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**POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AS A  
KEY TO BC'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY**





# STUDENTS WORKING TOGETHER

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## ABOUT THE BC FEDERATION OF STUDENTS

The British Columbia Federation of Students represents over 170,000 students at colleges, institutes, and universities in 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 and accessible for all students.

### **The Federation's membership is comprised of:**

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  
Quest University Students' Association  
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

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# SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

*The advocacy goals of the BC Federation of Students are set democratically by student representatives at twice-annual provincial general meetings. The discussions held at those meetings and the resolutions that arise from those discussions inform the advocacy that the Federation takes on each year.*

*The recommendations in this document would create more access to financial assistance for low- and middle-income citizens, restore necessary funding to colleges and universities, and reduce financial barriers to education for all learners. These actions toward ensuring access to high-quality education are vital to the government's economic recovery plan and will uplift all British Columbians.*

## STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Increase funding to the BC Access Grant to provide at least \$100 million in non-repayable financial aid annually in order to increase access to post-secondary education and skills training.

## INSTITUTIONAL FUNDING AND FEES

Complete the post-secondary funding review and determine gaps in government funding, in particular for regional colleges and universities. Then provide an infusion of \$200 million annually.

Freeze tuition fees and develop a plan to progressively reduce tuition fees at public colleges, institutes, and universities to lessen the financial burden on students and their families.

Strengthen the Tuition Fee Limit Policy to ensure that institutions are not increasing fees beyond the prescribed limits in the form of new ancillary fees.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Amend the Tuition Fee Limit Policy to include regulation of fees for international students in order to ensure fairness, consistency, and predictability of international student tuition fees.

Release a new BC international education strategy that will provide sufficient supports for international students to assist in their cultural, social, and academic integration.

## TRADES TRAINING

Develop an apprenticeship completion strategy which includes provisions for returning apprenticeship counsellors back to campuses.

British Columbians have struggled immensely over the last few years, with young people and students being at the forefront of these challenges. Over half the job losses from December 2020 to January 2021 were felt by young people, with the not in employment, education, or training (NEET) rate rising to 24%, the highest in 20 years<sup>1</sup>. Though we have seen economic recovery, British Columbians are struggling with the cost of living. As of August 2022, the cost of groceries has climbed 10.5%, rent has increased by 6.5%, and the cost of gas has increased by 30.5%<sup>2</sup>. Though there has been increases to minimum wage, wages have not kept up with the increased cost of living. On top of it all, there are those trying to attend post-secondary, who also struggle with the cost of tuition, technology, textbooks, and transportation. Students are making these sacrifices in the hopes of learning, growing their skills, and participating in our economy, and we need to do everything possible to support their education and success.

The post-COVID-19 economy and labour market look very different than their predecessors. In times like these, education is a crucial tool that governments must invest in to spur economic recovery by training or re-training those who have lost their jobs and those seeking skills to increase their employability. Therefore, it is imperative that British Columbians can access the skills needed to fill labour market demands to weather the unstable, unpredictable economic realities.



The government has committed to building a stronger BC for all of us: aiming to help make life affordable, delivering services that people count on, and building a strong, sustainable, innovative economy. By focusing on affordable and accessible post-secondary education, the government can tackle poverty and inequality, contribute to good-paying jobs in all regions of the province, and ensure people from all backgrounds can have the opportunity to fully participate in the workforce.

British Columbians are feeling the squeeze of the cost of education: more than half agree that BC's government funding should make up a higher portion of post-secondary funding than it currently does. Further, an overwhelming majority are opposed to further increases to the cost of post-secondary education, and nearly three-quarters agree that young people are required to take on too much debt to obtain a college or university education.

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**90%**

of British Columbians agree that making college and university education in BC more affordable for students is important.

**87%**

of British Columbians oppose increases in tuition fees; moreover, 50% support a reduction from current levels.

**79%**

of British Columbians support providing students from low- and middle-income backgrounds with grants.

**60%**

of British Columbians think government funding should make up a higher proportion of university funding.



# STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

British Columbians are struggling to make ends meet with inflation causing an affordability crisis in which post-secondary students disproportionately feel the impact. This is further exacerbated by high tuition fees, which have more than doubled since 2001<sup>3</sup>.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, BC's unemployment rate reached near-historic highs in 2020; youth unemployment was higher than the average and reached nearly 30% in early summer. Unemployment rates are on the rebound, now sitting at 4.7%, but for young people aged 15 to 24, the unemployment rate hovers at 8.3%<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the sectors where youth are overrepresented, like the service and tourism industry, have not recovered at the same rate as less seasonally reliant industries. Now post-pandemic, Canadian inflation is reaching a 31-year high, with the inflation rate in BC reaching 8%, prices of groceries have increased by 10%, and the cost of living is continually skyrocketing<sup>5</sup>.

Enmeshed with the affordability crisis is the labour market shortage: the province forecasts that there will be over one million job openings in the next 10 years, and 78% of future jobs will require some form of post-secondary education or training<sup>6</sup>. Yet, despite the necessity of post-secondary education or training, many students and their families cannot earn enough to save for post-secondary education. The volatility of today's economy, compounded by the barriers to post-secondary education that existed before the pandemic, is increasing the gaps between people who can afford education up-front and those who can't.

## Grants, Not Loans

Budget 2020 introduced the BC Access Grant, the first comprehensive up-front, non-repayable financial aid program for BC students in nearly twenty years. The Grant has helped to level the playing field for many forced to borrow to access post-secondary education; however, the limited funds available mean that the door remains closed for many. The Mandate Letter for the Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training directs the expansion of the BC Access Grant by increasing eligibility to reduce barriers to training for British Columbians. Students support the program's expansion; however, without additional funds, the impact of financial relief intended by the Grant is diminished.

Additional funding for the BC Access Grant is well within the government's budget. Eliminating expensive and inefficient tax credits for tuition fees and other education-related costs would divert funds to a more beneficial program while not impacting the government's budget. The 2022 Budget indicates that the province spent \$70 million on these tax credits, yet these funds don't increase access to post-secondary education up-front, where many people need the most help<sup>7</sup>.

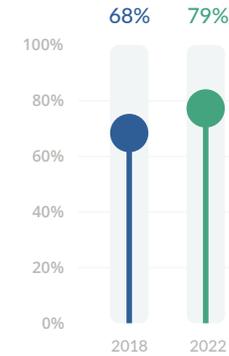
In times of uncertain employment, increasing access to post-secondary education has been a tried and true method to ensure that residents have access to training and retraining to remain relevant in a volatile labour market. A well-funded and expanded BC Access Grant will ensure more students can begin or continue their studies and assist workers laid off to get the retraining they need to re-enter the workforce. The BC Access Grant not only helps to reduce student loan debt at the end of a person's academic journey, it also opens the door to education that has previously been closed to many. At this time—when education is so integral to economic recovery—ensuring access for all British Columbians will help uplift everyone.

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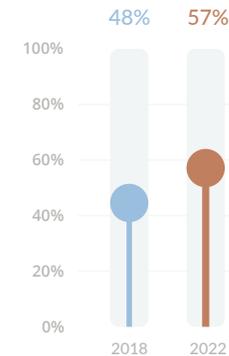


## Support has Grown

Providing up-front grants for students from low- and middle- income families



Eliminating tuition fees for at least one year of college and vocational/trades programs



Support for financial aid and debt relief initiatives, including up-front grants programs and eliminating at least one year of tuition fees continues to be very strong amongst British Columbians. Public support for both initiatives has increased in recent years.

## RECOMMENDATION

Increase funding to the BC Access Grant to provide at least \$100 million in non-repayable financial aid annually in order to increase access to post-secondary education and skills training.

# FUNDING FOR POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

## INVESTING IN BC'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY

As the Government grapples with economic recovery, and high inflation rates, educating and expanding the marketable skills of workers is a vital investment. The pandemic highlighted critical deficiencies in various sectors – sectors that are key to economic growth and stability, and public health. The pandemic has also decimated other industries that may take years to return to the level of operation they boasted just two years ago – such as the tourism industry. As a result, BC's economic recovery will heavily rely on having a skilled, adaptive workforce, that requires workers from particularly hard-hit sectors, such as tourism and services, to get retrained and be deployed into new fields as their sectors recover.

