

FIX EDUCATION: INVESTING IN BC'S FUTURE

BRITISH COLUMBIA FEDERATION OF STUDENTS
LOBBY BRIEF 2025





STUDENTS WORKING TOGETHER

The British Columbia Federation of Students represents over 170,000 college and university students from across all regions of the province. The Federation represents full- and part-time students at the college, undergraduate, and graduate levels. Together, these students advocate for a well-funded system of post-secondary education in BC that is affordable, accessible, and of high quality.

The Federation's membership comprises:

- Camosun College Student Society
- Coast Mountain Students' Union
- College of New Caledonia Students' Union
- Douglas Students' Union
- Emily Carr Students' Union
- Justice Institute Students' Union
- North Island Students' Union
- Northern British Columbia Graduate Students' Society
- Okanagan College Students' Union
- Selkirk College Students' Union
- Students' Union Okanagan of the University of British Columbia
- Students' Union of Vancouver Community College
- Thompson Rivers University Students' Union
- Vancouver Island University Students' Union

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

British Columbia's public post-secondary education system is the foundation of every other ministry's success. It trains the nurses, teachers, tradespeople and public servants who keep BC running. It drives innovation in health, climate, technology, and anchors local economies—especially in rural and regional communities. It is also a ladder of upward mobility for British Columbians, improving lifetime earnings, health outcomes, voter turnout and retirement planning.¹ In short, a strong, well-funded post-secondary system is essential to achieving the government's goals in every other ministry.

But the system is in crisis. After decades of underfunding, public institutions have been forced to depend on unstable revenue streams, particularly international tuition, to stay afloat. As those revenues decline and costs rise, colleges and universities are cutting course sections, suspending programmes, and laying off staff and faculty. Student services such as counselling, advising, and Indigenous supports, which were already overstretched, are being drastically reduced or eliminated altogether. This instability threatens affordability, quality, and the province's ability to train the workforce needed to deliver on government priorities in health care, housing, climate, and education.

The effects are not abstract. Since early 2025, institutions have cut or suspended roughly 80 programmes and laid off nearly 1,000 faculty and staff. These cuts are expected to grow as many institutions grapple with lower-than-expected enrolment and "surprise deficit budgets". Students are facing longer waitlists, delayed graduations and higher education costs. Communities including Castlegar, Nanaimo, Kamloops, and Prince George are feeling the local economic impact of campus job losses and programme closures. These cuts deepen regional inequities and risk setting back progress on reconciliation, including Calls to Action 12, 16, 62, and 65 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The vast majority of British Columbians believe that affordability must be protected: 91% agree that making post-secondary more affordable for students is important, with 55% agreeing that the government isn't doing enough to ensure post-secondary is accessible to everyone in the province. 3 out of 5 people polled also support the government contributing a higher portion of university funding.² By restoring predictable funding, developing a sustainable funding model and strengthening the Tuition Limit Policy, the government can keep education affordable while ensuring institutions remain financially viable.

The BC Federation of Students (BCFS) recognises the government's fiscal challenges. This is precisely why our recommendations include several cost-free policy improvements the government can commit to today. However, strategic investment in post-secondary remains essential. Reinvesting now is both socially and fiscally responsible. Every dollar invested yields higher employment, stronger tax revenues, and reduced demand on social supports. Delaying action will cost more later, as campuses, programmes, and staff capacity erode beyond repair.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

PROTECT AFFORDABILITY — STRENGTHEN THE TUITION LIMIT POLICY

- Maintain current affordability measures through the 2% cap on domestic tuition and ancillary fees.
- Close existing loopholes to ensure institutions do not circumvent the Tuition Limit Policy for any reason including rebranding existing programmes, introducing new ancillary fees, or realigning existing ancillary fees.

STABILISE INSTITUTIONS — DEVELOP A NEW FUNDING MODEL

- Develop a funding model that provides long-term financial stability for institutions, distributes funds equitably, accounts for inflation and reduces dependency on student fees as a primary source of revenue.

REINVEST STRATEGICALLY — RESTORE FUNDING

- Restore provincial funding to BC's public post-secondary system to not less than 75% of institutional operating budgets.

MODERNISE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY

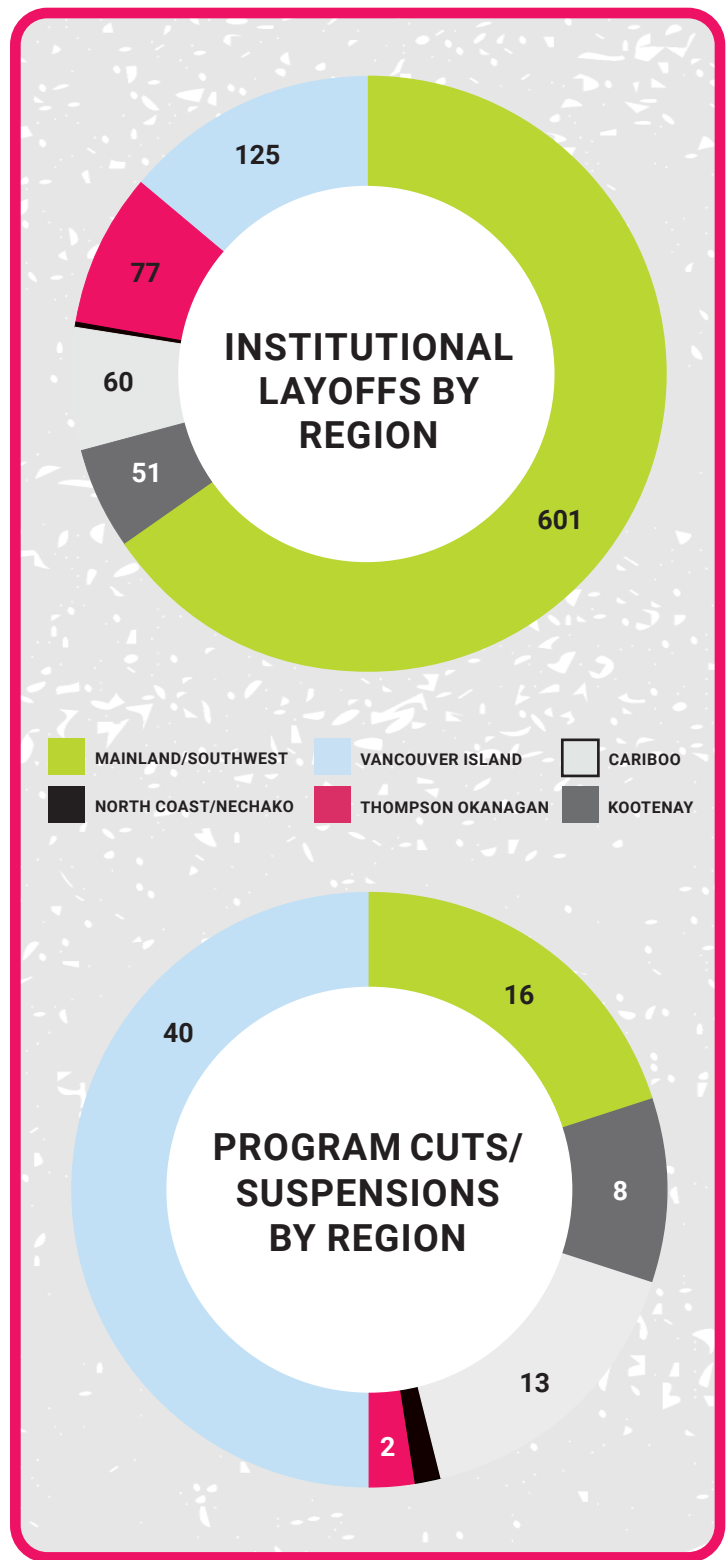
- Create a new International Education Strategy to provide sufficient support for international students to assist in their cultural, social and academic integration.
- Include international tuition and fees in the Tuition Limit Policy to ensure fairness and predictability for students, and institutional stability.

