

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Investing in a Better Future: Higher Education and Post-COVID Canada

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*An RSC Policy Briefing*

Post-secondary education (PSE) is a vital part of civil society and any modern economy. When broadly accessible, it can enable socioeconomic mobility, improve health outcomes, advance social cohesion, and support a highly skilled workforce. It yields public benefits not only in improved well-being and economic prosperity, but also in reduced costs in healthcare and social services. Canada also relies heavily on the PSE sector for research.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, despite all of the disruptions the pandemic has caused, PSE has maintained educational programs, contributed research to the pandemic response and other critical areas, and provided experts for myriad science tables, task forces, and committees key to public health and government decision-making. While we applaud the hard work and commitment of faculty, staff, and students, we must also recognize that the pandemic effort has stretched already strained PSE resources and people even further. The cost of this cannot be ignored. It is critical to support PSE's recovery so that it can continue to support Canada's pandemic recovery, maintain Canada's global position in research and international education, and continue to advance national interests in vital areas such as climate change, reconciliation, and information literacy.

Positive measures in colleges and universities have, in recent years, been the result of the federal government's renewed commitment to research: from the *Fundamental Science Review*, to increased grant funding, to the new Dimensions program, the research ecosystem has benefitted from evidence-based steps towards advancing inclusive excellence in Canadian scholarship. But, for about two decades, the urgent concern in the sector has been declining public funding for colleges and universities: a shrinking proportion of faculty are in full-time continuing positions with adequate support for teaching and research; institutional autonomy, and the academic integrity it is supposed to reinforce, has become more vulnerable to the vagaries of political and donor interests; many universities and colleges have become reliant on a volatile international education market to partially fill funding gaps; and too many students are burdened, even excluded, by the high cost of tuition, and lack the academic, technological, and mental-health supports they need to excel. The pandemic has not created cracks in the PSE sector—it has highlighted and even worsened cracks that were already there.

This document is organized into sections that reflect on these pressures in the PSE sector. Of general concern throughout this report is the ways in which sector-wide and government commitments to equity, inclusion, and reconciliation are persistently undermined by declining public funding and its effects. Inadequate public investment is hampering the ability of the post-secondary sector to support Canada's economic, policy, and social aspirations.

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to further erode sector-wide capacity for research excellence and accessible education, and therefore the many public benefits that flow from the PSE sector and

at a time when they are urgently needed to support our collective recovery. The recommendations in this report are guided by a single goal—to make the post-secondary sector a more effective partner and support in building a more equitable, sustainable, and evidence-driven future for Canada, through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

***Our recommendations rest on the following fundamental principles:***

1. *Purpose* Higher Education provides the means by which we can collectively flourish: it protects and advances knowledge through research, creation, and policy support; it nurtures students’ development of their interests, their skills and expertise, and their capacity to contribute to, and reflect on, civil society; it improves social inclusion and health outcomes, among other benefits; and it enhances connections between Canada and the world.

2. *Expert Review* The PSE sector relies on regular expert oversight through arm’s length peer review and assessment, especially of research and academic programs, as well as academic oversight within institutions to ensure the integrity and quality of academic programs, meaningful inclusion, and the ethical conduct of research.

3. *Freedom of Enquiry* Academic freedom is crucial to the full exercise of every scholar’s capacity to inquire, explore, and assess, including in contributions to peer review and oversight of academic activities, from scholarly societies to post-secondary institutions to governments. It is coupled with a responsibility to be rigorous and participate in collegial debate. Vigorous debate is as vital to higher education and research as it is to democratic institutions.

4. *Institutional Independence* Institutional autonomy is key to upholding the institutional diversity of the sector and enabling the breadth of education and research possible in Canada, and to protecting institutions from narrow and short-term interests. Institutional autonomy must be founded upon and animated by academic freedom and collegial governance which together ensure robust academic performance and expert oversight within institutions.

5. *Shared Responsibilities* Every institution relies on the larger system in myriad ways, including drawing peer reviewers from other institutions, collaborating in cross-institutional research partnerships, and in shepherding students from undergraduate to graduate degrees. Scarce resources can drive competition, but every institution shares a responsibility to contribute to, and benefits from, the success and quality of the sector as a whole.

6. *Transformation.* Academic programs are continually revised to be consistent with the current state of knowledge, and reviewed to support that renewal. Currency in this century requires frank acknowledgment of a history of structural and cultural biases and inequities in our society and in the PSE sector. Reconciliation, intergenerational equity, diversity, social justice, and collaborative internationalization are key to the currency of PSE programs and the sector’s responsibility to maintain, and model, high standards of respect, fairness, and awareness.

**Recommendations**

1. *We recommend that, as an immediate first step, the provincial and federal governments work together in the coming months to increase core funding for universities and colleges, starting in the 2021-22 academic year, to support i) significant improvements in the ratio of continuing, full-time faculty to students; ii) a tuition freeze or reduction. This increased core funding should be the foundation for long-term planning to stabilize core funding for the sector at a higher level to support adequate academic staffing and improve the accessibility of PSE.*

2. We recommend that governments work together with PSE institutions and Indigenous communities to i) establish and maintain pathways to post-secondary education for Indigenous peoples; ii) facilitate the establishment of programs of research that focus upon Indigenous peoples, topics, and experiences in appropriate and ethical ways; and iii) support the development of Indigenous-led research and scholarship through the recruitment of Indigenous students and scholars as well as through appropriate financial and institutional support.

3. We recommend that the federal government establish regular five-year reviews to evaluate progress on addressing the concerns of the Fundamental Science Review, the Dimensions initiative, and reconciliation in PSE. Reviews should be conducted by committees that include relevant faculty researchers from a variety of colleges and universities, and should have the authority to make recommendations. Their findings and recommendations should be made public.

4. We recommend that relevant federal departments (including Global Affairs Canada, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, and Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada), in collaboration with other levels of government, strike an expert panel to formulate a unified plan for supporting research programs and scholarships to advance a more sustainable, equitable, and collaborative environment for internationalizing PSE, including appropriate immigration policies to support connections between Canadian and international students and scholars.

5. We recommend that all PSE institutions commit, or recommit, to protecting and promoting the right to academic freedom of every member of their academic staff, regardless of category of employment, in the carrying out of their academic duties (teaching, research, collegial governance, community service) and in expressing their views on institutional policies and actions, and on matters of public interest or debate.

### **Recommendations Specific to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

6. We recommend that the federal government ensure continuing emergency PSE funding for 2021-23 to address the disruptions caused by the pandemic. This should include i) core funding to offset any declines in tuition revenues and increased instructional costs, including ongoing additional support to help students overcome any disruption to their educations because of the pandemic; ii) an emergency research fund to address the pandemic's disruption of research for early career researchers, including additional funding for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows as well as course-release stipends for non-tenured faculty; and iii) additional mental health resources to support the well-being of faculty, staff, and students.

7. We recommend that the provincial governments collaborate on a framework for recognizing and accommodating the COVID-19 disruption to secondary education, and especially its intensification of pre-existing inequities, to ensure that current high-school students not only maintain access to PSE but also have the resources necessary to support their success through, and in the wake of, the pandemic. This should include additional educational resources to identify and address any gaps in students' education as well as evidence-based, equity-informed policies to accommodate pandemic effects on grades used for admission and scholarships.

8. We recommend that the federal government maintain the moratorium on Canada Student Loan repayments through to 31 December 2022 and consider significant loan forgiveness; and that any federal basic income guarantee initiative take into account the cost of tuition to current PSE students and tuition debt to past students.