales portant sur la dynamique de

l'élaboration de politiques en matière d'enseignement postsecondaire. L'étude conclut que la décision du parti Libéral de geler les frais de scolarité des études postsecondaires relevait de relations avec les intervenants, d'opinion publique et de politique de médiation, dans le but de remporter les élections. La stratégie de mise en œuvre de la politique visait à faciliter la coopération et les intérêts entre institutions d'envergure. Au sein d'une communauté politique plus large, des groupes d'intérêt étudiants et d'autres défenseurs de la politique partageaient la même préférence politique, un élément essentiel à la réussite de ce changement.

Introduction

In the struggle over ideas of accessibility and affordability, tuition fee policy is an active and contested area in Canadian postsecondary policymaking. Recent public attention and interest mobilization on tuition fee policy raises important questions regarding what is known about provincial policy formation and decision-making processes. Despite widespread changes to government regulatory policies on postsecondary tuition in all Canadian provinces, there is little understanding of how postsecondary policies are determined.

The study of the policy process endeavours to explain causal relationships for policy development and adoption—an aim particularly important in the growing area of policy and politics in higher education research. Within a context of international calls for further scholarship of the policy process in higher education (Enders, 2004; McLendon, 2003; McLendon & Hearn, 2003), Canadian scholars have contributed important analyses of federal policymaking in postsecondary education (Wellen, Axelrod, Desai-Trilokekar, & Shanahan, 2012), and federal influence on provincial postsecondary policymaking (Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Rubenson, Jones, & Shanahan, 2009; Shanahan & Jones, 2007). Others have explored forces influencing policymaking in different Canadian provinces (Jones, 1997; Padure & Jones, 2009), some focusing on Ontario specifically (Axelrod, Shanahan, Wellen, & Desai-Trilokekar, 2012; Boggs, 2009; Charles, 2011; Constantinou, 2010; Shanahan, Fisher, Jones, & Rubenson, 2005; Young, 2002).

In April 2004, a newly elected Liberal government in Ontario announced that postsecondary tuition fees at all public postsecondary institutions would be frozen for two years. Through a close examination of this particular case of tuition policy change, this paper explores the social, political, and economic factors that influenced policymakers on this decision, to shed light on the broader dynamics of postsecondary policy change. This case study adds to the scholarship by providing a new policy history: a narrative chronological account of one episode of tuition policy formation. The case study describes the temporal sequence of decisions, processes, and events, as well as key characteristics of the policy subsystem in Ontario (Yin, 1989). My approach is grounded in two theoretical frameworks: Kingdon's multiple streams model (MSM) (Kingdon, 2003) and the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). These two policy frameworks provide alternative lenses on the policy formulation process; a growing literature combines two or more theoretical models to examine aspects of the policy process, including these two models in particular (McLendon, Heller, & Young, 2005; Mintrom, 2000; Ness, 2008). This investigation employs a case study research design. Data were collected through systematic investigation, and collection involved two key research tools: content

analysis of relevant archival and documentary materials, and interviews. A total of 23 informant interviews were conducted between September 2011 and January 2012 using a semi-structured interview approach. The interviewees were provided anonymity. Interviewees were selected for their unique perspectives on and contributions to the policy episode. They included senior civil servants, cabinet ministers, interest-group leaders, institutional leaders, and researchers; member-checking was employed to verify the final policy history and its representation.

Policy Actors in Ontario Policy Subsystem

Student Movement Characteristics

Prior to the early 1990s, organized student interests in Ontario consisted of two primary student federations: the university student organizations affiliated with the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS-O), and community college student organizations largely affiliated with the College Student Association (CSA). A schism occurred within the university federation in 1992. In the face of increasing public and government discussion on alternative approaches to tuition policy at that time, divisions in key values and policy goals had become apparent and resulted in a separation into two groups. The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) was formed by student organizations from the University of Toronto, Queen's University, Wilfrid Laurier University, University of Western Ontario, University of Waterloo, and Brock University. On the whole, differences in deeply held values drove the division, which resulted in a new significant policy actor (OUSA) contributing technical information and policy options to the policy community, new competition for membership and political attention, and a new factor in brokerage politics, or the non-ideological politics of consensus building amongst stakeholders in order to win and maintain office (Brodie & Jenson, 1996). In general, the CFS-O preferred political action strategies that involved large-scale student mobilization and action in the media to influence public opinion and exert pressure upon decision-makers. The rationale for these strategies, according to one student activist, was: "the only way that we had influence in any meeting of any government was when we could prove that we held the hearts and minds of the public . . . we don't do days of action as a ceremony" (Student organization 1, interview, December 6, 2011).