WHAT'S AT STAKE: A PREVENTABLE DECLINE OF POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

Since early 2025, students, staff and faculty have watched institutions gut themselves with increasing fervor, trying to stay financially afloat. Quality is slipping as sections are reduced, programmes paused or cancelled, and student services thinned to the point of collapse. Many of these decisions are being made with little or no consultation, undermining not only student success, but also the priorities outlined in the Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills' mandate letter. The BCFS has compiled this data in a province-wide cut tracker ([CutsSuck.ca/province_wide_cut_tracker](https://cutsuck.ca/province_wide_cut_tracker)) which illustrates the seriousness and far-reaching impact of the current crisis as institutions struggle to manage sharp revenue declines.

Nearly 1,000 staff and faculty have been laid off, with further losses occurring through hiring freezes, non-renewals of temporary contracts, and early retirements. As institutions of every size, from large research universities to teaching-focused colleges and regional campuses, implement austerity measures to manage deficits, the province is witnessing an erosion of institutional capacity and instructional quality.

80 programmes at institutions across the province have also been cut, suspended or had intakes paused with many in high-demand fields critical to the province's workforce needs. In the North, the College of New Caledonia has cut several diplomas in the arts, sciences and languages, as well as its Social Work diploma and Community Support Worker certificate.³ In the Interior, Okanagan College cut its Bachelor of Science in Nursing programme, while in the Kootenays, Selkirk College suspended gerontological nursing,⁴ despite our province's aging population. On the Island, the situation is even more severe. North Island College stopped accepting students into 10% of its programmes,⁵ including several trades, tourism and business certificates. Vancouver Island University has eliminated 29 programmes with cuts spanning business, technology, education, health, arts and environmental studies. In the Lower Mainland, Simon Fraser University has eliminated interpretation and translation programmes, while the University of the Fraser Valley has cut 10 programmes spanning criminology, trades and applied sciences.⁶ Perhaps the most concerning trend is the reduction in sections being offered, which has created waitlists for required courses. Many students have reported that this is preventing them from graduating when they expected to, requiring them to extend their studies and increasing the cost of earning their credential. Douglas College, for example, has fewer course sections this year despite higher enrolment.



Student Services are also being scaled back, with nearly 40 services impacted across the province. Counselling, academic advising, Indigenous student supports, and even operating hours for libraries, gyms and cafeterias, have been cut or reduced. These services, typically already overburdened, are essential to student retention and completion. Meanwhile, the closure of satellite campuses and learning centres in communities like Kaslo, Nakusp, Cowichan, Parksville and Ucluelet has left students in rural and remote areas with diminished access to education and fewer local opportunities to study and work. This “silent attrition” of staff, programmes and services is a clear sign of a sector that no longer has the financial ability to maintain stable operations.

When institutions make cuts, entire communities feel the impact. In cities such as Castlegar, Nanaimo, Kamloops and Prince George, campus layoffs mean fewer local jobs, fewer programmes for youth, and weaker local economies. For the province as a whole, these cuts translate to fewer nurses to staff hospitals, fewer tradespeople to build homes, and fewer educators to support BC’s children and families. The consequences extend to reconciliation as well, setting back progress on several of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action, specifically Calls 12, 16, 62, and 65, which depend on stable, accessible education across the province. Without intervention, BC will continue to train fewer graduates in the very fields it needs most, deepening regional inequities and slowing progress in healthcare, housing, and climate action.

The post-secondary system must be stabilised. Major revenue losses have left nearly all institutions at risk, and each year of delaying investments and policy improvements worsens the damage. The recommendations of the BCFS are designed to both stop the immediate bleeding, in programme availability, staffing, and student supports, and to build long-term financial stability for post-secondary institutions while preserving affordability for students and their families. Underfunding is not simply a sectoral issue; it threatens the government’s ability to deliver on its core priorities. The post-secondary system has served generations of British Columbians well, and it can continue to do so if the government acts now to restore stable, public funding.

HOW WE GOT HERE: DECADES OF DIVESTMENT

The financial crisis faced by BC’s post-secondary system is not a surprise—it is the foreseeable result of decades of disinvestment. In the 1970s and 1980s, public funding accounted for more than 80% of institutional revenue.⁷ By 1991, this share had dropped drastically, and tuition fees began to make up a growing portion of general operating revenue.⁸ Following deep cuts in the 1990s, government funding for BC’s post-secondary system never recovered. In 2000, provincial contributions accounted for 68% of operational revenue; today, that figure is just 40%. Successive governments have promised a world-class system but have consistently failed to provide the resources needed to sustain it, instead downloading costs onto students and their families.