### **Sector-Wide Funding Review Must Increase Annual Funding**

BC's post-secondary sector funding has not recovered since the deep cuts made in the 1990s. The chronic underfunding of the 90s was exacerbated by the austerity measures implemented by the BC government in the wake of the 2008 market collapse and subsequent recession. Despite its goal of creating a world-class post-secondary education system, past BC governments have been remiss in adequately funding post-secondary institutions, leaving institutions scrambling to make up for annual shortfalls with cost-recovery programming and ancillary fees. For example, between 2000 and 2019, provincial funding decreased by 27% in BC<sup>8</sup>; at the same time, institutions looked to create new ancillary fees and increase international tuition fees to fill the budget gaps.

In recent years, the proportion of public funding to BC colleges and universities has dropped to 41.1% of general operating revenue and tuition fees now make up more than 50% of general operating revenue<sup>9</sup>. Current levels of government funding are significantly lower compared to past levels. For example, in the 1980s, 80% of operational funding was the responsibility of the provincial government, and in the 1970s, the provincial government provided 90% of these funds<sup>10</sup>. This showcases the massive divestment in public education for the current generation of young people compared to the support provided to those who attended college and university in past decades.

The Mandate Letter for the Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training includes a directive to conduct a funding review of post-secondary education operating grants to ensure public post-secondary institutions have adequate resources to support economic recovery and student success. The funding review is currently underway, a step that students have been advocating for and welcome; however, a funding review with no intention of increasing funding to the sector will not achieve the government's goal of ensuring student success and aiding BC's economic recovery.

Further, a funding review should focus on ensuring that education is accessible to those who live in rural parts of the province. Education is a service to the people of BC and not a business enterprise; as such, the importance of regional access when reviewing costs and funding to those regions is vital.

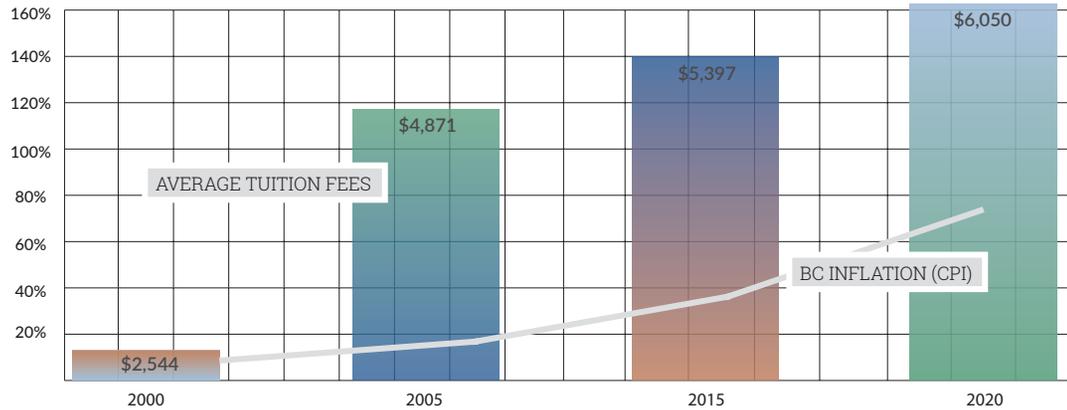
### **Stronger Fee Regulation Needed**

The lack of sufficient government funding has incentivized institutions to increase tuition and ancillary fees as much as possible. As a result, tuition fees in BC have more than doubled since 2001, outpacing inflation by every possible measure. Throughout this period, the cost of obtaining a degree has increased by over \$13,700 in tuition fees alone<sup>11,12</sup>. The Tuition Fee Limit Policy has had a substantial moderating effect on fee increases since its implementation. However, the loopholes and limitations of this policy have allowed institutions to circumvent the rules for years. For example, in the 2016-17 academic year, Vancouver Island University (VIU)<sup>13</sup> and North Island College (NIC)<sup>14</sup> implemented new ancillary fees to pay for services that were previously covered by students' tuition fees. These new ancillary fees—which

