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REPORT

Rebuilding post-secondary education as public infrastructure in BC

(or how we fix the predictable failures of marketization)

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Rebuilding post-secondary education as public infrastructure in BC *(or how we fix the predictable failures of marketization)*

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About the author

Véronique Sioufi leads a community-driven research desk dedicated to applying an intersectional lens to socio-economic policy. This work is guided by advocates from community organizations, unions and academia. She earned a PhD in Geography and an MA in Communication from Simon Fraser University where her SSHRC-funded research focused on the ways inequality is reproduced through digital platforms, data-driven technologies and artificial intelligence systems. Véronique is proud of her Palestinian heritage and is dedicated to decolonization from Turtle Island to Palestine.

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Executive Summary

British Columbia's public post-secondary education system is facing its worst funding crisis in history.

Nineteen of the province's 25 public institutions are projected to operate at a loss with an estimated $300 million annual shortfall. Since 2024, post-secondary institutions have cut or suspended over 180 programs, laid off more than 1,300 faculty and countless contract staff and closed over 45 student services. BC's public colleges and teaching universities have been hardest hit.

While the immediate trigger for these cuts was the federal government's 2024 cap on international student study permits, the systemic reliance on exorbitant international student tuition is rooted in decades of chronic provincial underfunding and marketization of the sector.

This report captures a critical moment in time for BC's public post-secondary education sector.

It traces the historical throughlines of the system to project the future well-being of the province and the people who live here. To provide this comprehensive analysis, the report draws on interviews with faculty and staff association representatives, student union leaders, labour advocates, institutional leaders and researchers with expertise in international and higher education. It synthesizes submissions to the 2022 and 2026 provincial sector reviews, government reports, academic literature and sectoral publications.

Key recommendations

The report outlines a path forward that reclaims post-secondary education as essential public infrastructure. Key recommendations include:

- **Decolonizing post-secondary education**: Shift away from extractive educational models that position students as customers. Embed Indigenous frameworks based on "the 4Rs," Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity and Relevance across funding, operational and governance structures, including in relation to international students.
- **Restoring public funding**: Return government funding to at least 75% of institutional operating costs, maintain the 2% cap on domestic tuition increases and extend the cap to international student tuition. Establish a concrete timeline to meet long-standing international commitments for the "progressive introduction of free education."
- **Reforming governance**: Implement community-driven governance structures. Ensure faculty, staff, students, community and host Nations representatives have genuine, structurally embedded decision-making authority.
- **Improving labour relations**: Reverse the casualization of academic labour by transitioning to permanent, full-time staff protected by collective agreements. Bargain in good faith and end the contracting out of essential campus services.

Ultimately, resolving this crisis requires a fundamental shift in values: prioritizing equitable, high-quality public education over market-driven extraction.

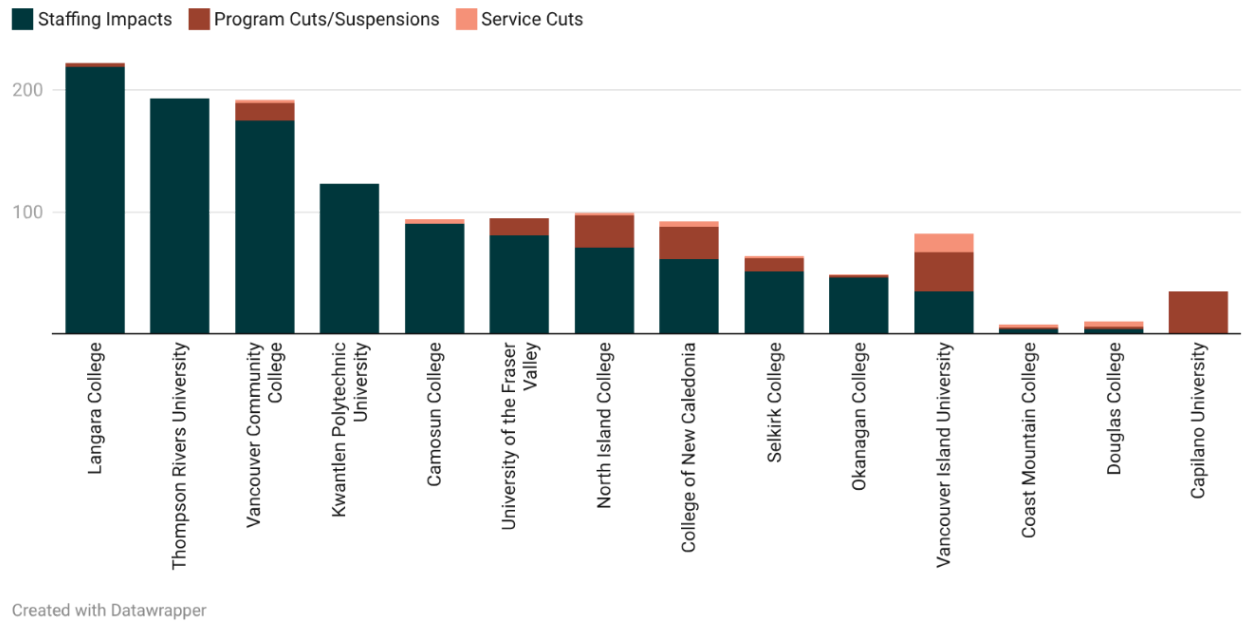
BC's public post-secondary education in crisis

British Columbia's public post-secondary education system is in the worst funding crisis in its history.

For the first time, the sector faces a consolidated deficit. Nineteen of the province's 25 public institutions are projected to operate at a loss over the next three years. The BC government estimates the shortfall amounts to approximately $300 million annually across the province.[1]

As of the end of the Spring 2026 term, BC's public post-secondary institutions have cut or suspended over 180 programs and laid off more than 1,300 faculty and staff.[2] This count excludes the likely equal or higher number of contract instructors whose contracts have not been renewed and the hundreds of course sections that have been eliminated.[3] More than 45 student services have been shut down, including counselling, academic advising, Indigenous student supports, international student supports, library hours and cafeteria access.[4] BC's public colleges and teaching universities have been hardest hit.

Top 15 impacted institutions by number of layoffs



[1] Government of British Columbia, "BC Budget 2026," 2026, https://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2026/.

[2] BC Federation of Students (BCFS), "Cuts Suck," accessed April 30, 2026, https://www.cutssuck.ca/province_wide_cut tracker.

[3] Interviews by the author, 2026.

[4] BCFS, "Cuts Suck."

Program cuts and suspensions at public colleges and teaching universities[5]

Capilano University (35)

1. Accounting Assistant Certificate
2. Accounting Assistant Diploma
3. Advanced Business Administration Certificate
4. Business Fundamentals Certificate
5. College and University Preparation Certificate
6. Communication for Professionals Certificate
7. Communication Studies Diploma
8. Community Leadership and Social Change Diploma
9. Computing Systems Certificate
10. Conducting in Music Certificate
11. Diploma in Tourism Management International
12. International Management Graduate Certificate
13. International Management Graduate Diploma
14. Music Diploma – Music Therapy Course Stream
15. Music Diploma – Music Therapy Preparatory Stream
16. North American and International Management Graduate Diploma
17. Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Financial Planning
18. Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Financial Planning Professional
19. Retail Business Fundamentals Certificate
20. Retail Operations Certificate
21. Tourism Management for International Students Diploma
22. Tourism Marketing and Development Post-Baccalaureate Diploma
23. Bachelor of Communication Studies
24. Bachelor of Tourism Management
25. English for Academic Purposes - Business Administration Pathway
26. English for Academic Purposes - Early Childhood Care and Education Pathway
27. Music Diploma
28. North American Business Management Post-Baccalaureate Applied Diploma
29. North American Business Management Post-Baccalaureate Diploma
30. Tourism Management Co-operative Education Diploma
31. University One for Indigenous Learners Certificate
32. Visual Effects for Film Streaming and Immersive Media Diploma
33. Tourism Marketing Citation
34. Visual Communication Advanced Diploma
35. Advanced Arts and Entertainment Management Certificate

Coast Mountain College (1)

1. Business Program

College of New Caledonia (27)

1. Associate of Arts – Modern Classics Diploma
2. Community Support Worker Certificate
3. English Language Program
4. Medical Science Diploma – Dental Pathway
5. Medical Science Diploma – Medical Pathway
6. Medical Science Diploma – Pharmacy Pathway
7. Medical Science Diploma – Veterinary Pathway
8. Nursing Pathway Certificate
9. Physical Therapy Bridging Certificate
10. Post-Baccalaureate in Accounting Diploma
11. Aboriginal Studies Certificate
12. Accounting and Finance Diploma
13. Associate of Arts – Aboriginal Studies Diploma
14. Associate of Arts – Anthropology Diploma
15. Associate of Arts – English Diploma
16. Associate of Arts – Sociology Diploma
17. Associate of Science – Chemistry Diploma
18. Associate of Science – Computer Science Diploma
19. Associate of Science – Math Diploma
20. Business Management Certificate
21. Business Management Diploma
22. Human Resource Management Post-Diploma
23. Kinesiology Diploma
24. Online Office Administration Certificate
25. Online Office Clerk Certificate
26. Social Work Applied Diploma
27. Tourism Hotel Management Post-Diploma

College of the Rockies (3)

1. Early Childhood Education Infant Toddler Diploma
2. English Language Program
3. Hospitality Management Program

[5] BCFS, "Cuts Suck"; supplemented by media reporting.

Douglas College (2)

1. American Sign Language
2. Teaching English as a Second Language Certificate

(Also noted: General reduction in course sections despite higher enrolment)

Langara College (3)

1. Chinese Language Courses
2. Business Administration – Bachelor
3. Journalism

(Also noted: Course offerings reduced in Geography, History, and Political Science)

North Island College (26)

1. Administrative Assistant Certificate
2. Aircraft Structures Technician Certificate
3. Computer Information Systems (CIS) Certificate
4. Computing Accounting Certificate
5. Metal Jewelry Design Certificate
6. Tourism and Hospitality Management – Post Graduate Certificate
7. Tourism and Hospitality Management – Post Graduate Diploma
8. Tourism and Hospitality Management Certificate
9. Tourism and Hospitality Management Diploma – Adventure Guiding Option
10. Tourism and Hospitality Management Diploma – Hospitality Management Option
11. Tourism and Hospitality Management Diploma – Tourism Management Option
12. Advanced Digital Design and Development Diploma
13. Adventure Guiding Certificate
14. Android Application Development Certificate
15. Bachelor of Business Administration Marketing Major
16. Coastal Forestry Certificate
17. Coastal Forestry Diploma
18. Digital Design and Development Post-Graduate Certificate
19. Digital Design and Development Post-Graduate Diploma
20. Fine Arts Diploma
21. Furniture Design and Joinery Certificate
22. Global Business Management Post-Graduate Diploma
23. Hospital Unit Clerk Certificate
24. Human Services Diploma
25. Web and Mobile Application Development Diploma
26. Web Design Fundamentals Certificate

(Also noted: NIC stopped accepting students into 10% of its programs for 2025-26)

Okanagan College (2)

1. Modern Languages in Arts (Cut)
2. Science in Nursing – Bachelor partnership with UBCO (Cut)

Selkirk College (12)

1. Blacksmithing and Metal Arts Certificate
2. Ceramics Certificate
3. Community Support Worker Program
4. Textile Arts Certificate
5. Accounting – Postgraduate Diploma
6. Business Administration Accounting Finance – Diploma
7. Business Administration Professional Management – Diploma
8. Business Management – Postgraduate Diploma
9. Culinary Management – Postgraduate Diploma
10. Full-Stack Web Development – Postgraduate Diploma
11. Gerontological Nursing – Postgraduate Diploma
12. Hospitality Management – Postgraduate Diploma

University of the Fraser Valley (14)

1. Aviation Concentration – Bachelor
2. Criminal Justice – Masters
3. Criminology – Extended Minor
4. Geographic Information Systems Certificate (Listed twice in source text)
5. Global Development Studies Extended Minor Program
6. Migration and Citizenship Graduate certificate
7. Migration and Citizenship Graduate diploma
8. Philosophy – Extended Minor
9. Physical Geography - Honours
10. Physical Geography - Major
11. Physical Geography - Minor
12. Program Evaluation – Graduate Certificate
13. Cabinet Making – Certificate (Suspended)
14. Teaching English as a Second Language – Post-Baccalaureate Diploma (Paused)

Vancouver Community College (14)

1. Addictions Counselling Skills Advanced
2. Adult Basic Education Graduation Program Certificate

3. Adult Basic Education Intermediate Program Certificate
4. Applied Technology for the Visually Impaired Certificate
5. Business Leadership and Management Certificate
6. Community Counselling Skills Certificate
7. Leadership Certificate
8. Leadership Coaching Associate Certificate
9. Leadership Coaching Certificate
10. LINC (ESL) Program
11. Management Skills for Supervisors Certificate
12. Networking Technology Certificate
13. Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality Design and Development Diploma
14. Wedding and Event Management Certificate

Vancouver Island University (32)

1. Business (BA)-Bachelor's
2. Community Planning-Master's
3. Dental Assistant-Certificate
4. Digital Media Studies-BA Minor
5. Economics-Major
6. Geographic Information Systems Applications-Advanced Diploma
7. Geographic Information Systems Applications-Master's
8. Gerontology: Active Aging-Graduate Diploma
9. Graduate Certificate in Business
10. Hospitality Management- Graduate Diploma
11. Inclusive Education-Graduate Diploma
12. Integrated Engineering Technologist Diploma
13. International Trade-Graduate Diploma
14. Jazz Studies-Diploma
15. Language and Culture: Romance Languages-Post-Degree Diploma
16. Languages and Culture-BSc Minor
17. Literacy Language and Learning-Graduate Diploma
18. Music in Jazz Studies- Bachelor's
19. Online Learning and Teaching-Graduate Diploma
20. Project Management-Graduate Diploma
21. Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy-Graduate Certificate
22. Sustainable Leisure Management-Graduate Diploma
23. Sustainable Leisure Management-Master of Arts
24. Teacher Leadership-Graduate Diploma
25. Arts One: First Nations- Certificate
26. Fisheries and Aquaculture-BSc
27. Global Studies-BA Major & Minor
28. Horticulture Technician Foundation-Certificate
29. Information Technology and Applied Systems Web & Mobile Development-Diploma
30. Languages and Culture (Romance Languages)-BA Minor
31. Liberal Studies-BA Major & Minor
32. Philosophy-BA (Hons Major & Minor)

Federal caps on international student study permits

The immediate trigger for this crisis was a sudden shift in federal immigration policy.

After decades of issuing an increasing number of international student study permits with seemingly no ceiling, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) announced the first-ever cap on international student permits starting in January 2024 and intending to cut new approvals by 35% from 2023 levels and by a further 10% in 2025. The announcement included stricter eligibility requirements for both post-graduation work permits (PGWP) and work permits for international student' spouses and common-law partners.[6] Later, in October 2024, the federal government announced reductions to its overall economic immigration targets, suddenly putting permanent residency

[6] Canada to stabilize growth and decrease number of new international student permits issued to approximately 360,000 for 2024," news release, IRCC, January 22, 2024, https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2024/01/canada-to-stabilize-growth-and-decrease-number-of-new-international-student-permits-issued-to-approximately-360000-for-2024.html.

out-of-reach for many international students expecting to stay in Canada.[7]

The federal government justified its international student cap as a necessary "stabilization" measure, arguing that rapid population growth was straining Canada's housing and healthcare infrastructure, while the study permit model was enabling predatory exploitation by private colleges. Minister of IRCC Marc Miller argued that the effort aimed to restore "system integrity" and address mounting pressure to reduce the temporary resident population. However, even Minister Miller had previously described this approach as "doing surgery with a hammer."[8]

The policy unfairly scapegoated students for structural housing issues that have been decades in the making and that scholars argued was "neither accurate nor fair."[9] The caps, in effect, punished students for the behaviour of predatory institutions, particularly private and for-profit institutions, rather than targeting the institutions themselves—especially given that companion measures like restricting post-graduation work permits applied to students and their partners, not to colleges. The Canadian Union of Public Employees warned these were "dog whistle tactics that could amplify xenophobia and racism."[10]

"While international students only make up about a fifth of the student population in public post-secondary education, they provide 47% of tuition fees and 18% of sector revenues."