Major Organized Interests

By 2003, a number of important policy stakeholders were influencing postsecondary policy in Ontario. The postsecondary system had 18 publicly funded universities and 24 colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs), as well as a number of interest groups. Table 1 summarizes the resources, views, and influences of the major interest groups at the time of the policy episode.

Table 1. Summary of Major Interest Groups in the Ontario Policy Community, 2003

Interest Group	Resources, Views, and Influences
Council of Universities (COU)	Formed in 1962, COU comprised the executive heads of each of Ontario's public universities. COU sought a remedy for university funding issues and an appropriate balance of cost-sharing between students and the public. Individual presidents called for tuition deregulation, but there was a range of preferences between institutions on tuition policy options. COU was influenced by member views, feedback from key constituencies, internal coalition politics, and internal policy analysis, including that of postsecondary finance policy.
Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario (ACAATO)	Established in 1967, ACAATO represented the province's 24 colleges of applied arts and technology. It was generally silent on tuition policy, but privately some individual presidents called for tuition deregulation. It was also influenced by member views and internal policy analysis.
Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA)	Founded in 1964, OCUFA represented its 27 member faculty associations and 17,000 university faculty and librarians. It was concerned about affordability and marketization in education, and was influenced by membership views and core values, which were generally progressive.
Canadian Federation of Students – Ontario (CFS-O)	Formerly the Ontario Federation of Students (OFS), CFS-O represented over 235,000 student members in 35 member local student unions. Tuition fee issues were the top policy priority; the policy goal was tuition freeze or reduction, with a long-term goal of eliminating tuition fees. It was influenced by membership views, national coalition policymaking, and core progressive values.
Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA)	OUSA was formed in 1992 and officially incorporated in 1995 as the result of an informal alliance of five student governments. It represented the interests of over 140,000 professional and undergraduate full-time and part-time university students at seven institutions. OUSA's policy preference at the time of the episode was a tuition freeze. It was influenced by membership views, its core values and mission, and internal policy analysis.
College Student Alliance (CSA)	Established in 1975, originally as the Ontario Community College Student Parliamentary Association (OCCSPA), the CSA represented over 70 percent of all Ontario college students, consisting of 17 colleges and 25 student associations with over 126,000 full-time students. CSA was not particularly active on tuition policy. It was influenced by membership views and a focus on college access.

Brief Overview of Antecedent Tuition Policy Decisions

Beginning in the 1960s, the Ontario government had used policy mechanisms to limit tuition fee increases through a complex and weighted funding formula for universities. New flexibility, referred to as *discretionary fees*, was subsequently introduced. The purpose of this flexibility was to allow universities access to incremental increases in non-grant revenue. This incremental change allowed universities to charge higher fees within a specified range—one that was gradually adjusted upward. Due to the nature of the weights in the formula, increases in the operating grant and increases in the standard tuition fees were not necessarily related; the traditional penalty for institutions overcharging tuition was an equal reduction in the operating grant, an idea “integral to the arithmetic of the formula” (Ontario university 1, interview, November 29, 2011). In 1990, the operating grant formula was modified to include a *corridor*, an element that neutralized some of the formula’s sensitivity to changes in enrolments and therefore affected enrolment-driven funding entitlements. This element of the formula created “extreme strategic emphasis in tuition fees” (Ontario university 1, interview, November 29, 2011), as tuition fees were the only major source of revenue that could be strategically manipulated by changing enrolment and the mix of programs. The impact of the overall policy mechanism was such that, even with the incremental changes over time, the funding formula largely kept all fees within a relatively narrow band, with little institutional differentiation on tuition (Boggs, 2009). In addition to constraining tuition fee levels, the formula funding process also limited system capacity at a time when demand for access was increasing. This resulted in a highly competitive environment for student seats, an “enrolment squeeze”; the consequent parental and student anxiety over postsecondary access was widely covered in the media (Lewington, 1993a).