As public funding declined, institutions turned to tuition increases and international student recruitment to fill the gap. Domestic tuition has risen 1137% and international tuition by 6761% since 1972.⁹ These are extraordinary increases for a public good essential to the province’s social and economic welfare. These changes have eroded accessibility and transformed post-secondary education from a public service into a market commodity. At the same time, overreliance on international tuition, a volatile revenue stream affected by enrolment, federal immigration policy and global events, left the entire system exposed to forces beyond provincial control. The funding model’s dependency on student fees also distorted institutional priorities as administrations redirected focus from supporting teaching and core research toward revenue-generating activities—placing the educational mission at odds with budget-driven objectives.¹⁰

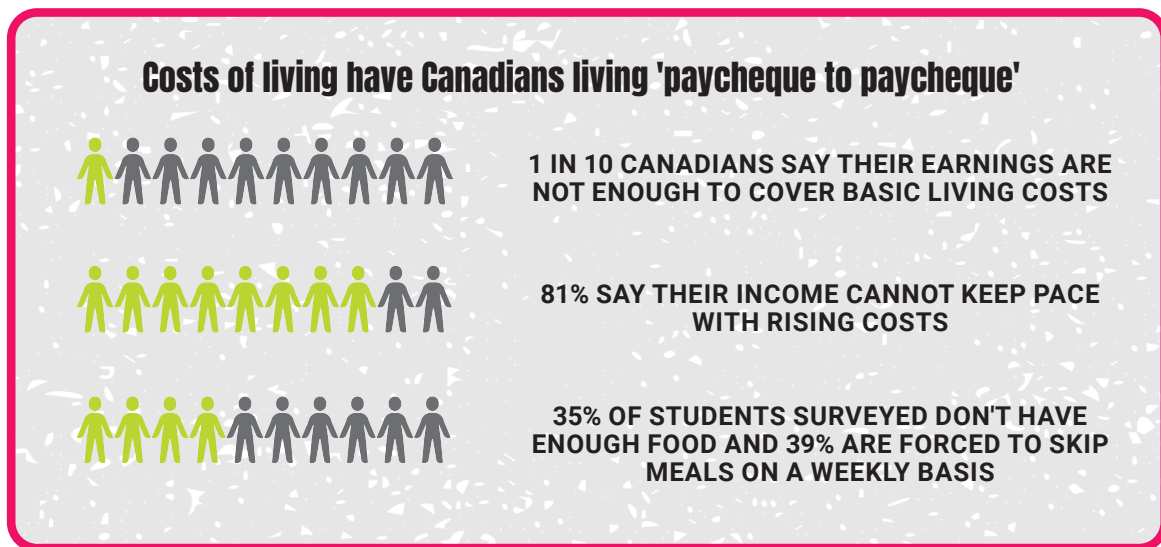
It is important to note that both institutions and the provincial government had ample warning of how ill-prepared they were to weather a drop in the price or the sale of international education. In 2018, a diplomatic incident had institutions panicked at anticipated losses of the Saudi government pulling its students from Canadian institutions. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed institutions’ overdependence on ancillary fees and the sale of services, in addition to international tuition revenue.¹¹ Although institutions and the provincial government did not expect the federal government’s sweeping changes to Canada’s international student programme in 2024, it is a failure of governance and leadership (both provincially and at the institutional level) that the post-secondary education system was not provided a stable revenue source when existing vulnerabilities were exposed.

For years, the BCFS has consistently warned that these trends would lead to instability. Yet stable public funding has never been restored. The present crisis is therefore not accidental; it is the predictable outcome of ignored warnings. Fixing it will require more than temporary relief. The province must re-centre post-secondary education as a public good, rebuild predictable public funding, and end the mission drift that compels institutions to chase short-term, high-risk revenue schemes instead of focusing on teaching and research. Restoring the connection between public investment and public benefit is the only sustainable way forward.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TUITION LIMIT POLICY

An Affordability Measure that Must be Preserved

The Tuition Limit Policy (TLP) remains one of the province's most effective affordability tools. Introduced in 2005, it caps annual increases in domestic tuition and ancillary fees at 2%. Without it, domestic tuition would have likely followed the same trajectory as international tuition, which has grown by more than 200% since the policy's creation. In 2002, the BC Liberals deregulated tuition fees causing them to rise 92.6% in just three years; average undergraduate tuition fees rose from \$2,527 annually to \$4,867 during that time. In 2025, the average domestic undergraduate student in BC paid \$6,862 in annual tuition.¹² Had domestic fees increased at the same rate as international tuition, they would now sit at roughly \$14,600, a difference of nearly \$7,955 per student. Multiplied by the 335,400 domestic students enrolled across the province, that represents a saving of roughly \$2.67 billion annually. This figure, while illustrative, demonstrates the policy's immense value to British Columbians.



At a time when living costs are rising faster than incomes, the importance of the TLP cannot be overstated. One in ten Canadians say their earnings are not enough to cover basic living costs; 51% say they are struggling to make ends meet; and 81% say their income cannot keep pace with rising costs.¹³ Food bank usage in Canada has risen 90% since 2019.¹⁴ Food insecurity is a prevalent issue among post-secondary students as well – a recent study found that 35% of students surveyed don't have enough food, and that 39% are forced to skip meals on a weekly basis. Further, students who identify as food insecure skip an average of 4.5 meals per week.¹⁵

Now more than ever, governments need to protect people from rising costs. While the government cannot easily influence the cost of food or housing, it can directly control the cost of post-secondary education by ensuring the true cost of education (tuition and ancillary fees) only rises by predictable, incremental amounts each year. By limiting annual tuition increases to predictable, manageable amounts, the TLP helps ensure that post-secondary education remains within reach for students retooling or upgrading their skills to meet BC's evolving labour needs.

Tuition Hikes Won't Solve the Post-Secondary Crisis

The most damaging effect of rising tuition and declining affordability is shrinking enrolment. After tuition was deregulated between 2001 and 2005—when undergraduate domestic tuition rose by \$2,340 annually—enrolment growth began to stall. Until then, enrolment numbers had increased steadily each year; but after deregulation, that trend broke. The 2009-10 academic year was the last time domestic enrolment in BC increased by more than 4%. In 2012-13 and 2013-14, enrolment growth fell below 1%. From 2014 to 2019, enrolment actually declined,¹⁶ despite the number of 18 to 24-year-olds in the province growing by nearly 5%.¹⁷ Over the past decade, BC's public institutions have experienced eight years of negative enrolment growth and have yet to return to the levels seen in 2005-06. This stagnation is also visible in high-school transition rates. Among the class of 2013-14, 63% entered post-secondary 2 years after graduation; by the class of 2021-22, that share had dropped to 59%.¹⁸

The government's latest Labour Market Outlook highlights that three-quarters of all future jobs in BC will require post-secondary education or training, and 60% of openings will replace retiring workers. Raising tuition now would only restrict access to the very education needed to fill those vacancies. Preserving the TLP not only aligns with the government's commitment to ease financial pressures on British Columbians, but it also aligns with broader economic goals. Keeping tuition predictable ensures that the province continues to produce the nurses, tradespeople, and teachers required to sustain its public services and build its future workforce.

Stronger Fee Regulation Needed

Since its introduction, the TLP has successfully slowed the pace of tuition and fee increases. However, years of weak oversight have allowed institutions to bypass its intent. If the policy is to remain a genuine lever for affordability and enrolment, government must close the loopholes that institutions routinely exploit.