Ultimately, implementing the caps proved far more drastic than the IRCC's targets. While BC was expected to see an 18% drop in study permit approvals in 2024, the actual decline was 66%.[11] Part of the problem, many in the sector argue, was the study permit (or Provincial Attestation Letter) distribution formula was based on provincial population rather than on existing enrolment, which meant BC and Ontario—thath together hosted three-quarters of all international students—received only about a third of the attestation letters. BC's provincial allocation for 2026 is 32,596 study permits, down from roughly 97,000 approved applications in 2023.[12] Alberta, on the other

[7] "2025-2027 Immigration Levels Plan," news release, IRCC, October 24, 2024, https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2024/10/20252027-immigration-levels-plan.html.

[8] Lucien Steen, "IRCC Announces Cap on International Student Permits," *McGill Daily*, March 11, 2024, https://www.mcgilldaily.com/2024/03/ircc-announces-cap-on-international-student-permits.

[9] Yvonne Su, "International Students Cap Falsely Blames Them for Canada's Housing and Health-Care Woes," *The Conversation*, January 25, 2024, republished by York University, January 26, 2024, https://www.yorku.ca/news/2024/01/26/international-students-cap-falsely-blames-them-for-canadas-housing-and-health-care-woes/.

[10] Canadian Union of Public Employees, "Scapegoating International Students Over the Affordability Crisis a Cynical Move: CUPE," news release, January 23, 2024, https://cupe.ca/news/scapegoating-international-students-over-affordability-crisis-cynical-move-cupe.

[11] Office of the Auditor General of Canada, *Report of the Auditor General of Canada — International Student Program: Reforms* (Ottawa: Office of the Auditor General, March 23, 2026), https://www.canada.ca/en/auditor-general/our-work/audit-reports/auditor-general-report-2026-international-student-program-reforms.html.

[12] Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, "2026 Provincial and Territorial Allocations under the International Student Cap," news release, Government of Canada, https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/2026-provincial-territorial-allocations-under-international-student-cap.html.

hand, received more attestation letters in 2024 than it had had applicants the year before.[13]

Because international student tuition has represented all new funding to the BC sector since 2008,[14] and international student tuition is roughly five times the cost of domestic tuition,[15] crisis-level shortfalls appeared in the province overnight. While international students only make up about a fifth of the student population in public post-secondary education, they provide 47% of tuition fees[16] and 18% of sector revenues.[17] When permit approvals fell, so did the revenue line that institutional budgets had come to depend on.

By Fall 2025, Okanagan College saw a 70% drop in international student enrolment;[18] Kwantlen Polytechnic (KPU) reported a 60% decline and projected a $49 million loss in tuition revenue.[19]

At Thompson Rivers University (TRU), international enrolment fell by 56% and is projected to drop even further for a loss of up to $14 million in tuition.[20] As a result the university is cutting $20 million in spending and may close its Williams Lake satellite campus by 2028.[21] Vancouver Island University (VIU) reported a "60% drop in international graduate enrollments and a 48% drop in international undergraduate and developmental programs in the 2024-25 school year" with more than $10 million in lost tuition.[22] International enrolments were down 46% at Langara College,[23] 37% at Camosun College and 30% at North Island College (NIC), with NIC projecting an $8.4 million revenue shortfall by 2027.[24]

[13] Brendan Coulter, "Alberta Expected to Welcome More International Students, as Other Provinces See Cuts," *CBC News*, April 9, 2024, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/international-student-cap-alberta-allocations-1.7167266.

[14] Alex Usher and Janet Balfour, *State of Postsecondary Education in Canada (SPEC) 2024*, Higher Education Strategy Associates, (Toronto: HESA, April 2025), https://higheredstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025-04-04_SPEC-2024_v6_Publications-1.pdf.

[15] BCFS, "Fairness for International Students," https://www.wearebcstudents.ca/fairness_for_international_students.

[16] BCFS, "Fairness for International Students."

[17] British Columbia, Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, "Province Reviews Public Post-Secondary System to Ensure Long-Term Sustainability," news release, November 25, 2025, https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2025PSFS0056-001159.

[18] Josh Dawson, "Education Story of the Year: B.C. Interior Universities, Colleges Face Plummeting International Enrolment," *Castanet (Kelowna)*, December 24, 2024, https://www.castanet.net/news/BC/524106/Education-story-of-the-year-B-C-Interior-universities-colleges-face-plummeting-international-enrolment.

[19] Sarah Jones, "KPU Set to Lay Off More Staff as International Student Enrolment Plunges," *CityNews Vancouver*, August 27, 2025, https://vancouver.citynews.ca/2025/08/27/kpu-langara-layoff-more-staff-number-i-students-drop; Adam Campbell, "B.C. post-secondary institutions facing millions in losses over student permit caps," BIV, July 3, 2025, https://www.biv.com/news/human-resources-education/bc-post-secondary-institutions-facing-millions-in-losses-over-student-permit-caps-10898539.

[20] Josh Dawson, "Thompson Rivers University slashing $20M amid international student decline," *BIV*, December 9, 2024, https://www.biv.com/news/human-resources-education/thompson-rivers-university-slashing-20m-amid-international-student-decline-9928288.

[21] *CBC News*, "Drop in International Student Enrollment Could Lead to Closure of TRU Campus in Williams Lake," CBC News, March 30, 2026, video, https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/9.7145292.

[22] Michael John Lo, "Sharp Cut in Student Permits Means More Financial Pain for Island Colleges, Universities," *Times Colonist*, November 6, 2025, https://www.timescolonist.com/local-news/sharp-cut-in-student-permits-means-more-financial-pain-for-island-colleges-universities-11449525 .

[23] Jones, "KPU Set to Lay Off More Staff."

[24] Maryse Zeidler, "Facing $8.4M Decline in International Revenue, North Island College Cuts Staff, Reviews Programs," *CBC News*, March 12, 2026, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/north-island-college-deficit-9.7125072.

List of service cuts at public colleges and teaching universities[25]

Camosun College (4)
1. Reduced counselling services
2. Reduced academic advisors
3. Reductions to EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) Office
4. Reductions to students' makerspace

Coast Mountain College (2)
1. Increased prices for student housing and campus food services (to offset revenue losses)
2. No active counsellors due to unfilled vacancies

College of New Caledonia (5)
1. Fort St. James campus closed
2. Reduced International Students Academic Advisors
3. Vacant Wellness Coach Position
4. Reduced Mental Health Staffing
5. Reduced Cafeteria hours

Douglas College (4)
1. Closure of Douglas College Vision Care Centre
2. Douglas College Gym fitness centre hours decreased
3. Budget cuts in Student Life Department and large-scale events
4. Reduced counselling availability

Emily Carr University of Art and Design (3)
1. Limited rentals of specialized animation equipment
2. Reduced library hours
3. Reduced Media Resource Centre hours

North Island College (2)
1. Interactive Television Course Delivery Technology discontinued
2. Ucluelet Learning Centre closed

Okanagan College (1)
1. Adult Basic Education (ABE) programming moved to online delivery

Selkirk College (3)
1. Kaslo Learning Centre closed
2. Nakusp Learning Centre closed
3. Victoria Street Campus in Nelson closed

Vancouver Community College (3)
1. Removal of Student Arbiter position
2. Closure of IT Help Desk Services
3. Closure of Office and Administration for the Visually Impaired Certificate

Vancouver Island University (15)
1. Closure of "The High School"
2. End of Elder College Partnership
3. Discontinuation of internal bus fleet
4. Field schools paused
5. Reduced library hours
6. Writing Centre service reduction
7. Closure and sale of Parksville Campus
8. Closure of Cowichan Trades Centre (pending; all trades programs being relocated to the Nanaimo campus)
9. New Childcare Centre project cancelled
10. Outdoor Recreation Program cancelled
11. Dissolution of International Education Department
12. Student Information System project cancelled
13. Community Cousins Program cancelled
14. Campus Starbucks closed
15. Reduced operation of residence grocery shuttle

[25] BCFS, “Cuts Suck”; supplemented by media reporting.

Decades of chronic underfunding

While the impacts of the federal international student caps on BC's public post-secondary sector felt sudden, this crisis did not arrive without warning. Institutions, faculty associations, the sector's labour organizations, student unions and the BC Federation of Students (BCFS) had been sounding the alarm for years. The BCFS warned the provincial government repeatedly that the system's reliance on international tuition was unsustainable.[26] The Federation of Post-Secondary Educators (FPSE) called it "an open secret."[27]

As faculty, students, institutional leaders, labour organizations and even the Province's own (subsequently buried) 2022 funding review have all concluded, the fragility of the sector is due to decades of chronic public underfunding that pressured institutions into structural dependence on international student tuition as a substitute. The current shortfalls from the loss of international student tuition revenue come on top of a sector that was already deemed to need at least $200 million in additional annual funding for stability.[28] The federal government removed the stopgap revenue source, but the provincial government created the conditions that made institutions dependent upon it.

Despite this, BC Budget 2026 added no new operating funding for the sector[29] and the 2025/26 sector sustainability review opened with the explicit caveat that no new funding would be on the table.[30]

The consequences are uneven.

The University of BC (UBC) is in a category of its own, weathering the storm through global brand recognition and a multibillion-dollar endowment built partly from extracting lease, rent and other development revenue on its government-granted stolen lands. The other research universities may have more cushion than colleges and teaching universities, but they have not been spared. And the gap is set to widen with the IRCC focusing on recruiting international master's and doctoral students. International doctoral students provide cheap academic labour to research-intensive institutions as teaching and research assistants while expensive professional master's degrees are a highly lucrative revenue stream.

Colleges and teaching universities, however, that serve the majority of BC students, particularly those from working-class, rural, Indigenous and racialized communities, will have no comparable replacement for the lost undergraduate international tuition. As one college faculty association president put it, "the bottom half of this sector is beginning to feel very under-appreciated and very frustrated."[31]

[26] E.g. BCFS, *International Education in British Columbia: Keeping the Post-secondary System Afloat* (British Columbia Federation of Students, 2023), https://assets.nationbuilder.com/bcfs/pages/258/attachments/original/1695187847/Document-Research_2023-International_Education-Digital_Final.pdf

[27] Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of British Columbia (FPSE), *Submission to the Post-Secondary Funding Review* (Vancouver, BC: FPSE, July 15, 2022).

[28] Don Wright, direction briefing, Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review, January 2023. Obtained by BCFS through FOI request, file PSE-2023-32707.

[29] Iglika Ivanova and Véronique Sioufi, "BC Budget 2026: A Slow Retreat from Public Services That Leaves People to Fend for Themselves," *BC Policy Solutions*, February 17, 2026, https://bcpolicy.ca/2026/02/17/bc-budget-2026/.

[30] Interviews by the author, 2026.

[31] Anonymous faculty association representative, interview by the author, 2026.

For Vancouver Island, rural and northern BC, the crisis threatens the fundamental mission of providing equitable educational access across the province. The marketization of the public post-secondary sector had already eroded that mission, leading to many campus closures over the last 30 years, including in Indigenous communities. The recent cuts signal a further abandonment of communities that were promised equitable access to post-secondary education.

Going forward, the provincial government seems to have two paths to choose from: treat this crisis as the predictable consequence of 40 years of deliberate public disinvestment in post-secondary education at both the federal and provincial levels and work to reverse course; or use the crisis—as many in the sector fear—to permanently narrow who public post-secondary education serves and what it aspires to be.[32] The signs of this narrowing are already emerging. Without new funding and with fewer international students to rely on for revenue, there are signals the Province plans to reverse the longstanding 2% cap on annual tuition increases.[33] Institutions are already exploiting loopholes around the cap by closing programs and reopening them under new names.[34] Increasing tuition costs will actually create a deeper divide across the province regarding who gets access to education and the kind of education they can pursue. To avoid this outcome, the province urgently needs a coherent, research-backed mission for what education should be and how to sustainably deliver it.

This report establishes the case for the first path. It begins by tracing a half-century of policy decisions—federal funding cuts, provincial disinvestment, the stratification of the sector, its marketization and the deliberate engineering of international tuition into a structural funding stopgap—that turned BC's public post-secondary system into something a single change in immigration policy could break. It then turns to who is absorbing the cost: students whose programs have disappeared and whose graduations are stretching out; faculty and staff facing layoffs, non-renewals and intensified workloads; and the rural communities and marginalized students whose access has been narrowed yet again. A look at submissions to the Province's two recent sector reviews—the 2022/23 funding review that the government abandoned and the 2025/26 sustainability review designed to exclude new funding—reveal that the sector told the government what it needs and it has been ignored. The final section outlines an alternative direction: rebuilding post-secondary education as public infrastructure, anchored in decolonization with restored public funding and community-driven governance.

[32] Interviews by the author, 2026.
[33] Interviews by the author, 2026.
[34] Interviews by the author, 2026.

How we got here

Understanding the current sector collapse requires tracing a series of policy decisions that, over decades, transformed public post-secondary education from a well-funded public service into a marketized sector dependent on egregious international student tuition for its survival.

A policy timeline

- **Pre-war.** BC's post-secondary system was, for much of the 20th century, essentially just UBC and the former Victoria College (now University of Victoria). Both institutions originally operated as McGill University affiliates, from 1906 and 1903 respectively. The BC University Act (1908) established UBC as an independent university in 1915 followed by the reopening of Victoria College in 1920 as a UBC affiliate. The system was small, elite, generously funded and deeply exclusionary along race, class and gender lines. [35]
- **Post-war.** Following WWII, the Province established 10 vocational schools and provided financial support to returning veterans. Concurrently, the federal government started to provide direct aid to all universities in the country until the 1950s when direct funding was replaced with per-capita grants distributed to provincial governments.[36]
- **1960s.** In the early 1960s, UBC president John B. Macdonald, inspired by Clark Kerr's University of California system, proposed a stratified higher education system—an elite research institution at the top, with lower-tier institutions oriented toward immediate economic needs for working-class students.[37] While BC never formally adopted Macdonald's pyramid, it effectively replicated it.

  With the national Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act of 1960,

  > *"The federal government agreed, for up to six years, to reimburse each province 75% of the cost of new buildings and equipment to a limit based on*

[35] Dale McCartney (professor, University of the Fraser Valley), interview by the author, 2026; University of British Columbia Archives, "A Brief History of UBC," accessed April 2026, https://archives.library.ubc.ca/explore-ubc-archives-online/campus-history/a-brief-history-of-ubc/; University of Victoria Special Collections, "History of Victoria College," accessed April 2026, https://spcoll.library.uvic.ca/Digit/schoolnet/digicol/vic-col/history.html.

[36] Bob Cowin, *Made in B.C.: A History of Postsecondary Education in British Columbia* (Vancouver: BCCAT, 2007), https://www.bccat.ca/resources/MadeInBC2007.pdf.

[37] McCartney, interview; Anonymous labour sector representative, interview with the author, 2026; John B. Macdonald, *Higher Education in British Columbia and a Plan for the Future* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1962), https://canadacommons.ca/artifacts/3527238/higher-education-in-british-columbia-and-a-plan-for-the-future/4328028.

the population, and thereafter at 50% of cost. The 1960s became the key decade for the founding of vocational schools."[38]

The new Universities Act (1963) and amendments to the Public Schools Act led to the creation of two new research universities (Simon Fraser University and the University of Victoria) and the melding of the vocational schools into community colleges.

By the 1970s, the college system expanded to 14 community colleges to meet demand for short-term certificates and diplomas, paralleling the credentialization of jobs that had previously relied on on-the-job training.[39]

- **1970s.** Before the 1970s there was no systematic basis for differential fees for international students who up to this point were not classified as a separate category of learners. But in 1976, the federal Immigration Act formally classified international students as temporary residents for the first time, assigning them special Social Insurance numbers that made them identifiable and chargeable as a distinct group. International students were also barred from off-campus work—a ban that lasted until 2006.[40]
- **The neoliberal turn (1980s).** In 1982, the conservative Social Credit government introduced a mid-fiscal-year budget cut of roughly 10% to universities. The following year's budget triggered the Solidarity protests, which nearly became a general strike. For post-secondary education, this marked the end of generous public funding and the beginning of the "user fees" ideology.

