



# A Pivotal Moment for Post-secondary Education in Canada

Backgrounder

March 2025





The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 13 Component unions. Taken together, we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 425,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

The office of the National Union of Public and General Employees is on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

We recognize the crimes that have been committed and the harm that has been done and dedicate ourselves as a union to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and striving for justice.

Bert Blundon, President

Jason MacLean, Secretary-Treasurer



Our governments have been underinvesting in our post-secondary education (PSE) system, which has caused many of the issues we are seeing in PSE today.

The situation varies across the provinces, but a common trend is colleges and universities are increasingly reliant on sources other than public funding. The share of PSE funding that comes from government has declined over time. In colleges, public funding as a portion of revenue dropped from 67.0% in 2008/09 to 48.5% in 2022/23, while the share of revenues from student fees rose from 19.6% to over one-third (38.1%) in that time.<sup>1</sup>

This trend is driven by Ontario and BC, where colleges and universities are particularly reliant on student fees.<sup>2</sup> The funding situation is worst in Ontario, where the government's per-student funding is lowest in the country by a long shot.<sup>3</sup>

The cost of education, including tuition, rent, and food, has been steadily rising in Canada. Since the early 1990s, the cost of tuition has increased faster than other goods, including housing and transportation.<sup>4</sup> And this is on top of the skyrocketing cost of living. Those from lower-income households, who are more likely to be workers from marginalized communities, are hit harder by the rise in fees.<sup>5</sup>

The underfunding of PSE is tied to the growth in international student enrolments. Colleges and universities have become reliant on international students—they charge them much higher fees than domestic students, generating more revenues. The proportion of international students in PSE jumped from 6.4% of total enrolments in 2008/09 to 21.2% in 2022/23.<sup>6</sup> The increase in international student enrolments is particularly noticeable in BC and Ontario. The two provinces combined account for over 1/3 of all Canadian college students, but over 8 in 10 international college students.<sup>7</sup> International students are an important part of our communities, vibrant educational institutions, and a thriving economy, but they have been treated like cash cows to make up for gaps in public funding.

The underfunding of PSE has also contributed to the increase of precarious work in the sector.<sup>8</sup> A growing number of academic and other staff are working on a temporary, contract, or part-time basis. Workers from equity-deserving groups are more likely to be working in contract positions.

While these issues are not new, they were exposed by the recent federal immigration policy changes that capped the number of international student study permits and restricted the post-graduation work permit (PGWP) program. These changes have caused a sudden drop in enrolments. Because many colleges and universities became reliant on international students, they are now implementing hiring freezes and layoffs, suspending or eliminating programs, cutting services, and even closing campuses. Colleges have been particularly hard hit by the restrictions to the PGWP. The situation is most acute in Ontario, but there are impacts across the country. This is having a devastating impact on students and workers in the sector, as well as on the broader communities.

This reinforces the need for governments to listen to the longstanding calls from the sector and invest in a robust PSE system.

## **Governments Need to Step Up**

### **1. Provide emergency funding to public colleges and universities**

NUPGE members have been calling on provincial governments to act. For example, OPSEU/SEFPO's [Save Our Colleges](#) campaign is calling for \$1.4 billion of immediate bridge funding to stop the cuts and save programs and jobs and another \$1.34 billion to bring per-student funding up to the national average. PSE institutions that have had surpluses in recent years should direct funds to support programs and support services during this period. Colleges and universities must not use this crisis as cover to cut programs.

NUPGE echoes our Components' calls on provincial governments to increase funding to public colleges and universities on an ongoing basis and to provide an immediate injection of funds to preserve programs, services, and staff.

The federal government also has a responsibility to help fix this crisis. We are urging the federal government to provide funds to public colleges and universities that are experiencing significant financial hardship to prevent job loss and cuts to programs and services. These funds should be restricted to supporting programs, services, and staff, not capital expenditures or administration. This funding must be accompanied by a long-term strategy and funding, as discussed below.

### **2. Expand the number of public college programs eligible for the PGWP program**

The federal changes to the PGWP program have meant that only international students enrolled in certain designated learning institutions and programs of study will be eligible for the PGWP. In public colleges, the eligible programs are linked to occupations where there are long-term shortages in Canada, namely in select fields of study: agriculture and agri-food; education; health care; science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM); trade; and transport; early childhood education; and developmental services.

The focus on fields where there are national labour market shortages, while important for these key sectors, could overlook the needs in specific regions or communities across the country. Where there are shortages nationally may not be where there are shortages at a provincial/territorial or local level. Business, hospitality, and culinary programs, for example, are excluded from the eligible fields of study but have significant enrolments. This could have detrimental impacts on enrolments, the PSE system, and local communities.

Our public colleges provide critical education and training that's needed to respond to various challenges our economy faces, such as technological changes and climate change, as well as labour shortages. This includes providing training and upskilling to mid-career workers.<sup>9</sup>

NUPGE urges Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to broaden the PGWP eligibility criteria to include more programs at public colleges that are eligible for the PGWP, working the colleges and local governments to determine local labour market needs.

### **3. Support for international students and workers in Canada**

The federal government introduced the international student policy changes in response to a public debate around the cost-of-living crisis in Canada. Critics blame immigration for the lack of access to affordable housing and challenges facing our public services like health care. But international students and others are being scapegoated for problems that they did not cause and are themselves affected by. Additionally, the federal government cited the predatory behaviour of private for-profit colleges. Instead of addressing the regulatory and transparency issues with private for-profit colleges or the issue of international students being misled and exploited by some recruiters, the government chose to make changes that affect the entire PSE sector.