In response to these impacts, institutions and their representative organizations sought a remedy for ongoing funding problems; this took the form of appropriate cost-sharing between students and the public and addressing problems with the financial aid system. Advocacy for this remedy was sustained for a number of years. By the early 1990s, as a result of enrolment pressures and in the face of stagnating government funding, universities in particular advocated for increased tuition levels (Young, 2001) and attempted to find creative solutions to circumvent these constraints, including new experiments in the delivery of cost-recovery programs (Lewington, 1993b). Jones (1991a) noted that a growing number of institutions called for more market-driven fees or greater flexibility in establishing tuition levels to address the universities’ financial needs.

In 1995, the Progressive Conservative Party was elected to majority government under Premier Mike Harris, with an election platform proposing significant change—in particular, to address the provincial government deficit and the size of the public sector. Ontario’s Minister of Finance announced subsequent changes in postsecondary policy, including (i) major cuts to government grants that funded postsecondary institutions and (ii) partial tuition fee deregulation. As a result of an increasingly difficult fiscal environment, enrolment pressures, and lobbying from institutions, the provincial government allowed greater tuition increases than had previously been entertained under the funding formula policy, with information that suggested fees could be increased without “hurting accessibility” (Ontario civil service 1, interview, November 23, 2011). The expanded free-

dom for universities and colleges to set tuition fees permitted limited tuition increases; in addition, tuition fees for international students became entirely deregulated. Further, a proposal originally from OUSA was adopted system-wide: the tuition set aside, whereby institutions were required to allocate 30 percent of tuition revenue above a base level of fees for need-based financial aid. President Robert Prichard of the University of Toronto has been credited with the successful lobby for “the freedom to raise tuition fees” under the Progressive Conservative government (Galt, 1995).

The Advisory Panel on Future Directions for Postsecondary Education, chaired by Mr. David C. Smith, was appointed in July 1996 by the Minister of Education and Training to recommend the most appropriate sharing of costs among students, the private sector, and the government, and to find ways to best achieve this. Its report, *Our Themes: Excellence, Accessibility, Responsibility*, was delivered in December 1996. It recommended a significant change in the way the system should be resourced. The recommendations included changes in funding approaches and tuition fee policies, with increased responsibility for setting fees shifted to the universities and colleges, greater institutional flexibility to determine fees at the program level, and conditions within which this flexibility would be permitted. The report was seen to give universities much of what they had lobbied to receive for over a decade; President Prichard of the University of Toronto described the report as “the best document in 25 years on universities and colleges” (Lewington, 1996), a view not universally held by other system stakeholders.

As a result, in May 1998, the Ministry established a new tuition policy for the province’s universities and colleges. The policy introduced, amongst other changes, limited deregulation of tuition fees for graduate, some undergraduate, and professional programs at the universities, as well as for select college programs, with some conditions; Boggs (2009) includes a detailed description. The new tuition policy adjustments provided a new cost-recovery fee, which gave institutions the opportunity to disconnect specific programs from the funding formula process, and as a result have institutional autonomy in setting tuition fee levels. This policy allowed universities to set tuition in professional programs (medicine, law, business, dentistry, optometry, pharmacy, veterinary medicine) and all graduate programs, while colleges could set fees in post-diploma and high-demand specialist programs, if the colleges met other accountability requirements. The universities with professional schools were seen to benefit from this policy change the most (Lewington, 1998). Predictably, these changes were not universally welcomed; student and faculty groups, in particular, voiced concern over the shift away from a publicly funded system (*Toronto Star*, Editorial, 1998). In the face of ongoing problems with the funding formula, the Council of Universities (COU) continued to press government to further allow institutional autonomy over fees, repeating the organization’s position: “deregulation is something universities support. Institutions want to set tuition fees” (Chung, 2001, p. A2).