  The government authorized institutions to charge international students differential fees and UBC and Simon Fraser University (SFU) immediately did so for the first time. This is the origin of the international-student-as-revenue-source model though it remained a slow burn for two decades. Additionally, corporate tax reductions shrank the provincial tax base,

[38] Cowin, *Made in B.C.*

[39] McCartney, interview; Cowin, *Made in B.C.*

[40] McCartney, interview; Dale M. McCartney, "'A Question of Self-Interest': A Brief History of 50 Years of International Student Policy in Canada," Canadian Journal of Higher Education 51, no. 3 (2021): 33–53; Dale M. McCartney, "*Border Imperialism and Exclusion in Canadian Parliamentary Talk about International Students*," Canadian Journal of Higher Education 50, no. 4 (2020): 37–52; Sharon Stein, "Framing the Public Good in the Future of British Columbia International Education Policy," in *International Education as Public Policy in Canada*, ed. Merli Tamtik, Roopa Desai Trilokekar, and Glen A. Jones (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 135–164; Pier 21, "Immigration Act, 1976," Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, accessed April 2026, https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/immigration-act-1976.

adding to the pressure for user-fee models and public-private partnerships across the sector.[41]

- **Federal transfer restructuring (1980s-mid 1990s).** Federally, then-prime ministers Brian Mulroney followed by Jean Chrétien restructured social transfers to the provinces in a way that led to less funding for BC post-secondary. Mulroney capped and reduced transfers, while Chrétien's 1995 budget merged them entirely, with health, education and social assistance all under the new Canada Health and Social Transfer. This forced the public post-secondary education sector to compete against health care for limited public funds.[42] "Between 1988/1989 and 2005/2006, the total transfer of federal funds for PSE decreased by 40 percent."[43]

- **Bill 22 and the university college experiment (1994).** To expand degree access to the interior and to Vancouver Island the Social Credit government had, between 1989-1991, designated some of the community colleges as "University Colleges" acting under a partnership framework with universities where students took classes at the college, but the actual degrees were issued and rubber-stamped by UBC, SFU, or the University of Victoria (UVic).

  Under the BC NDP government of Mike Harcourt, Bill 22 gave university colleges full degree-granting authority and established education councils, giving these colleges more independence and democratic governance.

  But the legislation did not move these institutions into the university designation, did not give them a distinct funding model and did not account for the costs of actually running degree programs—such as labs, libraries, research infrastructure, teaching assistants. The university colleges were expected to remain "comprehensive," keeping adult basic education, trades and college programming while also building university capacity, without additional resources nor access to the "economy of scale" of urban research universities.[44]

- **The BC NDP tuition freeze (1996-2001).** During this period, the BC NDP froze tuition fees, which students championed. After a five-year freeze, tuition fees were cut by 5% in 2001/02, making BC tuition fees considerably lower than those in Alberta and Ontario. The policy was a response to a decade of high tuition increases (190% for universities, 254% for colleges)

[41] McCartney, interview; Dale M. McCartney and Amy Scott Metcalfe, "Corporatization of Higher Education through Internationalization: The Emergence of Pathway Colleges in Canada," *Tertiary Education and Management 24*, no. 3 (2018): 206–220; McCartney, "'A Question of Self-Interest'"; Stein, "Framing the Public Good"; Donna Vogel, *Are Spending Cuts and Privatization the Answer for BC?* (Vancouver: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives–BC Office, 1999).
[42] McCartney, interview; Paris Marx, "Jean Chrétien's Austerity Made Canada Less Prepared for COVID-19," *Canadian Dimension*, July 7, 2020, https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/jean-chretiens-austerity-made-canada-less-prepared-for-covid-19.
[43] Stein, "Framing the Public Good."
[44] Labour rep, interview.

that far outpaced inflation. The freeze contributed to increasing the participation rate in post-secondary education from the second worst in Canada in 1991 to the second best by 2001.[45] This was an evidence-based equity-driven approach to education as a public good.

However, the government provided no compensatory funding to institutions. Prior to the freeze, institutions had been receiving roughly 10% annual tuition-fee increases and that revenue stream simply evaporated. This is when the funding slide began in earnest for smaller institutions.[46]

- **The BC Liberals' radical restructuring (2001-2008).** The BC Liberal government under premier Gordon Campbell enacted a cluster of changes that set institutions on a collision course with insolvency. They moved from program-based to block funding, which allowed the government to freeze and cut funding without transparency—they could increase enrolment expectations while keeping budgets flat, creating hidden per-student cuts. They completely deregulated tuition fees, leading to 200-300% increases at some institutions between 2002 and 2005. Then in 2005, when they re-regulated fees with a 2% annual cap, they froze institutions at whatever level they happened to be at—punishing those that had been more restrained during the deregulated period with a permanently lower funding base.[47]

  The Liberal government also dismantled the cooperative consultative structures within the Ministry of Advanced Education—committees on educational technology, prior learning assessment and transfer system optimization. Institutions were forced to compete with each other and to individually replicate services that had been provided system-wide. Private education was significantly expanded.

  Between 2006 and 2008, the remaining university colleges were converted into special purpose teaching universities. None received additional funding. And all were governed under a new act rather than the full university legislation, meaning their faculty became among the lowest-paid in Canada. They onboarded the direct and indirect costs of being a university—governance structures, library resources, labs, graduate programs—on a college funding base.[48]

[45] Labour rep, interview; BC NDP, "Accomplishments of the 1990s," BC NDP History, accessed 2026, https://bcndphistory.ca/accomplishments-90s/.

[46] McCartney, interview; FPSE, "The 1990s: Solidarity in Action," FPSE History, accessed April 2026, https://history.fpse.ca/the_1990s_solidarity_in_action.

[47] McCartney, interview; McCartney and Metcalfe, "Corporatization"; Vogel, *Are Spending Cuts and Privatization the Answer for BC?*

[48] McCartney, interview; Labour rep, interview; *Maclean's*, "From College to University," Maclean's, April 24, 2008, https://macleans.ca/education/uniandcollege/from-college-to-university/.

- **The international student solution (2005-2019).** By 2005, institutions successfully lobbied the federal government to allow international students to work off-campus. Between 2005 and 2008, the post-graduate work permit (PGWP) was introduced and enhanced, creating the clear "study, work, immigrate" pathway that dramatically expanded international student demand for Canada. In 2008, EduCanada was created as a global advertising brand, explicitly promising immigration pathways. The Conservative government of prime minister Stephen Harper introduced the 2012 strategy, "Harnessing Our Knowledge Advantage," which called for Canada to double the number of international students from roughly 225,000 to 450,000 by 2022. Canada surpassed the target early, reaching 500,000 in 2018. The Liberal government of prime minister Justin Trudeau undertook the 2019 strategy, "Building on Success," which continued the trajectory with undisguised satisfaction.[49]

  Parallel to federal policy, BC was building its own immigration pipeline. The BC Provincial Nominee Program, signed in 1998 and operationalized in 2001 under the new Liberal government, gave the province its own mechanism for selecting permanent residents. By the mid-2000s, BC had created an "International Graduate" stream—graduates of recognized BC post-secondary institutions could apply for permanent residency with no prior work experience, only a job offer.[50]

  In 2012, the province passed its first International Education Strategy, echoing the federal government's explicit economic framing of international education as a service export. The 2010 Canada–BC Immigration Agreement included a dedicated section on international students. BC launched its International Post-Graduate (IPG) pilot the same year, allowing master's and PhD graduates in science fields to apply for permanent residency without a job offer. Admission to a BC graduate program had effectively become an immigration pathway, with post-secondary institutions positioned as de facto immigrant selection agents.[51] The IPG became permanent in 2013. BC pioneered recruitment of master's-level

[49] McCartney, interview; McCartney, "Border Imperialism"; McCartney, "'A Question of Self-Interest'"; Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, *Evaluation of the International Student Program: 2010 — Background* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2010), https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/international-student-program-2010/background.html; Canada, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, *Canada's International Education Strategy: Harnessing Our Knowledge Advantage to Drive Innovation and Prosperity* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2014), https://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/strategy-strategie-2014/index.aspx?lang=eng; Canada, Global Affairs Canada, *Building on Success: International Education Strategy*, 2019–2024 (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2019), https://www.international.gc.ca/education/assets/pdfs/ies-sei/Building-on-Success-International-Education-Strategy-2019-2024.pdf.

[50] Lisa R. Brunner, "Higher Educational Institutions as Emerging Immigrant Selection Actors: A History of British Columbia's Retention of International Graduates, 2001–2016," *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* 1, no. 1 (2017): 22–41.

[51] McCartney, interview; McCartney, "'A Question of Self-Interest'"; British Columbia, Office of the Premier, news release, 2011, "B.C. maps future growth through international education and skills training" https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2011PREM0112-001182;

international students for immigration purposes a full decade before federal policy began moving in the same direction. In 2015, BC's Minister of Advanced Education stated directly to the BC Federation of Students that making a profit from international students was designed to be a major component of the funding model for BC's public post-secondary system.[52]

Post 2018, the number of Chinese international students declined in BC and were replaced primarily by Indian students, particularly from Punjab. These students attended different institutions from their Chinese predecessors, had less economic capital and were more explicitly interested in the immigration pathway. They were doing exactly what the system was designed for, but they were not the kind of students Canada had imagined: they were not wealthy, they were visibly working hard in the economy and they faced significant racism.[53]

- **The caps (2024-2026).** Federal caps on international student applications were introduced in 2024, framed as a 35% cut, but they were far deeper for BC and Ontario because attestation letters were distributed by population share rather than by existing enrolment. BC, which used to receive up to 30% of Canada's international students, now gets only about 10% of attestation letters.[54] The government also severely restricted spousal work permits, limiting them to spouses of graduate students, and closed the PGWP pathway for two-year diploma programs, devastating colleges and smaller institutions. The rollout was chaotic, with provinces given weeks to design attestation letter systems.

  The result was the collapse of international student numbers at the very institutions the system had made most dependent on them. The elite institutions, with diversified revenue and global reputations, were largely insulated. The teaching universities and colleges were not.

[52]https://assets.nationbuilder.com/bcfs/pages/258/attachments/original/1695187847/Document-Research_2023-International_Education-Digital_Final.pdf?1695187847

[53] McCartney, interview; Kumari Beck (professor, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University), interview by the author, 2026.

[54] IRCC, "2026 Provincial and Territorial Allocations."

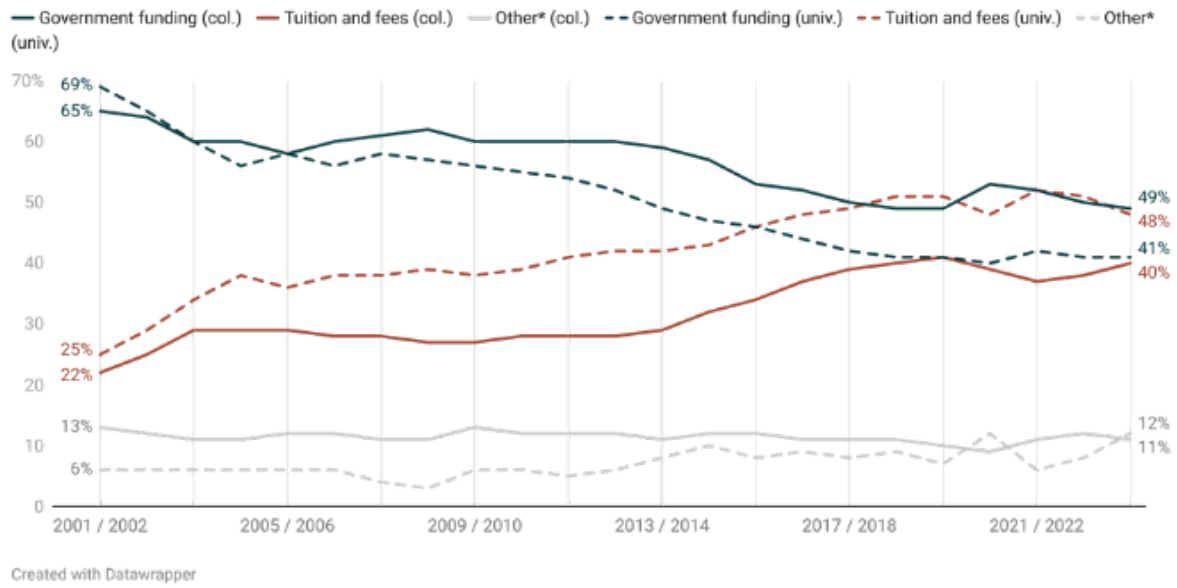
International students as funding stopgaps: the marketization of post-secondary education in a settler-colonial context

BC initially attempted to offset the drastic drop in federal funding for post-secondary education with slight increases in per-student funding through the 90s and early 2000s. However, in short order, the overall proportion of university operating revenues provided by the government shrank considerably, shifting the burden onto tuition fees.[55] When adjusted for inflation, provincial per-capita spending on post-secondary education dropped 20% after 2001.[56] Starved of stable public funding, institutions were forced to adopt entrepreneurial survival strategies. Chief among these was the aggressive recruitment of international students, a practice bolstered by provincial and federal policies that leveraged post-graduation immigration pathways as de facto marketing tools.[57]

This shift was not unique to BC.

Since the 1980s, public universities in Canada, the US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa have undergone a "neoliberal makeover": a sweeping structural and ideological transformation that has reshaped public universities into market-driven, corporate entities.[58] This makeover has been characterized by deep funding cuts, tuition hikes that transfer cost to students-as-customers, the casualization of academic labour, corporate management cultures and a redefinition of education as a globally tradable commodity rather than a locally situated public service.[59]

Share of operating revenue of BC universities and colleges by type of revenues and funds



[55] Fisher et al., 2009, cited in Stein, "Framing the Public Good."
[56] Dimoff, 2017, cited in Stein, "Framing the Public Good."
[57] Stein, 2018; Brunner, 2017a, 2017b; cited in Stein, "Framing the Public Good."
[58] Rob Watts, "After the Neoliberal University: Student Voice and Protest," chap. 8 in *Routledge Handbook of the Sociology of Higher Education*, 2nd ed., ed. James E. Côté and Sarah Pickard (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).
[59] Watts, "After the Neoliberal University"; Stein, "Framing the Public Good"; McCartney and Metcalfe, "Corporatization."

Recipe for a neoliberal public post-secondary education makeover

- **Austerity:** purposeful, deep cuts to state funding for public universities. To maintain operations and balance budgets without raising taxes, institutions embrace a "user-pays principle," transferring the financial burden onto students through substantial tuition increases and the normalization of massive student debt.
- **Commodification:** heavily marketized education. Students are rebranded as "customers" purchasing a service.
- **Flexibilization:** To contain costs and maximize revenue, universities erode academic tenure for professors and rely heavily on cheap, casual, short-term contract academic staff.
- **Corporatization:** adopt the language, ethos and behaviours of corporate business. This includes extending managerial control over academic labour, paying excessively large salaries to senior administrators and fostering an institutional culture of entrepreneurialism.
- **Instrumentalism:** Neoliberal ideology that frames education primarily as a tool for economic growth, global competitiveness and job-readiness.