We must reject the undercurrent of racism and xenophobia that's too often present in debates surrounding immigration. International students and graduates are valuable members of our communities. They are our coworkers, classmates, and neighbours. As we continue to see staffing shortages in many sectors and an aging population in Canada, we should be welcoming and investing in those who wish to come study and work here.

As of September 2024, over 200,000 people in Canada held PGWP that would expire by the end of 2025. But immigration policy changes mean that they might not all be able to obtain permanent residency in time.<sup>10</sup>

NUPGE calls on the federal government to ensure that international students and graduates, including those already working in Canada and with permits expiring, have a pathway to permanent immigration status. We call on governments to stop scapegoating international students, migrant workers, and immigrants, and deal with the real issues in PSE and areas like housing and health care, as we've advocated elsewhere.

### **4. Strengthen the federal role in funding: dedicated PSE transfer and legislation**

Although PSE falls under provincial jurisdiction, both the federal and provincial governments provide funding. Over the past several decades, the federal government has significantly decreased the amount it provides to PSE.<sup>11</sup> The federal government must renew its role in funding PSE.

NUPGE has long called on the federal government to develop a dedicated funding transfer for PSE. This must be supported by a federal *Post-secondary Education Act* that would outline conditions on the funds to ensure that public funding goes towards a PSE system that is publicly administered, accessible and affordable to all, and high quality.

## Building a Stronger PSE System

NUPGE believes that all Canadians should be able to attend a public college or university if they want to, regardless of their income level. International students should be welcomed to study in Canada and to build a life in Canada, not be seen as cash cows to be used and discarded. Workers in the PSE sector should be able to expect fair wages, full-time permanent employment, and decent working conditions.

Universities and colleges—and the workers who keep them running—are invaluable parts of our communities and overall economy. They provide crucial education and training, research, and other services such as libraries. PSE is particularly important for meeting the economic, social, and environmental challenges we face, from labour shortages to climate change. Governments must take immediate action to respond to the current crisis and ensure a strong PSE system for the future.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> "Trends in private and public funding in Canadian colleges, 2019/2020," Statistics Canada, January 20, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220120/dq220120c-eng.htm>; "Public colleges report a record revenue increase in 2022/2023," Statistics Canada, December 16, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/241216/dq241216d-eng.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada, "Trends in private and public funding."

<sup>3</sup> OPSEU/SEFPO, *A Better Plan: Solutions to the Crisis in Ontario's Colleges*, February 2025, <https://opseu.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/A-Better-Plan-OPSEU-Colleges-Policy-Report.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Education for All, *The Rising Cost of Post-secondary Education*, <https://assets.nationbuilder.com/cfsfcee/pages/2580/attachments/original/1648069400/Education4-All-Report-EN.pdf?1648069400>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.; Joel Harden, "The Case for Renewal in Post-Secondary Education," *Alternative Federal Budget*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2017, [https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2017/03/Case\\_for\\_Renewal\\_in\\_PSE.pdf](https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2017/03/Case_for_Renewal_in_PSE.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> "International students accounted for all of the growth in postsecondary enrolments in 2018/2019," Statistics Canada, November 25, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/201125/dq201125e-eng.htm>; "Canadian postsecondary enrolments and graduates, 2022/2023," Statistics Canada, November 20, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/241120/dq241120b-eng.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada, "Trends in private and public funding."

<sup>8</sup> "Precarious labour in our academic institutions," CAUT, accessed February 27, 2025, [https://ourfuture.caut.ca/brief\\_precarity](https://ourfuture.caut.ca/brief_precarity); Erika Shaker and Robin Shaban, *No Temporary Solution: Ontario's shifting college and university workforce*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, February 2018, [https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2018/02/No%20Temporary%20Solution\\_CCPA%20report.pdf](https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2018/02/No%20Temporary%20Solution_CCPA%20report.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada, *Unions Power Prosperity: A Report from the Union-Led Advisory Table*, February 2025, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/reports/evaluations/unions-power-prosperity.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Vanmala Subramaniam, "More than 200,000 international student work permits to expire by 2025, making transition to permanent residency harder," *The Globe and Mail*, September 17, 2024, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-international-students-canada-work-permits-expiry-2025/> ; <https://migrantrights.ca/2024immigrationchanges/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Canada and the Provinces," in *Almanac of Post-Secondary Education*, CAUT, accessed February 27, 2025, <https://www.caut.ca/resources/almanac/2-canada-provinces>; CUPE, "Backgrounder N° 1: Federal Funding for Post-Secondary Education," *Post-Secondary Education: Our Time to Act*, August 2018, [https://cupe.ca/sites/cupe/files/backgrounder\\_1\\_pse\\_federal\\_funding\\_2018\\_08\\_31\\_en.pdf](https://cupe.ca/sites/cupe/files/backgrounder_1_pse_federal_funding_2018_08_31_en.pdf).

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## COMPONENTS



B.C. GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION



CANADIAN UNION OF BREWERY AND GENERAL WORKERS



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF ALBERTA



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF SASKATCHEWAN



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PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND UNION OF PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES



SASKATCHEWAN GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION

The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of the Public Services International.