The institutional impacts of the changes to the funding formula varied, depending on enrolment and program mix contexts, but, as a whole, by 2003 these impacts had increased pressure on government to fix the overall postsecondary financial model and student financial-aid system. Tuition policy was one aspect of a greater whole. These shifts, combined with changing enrolments and significant cuts to government grants to institutions, put greater pressure on tuition fees at the institutional level and focused the ongoing funding formula discussion problems upon tuition policy. Amongst members of the

policy community as well as the general public, there was a sense that some institutions had been “overly aggressive” and “opportunistic” and taken tuition increases too far—well beyond the support of public opinion.

Liberal Party Policymaking

As early as 1998, the Ontario Liberal Party was preparing for the 1999 provincial election and leading in public-opinion polls. A senior party strategist told the *Globe and Mail* that the “new agenda for Ontarians is health care and education” (Rusk, 1998); the Liberals saw themselves winning the next election “if they [could] make it a fight about health care, education and Premier Mike Harris” (Rusk, 1998). Drawing lessons from their loss in the previous election, the Liberals began actively meeting with stakeholders to formulate policy and prepare their next campaign. The final policy platform was designed to signal the centre-left orientation of the party’s political commitments to tackle social programming broadly. The values of the traditional Liberal Party emphasized that the “government has a public-good and a common-good interest to serve” (Ontario cabinet minister 1, interview, December 2, 2011). In terms of electoral politics, considerations included individual riding vulnerability and gathering momentum away from the NDP with competitive social policy positions. This was compounded with a further desire to attract the youth vote and increase youth party membership; a tuition freeze promise was important to build key alliances with those constituencies. The election platform had to appeal to the middle-class voter, garner support from the major unions, and, in retail politics terms, have sufficient political appeal in its differentiation from the previous government’s policies.

Under Mr. Dalton McGuinty’s centralized leadership, the party worked carefully to build a positive relationship with stakeholder groups across many sectors, and brokered a coalition of those disenfranchised from influencing post-secondary policy by the Conservative government. Mr. McGuinty was sensitive to the views of the CFS-O and OUSA, also echoed by the OCUFA, who were critical of tuition increases and promoted increased public investment. Mr. McGuinty made his presence known to student groups. He also had a strong personal policy focus and interest in education. The coalition of interest groups brokered by the Liberal Party included the transfer of political staff and assets from the federal Liberals and the Peterson Liberal government, and cultivated significant social interlocks with student politics and interest groups.

Another important aspect of coalition building involved the public sector more broadly, and specifically postsecondary institutions. The Liberal Party made it clear that they intended to create allies to strengthen public services; the political strategy to accomplish this was set in the leader’s office with his senior advisors. Courting the support of institutions was a complex process, given that there were very different policy preferences amongst the university presidents. Some institutional presidents were in favour of tuition price controls, either because they believed that their markets were tuition price-sensitive, or they had values rooted in affordability and accessibility, or they were apprehensive of the internal politics and consequences of a deregulation episode in their institutions; some were motivated to keep tuition low, as they felt they could perform better financially on volume rather than price. On the other hand, other presidents were on a mission to substantially increase fees and supported high-tuition/high-aid policies. Notwithstand-

ing the diversity of views that COU members held on specific tuition policy directions, the COU maintained a stated preference for institutional autonomy. In the context of those differences, the Liberals proposed a temporary tuition freeze, with promises to fully fund the offset of the cost of that freeze to institutions, combined with a promise of a comprehensive policy review. This proposal was welcomed by the institutions, as it provided a predictable environment for financial and enrolment planning for two years. This was perceived to be an election-oriented position rather than a sustainable or rational policy direction. The particular strategy to fund the tuition offset was a significant financial commitment, intended to neutralize university opposition and facilitate cooperation with the major institutions and their interests for the short term, and the promise of formal policy review gave institutions hope that the ongoing difficulties with the overall system of post-secondary finance would be resolved.