Institutions have historically undermined the TLP in three ways; the first is rebranding programmes with only minor changes to learning objectives or outcomes to justify substantial tuition fee increases. For example, Okanagan College currently offers a *Sustainable Building Technology Diploma* (formerly known as the *Sustainable Construction Management Technology Diploma*)¹⁹ which equips students with hands-on multidisciplinary training in sustainable design, construction and building science and prepares them to lead the (re)design, management and execution of environmentally responsible building projects. In October 2025, at a special open meeting, the College's Board of Governors approved the renaming of the programme to *Sustainable Design and Construction Management Technology Diploma*, along with a 98.16% increase in tuition fees. If approved by the Ministry, it will carry a \$17,105.52 price tag, up from \$8,632.

The second way institutions circumvent the TLP is the creation or realignment of existing ancillary fees. For example, in the 2016-17 academic year, both Vancouver Island University (VIU)²⁰ and North Island College (NIC)²¹ introduced new ancillary fees to pay for services that were previously covered by students' tuition fees. These new ancillary fees—which at VIU total almost one million dollars annually—are tuition fee increases by a different name and constitute an all-too-easy means to circumvent the government's TLP. This year, the Justice Institute of British Columbia (JIBC) was approved to introduce a \$6.00 per credit (up to \$36 per semester) Student Support fee to fund existing services including mental health services, the writing centre, work integrated learning and the JIBC Safe App. The administration at JIBC also initially proposed the introduction of a second fee, the Student Learning Environment fee, which was intended to improve and provide new equipment and technology to classrooms. Though JIBC ultimately did not move forward with implementing this \$5 per credit fee (up to \$30 per semester), institutions continue to be driven to find new ways to squeeze students financially to offset insufficient operating grants provided by the provincial government.

Finally, institutions have continued to collect student fees for services that are greatly reduced or not offered at all. At the University of Victoria (UVic), the McKinnon fitness weight room and dance studio and the McKinnon Pool, the only free athletic spaces on campus, were closed in 2024, yet the mandatory \$94 Athletics and Recreation fee (ATRS) remained unchanged.²² Now, in addition to paying the ATRS fee each semester, UVic students must pay an additional \$93 per semester to access the weight room, and \$93 per semester to access the climbing wall with additional fees on top of that for fitness classes at the university's Centre for Athletics, Recreation and Special Abilities (CARSA). An archived version of the university's recreation FAQ webpage previously indicated that the ATRS fee collected from students is used to allow UVic to provide access to a range of facilities for all students, including free access to the McKinnon pool and weight room, CARSA squash courts, drop-in activities, and regular-season varsity home games.

At a time when living costs are rising across the board, these fee circumventions deepen barriers for students who are already struggling to afford food, housing, and transport. To restore confidence and protect affordability, the provincial government must reaffirm and strengthen its commitment to the Tuition Limit Policy. Enforcing the two-percent cap on both tuition and ancillary fees, prohibiting rebrands or realignments that disguise tuition hikes, and auditing institutions for compliance would close these loopholes and ensure the policy functions as intended. A clear, enforceable framework will protect students from unpredictable costs, uphold fairness across institutions, and preserve one of the province's most effective affordability measures.

RECOMMENDATION

PROTECT AFFORDABILITY – STRENGTHEN THE TUITION LIMIT POLICY

- Maintain current affordability measures through the 2% cap on domestic tuition and ancillary fees.
- Close existing loopholes to ensure institutions do not circumvent the Tuition Limit Policy for any reason including rebranding existing programmes, introducing new ancillary fees, or realigning existing ancillary fees.

THE CASE FOR A NEW FUNDING MODEL

BC Government Acknowledges Funding Issues

The current financial crisis now facing BC's post-secondary sector is the direct and predictable result of the province's failure to maintain stable public funding. Institutions were encouraged to pursue "self-sufficiency" by recruiting international students and increasing tuition²³, while the federal government reframed education as an immigration and export strategy.²⁴ Over time, this approach reoriented colleges and universities around market principles rather than public-good outcomes, undermining their teaching and research missions. As operating costs rise and revenues fall, institutions are cutting programmes, laying off staff and reducing services – not based on community or workforce needs, but on which offerings are most expensive to deliver. Without government intervention, this reactive cycle will continue, further eroding programme quality, access and affordability across BC.

In March 2022, the provincial government announced a sector-wide review of how it funds operations at its 25 public post-secondary institutions. This review intended to modernise a funding model that had "not been updated in more than 20 years and that has created constraints for inequities for some public post-secondary institutions," and was widely celebrated as a crucial first step to ensuring institutions have the resources needed to support economic goals and student success. The review focused on three objectives: (1) ensuring fair distribution of provincial funding, (2) aligning provincial funding with the needs of British Columbians and local communities, and (3) ensuring access to affordable, high-quality post-secondary education and student supports. It was guided by eight core principles, including advancing reconciliation, establishing transparency in funding provision, improving regional access and funding distribution, and ensuring funding is adaptable, stable and predictable.

Phase One, led by Don Wright, engaged a wide range of sector stakeholders—including institutions, student unions, faculty associations, labour representatives, and Indigenous partners—all of whom, including the BCFS, made detailed submissions. Despite this promising start, the government abandoned the process without public explanation before beginning Phase Two. That second phase, which was to develop concrete policy options and design an updated funding model, remains essential. Without it, institutions will continue to face unpredictable financial conditions that force short-term, reactive decisions at the expense of long-term planning, student success, and workforce development.

What a Sustainable Funding Model Should Do

BC is at a critical juncture. The province must now deliver long-term solutions to address the structural funding crisis that has hollowed out its post-secondary system. Though much has changed since the funding review was launched, the need for a modern, equitable funding framework remains as urgent as ever.

A sustainable funding model should:

- Provide stable and predictable funding to allow institutions to plan responsibly;
- Include annual adjustments for inflation and cost pressures to prevent the silent erosion of budgets;
- Distribute funding equitably by recognizing the unique costs faced by regional, rural and specialized institutions;
- Reduce dependency on tuition and other student-derived revenue; and
- Align provincial investments with BC's labour market and equity goals.

Tying base funding to inflation is integral to prevent silent erosion of institutional budgets. Without adjustments for cost pressures, institutions cannot maintain equipment and facilities, cover overhead costs, offer competitive wages, and adapt programming and services to meet the ever-changing needs of students and the province's economic and social goals. A reformed funding model should account for more than enrolment alone. It should also account for the elevated costs associated with offering certain high-need programs including nursing and health programs, ABE, trades training, specialized arts and sciences. Regional and mission-specific allocations should be made to ensure smaller and rural campuses and specialized mandates are supported. While some costs scale with size, all institutions face similar expenses for wages, utilities, and maintenance. Public grants must therefore be distributed in ways that allow every institution, regardless of location or size, to function sustainably.