This consumerist vision is particularly evident in the treatment of international students, positioned as customers in a global market yet objectified as "cash cows" recruited to offset domestic funding shortfalls.[60] This attitude is a departure from earlier policy that viewed international education through the lens of development aid, an approach largely driven by Cold War geopolitical interests.[61]

The federal government formally suggested that provinces could generate additional revenue by implementing differential tuition fees for international learners during the 1976 federal transfer payment negotiations.[62] "Both the aid and customer-oriented framings, however," writes higher education scholar Sharon Stein, "reflect the racialized positioning of international students as "other," or outsiders, within the context of Canadian public PSE institutions (Stein and Andreotti 2016)."[63]

"By the mid-1980s," she continues, "BC post-secondary institutions were charging higher fees for international students than domestic students."[64] The provincial government quickly organized to capture this

[60] McCartney and Metcalfe, "Corporatization"; Watts, "After the Neoliberal University"; Stein, "Framing the Public Good."
[61] Dale M. McCartney, "Inventing International Students: Exploring Discourses in International Student Policy Talk, 1945–75," *Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 1–18, cited in Stein, "Framing the Public Good."
[62] Brunner, 2017a, cited in Stein, "Framing the Public Good."
[63] Stein, "Framing the Public Good."
[64] Stein, "Framing the Public Good."

revenue, establishing dedicated provincial bodies and urging institutions to draft formal plans to capitalize on new global market opportunities. By 1993, the province's first international education strategy made the justification explicitly economic: international student recruitment was now a tool to guarantee BC's global competitiveness and foster lucrative trade relations.[65]

Built on colonial logic

The ease with which international students could be so readily instrumentalized rested on established colonial foundations—racialized hierarchies of knowledge, assumptions of Western superiority and economic dependencies between the Global North and South that made extraction appear natural.[66]

BC's higher education sits inside what remains "a settler-colonial state actively engaged in ongoing violence against Indigenous peoples."[67] Universities were built on unceded Indigenous territories and continue to enforce Eurocentric knowledge structures.[68] International student mobility is layered onto this foundation. While the standard narrative traces today's flow of international students to medieval European universities, which were shaped by empire: students from colonized nations travelled to imperial centres for colonial powers to train sympathetic administrative elites.[69] After the Second World War, the same student flows were rebranded as "humane internationalism" —development aid through which Western nations brought students from the Global South to impart democratic and capitalist values.[70]

Federal policy makers described these students as "sojourners by nature, present in Canada due to the benevolence of a generous government." They were seen as vessels for Western ideology who would "return to their home countries, taking with them the intellectual and cultural rewards of their time in Canada."[71] International students continue to be "dehumanized in [policy] materials, valued only to the extent that they can develop Canada's economy."[72] As international education scholar Dale McCartney found in an exhaustive archival analysis, Members of Parliament (MPs) "persistently discuss international students as outsiders and as vehicles for Canada's economic and foreign policy goals." Only once between 1984 and 2019 did an MP articulate the intrinsic intellectual value of international students.[73]

Canada's international education strategies use "the language of competition," engaging "new and emerging markets" to attract "the best and

[65] Francis, 1993; Dimond, 1998; Brunner, 2017; cited in Stein, "Framing the Public Good."

[66] McCartney, "Inventing International Students"; McCartney, "Border Imperialism"; McCartney, "'A Question of Self-Interest'"; Lisa R. Brunner and Dale M. McCartney, "Colonial Logics as Public Secrets of International Student Mobility," *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education* 9, no. 2 (2025); McCartney and Metcalfe, "Corporatization"; Kumari Beck, "The Ruling Relations of the Internationalizing Canadian University," chap. 1 in *International Students from Asia in Canadian Universities*, ed. Ann H. Kim, Elizabeth Buckner, and Jean Michel Montsion (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

[67] Jeannie Kerr and Amy Parent, "Contemporary Colonialism and Reconciliation in Higher Education: A Decolonial Response Through Relationality," chap. 14 in *Troubling Truth and Reconciliation in Canadian Education*, ed. Arlo Kempf and Sandra D. Styres (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2022).

[68] Kerr and Parent, "Contemporary Colonialism."

[69] Brunner and McCartney, "Colonial Logics."

[70] Brunner and McCartney, "Colonial Logics"; Kumari Beck and Michelle Pidgeon, "Across the Divide: Critical Conversations on Decolonization, Indigenization, and Internationalization," in *International Education as Public Policy in Canada*, ed. Tamtik, Trilokekar, and Jones (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 384–419.

[71] McCartney, "Inventing International Students."
[72] McCartney, "'A Question of Self-Interest.'"
[73] McCartney, "Border Imperialism."

brightest international students" through "branding Canada to maximize success."[74] Education is positioned as a service export and international students as both the commodity and consumer. Dominant approaches to internationalization either perpetuate "business-as-usual competition for resources and positioning" or offer only modest reform through "knowledge transfer from North to South, framed as international aid"—risking the naturalization of "already uneven geo-political, economic, and epistemic relations."[75]

At the same time, international students were also being recruited as part of Canada's longstanding economic dependence on immigration. Where economic immigrants were once directly recruited from abroad in a 'one-step' process, the federal government increasingly drew immigrants from a pool of temporary residents living in Canada. For this, they used a 'two-step' process, with the rationale that applicants with Canadian credentials and local work experience tend to integrate faster and earn more over time.[76] Migrant studies scholar Lisa Brunner has named the version of this system targeting international students edugration[77]: "Edugration refers to a specific form of two-step immigration targeting international students, who are seen as ideal immigrants due to their relatively young age, official-language abilities, and high skill levels,"[78] Brunner writes. In this iteration, immigration is really a three-step process in which students "(1) gain admission to, and graduate from, a qualifying higher education institution can (2) compete in the labour market for a limited time on a post-graduation work permit, during which those who gain sufficient qualifying work experience can (3) remain permanently as immigrants and, eventually, citizens."[79]

Edugration crystallized in the 2000s when off-campus work eligibility and the PGWP came online and IRCC and Global Affairs Canada explicitly promoted permanent residency as a selling point of Canadian higher education. So, for many international students at BC institutions without major global reputations, the academic credential was not the primary draw, permanent residency was.[80] High tuition functioned as the entry fee to a multi-year competition for permanent residency (PR) spots, with post-secondary institutions serving to "essentially screen and train future Canadians."[81]

In BC today, international students from the Global South are channelled into a system that follows a "neo-imperial pattern of moving human resources from non-Western economies into Western knowledge economies," a pattern that "would seem to do little to redress historical

[74] Kumari Beck, "Seeing International Students: Challenging the Culture Trap," chap. 18 in *Research with International Students: Critical Conceptual and Methodological Considerations*, ed. Jenna Mittelmeier, Sylvie Lomer, and Kalyani Unkule (London: Routledge, 2023).

[75] Sharon Stein and Dale M. McCartney, "Emerging Conversations in Critical Internationalization Studies," *Journal of International Students* 11, no. S1 (2021): 1–14.

[76] Lisa R. Brunner, *Canadian International Student Policy at a Crossroads*, Policy Brief No. 1 (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, October 2025), 7, https://irpp.org/research-studies/canadian-international-student-policy-at-a-crossroads/.

[77] Lisa R. Brunner, "'Edugration' as a Wicked Problem: Higher Education and Three-Step Immigration," *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* 13, no. 5S (2021): 25–37.

[78] Lisa Brunner, quoted in Sachi Wickramasinghe, "How the International Student Cap Affects Immigration to Canada," *UBC News*, February 1, 2024, https://news.ubc.ca/2024/02/01/how-the-international-student-cap-affects-immigration-to-canada/.

[79] Brunner, "Edugration."

[80] Brunner, *Canadian International Student Policy at a Crossroads*.

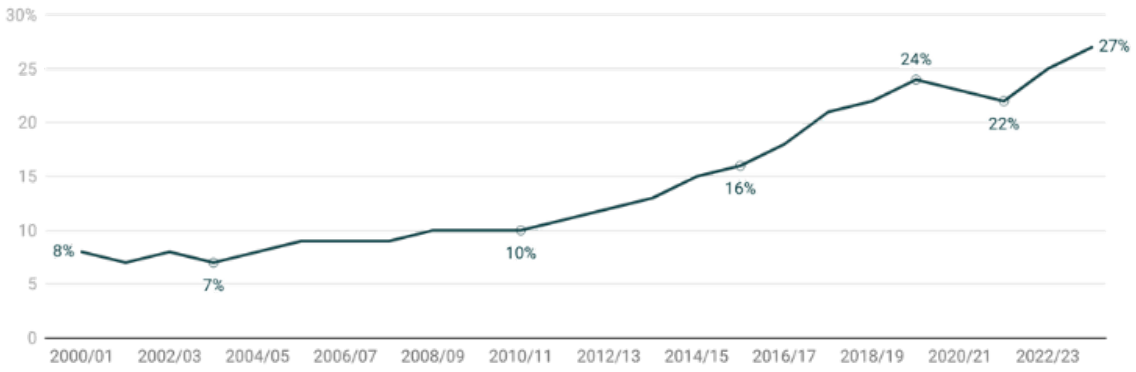
[81] Brunner, quoted in Wickramasinghe, "How the International Student Cap Affects Immigration to Canada."

patterns of dependency and uneven development."[82]

This border imperialism—the structuring of mobility and value through citizenship hierarchies—is "legitimized by its incorporation into legal frameworks of citizenship and migrancy."[83] International students were available for this form of extraction to BC post-secondary institutions because the legal categories had already made them so. When international students were classified as temporary residents in 1976 they were "made into a category of migrant, permanent outsiders to the Canadian nation."[84] Students cannot vote, cannot easily organize across institutions and are positioned as outsiders whose presence is contingent on economic utility. The category "international student" was itself invented in policy talk that catalogued, classified and assigned them economic and diplomatic value before they had set foot in Canada.[85] As researchers Brunner and McCartney write, using the term is "more than a description. It is a decision to reproduce imaginaries of the nation-state as the natural arbiter of rights."[86]

Post-secondary institutions in turn have instrumentalized their position as pseudo-border agents by actively framing themselves as essential to Canada's nation-building project through immigrant recruitment.[87] As the president of Universities Canada put it in 2016, universities had become "the Pier 21 of the 21st century," likening themselves to the early-twentieth-century ocean liner terminal through which a million immigrants entered the country.[88] Rather than asking the state to fund education for its democratic and civic value, institutions began asking governments to fund education because it was now a key immigration pipeline.[89]

International students as proportion of total enrolments at BC colleges and universities



Source: Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0086-01. • Created with Datawrapper

[82] Johnstone and Lee (2014), quoted in Stein, "Framing the Public Good"; Brooks and Waters (2011), quoted in Stein, "Framing the Public Good."
[83] McCartney, "Border Imperialism" (drawing on Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism* [Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2013]).
[84] McCartney, "'A Question of Self-Interest.'"
[85] Brunner and McCartney, "Colonial Logics."
[86] Brunner and McCartney, "Colonial Logics."
[87] Lisa R. Brunner, "Settler Nation-Building through Immigration as a Rationale for Higher Education: A Critical Discourse Analysis." *Higher Education Research & Development* 42, no. 5 (2023): 1086–1102.
[88] Brunner, "Settler Nation-Building."
[89] Brunner, "Settler Nation-Building."

Competition over cohesion

"We talk about collaboration, but we're actually set up to compete."[90]

Chronic underfunding, marketization and colonial logics combined to produce a sector in which institutions compete for international students, sometimes at the expense of delivering on their public mandates. Deprived of stable government funding, BC's public post-secondary institutions have expanded into each other's catchment areas, duplicated programs and spent countless public dollars on marketing. In Metro Vancouver, Douglas College and Vancouver Community College advertisements sit side by side on transit platforms, each aiming to recruit from the other's community.[91] Across the province, "multiple nearby institutions [are] offering similar business degrees largely designed to attract international students."[92] As North Island Student Union's (NISU) Executive Director Carissa Wilson put it, "Our institutions have been working in silo a lot. There's a lot of competition for students. We're preaching to the same choir, and it's not that big."[93]

The early 2000s shift in BC from a partly, need-based funding model to a predominantly, block-funded, per-student model was framed as a way to provide greater flexibility to institutions to meet regional needs and achieve parity. Although supposedly intended to provide flexibility, the model meant that when costs outpaced per-student grants, institutions, rather than the Province, had to manage the deficit.

With no real funding increases for decades, the funding model overhaul ultimately replaced a system that funded for breadth of programs with one that funded for volume of students, which financially incentivized popular, large-scale programs over smaller, specialized ones.[94]

The same period saw the dismantling of cooperative ministry structures—committees on educational technology, prior learning assessment and transfer system optimization. As part of the BC Liberal government-wide "Core Services Review," these agencies had their funding eliminated and were shut down. This included the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (C2T2) and the Centre for Education Information Standards and Services (CEISS), which were created in 1996 to coordinate system-wide services, and were defunded and ultimately closed in 2003. The Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission (ITAC) was also phased out in 2003 and subsequently replaced with the employer-dominated Industry Training Authority (ITA).[95]

The mid-2000s conversion of colleges to universities, without additional funding, intensified the competition by creating institutions with university aspirations on college budgets, all pursuing the same international student revenue to close their funding gaps.

As many have put it, the federal government's 2024 decision to cap international student permits was a blunt instrument applied to a

[90] Labour rep, interview.
[91] Labour rep, interview
[92] BCFS, S*ubmission to the Sustainability Review of the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills,* January 13, 2026.
[93] Carissa Wilson (executive director, North Island College Students' Union), interview by the author, 2026.

[94] Michal Rozworski, "How BC Is Short-Changing Schools and How We Can Fix It," *Policy Note*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-BC Office, August 16, 2018.
[95] Bob Cowin, *Made in B.C.: A History of Postsecondary Education in British Columbia, vol. VI: Agencies and Organizations,* (Vancouver: BCCAT, 2011).

problem that required precision.[96] International students were made to bear the visible cost of a system that had long been set up to fail. Media coverage of international students in BC reacting negatively to the caps reinforced the image the federal government seemed to want to project as the Conservative Party opposition demanded toughness on immigration. Northern Lights College (NLC) faculty member Rob-Roy Douglas said, "they were being cruel. And I think that was an important part of this."[97]

The PGWP restriction on college diplomas was particularly damaging. It hit the institutions most dependent on international tuition revenue—the teaching universities and colleges that had followed every incentive the government set. As BCFS chairperson Debi Herrera Lira argued, the change had "a larger impact on international students attending colleges, and also a larger impact on colleges' budgets, because the enrolment faltered even more at colleges."[98]

Even if Ottawa reversed course tomorrow, recovery would take years, some suspect.[99] Canada's reputation has been badly damaged abroad. One labour sector advocate estimated it would take "at minimum, 10 years to restore our reputation if we started tomorrow. And we are not starting tomorrow."[100]

[96] Interviews by the author, 2026.
[97] Rob-Roy Douglas (professor, Northern Lights College), interview by the author, 2026.
[98] Debi Herrera Lira (chairperson, BCFS), interview by the author, 2026.
[99] Anonymous faculty association rep, interview by the author, 2026.
[100] Labour rep, interview.

Who is affected?

It is easy to lose sight of the human element when confronted with the sheer scale of the crisis outlined earlier in this report: more than 180 suspended programs, 1,300 formal layoffs and 45 eliminated student services recorded by spring 2026. Behind these staggering statistics—and the invisible toll of thousands of non-renewed contract workers—are the actual people who constitute a post-secondary institution.

A university or college is a complex, interdependent ecosystem. It is driven by a deeply diverse student body encompassing young and mature learners, continuing education and students upgrading their skills, trades apprentices, artists, scientists, international scholars and graduate researchers. Supporting them is an equally diverse academic workforce: tenured and contract faculty, industry-professional vocational instructors, teaching and research assistants, librarians and lab technicians. Beyond the classroom, the institution's survival relies heavily on a vast network of support and administrative staff. This includes academic advisors, financial aid officers, mental health counsellors, accessibility coordinators, IT professionals, cleaning staff, maintenance workers, food service employees and campus security.

These individuals do not exist in a vacuum; they represent a cross-section of rural, urban, domestic and international life. Post-secondary institutions serve as vital local community hubs and essential economic drivers. Therefore, a post-secondary sector in crisis is not merely a localized problem for the students and staff on campus today. It is a crisis that will ripple outward, compromising the social, intellectual and economic future of the province for decades to come if a dramatic shift in approach is not made soon.

The student body

The post-secondary education funding crisis in BC is first being absorbed by students. Program cuts, suspended courses, lost services and staff layoffs are extending degree timelines, deepening debt, closing off high-demand fields and pushing the most precarious students (international, Indigenous, racialized and low-income) further to the margins.

When colleges and universities cut programs, suspend offerings or thin out staffing, students do not graduate on time. As BCFS' Herrera Lira put it, "students are no longer graduating at two, maybe four years. They're taking a lot longer to graduate."[101] Beyond announced program cuts, the "silent erosion of course sections," in Herrera Lira's words, is making it "nearly impossible for students to be able to get their required courses, to get the credits that they need."[102] BCFS represents more than 170,000 students across the province, students at every campus they have visited report waitlists and missing upper-level course offerings.