The institutions were friendly to the idea of a commission; Ontario had a long history of commissions in postsecondary education (Clark & Trick, 2006). The tone and signals from the Liberals were consultative, particularly in contrast to the previous government. The universities believed that the “real” tuition policy decisions would be shaped by the upcoming commission, and, as a result, they directed their lobbying efforts at influencing the commission’s agenda. In particular, the universities felt tuition policy was receiving disproportionate public attention compared to the complex “real issues” that they wanted to ensure were addressed: student financial aid; the funding model, which was increasingly insensitive to enrolment changes; and longer-term reliability and predictability from the funding environment to create higher certainty for university planning. There was frustration that, in the overall complex policy structure to support student access to postsecondary education, there was a tendency to focus on tuition policy rather than student financial-aid reform.

The CFS-O and the OUSA were united in their criticism of existing tuition policy and were in rare alignment in support of a tuition freeze. Both student groups and the OCUFA were lobbying the political parties; because Mr. McGuinty was sensitive to student concerns, organized student interests were seen as “a very powerful special interest group” (Ontario university 1, interview, November 29, 2011). With their goal of zero tuition, and the interim goal of a tuition freeze, the CFS-O worked with the Liberal Party from September to December 2002 to help shape the platform, meeting with individual members of parliament and, in doing so, generating pressure on the party leadership from below. Quality, access, and affordability were OUSA’s concerns leading up to the 2003 election, and OUSA was publicly supplying the policy community with policy research on the issues of tuition and financial aid.

On January 30, 2003, the Liberal Party released its election platform on postsecondary education, which included a commitment to re-regulating all tuition fees, fully funding an immediate freeze, and conducting a review of the postsecondary system. On the day of the platform release, Mr. Joel Duff of the CFS-O issued a media release supporting the policy and validating the platform, referencing the Federation’s repeated calls for a tuition fee freeze as a “first step towards undoing the damage to access caused by double-digit fee hikes during the tenures of Premiers Harris and Eves . . . an important response to the crisis of accessibility at our colleges and universities” (CFS-O, 2003, January 30). The Federation was expecting an election within months and was committed to mak-

ing access to education a central issue. From the institutions' perspectives, the Liberals' commitment to freeze tuition was not a full policy commitment, but rather a temporary "pause" until formal policymaking could be undertaken. Given that perspective, institutions were receptive to the policy commitment and redirected their efforts to the larger policy agenda, including matters of policy implementation and the calculation of financial offsets, in particular.

The commitment to a tuition freeze as part of the electoral platform was "a Premier's office decision" (Institutional president 2, interview, December 1, 2011), supported by "the brain trust of the political advisors" (Faculty organization 1, interview, December 7, 2011) with Minister Mary Anne Chambers responsible for implementation and "managing stakeholders" (Student organization 4, interview, January 17, 2012). Within the Liberal Party, there was a relatively high degree of consensus on the goal to pause policymaking on postsecondary education. The Liberal Party leadership had two goals specific to electoral considerations: first, to create an attractive and progressive electoral platform, and second, to build a supportive coalition of interests. These goals were informed by a sincere commitment to accessible and affordable postsecondary education. This combination of "philosophical commitment and political reality" (Institutional president 2, interview, December 1, 2011) was expected to have political appeal: "the decision around tuition was a political get-elected decision, but that doesn't mean there wasn't pressure from students and pressure from the system" (Institutional president 1, interview, December 9, 2011). From the Liberal Party perspective:

It really was part of the art of politics. In implementing the freeze, we made it very clear to the sector that we were their friends. We were going to look at what needed to be done to strengthen the sector. We were not going to continue the legacy of the Harris-Eves cutbacks, so we did it on the basis of hope. (Cabinet minister 2, interview, December 5, 2011)

From another cabinet minister's perspective, "a powerful policy on postsecondary education tuition helps us with our core voters, middle-class families, middle-class women" (Cabinet minister 1, interview, December 2, 2011).