A modernised model should balance accountability with flexibility, empowering institutions to plan responsibly while fostering innovation and stability. It should enable colleges and universities to deliver the training and research the province depends on without compromising affordability or system-wide equity. Above all, the government must recognise that predictable, adequate funding is not a cost but an investment in BC's economic and social resilience.



The Risk of Doing Nothing

The province's reliance on international tuition as a substitute for stable operational funding has always been risky. Neither the federal nor provincial governments, nor the institutions themselves, established safeguards to prevent the negative effects of treating education as a revenue stream. Few asked how international recruitment would interact with labour-market needs, or how profits might compromise teaching quality and institutional purpose. The result has been a system misaligned with BC's workforce priorities.

Despite the rhetoric that international education would drive economic growth, most programmes developed under this model did not channel graduates into areas of labour shortage. Outcomes data from 2020 illustrate the mismatch:

- Three years after graduation, the employment rate for international graduates was 2.4% lower than that of domestic graduates. In addition, 3.6% more international student graduates were looking for work 3 years after graduation.
- International student graduates with a diploma were two times more likely to work in sales and service occupations than domestic graduates. Those with a bachelor's were three times more likely to work in this type of occupation.
- Only one-third (33.8%) of international graduates felt their job was closely related to their field of study, compared with nearly two-thirds (62.3%) of domestic graduates. Domestic graduates were also 22% more likely to be employed in jobs that typically required a university degree.²⁵

These figures make it clear that the current model has neither secured stable funding for institutions nor met the province's workforce needs. Without intervention, institutions will continue to prioritise high-revenue programmes and markets rather than those aligned with BC's economic goals. For example, North Island College has stopped accepting students into 10% of its programs for the 2025-26 academic year, while axing the Aircraft Structures Technician programme and Metal Jewellery Design certificate (both high on IRCC post-graduate points system).

Continuing to rely on student fees and international enrolment as financial stabilizers is neither fair nor sustainable. A transparent, inflation-indexed, and equity-focused funding model is needed. Stable public investment is both a fiscal and moral imperative, one that ensures institutions can provide high-quality, accessible education while supporting BC's long-term economic and social goals.

RECOMMENDATION

STABILISE INSTITUTIONS — DEVELOP A NEW FUNDING MODEL

- Develop a funding model that provides long-term financial stability for institutions, distributes funds equitably, accounts for inflation and reduces dependency on student fees as a primary source of revenue.

RESTORING PROVINCIAL FUNDING TO 75% OF OPERATING BUDGETS

Developing a new funding model alone will not reverse the instability faced by institutions; a modernized funding model must be accompanied by renewed public investment. The quality, reach and accessibility of BC's public post-secondary system depend entirely on how it is funded. Systemic underfunding doesn't just limit growth and adaptability; it distorts the very purpose and structure of the system itself.

BC's Public Blueprint: The MacDonald Vision

When *Higher Education in British Columbia and a Plan for the Future*, otherwise known as the MacDonald Report, was published in 1962, it laid the blueprint for an interdependent system of colleges and universities. MacDonald envisioned a binary model where colleges and universities would serve distinct but complementary purposes: colleges providing accessible, community-based, technical training and transfer programmes, and universities focusing on advanced research and academic specialisation.²⁶

Excellence, according to MacDonald, was never meant to be defined by competition between institutions, but by the system's ability to meet learners' needs collectively. He cautioned that any institution that "sets out to be all things to all people will end up doing many unrelated educational jobs, at a high cost, and...do none of them well".²⁷ In short, BC's public post-secondary system was designed to function through cooperation and cohesion, not competition. For MacDonald, human capital and its formation was the most important tool to meet the challenges of the day. Without it, BC and Canada "would be doomed to economic distress at best, and economic disaster at worst."²⁸

How Underfunding Undermines BC's Public Education System

Tuition fee revenue was never designed to sustain BC's public post-secondary institutions, yet provincial funding for BC's institutions has fallen from over 80% in the 1980s to just 40% today with tuition fees making up the difference. This divestment has forced institutions into competition for students and international tuition revenue. The result is institutional isomorphism – a system where colleges and universities begin to look and behave the same, chasing the same revenue streams rather than fulfilling distinct mandates.²⁹

Without sufficient operational grants, institutions have increasingly prioritized financial survival over their core missions of teaching and community service. This shift has led to academic drift, evident in the widespread adoption of international recruitment strategies, the standardisation

of academic programs, and a focus on short-term revenue-generating activities at the expense of long-term educational goals. Institutions, regardless of institutional type, "face the same constraints around funding, enrolments and a desire by government to have them support economic development", meaning they will resort to the "same behaviours used to address funding shortages...through a replication of similar strategies."³⁰ This drive towards sameness can be seen in international recruitment strategies: of the 185 countries represented, 78% of BC's international students in 2024-25 came from 10 countries, with only 18% of students not hailing from India or China;³¹ in 2022-23, 59% of BC's international students came from India or China.³²

If funding levels are not restored to 75% of operating budgets, we risk repeating past mistakes. Government intervention is urgently needed to prevent institutions from competing over domestic student enrolment as a means to offset the steep decline in international tuition revenue. Increasing the proportion of public funding would not only realign institutions with their regional and specialized mandates but also reduce inter-institutional competition and foster greater collaboration in areas such as curriculum development, resource sharing, and strategic partnerships.

Restoring Funding: The Economic Case for Reinvesting

Post-secondary institutions are more than places of learning—they are vital economic anchors, especially in regional and rural communities. Funding shortfalls that lead to layoffs, programme cuts, or that threaten campus closures, have impacts that extend far beyond campus walls. In many BC communities, colleges and universities are among the largest employers. They provide stable, family-supporting jobs for faculty, staff and service workers. They also attract students who rent apartments, shop locally, and participate in the workforce and community life. Crucially, these institutions enable young people and non-traditional learners to pursue higher education without leaving their home or chosen communities, ensuring a locally-grown workforce ready to meet local employment needs, and easing pressure on already overburdened urban centres.

Thompson Rivers University (TRU), for example, contributes over \$885 million annually to Kamloops' economy and supports one in every ten jobs in the region.³³ Now imagine the impact of reversing these benefits. In October 2025, TRU issued 65 layoff notices to mitigate an anticipated budget deficit of between \$7 to \$10 million, a number which is projected to grow to up to \$30 million by 2027-28.³⁴ Layoffs not only harm staff, but also the wider local economy. Shutting down a programme—or worse, an entire campus—reduces opportunities for rural and regional residents while depriving local businesses of prospective skilled workers.

Society also benefits when governments invest in post-secondary education. A more educated workforce experiences higher earnings and lower rates of unemployment, making society less vulnerable to economic downturns. An educated workforce is also equipped to produce a wide range of high-quality products and services, which is increasingly important as Canada focuses on becoming more self-sufficient amid global uncertainties. Another societal outcome is higher tax revenue being collected which ultimately supports government in maintaining or improving other programs it offers.³⁵ From an economic standpoint, investing in post-secondary education is the most responsible way to guarantee the system's long-term sustainability, and to ensure the government's investments in other ministries and election promises are realized.

Cuts Today, Cost More Tomorrow

At the close of the 2024-25 academic year, institutions across BC were already making deep cuts as they faced multi-million dollar revenue losses: UVic was forced to cut \$13 million from its budget, VIU \$20.2 million, SFU \$50 million, KPU \$49 million and TRU \$16.6 million. Colleges across the province saw similar losses: Langara saw a \$2 million drop with an expectation that would grow to \$13 million in 2025-26, Selkirk College \$9 million, the College of New Caledonia \$7 million, and Okanagan College \$8.3 million. Camosun College faced \$11 million in losses even stating publicly that provincial operating grants are no longer sufficient to sustain operations.

Although most institutions presented balanced budgets for 2025-26, there are already signs that many will in fact post deficits as fall enrollment data stabilises. VIU's projected deficit has grown from \$500,000 to \$11.6 million³⁶, and NIC's Board of Governors approved a revised deficit budget of nearly \$2 million at a special closed meeting in September.³⁷ This trend underscores the sector's worsening financial instability and will force new rounds of layoffs, program suspensions, and service reductions.

Rebuilding institutional capacity is far more expensive than maintaining it. Without sustainable, long-term commitments to fund our public post-secondary education system, the pressures facing colleges and universities will continue to intensify. The province-wide cuts to programs, student services and staffing will continue to be driven by short-term financial logic rather than long-term provincial needs. BC is experiencing shortages of nurses and family doctors, yet institutions offering these programs regularly have a waitlist for applicants. When institutions cannot afford to offer more seats in nursing or trades programs that are higher cost to run, the province can't deliver on its promise to staff new hospitals or build the housing projects so desperately needed by British Columbians.

Tuition and ancillary fees will keep rising as institutions attempt to fill the gaps left by stagnant operating grants, pricing out students who are otherwise prime candidates to fill workforce gaps. Our province will be better off if the doctors and nurses working in our emergency rooms, the scientists working to solve climate issues that lead to extreme weather events, and the teachers who inspire future generations, are the most qualified students, not simply the ones who can afford those career paths.

Cuts on campus are already resulting in less course offerings, larger class sizes, reduced access to critical support services and a shallowing of faculty expertise growing with every layoff. Students are reporting waitlists for required courses, needing to transfer to different institutions to complete their credentials, and being forced to delay their planned graduation date. Each delayed graduation increases the total cost of attending post-secondary and holds future workers back from entering the workforce.

Any good mechanic will tell you not to run your car on empty; it causes critical system failures that will damage the engine beyond repair. Deprived of gas, no motor vehicle can operate effectively, regardless of what hopes and aspirations an owner has for the vehicle. This analogy adequately summarizes the current state of BC's public post-secondary system, which has been underfunded for too long. Restoring provincial funding to 75% of operational budgets is not new spending, it's a correction that rebalances the responsibility between students and the province. Reinvesting and protecting our post-secondary system now will also prevent costs of rebuilding the system later from growing.

RECOMMENDATION

REINVEST STRATEGICALLY — RESTORE FUNDING

- Restore provincial funding to BC's public post-secondary system to not less than 75% of institutional operating budgets.

A NEW VISION FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION IN BC

British Columbia's future as a premier destination for international education depends on redefining its approach to international education. For more than a decade, BC's approach to international education has been guided primarily by revenue objectives rather than by educational or ethical ones. With the federal government's 2024 cap on international study permits and new Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) restrictions, this model is no longer viable. A renewed provincial International Education Strategy is urgently needed—one that values international students as learners and future community members, not as revenue streams.

In 2011, the provincial government announced a target to increase BC's international student enrolment by 50% (about 40,000 students). When BCFS representatives met with then-Minister of Advanced Education in March 2015, the Minister explicitly stated that institutions selling education at a profit to international students was designed to be a cornerstone of the funding model for BC's public post-secondary system. The results were immediate: between 2010 and 2015, international student numbers in BC increased by 44%.³⁸ By 2022-23, that figure had more than doubled since 2012, with international students representing 22% of all students in the public post-secondary system.³⁹ This surge in international enrolment also brought substantial economic gains for institutions and the province. In 2010, international education was BC's fourth-largest export (\$2.1 billion); by 2015, it ranked third (\$3.5 billion).⁴⁰ In 2023, international education (labelled "education-related travel") was the province's second highest service export, valued at \$6.3 billion and accounting for 43% of total travel service exports.⁴¹

International students have long been essential contributors to BC's classrooms, communities and economy – they must be valued and treated fairly when studying in our province. As the number of study permits issued declines, the importance of BC being able to attract highly skilled newcomers increases. However, recent shifts in federal policy have made it significantly less desirable to study in Canada. National Occupation Classification (NOC) requirements make it challenging for international students to get enough relevant work experience, which is needed for applying for permanent residency, constantly changing policy has created fear and confusion, and off-campus work hour limitations add barriers for international students to be able to earn enough funds while studying in Canada to cover the costs of annual tuition fees. Without immediate provincial leadership, BC risks losing both its competitiveness as a study destination and the trust of international learners.

An Issue of Instability and Inequity

In addition to creating financial instability for institutions, years of overreliance on international tuition has left international students facing unregulated fee increases and declining student supports. International students already pay 5 times higher fees than their domestic peers. According to Statistics

Canada, international undergraduate students in BC will pay 483% more for their academic year than domestic students (\$39,851 vs \$6,826) in 2025-26. This trend is persistent, in just three years, this gap widened by 57% from 2022-23 fee levels.⁴² In 2022, the Emily Carr University of Art and Design (ECUAD) raised international fees for incoming students by 30%, and 10% for current students, stating the increase was required for the university to table a balanced budget.⁴³ History is repeating, with the Okanagan College Board of Governors considering a 40% increase to annual tuition fees paid by international students beginning in fall 2026.⁴⁴ All these increases are being brought online albeit public polling showing that 71% of British Columbians do not believe that international student fees should be increased.⁴⁵

Research has shown that when institutions act to embrace diversity and create socially supportive school contexts, the social inclusion and academic success of not just international students, but all students is improved.⁴⁶ International students who feel supported in their academic experience and who feel integrated into their local community are much more likely to complete their studies, and are more likely to stay after graduation and be an enduring presence in BC's local communities and labour force. Unfortunately, as international tuition revenue declines, a concerning trend of institutions pulling back on-campus supports for international students is emerging. International advisors are available to support international students with questions about study permits and immigration, registering for BC's Medical Services Plan, and community resources. College of New Caledonia and Camosun College no longer offer specialized international advisors and students must instead speak with a general advisor. Vancouver Island University has gone as far as dissolving its International Education Department.