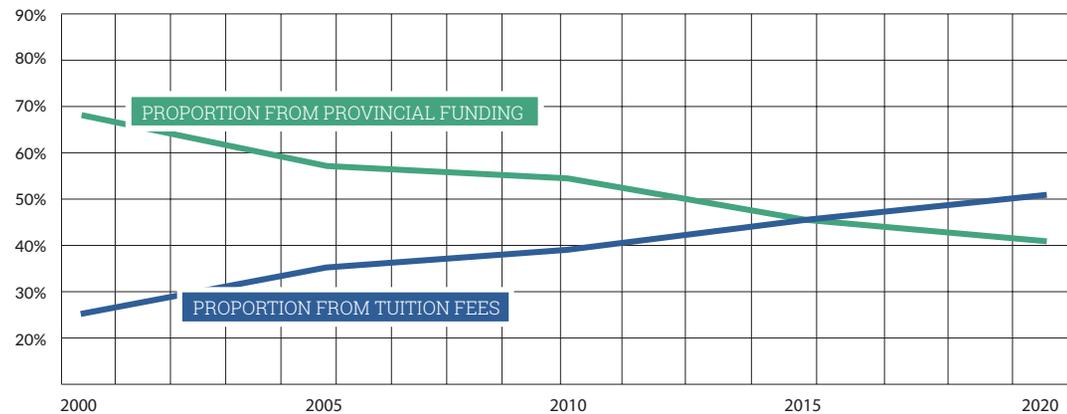
at VIU total almost one million dollars annually—are tuition fee increases by a different name and constitute an all-too-easy means to circumvent the government’s Tuition Fee Limit Policy.

Post-pandemic inflation has left many British Columbians struggling financially. The rising costs of tuition and a multitude of new ancillary fees, unaffordable housing, gas and food costs, and other rising costs are erecting barriers to people’s ability to get reskilled and re-join the workforce. Minister Kang’s Mandate Letter includes a directive to strengthen the existing Tuition Fee Limit Policy to ensure institutions are not increasing fees beyond the prescribed limits; students in BC strongly support this directive.

**DOMESTIC TUITION FEE INCREASES FAR OUTPACE INFLATION**



**UNIVERSITY & COLLEGE REVENUE**



**RECOMMENDATION 1**

Complete the post-secondary funding review and determine gaps in government funding, in particular for regional colleges and universities. Then provide an infusion of \$200 million annually.



**RECOMMENDATION 2**

Freeze tuition fees and develop a plan to progressively reduce tuition fees at public colleges, institutes, and universities to lessen the financial burden on students and their families.



**RECOMMENDATION 3**

Strengthen the Tuition Fee Limit Policy to ensure that institutions are not increasing fees beyond the prescribed limits in the form of new ancillary fees.

# INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

## A VITAL COMPONENT OF OUR POST-SECONDARY SYSTEM

*International students come to Canada for an opportunity to access one of the top ranked countries for higher education globally. Yet two decades of stagnant or reduced core funding to public post-secondary institutions has resulted in an over-reliance on ever-increasing fees charged to international students to make up budget shortfalls.*

### International Students in British Columbia

British Columbia is Canada's second most popular destination and hosts one-quarter of all international students in the country<sup>15</sup>. The number of international students attending public post-secondary institutions across the province has increased by 291% since 2007<sup>16</sup>. The largest growth in international enrolment has been at colleges, where the international enrolment has more than tripled in the last decade, from 5,000 to nearly 17,000—an increase of 240%<sup>17</sup>.

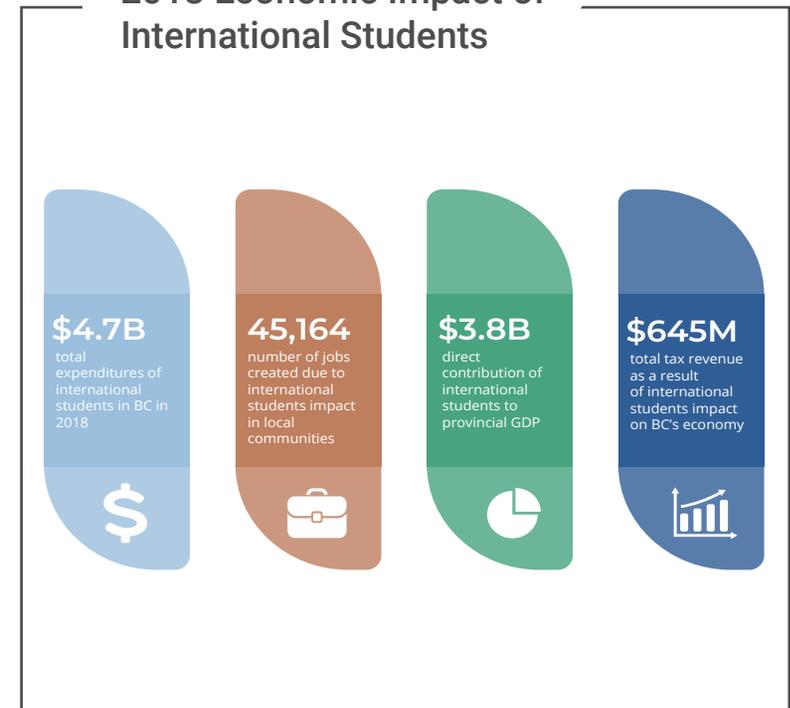
The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the folly of the over-reliance on international students to fund the public post-secondary education system. In the Fall 2020 and Winter 2021 semesters, international enrolment at many institutions declined sharply, directly resulting in budget deficits for those institutions. As of 2021, BC's international student population totalled nearly 101,000 enrolled in the post-secondary system—a decrease of 25% since 2019<sup>18</sup>. This enrolment decline, and corresponding budget deficit, has answered the question that advocates have posed for some time: what happens when international students stop coming?

International students contribute a vast amount to local economies, such as living expenses, arts and culture, and recreation. When comparing international education services to top exports from BC, international education services in 2017 continued to rank third (only after wood and mineral exports), and account for 10.5% of BC's total value of exported goods<sup>19</sup>. According to a report of Global Affairs Canada, in 2018, expenditures from international students enrolled in the province's post-secondary education system totalled \$4.7 billion in annual spending, contributing to more than 45,100 jobs. A direct contribution of \$3.8 billion to the provincial GDP and over \$645.4 million in tax revenue<sup>20</sup>. These figures make it clear that the value of international students expands much farther than the campus they are studying at.

### International Students Deserve Predictability

One of the biggest financial challenges facing international students is the inability to budget for a four-year degree properly. In any given year, fees may increase by as much as 20%, as these increases can be based on whatever the institution deems necessary to balance its budget. This unsustainable model often results in students struggling to stay in BC to finish their studies.

### 2018 Economic Impact of International Students



Exacerbating the unpredictability of the cost is the lack of requirements for fee increases, which allows institutions to implement substantial fee increases with only a few weeks of notice, leaving students scrambling to gather resources by whatever means necessary. Unlike domestic students, the consequences for international students who fail to assemble the payment for impromptu increases are grave: removal from their courses and programs and removal from the country for violating the terms of their student visa. Moreover, the lack of predictability for international student tuition increases is not a recent problem. International student fees at universities in BC have risen 594% since 1991, from \$3,991 to \$30,903 annually in 2021<sup>21</sup>, an exponential increase from their domestic peers. With the economic volatility post-pandemic, these increases acutely affect the international student population more now than ever.

The regulation of tuition and ancillary fees for international students would create fairness, consistency, and predictability to changes in international student fees. It would respect those travelling great distances and paying substantial fees to participate in our education system. It would also mean that pricing policies for this vital export would be set centrally by the BC government and not left to the individual board of governors who regularly implement increases to offset projected budget shortfalls.

### **BC Needs an International Education Strategy**

BC's international education strategy concluded in 2016; thus, developing a new strategy through consultation with students and key stakeholders in the sector is imperative. The new strategy should consider the full benefits of having international students participate in PSE and look beyond the economic contributions of international education. These considerations should include providing adequate services to international students inside and outside the classrooms, supporting integration into their host communities during and after their studies, and empowering them to amplify their contributions to the diversity of thought, opinion, and lived experience in the academic hemisphere. Research has shown that when institutions act to embrace diversity and create socially supportive school contexts, the social inclusion and academic success of not only international students, but of all students are improved<sup>22</sup>. International students who feel supported in their academic experience and who feel integrated into their local communities are much more likely to complete their studies and are more likely to stay after graduation to be an enduring presence in the labour force. An international education strategy should ensure international students have the potential to expand BC's job market while still delivering a positive return on investment fairly and ethically. Hence, a new strategy must focus on providing support that assists international students in their cultural, social, and academic integration.



## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Amend the Tuition Fee Limit Policy to include regulation of fees for international students in order to ensure fairness, consistency, and predictability of international student tuition fees; and

Release a new BC international education strategy that will provide sufficient supports for international students to assist in their cultural, social, and academic integration.

# TRADES TRAINING

## IT IS TIME TO BUILD BACK BC

Whether it is building infrastructure, getting goods from point a to point b, manufacturing essential products, or providing important services, the trades and trades workers are an essential part of BC's economic and social tapestry. In order to successfully meet the challenges posed by a post-pandemic world, trades education and trades workers must be supported. These important jobs require skilled tradespeople who go through training, many at public post-secondary institutions.

An essential part of trades training is apprenticeships, a mix of classroom and paid on-the-job training. It teaches students all the theoretical parts of their trade with invaluable on-the-ground instruction in their chosen field. Apprenticeships are the historic foundations of trades and a proven method of high-quality skills training that works. Yet, when the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission (ITAC) was dissolved in 2003 and replaced with the Industry Training Authority (ITA), it took only 4 years to see apprenticeship completion rates drop by over 30%<sup>23</sup>. The drop in completion rates is partly the consequence of the gutting of supports for apprentices, including the removal of trades counsellors from post-secondary institutions. Those counsellors helped apprentices or future apprentices navigate and successfully manage technical class offerings across institutions and the province.

In addition to removing support for apprentices, the previous BC government established a 'BC model' for trades training, driven by the deregulation of skilled trades and the modularization of training and certification. Included in this change was the removal of compulsory trades, or trades that required certification to perform, which allowed employers to hire under-skilled workers without certification to do jobs like welding, plumbing, and automotive services while also taking advantage of their labour.

Evidence shows that the move away from compulsory trades has negatively impacted apprenticeship completion rates<sup>24</sup>. Also, with the modularization of trades, we have had a 'narrowing and shallowing' of the trades and have created a far less mobile workforce able to take their fulsome set of skills and apply it to new industries as the needs of the economy change.

Students in trades programs must have the same academic and professional support enjoyed by students on other post-secondary tracks. To ensure parity between the trades and other programs, the government must put forward an apprenticeship completion strategy that is student-centred and based on the evaluations and recommendations from independent assessments of the ITA system. In addition, any student-centred strategy must include provisions for apprenticeship counsellors embedded in the trades programs offered in each region and working with institutional partners who provide support to trades students who are not yet apprentices.

### RECOMMENDATION

Develop an apprenticeship completion strategy which includes provisions for returning apprenticeship counsellors back to campuses.

# POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IS AN ESSENTIAL INVESTMENT FOR BC'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Education is a critical tool that the BC government can use to spur economic recovery by training or re-training those who lost their jobs and are seeking new employment. The post-COVID-19 economy may look very different, at least for a time, and it is imperative that British Columbians are equipped with the skills needed to fill labour market demands.

Restoring necessary funding to the province's institutions – through annual investments of \$200 million is a vital step in allowing the government to provide a post-secondary education system that is accessible and of high quality. This, coupled with increasing access to financial assistance for low- and middle-income individuals, strengthening the Tuition Fee Limit Policy and extending its reach to include regulation of international student tuition fees, and the development of strategies to support international students and trades students are key to reducing financial and other barriers to education for all learners.

By focusing on affordable and accessible post-secondary education, the government can tackle poverty and inequality, contribute to good-paying jobs in all regions of the province, and ensure people from all backgrounds can have the opportunity to fully participate in the workforce. Further, a robust and accessible system of high-quality post-secondary education is key for British Columbia to remain competitive and innovative into the future, and is a step towards the government delivering on its commitment to build a stronger BC that makes life more affordable and allows our province to prosper.

\$ 70 INCREASING ACCESS TO THE BC ACCESS GRANT

\$ (70) SHIFTING FUNDING FROM TAX CREDITS TO THE BC ACCESS GRANT

\$ 200 INCREASING FUNDING TO INSTITUTIONS TO ENSURE QUALITY AND AFFORDABILITY

\$ 0 STRENGTHENING THE TUITION FEE LIMIT POLICY

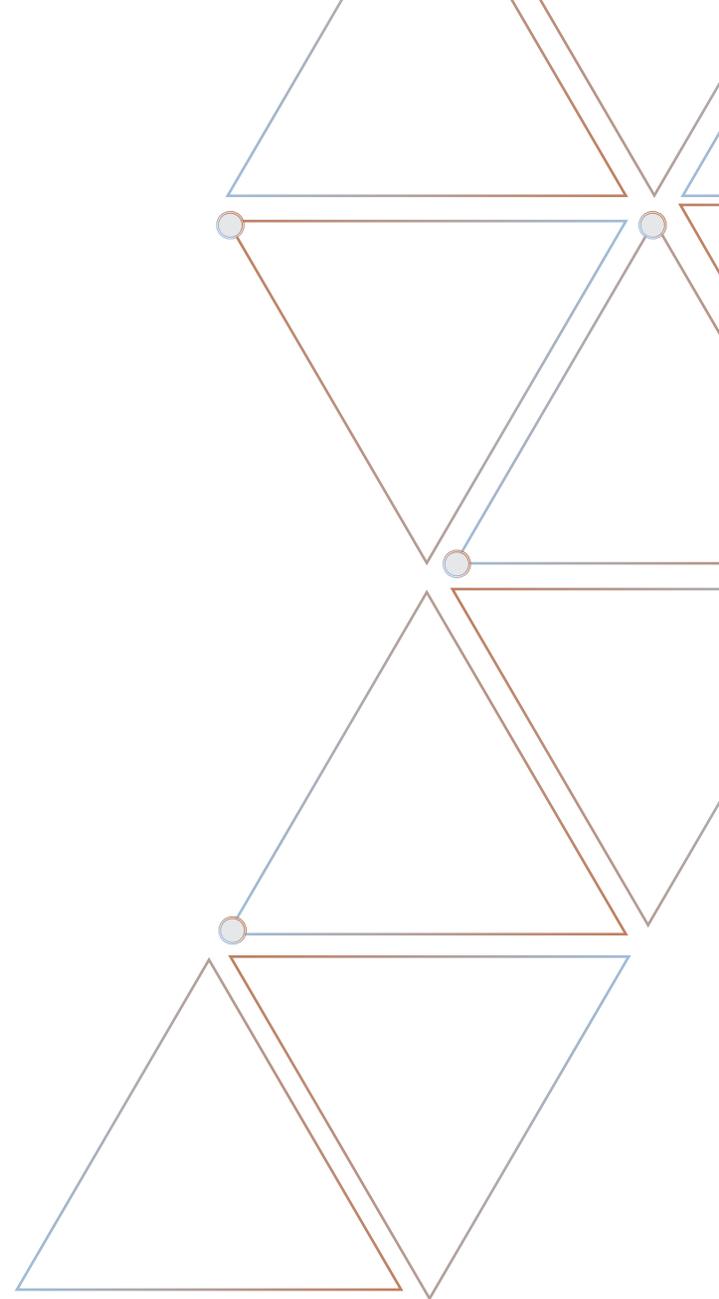
\$ 0 ACTING TO SAFEGUARD BC'S REPUTATION AS A DESTINATION FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

\$ 0 DEVELOPMENT OF AN APPRENTICESHIP COMPLETION STRATEGY

\$ 200 TOTAL ANNUAL INVESTMENT

# ENDNOTES

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