The Liberals were determined to differentiate themselves from the Conservative government, whose postsecondary policies were falling out of public favour. The creation of a winning electoral platform was informed by several considerations, including several individual riding vulnerabilities, the need to gather momentum away from the NDP with competitive social policy positions, and a desire to attract the youth vote and youth party membership. Although electoral politics was a major factor in the choice of the tuition freeze as a platform policy, the tuition freeze itself was an important but minor component within a larger overall platform; policymakers were somewhat skeptical of there being a strong link between postsecondary policy and electability, but they wanted to accomplish something politically progressive and positive for the postsecondary system.

Further, it was also important to the party to build relationships with the institutions and interest groups, and in particular to build relationships with potentially vocal student groups. The various stakeholders in the policy community had a rare occasion to be relatively aligned in their policy positions, at least for the short term. The *Toronto Star* reported that

the first tuition freeze in Ontario history has sparked an odd honeymoon between Queen's Park and the province's colleges and universities, after a decade of turmoil. The very student unions that for years have slammed Ontario's shrinking post-secondary grants yesterday traded protest signs for pro-government cheers over the two-year freeze unveiled by Mary Anne Chambers, Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities. (Brown, 2004, p. A17)

Minister Chambers commented that "we know this freeze is primarily a symbolic move . . . so now we want to consult with students, parents, industry, colleges and universities about developing a long-term plan" (Brown, 2004, p. A17). The institutions' goal was for government to address the larger and more complex policy questions in the system, and the tuition freeze policy was accommodated to achieve longer-term objectives. Student stakeholder groups, including OUSA and the CFS-O, regarded the tuition freeze as a vital commitment supporting their goals of accessibility and affordability.

The Liberal Party leadership also had a non-electoral goal with the tuition freeze: to obtain some space and time for the whole postsecondary portfolio to be reviewed. The tuition freeze policy was regarded by both elected officials and civil servants as a "pause" rather than a policy commitment, in order to support a longer, deeper discussion about the higher education system (Ontario senior civil servant 1, interview, November 22, 2011). In this light, many in the policy community regarded the tuition freeze as a non-decision, a politically popular but temporary strategy for buying time so that actual policymaking could be undertaken; "there was a genuine desire to pause the system and rethink it in view of the impact of deregulation" (Student organization 2, interview, December 1, 2011). In this light, the freeze was explicitly tied to a review of the higher education system; "it was a freeze for the purposes of having a longer, deeper discussion about the higher education system in Ontario before any future decisions are made on what's going to happen with fees" (Student organization 3, interview, December 15, 2011). The commitments were seen to be reasonable and were generally supported, particularly as they gave policymakers "a chance to catch up with where policy decisions have taken us" (Student organization 3, interview, December 15, 2011). Members of the CFS-O believed that the tuition freeze commitment was not limited to a two-year period, based on the Liberal Party's response to the Federation's pre-election questionnaire; however, the majority of research participants interviewed clearly understood that the freeze was a short-term commitment, a "temporary gesture" (Cabinet minister 1, interview, December 2, 2011).

Heading into the election, the public mood appeared favourable to a change in government. The Conservative government was weakened by both internal party issues and diminished popularity with the public. The party suffered from an uninspiring leadership race ("McGuinty's opening," 2002) and significant internal conflict (Urquhart, 2002). The public was increasingly critical of the Conservative government, perceiving a war on education and witnessing widespread labour relations conflicts with public sector unions, as well as several high-profile incidents that undermined public confidence in the government (Urquhart, 2002). In contrast, public opinion was quite favourable towards the Liberal Party. According to the *Toronto Star*, the Liberals had put together a platform that was "solid, substantive, and affordable," and Dalton McGuinty was "presenting himself as a well-prepared alternative" (Goar, 2003, p. A18).