Graduation timelines are lengthening, and with every additional semester comes additional tuition, rent, food and opportunity cost. "If a program is offered every other semester or every other year, that's one more semester of groceries, one more semester of tuition, of rent," Herrera Lira said.[103] Financial barriers are

[101] Herrera Lira, interview.
[102] Herrera Lira, interview.
[103] Herrera Lira, interview; see also "Government Post-Secondary Review Sparks Students Concern

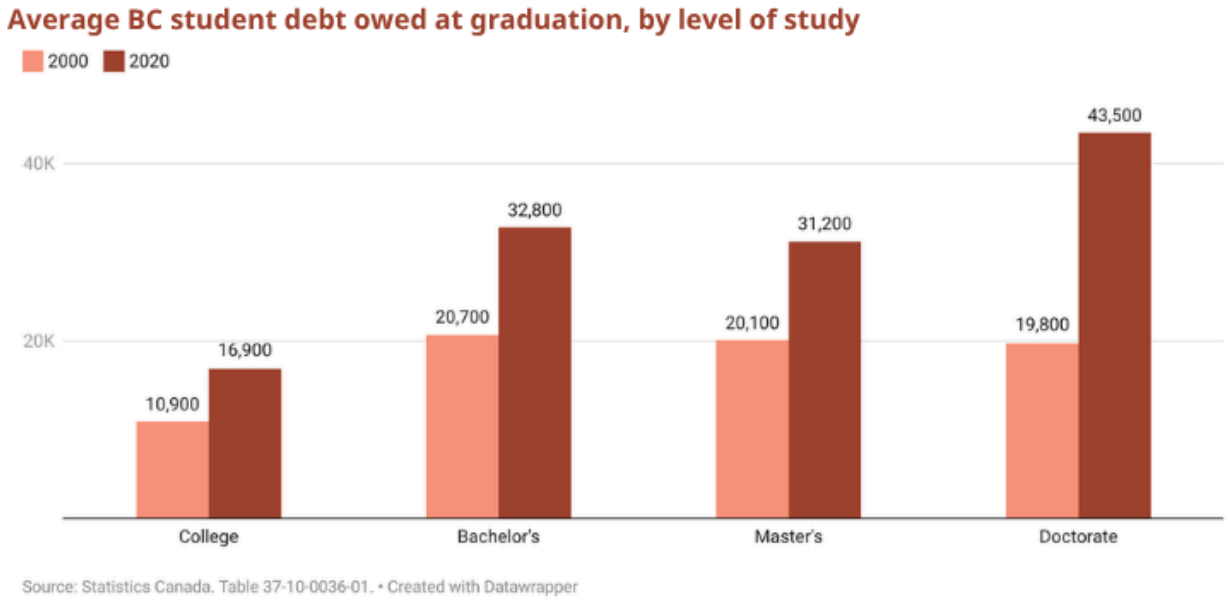
the number one reason BC youth do not pursue post-secondary education, exceeding lack of interest. On average, BC students pay close to $27,000 in tuition over the course of an undergraduate degree and graduate with nearly $33,000 in debt; domestic tuition has risen 1,137% since 1972.[104] As many report, the 2% annual tuition cap is being routinely circumvented.[105] Institutions "repackage" programs, make minor changes and reintroduce them with higher fees, with some programs reportedly nearly doubling in cost from one year to the next.[106] Ministry oversight is effectively absent when it comes to these manoeuvres and accountability sits with internal bodies (Educational Councils, Senates, Board of Governors) without independent scrutiny.[107]

Ancillary fees add to costs. Institutions add fees for things that should be covered by operating grants, like maintenance and technology, because the grant is insufficient. UVic closed its weight room, dance studio and an athletic centre but kept charging the fees that funded them.[108] Parking fees, cafeteria earnings and on-campus housing are also increasingly used as revenue streams.

Students report skipping meals because campus food is too expensive. Many work two or more jobs, in addition to their studies, to make ends meet.[109]

Equity dimensions

When institutions face budget pressure, the most vulnerable students are the first to feel it and the last to recover. For rural and remote institutions, the crisis threatens the fundamental mission of providing equitable educational access across the province. The consolidation of programming toward urban campuses and main sites has increased over



About Rising Tuition Fees," BCFS, November 25, 2025, https://www.wearebcstudents.ca/sector_review.
[104] Herrera Lira, interview.
[105] FA reps, interviews; Herrera Lira and Adams, interview.
[106] FA reps, interviews; Herrera Lira and Adams, interview.
[107] FA rep, interview.
[108] Herrera Lira and Adams, interview.
[109] Herrera Lira and Adams, interview; Wilson, interview.

decades, but the current revenue crisis threatens to intensify the trend.

As North Island College Faculty Association (NICFA) president Jen Wrye describes, “there was a campus on Alert Bay and they closed it. There was a campus in Port McNeil and Port Hardy and now there’s just Mi̱alakwila [...]. The government funding formula has resulted in long and slow and certain consolidation toward Comox.” Courses that were once taught across multiple campuses, such as introductory sociology in Campbell River and Port Alberni, were cut during the COVID-19 pandemic and “have not been reintroduced in those communities.”[110]

Similarly, at the College of the Rockies, the reduction in university studies offerings, "just chips away at the choices students have in this area," a source explained, "Our students really have to move away to do university studies," warning that without deliberate intervention, the institution risks unintentionally drifting into a strictly vocational college.[111]

This consolidation has particular consequences for Indigenous communities. Indigenous enrolment is significantly higher at rural colleges compared to urban research universities. Many Indigenous learners face compounding barriers related to income, rurality, caregiving responsibilities and proximity to campuses. “This is a basic form of equity,” Wrye argues, describing how the slow withdrawal of in-person programming from remote campuses erodes access for First Nations communities where “the proportion of the population is high.” One of the few surviving cultural programs in the area—a land-based adult basic education program for First Nations students—exists only because it is endowed, not base-funded.[112]

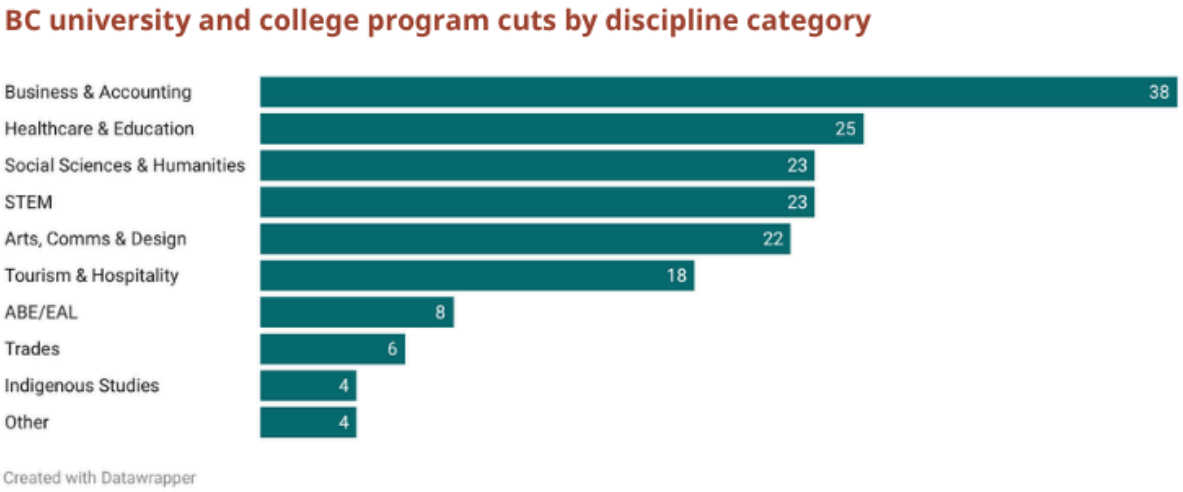
As the BCFS reports, arts and Indigenous programs are being eliminated disproportionately. The College of New Caledonia cut or suspended five Associate of Arts programs, including Aboriginal Studies. North Island College cut its Fine Arts Diploma and its metal jewelry design certificate. Students at those institutions see a clear message in what is being protected and what is not, which Herrera Lira connects to a broader narrowing of human capacity, “why would we not want a nurse who's also excelling in being able to know how to communicate?”[113]

Service cuts compound the harm of program closures. At Douglas College in New Westminster, four counsellors were laid off, leaving Indigenous students without a single counsellor on campus who shared their lived experience.[114]

Adult Basic Education, English language training, upgrading and bridging programs are essential equity infrastructure. These pathways are relatively low cost compared to the social return yet they are among the most vulnerable during fiscal constraint. They are the programs that serve newcomers, refugees, adults with interrupted education, people with disabilities and second-chance learners—the populations for whom post-secondary education is the pathway to participation in the economy and the community.

Students with disabilities face particular consequences. Specialized programs serving students with cognitive disabilities generate the largest per-FTE deficits—up to $155,000 for a

[110] Jen Wrye (president, North Island College Faculty Association), interview by the author, 2026.
[111] Interview by the author, 2026.
[112] Wrye, interview.
[113] Herrera Lira, interview.
[114] Herrera Lira and Adams, interview.



single program serving 11 students.[115] The marketized logic of fiscal constraint has led to these programs being among the first to close, despite institutional equity mandates. In 2022, Vancouver Community College (VCC) delivered classes for 14% of all Adult Special Education students in BC.[116] VCC may be the only remaining college offering these programs at no cost.[117]

As Herrera Lira puts it, "A system that only works for well-resourced, traditional students is not socially or economically sustainable. BC's post-secondary system is strongest when it lifts up those who have historically been left out."[118]

International students

> *As temporary residents, international students are vulnerable to exploitation yet have limited recourse and political representation. They have long been used as a solution to a multitude of Canada's public policy problems. But international students are not just numbers. They are people taking big risks at the start of their adult lives. Just like any student, they are trying to plan their futures while navigating a complex, inequitable world.*[119]

For international students, systemic inequities are amplified by political scapegoating and acute financial extraction. Federal immigration policy increased study permit volumes while underfunding the housing, social services or post-secondary capacity they would inevitably depend on. Lacking protection under the provincial Tuition Limit Policy, access to most financial aid and many citizen or permanent resident rights, international students are highly vulnerable. One source noted, "some institutions were referring to international students as RGUs—revenue generating units."

Education researcher Kumari Beck has identified what she calls the "culture trap"—the uncritical celebration of cultural diversity that simultaneously erases structural racism. International students are enticed to Canada

[115] Vancouver Community College (VCC), *Submission to the Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review* (Vancouver: VCC, 2022).
[116] VCC, *Submission* (2022).
[117] Frank Cosco (president, VCCFA), interview with Iglika Ivanova (ED, BC Policy Solutions), digital recording, 2026.
[118] Herrera Lira, interview.
[119] Brunner, quoted in Wickramasinghe, "How the International Student Cap Affects Immigration to Canada."

told they will be valued as "the bearers of culture, the bringers of economic prosperity." But as soon as they land, the framing shifts: "What's wrong with you? You're gonna have to learn the language, you're gonna have to assimilate." Students consistently express a desire to "be seen as students of their discipline rather than 'the international student'." They report being the last picked for group work, being blamed for "hanging out with people of their own background" while no one opens up to befriend them and internalizing a deficit discourse that begins with repeated standardized test failures and follows them through their education.[120]

These social pressures are compounded by immense financial strain. Families often mortgage farms or pool the savings of extended relatives to afford international tuition.[121] Yet, students frequently arrive without fully understanding the hidden costs: new ancillary charges, textbooks at $250 per course and opaque "international student service fees." Because federal rules cap their legal off-campus work hours, many are pushed into precarious, under-the-table jobs.[122] To survive, they skip meals and crowd four to six people into small one- or two-bedroom apartments. As NISU's Executive Director Carissa Wilson describes, they are "getting chewed up in the churn."[123]

Ultimately, international students are paying for a system that built itself on their tuition fees without building the social infrastructure to support them. As a result, trust has completely collapsed. With the very international education departments that were supposed to support them now being gutted—at one university, the entire department was dissolved and dispersed—students are left adrift. Some wait in limbo for their immigration status, uncertain if they can even finish their studies. Others are returning home, actively advising friends and family not to come to Canada.[124]

And yet, as Beck notes, these are people of remarkable resilience whose strengths the system refuses to see.[125]

For nearly two decades, Canada actively recruited international students with the explicit pledge of a pathway to citizenship. As late as 2021, then-IRCC minister Marco Mendicino made the offer unambiguous: "Our message to international students and graduates is simple: we don't just want you to study here, we want you to stay here."[126] The students who answered that call—arriving between 2021 and 2023, paying inflated tuition, taking on debt and mortgaging family assets on the expectation they could remain—are now precisely the students being scapegoated, framed as expendable and kicked out of the country.[127]

> *What is happening in Canada today happened in Australia years before. There, the education-immigration nexus created identical problematic imbalances. This contributed to safety and security concerns for international students, who became victims of assaults and were exploited in the housing and employment sectors. This eventually resulted in diplomatic embarrassment for Australia with both the Chinese and Indian governments. Yet despite warnings over a*

[120] Beck, interview.
[121] Beck, interview.
[122] Wilson, interview
[123] Wilson, interview
[124] Beck, interview.
[125] Beck, interview.
[126] Quoted in Brunner, Canadian International Student Policy at a Crossroads.
[127] Brunner, Canadian International Student Policy at a Crossroads.

decade ago, Canada did not learn from Australia's mistakes.[128]

In March 2024, the federal government announced its intention to reduce Canada's temporary resident population to 5% of the total population and the fall 2024 Immigration Levels Plan subsequently cut permanent residency targets for the following three years.[129] This positioned international students, their spouses and post-graduation work permit holders—all of whom are temporary residents—as a problem in the eyes of the federal government.[130] With the federal government wanting them to leave to reach their 5% target, there are no longer many realistic pathways to permanent residency for most international students. This could mean that upwards of a million current and former international students who came to Canada expecting to remain will have to leave.

Faculty and staff

The post-secondary workforce has been under stress for decades. Chronic underfunding and the relentless push towards precarious employment contracts has eroded working conditions across the sector.

The number of assistant professors in BC dropped by 26.6% between 2006 and 2019, a steeper decline than the nationally, 17.9%.[131] Over the same period, positions below assistant professor in BC—such as lecturers, instructors and other teaching staff—grew from roughly 10% of full-time faculty appointments to about 30%.[132] Nationally, 54% of academic appointments are now limited-term, mostly contracts of four to eight months.[133] Universities also rely heavily on the teaching and research work of graduate students and "disproportionately rely on international PhD students' specialized research and teaching skills."[134]

The international student revenue collapse has led to outright job losses and consequently intensified workloads for those who remain. And the workers who absorbed years of the sector's reliance on contingent labour were the same workers cut first, as Camosun College Faculty Association president Lynelle Yutaniput it, "sessionals, or our precarious workers, have very few rights to future work. In fact, that's the reason why it's so easy to end their work by simply not offering those programs or courses."[135] Before layoffs were announced, many of BC's public post-secondary institutions had already effectively terminated many sessional instructors and contract workers through the quiet non-renewal of contracts. Another faculty association leader said that administrators "keep talking about, 'we haven't laid off anyone.' But we've had all these people that had but we've had all these people that have been with us five, 10, in some cases 20 years, that their contracts ended, and they were just gone."[136] At several institutions, workers on the verge of achieving continuing or permanent status saw

[128] Lisa Brunner and Roopa Desai Trilokekar, "International Students as Problems and Solutions: Shifting Narratives in Canada's International Education and Immigration Landscape," *University Affairs*, February 1, 2024, https://universityaffairs.ca/opinion/international-students-as-problems-and-solutions/.
[129] Brunner, Canadian International Student Policy at a Crossroads.
[130] Brunner, Canadian International Student Policy at a Crossroads.
[131] Confederation of University Faculty Associations of British Columbia (CUFA BC), *Funding for Success: Post-Secondary Education in BC* (Port Moody, BC: CUFA BC, 2023).
[132] CUFA BC, *Funding for success*.
[133] Marc Spooner and James McNinch, eds., (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2026).
[134] Brunner, quoted in Wickramasinghe, "How the International Student Cap Affects Immigration to Canada."
[135] Lynelle Yutani (president, CCFA), interview by the author, interview.
[136] FA rep, interview.