Previous international education strategies—national (2014, 2019) and provincial (2012)—acknowledged the vital contributions international students make to B.C.'s regional economies and institutions. Many arrive intending to work, and their presence is evident across sectors such as hospitality, healthcare, and the trades, especially in smaller communities. However, these strategies failed to address the strain that rapid enrollment growth placed on student and community support services, and did not provide adequate financial support. As one analyst notes, "growing international student recruitment has created real financial and social benefits for Canada's institutions, but has also contributed to new strains on student support services, amplified faculty complaints about student academic preparedness, and perhaps set the stage for incidents of racial tension and conflict on campuses and in surrounding communities."⁴⁷

International students contribute immensely to BC's campuses and communities, enriching classroom discussions, supporting local economies, and filling critical labour market needs. But to remain competitive globally,

BC must move beyond recruitment targets and focus on retention and integration. This requires clear standards for support—fee regulation, academic advising, mental health resources, housing, employment pathways, and anti-racism initiatives—that ensure international students can succeed academically and socially.

A Strategy for the Future: Centring Student Success and Retention

BC's international education strategy concluded in 2016; it is imperative that a new strategy be developed in consultation with students and key stakeholders in the sector. International education must be managed as part of BC's public education system, not as a parallel enterprise. This means recognising the interconnectedness between domestic and international students and the decline in public funding to BC's post-secondary system. An international education strategy should not be oppressive and extractive, but ensure international students have the potential to expand BC's job market while still delivering a positive return on investment in a fair and ethical way. To do this, a new strategy needs to focus on providing supports that assist international students in their cultural, social, and academic integration.

By including international tuition and ancillary fees within the Tuition Limit Policy (TLP), the province can ensure predictability, fairness and transparency in how institutions set fees. This will protect students from unpredictable increases while stabilizing institutional revenue planning. A new international education strategy should also use retention, not recruitment as a measure of success. Research demonstrates that international students who receive adequate support and experience meaningful integration are significantly more likely to successfully complete their academic programs and contribute to their host communities post-graduation. Focusing on retention increases the odds that international students will become skilled, long-term contributors to BC's economy and civic life. It is essential that any new strategy aligns with both federal and provincial immigration and workforce priorities. This alignment will not only enhance British Columbia's global competitiveness in attracting international students but also improve students' employment prospects in fields that meet the province's labour market needs.

BC's next international education strategy should therefore:

- Set clear standards for institutional supports that promote academic and social integration;
- Regulate international tuition fee increases, by capping them at 2% annually under the Tuition Limit Policy;
- Align education pathways with labour market needs and federal immigration policy; and
- Ensure housing, healthcare and other provincial policies provide considerations for the realities of international learners.

The government must therefore embrace the opportunity we have today and create a new international education strategy that improves our reputation among international students globally, sets a consistent standard for student supports, and contributes to a more fair, sustainable, and diverse post-secondary system that our communities and workforce, as well as domestic and international students, all stand to benefit from.



RECOMMENDATION

MODERNISE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY

- Create a new International Education Strategy to provide sufficient support for international students to assist in their cultural, social and academic integration.
- Include international tuition and fees in the Tuition Limit Policy to ensure fairness and predictability for students and institutional stability.

END NOTES

- 1 Statistics Canada, "Weighing the costs and benefits of a university education", StatsCAN Plus, (Statistics Canada, November 24, 2021), <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/176-weighing-costs-and-benefits-university-education>
- 2 Polling conducted by Viewpoints on behalf of the British Columbia Federation of Students, August 2024
- 3 Sam Bennison, "CNC looks at Cancelling Three Programs", CKPGToday.ca, February 18, 2025, <https://ckpgtoday.ca/2025/02/18/cnc-looks-at-cancelling-three-programs/>
- 4 Besty Kline, "Selkirk College cuts jobs, \$9M to reach balanced budget". Rossland News, June 25, 2025, <https://www.rosslandnews.com/local-news/selkirk-college-cuts-jobs-9m-to-reach-balanced-budget-8094775>
- 5 "Adapting to New Realities: NIC Aligns Programs to Meet Labour Market Needs Amid Federal Policy Changes", North Island College, February 5, 2025, <https://www.nic.bc.ca/about/news/stories/new-realities-alignment.html>
- 6 "2025/2026 Consolidated Budget FPlan", University of the Fraser Valley, <https://www.ufv.ca/media/assets/budgets-planning/2025-2026-Consolidated-Budget-Plan-Final.pdf>
- 7 Iglia Ivanova, "Paid in Full Update: Who Pays for University Education in BC?" Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, January 2012:8
- 8 Rose Pelletier, and Terence J. Thomas, "Financing university education in Canada", (Library of Parliament, Parliamentary Research Branch May 1998), <https://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection-R/LoPBdP/BP-e/bp460-e.pdf>
- 9 Statistics Canada, Table 37-10-0160-01, "Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study, 1972/1973 to 2006/2007", inactive, Statistics Canada, accessed October 14, 2025, and Statistics Canada, Table 37-10-0045-01, "Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study (current dollars)", Statistics Canada, accessed October 14, 2025
- 10 Alex Usher, "One More Thought on Administrative Bloat", Higher Education Strategy Associates, February 24, 2020, <https://higheredstrategy.com/one-more-thought-on-administrative-bloat/>
- 11 Statistics Canada, "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college finances for the 202/2021 fiscal year", archived (Statistics Canada, December 7, 2021), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221207/dq221207a-eng.htm> and; Statistics Canada, "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university finances for the 2020/2021 fiscal year", archived (Statistics Canada, August 9, 2022), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220809/dq220809c-eng.htm>
- 12 Statistics Canada, Table 37-10-0045-01 "Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study (current dollars)", (accessed October 13, 2025), doi: <https://doi.org/10.25318/3710004501-eng>
- 13 Irish Mae Silvestre "Cost of living has 85% of Canadians saying they're living 'paycheque to paycheque'", Dally Hive National, April 2, 2025, <https://dailyhive.com/canada/cost-of-living-canadians-paycheque>
- 14 Food Banks Canada, "HungerCount: Overall findings", (accessed September 26, 2025), <https://foodbankscanada.ca/hunger-in-canada/hungercount/overall-findings/>
- 15 Dean Stoltz, "VIU study finds many post secondary students going hungry", Checknews.ca, May 25, 2025, <https://cheknews.ca/viu-study-finds-many-post-secondary-students-going-hungry-1256752/>
- 16 British Columbia Post-Secondary Finance, "Full-time Equivalent Enrolment at BC Public Post-Secondary Institutions", Post-Secondary Finance, (accessed October 13, 2025), <https://catalogue.data.gov.bc.ca/dataset/full-time-equivalent-enrolments-at-b-c-public-post-secondary-institutions>
- 17 BC Government, "British Columbia Population Estimates 1971-2023 and Projections 2024 to 2046", 2024, (accessed October 12, 2025), <https://catalogue.data.gov.bc.ca/dataset/bc-population-projections/resource/25d7fb36-003d-4d0d-a8b3-18ada3e8a987>
- 18 Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, "Student Transition Project: Student Transition Matrices", Heslop, (Government of British Columbia, June 3, 2025), p. 3 https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/post-secondary-education/data-research/stp/indigenous_student_transitions_into_public_post-secondary.pdf
- 19 Okanagan College, "Department of Sustainable Building Technology", accessed October 13, 2025, <https://www.okanagan.bc.ca/technologies/sustainable-construction>
- 20 Vancouver Island University Board of Governors Regular Meeting of the Board Minutes, February 25, 2016. (Accessed January 29, 2021) https://isweb.viu.ca/comm_public/main.asp
- 21 North Island College Board of Governors Regular Meeting Minutes, November 26, 2015, (Accessed August 29, 2023) https://www.nic.bc.ca/pdf/bog/minutes/20151126_BOG_regular_minutes.pdf
- 22 Atum Beckett, "UVic's McKinnon gym has officially closed its doors", The Nest, accessed October 13, 2025 <https://martlet.ca/uvics-mckinnon-gym-has-officially-closed-its-doors/>
- 23 Ministry of Advanced Education, "2012/13-2014/2015 Service Plan", (Government of British Columbia, February 2012), (accessed October 13, 2025), <https://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2012/sp/pdf/ministry/aved.pdf>

- 24 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, (2021), p. 40
- 25 Statistics Canada, "International student graduates’ labour market early outcomes: Results from the National Graduates Survey" by Brittany Etmanski, (Statistics Canada, February 5, 2025), (accessed October 13, 2025), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2025001/article/00002-eng.htm>.
- 26 John B. MacDonald, *Higher Education in British Columbia and a Plan for the Future*, (the University of British Columbia, 1962), p. 51, eBook collection (https://www.library.ubc.ca/archives/pdfs/misc/higher_education_in_bc.pdf).
- 27 Ibid, p. 20
- 28 Ibid, p. 6
- 29 Lande D. Trotter and Amy Mitchtchell, "Academic Drift in Higher Education: Research Mandates, Strategy, and Culture", *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 48, no. 2 (2018): 101
- 30 Ibid
- 31 Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, Student Transition Project: Transition & Enrolment Trends prepared by Joanne Heslop, (Government of British Columbia, June 24, 2025), p. 11, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/post-secondary-education/data-research/stp/stp_research_results.pdf
- 32 Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, International Students in BC’s Educational System: Summary Research from the Student Transition Project prepared by Joanne Heslop, (Government of British Columbia, January 27, 2025), p. 6, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/post-secondary-education/data-research/stp/stp2023_international_research_results_2025-02-07_final2.pdf
- 33 Brett Fairbairn, "Impacts of having a full university in Kamloops has been far-reaching", *Castanet Kamloops*, March 12, 2025, <https://www.castanet.net/news/Opinion/537997/Impact-of-having-a-full-university-in-Kamloops-has-been-far-reaching>
- 34 Akashay Kulkarni, " <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/thompson-rivers-university-job-cuts-1.7648882>
- 35 Government of Canada, "Post-secondary Education: an imperative for Canada’s future" by Odette Madore from the Economics Division, catalogue no. YM32-2/319E (Economic Division, November 1992), <https://publications.gc.ca/Collection-R/LoPBdP/BP/bp319-e.htm>
- 36 Skye Ryan, "‘Really scary’: VIU Faculty says deficit is \$11.6-Million more than first reported", *Check News*, September 17, 2025, <https://cheknews.ca/really-scary-viu-faculty-says-deficit-is-11-6-million-more-than-first-reported-1278853/>
- 37 North Island Board of Governors, October 2, 2025 Board Package, p. 18-19, https://www.nic.bc.ca/_resources/pdf/bog/agendas/20251002_BOG_regular_agenda.pdf
- 38 Government of BC, "Thriving international education in B.C. boosts provincial economy", news release, February 27, 2017, <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2017AVED0018-000393>
- 39 Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, Student Transition Project: Transition & Enrolment Trends prepared by Joanne Heslop, p. 4
- 40 BC Council for International Education, "An Assessment of the Economic Impact of International Education in 2010 and 2015" by Roslyn Kunin & Associates, (BC Council for International Education, January 2017), p. 8, <https://bccie.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/RKA-International-education-Rpt-to-BCCIE-final-revised-1.pdf>
- 41 Government of BC, BC Stats, "British Columbia Trade in Services 2012 to 2023", (prepared for Ministry of Jobs, Economic Recovery and Innovation, March 2025), p. 5, 7, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/data/statistics/business-industry-trade/trade/trade_in_services.pdf
- 42 Statistics Canada, Table 37-10-0045-01, "Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study (current dollars)"
- 43 CBC News, "Emily Carr students stage walkout to protest tuition increase for international students", *CBC.ca*, December 1, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/emily-carr-walkout-1.6669887reference>
- 44 Okanagan College, "Okanagan College sets tuition rates for 2025/2026" news release, December 13, 2024, <https://www.okanagan.bc.ca/news/okanagan-college-sets-tuition-rates-for-20252026>
- 45 Polling conducted by Viewpoints on behalf of the British Columbia Federation of Students, August 2024
- 46 Laura Celeste, "Embracing Diversity: A Multi-Method Study of the Social Inclusion and School Success of Minority Youth", (Doctoral Dissertation, KU Leuven, 2016), <https://www.cils4.eu/>.
- 47 Ken Steele, "The Changing Canadian PSE Landscape", in *Strategic Enrolment Intelligence*, 1st ed, (Academica Group, 2010), p. 29, <http://eduvation.ca/wp-content/uploads/strategic-enrolment-intelligence.pdf>.

**CUTS
SUCK**
FIX EDUCATION