Tuition policy was raised as a political issue during the election. Public opinion polls showed that the public felt tuition fees were too high and deregulation had gone on long enough; the public mood was that cuts in the public sector had hurt the quality of life in Ontario, and services needed to be restored. On tuition policy, amongst members of the policy community as well as in the general public there was a sense that some institutions had been overly aggressive and opportunistic under tuition fee deregulation and taken tuition increases too far, and therefore were provoking a need for a political and regulatory response (“We must freeze tuition fees and offer more financial aid for students,” 2003, p. A26). Institutions were concerned about the overall financing of the system and the impact of a potential tuition freeze on their operations, including quality. In an op-ed titled “The Politics of Tuition,” Principal William Leggett of Queen’s University called upon the political parties to clarify their platforms:

Parties must come clean on how much freezes or rollbacks will really cost the university system . . . Until our political parties clearly spell out a full and meaningful platform for guaranteeing that the quality of the post-secondary education provided in Ontario is consistent with that provided in other provinces and in leading universities elsewhere in the world, the current campaign flourishes with regard to tuition policy must be judged for what they are—mere politics. (Leggett, 2003, p. A21).

The Liberals made campaign commitments for action they would take during their first 90 days in office, including addressing auto-insurance premiums, compensation for victims of a tainted-water disaster, and class sizes in primary education. The Liberal leader reportedly wavered briefly on his platform commitment to the tuition freeze, given increased concern about the province’s projected deficit—anticipated to reach two billion dollars (Galloway, 2003); however, that promise was quickly reaffirmed under questioning by the CFS-O (Benzie, 2003).

The election held on October 2, 2003 returned a significant victory for the Liberals; the party had been successful in building a broad-based coalition of support amongst a diverse set of voters, having “pried away from the NDP a lot of the unions . . . teachers’ unions, auto workers, all to the Liberals, along with their traditional base of Toronto, the ethnic Canadian vote, Catholic vote, Franco-Ontarians” (Ontario senior civil servant 3, interview, November 30, 2011). The *Globe and Mail* outlined Premier-designate McGuinty’s timetable for government transition on October 3, 2003; announcing plans to freeze university and college tuition was fifth on a list of 30 (“The Liberal timetable,” 2003). The freeze was again signalled in the Throne Speech of November 20, 2003. The *Toronto Star* reported that the institutions’ compensation for the tuition freeze was to be announced by February 29, but a “tangled cabinet debate delayed the decision” and “at one point, the Liberal government contemplated back-tracking on its promise,” but Premier McGuinty reportedly personally rejected that proposal, and the compensation plan proceeded (Brown & Benzie, 2004, p. A7).

In April 2004, the Ontario government announced an immediate two-year freeze on university and college tuition for both undergraduate and deregulated professional programs, with funding to institutions to compensate for revenue lost in the first year of the freeze (Campbell & Alphonso, 2004). The “first tuition freeze in Ontario history” received attention for the “unprecedented show of co-operation” between the CFS-O and government (Brown,

2004, p. A17). The *Globe and Mail* expressed reservations about the “political” decision: “it chose a quick political fix that fixes nothing” (“Tuition on Ice,” 2004, p. A12).

Following the decision to freeze tuition, and responding to the significant need for policymaking in the larger postsecondary policy context, on June 8, 2004, the government announced the promised comprehensive review of the design and funding of Ontario’s postsecondary education system, to be led by former NDP Premier Bob Rae and supported by a seven-member panel. The overall objective of the review was to provide realistic, evidence-based recommendations to be implemented with the Ontario Budget 2005. In particular, government was looking for strategies to improve higher education by providing recommendations on: system design; funding models; the appropriate sharing of the costs of postsecondary education among the government, students, and the private sector; and the related questions of an effective student assistance program that would promote increased access to postsecondary education. Following the completion of the commission, the government introduced a new five-year tuition policy framework that re-regulated all programs but permitted some new tuition flexibility (Boggs, 2009).