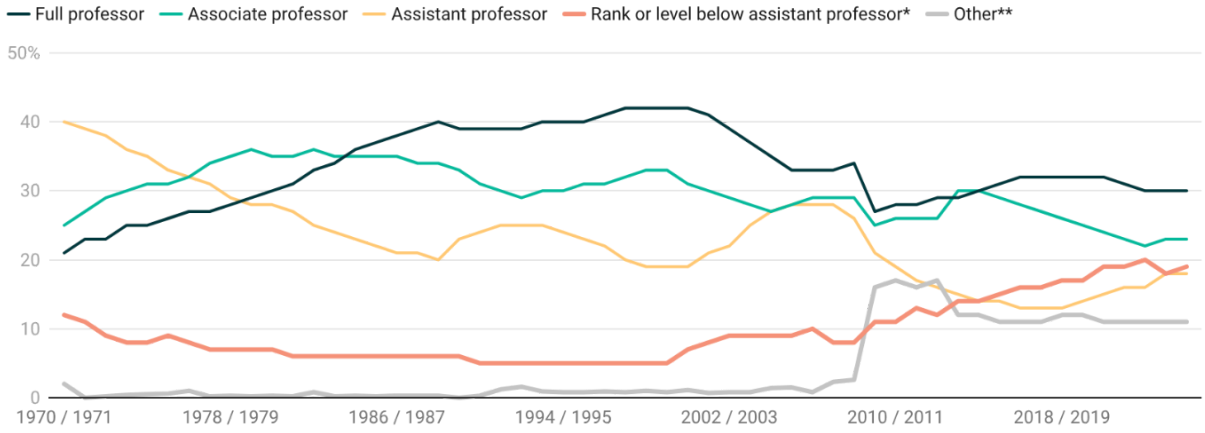
their work terminated just before they could cross that threshold.[137]

VCC's Faculty Association President Frank Cosco estimates that the institution lost at least 100 staff this way on top of an announced 150 layoffs.[138] FPSE reported that across its member institutions, "the non-regular cohort of faculty has been virtually eliminated on some campuses."[139]

Regular faculty layoffs followed more formal processes—financial exigency at one institution, Section 54 processes at another. FPSE projects that by the end of the 2025/26 fiscal year, the sector will have lost "upwards of 10% of full-time regular faculty jobs."[140] With so many positions eliminated, tenured and continuing faculty who have retained their positions have seen their workloads intensify because of larger classes, fewer teaching assistants, research assistants and sessional supports and added administrative duties.

Beyond teaching staff, institutions are also cutting student advisors, financial aid officers, accessibility coordinators, IT and library workers, recruitment officers, counselors and the professional staff who keep day-to-day campus operations running. The international education workforce has been hit particularly hard. The recruitment, advising, immigration support and settlement functions that grew around two decades of 'edugration' were staffed by teams of international student advisors, program coordinators and credential officers. Subcontracted workers—such as in food service, maintenance and janitorial crews—are also impacted. As one labour organizer noted, "there is also all of the people who are running the Tim Hortons that the students are at 24 hours a day. There's the people that have to keep these

Distribution of full-time teaching staff at BC universities and colleges by rank



**Rank or level below assistant professor includes lecturers, instructors and other teaching staff. **Other ranks include staff that do not fit in the above categories. Administrative, support staff and librarians are excluded, as are staff solely engaged in research without academic rank and/or whose salary scales are different from academic teaching staff. Teaching and research assistants are also excluded.*

Source: Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0077-01. • Created with Datawrapper

[137] FA reps, interviews.
[138] Cosco, interview.
[139] FPSE, *BC Post-Secondary Education Sustainability / Modernization Review: FPSE Submission* (Vancouver: FPSE, March 2026).
[140] FPSE, *Submission* (2026).

immense buildings clear of snow and clean. Those are a huge piece of the pie."[141]

Compounding this widespread frustration is administrative bloat. Across the province, data show growth in administrative spending significantly outpacing faculty investments over the last decade, with exempt managerial salary increases routinely dwarfing those of frontline educators. In some glaring instances, institutions have hired new upper management while simultaneously declaring financial exigency and cutting teaching roles.

Faculty associations across the province have expressed deep frustration with their institutions' lack of transparency and governance structures that exclude their expertise in crisis decision-making. At one college, FOI requests revealed that the basis for a major restructuring was "a single late-night email strand" that did not even include the financial officer. At another, data presented to the Senate for program closure decisions were described as "flimsy, often incorrect, and cursory." Non-confidence votes against university and college presidents have occurred at multiple institutions.[142]

And, for every one of these unrenewed contracts that result in staff and faculty layoffs there is a family facing financial strain in a contracting sector in an affordability crisis. These job losses mean more people need social supports, they can pay less in taxes and there's less money in the local economy.

Local communities and the province's future

Post-secondary institutions don't exist in isolation from surrounding communities campuses sit on unceded Indigenous territories, requiring ongoing work to build reciprocal relationships with host Indigenous nations; campuses provide local residents with libraries and event spaces; they employ hundreds to thousands of local workers and students are employed in local businesses. When the institution contracts, so does the community. The crisis in BC's post-secondary sector is fundamentally reshaping local economies, regional access to post-secondary education and the province's capacity to staff its own future.

Northern Lights College (NLC) serves a region representing over a third of BC's land area but with a small, dispersed population and it is one of "the last vestiges" of the founding commitment that every British Columbian, regardless of postal code, should have access to post-secondary education. Rob-Roy Douglas, NLC's union bargaining chair, argued that international education has particular value in this context: "international education has actually a lot more to offer rural and remote communities in terms of keeping them open to the world than it really has to offer major metropolitan areas."[143]

As international enrolment at North Island College (NIC) drops, NISU ED Carissa Wilson describes what the loss looks like on the ground: "it is a big difference on campus to not have that whole cohort. Every time a semester ends, we're losing more people." The ripple extends into the surrounding economy, "it's really impacting our local businesses. There are

[141] Anonymous labour sector representative, interview with the author, 2026.

[142] FA reps, interviews.

[143] Douglas, interview.

way fewer people to hire already in these communities and that's just being hugely exacerbated."[144]

Post-secondary institutions play a particularly important role as economic anchors in communities outside Metro Vancouver; "Thompson Rivers University, for example, contributes over $885 million annually to Kamloops' economy and supports one in every 10 jobs in the region."[145] In these rural and regional settings, "every single layoff of a faculty member has a really big impact on our community. We're gonna be losing families as people have to go to other places."[146] Because the entire sector is contracting, laid-off faculty often have nowhere else in the province to go.[147] The non-profit settlement agencies, language schools, credential evaluation services and newcomer support organizations that historically wrapped around BC's international student and immigrant populations are also contracting under the simultaneous loss of international students and reduced federal funding.

These layoffs and program closures directly contradict the Province's stated priorities. BC's Labour Market Outlook projects more than 1.1 million job openings over the coming decade, 76% of which will require some level of post-secondary education or training.[148] The provincial government has announced nursing seat expansions while colleges shut down nursing pathways; has committed to accelerating housing construction while trades programs are suspended as too costly; and has set goals for early learning and social work while the programs that produce these workers are cut.[149] In other words, the Province is cutting the programs it has publicly identified as workforce priorities. There are also longer-term reputational and economic costs. Statistics Canada data show that former international students who became permanent residents substantially improved their occupational alignment within their field of study; Indian STEM graduates, for instance, were retained in Canada at a rate of 86.4% by their third year post-graduation.[150]

Faculty and researchers across the province argue that the dominant policy framework of collapsing education into workforce training is both intellectually impoverishing and economically self-defeating. "That the ministry now responsible for the sector is named "Future Skills" tells you the frame the government has chosen," one source commented, connecting a vision of post-secondary education as a public good to material outcomes: "we want graduates who are educated, not just in a narrow workforce delivery mechanism, but in terms of the social justice. The contemplative, critical thinking and citizen judgment that we need for good governance."[151]

NLC's Rob-Roy Douglas echoes, "post-secondary education is a means to build and maintain and educate a literate, liberal citizenry, right? Not just the workforce. And for far too long, the emphasis of education has been on training workers. And we're not going to solve the

[144] Wilson, interview.
[145] BCFS, "Fund Post-Secondary Education," accessed April, 2026, https://fundpse.wearebcstudents.ca/.
[146] Wilson, interview.
[147] Wilson, interview.
[148] Government of British Columbia, *British Columbia Labour Market Outlook: 2024 Edition* (Victoria: WorkBC, 2025), https://www.workbc.ca/sites/default/files/2025-02/BC%20LMO%20Report%202024.pdf
[149] Herrera Lira and Adams, interview.
[150] Youjin Choi and Feng Hou, "Retention of Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Computer Science Graduates in Canada," *Economic and Social Reports* 5, no. 7 (July 2025).
[151] FA rep, interview.

problems and challenges of the 21st century simply by training workers."[152]

Post-secondary institutions are physical places where people gather, learn and encounter differences across class, language and generations. When humanities, fine arts and liberal studies programs disappear, institutions also lose this convening function. NIC's Jen Wrye described the loss of the fine arts programing, which hosted hundreds for artist talks or student showcases: "we're losing this place where the community can coalesce around things that hit at your mind and hit at your heart and challenge people. That will be gone."[153] Another source adds that rural institutions are "the meeting place. That's where people get together. And so to say, 'oh, you can just move that online', you're then separating the community from itself."

[152] Douglas, interview.
[153] Wrye, interview.

The provincial public post-secondary reviews

The 2022/23 funding formula review

In March 2022, the BC government announced a sector-wide review of how it funds its 25 public post-secondary institutions—the first comprehensive examination of the funding formula in more than 25 years.

The review, led by economist Don Wright, former deputy minister to the premier and former president of the BC Institute of Technology (BCIT), was widely welcomed. It received submissions from three constituencies of the PSE sector: 24 public institution administrations, 14 labour and sector bodies, nine student unions and the BC Federation of Students.

Despite different vantage points, the three constituencies shared a unified assessment: BC's public post-secondary system runs on a funding model that has fallen out of alignment with its mandate, has been chronically underfunded for decades and is approaching structural failure. The public share of institutional operating revenue fell by over 90% in the 1970s to roughly 44% by 2022 and provincial operating grants remained flat in real terms for at least a decade.[154]

A second near-universal concern was unsustainable reliance on international student tuition. By 2022, BC had the highest international enrolment share in Canada at 24%. The sector warned that geopolitical or demand shifts could trigger immediate fiscal crises, a lesson many institutions learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. Student unions framed the dependence most pointedly as the exploitation of equity-deserving learners as a revenue stream, with international tuition up 485% since 1991 at some institutions.[155]

The 2% domestic tuition cap, implemented in 2005 without baseline adjustment, drew some institutional criticism for locking in arbitrary disparities.[156] Colleges and teaching universities that had maintained lower tuition through the 80s and 90s started lower have been compounding from a smaller base for nearly two decades.[157] The tuition cap protects affordability for domestic students but transfers the fiscal stress onto institutions with no compensating mechanism.[158]

The submissions also pointed to the way that rural, northern and remote institutions face structurally higher delivery costs that the funding formula does not recognize. Rural colleges must maintain multiple campuses and facilities spread across massive, sparsely populated regions.[159] This high degree of dispersion prevents these institutions from

[154] Students' Union of Vancouver Community College, *Submissions to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review* (2022); Research Universities' Council of British Columbia, Submission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review (Vancouver: RUCBC, 2022); Vancouver Island University Students' Union, *Submission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review*, (2022).

[155] Emily Carr Students' Union, *Submission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review* (Vancouver: ECSU, 2022); North Island Students' Union, Submission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review (Courtenay, BC: NISU, 2022).

[156] BC Colleges, S*ubmission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review* (Victoria, BC: BC Colleges, 2022).

[157] BC Colleges, *Submission* (2022).
[158] BC Colleges, *Submission* (2022).
[159] BC Colleges, *Submission* (2022).

achieving the "economies of scale" enjoyed by centralized, urban institutions.[160]

This geographic disparity was part of a broader mandate expansion across the sector over the years without matched funding. The provincial government loaded responsibilities for reconciliation, mental health, accessibility, equity, environmental sustainability, micro-credentials and work-integrated learning onto institutions while base funding stayed flat.[161] Despite paying lip-service to the importance of the trades, ITA rates had not moved since 2001 and cover roughly 31% of actual delivery costs.[162] Student services are overwhelmed.[163] Labour submissions described a recruitment and retention crisis driven by high housing costs, low salaries and casualization—nearly 70% of UVic Professional Employees Association members had looked for outside work in the past year.[164]

In their submissions to government, sector members offered a multitude of potential solutions. Labour and student union groups urged the Province to restore public funding to cover 75% of operating budgets. Institution administrations asked the Province to establish multi-year predictable funding, funds for capital needs, FTE-model reform and collaboration incentives. Student unions emphasized the importance that post-secondary education be affordable and equitable with international fee caps, expanded BC Access Grants and dedicated funding for services to support students. Universally, the suggestion for performance-based funding was seen as counter-productive and the practice of one-time targeted grants as a poor substitute for stable base increases.

The shared ask was for a modernized formula that funds actual delivery costs, recognizes mandate diversity, rewards collaboration over competition and provides multi-year predictability. And all of this needs to be backed by a real-dollar increase in public investment, not a redistribution within an inadequate envelope, sector membership advised.

But the government abandoned the review before phase two was started, without public explanation. It never published the engagement findings, in what FPSE called a "bizarre decision to ghost our members".[165]

The BC Federation of Students obtained the review documents through an FOI request (for $240).[166] The draft What We Heard Interim Report and Don Wright's January 2023 briefing for the government validate the sector's assessment. Wright's internal verdict was that "there is no funding formula." Without a material increase of at least $200 million per year for the sector, he suggested, the review is a zero-sum exercise.[167]

[160] BC Colleges, Submission (2022); Canadian Union of Public Employees BC (CUPE BC), *Submission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review* (Burnaby, BC: CUPE BC, 2022).
[161] FPSE, *Submission* (2022).
[162] Industry Training Authority, *Submission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review* (Richmond, BC: ITA, 2022).
[163] CUPE BC, *Submission (*2022).
[164] CUPE BC, *Submission* (2022).; British Columbia Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU), *Submission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review* (Burnaby, BC: BCGEU, 2022); FPSE, *Submission* (2022); Professional Employees Association (PEA), *Submission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review* (Victoria, BC: PEA, 2022).

[165] FPDSE, "FPSE Demands Action on Layoffs and Funding Cuts," news release, September 3, 2025, https://fpse.ca/news/fpse-demands-action-on-layoffs-and-funding-cuts/.
[166] Herrera Lira and Adams, interview.
[167] *What We Heard Interim Report* and Don Wright, January 2023 direction briefing, Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review (BC Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training, 2023), file PSE-2023-32707.

The 2025/26 Sector Sustainability Review

In November 2025, the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills launched a new review, this time led by Don Avison, former deputy minister of advanced education.[168] The review, however, picked up precisely where Wright said meaningful reform stops being possible, with terms of reference that took new funding off the table from the outset.

As the BCFS put it, "the review excludes the single most important factor in the current crisis: funding."[169] "Our members," FPSE echoed, "express strong concern with the premise that no additional provincial operating funding is anticipated, emphasizing that this is not a neutral constraint but a policy choice with foreseeable system consequences."[170]

The review timeline was impossibly compressed. Where previous reviews of narrower scope had taken 14 to 15 months, this review aimed to wrap up in three.[171] Multiple stakeholders expressed a widespread belief that it was a pro forma exercise to give cover to a predetermined outcome: using the fiscal crisis at the time to implement higher tuition fees, institutional mergers and deep cuts, while jeopardizing free and fair collective bargaining.[172]

The scope of the review also raised concerns.

Questions about governance, legislative frameworks and institutional structures struck one labour source as "unrelated to the current crisis" and raised "profound concerns over the undermining of academic freedom, institutional academic democracy and educational quality."[173] FPSE notes that "several of the questions seem to assume that senates and education councils are the problem thwarting academic administrators from responding more immediately to the government of the day."[174]

In response, the publicly shared submissions to Avison's review effectively reiterated the same assessment that Wright received in 2022: BC's public institutions are in a crisis of deliberate underfunding. Unfortunately, the worst consequences of this underfunding anticipated by the sector just a few years ago have come true.

Underfunding has bred destructive competition: mission creep, duplicated business degrees chasing international tuition and growing layers of administration.[175] Yet the suggestion of mergers in the Terms of Reference risks further eroding regional access, relationships with Indigenous Peoples and host nations and place-based delivery.[176]

The sector also raised alarms over signals that the Province intends to use the review to strictly prioritize workforce training over broader educational mandates. FPSE warns that "when workforce alignment becomes overly dominant, institutions are incentivized to prioritize short-term, measurable outputs in ways that can weaken their capacity to deliver broader educational, civic, and social outcomes."[177] The BCFS adds that graduates "are more likely to vote, engage in their communities and feel

[168] British Columbia Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, "Government Launches Post-Secondary Sector Sustainability Review," news release, November 25, 2025.
[169] Herrera Lira, interview
[170] FPSE, *Submission* (2026).
[171] BCFS, *Submission* (2026); FPSE, *Submission* (2026).
[172] BCFS, *Submission* (2026); FPSE, *Submission* (2026); VIUSU, *Submission* (2026).
[173] Labour, interview.
[174] FPSE, *Submission* (2026).
[175] BCFS, *Submission (*2026); FPSE, *Submission* (2026).
[176] BCFS, *Submission* (2026); VIUSU, *Submission* (2026).
[177] BCFS, *Submission* (2026); VIUSU, *Submission* (2026).

connected to their work."[178] Public post-secondary education, the sector insists, is a public good with civic and democratic functions, not a labour-market pipeline.

Finally, some submissions expressed fears that the review is paving the way for amendments to the Tuition Limit Policy. Where institutions in 2022 pointed to disparities locked in at the cap's 2005 baseline—students and faculty argue that those disparities are the predictable outcome of the funding arrangement, not a flaw in the cap. Weakening the cap to address institutional revenue would penalize students for a problem government created.

BCFS set a clear test for the review's success: "do students have stable programmes, stable supports, stable costs, and a clear path to graduation?"[179] The government is expected to release the sustainability review report in fall 2026.

[178] BCFS, *Submission* (2026).

[179] BCFS, *Submission* (2026).

The future of public post-secondary education in BC

Post-secondary as public infrastructure

Faculty, students and sector staff across BC describe post-secondary education as a public good with social, economic and civic purposes that extend well beyond producing workers.

Yet, for decades, higher education has been increasingly framed simply as a private investment—a way for individuals to secure higher wages. This narrow view has been used to justify shifting costs to students through tuition hikes and a market-driven approach. The aggressive recruitment of international students at higher tuition rates created, in effect, a private marketized stream operating within public institutions. This further normalized the marketization of higher education in the public imagination: education became a commodity that could be bought and sold, the only question being who pays what price.

But education is not a standard consumer product. While graduates do benefit personally, an educated population drives innovation, supports public health and sustains a democratic society. These benefits spill over to employers, communities and governments that never set foot in a lecture hall.[180]

The case for treating post-secondary education as public infrastructure rests on the same logic that justifies public roads, water systems and the electrical grid:

a) They produce massive, uncapturable positive externalities—the whole economy depends on them.

b) Universal access is necessary for their social function—a road network only serves its purpose if everyone can use it.

c) Private provision systematically underinvests relative to social need and produces inequitable access.

d) Their degradation harms everyone, not just those who fail to "purchase" adequate access.[181]

Because these are collective benefits, a purely market-driven system will always underfund the types of education that society needs, such as foundational scientific research, the humanities and civic education. Public financing, therefore, is not merely a subsidy to individuals, it is an essential investment in shared infrastructure.[182]

When we treat higher education as a commodity funded by student debt, we deepen existing inequalities. The post-secondary sector performs particularly poorly for low-income,

[180] John E. Petrovic, "Toward a Non-Economistic Understanding of Higher Education as a Public and Private Good for the Public Good," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 57, no. 2 (2025); Simon Marginson, "Problems of the Public Good in Higher Education: Building the Common amid Sovereign Individualism, Capital and the State," *Higher Education 89*, no. 1 (January 2025): 29–52; Elisa Brewis and Simon Marginson, "Introduction to the Special Issue: 'The Public Good of Higher Education: A Comparative Study,'" *Higher Education 89*, no. 1 (January 2025): 1–27; Lin Tian, Zhuo Lin Feng, and Nian Cai Liu, "Measuring Global Common Goods in Higher Education: Dimensions and Potential Indicators," *Higher Education* 89, no. 1 (January 2025): 83–98.

[181] Petrovic, "Toward a Non-Economistic Understanding"; Marginson, "Problems of the Public Good."

[182] Marginson, "Problems of the Public Good"; Petrovic, "Toward a Non-Economistic Understanding"; Tian, Feng, and Liu, "Measuring Global Common Goods"; Brewis and Marginson, "Introduction to the Special Issue"; Vincent Carpentier and Aline Courtois, "Higher Education and the Public Good in France," *Higher Education 89*, no. 1 (January 2025): 223–238.

racialized, Indigenous and first-generation students under market conditions. Tuition increases, reduced means-tested supports and the expansion of for-profit post-secondary providers disproportionately affect these groups.[183] The 2021 Census shows that educational gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada were widening from the bachelor's degree level and above for all Indigenous groups.[184] "Marketized international education systems, such as in Australia and Canada, also spurred a proliferation of lower-cost, lower-quality academic programs capitalizing on the desires of this growing cohort."[185]

As neoliberal ideology reframes post-secondary education as individual investment, the college-access imperative becomes "largely situated in the need to meet workforce development needs" rather than addressing "historic inequities and marginalizations".[186] This reframing converts a justice claim—that all people should be able to access intellectual and civic life—into a purely instrumental claim about labour market participation, stripping universities and colleges of their potential as sites of equity-building and social repair.

Evidence from fully marketized systems, like England's, shows that high-debt loads force lower-income students to make educational choices based strictly on expected earnings, while wealthier students have the freedom to pursue a broader range of fields.[187]

Marketization also degrades the core functions of the university. When students are positioned as consumers and faculty as service providers, education becomes a transactional exchange rather than an intellectual and civic pursuit. Institutions are forced to compete on amenities and marketing rather than on educational quality, compromising their role as "one of the few public spheres left in which people can learn the knowledge and skills necessary to allow them to think critically and hold power and authority accountable".[188]

This corporate shift also threatens academic freedom—the very condition under which universities produce trustworthy knowledge. When universities depend heavily on private research contracts and industry partnerships to survive, research priorities skew toward what is commercially profitable, undermining independent, critical inquiry.[189]

Once private investment is made to seem like the natural value the system has to offer the public, the "public-good" language is systematically hollowed out, a pattern documented across jurisdictions where policy has lost the capacity to name social and collective outcomes at all.[190]

Canada has long had the highest share of post-secondary-educated adults among the

[183] Petrovic, "Toward a Non-Economistic Understanding."
[184] Statistics Canada, "Canada leads the G7 for the most educated workforce, thanks to immigrants, young adults and a strong college sector, but is experiencing significant losses in apprenticeship certificate holders in key trades," *The Daily*, November 30, 2022, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221130/dq221130a-eng.htm
[185] Brunner, *Canadian International Student Policy at a Crossroads.*
[186] Michele Tyson et al., "Leveraging Higher Education Departments to Promote Institutional Change for Equity and the Public Good," *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education 4* (2020).
[187] Marginson, "Problems of the Public Good."
[188] Giroux (2013) quoted in Petrovic, "Toward a Non-Economistic Understanding."
[189] Petrovic, "Toward a Non-Economistic Understanding."
[190] Brewis and Marginson, "Introduction to the Special Issue."

OECD countries.[191] But that ranking is "thanks to immigrants, young adults and a strong college sector" with "recent immigrants making up nearly half of the growth in the share of Canadians with a bachelor's degree or higher," meaning that it is not the accessibility of higher education driving this education rate.[192] And with Statistics Canada projecting that Canada will reach "zero natural increase" in its population around 2029 after which the domestic population will decline, that means the traditional post-secondary-age cohort in BC will shrink with it.[193] These factors combined with the underfunding of BC's post-secondary institutions could see our education rate start to decline.

Within the existing marketized logic, BC can default to another round of international student recruitment as soon as policy and the political climate allows or institutions can reorient toward credential recognition and upskilling for the immigrants that Canada will continue to recruit, yet whose credentials are under-recognized and underutilized.[194]

Or, the Province can rebuild public post-secondary education as an accessible right, including at the graduate level, so more British Columbians actually use the system.

Treating post-secondary education as public infrastructure runs against the grain of decades of BC provincial policy. To make it truly a public good requires a different organizing logic altogether based on:

1. Access decoupled from ability to pay: Removing financial barriers that reproduce class stratification, moving toward models that do not require assuming massive debt.

2. Labour protections for academic workers: Reversing the casualization of academic labour, which impoverishes staff, degrades teaching quality and undermines the conditions for serious intellectual work.

3. Public accountability and community governance: Reorganizing governance structures to empower those closest to the work, ensuring faculty, students, staff and local communities have genuine decision-making authority.

4. Research independence and mission plurality: Providing stable public core funding sufficient to sustain basic research, the humanities, the social sciences and civic education.

5. Equitable distribution across regions: Making meaningful investments in Indigenous post-secondary education, regional institutions, community colleges and programs serving first-generation and working-class students.

With these measures the Province can rebuild public post-secondary education as an accessible right, including at the graduate level, so more British Columbians actually use the system.

[191] OECD, "Population with tertiary education," Indicators, accessed May 18, 2026, https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/population-with-tertiary-education.html;

[192] Statistics Canada, "Canada leads the G7."

[193] Statistics Canada, "Population Projections for Canada, Provinces and Territories: Interactive Dashboard," Catalogue no. 71-607-X, last modified January 27, 2026, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/71-607-x2022015-eng.htm.

[194] Statistics Canada, "Canada leads the G7."

Decolonizing post-secondary education

Rebuilding post-secondary education as true public infrastructure is impossible without confronting its colonial foundations. The colonial logic that built BC's post-secondary system continues to shape the present crisis.

British Columbia's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA) mandates BC to bring provincial laws into alignment with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous Peoples. The public post-secondary education sector is a substantive domain to which DRIPA applies, both through the UNDRIP articles it incorporates and through the specific actions in the provincial Declaration Act Action Plan.

UNDRIP affirms the right of Indigenous Peoples to see their histories, languages, cultures and knowledge reflected and respected in education, to improve their economic and social conditions, including through education, without discrimination to establish and control their own post-secondary institutions. These articles ground equity-based approaches as rights obligations rather than discretionary programs. BC's 2022–2027 Declaration Act Action Plan translates these obligations into three commitments that apply to the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education, including:[195]

> *4.5 Co-develop a policy framework for Indigenous post-secondary education and skills training that includes:*
>
> - *supporting post-secondary institutions to be more culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners and communities;*
> - *expanding the Aboriginal Service Plan program to all 25 public post-secondary institutions;*
> - *ensuring that Indigenous learners have access to student housing that is safe, inclusive, and enables them to thrive personally, academically, and culturally;*
> - *developing mechanisms for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners and communities to play an integral role in public post-secondary institutions' decision-making; and*
> - *identifying legislative amendments needed to ensure all public post-secondary institution boards include at least one Indigenous person.*

In 2025, the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE) released a renewed Accord on Indigenous Education that sets eight responsibilities for institutions across the country, grounded in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and UNDRIP[196]:

- *Recognizing and affirming Indigenous rights and self-determination*
- *Decolonization and Indigenous resurgence in and through curricula*
- *Indigenous and anti-colonial pedagogies*
- *Indigenized approaches to assessment*
- *Indigenous language revitalization*
- *Indigenous education leadership*
- *Relational accountabilities*
- *Indigenous scholarly activity*

[195] https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/government/ministries-organizations/ministries/indigenous-relations-reconciliation/declaration_act_action_plan.pdf

[196] https://www.csse-scee.ca/acde/accords/

The same extractive, market-driven mindset that has marginalized Indigenous knowledges also structures the sector's treatment of international students. As Brunner and Trilokekar write, "Canada's higher education has become dependent on a large-scale wealth transfer from the Global South to the Global North, premised on notions of Western supremacy—even as many stakeholders engage in parallel conversations regarding indigenization, decolonization and equity concerns."[197]

Decolonization is not merely an isolated departmental or institutional initiative, it requires a fundamental overhaul of how post-secondary education operates in the province. To rethink this system, scholars Kumari Beck and Michelle Pidgeon argue we can look to the precedent set by the ACDE. The relational, decolonizing process used to develop the ACDE's earlier Accord on Indigenous Education (2009) directly influenced its later Accord on the Internationalization of Education (2014).

> "*The Accord presents five principles for ethical engagement in international activities*"[198]:
>
> 1. *Economic and social justice and equity across contexts and sites of educational practice;*
> 2. *Reciprocity as the foundation for engaging in internationalization activities;*
> 3. *Global sustainability;*
> 4. *Intercultural awareness, ethical engagement, understanding, and respect; and*
> 5. *Equity of access to education, regardless of socio-economic status or financial circumstance.*

The ACDE's work demonstrates that Indigenization and internationalization share common goals. Both demand a shift away from Eurocentric, market-driven education toward social justice, ethical engagement and respect.[199] To guide that shift, Beck and Pidgeon look to the Indigenous wholistic framework grounded in the "4Rs" first articulated by scholars Verna Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt: Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity and Relevance.[200] The Province and its institutions should evaluate all future policy, governance and funding decisions through this framework:

- **Respect for different ways of knowing and being**: Post-secondary education must move beyond Western-centric models and "us-them" binaries. This means genuinely embedding Indigenous ways of knowing and respecting international students as intellectual contributors rather than just 'revenue-generating units'.
- **Responsibility to land and peoples**: Institutions must move beyond performative territorial acknowledgments to accept their active, material responsibility to the land, its original peoples and the communities they serve.
- **Reciprocal relationships**: Institutional relationships—whether with local First Nations or international students—must shift from an extractive "give-and-take" to an equitable exchange. Institutions must stop asking what financial or economic value they can extract from students and

[197] Brunner and Trilokekar, "International students as problems and solutions."

[198] https://www.csse-scee.ca/acde/accords/

[199] Beck and Pidgeon, "Across the Divide."

[200] Pidgeon, 2008 and Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991 cited in Beck and Pidgeon, "Across the Divide."

instead focus on mutual support and shared knowledge.

- **Relevant policy, programs and services**: Government and institutional policies must stop framing education merely as a workforce pipeline and international students simply as "ideal immigrants" to feed the economy. The focus must return to providing wholistic, culturally relevant educational experiences.[201]

Applying the 4Rs to the current crisis means recognizing that a public system cannot survive by exploiting marginalized groups.

Restoring public funding

The BC Tuition Limit Policy—that caps domestic tuition increases at 2% annually—is one of the most successful post-secondary public policies in the province's history. Every student and faculty organization consulted for this report called for its preservation. However, the policy is under threat. The 2026 sector review's terms of reference list "review of tuition limit policy" under revenue generation.[202] The leaders of several institutions have privately and publicly expressed interest in deregulation.[203]

If the cap is weakened or removed, the consequences will fall hardest on students who can least afford it—lower-income families, Indigenous students and students in rural areas where there is no alternative institution. The cap should be maintained, loopholes closed and protections extended to international students whose fees remain entirely unregulated.

Many sector stakeholders have set a restoration of public funding to 75% of operating costs as a minimum starting place for sector recovery. In its submission to the 2022 funding review, the BCGEU recommended reducing student fees to an absolute minimum and focusing on "funding the system on a 'cost recovery' basis through progressive income and business taxes."[204]

The longer-term horizon should see tuition-free post-secondary education realized. In 2022, the FPSE recommended the Province recognize that a post-secondary designation is now the minimum requirement for stable employment and argued that "the Province should work towards the bold plan of making all undergraduate and trades education free to students (following the historical pattern of how K-12 education was made free)."[205] Others in the sector, including the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) and provincial labour coalitions, have long argued that eliminating tuition is highly supported by the public and is financially viable through restored government funding.[206]

[201] Beck and Pidgeon, "Across the Divide"; see also https://bccampus.ca/2020/11/23/indigenization-guide-indigenous-ways-of-knowing-and-being/

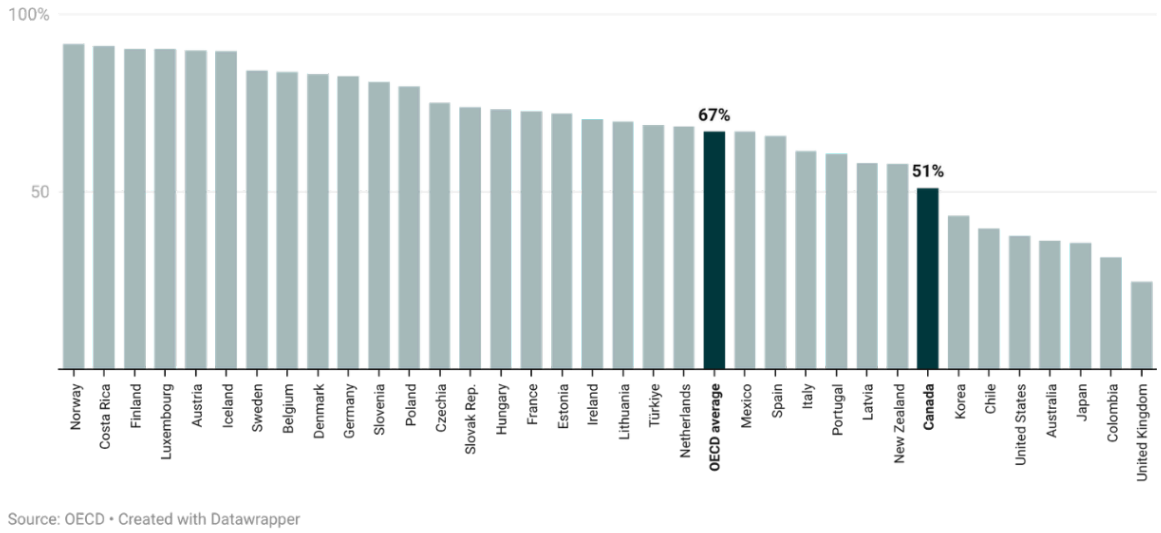
[202] Herrera Lira and Adams, interview.
[203] FA reps, interviews.

[204] BCGEU, *Submission* (2022).

[205] FPSE, *Submission* (2022).

[206] Canadian Federation of Students, "Fight the Fees," accessed April, 2026, https://www.cfs-fcee.ca/fight-the-fees; Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario, *Free Post-Secondary Education: The Case for Eliminating Tuition Fees* (Toronto: CFS-Ontario, 2017), https://cfsontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Factsheet-FreeEducation.pdf; Institut de recherche et d'informations socio-économiques, *Tuition Fees in Quebec: Current Situation and Future Perspectives* (Montreal: IRIS, 2021), https://iris-recherche.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Indexation_EN_WEB_01.pdf; Canadian Association of University Teachers, "Poll: Eliminate Tuition in Canada," *CAUT Bulletin*, accessed April, 2026, https://www.caut.ca/bulletin/poll-eliminate-tuition-in-canada/.

Public spending on tertiary education as percent share, 2020



International data clearly show that BC's current reliance on high tuition is neither necessary nor normal. OECD data tracking the share of higher education expenditure coming from government sources place Canada (51%) far below the OECD average (67%).[207]

The OECD's framework on tertiary education financing categorizes global systems into four broad models[208]:

- ***Low or no tuition fees combined with high levels of financial support*** *are characteristic of systems in countries such as Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden and Türkiye, where annual tuition fees in public institutions are below USD 500 and more than half of students receive public support through grants and/or loans. These systems offer generous student benefits that reduce upfront costs and promote access, but graduates often contribute more through higher income tax rates later in life. This reflects a broader policy choice to finance tertiary education collectively through progressive taxation rather than through individual student payment (OECD, 2024[5])*.
- ***High tuition fees combined with well-developed financial aid systems****, as seen in Australia, England (United Kingdom), Latvia, Lithuania, New Zealand and the United States. In these countries, average tuition fees for bachelor's programmes in public institutions typically exceed USD 4,000. However, more than 50% of students receive robust financial aid, primarily in the form of student loans and, in some cases, need-based grants. Loans in Australia, England (United Kingdom), New Zealand and the United States are income contingent, meaning graduates only start repaying*

[207]https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/spending-on-tertiary-education.html

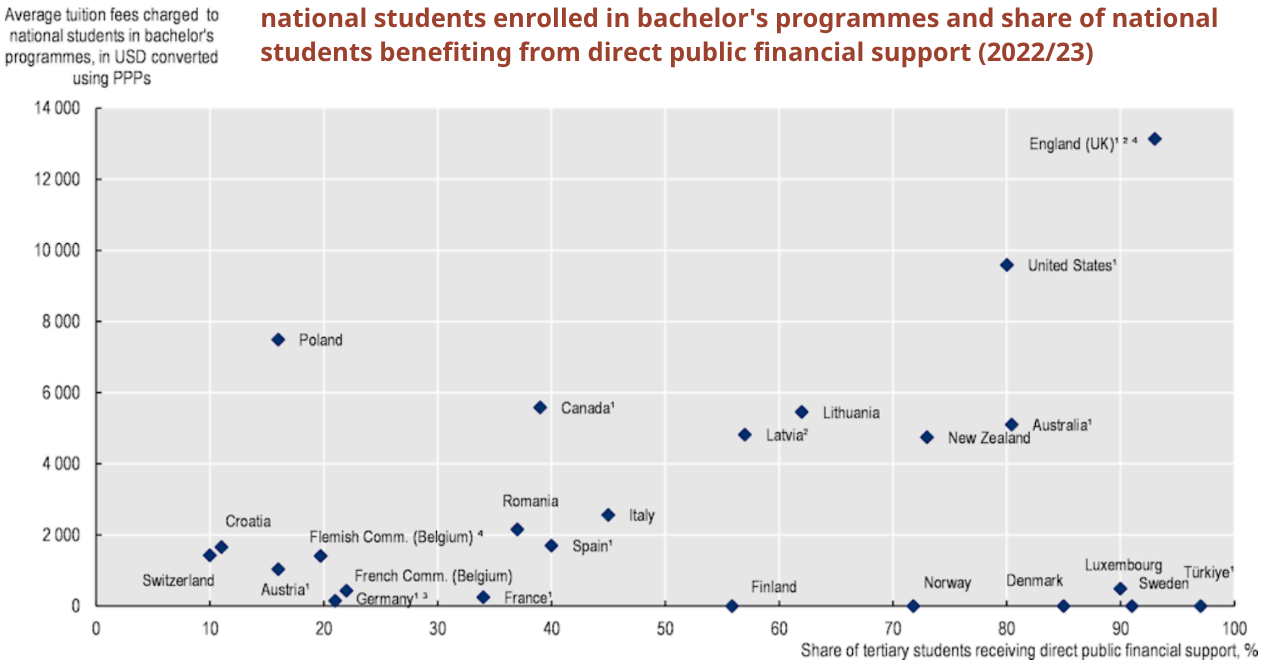
[208] OECD, "How Is Tertiary Education Financed?," in *Education at a Glance* 2025 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025_1c0d9c79-en/full-report/how-is-tertiary-education-financed_2845d742.html (bolding added).

them once they reach a certain income threshold, whereas in Latvia and Lithuania loans have fixed-term repayments. Student debt levels are high in many of these countries, with average debt per borrower exceeding USD 20,000 in Australia, England (United Kingdom) and the United States (Table C5.5).

- ***Moderate tuition fees combined with targeted student support** are characteristic of systems in Austria, the Flemish and French Communities of Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, and Switzerland. In these countries and economies, annual tuition fees for bachelor's programmes in public institutions typically range from USD 150 to USD 2,000. Financial aid is generally means-tested and directed toward the most disadvantaged students, based on family income or other social criteria, rather than being universally available. As a result, less than 40% of students receive public financial support in all of these countries. These systems rely predominantly on public funding to ensure broad access to higher education, while limiting the accumulation of student debt.*

- ***Relatively high tuition fees with limited public financial support,** as observed in countries like Canada and Poland. In these systems, less than 40% of students receive public grants or scholarships, while tuition fees are substantial, averaging over USD 5,500 in both countries for a year in bachelor's programmes in public institutions. As a result, students and their families bear a significant share of the cost, which can create financial barriers for low-income groups unless mitigated by institutional aid or private support mechanisms.*

Figure C5.6. Annual average tuition fees charged by public institutions to national students enrolled in bachelor's programmes and share of national students benefiting from direct public financial support (2022/23)



Source: OECD, *Education at a glance 2025, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025_1c0d9c79-en/full-report.html.*

Canada currently sits in the fourth—and arguably worst—category among nations with the highest tuition fees for public institutions while simultaneously providing direct public financial support to fewer than 40% of students.

Moving toward a tuition-free model—funded on a cost-recovery basis through fair taxation on the increased incomes resulting from post-secondary education—would bring us into line with many of our peer nations. In fact, under the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which Canada ratified in 1976, the country is legally committed that higher education "shall be made equally accessible to all [...] by the progressive introduction of free education"[209] Continuing to raise tuition, even at 2% per year, violates this commitment.

Labour relations

As the BCFS writes, "faculty and support staff working conditions are student learning conditions."[210] To treat post-secondary education as public infrastructure, the Province must treat the people who run it as essential public workers. Currently, decades of chronic underfunding have resulted in severe staff burnout, wage stagnation and an unsustainable reliance on precarious employment.

Both labour and student sector bodies call for BC's public post-secondary institutions to transition away from their over-reliance on short-term and casual contracts by hiring permanent, full-time faculty and staff.[211] Institutions must also stop contracting out campus services (such as food, custodial, facilities and maintenance) and return this work in-house. This would ensure that all campus workers receive fair wages, benefits and access to institutional resources like on-campus childcare and tuition waivers.[212]

"System efficiencies" cannot be achieved by laying off instructors and forcing remaining staff to manage double or triple workloads.[213] New institutional goals—such as equity, diversity and reconciliation work or the adoption of new online learning tools—must be properly resourced rather than simply added to the side of employees' desks. [214] This is particularly critical for Indigenous faculty, whose cultural labour and mentorship are often heavily relied upon but rarely compensated in workload evaluations.[215]

To combat wage stagnation and high turnover, labour advocates recommend implementing annual Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA) and establishing a common wage grid for public post-secondary education support staff across BC.[216] Beyond direct wages, the Province and institutions must provide systemic living supports that reflect current economic realities.

[209] Cited in E. Wayne Ross, "Working Toward Tuition-Free Post-Secondary Education in BC and Canada," *Institute for Critical Education Studies (ICES) Blog,* University of British Columbia, April 25, 2013, https://blogs.ubc.ca/ices/2013/04/25/working-toward-tuition-free-post-secondary-education-in-bc-and-canada/.

[210] BCFS, *Submission* (2026).

[211] BCIT Faculty and Staff Association, *Submission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review* (Burnaby, BC: BCITFSA, 2022); BCGEU, *Submission* (2022); University of Victoria Faculty Association, *Submission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review* (Victoria, BC: UVic FA, 2022).

[212] CUPE BC, *Submission* (2022).

[213] BCFS, *Submission* (2026).

[214] Simon Fraser University Administrative and Professional Staff Association, *Submission to the Provincial Post-Secondary Funding Formula Review* (Burnaby, BC: SFU APSA, 2022).

[215] BCIT, *Submission (*2022); UVICFA, *Submission* (2022).

[216] PEA, *Submission* (2022); BCGEU, *Submission* (2022).

Expanding on-campus childcare spaces, providing affordable dedicated housing for faculty and staff and enhancing remote work flexibility for non-instructional staff are critical to resolving recruitment and retention barriers.[217]

The funds to support these improvements can be found by addressing administrative bloat, targeting the growth and compensation of senior administration rather than cutting student-facing staff. Recommendations include implementing salary and spending caps for senior management, freezing executive pay increases and tying executive compensation to budget restraint.[218]

Finally, the province must protect free and fair collective bargaining. In their 2026 submission to the sector sustainability review, FPSE strongly advises against any legislative changes that would undermine the bargaining process, explicitly rejecting suggestions to consolidate all post-secondary unions into a single entity—a "one size fits all" move that would ignore unique campus cultures and invite massive labour strife. Many also suggest reducing the intrusive micromanagement of government bodies like the Public Sector Employers' Council (PSEC) and the Post-Secondary Employers' Association (PSEA). Institutions need the autonomy to negotiate competitive wages and collaboratively navigate workforce planning directly with local union representatives.[219]

Public accountability, collaboration and community governance

Across research, interviews and the sector labour and student submissions, an alternative structure is suggested for how the post-secondary education system should be governed and organized in BC. This reform calls for a system guided by high-level, values-based provincial principles, backed by robust public funding and supported by centralized operational agencies. This support should in turn be paired with flexible, community-driven governance at the local level.

This framework rests on four core principles:

1. The Province's role is to set high-level principles that govern the sector—such as equitable regional access, Indigenous self-determination, academic freedom and fair labour standards—and to fund the system at the level required to deliver them.

2. Robust public funding must be paired with collaborative, centralized coordination. Instead of merging institutions, the Province should incentivize operational collaboration. BC already has centralized coordinating agencies: the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer, BCcampus and SkilledTradesBC. Expanding these agencies to handle shared digital infrastructure, cybersecurity and bulk procurement can drive down administrative overhead and create system-wide efficiencies without stripping institutions of their autonomy.

3. Governance must be participatory and multi-stakeholder. Current board governance models—often dominated by political appointees from the business community with little understanding of academic culture—are a source of

[217] UVICFA, *Submission*; FPSE, *Submission* (2022); CUPE BC, *Submission* (2022); PEA, *Submission (*2022); BCITFSA, *Submission* (2022).

[218] FPSE, *Submission* (2026); BCFS, *Submission* (2026)

[219] FPSE, *Submission* (2026); PEA, *Submission* (2022); BCITFSA, *Submission* (2022).

dysfunction. Meaningful reform requires a return to strong collegial governance. Senates and education councils need real authority over academic and budgetary matters. Decision-making bodies must reflect the people actually doing the work and receiving the education, ensuring faculty majorities and protected, influential roles for contract workers, support staff and students. Furthermore, Indigenous representation must be structurally embedded through designated seats and Elders Advisory Councils that actively shape decisions rather than merely ratifying them.

4. Between the provincial and institutional levels, regional coordination tables can foster local strength. By convening neighbouring institutions alongside faculty, students and community stakeholders, these coalitions can cooperatively manage the deduplication of programming, share expensive infrastructure and align their offerings with genuine regional needs.

Future policy directions: Technology, online learning and AI

Technology can extend access to post-secondary education. Online learning provides flexibility for students who cannot relocate or attend classes in person—caregivers, workers, people in remote communities—as well as for some students with accessibility needs. BCcampus and open educational resources have demonstrated how shared digital infrastructure can reduce costs without shifting expenses to students.

But technology is not a substitute for full accessibility and adequate funding and it is not a solution to the structural problems described in this report. While many of the benefits of remote learning were embraced during the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic also demonstrated that online learning has real limitations: many students reported challenges with engagement, motivation and mental health. Not all students had equal access to reliable internet, private study space and the technology required for full online learning. Trades, health sciences, environmental programs and field-based disciplines require supervised, hands-on instruction that cannot be replicated online.

The emergence of a two-tier system—in which smaller, rural or northern campuses are left with online-only instruction while urban institutions retain in-person learning—must be avoided. Technology should complement place-based delivery, not replace it.

With the federal cap constraining how many international students can physically come to Canada, some institutions are signalling interest in online and offshore delivery as a way to keep extracting international tuition without the political costs of in-country enrolment such as housing pressure, job competition and public backlash. Migration studies scholar Lisa Brunner's analysis of Canadian distance-education policy finds that this kind of "internationalization at a distance" functions less as an educational strategy than as a governance tool, one that allows institutions and governments to "ensure the uninterrupted mobility of capital," that is, the continued flow of international tuition revenue, even when the human beings paying that tuition can no longer cross the border.[220] "Education, equity, sustainability or other rationales were almost entirely absent" from these discussions.[221] But

[220] Lisa Ruth Brunner, "International Student Mobility and the Politics of Distance Education," *British Journal of Educational Technology* 56, no. 2 (2024): 870–889, https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13543.

[221] Brunner, "International Student Mobility."

an online credential bought from abroad is a thin substitute for the package students were originally sold and one the international student market is unlikely to accept at the same prices.

Decades of underfunding have left institutions stretched thin—and in these marketized conditions, artificial intelligence and expanded online learning are being sold as cost-efficient fixes. They are not. Research shows that over-reliance on AI erodes students' critical thinking, hollowing out the very competence a degree is supposed to certify. Predictive algorithms and generative models encode the biases of the data they were trained on, reproducing barriers for Indigenous, racialized and low-income students. And handing core academic functions to private tech corporations cedes the governance of public education—along with the data of every student and instructor—to companies whose interests are not the public's.

Faculty report that AI tools often increase workload, require significant support and raise serious concerns about reliability, bias, academic integrity, intellectual property and privacy. Ultimately, technology must complement human capacity, not replace it to balance a broken budget; we must not sacrifice our future capacity for faux-efficiency.

Rebuilding BC's post-secondary sector requires first, that we recognize that education is a fundamentally human, relational process and second, that we invest in the people—faculty, staff and students—who make it the vital public infrastructure our society relies upon.