Conclusion

The antecedent policy history in Ontario set the conditions for policy change, as tuition prices under deregulation provoked the need for a political and regulatory response; as a result, tuition policy had the potential to become useful in retail and coalition politics. The Liberal Party leadership had two goals in the tuition freeze commitment, specific to electoral considerations: first, to create an attractive and progressive electoral platform, and second, to build a supportive coalition of interests. In the problem stream, there was increasing public awareness that the cost of postsecondary education was out of step with (i) expectations and other provinces, (ii) institutional concerns about the funding formula and related policy issues, and (iii) Liberal strategy in preparation for an upcoming election. In the politics stream, the Liberals needed to differentiate themselves from the previous government and broker a coalition for electoral support; this involved developing a simple progressive policy that would resonate with the electorate and be consistent with the party’s overall approach. In the policy stream, there was tuition freeze entrepreneurship from the student organizations; within the Liberal Party, a policy proposal emerged that suggested the tuition freeze be a *pause* on policy development. With the election victory as a key event, the Liberals moved to fulfil their platform promise by implementing the tuition freeze. Critical components of policy change were the student policy entrepreneurs, who were successful in agenda-setting the terms of debate and in moving tuition fee policy onto the decision agenda.

From an advocacy coalition perspective, both student and faculty interests were aligned in supporting the tuition freeze policy, and the university coalition was weakened by a lack of internal cohesion on policy preferences. Other changes in coalition activity included shifts of traditional alliances between progressive, organized interests and the NDP to the Liberal Party, and increased coordination between student organizations to achieve a common policy goal; these occurred within a larger context of changing public mood and government. In the ACF framework, policy learning is a key component for understanding policy change. First, having learned from previous attempts to form government, the Liberal Party took steps to better cultivate stakeholders in electoral platform development, drawing lessons from previous experience in brokering coalitions within

Ontario's postsecondary policy community. Organized interests provided political support in exchange for policy commitments from the party. This political support included public policy and party validation, support for voter mobilization, and volunteers. Second, the Liberals were attuned to the recent history of political protest in Ontario, which included several key events of mass mobilization and demonstrations of coordinated, organized interests. These mobilizations, and the unpredictable influence strategies employed by student groups in particular, presented potential political problems; bringing these particular organized interests into a political coalition served to mitigate that risk. Finally, drawing lessons from other episodes of significant policy change, the Liberals sought to facilitate university cooperation by committing to fully fund the cost of the freeze, provide a predictable planning environment for two years, and address their primary desire for a comprehensive policy review.

Table 2. Summary of Primary Factors Found to Influence Policy Change

Multiple Streams Factors			Advocacy Coalition Factors	
Problem Stream	Politics Stream	Policy Stream	Internal Shocks	External Shocks
Public concern about tuition prices	Election	Entrepreneurs: student organizations, Liberal leader	Converging policy agreement; increased coordinating activity with student coalitions	Public mood for change
Funding formula of institutions	Brokerage politics	Policy proposal: "freeze as pause"; comprehensive review promise	Change in political alliances	New government
Liberal platform planning			Loose university coalition	

It has been observed that scholars in higher education have tended to frame policy decisions in terms of system design, reflecting a strategic management conception of policymaking and assuming that policymaking is a technical exercise (Warne, 2008). Findings in this case of policy change show evidence that politics affects policy; it has a critical role to play in policymaker perception and the framing of policy problems, as well as in informing the selection of policy options. In this particular policy episode, for many policy actors, "frozen" tuition framed the policy problem in terms of affordability and accessibility, emphasizing the importance of minimizing costs to students and their families in the broader goal of increasing participation rates generally, and the participation of low-income students in particular. However, this case study shows that for policymakers, tuition policy—in this case, a tuition freeze—can serve important political functions far beyond stated educational and social goals.

Some lessons can be drawn regarding current scholarship on postsecondary policymaking. There is an important and underdeveloped field of analysis in Canadian postsecondary policy studies, the specific dynamics of agenda-setting, alternative specification,

and decision making. In a recent American study, Conner and Rabovsky (2011) found that the increased use of theoretical frameworks from political science and public policy has been “instrumental in pushing the boundaries of educational research” (p. 105); there is a need to push Canadian postsecondary policy studies forward to fulfill our potential contribution to improved democratic participation in the overall governance of postsecondary education. The often missing factor of the practice of politics is a critical component of that scholarship; without further empirical analysis of these particular dynamics of policymaking, advocates and postsecondary system stakeholders will struggle to advance their policy interests in uncharted territory. 🍁

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Contact Information

Deanna Rexe
Faculty of Education
Simon Fraser University
drexe@sfu.ca

Deanna Rexe is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia.